

SHADOW SLAYER



C. S. BROWN

BOOK ONE IN THE DESTINY OF THE LIGHT SERIES

BOOK COVER ILLUSTRATED BY LOGAN HAYSE

Shadow Slayer

Book One in The Destiny of the Light Series

Truesource Publishing/Starving Writers Book

Published by arrangement with the author

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Truesource Publishing: Dallas Texas

Starving Writers Publishing: Dallas Texas

www.truesourcepublishing.com

ISBN : 978-1-932996-30-2

Printed in the United States of America

Published in Dallas Texas

For more information on C. S. Brown go to.

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To my parents, for all the guidance and encouragement they have giving me, and to my friends who helped me through the writing process. I couldn't have done it without y'all

~ *About the Author* ~



C.S. Brown was born in Levelland Texas on March 20th, 1978. His family lived in New Mexico at the time but Levelland had the closest hospital at the time of his birth, C. S. Brown grew up in East New Mexico and North Central Texas. He graduated high school in a little East Texas town called Athens. C.S. Brown has his education in Aerospace Engineering and Economics with a minor in Business Foundations receiving his degree from the University of Texas in Austin. In addition C.S. Brown holds two black belts, one in Tae Kwon Do and one in Shorin Ryu. C. S. Brown works in the business world in Austin Texas where he makes his home. Shadow Slayer is C. S. Brown's first novel.

- Foreword -

I've known Shane since our junior year of high school - for over that's about 15 years now. I remember back in 2005 Shane emailed me and mentioned he was writing a book. I remember thinking, "What? Shane? Writing?" He'd also mentioned to me that it was in the fantasy genre, which is just one of those genres I never cared about reading. I guess at that time in my life I considered fantasy on par with romance novels. Yes, I was an ignoramus. All the reading and writing I've done myself is in the horror and Sci-Fi genres, so I quickly forgot about Shane's "little book".

About a year later Shane asked me if I would read through the book and maybe do some editing on it. I said yes because he's my friend, but I really wasn't looking forward to it. Editing means you have to read every word of and I had never read a word of fantasy. So he emailed the rough draft to me and I settled in. To say that I was surprised is an understatement. Not only did I find out I like fantasy, I found out Shane is actually a good author.

I've always believed that a good author can outdo the best special effects gurus in Hollywood. It's not necessarily just the author who produces the "special effects" in a book; it's also your mind. However, the author is the primer, the maestro, who takes your mind to a place where it can utilize the best and most expensive special effects known (and unknown) to man. Shane has accomplished all this and more.

Maybe you, Dear Reader, have a bias against the fantasy genre and only bought a copy of this book because you're a friend of Shane's. Even if that is the case, I hope you pick up this book someday and give it a try. I think you'll find that Pralin's magic will banish your biases to the netherworld, and will open up your eyes to a whole new world you can escape in to. The question is: will you want to leave that place once you've spent some time there?

~ Clint Stutts

The Dueling Patriots Radio Show
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PROLOGUE

Tarstian stared back through the gateway as it sealed. He gazed upon the world he loved so much for the last time. The world he had fought so hard to protect, and now the world he must leave forever in order to preserve its safety. When the seal was finally closed and he knew his eyes would never again see that world he turned, with a sigh, and faced his followers. They carried long faces themselves and as he looked out upon the new world he was startled by what he saw. Many more people were there than should be and he knew that this was not the only area people would have been placed by the magic he had used.

“What happened? Where are we?” Asked Garren, one of his eldest followers.

“I do not know for sure, but I believe that the magic is such a part of us and what followed through that it cannot be removed,” he explained.

The others looked at him and at each other. Many looked out upon their new world in fear.

“I am sorry my friends, I had no idea that this is what would happen,” he told them somberly.

“You only did what had to be done old friend,” Garren told him. “We all knew that what we were doing would be a risk.”

“Thank you, Garren. I guess we’d better go to those people and any others we can find and explain to them what has happened,” Tarstian told his followers and then headed for a large crowd of people that were looking back up at them.

After many years and creation of the Crystalline Fortress, Tarstian approached the members of the Order of the Light and told them of a prophecy that had come to him. He told them that it was up to them to make a sword. A sword that could stand against the darkest of magic...a sword that would be forged of magic.

At first the members of the Order of the Light just stared at him in disbelief, but finally after hours of explaining and pondering they realized that it would be possible. For months and years they tried forging the blade of magic until one day they were finally able to accomplish their task and thus Shadow Slayer was born.



When Pralin Bryar woke up, his vision was blurry. As he looked around his room he tried to shake off the drowsiness. *It must be early still*, he thought as his gaze swept the dark room. Work had seemed to drag on forever the day before and he was glad for the weekend. His eyes finally found what they were searching for, the clock next to his bed. “Nine in the morning,” he grumbled to himself realizing that it was going to be another overcast and dreary day. All the days lately seemed to be dark and gloomy. Granted, this was Texas and springtime was usually filled with rain, but it seemed so long ago since the last time he had seen the sun in a clear blue sky. The clouds were so thick as of late that the sun never seemed to break through. In fact, the only way you could tell that it was spring was the warm muggy weather when you walked outside. *Oh well, enough focusing on the bad, it isn't going to change anything.*

Pralin sat up, rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, and decided he didn't want to spend one of his days off moaning about the bad weather. Standing up and stretching his stiff neck and shoulders, Pralin started toward the kitchen only to stop dead in his tracks. The world around him went black, only to be filled by visions of a dream he had last night. He did

not know why or what brought this on but he was very unnerved by it. He tried concentrating and focusing on the images hoping to recall the dream, but they were all jumbled together and each one only lasted mere moments before the next appeared. None of them seemed to come in any kind of chronological order either, which made it even harder to try and interpret them. It was all over in a couple of seconds, but it seemed to have lasted hours. The stranger thing was that it seemed more like memories of something that he had actually seen or done rather than a dream. Standing there in a cold sweat, Pralin tried to slow down his breathing and regain his balance. It had hit him so hard and fast that he was dizzy.

Slowly, the world quit spinning and he was able to get control of his thoughts. He was able to recall a vast cavern with a strange inscription carved over the entrance. Faint images of things on the inside of the cave came back to him. It seemed to be a very dark and dangerous place. A chill ran through his body just at the thought of being inside it. One image still burned brightly in his head though. It was a sword, shrouded in light, deep in the center of the cave. It occurred to Pralin that there shouldn't be any light that deep in the cave.

The sword seemed to hover in mid-air. Its handle was silver with gold thread intricately woven around it for grip and at the end of the handle was a loop. The guard of the sword just before the blade made a sideways figure eight. The figure eight had straight lines instead of curved, however, so that it looked like two sideways diamonds, and where the figure eight would normally have crisscrossed a clear crystal stood. Past the guard was the blade. The blade was covered in intricate patterns and letters and Pralin could tell it was not like any other blade he had ever seen. It shone more brightly than the rest of the sword and was obviously the source of the light that was filling the cave.

Shaking his head and deciding that all of this was nothing more than a strange dream, like many strange dreams he had been having lately, Pralin again made his way toward the kitchen. He needed to eat and just hoped that the milk was still good so that he could enjoy a bowl of cereal.

As he opened the refrigerator Pralin was pleasantly surprised to see that the milk was good and that he also had orange juice. After pouring his cereal, milk, and a glass of orange juice he carried the bowl into the living room opting to watch television instead of eating at the table. The table was actually starting to collect dust from the lack of use lately.

Pralin almost had the spoon in his mouth when the phone began to ring. Muttering a few choice words to himself, he ate the spoonful of cereal and rushed toward the phone. Naturally, it wasn't where it should be so he began a somewhat frantic search for the ringing. He knew that whoever was calling probably wouldn't leave a message, they never did. Suddenly, he remembered lying in bed talking on the phone with his friend last night. She was always pleasant to talk to and could usually cheer him up, but she had called last night after having a huge fight with her boyfriend and had been the one who needed cheering up. Many choice words flowed fluently from his mouth as his little toe collided with the doorway and brought him out of his daydream. Hopping on his good foot he finally made it to the phone.

"Hello," he grunted in pain as he brought the phone up to his ear.

"What's wrong?" came the voice on the other end.

"I stumped my toe on the damn door." Although he had hoped it would be his friend Elendria he wasn't disappointed that it was his good friend Ryan. He had known Ryan for just a few years, but it felt like he had known him for most of his life. They had many things in common and got along really well.

"I was calling to check and make sure we were going to work out later," Ryan told him.

"It's a good thing you called, because I had totally forgotten about that. I'm glad you remembered, though, because I could really use it," Pralin admitted.

"Alright, I'll see you around three then," Ryan said.

"Sure, I'll catch you later then," Pralin responded.

"Later," Pralin heard followed by a click of the phone being hung up.

Pralin had been teaching Ryan martial arts for almost a year now. Ryan was very enthusiastic about it, just like Pralin had been when he first started learning over twelve years ago. Pralin still enjoyed martial arts immensely, but now he taught more than he learned. Ryan was a good student and a very quick study. He had vastly improved since they started.

It would be awhile before Ryan came over so Pralin decided to straighten up his apartment. The apartment was not large, but it would still take some time to get it clean and ready for his workout with Ryan. He had been out of college for almost two years now and was doing well for himself. His job was decent and paid enough so that he could live comfortably,

but something seemed out of place. Usually, he just dismissed the thought and told himself that most people weren't overly excited with their jobs, but lately it seemed to be more than that and even more than the job. Pralin never could figure out what the feeling meant, and he *had* spent large amounts of time trying to understand it. Well, he didn't have time to think about it now because he had to get this pigsty clean and eat something before Ryan showed up.

Sweat rolled off of the tip of his nose as he moved the couch up against the wall. There was no separation between the living room and dining room so he always moved the big furniture into the dining room so he and Ryan would have room to workout. That cleared up a large amount of space for them to train, which was good because it never felt good to kick a very solid piece of furniture. Pralin knew this first hand but never liked to admit it. Finally finished, Pralin glanced around the apartment and decided that it was presentable. He did not realize that he would get so sweaty just from cleaning and moving furniture but it had happened and now he would have to take a shower before they worked out.

Pralin glanced in the mirror before he stepped into the shower. He noticed how average he was. His hair and eyes were brown, probably the most common color for hair and eyes in the human race. He was even the average height for a man at five foot ten inches and his body was neither ripped with muscles nor overflowing with fat; it was average. He wasn't out of shape by any means, but was not in the top shape of his life either. This part he blamed on how unhappy he had been with his last girlfriend. They were together for a couple of years and he hadn't realized how miserable he was with her until he was finally out of the relationship. Pralin stopped himself in mid-thought. *Can't blame that on her, it was still my choice and I could have stayed in shape.* Looking at himself in the mirror he realized that about the only thing remarkable about him was the fact that he was so unremarkable. There was only one thing that was unusual about him. On the right side of his chest he had a birthmark. Normally this wouldn't be considered strange but this birthmark looked almost like the sword in his dream. *That's why the sword had a familiar feeling in the dream.* That was also probably what had made him have the dream.

He was not remarkable like Elendria. She had long black hair that touched her back just above her shoulder

blades. Her body looked like it had been hand sculpted by the hand of God Himself. She could make any day better with her smile, the way her nose bunched up and her brow wrinkled slightly. But the most unique thing about her was her blue eyes. They were light blue like the sky and had a way of hypnotizing and calming him whenever he looked into them. Every time Pralin looked into them he could swear that he could almost see into her soul. He could never comprehend why her eyes did that to him, but he was thankful for every moment when he had a chance to look into them. It was for all of these reasons Pralin knew that he would never stand a chance to be with her. He was the epitome of normalcy and she was one of the wonders of the world, as far as he was concerned. He even thought her name was beautiful. It actually had surprised him when he asked her how she got her name because it was very similar to the way that he had gotten his. Her mother had had a dream during the latter months of her pregnancy and the name came to her then. She could not explain it, but something just seemed right and fitting about the name. A couple of times he had thought that she might have some of the same feelings about him, but he could never work up the courage to ask her out.

Pralin sighed as he stepped into the shower. *Oh well*, he thought to himself, *at least she is my friend*. The hot water rushing over his stiff neck and back felt refreshing as it loosened and relaxed his muscles. He was just reaching down to shut off the water when suddenly he heard a whisper.

"Pralin", the voice whispered.

"Who's there?" Pralin said, nearly losing his balance as he jumped back.

"Pralin" the voice said louder. There was something strange about the voice. It definitely wasn't human and for some reason it didn't sound threatening. That didn't stop it from terrifying Pralin though. *"Pralin,"* came the voice again.

Pralin's eyes quickly searched this way and that and finally looked up at the showerhead as it seemed the voice was coming from there. Suddenly, the world began to go dark and Pralin was suddenly surrounded by pitch black. It wasn't the darkness that comes from closing one's eyes but more like being in a room where light had never existed. Before he knew it, Pralin was surrounded by water. It was neither warm nor cold and to his surprise Pralin was still able to breathe. In fact, being in the water really felt no different than being outside in the open air.

“Pralin.”

“Who’s there?” Pralin suddenly realized that his lips weren’t moving, but the words came out anyway.

“*Me,*” came the voice as the outline of a face appeared in the water in front of him. It seemed to be made from the water.

“Who are you?” Pralin asked.

“I am part of your destiny, Pralin.”

“What do you mean, part of my destiny?” He asked.

“I am part of your destiny, Pralin, and soon you will have to make a choice,” the voice responded.

“What destiny and what choice?” Pralin managed to say over the confusion, as the world began to spin again.

“Soon, Pralin, you will see what is meant and you must choose,” came the voice again, but this time it sounded very distant. It was then that Pralin realized he was staring up at the showerhead and choking on the water that was hitting him in the face. He pushed his hands against the shower wall in front of him as he bent forward coughing. His breath came in gasps, which he knew wasn’t just from the choking, but also from the panic of what he had just been through.

Eventually his breathing returned to normal and his head began to clear. With shaking hands, he reached down and turned the water off. Pralin pulled the shower curtain back and grabbed his towel. He put it to his face first as he tried to come all the way back to reality. Finally, he toweled off and brushed his teeth and hair.

“I need to get some sleep,” he heard himself say out loud. Pralin made his way toward the bedroom, deciding that he would take his own advice and sleep until his friend Ryan came over. After throwing on some clothes he set his alarm clock and fell into bed. As he laid there he tried to convince himself that it was all just in his head and that he had fallen asleep while in the shower and that when he got some rest he would see things more clearly and could figure out what was going on. Sleep crept up on him surprisingly quick and soon the conscious world was left behind.

2

Elendria Shayle woke up in a much better mood than she had expected to. She realized that it was because of the conversation with Pralin the night before. It seemed like he always knew the right things to say to her when she called him. *How did he always know how to make her feel better?* Maybe it was just because he actually cared for her. Too bad she couldn't meet someone like him. It always felt good to talk to him or be around him. She had daydreamed about being with him before, but in the end decided it would be too much of a risk to their friendship. Besides, there had been chances for him to ask her out and he had not, so he must not think about her in the same way. At least there was one guy she knew that was there for her when she needed him, even if it was only as a friend. Besides, she had bigger problems to worry about.

What was she going to do about her boyfriend? They had been together for what seemed like such a long time. Could she really give that up? Who was she if she wasn't with him and what would she do without him? She would be Elendria, at least that was what Pralin had told her last night. If only she could believe him, but it had been so long since she had been by herself and she didn't like the thought of being alone. In fact, that thought terrified her to the very depths of her soul, but she knew that she couldn't keep going on with

things the way they were. She was tired of being miserable, and looking back on her relationship she realized that she had not really been happy in a long time. Well, something had to change or she would go crazy.

She decided she would have a talk with Peter and tell him that if things didn't change it would be over. Now she just had to work up the courage and hope he wouldn't get too angry. Peter tended to get angry fast, and when he was, she was never sure how much control he had. Hopefully, he would see that she was right and agree to try to appreciate her more. Maybe he wouldn't get violent and hit her again. He had only slapped her once or twice in the past and it was never hard enough to hurt her, just hard enough to sting. She had made the mistake of telling Pralin about it and it was all she could do to keep him from driving over and confronting Peter. Peter was bigger than Pralin, but Elendria was not sure what Pralin was capable of with all of his martial arts training. He had finally backed down, but told her if he ever found out about it happening again she wouldn't be able to stop him. Although Elendria would never admit it to Pralin she liked him being so protective. It made her feel safe in a strange sort of way, almost like he was her protector.

Maybe she would call Pralin tonight and ask how she should go about confronting Peter. No, she had better wait a couple of days to call him. As much as she liked calling him she didn't want to seem needy, and it seemed to her that as of late she only called him when she had problems. She didn't want him to think that she only liked or needed him when something was wrong. In the end, she decided that she would wait a day or two and maybe something would happen that she could call and talk to him about. Then she could casually work her current situation into the conversation. With that decided, it was time to get up and put some clothes on. Walking into her closet, Elendria decided she would be comfortable today. Looking around she decided on shorts and a t-shirt. Once she was up, she threw on her shirt and shorts and decided to go for a jog. After pulling her hair back into a ponytail and tying her shoes, she stretched a little and headed out the door.

As she shut the door she pulled the string that held her keys off of her neck and locked the door. The sight of the key chain brought Pralin back into her mind. When she first started jogging she had complained to him about not having anywhere to put her keys and that she didn't like leaving her door unlocked. So the next time she saw him, he gave her this

keychain necklace. He was always so thoughtful. It was even her favorite color. Pralin never ceased to amaze her. Suddenly, she felt kind of silly being so sentimental over a simple little thing like a keychain. No, it wasn't silly. It wasn't the gift that she liked so much, but the thought that was put into it. With a quick smile to herself she threw the keychain necklace back over her head and started walking toward the park across the street.

Once across the street she started jogging at a slow pace. It didn't take long for her mind to wander back to all of her problems. At least she would have something to think about while she ran. She liked the fact that jogging kept her in shape and that it sometimes helped her clear her head, but she had no love for the pain that went along with it. Having something to think about while she ran helped keep her mind busy instead of allowing it to notice how her lungs burned and her legs ached. Maybe she would be able to run really far today since she had so much to think about.

Thoughts raced through her head as she plodded along the trail. The constant jingle of the keys around her neck was almost hypnotic and it kept bringing Pralin back into her thoughts. Why could she not get him out of her head as-of-late? She still felt bad because lately, it seemed like she only called him when she had problems. Elendria hoped that he realized she always talked to him because he was the only one she felt like she could totally trust. It seemed like forever when she saw him last. This last thought is what gave her the idea. Tonight she would call him and ask if he wanted to go to lunch tomorrow. That way she could see him and talk to him. Then maybe she wouldn't feel like she was always calling him with her problems. Knowing him, he would eventually ask how everything was with her and Peter and then she could tell him what she was planning to do and get his advice. After deciding that, Elendria felt like a small weight had been lifted off of her shoulders. As she slowed to a walk she realized that she had ran over four miles. Since that was farther than she usually ran she decided that she would go home and take a shower.

She unlocked the door and stepped into her apartment. It would feel good to wash the sticky sweat off of her body. The warm water would probably feel good on her sore muscles too. Now that she had found a resolution to some of her worries she was feeling just how wearing the run had been on her. Turning, she checked the door to make sure that it was locked and headed for the bathroom. She paused at her

bedroom door taking off her socks and shoes. Once she was in the bathroom, she took off her shirt and shorts and paused in front of the mirror to give herself the usual criticisms. Looking in the mirror she pinched her stomach and let out a loud sigh thinking that she had been able to pinch way too much between her fingers. Pralin always told her she was crazy for thinking she was even a little overweight. If only Peter thought the same thing, but Elendria knew by the way he looked at her that he did not. He never gave her any compliments anymore. The other day she had put on what she thought was a pretty revealing dress and he didn't even give it two looks before telling her that he was going to go hang out with friends. "Maybe I have let myself go," she thought out loud.

Finally, deciding that looking in the mirror wasn't doing her any good, she turned the shower on and let the water heat up. When she could see the steam rising she slipped out of her underwear and into the shower. The warm water hitting her body felt very good. It had a calming effect. She let her hands lightly massage her sore shoulders and was surprised at how good it made them feel. In fact, when she stopped she noticed that the soreness was totally gone. Soon she began rubbing her sore calves and they suddenly felt better too. She jerked her hands back quickly. *This should help, but it should not stop the pain altogether.* It was as if her muscles had never been sore. Feeling herself breathing quickly, she tried to calm down. It was all in her head. It was the same thing that happened when someone took a placebo and thought they felt better because of taking the pill, even though it was made of sugar. That decided, she calmed and began enjoying her shower again.

After she was through cleaning herself she turned off the water and grabbed her towel. Since it was her day off she decided that she would let her hair air-dry. She had no one to impress today and she hated using the blow dryer. She threw on an old, but very comfortable t-shirt, along with some of her workout shorts and began combing her hair. When she finished getting all of the tangles out, she plopped down on the couch and threw on her favorite movie.

3

Pralin awoke to the sound of blaring music. He sat up and quickly scanned the room before he realized it was just his alarm clock. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he wondered if he had dreamed everything that had happened earlier. It didn't take long for him to realize it had all been real. The towel from his shower was there on the back of his chair where he had left it and the alarm clock that just went off had been set as he was climbing into bed. Sleep had done him no good. Nothing was clearer in his mind like he had hoped it would be, and now he felt groggy. Pralin wondered if he should call Ryan and cancel. He decided against that, hoping the workout would help distract him.

Pralin still had a little time before Ryan came over so he walked into the living room and sat on the couch. He turned on the television and as usual there was nothing interesting on. Football season was over and he didn't care to watch any other sport. Finally, he stopped on the music channel and decided to watch some of the videos. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes as he yawned and stretched his arms out. It was not until after he had opened his eyes and that he realized he was not in his living room anymore.

Quickly glancing around he realized that he had no clue where he was. Everything seemed slightly blurred and he couldn't see anything that he recognized. His eyes scanned all around but with everything being blurry it was to no avail.

Maybe I just dozed off. He realized he wouldn't know he was in a dream if he was in one.

"*Pralin,*" came a voice as the ground shook lightly.

"Who's there?" Pralin asked nervously as he spun in a circle searching for the source of the voice.

"*Me,*" came the voice as the ground shook again.

As much as he tried not to believe it, Pralin knew where the voice came from and why the ground shook as the voice spoke. The ground shook not because of the voice, but because it was the source of the voice. "Who are you and why have you brought me here?" Pralin said finally, managing to form words through his total confusion.

"*I am just one part in many decisions you will have to make and truths that you will come to realize,*" the voice responded.

"What decisions and what truths?" came Pralin's response.

"*It is not my place to tell you, but I must warn you that your decisions will affect many and will affect the one closest to you,*" came the voice again as the ground quaked.

Pralin was just about to respond with a flurry of questions when he heard something. In the span of a second Pralin was back in his living room once again. It took him a minute to get his bearings, but he finally realized that the sound was coming from his front door. He slowly walked to the door and opened it. Ryan was there.

Ryan looked at Pralin and noticed that he looked confused.

"Are you ok?" he asked.

"Huh? ...yeah, I'm ok I just had a really strange dream and I'm having trouble shaking it off," Pralin answered.

"What was it about?"

"I couldn't explain it even if I could remember it all," said Pralin, even though he knew it was not the total truth. He remembered every detail and doubted that he would be able to forget any of it if he wanted to. To top it all off, he knew it wasn't a dream, but he didn't know how he could ever explain it to Ryan or how he'd react. "I'll be fine after I knock you around a little," he said finally, smiling a little and allowing Ryan to relax.

"It's getting a little harder for you now that you've been training me for this long," said Ryan.

“You have gotten much better, but you’re still very slow,” Pralin joked.

“I guess we’ll just have to see won’t we?” Ryan said as he stepped through the door smiling.

Ryan was a little shorter than Pralin, but he was thicker. He had curly light red hair with blue eyes. He had always had an interest in martial arts, and when Pralin had told him that he felt out of shape and needed someone to train with, Ryan had enthusiastically volunteered. Ryan enjoyed learning from Pralin. He had told Pralin that he was glad he was a good teacher and very patient.

As they walked into the living room Pralin told Ryan that he was going to go change. Ryan sat down on the floor and began to stretch as Pralin went to his bedroom. It wasn’t long before Pralin returned wearing his ghi pants and a t-shirt. Pralin sat on the floor and started stretching and warming up.

“I don’t see how you can stretch that far,” Ryan said as he watched Pralin leaning forward with his legs straight out to his sides.

“It took me a long time to get this flexible, but it’s easy to stay that way once you get there,” Pralin said as he grabbed his left foot and pulled his chest to his knee.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever get there,” Ryan said.

“Sure you will,” Pralin said as he hopped to his feet. “Ready to start?”

“You know I am.” Ryan replied.

They bowed their formalities to each other and Pralin began the workout. They started by going through all of the various punches and blocks that Pralin had taught Ryan. After teaching him a few new ones and being satisfied that he had those plus the old ones down, they moved on to kicking. Here they spent a longer amount of time going over the intricacies of each movement. Pralin demonstrated how the balance foot and waist should be positioned throughout the various stages. When Pralin thought Ryan had the idea of these he moved on to katas, watching each one Ryan did and then correcting the little mistakes.

“You’re doing well,” Pralin told Ryan.

“Thanks, I’ve been practicing a lot at home,” Ryan said.

“That’s good. I think you’re going to be ready to test for your next belt soon,” Pralin said.

Ryan smiled, “That’d be great. I’m getting tired of this color anyways.”

They both laughed. "Ready to spar for a little bit?" Pralin asked.

"Of course."

At that, both of them started putting on their gear. Pralin knew this was Ryan's favorite part of the workout since he always grinned the whole time they were sparring. Soon each of them had their gloves and foot pads on and was ready to start. They stood about four feet apart from each other and bowed. They both stepped toward the other with a hand out. This was a good natured way of reminding the other that this was just for fun and learning, and not to knock the other person's head off. After slapping hands they backed away and assumed their fighting stances. Pralin threw a couple of punches and kicks that Ryan mostly blocked. When they first began sparring Pralin could land punches and kicks on Ryan at will but now that they had been training awhile it wasn't as easy. He still only sparred at a little over half of his full speed, but it was still more difficult for him to catch Ryan off of his guard. At times it almost seemed that Ryan was just toying with him and that he had some previous experience that he was hiding. They finally stopped after about ten minutes.

Each plopped himself down on the floor sweating and breathing hard. Pralin put both hands to his head feeling his sweat soaked hair and brow. The workout helped a little but he was still having a hard time letting the images of his dreams, or whatever they had been, out of his head. He let out a long sigh.

"Are you alright?" Ryan asked as he looked over at Pralin.

"I'm fine, just tired I guess," Pralin told him as he sat up. "I just need to get some rest is all."

Ryan looked at his watch. "Well, I gotta go. I'm suppose to go on a date with that girl I met the other day and I need to take a shower and shave before I see her."

"Alright, thanks for stopping by. We need to set up a time so I can test you for your belt," Pralin said as he stood up.

"Sounds good to me," Ryan told him as he gathered his things and headed for the door.

"Call me tomorrow and let me know how your date went," Pralin said as he reached the door and opened it.

"Sure thing," Ryan said as he left.

Pralin shut the door and locked it behind him as he went and threw himself down on the couch. He felt almost

dizzy. Everything that had happened earlier weighed heavily on his mind. He tried to make sense of it all, but he couldn't. Slowly, he was beginning to wonder if he was going crazy. He decided that was not the case. There was no way he imagined what had happened, and he was still far too coherent to be losing his mind. At least, he thought he was. Maybe that was all part of being crazy, believing that you're not when you really are. Pralin leaned his head back against the couch and stared blankly at the ceiling. After awhile he leaned forward and decided that moping around wasn't helping matters. Besides, he didn't want to do anything that might cause him to dream anymore.

Pralin stood up and went into the kitchen. As he looked around he noticed that he had forgotten to take the trash out. Deciding some fresh air might be good for him he pulled the bag out of the trash can and tied it off. He made a quick round through the apartment gathering all of the trash and then headed for the door. Once outside he noticed how nice of a day it was and wished he could spend more time out here, but the sun would be setting soon. He strolled to the trash bin and threw the garbage over the edge. Halfway back to his apartment a gust of wind hit him in the face.

"Pralin," came a voice in a whisper.

Pralin jerked around looking for the source of that voice and noticed nothing. "I must be really jumpy from earlier," he told himself aloud.

Another gust of wind hit him and it once again carried the voice, *"No, I am very real."*

Now the wind swirled around him as he groaned, knowing where the voice came from. "I wish somebody would tell me what's going on. Am I losing my mind?"

"No, you are perfectly sane. You were chosen long ago and now the time of your calling is coming," the wind whispered in his ear.

"Chosen for what and how much longer do I have?" Pralin asked.

"I cannot tell you these things yet, but it will be soon. You will be visited one more time and then you will have to decide," the voice answered.

"How can I choose when I don't even know what it is I am suppose to be choosing?" Pralin said, sounding irritated now.

"When it is time you will know," the voice said, never changing its tone.

“What if I choose to not do anything?” Pralin asked.

“*Then all will be lost and she will fall into the hands of darkness,*” the wind told him.

“Who is she?” Pralin said with increasing urgency.

“*Soon,*” the wind said as it faded away, “*soon.*”

Pralin looked around him to make sure no one was watching. While quickly turning his head to the right he caught a glimpse of something. It took a second to register but when he looked back nothing was there. *Was that an old man?* Pralin could not explain it, but something seemed familiar about whatever he saw or did not see. He was fairly sure that he didn’t imagine what had just happened, but he couldn’t be sure what someone else might think if they had been watching. After all, maybe he was the only one that could hear the voices, and if that were the case any onlooker surely would think he was crazy. “Maybe they would be right,” he quietly said to himself as he shook his head and walked back to his apartment.

As Pralin opened the door he heard the phone ringing. He rushed to get to it not knowing if it had just started ringing or if the answering machine was about to pick it up. It only took a second for him to find the phone. “Hello,” he said as he got the phone to his ear.

“Hey,” came Elendria’s voice.

A huge grin instantly came to Pralin’s face. “Hey, I didn’t expect to hear from you today.”

“I don’t have long to talk today because I still have a few errands to run, but I was going to ask if you wanted to go have lunch tomorrow. It’s been a really long time since we have been able to sit down and talk,” she paused, waiting for his answer.

“Of course, that would be great,” he replied and added, “What time would be good for you?”

“Let’s try for noon,” she answered.

“Sounds good to me,” he said. “Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know. We can decide that tomorrow. I’ll be in your area so I’ll stop by and we can leave from there, if that’s ok with you.” She said.

“Sure that’s fine with me,” he said, grinning even more now. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” she told him.

“Me too,” he said to her, just before he told her bye.

“*Bye*” Elendria said as she hung up the phone.

Pralin was grinning so much by this time that his face almost hurt. He always liked the way she said bye. It kind of had an inflection to it and was pleasantly different from the way anybody else said it to him. The effect she had on him never ceased to amaze him. Just moments ago he was wondering if he was going crazy and was at the point of depression, and now he could barely remember what had been bothering him so much. It all came back to him, though, as he realized that he stank and still needed to take a shower.

Pralin grabbed his towel and eyed the shower warily. He wasn't sure if he could go through with it. Catching his hands lightly shaking, he gripped his towel tightly to steady them. Hanging his towel on the towel rack, he slowly stepped into the shower. With a long sigh he turned on the water. After a few seconds he realized he wasn't breathing and drew in a breath. The shower turned out to be uneventful, but he also couldn't ignore the fact that it was probably the fastest shower he had ever taken.

After he had dried off he pressed against his hands against the counter top of the sink and leaned forward to look into the mirror. *Is this how I'm going to spend the rest of my life. Afraid of the water and the wind and the ground? I'll never be able to go anywhere.* He shook his head and let out a small laugh. *Well, I'd better get over it before tomorrow or Elendiria will think I'm crazy and won't want to have anything to do with me.*

He turned from the mirror and went to his bedroom to get dressed. After that he was off to the kitchen to make some supper. He turned on the gas stove and set the frying pan on it. Once he had retrieved the beef stir fry strips he had thawed in the refrigerator, he pulled out some onions and peppers and set them on the counter next to the stove. As he was turning back to the sink, his eye caught sight of the flame under the pan. Suddenly, he was mesmerized by the blue flames that licked the bottom of the pan. Without warning he was moving toward the flame. He tried frantically to stop and then realized that his body had not moved at all. *So is the flame coming at me?* Before he could make heads or tails of either, he realized he was surrounded by the flames and was not in the kitchen anymore. To his surprise, though, he was not burning. Another thing that surprised him was that he was not afraid or frantic like he had been the other three times. *Maybe I'm getting used to this.* He laughed. *I must be going crazy if I'm getting used to anything like this.*

"*Pralin,*" came a voice with a deep roar.

"What do you want with me?" Pralin responded, but did not search for the source of the voice. There was no need. He knew where it had come from.

"*This is the last time you will hear from one of us,*" the voice roared like the fire surrounding him.

"Who is us?" he asked.

"*We are the four elements. Earth, Wind, Fire, and Water is how you know us. You, like others, have the ability to hear us,*" the voice answered.

"What do you want with me?" Pralin said in a surprisingly calm voice.

"*We want nothing with you. Only to let you know that the time is coming. You are the chosen one and have the true calling*" the voice told him.

"I'm so confused. I don't know what it is that I'm supposed to be choosing or what this calling is that you speak of," Pralin said with a note of agitation in his voice.

"*You will when the time is right. It is not our place to tell you, just to let you know of its coming. Soon you will know and then you must decide. Remember, your decision affects everyone, especially the one you care most about,*" the voice responded as the flames died away.

Without realizing any change, Pralin was once again standing in the middle of his kitchen staring at the pan on the oven. "The one I care most about. Surely they can't mean whom I think they mean," he muttered to himself. He shook his head and began washing and cutting the vegetables. After seasoning the meat he tossed it into the pan and after it had browned he threw the vegetables in. When he finished cooking he turned the stove off and fixed his plate. He ate his meal barely tasting any of it. The last line that the fire had spoken to him had greatly disturbed him. Worrying was not going to do him any good though, but suddenly he felt very alone in his apartment. He grabbed the remote and turned the television on. After flipping through the channels awhile, he found an old movie that he liked and left it there. After an hour of staring at the television he realized that he hadn't even paid attention to five minutes of it. Soon after that he turned it off and decided to go to bed.

Pralin set his alarm clock for ten in the morning so he'd have plenty of time to get ready. After double-checking to make sure it was set right, he turned the lights off and pulled up the blankets as his head hit the pillow. With the day he

just had he thought it would be a long time before he would be able to go to sleep. Within five minutes he found himself drifting off and was soon in the world of dreams.

While she was getting ready for bed, Elendria couldn't help being excited about seeing Pralin tomorrow, although she wasn't sure why. They were just friends and she did have a boyfriend. Pralin had also been on a few dates with some new girl, but he hardly spoke of her. *Maybe it's just because it's been awhile since I've seen him.* As she climbed into bed wearing her favorite t-shirt she looked at her clock and set the alarm for nine in the morning. They may only be friends, but she was going to give herself enough time to look good when she saw him. The thought that maybe she could change his mind drifted through her head, but she quickly dismissed it with a sigh and lay down on her big soft pillow. She closed her eyes and let sleep come over her.

Suddenly, she was in the sky looking down on someone who felt very familiar to her. As soon as that thought crossed her mind she realized that it was Pralin she was looking down on. He was just laying his head down to go to sleep. Somehow she was faintly aware that she was in a dream, but it felt so real. It felt so real that for a moment she wondered if it might be. This looked exactly like his room. She had only seen it briefly once when he was giving her a quick tour of his new apartment but this seemed to be the same. There were no unpacked boxes this time though.

In the blink of an eye Elendria was somewhere else. She wasn't sure where, but she was outside. Fields of tall green grass flowing over gradual sloping hills went as far as the eye could see. The wind caused the grass to ripple like water. There wasn't a hint of modern civilization here. There were no roads, buildings, or power lines. Elendria was still vaguely aware that she was in a dream, but somehow this seemed to be much more than that. While glancing around she caught sight of something moving. She wanted to get a closer a look and as soon as she thought it, it happened. There she was face-to-face with a man running. *It's Pralin! Why is he in this dream too?* She noticed he had a somewhat frantic look on his face and was sweating like he had been running for awhile. "Pralin!" she called, but except for a quick glance to the left and the right he gave no sign that he heard her. After trying several more times she realized it wasn't working and gave up on

trying to get his attention. Without warning she was in a different place again.

This place was dark and seemed to have a very old feel to it. It felt as if no one had been here for hundreds of years. She noticed that the only light in this place came from somewhere up ahead. As soon as she thought about moving toward it she was speeding ahead. When she got closer she noticed that she was in a vast open area. The roof was so high up that she could barely see it through the shadows, and then her eyes were finally drawn to the source of the light. There was a sword that seemingly floated in midair while slowly revolving. That would have been strange enough, but this sword seemed to be the source of the light that she had been seeing. Near the sword a man stood staring. It was Pralin again. *Why is he showing up in all of my dreams?* His hand slowly reached out and as his fingers wrapped around the hilt of the sword the light became so bright that all Elendria saw was white. The light seemed to pierce her skull and then it was all over. Now she was sitting up in her bed breathing hard and sweat matted her hair to her head. Without realizing it her phone was in her hand and she was dialing Pralin's number. When it began to ring she came back to her senses and quickly hung the phone up. *He'll think I'm crazy if I call him over something silly like this at this time of night.*

As his fingers curled around the hilt a brilliant light filled the room. He could feel something pulling him, testing him. *It's the sword.* Suddenly he began to wonder if he would be able to stand it. Just when it started to become unbearable, he heard a ringing and in a flash Pralin was back in his room sitting up in the middle of his bed. Sweat dripped down his face as he brought his hands up and ran his fingers through his hair until his forehead rested on his palms.

Pralin tried to slow his breathing down and calm his nerves. *Why do I keep dreaming about that sword, and who was watching me? That faint voice almost sounded like...no, I'm just imagining things.* All of these thoughts raced through his head as he tried to make sense out of them. The whole time he had been dreaming, it almost felt as if someone had been watching him. For that matter, it felt like more than one person. He definitely could sense something different about those that watched. One gave him a somewhat comforting

feeling, while the other chilled him to the deepest part of his soul.

Shaking his head he started for the bathroom. He turned on the cold water, cupped his hands under the faucet to collect it in his palms, and then threw it on his face. After doing this a couple of times he grabbed his towel and dried his face. Slowly, he raised his head and looked in the mirror. His eyes seemed to have a dark tint surrounding them. It was apparent that he hadn't been getting any sleep. Reaching up he flipped the switch turning the lights off and with his head slumped, he walked back to his room. Now, he was really starting to wonder if he was going crazy.

Wearily, he laid his head back down on the pillow. He didn't want to go back to sleep, but he was so tired that his eyelids felt like weights were tied to them and he could no longer hold them open. It seemed like his eyes had just closed when he was awakened by his alarm clock. Sitting up he hit the snooze button to shut the alarm off. After a couple of minutes of laying there staring at the ceiling he decided to just turn the alarm off and take a shower. He climbed out of bed and went into the bathroom. Looking in the mirror he decided he would need to shave.

Although last night's shower had been uneventful he was still cautious as he turned on the water. Letting out a deep sigh he slowly stepped under it. After a few minutes in the water loosening his stiff muscles, he relaxed and began to wash. It was not long before he was done and stepping out. Taking a washcloth he wiped the mirror that had been fogged over by the steam. Once he could see he turned on the hot water and put shaving cream on over the stubble on his face and neck. He shaved very slowly and carefully to avoid cutting himself. When he was done he inspected the job to make sure that he did not miss any hair. After a thorough inspection, he went to his room to get dressed.

Once in his room Pralin started looking through his closet to decide what to wear. There was not much to choose from, so at least that much of his decision would be easy. He wanted to look nice, but he didn't want it to look too much like he was trying to impress Elendria. Finally, he decided on a pair of lightly tanned khakis and a button up collar shirt with his brown leather belt and brown shoes. After he finished dressing he sprayed a little cologne on and combed his hair. Looking at the clock he noticed it was almost eleven thirty in

the morning and decided to sit and watch television while he waited on her to arrive.

After close to fifteen minutes of watching television the phone rang. Pralin had thought ahead this time and the phone was sitting next to him. He grabbed it quickly figuring that it was probably Elendria calling to ask about some direction that she missed. "Hello."

"Hello," came the voice he expected.

"So, are you almost here, I'm really hungry," he said as he began to grin. He was not quite sure why he always grinned like that while talking to her, but he couldn't stop it.

"That's what I was calling about," Elendria responded in a sober voice. "Peter just showed up and says he needs to talk to me and that it's really important."

"That's fine," Pralin said trying to keep his disappointment from his voice. "He's your boyfriend and if it's important you need to talk to him. Besides, we can get together some other time."

"I'm glad that you understand, Pralin. I would still like to get together today, though. Peter is supposed to be at work by two, so hopefully we can get together sometime between one and two. Feel free to eat if you're hungry, though," she told him.

"Ok, that sounds good to me. I'll wait to eat for a couple of hours. I hope everything goes well with your talk," Pralin told her, hoping that his voice did not betray that he was thinking he wouldn't see her today.

"I'll see you in a little while then," she said quickly, hoping that he would believe her and not be as disappointed as he sounded.

"I'll see you in a couple of hours," he replied.

"Bye" she said.

"Bye." Pralin looked at the phone as he hung it up. *I don't think I'll be seeing you today. Something always comes up when Peter is involved. I know she is his girlfriend, but he's not right for her. If it were anybody else, I probably wouldn't care.* He quickly put these thoughts out of his head. They weren't doing him or his mood any good. Setting the phone down he watched television for a little while longer. Finally, he got up to go to the bathroom. He was almost to the hall that connected his living room with the bathroom and his bedroom, when a flash of light behind him grabbed his attention.

As he turned around, his mouth dropped open, and he saw three figures standing in his living room. A quick glance at

the door showed that it was still closed and locked. *Where did they come from?* Two of the figures in front of him seemed mostly normal. They were large men with broad shoulders and rough faces. Each wore a beard that didn't look like it had ever been tended. Their clothes looked different from any he had ever seen. They seemed to be made of dark leather and hung loosely. The tops looked like a sort of tunic with various tears throughout, and each had on some loose breeches with leather boots. None of it was anything he had ever seen in a store. Even with all of these things considered, the most puzzling thing was the creature that stood behind them. Whatever it was, it did not appear to be human. It stood at least seven feet tall or more. Its bald head had two small horns that curved up and backwards. The face had some normal human features, but it was hard to tell since most of it was covered with a short dark gray fur. Deep red eyes filled sunken eye sockets. Another unfortunate surprise was a mouth full of fangs. There was no iris or pupil that Pralin could see. Its upper body was unclothed and was covered by that same short dark fur. Each forearm had something that looked like a bone growing out of it. Each bone curved to a point just past the creature's clawed hands. From what Pralin could tell, the part of the curved bone that faced outward from its arm was sharp. The creature seemed to be wearing something like a kilt made of the same dark leather the men wore. Its legs were covered with the same dark fur and it had a long thin tail that slowly whipped back and forth.

Pralin only had a few seconds to take it all in before the creature in the back growled something and pointed at him. Before he knew what was going on one of the men rushed him. Pralin just had time to side step and dodge a punch aimed at his face. Another followed that he blocked and countered. His counter punch was blocked and they both moved through the living room punching and blocking. The man was stronger than Pralin so he had to side step many of the punches rather than try to block the full force of them. He had his hands full and he knew the other two were still there. *I have to do something fast before they decide to join in.* The man finally made his first mistake, putting too much behind his punch. Pralin stepped to the side allowing the punch to brush past him, and caused the man to push all of his weight on his front leg. Pralin side kicked the man's knee with everything he had and it bent ninety degrees the wrong way as the man let out a shrill cry and fell to his other knee. Without another thought,

Pralin's foot was flying through the air and into the man's throat. As he fell back making gurgling sounds and trying to catch his breath through his collapsed windpipe, the man looked up at Pralin with hate-filled eyes.

The other man slammed his shoulder into Pralin, not giving him time to contemplate what he had just done. Pralin's shoulder and head hit the wall on the other side of the hallway. He had less than a second to realize what had happen and move before a foot was crashing into the wall that he had just bounced off of. Shaking his head, he moved toward his room where there would be extra space. He knew his odds would be better where he could move more and not have to go toe-to-toe with a man that was larger than him. This man seemed to be a little slower than the other as he attacked Pralin. It was much easier to block and counter his moves. Finally, the man swung his arm in a wide arching punch and Pralin hit him in the ribs twice, following with a backhand to the face. Staggering back with blood pouring from his mouth the man reached behind his back and pulled out a curved knife. Pralin's eyes went wide. He had not noticed the knife before.

Smiling with spittle coming out of the side of his mouth the man growled, "I'm going to gut you little man and then *he* will reward me."

Pralin was about to ask the man who he was and who was going to reward him when the knife was suddenly swinging at his face. He leaned back and saw the blade pass just in front of his eyes. The wild slash left the man's stomach open and Pralin took advantage of it by side kicking him and following with a heel kick to the man's massive jaw as he staggered back. It didn't take long for the man to recover and he felt the tip of the blade tear through his left sleeve and cut into his flesh. Although it was not a bad cut, it made him realize he needed to use more caution. *I'm getting winded and I won't be able to dodge every strike he makes with that knife.* The thought flashed through his mind quickly as the man came at him with the knife raised over his head. Without thinking, Pralin was stepping into the man and high blocking his forearm. As soon as he made contact with the forearm, he spun his body one hundred and eighty degrees while stepping past the man and bringing his arm down. Suddenly, Pralin felt something warm running over his hands and when he looked down he noticed that he had caused the knife to bury itself deeply into the man's stomach. Looking at the knife that had

been guided by his hands, he shuddered and let go of the man's arms, allowing him to crumple face first onto the floor.

Drawing hard deep breaths, Pralin propped himself into the doorway with one arm on each side of the doorframe. His heart felt like it was going to pound out of his chest. From the corner of his eye he saw a streak heading toward him. He threw himself back into his room just in time to see one of those bladed bones fly by where he had just been. Without thinking he made a break for the living room. Space was what he needed if he hoped to survive this monster or whatever it was. There was little time to think before the thing was heading at him again. *This thing is so fast.* The thought passed across his mind as he began moving, ducking, and dodging the flailing arms of the creature in front of him. *It's too fast. I can't stop blocking long enough to counter.* Pralin was growing tired and it was getting harder to block, not to mention he had to be careful not to block those two bladed bones. That would do more damage than it prevented. The creature let out unearthly screams as it slashed and kicked at him. Pralin moved too slowly one time and he felt the sharp side of that bladed bone tear into his shoulder. The force of the blow spun him into the wall, smearing his blood against it and knocking the clock off. He spun quickly away as one of the points of the creature's bladed bones rushed at his head. When his head spun back he noticed that the bladed bone was stuck in the wall. In an instant Pralin was flying through the air and kicking the creature in the side. The creature yelled in pain from the massive blow that threw it backwards jerking its arm free from the wall.

Pralin rushed in to attack while the creature was stunned when something slashed his face throwing him into the couch and turning it over. *So, that's what the tail is for,* Pralin thought groggily as he started to get to his feet. When he looked around he saw one of those bladed bones rushing at his chest. Too late to block he tried to move just as he felt it tearing and sinking into his flesh. Pralin screamed from the pain that appeared in the upper left part of his chest. It was so intense that it threatened to make him black out. The creature's mouth moved so that it resembled a smile. Drool rolled off of its fangs as it bared its teeth. Now, Pralin knew he was going to die and there was nothing he could do about it. All of his strength was draining from him as he felt blood flowing freely from the wound. As things in the room began to blur one thought crossed his mind. *Elendria.*

If she does come over this thing could still be here when she arrives. I can't let that happen. The last thought came as yell of rage inside his head. With sudden renewed strength he planted his foot against the creature's chest and pushed off as hard as he could. It freed him from the bladed bone and sent him rolling on his back. He was able to roll onto his feet and face the creature. Pralin bared his teeth in a snarl at the creature. Rage filled him at what he thought this creature might do to Elendria. The creature charged just as Pralin did. Pralin let go of all conscious thought and gave over to instinct. Suddenly, the creature seemed to be moving in slow motion. Pralin did not seem to be effected in the same way and took advantage side stepping and kicking the thing in the ribs. Dodging his tail as it whipped toward him, Pralin kicked the creature in the back and sent it into the wall face first. The creature spun and rushed. Moving to the side again Pralin let the creature pass, and in one move planted his foot in the creature's back while grabbing its chin. He pushed off with his foot and pulled with all of this strength. Pralin heard the bones in its neck and back snap like twigs, and they both crashed to the ground.

With the threat gone, pain and exhaustion came crashing back down on Pralin. He sank to his knees breathing hard and wincing. Thinking about calling for help he tried to move toward the phone and only fell over. It was all he could do to keep his eyes open as he lay on his side. His vision went in and out of focus. *At least she will be safe.* The thought drifted through his head while he lay there ready to lose consciousness and die. Just as his eyes were shutting his front door crashed open and a man ran through it toward him. *I'm sorry Elendria I tried, I really did. Please don't come over today. Stay away.* Pralin wished and hoped that by some miracle those thoughts might reach her. He looked up at the man and an odd sense of recognition tickled the back of his mind, but before he could try to make sense of it darkness overtook him.

Elendria looked down at the clock on her stereo as she drove toward Pralin's apartment. She was a little upset that he didn't think she was going to show up. Granted, she had done this before, but that was still no reason to assume that it was going to happen this time. Looking back at the clock, she began to drive faster. It really should not have taken that long

with Peter, but this time he seemed so sincere and it was just hard to leave. Hopefully, Pralin would still be at home because she still wanted to talk to him and now she needed to straighten him out about not trusting her.

After what seemed like forever she was turning into his apartment complex. For the first time today, she realized that she was nervous. *Why am I nervous?* Taking a few deep breaths she found a parking spot and pulled into it. Without thinking she checked her makeup in the rearview mirror. It did not occur to her what she had done until she had stepped out of the car. She shook her head and began walking toward his door. As she rounded the corner she noticed that his door was halfway open. “Good” she said to herself, “I haven’t missed him.” Lightly knocking on the door she called out his name. There was no reply but the door opened a little bit more. Deciding that he might be in the back, she slowly took a step inside and called out his name again. It was not until she was deeper into the apartment that she noticed the couch was turned over. Panic started to build inside her as she quickly looked around. Her breathing became quick and her heart pounded in her chest when she saw the blood on the wall and on the floor. She ran into his room and saw even more blood on the carpet.

Panic seized her and her vision began to narrow. “PRAALIN!” she screamed as she tried to control her fear. She knew passing out right now wouldn’t help him in any way. Tears rolled down her face as she reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone and dialed 911. When the operator answered she forced herself to calm down and explain what had happened. After she hung up her phone she stepped outside and waited for the police to show up.

Elendria did not have to wait very long before she heard the sirens. Soon, there were police officers running toward her. They were saying things, but everything she heard sounded as if it were coming from very far away. She was able to figure out that they wanted to know which apartment, so she pointed. It was then that she realized she could no longer block out everything that was going on. Everything around her spun and the last thing she remembered were hands reaching out to catch her.

When Elendria finally came around, strange faces surrounded her. It took her a minute to gain her senses and it was then that she realized they were paramedics and that she was in an ambulance. She asked them how long she had been

out and they told her that she had fainted about ten minutes ago. Slowly, she sat up holding her head and rubbing her temples trying to relieve her headache. The paramedics kept asking her if she was ok and she kept telling them that she was fine. All around her, red and blue lights flashed. She could see yellow police tape surrounding the entrance to Pralin's apartment and after awhile one of the police officers approached her and asked if she would be able to answer some questions. She told him she would and he took out a piece of paper.

The questioning went on for what seemed like hours. Most of the questions were ones that she had expected. How had she known Pralin? What was she doing over here today? When was the last time she had talked to him? Did she know anyone that might want to hurt him? It was a battle to keep from breaking down and crying during the questions but she did her best. She had figured out that the officer who was questioning her was in charge. That had been easy to deduce, since everyone kept coming to him for instructions. The questions finally stopped and she was glad because she didn't know how much longer she could hold out. Just as she was about to climb out of the ambulance another officer approached the one she had been talking with. Elendria would have just walked away, but the officer was holding a clock that she remembered seeing in Pralin's apartment the first time she had ever come over.

It was what he told the officer in charge that made her heave everything in her stomach all over the parking lot. He said that they figured whatever happened must have been around twelve thirty in the afternoon. They were able to figure out that it was knocked off during the scuffle because of the blood on the wall under where it had hung. He pointed out the time saying that it must have stopped when it hit ground and knocked the battery out. Both officers were staring at her as she finally finished dry heaving and was wiping her mouth. The one she had been talking to asked her what was wrong and she told him about how she was suppose to meet Pralin at noon and how that if she had, none of this would have happened. They assured her that it wasn't her fault and that if she had been on time both she and Pralin may be missing right now instead of just him. She nodded though she did not really believe it herself. When they finally thought she had calmed down they asked her how she was going to get home. She told

them that she would drive herself and refused their offers to take her home.

The car ride home didn't seem to take very long, although with the numbness she was feeling now she wasn't sure how much time had actually passed. She unlocked her door and went into her apartment. After she had locked the door and turned on a few lights, she picked up the phone, sighed, and called her mother. It must have been hours before she hung up the phone. She wondered how her mom could even understand half of what she said, since she had cried through most of the conversation. Her eyes hurt from so many tears and her voice was raw from the strained words that she had forced out of her mouth. Looking at the phone she thought about calling Peter, but decided against it. For some reason she did not feel like talking to him at all. Once she had put the phone back on its stand she went to the bathroom and washed her face. Slowly, she walked to her bed and lay down, not bothering to get undressed or under the covers. She had thought she wouldn't be able to cry anymore, but once she closed her eyes a vivid picture of the apartment came to her and the tears flowed freely once more. *Pralin I'm so sorry.* That was repeated over and over in her head before she finally drifted off into a fitful sleep.

4

Pralin could not see, but he could hear a soft distant voice. *You are very lucky or very strong to still be alive. Perhaps it is both. Just by looking at you I can tell that you are truly remarkable, but to survive an attack by a seething without weapon or magic is beyond remarkable. Maybe you are...* Pralin wondered where that voice was coming from and slowly tried to open his eyes. Blinding light filled his vision at first and his eyes began to water before clamping shut. Slowly, he pried them open just enough to let a little light through and allow his eyes to adjust. When his sight finally came into focus he could see the face that belonged to the voice. It was a woman with long wavy red hair that fell down to her waist. Her eyes were as green as emeralds, her lips were full and the color of a fine red wine, and her skin was pale with just a touch of brown. She wore a top of the lightest green that seemed to be made of silk. The edges were embroidered in brown lines that wove their way around her arms and her upper body. A leather cord hung with a small clear crystal dangling at the bottom hung around her neck. Although he could see through the crystal, it seemed to be emitting some sort of light, but from where, he could not be sure. The crystal, however, did not hold his attention long because the face he was looking at was so riveting that he could barely remember to breathe.

She touched his face with long smooth fingers. "You are finally awake," she said, her voice so soft and tender.

“Are you an angel?” Pralin asked groggily, still staring up into those unnaturally green eyes. He vaguely remembered what had happened and knew that he must be dead.

She smiled, making her even more beautiful than before, which Pralin thought would be impossible. “No I am no angel. My name is Farolyn Far’thalasa.”

“Where am I?” Pralin asked looking around the room. He noticed that he was on a bed with four tall wooden posts at each corner. Looking around the room he saw that everything was made of wood. The walls, the chair and table, and the floor all seemed to be made of the same wood. When he glanced at the window he noticed he could see the tops of trees on the other side. His head started to spin a little so he laid it back down on the pillow and looked back into those enchanting eyes.

“Where you are is hard to explain, and you are not well enough to try to contemplate it right now,” came a man’s voice from behind Farolyn. Pralin adjusted his head so he could see around Farolyn. When he looked he saw the man that had come rushing toward him just as he was losing consciousness in his apartment. He jerked to sit up, not wanting to be in such a defenseless position, but before he could sit halfway up Farolyn’s gentle hands were on his shoulders pressing him back down. That he did not resist was a testament to how exhausted he was.

“It’s ok Pralin, he will not harm you. Dassimar Far’thalasa is my father.” Farolyn’s soft voice somehow seemed to calm him.

“He’s your father?” Pralin looked at her in confusion. For the first time since he had awakened he realized just how tired he was. Wincing at the pain radiating from the left side of his chest he moved his hand to it and noticed there was no wound. The pain was still there but there was no evidence that anything had happened.

“You are very lucky that my daughter is a good healer. You were at death’s door when I brought you to her,” Dassimar said to him as he stepped next to Farolyn and lightly laid his hands on her shoulders.

“You were the one I saw the other day after I took the trash to the dumpster. Have you been watching me?” Pralin asked him as he recalled events from the other day.

“Yes I have, but we will talk of that more after you have rested some more.”

“Why do I still have this pain in my chest?”

Farolyn cast her eyes down as she spoke, "I'm sorry I couldn't take all of the pain from that wound. I was not strong enough. You will be fine, but the pain will have to go away naturally." Dassimar started to speak, but just as he did Pralin moved his hand out from under the sheets and placed it on Farolyn's. Surprised by the touch, she looked up and Pralin's eyes found hers. He looked intently into her eyes.

"You did what you could and saved my life. No one could ask any more of you. Thank you. Maybe someday I'll be able to repay you," Pralin said as he smiled at her. It was hard for Pralin to concentrate as he stared into those mesmerizing eyes.

Farolyn stared just as intently back into his eyes studying him, or at least that was what Pralin thought. A smile touched her lips as she lightly ran her fingers through his hair. "I'm sure you will," she said so softly that Pralin could barely hear her, "but now you must rest." She began to sing softly. Her voice was so beautiful that Pralin could concentrate on nothing else. It sounded like the softest bells chiming. He felt tingles wherever her fingers touched and soon he was fast asleep.

Farolyn and Dassimar remained by his bed for a little while longer. Once they were sure he was going to stay asleep, they left his room. They were in a long hall that curved to the left. On one side was a wall, while the other was a series of windows and wooden posts that allowed light to flood into the hallway. Dassimar looked over at Farolyn. "You also need some rest. You have done much the last couple of days and have barely slept at all."

"I had to watch him and make sure that he lived. So much may depend on him and he doesn't even know it," she said with a sigh.

"I know child...I know. Soon he will be well enough for us to explain much to him. I just fear that telling him too much too soon will be a burden that will hinder his healing," Dassimar said as he looked over at his daughter. "That is not all that weighs on your mind though, is it daughter?"

Farolyn looked over at him and stopped. "Father, when I healed him and tried to take away the pain, I was able to see some of what he is...if that makes sense," she did not wait for an answer to continue. "You know how when I heal someone I can sometimes sense their gift if they have the ability to touch the elements?"

Dassimar's face took on a look of concern as he looked back at Farolyn. "Yes daughter, I am aware."

"Well, father, I sensed it in him."

"That's impossible! He has only recently had the calling. He has yet to embrace the essence of any element." Shock was apparent on his usually calm and serene face.

"I know I shouldn't be able to, but I did. There is something else father...it is different in him...almost like it is part of him rather than just in him," she said, her face showing the disbelief in the words she had just spoken.

"Different, how is it different? What do you mean by a part of him?" he asked, calm again.

"It is difficult to explain, since you have never sensed it...when I sense it in you it is like there is this ball of...of the gift radiating inside you. It is the same with the few others that I have noticed it in, but with him there is no ball, it...it radiates from everywhere in him at once...almost like he is the ball. It was very strange." She looked lost. "I am sorry I can explain it no better than that."

"This is very interesting, but I can tell by your face that there is even more," he said as he lead her to the windowsill and sat down on it beside her.

Farolyn sighed, "Yes there is more...with the gift one is usually stronger in one element than the other and that essence usually radiates more than the others and I can usually sense that difference. All four are present, but one is usually stronger, like earth is with you. Well, not a one of them is more apparent than the other in him and yet...they all seem to radiate far more powerfully than even earth does in you. Father, it was far more powerful than anything I have ever felt."

Dassimar looked intently back into his daughter's eyes, "Does that scare you?"

Farolyn looked back into his eyes just as intently, "No, for some reason it made me feel safe," she paused for a long time as she glanced at the floor lost in thought, "In fact, I felt safe just being in the same room with him, and he is almost totally helpless right now. When he touched my hand, all I could hear were his words...all that existed was him and suddenly my heart felt lighter, like some huge burden had just been lifted from me. I felt that as long as he touched me nothing could harm me. It was hard to remove his hand from mine."

She looked almost lost. He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I, too, have felt some of what you speak of while in his presence. I do not know what to make of it other than it has something to do with what the prophecies proclaim of him."

"So you think that he is the one spoken of in the prophecies," it was more of a statement than a question, "so dark times are upon us...the shadow is coming."

Dassimar pulled her close, hugging her as he ran his hand over her hair, "Yes, child I am afraid he is. It is still too early for the prophecies to prove he is, but I can tell just from being near him. And if he is the one, then I do fear very dark times are here."

Farolyn let out a long sigh as her head slumped against Dassimar's shoulder, "I know it sounds selfish but I had hoped it would not happen in my lifetime. Like you I know who he is just from being near him. I fear his journey will be much darker than ours though," she said as she glanced back at the door they just came out of.

"You should get some rest, dear one. We have much to do in the days and months to come, and you will need your rest."

"You are right father, I'm glad you're back. You've been gone for a very long time." she hugged him tightly and then stood. Glancing at the door once more she turned and walked down the hallway toward her room.

Dassimar watched her as she walked away, amazed at the woman she had become, and then he glanced out the window. His gaze drifted past the trees to the now setting sun, which was slowly falling behind them. "I'm afraid you have no idea just how dark these times will be," he muttered under his voice. He was not sure if the words were meant for Farolyn or himself. The only thing he knew was that they were true for whomever they were for.

He sat for a long while staring out the window and watching the sun fall completely from the sky. Night slowly crept over the trees until it encompassed everything in sight and the last rays of the sun faded from memory. Hundreds of thoughts tried to enter his head at the same time. *Is he really as strong as she says? I pray to the Creator that he is, but is that going to be enough? Even if he is, there is still one more vital person to this puzzle that has yet to be discovered. Will we find that person in time?* Dassimar let out another sigh. The

darkness was a reminder of the things that were coming. It was hard for Dassimar not to notice the pitch black that was surrounding everything. Nights over the last couple of months had been far too dark, but just as despair started to overcome him a faint ray of light appeared on the horizon. Slowly, the light grew stronger and forced some of the night back. After a little while the moon rose over the horizon and shone brighter than Dassimar had ever seen. Despair started to flee from his spirit as he glanced back at the door. Courage and hope began to build inside of him. “*He will be our light in the shadow, and that shadow he will cast back into the pits of the beyond.*” With a determined look, Dassimar walked to his room. He had much to think on and many things to plan.

Pralin’s eyes slowly began to open again. *That has to be the strangest dream I’ve ever had.* As he tried to sit up a sharp pain lanced through the upper left part of his chest and he fell back onto his pillow. He closed his eyes. *It wasn’t a dream.* His eyes surveyed the room once again. There was no one else to be seen. This time when he glanced around the room he noticed some things he hadn’t noticed before. There were no lights anywhere to be seen. On one post he saw something that looked like a light but after looking at it more carefully he noticed there was no cord going to an outlet anywhere. It was just a clear ball with no filament or anything to carry electricity. Looking around more he noticed that one of the walls seemed to have tree bark covering it. His eyebrows drew together as he tried to figure that one out. Shaking his head he glanced over at the window. It was open, letting a light breeze in. The sunlight seemed to come through it and directly onto him. Its warmth seemed to seep into his body and energize him. *Maybe I can look out that window and have some idea of where I am.*

After a moment of thought he gritted his teeth and through pure strength of will and determination he sat up. His head spun so that he had to support himself with his right arm. Realizing he was holding his breath against the pain, he slowly let it out. He closed his eyes for a second hoping to get the room to stand still, and when he thought the spinning had stopped he opened them again and looked toward the window. *This is going to be a lot harder than I thought.* Gingerly, Pralin slung his legs over the edge of the bed. The cool wooden floor pressing against his feet felt good. It helped to distract him from the searing pain in his chest.

Pralin slowly talked himself into standing. Pushing off with his right arm he let his legs do most of the work and was able to avoid some of the pain that way. His legs wobbled and for the first time he realized just how weakened this ordeal had left him. Firming himself, he looked down and his cheeks reddened as he realized he was not wearing any clothes. Quickly, he grabbed the sheet off the bed, wrapped it around his waist, and secured it with a sissy knot. He wondered how long he had been naked and where his clothes were. After a quick glance around the room again he saw a chest against the far wall and concluded that they must be there. It did not take long to talk himself out of trying to make it to that chest. That was too far and they might not even be in there. *No, I'm going to have enough problems just trying to get to the window.* Setting his mind to the task at hand he cautiously set one foot in front of the other. Each step caused blinding pain to shoot through his chest until he finally reached the windowsill and supported himself on his right arm once more. His head hung low as he panted and sweat rolled down his nose, but a small smile crossed his lips at his accomplishment.

Pralin lifted his gaze to what lay beyond the window. A small breeze brushed his sweat soaked face, cooling him considerably. The smell of pine filled his nostrils, but what his eyes saw he could not believe. When he first looked out from his bed he had thought he must be in a hospital on some upper level but now he was eye level with tops of endless rows of trees. Well, he was eye level with the tops of most trees. Some rose to unimaginable heights. In all his life he had never seen trees that big. *Was that a person that I just saw moving in that one over there?* Closing his eyes he shook his head. When he opened them nothing had changed. As he glanced down he noticed he was well over fifty feet in the air. He started to lift his left hand to run his fingers through his hair and realized quickly that was a mistake as pain shot all the way through his arm causing his fingers to tingle. *I'm in one of those trees.*

"You really shouldn't be out of bed," said a soft feminine voice from behind him. He was startled and started to jerk around but was halted by more pain. Suppressing a wince he turned around to see who it was. It was Farolyn. Today she wore a white dress that just fell short of covering her ankles. The dress was simple with a wide white sash tied around her middle. Small brown leather pouches were tied to the sash. Its neckline swooped down just enough to show the strange

necklace she was wearing when last he saw her. The crystal rested against her bosom just where it began to push away from her body. Her hair was free flowing except where a small band threaded through it and held some sort of green stone pressed to her forehead. Long loose fitting sleeves flowed down to her wrists and she wore no shoes of any kind. Pralin couldn't get over how perfect and beautiful she was.

"I just thought I would try to see where I was," he told her, trying to keep the pain from his voice.

"Did you find the answer you were looking for?" she asked, as she slowly moved toward him with an eyebrow raised.

"No," he sighed, "in fact, I think I am more confused now, and I didn't think that would be possible."

"I promised father I would let him explain things to you, but I will tell you that you are farther from home than you have ever been before."

How could she know how far I've been from home? The word home brought back the memories of being attacked. He wondered what would happen when someone found the body of that monster. It hit him like a freight train that that someone could be Elendria. His eyes widened. "I have to get back! I have to make sure she's ok!" he said as he spun and started to race for the door. He had taken two steps when his legs started to give way under him. The pain in his chest could not be overcome this time as it encompassed him. He let out a cry.

Farolyn moved quickly and caught his right arm. She struggled under his weight as she moved him toward the bed. Pralin was gritting his teeth trying to suppress the screams that wanted to leave his mouth. Instead, they came out as loud grunts. His right hand grabbed at his chest fully expecting to find that bladed bone sticking out of it. Clinching his eyes shut he tried to concentrate on anything else.

Digging in her pouches Farolyn pulled out something long, narrow, and white. "Eat this, it will help with the pain. It's the root from the Tenaisha plant."

Pralin opened his mouth and she stuck the root inside. Slowly, he chewed and swallowed it, and after a time the pain began to subside and it became easier for him to breathe. Farolyn's nose was almost touching his as she gazed into his eyes. Concern was clearly evident in them. The green surrounding her pupils seemed hypnotic, and he wondered which was helping more: looking into her eyes, or that

disgusting root that he just ate. "Thank you," he mumbled.

"I'm just glad that it helped," she said as the door opened and Dassimar came rushing in. A look of worry showed on his face as he surveyed the room and then walked over to the bed. Dassimar was in a simple brown cloak. Pralin knew he was old by the knowledge that seemed to be held in his eyes and his white hair that just touched his shoulders, but his face showed none of the signs of his age.

"What happened?"

"I was looking out the window when I realized I needed to get home and check on a friend. She was coming over the day I was attacked and I don't know what she'll think when she sees the bodies of those men and that monster. I tried to rush for the door and the pain of the wound almost took me to the ground. Luckily, Farolyn was here to catch me. She also gave me something for the pain." Pralin smiled weakly at Farolyn as he spoke those last words.

"That thing was a seethling and I am afraid there is no way for you to get home, even if you could take more than three steps. I am astonished you were able to make it to the window without passing out," said Dassimar.

"Why can't I go home?" Pralin asked in desperation. "I need to make sure she's alright. The sight of that seethling thing alone could scare her to death."

"The seethling will not be there when she arrives, young Pralin," said Dassimar in a fatherly tone.

"How do you know? Did you see her?"

"No, but you will have to trust me. I will explain it when you are well enough to hear it. Now you need to rest," he said, and his mouth twisted into a comforting smile.

"I can't rest. Not when I have no idea what's going on or if someone I know is in danger. If you won't tell me, I'll just keep trying to leave until I make it." Determination was clearly present in Pralin's voice.

Dassimar glanced over at Farolyn. She nodded after a moment, "I believe he would try and I do not know how much he would be able to take. You might as well tell him. Maybe it will set his mind at ease about some things."

Farolyn sat herself down on the bed near Pralin's right shoulder. Her leg brushed his arm briefly, but in that brief instant he felt the firmness of it. She grabbed the sheet and raised it above his chest. Pralin's cheeks went red remembering that he was not wearing anything under that

sheet. He turned his head trying to hide his embarrassment but realized he hadn't done a good job of it when she giggled. *There's not even a flaw in her giggle.* Pralin watched as Dassimar pulled the chair over to the other side of the bed and sat down. Dassimar raised an eyebrow at Farolyn's giggles and she soon stopped.

"Foolish youth, always wanting to rush into things instead of taking their time and thinking," Dassimar muttered to himself but made sure it was loud enough to be heard by both Pralin and Farolyn. "I'll tell you these things, but you have to promise me that you will not overreact or do anything but lay there and listen. The pain from that wound is still strong enough that it could send your body into shock and kill you." Tightness seemed to touch Farolyn's eyes as those last words were spoken.

After Pralin promised, Dassimar continued, "First we will start with where you are, but that in itself is going to take a great deal of explaining. You see, thousands of years ago, your Earth had magic." Dassimar paused as he watched Pralin try to work that out in his head.

"What do you mean my earth?" Pralin asked.

"Patience, all will be explained in time," Dassimar said before continuing. "Thousands of creatures that exist only in your stories and dreams did and still do exist in this world, to some extent anyway.

"There was one in the heavens just under the Creator who controlled the magic. It was his gift to the world, but over time he became increasingly greedy for power and eventually he tried to use his magic to surpass the Creator. For this, the Creator cast him out of the heavens and into the underworld. The Shadow Lord, as he is called now, was not finished though. Since he had created magic, he still had some control over it, even while in his prison. He used that control to twist and contort those corrupted with a lust for power to his side. His evil corrupted their magic and minds and soon they conquered and killed everything in sight. They did his bidding and through his aide soon became very powerful. You see, the Shadow Lord was angry with the Creator and wanted revenge. He planned to destroy one of the Creator's dearest creations, mankind. Those who used magic for the good rose up and tried to defeat these evil wizards, but they were not strong enough. The world began to fall into chaos through their death and destruction until at last one rose up who was very powerful. Some said this wizard, Tarstian, was touched by the

Creator himself. Tarstian brought the last remnant of good wizards together and fought the evil wizards. Slowly, they destroyed each and every one of them. Many called this the War of Hope. Much was lost or destroyed during this time though.”

As Dassimar paused, Pralin decided to speak, “Why would the Creator not stop this or take the magic away to stop it?”

“The Creator gave man free will to do as he will. Those that lusted after power could have resisted, but chose it over the Creator. He also knew how much man loved magic and could not bring himself to take it away. Many believe that Tarstian was his answer,” Dassimar explained.

Pralin struggled with all of this information and then looked back at Dassimar, “That still doesn’t tell me where I am.”

Dassimar grinned, “You must learn patience Pralin, there is still much to this story. After Tarstian had finally banished the last of the great sorcerers he began to really see the damage that they had caused. Those without the ability to use magic had not stood a chance and they had suffered greatly because of it. It was also then that he realized just how few could truly touch the magic. Realizing that those few could control the rest and that the Shadow Lord would keep touching man through this magic he decided that something needed to be done. After years of thinking and studying he set upon his course of action. Tarstian realized that magic was the ability to hear and control the essences of the four elements.

Dassimar saw Pralin about to ask a question and stopped him, “I will explain more on that later.” He then continued with his story, “Tarstian realized that this ability could be removed, but never destroyed. It was linked to man’s life somehow. He called a council of all of the wizards who had helped him in the War of Hope. After long deliberations they all decided that his plan of action was best and finally, on the day of a full solar eclipse, when the magic was at its strongest, the wizards gathered around Tarstian and called on the elements. When each held the limit of what they could, Tarstian opened a gateway and funneled all of the magic through it, creating a suction if you will, and drawing all magic with it. This had a vastly different effect than they thought it would. None had realized that some of the land had held magic or the extent of the creatures that did. In their ignorance they created a whole other world...this world, and broke apart much of the Earth.

Each was sucked through the gateway, since they also had magic and as Tarstian passed through the gateway he used magic on earth one last time and pulled the memory of magic from those who would remain. He hoped it would take the longing and need for it away with their memories. Once through, he sealed the gateway, so that Earth could never be reached that way again.”

“Am I supposed to believe all of this? That there is such a thing as magic and that we’re in some other dimension?” Pralin asked as he looked at Dassimar. His questions were soon answered, however. A small flame levitated over Dassimar’s hand and then slowly floated to the globe Pralin had once thought was a light. Soon the flame was floating in the globe and Dassimar was looking at Pralin’s astonished face. Slowly, Pralin brushed the fingers of his right hand through his hair and rested his head on his palm. There was no doubt where he was now. Dassimar had clearly described this world.

Farolyn rested a comforting hand on his shoulder as Dassimar got ready to speak again, “Maybe we should stop there for today.”

“No” Pralin said in a soft voice, “I need to hear this. Ignorance rarely leads to good things.”

“Perhaps you are wiser than I gave you credit for,” Dassimar said with a reassuring smile and continued, “Once in this world, Tarstian and his companions realized things had not gone exactly as planned. They had not counted on another world being formed. They had also thought the magic would be stripped from them and other men, but instead they realized that hundreds of thousands had been pulled through with the magic. After studying only a small group they realized that few were capable of controlling the elements. Many of them had magic but few were able to call on it. It was then that they decided something would need to be done to protect these people. That was when the Crystalline Fortress and the Order of the Light were created. Their purpose was to protect the helpless and guard the seal because Tarstian knew if the seal was ever broken, the ones on the other side would be utterly defenseless. The Order also soon realized that the Shadow Lord would try to shape this world. They began to worry that with so many things here being of magic he would be able to affect this world easier and would eventually attack the seal. It was then that Tarstian prayed to the Creator and received The First Prophecy.”

“What did the prophecy say, Dassimar?” Pralin asked.

Darkness will slowly gain power. Greed for power will split the land. The good will continue to fight, but the shadow will begin to encompass this world and despair shall fall across the land. And through the ashes of that despair, hope shall be born in the form of two beings on Earth. One man and one woman. The cracking of the seal shall mark their birth. He shall be the light, the protector who will command the elements and fight the shadow for all the people. She will be the true healer who will heal wounds that no other can.

“After that was prophesied, Tarstian and the Order of the Light began creating a key that would open a small gateway to Earth. It was difficult since the way of the other gateway had been blocked by the seal. Some died in the process of the key’s creation, but it was finally made and its guarding was entrusted to the family Far’thalasa. It has been passed down for thousands of years in the hopes that we would find the Protector and the True Healer,” Dassimar finished.

“Have you found them yet?” Pralin asked as he looked up at Dassimar.

Dassimar looked briefly at Farolyn and then back at Pralin, “I have found the Protector. I am looking at him right now. Pralin...you are the Protector.”

Pralin’s eyes went wide as his mouth hung open and he slowly shook his head. Thousands of thoughts ran through his head all trying to get his attention, but each drowned the other out. All he could do was stare, first at Dassimar and then at Farolyn. Slowly, his mind began putting all of it in order. “I can’t be the Protector...it’s impossible...I don’t know the first thing about this world, and I especially don’t know about magic or how to deal with it. I’m sorry, but I don’t think you have the right person.”

Dassimar looked back at Pralin. His eyes conveyed the look of fatherly patience while trying to tell his child something difficult. He gave Pralin a small smile. “Pralin, all of the signs are there. I have spent the better years of my life looking for them, but even if they weren’t, one look in your eyes tells all. The seal is cracked and here you are.”

Pralin looked over at Farolyn. She noticed a look that almost seemed to be pleading to her. “Tell him I’m not who he thinks I am, Farolyn...I’m not.”

She looked at him, her eyes so calming that, for a second, he almost forgot about everything that Dassimar had just told him. “I am sorry, but I agree with father. I knew it

when I healed you and you confirmed it further for me when your hand touched me. Somehow, I could feel who you were. As silly as it sounds, you made me feel safe by just a simple touch and a few words.”

Letting his head fall back against the pillow he closed his eyes. He tried to work everything out in his head. Anguish was apparent on his face as he rubbed his temples. It was just too much for him to take. Finally, Dassimar spoke, “Over the last few days has anything strange happened...have you heard any voices that seemingly came from nowhere and everywhere at the same time?”

With a look of surprise covering his face, Pralin stared back at Dassimar. *How could he know about that?* Before he could stop himself, Pralin was telling Dassimar about everything that had happened to him. He told him about the dreams and the sword and about the four elements talking to him.

Pralin’s look of surprise was no match for Dassimar’s. “You say *all four* of the elements spoke to you?”

Pralin nodded, “Yes, first Water, then Earth, then Wind, it was during that one that I saw you, and finally Fire. Is there something strange about that?”

Dassimar could only nod his head, “Yes, that is how you would know them...what you experienced is the Calling. It happens when the essences of the elements mature in you. The strange part of it all is that usually only one speaks, and that is the one that is strongest in you. The sword in your dreams has to be Teradoghn Lavishita...Shadow Slayer, the sword forged to stand against the darkness. The sword that only the Protector can wield.” He turned to Farolyn, “It seems that you were right about what you saw in him daughter, although I do not know what it means.”

Pralin looked back and forth between them. “What do the essences of the elements have to do with anything? What did you see in me Farolyn?”

Dassimar answered him first, “The essences of the elements appear in some people here in this world. We have the ability to use them to manipulate things around us. That is what most people call magic. For instance, things that deal with heat and light can be manipulated by the essence of fire. Solid things, like the ground, trees, minerals, and so forth, are affected by Earth. Air is a part of wind and water is a part of moisture. This is just the basic idea of it, but as long as there is some form of one of these things present, the essence of that

element can manipulate it. It was through the Calling that I was able to find you. When it happens, those with magic can sense it. That is how I knew whom and where you were. Magic has long since vanished from your Earth, so it stood out like a beacon. Unfortunately, that is also how those others found you.”

It was Farolyn’s turn to answer, “Whenever I heal someone I can sense their abilities and can usually sense their strength. I told my father the other night that when I healed you all four appeared in the same strength and that strength felt greater than any I have sensed before.”

Pralin stared back at her in disbelief. “It can’t be me...I can’t be the one,” he mumbled.

“I know this all must be overwhelming and you should rest before making your decision, but you must choose soon. The Shadow grows darker every day and time grows shorter,” Dassimar told him.

Choice. It was like an alarm going off in his head. The elements had told him that he would have to choose. They told him that his decision would affect everyone, but most of all it would affect the one he cared about most. *Surely, it can’t be her.* , *They had to be talking about someone else.* Dassimar put his hand on Pralin’s shoulder looking into his eyes. “Are you alright Pralin? What’s the matter?”

“The...the voices...Elements...told me that I would have to choose soon and that my choice would affect many, but would greatly affect the one I cared about most,” said Pralin. “What choice do I have to make and who do they mean?”

Dassimar lightly shook his head and answered, “You cannot be forced into being the Protector. You have to choose to be so of your own free will. It is a great responsibility and both worlds will depend on you. The dangers will be near insurmountable. As for the person I am not sure who it is, but I suspect it is the True Healer. She is a Healer, which means that she doesn’t have magic like you or I. There isn’t the same sort of calling that we have. This means there is no way for any here to know whom she is or where to find her. From the prophecies that have been deciphered, most believe that she will have some special connection to you and will probably be someone you know and are close to.”

“So what will happen to her if I choose not to be the Protector?”

Dassimar’s demeanor turned very grave. “There is an evil wizard here by the name of Darvian. Some believe he is the

Shadow Lord in the flesh, but he is only an agent, albeit a very powerful agent one. He is the one that cracked the seal. Darvian is using a piece of the seal to open a gateway of sorts to your Earth. One particular foretelling tells of the blood and sacrifice of the True Healer on the wounded seal. We are unsure of what this means as it is part of a dark prophecy, but we do know that it has some significance for the Shadow Lord. One thing we do know is that Darvian intends to break the seal here and march into your world, which will be mostly defenseless against magic. If, that happens, then the Shadow Lord will be virtually unstoppable.

Pralin replied, "Well if none here know who she is then she is safe. He won't find her. Why does he even need her if he already has a gateway?"

"It's not so simple. Darvian desires power above all things, but he is still an agent to the Shadow Lord. It is our belief that the blood of the True Healer may somehow be able to crack the seal holding the Shadow Lord. He will eventually look for people close to you and, in time, will find out who she is. I am sorry, but I am afraid without you she will die and all will be lost.

Anger flashed across Pralin's eyes as his fists clinched the sheets and blanket covering him. Through gritted teeth he spoke, "I really don't have much of a choice then do I." It was more of a statement than a question. "So much for free will," he sighed. He didn't want to make a decision like this when so much hinged on it.

"I take it that you have an idea of who she is?"

Dassimar asked him.

"Yes, I think I do. I just don't think that I am who you think I am." A thought crossed his mind, "I have made a decision. I choose to protect her." He hoped they realized that he was not committing to being the Protector, but he would do anything to keep harm from Elendria. Hopefully, he could solve both problems with that statement. Maybe he could learn to use his magic enough to keep her safe until they could find the real Protector.

Dassimar looked at Farolyn and gave her a slight smile. He had picked up on what Pralin had said and wondered if she had. Sooner or later, Pralin would realize that if this woman he was thinking of was the True Healer, it would mean that he had to be the Protector. Hopefully it happened sooner, rather than later, because time really was running out. *In time he will accept who he truly is.* "Well, Farolyn, this has

been a long day for Pralin and he really needs rest. We will have to start teaching him about our ways and the ways of magic soon, if he is going to be able to protect his friend.”

Farolyn nodded as she lightly squeezed Pralin’s shoulder. “Sleep well, Pralin.” She stood and followed Dassimar out the door.

After the door was shut Farolyn looked at Dassimar. “You did notice that he managed to avoid saying he chose to be the Protector.”

“Yes, child I did,” Dassimar said as he looked straight head and began to walk away.

“Do you think he will come around, Father?”

“We can only hope, for he is our only hope. The True Healer is very important, but it all rests on him.”

Farolyn told Dassimar that she was going to stay there for awhile to make sure nothing happened after Pralin fell asleep. She explained that fitful sleep could be very painful and possibly dangerous. Dassimar smiled and nodded before walking down the hall.

Waiting until Dassimar was out of sight, Farolyn turned back to the door. She laid her hand gently on the door and lightly stroked it. “Please Pralin....we need you...please....you have to realize who you are.” It was barely audible but she sighed deeply. Moving to the window, she propped herself and one leg up on the ledge bending her knee halfway and resting her hands and chin on it as she looked out into the night.

Dassimar knew the reason that Farolyn was staying behind. He hoped that she was not falling for Pralin, but that look in her eyes said that she was. It pained him to see because he feared that Pralin’s heart belonged solely to another. There would be a lot of pain for her if she fell in love with him and he did not want that for her, but what could he do. Mumbling to himself he went into his room and began writing letters.

Pralin shook his head trying to make sense of it all. *Maybe he was dreaming this all.* He knew it was not a dream, but he could still hope. In the end, he knew he would do what he needed to, but it was going to take much more to prove to him that he was anything beyond a normal person. With that, he laid his head down and closed his eyes, allowing himself to fall asleep.

If you can see your path laid out in front of you step by step, you know it's not your path. Your own path you make with every step you take. That's why it's your path.

~ *Joseph Campbell*