

CHAPTER 1

The Paladins of the Permafrost

Time never stops, nor stays still. It is faint and unnoticeable whose presence is barely detectable, yet it is restless and reliable. So it was that the centuries spun forward into the time of the paladins of the permafrost. Deep in the vast outreaches of space, a great disturbance had filtered through the cosmos. Here, the patience of the Shakrelian Assembly had finally yielded to affirmative action when Lord Kruval was brought before them.

“Lord Kruval, the Assembly has voted. You must end the pitiless escapades of these time-travellers, or we shall be forced to vapourize the colonies. The Shakrel *must* materialize once more to populate and thrive as the sovereign master race of the universe. Unfortunately, we have lost



faith in this earthly wizard that *you* chose to lead us to freedom. He must now be terminated and a new conduit chosen for our reemergence into the galaxies. This is our collective command,” said Lord Xahl.

Lord Kruval was not an alien to tolerate mutinous insurrection when he vehemently opposed the motion.

“You forget your place, Lord Xahl. I am still the elected chairman, and I shall decide what measures are to be taken. May I remind the Assembly how miserably we have failed in our last six attempts to bring justice to our civilization? Hmmm? Five unholy wars have we endured only to remain entities in time. No. We *must* persist. The earthly wizard has within his grasp eight of the coveted vials. To abandon our cause now would be sheer madness. I beg of you. Let us see where these menacing time evaders reside. Then I shall coerce this wizard into action once more.”

The Shakrelian lords quietly debated amongst themselves.

Lord Zol was feeling far from satisfied. “How can we trust him? I know that we appointed him for the task, but we are no closer to materialization than we were some ten years ago.”

“Has he ever failed us before? We must give him the chance to prove himself if not for a while,” said Lady Zundrick.

Finally, they agreed.

“Very well. Despite my opposition to this new motion, we grant you a further year in relative Earth time. Once the time has elapsed, the wizard and all of his earthly disciples shall be eliminated if you have not achieved the task,” said Lord Xahl.

The Assembly had spoken.

Meanwhile, thousands of years into the future, the time-travellers floated down through the fantasy portal into a world of paladin frost and freeze.....

Whoooosh, whoooosh swirled the wind in a restless echo. Here, on the frozen lands of Grinschveldt Glacier did the relentless motion of wind and water sculpt the frozen wasteland into a white, winter wonderland. It was a cold and cruel place, the sister planet of Chronis Saumattica and Shakul-Amir; a barren winterland lorded over by the mighty paladins of Padzhur. To the north, the fearsome king, King Zeklar The Impaler, ruled over his dominion with an iron fist whose fury amongst the godless peoples of the lands was felt with uncompromising thrashes of his sword and cruel thrusts of his poleaxes. That was until his untimely death. This was the most foreboding of places, a place where the endless struggles for power



culminated in the wanton destruction of warring wizard dynasties and their bevy of necromancing sorcerers. Here, on the southern slopes of the Slumbering Sleuth Mountains did the paladin brethren pay homage to their fallen king when the elderly shaman chairman, Lord Valkroy, lit the funeral pyre.

“You were a great and noble king. The wizards of Shartoum shall pay a hefty price for your passing. Go now and be free amongst the gods.”

All eyes stared at the rising flames of the fire which consumed the dead king with a growing ferocity. A range of emotions then beset a grieving populace. Hours later, the council of the elders met in the cloistered environs of Herscholl hermitage where the strained voices of democracy argued with a decidedly feverish intent.

“Our king shall not have died in vain. We must crush those barbarian wizards into the icy depths of deprivation with no thought of mercy – only death,” said General Dhakvoth, the gruesome paladin warrior.

A paladin possessing beastly, dark powers, his swollen eyes glowed peevishly into the shadows of the night. Slowly, but ever so surely, his

grisly words seeped into the reservoirs of the pontificating paladins' minds.

A series of grunting objections ensued before Lord Kumar Krone, an imperious paladin statesman, offered his worldly words of wisdom.

“That we should seek death only enforces this endless need for battle. And what has *that* strategy achieved, my friends? – Nothing. Only the death of our king and the plundering of our villages. I tire of these conflicts. We must seek to mitigate a peace process with the wizards of Shartoum,” he said.

“Peace with those demons is akin to treachery. They are the very devil. And now, as if things could not be worse, Lord Cerafax should seek the crown no less. Peace shall never exist whilst his tardy posterior remains on the throne,” said Zoltan The Wise.

General Dhakvoth remained passionately resistant. “And what would you have us do, my lord? March into Padzhur and declare our unyielding love for his army of serpents. I'd rather freeze in the permafrost than kiss his salty behind.”

All of the paladins were amused with the delivery of General Dhakvoth's passionate response before Lord Kumar Krone answered him with a certain poetic licence.

“Patience, my friends. Let the waters recede. Let the flames of disquiet die down to a pile of smouldering ashes, and we shall see with clarity a path through the forest glade.”

“I'm tired of these tyrants' interminable treachery. I, for one, shall not sit idly by and let my brethren suffer the insufferable thrashes of their swords and the sorcery of their staffs. No. The clans of the Zhojen shall not yield,” boomed General Dhakvoth.

“Then death shall prevail, and any chance we had for diplomacy shall disappear like the vanishing shadows of the night,” said Lord Kumar.

There was silence as the elders processed the various points-of-view before the chairman of the elders, Lord Valkroy, voiced his concern.

“What say you, elders of the Skroll?”

“I say we unite the clans and cleanse these lands of these filthy, barbarian wizards once and for all,” declared General Dhakvoth.

“That you would march headstrong into battle with no thought for reconciliation reeks of Zhojenian ignorance. I shall not command my soldiers to a certain death,” said Lord Komaso.

“Then stay here with the women, my lord, and make daisy chains in the fields for all I care. Death to the wizards!” shouted General Dhakvoth.

“Death to the wizards,” shouted the elders in a rising tide of communal anger and frustration.

So it was that peace should not reign in this most conflicted of lands.

In the meantime, remaining totally oblivious to the extremely delicate nature of war's hold fracturing this merciless planet, the time-travellers descended through fantasy's portal when they fortuitously floated down into the empty barn of a peasant farmer's lodge. Here, protected somewhat from the ice and freeze of the permafrost, Nicolas awoke. We was not feeling happy as he glanced around.

Oh no! I thought we were going home at long last, but I'm sure this isn't Oslo. Why does Lord Occulus promise us that we'll go home and we never do?

Surrounded by mountains of ice, he muttered verbal obscenities under his breath as his knees knocked and his teeth chattered.

"Oh, n...n... no. N...n...now, where the hec are w...w... we? I thought we were going h...h... home. Lord Occulus said we'd be g..g... going home. Please, Uncle Olaf, can't we go inside the f...f...farmhouse?"

Uncle Olaf couldn't agree more. "Yes, quite right, Nicolas. We're going to freeze to death if we stay out here much longer. Come on. We can't stay out here another moment."

Henry was his usual, whinging self. "I thought Lord Oncerlus was going to send us home. Why have we been sent here in the cold? I can't feel my toes, Pappa."

"I have no idea, Henry. Nedebiah, we must get the children inside immediately."

"All right, all right, but I'll go first. Who knows what danger lurks behind *those* ghastly doors."

Slowly, Nedebiah stood up with the aid of his staff who moved forward as his eyes squinted whilst he viewed the sheets of sleet and hail falling from the sky. It was an odd-looking dwelling whose erection was simple in its construction, with a heavily thatched roof and two, massive, crossed timber beams mounted regally at the front. A waft of smoke emanated freely from the cobbled stonework of the chimney stack whose emission alerted everyone to the presence of life inside.

Ever the pragmatist, Nedebiah was firm with his instruction. "Now, huddle up nice and close and stay warm while I see who's inside."

Henry's anxiety once again bubbled to the surface. "You'll come back, w...w... won't you?"

"Of course, I will, Henry, but, if I don't, you best clear off down into the forest fringe."

With that being said, Nedebiah winced as he braved the blustery chill of the wind before he ventured out into the cold. The children watched him depart as the image of his body gradually disappeared into the white haze of the sleet and snow whilst their thoughts remained ever mindful



of their enduring love for him. All the while, a heavy blanket of ice crystals fell down from the sky and covered him up. He twinkled in the of their enduring love for him. All the while, a heavy blanket of ice crystals fell down from the sky and covered him up. He twinkled in the light before he finally arrived at the ornately inscribed front door conspicuously impregnated with the tell-tale, alien signature marks of an ancient wizard's heraldry and two massive, glowing skulls.

It fascinated Nedebiah's curious mind for a few moments whilst he thumped heavily on the front door and awaited a response.

Hmmm. If I'm not mistaken, these skulls represent the ancient order of The Wizards of Shartoum. I wonder why they're here. Perhaps this is Shartoum. Well, let's find out, shall we?

Moments later, the door opened up when the unsightly presence of an old man greeted him.

“Oh! I see that you’ve finally arrived. Well, thank goodness. Come in, dear fellow. The council has been expecting you. Come in, come in,” he said.

Cautiously, Nedebiah entered through the doorway when his senses became enlivened at the familiar presence of cosmological charts and pictures of planetary symbols hanging from the walls. It immediately reminded him of his quaint cottage in Karman as he gazed all about when a smile enveloped his face. Intrinsicly, he knew that this was a place of wizardly wisdom whilst in the corner bubbling away profusely, a large, bronze cauldron emanated a pungent, acrid smell. Most surprisingly, a tattered copy of the antiquated chronicles was visible in front of a bookcase whose shelves were thoroughly stacked with a vast array of sorcerous books and manuscripts. All the while, smiling piously and seated upon three matching ornately inscribed Zitkist chairs, were three imperious wizards seemingly at peace with themselves at Nedebiah’s arrival. It was familiar territory for Nedebiah’s observations when, with an open mind and a curious delivery, he asked a probing question.

“Permit me to introduce myself. I’m Nedebiah Jericho, the Time Warp Keeper of Karman. Now, what the devil are we doing here?”

“We can dispense with the formal introductions, my friend. Yes, we know who you are, but before we proceed may I suggest that you rescue your friends from the cold and invite them in. I don’t want to upset the council,” said the old man.

Realizing that these men posed no threat to his immediate safety, Nedebiah walked back to the door when he opened it up before he signalled for everyone to approach. With a wave of his hand, Henry noticed Nedebiah in the distance when he reacted accordingly.

“He’s signalling us to come in, Pappa. Come on. Let’s go.”

“Yes, I think you’re right, Henry.”

Elise was urging. “Well, come on. I’m freezing. Let’s go!”

So, without further ado, they trudged through the sleet and snow until they all arrived at the front door where Nedebiah was waiting. After Nedebiah ushered them inside, Henry’s eyes sparkled when he saw the glittering array of symbols on the walls before his imagination took hold.

I'll bet they're wizards. Wow! This looks just like Nedebiah's cottage back in Karman. Maybe they can send us all home. Oh boy! This is going to be great.

Still shivering from the cold, Elise spotted the radiant warmth of a fire pit in the corner of the room when, without further invitation, she made a beeline straight for it.

“Over there. Oh, my God, it’s a fire.”

It was wonderful to absorb the warmth of the fire’s radiating heat when everyone put their hands up to feel immediate relief.

“Don’t mind them. They’re just cold,” said Nedebiah.

Immediately, the old man approached Nedebiah whose eyes glowed with a sense of satisfaction when he put out his hand in a friendly greeting. He was shaking his head.

“They said you’d come, but quite frankly, I never believed it. Well, not until now. Permit me an introduction, my friend. I’m Dharzhal of Empirion, the fourth earl of Shartoum. These wizards you see before you are the elder members of the Wizard’s Council. To your left is the honourable Professor Azithius Oriquinn; seated centrally, the wise counsellor, Jedius Apenthall and the honourable Gophar Shalbaryn to your right; all elder members of the council who expected your arrival. I must say that is, indeed, an honour to finally meet you,” said the wizard.

A momentary pause ensued as everyone stayed silent.

“I don’t understand. You said that *you* were expecting us.”

“Please make yourselves comfortable, and I shall explain the passing events that have ultimately led to your presence here,” said the wizard.

Warily, Nedebiah sat down on a vacant seat who cast his eyes towards the wizard when Henry spoke up.

“Could we have some blankets and some food please? I’m starving. We haven’t eaten anything for ages.”



“Oh, of course. Please forgive me. Yes, I shall arrange that immediately,” said the wizard.

So, in the blink of an eye and the flash of his staff, a powdery puff of smoke ensued before a multitude of blankets appeared before them whilst on the fissured tabletop bench a vast array of food suddenly materialized.

“Well, go on then, youngsters. Help yourselves.”

Immediately, everyone vacated the warmth of the fire who made for the table where, with unrestrained impetuosity, they gorged themselves on the available offerings. It seemed to alleviate some of the fear Nedebiah was feeling when the imperious wizard spoke again.

“I know that this must seem confusing for you, but we are just entities in time on the same journey as yourselves believe it or not.”

Nedebiah’s mind was travelling at the speed of light. “The Ruby Rainbow – Lord Oculus – hmmm? You know of all this? Well, well, well, I assume that *you* are the descendants of the members of the Soothsayers Guild. Are you not?”

“The Soothsayers Guild?! Goodness, gracious me, aren’t you a testament to history, my friend. I’m sorry to inform you, Nedebiah, that the ancient guild of which you speak hasn’t existed for many thousands of years, but you would be correct in thinking our association with it is historical. In fact, the Federation of the Wizard Warriors is directly descended from them. So we have a commonality of existence and cause. And yes, the legend of Lord Oculus lives on. It’s all part of historical folklore, my friend.”

Nedebiah appeared to be totally bewildered. “I see. Well, I’m utterly speechless.”

“Don’t be afraid. The Wizard’s Council and Federation of Warriors is on your side, Nedebiah,” said Professor Oriquinn.

“We’ve been following you through the eons, you know. Well, about three months in your relative time. The chronicles are proof of your destiny,” said Jedius Apenthall.

“The chronicles! So they still exist – even now?” asked Nedebiah.

“Yes, but they are very ancient and nearly illegible. Perhaps, when you are rested, you may be able to help us decipher some of the unknown text,” said Professor Oriquinn.

“It would be my honour, Professor, but first we must locate our magical piano.”

“The Magic Piano. Good God! So it does exist. Oh, won’t the fellows at the League of Nations be excited when I tell them. Why, I may even be appointed to Dean,” said Professor Oriquinn.

There was a palpable feeling of excitement before Uncle Olaf interjected.

“If you truly want to help us, then you’d help us find it. And by the way, where the hell are we anyway? And what year is this?”

“Of course. Yes, you must all be tired from your journey. Welcome to Polaris Saumattica, my friends, and the year, my dearest Olaf, is eighty four thousand and twenty two A.D.,” said the wizard.

“Wow!! That’s mega years into the future,” said Henry. “But what about our piano?”

“Ah, yes! That time-travelling marvel of the ages. Well, I’m afraid that our scouting party advised us that something fell from the sky and tumbled to the ground in paladin territory. I had no idea that it might be your marvellous piano. Well, I’m very sorry, but regrettably, we are unable to access it,” said Lord Dharzhal.

“But we need it to get home,” said Henry.

“And get home you shall, my lad, but not before the chronicles are realized,” said Lord Gophar Shalbaryn.

“But that could take forever,” said Nicolas.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha. No, not forever, but certainly once the pure essence is eventually lost in time, then and only then shall your destiny be revealed,” said Lord Dharzhal.

Uncle Olaf was beyond reproach as his frustration bubbled to the surface.

“All you wizards are the same. Hocus pocus, wee willy winkus and all that jazz. Why don’t you all just talk plainly and tell us when we can go home?”

It brought a smirk to the wizards’ faces and a chuckle from the children when Lord Dharzhal explained things further.

“Nothing is certain. There is nothing more certain than that, and there is certainly nothing more certain than your presence here,” said the wizard. Ultimately, you shall all find your way home, but there are a great many challenges that lie ahead. You must, indeed, find your piano and return to your time. However, according to the chronicles, a great faun warrior shall fight that blessed wizard before peace shall return to the universe once more. And it shall not be an easy journey, I warn you. To the north of the Slumbering Sleuth Mountains lies the village of Dragonvale. It’s a hellhole of living, beastly sorcery I’m afraid where you must all go and find that piano of yours. There’s simply no other way.”

“That sounds awfully dangerous, and I’m tired. Every time we meet a wizard, we’re told that home is near and it never is,” moaned Elise.

“Chin up, lass. You’ll not be making the journey alone,” said Professor Oriquinn.

“Yes, we understand that Lord Occulus is a most mysterious and frustrating fellow, but we’re all in the same boat you know,” said Lord Dharzhal.

Nedebiah moved over towards a crusty, old chair who seated himself down as he began to chuckle. Everyone remained bemused when Lord Dharzhal approached him. Feeling indignant, the wise, old wizard spoke again.

“Well, I fail to see what is so humourous.”

It was a somewhat conceited chuckle that brought a wry smile to the rosy red cheeks of Nedebiah’s face.

“Forgive me. I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but you must understand that we have been journeying through the heavens for what seems like an eternity. I really thought it was over this time, but I see that we are no closer to home than we were two months ago. Lord Oculus is either a conceited prankster or an apathetic narcissist. Hmmm, perhaps he’s both.”

Henry’s curiosity surfaced once again. “What’s a pathetic narcy list? Is that a list of hopeless people?”

Everyone laughed out loud at Henry’s mispronunciation and misunderstanding. However, Elise tried to explain things.

“What Nedebiah is trying to say, Henry, is that he is disappointed that we haven’t gone home yet. I mean we’re all disappointed. Everyone kept telling us that once we reached the Ruby Rainbow that we would be sent home, and now look where we are.”

Now, with that realization finally sinking-in, she was on the verge of crying before Professor Oriquinn approached her.

“Yes, I can certainly understand your frustration, lass, but there is light at the end of the tunnel, I assure you. We know from history that Astrophus, The Great guided you here. We know a great many things this far into your future, but you need to trust us. From my studies of the ancient Chronicles, we knew that one day we would all make your acquaintance – all of you. Why? Well, the answer to that question is quite simple. There is unfinished work to be done.”

“What work?” asked Nicolas.

Now, it was the wizards’ turn to chuckle conceitedly.

“Ah, the ever-present innocence of youth. Oh, how I’ve missed that,” said Lord Dharzhal.

Slowly, he extracted his pipe before he lit up as his memories travelled to some distant location.

“There was a time when we were free, and the peoples of this planet lived in harmony, but that was long ago. Many thousands of years ago, the Shakrelian lords invaded our planet who sought to impose their sovereignty over us. Well, I can tell you that the ancient warriors of Shartoum fought tooth and nail for our independence which we finally achieved after two thousand years of intense fighting. Believe me that there is no love loss between us.”

Nedebiah thought deeply about the professor's story when he connected the dots.

"Ah, I see. That we have been sent here is just a continuation of the journey that we're all making, Yes – the eradication of the Shakrel from our planets. Hmm, but I fail to see how a small group of time-travellers can achieve that end."

Jedius Apenthall, a wizard with elite academic status at the University of Shartoum, interjected.

"Yes, you fail. That is the point, my dear fellow."

An expression of bewilderment enshrined Nedebiah's face.

"Would you care to explain yourself?"

"Yes, I certainly would. We have been following your travels for over three months now in your relative time. It seems that doubt and indecision has plagued you all throughout your journeys although, most remarkably, I find *the legend* of the chronicles here at our door step speaking to me at this very moment. Why? Well, because it is simply *your* destiny. Remember that Astrophus The Great reminded you all to maintain your faith. Don't lose sight of what is important here. Yes, I know that you are all pining to get home, but there are souls in the universe that need your help. There are circumstances that you shall encounter that shall remain beyond your understanding. So stop questioning the validity of your experiences. You shall go home when the all the pieces of the puzzle align."

"That's not fair. We didn't ask to be to part of this. We all just want to go home. That wizard said that the Ruby Rainbow was the way home," said Uncle Olaf.

"And it shall be. Why do you think that Lord Occulus sent you here? Hmm?" asked Gophar Shalbaryn, an elderly lord of the Wizard's Council.

There was stunned silence for a moment before Marius spoke.

"To protect us. He was protecting us, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he most certainly was. He knew that Lord Kruval's patience was wearing thin, and the Shakrelian Lords had lost faith in him. You're just lucky Lord Occulus acted when he did."

"But why here?" asked Nicolas.

The wizards all looked at Nicolas with a profound degree of respect and understanding for him.

"Ah, the boy that plays the tunes through the heavens. You are a most remarkable young man, Nicolas Christensen. Yes, why here, indeed? Hmm, well, we are all part of the same painting. Your presence here is merely adding paint to the canvas. I should hope that painting becomes clearer in time and we are able to see the final picture."

"Huh? What's he talking about?" asked Henry.

"I think he means that he needs our help," said Elise.

“We need *one another’s* help, youngster,” said Lord Dharzhal.

“How so?” asked Marius.

“We shall guide you through the northern mountains and hopefully to your freedom. In return, we expect that your presence here shall turn the tide of history. It’s really that simple.”

Everyone breathed a little bit easier now that the reality of their circumstance was made clearer. After a few moments of pondering things, Nedebiah spoke again.

“These northern mountains. Are they far away?”

“Three days walk on the northern trail, and then a further two days into the foot of the mountains should see you there, I should think,” said Lord Dharzhal.

“Five days. Hmmm. Well, I guess that’s not the end of the world, but we’ll need some rest and provisions for the journey before we leave. Anyway, what’s your interest in all of this?” asked Nedebiah.

Finding his voice, the very learned Professor Azithius Oriquinn interjected when he tried to explain things further.

“There is a darkness in the mountains where it is said that the souls of the sleeping sleuths seek their vengeance upon the wicked. According to the myths of the ancient prognosticators of Dragonvale, these immortal souls investigate the treachery of those who succumb to the dark side where it is said that they administer their own justice. It’s a godsend really, and it keeps those marauding paladins of debauchery from attacking our borders. Well, I don’t wish to frighten the children, and I have no intention of finding them, so *we* shall be your guides, your eyes and ears if you will. Hmmm. Now, I suggest that you all get some rest, for we shall leave at daybreak.”

Henry felt justifiably curious. “Are they dangerous? I mean, will they eat us or something?”

“No, child. I dare say that you are not part of their culinary persuasion, but if tested, yes, they are certainly dangerous,” said Lord Dharzhal.

“Oh, great! Another mob of conjuring conspirators to contend with,” moaned Uncle Olaf.

Elise remained optimistic. “Oh, come on, Pappa. It’s not so bad. At least we’re warm here, and this food *is* delicious.”

“That damned piano! I swear that we shall never strike another note if we ever find the damned thing,” moaned Uncle Olaf.

Lord Dharzhal smiled warm heartedly when he gave further instruction. “Well then, let me show you to your quarters. Now, get some rest, won’t you? For we shall be leaving at first light.”

All the while, the lords of the Shakrelian Assembly watched the passing of events from outer space. Floating as super-intellectual entities in time, a growing frustration was setting in.

“We wait eternally for Lord Kruval to change the course of our destiny, but nothing appears to have changed,” grizzled Lord Zol.

“Patience, my lord. He knows that we have only granted him an earthly year to achieve the task,” said Lady Zundrick.

Lord Xahl was as imperious as ever. “And at year’s end, we shall decide his future.”

Lady Zundrick remained alert to the cause. “Perhaps he shall decide ours. You forget, my lords, that we are powerless to act. Until materialization is completed with the power of the pure essence, then we must face the fact that we are mere pawns in a game.”

“Yes, it is a game, and a game we cannot lose,” said Lord Zol.

Meanwhile, back on Earth and centuries into the past, the Grand Wizard stared into the Eye of Oculus, an incredible device allowing him to see into the future. A tear collected in the corner of his eye.

Remembering his mother fondly, he recalled a certain occasion when he felt the distant pulse of her love. Slowly, his mind was shrinking under the weight of an unfathomable lack of a conscience which was ever so slowly driving him to an uncertain madness. He was, indeed, the most conflicted of characters.

Mother. Where are you? Why did you desert me in my time of need? Why must I walk alone in the shadows of the night? I searched for a sign—anything that would bring me closer to you, but I only found the dark pits of despair devoid of your presence. A faint whisper.... a solitary word of endearment.... the simple caress of your hand. But no! Only this unholy madness of isolation and the dreaded weight of the accursed beast master peering over my shoulder. Why did you allow father to treat us so? Were we not deserved of his mercy? Yet he taught us to slay the weak and show no pity for our enemies. I have heard the cries of anguish from our foes. Their painful howls of death ring in my ears with unrelenting fortitude. It is an echo that repeats its torrid testimony to the very heart of my soul. At times, I cannot breathe, and I so wish for you to take my pain away. Ergh... it is a torment that breathes in my being, a foul-smelling wind of sordid perpetuity. Hmmm. Yet I must stay strong. Indeed, father, you were right and righteous in your action. There is no mercy for the weak. There is only power. Yes, power and the glorious destiny that awaits me. So run, my friends. Run to the ends of the galaxies, for you cannot avoid the fate that awaits you. Run until your hearts beat no more. Then, in the deathly silence, shall I find you and strike your worthless, withering bodies down. Run, my menacing friends, run.....thought the Grand Wizard.



Little did he know that Lord Kruval had been watching and listening to him through the powers of his incredible telepathy.

Azirael, I know that you can hear me. The Assembly grows impatient. You must achieve your task before the earthly year ends. If not, then I cannot guarantee the safety of your world.

It was a mild threat purposefully communicated to intimidate him. The Grand Wizard was no fool who answered the alien lord with venom in his words.

“And if I fail, Lord Kruval, then what? What do you hope to gain by destroying my world? Don’t think for a moment that you don’t need me. I know that *you* do, so tell your Shakrelian masters that the task shall be completed when I decide that the time is right and not before. Now, tell me where do the time-travellers reside?”

They have travelled to the future, Azirael, into the world of Polaris Saumattica. They are being aided by a group of intrepid wizards who oppose our future cousins. You must stop them, Azirael. You must find that thieving menace and deliver us from our entrapment. Then you shall ascend to the glorylands with us and rightfully claim your place on the Assembly. Just remember that if they should not accept your terms, Azirael, your world could face extermination.

“Then we shall all die, and you shall remain as entities in time in the vast wilderness of space. Your threats mean nothing to me, Lord Kruval. Go now, and deliver my reply.”

It was not what the imperious lord wanted to hear, but the Grand Wizard wasn’t anybody’s fool. Lord Kruval new better than to press the envelope any further as his telepathy slowly diminished. The Grand Wizard was tiring. He had chased these human irritants throughout the galaxies, but still a rage dwelled inside him.

What have I done to deserve such a fate? I would have spared your worthless lives if you had just given me Marius and the pure essence willingly. As it is, I wander the universe with only hate in my heart and hope that you come to me once again. That you seek safety in the arms of those marauding wizards shall not protect you. Heh, heh, heh, heh. The time is coming my friends...yes, the time is coming.....

**Into a world of frosty freeze,
The time-travellers tumbled and fell.
Would they find the magic piano,
Or another living hell?
All the while, they journeyed on,
Through sleet, ice, rain and snow.
And all the while, the Shakrelian lords,
Waited for time to flow.**

CHAPTER 2

Journey to Dragonvale

In the meantime, the senators and Lords of the Assembly watched the proceedings from millions of light years away. Despite granting Lord Kruval an earthly year to complete his task, a growing frustration was setting-in.

“This is a complete waste of our time and energy. We should have terminated this wizard’s contract and placed Lord Kruval under house arrest,” griped Lord Xahl.

“And precisely what would that achieve, Lord Xahl? Would it bring us closer to the ownership of the pure essence? Hmmm?” asked Lord Zol.

Lady Zundrick spoke her mind. “I agree. We must give Lord Kruval the opportunity to change the wizard’s mind, to soften his horizons and give him hope.”



Lord Xahl remained as blind as ever. “Hope?! What do you mean? How does he need *hope* more than any of us? Surely you can see that this mindless exercise is nothing more than a fiasco.”

“Hope is an eternal state of anticipation that is shared by all, my lord. He is no different to us. He clings to life’s expectations like a withering leaf trembling in the wind. His soul is denied it, but his mind craves it as do we all. Yes, hope is all we have.”

“Bah! Hope is a wasted emotion, Lady Zundrick. Do not invest your time and energy in such fanciful notions of inaction. We must decide our future realistically and not in the vain ambitions that hope should provide. Get a hold of yourself. See this barbaric incarceration for what it is. If we do not act decisively, then you may hope for eternity, but I intend to return to the glory days whether we hope to or not.”

“Those days are gone, Lord Xahl. Face it. We are entirely at the wizard’s disposal. He *is* our last bastion of hope. Let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater and live to regret this moment of frustration. Patience is a virtue that must be tested through self-discipline and awareness. I beg of you to resolve your internal conflict. Give Lord Kruval the time he needs to achieve the task, and we shall all return to those glory days you hope for.”

Silence ensued as Lord Xahl pondered Lord Zol’s wise words, but it didn’t last for long.

“Not one moment longer shall he have. When the clock’s hands strike true to the earthly year shall he be disengaged from his mission. This I avow.”

So it was that Lord Xahl reluctantly accepted the Assembly’s decision. Would it prove to be a wise decision? Or would the universe decide otherwise? Tick, tock, ticked the hands of destiny’s clock.....

Meanwhile, after listening to Uncle Olaf’s objections, the time-travellers were escorted through a maze of corridors before they arrived at the guests’ quarters. The room contained a simple arrangement of necessary furniture items, with a comfortable row of beds freshly prepared with white, clean linen sheets. It brought a smile to Uncle Olaf’s face, for sleeping was a simple pleasure that he simply couldn’t resist. Soon he was snoring away happily. A cosy atmosphere of warmth penetrated the room as a soft, glowing fire burned profusely in a corner fireplace. Immediately, the children gathered around as Nedebiah cautiously professed his plans.

“I want you all to stay close. Whilst they appear friendly enough, something tells me that we’re being used as pawns in a chess game. Funnily enough, I’ve never read anything of detail about these wizards in

the chronicles, so until I have a better understanding of why we're here and who they are, may I suggest that we just lie low."

Fidgeting about, but happy to have his extremities warmer, Henry looked at Nedebiah with longing in his eyes.

"Nedebiah, remember when we first met the dwarves and they told us that if we travelled through the portal that the mage was guarding, then we would find the Ruby Rainbow, and then we could go home. Well, why have we come here? I thought that we'd be going home for sure."

It was an innocent statement founded on a supposed truth. Why indeed? Well, Nedebiah could see the desperation in Henry's eyes and certainly the validity of the question. He thought momentarily about the significance of it before he offered a plausible explanation.

"Yes, well. Hmmm. I guess nothing is certain, Henry, and certainly even the chronicles lack definition. Why we have landed here in this frosty, frozen land, I cannot answer you, but I just believe it is part of the journey we must make. The wizard tried to explain that, but to tell you the truth, I'm running out of patience. I agree with you. It feels as though we've been deceived although I know Lord Oculus acted out of necessity. Still, it doesn't make it any easier to accept, does it? Hmmm, now, try and get some rest like a good lad. It's going to be an early start," said Nedebiah as he affectionately ruffled Henry's mop of unkempt hair.

It was a reasonable explanation of things, but it still left Henry in a state of perpetual wonderment. Slowly, he closed his eyes as his mind drifted off to the certainty of his memories back home.

Go on Milly. Take the carrot. You're a beautiful horse, aren't you? When we go back to the barn, I'm going to comb your mane and make you really sparkle thought Henry as he patted her on the bridge of the nose. She snorted with satisfaction as her teeth ground the carrot away with unrelenting pressure and pleasure as she happily swished her tail. Henry just stared in awe at his beautiful animal who felt thoroughly contented with all that she had to offer. It was a beautiful memory as he slept peacefully.

Gradually, night beset them whilst outside the howling winds chilled the icy landscape with bursts of frosty, frozen ice and snow. As gloriously beautiful as it was, this was a land of extremes and unremitting dangers. Many creatures lay hidden in the caves and tunnels that permeated the mountains here, dangers that were ever-present and unyielding.

Straining to make its solar presence felt, the light of the sunstar filtered across the mountaintops which provided the morning's presence in a

subdued, filtered light. It was enough to awaken the group whose tired bodies felt invigorated by a good night's sleep.

"Finish your breakfast, and we'll be off! Oh, and make sure you put on those fur coats that the wizards provided," said Nedebiah.

"Are we going to the mountains today?" asked Henry.

"Well, you want to go home, don't you? So be a good lad, eat up and put on that coat, Henry," said Nedebiah.

Everyone accepted now that they were going to trek to the mountains, but it held an understandable fear for Elise who had nearly fallen to her death months before in Goblin's Gorge. Seeking assurance, she sought Uncle Olaf's comforting words.

"Pappa, will you stay close to me? I don't want to fall off the mountain again. I'm really scared."

"I'm not going to let that happen, Elise. Look, we have guides this time to help us. I'm sure we'll be okay. There's no need to worry."

It was somewhat reassuring for Elise's fears to hear positive words of encouragement especially from her father. Good, old Uncle Olaf. He really did love his children. So, having attended to the emotional needs of the children and with their practical preparations completed, they set forth into the cold, dark world of this unforgiving planet. Fortunately, there was a reprieve in the weather when they set off into the bleakness of the day as they trekked through the snow. Of course, it wasn't long before Henry started whining.

"Is it far now?"

"Oh, Henry, will you be quiet? You've asked that question five times already, and I'm getting sick of it," said Nicolas.

"But the wizard said it would only take a few hours to get to the base of the mountain, and we've been walking for ages."

Nicolas checked his watch. It wasn't set to the current time of their location, but the second and minute hands still worked as trusty as always. Exactly thirty three minutes had passed since they had departed, but in an attempt to alleviate Henry's anxiety, Nicolas falsely answered him.

"Hmmm. It looks like we've been walking for an hour and a half. Shouldn't be long now, Hen."

His response brought a smile to Henry's face and a renewed vigour in his footsteps. Puffing frosty breaths into the air, they ploughed through the sleet and snow as they headed for the mountain when, amid the eerie silence, the distant howling of wolves could be heard. Immediately, Henry became panic-stricken.

"Are those wolves I can hear?"

Lord Dharzhal had been leading from the front when he heard Henry's question before he stopped in his tracks. He then turned around and spoke his reassuring words.



“Yes, my boy. Those are the wolves of the Slumbering Sleuth Mountains you can hear. But they won’t come near us as long as I’m in charge. Now, don’t worry yourself. You’re quite safe.”

It was cold comfort for Henry and the other children whose experience with wolves had caused nothing, but heartache. Understandably, they moved closer to Uncle Olaf who smiled at his children when he tried to cheer them up. For another two hours, they trekked wearily over the vastness of the cold, tundra landscape when a huge, frozen image of a god-like wizard and the Gleaming Pinnacle Mountain Ranges came into view.

“Oh, look! What’s that monstrous statue? And I can see the mountains now,” said Henry.

“It’s huge! Just look at those massive ice crystals,” said Nicolas as he pointed towards the horizon.

Up front, leading the expedition, all the wizards were smiling amongst themselves at the animated commentary of the children. The wizards knew very well the dangers that lurked in the shadows. Slowly, they trudged ever closer and closer before the true majesty of the Gleaming Pinnacles came to bear. However, Henry being Henry, couldn’t contain his curiosity when he surged forwards to the lead before he tugged at Lord Dharzhal’s furcoat.

“Excuse me, Lord Dharzhal, but what is that huge statue? And why is it out here in the middle of nowhere?”

Lord Dharzhal placed his staff to his side as he came to rest before he put up his hand to stop the trekking party when he thoughtfully considered Henry’s questions.

“That, my dear boy, is a remembrance statue dedicated to Astrophus The Great. It is said that he was first to teach the Grand Wizard his sorcery, and it was the Grand Wizard who erected this statue here millennia ago to

remind all in sundry of the origin of his powers. Of course, we know the truth of it, but the northern paladins are convinced that his image represents the evil wizard, Azarax, a hero in their eyes,” he explained.

“Azarax! Who’s he?” asked Henry.

“A great and noble paladin according to paladin legend, but nevertheless, a mistaken myth,” explained Lord Dharzhal.

“But why is *he* here?” asked Henry as he persisted with his questions.

“Well, you see those crystals before you. They have been here for over a thousand years. It is said that they grew from the tears from the Grand Wizard’s mother when she visited here. Seeing this monumental statue erected here on the peak of the horizon, I think she realized what a monster he had become when she shed her tears and the crystals arose from the ground. It’s a reminder that despite his evil doings there are those in his bloodline that actually feel remorse and pity for the peoples of this planet and other worlds,” said Professor Oriquinn.

“Yes, there is beauty even amongst the most dire of settings,” said Jedius Apenhall as they gazed about at the miraculous scenery around them.

“Come now, Henry. We must leave these gentlemen alone to guide us into the mountains,” said Nedebiah.

Slowly and deliberately, they recommenced their walking as they passed by the monumental crystal formations while the statue of the paladin god disappeared into the white-washed expanse of the tundra behind them. Meanwhile, from their unobscured vantage point atop the rise, the eagle-eyed spies of the paladin knights spotted the advancing party. Moments later, they returned to Padzhur to make their hasty report. Informing General Dhakvoth of the time-travellers last known location, Lord Cerafax’s eyes narrowed to a spontaneous degree of unimaginable evil.

“My lord, the wizards of Sharthoum approach from the south. Should we execute a response?” asked General Dhakvoth.

What a brooding, cunning brute of a paladin he was. Possessing a frosty epidermis of wrinkled skin that stretched over his scar-riddled face, his brow remained rigid while an icicled crown of frozen shards sat upon his hallowed head. Despite his fearless reputation, Lord Cerafax contemplated the circumstances of their journey with great thought. A wise, but decidedly aggressive paladin, his moral and ethical thoughts of



paladin reprisals tossed restlessly around in his brain. Should he engage in battle only to feel the wrath of their wizardly powers destroy his domain once more remained a deliberating question. The king was dead. That fact was undeniable. So, thinking with clarity, caution became the better part of valour when he responded.

“General Dhakvoth, I cannot risk another attack from these menacing wizards. Follow them and report every advance in their journey. If they approach Padzhur, then we shall reconvene our meeting in the morrow,” he said.

General Dhakvoth was animated in his response. “But they are wizards, my lord. They shall surely seek to destroy us, and what’s more a strange group of travellers accompany them.”

Lord Cerafax was most reassuring. “Have faith, General. We have held our northern position throughout all of history. I tell you solemnly that no southern, crystal-gazing prophets of the ages shall penetrate our defenses. Hmmm. As for these travellers, there must be a reason for their presence.”

General Dhakvoth nodded appreciatively, but he wasn't convinced of Lord Cerafax's confidence. Slowly, he retreated from his presence before he sought to secretly engage in private conversations with the traitorous and treacherous Lord Kumar Krone.

"I tell you, Lord Kumar, that Lord Cerafax cannot see the forest for the trees. His blindness is intolerable, and I, for one, shall not yield. We must plan for an attack."

Lord Kumar remained cynical. "I agree, General. Don't worry yourself. The council does not have confidence in the king-elect. In fact, I shall be surprised if he lasts more than a few days in power."

"I see. That you have made a pact with the brotherhood of the Shakrel is not a surprise for me," said General Dhakvoth.

"No, General. You misunderstand me. It is a voice carried loudly on the breeze from your own – the Zhojen no less," he said.

General Dhakvoth, despite his feisty nature, remained loyal to his paladin brotherhood as he responded animatedly. "Why was I not notified? Ah! I see it clearly now. First, they shall strike at the belly of the beast, and then *I* shall be cut down."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha. You really are a passionate soul, but fear thee not, General, for your brothers in arms only wish to dislodge Lord Cerafax. Their allegiances to you remain steadfast and true," explained the corruptible lord.

Little did General Dhakvoth realize what an insidious soul Lord Kumar truly was. With a blinding ambition for obtaining power as his guiding light, no value of friendship, relationship, nor life for that matter would be an obstacle for his interminable obsessions. Yes, he was demon in disguise and by far the most potent enemy of the state.