

Return to Daranor in the sequel to DreamQuest.

ProphecyQuest

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Chapter 1: The House Special

“Try as you might, you won’t beat this anywhere!” Gerthoud said loudly, daring anyone to step forward and contradict him. “The king himself can’t get enough. Sent a whole wagon up for some of it just last week, didn’t he mister Rowen?”

Rowen pretended not to hear him, turned his head down to the side, and looked away.

Gerthoud kept shouting, all the louder. “Isn’t that right, Rowen? Probably takes it as a delicacy to the elves, is what he does. That’d impress an old elf king, yes it would. He’d say, ‘In all my thousands of years of livin’ in this here world, I ain’t never tasted anything finer!’”

One of the newcomers had had about enough. He stood up forcefully. “What are you talking about, imbecile? Do you mean this crap? He might as well have served us dwarf snot!” He finished his words by turning his mug upside down and letting the contents spill onto the floor.

Gerthoud was aghast. “Don’t waste it now! That there’s preciouser than the duke’s own blood, it is!”

Rowen sighed. Things usually ended up like this. Why did he let Gerthoud still come to his tavern? He knew it was because his father had adopted Gerthoud some twenty years ago. As his father had brought him in from the cold, Rowen couldn’t throw him back out. Although, he knew in the back of his mind that he was good for business. Rowen had been experimenting with a special ‘house brew’ ale, and honestly, it did taste terrible. Gerthoud hated it too, but like most everything else in his life, he failed miserably at sarcasm. So Gerthoud would come in night after night, swallow the stuff as best as he could, and then start raving about how much he ‘loved’ it. Other people would take him at his word, and business would flare up. In fact, these newcomers now spitting it out had bought it on Gerthoud’s recommendation just moments before. It all stopped once they had tried a few glasses, but then Rowen just mentioned about how it was an ‘acquired taste.’ Most would give up at this point, but if someone had a formidable mixture of drunkenness and gullibility, they usually ordered a few more.

“That’s enough from you now, Gerthoud.” Rowen’s voice was stern, and it seemed to cut through the drunken fog surrounding his friend. “I think you need to be heading home now before you cause any more trouble.”

Rowen turned to the newcomers. “I’m sorry the house special is not to your liking, it’s a unique taste that takes some folks a few to get used to. Perhaps I could interest you in a nice Scorpion brand beer from Tealsburg?”

William Pottle

The newcomers each took a glass from Rowen, and he breathed a sigh of relief. “Now Gerty, you get up on out of here. Go home and get us some wood chopped for the fire. I’ll be coming home late tonight.” It was already 2 a.m., but Rowen would serve customers for another hour or so before he cleaned up and went home. Most of the other tavern owners lived in their taverns, but Rowen couldn’t understand that. He wanted his home to be a place away where he didn’t have to think about work. He had enough of loud, filthy drunks all day long. Why would he want them in his home too?

Gerthoud was about to protest, then seemed to think better of it. He had had enough for one night. Groggily, he slung his cloak over his shoulder and moved outside, pushing the heavy door open in front of him. Rowen sighed as he watched him exit, and then set to work wiping down a dirty table with a rag that was only slightly less filthy.

Gerthoud stumbled about as the cool winter air hit his lungs forcefully. He wasn’t terribly drunk. He was still at the point where he thought he had more coordination than he actually did. Soon he caught himself on a nearby building and began to walk more normally. The walk from the tavern to the home he shared with Rowen was not far, and he was in no hurry tonight. Spring was just beginning to come, although it was still cold outside. The alcohol lent him an artificial sensation of warmth. He was content to wander the near-deserted streets of Walis, pondering the meaning and purpose of life. Gerthoud was not normally a deeply reflective man. In fact, it was only when he was drunk that he happened to begin to wonder about what the purpose of his life was. Yet, what he was incapable of pondering while sober, he was especially incapable of understanding while drunk. Still, it was nice to gaze up at the stars and imagine that each was a world, or an angel, or even just a really shiny button.

Abruptly, something broke into Gerthoud’s rambling meditation. He was not alone. There was a young man staring at him from across the street.

It wasn’t unheard of to see someone out and about at this time of night, but this man seemed not to fit.

For one thing, Gerthoud had never seen clothes like that before. The stranger wasn’t going about his business, but just stood there, eyes fixated on Gerthoud, as if he were looking straight through him. That was especially odd, as the young man was the one who was transparent.

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"It is time." When he finally spoke, Gerthoud was shocked by the pleading urgency in the other's voice. Gerthoud looked down at his watch, forgetting that he didn't own one.

"Time for what?" Gerthoud was about to add, 'time for you to leave me alone!' but thought better of it. Something about this figure frightened him.

"The One walks among us! It is time for him to enter." The figure began walking closer to Gerthoud. He was only a few meters away now.

Gerthoud instinctively stepped back, but this only caused the other to increase his anxiety all the more. His eyes called out to him, beckoning Gerthoud to help him. *"The age is here. The time is now! I cannot do this alone!"*

Gerthoud rubbed his eyes, trying to erase the specter of the vision he saw. That 'house brew' must have been a lot stronger than he realized. When he looked again, the figure was gone.

Cautious now, Gerthoud continued walking towards home, his pace slightly quickened. After he had gone a few hundred more meters, though, he couldn't stand it any longer. He quietly ducked into an alleyway and began to relieve himself against the wall of a building.

The previous scare had almost been forgotten, as he happily urinated on the wall. He thought to write his name, but then sadly remembered that he knew neither how to read nor write. It was amazing how alcohol could manage to magnify one's perceived possessions and abilities. Once, he had even jumped off a table, believing that he could fly. His constant limp was to serve as an eternal reminder that he could not. He was almost done when he noticed with alarm that his urine had a green tint to it. What had Rowen put into his vile concoction this time? As he looked around, though, he saw that the green tint was coming from a mist that was slowly wrapping around his ankles. Confused, Gerthoud turned to see a new figure blocking the alley. This just wasn't his night for drunken hallucinations!

The new figure was dressed all in dark black robes and seemed to float on the green mist. Suddenly something made Gerthoud very afraid.

"What did he tell you?" The figure spoke with a raspy voice that grated on Gerthoud's eardrums.

"Who?" He asked his question boldly, daring the vision to challenge him.

If the figure was annoyed, Gerthoud couldn't tell. "The one who came to you before. The Cloudwalker." His voice sounded the same as before.

Gerthoud had been pretty drunk before, but he never remembered his hallucinations talking to him about each other. Something was seriously wrong here. Gerthoud decided to play along. He didn't know any Cloudwalkers, or even what one was, but he instinctively knew who the dark figure was referring to.

"He said something about the time. Time for 'the One' to do something he couldn't do by himself." After speaking the words, Gerthoud almost wished he hadn't. Something was not right.

The figure seemed pleased. "Did he say anything else?" Now Gerthoud was beginning to get annoyed again, his moods quickly changing as he felt threatened.

"He said that you should get out of here and leave me alone!" Gerthoud almost shouted the words.

The dark wizard nodded. It seemed that he was satisfied with his interrogation. He turned to leave, and then turned back. "I almost forgot something. You should be rewarded for your help. I will make you great...I will make you powerful." He was almost panting with anticipation. "But first...I need something from you."

At this he brought his hand up over Gerthoud's chest, and then his fingers abruptly stiffened as a green glow began to form in his palm. Gerthoud felt the worst pain of his life. It felt as if the very cells of his body were being ripped from him, his life-force being torn from his chest. The pain cut through the haze of drunkenness and allowed him to feel the last few moments of his life with astounding lucidity. This was real. He screamed with all his might, but his voice was quickly lost as he felt his life draining from his body.

The wizard's breath was haggard, full of weakened excitement. He grabbed the dead body and slumped it over his shoulder. Before he left, he paused for a brief moment to savor the sensation of the warm life he felt within him mix with the cold night air. So the One now walked the earth. His goal had never been closer. The race was on.

The pyramid collapsed, sending up a shower of sparks. The boy flinched back just in time to avoid being burned physically, but it was still emotionally painful. He wished that he could just ignite the larger logs with the burning shame that came to his face.

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“It’s okay, dear. Just try it again, and make sure that there are enough thick pieces there to hold it up.” If the situation wasn’t bad enough already for Alahim, now his mother was giving him advice.

It was ironic, he thought, that his father had once possessed the elemental Power of Fire, and now he couldn’t even build a simple blaze to keep his family warm on a cold winter’s night. It was his tenth birthday, and if he could wish for anything right now, he just wanted this fire going before his father returned home.

It wasn’t that his parents weren’t supportive—they were—but sometimes it was too much. He just wanted to be able to figure things out by himself. Having famous parents did have some advantages. Nobody tried to beat him up, but everyone was always expecting ‘great things’ from him. He did not know this, but his situation was much improved by residing in the small mountain town of Krendon. If he had lived in Tealsburg or another large city, his problems would have been multiplied many times over.

The ring on his finger shimmered and flowed, a trapped silver river. A single tongue of dancing flame burst forth, mocking him. What a useless magic.

So he tried again, this time starting carefully with the small pieces that he had shaved off with his knife. He stacked them into a pyramid shape, and then lit them with the flaming end of one of the pieces from his old pyramid, which was thankfully still burning. The dry tinder soon caught, and Alahim busied himself with setting up sturdier pieces to catch the flame from his new pyramid. He dug them into the sand of his fireplace and balanced them against each other. First, he set up three pieces, and then began to add more around the sides. Slowly, the middle of the tripod began to catch and then as he added more wood, flames started lapping hungrily down the sides. He added some thicker logs underneath, and watched as they began to smoke and crack. He knew he had it this time. He would have to be careful and continue to add medium-sized pieces for a few more minutes, but he was now out of danger of his fire going out.

Yvonne came from behind and squeezed him with a big hug before he could think to escape. “Your father will be so proud!” Alahim hoped it was so. Twin smiles burst forth on his face and ring.

But Tarthur did not come home that night. At least, not until long after Alahim’s fire had burned itself out and turned to ashes. For the farmer Addyeen had summoned Tarthur to a secret meeting inside Zelin’s house.

The old wizard Zelin was fast approaching the end of his days in the Lands of Daranor. He had already survived two great wars and had seen enough pain and suffering to last many lifetimes. Zelin was a very powerful man, and to obtain power always required sacrifice. His will was strong, and so he had always been able to endure what was necessary. But more than four centuries of living had begun to take its toll on his body. His once-powerful muscles lay flaccid and dormant under great wrinkles of a skin that had once covered a larger man. He spent most of his time resting, but Tarthur saw his eyes were wide open now. What Addyeen had come to tell them was too important. Could it be true, after all these years? And why now, of all times?

Addyeen was explaining the situation.

“Several people in Walis have seen it,” the farmer-spy continued. “This includes one of ours.” Tarthur knew that by ‘one of ours’ Addyeen meant one of King Garkin’s royal intelligence gatherers. This would be an extremely reliable source. “He has even been appearing to groups of people, although it seems that he prefers to appear to people alone.”

Tarthur was dumbstruck. “How long has this been happening?”

“We don’t know for sure,” Addyeen answered. “Our first reports came in last week, but after he started appearing to large groups of people, nearly everyone claims to have seen him before. So it is hard to tell when it really began. One thing’s for sure— no one dares to walk the streets alone anymore.”

Tarthur was still reeling, trying to take in everything that Addyeen was telling him. “Are you sure that it was him?”

Addyeen shook his head. “No, we cannot be sure, but he has appeared as a half-transparent wraith, saying that now the One is of age. If he has revealed his name, no one who has heard him has understood.”

Zelin spoke. “This is fortunate, for I fear that there may be those who would try to search for the One themselves. They cannot be allowed to enter the Vale.”

Tarthur thought carefully. “So...if the One enters the Vale, then Tivu will be able to pass through the Wall also. Do you think he will be able to restore the lost Power of Air before he does so?”

Addyeen looked at Zelin, but Zelin took his time to answer. He chose his words carefully, looking like a doctor trying to tell a patient that he *might* have a cure without raising his hopes. Everyone knew why Tarthur had asked his question. It was because of the one thing that haunted Tarthur like no other, never leaving him free to live his life in peace. Wild and carefree in his youth, Tarthur had become almost melancholy as he approached his thirty-

second year. He blamed himself for the loss of Yan. Although Yan had made the decision of his own free will, Tarthur felt a special pang of guilt because he was there at the end. Even Tarthur knew that it was absurd to blame himself for not being able to defeat the Death Lord Darhyn with only the Water Orb to counteract Darhyn's Flame Tongue. Darhyn had been at the peak of his power and had scores of deadly monsters inside his fortress. Still, given the choice again...

"Presumably, yes," Zelin said. "But we cannot know if this would resurrect Yan, Tarthur."

"But there is a chance, isn't there?" Tarthur was pressing his question forward, trying to make Zelin confirm something that he could not possibly know. "If there's any chance at all we need to take it."

Zelin smiled at Tarthur to reassure him. "There is a chance, yes. But, remember, when an *alahim* transforms into something, that object still exists independently of the shapeshifter. Rather than becoming an object, he becomes a copy of the object. If Yan were to transform into this table, there would be two tables in the room. Now, since the Power of Air was lost to the world, I do not know if Yan transformed into a copy of the Power of Air or the Power of Air itself. It may be that the Power of Air that is restored by Tivu will have nothing to do with Yan."

Tarthur nodded, comprehending. After all, Tarthur was a relatively powerful magician himself, and transmutation was his specialty. He had read every book that he could find relating to shapeshifters. Unfortunately, no books existed that offered him insight on how to revive someone who had been sent out of the world.

"Still," Addyeen interjected, "even if we do not succeed in reviving Yan, it is important for us to try to reclaim the Power of Air. We already have control over the other three powers, and this would safeguard our realm for decades to come."

All three were in agreement on the last point. They all recognized the importance of obtaining the power of the four elemental forces.

"So what do we do, then?" Tarthur cut straight to the point. "The most reasonable course of action seems to go to Walis and have a talk with Tivu."

Zelin shook his head. "I do not believe that is our best course of action at the moment. First, we must learn everything we can about the One and the Wall of Glass. There are several prophecies, but they will not all turn out to be correct. We must also check all of the known manuscripts to see if there is anything that has gone unnoticed. We cannot trust Tivu. We can only

trust that he will do everything possible to get into the Eternal Vale, but I do not know what he would sacrifice to make it there.”

Tarthur pondered Zelin’s words for a moment. “So we will head to the library of Deguz, then?” Tarthur had been to the library a few times before. Anyone who had known Tarthur as a teenager would have been more than a little surprised that he now not only knew how to read but even *enjoyed* going to libraries. Change was the way of the world. In his youth Tarthur had mocked Baron Morty for being forced to spend all day with a tutor, yet recently Tarthur had donated the funds to start up a local school for the children of Krendon and the neighboring environs.

“That is the best place for now. Once we get there, we may be able to discern more about who the One is.” Zelin spoke as if he was dreading any travel. They would take the wagon, but the trip would still be difficult for the old man. “Once there, we will make a new plan. Perhaps I can stay at the library and search old documents while you follow leads,” he finished, pointing at Tarthur.

“I will join you also,” Addyeen added. “The planting season does not begin for many months, and I was planning to let the majority of my fields lie fallow this year anyway.” Addyeen worked hard farming the land, although he was a spy for King Garkin. He was a good spy, but Tarthur believed his heart was really in the land that he tilled.

Tarthur was so excited to begin his journey that he had quite forgotten about his family. He asked his question haltingly. “What about Yvonne and Alahim?” As a family, they had traveled together to many places in Daranor, but they had just returned from a trip to the metropolis of Freeton and as Yvonne had aged, she had become more comfortable living a home life. Alahim, too, while he liked to travel, did not have Tarthur’s burning desire for adventure. He was just starting a new class at school.

“It is up to them,” Zelin responded. “I am old and cannot travel fast at any rate. Having two more people will not slow us down. Now,” He said with finality that closed the discussion, “Tarthur, can you go to Judith and let her know that we once again need food packed for us?”

Tarthur left Zelin’s house visibly excited. He was trying not to get his hopes up too much, because he knew that they very well could be chasing phantom illusions and false prophecies.

It was well past midnight but not yet dawn when Tarthur finally returned home, opening the door to see Yvonne dozing in her rocking chair. Tarthur cringed as he suddenly realized that he had lost track of time. His wife must have put Alahim to bed in his room upstairs while she waited up for

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Tarthur. The gentle rocking of the chair was too much for her, however, and she had finally given in to slumber. Yvonne had been a light sleeper since her youth, and as Tarthur closed the door the creak of the hinges woke her.

“Where were you? I was starting to get worried.” Yvonne’s tone had a faint hint of irritability in it, both from concern over Tarthur and displeasure at having been awakened so suddenly. “You missed our son’s birthday, you know.”

Tarthur winced. “I’m really sorry. I’ll make it up to Alahim tomorrow. I got called to a meeting at Zelin’s, and it looks like it might finally be time!”

Yvonne did not ask what time it was and Tarthur knew she didn’t have to. More than anyone, she knew of her husband’s obsessive quest to find some way to bring Yan back to the world of the living. She was the one who wiped the sweat from his brow each time he woke up screaming, “*You don’t have to! There is another way!*” in the middle of the night.

When she spoke, she was almost relieved. “So what happens now?”

“We are traveling to the library of Deguz. Zelin wants to check up on the prophecy there to see if there are any clues as to who ‘the One’ might be. We must leave the day after tomorrow.” Tarthur talked breathlessly. In his mind, it was like he was already halfway there.

“We?” Yvonne asked.

“Well, we—Zelin, Addyeen and I. But I would like you and Alahim to come as well.”

Yvonne thought about it for a moment. They had been traveling for the past few months, and Tarthur knew she had been looking forward to spending some peaceful time at home with Alahim. “I’m not sure, Tarthur. I mean, we just got back, and Alahim’s school is starting...”

Tarthur felt the pit of his stomach drop out. He didn’t want to be separated from Yvonne and Alahim. Still, he knew it was a lot to ask. Also, he did not want to put his wife and son in any danger. Thinking of them being attacked sent shivers down Tarthur’s spine. Plus, despite what Zelin had said, it would be faster without them. “Well, how about this, then,” Tarthur floated his compromise. “You will stay here while Zelin and I research the prophecy. Then, once we know where we are going, perhaps you can join us later.”

Yvonne nodded several times as she was mulling it over in her head. After fifteen years of living together, Yvonne was remarkably good at accepting compromises, as long as they were reasonable. This plan would not disrupt Alahim’s life drastically. She shrugged her shoulders. “Well, why don’t we sleep on it and talk about it in the morning? It’s too late tonight....”

Tarthur agreed. He helped Yvonne up from her chair and brought her into their bedroom where he laid her softly down on the bed. He slipped off his boots and went to change into his nightclothes.

Lying silently awake together that night, both thought of the coming months with apprehension. After fifteen years, it wasn't as if the obsession with Yan had completely taken Tarthur over. Time had brought acceptance. Rather, it was just that there was enough of it there that was always lurking under the surface, ready to spring up at unpredictable moments.

She turned her body towards him and set her head down on his chest. Tarthur put his arm around her and held her close. He knew his heart was beating furiously with a mixture of excitement and worry, pounding away close to her ear.

Unable to sleep, after a few minutes she turned away, fixing her eyes on the far wall. Tarthur shifted his weight, moving closer to her. He stroked her smooth golden hair, gently placing it on the pillow next to her. He leaned in and kissed her softly on the point of her chin before whispering words of reassurance into her ear. He allowed himself to linger for just a moment longer, inhaling through his nose and taking in her distinctive, familiar smell. She no longer wore the perfume that gave her the fiery cool scent that had given Tarthur a smooth burn the first time they met. He closed his eyes, trying to etch Yvonne's essence in his memory so that he could turn to it in the days ahead.

He hoped to see Yvonne and Alahim soon after he determined whether or not it would be possible to return Yan, probably within a few weeks or months. The lessons of history were not lost on Tarthur, however. He remembered when he and Derlin had set out on a 'two-day' journey north to see the merwizard. They had been swept up in a storm of events that did not allow them to return for more than a year, and they were very lucky to have returned at all.

Finally, sleep overcame them both as the first grey streaks of dawn were just beginning to peak over the horizon.

Over the next two days they talked about their decision again, and Tarthur agreed to leave Yvonne and Alahim in Krendon, at least until he had a better idea of what the arrival of the Shade of Tivu meant and whether or not Yvonne and Alahim would be in any danger.

Now, Yvonne stood waiting to say her goodbyes at the edge of town. She was wearing a loose-fitting white and yellow dress that was tight about

her waist and wrists. Alahim pressed against her leg and held her tenderly. He was usually more independent, but in times of impending crisis, he sometimes reverted to a more childish state. She didn't believe he understood everything that was happening, but she could see he knew it was important for his father to leave for awhile. Yvonne had always been proud of how perceptive Alahim was. She could tell he was apprehensive by the way he stared off into the distance, as though if he looked far enough he could see what the future held. Although Tarthur had traveled alone many times before, the sense in the air was that this time unfamiliar dangers lurked beyond the horizon.

Zelin was too old to ride comfortably, so they had loaded everything into a wagon drawn by four horses. Addyeen would drive, and Tarthur and Zelin were set to ride in the back. Zelin had packed numerous bags as well as two large trunks overflowing with magical equipment. Tarthur and Addyeen were straining as they lifted everything. Books, powders, and scales landed with a crunch on the wagon floor. The way the wagon wheels visibly sank, even into the hard-packed earth, made Yvonne feel sorry for the horses. Zelin looked like he planned to spend a great deal of time in Deguz, and wanted to be prepared for everything.

Addyeen was helping Zelin into the wagon as Tarthur said goodbye. She wasn't sure what to say.

"If there's even a chance..." Tarthur started to say.

Yvonne stepped forward and brought a finger to his lips to quiet him. "I know," she said. Her gaze wandered over to her son. "We know," she amended. Alahim was reminded of the lost shapeshifter every time someone spoke his name.

"The time will pass swiftly," Tarthur said. He had never been known for his eloquence.

Yvonne forced a smile. "We will see you soon in Deguz or Tealsburg perhaps."

Tarthur smiled back, and reached down to rustle Alahim's hair. "Take good care of your mom while I'm gone. You're the man of the house now!" It wasn't the first time he had said it, but this time Alahim beamed as if Tarthur meant it more than ever.

Tarthur and Yvonne embraced once more, and then he hopped up into the wagon. Addyeen gave the order to the team and they started away down the king's highway.

Zelin took a long look back at the small village he had lived in for centuries, the village that he had watched over and protected. He was the only one who knew that this would be the last time he ever looked upon Krendon.

Tarthur peered out the back of the covered wagon to see the awesome form of the Tabletop Plateau off to his left. There were actually several separate plateaus that abruptly rose above the plain. Tarthur let his gaze drift upward, mentally filling in the mountaintops that were missing, as if some gigantic sword had sliced them off eons ago. Would those mountains have been larger than those guarding the Eternal Vale?

The various plateaus were crisscrossed with goblin caves. No one knew for sure how many goblins and other creatures lived there, but there was a rumor of an entire city underground. In the last war, what was now being referred to as the War of the Orb, Queen Marhyn had hidden a portion of her army in those caves. Queen Marhyn was the sister of the Death Lord Darhyn and a potent sorceress herself. They had led a surprise attack against the company of the king's army commanded by General Cilio. Two ferocious personal confrontations had decided the fate of the battle that day. Yan, fighting as a dragon, had defeated a body replica of Queen Marhyn and her black dragon. Yonathan, aided by the Light Sword and fighting to avenge the destruction of Freeton, had killed General Lithar Lifehater. Yan's victory over Queen Marhyn's double had destroyed the brain of her army, while Yonathan's victory had destroyed its heart.

It had been about two weeks since they had left Krendon. They weren't overexerting the horses, yet they were still making good time. They had stopped in Tealsburg for two nights to resupply their provisions and to hear news from the intelligence network. The king had a fantastic network of spies spread throughout the kingdom. There was no new information, however. As far as anyone knew, Tivu was still appearing, and his pleadings had become more urgent.

Tarthur turned to look at Zelin. The old man seemed to be doing well. Although he wanted to press on and get to Deguz as quickly as possible, Tarthur was actually enjoying the trip very much. Being a fellow magician, Tarthur frequently worked with Zelin on magical problems, but he still couldn't say that he really knew the man well. He was relishing this chance to get to know the magician better and to drink from his vast cup of knowledge. "Zelin, what happened to those mountain tops?"

The old wizard simply shrugged his shoulders and replied. "I don't know."

It was rare that Zelin flat out admitted not knowing something fundamental about the world, so Tarthur decided to press with a half-joke. "I

thought you knew everything. Isn't that why you're the most powerful wizard on the face of Daranor?"

Zelin responded with a half-chuckle, deflecting away Tarthur's question. "I'm afraid you still share many of the common misconceptions of the world, Tarthur. Knowledge is not the same thing as power."

Tarthur pushed the conversation further. "They are not the same, yet, they are related. Knowledge leads to power. You might call power the child of knowledge. Just as one man who unlocks the secrets of forging iron into a sword can defeat two unarmed opponents, the man with more knowledge can defeat the man with less. The ability to defeat another—that is power."

"Power is the ability to affect the workings of the world and bend them, even in only some small way, to your own will." Zelin replied in a calm voice. "The knowledge of one man, when shared, increases the power of many. What if your blacksmith loses his weapon by the side of the forest? The one who finds it can defeat him. His knowledge has led to others having power over him."

Tarthur tried to force the argument into a conclusion he knew Zelin couldn't support. "So, are you saying we shouldn't try to obtain or disseminate any knowledge, because it might come back to hurt us later?"

Zelin's pause made Tarthur wonder if the question was more valid than he had originally thought. The wizard looked around at his magical books. For the first time Tarthur wondered what it had cost to gain the information hidden behind their worn leather bindings. Had the first person who discovered how to call forth the power of fire burnt himself? Did the first man to enchant an ax to aid his chores chop down his house...or worse?

"In general, we must still try to obtain information, but we must do so with another quality, something that I'm afraid is often no more than a distant cousin to knowledge, and even more unrelated to power—wisdom. We need power, because it can help us to do good in the world. Yet, because the universe constantly tends to disorder, it is always easier to destroy than to build."

Tarthur took a moment to reflect on what Zelin was saying, as the old wizard continued. "So with each greater power that we uncover, the danger of its misuse becomes ever greater. There is some knowledge where the temptation to use the power discerned is too strong—no one yet has been able to unlock it without unleashing havoc on the world. Not that many have tried, but the names Frehu, Darhyn and Marhyn spring immediately to mind."

Although usually reserved, once Zelin got to speaking on a certain topic, he would expound on it at length, laying out not only his position, but

the positions of others with opposing views and why he considered them flawed.

“The triangular relationship of the human mind, body, and soul is perhaps the greatest mystery we have. I yearn to understand this completely, yet doing so would require sacrificing one part to understand how it functions in the whole. I would pay a great price to learn this, but we cannot pay the price of destroying innocent lives. The ends cannot always justify the means, because what ends may come cannot be known in advance. Beware those who promise that good will come from the evil that they are bringing.”

“What if a large good can come from a small evil? Surely it is worth a few lives to gain incredible knowledge!”

“Would you sacrifice your life?”

Tarthur was silent.

“How about your son’s life?”

Knowledge suddenly seemed a lot less important. But this couldn’t be the end of it.

“No knowledge is worth harming even one hair on Alahim’s head.”

Tarthur pondered a moment. “But how will we ever understand these mysteries?”

“We learn what we may from abnormal cases,” Zelin replied. “People who have lost one or more parts of their being can tell us a great deal. Tivu, for instance, has lost his body, yet his soul and mind are presumably intact. We may learn much from him. Yet, remember, these mysteries may have been unlocked by others. Anyone who would destroy the lives of many to further his own power certainly won’t hesitate to use that power for his own ends. Darhyn had this power, and any other would surely make a formidable enemy.”

“How can we defeat an enemy who has this advantage over us? Surely some will volunteer to let us experiment on them.”

“Surely they will,” Zelin said in a tone of voice that said rather than conceding Tarthur’s point, he was about to explain why it was irrelevant. “Surely some brave parents will come forward and volunteer their children when the children become just one more mouth to feed. Surely some noble man will convince his elderly father to let us destroy him and learn what we may before he becomes a burden on his son.”

“The Creator was wise to set good and evil to be things outside of man,” Zelin continued. “He gave us each a conscience so that we may orient ourselves. If morality is defined only by the individual, then the word loses all meaning.”

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Tarthur agreed. He had copious amounts of experience in rationalizing his own behavior.

“Do you think Darhyn sees himself as evil?” Zelin didn’t wait for Tarthur’s reply. “No, he sees himself as doing what is necessary. One of the human mind’s most amazing traits is the ability to see whatever it chooses to do as right.”

“It doesn’t mean good is an abstract thing that doesn’t exist. It just means that sometimes...it can be very tiring defending it.”

Zelin seemed finished, and Tarthur didn’t reply further. Rather, he just nodded to show Zelin that he had heard, and stared again out of the back of the wagon, watching the dust kicked up by the wheels swirl until it settled back into the road when they had faded into the distance.

Chapter 2: An Old Friend and a New Enemy

She scrubbed hard, forcing the *torgyu*-wool brush back and forth, trying to dislodge the last remnants of potatoes and dried carrots that stubbornly clung to the pot. She usually let the pot soak right after removing the stew, but today they had eaten directly from the cast-iron vessel and then she had read to Alahim before putting him to bed. The massive glass tanks that held their household water had just run out, and Yvonne wanted to wait until Alahim was asleep before hauling up more water from the well. Several years ago, the mechanically inclined Derlin had fashioned a contraption that drew water from a nearby river and pooled it with rainwater caught on their roof. Their house had been quite the envy of Krendon until one of the gears opening the main distribution pipe had become stuck while they were away on their most recent trip. Yvonne looked wistfully at the empty water container. It amazed her how one could get so used to little conveniences that they were soon taken for granted. Yvonne thought about trying to repair the broken gear herself, but was afraid of making matters worse and flooding their whole house. The only mechanical object she was able to fix with anything approaching reliability was her crossbow, and that was only because she had taken it apart and reassembled it so many times.

She made less stew now that Tarthur had been gone for eight days. Yes, she counted the days until his return. She always had. It wasn't although she couldn't survive on her own; she had managed just fine before Tarthur had shown up. Still, she did miss him, and counting the days helped Yvonne imagine where he was at any particular moment. He should have just passed Tealsburg.

Yvonne was actually somewhat relieved, and she hoped that this quest would end successfully and give Tarthur back to her. Although she felt guilty for being jealous of Yan, sometimes she felt like her own husband wasn't even hers anymore. She was excited for the possibilities that this new information represented, but why couldn't she be happier for Tarthur?

Yvonne turned away from where she had been scrubbing and then gasped in shock and dropped the pot at her feet.

There was a figure standing there, looking at her.

How had this figure entered the room so silently? Yvonne, the former co-head of the Guild of Thieves, was not one who was accustomed to having people sneak up on her. In fact, she couldn't remember it ever happening before.

This was no ordinary intruder.

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The new figure was an elf maiden dressed in a blue tunic and pants, who had a short black cloak billowing down from her shoulders. An eerie sword traced the curve of her back and was fastened to her body by a leather thong that attached to both the hilt and point of the sword. Her sleeves were rolled up to the middle of her forearms to reveal a strange tattoo that looked like it had been hurriedly scratched by an insane artist. She had black hair with blue highlights combed over to one side of her face, which was both stunning and menacing. Her eyes were jet black, and her bright red, sensual lips broke into an eerie grin when she saw Yvonne's reaction. Yvonne had no idea how long she had been there.

The figure slowly spoke. "Where is he?"

"Who?" Yvonne shot back her reply, almost before she had thought about it. Was she talking about Tarthur? Yvonne had enough wife-sense to know that this was exactly the kind of girl she did *not* want talking to her husband.

The dark elf just stood there, waiting for something. Suddenly, her grin broadened as she bolted for the stairs.

Yvonne stood puzzled, unsure who this stranger was and what she could want. Suddenly, the image of Alahim lying in his bed broke through her thoughts and she ran after the elf, calling ahead for Alahim to flee. She hoped he was still awake.

Yvonne lunged and caught the figure by the ankle as she was heading up the stairs. Yvonne pulled hard with both hands and caused the elf to fall on her face, but she caught herself and swung her other leg around to smack Yvonne in the chin. Yvonne cried out in pain, but didn't let go. Instead, she pulled the assailant towards her and punched her hard in the thigh. The dark elf stopped scrambling up the stairs and turned back to face Yvonne. She pushed off the stairs and with one swift motion grabbed Yvonne's arm and pulled it towards her while wrapping her legs around Yvonne's neck to trap it in a triangle. She locked her left leg under her right knee and Yvonne could feel her carotid arteries constricting like she was caught in a vise that the dark elf was slowly cranking tighter. Her assailant's strength was astounding. Yvonne launched a flurry of blows into the elf's right leg, trying to cause the muscles to cramp and release their hold. However, she stopped when she realized that it was not working and that she was losing more and more precious energy.

She could feel her life draining away, choking on her own arm. She was so confused. Why was this happening? Her vision was beginning to grey

around the edges. Detached, she barely saw the elf go to her belt and pull out a dagger....

“No!” The sound came from above them. Wakened by his mother’s frantic cries, Alahim had been watching the confrontation, not sure what was happening. It was obvious that his mom was in trouble. He threw a chair down the stairs and it hit the figure on the head, causing her to lose her grip on the dagger and on Yvonne. Yvonne tumbled backwards and gasped for air.

The dark elf was bounding up the stairs, but Alahim had already taken off for the window leading to the roof at the end of the hallway. Yvonne was dizzy and barely conscious. She grabbed the dagger and hurled it at the elf’s back. Her throw was weaker than usual and a bit off target, but it did strike the attacker’s leg and slice through part of the thigh before hitting the wall. The creature yelped in pain, but didn’t slow down.

Rather than pursuing, Yvonne turned and ran out the door.

She knew where Alahim was going.

Although she had been against it at the time, Tarthur let Alahim and his friends play on their roof, because it wasn’t very high and there was a bush that they could jump onto when they wanted to get down. Now, she was glad he knew of the alternate escape route.

While running to meet him where she hoped he would jump, Yvonne began screaming for help. Everyone in Krendon knew each other, and the townspeople were close. It wasn’t like Tealsburg, where she had grown up. There, people were just as likely to ignore a cry for help because they were afraid that it was a trick or they were too busy. Soon she saw a few lights in the vicinity come on and some men stepped outside. “Raise the baron! There’s been an attack!” she called out frantically, hoping someone would hear her.

Rounding the side of the house, she saw Alahim out on the roof with the attacker close behind him. He jumped just as the dark elf reached her hands out, barely slipping through her fingers. Yvonne reached into the leafy bush, cracking the branches as she pulled Alahim out by the arm. The attacker jumped to the ground and landed in a crouch, then rushed for Yvonne again, this time drawing the sword that hung over her shoulder.

Yvonne paced backwards cautiously, keeping Alahim behind her. Her mother’s instinct had taken over now, making sure Alahim was unhurt was her only priority. The elf advanced and swung the blade down diagonally and then lunged straight ahead, but Yvonne leaned back and then stepped to the side as the cool steel passed within inches of her body. The elf’s sword moved

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strangely, starting out slow and then speeding up as it moved nearer to the target.

The aged blacksmith Darac, whom Tarthur had been apprenticed to long ago, was one of the first to hear Yvonne's call for help. He raced towards the elf as she turned to face him. He was carrying his blacksmith's hammer and a sword that he had hastily grabbed. Upon seeing Yvonne defenseless, he tossed the sword to her and faced the elf with his hammer.

She charged forward, swinging the sword horizontally for Darac's left shoulder. He blocked the blow but she spun around and sliced across his right thigh. He brought his hammer back towards her but she parried the blow with her sword and then jabbed her blade into his chest right next to his shoulder. She turned to go at Yvonne again as Darac staggered backwards, but now two of the baron's guards were closing in fast from the sides.

One swung his sword high and the other came in low from the opposite side. Just as Yvonne felt that there was no way the dark elf could escape, she threw her head down and jumped so that her horizontal body spun in the air between the two blades. Landing safely on her feet and hearing the clanging of more soldiers, she seemed to think better of continuing her attack. She sprinted for the edge of the forest, with the baron's soldiers hot in pursuit.

Yvonne rushed to Darac, who was lying on the ground, badly injured but still alive. She ripped a piece of her dress and held it tightly against the wound in his chest, even as she felt his blood seeping out and oozing through her fingers. Alahim stood behind her silently.

Ylila, Darac's wife, ran forward to her husband and cradled him in her arms. He was trying to speak to her, but she put her finger to his lips and kissed him softly. The old blacksmith was in pain, but he was trying not to show it. Had he been younger, he might have had a better chance, but he was now far past his prime. They were both crying now, and Yvonne had to turn away. She couldn't watch anymore.

Baron Morty came up, out of breath. "I was just awoken. Are you alright? What transpired here?"

Still in shock, Yvonne pointed to Darac. "He needs a doctor."

Morty nodded. "He's already been summoned." Krendon had no real doctors, but the barber had passable medical skills, and after being the town's only medical authority for a good four decades, he was now very experienced.

Yvonne told Morty about the attacker, mentioning that she was looking for Tarthur. Yvonne doubted that she was working alone. Even if she were caught, Tarthur could still be in great danger. "We've got to get word to

them,” Yvonne insisted. “And we’ve got to join them. I don’t feel safe keeping Alahim here.”

Morty thought for a second. “We have one Deguz pigeon, and several for Tealsburg and Breshen. That’s certainly the most expeditious method of communication.”

Yvonne agreed. Although pigeons were usually good, sometimes they were unreliable, and useless or dangerous if an enemy controlled the skies. The adult pigeons would return to where they were raised, and had been just one of the amazing discoveries that Captain Girm had made on his first voyage north. “I will write the messages myself, then. Can I borrow some of your guard to escort Alahim and me to Deguz?”

Yvonne knew it was a rather bold request. For all the baron knew, it could have been the town that was under attack and not simply Tarthur and his family. There had certainly been no love lost between Tarthur and Morty when they were younger. The two had been fierce rivals, although all that had changed shortly after the War of the Orb. Morty had developed a recurring case of massive vomiting that would last for a few hours. After living with this mysterious illness for several months, Tarthur had come in and offered to heal Morty with a powerful magic that he had recently mastered. It required Morty to stand outside for eight hours on the winter solstice wearing nothing but his undergarments, while the girls all walked by and laughed. Although he objected to the spell’s demands, eventually Morty gave in and was cured from that point onward. Tarthur and Morty had not become friends, but they had respected each other. When Baron Ercilla had passed away four years ago, Tarthur had given Morty his blessing to assume control of Krendon.

It was somewhat of an odd situation. Tarthur had been promoted to Earl of the North, a title that was created for him so that he could be the direct supervisor of the Baron of Krendon. However, he had never really exercised his power and as long as Baron Ercilla and Morty didn’t interfere in his affairs, he allowed them to run Krendon as they best saw fit. Technically, Yvonne could order Morty to loan her an escort, but asking was always preferable to ordering, as long as the request was granted.

“Certainly,” Morty said without hesitation. “What are you planning to do?”

“We must leave at first light to reach Tarthur in Deguz. I will send the pigeons out tonight.”

Morty pondered her request for a minute. “Are you sure that is wise? You will be vulnerable on the open road, and it will take you three weeks to get there, even if you hurry.”

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Yvonne shrugged. “We seem to have no other options. Besides, the road is well-traveled and should be safe in the day time. I hope that your men will find this attacker and then we will be safer.” She tried to hide the hint of doubt in her voice from Baron Morty and Alahim. That elf woman had moved so quickly, so confidently.

Morty nodded, as if the matter was settled. “Well then, we would be wise to commence preparations. I will send a detachment of guards to your house for tonight, and I will supply a half-dozen more for your journey. I’ve promised some of them a trip to Tealsburg within the next year anyway.”

Yvonne thanked the baron and collected Alahim for the short trip back inside. Neither spoke until they were within the house and away from potential eavesdroppers.

“Who was that person?” Alahim talked softly, his voice quivering. Yvonne couldn’t tell if she detected a faint accusatory tone in his voice.

“I don’t know, dear. She was looking for your father. I don’t know who she was or what she was doing, but I promise you we will find out. But I do know that you saved your mom’s life tonight. Thank you.”

Alahim seemed unaffected by her praise. “Why did she have to come to us? It’s because of father, isn’t it?”

Yvonne reached out and brought him close. It was hard for children to understand the unfairness of life. Alahim was so different from his father. Whereas Tarthur would have loved to be born into a powerful family, Alahim dreaded it. He just wanted to grow up as an ordinary boy and become an ordinary man. Some people were just born to greatness, and others were not. Yvonne was glad that everyone was different, however. It made life interesting.

She had tried to explain about their family to Alahim many times before, and although he understood on some level, Yvonne thought that Alahim really didn’t understand underneath. Everything had layers for the boy, and his favorite word was ‘why?’ Whenever she supplied an answer to his question, he always immediately wanted to know the why of the answer as well. Answers kept turning into questions over and over, until Yvonne would give up and tell Alahim to go ask his father. She was too tired for drawn out explanations that she knew wouldn’t satisfy him.

“I don’t know,” she said, pulling him even closer. It was going to be a long night.

The morning breeze gently stirred the forest, rustling through the leaves and slowly bending the branches as they swayed back and forth. Spring had arrived early. Multicolored flowers were bursting out of their buds, ready to seduce carriers of their pollen. The morning air was cool, but mild. Winter never really came to the heart of Breshen—it was always muted from the harshness of the world outside.

King Dalin stood outside his office, looking out on the elven city and contemplating the passage of time. The branches that offered him shelter moved outwards automatically as he walked out onto the balcony. He saw children playing with sticks and balls, and strained to remember the carefree times when he had played with Valena and Hano. Although he knew that they had happened, he could not remember them in the sense that he could not return to them in his mind. He could not feel as he had felt then. His life was too different now, too full of worries and projects. That his many projects were his own and not imposed on him from any outside source was no consolation.

Yet, as he surveyed the city, he knew that it was worth it. Upon assuming the elven throne, Dalin had worked tirelessly to modernize his city, and to open Breshen to the outside world. Many humans had glimpsed at least a part of the fabled tree city during their encampment in the War of the Orb, although, many had been fearful of entering. Dalin observed their fear of the unknown with great sadness. Some soldiers had died in battles later on, having been too afraid of the layers of lies and misconceptions surrounding a beautiful thing to peel them back and experience it first hand.

The last fifteen years had been a great period of openness and racial harmony that was unprecedented in recent memory. The leaders of various human-like races had always known and worked with each other, but the common citizens had remained fearful and distrustful of outsiders. Great progress had been made by opening travel routes and encouraging trade. Exchange programs were supported where citizens from one race would work for a year in the cities of another race. Not only did this promote understanding, but it helped expand and disseminate knowledge of the physical world. Military cooperation was common as well, and the mermen, humans, elves, gnomes and dwarves all effectively had one large and coordinated fighting force.

He sensed a familiar life-force as the figure who had engineered much of the closer connections of the world entered the room. Derlin had become the first non-elf ever to marry an elven princess. Elves and humans did sometimes marry, and throughout the years, many more had joined

themselves together for a much shorter time than eternity. Unfortunately, the offending elves and their offspring were often ostracized and removed from elven society, left abandoned to wander the world and find haven in one of the more accepting villages or cities. One man could not unseat a cultural tradition, but Derlin's acceptance by the elven nation was a huge step forward. Calm, understanding and intelligent, Derlin was gradually winning over even his staunchest critics. Today, however, Derlin looked flustered and unsettled.

"Your majesty," Derlin said breathlessly, bowing as he entered. Dalin nodded in acknowledgment and Derlin began his message. "I have just received an urgent pigeon from Yvonne requesting that Valena, Lily and I meet her and Tarthur in Deguz as soon as possible. They believe that Tarthur may be in danger."

King Dalin was surprised at the urgency in Derlin's voice. He must have run to see Dalin immediately after receiving the pigeon. "You may journey to meet him, but if there is danger, I would rather Valena and Lily stay here. We can protect them." Dalin was, of course, aware of the recent events concerning the reappearance of the Shade of Tivu. One of the new openness initiatives involved connecting the elven spy network with that operated by King Garkin. This had proved to be a major boon for Dalin, as the elven network was old and unreliable.

"I was hoping we could all go, your majesty. You were a valuable companion on our journey once before." It was all too true. Dalin yearned to travel freely in the world again, but his responsibilities weighed him down. Glancing down at the work spread on his massive desk as if to physically remind himself of the fact, he saw the tasks he had for the morning. He had to approve the selection of applicants for a group of five elves that were to go to Treshin to train in healing arts, find some money in his budget to buy new bowstring wax for the outpost on the northern front, and decide which three trees to allow the construction of new houses in. Although he knew he could leave the work to others, he didn't trust that they would do it the way he wanted it done.

"I'm sorry, Derlin, but I am needed here." Dalin turned his back to Derlin, once again looking out at his city. "You are a powerful man now. You have not needed my protection for some time."

Dalin could tell Derlin was crestfallen, and the room was silent for a minute. The subtle smell of the multitude of colorful and fruity flowers placed in his office filled Dalin's consciousness. Valena personally arranged the flowers each week, transporting them live from small hideaways in the forest.

Derlin spoke again. "There is one more thing. Yvonne was attacked. Her attacker was strong, but Yvonne managed to escape from her."

"Her?" Dalin asked, mildly surprised.

"Her attacker was a dark elf," Derlin said without emotion.

A barely perceptible shock rippled through Dalin, his back still turned to Derlin. "That is impossible." *This could not be!*

"Whether you say it's impossible or not, it happened," Derlin replied. "Yvonne would not lie."

King Dalin seemed to have collected himself, and then responded. "Give me some time to think about this matter and see if I may find someone able to govern if I were to leave. Go pack your things and I will let you know by nightfall."

Derlin left the elf king to his musings, silently exiting the room without noticing the mixture of anguish, excitement, hope, and guilt struggling to control Dalin's soul.

Yvonne and Alahim set out the next day from Krendon. Baron Morty had lent her eight of his personal guards, which was a generous gesture. He only had a dozen and the unidentified assailant was still at large. Each guard had his own horse and Yvonne and Alahim shared one. They were well-stocked with provisions. The horses' saddlebags carried dried meats, wine, cheese, bread, and water, and a bedroll for the night was strapped across the back of the saddle. They also had their weapons. Yvonne carried her short sword at her left side and had her crossbow as well. She usually wore the bow slung over her shoulder, but since Alahim was riding with her, she fastened the bow to her horse's right flank. Although she had always been familiar with men's weapons, she had taken a liking to the crossbow the first time she had fired one. With practice, she had developed a rapid shot that was also rather accurate. She kept a small, flat, dagger pressed tightly against the inside of her left thigh and there was one throwing knife in each of her riding boots. Alahim, for his part, was only allowed one small dagger that he kept strapped to his waist.

Their horse was Wendimede, a deep brown stallion with a black mane. Yvonne exercised her nearly every day, and she was a strong and swift galloper. The baron's men had good horses as well, although none could outrun Wendimede in an all-out sprint.

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Five of Baron Morty's men had grown up in Krendon. There was Mik, the leader, as well as Aevan, Jaag, Zak, and Grags. There were the twins, Kris and Jon from Breswick, and Ziam, an exchange soldier from Tealsburg. The nobles had recently started a custom where they sent out a few of their soldiers to serve under other nobles for a period of a year or two. Although this had been less successful than other exchange programs due to competing nobles' interests, it had still strengthened ties between leaders around the world.

They rode their horses hard throughout the first day, staying in a gallop all day long and only stopping long enough to water the horses and grab a quick bite to eat. There was no obvious sign of their attacker, but the roads were well traveled and many travelers preferred to make their way in covered wagons or with cloaks drawn tightly around their faces.

Their journey would be split into three legs. Yvonne hoped to make it to Tealsburg in six days. From there it would be eight days to Treshin and then just three to Deguz.

That night they made camp in a grove of trees right off the King's Highway. Yvonne didn't get much sleep. She kept looking anxiously at every shadow, even though the soldiers were taking turns at guard. Her near-paranoid searches were in vain, however, for their pursuer was still far away.

The pursuer was waiting confidently in the vicinity of Krendon, cool and relaxed. She was not troubled by the distance that her prey had been able to create between them. She was only interested to see where her quarry would decide to go. She did not feel them slipping away, for her steed traveled with a swiftness that could far outmatch any other creature in the Lands of Daranor.

Tarthur helped Zelin down from the wagon as Addyeen unhitched the horses and gave them over to the stablehand in charge of the library stables. Certainly, most buildings in Deguz did not have their own stables attached. A few of the major inns had them, and for the most part travelers used either one of those or one of the three public stables. However, since the library had become so popular and attracted travelers from all over the world, one of the recent additions was the magnificent stables. Visiting scholars were allowed to keep their horses there free of charge, and other visitors had to pay only a nominal fee.

The horses looked like they would very much enjoy their time there. They had not been driven particularly hard, although they had walked across nearly the entire Lands of Daranor. Tarthur, Zelin and Addyea had kept up their pace through a stop in the healing spring of Treshin, although they stayed there for only one night. Three days later, they were in Deguz.

The town was a sort of sleepy seaside community, founded centuries earlier by the legendary artist of the same name. It was said that he could create things by simply envisioning them in his mind, and he worked in any medium. If he sculpted a flower of stone, when the sun came out the flower would burst into bloom. The legend of the town's founding said that he simply painted a canvas with an image of what he believed a town should look like. The buildings all sprung into place, yet there were no people. For although he could create objects and non-human life with his brush, the artist could not create humans. Humans eventually found and colonized the city. As the buildings were already perfectly formed, the residents of Deguz were known to frequently brag that their city had always been—and still was—far ahead of the rest of the world, especially in its architecture.

Tarthur wasn't sure about the legend. It seemed like every town had some kind of dubious claim to fame, and as they frequently contradicted each other, he was certain that they couldn't all be true. Seeing the legends that had grown up about him since his defeat of the Death Lord Darhyn had helped to show Tarthur just how much truth most legends contained. He would be a much richer man if he had a gold piece for every time he met someone who disbelieved his identity. "You can't be him," they'd say, "I'm sure he was a head or so taller." Again, he would hear something like, "You can't be him, because he's always riding on a winged unicorn that can raise the dead." One time, he had almost been chased out of the village of Ruf by an angry mob who insisted that in order to prove that he was the great Tarthur of Krendon, he should sprout his wings and then shoot fire from his eyes, as "everyone knows" that's how the Great Hero defeated Darhyn in the War of the Orb.

Tarthur could not, in fact, grow wings or shoot fire from his eyes. He had never even seen a unicorn, let alone a flying one. And unfortunately, nothing but the direct intervention of the Creator himself could raise someone from the dead. However, legends did often have at least a kernel of truth. He had not technically raised the Merwizard Tustor back to life—he had just called his soul back into his body before it had had a chance to enter the Eternal Vale. He had flown with Wind Yan, and he did shoot fire from his fingertips. It was just that the truth was frequently too much for the common people to understand; it was usually easier to just make up something

plausible. Unfortunately, one could not successfully act on half-truths. That was sometimes more dangerous than not acting at all.

As they walked up to the front of the library, Tarthur couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched. He looked over at Addyea, and he could see in his eyes that he felt it too. Tarthur was about to suggest that they enter around the back instead when Artholeus burst out of the front. "Zelin, my friend!" he called out enthusiastically, bounding down the stairs to embrace the trio. This was no easy feat, for Artholeus was nearing seventy himself. Although seventy years was not old for a wizard like Zelin, this was longer than most ordinary men lived.

"Welcome!" he called out again, before the travelers had been able to respond. "Come in, come in, we have much to discuss." Tarthur hurriedly glanced around him, in case he could spy anyone watching them. He saw many people, but none of them looked suspicious. The large oaken door to the library clicked shut behind them, and Tarthur thought no more about it.

Artholeus led them through many twists and turns and into his private office. Tarthur had seen most of the library before, but he had never been in the director's office. The room felt warm and soft. The wood was worn and polished. It looked like the kind of place one could leave for years, and then return and find it undisturbed and feel like you'd never left.

There were already three large plush chairs pulled up around Artholeus's massive desk. Tarthur sank into the velvet padding as Artholeus took a seat in his own chair, facing his visitors. "First of all," he began, "how was your trip? Wait, I forget myself. May I offer you anything to eat or drink?"

Tarthur smiled. It was inspiring for him to see someone as old as Artholeus who was still able to get so excited over something that he stumbled over his own words. Tarthur and Addyea both looked to Zelin, and the old wizard cleared his throat. "Ahem, well, we have just eaten, but perhaps some warm tea will aid us if we plan to talk long into the night."

Artholeus nodded and motioned to a servant who was waiting at the door. The young woman rushed out for the kitchen.

"Our trip passed well," Zelin began, "yet we were full of anticipation for the future. The loss of Yan weighs most heavily on young Tarthur, but I too miss my old friend. I did not think that I would see the opening of the Vale come to pass in my lifetime. Then again, at one point in my life I did not think that I would see the defeat of Darhyn, nor his return."

Tarthur suddenly realized that Zelin was talking about the first defeat of Darhyn. It was amazing to sit and look at someone who had lived for

nearly four hundred years. The first time Darhyn had been defeated, he had possessed a nearly insurmountable advantage. It was only through Darhyn's tactical blunders and infighting with Queen Marhyn, his sister, that King Hana-Chan had been able to rally his troops for a final victory. Of all the stories in Daranor's history, Tarthur liked that one the best. Maybe it was because the king's men banded together and were defiant in the face of near-certain slaughter, but it probably also had a great deal to do with the fact that Tarthur had first met Yvonne at the statue in Tealsburg commemorating Hana-Chan's victory.

While Tarthur was impressed, Artholeus was ravenously devouring Zelin with his eyes. For the scholar, it was all well and good to posit theories about historical trends and corroborate them with certain pieces of evidence. They used old letters, diaries, records of battles, marriage certificates, tombstone engravings, and anything else that they could find, but the record was always incomplete. Yet here, in this study, was a living, breathing, primary source, the greatest treasure to a historian. If someone wanted to know what life was like two centuries ago, one only had to ask.

"I guess it just goes to show that whatever else we may be, none of us are prophets," Addyeen interjected, speaking for the first time. Tarthur knew that prophecy had always concerned Addyeen, ever since King Garkin, drugged and hallucinating, had proclaimed Addyeen to be the next king in front of the majority of knights and nobles of the kingdom. That had been fine for a childless king in his thirty-seventh year just going into a major war when everyone had larger things to think about, but as time wore on, Tarthur could sense the prophecy starting to eat at Addyeen more and more. King Garkin said nothing, but Tarthur could tell that he was bothered by it as well. Just before his fortieth birthday, King Garkin had given birth to a son by Queen Dalia.

Young Prince Ajani grew strong, and although Addyeen liked the boy, when Tarthur saw him regard Addyeen, he could see poison in the other's eyes. Ajani knew full well the whispered stories, and at thirteen, he was far too young to know how to use tact and hide his feelings. Although Addyeen had chosen to live in Krendon for other reasons, Tarthur sometimes questioned how much of it was because of that boy.

"Too true, too true," Artholeus agreed. "Yet, Tivu, or someone, or *something* pretending to speak for him apparently does have at least some power of prophecy. It could be that this is only a trap, although, I do not see what anyone stands to gain from this."

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“The motives of the evil ones are shrouded in secrecy,” said Zelin. “Yet, our greatest danger lies in that which we understand the least.”

Everyone nodded, thinking silently. Artholeus was the first one to speak. He went to his drawer, removed an aging scroll, and opened it on his desk, holding the ends down with some shiny brass paperweights in the shape of books. “Here is the first stanza:”

*When the powers of life shall be implored
For he that was lost to be restored
Water forged into a gate stronger than steel
To open the way, but One may reveal
A child born, three swords he must wield*

“*He that was lost*,” Tarthur began. “That must refer to Yan!” His pulse quickened and excitement spilled out into his voice.

“It does appear to refer to him,” Artholeus conceded. “*Water forged into a gate* will be the Wall of Glass that separates the Eternal Vale from the rest of the world.”

“How is glass stronger than steel?” Tarthur questioned.

Zelin spoke, carefully weighing his words. “The gate is strong because only One can enter. It’s not physically strong, but when one tries to pass through, he must first come to terms with his reflection there.”

Tarthur immediately understood. “It’s the mirror that reflects back the true self.”

Zelin nodded. “We do not really know what happens there, as we have never been able to examine someone who has tried to go through and failed. Rather, we have examined them, but they could tell us nothing, as their minds are all gone. I do not think it is so much as seeing all one’s faults that does this, but rather seeing one’s insignificance.”

“We all think that we are special, and losing that can be a huge blow to the mind,” Addyeen contributed. “It’s amorality, rather than immorality which is hardest to bear.”

“But who is this child, the One? How can he wield three swords? Does he have three hands, or is he some sort of shapeshifter?” Tarthur asked his question to everyone, but looked to Zelin for the answer.

“We must read this carefully,” Artholeus continued. “He might not wield all three swords at the same time. I think we can safely assume that the child referred to is the One, but he may no longer be a child. Here is the rest of the prophecy:”

William Pottle

*With the elemental power he will banish the dark
From this you may know him, for he bears no mark.*

Tarthur read it over in his head three times before it sank in. The tension was palpable.

“It’s talking about me, isn’t it?”

Zelin was the first to break the heavy silence. “It certainly seems to be talking about you, yes. You are the only one who has banished the dark with elemental power. If the One were only a child now, it is hard to imagine a monster like Darhyn coming back, since we are watching the gates so carefully.”

“I hope it is me,” Tarthur said without really thinking about it. “Because I couldn’t imagine putting anyone else at risk by asking them to pass through the gate.”

“What you hope is irrelevant, as the world will make its way without you.” Zelin spoke, his voice gaining a surprising hardness. “This is the first thing you must accept if you are going to stand any chance against that Wall.”

“Maybe that is why you found the Rune Sword,” Addyeen offered. “You were being prepared to face this truth all your life.” The idea certainly made sense to the rest.

The Rune Sword was dormant in its scabbard. Although he didn’t wear it, Tarthur had brought it in because he didn’t feel safe leaving it in the wagon. The blade was so ancient, Tarthur only wore it on special occasions. He had another sword for everyday use.

His other sword had been forged by the master smith Lytuoten, and was both light and strong. The flawless turquoise gem that adorned the pommel acted like a finely-tuned magergy compass—coherent beams of magical energy lit up like lightning bolts when the blade of the sword aligned with one of them. Tarthur could feel the magergy beams himself as he crossed through them, but the sword helped him locate them more precisely. And he never tired of seeing the jewel light up fully whenever he cast a spell.

One sword down, he thought. Only two more to go.

They debated on and on, analyzing every word. The more Tarthur heard about the prophecy, the more he knew inside that he was the One.

As the day was drawing to a close, the attendant reentered the room with food. Tarthur was hungry. They had eaten breakfast, but in their excitement over the prophecy had quite forgotten about lunch. The attendant set down their plates of chicken legs and *torgyu* steak. He left a basket of *nishei* bread and a flask of *papple* wine for everyone to share. *Nishei* bread

had been first baked by Queen Marhyn's army in order to sustain them during times of war. Although the army itself had wrought much suffering, since their bread was hearty and nourishing, if not tasteful, it had caught on in the lands of Daranor. However, it was still looked upon badly by those who had suffered the most at the hands of her armies. Opening up a *nishei* shop in Freeton or Ruf was a sure recipe for a quick bankruptcy. The *papple* was a cross between an apple and a pear. The sugar content had been magically increased to aid in fermentation.

Everyone began to dig in to the feast. As the attendant was lighting some lamps to cast aside the gathering darkness, Artholeus suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, Tarthur! I almost forgot. This came for you by pigeon six days ago." He fished around in his desk for a moment. "Now, where did I put it..."

Tarthur's heart rate increased. He hadn't been expecting any communications. There were only a handful of people that even knew where he was.

"Ah, here it is." Artholeus retrieved the scroll and handed it over to Tarthur.

Tarthur took the scroll warily. His pulse quickened when he saw "URGENT" scribbled across the front in Yvonne's handwriting. He tore open the wax seal holding it closed. As he read its contents, the color drained from his face:

Tarthur,

You may be in danger. Last night Alahim and I were attacked by someone looking for you. We are coming to meet you with guards by way of the king's highway. Whatever you do, be careful—someone is watching us.

Love Always,

Yvonne.

His hunger and excitement forgotten, Tarthur shot up from the table. "Our home has been attacked and Yvonne and Alahim are on their way here. I have got to go back and meet them." Tarthur was angry. He cursed silently. Artholeus had been so caught up in their search for the One that he had forgotten about Tarthur's letter.

Artholeus didn't seem to notice Tarthur's frustration. "If you are in danger, you cannot go by yourself. Take some men from the village to help you."

Tarthur turned towards the scholar and his retort was meaner than he meant it. "I can take care of myself—and my family!"

Addyeen was also up and ready. "You can, Tarthur, but I will go with you. You may need help." The way Addyeen replied, it was almost as if he feared for whoever Tarthur encountered. Tarthur had never been able to hold his temper, and if it was some kind of misunderstanding, it was unlikely that it would be sorted out before Tarthur had blasted the offending party to bits.

"I will stay here," Zelin said, tiredness apparent on his face. "But we will await your return."

Tarthur nodded his assent, but it was hard to tell if either Addyeen or Zelin's statements had actually made it through to him.

"Now," he said, turning to Artholeus once again. "Old man, is there anything else that I should know about before I leave?"

Artholeus shook his head guiltily, and Tarthur was out the door, Addyeen trailing. He flew to the stables, shoved some provisions into his saddlebag, and tore off into the night.

Return to Daranor in the sequel to DreamQuest.

ProphecyQuest

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