

CHAPTER 1

The Appointment

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock. All of the clocks and confounded contraptions that hung from the wall of Eriostemon Jericho's house suddenly sprang to life as a flurry of springs twirled and coils unfurled. Every day they would chime noisily and alert him to the passing of the hour. It was a strange house full of cosmological charts, zodiacal symbols and an array of potions that would be at home in an apothecary shop. The clocks were a gift from his friend, a master druid by the name of Lord Oculus who had supposedly mysteriously obtained them from one of his many experimental visits into the future.

What craftsmanship! What mechanical mastery! thought Eriostemon as he gazed up at the miraculous ticking machines. I swear his stories are true.

Eriostemon felt eminently happy living in the foothills of Karman. It was an intensely beautiful place where the forested hills stretched down to the open, green valley of his sprawling estate. Happily married to the



love of his life, Lilith, a beautiful, homely woman, they devoted their lives to one another and to their three wonderful children. He was a soothsayer, a practitioner of herbal medicine and remedies for the human condition and a senior member of the Soothsayers Guild. They were a powerful association looked upon with reverence by all of the warring parties that occupied these vast lands.

Eriostemon and Lilith had three boys: Ambrosian, Jabaal and Nedebiah. They were typical boys, for each possessed a personality distinctly his own. Ambrosian was the excitable one – a boy who liked to discover the secrets of the wilderness around him. He was forever disappearing into the woods much to his mother’s distress and dismay. Jabaal, well, he was the quiet one. A thinker and planner, he used his mind to overcome problems that the other boys just couldn’t. And Nedebiah, well, he was the cautious, slow, progressive type who was always learning the wizardry and herbal nuances of his father’s profession.

Life rolled on for the Jerichos with not a care in the world. That was, until one, fine spring day when a platoon of Prince Azirael’s soldiers came over the rise towards Eriostemon’s ramshackle hut on horseback. They rode wilfully down through the sparsely forested plains until they had reached Eriostemon’s hut when, with regal impunity, the prince imperiously addressed him. He was a most conflicted of characters, the son of King Elvorix, a cruel and evil king, who lorded his power over Meadhonach with an iron fist. Seeing them approach, Eriostemon quickly ushered his children inside

“Greetings to you, Prince Azirael. Lovely morning, isn’t it?”

The prince was in no mood for small talk when, in an aggressive frame of mind, he gave a terse response.

“Eriostemon, son of Zhor, I have come to make you a peace offering from my father. As you are no doubt aware, these lands belong to the realm of Balthazar under the rule of the king. Our territories are being threatened by the northern barbarians and the eastern tribes of the Medulkh. It is to that end that King Elvorix wishes to award you with the honourable title of Time Warp Keeper of Karman. No one may pass through the portals, old man. This is the king’s command. I shall personally station guards at Occulta Porta, and he expects your full co-operation in protecting it. In return, your family is free to roam the king’s lands,” said the prince.

Eriostemon looked him over cautiously. He was a grievous-looking chap indeed. Those eyes! Eriostemon gazed into the prince’s black, narrow eyes. They appeared to be empty, bereft of compassion and empathy that revealed

nothing, but a tormented soul that lived in the shadows of fear from a merciless father. Twisted into an angst-ridden, anxiety-plagued shell of a man, Eriostemon could see the suffering that the prince had endured. In acquiescing to the king's will, he nodded his understanding before the prince acknowledged his answer. With no more words being said, the prince grasped the reins of his horse who yanked it forcefully to the right.

"Oh, one more thing, old man. *Do not fail the king!* There are limits to his mercy," the prince snapped before he kicked his heels into the horse's ribs which sent it galloping away.

Eriostemon breathed a sigh of relief knowing the reputation the king and his sons had obtained in his territories. It was a perplexing problem being given *that* unwanted duty, but what choice did he have? Little did he know that the pages of history's book were being written silently in the ink of a cruel and misguided pen...

Hovering up above in the spinning vortex of the wormhole, Nedebiah watched the passing of events with understanding and unhappy recall. Magically, he was joined by his brother, Jabaal, who had floated up into the sky through the massive interior of the Great Oak Tree in the Valley of the Green from the future. Nedebiah was completely taken aback at the sight of his brother whom he hadn't seen for such a long time before there was a great rejoicing at their reunion. No one understood why Jabaal had been sent to them, but Nedebiah suspected that Lord Oculus was preparing them for the future somehow. After some overdue backslapping moments and vigorous hugging, they looked downward to view the time-traveller's tale. It was emotionally difficult for Nedebiah and Jabaal to see their mother and father again after all this time. Subconsciously, Nedebiah had buried the past, so of course, it tugged at his heartstrings.

I'll be damned. Just look at my father. Hmmm. It was like it was yesterday, and I look just like him. Oh, mother. My beautiful mother. How I miss your touch..

"Are you all right, Nedebiah?" asked Elise.

"Yes. Yes, it's just a shock to see them again after all these years."

"Who was that horrible man on the horse?" asked Henry.

"Hmmpf! Well, that, my boy, was the Grand Wizard. Hard to recognize him, isn't it?"

"Yes, he's quite the devil," said Jabaal.

"That's the Grand Wizard! But he looks so young," said Henry.

“Yes, indeed. Hmmm. We must be back in Karman during my youth. I don’t know why, but we seem to travel from blessed place to another without any real explanation.”

However, there was an explanation. He just wasn’t aware of it yet.

“Look, Jabaal. I’ll be damned, but I can see the old apple tree where we played as boys. Do you remember?” asked Nedebiah.

“Remember! I’ll never forget it. Yes. Hmmm. Especially when we left *you* dangling in the damned branches as a toddler.”

Nedebiah’s memories came flooding back. “Oh! I wish we were here again. They seemed such pleasant days.”

After that short period of thoughtful reminiscence, Nicolas’ curiosity surfaced.

“So why would we be sent here to see you in your youth, and why has your brother joined us?”

Shaking his head, Nedebiah was unknowing. “I don’t know, Nicolas. I just don’t know, but something tells me that Lord Oculus is up to his old tricks again.”

“I wish he would just send us to the Ruby Rainbow and be done with it,” said Elise.

Nedebiah couldn’t agree more. “So do I, lass. Believe me when I tell you that I can’t wait to get home.”

“Is that *you* down there?” asked Uncle Olaf.

“Oh, yes. Just look at me,” said Jabaal as he pointed to himself.

Indeed, all of Nedebiah’s youthful family were present. They had been watching through the window when the prince appeared and made his appointment. Slowly, with tired footsteps, Eriostemon trod through the front door entrance before he took a seat on his favourite chair in front of the fireplace. Ever the pragmatist, he was ready for his sons’ curious questions.

“Father, what did that man want?” asked Ambrosian.

“Oh, just letting us know that some rebels are on the loose in these parts Don’t you worry about it.”

He couldn’t tell his family the truth, but his wife instinctively knew that something was wrong. She feigned a disbelieving smile before she fetched Eriostemon his favourite cup of herbal tea. It seemed to warm his spirits somewhat as he searched his memory for answers while his gaze was drawn to the ambience of the glowing fire.

“What’s wrong, father?”

“Hmmm. Nothing I can’t fix, my boy. Now, don’t give it a second thought,” said Eriostemon as he ruffled his son’s mop of unkempt hair.

Stoic as ever and not wanting to expand into gratuitous detail, Eriostemon put a cap on the inquisition right there and then.

Eriostemon wasn’t a man to dwell on things, but this surprise visit by the prince had certainly rocked his world. He knew that the prince would

pursue him and his family if he failed to obey his every word. So, with a heavy heart, he breathed a heaving sigh as he collected his thoughts.

Now, what the hell am I going to do? To serve the king is a recipe for disaster, but to serve that wretched prince is worse. Hmmm. I'll bet my bunions that Lord Occulus has something to do with this. He and those phony doomsday prophets in Omniach. Yes, I'd be willing to wager that their time-altering potions are at the core of this disaster. And why am I being dragged into their mess? Hmmm. Well, yes, of course! The king wishes to keep the portals closed why they develop the 'pure essence' as they call it. What a lot of bunkum! Time travel! I don't know what Lord Occulus was thinking. Perhaps he's been drinking too much of it himself. And as for these infernal contraptions hanging on my wall, well, any decent tinsmith could have manufactured them. They do seem to tick regularly though, I must say. Well, I have to keep this secret from my family. Indeed, they must never know.

Nedebiah seemed satisfied with his father's explanation. I mean, he trusted him implicitly, and he was only a young boy. He leaned softly against his father's shoulder who gazed into the fire as the pleasantness of the radiating warmth eased their worries. Slowly, Eriostemon's mind wandered before he drifted off to sleep.

Meanwhile, outside the cloistered halls of the magnificent, Occulean Temple in Omniach, the druid lords assembled. Summoned before the king, an air of uneasy expectation wafted in the breeze. Here, taking pride of place amongst his subjects, an aggrieved King Elvorix cast his discerning eyes over the druid throng.

“Lords of Omniach, your time draws near. Have you procured the time- travelling potion that your predecessors claimed should change the world?” asked the king.

There were murmurs of discontent and utterances of disrepute, for the science of herbology had always been the druids' collective concern and responsibility. Now, feeling indignant, Lord Basquin approached the king in order to vent his point-of-view.

“My King, to synthesize the extraordinary power of this substance requires thousands of hours of purification. The natural materials that we use to extract the most-pure form of the time-altering chemicals requires the most delicate of procedures. We simply cannot force the process. It states it right here quite emphatically in the chronicles' own sacred pages, Sire.”



The king's eyes were heavily glazed with frustration when, with a selfishly schemed political will and determination embedded into his thinking, he answered.

“Hmmm. Perhaps you're right, Lord Basquin. Nevertheless, have I not given you all free reign to procure this so-called 'pure essence'? For years, I have waited while I have listened to your bumbling explanations, falsehoods and proclamations of near successes. Well, my lords of the Druids League, I shall wait no more. You have three months to perfect this formula and not a day more. The Aquitanians are beating down my door as we speak. I must have that bargaining chip. So it is to you, my druid lords of Omniach, that I bestow this most grave responsibility. Give me this magical 'pure essence' and our kingdom shall reign,” said the king.

Lord Ostraphim, the Druid League's Chairman, had been listening intently. He was a herbalist of credible qualification having attended to

many of King Elvorix's personal malignancies, so the king trusted him implicitly. However, he could listen no more when he moved forward to offer his opinion.

"Your Majesty, I understand your frustration, but we must not rush towards an inconclusive finality. Time travel is a very imprecise science, Sire, and we are only at the very tip of the iceberg."

The king respected his opinion, but it was news that thwarted his personal ambition. Looking for another opinion to mitigate his doubt, he asked Lord Oculus, another of the druid's senior herbalists, to speak.

Slowly, Lord Oculus moved forward to address the gallery.

"My King and lords of the league, Lord Ostraphim is quite correct in his assessment. We must not tempt fate by rushing the process. However, I feel that we are on the brink of discovery. Molecular possession is only days away."

"You have seen this?" asked Lord Basquin.

"With my own eyes."

"Then it is true. We shall be able to open the gateway as the prophets have foretold. Perhaps then we can access the Ruby Rainbow as it is written in the chronicles," said Lord Ostraphim.

"It is early days, my lord. We cannot assimilate the purity of the substance as yet. It is highly unstable."

This was wondrous news for the druid lords who were clapping in appreciation of this new discovery. Taking advantage of this political development, Lord Ostraphim then moved forward who offered his nomination.

"In light of this new discovery, may I put forward my nomination that Lord Oculus be appointed chief experimental herbalist for the procurement of the 'pure essence'. What say you, my lords?"

There was a resounding, collective voice of approval. The league had unanimously decided. So, in accordance with the druid dictates of democracy, Lord Oculus had been appointed the Chief Herbalist. The king looked duly pleased who nodded his approval before he disappeared into his privy chamber. Little did they know that Lord Oculus had already achieved time travel secretly when he secured two vials of the time-travelling substance into his possession. What wayward path would the druid obsession of achieving time travel lead to? Nobody knew the answer to *that question*, not even Lord Oculus. It would be left to fate, a fate that would rest heavily upon the wondrous magic of the pure essence of time.

In the meantime, up above, the wormhole spun furiously and picked up speed. Twirling, whirling and spinning uncontrollably, it spun into the

future before it came to hover above the Occulean Temple once more where Prince Zaxius' daughter, Sasha, was in the throes of wedding the gallant and handsome peasant boy, Valerian. In a picture-perfect setting, the sun was setting over the great lake where the two lovers stood clasped in one another's tender grip. In the tranquility of the moment, Sasha gazed into her lover's eyes as the high priest, Heterion, prepared to make his final blessing.

However, Sasha's father, being the son of a torrid king, was enraged that such a lowly figure could become part of his prestigious family. Suddenly, a madness swept over him whereupon he drew his sword when, in a moment of unrepentant cruelty, he struck the poor boy down. Such was the merciless



actions of this evil prince that the poor, young boy died right there and then at his feet. Sasha swept him up into her arms who wept uncontrollably as his blood-soaked body seeped into the beautiful, white, satin fibers of her wedding gown. All was lost it seemed, but not forgiven.

“Why? Why? Why, father?” she pleaded as tears streamed down her beautiful face.

There was no answer – just the satisfaction of the young man's death. All the children watched from up above in horror who were feeling too upset to speak a word while Nedebiah nodded his head in understanding. Finally, breaking the silence, Elise spoke up.

“Who is she, and why did that awful man use his sword?”

“Hmmm. Well, who you see before you is Princess Sasha, and that awful man, as you refer to him, is Prince Zaxius, the son of King Elvorix,” said Nedebiah.

“The same king we saw just an hour ago?” asked Henry.

“Yes, that’s right, Henry.”

“It’s like someone is trying to show us a story of history or something,” said Nicolas.

Nedebiah agreed. “Yes, Nicolas, you may very well be correct.”

“So why have we been brought here?” asked Henry.

“Look, Henry, I am as unknowing as you, but something tells me that a higher authority is behind all of this. Indeed, I suspect Lord Occulus is showing us our destiny somehow. We shall know soon enough.”



Gathering momentum, the wormhole began to spin once more. Back into the blackness of time and space, they floated and tumbled freely forwards. Around and around, the wormhole swirled and twirled before it slowed and finally came to rest above the Great Hall of King Elvorix’s palatial residence in Castille. Here, the tormented king planned for the expansion and defense of his territories while his sons listened intently as a messenger from the north knelt before him.

“I shall not yield to these northern barbarians,” he bellowed. “Azirael! Take a party of your soldiers and meet with King Omar in Zoln. Tell him to withdraw his forces from the foothills of our mountains, or war shall be declared upon his shores.”

“But, Your Majesty, King Omar sent me here to negotiate a truce,” said the lowly messenger.

“Did he now!” said the king as he arose from his throne.

Without uttering a further word, King Elvorix drew his broadsword who raised it up high and sliced through the terrified messenger’s torso which killed him instantly.

“Heh, heh, heh. Well, so much for negotiation, my friend.”

Prince Azirael and Prince Zaxius watched with glee as their father showed no mercy to his enemies. He was a tyrannical king, a product of an equally merciless father who placed the value of human life below the ambition of his sword. And it swung freely despite the calls of mercy from the innocent. No. These were dangerous times with dangerous people at the helm.

Uncle Olaf tried to shield his children from the horrific display from up above, but it was too late. Poor, young Henry nearly fainted and Nicolas felt light-headed when Marius asked a curious question.

“If Prince Azirael becomes the Grand Wizard, then what happened to his brother?”

“Hmmm, yes, well, there are rumours that the Grand Wizard finished him off, but they are only rumours, Marius,” said Nedebiah.

“I think that there is more truth to that than just rumour,” said Jabaal.

Henry agreed. “I bet he did. He’s just dreadful.”

“Look! What’s happening now?” asked Nicolas.

Down below, they could see King Elvorix’s cavalry galloping towards the city of Zoln, with Prince Azirael riding regally up front poised piously upon his beautiful, white stallion. Charging furiously across the northern plains, they headed for the Aquitanian protectorate in readiness to send the northern king a contemptuous message. Sitting upon his throne, King Omar was equally as unremitting in his demeanour when Prince Azirael arrived.

“Greetings to you, King Omar. I come in peace. My father wishes that no further conflict should take place between us, but he shall not tolerate the presence of your soldiers in our province of Alisaunia. Withdraw your forces immediately, and there shall be no need for bloodshed,” he said.

King Omar chuckled conceitedly at the snivelling prince before him. “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.”

Slowly, the king arose from his throne as his eyes focused intensely when his anger came to the fore.

“You dare enter *my kingdom* and make demands from me – a king no less! Alisaunian serpent! Druid dog of damnation! The shores of Sashebah stretched all the way to the Alisaunian Mountains before four generations of



your kings wielded their swords and stole our lands. We shall not yield to your spiteful and false claims, Prince Azirael. Restore to us what is rightfully ours. *That is my demand.* Now, go! Before my ogre spikes your heads on the end of my poleaxe,” he snarled.

“Very well, but know this. From this moment on, *you* are our enemy, King Omar.”

Escorted back through the massive, iron gates, Prince Azirael mounted his horse who headed back towards Castille as he spewed words of ill repute against his northern neighbour. All the while, the wormhole whirled above while everyone followed the amazing story. Henry remained somewhat naïve.

“It seems to me that they’re just two silly, old men – those kings, I mean.”

“Hmmm. Yes, how right you are, young Henry. They are indeed, but they are two very powerful, old men, I’m afraid,” said Nedebeah.

“Are they going to fight?” asked Nicolas.

“Why yes. I think I remember a great battle taking place in Ballysmead if I’m not mistaken. But it was a long time ago.”

“Ballysmead? Yes, that’s right, Nedebiah. I remember it well, “ said Jabaal.

Suddenly, as if by divine magic, the wormhole began to spin again when, once more, they felt their bodies begin to float into the blackness of timeless space. Around and around, they tumbled and floated before the wormhole eventually hovered above the battleground at Ballysmead. It was simply carnage as the two enemies faced off who engaged in a



horrendous battle when swords, axes, and spears pierced the armour of the soldiers while their battle cries echoed restlessly in the wind. Everyone felt horrified. Even Henry obscured his view with his hands, but still his curiosity was aroused as the gallant soldiers fought so bravely. Henry then sought clarity.

“Why are they fighting, Nedebiah? Don’t they know that they could get hurt.”

It was an innocent enough question, for the reality of war was a different kettle of fish altogether from the fanciful notions of Henry’s fertile imagination.

“I’m afraid, young Henry, that humanity never seems to learn from their mistakes. Yes, they can indeed get hurt – even killed.”

“Oh, that’s simply awful. Shut your eyes, Henry. I don’t want you to see this,” said Elise.

Fortunately, it was only a fleeting visit before the wormhole furiously spun once again which transported the time-travellers to Castille in the

future. Here, the somber presence of Sasha could be seen from up above. She was deliberating in thought, with her hands clasped together in prayer as she sought divine inspiration from God. What unholy madness should have transpired to see her incarcerated in the very place of her birth was anyone's guess. Silently, she prayed.

God, please grant me the strength to endure this nightmare. I shall pray that I shall be everything in life that my father has failed to be. What so grips his mind that he should imprison his only daughter, I wonder? If only I could feel the warmth of the sun on my back, I should relent from this living hell. What is this unholy madness that consumes his mind, for him to wreak such destruction upon my life? And yet despite his cruelty, I love him. It is such a burden, much too hard to bear and harder to understand. If my mother was here, she would never allow this intolerance. Why? Why must I stay locked away from the world? What purpose does it serve him? And now my true love is dead. Oh! Then so am I bereft of any feeling, dead to the feelings of the world.

"Who is *that* girl?" asked Uncle Olaf.

"She's very beautiful," said Elise.

"Hmmm. Well, I believe that she is Sasha, the betrothed to Valerian," said Nedebiah.

Henry was confused. "Where's Valerian then?"

"Yes, well, he was killed, unfortunately, by Sasha's father. Don't you remember?" asked Nedebiah.

The penny then dropped for Nicolas. "Oh! He was *that* monster? I mean who would kill your daughter's fiancé?"

It was a fair enough question which had everyone on edge, but Nedebiah thought a proper explanation was in order.

"Ummm.. well, you see, her father is the brother of the Grand Wizard, so I'm sure you can understand that he wasn't a very nice fellow at all."

"Look! Something's happening," said Marius.

Down below, they could see a conga line of scurrying shrew soldiers as they climbed up the castle walls. Fearless to the core, they were rescuing Princess Sasha from her imprisonment. Within the hour, they had opened the heavy iron gates who were escorting the princess through the dungeons of Castille to her freedom in the woods. All the children smiled happily at the living fairytale when Elise became exceptionally emotional.

"Does she go and live with those creatures?"

Nedebiah remained confident with his version of events. "Hmmm. Well, not exactly, but it's a good story nevertheless. No, she dedicates her life to the preservation of the wilderness and all of the creatures that dwell within it. My dear children, who you see before your very eyes is the Shaman of Sashebah."

Henry was wide-eyed. "Oh! Wow! Can she fly like the birds?"

“Why, yes, she can actually, Henry,” said Nedebeah.

“I want to meet her,” said Elise. “She seems so peaceful.”

“All in good time, children. All in good time.”

Once more, the wormhole began to twirl and whirl as though some divine puppet master was pulling the strings of this educational pantomime. Off they twirled into the black abyss of time, far off into the future as the decades tumbled by. Eventually, the wormhole stopped spinning when they looked down who were now witnesses to the mournful scene of King Elvorix gasping his last breaths on his deathbed. He was surrounded by his personal druid courtiers and herbal prognosticators – mere fools in his eyes. Groaning and moaning his discontent amid his semi-conscious state, his evil sons were summarily plotting the course of things to come.

I shall rule with an iron fist as you did father. There shall be no thoughts or displays of mercy. Mercy is for the weak of mind, and I shall not allow weakness in my kingdom. The steel of my blade shall talk louder than the flapping of my jaw. Yes, negotiation and diplomacy is for the weak. Only the powerful rule thought Prince Zaxius.

Restless thoughts also preoccupied Prince Azirael’s mind....

When you are least suspecting, I shall strike you down. You ignorant fool. Oh, my brother, you, who have always come first in our father’s eyes, you shall feel the full fury of my vengeance, and I shall watch you slowly disappear from the face of the earth. Yes, you shall wilt before my eyes like a dying flower in the sun. Heh, heh, heh. You, who always courted his favour, you shall die knowing that I, your brother, Azirael, killed you. But it shall be a long, slow, fateful death. Heh, heh, heh. Go! Sleep now father, and let my hand turn the tide of history thought Prince Azirael.

“Who is that old man?” asked Nicolas.

Nedebeah was positively disbelieving when he sighted King Elvorix once more.

“Well, I don’t believe it. That’s old King Elvorix down there again. He’s legendary you know.”

Jabaal was more circumspect. “King Elvorix?! Well, the legend is true after all.”

“What’s so important about him?” asked Elise.

“He’s the Grand Wizard’s father, Elise. Well, there must be some reason why we’re here,” said Marius.

Everyone stared down through the wormhole’s portal where time had moved forward yet again. Here, amongst the beautiful gardens of Pernalia, the two princes were arguing about something when Prince

Azrael's temper boiled to the surface before he struck his brother down. With his evil cunning and vicious arrogance surfacing, he mysteriously summoned the guardian mage of Arragon before him.

"Hear thy spirit of the guardian mage and release thy dark power, for I seek the death of my brother's soul. Yes, come forth the Guardian Mage of Arragon."

Suddenly, a pulsing, white light flashed before them when the Guardian Mage of Arragon and his protective wolf, Blaze, appeared. A deathly- looking soul bereft of all compassion and empathy naturally imbued within the human spirit, this dastardly wizard appeared to be a shell of the man he once was. Condemned into an eternal state of restless oblivion and solitude, his eyes glowed a demonic, bright red as he groaned his powerful, sorcerous message.

"Who dares summon me from the netherworld shall pay the price."

"It is I, Prince Azrael, that calls on you, thy spirit of the dead. Name your price."



“The days shall be long when an endless darkness shall prevail. Your servant soul shall guard the portal in Shahjahanpur for perpetuity, or thee shall face the rage of the beast master,” said the mage.

Prince Azirael was merciless. With no thoughts of compassion or empathy for his brother’s welfare, his eyes sagged when he delivered his executorial response. “Then let it be so, dark spirit.”

Having uttered that final command, the mage pointed his magical sword at his unfortunate brother. Woooosh! swished the magical light from the guardian mage’s sword as it engulfed Zaxius within its power. Croaking his grisly words, the mage’s eyes glowed a ruby red when an evil grin enshrined his face.

“By the spirit light of all the mages, ye shall be a servant for the ages. To Shahjahanpur, your spirit is cast, for now, the future and the past.”

Thus, the spell had been cast. Prince Azirael smirked as he conveyed an expression of utter contemptuousness before a look of complete surprise showed upon Prince Zaxius’ face as he desperately sought to cling onto his brother’s arm. However, feeling the effect of the spell taking hold, he slumped to the ground as Prince Azirael laughed with glee. Then, in a final act of pure, conceited evil and betrayal, Prince



Zaxius' body began to metamorphose into the horrible likeness of the mage of Arragon.

Prince Zaxius' desperation was palpable. "What's happening to me? What have you done, brother?"

Slowly, deliberately and mercilessly, Prince Azirael answered.

"You shall spend eternity guarding the portal at Shajahanpur, Zaxius. It's nothing less than *you* deserve, you pitiless fool. Heh, heh, heh, heh. Go now, brother. Oh, what is that? Oh, yes. I can hear the wearying wails of the black fingers of death approach. Heh, heh, heh."

Hissing hideously, the macabre, gaseous claws of the Luciferin guards gradually extended their branching arms of death around Prince Zaxius' body as he cowered in fear. A look of complete and utter betrayal became embedded upon his anxious face when Prince Azirael spoke his final, parting words.

"Farewell, Zaxius, my foolish brother. At last! At last, you are as good as dead, and I am rid of you. Fare thee well, you fool. Heh, heh, heh. Now, at last, I can fulfill my destiny."

Up above, conclusions were being made.

"He's the Grand Wizard, isn't he?" asked Henry.

Swaying his head from side to side, Nedebiah was disbelieving, yet he knew the truth. "Yes, my boy. He certainly is."

Instantly, the wormhole spun and rotated. All the while, it sped faster and faster before it slowed once more when it came to rest above the residence of Lord Occulus, the legendary druid. Inside his house, a convoluted system of pipes and boiling pots bubbled profusely while he was busy tinkering with his potions and making complex calculations. In his never-ending pursuit of perfecting his time-travelling theories, he toiled away happily.

Hmmm. A dash of wormwood to balance the brew and a few drops of boiled troll blood for energy. Yes, that's enough. Now, to add the ground scales of the dragon for the fire of its breath. Wonderful! I hope that I have more control this time. Hmmm. Perhaps I didn't extract enough of the deadly nightshade. Ah, yes. The molecular synthesis seems to be working thought Lord Occulus as he gazed in awe at his ingenuity.

It was a tedious process; a complex application of both sorcery and herbology of which he was a master of both. He had been applying the chemical equations of his trade since he was a small child, but only recently had the compound chemicals of the many herbs and experimental animal parts he used for his potions yielded any success at all. In fact, it was quite by accident that he found himself floating to the wormhole when a rudimentary extract of the substance escaped after

three months of the purification process. Luckily, he landed softly back in Omniach's gentle
grasses when he pursued this initial discovery more closely. However, it was dangerous work while searching eyes watched from around every corner. So Lord Oculus continued to purify his magical potions while the lords of the Druids League awaited him.

"What's he doing?" asked Henry.

"Well, well, well, my old friend, Lord Oculus. It seems that we are in the presence of genius again, children. That's Lord Oculus, Henry. Don't you remember him? He's the reason that we can all travel through time," said Nedeblah.

"He's the legendary druid?" asked Nicolas.

"That's right. And it looks as though he's trying to manufacture some of the pure essence as we speak," explained Nedeblah.

"He might be a genius, but he's caused a lot of problems with his discovery. We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him," said Marius.

"Now, now. That's a trifle unfair, Marius. He couldn't have known that the Grand Wizard would chase him around the universe."



“Yes, that’s right. I mean, it wasn’t his fault. It was the druids of Omniach that wanted the pure essence developed,” said Jabaal.

“I agree with Marius. If it wasn’t for his meddling none of us would have ended up here,” said Uncle Olaf.

Henry felt angry who pointed his finger. “He’s to blame!”

“Yes, I agree, Henry. It’s all his fault,” said Elise.

Being more circumspect, Nicolas offered a solution. “I don’t think that we should get upset. I mean perhaps we can find him, and maybe he can help us.”

“What you see now is in the future, Nicolas. Nobody knows where Lord Oculus is, or even if he is alive,” said Nedebiah.

Elise sought clarification. “So, why are we here if he can’t help us, Nedebiah?”

“That’s a very good question, Elise, and I simply don’t have an answer at the moment.”

With that being said, the wormhole started to spin once more. Into the infinite blackness of space, they were thrust amid the twinkling stars and the beautiful planets of the cosmos. Everyone floated and tumbled within the whirling vortex of time before they felt the wormhole slowing as their bodies gently fell to earth. Here, in the magnificent palatial chambers of Castille’s central hall, the villainous, Prince Azirael, was deep in conversation with a dark spirit watching over him. Everyone watched with bated breath.

“Azirael! You have been summoned here to answer to me, Kruval, Supreme Lord of the Shakrel. We have been closely watching the druids of your time. A great awakening has occurred. This new discovery, this ‘pure essence’, as your druid accomplices call it, must be protected by *your* realm at all costs. It is a singular heralded honour for you to be chosen, so you are hereby charged to be the holy guardian of our covenant. Do not fail me, Azirael.”

“But wait! Why me? The druids protect their secrets with their lives. They can be the most wretched, old bunch of geriatrics to deal with. What am I to do?”

“Heh, heh, heh, heh. *You* are the chosen one, Azirael. Remember that! Do your duty, and you shall be rewarded beyond the wildest riches of your imagination. The Shakrelian Legislative Assembly gave you this task so that you may take your place amongst the immortals. Remember well your task to find all of the vials, for only once the coveted collection is complete may we be able to materialize when you shall become an honourary Shakrelian lord. We have faith in you, Azirael. We know that your wickedness knows no bounds. Heh, heh, heh. Do not fail me,” said Lord Kruval as his image slowly vanished.



Nedebiah was awe-struck. “I don’t believe it. I had heard on the raspus vines that his legend may have been true, but to have actually witnessed his presence is quite bewildering.”

“Who? Whose presence?” asked Henry.

“That unholy image you just witnessed was the legendary Lord Kruval, the Shakrelian Legislative Assembly Chairman, or was he the emperor? Hmmm, I ‘m not so sure.”

“Like the Roman emperor back in Gaul?” asked Nicolas.

“No, this fellow is a different kettle of fish altogether, Nicolas. He is a Shakrelian lord from an ancient race of aliens who are responsible for the healing stone.”

“That’s where the druids get their powers from, isn’t it?” asked Elise.

Nedebiah put two and two together. “Yes, well, now it’s all beginning to make sense. The Grand Wizard is being commanded by that devilish beast.”

Uncle Olaf felt confused. “But why? What do they have to gain?”

There was a pause as Nedebiah thoughtfully considered things.

“Everything, Olaf – absolutely everything!”

“What do you mean, Nedebiah?”

“Look, it’s become abundantly clear to me that the Shakrel are behind the Grand Wizard’s darker motives. Hmmm. This isn’t good news, I’m afraid. No, not at all.”

“Why ever not?” asked Elise.

“I fear that if the pure essence fell into their hands, then this world we know now may cease to exist, or at least, as we know it.”

“I don’t understand,” said Uncle Olaf.

However, Marius did understand. “Look, Olaf, it’s this simple. What Nedebiah is trying to say is that, if they control all of time, then they may eradicate us from the existence of the world and use earth for their own twisted purposes. Isn’t that right?”

Nedebiah slowly nodded his head in agreement. “Yes, Marius. You’ve got it in a nutshell.”

It was a very worrying thought when the image of Prince Azirael appeared once more. Still stationed within the vast, palatial halls of the Occulean Temple, he was plotting to overthrow the Druids League and force them to manufacture the pure essence for his own twisted, evil ambitions. Of course, the demands of the Shakrelian lord were playing on his mind.

“Druid lords of the League, I address you today to convey to you the last will and testament of my father. This experimental substance that you have been manufacturing so assiduously is to remain the private concern of the realm. We cannot allow our enemies to get their hands on our new discovery,” he said.

There were murmurs of discontent and hushed accusations before Lord Basquin offered an objection.

“Prince Azirael, it has been barely a month since the death of our king, and you expect us to believe that we should hand over all of our secrets to the realm. Why, it’s preposterous.”

“I agree. The Druids League has operated for a thousand years independently from the king’s influence in these matters,” protested Lord Oxar.

“We must protest,” said Lord Ostraphim, the elderly Druid League Chairman in support.



Prince Azirael held a steely gaze when he stood up from his throne who approached the druid lords more closely before he pointed his staff directly at Lord Ostraphim. Little did the druids know that he had been learning his sorcery from the king's own sorcerer, Astrophus, The Great. With his fingers clasped tightly around the staff, his hands trembled as he spoke his demonic words.

“From the power of this magic staff, a strike of death shall flash when *you* shall feel its unholy power and be reduced to a pile of ash.”

Instantly, a bright flash of blue light leapt from the staff's crystal eye which zapped the unsuspecting chairman whose body became enveloped within a thick cloud of deathly, purple vapour. Writhing about in agony, he instantly turned into a smoldering pile of ash. All the druids were astonished who stayed silent while the evil prince arose to stake his claim. With his eyes ablaze, he spoke his dark words.

“Now, there shall be no more discontent amongst you. You serve *me* now, and I shall be a king amongst kings, a wizard amongst wizards and the lord of all lords,” he said in an overly exaggerated theatrical delivery.

No one dared speak a word while all eyes focused on the rising smoke from the pile of ash. It was horrible, it was horrendous, and it was the genesis of the rise of the Grand Wizard of Balthazar. Now, everyone understood how the Grand Wizard came into being, but it did nothing to soften their feelings for him.

Elise felt mortified. “Oh! He's so awful, and he betrayed his only brother. Who does that?”

Henry felt incredibly anxious. “And he zapped *that* poor man. He won’t do that to us, will he?”

“He has to find us first, Henry, and I’m not going to let that happen,” said Uncle Olaf.

The very next day, all of the druids were summoned to the presence of the evil prince again whose claims of assumptive power were made with astonishing impropriety and arrogance. In a statement of utter impudence, he outlined all of the new rules for his realm while the druids listened in total disbelief. Chief amongst his demands were that the newly elected Lord Occulus take orders only from him who must report on a daily basis on the progression of the pure essence’s manufacture. This was, of course, completely unacceptable to Lord Occulus who knew that the prince only wanted to use the pure essence for his own twisted ambitions. So, after the meeting had ended, Lord Occulus crept into the Basilicum where he extracted two of the vials from the golden chalice that had reached maturity. Now, with the power of four vials of the pure essence within his grasp, he immediately made for home.

Slowly, the wormhole spun and twirled before it edged towards the following morning when the portal opened up to reveal a frantic Lord Occulus collecting his potions and statistical documents. He appeared distressed, but alert to his cause as his thoughts raced to a definitive conclusion.

He cannot have his hands on the secrets of my research. No – never! Never! He cannot be trusted. Well, there is only one thing left to do. I must leave this world at once and burn this place to a cinder. Hmmm. But is the pure essence ready? I just don’t know, yet I have no choice.

Now, in an anxiety-driven state, he set his house alight when he watched the flames engulf much of his research. Then, with his hand trembling over the cap of the vial, he slowly released it as he closed his eyes with anticipation. Suddenly, great, swirling clouds of gold dust leapt into the air that spiralled rapidly towards the sky when he felt himself being drawn up into a sphere of magical energy. Up and up, he ascended into the clouds and into the portal of the wormhole where he tumbled restlessly into the black abyss of timeless space. Floating and spinning, falling freely and tumbling, he passed the planets and the litany of stars twinkling in the sky before he felt his body falling into an emptiness once more. Down, down, down, he fell into history’s portal when, with a final eclipse of pulsating, white light, he fell to earth in the late nineteenth century.

“Hmmm. So it’s all true,” said Nedebiah. “Well, I never really doubted it.”

“Neither did I, Nedebiah. It only gives more credence to believe in the chronicles, doesn’t it?” asked Jabaal.

“Yes, I suppose it does.”

“What’s true?” asked Henry.

“Well, all of it. He stole the pure essence, and he travelled to a new world. Well, I’ll be damned,” said Nedebiah.

“If we could only get our hands on it, Nedebiah, then perhaps we could go home,” said Uncle Olaf.

“Yes, well, that’s another story entirely, isn’t it?”

Whoosh.... Whoosh. Again, the wormhole began to spin faster and faster as the cosmic energies of space twirled into a whizzing, fizzing vortex of incredible time-travelling wonder. Up and up, they floated and spun where all of time had just begun to unravel in space in cosmic glory to continue the race of this miraculous story. Around and around, they tumbled and fell where, with widened eyes, their hearts did swell as they floated into the vast openness of space protected by the piano’s alluring grace. And all this time in an alternative portal, Jabaal entered into a wondrous world of elves and giants as everyone else floated into history’s door to a land they’d certainly seen before. A place where the green grass swayed gently in the breeze and where the leaves of the great oaks’ branches rustled in the trees. A place where the soothsayers gathered together to formulate strategies despite the weather. Here, in the Valley of the Green, they landed to witness sights unseen of the rise of the legendary chancellor, Chancellor Bahlizhor, the great and noble lord of the Soothsayers Guild.



**Falling, falling, falling from the sky,
Jabaal disappeared -no one knew why.
When on the horizon loomed history's door,
Where the stars shine bright,
And the galaxies soar.
For into this portal, the time-travellers fell,
Under the guise of Lord Occulus' spell,
To find themselves floating swiftly through space,
In an unknown time to an unknown place.
But as fate would decide, the green grass appeared,
In the Valley of the Green when all that was feared,
Disappeared into the light of a warm spring day,
With the Great Oak Tree guiding their way.**