

## ✦ THE FOUR WINDS: The Battles of Brendimore ✦

*"...a knowing soul shall seek the peace / the Four Winds blow and Shadows cease / in times of magic or times of lore / these Four great spirits triumph in war / whosoever shall cross their sacred path / Angels of the Realm must guide / the Four Winds call down their battle's wrath / true power Alexicon provides..."*

(From The Creed of the Four Winds)

In the Age following great wars that created the Valleys of Alexicon, a mystical and powerful allegiance rises forth to protect the Kingdoms of Morina Shu. The Four Winds—embodied in legendary warrior Brendimore from the South Valley, Princess Sylvaknoll of the East Landings, Concross the Emperor from the Gates of the West, and wizard king Marcelladeux of the Northlands—soon learn their greatest foe, the deposed malevolent ruler and demon king Juldoom the Skull Lord, has captured their most precious treasure—the Langaveld Heart.

A long protected talisman of magic and lore (possessing the Twelve Prophecies of good and evil), if kept in the hands of Juldoom would diminish the powers of the Four Winds and bring about the annihilation of Morina Shu. *The Battles of Brendimore* is a tale of the Quest for the Langaveld Heart, the Four Winds' journey to rescue a young knight sworn to slay the demon king, and treacheries faced as one of their own fall prey to the deepening Magic of Shadows.

Brendimore the Warrior must face a series of battles to gain the hand of a Princess wielding a power greater than all others over his destiny. From the Days of the Onyx Tigers to the Lands of Evermore Sleep, among the Death Swords of Sergan-feur and the Magical Cliffs of Tresta Mun, join the Elder Council, the Mystical Angels of the Realm, and Allegiance of the Four Winds as they keep safe the sacred path of men, gifted beasts, and the lands of Gold and Shadow in the Valleys of Alexicon (first in **THE FOUR WINDS** series, to include: *The Sojourns of Sylvaknoll*, *The Combats of Concross*, and *The Miracles of Marcelladeux*).

*the temples of morina shu,  
vestige of the elder council.*



## ***touchstones***

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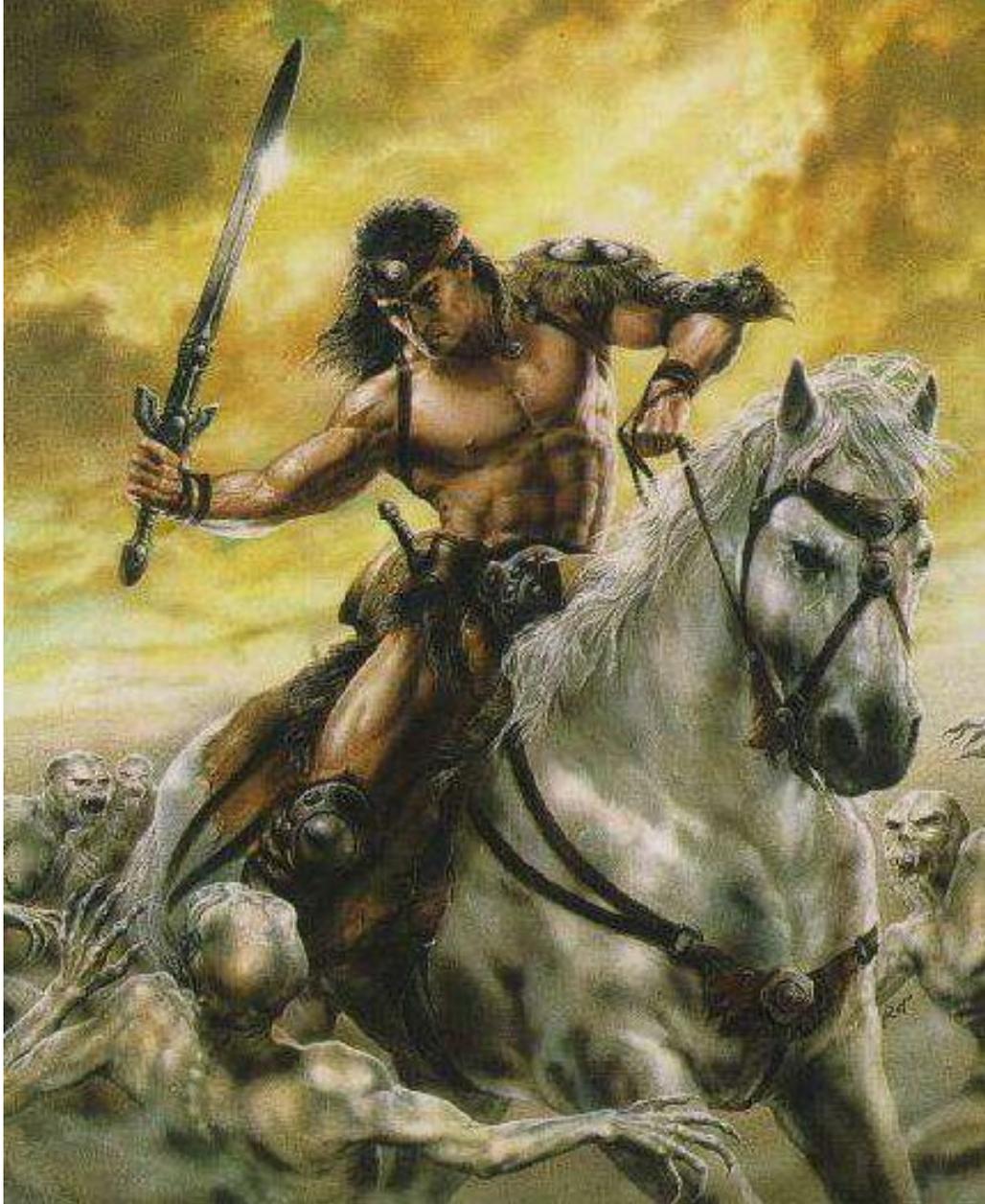
"a knowing soul  
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these four great spirits  
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whosoever shall cross  
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—from the creed of the four winds

*BRENDÍMORÉ the warrior,  
LORD of the south valley*



*the four winds:*  
*Battles of Brendimore*

*By*

*Johnny Fontaine*

## prologue

There is a strange feeling that surges through my blood, as if the invisible bony-pulsed grip of untimely Death itself threatens to squeeze the last days of a long life straight from my heart. My eyes are stung with tears felled in witness to the carnage promised at the oath taken so long ago by Concross, the powerful Emperor of West Alexicon—to have the futures of my world shred by the velocity of his will. This, one of the Twelve Prophecies said, would be the sacrifice for any powers that were either gifted or stolen from one of the Four Winds.

I am at the Door of Emaneen. There is no keyhole; a small white cloud floats upon the essence of its structure, a massive wooden slab of eons weathered planks emboldened with the deep musty hues of both morning sky and twilight forest and the long golden cords shaped by the peoples of the Waiting Gates. Its knob, a miniature bronzed head of a dragon resembling the great Yaxfang the Dead, turned easily in my fingers as if waiting for this moment since being cast over thousands of years before in the fires of the Kilgorthian Flame to leap upon the only flesh it would ever touch.

Beyond the Door, a path of diamond encrusted gleandonia leaves stretch out for what seems infinity, on each side a series of darkened and mist enshrouded passageways waited as if secrets lurking in the nights mind that would not sleep. The door closed behind me as a steady march drum of my heartbeat screamed out for what I could not have, pounding each bead of sweat through my pores in mercy of what seemed the weaknesses of youth haunting my tired steps. With a moment of distant sight given to me by Marcelladeux (one of many powerful secrets clutched from the enchantments of Tresta Mun by the great magi of North Alexicon), I could see her off in the hazes of my sight, trapped in the living branches of a large moss-

covered Battle Tree. In a blaring of trumpets from ages almost forgotten, I heard a voice cry out her name...

Sylvaknoll.

A choice hidden in one of the dank passageways looms before the quest for her soul will be decided, a battle designed for one purpose—to keep us apart. I stand alone, drifting forward upon my fears. There is neither the time to spirit away my terror nor pacify my rage. My fingers tremble at the hilt of Xiljadon, the sword of my ancestors—the founders, builders, and rulers of South Alexicon.

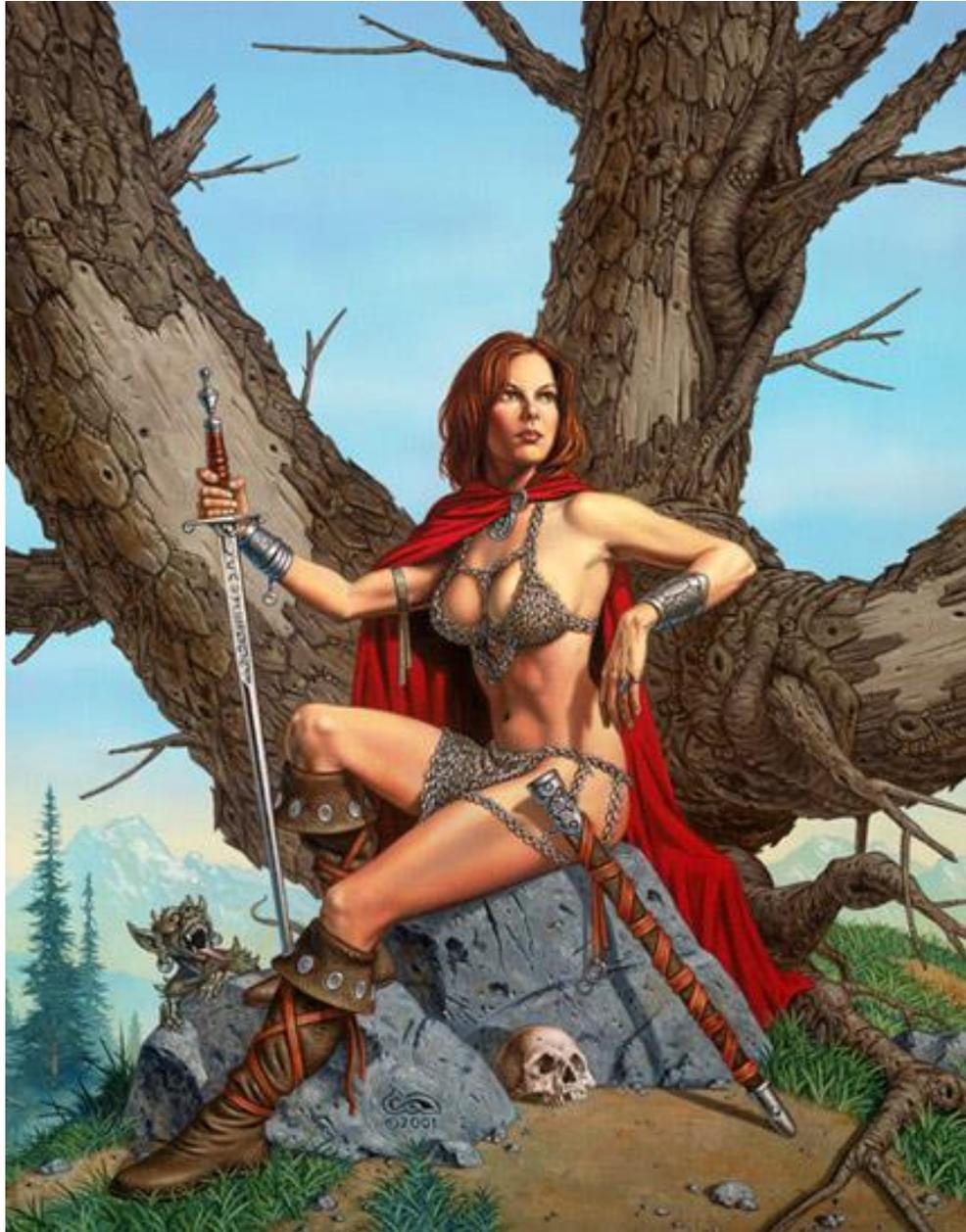
“Brendimore,” she calls out, “come to me! I am soon to the Lands of Evermore Sleep, and the eons of dreams will capture me forever. Let me not go there alone or without your lasting kiss.”

As her image fades, I am trammeled down with an unmistakable presence behind me. It is something evil, neither of this time nor of this place, yet strangely familiar. It approaches me as if a sunlit memory found on a day, long ago, when this odyssey for the Langaveld Heart began. Much has been seen—and lost. I begin to run towards Sylvaknoll...and away from the minion of Concross, who once we proudly called our ally—and now, deep in Shadow, only cursed the name of our enemy.



Legend decrees that in the Days of the Onyx Tigers, Princess Sylvaknoll of Ralemanor leapt from the high cliffs of Tresta Mun after the Langaveld Heart, thrown into the Talisvex Abyss by Juldoom, a malevolent ruler pushed aside for his youngest son by the kingdom—Fallfax—he led for one hundred and twelve years during the Weldonian Age. The ensuing wars created the

*syloaknoll of ralemanor,  
warrior princess of the east landings*



Valleys of the Alexicon, but it was Juldoom's passionate search for the Heart that led him to destroy Sylvaknoll's sojourn upon the magical cliffs. None, the Elder Council advised, could possibly return from the treacheries of Talisvex. The Warrior Princess of East Alexicon, legend *whispers*, did not go off the cliffs alone. She steadfastly maneuvered her sojourn towards the mystical lands of Tresta Mun with her fellow travelers, Etrarias and Vox, after the pursuit of the Heart had brought them much loss and suffering. She would not let go—not until she returned Langaveld to its temple in Morina Shu and could stand once more by Brendimore's side upon the lofty palace steps of Ralemanor.

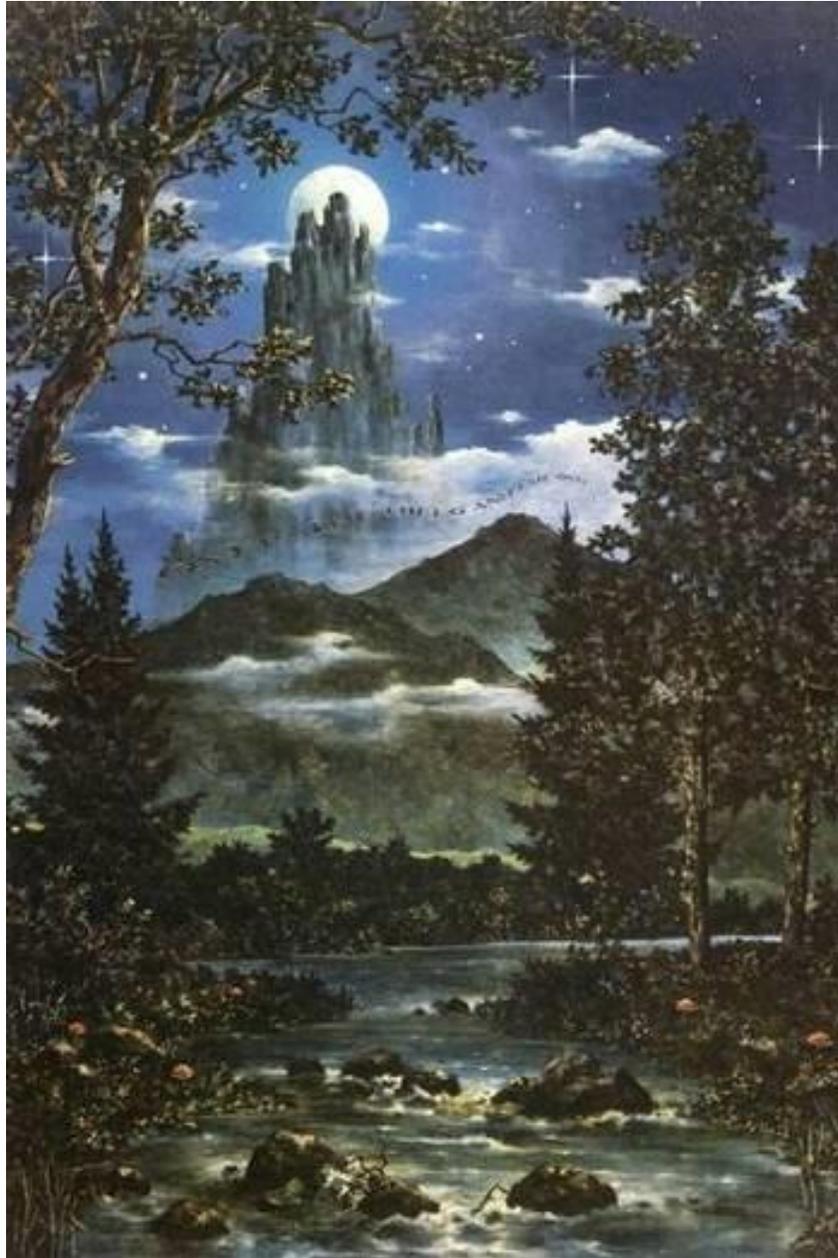
The Princess was not born to her nobility but dropped from the sky one early winter's day in the town square of Ralemanor, the only survivor from a violent storm of black winds, fierce lightning, and orange lights that swept its way through Tiftsdale, over thirty miles to the south.

Villagers recoiled in horror at the sight of three huge serpents of clouds dipping their way along the vistas of ground, ravaging the landscape of its dwellings, trees, animals and farmers. When it spit out a child of nine upon the Treyquiste Fountain at the village center—one of its huge, ornate marble bowls catching the young girl as she appeared to fall from within the dark miasma of twisting winds, clutching for an unseen hand above her—the Village Protectorate raced the child, now shielded by a small brace of riders, to the castle grounds of Ralemanor. When they arrived, Lord Arringshaw swore the child was gone to the Mystical Angels of the Realm.

"She breathes," Punthelamare, the Protectorate, said. "Quickly, summon your wizard! She has come from the skies, borne of an evil wind. He must save her." And, of certain deed, he

would do just that. The path of the wizard king started long ago, in the dawning of the Kilgorthian Age—which is the doorway to what tales are left of his time.

*the magical cliffs of tresta man,  
sacred lands of gold and shadow*





*the scrolls of morina shu*

(1)

*the birth of the onyx tigers*

(2)

*marcella de ux transformed*

(3)

*origins of the Langavelo heart*

## *the Birth of the onyx tigers*

In the eons heralding the Kilgorthian Age (a time when the Realm of Wizards led great wars to spirit away the Seven Centicles of Pain from destroying the female race and gave rise to the great legions of the Warrior Princess), a young boy from the lands of Sergan-feur, Marcelladeux, witnessed the Birth of the Onyx Tigers when—quite by mistaken interest—he found himself drawn to the edgings around Castle Fallfax, in a usual daydream, playing a game with his walking stick as if he were the great wizard king Daskang.

Entering the forest spread upon the top of Nantelling Edge, he was fascinated by—and followed to its surprising conclusion—a series of loud mewing noises and colorful bursts of light which lured his steps with breezes of intoxicating mystery that swirled among the forest around him. Marcelladeux, when he arrived at a clearing near the middle of the magic woods, was transfixed to see Lord Valkran casting a spell upon a tiger cub—which began to change shape and color before the young boy's widening eyes.

It grew powerful, like the stories he had listened to about the roots and vines of battle trees in Qualnox Forest as well as the stone hewn majesty that graced the cliffs of Tresta Mun. Marcelladeux held his breath as he hugged closer to a tree, watching the cub surpass even a full sized beast, its orange and black stripes melding into a polished stone skin as black as the shadowed night which brought the young boy such dreams of magic from faraway places of legend and lore. Valkran, even young Marcelladeux understood, was a powerful young Lord, heir to the Kingdom of Fallfax (and—to the histories yet to be passed down—kin to the great ruler Juldoom). Yet no one loved him, so he spent his time away from the Castle, tending to the tigers he raised in the woods. There were first only whispers of such beasts, for the young Lord Valkran

*LORD VALKRAN OF FALLFAX,  
MASTER OF THE MAGIC TIGERS*



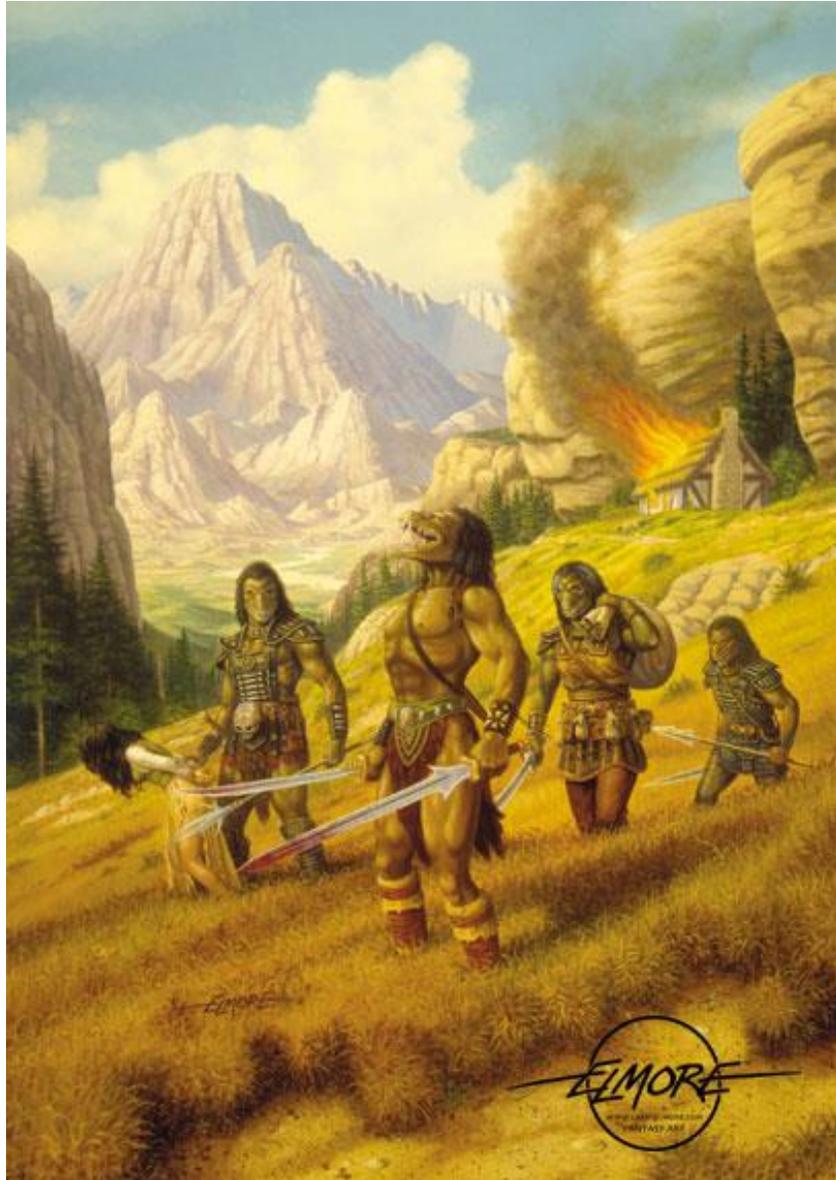
had made them invisible to the villagers, craftsmen, noblemen, and soldiers that traveled within the Kingdom.

One day when a marauding band of Stonehand fighters attacked a village outpost and fled with an orphaned girl captive, Lord Valkran undid his spell and summoned three of his fiercest tigers to leave the woods. They were seen flying down the hills, chasing the fighters across the Fallfax River where two of the beasts ripped the Stonehand's from their stallions and left not a piecemeal of bone for the sacred waters to wash away while the last tiger safeguarded the child.

The waif, Ballestina, returned to her village upon the back of Dulcedin, Lord Valkran's most regal beast. As she was embraced back into her settlements, those who witnessed the ill-rumored tiger magic watched a pair of the great cats fade into stillness and disappear. Lord Valkran, still protected by Dulcedin, addressed the gathering outside Castle Fallfax who had come to bless his father, the King—mistakenly thought to have summoned the tigers to save Ballestina.

"These magical beasts will never do ill harm to those who love our lands or our people," Valkran told them. "But they are not blessings from the King." A hushed silence fell upon the gathered, some who spent years cursing the young Lord while others simply feared his powers out of ignorance. "Even though I have borne the scars of hate, these regal friends have been raised by my hand to respect those peoples who call my father King. They will never leave the woods of Nantelling unless summoned by me to protect our lands or our people. Fear them not—nor harm them, hunt them, or curse them. They shall forever be your battle charges in times of the darkest need."

*stonehand fighters,  
the death swords of sergan-feur*



Ballestina walked up and gently kissed Dulcedin goodbye as those present watched the great beast amble out towards the Edge. As Lord Valkran moved off from Fallfax alongside his friend, the times were told his favor—so unduly measured through all the written and rumored deeds—should come back upon the precious blessings of his future Kingdom.

No one yet could see, but even forgiveness of a people could not renegotiate the bonds so angrily twisted between the King's two sons, the young Lords Valkran and Arringshaw. This Marcelladeux would see become the curtain of death to shroud one of their destined roads, and it would be the Shadow tigers Valkran raised from magic cubs that would—in its fortunate time and place—decide the fate of one of the Four Winds.

The child Marcelladeux blinked hard, swallowing down his fear as he would the medicines his mother pushed upon him to quest off his bothering dreams. The great onyx tiger now crouched low to the earth before Valkran in the clearing of woods inside Nantelling Edge.

“My dark beast,” Valkran intoned, honoring the great cat in a genuflection of both respect and fear. “You have crossed hidden times to finally bring the strength of your purpose to light!”

Marcelladeux watched from his hidden spot behind a tree as Lord Valkran lowered his eyes to the ground. The tiger raged back his massive head and spit forth a deafening roar, which shook the rough bark Marcelladeux pressed his face to and seemed to push out from within the canopy of trees surrounding them in Nantelling Edge like a crack of thunder that portended the storms of night no one could see. The onyx majesty raked a gargantuan claw upon the air not inches from Valkran's lowered head. Pinching shut his eyes, Marcelladeux could still hear the great cat's breathing, a shuddering rumble that moved Lord Valkran to slowly rise from the ground and stand proudly before the incarnation.

*Talcedin,  
Battle Lord of the Valkran tigers*



“Arringshaw,” he said to the tiger, “is to be King. The people have already chosen in their hearts. But, you, my dark carnivore,” he promised the beast, “shall change the course of a fate cast so freely upon him in love never equally shared.”

The tiger opened his mouth as if to speak. Marcelladeux, once again brave enough to open his eyes, watched the massive cat—not a bow’s shot away—begin to lick its massive jowls and purr softly before the young Lord of Fallfax.

“If then through fear I capture their allegiance,” Valkran pledged, stepping up to lay a soft hand on the tiger’s massive head, “then let it be this day when I grace the power of my magic in you so as to deliver the will of my people. A knowing soul shall seek the peace.”

From behind his tree, the young child began to weep. The tears, he mysteriously felt, were not out of such fears that crept across the night to find a hidden ball of young dreamer pressed tightly under his beddings. Marcelladeux—hot rivulets of destiny running across the dirt-tempered beauty of his young face—knew as he witnessed Lord Valkran bathed in a light spreading from the great tiger’s eyes his path was not hidden in dreams but clearly in magic before his own. *A knowing soul shall seek the peace...*

Marcelladeux—daring not to move from his hiding place as the forest grew silent and dark once more under the spell—found his body drawn to the dark leaves and grasses around his feet, nestling himself down to the embrace of a land his father loved so much.

As day marched towards night, his eyes began to butterfly themselves into the whispers of sleep, fluttering slightly as he thought of wanting a magic tiger cub. As darkness poured over Nantelling Edge the smell of pines and oaks called him. Still, in the background of his heartbeat

as the young boy crossed over into rest, he could hear the roar of the great onyx tiger summoned by Lord Valkran.

When he awoke, startled by a strange noise slicing through his dream of Daskang's great battle on the Edges of Qualnox Forest (where the Green King ruled the Battle Trees), Marcelladeux righted himself trying to picture the landscape.

Wedges of moonlight slid down through the treetops, yet he sat caught in darkness. Some strange noise was very close, his vision shut off from the nearest reaches of his hand. As grasping fingers brushed through the moist earth, twigs, and leaves, they came to rest upon something unusually smooth. In the warm breeze of the night, Marcelladeux felt the coldness of the surface under his hand.

The noise in the darkness was steady, a pulse of intent but still, as he came to his knees—now reaching out with both hands—Marcelladeux did not want to blink, fearing even then it would awaken. His fingers would not tremble nor would his heart miss the chance of a beat. The young boy felt the polished stone underneath his fingertips continue to breathe and expand, then settle back in rhythm to the unseen purring—Lord Valkran's beast was fast asleep beside him in the forest.

Marcelladeux wished he could see better in the silky darkness. At that moment, as his small hand lay fixed on the stone skin of the cat, a soft glow began to curl around the edges of the sleeping tiger. The young boy slowly inched away and came to his feet, the walking stick gripped tightly in his hands. The onyx beast illuminated, a gentle blue aura coming from its hard polished black stone gifting Marcelladeux a closer look at the tiger's fine whiskers of colorful light, his great claws of sharpened diamonds, and the enormous tail which ended in a deadly spearhead

*the green king,  
ruler of qualnox forest*



capable of piercing a sturdy tree or the much so tender flesh of man. With one more step backwards, the young boy who dreamt of being a wizard broke a larger stick under his bare foot, the sound stabbing out and piercing the sleep of the magic beast. Its eyes of orange fire opened quickly, its body seeking prey and flying into a crouched attack awaiting a signal. Marcelladeux held his last breath in as long as he could, but he could feel the wind caress the bare skin of his neck. His scent, already, had the great onyx tiger shedding a fine coat of saliva across its massive rows of teeth.

The boy set his eyes. *"A knowing soul shall seek the peace,"* he whispered aloud into the face of his most certain death. They were the only words he knew. He repeated them, feeling not the spasms of fear in his legs but a strengthening of the muscles as the words pushed forth off his tongue. As they were barely heard above the tiger's deepening growl, Marcelladeux drew in a large gulp of night air. *"A knowing soul shall seek the peace!"* he bellowed, and the great cat did bow.

"Lord," the stone tiger said, his voice a forgiving yet cavernous echo of bold thunder and latent doom. "I did not recognize you in this magic form." The beast kept his head lowered, waiting for the touch of a master's hand upon his crown.

As the young boy summoned his courage and placed his small hand upon the great head of the tiger, a vision moved quickly before his eyes, even though they were open and fixed steadily on the beast. In the instant that was his Seeing, Marcelladeux recognized the dark skies over the majestic castle on Ralemanor grounds. He saw Lord Arringshaw, well-aged yet virile and wise. He witnessed a twisting cloud of serpent storms wreaking havoc, and—in the end moment of his distant sight—saw a young child, a girl, with soft curls of red hair and unconscious in the

arms of a man standing before him. As the vision ended, he began to feel his fingers tremble upon the head of the onyx tiger.

“Your touch is *special*,” purred the magic beast. Marcelladeux looked down as the tiger’s head began to raise, its eyes of orange flames slowly lifting to target him. “But it is not the touch of my Lord.” As the beast tensed, the young boy leapt backwards, arching his walking stick behind him as if it were Edenstorm, the wizard Daskang’s great sword.

“I mean you no harm!” Marcelladeux warned. His heart raced ahead of his words, and he was sure the beast could hear it in the dead silence of Nantelling Edge. The tiger, abandoning his attack crouch, stood taller on his thick stone legs and looked the boy in his brave blue eyes.

“You know what words to speak yet stand with your weapon poised,” the cautious voice of the magical beast said. His eyes danced with licks of fire that warned of danger yet communicated silently along the fine blue edges of the flame to tell the young boy his life would be spared. “And your thoughts are on the wings of distant sight. Only the *powerful* have that, young Marcelladeux.”

Marcelladeux did not want to move, but he allowed his muscles to ease down, the walking stick coming to rest by his side. The tiger, standing his own ground, offered a slight purr and a twitch of his brightly colored whiskers, their illuminated strands waving in the air like a small rainbow on either side of his strong jowls.

“How do you know my name?” the boy asked the beast.

“It is part of the magic given to me by my Lord,” he answered. “Anyone so brave enough to touch my coat must be willing to hide not a whisper in their soul. It is to be so.”

Marcelladeux gripped the top of his walking stick and pushed his body one more step forward, coming to stand even closer to the beast. This time he did not hesitate, placing a firm hand upon the crown of the tiger's head, letting it sit there as he looked into its fiery eyes.

"What is your name?"

"I am Granvoriox," the great beast said, its voice now a shield of rolling thunder, washing over the child as if a protection against the suns and moons of time. "I am the King of the Onyx Tigers."

The boy, suddenly wary, took his gaze to the darkness that surrounded them both in Nantelling Edge.

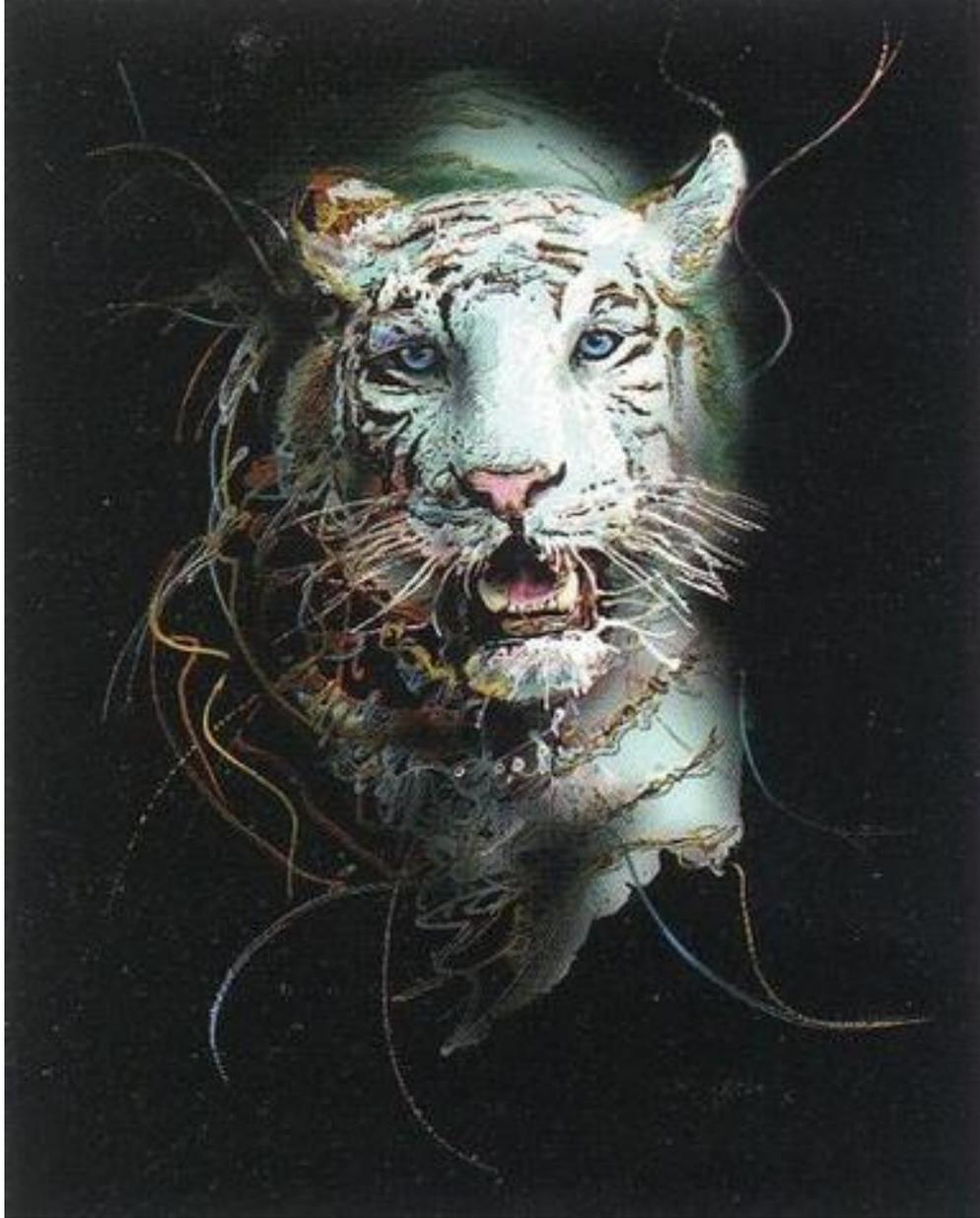
"The trees have stolen away my stars," he said. "I cannot see the way home."

"No need." The tiger lowered himself to the ground next to the boy. "Climb on and I shall guide the way home, young sightseer. I shall tell you the lore of our kind along the way. Come, there are other beasts in this forest you *should* fear."

And so they rode off into the night, Marcelladeux sitting firmly on the tiger's back. He was silent at first, feeling his way as the great stone beast moved across the dark grounds of Nantelling Edge. The boy noticed, as they moved through the forest, that the animal would disappear from sight when not in the slanting paths of moonlight entering from the treetops. It wasn't until they cleared the last of the woods and came down upon the slopes of Nantelling—where they were underneath the moon's silent pale—that the beast was fully shown to the young boy's tired eyes.

"The moon is your friend," he said to the tiger.

*granvoriox,  
king of the onyx tigers*



“As the day is my enemy.” The beast let out a low growl, seeming to prick up its ears as the echo of his noise rang down upon the slopes. “I can be in sunlight, but the longer I am the weaker my stone becomes. It is for night I am strongest.”

As Granvoriox shepherded the young boy home in the still of the night, he gently spoke in his voice to the child of wizard’s dreams about the magic his heart called out to.

### **Lore of granvoriox**

It was to the Mystical Angels of the Realm and the Lands of Evermore Sleep that the original breed of magic cats, the Angel Tigers, first belonged. The Queen beast—Urzanda—was said to possess the beauty of the entire Realm in her crystal blue eyes, her white fur as gentle as rain washing upon the barest skin. Her teeth, it was told, would never taste the flesh of man unless evil invaded the protected lands to harm the Angels of Life and Death—then all those who laid eyes upon her would become the morsels to her immortal hunger.

Granvoriox recounted to the boy how Andrelica, the Angel of the Beasts, summoned forth both Urzanda and her regal mate, Chulgorian, when the Realm decided to fortify any ill thoughts which sought to intercourse their boundaries.

“Why was she afraid?” he asked the tiger.

The beast snorted loudly. “A goddess as she—*afraid*? Never throughout the eons of Urzanda’s stripes would Andrelica fear anything. The Angels of the Realm, young seer, are both guardian and guide to the Lands of Evermore Sleep. They must see the passages of both Life and Death and choose not which to decree or defend. The magic of the tigers, the Realm understood, was for another purpose.”

*urzanda,  
queen of the angel tigers*



That purpose, the beast told Marcelladeux, was to ensure that the lands of great clouds of peace and lush walking pools of water in the vastness above the Fathers of the Sky would eternally be held safe for the passages of all. Even the souls of the wicked and the wrong, the Angels held forth, were to be sent along the journey to Evermore Sleep without any further disparages. Hence, if the pallbearers of terror came upon their shores to reclaim any lost souls valuable to their consortiums of evil—or, an even greater threat, attempt to pilfer the souls of the good on their way to deliverance—the Realm knew the beasts called forth would deliver any soul within their lands to safe concerns.

“I thought all souls, once to the Lands of Evermore, *were* safe?” the young boy asked. Off in the distance, he could see the vague torches of Sergan-feur, his home.

“They are,” the onyx beast proudly said. “The tales of your people ring true because the courage of my kind has, for a long time, sought and kept that peace.”

“Then what has changed?” the boy asked with trepidation in his young voice.

“The times do change,” the beast warned as the moon dipped behind passing clouds in the sky, his shape disappearing. The invisible cat quickened its pace, the night air tickling the bare soles of Marcelladeux’s feet as he bounced along the countryside nearing the outskirts of Sergan-feur. “The evils of men want nothing more than the death of certain peace.”

“I don’t understand,” the young boy confessed. “I dream of great battles, and the wizard king, Daskang. The times we live in are where people fight for the goodness we wish. I’m told tales of great foes by my father—those who have been vanquished, and those still abreast of the night.”

*mystical angels of the realm,  
seers to the lands of evermore sleep*



Granvoriox appeared once more as the clouds began to pass. “Such wisdom is why you have such powers so early in life. Perhaps your father has sprinkled your dreams with the blessings of such Angel’s dust to fall from the skies?”

Marcelladeux laughed, his throat quick to swallow. “No, not likely. It is my mother who keeps the watch against my dreams and mixes potions to dispel them. I tell her not to bother but her face writes a story I do not like the ending to.”

“Yet you have seen the distant sights?” Granvoriox asked. “Are you not frightened yourself of what they may not yet reveal?”

The boy smiled in the darkness. “I run to them. Come,” he coaxed the great onyx tiger, “let us charge against this night!” He thrust out his walking stick as if carrying a formidable spear on which to skewer the evils Granvoriox described. “If a wizard I am to be, let me feel the magic winds of your kind race against my bones!” Marcelladeux squealed as the tiger obeyed his command, bolting off in a semi-charge across the night air, barely touching the solid ground beneath them as they crossed through the fields, hedges, and farms that now dotted the demarcations of his family’s lands.

For many histories passed between the settlers of Sergan-feur (which lay beyond the great lands of Fallfax), there had always been whispers of Spirit Tigers which belonged to the Angels. Marcelladeux’s father painted his son’s dreams with great beasts of color: the White Tigers of Winter, Yellow Tigers of Spring, Red Tigers of Summer, Black Tigers of Autumn, Blue Tigers of Sky, Brown Tigers of Earth, and rarest of all—the Gold Tigers of Peace. The beasts of the directions were told to have great powers over water, fauna, fire, and metals, as well as the

heavens and all the lands. Never had his father's daring tales of legend include any calling of the massive cat of stone he rode.

Granvoriox, measuring his pace into a wary stroll, took refuge at a small pond near a graveyard. Its water held no taste for him, yet he drank to please the boy, who now had disembarked from his haunches and stood watching the great beast in the dark.

"I know the way from here," he said to the cat. He wanted to thank him for taking him the distance from Nantelling Edge he had traveled by day; it actually wasn't that far, but the night—to a boy who should be a wizard—should not be something to fear. "I fear if anyone sees you, they will panic, or worse call for the Protectorate's forces."

Granvoriox padded up to the young boy. His whiskers seemed to curl into a smile. "You believe you are still safe?" the great beast asked, its voice peddling a riddle the young boy wished not to solve. "Be wary, Marcelladeux. It is from the lands of your dreams that you should find the strongest enemies."

The boy looked into the fiery eyes of the cat and felt sleep calling him again. Before he ventured home, Marcelladeux leaned into the breast of Granvoriox, its black stone skin cool against his face. He wrapped one hand up around the tiger's neck.

"Will you return?" he wondered, perhaps afraid it was all a dream of the forest.

The magical cat paused, allowing the boy a moment of doubt. "Do tell your wisdom will keep you from Nantelling Edge. Lord Valkran should not know of this," the beast warned, "and from my mouth no roar shall utter of your footsteps upon the doors of his magic." The beast coddled the boy with a deep, resonating purr from within. "But I shall bring the emissary of your wishes to a hidden dream one night. Only he, Marcelladeux, can align your powers to their truest

course. Our path," he said, "is as blessed as its chance, fleeting as its strength. Fear not the bonds will disappear as the times march on. Your preparations must replace your desires."

With that, Granvoriox turned from the sight of Marcelladeux and trotted off into the darkness beyond Sergan-feur, the wake of his departure whisked away as a pair of heart shaped clouds crossed over the moon.

The young boy watched as the tiger faded away, then up to the skies to see the clouds—now backlit with an amazing glow—kiss each other and part. As he pushed himself away from the pond, Marcelladeux looked back over his shoulder only once. From that moment, it would be nearly three lifetimes before he would ever do so again.

*marcelladeux the wizard,  
magi king of the northlands*



## *marcelladeux transformed*

The boy lived many years, entering the archway to manhood without ever seeing Granvoriox again. In the days following his adventure atop Nantelling Edge, Marcelladeux kept unusually busy helping his father on his hunting trips into the wilds of Kamaldorn, a land adjacent to Sergan-feur rich with elk, deer, and other stout game. At night, he refused to sleep, chasing his mother away and growling at her potions.

“Enough!” the boy roared. “Be gone or the moonlight shall haunt the steps of your sleep ‘till you fear all shadows.” The woman, raised to curse the comings and goings of wizards and beasts, crossed herself nightly and heeded the stern warnings of her husband.

“Let the child grow strong,” Hemelston, the boy’s father told her, “without the poisons of your mind weakening him.”

When it was clear that the magic beast had no intention of returning upon the wishes of a young man, Marcelladeux began to seek out his desires to their fullest extent. His skills as a hunter, swordsman, and fighter became common tongue to the lands surrounding Sergan-feur. His father came from a recognizable yet uninteresting line of men who had served their Kings and as the young man’s noble deeds began to accumulate, his name became deeply ingrained to those around the lands beyond Fallfax as being a sign of a man determined yet decidedly mysterious.

It was little known, therefore, that within the curtains of night he would hunt the landscapes for magic of his own, seeking out the secrets to his dreams. The nighttime callings were stronger now, even though Granvoriox’s promise that the passage of time would not diminish the power of their meeting still held water. Marcelladeux’s dreams possessed larger

moments of distant sight, far more seeking than what he discovered in the forest long ago. There were also images of distress involving more ethereal forces. He saw two warriors—regent and strong as they were different. The visions also brought the specter of a beautiful young woman—the child with red curls from his first moment of Seeing—now fully grown and wielding the most valiant of swords to defend her own dreams.

There was something present in the daylight that disturbed his steps upon any path forward from the life of those in *Sergan-feur*. Marcelladeux knew that he was different. His looks—envied by other young men and perpetually fawned over by young ladies of the village—made him feel transparent, as if the shield of his skin was the only concern for those with little else to talk about. His comings and goings from childhood in the wilds and fields and forests had built his body, bones, and muscles to a strength that spoke of force to those unwise enough to challenge his stakes. His aim with a bow was clear, agile, and swift. Marcelladeux’s love of the steel and the way in which he could wield it proved to be, as in his father’s lineage, a gift of extraordinary talent and security. Yes, the young man knew, he could *hunt* the common beasts with all that he was and was capable of.

“It is as if I’m supposed to be preparing for something,” he told his closest friend in the village, a young man who was preparing for an apprenticeship to a Quest Knight of Fallfax. “But there seems to be something in my way.” As the only child to Hemelston and Cynvianu (who was said to have been abandoned by her mother, a sorceress), Marcelladeux had often confided in his adventurous mate.

“What?” Brendimore asked. He was an intense young man with long dark hair, eyes stolen from the eagles which flew high above their lands, and a penchant for stallions which knew no end to speed.

“I am not to be a Knight, if that is what you mean.” Marcelladeux laughed. Brendimore, on several instances, had been nearly belligerent in his profession for the Quest Knights of Fallfax and all the adventures in store—and he was adamant that his friend should join him in search of the battles, sojourns, and combats that were waiting.

“You are your parents’ son,” Brendimore rejoined him. “I would expect nothing *less* from you if you didn’t go running mad into the night or be captured by your dreams. There are real journeys to be taken,” he said to Marcelladeux, “*out there*,” he added, throwing his sword arm to the winds. “You should come with me, or at least come speak to the Ancient One.”

Marcelladeux was silent when his friend mentioned those who kept secret the magicians of Morina Shu, the Elder Council who acted as the Guardians to the Doors of Fate. As an apprentice to a Quest Knight, Brendimore was now required to study under the tutelage of an Ancient One, who—only known to a handful of those in Sergan-feur, including Marcelladeux—was secreted away in the foothills outside the village where he mentored young Brendimore in the protocols he would be required to know once arriving at Fallfax in his appointed time.

“You would bring me to him?” he asked.

“If you are ready,” Brendimore said. “Only you will know if that is to be.” He mentioned nothing of the Ancient One again, but Marcelladeux—like his visions of Granvoriox—would not easily forget.

*elder council hall of morina shu,  
guardians of the doors of fate*



For a time, Marcelladeux believed that his friend's chidings may be perceived true. The young man thought perhaps the incantations and defenses in the night of his mother, Cynvianu, were meant to steal away the power being gifted to him. As a child, all he dreamed about was Daskang the wizard. Now, his dreams were of archetypes he would not wish to meet—dragons like Yaxfang the Dead, intoxicating mistresses such as Lingulsteel, Siren to the Battle Trees of Qualnox, and great conjurers of spells like Vuljazad, Muse to the Dragons of Emaneen. These, he knew, were the destinations to the tales of foes passed down by his father, the lands where Quest Knights of Fallfax—such as the ones Brendimore aspired to join—would be off to, many never to return.

One late afternoon, while carving out some runes upon a newly fashioned walking stick (the one from his childhood adventures stood guard in the corner next to his beddings), Marcelladeux sheathed his knife and took the stout length of oak on its maiden wandering. The weather, a hazing of sun being chased away by the bustling grey and darkening clouds approaching from the West, brought great breezes upon his back as he walked. Although not his intent, he smiled warmly when he realized the path he was following would eventually lead him by Nantelling Edge, a place he had not set his eyes upon since riding off on the back of Granvoriox.

Immature drops of rain fell gracefully upon his golden hair, and it mattered not that his food sack was light. His bow felled a kingly rabbit on the journey, and the respite as he kindled a fire, prayed to Andrelica for the Spirit of the beast providing its life, cooked its tender flesh on the small fire, and saved a furred foot for luck all helped marshal his spirits into a curious pace as he neared the lands adjacent to Fallfax.

*Lingulsteel,  
siren to the battle trees of Qualnox*



As twilight drifted in on purple lights and the distant sound of thunder, Marcelladeux climbed up the slopes of Nantelling, smelling the grasses and trees before him as if entering a home he hadn't seen since childhood blind and knowing instinctively which way to turn. Once inside the great canopies of trees, Marcelladeux only felt gentle reminders of the rain outside, the winds inside the forest traveling pathways of their own. He was only a few feet inside the darkening mazes of great wood sentries when, on one such breeze, he thought he heard a wise voice say:

*"...a knowing soul shall seek the peace..."*

Pivoting on the sturdy new stick, Marcelladeux smiled, expecting to see the blue aura of the black onyx beast, Granvoriox. Instead, he only saw slim flashes of illumination borne of the lightning above the Edge. The grounds before him were empty; the longing whispers of his youth still held sway their powerful reach across the many years, waiting here for his physical presence to return.

After the hearty walk, Marcelladeux wished to rest, hopeful the magic tiger would return to take comfort next to him once more. The heaviness of his eyes spread over his body like a warm blanket, the rich earthy bed he lay on wrapping him with brown leaves, green vines, and pleasant smelling grasses and flowers that, like the magic Lord Valkran brought to the forest, could bloom and spread beauty in even the dimmest of light. A ready hand stood watch on the hilt of his walking stick, and with a wish for his hidden dream, Marcelladeux let his spirit drift.

He saw the Minotaur Children of Tresta Mun, playing along the edges of the Magical Cliffs. He saw Lord Valkran with a beating heart of light and magic in his hands. He saw a great berserker king, riding across a field of Skeleton Warriors as if racing away from the dreaded Soul Eaters of

the Darklands. There was a flash of vision that mirrored his friend, Brendimore, yet there was something majestic about him, his armor heralding the lore of battles he reigned victorious over. Once again, he saw the red haired Princess, now upon the steps of a great castle, the jewels in her crown casting off a mesmerizing shine from the precious gemstones of her kingdom's riches. She was dressed in flowing robes of red velvet and golden chain mail settling across the worthy cleavage of her upper body, her battle sword in a handsome scabbard belted to her side with rich black leather. Yet in her eyes, Marcelladeux dreamed, was the beacon of sadness for something held deeply from her will—as if the evils of a history yet to be were calling out to her, singing the sweet tale of malice that was yet to bring symphonies of destruction to her peoples.

Lost in her sight, the vision turned into sleep, a comfort so rich and resonant it felt to Marcelladeux as if the Mother of the Earth were giving birth to the deepest of slumbers just for him. He did not want to wake, but in this stillness came again the whispers in the breeze:

*“...the Four Winds blow and Shadows cease...”*

Curiously, from the shadows of his dream came the image of a wise and aged man. It was not Daskang the wizard king. Marcelladeux felt as if stumbling between the waking moments and sleeping thoughts, maddening himself to discover which was real. The man, small in stature, bore a hint of a frame strong enough, perhaps, to carry the lightest wings of a feathered bird. It looked to Marcelladeux as if the apparition were motioning to him, calling out with a friendly hand. Inside the dream, the young man could feel the presence of heat, the wetness of steam, but see no fire.

“Come forth, wizard seeker,” the aged man said with a toothless smile. It did not frighten the young man, but with each footstep his thoughts danced closely with courage and fear,

exchanging his trepidation with an unquenchable thirst left for the hidden dream promised by Granvoriox. “You return to a place you were forbid to see. The powers in you are strong.”

Marcelladeux was now standing in front of the visionary. The murky shadows behind him crystallized into the backdrop of Sergan-feur, for they were standing on the outcroppings of the foothills where Brendimore’s mentor had secured his teaching grounds.

“Who are you?” the young man asked.

“You do not recognize the one you seek?” the meager voice asked, his eyes two walnuts of endless black, his lips mumbling secret incantations as Marcelladeux looked upon him. “I am the ruler of your dreams!” Incredulously, the man’s thin voice pushed forth a loud ruckus, as if many lives of men—all at once—had spoken through his words. In the fury of his demand, Marcelladeux saw not the aged man but a vision of the wizard king himself, Daskang.

“It cannot be!” he cried. “Of legend you stand, the size of many men, and with powers that...”

The old man smiled. He gently folded his arms to his chest, and the vision that Marcelladeux had witnessed of the great wizard melted away to once again behold the scrawny elder standing before him.

“...with powers that age, like any other magi. Our knowledge is our power,” he said to Marcelladeux, “but as with all knowledge it can fade with time until no more.”

The young man remembered what the great onyx beast had vowed: that a hidden dream would bring an emissary, the only one to align his future course. Marcelladeux stood amazed that Granvoriox could travel to the realm of Daskang and bring forth this prophecy.

"I seek my rights," he told the guide. "I am to be a wizard. But," he also admitted, "I am not to see the way. I was told there would be one to show me how to proceed."

"And you seek this willingly?" The old man cocked his bald head towards the younger man before him. Marcelladeux could see all sorts of odd markings on his skin, as if messages from the gods above him reigning down their symbols for him to convey. "For powers greater than yourself may ask if you cling to the rituals of a hunter's son. You dream of places to which others pray you never belong."

It was true, then; his mother's lineage and all of her witching spells at night to battle the dreams he sought so eagerly had filtered their whispered fears into the night's sky, letting the Ravens of Begotten Sleep take the unwanted dreams to those who could use them for ill.

"I need your help." His eyes searched the black lidless pools of light upon the man's face. "I know I am to do this. Just as my friend Brendimore knows he is to be a great warrior."

"You know," the man whined, his voice piercing the young man's ears. "*You know?*" The aged one shook his head, as if scolding the young boy Marcelladeux was when his dreams first gave birth to the notions of his wizardry. "*A knowing soul shall seek the peace,*" his voice whispered. "*The Four Winds blow and Shadows cease.*"

"How do you know those words?" Marcelladeux asked. He had not breathed a mention about what he saw Lord Valkran do with the magic tiger cub, and who then, he asked himself, was behind the whispers in the forest?

"Wizards," warned the visionary, "know many words. They are the servants of our spells, the messengers of our magic. We must take them seriously enough to die for," he said with ominous tones, "or bid foolish wings to their lilted lies." With this the aged man began to dance

around Marcelladeux, as if spirited with a younger man's legs and lifted up by the music of celebration. "You came because the great black beast spoke such words to you. I know this," he said, "because I am the one to align your futures. I am the emissary."

Marcelladeux felt as if the waking from this dream could never come. The deepening blackness in the man's hollow eyes reached out and took hold of the young man's soul. In those frightening moments, the last thought he had—even beyond the powers of Granvoriox—was of his friend, Brendimore.

### *the lodge of spirit winds*

Brendimore had just settled in with his horse and unpacked a few belongings at his mentor's camp when his vision was drawn off near a stand of giant sycamore trees on the apex of the foothills.

A small fire was going, and next to it was sitting Marcelladeux wrapped in a great cloak of blue. His eyes delved into the small dance of flames, seeking clues to riddles—Brendimore could sense, even from a distance—that obviously were outside his understanding. He had, after all, only delivered the invitation—not its acceptance.

"When did he arrive?" Brendimore asked the Ancient One, who had been up before the setting of the white moon preparing the Lodge of Spirit Winds for Brendimore's teachings.

"Sometime in the night," the Sensei of the Elder Council noted. "He appeared from within moonlight, riding the back of a shadowy beast." Brendimore could see within the endless ink of time waiting in his mentor's eyes that something had indeed frightened his cause within the night. "I shall not speak of such visions, nor so with the courage to slay them. He came bearing

his walking stick, bow, and knife, uttering nonsense.” The small boned man laughed once. “He spoke of *dreams and wizards*.”

Brendimore looked out once more upon the concerns of his only friend.

“His path is troubled and not as sure,” he confessed, not wanting to reveal any more to the one who would soon know all too much. Brendimore had only been told mystical tales about the secrets inside the dark heat of the Lodge, but his visions had not yet visited within the powerful realm of the Ancient One. “But I’m glad he arrived. Go,” he playfully ordered his mentor, “see if you can’t be of use and find us your blessed waters. I shall ready the Relations of Stone for the fires and send Marcelladeux out to gather wood with my axe.”

As Brendimore hefted the gleaming steel in his hand, the agile Ancient One delivered a blow knocking the strong young man off balance, deftly snatching the axe from him and swinging it around his bald head as if it were a toy for the Minotaur Children of Tresta Mun to play with. Before he could regain his stance, Brendimore found his mentor had halted a quick swing of the blade mere inches from his neck.

“Have your friend carry water,” he instructed Brendimore. “I shall ready the stones. You,” he added with a small grin to his firm lips, “should take your axe and go find a place among the trees. Bring me only wood you can split with one blow, no more. The Lodge is waiting.”

In his search for fallen trees, Brendimore found available wood that was ready to sacrifice its noble legend for the fires of the Lodge. His mighty axe crushed great branches and trunks, splitting the bark and its marrow of different ages with the speed and anger of a young man wanting more than just his mentor’s pacing.

*the ancient one,  
sensei of the elder council.*



But his heart stilled as he thought of Marcelladeux and the Ancient One's telling of the beast of moonlight. When he brought him a large wooden bucket to fill with cool waters from nearby Feurjolan stream, all his friend did was look Brendimore in his inquisitive eyes and nod his head. He spoke not a word, but even the young apprentice could tell there was a difference the night would never speak of again.

Upon his final return from gathering wood, Brendimore saw Marcelladeux sitting at the feet of the Ancient One who was preparing the Relations of Stone to go into the fires. He dipped his hand into a dark bag made of diamond encrusted gleandonia leaves stitched together to form a sturdy pouch. His gnarled fingers sprinkled fine dusts, pulverized weeds, and intoxicating herbs upon the stones, which held the Relations inside of them—their tales, their battles, and most importantly their wisdom.

“Here now, mentor” young Brendimore said, dropping a large pile of split logs near the fire's edge. “Learning my skills to our guest?” The fire, which had been burning most of night while the Ancient One prepared this ceremony, would soon be roaring again in preparation for the Lodge.

“As you said, apprentice,” the Ancient One reminded him, not taking the black telling mirrors of his eyes off the stones, “his path is troubled and not as sure.” Marcelladeux looked over to Brendimore, a sneaking look upon his face, as if a secret had passed between without approval. “He has come in search of guidance. I have enough for more than you.”

Brendimore followed the rituals he was taught by the Ancient One in preparing the Lodge fire. He blessed the wood and prepared the fire pit as the dancing embers that remained hot

from a night burning singed the bare skin on his legs. His mentor instructed Marcelladeux to sit and watch as he aided Brendimore in arranging the Relations of Stone upon the altar of wood.

When they had covered up the configuration with larger logs and split wood forming a lean-to over top the blessed pile of wise rock, the Ancient One breathed deeply into the shrine. Brendimore, having seen this miracle before, watched his friend closely instead. Marcelladeux—his eyes wide upon the magic of the Ancient One, now stronger in the growing flames ignited by the spirit breath of the Sensei—seemed to Brendimore as if he had aged slightly, the night perhaps making him seem wiser than his youth could afford.

“The Lodge calls me,” Brendimore’s mentor announced. “The two of you shall watch the fire. I will beckon the Relations as is their time.”

The old man, pacing his footsteps as if climbing unto the Mystical Realms, walked away from the young men and towards the Lodge of Spirit Winds. It was in the night, Brendimore knew, that the Sensei had gone into the forests of night and found the magic willows that would surrender their boughs in order to create a skeleton for the Lodge. From Morina Shu, the aged one had brought great pelts of fur and skin—some from common animals of great size and strength, while others were of legend, captured from beasts that either hunted the magic realms or were no longer seen even by the sights of the gifted. These would cover the Lodge, which was firmly planted into a large oval of land sitting across from the fire that seemed to be a flat belly of the Mother of the Earth, with the shell of the Lodge rising above it as if bearing forth the Child of Wonder into woods and animals that swore to protect it. A small opening faced the fire line. As the Sensei crawled into the deep darkness of the Lodge’s interior, Brendimore sensed it had been unwise to invite Marcelladeux.

Later, as the fires consumed the wood and heated the Relations to unbearable temperatures, Marcelladeux gazed into the flames, offering some of the leaf he smoked in prayer. When he was finished, he looked upon his friend.

“Do not go in the Lodge,” he warned.

Brendimore stopped tending the fire. “Why?”

“You will see strange fates in the dark. One of them is mine.” He moved closer to Brendimore, who noticed that his friend’s features had changed measurably since their last meeting. His maturity, the fall of his cheekbones, the slight wrinkle around his eyes, and the fiercer set of his jaw looked to be a man twice their ages; even his stance and frame of build, both solid, had become purposeful, imposing. “No one should know the truth,” Marcelladeux said.

“Sensei talked of nonsense tripping from your lips,” Brendimore teased, wanting less of the threat growing around them, needing more of his friend to show. “Do not worry yourself, friend. This is my training. I will it to be.”

“And I ask once more,” Marcelladeux said, his voice more commanding than before, deeper in timbre and threatening in tone, “do not go in the Lodge.”

Brendimore moved his attention back to the pitchfork used to move the burning logs and remove the Relations of Stone when the Sensei called for them from within the Lodge. The young man had it gripped between his hands as if it were to be called upon in battle if raised from its current downward steer. He looked upon Marcelladeux, wanting to ask him of the magic beast of the night, afraid to look in fear of something he did not know as he prepared to go places much the same. He had felt this peculiarity before in the presence of the Ancient One, a disorienting

*the lodge of spirit winds,  
the phoenix of strange fates*



effect of his mind, as if the thoughts painted themselves different colors and confused on purpose their true intent.

As Marcelladeux stripped his cloak and garments in preparation for entering the Lodge, Brendimore silently refocused his mind as the Sensei had taught him many months ago. It came from that natural strength inside of him, the blood waiting in his veins to pulse against the days when he would slay a demon to win the favor of a Fallfax Princess.

A massive beast skin that covered the entranceway of the Lodge pushed back. Brendimore felt an invisible rush of energy move out across a small shrine near the doorway and across the fire line. The flames themselves leapt higher and fiercer as a low moan rumbled from within the darkness of the Lodge.

“Bring forth a Relation!” cried out the Sensei. Brendimore laid down the pitchfork, retrieving first the Ancient One’s pouch. He passed it into the emptiness of the Lodge as Marcelladeux stood off to the side, watching them with intent boldness in his eyes.

Brendimore returned to the fire, opening up the logs to aim his pitchfork underneath a burning mass of rocks, tilting a stone the size of four hands—burning white and orange red, small bits of ash sparking across its molten skin—back onto the large tines. When he brought it to the entrance of the Lodge, Brendimore watched just the Sensei’s bare hands emerge from within, deftly angling a pair of large beast antlers around the stone, welcoming it into the Lodge with a mighty call of “*Ho, Relation!*”

The Ancient One called for a dozen more stones to be ushered forth, burning hot, into the Lodge. Brendimore carried the Relations, praying to his Spirits and wondering still about Marcelladeux’s warning. When all the stones were inside, the aged mentor called out for the two

young men to enter the Lodge. Before Marcelladeux entered, Brendimore passed in the large bucket of water, inside of which floated a cup of kiln borne red clay taken from the grounds of Tresta Mun. He walked over to where his friend was standing, gazing into the fires.

“Be not sure the darkness is your friend,” he issued forth his own warning to Marcelladeux. “The shadows of your dreams are not the shields to your battles against me, brother. I go naked into the womb of hidden knowledge,” he said with a tilt of his head towards the mystical mound, “but not unarmed to the spirits that wish me harm. My courage, brave Marcelladeux, is my light.”

He watched his friend say nothing and move off, first kneeling in front of the Lodge entrance, bending down to kiss the moist earth at its mouth. Once inside, Brendimore covered the stones again with more wood and crawled into the Lodge himself, shutting the great skins over the doorway, throwing the ceremony into total darkness.

The two young men fell silent as the Ancient One began to offer prayers, the heat of the stones filling the Lodge with an intense suffering before the first drop of water graced their heated magic. He spoke in tongues that Marcelladeux did not understand fully nor Brendimore recognize. In the darkness, he was calling forth the Spirit Winds of the guiding directions, asking forgiveness and favor upon the prayers and battles the Lodge would know.

“There are two souls here seeking guidance,” the Sensei said in common tongue, “yet both are opposites of the bond which holds them strong.” In the pitch black, the sound of the clay cup sucking water into its hollow while the old man dipped it within the bucket massaged the hissing of the rocks. Brendimore ran a length of sweetgrass over them as instructed by his mentor. Marcelladeux was stilled in the silence, only his measured breathing at times belying his

*two souls entwined,  
a vision of the ancient one*



presence to his friend. “Both seek the futures of greater worlds—those of the deep secrets of magic and the evermore lands of victory, battles, and quests against the great evils of our times.”

The Sensei let a cup of water splash onto the Relations of Stone, sitting in a vast pile in the middle of the black Lodge. Their eerie glow disappeared as the water cascaded over them, the railing of steam filling Brendimore’s ears while the heat punched out its vicious fists of blinding hot air into the confines of their space. The Ancient One’s mystic mumblings pranced about the water as he continued to pour, two more cups full upon the scalding heat of the stones.

It was the heat, Brendimore prayed, that would bring him a vision of what would be ahead in Fallfax. It was the heat, as it began to play with his senses as the old man told a tale of the Tree people and the Relations of Stone, of the creepy crawling things of Earth and the winged to flight fantasies of the sky. He spoke of men and women, magic and myth, and the trials ahead for the young apprentice. When it was his turn to speak, the mentor asked Brendimore what purpose he sought inside the womb of the Lodge.

“To know the way,” he said, not wanting to name his Quest Knight but instead fixing a silent picture of him inside the darkness, trying to see his outcome while his mentor prayed in a soothing tongue, pouring more water and increasing the heat and steam. “To fear no evil or the Shadow it casts upon the valleys I seek to travel,” he prayed. “Let the kingdom of Fallfax welcome me as they would their future warriors—proud and strong!”

Brendimore let out a guttural wail, reaching up inside the darkness to feel the strange webbings of the willow boughs above his head. His hands gripped them as he screamed, a piercing charge of courage that he sent into battle against the images pushing at him through the dark heat. One, in particular, troubled him. It was of a dark warrior Lord, wearing a horned face

shield of black armor, his body as thick as granite cliffs and his sword the size worthy to chop the Fanged Bearbeasts of Nilbarrow in half. He stood triumphantly on a pile of bare skulls, just a portion of the days he had ended with his brutal rule and vicious taste for the blood of his enemies. As his scream died inside the Lodge, Brendimore heard the echo of his own fear whisper a name:

*Juldoom.*

“May the Spirit Winds hear your cry,” the Ancient One said in benediction of Brendimore’s prayer. “I can see your soul speaks clearly, its truth a fierce arrow of light.” He cried out to the Doors of Fate, the realm of the Elder Council.

During Marcelladeux’s time, the Lodge grew completely silent. The Sensei did not chide him; he continued to mumble his spirit wishes and pour the Water of Life upon the heated Relations. The air in the Lodge became like a serpent wrapped around his throat—Brendimore could no longer breathe.

It was as he lay in the hallucinations of his need to be rid of the darkness and the oppression of his air that Brendimore felt the cool wet arms of the Mother of the Earth wrap around him, pulling him down into the clay. His thoughts circled away from the incantations of his mentor or the words that began to spill forth from Marcelladeux’s lips inside the black realm of the Lodge.

*“...a knowing soul shall seek the peace,”* Marcelladeux began, his voice pitching forth in the Lodge, circling around the darkness as if being carried on invisible gales. *“The Four Winds blow and Shadows cease. In times of magic or times of lore, these four great spirits triumph in*

*Jaldoom the skull lord,  
demon king of sergar-fer*



*war. Whosoever shall cross their sacred path, Angels of the Realm must guide. The Four Winds call down their battle's wrath, true power Alexicon provides."*

In his delirium, Brendimore kept whispering "Alexicon" to himself. He had never heard such a name or kingdom in all the lands beyond Sergan-feur or the tales of his father's people.

Marcelladeux fell silent again, yet the water continued to pour. The Sensei had no mercy in store for either of them. He called for more Relations to be brought inside, and as Brendimore crawled on his belly from within the magic of the Lodge, he saw standing beside the fires a wavering image of a large pile of skulls. On the most quivering of legs, he obeyed his mentor's call and brought forth another score of glowing hot stones into the Lodge, finally retaking his place inside and pulling down the skins of the doorway.

"There is a Shadow here," he announced. The voice, Brendimore noticed, did not sound like his own, more so the remnants of an evil wish buried deep inside his heart.

"Fool," the Ancient One laughed, splashing more water upon the pile of smiling stones. The Lodge became a doorway of pain. Brendimore struggled to remain sitting, wanting to be more like his mentor, wanting not the ill thoughts of Marcelladeux to take control again of his wandering mind. As his lungs sucked in the knives of hot air, Brendimore once again took shelter in the cool arms of the Mother. His tears ran down into her moist soil, and in the dark he thought he could hear the pile of skulls he envisioned outside begin to whisper the name once more: *Juldoom*.

"I see the Shadow he fears," the voice of Marcelladeux warned. The Ancient One had sprinkled more herbs and dust upon the stones. The air filled with deep and musty odors, of pines and sage, of dragon's blood and magic weeds. Brendimore drifted near the edge of

unconsciousness, leaning back against the supple skeleton of the Lodge. Marcelladeux's voice twisted inside his head. "I am the Shadow he speaks of. He has seen the enemy of Alexicon," he said in a harbinger's tone of death. "He has seen the Skull Lord."

Brendimore began to tremble in a corner of the Lodge. He prayed for himself silently, wishing not to hear anymore from the voice of a friend now unrecognizable even in the dark. He wanted to ask mercy of the Ancient One, to ask his protection against this intruder into his ceremony. But, again he realized, the invitation had been his to proffer. Marcelladeux's being there, he suddenly reasoned—as if it presented the only choice to survive the pain of the Lodge—was as provident as his approaching journey to the kingdom of Fallfax and his apprenticeship to the Quest Knight.

"Alexicon." It was the imposing whisper of the Sensei. "You speak again of this place. Tell the Lodge that knows all destinations where such a kingdom rules."

Once more the silence of Marcelladeux cast thick shadows of fear as the water continued to burn the wisdom from the rocks. The Relations of Stone, after all, were to be a part of such a place, as foundations always are. As Brendimore's friend began to speak in a tongue that sounded as strange to the Ancient One as to him—yet was filtered through the singing of the rocks and returned to their ears interpreted—the Lodge began to fill with the pictures of which he spoke.

"Alexicon is to be. The wars are coming to leave no choice. The times of ill fates are upon us. The Skull Lord will build his dungeon realm in the black skies over Sergan-feur. This no mortal shall deny. The lands we know as the blessings of the Mother Earth will be scorched and razed, and evil magic will begin to link across the mountains and the seas. All will succumb or perish to fuel the armies of death." Marcelladeux leaned forth in the darkness, spitting his words across

nulgana,  
Dungeon Realm of Jaldoom



the pain of the heat. “The Four Winds will have no choice but to unite the Valleys of Alexicon. That is the only hope.”

Brendimore could no longer wait. He pushed his exhausted body underneath the door of skins, crawling to the cool grasses beyond the fire pit. As he lay there, looking through the rising smoke and ash, he saw the images of a young woman leaping off the Magical Cliffs of Tresta Mun and a great fighter standing guard at sunsets upon the West. Neither he knew by name, but as he fell into the deep peace of sleep, he cared not whether they were ally or foe. Even the momentary shame of leaving the Lodge and his mentor’s teachings washed away as his tears bid his eyes to their needful slumber.

In the reverie of his unconsciousness, Brendimore could hear great cries of wonder and awe coming from within the Lodge, the deafening sounds laying siege in his mind as if some battle between his mentor and young Marcelladeux had been shaped inside the darkness with his passing to the outside. He could see, once more, this shadowy figure standing in the West, his battle armor, shield and lethal sword stained with the deep crimson and black colors of enemy blood. The man’s face was a curious mosaic of mayhem and compassion, his dark eyes searching the landscapes of the East for a sign, perhaps, of more victims or even yet a purpose unto his skills. As more noise from outside his daydream punctuated his terror-filled heart, the vision of this guardian lost itself. A seductive chant began to lull him; Brendimore wasn’t sure if it was from inside the Lodge or from within him, but it first sounded like the sonorous vocal drums of his mentor, yet strangely melded into Marcelladeux’s young tenor. As sleep fully captured him, Brendimore heard this voice calling forth a Princess from the East.



The powerful hands of his mentor brought his body to a sitting position. Brendimore's head was splitting like an axe through the wood which had perished in the fires before him, now just a pile of razor hot embers, glowing fiercely in the day's light. The air smelled thick of magic and sweat, the birds flying about and telling each other tales while the young apprentice tried to focus his eyes on the Lodge. Looking out across the fire pit, he could see two figures, one clad in a blue cloak. Marcelladeux was now wearing a polished silver head cap, his long blonde locks completely gone, instead now the only hair visible upon his head a striking white moat of beard around his mouth, sharp to a point thrust off his chin.

Brendimore blinked many times, unable to move from his sitting position. From the distance, his friend seemed even taller, physically more alarming yet somehow aged—it appeared—to be past the middle course of life. He wanted to cry out to his mentor standing next to Marcelladeux, but his words crippled as he saw the Sensei, his body lithe and supple, the muscles well defined and strong. His head was graced with a fine bounce of blonde curls, and his eyes were the amazing blue waters of the Mystical Angels of the Realm. His smile was broad and dazzling, and he was handing Marcelladeux his walking stick, now adorned with a single black raven's feather and a seer's globe of portending colors.

Brendimore crawled to his feet as he watched Marcelladeux mount and steal away Cavalier, his mighty brown horse. He was spitting foams of anger at the magician standing now before him, who stood waving goodbye in a fit of laughter as Marcelladeux galloped off from the foothills of Sergan-feur.

“What devils have invaded your mind?” the student wailed. He was still incredulous, even now at closer inspection, to see the transformed Sensei indeed bore the eyes of Marcelladeux.

“Great spirits!” he cried in terror. “Your eyes are real and seeing with the colors of youth. How can this be?” He was without his sword, yet suddenly felt a calm coming from within the Ancient One, whose voice was steady.

“You had been *warned*,” he challenged Brendimore, “not to go in the Lodge. This is true?”

The young apprentice nodded. He looked out to the foothills, dispartate that his friend was now gone forever. “He wasn’t mad. It was I who succumbed to the mind’s evil games.”

“Take heart,” the Sensei told him, placing a firm hand upon his shoulder. “Your brother in spirit left you some hope.”

“Why is that?”

“He said you will someday battle for the hand of a great Warrior Princess from the East Landings of Alexicon.”

“There are no such muses,” Brendimore scoffed. “Alexicon. A Warrior Princess. *The East Landings*? Your Lodge plays tricks on the mind.” The Sensei was smiling.

“The secrets of *someday* are yet to be revealed. Beware the name of Concross the Emperor. He stands Ruler of the Gates of the West.”

“Why?” Brendimore did not reveal his hallucinatory image of the Western one, yet such a realm as the Ancient One described, as all else yet divulged, still had yet to be.

“Because,” the Sensei warned, “your friend, Marcelladeux the Wizard, has found his path. The future Magi King of the Northlands has spoken. The Beserker is the one who shall kill you.”

*concross the emperor,  
ruler of the gates of the west*



## *origins of the langavelo heart*

“She breathes!” Punthelamare, the Protectorate of Ralemanor cried out, carrying the lifeless young girl with the burnished coppery curls of red hair in his strong arms. “Quickly,” he beseeched Lord Arringshaw of Fallfax, “summon your Wizard! She has come from the skies, borne of an evil wind. He must save her.”

Arringshaw—full of the regal strength his kingdom had bestowed upon him in the times now told—scooped the child from Punthelamare’s arms.

“Her kin?” the Lord asked as they hastened through the great halls of Ralemanor Castle, the path towards Marcelladeux’s lair secret and guarded by spirits only Arringshaw could please.

“They never dropped from the serpent clouds,” he said. “Gone, my Lord.” Punthelamare made a cross upon himself in quick religion to the ghosts he knew haunted such storms. His round face looked upon the girl. “Ne’er such a beautiful lass has blessed these halls for so long,” he whispered, perhaps in a wish of a prayer that Lord Arringshaw could convince the great magi to save the young girl’s life.

“Her breath troubles to rise,” the leader of Fallfax said. They came upon a wall with three doors. He stopped. The Protectorate began to swivel his head.

“What is it, my Lord?”

Arringshaw did not answer, for he did not know what to say. The Wizard cloaked his sinister side in the games and tricks he liked to play, as if he took the shape of the foolish coyotes that sprang about the outskirts of Nantelling Edge, teasing one to play only to have them for supper. Of the three doors facing him, only one would lead to the path of the Seeing one. If Arringshaw would choose unwisely, it would only lead upon the frustrations of other choices,

decisions—the foreboding Wizard had put in place—to stymie the simple, befuddle the brave, and consequentially keep his secrets safe. The challenge to Arringshaw, he declared, “would be to choose always the path you know, in your heart, could be wrong from the start but right to the end.”

*In your heart*, Arringshaw thought, and the choice was made strong. The door in the middle opened to them, and he rushed through with Punthelamare chasing in frightened need. When they reached Marcelladeux’s throne room, he was standing near one corner, speaking in whispered tongues to a great black raven that perched on a living tree with no roots.

“You bring an Outsider,” the Wizard scolded Arringshaw without turning around to view the intruders. “I’ve blessed that for only your brother’s indulgence.” Marcelladeux turned to greet them, his eyes a pair of dark nighttime shadows yet his smile was brought forth at the sight of what lay in Arringshaw’s powerful arms. “Forgiveness is mine to behold. You bring her to me at least, so the Sight is as far true as it is reaching.” The Wizard came and placed a hand upon the fair child’s brow. “She is the one I saw in the Lodge, long ago.” He looked into Arringshaw’s intrepid eyes, for the ruler had been told of the mystical realms that gave birth to his kingdom’s magic. “There is little time.”

Punthelamare did as the sage magi instructed, and the child’s body was placed upon a large cot of twisted panther legs and stretched white bear pelts. It held the stilled child’s body peacefully, yet the Wizard grew vague over what he saw when he closed his own eyes above her. His hand upon her chest returned the emptiness of his vision, her heart having beat its last cadence before his touch had landed.

“What is it?” Arringshaw asked his Wizard.

Marcelladeux opened his eyes of evermore darkness. “Her heart the Mystical Angels of the Realm now guide.”

“But what you spoke of...?”

The Wizard looked sternly upon the ruler of Fallfax. “Whosoever makes as if it’s the gods choosing to bend, what little ways are left for even those with my powers?” It was true—the magi knew this was the foretold Warrior Princess of the East Landings to Alexicon dead before him.

“Do what you must,” Lord Arringshaw ordered. He bid Punthelamare to close and seal the chamber’s door. “Bring her back to life, my grand Marcelladeux, and your name will live upon the bindings of time—both in these realms and within the Temples of Morina Shu. No man, beast, or demon shall steal a breath from the Four Winds past this day’s night should you bring her to live upon these halls.”

The mystical enchanter took hold his staff, and the globe began to mist with vagrant colors of swirling orange, cataclysmic blues and greens, and the shifting charges of lighting made real inside the magical crystal orb. The face of the child appeared to grow from within the kaleidoscope, her features gaining color, her eyes opening up, the life springing forth from her lips in a cry of air. But as the image seemed to take hold in Marcelladeux’s magic staff, the child’s body remained lifeless upon the healing altar. She had not returned.

“Nothing!” the Protectorate cried. The Wizard cast the angry flare of his wrath upon Punthelamare’s face, watching the strong man wither and shrink behind his Lord. Marcelladeux looked into the eyes of Arringshaw. *There is no choice*, he told him.

“Move not yet be stricken ill fated,” the Wizard warned them both. “And to you,” he added for Punthelamare’s sake, “be *gravely* tasked. A breath of this and the Four Winds shall rip apart your soul!” Marcelladeux turned and aimed his mighty staff towards the tree with the black raven. Arringshaw closed his eyes, not wanting to see the truth he longed so deeply to avoid. The Protectorate nearly spilled his kidney’s worth of brew consumed for breakfast at the sight of the dark bird shedding its feathers as it spread a perversely large wingspan. The fan of its wings beat the air inside the magical chamber until the humming it produced lulled the fleeing spirit of the young girl into a trance.

“Upon the steppes of Langaveld,” the Wizard intoned, “sits a great cauldron of fire, from which the Kilgorthian flame shall never die. Come forth, spirit of Valkran,” he cried out to the morphing raven, “and taste for a moment’s peace the presence of your mortal form once again!”

The room was taken within the piercing cry of the majestic black raven as it could grow no bigger and so took flight directly towards Marcelladeux’s staff. Punthelamare swore to the gods as he saw the bird decay and wither into the shape of a man’s skeleton, and as the bird’s cry dissolved into the human’s scream of Lord Valkran returning from the mists of his time, his body took full form and stood regally before the trio. When Arringshaw opened his eyes, his brother stood before him smiling.

“Good to feast eyes upon the blood of my enemy and kin, flesh in one form.” His spirit hand braced forth upon Arringshaw’s shoulder, grasping the crests of his fine leather garments. “Though I fear your words hold little hope for me.” His smile remained even though Arringshaw did not return his honor.

*yaxfang the dead,  
guardian of the kilgorthian flame*



“Your purpose is for her,” the Lord of Fallfax reminded his disowned kin, a disgrace unto the kingdom who had disguised his powers as helpful. Only those who remained under a handful of his spells remained in the realm, but most believed he had died or gone off in a magician’s frenzy upon the back of Yaxfang the Dead, Keeper of the Kilgorthian Flame.

“At once!” Marcelladeux did order the apparition of the sorcerer. “You spoke of an enchantment taught to you by the Muse to the Dragons of Emaneen.”

Valkran laughed, dismissing the reproaching Punthelamare, who was still tongued in terror at what he witnessed. “Vuljazad is both temptress *and* teacher. One who is wise enough to avoid her is at the same time attracted. I, like any powerful mortal, am no different.” He looked squarely into Arringshaw’s eyes. “I, too, had to make the pacts of power to remain in the realm of my choosing.”

“Enough of your sniping wills!” the Wizard cried out. “My spell upon her spirit shall not last the minutes you chase away. Quickly,” he instructed Valkran, “what did you learn from her?”

Vuljazad was the venomous demon queen who used the seductions of her sins to lure the Dragons of Emaneen into the powers of her dreams. There she entranced them into believing they would fly into the fiery nights against those who would do her harm—when, by truth, they were the ferocious assassins of her evil contract with the Skull Lord. Her powers, Marcelladeux understood, were to be rightly feared and respected, among the highest of the fair maidens of the twisted night.

“If you wish for me to save her,” he threatened, “I must have something bid me first.” He stood with his arms folded, looking down upon the stilled child with no feeling.

*valjazar,*  
*muse to the dragons of emaneen*



Marcelladeux was incensed. This, even from a force as ambiguous as Valkran, still was outside the dark canon of ethics held accountable by the Realm of Wizards.

“Name your ill deed,” Arringshaw demanded.

“Her life,” Valkran swore, “in exchange for my freedoms from the Twelve Prophecies of Good and Evil.”

“Wretched ilk!” screamed Punthelamare, whose murderous grasp had to be quelled by Marcelladeux’s powerful gaze.

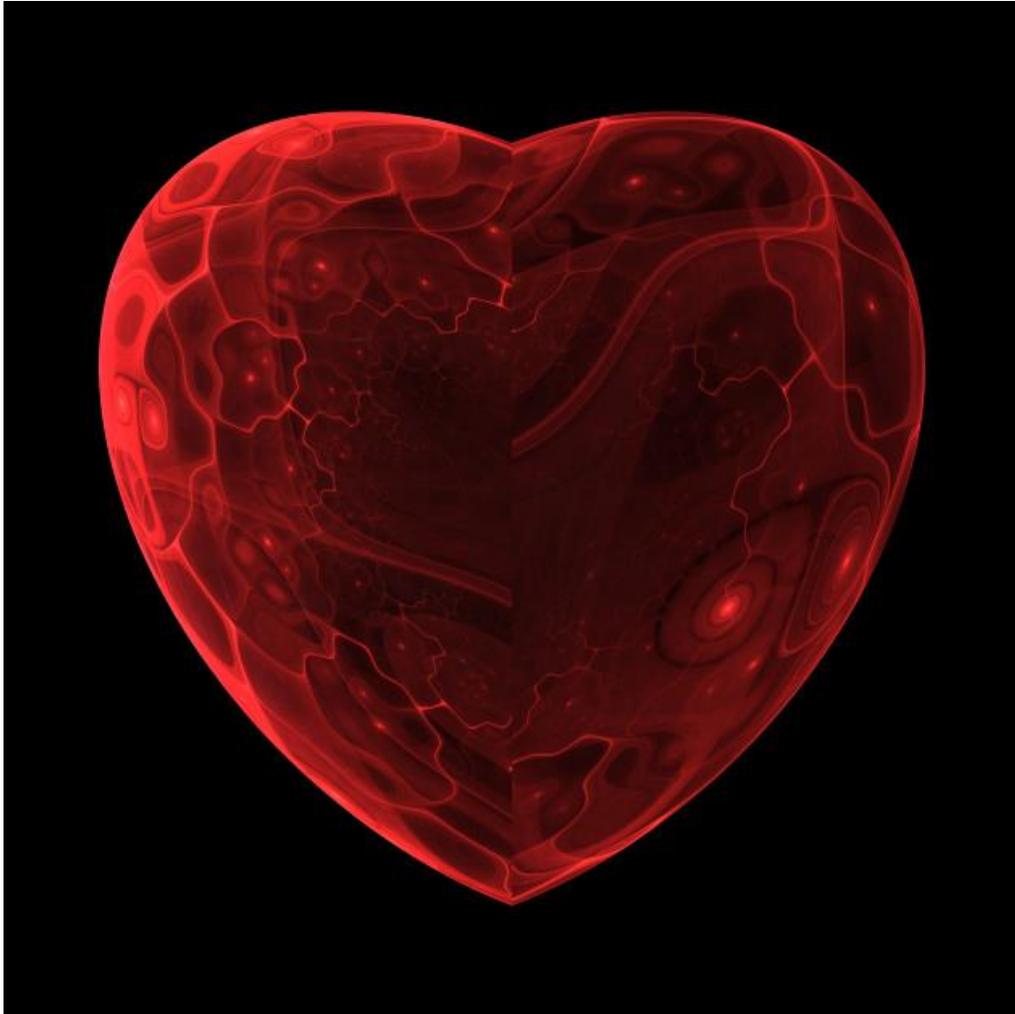
“And she will be raised as the Princess of Ralemanor, in similar fashion.” He looked at the Wizard. “She will stand eternal to the passing of others before her. No mortal man shall ever quest her heart. This, for my power, must hail true.”

Lord Arringshaw’s head bowed in quiet prayer. *If my Wizard speaks true*, he told himself, *this Princess will go to the East when the Valleys of Alexicon are carved out from portending storms of war’s bitter change*. “Do what you must,” he bid them both.

Valkran bent down to the child and looked into her empty eyes. He reached into his flowing black and blue robes and handed forth to Marcelladeux a piece of hewn stone from the marbled steppes of Langaveld and glazed to impenetrable resilience by the Kilgorthian Flame at the command of Yaxfang the Dead.

“Reach into our hearts,” he commanded the Wizard of Fallfax. “Tear forth a piece of the good in Arringshaw and the evil within my core. It shall be spelled into the Langaveld Heart along with the decrees of the Twelve Prophecies. It shall stand forever as a talisman of power to decide the fates of the Four Winds. They must answer to its call, defend it to the final pulse, and seek not the wealth of good or evil it embraces.”

*the Langavelo heart,  
keeper of the twelve prophecies*



Calling forth on powers that were gifted to him within the Lodge on the foothills of Sergan-feur, Marcelladeux reached into the void of the brothers and returned with the magic flesh of their heart realms, half from Arringshaw and the other from Valkran. He laid them between his palms, in which he nestled the Langaveld stone, and pressed forth his mighty strength—deep incantations of the Twelve Prophecies uttered from his lips in rapid succession until the wisps of flame from the Kilgorthian Urn itself spewed forth until the Heart had been created and sealed within the fates of the Four Winds themselves.

Marcelladeux placed the talisman upon the immobile chest of the young girl. Punthelamare offered prayers onto his knees before her, and Arringshaw watched his brother closely as the Wizard moved back with his staff aglow, watching the Langaveld Heart begin to beat upon the dead girl's chest. It beamed itself into life, taking from her the end of her spirit, the crushing blow of her loss—infusing into her the Twelve Prophecies and also the secret wish of the brothers (and Marcelladeux himself).

As her small chest began to heave with the breath of life, her hand reached up to clutch close the Langaveld Heart to her skin. When her eyes flew wide—and looked not in terror but amazed wonderment at the wise and wicked men standing over her—Punthelamare the Protectorate took hold her hand.

“My sweet lass,” he said to her. “What be your name, child?”

The Princess of Ralemanor looked at them and said, “I am Sylvaknoll.”

Marcelladeux, having turned away from the miracle he had seen come from long ago, wept but one tear. He touched a finger to it and saved it in his palm with the pieces of the heart realms still clinging to his magic hands.

“Two Winds left to blow,” he whispered. His was the first, hers was the second. Yet others, he knew, drew curious as to the South and West.



Punthelamare kept his visions of terrifying magic secret. It was not told from the tongue of Lord Arringshaw. Valkran, returning to the magical form of the black raven, stood watch over Marcelladeux’s throne room—coming and going as he pleased through a small oval window that looked out onto the kingdom of Fallfax.

It was the still uncrowned Magi King of the Northlands who sequestered himself in the night to his old homeland, Sergan-feur. It was here, the visions of the Lodge decreed, that the Skull Lord would first imprint the boots of his destructive reign. The Wizard had sent word using the Butterflies of Time to call forth Ballestina the Brave from Nantelling Edge, the orphaned child who was saved by Valkran’s magical tigers. She met him, wearing her cloak of night and swords of death, for he had rightly so a mission of grave importance that he could only trust this immortal warrior with.

“The eternal realm was given to you by Lord Valkran, who has never seen a mortal kiss one of his beasts,” Marcelladeux told her, relinquishing not his own secrets. “You will play a role of significant valor in the wars to carve out Alexicon. These lands,” he said to her sadly, looking out upon the still night of Sergan-feur, “are to be slaughtered and rebuilt upon an army of Death Swords.”

The young female warrior—having chosen the age at which she could remain immortal, a fierce blend of freedom and courage—laid a sure hand upon the hilt of one of her swords. Ballestina was not afraid of what the Wizard spoke.

*Ballestina the Brave,  
free Blade of alexicon*



“The Warrior Princess lives,” he confided to her. In the dark, he held out his hand and put forth into her steady palm an object which, although she did not see, conveyed its sense of power and ill within the sensuous and rough balance of its cause. “You hold the true Langaveld Heart—the talisman to the Four Winds and the most precious treasure of a kingdom yet to be seen.” Marcelladeux closed his palm over hers. “In this I trust you will speak not, think nor, or do nil to alert its existence to anyone but the eyes you look into this night.”

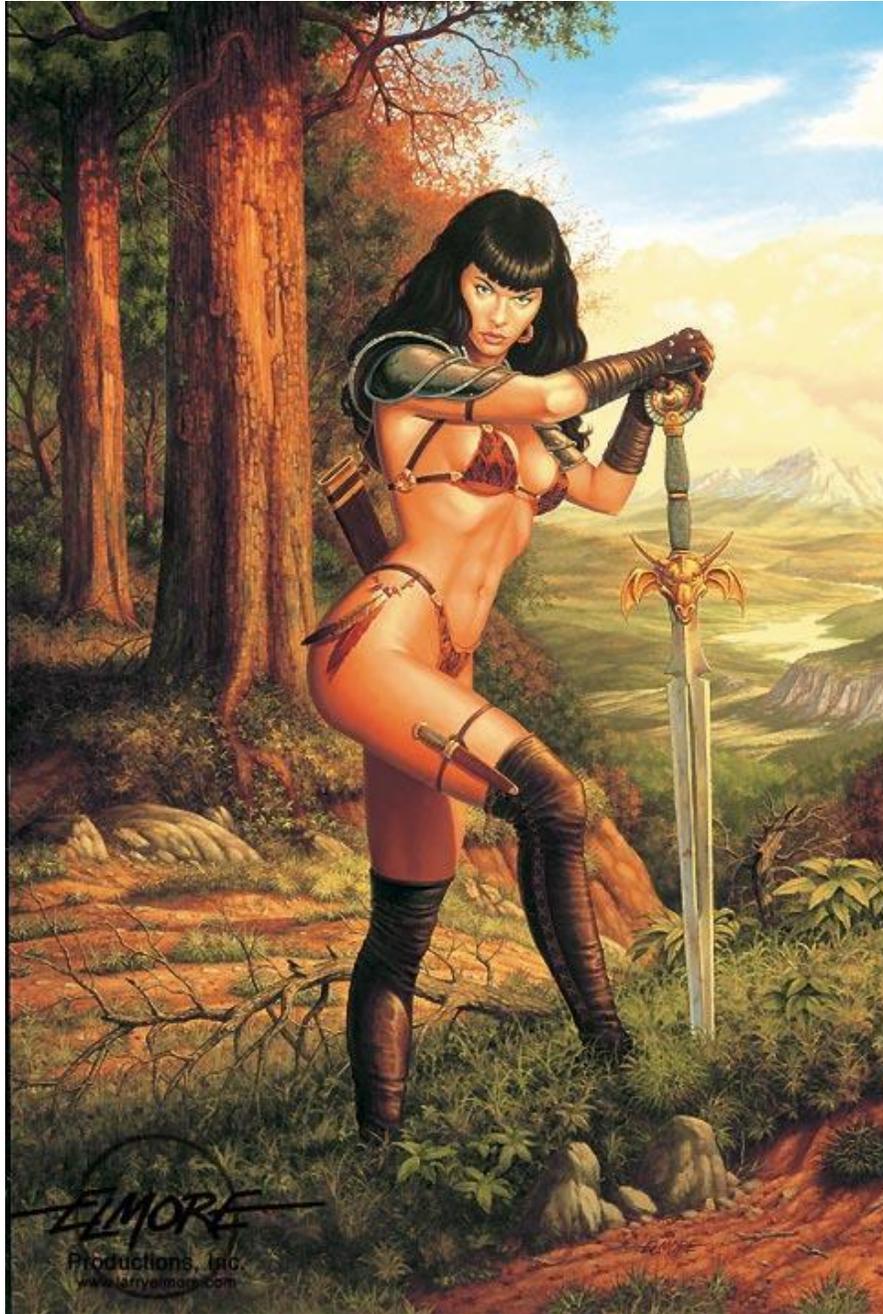
“I will do, Sage of the Northlands,” Ballestina swore unto the Wizard, “what you command of my trust. Alexicon shall have my Free Blades at their will. The Heart will remain hidden from the evils who quest it.”

“Beware,” he gave warning, “of Qualnox—for the Green King’s reach looms far into the wilds. And return not here to Sergan-feur, for soon it will be the realm of Kivixuday and the Death Swords she laid mistress to. You will heed my call when the Quest Knight is ready.”

Ballestina laughed. “I need not the foibles of a Quest Knight,” she chided the Wizard, throwing open her cloak of darkness to reveal her weapons and her intoxicating wares. No man—even the great magi agreed—could possibly guard his heart from her fetching even while she swung down her free blades of steel in search of his life. “But when needed I shall be his mist and shadow.”

Marcelladeux blessed her—then watched, in the patchwork moonlight that lay across the farming fields and steady homes of Sergan-feur, as she rode off into a race against the gathering curse of the Skull Lord’s wrath. As he toyed his dark eyes to the moon above, he searched the land around him for a glimpse of Granvoriox.

*Kivixuday of sergan-feur,  
mistress of the death swords*



*"A knowing soul shall seek the peace,"* he breathed into the night air before the black and white ravens of his call swept forth from the trees of his homeland, lifting him off the planes of Sergan-feur. He did not look back. In the winds that churned past his flight towards the creation of Alexicon, he heard a great roar in the sky riding amongst the stars. In the pantheon of brilliant lights, he saw the shape of Ingwol in tall array, his Quest sword striking down upon the altars of Alexicon.

*This, the Wizard knew, was the origin of all.*

*ingwol of fallfax,  
quest knight of alexicon*

