

Veiled in a Sunlit Haze is a fantasy novel that delights readers with the best aspects of a heroic quest, while also challenging readers to confront more philosophical ideas about the nature of power and family, loyalty and responsibility.

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Veiled in a Sunlit Haze

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Chapter 1

Askillen—the Chosen Son

Askillen stepped into his field tent and closed the flap, leaving outside the bustle of soldiers under his command. The thin material did nothing to block the noise of his men, but for a moment, Askillen could pretend that the tent gave him a space in which he could be alone and escape the burden that came with fulfilling Lord Eliphas' orders. Today, however, it seemed that pretending wasn't enough. The feeling of blissful isolation would not come, and Askillen knew why.

He had to report, and no distance of space or Realms would satisfy Eliphas as an excuse for being late.

Askillen sighed and rubbed a hand through his short, black hair. He cleared a space on the floor of the tent. He knelt, his feet together and knees widely separated, forming as close to a perfect triangle as he had been taught. He cleared his mind and felt the anticipatory tingle in his fingers as he summoned the magic.

The smile that came to him at first quickly dwindled away and his eyebrows furrowed. He searched in the rune ways until he felt it, the connection to his Lord Eliphas. He grabbed hold of it with his mind until a small circle of flickering lights materialized in the air in front of his face, waiting for his command. Everything was ready. He quickly cleared his mind of polluted and dangerous thoughts, knowing that Eliphas would surely sense them, and began his first report, letting Eliphas know that everything was going according to plan.

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Every detail was in place, like a stone neatly placed in a slingshot, ready to be catapulted violently through the air...

* * *

“In ancient times, when there were no Gods and everything was different, even the world and the Races, four men discovered by chance that they could become creators, themselves, if they destroyed what was. Thus, in time, the four men became the Four Gods and no one has ever challenged them – until now. However, even the Gods were limited in their power, for they could only create a better world if they destroyed the old. They did once, and this event is called the Sundering.

Now the Shamans and the Daimons, the Children of the God Orcalus, are challenging the existing order and the Four Gods.”

Talis paused before continuing his story. His long and wrinkled fingers straightened his white hair. The old man leaned forward for a moment, placed his left elbow on the round table to support his head, and gave a habitual tug at his white beard. He feigned a smile, producing deep lines on his face, and looked straight into the eyes of the Visitor across from him who had arrived in a spinning and hurling wind of flickering colors and symbols. In the Visitor’s eyes, Talis saw worlds. In those eyes, Talis saw his own face.

The old man had, for his entire lifetime, preserved his angst in his heart where he could control it, own it. He showed it to no one, not even the Four Gods who owned him. His power was leaving his heart, as if his blood were drying in a

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dripping wound, and the angst grew into his fingertips and down into his legs. He shut his eyes for a moment. His wrinkled hands, marked by a landscape of dark-blue rivers, clenched the old wood of the chair.

Talis looked like a beggar, with his ragged beard and shabby clothes. Perhaps he was now almost begging for his life that the Visitor had come to take. Talis needed to tell his story before he could begin his Flight of Souls. He needed to make some sense out of his life and understand all that he had done. Most importantly, he needed to stall his own approaching demise—for, who knew? Perhaps one could even bargain with Death.

However, he could not stall forever. Talis took a breath and continued. The Visitor listened with interest, for the story was about fate. Moreover, Death, Talis knew, is nothing if not fate's ultimate instrument.

"Askillen was always very descriptive in his reports to his Lord, Eliphas. In that way, he distanced himself from what was happening. By glorifying their actions, it was easier to see them as good, serving a greater purpose. The reports revealed much, as you will hear, of the wickedness in the face of racism, patriotism, and ongoing power play of the Shamans and the Daimons. A power play that sowed the seeds of corruption in the other Races as well."

"I wonder what Lord Eliphas made of all this, himself. Born to a modestly wealthy family, Eliphas had, from childhood, received a good, but hard, education in the expansionary Shaman classics. He entered the service of the College at only eighteen, and served on many diplomatic missions before he gradually came to absolute power. The College was a group of thirteen Cardinals, founded by Lord

Eliphas himself, with a shared interest in the people, the socio-economic development, and political and military affairs. Eliphas had proclaimed the foundation of this body a victory of a common and democratic rule of the Shaman people, but unofficially, he used it as a tool of legitimization for his ruling power. The College thus appeased some of the fiercest critics of Eliphas' de facto absolutism and war mongering."

"The College was also the clergy of the city of Sha Elilos, the proud Shaman capital, and the Cardinals were assigned duties now and then—all in Eliphas' interest, of course. Eliphas was the kind of person who always thought in tactics, and always considered each word carefully before he said anything. On one side, he was warm and extroverted and perhaps even sympathetic and charming, and thus, he attracted people. However, at the same time, he was a perfectionist and dominated those he attracted; he always considered his opinion or tactic better. Thus, he pushed people away, but he was too selfish and narrow-minded to ever realize why or see it happen before it was too late. This personality evolved and became more and more entrenched, and he spent more and more time in his private, secret room. No one, not even his little family, was allowed to enter."

"Eliphas had two major projects during his life. One was to create immediate and absolute power with a mighty army that answered to no one but himself, not even the Four Gods; the other was to have a family in harmony."

"Both projects were created with family blood on his hands."

"The reports from Askillen to Eliphas are a key to understanding change during these troubled days, but one thing they never could reveal was the level of madness the

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world had come to. This story is told as I remember it. But, as each event holds many sides, so does this story."

Chapter 2

Evil on the Realms

Lord Eliphas' Chosen Son remembered his chilling orders very well: "Wipe them out. Spare no one, save for those worth taking for slaves. Surround the village and destroy it."

Askillen was to annihilate the people outside Shaman control. He was nothing but a messenger, delivering the Shaman Lord's message of death and destruction.

Askillen's stallion stomped restlessly and pounded its hooves into the ground. Askillen dug his heels into the horse's flanks and rode with three banner men following him to the entrance of the tunnel leading out of Sha Elilos, their proud city. He reined in his stallion and faced his army.

"Unfurl the banners!" Askillen commanded. "Sound the horn!" Soon, the red banners rippled in the wind and the horn blew, making the earth ring. As Askillen unsheathed his sword and raised it high above his head, the stallion whinnied and reared. The army marched off.

Askillen repeated the words of his Lord as he led his army to battle, and soon they all disappeared into the dark tunnel.

Rise, you fellow Shaman, to a common cause.

Rise, and do not lie idle again before that enemy is vanquished.

Hunt them down like the dogs they are.

For we will not be defeated.

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Not now, not ever.

The army of Shaman soldiers and the Chosen Son rode aggressively on horseback out of the tunnel. They rode determined into the sunlight and into the Realm, into the countryside where the yeomen and villains lived, where the Humans lived.

This part of the Realm was Shaman land and in Shaman land, there were no walled towns, for they had long ago come under Shaman control and ceased to exist. Now, only scattered hamlet communities and villages existed in their hope of being overlooked by the Shamans' power, a power that increasingly focused its aggressive righteousness in a narrow and blind crusade.

The vast army moved down the hillside and into the hot desert that was the demarcation between the Shaman and Daimon land that the two tribes had long ago decided with a cynically and arbitrary application of a pen to a map. The Shamans and Daimons didn't cross the demarcation line, however tempted to do so every waking second. Both sides had often argued to simply make a wall of the demarcation line once and for all. However, the construction of a wall would require them to cooperate, the one thing the Shamans and the Daimons could never do. Therefore, neither had ever summoned the will to do so.

It took two days to reach the farmlands and open pastures, two days of sweat and toil, sand and sun. When the army finally reached the borderline of the hamlets, it split into many sub-units, each of a hundred Shaman soldiers on horseback. Askillen led one of the units into battle.

Askillen was secretly pleased that his mother would not witness this slaughter.

* * *

“Get up, son. It’s time.”

Ruarc opened his sleepy eyes to see his father bending over his bed. His father, Roan, looked down with his mild, brown eyes. Ruarc could see a crooked smile spreading through his thick beard. “You are always so tired in the mornings, son. Why do you not do as I tell you and hit the hay earlier in the evenings as we do?”

“Because I like evenings better than mornings. It is the way I am. Really, you and mother are to blame, for you made me.”

Roan laughed and rolled his eyes. “Come on, lad, breakfast is waiting.”

Slowly, still half-asleep, Ruarc climbed out of bed, reached for his leather pants, his shirt, and the vest that rested on a rough stool nearby, and followed his father into the living room. His mother was already up milking the cows in the stalls, he reckoned. Together, father and son devoured a hearty meal of two loaves of white bread, a piece of cheese, a mug of fresh milk, and a pint of beer.

“So, what is the plan today, father?” Ruarc asked with his mouth full of bread and cheese.

“Big plans today. Wait and you will see.”

Ruarc took a slurp from his mug of milk and mumbled in response, “Nothing I haven’t already done before, I am sure.”

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“I heard that, but listen. I know times are not easy, but I promise you, one day it will all change. Come on, we have to get going now.”

The two went outside the building, each man with an axe slung over his shoulder.

Ruarc and his family lived together with a handful of other families in a small hamlet community. Most in the hamlet were farmers, making their livings sharing the pastures and cultivating the land. Only Ruarc’s family lived by felling trees and chopping wood from early morning to late evening. The hamlet survived well, with everyone sharing the land and the commons, where Ruarc’s family also had a few goats, sheep, cows, and crops. From the commons, they also collected the firewood and hunted rabbits and such. If one family’s hunting or crops failed, another family shared. The cows and goats gave meat, milk, and cheese, and the sheep not only fertilized the land, but they also fed and clothed the families. In that way, the yeomen produced collectively in an organized form. Everyone depended on everyone else to survive in difficult times like these, which gave the hamlet the feel of a large, but close-knit, family. Tomorrow was market day, so all in the hamlet worked their businesses all day to make it in time. Ruarc had a good family, though they worked hard almost every day to survive, and though he was sometimes a bit tired of the physical routines, especially in the mornings. Today, the sky was azure blue. The sun shone down, heating the air, and more importantly, drying the trees. Father and son walked side by side. Soon, they were inside the forest, looking for the best trees to take down.

“Here’s a good one. You start with this tree, Ruarc. I’ll look for a few more.”

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“Sure, father, go ahead. I’ll take this tree down, if that was your big plan,” Ruarc said, smiling.

“No, no, the big plan is to be revealed tonight. Just wait and see. You won’t be disappointed.”

Roan left. Ruarc examined the tree trunk, deciding where to make his cut so as to best dictate where the tree would fall. He made his choice, heaved his axe, and cleaved into the tree with a practiced, powerful stroke. The air above him exploded in a cacophony of shrieks and wing-beats. Ruarc let go of the axe, leaving it jutting from the side of the tree trunk as he instinctively ducked. A flock of ravens, shrouded within the tree’s canopy, protested the disturbance of their resting place. The birds flapped wildly, jeering and cursing at him. Ruarc raised an arm in defense as one of the birds swooped down to strike at him with its talons. “Perhaps there was a nest in this tree,” he thought.

Then, for no reason Ruarc could discern, the flock departed as one, in a chaotic mass of black bodies writhing through the sky. Away, away. “Strange,” Ruarc thought, as he stood. He worked the axe back out of the tree trunk and took another stroke.

The big tree shook and threw down leaves with each blow. After a time, Ruarc stopped to catch his breath. Even though he was a broad-shouldered man with arms the size of his legs, felling a tree was very hard.

He wondered what plan his father had made for tonight, and hoped it included ale, roasted boar, and the neighbor girls. He looked up from the tree trunk to the canopy overhead. His eyes fell on a flock of ravens that suddenly took flight, shrieking and cawing. Ruarc hesitated and searched the

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branches at the top of the tree for a moment. Deciding it was nothing, he took a good, firm grip on his axe and was just about to resume his work when he heard his father's cry.

"Run, lad! Run into the forest!"

Ruarc loosened his firm grip on his axe and looked in the direction of his father's voice. He couldn't see him, but the approaching violent sounds were a complete shock. He could hear horse riders, and felt a danger coming closer and closer.

"Run, Ruarc! Now, son!"

Ruarc heard twigs cracking and horses' hooves pounding into the ground.

Not far away, Roan fought for his life, trying to keep his attackers away from his son. The riders were just behind him now, almost within reach. Their skin was covered with flaring runes. Roan wielded his axe, buying time for his son. The soldier leaped back and the blow glanced off and hit a branch. Roan yanked the axe out of the branch and lunged forward again, swinging his axe in an upward arc to gut the soldier from crotch to chest. But before the blow landed, he was struck by a bolt of magic that cast him violently backward, hurling him into the dirt.

Confused, and with a twisted face, Ruarc heeded his father's warning and ran with all his strength. As he ran, a rush of fear surged through him.

"Run! I'll hold them off, Ruarc," he heard his father behind him.

Grimacing and grunting, Roan got back on his feet and stepped forward, even though he was outnumbered and

defeated. In a last attempt to buy more time for his son, he coaxed a burst of strength from his arms, swinging his heavy axe from side to side, attempting to crush the chests of as many soldiers as possible.

The horses snorted and stamped in the battle noise and confusion, and another Shaman fell with a cry as the axe sliced open his chest. Then, a roaring fireball erupted from one of the Shaman's empty hands and plunged into Roan's body. Roan fell to the ground with a thud, crushing the back of his head on a stone.

"Finish him. I'll get the boy." One of the Shamans knelt by Roan, closing his nerveless right fist around the handle of his axe. The woodsman was not dead yet, each breath more laboured and raspy than the one before. The Shaman drew a knife and shoved it into Roan's chest. Roan gave a great shudder as he breathed his last.

Ruarc ran, clutching tightly to his axe, not into the forest as he was told, but back to the hamlet, back home to save his mother. As he came out of the forest and into the commons behind the hamlet, he was nearly blinded by a heavy, thick smoke. Yet, he could make out maybe a hundred riders, men whose skin was covered with flickering Runes, raining fire and death upon the hamlet. His neighbor's cottage was on fire. Two bodies lay on the ground, burning, filling the air with the smell of burned flesh.

By now, the riders behind him had caught up with him, and he knew he was surrounded by some higher power. Moreover, he knew he should have heeded his father's warning, but he just couldn't abandon his mother. Ruarc turned around. One of riders was a handsome young man with short, dark hair. Their eyes met. Ruarc readied himself to fight.

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The young man faced Ruarc and said, "You should have heeded your father's warning and saved yourself. A pity he died in vain. Do not do something stupid now. You are surrounded by a higher force, but your life can be spared. Drop your axe. There is no reason for you to share the fate of your old man." The man, without taking his eyes away from Ruarc, and without flinching, said, "Take him. He will be our prize from this hamlet. Kill the rest. Spare no one."

Thinking of his mother inside the cottage, Ruarc moved to with a tight and fearless grip on his axe. But a light of hurling winds and flickering symbols left the young man's hands and struck Ruarc, knocking the rage out of him. There was no time for tears, as the paralyzing magic worked its way into his system, stinging and burning. He caught a last glimpse of death in the form of melting fireballs and lightning arrows that the other soldiers sent into his family's house. He heard a last frantic and terrifying scream from his mother, as death was brought to her home, to her nest.

Askillen and a unit from his army sacked the hamlet, burning it to the ground along with its inhabitants. This dirty business was Askillen's important mission, and he had succeeded without flinching. The other units reported equal success in destroying the surrounding hamlets and villages, and taking prisoners for the Shaman workforce.

Askillen remembered the words of Eliphas, "Every soul should be subject to the higher power, and there is no power but of the Shaman Lord. The power established by the Shaman Lord stands, and whoever resists this power resists the ordinance of the Lord. And they that resist shall receive to

themselves damnation. But whoever obeys the ordinance shall receive praise and reward.”

The words lingered in his head in a sickening way. Askillen was not proud of his little battle. It was dirty. Under his command, his soldiers had killed many completely innocent villagers and farmers – women, children, and livestock alike. It was at Lord Eliphas’ pleasure, but still, Askillen had given the orders.

Askillen had killed the man in the woods who had tried to warn his own son. He knew he had taken a father from a son, just as his own father had been taken away from him when he was only five years old. He regretted it had come to this. Had the man simply put down his axe instead of slaying a rider, Askillen would not have killed him, but taken him prisoner like his son. He did not want to take away any father from any son, if he could help it. But as long as he was obeying his Lord so loyally, there was no chance he could avoid circumstances such as this.

Askillen did not want praise and reward on his return. In fact, he hoped his mother would not know. Still, he did it with unquestioned, rigid loyalty. He was the Son—if not by blood—of the Shaman Lord. But he was ashamed of his arts, for he had neither spared the humble nor warred down the proud enemy. He had not even imposed the Shaman ways, for there was no one left for them to be imposed on. He had brought death on earth. These were his arts.

The army assembled at the arranged rendezvous point and began the long march home, through a landscape of burned and destroyed crops, hamlets, and livestock. The Shaman army knew there would be a festival in their honor when they arrived in Sha Elilos bringing news of victory. The

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army marched along the steep cliffs toward the entrance to Sha Elilos, toward the Arch of Triumph that marked the main gate. People were already out, waiting to wave at the returning army, at the heroes who had fought a battle and won. Men, women, children, and elderly alike rushed out on the streets to cheer and throw flowers at them, as if the army had saved them from evil itself.

The Lord of the Shamans emerged on a balcony raised high above street level. His eyes shone, and he stretched out his arms as if he were trying to embrace them all as his children. As the riders approached the balcony, his eyes met Askillen's. Askillen shot Eliphas a grim nod. Lord Eliphas saluted the returning army, ignoring Askillen's gesture.

Later, a hundred men and a few women gathered around a grand, long table set with a red silk tablecloth, plates of ivory, glasses of crystal, and the finest silverware. In bowls, was a soup of lobster and cream, spiced with cinnamon, lemongrass, tomato, and honey. Strong and spicy red wine filled the glasses. A toast was proposed and the glasses were raised. Shortly after the meal began, Lord Eliphas stood up, interrupting the conversation among the prominent guests.

"My dear Cardinals, honored guests and officers, my thanks to the Shaman army that has so convincingly showed the world who is to rule. This battle is only the beginning. Greater battles, greater than any can possibly imagine, will soon find their places in the history books. A toast to my loyal son, Askillen, and a toast to victory!"

All rose, glasses met glasses, looks met looks, and all those around the table saluted their Lord. Eliphas smiled. Askillen looked down. His mother, Anaïs, saw him do so.

Askillen's thoughts turned to his next mission, due to start on the morrow, and he thought of what new sins his Lord had masterminded for his loyal son to carry out. Again, he thought about the two tree-fellers in the forest, father and son. The youth could have been himself, except for the accidents of their respective births. Cynically, and in cold blood, he had killed the youth's father. He had done what his Lord had expected of him, what he was schooled in and trained for. Nothing more. Nothing less. The words, "nothing less" lingered on in his raging conscience, for if he had had the will, he could have done something less.

His men had sent fireballs into their house. He had not known she was in there, the boy's mother. Maybe the others had known. It was too late, but Askillen remembered her scream, as she surely must have burned terribly to death. He remembered the son's ruddy, wet eyes of fear and hate. He had taken the son prisoner and brought him back here as a spoil of war. The boy—no doubt only living to see the death of Askillen, or, in his place, any other Shaman who was convenient—would now work himself to death in the mines along with the other slaves.

Askillen was suddenly aware that everybody around the table was looking at him.

"Is something the matter, my son?" Eliphas asked in a way that irritated Askillen, for he knew his father did not expect or want to hear an honest answer.

"No, of course not, my Lord. I was only thinking of my mission tomorrow."

Eliphas glued his eyes to Askillen's, as if sensing or trying to read his emotions. "Are you ready for it?" The look also irritated Askillen.

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“Yes, my Lord. I am ready. More than ever,” he said, hoping his eyes did not betray his lingering and growing misgivings.

“Good, for much now depends on your will and loyalty. My dear Cardinals and guests, and my son, Askillen, whom I have chosen to lead the first move on our way to victory, I owe you my greatest thanks and respect. In return, you owe me absolute loyalty. Nothing less.”

The words burned in Askillen’s ears.

“My dear son, the finest Rune Transport has been prepared for your journey. Use it with care. A last toast to our people and a quick toast to the downfall of the Daimons. Spare them not, my friends! Perhaps not even the flying and the humble.” Eliphas flashed a broad smile that revealed his white teeth to Askillen.

Anais, Askillen’s mother, had once spoken to him of war as mental turmoil, as a battle between the flesh and the dictates of the spirits. In particular, Askillen recalled one thing that Anais had told him many times, almost as a mantra. He remembered his mother’s passion, the quick gestures of her hands while she spoke. He remembered the sparks in her eyes that, more than anything else, convinced him this was her most important lesson.

“It is interesting that Rune Magic, for all its amazing power, cannot heal what it destroys.”

She had heaved a grim sigh that Askillen recognized whenever he said something that worried her.

He still remembered how she had taken a long pause before turning her attention to him again, as if she had needed

time for reflection on how to address this difficult and tender issue. Her eyes revealed that she admired him.

“You surely are beginning to turn into a grown man with your own ambitions and dreams. But I wish your father—your real father, I mean—were here to give inspiration as opposed to that given by Eliphas, and at the same time, I am afraid of teaching you other ethics and ideas, because it is a clear violation of Eliphas’ instructions. I don’t want to lose you, son, as we both have lost a father and a husband.”

Askillen knew the reason for her fear. Eliphas’ threat had been absolutely clear. From a hiding place, Askillen had witnessed how Eliphas had taken a far too firm a grip on her wrist and how Eliphas had pulled her close, locking eyes with her, his warm breath flowing over her as he spoke. “I love my family, which is you, and my Chosen Son, but if you cheat me or stray from my politics, I will not hesitate a second to take your son away from you.” Askillen had stayed hidden for a long time. Even now, Eliphas’ dark words were fresh in Askillen’s mind. If Eliphas detected the smallest disloyalty and opposition, what would he be capable of? Yet, Anaïs pushed different thoughts into Askillen’s mind, ideas that did not mesh with Eliphas’ view of the world. He remembered her words as she had spoken about their power in a philosophical way.

When Anaïs first presented that lesson, Askillen had only looked puzzled, as if not being certain whether it was a trick question or a serious one demanding a serious reply. In his mother’s eyes, he saw no irony or deceit as he was used to from Eliphas, only love and worry.

At last, Askillen replied, “One day, my Lord took me secretly outside our city, to a small hamlet. ‘To teach me

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something,' he said." Anaïs listened carefully, narrowing her eyebrows slightly. "On our arrival, Eliphas made the Runes come alive, and with his bare hands and words, he formed a small fire inside his palm. The flame grew, and the heat became more intense. Soon the small fire had become an inferno, a powerful fireball. Yet, he held it in full control between his two palms. He cast the fireball into the houses. The cracking fire and the black fumes almost covered the smell of burned flesh and the screams of the people inside. He said to me that to carry out his will and become his Chosen Son, I had to watch and learn first. Then, we came back to the city and Eliphas went into his room where he kept all his secrets."

Askillen's mother opened her mouth in shock and disbelief. Then, she gritted her teeth and let go of her desire to say what she was really thinking. She placed her hands firmly on his shoulders and looked deep into his eyes. "What did you think about this?"

"It made me feel powerful and sad at the same time."

"Our Rune Magic has many amazing abilities, but one thing it fundamentally lacks is the ability to heal. Just like the Lord lacks the ability to make peace. Remember this, son; there is no pride in war, especially not by warring down innocent people. War is, in essence, a mental turmoil, a chaos where common rule and law are absent. It is an ugly battle between the flesh and the dictates of the spirits. Our magic, with its tremendous power, makes war very easy. When Eliphas brings you up and schools you in our Rune Magic, always remember there is an evil side attached to it. If you cannot control this evil of our magic, then you have lost your values, morality, and integrity. Our crusade against the other Races, even the Daimons, reflects that our high ideals are besmirched by

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cruelty, greed, and narrow self-righteousness. Our long conflict with the world is nothing more than a long act of intolerance in the name of our own Race and our God Orcalus.”

“But Orcalus wants the Shamans to be victorious.”

“Does he?” Anaïs asked. “How do you know?”

“From sermons by the Cardinals, of course.”

“They are only men, Askillen. Has Orcalus spoken of this war to you, yourself?”

“No,” Askillen admitted.

“Really, the Daimons and the Shamans are not so different. At least, not at the starting point of our creation. According to the books, Orcalus created one single Race, which he merely called Orcalus’ Children. This Race had the seeds of both magics in it – but factions within it caused that Race to split itself into two tribes, the Shamans and the Daimons. The two tribes went their separate ways, both geographically – although settling on the same Realm – and in the study of magic. The rune-studiers became the Shamans, and the elementalists became the Daimons. In time, each side lost interest and knowledge in the magic of the other, out of old bitterness against the other tribe. However, we share the same God, we have both concentrated our energy on magic, and neither of us ever develops anything revolutionary. We both have warmongering Lords with a desire to take over all the Realms. We share the same bloodline. But over the years, we have each taken our paths and changed in different ways. Today, we are more different than alike, I think; however, essentially, the same Race. Still Orcalus’ Children. There is much reckless hate between us that I do not understand.”

Askillen thought for a moment. “You mean, the Cardinals are lying?”

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“I mean,” his mother answered, “You must consider not only what they say, but why they say it. The same goes for Eliphas.”

His mother taught him many things in lessons she took pains to keep secret from Eliphas, not always with success. However, as Askillen grew into manhood, he had begun listening with more interest and didn't think the Rune Magic was so amazing anymore. Perhaps, that had something to do with Anaïs feeding him with stories of how his birth father, Thoram, had dreamed of changing the Shaman ways, their customs and traditions, the legal system, and everything else that formed and shaped Shaman culture and society. Thoram had said the Shaman ways were all written down in a book, one Askillen had never seen. Askillen had always wondered if maybe that was why his father had disappeared.

* * *

“It all began long before Askillen's birth,” Talis said to his visitor. “Anaïs was only nineteen years old when she'd been given a seat in the powerful College. She had done very well and earned respect among the people, and from Lord Eliphas, and moved up to become a Cardinal. Thoram already held a seat at the time. He was some ten years older than Anaïs, and already one of the most trusted Cardinals; he stood very close to Eliphas.”

“The two lovers discussed politics and ethics. Thoram revealed to Anaïs that he hoped to find a way to make the Rune Magic more peaceful one day. Thoram deeply believed that his Race was incompetent in two major ways: in the art of

healing, and in ethical values. Thoram and Anaïs developed their ideas and values into a more coherent and written idea, 'Law of Shaman Morals and Ethics—The Foundation of a New Shaman Rule.' This was the course on which he set, but it was powerfully dangerous; Eliphas would never tolerate it. Having written it all down, they knew they had to keep it hidden.

"Thoram's and Anaïs' relationship grew close. After a year, Anaïs could feel the change inside her. With proud, wet eyes, she told Thoram the news. Intoxicated with happiness and gripped by a surge of excitement, they made their first fatal mistake. They decided to reveal some of their thoughts to Eliphas, to work the ideas slowly into his heart.

"Some months later, when Thoram broke the news to Eliphas about the pregnancy, he felt immediately uneasy. Lord Eliphas' eyes shone with jealousy, and anger flared across his face. But Thoram could not stop himself. He also felt compelled—perhaps Eliphas would feel the same rush of excitement—to explain their idea of changing the Rune Magic and Shaman ethical standards. Eliphas turned his back to Thoram, but Thoram could see his clenched hands and white knuckles from behind. Thoram realized his mistake—that Eliphas had feelings for Anaïs too, and that, helpless to change Anaïs' feelings for Thoram, he was bound to directly oppose whatever Thoram put forward. Had Thoram kept quiet about the baby, maybe it would have been different, but the damage was done."

"Eliphas broke off the meeting, and Thoram was sent out in the cold. But since Thoram was one of the highest-ranking officers in the army and a highly respected member of the College, the Shaman Lord puzzled like mad over how to

solve the dilemma he now faced: how to get Thoram far away from him without risking his own reputation.

“A week later, Anaïs gave birth to a baby boy she named Askillen, which means ‘hope,’ hope for a better world and a better life than she, Thoram, and many others had had.

“Askillen was the son Eliphas needed, and his birth only deepened the rift between Thoram and Eliphas. Eliphas maneuvered to force Thoram to choose between being a father and serving in the College. However much Thoram missed his past political and military duties appointed to him in the College, he gradually took his new life as a father more seriously, and spent many hours every day with Askillen, playing and walking together, teaching him.”

“Thus, Thoram was still about in the land, but had shrunk into anonymity. Being opportunistic, Eliphas saw this and quickly decided to make his long-desired move. Officially, he regretted having lost one of his best men to the duties of family, but privately, he celebrated. Eliphas conjured up a mission Thoram could not refuse. He challenged Thoram to find evidence that a new kind of ethics and politics could work in real life, promising to give it his most sincere consideration, should Thoram manage the task.

“Never having abandoned his own formulated ethics and ideas, Thoram’s eyes first sparked fire and he eagerly agreed, never seeing Eliphas’ true motivation. Near his departure, Anaïs begged him to stay, feeling Eliphas’ true scheme, and feeling that Thoram’s dedication to this mission went beyond simple matters of personal and professional comfort. She tried everything, but nothing could change his decision. He kissed her farewell, promising he would return with new ideas to a changed world.”

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“She never saw Thoram again.”

“So,” Talis explained, “Askillen lost his biological father at the age of five, and this, in combination with him being raised and trained thereafter by both his mother and Eliphas, surely formed his personality in many conflicting ways. Maybe none of the four ever forgave the other, as they all did something that was painful to one another, and with Thoram suddenly gone, much of the problem could never be confronted or solved. Askillen often wondered why his biological father had not fought more strongly against leaving. What reason was so strong that Thoram chose it over his family? Anaïs later hinted that Thoram was an idealist and was manipulated by Eliphas. These thoughts made Askillen easy to manipulate. Deep inside him, a wish to, one day, meet his father again bubbled in his heart with its own little life.”

“Not one word ever came from Thoram, no letters of explanations, not even excuses . . . nothing. Over time, Askillen changed from blaming his father for wanting to change the Shaman way, to being curious about how it could be done, knowing the restrictions. Now, grown up, Askillen was the instrument of his Lord’s will, bringing destruction and death to the Daimons. His actions would shake the foundation of Thoram’s and Anaïs’ dream.”

Veiled in a Sunlit Haze is a fantasy novel that delights readers with the best aspects of a heroic quest, while also challenging readers to confront more philosophical ideas about the nature of power and family, loyalty and responsibility.

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