

Legend of Horian
&
The Dycentian Blade

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Chapter One

Home Coming

The first light of dawn coloured Kiraachu Island. Horian smiled. 'It is good,' he thought to himself. Good indeed, that he would return finally, return at daybreak. His strong legs quickened their stride along the rocky beach and up into the brambles. He could not remember a more perfect or fitting start to the day. As the sun's rays vanquished the remaining darkness, he felt the fullness of welcome to the Kingdom of Dycentia.

He had disembarked the Lady Delveena, just beyond the harbour. *Old Del*, as her crew referred to her, was the grand ship of Horian's apprenticeship. As he rowed through the darkness toward the shore, he knew that no port, no land, no other place could ever rival the place his Dycentia held in his heart.

The sun rose wide over the island, resurrecting all the colours and smells. Towering trees. Flowering fields. The song of the soaring birds and the chirping of insects. He felt his senses more alive than he could remember as he soaked in every hue, every colour, every sound and every smell.

Even as he took in his home, he recalled the dinner the captain had held in his honour the evening before. 'Two years of service,' the captain intoned, raising his glass to the brave young man, knowing how much he would be missed. There were cheers and heartfelt hugs. Such men who worked the seas knew the value of a good man.

Still, in the morning when Horian left the ship, it was without ceremony. Ending two years of combat training on land followed by two years of servitude on the sea was ceremony enough for Horian. He had been grateful for the knowledge gained and experience earned, but his overriding emotion was gladness; gladness that it was finally over.

He traversed the narrow chain of peaks that separated the coast from the fertile inland. It was autumn and the fields had recently been harvested. Soon, they would be ripe again, chest-high, nodding and billowing with rows of rice, wheat, oats, barley, millets, and corn. The fruit trees in the orchards would again be heavy with succulent fruits.

Ah, and such fruits! He knew the peaches and papayas, the thimbleberries and mulberries the elderberries and huckleberries were already preserved in mason jars, soon to be baked into pies. He closed his eyes and imagined his own mother's specialty – peach and cloudberry cobbler, with some snowberries thrown in for good measure and heaps of cinnamon all covered with a drizzle of Dycentian wine.

As he crested a hill, he paused. His heart was filled with emotion as there, before him; he saw his boyhood village just beyond the hills and forest. His face creased in a broad smile at the well-constructed cottages formed from the chalk-white stone taken from the faces of towering cliffs, and then wreathed in wisteria and finally thatched with golden bark. Such cottages that had been passed down from generation to generation to generation, never seeming to age.

His own cottage was perched on an ocean-ogling cliff. It had been built by his great-great-great-grandfather. Though Horian could not yet see his home, the thought of it urged him to quicken his step. Following the grazing cattle, he crossed Raushinee River, whose waters irrigated tier upon tier of terraced gardens upon the slopes.

And then, just like that, he was in his village, walking her cobblestoned roads and paths. Through a labyrinth he knew as well as he knew the back of his own hand. He made his way into a dingle festooned with toadstools, fennels, folaashees, fig trees, mushrooms, molehills, rabbit holes and wildflowers. He enjoyed the familiar twists and turns. Each boulder, each tree had a memory attached to it.

How many times had he run this enchanted path as a boy? More times than he could ever count! His years away had matured him as they were meant to, but as the path ended and his parents' cottage appeared before him, he felt himself transformed back into that young boy; sent away carrying a cloth sack containing little more than a change of clothes and a blunt blade, and the same sleeping squirrel it contained right now.

How much lighter that sack felt upon the shoulder of a man!

Rather than run to the cottage, Horian paused to allow his feeling of joy to wash over him. In his mind, he could see his family's smiles. He could feel the warmth of their embrace. Then, as he walked along the path to the door, he wondered how he should greet his family. Should he knock and let them open the door, finding him returned on the doorstep? Should he push the door open and surprise them?

Still unsure as he approached the door, he raised his fist to knock, but hesitated. Then, with the anticipation of his father's pride when he gazed upon a son transformed, Horian reached instead for the old iron latch and swung the oak door open.

He was greeted with familiar warmth and sweet air.

He was home.

Horian breathed in the sumptuous smell of breakfast through the closed kitchen door. He could tell it was a feast of boiled strips of venison, and he guessed that there were dried gooseberries and plums to go with it. He made his way past the basil plant sitting on the windowsill. On the wall alongside it, there hung the fine portrait of his mother. He smiled, admiring the way the sunlight enhanced the already radiant beauty of her elegant, pointed nose and her high cheekbones and forehead – features typical of Dycentian women.

Horian walked slowly to the kitchen door, the floorboards creaking beneath his heavy boots. He twisted the wheaten knob and entered to see breakfast boiling over an unattended fire. Curious. Where was his mother?

He remembered her to always be up at dawn, nursing the fire, sweeping morning dew from the doorstep. But, though the breakfast boiled, the house was quiet.

Suddenly, a noise caused him to freeze. Someone honing a blade!

His heart pounding, Horian unsheathed his own sword. He moved forward cautiously. He sighed in relief when he saw his mother and grandmother sharpening the kitchen knives and machetes.

‘Hello!’ he called out, replacing his sword.

The two women looked up and stared at him blankly, clearly shocked at the sight of a man who only a moment ago had been threatening them with a blade. Then, after a moment, recognition brought joy and surprise to their expressions.

‘Horian... is it really you?’

Horian dropped his canvas sack to the stone floor, forgetting in his joy that his red squirrel, Arthur, was asleep within, and hurried to them, hugged them both at once.

His little sister Gail, who had been sitting nearby playing with a doll, jumped up and threw her chubby arms around her big brother's legs, squeezing very tight. Horian broke away from the women and picked up the little girl. He spun her round and round while exclaiming, 'Oh, how I have missed you all!'

'We have missed you too, Horian, so very much,' his mother sobbed, overcome with emotion. She held him at arms' length and spoke with wonderment in her voice. 'You are so changed. You cannot possibly be the same little boy who left all those years ago.' She peered more closely at him. 'But your eyes, your eyes are the same, Horian.'

For his part, Horian was hungry for news of his family and his village. 'You must tell me everything that has happened while I have been gone Mother, and Grandmother.'

'Me too!'

'Yes, you too, Gail,' he laughed as he put her down.

'Oh Horian,' Zaania said, reaching up and stroking her son's cheek, astonished to feel stubble there. 'You are the one who has been on an adventure. You must tell *us* what *you* have been up to!' Just then, Arthur, the squirrel who had been unceremoniously dumped on the hard stones, had made his way from the sack and was performing tricks for a very delighted Gail. Horian smiled at his sister, knowing she would remain unaware of the squirrel's most special talent.

Turning back to his mother and grandmother, he shared just some of what he had seen and done, careful in what he said, knowing that most of the last few years were not fit for women folk.

He certainly did not think his refined mother would appreciate hearing any of the crude language he had learned aboard the *Old Del*. Although the crew assured him that speaking that way was just part of being a man, Horian never took to it.

Meanwhile, his grandmother, Rosalina, could not stop staring at this young man before her. 'You remind me so much of my son, your father. You have certainly developed into a strong, tall, handsome young man,' she told him.

'Speaking of Father, is he not home?' Horian said, 'Where is he, and where's Marlon?'

Just then, footsteps came through the garden gate. 'Right here, my son,' the deep voice stated. 'My word, it has been so long!' His father, Juratan came closer, carrying a brown leather satchel. Not far behind, Horian's little brother Marlon, moved quickly to keep up.

'Horian! You grew so tall!' Marlon cried out. 'Father, will I one day grow tall like Horian?'

'Yes Marlon,' his father chuckled. Then he turned to Horian. 'Your little brother is right. You have grown. When you left, you were nothing more than a tiger cub. And now,' he went on. 'Look at you, a man!'

'Enough talk,' Horian's mother declared. 'You must be starving. Let's eat!'

Soon, the family was sitting together for the first time since the day Horian left. Not a day had gone by when, during those four years of training, Horian had not longed for his family. And now that he was home, it all felt like a dream.

'So, Horian, tell us,' Zaania said in a teasing voice, 'did you meet any nice girls on your travels? I would not mind a daughter-in-law – another pair of hands to help around the house.'

Horian's strong features coloured. 'No, mother, no girl has stolen my heart... as yet.'

Juratan chuckled. 'She would have to be beyond beautiful, Zaania, to melt and steal my son's heart, right Horian?'

Horian smiled but he kept his eyes on his plate. The talk might have been of romance but his focus was on the delicious food his mother served. Despite his double helpings, Horian was the first to finish his meal. Zaania tried to fill his plate a third time, but he gently refused.

Finally, Juratan put his own utensils down. 'That was fine cooking, my dears,' he said to his wife and mother. 'Now you should go and rest. Horian and I will do the dishes.'

'Rest?' his wife smiled.

Gail and Marlon were only too happy to leave the table. They were delighted by Arthur's antics and coaxed him back out to the garden, where he could entertain them some more.

The two women knew that rest was not for them. There were other chores to attend to. However, as promised, Horian and his father washed the dishes. When Juratan finished drying the last bowl, Horian turned to his father and asked about the contents of the leather satchel.

Juratan held his son's gaze for a long moment. 'Come, let us sit and talk, my son.'

Horian was eager to do just that. His father never ceased to amaze him with his wizardry, although Zaania was not supposed to know he practiced magic as much as he did – at least, that had been the rule when Horian left.

Juratan settled down in Rosalina's rocking chair. Horian brought a chair from the dining table and sat down in front of his father. For the first time, Horian noticed dark circles under his father's eyes. His face did not bear a single wrinkle but his hair showed some grey, signs of age that had not been there when Horian left.

Juratan lifted the case to his lap. He rested his strong hands on it. 'Horian, in this case rests the key to the world's salvation from the tyranny of King Galleroth.'

Horian leaned forward.

Rather than continue, Juratan leaned back. 'I fancy some tea.' He looked at his son. 'Would you like some tea, my son?'

'No, thank you, Father,' Horian said, surprised his father could follow the power of what he'd announced with something as mundane as putting on a kettle. But Juratan had his ways and his reasons. When he returned to the rocking chair, cradling a steaming cup of tea, he looked at his son.

'I suppose you had been gone no more than two years, Horian, when our clever king, King Hemlington appointed me to create a blade of great power. And create it I did.' Juratan lowered his voice to a whisper, as if there were ears that could hear the secret he was telling. 'It is called The Dycentian Blade.'

'Wow, what a name, The Dycentian Blade. And just how powerful is the sword, Father?'

'Powerful beyond anything you can even begin to comprehend, my son, even begin to comprehend. The fabled Nine Elements have been imbedded into the sword.'

Horian felt a tremor as his father spoke. 'Father, what exactly are the Nine Elements and if they're merely fabled, how did you know where to find them?'

'Good questions,' replied Juratan as he took a sip of tea. Savouring his tea, the older man looked at his son. 'The Nine Elements are the nine precious stones and to the world they're a fable, but to the Dycentian Dynasty they're very real. Our forefathers, warlocks of old, wrote in the archives, proving that such magical jewels do exist. They also told of the truth that only a very powerful magnet can track them down.'

'And after many years of sleepless nights of testing, I made a substance with a magnetic force never before known. I tested it by molding it into a compass on the sword's hilt and by God's grace it detected nine force-fields emanating from nine different places scattered throughout the world.' He sighed. 'That there were nine was sufficient evidence for me to prove the existence of the elements and so I set out. That it took nine months to gather them together and incorporate them into the sword's steel also spoke to the symmetry of their power.'

Horian was impressed, yet still puzzled by his father's whispering. 'Father, why are you whispering? Is this still a secret?'

His father sighed deeply. 'Sadly, in today's world nothing can be kept secret. Galleroth's fellow warlocks are always seeking anything that poses a threat to their liege. Once they discover something...' he let the thought hang in the air, unspoken.

'If that is true then whispering will do you no good, Father,' Horian frowned with some concern.

'Yes and no. Do not forget that I too am a wizard, my son. I have a special whisper.'

Now Horian was confused. 'You cast a spell on yourself?'

'No, not at all,' his father said but then stopped again mid-thought. Horian thought it was unusual for his father to be so cryptic, to make such little sense. 'Father, are you feeling all right? What you are telling me is very strange. After all, if you have the key to Galleroth's destruction why have you not embarked on your quest to bring the demon down?'

The older man smiled ruefully. 'Would that it were so simple. But the Dycentian Blade will not let me, Horian. Nothing is as it seems. What should be simple is often complex and what appears complex is often easy.'

'This time, I'm afraid, I outdid myself; I created a magic far greater than myself. I did not foresee that once the Nine Elements are united and fused into the frame of the sword, they would create a force-field so strong that the Dycentian Blade would weigh as much as a lote tree. Therefore, no ordinary man can possibly wield it.'

He sighed and shrugged his shoulders. 'I do not really know why this should be, but then I think it might have something to do with the Gods.'

'The Gods?'

'Yes, the Gods. I fear I might have angered them by creating something so splendid. I think that the Crown and Trophy of the Timeless Kingdom himself, King Trinnigen Apocalypse wants to control the weapon's power by deciding who can wield it.'

The more he heard the more troubled Horian grew. His father, recognizing Horian's feelings, tried to comfort him. 'I want you to know that I have thought of every protection possible. I have encased the sword in this force-field breaking satchel so it is easy to carry as well as planting a paranormal virus of living cells inside the Dycentian Blade, which will be activated if it is ever taken by force.'

'That is, if Galleroth did manage to obtain the Dycentian Blade... before I could get it to King Hemlington.' He lowered his eyes as the truth of what he was saying became clear. 'The sword would dissolve like salt in water.' He shrugged his broad shoulders. 'Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for the elements.'

'So where would the sword go?'

His father looked at him with a twinkle in his eye, a twinkle that spoke to what he considered a very wonderful outcome. 'It would rematerialize in a red portal beckoning behind King Hemlington's throne.'

Horian allowed this news to sink in before continuing. 'I heard during my travels that Galleroth has been relatively quiet recently; just trying to keep his disintegrating empire together. Is he still a threat to Dycenia?'

'Always my son, always. It is true that for many years Galleroth was tending to his crumbling kingdom. His cavalries were a shambles, staffed with lazy, fat men who do not know how to handle a lance. His full blown schizophrenic father, Gallgangstinople, who is The Dragonking and Head of the Gallerian Government and the Ministry of Monarchs, did not pass greatness down to his only son, as I promise to do for you.' Juratan smiled at Horian in a way that made him uneasy.

'You will not be passing anything down to me anytime soon, Father,' Horian said, alarmed. 'You are still a strong man.'

'Maybe, my son, but the world has changed since I was young. There was a time when the Kingdom of Galleria was great—too great, some said. The line of Galleria became spoiled; growing ridiculously rich off their crown crop they desired the fruits of ruling without the duties that come along with it.

'A succession of sovereigns wasted the land's liquid wealth and angered their people. Gallgangstinople was just the worst of them.

He exhausted his land's natural resources.' He shuddered. 'It took less than half a century for him to strip the forests of Galleria clean. He left impoverishing provinces in his wake. He enslaved the beaten down men and forced them to mine the highlands, where the stone was pregnant with paragons.

‘These rare jewels financed the kingdom’s invasions into neighbouring realms, allowing him to establish an empire which boasts mountains sculpted into monolithic mansions. And like other men driven with such an insatiable lust, he was not satisfied with mere stone, sky and steel.

‘Oh no, he dreamed of dragging the dales to the sky and he did! He realised his mad dream with the aid of an ancient and once lost art; that allowed him to conquer the clouds, by commissioning cataracts of cream to stream through floating fields of flowers. Yes, he created extraordinary architectural feats, but at a pyrrhic cost.

‘To my mind, he’s nothing but scum, the epitome of the word egregious. For he spent his youth yielding to illicit gain by scheming, stealing, and engaging in everything foul.’

‘He was a man hated by many and loved by few. He commands no more respect from his own people than from those he had conquered and whose lands he pillaged. This king was a malignant mastermind Horian; his mundane mind earned him the name the very Gore of Greed, as if that’s something to be proud of.

‘Do you know how this criminal tried to strike a deal with Dycentia in order to feed his subjects and avoid an overthrow of his empire?’

Horian nodded. ‘Yes, Father. You told me that for many years now we have supplied the Gallerians with a portion of our crops, in exchange for a truce. What I never understood was why they did not just take over Dycentia? Considering they outnumber us seven to one.’

His father nodded. ‘A wise observation. But why take on the responsibility of ruling when we were providing them with food for free? He is a paranoid despot, but Gallangstinople is also a practical man. Why waste his men’s lives fighting us when the mere threat of the fight got him what he wanted?’

Horian shrugged. ‘It does not seem fair to us though. And has our king and all the kings before him have no ambition? If you ask me, our title should have been The Dycentian Empire by now, not some kingdom that submits to the threats of its adversaries.’

‘Empire? Huh, we are a long way from that and fair? Of course it’s not fair. One does not expect fairness from his kind. One is grateful for whatever crumbs one receives. For us, an unfair treaty is better than none at all. But even that cannot be trusted. Now it seems Galleroth wants to go back on his father’s promise to Dycentia, and smash the treaty.’

‘Galleroth very well knows that the swelling number of his people means that soon Dycentia will not be able to supply the Lands of Galleria with enough grain. Not enough grain means famine, and famine means civil war. Their godforsaken soil can supply them with rye, but for how long? No one knows.’

‘It is clear that when Gallangstinople plunged from the tower and died due to drinking his weight in Dragonsblood, he left his son quite a mess. No gold in the coffers. No decent army. A host of high-ranking officials waiting in the wings to seize the throne and overthrow the ruler but Galleroth... Galleroth is standing tall and firm. Only several years older than you are now—he raised and trained an army of a hundred million men.’

‘Whaaat! A hundred million men?’

‘Yes, and yet, this is just a fraction of his achievements for, for this army, he managed to tame and train ten million Moltrosions.’

‘Whaaat! Ten million Moltrosions!’ Horian exclaimed, as he clutched the arms of his chair until the wood groaned with protest.

‘Yes, ten million. He has proven his mettle in other ways as well such as ploys, strategies, double-dealing and even courage. He has made deals with neighbouring realms.

‘He has addressed corruption, indemnified victims of interest, elevated the status of women by granting them suffrage, banished bureaucracy, nullified nepotism, introduced democracy, abolished slavery, lionized law and instead of waging war, weaned warrior kings with wings and Waterfalls of all sorts of Blood. He made quite a name for himself; the Gallionic Council calls him King Charisma.

‘Considering he conquered half the world with just two conversations, some senators argue that The Wizard with Words would be more apt. He is charismatic. But cunning as well. He has essentially bought the world with little more than words.

‘A good paradigm would be that he orchestrated a marvelous coup by stirring a storm in the Panjiyan Congress, and ultimately bribed the vicegerent to butcher the King and his subjects under the veil of night.

‘Yet this comes as no surprise, for Galleroth has been giving speeches since the age of six. He has the gift of intimacy with crowds and iciness with individuals. They say he grew skilled in the art of politics by osmosis, understanding as a child that mystery creates prestige whereas familiarity breeds contempt. And above all, to diadem his demeanour he has a fabled face.

‘What does that mean?’

‘He is handsome Horian, so handsome that his beauty commands the bees and all sorts of beasts to the degree that dragons dance for him by performing airborne ballets and little singing birds, butterflies and ladybirds come and sit on his shoulders and sing for him while he feasts or as a prelude to the prelude of The Sovereign’s Speech.’

‘Father, how do you know so much about him, and other than the Panjiyan coup how on earth did he conquer half the world with just a few words?’

‘I have read his life story. And you should too. It is wonderful, absolutely wonderful. I think it is the greatest book ever written... no,’ he said, pausing, ‘it is second to the Book of the Gods of course. And his conquest of other kingdoms comprises mainly of alliances, Horian. He forged a lot of alliances as love letters written by many monarchs and princesses from provinces all over the world flooded his court, asking for his hand in marriage as they all fell madly in love with him.’

‘The most prominent love letter would be from the Queen of the Fairies. And as so many sovereigns eyed the throne next to Galleroth’s, a war nearly broke out as Galleroth had yet to choose a suitor. Spoiled for choice and feeling the pressure in bringing peace he declared a dance competition to settle who will bear his seed.’

‘However, after the competition Galleroth announced that he was so impressed by all the royal dancing damsels that he will wed them all. Some declined but the majority of the monarchs and princesses agreed.’

‘What is the title of his life story?’

'*Prince Prodigy*. Titled because it was written when he was a prince. I am anxious to read *King Charisma*, the second installment of his life story.'

The older man was thoughtful for a moment. 'He is nothing at all like his father, and not your typical truculent tyrant either. Perhaps that makes him even more dangerous, being a most magnetic, menacing monarch. He most likely takes after his empress mother Lady Cassandra, who hales from a family of philosophers and pioneers.'

'She is in exile now, for her motives and ingenuity – not to mention her insatiable thirst for supremacy – certainly threatened Galleroth. Rumour has it that knowing his father fell from the tower after downing a barrel of Dragonsblood, he framed her for kicking him off.'

'That and accusing her of attempting to burn his step sister Princess Suraya, and his two half-brothers Prince Collosus and Prince Gelaana, all three of whom who fled the realm, their lives at risk.'

Juratan stood slowly to get some hot water off the fire and warm his tea. Before sitting down, he went to the shelf and took down a big, black book which he handed to Horian.

Even as he reached to receive *Prince Prodigy*, Horian's heart was engulfed by the fangs of envy. Evil or no, Galleroth had achieved a great deal in a short period of time, and having a face to go along with it gave the aura that Galleroth had it all.

Weighing the tome in his hands, Horian could not help but look down on himself as a scrawny little farmboy destined to plough corn fields for the rest of his life. Oh, but at least he was an ambitious farmboy as he recalled with bitterness how delivering meaningful speeches, commanding armies, conquering countries

and making Dycentia into an empire had been his childhood dream. But for the enemy to achieve this at such a tender age hurt him dearly.

Jealousy coursed through him. He knew that the ways Galleroth employed were not favoured by the gods or man. But what he had achieved! Horian could not help but admire this man who managed to arouse adulation in a heart as honourable as Juratan's, something he desperately contended in doing. This made him curse Galleroth's charisma as he finally felt the venom of envy flood his heart, but suddenly... something happened quite extraordinary.

A series of pleurably portending stings pricked his jugular vein and made him gladly grimace as he found solace in a feeling flowing from his very gut. His mind clearly composed a message: Pummel the pangs of your contempt, for the Gods are grooming you for far greater things than mere emperorship.

The words faded from his mind but the message remained. He was destined for greatness. But what form that greatness would take was unclear. Horian admitted to himself that like all men he was a devout believer in his earlier years but had stopped believing in Lord Trinnigen Apocalypse after seeing the mindless miseries of the world during his travels and training.

Yet he welcomed anything that would kindle the fire of his faith again and cast off a dark cloud that hung over his head. A moment later, he was focused on the matter at hand. 'So, if this precocious yet pragmatic prodigy has been plotting like a deranged demagogue in his own dominion, it is certain that Dycentia will be rent asunder by this army of a hundred million men.'

'Why, father, are we even trying to keep it intact when it is meaningless?'

Juratan looked fondly at his son. 'You have become a man, my son. Not only have you grown handsome, but also judicious. King Hemlington is very virtuous. He believes that if you show an enemy mercy, the Gods will show you mercy.'

Horian was shocked by this declaration. 'Is it that kind of thinking which makes a man a noble?' he asked, his voice tinged with disgust. 'I say it is not nobility but stupidity. We should be readying our army to fight. This folly, this so called mercy could jeopardize Dycentia's security.'

'We should be burning the weeds before they bloom nettles and overwhelm us... And yes, this is what baffles me the most, if Galleroth has already bloomed a hundred million nettles, why hasn't he attacked us and how long has it been, Father?'

'It has been two and a half years Horian and this morbid mystery has spawned a sickening suspense in the great halls of The Dycentian Dynasty.'

'And you propose that we should ready our army, yes, we would have if we even stood the slightest chance of even dealing a glance. For forget our army, if all the armies of every nation were to march against his majesty, even then he would blow them into oblivion with a single breath. His magic is mighty, but The Dycentian Blade is mightier.'

'And you should not underestimate the King of Dycentia, for he knows peace is not only our best situation, it is our smartest one right now. For even if Galleroth wasn't the wizard he is and we were to assail the Lands of Galleria head on, we would have to mobilize the entire Dycentian Armada and confront the many perils posed by the Panjiyan. Good men would die, men with families, friends and dreams, and all before even reaching the enemy.'

‘Furthermore, there’s an old saying, ‘When the Lands of Galleria sneeze her neighbours catch the cold.’ So, if our forces did set sail for the Lands of Galleria, the Lands of the Fairies, Panjia, Orclia, Gowlin as well as Trauleon would be sure to find out and make a move on us while we were completely defenseless.’

‘Majestic our military might may be my son; I fear we could not stand against such an onslaught.’ Horian began to say something but his father hurried on.

‘And if you are thinking that the Treetlings, Gnomes, Dwarves, Centaurs, Humans and Elves would lend their aid, then you are wrong.’

‘They would rather try to keep the peace than be responsible for starting a war. Like us, they would remain noble and stray to their swords only when directly attacked.’ He sighed.

‘They share the sentiment of our motherland’s main motto, ‘It is better to die fighting for your fatherland, than to die trying to conquer another’s.’ Of course, if the worst does come to pass, I am sure everyone will feel differently about picking up arms. Until then, the situation remains what it is.’

Horian was thoughtful after listening to his father but hardly comforted. ‘I understand. We do nothing and wait to be slaughtered; for the sky to snow salt so we can perish like slugs and snails.’

Juratan made a face. ‘You are right about one thing, Horian. We do nothing, we wait it out. The seeds have been sown, and when the fruits turn ripe, we strike. Our hope is that civil war and disease tear the country apart. But if Galleroth makes a move, we will be prepared to massacre him and his minions with one wipe, while keeping casualties to a minimum.’ Juratan concluded again, in a whisper.

‘That’s the plan? To let disease and internal strife weaken them and then strike?’ Horian asked, not sounding convinced. ‘Father, Galleroth did not raise this ridiculous army just to admire it, only the gods know if he’s already set sail for our soil.’ Juratan said nothing but his silence said something, and knowing his father intimately Horian knew it meant for his children to surrender to whatever he says.

So Horian swayed to Juratan’s plan. ‘It is always good to fight a weakened enemy than a stronger one, but why don’t we speed up the process, perhaps with an embargo?’

‘You mean go back on our word and void the treaty ourselves? No, Horian. How do you think history would treat us? What would our neighbours say? That coward King Hemlington starved the Gallerians into submission. We would be no different than the Gallerians then. And Dycentia is not a nation of tyranny. If we must fight, we fight to victory. However, we have never sought a fight, nor have we ever stooped to the level of our foes.

‘This is a reputation that was hard to build for we didn’t build it on blood and betrayal, but forged it, on the foundations of fidelity. An embargo would undermine Dycentia’s moral standing. What’s more, it was not something our generation but our predecessors who worked so hard to put on the world’s political platform. And it seems to me that you fail to comprehend the chaos that entails with war, believe me, I should know, I lived through one. And all I can say is that war is like a lamprey that bites little pieces off your soul until there is nothing left.’

Horian seemed chastised by his father’s words, and thoroughly convinced. ‘Yes, I see that you are right.’ Then he looked into his father’s eyes. ‘May I see the Dycentian Blade, Father?’

His father shook his head slowly. 'I'm afraid not. It would only put you in danger for you would become one of the very few who could identify it by sight. We must keep it hidden until someone can brandish its true brunt.'

'We?'

'King Hemlington and I.' He leaned closer to Horian. 'But if something were to happen to me, King Hemlington would need all the help he could get in finding someone strong enough to wield the Dycentian Blade.'

'Father, I told you – stop talking like that. We have many years to make up for. You are not going anywhere. I will not hear of it.'

Jurantan smiled. 'Thank you, my dear son.'

Just then the women folk came into the room. 'The day is a-wasting!' Rosalina cried out, clapping her hands. 'You men will have plenty of time to catch up. Right now, there is work to be done. It will be winter soon and we need to start preparing. Horian, you may be a grown man now but there are still chores you have to do,' she said, holding out a broom to him.

'Yes, Grandmother,' Horian said, taking the broom. He began to sweep, attending to the mundane matters of the day. There was no more mention of the Dycentian Blade. The brown satchel was put away. But it was not gone from his thoughts. He was determined that the next time he was alone with his father, he would learn more.

Chapter Two

I Will

The next day Zaania sent Horian to the lake to catch a stock of fish for her and Rosalina to cure for winter. Of all the chores he had been asked to do, Horian was more than happy to oblige this one for he loved spending time outdoors.

He had seen much since he had been away, but no land could rival the rugged resplendence of Dycentia. The colours found there, in the flowers and trees, in the decoration of the plentiful island creatures, seemed to exist nowhere else.

And almost as much as he'd missed his family, he had missed the countryside of his homeland, especially on the dawn of a new day.

So, early that morning, Horian had climbed into a wooden rowing boat and was now sitting in the half-light of a newly-breaking dawn. He had fished this lake many times as a boy.

He turned to look at the land behind him, not needing the illuminating daylight to discern the thatched cottages of his village. To alleviate his homesickness when he first left Dycentia, he would close his eyes and map each cottage and each face in his mind; each craftsman, each friend.

This place was his heart and its people were his soul, for he and his friends grew up together as they played with the soil and ran along this lake, the river, the mountains, animals and trees. And the unchanged glory of these surroundings had brought Horian a tremendous sense of peace upon his return. With a large strong hand he dug into the moist dirt from the bait-bucket and brought it to his nose. He breathed deeply, inhaling the familiar scent of the soil; the scent of his home.

During his four years away Horian had often imagined himself in this very spot, fishing as he used to. He had been a wide-eyed twelve-year-old boy when he left the Island of Kiraachu. As was the purpose of his absence he had returned a man, strengthened from his years of combat training and bronzed from his time spent as an apprentice on a ship studying the ways of the world.

The Dycentians were a race of people much like humans in appearance. Their bodies, however, tended much more to physical perfection. Descended from giants, each Dycentian grew to an average height of twelve feet, give or take an inch or two.

Horian had reached a mere six and a half feet when he left his island home, but by his fifteenth birthday had shot up to his full height of twelve feet and one inch.

His once slight frame had not just grown taller; it had now filled out with sinewy muscle, like his father's. Horian's complexion was smooth and fair like his mother's, but his face was by no means womanly. It was the tradition of Dycentian boys to wear their hair short, but now Horian's brown honey-streaked hair hung down, flatteringly framing his chiseled cheeks.

He was by all accounts a very handsome young man, a gentle giant, sure to be the object of much female attention. It was inevitable that he would one day bring home the fine daughter-in-law his mother hoped for. Still, in truth, Horian had not been around women enough for them to occupy much space in his mind; the only ones he thought of were the ones he had been separated from.

He had missed his family terribly while away. He dreamed of them nightly, longing for the day when he would be with them again. He had hoped that Marlon and his father would have gone fishing with him but Marlon was still fast asleep when he left and Juratan had work of his own to attend to. Despite the weariness of his journey, Horian had barely been able to sleep the night before.

More than anything else, he had been kept awake with thoughts of the Dycentian Blade.

Although Horian had been disappointed that his father and brother had not accompanied him, he was gratified to find that his luck with the fish remained the same.

In short order, he had filled a large basketful, doing all he could to shore up the family's food supply before the fish found protection from his hook through several inches of solid ice. Arthur, his squirrel, was not nearly as fond of being in the small boat as was Horian. 'Do you not think you have caught enough fish already, Horian?' Arthur asked, yawning.

'Enough?' Horian retorted, looking at the red rodent. 'Pardon me for being so industrious. But we have to survive the whole of the winter on these fish,' he said as he threaded a large spider onto the hook of his rod and heaved it into the water to attract yet more bounty. 'When you are looking up at me with those beady little eyes of yours, begging me to fill your empty belly, I will remember how supportive you were of this venture, my squirrel friend.'

Arthur lowered his head and muttered silently to himself.

The squirrel had been a gift to Horian when he left Dycentia to first begin his training. The creature, instilled with the magic of speech, was to keep the boy company during his time away from home. When Horian was still a boy, the idea of a talking squirrel seemed less silly than it did now. Still, he could not imagine himself without Arthur.

Although the squirrel sometimes annoyed him with his laziness and back talk, he had proven himself an excellent companion. Indeed, after all this time, Horian hardly noticed that Arthur was anything other than his constant companion except, that is, when he caught himself conversing with him in front of others.

What's more, when others were present, Arthur grew dumb. After all, a red talking squirrel would fetch a high price on the open market, and Horian did not want to risk the theft of his good little friend.

Many minutes passed without any bites on the end of Horian's fishing rod. The sun was rising wide over the calm lake. He had been out for two hours already, taking advantage of the fact that fishing is most fruitful just before daybreak, when the world is dark and quiet and it is more difficult for the fish to figure out that they are being tricked. Weary from the hour and their task, Horian and Arthur were nodding off when the sudden, creaky sound of the rod's reel alerted them.

'Brace yourself,' Horian cried out, the arched rod tightly in one hand and managing the reel with the other. 'This is a big one!' Over the minutes that followed, Horian played the fish with the artistry of a skilled fisherman, bringing his catch in. When the fish was finally in the boat, both could see that the glittering silver prize was the length of his arm.

'A *Sissingra fish*,' he told Arthur. 'He will feed us well... that is if I can get him off the hook.'

The sun had now risen fully above the lake, its bright light dancing on the small ripples of the crystal blue water, the glare making it harder to see what lay beneath. The best time for fishing had passed; it was time to head home. Horian looked at Arthur, about to let him know that his wish was about to be granted. And just when he was about to do this deed, a piercing scream cut him off.

It was a man's scream, so shrill that stags and deer came bursting out of the wood as the sound rang through the forest, and echoed off of the lake. A scream of that pitch and of that volume at that hour, would have filled anyone's heart with fear. It was no different for Horian as he looked at Arthur, whose small eyes widened.

The Sissingra fish had been putting up an honourable fight, as Horian struggled to free its long slippery form from the end of the rod. The prey took advantage of his distraction and gave its predator one last hard slap with its tail before skittering over the edge of the boat and back into the depths of the lake.

Under normal circumstances, Horian would have been mightily distressed to have lost such a catch. But right then, he paid the fish no mind and instead focused his gaze on the trees lining the lake. The morning sky was filling with the island's many bird species; their multicoloured wings in frantic motion as they hurried away from the spot where Horian's family cottage stood.

Horian steeled himself, trying to be brave, but his soul quaked. He had never heard his father scream before but in his heart he knew that was exactly what that horrible shriek was, his father screaming. He grabbed the boat's paddles and drove the boat toward the shore to where he had left his father's trusty steed, Tempest, tethered to a tree.

The horse was well-trained and remained calm in the face of the commotion. Arthur scurried onto Horian's shoulder just as the young man swung on to the saddle before giving Tempest a firm kick, neighing and rearing on its hind legs the beast shot off into the forest with great speed.

The short ride from the lake to his cottage was the longest of Horian's life as so many questions clawed his mind. Almost there, his thoughts were interrupted by a man's shout.

'What the Hell!' The voice, which Horian could not place, sounded very displeased.

Dragging the reins he skidded Tempest to a stop just out of ear-shot, he then dismounted and hid behind a tree. Peeping around the side of the thick trunk he surveyed the scene, the man spoke again, just as loudly and just as angrily.

'Tell me, you son of a slug, what is this Blade made of..?'

Juratan, not easily cowed, snapped back, 'You tell me how you found out about it!'

'Don't play with my patience or I'll bite your head off! Now answer me! What is this Blade made of?'

Stunned, Horian realised that this could be none other than King Galleroth. And when he saw that his father's left hand had been amputated by some sort of weapon, the colours of his world just seemed to have lost their lustre.

He remained watchful, utterly usurped by a terror so complete that he could taste it.

He had never seen Galleroth but there was no one else it could be. The Gallerians were also descended from a race of giants – before undersea earthquakes cleaved the continents and volcanic ash gave birth to distinct island worlds, most two-legged beings were more alike than they were dissimilar.

However, while the Dycentians' beauty had evolved to match that of their home, the Gallerians' appearance, which did not seem terribly evolved at all, matched the crudeness of theirs. Long sharp horns protruded from their large skulls and their complexions were a deathly white.

King Galleroth was almost ghostly white and his horns grew back from his head, marking his royal bloodline. The horns of common Gallerians curled in the direction of their sunken white cheekbones.

Still, this beastliness could be strangely attractive, perhaps because of the power that went along with it; the way one is captivated by sharks not because their looks are handsome, but because those attributes grant them such a high position on the food chain.

King Galleroth bore his thirteen-and-a-half foot frame with great nobility, exuding an air of command, as was his birthright. Even as he shouted at Horian's father, he had Zaania's cheeks clasped firmly in one enormous gloved hand, so tightly that blood was drawn from her pale lips. Seeing his mother in such peril made Horian feel as though his heart had stopped.

'How did you find out about the blade?' Juratan demanded. Even in his vulnerable position, his inherent nobility was obvious.

Instead of replying, Galleroth suddenly released Horian's mother and bent towards the ground. Only then did Horian note the hilt of a weapon sticking out of the top of his father's familiar leather satchel. The King gripped the hilt. 'What the... what the filth is this? It weighs more than a whale!'

Screwing his boots into the soft soil he interlocked both hands on the hilt, struggling he swung the Dycentian Blade free of its covering. Horian's eyes expanded when he saw King Galleroth's hands begin to glow with a ruddy light, a light so bright that the Dycentian Blade blurred into the surrounding light of the morning.

'Aaaaarrrggghhh!' cried the ominous overlord. 'You, little leech, what cursed sorcery is this?'

The light grew in intensity and wisps of grey smoke began to emerge from between his hands. Horian watched in wonder as the Dycentian Blade started to fade, a mist creeping down its length. Suddenly, the metal appeared to vaporize and Galleroth gave a harsh scream.

The Dycentian Blade had vanished in a veil of smoke, leaving the villain with something far more valuable than the blade itself – the Nine Elements.

Blinking like an owl blinded in the sunlight, Galleroth looked at the precious stones and then gripped Zaania's face once more. 'What in blood's name just happened? And what are these stones..? Answer me! And restore the bloody blade this stinking instance, you son of a skunk,' he demanded, squeezing ever harder, 'or I will crush the head of your bitch like a grape, bitch!'

The sight of his mother being tormented on her knees like an animal, combined with his father's injury, overwhelmed Horian with an emotion he had never felt in his life. Glaring with eyes that could gobble Galleroth alive, he was unable to control his trembling chin, and the tear that rolled down his otherwise stoic face.

His fright flared into rage, roaring through his veins, his blood boiled like lava and throbbed through his neck, pounding behind his ear a brusque hatred choked him as he found himself running to a nearby tree that had an axe protruding from its trunk.

Still unseen, Arthur hissed desperately into Horian's ear, 'Don't do this. It is folly. You will be killed faster than the flap of a bee's wing beat.' Good counsel indeed, but unheeded. 'You stand no chance, no chance at all! Do you really believe that this axe will protect you against Galleroth?'

Deep down, Horian did not want to be dissuaded as he endeavoured to pull the large heavy axe, which was meant to be used by two men simultaneously. Like the axe, the tree itself was huge.

Everything in Horian's land was large – the plants and mushrooms, the animals and insects, even the boulders – in keeping with the needs of its residents. If a person ever had cause

to wonder why there would be a tree as ludicrously tall and big around as a Juydhaad on the earth, the answer may very well be because that forest was once home to individuals who required such trees for safety and shelter.

On this day though, the tree in Horian's forest was behaving much more like a hindrance than a help, refusing to release the axe from its thick bark. Finally, after much effort, the axe broke free in Horian's hands, its blade falling heavily to the ground. Horian struggled to toss it over his shoulder; Arthur shook his head in disapproval.

'See how you struggle? You can barely carry that axe, let alone swing it. Do not be dim-witted. Galleroth is not going to leave this world as easily as he can take you out of it. And you know in your heart you can't take him on, Horian... Listen to me! A strong man isn't the one who can wrestle another, but a strong man is the one who can wrestle his anger, so please.'

Arthur's words somehow pierced Horian's hurt, fear and anger. He paused and bowed his sweat-drenched head.

Slowly, he released the axe's handle from his grip. Not only Arthur's words, but his training too came to mind. He had been trained to be courageous, but careful. To attack smartly, when prepared. It was not easy, but he managed to allow the wisdom of those teachings take control.

'You are right, my loyal and shrewd friend, you are right,' he sighed, bending over and resting his hands on his knees. Already they were blistering from his struggle with the axe. It was hard, but Horian had to accept that he was not yet ready for this level of confrontation. Fortunately his actions had gone unnoticed by the single-minded Galleroth. The malevolent monarch was still menacing Horian's parents.

‘What deep thought are you in, Juratan? The grip I have on your lovely wife is getting tighter. I am sure she would scream if she could.’

‘No! Please wait,’ Juratan cried out. ‘I will tell you what you need to know.’

Galleroth smiled, convinced his adversary was weakening. In doing so, he underestimated Juratan as a magic staff manifested itself in his remaining hand. He used it to cast a spell that brought the tree behind the brute to life. Before Galleroth could react, the tree grabbed him with its branches, wrapping him around and constricting him like hundreds of boas.

As soon as Galleroth’s grip on her face loosened, Zaania took refuge behind a well, as her husband pointed his staff and fired a blue blaze at his oppressor.

To Juratan’s dismay, Galleroth had used his own magic to break free from the tree’s tight embrace, and quickly cocooned himself with his crimson cape.

‘So, you want to fight fire with fire? Very well, it is time to see whose magic is greater.’ The fiend fired a red bolt of energy at Juratan, who immediately parried it with a blue one of his own.

‘My fire was born to blow, now cinder already, you slug,’ Galleroth snarled, his red bolt overpowering the injured wizard. In a horrific instant, the red energy turned into a huge singeing snake which tore Juratan’s head apart. The sparks fizzing fiercely into the air were so intense that they silenced Juratan’s death scream.

Watching powerlessly as his father was burned alive, Horian felt as if the sky came crashing down to earth and the forest floor shifting beneath his feet; plunging him into the lightless lair of agonies abyss. As he looked on, he saw Juratan’s left eye dangling free, held in place by the optic nerve. As his brain bubbled and

boiled, Juratan held his eye in his hands. And he screamed. Juratan screamed a scream that would surely have made the stones cover their ears if they had any.

Rage, agony, fear, hurt, grief. These five foul feelings filled Horian with a blackness so vile that anyone's shadow would flee upon seeing it. Even the darkness of his despair however did not save him from seeing the end of his father's terrible pain. Blood bubbled and burbled from the opened crown of his skull. His face, or what remained of it, looked like that of a rotten apple's.

'All is lost. All is smithereens,' Horian slurred before sinking his teeth into his forearm to forestall a scream that would betray his presence.

He was not the only one who rued the terrible deed of his father's death. The wicked wizard too had overplayed his hand. 'No! What have I done in my fury?' Galleroth clapped his hands and the sheer shockwave extinguished the blaze, preventing it from spreading. Galleroth flew to his fallen foe and after squashing the snake, he kicked it away.

Seeing Galleroth occupied, Zaania bolted from her hiding place for the forest. She moved quickly, but not quickly enough.

'And where do you think you're going, gorgeous?' Galleroth sneered, his lips gnarling a fearful grin. He aimed a fist in her direction and used his mental might to pull her back. Zaania cried as she clawed at the grass, fighting desperately to stay away from her husband's killer. 'Let me go! Please, my children will be orphans..!' she beseeched with all her heart.

Hearing the horror fused with hatred in her voice, a lump formed in Horian's throat. He stretched his right arm forward, his fist claspng the empty air. He was so close to his mother and yet... yet he might as well have been on the other side of the ocean. As she was dragged further away his closed fist slowly unclenched. His

heart ached, remembering the last time he held her hand. His hand touched his cheek, where she had last touched his face.

Galleroth brought Zaania to him and like a shameless thief, raised her to her knees. He then pulled her hair and said 'look you little bitch, look at what happens when you wage war with a wicked wizardly warrior king like Meeee! Now kiss the consequence.'

Aiming his other fist at the remnants of Juratan, Galleroth unsheathed his own blade, known throughout all the lands as The Monarch's Machete. Horian's hatred for Galleroth grew even more when he found himself marvelling at this machete that was going to guillotine his father's head. Seven and half feet long it was, with a full tang, scale grips, a vestigial cross-guard, and a broad, flat blade that widened and was scalloped near the end, a shape reminiscent of a dragon wing.

Horian and his mother held their breath as Galleroth gently tapped the back of what remained of Juratan's neck. The wicked wizard then raised the blade as though it was a trophy, and then, down it came and off went Juratan's head, rolling away like fallen fruit. Galleroth paid it no mind as he flayed the dead man's flesh.

Juratan's internal organs oozed upwards, moving in a viscous mass, filling the satchel that the wizard had made of the dead man's flesh. Even as this horrible thing was taking place, Galleroth reached for a bottle on his battle belt. He uncorked the cylindrical canister and poured out a dark green liquid, stirring both his hands over the concoction like a mad mage, speaking words Horian did not understand.

'Saavootaarey, meree jaan thoo meree humshukle hai.'

He chanted these strange words over and over; his formerly glittering sea green eyes were now a smouldering red. 'If you would

not explain the Blade to me in life, you will do so in death, you scum! Now reveal the secret!

‘Do you want to know how I found out about the Blade? It was only a revolting rumour, a whisper in the waves until today. It was the sheer energy radiating from the Blade, Juratan; you must’ve been a fool to think that with all my mental might, I could not sense such, such power! Now tell me its secrets..!’

Galleroth repeated the chant ten times over, and then he gave up. ‘Aahkh! In vain! A waste of good black magic and my precious breath. He gives up nothing even in the permanent defeat of death.’

Galleroth shook his head until something new captured his attention. Marlon had just woken up and was rubbing his eyes, unaware of the significance of the scene before him.

‘Who’s this?’

‘Marlon, run!’ Zaania shrieked. But too late, as her son was already in the orbit of Galleroth’s gravity. With a sneer, Galleroth turned his attention back to Zaania. ‘I suppose this means that you and your swine of a son will be coming with me.’ His smile was even more horrible than his grimace.

‘You are far too winsome to live a widow’s life. And I do believe you know something about that infernal Blade. But mind you, if I am not able to choke the truth out of you, you will not be lucky because you live. No, my lovely, you will be lucky if I allow you to die!’

Galleroth growled these words with his face pressed close to Zaania’s. He followed his edict with the senseless laugh of a crazy drunkard, which made Horian’s toes curl in his boots as the

coldest shiver shattered down his spine. A moment later, Galleroth had thrown Zaania over his shoulder and had tucked a squirming Marlon in the crook of his powerful arm.

Both mother and son screamed and beat him on the back with their fists. They might as well have been fleas on the back of a rhinoceros. Galleroth gestured and a cage materialized before him. With a rough thrust, he shoved Horian's mother and brother inside.

Of its own accord, a Moltrosion swooped down through the canopy of trees, its expansive wings taking down branches and leaves as it made its way to its master. Galleroth glided onto the three-headed white dragon that jumped, and then, with a single lazy flap of its awesome wings, the Moltrosion was in the air again, grasping the cage that held Horian's mother and brother in its topaz talons.

Asphyxiated by abject agony, Horian screamed 'Nooo!' Finally able to give a sound to his pain. In that moment, fear fled from his face. His bones felt as if they would leap from his body. No longer interested in stealth, he lunged forward, jumping over a toppled tree, barging boughs; tackling tree stumps and thorns, skipping over stones, protruding roots and camouflaged crevices.

Like a wild deranged Dycentian bull, Horian burst from the forest directly under the path of the dragon's flight. The din of Galleroth's laughter still ringing the drums of his ears, made all sound die away. So filled was he with rage that his field of vision shrank to a narrow tunnel before him.

There, he could see the cage, which made him foolishly fuel a new valour with the thought that whatever happens, happens. Also that one can run from fate but never hide. And that whatever is inscribed in one's destiny cannot be changed, save by the Decider of Destiny himself.

Knifing the air with his hands and pushed on by an otherworldly wind, at the least, he would touch his lips to his dear mother's forehead one last time.

His breath was ragged as he huffed and puffed and pushed his legs to the limit but he slipped. He fell to the forest floor as his hopes and dreams flew away. He had spent his youth in that forest and could expertly navigate every inch of it even in the dark. So it took him by complete surprise when he found himself falling, having slipped on something unexpected and gelatinous.

‘What is this goo?’ he cursed as he found himself lying on his back. He was at the very edge of the forest, an area he had not visited since his return to the island. When he realised what had caused his misstep, he felt his blood go cold. Next to him, illuminated by the sun’s light, lay a heart, entrails, lungs, and one emerald green eyeball that resembled his own—his father’s eye. From a branch they lay leaching out of a sack that looked like the one Galleroth had been chanting over.

Seeing the guts of his father convinced Horian that he was still cloaked by that cloud, the cruel cloud that thundered, ‘Lord Trinnigen Apocalypse doesn’t exist, son! If Trinnigen did exist, would he ever have allowed you to see such a dark day?’

Such a cruel message! Yet, it seemed to provide a poisonous proof to Horian that even if anything divine did exist, it was no better than the tyrants who dictate their dominions.

‘So much for the portending stings and a rank greater than emperorship,’ he thought bitterly, as he realised that Galleroth had been using his father’s remains to try to summon Juratan’s spirit, to get him to reveal the secrets of the Dycentian Blade. He had underestimated what a worthy warlock and adversary Juratan was, and had made the prideful mistake of misjudging his opponent’s own foresight and influence.

Even in his grief, Horian felt a huge surge of pride for his father. That positive feeling lasted but a fleeting moment though before it was swept away by an even larger wave of woe.

He picked up the heart that Galleroth had cast aside with such disdain. Tenderly, he washed it with the tears of his eyes that flowed from the flood of an inconceivable sorrow. And then, he brought his lips to them in a devotional kiss. It was his father's heart which had been ripped out, but holding it in his hands Horian could swear his own heart was being wrenched from his chest, over and over again. And then chewed on by Galleroth like cattle maul hay.

'Is this then my destiny!?' he cried out in a voice so loud that it broke. 'That since the time of my birth I was destined to be an orphan..? A bloody orphan!'

Tears that did not come suddenly could not be stopped. 'I am so... so... so sorry...' he cried to his father. But without being able to form the word, 'Father.' The lump in his throat clogged any possibility of that word being uttered.

He looked up to see that the dragon was long gone. Just a speck in the sky, so small anyone would have mistaken the Moltrosion for a bird. He scowled at the fading fiend as he waved the black flag of immortal hatred for Galleroth in his heart.

'She is gone... They are gone. My Mother, my Father, my little brother, my best friends... my everything, is gone! What do I do now?' he said in a whimpering whisper, gently cradling his Father's heart in his trembling hands.

That night, at dusk, Horian built a ceremonial funeral pyre on the beach, placing his father's remains with grace and honour upon it. He could not fathom the hours that had gone by on that terrible day, could not measure when he'd revealed the news of his father's

death to his grandmother, not with words but with eyes cracked by sorrow and pure pain.

Rosalina had screamed then, screamed in such a manner that Gail was awoken from her sleep, as well as alarming the entire village.

They all came running. Now they wept and gnashed their teeth on the beach, waiting as Horian prepared to perform a man's task, the duty of the firstborn son and now the only son. Rosalina had tried to keep Gail away from such a sight; her granddaughter as yet had not shed a single tear. She was standing beside her grandmother in silence; strangely and calmly stroking the hair of her doll.

Rosalina knew how deeply Gail loved Juratan, and she could not even begin to conceive the effects Juratan's demise would have on the child's young and fresh mind. It was an impossible task to keep her at bay but it was indecent, she thought, to even try and keep her from witnessing the last rites of her father, no matter how young she was.

Rosalina and the entire village cried and bayed when they saw Horian step out of the now frightening forest with a large seashell, the very one Zaania had always used to carry water with. Now it was overflowing with oil and, with tears overflowing from his eyes, Horian stopped and looked down at his little sister. Gail did not so much as flinch. Wordlessly, he acknowledged her presence. Then he continued and, standing before his father's funeral pyre, dipped his fingers into the shell. He looked back at Rosalina, who nodded her head solemnly.

Horian flicked the oil liberally over the pyre. He sprinkled the incense and then went toward Rosalina, to take the torch from her. Raising it in his hand he heard something, a splattering sound; looking back he was aghast to see Gail pouring the rest of the shell's contents over herself. 'Gail!'

In a voice ghostly calm, she said, 'Horian, if you burn my father then you will also have to burn me.'

'Gail, please do not do this! We have lost our love Juratan, our love Marlon and my dear daughter-in-law Zaania; we do not want to lose you too,' Rosalina begged.

'Grandmother, understand. I cannot live without Father, I love him too much. I want to go to him; I want to be with him forever.' She turned to Horian. 'Burn me Horian. Please burn me!'

'Wow Gail, Father always said you would grow up to be someone significant, a healer or a sorceress. Will you not fulfill his dreams? Surely you will not let them go up in flames?'

'Horian, please understand. And do not try to bribe me with Father's hopes.'

Horian was not sure what to do. 'Gail, please move out of the way. The auspicious time is fleeting.'

'No!' Gail cried out, shielding the pyre with her body.

'Gail, what foolishness is this? You understand..! Please understand that we will not be able to live without you. It is a selfish act you contemplate. Think of Mother and Marlon, who still breathe and live. Think of the rest of us. We are still alive and we need you to live.

'I will bring Mother and Marlon back, I promise; I swear on my own life, I swear on Mother's wellbeing... I swear, I swear on the sun! That I will bring them back, so please, just live to see that day.'

Horian sank to his knees, pressing his hands to his face in a prayerful pose. A moment later, his hands were drawn from his face and he found himself looking into the caring eyes of his sister. She wiped away his tears even as her own began to roll down her cheeks. Horian wrapped his arms around her saying, 'Yes. Cry Gail. Let it out.'

Great sobs suddenly erupted from her. With tears filling her eyes, Horian glared up at the star-studded sky, thinking that the Gods are so cruel and have no love or mercy for man whatsoever. Gail's tears slowed, finally sobbing softly to a stop, with a shuddering sigh, she released him and walked back to Rosalina who took her into her arms.

Horian waited another moment and then picked up the torch and walked toward the pyre. He held his hand steady and his tears at bay as he set the stack of wood alight. His head turned away unable to see the first burst of flame as they began to lick over the remains. He could hear the wailing of the women and the hum of the men keening in the fire light.

The sound of their grieving grew to a sound that said they themselves were set ablaze when a geyser of sparks soared into the air. The fire flew and fell and then danced and sputtered. For a time, the whole of Kiraachu Island seemed to shake with the grief expressed in a thousand hearts. Their energy spent, it was not long before the fire conquered their cries and made it a continuous sigh in the background.

Had it only been a day earlier that he'd spoken so seriously with his father? Listening with his inner ear to those words anew, it was as if his Juratan had foreseen his fate. He had told Horian just enough so that he knew where to take his next steps, but not enough to have been able to use the Dycentian Blade to try and save him.

As his eyes adjusted to the brightness, an image continually played in his imagination. In it, he split Galleroth's head in two with that axe. He used this image to distract himself from the other, more distressing one: The terrifying task of retrieving Juratan's decapitated head, which was charred to a crisp, blacker than coal, nowhere within the realm of recognition.

With this image seared in his thoughts, he silently expressed his pain, 'I promised that I would not let you go anywhere, Father. And now Mother is gone too. The mother who was my light when the sun hid its face; the mother who was my rain when the clouds never came; the mother... the mother who never had to wipe my tears away and never can she be replaced!'

Rosalina had held him close when she told him that with Juratan's death, he had become the man of the household.

How those words cut him now! Just the day before, he had felt very much a man – happy in his growing maturity, happy to breathe the air of this world but today... today standing before his father's funeral pyre and smelling the smoke he had never felt more a child, a helpless boy heavy with a heart that knew only gloom and doom.

If this is what it meant to be a man, he wanted no part of it! Coming close to his sister, he spoke softly. 'This is it... this is my life, this is our life, Gail. Just when we thought we had the perfect life, this is what happens!'

The savageness of the situation slithered up Horian's spine, and upon reaching its climax he raised his eyes to the heavens.

'And yoooo!' He cried out to Lord Trinnigen Apocalypse but his words were bitter. 'What kind of god are you? You allow evil people to strut the earth like serpents on two legs, and you let the good be slaughtered when they're the only ones who obey your commandments.'

'He wept hard tears and shook his head, regretting the times he had *not* shown his father his love. 'And I swear... I swear I could have hugged you harder Father. Why didn't I hug harder? Now... now there is literally nothing left to hug, not even a corpse.

'And that smell... the smell of your burning flesh it smelt like scorched swine. I wonder why the flesh of man smells like scorched swine.'

‘Nevertheless, the sick stench doesn’t die; my nose is its new home. That fizzing as well, it haunts me. That fizzing frazzle has called my ears its final abode and it rings with raw relish but, this is what I do not understand.’

‘What sin? What sin did you commit to meet such a fiery fate, father... what sin? It is so hard to believe that only a few hours ago you were a being with feelings, aspirations and dreams but now... now you’re nothing but a memory.’

‘And you were so beautiful inside and out, your bodily gestures, your courage, your smile; your laugh and down to the very way you used to eat, breathe and sneeze were noble and adorable.’

Horian thought of his father’s humour. ‘He was hilarious as well.... and not your typical Dycentian Father. To compliment his characteristics, I have to say that he was more than hilarious; this man had it all, Arthur.’

‘You think I’m funny well, you don’t know what funny is until you meet my father. I mean, every little thing this man used to say and do was funny. Even his mere presence... yes, even his mere presence was funny. He was so funny and fabulous, every time I used to see his face or remember one of his indelible expressions I used to say ‘god is great’... god is great?’

Raw emotions swirled through Horian, buffeting him like wild waves against a jagged shore, which made him blaspheme against the Almighty. ‘No! God is not great. God is not great, for if he was great he would’ve saved my Father from such a fiery fate!

Horian began to cry again, not just for what was lost in reality but that which was lost in potential. ‘And Father I g... I guess you won’t be a grandfather after all, that was your dream wasn’t it? And do you want to know what my dream was..? My dream was for you to brew a banquet in a king’s cauldron and feed the entire village in merriment for its newest member. That was my bloody dream!’

‘For father and son to down a dozen spirits after the wedding and then tell timeless tales around the family fire, and that was the only thing lacking in your life, the only thing that would have made it complete, but you always used to say.’

‘You always used to say ‘Horian, son, whenever you feel gloom or be ill with a tragedy never curse the enemy but raise your hands to the sky with a selfless soul and a wholesome heart, and ask Lord Trinnigen Apocalypse for anything. For your own good he may not give you everything, but he will without a doubt give you something for verily he is ‘The Shy.’

‘Yes Gail, God is The Shy. He is so shy that he will not let your hands hit your knees empty. So come on everybody, what are you waiting for? Raise your hands. Raise your hands to the sky and sincerely supplicate, and today..! Today Lord Trinnigen Apocalypse, today you will not get away. Crown and Trophy of the Timeless Kingdom you are but you will not get away; you will have to answer this prayer. For we are ready to measure your mercy by raising our hands and beseech before you.’

‘Let’s see how merciful you truly are, please perform what you never performed, please give my father back, take my life instead... well no, but you understand. And why do the good die young?’

‘They should live long, so they can exalt you as much as they can, so please give him back, but if you will not... if you will not then at least seal this scar, fill this void, fill this gaping hole in my heart.’

‘Fill it by, by guiding me and adjoining justice, for you are the Duke of Justice!’ Then, imagining Juratan looking down on him, as well as the villagers, Horian suddenly stopped beating his chest, becoming embarrassed by his self-pity.

He licked his lips and upon tasting his father's dried blood his heart was set aflame, this time lava literally coursed through his veins, or so he thought as he neighed 'NOoo!' His tone turned from tearful to tyrannical, his head came up like the head of a hound scenting prey.

Wiping his tears he jolted up. The sky was scarred by a blazing branch of light as he faced Rosalina and Gail; and when the wail of the water wealthy clouds came, rain roared down as he waved and pointed the torch randomly at the villagers and proclaimed. I will not let my spirit break down like this, and let that vindictive villain be victorious! I am my father's son. He sent me away to make sure I was prepared to be a paladin.

'And remember Arthur..? I said 'All is lost, all is smithereens.' Well, what I forgot to say, no, what I was meant to say, was. 'All is lost, all is smithereens, but a new will life blossom to carry out his Father's dreams,' and that new life, that new life will be me! I will restore the sword and use it to slay that scum Galleroth, who will feel the worst of my wrath!'

'Do you hear me? You son of a snake, your shadow has fallen on the wrong light. And you will pay dearly for your evil! Little do you know that this mere being, this little lion, Horian, has the key to the gates of hell... or will soon enough go to the ends of the earth to obtain that key.'

'And he will let nothing on his way stop him from opening the doors of the underworld and unleashing her unimaginable fires to engulf your world.'

'I will make you pay. I will make you pay for calling my baby brother Marlon a swine. I will make you pay for every hair that you dishonoured from my mother's head.'

‘I will make you pay for every drop of my Father’s blood that stained, no, graced this ground, I swear down I will make you pay!’

‘If I have to bleed out my last drop of blood, I will.’

‘If I have to walk through the wall of a waterfall, I will.’

‘If I have to run across a roaring river, I will.’

‘If I have to scale a lava-veiled volcano, I will.’

‘If I have to stop an avalanche in its tracks, I will.’

‘If I have to flatten the dunes of the Deserts of Galleria, I will!’

‘If I have to close the cavernous mouth of the Colossal Canyon, I will!’

‘If I have to peck the peak, split in two or literally lift mighty Mount Apocalypse, and then smash it into oblivion, I will!’

‘And If I have to touch..! Yes, if I have to touch the bowels of the Panjiyan Ocean, I will!’

‘And if I have to die, yes, if I have to dive into the jaws of death itself, I will take you with me, Gallerauuuth! As long as I have breath in my body, I swear it on my father’s pyre, and on my mother’s name, that I will make you dig your own grave, your own bloody grave, Gallerauuuth!’

‘And what a fitting punishment... what a fitting punishment for underestimating the blood coursing through my veins; never judge a sword by its sheath and start counting your days, for nothing is more dangerous than fighting a foe that has nothing to lose you knave.’

‘So blow your belly with blood and smoke the smoke you smoke till your throat’s the colour of coal, and get ready... Get ready to say goodbye as well as lust for light, and pay for your atrocity and animosity, in full recompense! How sweet my retribution will be.’

Chapter Three
The Dream of Destiny