

Chapter 1



There is a place outside time – outside space – that none know exists. Far from Tralodren and the cosmos in which that world resides, there is a realm where only two entities dwell. Each the opposite of the other, they draw their strength and substantive nature by these polarized distinctions. It is here where only a faint shimmer of white illumination swims about like uncollected waves in the vast sea of darkness around it. It is here where these two beings ponder the fate of an insignificant dot in a stellar array of an ever-expanding cosmos.

These two entities are old. And it is an old game they play – the rules set down before matter came to be and the cosmos was known and formed. These rules held all things together – keeping the balance in all things. Without these rules, there would be nothing again, with nothing to follow. So it is by these rules the two entities, and all the cosmos are bound.

“So we have returned to this world once more,” the one who could be compared to light spoke aloud.

“We have,” The Darkness shifted. “It is our nature and our pact, if you recall.”

“So it is the same rules then, the same pattern as before?” The Light shimmered like the sheen of the sun on a wave.

“The very same,” The Darkness replied. “I have a feeling this time I may succeed.”

“You might, but don’t forget the resourcefulness of the inhabitants. Its defenders have defeated you before, and might do so again.” The Light chuckled.

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“Ah, but you forget the clause of the pact we made: degeneration, entropy. It has whittled them away to a weaker form than what they were before.” The Darkness churned in glee. “They are not what they once were when they first opposed my will. I, however, am eternal and unchanging.”

“I must admit, your plan has worked so far,” The Light continued to shimmer in The Darkness’ glee.

“Yours does not seem to be going so well,” The Darkness stated. “Already those you have gathered have scattered. Your opposition is severely lacking at best. You must be foolishly optimistic if you think you still have a chance at beating my best.”

“Wait and see. Patience is a virtue,” The Light remained calm amid the taunting. “Your puppet has yet to secure what you’d have him wrought as well.”

“I have faith in absolute victory,” The Darkness sounded as if it was speaking through a rather large grin.

“So it is still the same plan, then, it would seem,” The Light repeated the age-old rules to The Darkness. “Though with a different champion. Even though when last you worked this plan on their location of the cosmos your previous champion was defeated.”

“Recall when last that champion was used, it nearly defeated all it set out to destroy.” The Darkness grated against the luminous waves. “The plan was nearly flawless in execution.”

“But not quite,” The Light pertly stated.

“I have corrected that flaw.” The Darkness let loose a bit of its wounded pride.

“Have you?” The Light swirled about The Darkness with its sardonic words. “We shall see then.”

“I believe it is now your move.” The Darkness shifted once more amidst the perpetual illumination of The Light.

“So it would appear,” said The Light.

“You put too much trust in your champions, and your sentimentality for this meaningless world is pathetic!” The Dark-

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ness' displeased tone rolled through the expansive hidden realm. "What are they to you, but an afterthought; a breath?"

"It is my nature and the defining quality of who I am – *what* I am," said The Light. "Knowing you still don't understand my reasoning on these matters further encourages me that we are secure in our existence. For what has oblivion to do with creation?"

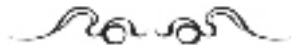
"Opposition," The Darkness answered as it rolled around the edges of The Light, skirting its borders.

"Opposition," The Light agreed. "Now, I must be about my work."

"You should hurry then," said The Darkness. "My plans have been well laid. To stop them now would be a challenge indeed."

"Perhaps," The Light reasoned aloud. "We shall have to wait and see. It is still far from over...the game has just begun."

Chapter 2



Thousands of miles from the Midlands, in the temperate waters of the Sea of Bithal, rested the Republic of Rexatious, home of the Patrious elves. Founded because of an argument between two elven princes, the Republic had long been governed by a collective form of representative rule. This was in opposition to their Elyelmic kin, who tended to be more autocratic and despotic until they eventually developed into an imperial cult of order centered upon Aero and his political descendants.

The Patrician Republic, however, had begun to change in later years. The chief representative, called the Elucidator, was named ruler of Rexatious and her people and over the House of the Voice and its various speakers. The change was organic, and kept in check by various political counterweights, but in the end the Speakers of the Voice were losing these checks by a plethora of means, both minor and major. The voice of the people was still present. However, with each new Elucidator the hold of the people slowly ebbed away in favor of a single enlightened ruler and thus they were coming to embrace more autocratic traits and tendencies in their government.

Many commentators found it sadly ironic those of the race who had once left because of just such a government, were now returning to it. Still though, with the general longevity of the elven race, this regression would be slow in coming. Compared to the shorter lived humans and their own nations, which fluctuated as often as the wind changes direction, the elven nations seemed nearly eternally unchanging.

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Regardless of its changing nature, the Republic stood with grace, honor and wisdom. It was one of the true jewels of the West, filled with ancient mysteries and riches no other race could boast. Even the continent where it resided was a breath of inspiration for bards and the stuff of dreams for yet many more.

The idyllic land was awash with sun, greenery, and elegance of architectural wonders and breath-taking landscapes even beyond dreams to illustrate properly. Rexatious' rocky coastline gave way to soft rolling hills, thick forests and crystal clear lakes, rivers and streams. A few snow-capped mountain chains even ran their brief race across the land until they collapsed deep underground, to slumber from their journey on a bed of lush, green canopy.

Legends even were told that the first followers of Dradin, the god of learning and magic, came from this land. Along with them were the first bards, springing from the wilds and infused with the divine gifts of Causilla, the goddess of bards. Causilla herself was said to have a love for Rexatious' fragrant, flowering hills. Indeed, it was here the fabled Great Library could be found.

It was deemed even by those who hadn't and never would see it in their lifetimes as a Tralodroen wonder, rumored and built into a collection of legends claiming it held all the knowledge of the world. To those who spun tales – and those who believed them – this was the cornerstone of the ancient mystical West whose secrets could change the world if one sought them out to master their profound insights.

Often, even the Patrious who lived there were made into fable and myth by outsiders. Not that many folk in the Midlands, Northlands, or even the Southern Lands knew much about them, let alone that they existed. The same could be said for folk in the Western lands knowing about the Elyellium, and other Eastern races. Only a few well-traveled folks and the Patrious knew the whole truth of the matter. To the rest of mortalkind, the world was

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confined to the context of their understanding of local affairs and localized boundaries.

Delightful cities mingled amid small towns and villages scattered about Rexatious like grain hefted into the air to land in random localities. Though seemingly disconnected from each other, each town, village and city was within access of wide, wheel rut-worn, cobblestone roads packed so tightly together not a single blade of grass dared show itself. These roads – the arteries of the Republic as some called them – crisscrossed the land en route to Cleithious, the capital of Rexatious – the heart of the Patrician Republic.

It was to Rexatious Gilban traveled after he completed his mission for Saredhel. A word of prayer took him from the steamy jungles of Takta Lu Lama back to the gentle nation of his birth. He took with him the fruit of his quest: lost knowledge of the Ancients on imperial might and its maintenance; preventing it from falling to the hands of the Elyellium.

He lost his assistant on the way back, but wasn't worried for her absence. She'd felt called to help another mercenary who had been taken captive by an unknown figure who appeared near the final moments of the quest's completion. In her place, Gilban had acquired the services of a goblin named Hoodwink. They had recently liberated him from a tribe of hobgoblins that had made the ruins where they'd found the knowledge home.

The more he had gotten to know the short, green creature since their return, the more he felt there was something about the goblin he couldn't quite place. He sensed that destiny, the very hand of Saredhel herself, was powerfully upon the goblin in a very personal way. It was a way he didn't quite understand.

There was something else too...something even greater he couldn't yet fathom. It was almost a visible weight Gilban could see in his mind's eye upon the slightly stooped shoulders of the short creature. It was a compelling mystery even he couldn't seem to unravel. He trusted Saredhel would reveal

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these things, as she had others, in due time. For the moment, though, he had more important matters to attend to.

The two had appeared in the chief temple of Saredhel called The Temple of The Goddess of Mysteries, in the heart of Cleithious, when they first returned by Gilban's prayer. Hoodwink had been overcome with shock from the whole ordeal of his arrival. Though glad to be free from his almost certain death in the jungles, he found himself in a jungle of a different sort. The inner workings of the temple and the city at large dwarfed the small creature and caused his mind to lock up in confusion. He literally didn't know what to do.

Hoodwink, like others before him, had found the Patrious were a very artistic race. Gilt covered all things around him: rock, sculpture, and dress. The temple alone where he'd appeared with Gilban was pure splendor. Pools of mercury held aloft tiny ivory boats inside small bronze basins, which sat on top various marble pillars stuffed into random empty alcoves and spaces. Golden life-sized statues of great leaders of the faith stood in various niches around junctions and corridors, behind which were hung rich, motley tapestries of silk depicting past deeds of the Republic and Saredhel's faithful.

Every corner, opening and space spat out opulence. It was soaked in it. It swarmed, breathed, and seemed to draw life from the riches. Everywhere was the fragrance of the rich incense, which the priests and worshipers used in their services: a fragrant cinnamon and honey mixture tied to a few other spices, flowers and herbs the goblin couldn't quite place.

It was often said by bards and those who listened to them that to be in the Republic of Rexatious was to walk into the gates of Paradise itself. Hoodwink had to agree. After they'd arrived, he dared a look out a temple window to see the city around it only to be more amazed that such a wonder could be contained in just one place.

The city appeared as if the gods or giants had built it. Towers and spires; fluted stone blending and twisting with

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marble and brick, wood, glass, and steel. It was more than he could take in with one glance, and so he pulled away to try to make sense of all he had seen in such a short glimmer of what might very well have been the most beautiful city on all of Tralodren.

The next morning, the former jester found himself covered in a rainbow of light flooding in from the stained glass windows of his modest room. The colored images showed the history of the faith and how the temple was built. In one of them, an image of a radiant woman was seen touching the head of a kneeling Patrician man, behind whom a collage of multicolored glass reigned supreme. Hoodwink stared at the windows, wishing he could understand them, but Gilban had been too busy to help explain them. It wasn't that the goblin was slow of wit, it was just that the images, like the temple, were just that: images. The priests of Saredhel loved to study, speak in, and look for symbols, riddles, and their meanings. Theirs was the language of figurative texts, and revelatory concepts. In the eyes of the untrained their meaning was lost or worse still, incorrectly translated.

Upon their sudden arrival the night before, Gilban informed the priests of his order of his desire for Hoodwink's safety. The priests agreed to his wishes and put the goblin in a smaller section of the great temple where he would be 'safe from harm'. But Hoodwink really knew this meant 'to cause the least amount of harm to them, the temple, and its activities.' Though Patrious were known to be more accepting than other races of Tralodren, they still were wary of creatures that held certain destructive and evil tendencies, such as Hoodwink's kin.

Goblins, along with hobgoblins, didn't have the best reputation on Tralodren. Hoodwink, if he left the confines of the temple, might come to harm or certainly be put into a far worse state than he currently resided. The priests made sure they'd given the goblin a simple chamber to rest from his journey, and allowed to roam a small scantily-used section of temple apart from the major areas, lest he also interfere too heavily with the

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day-to-day activities of the temple and the clergy who made it their home.

He didn't.

The goblin was far too tired to do much more than walk around the small, yet richly decorated hallways in the section where he was confined, and contemplate his decision to join Gilban and leave his former world behind.

Hoodwink was the exception to many goblins. Though descended from Jarthals – the parent stock of hobgoblins, goblins, and ogres – none of the three descended races really liked each other, let alone other races. Hoodwink, however, was curious about other races around him, and possessed a strangely odd and strong desire for self-improvement. In most other respects, though, he resembled his common kin. Goblins were shorter creatures that tended to be lanky and lime-green hued, bald, or possessing thin hair.

Though goblins really couldn't read and write that well, Hoodwink was actually fairly bright. He could read and write Goblin (the language of both goblins and hobgoblins), Telborous, and a smattering of Elonum. His interest in the past – and trying to learn from it – separated him from his kindred as well. While at his stay in the ruins of Groledron in Takta Lu Lama he had strived to gain as much insight as he could from the fallen city. He'd constantly retreat to ponder about its builders; trying to piece together a greater picture of the whole from the shatters surrounding him then.

The goblin thought about his choice to follow Gilban more and more as the hours in the temple lengthened. It was just about all he could do. Gilban left to report to his ecclesiastical superiors, and finally the Elucidator about the mission's success. The little goblin felt abandoned in the old priest's absence. Lost in an even stranger world, he sat down upon an old worn chair in his chamber. It was the only thing lacking rich gilt he'd seen so far, and he sulked deeply. His own tiny hands removed the jester hat from his bald head. The rest of his former garb still

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remained; the orange leggings and purple tunic had seen better days now that they had survived the great blaze the goblin had escaped, but the life he'd known had gone up in smoke with the rest of the ruins.

Hoodwink had in him the spark of something great, at least Gilban had told him that before he left the temple for his audience. It was said in hurried passing mixed amid the assurance the priest would return shortly, but it had a great weight to it. The saying hit something deep inside the goblin, which he couldn't readily identify. Gilban didn't seem to want to elaborate any further on it, not even after his meetings today, of that Hoodwink was certain.

So if the small word of encouragement said in passing by the blind elf was supposed to help him feel better, it didn't. He had no idea how he could have the spark of *anything* great in him at all. He was smarter than his kin, he knew that, but he wasn't much further along than the rest of them. In fact, in many cases he had been below them. So what did Gilban mean? More importantly perhaps, why was he here now? Sure, he got away from his old life to perhaps a safer location, but what now? These were some powerful thoughts he had to contend with if he wanted to move forward with his life and make sense of what had happened.

Hoodwink had sunk his head in deep contemplation as he waited for Gilban's return; heavy-lidded eyes closing in his thoughts. He found himself thinking back to his mistreatment by Relforaz. He was glad the priests here had been able to heal his most recent wounds, dealt him by his former chieftain, with some healing ointments. He rubbed his previously swollen lip in gratitude and remembrance.

What now though?

So many of his kin would never come to this point in their lives and would never even be in such a wonderful land as this. So now that Hoodwink was here, where did he go? What did he do? He used to tell himself one day he would be great, and he always knew such a proclamation was predicated on the notion

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he would have to first be free of Relforaz and his tribe...but he never planned beyond that. He realized now that he never really saw himself as being free from the ruins and his former position in the first place and so never dared to dream beyond that past reality.

It was disheartening, to say the least. He now understood the nature of his inner most thoughts. He had only been hopefully wishing – spinning a fantasy instead of a solid plan. He'd attained a level of freedom, and he didn't know what to do with it. The goblin knew it was the oddest of fates that could ever have been dealt his kind.

He couldn't stay here forever, and doubted if he'd find a home in the city. If there were any goblins on Rexatious, he wasn't quite sure if he was so keen on joining them either. So he was placed in a rather difficult spot, which was becoming more uncomfortable by the moment. However, Hoodwink wouldn't remain with this train of thought much longer as fate had other plans for him...

"Rise, Hoodwink," a soft, inviting voice suddenly spoke to the goblin, startling him from his ponderings.

"Who's there?" The goblin jumped up and hastily looked around.

The room appeared empty.

"I have a task for you," the voice continued in an almost feminine tone.

"Where are you?" Hoodwink circled the room with his gaze.

"Here," the voice seemed to pick up weight in front of the goblin's view, where it was joined by an ethereal shape becoming solid before his sight.

The figure appeared to be of a womanly build, though Hoodwink couldn't tell much more about her as she was wrapped from head to toe in a long, black, hooded cloak which, besides obscuring her frame, engulfed her face – shading it from view.

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“Saredhel?” The goblin nervously question. After what he’d been through, he thought it was possible for the goddess of the temple to pay him a visit. It seemed no less bizarre than what he had experienced so far.

“No,” the soft voice spoke again.

“Who are you then?” Hoodwink’s face was troubled.

“Peace, goblin. I am not your enemy, simply a messenger,” the figure was a calm image before him.

“*Whose* messenger?” Hoodwink tilted his head to try to look up into the inky shadows of the figure’s hood.

“Someone who has had their eye on you, Gilban, and your previous allies for quite some time.”

Hoodwink began to shake his head from side to side in confusion. “I don’t understand—”

“Here,” a pale hand darted out of the black cloak. At the end of the hand, a medium-sized, red silk pouch dangled before the goblin’s eyes. “Take this.”

“What is it?” Hoodwink simply stared at the object.

“Something you will need for the next place you’re about to go.”

“What if I don’t *want* to take it?” Hoodwink asked sheepishly. His eyes tried again to peer beyond the stranger’s midnight hood. She wasn’t a Sarellianite that was for sure. The dress was all wrong – and the way she carried herself – a regal bearing, spoke against a priestly nature as well. So not a goddess or a priestess...

The goblin frowned. “Who said anything about *me* going *anywhere* for that matter?”

“You are free to make that choice, but understand all who have been chosen cannot deny their purpose for long.” The figure answered. “Deny me now, and you will only come to see my offer is the only one you can take in the end. It is the way of things.” The feminine form’s words were authoritative but pleasant.

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“I might be at *peace* if I knew who sent you or *what* you *really* want.” The goblin continued. Again, there was the hint of a greater purpose for the goblin. Was he the only one to not know about this? Did everyone know he had some great calling to perform? Then why couldn’t *he* see it?

“I don’t have time for questions. Gilban will understand all the questions which shall arise from what I have spoken and will know what to do with this.” She tossed the pouch at the goblin’s foot where it hit with a solid thud.

Something was inside it.

Something hard and round.

“He will?” Hoodwink spoke to his feet as he looked at the red pouch before him with some mild unease.

Looking up, he noticed he was alone once more; the figure had vanished as quickly as she had appeared.

“Well,” Hoodwink backed up to get as far from the object as possible, scraping the chair’s legs along with him on his path toward the wall behind him. “If Gilban is supposed to figure you out, you can just wait for him then. I don’t want to even touch you if I don’t have to.” The goblin retreated to the far corner of the room where he sat down in a huff.

“If they can’t even tell me *who* they are or *who* they’re *speaking* for, then I don’t want anything to do with them or their *gifts* either. I’m not dumb enough to start getting into any mess now – and in a temple of Saredhel no less.

“Yep...we’ll just let Gilban take care of you when he gets back. I’m not about to be dragged around on some other crazy journey just ‘cause some strange woman appears, tosses out some goodies, and then disappears again.”

“Priests.” Hoodwink muttered as he fought against the urge to turn his head back toward the pouch, to stare at it with a curious eye.

Was that pouch tied to his greater purpose in some way?

He settled down to his thoughts once more. Thoughts telling him he was mad; that he didn’t really have a purpose

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here at all. But perhaps, if what this woman had said was true then maybe...

Nah, that was even greater madness.

Why risk his life again to just find his way out of this land when he had just barely managed to keep it a little over a day ago? No, it was better to make his stay here – to see if Gilban could help get him settled here on the continent somewhere and hew out a life as best he could after that.

But if he *was* fated to take part in this to some degree as she had said...

The goblin let out a frustrated sigh.

His brain hurt.