

Chapter 3



Galba appeared to the group gathered inside her circle in a flash of pure white light. They had been plucked up from all over the world to be gathered to this place for one final task before they could return to their lives. One task which no one really wanted to do, but had come to understand they had to do if they wanted to return to the normalcy of their former existence.

So all the mercenaries who had been present at The Master's arrival, sans Cadrissa, had been summoned to Galba to meet the being to whom they had to honor this final obligation.

Joined by two priests of Asorlok and a messenger of Endarien, they stood fast inside the eldritch stone circle named after its inhabitant. A brief reintroduction was all they were afforded before the brilliant pulse of light of Galba's appearing swallowed everything around them. When it subsided each tried to move, but found themselves transfixed with the transcendent person of Galba hovering above them.

A gray, clinging, long sleeved robe outlined her firm, lithe frame, allowing for a small sporting of cleavage, and stopping halfway down her calf where delicate feet of alabaster cast dangled above the ground. Though her dress was rather plain and unadorned, her face more than made up for the simplicity of garb. Smooth and clear as porcelain her skin told of a youthful manner, which seemed almost eternal. Eyes as deep and green as the leaves of a grape vine sang of hidden depths and mysteries residing behind them – a secret collection of insight none living had ever seen or known. These eyes were gems of shimmering light, a radi-

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ating effervesce adding richness to her silky red serpentine locks slithering around her head in a wind only she could feel.

“*You’re Galba?*” was all that Rowan could say or think when he looked up at the spectacle of the woman before him. Because he was so overwhelmed with her presence he had also spoken in his native, Nordic tongue.

Ruby lips parted into a smile that was at once inviting, comforting and attractive to the youth. “I am.” Her tone was gentle like the words of a mother to a son and also in the Nordic language.

“Now that you are all here, we can begin.” Galba slowly descended to the grass as she turned her words to Telborous.

The others still couldn’t say anything – didn’t dare, as to what she meant by a ‘beginning’. Instead, they merely looked at each other in silent wonder at what was going on before them. When it was clear that the others shared her same concern as to figuring out just what was going on and they didn’t seem to be getting any answers...yet. Clara turned toward Gilban, who stood emotionless and still beside her.

“What’s going on here Gilban?”

For a moment the old priest was silent. The dark enigma plaguing him since his wait outside the sanctuary doors on Rexatious had only grown stronger. It now even seemed more physical in nature; a dark claw that gripped his heart attached to a severed arm that plummeted into his stomach where it’s bitter root was starting to make him feel sick. His head was still clear though...for the moment. That too had been clouding over as more of the enigma moved into his mind, preventing him from seeing too much by aid of Saredhel. He assumed that in time he would lose all lucidity and still never know why. It was an irksome matter the elder priest tried to take in stride.

“I have seen many things – and not all have come to pass as they were first seen – for the future is always in motion, diverted and directed by actions in the present. However, *this* I did not see.” Gilban answered Clara, but continued to stare ahead at Galba as if his sightless eyes could actually see her glorious personage before

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him. There was something about the mysterious woman he had to know...something important, but also something eluding him...

"I don't like this Gilban." Clara made a scan about the people gathered and saw they shared her sentiment as well on various levels. "We've been led here by things outside of our understanding; visions and strange coincidences that just happen to bring us all together to this one spot. I don't like being led around on a leash." She also didn't like the fact that Gilban *hadn't* seen this event. If *he* was unable to make sense of all this then they stood little chance of making any understating on their own.

"So what is going on here?" Clara's face turned stern as she took in the alabaster visage of Galba. She might as well go to the source if it was all which remained for her to get an answer.

"True, you have all been used to this greater end and though it might anger you, it is for the best of intentions." Galba drew closer to the elven maid.

"I don't care what the intentions were. You used all of us, took our lives as sport for your own amusement and I'm sure the rest of us gathered, would like to know why." Clara caught a glimpse of herself in Galba's green orbs as she spoke. She marveled at how small, almost trivial her reflection seemed in such a massive expanse of green – like a pebble in a sea of grass. In that moment her rage, though it had once seemed important and right, fluttered away from her – ebbing out of her body like dross from silver.

"She has told us some of the reason," Cracius offered Clara. "But I think it best to hear her tell it to you four so we are all informed of what is happening."

"Where is Cadrissa though? I was told she would be here." Rowan finally managed to get his thoughts back together in his head, even speaking Telborous as the rest of those gathered did. "Panthor told me that—"

"Cadrissa is safe and on route as we speak." Galba's pleasant face took in the young Nordican with a serene aura that made the young knight just want to wash away into such a presence if somehow possible and simply be no more...

“But—” The knight shook his head as if awaking from a day-dream and tried to get his say in once more, like someone trying to get their head above water before they plunged under again...but to little effect.

“First you must listen. All of you must listen to what is now expected of you and why you are here. Far from being playthings as some of you might think you have been,” Galba’s gaze swept by Clara for a moment. “you have all been chosen as champions of a great and important cause. All of you have a purpose and a role to play. Some greater than others.” Galba peered down before she moved on toward the center of the circle. For a moment, the green gaze of the woman weighed heavily upon Hoodwink. The goblin’s yellow eyes grew wide and he swallowed hard at the implications of her words. He didn’t like this already. Was his great purpose, the one Gilban had told him he had, really *that* great?

The green creature broke out in a cold sweat.

“All of you have been chosen to hold back The Master from claiming his prize.” Galba continued. “He comes here to attempt to gather the laurels of godhood. He must not be successful in doing so.”

“Godhood?” Clara was more than a little astonished.

“Yep.” Vinder nodded slowly. “Madness I know...and we’re all a party to it would seem. I still don’t think he can do it, no matter what these priests might think.”

“So you think he could succeed then?” Rowan asked Tebow.

“Anything is possible,” the older priest responded dryly.

“He comes here with the aid of a patron who he is yet to be made aware of, but will in time. With that aid he is almost certain to succeed unless you stand in his way.” Galba stopped her movement to hover at the exact center of the circle; the others now arrayed in a semicircle between her and the outer ring of stones.

“Stop him *how*?” Rowan crossed his arms. This was going to be an interesting explanation he was sure. When they fought him before in the ruins he had easily defeated them, nearly killed them

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if he hadn't left when he did. How do you fight against *that*, let alone win?

"Now you're getting the picture aren't you?" Dugan smiled at the youth. "It's a fight to the death from what I reckon." There was no mirth in the Telborian's smile, however. It seemed as emotionless as the grave.

"A fight to the *death*? But this isn't even *my* fight." Rowan voiced up. "I came here to save Cadrissa from this Master – and that is what I intend to do, not defend some circle of rocks from a fool trying to claim godhood." His Nordic blood was rising. This went past Clara's previous apprehensions and premonitions about what they now were told was a reality and had moved into something far more serious. He wasn't about to fight to the death for this entity, no matter how much he felt enthralled by her charms.

Clara gripped his arm. "Calm down," She whispered in his ear. "You might want to watch your temper around her. The same power I could feel coming off the stones before we came in here is coming from her as well."

"I don't care who she is." Rowan shook his arm free. "I'm not going to be someone's puppet in a war that isn't even mine in the first place. I may have been duped to get this far, but I'm not about to be used again. I have a duty to my Knighthood first and to Cadrissa second. Nothing comes between these two priorities."

"On the contrary," Galba raised her hands.

Suddenly, the earth beneath them grumbled and moaned as it shook about in wild tantrum. Each did their best to hold fast to their balance, but had a difficult time with it.

"This war is universal and effects you all." The shaking increased as Galba rose up on top a mound of dirt which had begun to jut up from the earth below like an unwatched cauldron boiling over. As the mound rose, it shed its dirt shroud, revealing a ten-foot tall, white marble dais on whose top rested a majestic throne, which looked like it could have seated a giant quite comfortably. This throne was carved of solid white marble as well, but

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was covered in diamonds, rubies, emeralds, onyx, peridot, lapis lazuli and pearls.

Every inch that could be puckered with these precious stones of various sizes was. Besides the gems, the rest of the throne itself was rather simple looking in design: a tall backed chair with sturdy square armrests. Despite this plain design, it seemed worthy of the most grand of beings – something a seat of the god of the gods would rest upon to rule. Even as they all watched in amazed silence, the pristine jewels shined with a brilliant fire all their own.

On either side of the throne stood two statues, no more than fifteen feet tall. These too were of white marble, but the images they represented were strange to the eye, and at the same time vaguely familiar.

The one on the left was a strong male. His lineage of race seemed mixed as to prohibit speculation on his origins save that they appeared to be human. However, the statue also hinted at something of a supernatural origin as well, an unearthly nature about his frame that all who saw it knew but couldn't explain. In his right hand he held aloft a great mace with a strong arm. This arm matched the incredible muscular nature of the rest of his frame. For his dress he was shown with a kilt made of leather strips, a breastplate, tall sandals, and a flowing cape stopped at the back of his knees. He also possessed a long handlebar mustache, flowing hair and eyes which pierced the soul of anyone who met their cold, lifeless gaze.

The shape of a woman of similar racial lineage stood on the right. She was strong like the male, but just a hair shorter. She carried no weapon, wore no armor. Instead, her long haired figure was draped with a simple gown that fell just below her knees with tall sandals on her feet. Her hands were outstretched in a welcoming gesture, her face and eyes warm and inviting.

It was in the middle of these two statues and before the throne that Galba stood as the last of the dirt and debris poured down the

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white marble steps as if it were water. The quakes then subsided and each had regained solid footing once more.

“He comes for the Throne of Vkar, which I have protected since the creation of Tralodren. It has remained here since the beginning and though some have sought out its boon, none have succeeded.”

All of them were speechless at what they saw. If being near Galba was beyond compare than getting a glimpse of this throne with its flanking statues was to have been taken to Paradise while still alive. The emanation of its importance – its spiritual power was thick in the air.

“And *we're* supposed to stop him?” Rowan asked with wide eyes once more adjusting to a more cognitive state of mind, though it took some struggle.

“What did I tell you kid,” Dugan seemed darkly comedic as he spoke, “suicide mission.”

Rowan found the Telborian's grim statement more than unnerving.

“Not as such.” Gilban's voice caused all eyes to spin his way. In truth, everyone had forgotten him when faced with the splendid scene before them. How could they not?

“I have secured a means by which The Master can be defeated with little effort or bloodshed on anyone's part.”

“Have you now?” Vinder was less than cheered. “Isn't that just *convenient* then.” He liked all of this as little as the rest of them.

“This scepter will stop The Master should he be able to claim godhood.” Gilban held up the object which he had bartered Gorallis' eye for with some amount of pride. He was proud and why not? He had been able to do what few others could – survive a meeting with the dread linnorm and better still, been able to trade with him as well. Though it had been the favor of his goddess that rested upon him to do so, it still had been him doing the actions needed to bring it about and that made him feel good...even if the

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pesky dark thought rolling around his head made him feel increasingly worse.

“How?” The bird chirped the question everyone else was thinking.

“I will explain what I can in a moment.” Gilban’s words were calm but all could tell he was restraining his own frustration and perhaps even a little anger at being forced to rush through his thoughts and explanations. Gilban came from a race whose ways were bit a more relaxed and slower in inclination and declaration. Being pressed for rapid fire answers just ruffled his feathers.

“Well, if he should prove to be able, we might need a plan then as to how we are going to deal with The Master if we are to fight him then.” Dugan tried to clean up some more of the grease paint from his face with little success.

“Indeed, and you must do so quickly for time is falling fast before he will be here to try and make good on his bold claim,” Galba replied.

“You don’t have to stay.” Clara put her hand on top of Rowan’s shoulder – which caught the knight’s attention. “You can leave at any time you wish and none would think less of you. You’ve done more than what you set out to do and if you want to return to Valkoria there is no shame in that.”

“I’m here for Cadrissa.” His words were resolute but his face was filled with affection for Clara. He didn’t work at hiding such sentiment from her now...there was no need.

“Who is in the bondage of The Master.” Clara returned.

Rowan drew in a deep breath, held it, then let it go. He knew he didn’t have to stay and fight with them. He could take Cadrissa and flee the battle but then would that be right? To leave them alone to fight such a battle? Would it be the right thing to do, and could he live with himself if he did it?

And what if he stayed to fight? He might risk the death of Cadrissa along with himself and everyone else. Could he take the risk? Rowan began to notice the eyes of the others all turned on

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him, focused on him like the tips of arrows held taut by archers ready to fire at any moment.

“If you value your commitments lad,” Vinder’s stern glare dug into the youth’s heart, “you’ll stay and fight. You’re a part of this just like we all are and bear a responsibility to finishing up what you started.”

Vinder’s words hit Rowan hard.

“You had just as much part in setting this wizard free as we did and if you ever want to be a good man, as well as a knight, you need to take responsibilities for your actions,” the dwarf dryly concluded with all the elegance of a lecturing father.

Though it was a dwarf who had said the words, they struck true to the knight’s heart as he could hear the echo of his own father in them. He also knew in his heart it was the right thing to do. He wouldn’t have fulfilled his mission, why he had been sent to the Midlands in the first place, if he didn’t take a stand against The Master. That was an obligation that had to be kept. Once the choice had been made, everything else fell into place.

“Okay then,” Rowan looked about those gathered. “What’s the plan?”

Clara gave him an affectionate smile.

Each then turned to another. Hopeful at least one savior in their band had some brilliant scheme...they discovered none had one.

“No need to be shy now,” Vinder’s sardonic grumbling soaked into his beard.

“Perhaps we should assess what the other knows.” Cracius took a sideways glance at Tebow and then the rest. His face did well at keeping calm though his mind behind it raced for ideas. Both he and Tebow were separated from the voice of their god as long as they remained in the circle. Without this supernatural wisdom, they were as blind to the situation as the others...with the exception of the priest of Saredhel. That was if he wasn’t cut off from his goddess inside the circle as well, as both death priest’s believed him to be.

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“A good idea.” Clara made a move toward the center of the group as they slowly closed ranks around her to listen. Behind them, Galba stood serenely as she faded from their sight like dust in the wind. She would return when needed again.

“Well, I don’t know anything.” The Telborian was rubbing at his cheek now, continuing to try and get the smudges of greasepaint off his face, but only managing to smear them around more.

“And don’t go looking to me,” Vinder added sourly. “I was done with all of you and this before these vultures got their claws into me.” He ended his statement by fingering out the two death priests.

“I don’t think I can be of much aid either.” Hoodwink meekly offered his words, eyes focused on the ground before him.

“I don’t think anyone thought you would.” Vinder fired off his barb.

Clara flung darts from her own eyes which aborted the sneer on the dwarf’s face in an instant.

“Then where do we start?” The bright plumed bird fluttered to settle upon Tebow’s shoulder.

“What?” He squawked as all present turned to give him a puzzled stare. “I’m a part of this too.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Dugan nodded dismissively.

“So what now?” Rowan was just as much at a loss of ideas as his companions.

“I suppose we wait to kill this lich then.” Dugan shrugged his strong, darkly garbed shoulders.

“We need some sort of plan though.” Tebow built upon the gladiator’s advice. “If you run into this haphazardly then we’ll be picked off easier than gnats.”

Dugan’s face was the haunting expression of a man who no longer cared if he lived or died; a reckless maniac who had only plans to take as many with him when he went in the end. “Not much of a plan you can have if you’re trying to fight off someone powerful enough to be a god.”

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“Well some of us plan to *survive* this encounter.” Clara took charge. Somebody had to or they would get nowhere and waste the precious time they had been afforded to plan. “So let’s hear it then. Any and every idea that you’ve got.”

“Perhaps it would be better to hear what each of us knows like Cracius was saying” said Rowan. “After all, we all were brought here under different means; different pretenses. I came here to rescue Cadrissa...and in a sense,” the young knight swept the people gathered near him, “I’m still going to do what I came here for, just now with some extra help.

“So what are you here for – what were you told you were needed to come here for?”

Vinder let out a wavering sigh. “Obligation.”

“We have only come by request of our god to destroy the lich.” Tebow answered for both he and Cracius.

“I’m here to just see one more person off to Mortis before me.” Dugan followed the priest.

“Well I’m here because I wanted to help save Cadrissa, but in order to do that it’s obvious we’ll have to stop this lich as well.” Clara felt the frustration rise. Some how she wasn’t getting them where they needed to go but she was having a difficult time getting them where she thought they should be since even she didn’t know where they needed to be.

Clara spoke out loud with a milder version of the frustration she felt inside. “We’re all here now and we have to deal with the coming of this lich and putting an end to him.

“How we do this though is what we should be focused on here.” The mantle of leadership she had put on again would never sit right on her shoulders.

“I agree.” All turned toward Gilban as he raised the silver scepter before his chest once more for all to see. “And this is the means by which we shall win. This scepter has been given to me to stop The Master after he has come into power. This was the reason why Hoodwink and I have come.” Gilban felt comfortable in what

he said. While he couldn't completely understand what was going on, it now seemed obvious why he had been called here.

"How is *that* going to help us?" Dugan took a good long gaze at the silver object trying to figure out just what it was and how it would bring them victory. "You going to *pummel* him to death?"

"I got this scepter from Gorallis." The blind priest brought the head of the scepter down into his other hand so that it now rested between both fists at about waist level.

"Gorallis?" Rowan's eyes widened, as did all the others gathered.

"Yeah," Hoodwink spoke up softly, his gaze still at his feet, "Gorallis."

"So what does it do then?" Asked the knight.

"It was designed by the Wizard Kings in their fourth age to defeat a god." Gilban released the scepter to his right hand where he held it tightly at his side.

"Defeat a god?" Vinder was astonished with the revelation. "You mean they could do that back then – mortal men could actually *defeat* a god?"

"Well, this scepter alone wouldn't *slay* a being of such power, no." Gilban moved his line of sight toward the stout warrior. "It was designed to drain the very strength of a god away from it and weaken it so they could face off with it on a more equal level."

"Wizard Kings were able to craft such an item though, huh?" Vinder still was in wonder at what he had heard. "Are we sure we want to save Cadrissa as well? After all, I have my suspicions she wants to be the next Wizard King, well Queen anyway. If they could have stood against gods and even planned to do so then might it just be wiser to stop Cadrissa too? She has been under the influence of this other wizard for a while. She could be corrupted by now."

"What?" Rowan turned sharply to Vinder, blood hot in his veins. He couldn't believe what the dwarf was saying. Abandon a human woman in trouble? "I'm only here because I want to save Cadrissa, not *kill* her. She isn't the threat here. It's her abductor

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who is, and we have to deal with him. By doing that we will save Cadrissa from any harm and influence that this lich might have over her, which I believe would be minimal to none.”

“I’m not saying kill her Rowan,” Vinder grew a bit flustered at the rapid resistance to the idea. “I’m just thinking maybe we could stop her from getting any more magic – keep her from rising to places where she doesn’t belong.”

“I can–” Rowan started into what he thought would be a good retort, but was cut short by Clara’s commanding voice. It almost reminded him of Journey Knight Fronel for a moment.

“We have to get on task.” The elven maid pulled all eyes back toward herself. “We can’t be divided right now on petty issues when we have so much to get done and not that much time in which to do it.”

Clara nodded toward Gilban. “Please continue Gilban.”

The elder priest bowed his head then spoke.

“The scepter can drain the power of a god or similar figure of substance from beyond our world, with the right incantation. However, it can only be used once against such an opponent in the wielder’s lifetime. It has such an incredible effect upon these beings, draining them of their very life force, that it had to be limited in such a matter in order to work. Such is the way with the arcane arts I am told.

“I have also been told the incantation needed to work the scepter and what needs to be done once it has been activated. I would put forth the strategy that you should let me attack The Master if he should prove successful in gaining godhood. The scepter would then drain him of his new found strength and allow the rest of you to attack him on an equal plane.”

“*You* attack him?” Dugan grew concerned. “You’re not really a warrior Gilban and I don’t think what we need is a blind man trying to hit something with such a powerful weapon.

“Why not just tell me the incantation and let me do the deed?”

Gilban drew still for a moment. None dared say anything more until the blind elf spoke up again. When he did his voice was calm and small; many having to strain their ears to hear what was said. To Dugan though it sounded louder than it was as it spoke to some part of him deep inside and was amplified there for his own benefit.

“No, you have a work yet to do and this is not it. I have my task and it is to use this scepter as I have already stated.”

“Who told you how to use it anyway?” Vinder returned with his skeptical eye pawing the scepter which had not left the priest’s hand.

“Gorallis.” Gilban’s answer chilled the air between all gathered.

“You’re going to trust a linnorm?” Vinder was almost beside himself with what he had just heard. “Not just any linnorm mind you, but the oldest and baddest of them all?”

“I have, and shall,” came back the elven priest’s calm reply.
Silence.

“I trust him.” Hoodwink tried to add some weight to Gilban’s words – even looking up at the others with his answers, but the dwarf didn’t seem to want to hear what he had to say – snorting with disgust at the goblin’s comment.

“What if The Master doesn’t make it to godhood?” Rowan entered the conversation with this new thread of thought. “What if he failed?”

“Then our task would be far simpler.” Tebow reminded everyone of his presence. “However, I doubt we were brought all the way here if it was assured or even assumed that The Master would fail in his attempt. I think it wise to consider that there is a very good likelihood the lich will succeed in his quest.”

“So we just sit back and wait for him to become a god and then attack him, assuming that what Gilban says is true and he can land a solid blow and the incantation will work?” Dugan shook his head at the sheer madness of the proposal. Madness he had already experienced and accepted with these two priests before

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he came inside the strange stone circle. This was the last day he'd be alive, that was for sure. How did you expect anyone to stand against a god, even a weakened one at that?

"Yes," Cracius matter of factly answered the Telborian's question.

"Doesn't that seem a bit idiotic?" Dugan snorted his displeasure.

"Maybe not. Just sit back." Clara could sense the confusion and desperation of what had just been said. And it would only continue to grow about the company if she let it. The only cure she could devise to combat it was action. "We should still have a plan as to how to attack The Master, once he achieves his goal. Probably should have a plan where to place ourselves before he arrives."

Silence again returned and lingered for a while, bringing along its companion: awkwardness. Together, they stayed until Rowan shooed them away with his words.

"Clara, I don't think we will need much of a plan to lead an attack." His face was solemn, but still kind toward the elven woman who he was learning to and allowing himself to love more with each passing hour.

"No," Cracius added. "We'll all allow Gilban his path to strike when the time comes and Galba will take care of the rest."

Vinder scanned the circle with sleight concern. "Hey, where did she go?"

"She'll be back again when the time has come." Tebow started to move away from the others. "I would advise we make use of the short amount of time we have left to see to it we make peace with what we have to do before the battle begins."

"You sound as if you expect all of us to die." Rowan's worries deepened.

"They're death priests," Vinder slapped the knight on his back in passing toward another area of the circle. "What do you expect them to think?"

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Rowan managed a slight smirk at this modest jest but his spirits still failed to be lifted. He couldn't die now; he was just starting out on his service to his goddess. Panthor wouldn't let him die; had told him he had a great destiny to fulfill and he wouldn't be able to accomplish that if he was dead. The queasiness of his stomach wouldn't leave him no matter how many positive words he tried to flush into it along with his mind and heart.

"A good idea Tebow." Clara formally dismissed the already dispersing gathering. "Let's all prepare as best we can before its time to do what we came here to do."

The others then went to a separate location of the grassy circle to be alone with their thoughts.