

Star of Zara

** Special Edition **

Part of the Sandals of Time adventure series

Series 2 of 6

By: Palm Copenhagen

&

The PAWS Soulforge

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Chapter 1

Of Clocks & Time

The moons of Trammel and Felucca slowly lumber along together, like a ballet being played out in slow motion. Felucca rotates clockwise while Trammel rotates counter clockwise and Hathor watches the display from a distance as the light from the sun fades on one side, then simultaneously appears on the other. The luminescence unravels the dark portions of the two moons, revealing its' previously hidden contents to Hathor and with each passing moment new and familiar features come into sharp focus.

Trammel, the larger of the two moons, moves much slower than that of Felucca, so the combination of the two visible bodies work together as a kind of clock to tell time with. However, this is not the kind of time that humans are accustomed to, but rather the kind that only an ancient dragon would care to keep.

Hathor selects this moment to converse with her copy of the Logic Matrix in order to send her brother Ladon a message. She has made this practice part of her routine and like clockwork when the mountains of Destard came into view she began searching for him. She hoped that somehow her words would reach him in some way, but more importantly she was aspiring for some kind of response from Ladon in return. As usual, there wasn't one.

Glancing up from the book and then back down to the moon of Trammel, Hathor begins to study the land, looking for something specific. She now makes out the city of Britain coming into her vantage, then closes her eyes to search the countryside just beyond it. I could sense that she was looking for the Valkyrie who now inhabit the small house there.

After a few moments, the house with the orrery and telescope on the roof, the one that Lemuria had installed her Soulforge in, would be the only thought that would consume the mind of the great dragon seer. Hathor set about leaving a message with the memory of Ladon for her other brother Kumara to find. If anyone could find Ladon, she thought, it would be Kumara.

The clouds at the edge of the sunrise, high in the sky, above the moon of Trammel, begin to swirl around in their minor attempts to escape the break from order into chaos. Something was disturbing their peaceful slumber and Hathor abruptly opens her eyes to watch this event. As quickly as the clouds initiated their bustle, the occurrence was over and she could make out her sister Venus flying towards her from the direction of Destard.

Venus looks radiant against the backdrop of the sunrise in the distance. Her brilliant multi-colored scales, now form a mimicking toccata against the display of the refracting light on the layered edges of the rotating moon. It was almost as if Venus was in control of all things beautiful, with such a grand entrance. Hathor then makes note of this same observance that I had, then patiently waits for Venus to come closer. Every movement that Venus does make, is done as some great performer on her mighty

stage. She is always to be on display for the world to see her and of course Venus is well aware of this fact, as she plays her part perfectly. Hathor smiles as she comes within range, because she loves her sister very much and as the magnificent white dragon does smile, I could feel the warmth of that love piercing the very space that I too occupy.

For I am the pillars of men, the left and the right. Here in this existence, I am known as the Destiny of the Angels or the Archangel Destiny and the Archangel Angel, the first angel. My captain is that of Kumara and my charge is for the protection of his two sisters, Hathor and Venus, who have been given their complete dominion over the skies of all twelve realms of mankind.

“It’s done”, said Venus as she flew up to greet Hathor, in which Hathor responds with her usual reply, “you’re late”. This always has an effect of annoyance for the younger dragon sibling. Her impatience often causes her to overlook the subtle and miniscule nuance of the verbal exchanges between the both of them. Being humble has never been a strong suit for Venus. “Yes, your highness”, Venus sarcastically says in return and then asks if she was able to find Ladon. “I don’t expect that he will reply, but he isn’t the most punctual of kinds, so it is always wise to keep him continually updated, just in case”, Hathor affirms back.

Hathor starts her descent from her faraway position to be closer to that of Trammel, as to look for a place to perch and observe, with Venus following close by. “Why Alania”, Venus inquires, while Hathor seems to ignore the question outright, for she is hyper-focused on her task at hand. Venus interjects again, but this time Hathor interrupts her in mid-sentence by saying, “I don’t know, it must be her time to contribute to these events and Lemuria has sent the request personally”. Venus appears to be offended and now I could sense that she was thinking to herself how much she hates when Hathor disregards her in such a way. If I could sense this, then obviously so could Hathor, the great dragon seer.

Suddenly Hathor drops below her sister, swooping up and around Venus in a large, impressive and magnificent display of strength, which catches Venus off-guard. Hathor stops, now slightly just above Venus, for that positioning was of no accident, for Hathor had briefly abandoned the subtle and the nuanced to communicate in a way that her sister would fully understand. She looks slightly down to where Venus was positioned and says that “this location will do”. Venus looks on, down to the world of Trammel and then back up to Hathor, wondering what the big deal was about. There she stayed, without saying a word, quietly waiting patiently and having abandoned all thoughts of any petty sibling rivalry.

Hathor eventually breaks the silence after some time and asks: “What did the Judge say?” Venus looks up and responds by firing her comments back that “he was eager to help, as much as anyone could be eager to help, without knowing all the details”. “Are you saying you are not eager then yourself my dear sister?”, as Hathor prods back. “Not at all, oh wise one”, Venus counters sarcastically again. “I was talking about Valentine, the judge”. “I think he was more interested in confronting his old friend then helping the child.” After a brief pause Hathor says with a smile, that “I’m sure it is both, in equal parts”. As she says this, Hathor also looks over to Venus, so her words could apply to her as well, so that the same sentiment was expressed to her, for Hathor loves her sister very much.

As time wore on, as time to an ancient dragon could, Venus jumps around from warning her sibling of what Sirius was up to, then asking about Kumara and contemplating out loud what Ladon was doing right at this exact moment. Hathor starts to tune her sister out as she was again concentrating at the task at hand. Hathor closes her eyes to search for the girl and then she waits for the exact moment that she foresaw some time earlier, for no ancient dragon can see as far into the future as Hathor. When the time was right, she opens her eyes, then commands the winds to answer her call and so the winds do, as they had always done before.

The clouds begin to swirl as the air stream and currents dance together like children playing in the spring-time rains. The all-white dragon launches a slow buildup of energy within her mouth and she gradually, like a careful artist finishing her masterpiece, applies the final touches that increase the intensity of her dragon's breath, so as to influence the winds as their conductor. She instructs them to descend onto the surface of Trammel with more vigor and with each passing second. Just then and all at once, Hathor witnesses a small glint and brilliant ruby-glimmer, as something caught the reflection of the sun at just the right moment. Venus notices this vibrant red sparkle as well and pays close attention.

So, it was at this exact instance, a mere pause between heartbeats, that Hathor orders the skies to focus themselves down onto a single point. She let loose her dragon's roar and the word "Wuld" that followed henceforth. The command instantly instructs the winds into their service and they obey without hesitation.

As songs are beckoned by the songbirds, so too are the winds of the realms of mankind bound to the will of Hathor. They bend to her liking and wise guidance, for the winds within all realms answer only to her. The storms and chaotic gusts now assemble together and they race in unison rather quickly and suddenly to their location, which brought upon great worry to Venus. As one precision strike, the winds that formed their great storm violently crashed onto the ground and to a specific point, guided by their great teacher, as if they had become a single bolt of lightning. Before Venus could say a word, Hathor looks over to her sister, being satisfied with the result and said to her:

"It is done indeed".

- Archangel Destiny of the Angels

Chapter 2

An Ancient Wisdom

It has been several weeks since the Valkyrie have merged themselves with the memories of The PAWS Soulforge and so far, Kumara has not had success in gaining any usable intelligence as he had hoped for. He doesn't appear to be bothered by this either, but then again, he doesn't seem like the type to let on if he was to be troubled. I have decided to move into the house and start writing the accounts that Kumara had asked me to scribe, as well as to journal any of the observations regarding the house itself, which I do find to be a fascinating subject.

It is quite interesting how each morning there are slight changes within this abode, as if the house itself was alive and growing with each passing day. I have asked Valkyries why these other Valkyrie are so different than she is, to which she commented by saying that "we are the same, except they are constantly relating with the memories of this place and those interactions are increasing in intensity and strength". I asked her why she then didn't have the same experiences as they did, for she too is a Valkyrie. She didn't have an answer for that, but said that "It takes much effort to do this" and then she added that "I am sure they have to stay focused", but it was clear my inquiry bothered her greatly.

I noticed that some of these memories are starting to look different. One had an order shield on today and yesterday another one was holding a shepherd's crook. I have not understood the importance of these changes, if there are any, but I plan to study them as they arise regardless.

A few days later something interesting transpired as Kumara decided to spend the entire morning outside of the house. Kumara was not listening to the memories as he normally does, so I decided to walk outdoors to see if he discovered anything new. "Archmage", Kumara said, as I exited the building. "I have a message from my sister Hathor", then he handed me a book.

"This is The Logic Matrix journal of my sister that she has gifted to us, for our quest to find Ladon and I have taken the liberty to copy the book from the memories of ImaNewbie this morning for you." "Also, while listening to those memories, the champion next to him spoke the word "compassion" to me." "compassion", I scrutinized? I wonder what that means and what about this book? What is this all supposed to be about? "I have no idea, as I can only copy the book for you and I am not allowed to assist you with this part of the quest. Although finding my brother is important to me, this endeavor is for the people of your realm and you only", answered Kumara. "You must research the contents of this Logic Matrix, but Archmage do not worry, because I am confident that you will find the answers that you seek." I hesitantly took in his words, then looked down to the book and began to open the cover.

The Logic Matrix was fairly complicated at first glance, but after closely studying it for a few days, I have come to really appreciate the detail behind it. There is a kind of ancient wisdom that I can sense about this tome, that seems to have all kinds of answers for questions that haven't even been asked yet. It didn't take me long to uncover the clues within and what the word, "compassion" might imply, but that

was just a small portion of what was contained in this numerical codex. For there is great amount of enlightenment that might be gleaned from this book still and much to be unlocked. Surely, I thought to myself, I would be spending many hours investigating these intricacies at a later time.

I believe the Valkyrie in the house are slowly changing their appearance to be that of the virtues of our realm. A Paladin, a Shepherd, a Ranger and a Mage so far seem to be the themes of these memories. The memory upstairs that uttered the phrase “compassion” must be that of the bard. I figured that we must try and locate The Book of Virtues mentioned, so I set out to learn more. Hopefully there is some kind of clue inside of this ancient manual about the location of that book written by the Old Ones.

After several hours my search ended no better than it started, so I began to doubt that this was indeed the course that should be taken. If we are to locate The Book of Virtues, then how can we find this tome, would be the question of the hour. Perhaps that wasn’t the answer I should be searching for. Perhaps my question needed to be recalculated. Whatever the next course was though, it was clear that I was not going to gain any more insight from this scholarly opus, this Logic Matrix, at least for this portion of our quest. For a new course must now be plotted.

I decided to recruit the help of the librarians of Britain, for I would ride to town and speak with them about this topic directly. Perhaps with enough scribes, some minor detail being over-looked could then be uncovered. Before I did leave though, I thought to ask Kumara for his wisdom first. It didn’t take long to get an affirmation that I was on the right trail, so instead of wasting more time, I did journey to Britain, but not to converse with the scholars at the library. Instead, I rode directly to castle Blackthorn to speak with Stanis, the captain of the King’s Guard and about locating The Book of Virtues.

Another call went out from the Captain of the Guards and Mages’ Guild across the land to assist with recovering this book, once I explained the story to them thus far. Since the Paladin and the Ranger were the first two recognizable memories at The PAWS Soulforge, I specifically requested that we recruit the Paladins of Trinsic and the Rangers of Skara-Brae, to see what they could find out about this book’s location. That would only be the logical place to start, in which the court agreed with my assessment.

The Mages’ Guild and the scholars at the Britain Library researched everything they could find about the virtues. The Paladins engaged with the business of demonic and undead forces, directly with the sword, while the rangers searched the overland and enchanted forests for information, as only a scout could uncover. There was much promise and hope for our fellowship at first, but as time grew on, clues expired and dungeons where explored, yet there was no sign of The Book of Virtues. What made matters worse was that winter was upon us now and most of the fellowship had started to return home. It became clear that our efforts were not going to produce anything meaningful. So, in my disappointment and failure, I returned back to The PAWS Soulforge myself. When I did return, I discovered Valkyries in the same place that I had left her, but Kumara was nowhere to be found. I asked her about this and she said that “he will be back in due time and not a minute before, but he will return exactly when he needs to be here”, she added. Great, more riddles, I thought and then asked her about what she was laboring on so intently, as she was clearly hard at work, crafting many artifacts at the forge. “The citizens of Britain have created a tree to celebrate the holiday season and this requires presents, of which few are participating. I need to do what I can to help spread good will and holiday

cheer, as the bonds of mankind are precious and must be preserved, even if humanity fails to understand the importance of this.”

Out of my curiosity I noticed some of the items that Valkyries was constructing and appreciated one item in particular. A brilliant white banner of very fine quality, with small golden lilies decorating the entire field of white silk. At the base were two angels on either side kneeling, while holding up the world in their hands, as a kind of pillar of sorts. On the left side of the banner was one angel and on the other side, the right angel mirrored its counterpart in perfect unison, as both were facing each other. On top of this depiction was a pure white dragon, which had its’ wings stretched out over the world with a vibrant and brilliant display of azure, then golden rays of sun-light behind it, as if proclaiming some kind of importance in its magnificence. Above that scene was also some kind of un-recognizable word or phrase, a type of language that I was unfamiliar with.

I nodded in agreement and appreciated the sentiments from my dear friend, then went upstairs to retire for the evening so I could think on the events that had transpired. To find Ladon still means to locate The Book of Virtues and our efforts had not produced the correct fruit, at least not yet. I would need to reflect carefully on how we might proceed next and I would need to speak with Kumara as soon as possible, so as to recruit his assistance when he did return.

As I walked up the stairs, my mind again was drawn back to the banner that Valkyries had made and the conversation we had together about the Valkyrie, this house and her some time ago. I don’t know why she wasn’t like her own kind, but that didn’t matter to me, for she was better somehow. Those other memories have a cold demeanor about them, something that my good friend doesn’t exhibit. For her tone and tenor is of the highest quality I thought.

I reached the room that I was using as my study, then sat down in my reading chair and as I did, I muttered under my breath, that maybe one day she will get the chance to see her quality the way that I do.

- Archmage Guildmaster

Chapter 3

The Littlest of Angels

The next day Kumara returned to the house but riding a large black and white dire wolf. With him were new recruits or so I assumed. I was out pacing near the ocean, thinking through all the small details as to do my due diligence. Once I noticed Kumara in the distance, I eagerly waited for him to be within the range of my voice. “Well met travelers and Kumara”, I said.

The massive wolf that carried the ancient dragon in human form, slowed its advances until it came to a stop a foot or two in front of me. I cautiously took a retreating step back, as Kumara proceeded to dismount the mighty beast. “Archmage, this young lady here is Zara”, as he turned to help the girl down from the animal. Looking to the young girl and slightly bowed with proper introduction etiquette I greeted her. “Malady and well met” I replied. Then I looked to the other figure that walked beside them.

A gargoyle dressed in all-red, who looked rather ominous in some kind of distant, obtuse, dream-like state. Hello sir, I said to this mysterious person, then Zara walked up to me and pretended to hold out an imaginary dress-skirt at her sides, then curtsied to me in a response to my earlier salutation. Looking back down to Zara, I smiled then quickly changed views, back to the figure dressed in red garb, holding a shield and spell book and added, well met sir?

Kumara was ignoring my hesitant tone, as he was attending to the dire wolf instead, then the man dressed in red spoke up. “Well met Archmage, my name is Valentine and I have come to lend my aid to Kumara and with your quest as well”. Kumara looked over to me and told me that “this is a judge Archmage, but you will know him as Saint Valentine perhaps, as it is one of his many names”. “He is an agent of Venus, my sister and has rescued this girl from the clutches of this wonderful beast here.” The dog quickly snapped to attention, recognizing he was being talked about, then let loose a loud single bark in confirmation, as if saying hello to me, while wagging his tail furiously. Startled by the display and taken back by all of this, I greeted Saint Valentine and the dire wolf. One would not want to be on bad terms with a dire wolf, especially one who could understand words, such as this one could. We all then walked inside to discuss the events that led this group back to The PAWS Soulforge.

I quickly learned that Zara was following her father, a scout of the Skara-Brae Ranger’s Guild, who was near the forest by Destard, when she got lost and found a small cave in the mountains to rest. There, she was confronted by the large dire wolf, who was alone and Zara quickly found herself in a dangerous situation. Saint Valentine said that he was led to Zara by Venus, Kumara’s ancient dragon sibling and was instructed to teach her in the ways of archery specifically.

Archery I asked, but why?

He didn’t seem to know, but did add that his mission was to confront an old friend of his and this girl was to be a side task that Venus instructed him to undertake.

Zara was in danger, so the judge rushed to her location and just in time to find her confronted by what appeared to be a rabid beast. He said that he immediately cast a spell of love over the animal, so as to calm its demeanor. When this happened, the great wolf laid down on the ground and started to whimper. Zara realized that she was just rescued from some eminent peril, but in her shock and terror, she also noticed the animal was very much injured, suffering in pain. The over-sized wolf had a missing ear and had a broken front leg. It also looked as if he had not eaten a thing for weeks. Zara carefully approached the beast and put her arms around the massive wolf. She closed her eyes and said:

“Love cures all things.”

It was at this time that Kumara had also arrived and was able to heal the wounds of the animal. He repaired the missing ear with the staff that he normally carries with him. That part fascinated me, because after Kumara infused himself with the young mage, when he first arrived to this realm, he had that staff with him. I just assumed it was a part of the ensemble of the young mage, but apparently it holds the power of Kumara’s dragon’s breath, a type of signet if you will. I dangerously thought to myself, what the Healer’s Guild would do to get their hands on this relic, then focused on the rest of the story.

Kumara didn’t stay long and left halfway through our conversation to find, then retrieve the girl’s father. He also took with him the dire wolf and Valkyries strangely kept to herself by the forge the entire time. Once Kumara had left, I quickly realized that I had forgotten to converse with him about The Book of Virtues and out of reflex I rose to my feet. “Something wrong”, the judge inquired. As if broken from the striation of my thoughts, I turned to him and said, no, then apologized. Please continue.

Zara and Saint Valentine finished recounting the story and of her rescue, then how it was that they both came to be sitting here at The PAWS Soulforge. “Well then”, I said, looking to Saint Valentine. That is quite the tale. I briefly remembered Valkyries’ words about Kumara, that “he will return exactly when he needs to be here”, then considered that the need of this hour was to assist the judge with confronting this friend of his.

Who is this old friend of yours, that you speak of, since he is clearly our focus now, I asked. Saint Valentine replied, “another judge by the name of Nicolas”.

Saint Nicolas? I catechized.

“Yes”, replied Valentine.

By confront, what do you mean, as in kill?

“Perhaps”, the judge affirmed.

We are going to kill Santa Clause? This has to be some kind of folly, I demanded.

As soon as I said this Zara became wide-eyed in terror and yelled out, “no!”.

“Don’t kill Santa!”

Saint Valentine continued by saying that “Nicolas has changed over the years and has somehow become corrupted with his consumed hatred”. This does not bode well I thought to myself and being perplexed by this revelation I asked how we would even find him to begin with? “I don’t know, but since we are in his season, I am sure it won’t be too difficult a task” Valentine answered back. “Perhaps we should speak to Kumara about these matters, once he returns”, said the judge. Yes, but in the meantime, this might make a good opportunity for you to acquaint Zara with the bow and arrow, I suggested back. Valentine then gave me his approving nod to my counsel.

Kumara was gone for two days and so far during that time Zara was learning how to use the bow and arrow from Valentine. She was too weak to pull the string back all the way and the arrows only flung pathetically a few feet in front of her. I felt bad for the girl as she trained with the master bowyer. Perhaps she needs a smaller, less powerful draw, I suggested to the judge. Valkyries overheard me say this and acted on her own accord. She decided to make Zara a bow more appropriate for the girl and it was during this time that one of the memories in the house spoke up. The memory of the Ranger uttered the phrase “Twenty-Twelve”. That was immediately followed by the memory of the Bard saying, “Zara”.

Valkyries looked over to me, while Saint Valentine and I were trying to process what was just said. This is when I noticed the expression on the judge’s face, for he normally carries with him a solemn and obtuse look about him. Saint Valentine was in shock and even more puzzled than I often was accustomed to being myself. Clearly, he knew something that the rest of us didn’t know. I inquired to his condition, so as to learn what he was not saying out-loud. “Archmage, the book that Kumara gave you to research, Hathor’s Logic Matrix.”

“Do you have this nearby”, he asked.

Yes, I replied, but why?

To which he instructed me to “look up the number twenty in that journal and tell me what it says”.

I did as he requested and the number twenty seems to represent “The Book of Angels”, which we don’t have, but there were a few notes assigned to this specific tome written by the Old Ones, in the copied journal of Hathor. The Archangel is represented by the number 2, the angel is represented by the number 4, the paladin is represented by the number 6 and the Valkyrie is represented by the number 8. I looked over to Valkyries and asked her what the number 8 means to her, in which she responded by saying, “I’m sorry Archmage, I have no idea-really, but I would be interested in knowing this information as you are.”

After the information was relayed to Saint Valentine, he paused briefly as to work through a difficult problem in his head, then he looked over to Zara and gave her his smile. “Young lady”, he said, “we are going to need to get you comfortable with a composite bow instead.” Confused by his words, Zara asked the only question that we all were thinking at the time, as she asked:

“Why?”

“Valkyries, can you construct a composite bow and also a brace for little Zara to wear on her arm.”

“Something that she could use to assist with the heavy compound mechanism of a more advanced draw, so as to allow her to train with that weapon style in lieu of these events”, he asked. “I think I can figure something out”, Valkyries responded, but in a confused delayed tone.

“Wait, what is going on”, Zara interjected.

“I am sorry little girl, I do not want to divulge the meaning discovered by these memories in case I am wrong, but If I am right, I do not want to do anything to prevent whatever is supposed to happen from happening. Let’s begin your studies tomorrow once Valkyries has finished her work for you, shall we?” Zara agreed and Saint Valentine left The PAWS Soulforge, saying that he would be back the following morning.

Sometime later, Zara was getting restless as any child in a new and strange place would find themselves to be. She wanted to go explore the rest of the house and asked Valkyries for her permission. Valkyries nodded in her direction, as she continued her work at the forge and the girl was gone up the stairs to look around. Valkyries peered over to me and I raised my eyebrows at her, then asked if it was safe for her to wander around the house by herself. Valkyries shrugged off the question and said, “death and corruption have no power here in this place, so she is quite safe Archmage”. Then I directed my other question to her, that I was holding onto, when I asked:

“What do you think Valentine had discovered about Zara?”

Valkyries started to think about the question and seemed to get lost in her thoughts, then she looked up to her banner that I had admired earlier and began to cry.

Dear friend, what is the matter?

Valkyries looked to me and smiled, then said “a memory came to me Archmage, not of the girl Zara, but of my past”. “I don’t know what this all means, but it seems very important, both the memory I just witnessed and what the judge is keeping to himself.”

I did not press Valkyries further on this issue, as she was clearly upset, then I pondered the banner once again, to study the pattern on the flag more closely than I did before.

This is when I noticed the small flames that each angel was holding in their hand. Those flames strangely resembled that of a dragon and I made note of this, as being somehow odd, but also perhaps important in some unknown way.

Sometime later, Zara returned and beckoned Valkyries to pay her attention, so Valkyries did.

“What is it”, Valkyries asked.

“Well mam, I was thinking since the holiday season is upon us, that we could decorate the attic and put a tree up there, since there isn’t anything in that space anyways.” “It is completely unused”, she added.

Valkyries finished working on the arm mechanism and turned to Zara and asked her to try on the device. As Zara was attempting to figure out how to put her arm through the contraption, Valkyries smiled and answered her previous request.

“I don’t see why we can’t do that.”

“A Christmas display in the attic, does seem most appropriate and I think that is a grand idea Zara.” “Let me see what I can come up with and in the meantime, I arranged you a place to sleep near the forge, where it will stay warm for you throughout the entire night.”

“So, get some rest Zara, for tomorrow is a new day, full of many new discoveries.”

This seemed like a good time to retire for the evening myself, so I wished the lady’s a good-night and headed upstairs to fall asleep, reading as I normally did from my reading-chair. Again, as I walked up the stairs, I peered over to the banner that was propped against the wall. I knew that somehow this artifact that Valkyries created was bound to her in some highly significant way. I would make sure to ask Kumara about the white dragon specifically, which was depicted in the field of lilies, presiding over the world formation. For surely Kumara would know who that might be.

- Archmage Guildmaster

Chapter 4

Alania's Task

During the night I was awoken by a commotion playing in front of me on the second-floor balcony. Quickly I spoke the words of light, to brighten the dark spaces. It must be very late at night, because all of the candles had all gone quiet and the air had turned to its' cold and uninviting ways. As my eyes adjusted to the chaos unfolding in front of me, just passed the curtains into the frigid exterior, I could make out Valkyries and someone else. Valkyries had a mysterious figure in a black death robe pinned against the railing, with a sword to the throat of this stranger. My eyes were now fully focused and my senses rapidly turned to panic, as I could make out a black dagger drawn against Valkyries' stomach.

"What is the meaning of this" I demanded, as I raised up out of the chair, I was in.

The mysterious figure, said in a playful women's voice: "This is the Night's Kiss", referring to the dagger she was holding.

"My lovely Valkyrie, are you sure you don't want to taste its' warm embrace"?

Valkyries quickly rotated the sword she was holding and with a flick of her wrist slapped the women's hand with the flat part of the blade. As the dagger was knocked to the ground, Valkyries then rotated the sword, she held, back up to the throat of this intruder and all within a single motion.

Valkyries replied, with her bone chilling determination:

"I am quite sure".

The mysterious figure opened the palms of both hands and surrendered her advances. "O.k., O.k., mercy-please." "I didn't come to fight, but instead I came to deliver a gift to the girl and that is all."

Valkyries was not convinced and stepped closer, which prompted the woman to yell out, "Venus!".

"Please, Venus sent me", she said.

I began to walk closer as the scene was playing out and Valkyries let loose of the grip over the woman in black, when she heard the name of Kumara's sister. She left her sword at the ready, as she took a few steps back.

"I am sure the girl does not want any gift you could offer", Valkyries responded.

"It isn't from me" and as she said this, the woman produced a pure white lute from under her death robes. "Venus instructed me to retrieve, then deliver this thing here to the girl who sleeps on the first floor, so that is what I did."

Valkyries took the lute from the mysterious figure while the women in black collected her weapon and suddenly, she noticed the memory of ImaNewbie, standing beside her. She stopped in mid-motion as if she had seen a ghost and was frozen in-time, but only for an instant.

“What is the meaning of this here”, the stranger demanded.

Clearly her tone had changed and she was quite upset by what she saw. Just then the memory with the Shepard’s crook next to Ladon spoke the word, “Pride”, startling the women.

The mysterious figure now free from Valkyries’ grasp and her weapon collected, proceeded to jump over the balcony and vanished into the night. As Valkyries ran to the railing and leaned over, we both could hear the strange woman in the distance, yelling through the blackened woods and in the dead of night:

“Adieu-adieu, parting is such sweet-sorrow, that I shall say good-night till it be the morrow, or whenever my little Valkyrie” and like that, the mysterious figure was gone.

Silence had filled the air once again and Valkyries turned to face me. Never a dull moment, I noted to Valkyries as I walked over to examine the lute in her hands. “There is an inscription on this Archmage”, Valkyries pointed out to me, as I Leaned in to take a look. I read the word “Lolo” and as soon as I did the memory near us said, “compassion”. I looked up to Valkyries and said Lolo is the Champion of the Virtue of Compassion and this must be his lute. “I hope that wretched thing didn’t steal it from him then”, Valkyries commented. It is very much possible that she did, but she did say it was from Venus after all. Valkyries took a closer look at the lute and said that she “didn’t sense anything evil about the instrument, but quite the opposite”. After a small pause, her normal warm demeanor returned to her and she added that “It should be safe to give to Zara”.

I returned to my chair, as Valkyries left the room. I spoke the words that removed the light that brightened the dark spaces and there I sat, thinking about the chaotic events that just had transpired. I re-summoned the words of light again, found my dagger and held that close to my chest. I looked around the room and listened far and deep into the silence, waiting to hear any indication of any kind of sound at all. After convinced I would hear nothing more, I realized how tired I was and undid my spell once again to finish my slumber, while clutching my dagger ever so tightly.

- *Archmage Guildmaster*

Chapter 5

The Smallest of Things, But the Mightiest of Gifts

“Archmage Guildmaster”, I could hear coming from the castle grounds, for I was being summoned by Lord British. I set my peacock quill pen on the table and looked down to the book I was scribing.

“Archmage Guildmaster”, Lord British again called from outside the window of my study. Looking up and then back down to my book, I realized that the tome was empty still, for I must have been day-dreaming and nothing had been written at all. I let loose a sigh. I didn’t have time for this, I thought, as I hurried to the window. “Archmage, come and look”, Lord British said again, but now coming from the hallway outside my place of literary sanctuary.

I turned and hurried over to the oak and ironclad door, to see what the lord of the castle required of me. “Archmage” as the words where directly behind me now instead. I turned to find no one standing there, then the walls of the room began to fade around me.

What was going on, I wondered.

“Archmage, come and see”.

I heard the call, but I could no longer make out my surroundings, for I was now consumed by darkness.

I felt a stark jostle and tug and I forced my eyes to open. I was waking to Zara who was excited about something and she was pushing and pulling on my arm. “Archmage come and see what Valkyries did”, she said and “hurry Archmage” she added. I began to gather myself and my bearings, then realized that I was in a desperate need for a cup of coffee. Coming to my senses, I replied to Zara. Whatever dear child, are you clamoring on about.

“Upstairs, the Christmas room, it’s amazing”, Zara answered.

Zara led me passed the fireplace and to the stairway to the first floor, but was directing me to look in the opposite direction, where the dusty ladder lay fastened against the wall. I looked up to the hatch, to the next level up, the attic above us, that she was expecting me to go explore.

“Go and see Archmage”, Zara declared.

I climbed up and opened the hatchway at Zara’s request to enter the dark cobwebbed place, to only find no cobwebs or a dark place waiting for me at all. I entered the room to find Valkyries standing there, then I looked down as she handed me a cup of coffee, of which she prepared for me, waiting there for my arrival patiently. I smiled and thanked my friend, as I took the cup from her, then indulged in a sip. I was trying to take in the entire room, when Zara said, “isn’t it beautiful”. She had followed me close behind, into the once dingy and abandoned space. “I wish my dad were here to see this”, she continued on.

I looked around the attic and the entire room had been transformed into, as the child had said, a Christmas room and it was amazing, as the girl had also said. A snow-white tree in the center, bustling with presents underneath it. A beautiful large carpet lay underneath as a backdrop and somehow Valkyries had managed to install a large grand piano in the room, with an elegant golden candelabra flickering next to it. I looked over to the Valkyries, then the piano and then to the small hatch on the floor behind me.

“It was already here Archmage”, Valkyries said with a smile. Of course, as I returned a smile back and continued to gaze upon the room. Nutcrackers, a rocking horse, a stocking that hung from the fireplace, fine tapestries of holiday-cheer. There seemed to be no detail left unattended and I have never seen anything like this before. I noticed the couch in front of us, as that looked to a good place to take in the rest of the beautiful Christmas room that Valkyries had created. There were presents on a large table, scented candles and then I noted the lute from the previous night, laying on top of one of the packages underneath the tree, as I sat down.

Zara noticed two angels on top of two small miniature trees at the front of the room, then asked Valkyries about them. Valkyries replied to her: “I am pleased you have asked about these angels, as they are very important where I come from”. The angel on the left is the Archangel Destiny and the one on the right is the Archangel of Angels, simply known as Angel. They are the lieutenants in the grand army of Kumara”. They are the Archangels that hold up the pillars of the world and the ones that I have depicted on my banner as well.”

Zara was fixated on the two angels as Valkyries continued with her rendition of the accounts of the two beings and to be honest so was I. Especially since context had been added to the banner downstairs that I was so curious about.

“Together these angels are known as the Archangel of Destiny of the Angels” and they are the first angel. “They oversee all angels everywhere and are assigned to protect both of the pillars of the realms of mankind”, Valkyries continued.

“Are they powerful”, Zara asked.

“Yes” replied Valkyries.

“Are they more powerful than you Valkyries?”, Zara continued on.

“Of course,” said Valkyries.

Taking a sip from my cup of coffee, I could tell this line of questioning would carry on for a while. “What are the two pillars?”, the young girl then inquired.

“My sisters Hathor and Venus”, replied Kumara.

“Sire!”, as Valkyries kneeled before kumara.

I looked over to find Kumara standing near the hatch, with his impeccable timing and regal demeanor. “Daddy!”, Zara shouted-out, as next to Kumara a ranger-scout was produced. The ranger dropped to a knee and embraced his little girl and hugged her tightly when she ran to greet him.

“I was so worried about you”, he commented.

I decided that this would be a good time to stand up and greet Kumara, then the ranger-scout. Kumara looked around the room and said, “you have been busy my dear and you have done very well as always”, as he directed himself to Valkyries. “Thank you, milord”, Valkyries replied, as she stood to her feet. Yes, I chirped in, this room is fantastic, then the ranger-scout looked around the room and also re-enforced the same sentiment.

“I hear that young Zara had a visitor last night”, said Kumara.

Right-right, you are, I mumbled and then I reached down to pick up Lolo’s lute. “I had a visitor last night?”, the young girl asked, puzzled with Kumara’s question. I explained to the party what had happened as I handed Zara the white-Lute and as I continued with the story Zara went to sit down with her father on the couch. A few moments later, I was interrupted by the girl when she said out-loud that “I don’t know how to play”. We all turned to see her examining the lute, kicking her feet back and forth, while she sat on the couch with the ranger-scout.

“Why don’t you give it a try, just play from the heart and I’m sure it will be perfect” Kumara noted with a smile. Zara looked down at the lute and then to her father, who gave her a re-enforcing nod. After examining the instrument for a moment to determine how she was to make it work, Zara rotated the lute to its’ side and sat it facing upward, on her lap. She placed both hands on the lute and was attempting to play the instrument, as if it was a piano. That was a rather odd thing, I made note to myself, then Zara began to pluck the strings with both hands. Somehow, she produced a little melody and it sounded remarkably unfamiliar, but quite good actually. Another odd thing that I made note of. When Zara finished playing, I witnessed an unlocking sound and I instantly recognized the noise. The lute had a spell-lock on it, which must have been deactivated by her playing that tune.

How could she have known?

How strange indeed I noted, as I walked over to take a closer look at the instrument again.

Zara started to inspect the lute and then began to shake it ever so slightly, which revealed a noise of some tiny object that was moving freely inside. She turned the lute upside down and a pendent fell out. I sipped my coffee and took a few steps closer, then leaned in to see what it was. She held up a white necklace with the ankh of spirituality on it, but with some kind of formation at the other end that I struck me as quite peculiar.

“What do I do with this”, Zara looked over to me and then to Kumara. “Wear it for good luck”, Kumara replied and so Zara did.

- Archmage Guildmaster

Chapter 6

Krampus Claws Is Coming to Town

Zara was sitting on the rocking horse in the Christmas room, strumming the lute and pretending to play her horse a melody as it rode gallantly on whatever course she had set for the two of them in her mind. Valkyries had returned to operate the Dragon Soulforge, Kumara had ventured downstairs to converse with the memories of his brother Ladon and me and the ranger-scout sat on the couch sharing stories of our long past adventures. Time passed us by as a snow globe might dance to its' finale, slowly and effortlessly, until the last snowflake had found a place to land.

The brief moment in the room that Valkyries had created for us was a welcome escape into the sublime illusion of tranquility, but suddenly that dream would be disturbed by the dire wolf that was outside The PAWs Soulforge, for it began to growl and bark feverishly. Alerted by the great beasts' massive and deep tone, we rushed to meet the animal, who was clearly sounding some kind of alarm.

In the far-away distance and abruptly, a menacing laugh echoed through the woods and we all stood there trying to process this new threat, as if trying to recognize what was making that awful sound. the ranger-scout turned to us, then said he would go investigate. He looked to his daughter, instructed her to "wait here where it was safe-and Zara, do not follow me this time", he said. The ranger-scout then sprinted off, to do his reconnaissance, as a ranger-scout could only do.

I looked to Kumara and asked if we should go with him. Kumara mounted the dire wolf and said, "no Archmage, I should wait here for now, but you should take little Zara to be with her father". Confused by this reply, I questioned why he would stay behind, if we were to go as he suggested.

"I cannot interfere with what happens next Archmage", Kumara said in response. Then Zara interjected and proclaimed that "my dad said to stay here".

Kumara looked down at the child and smiled. "Do you want to wait here Zara?"

"No, but I have to", she fired back.

Kumara agreed that she should mind her father, but in this exact moment she should decide her own path and only she alone could determine that course, but her decision must be made at the present.

"Let your heart speak your mind." Kumara added.

Valkyries came out of the house and handed Zara her composite bow and arm-brace, which she had made for her the previous day. Zara took the items from Valkyries and started to cry.

"I can't fight, I don't know how and Saint Valentine never came back to finish the training".

“Do not be scared” Kumara replied, “but you need to decide at this moment and your decision needs to be yours alone to make” he insisted again. Zara looked down at the brace and then to the bow. She peered up to where her father had run off, in the direction of this unknown danger, then back down to the mechanism that Valkyries had given to her.

Another menacing echo could be heard and Zara proceeded to equip the arm-brace. On that cue, I summoned my horse to take the poor girl to meet whatever end was at this conclusion. I paused briefly and thought that perhaps my own conclusion, also lay ahead.

I could tell Zara was very scared, for she held onto me as tight as she could as we rode off into the distance. A few moments later, another demonic scream echoed through the forest, but even louder and I flinched in my startled state, almost dismounting myself in the process. I quickly realized that I was also terribly frightened.

The nightmarish echoes were growing in frequency and with intensity. What could possibly be making that noise, I wondered. As we made our way towards our foreboding destiny, I could make out the sound of a large battle taking shape. “don’t be scared Archmage, we need to find the courage to be brave right now”, Zara spoke to me. As she did, her words caught me off-guard. I instantly found myself inspired by her selfless offering of hope, but also my cowardice thoughts convicted me simultaneously. How could I possibly be concerned with my own fears, for Zara was also managing the very same situation as I. So, I abandoned my self-obsessed inclinations that produced a brief stay of weakness inside of me, then I promised myself that I would not let anything happen to her, whatever the cost.

I instantly found my courage again, so with this covenant I found the resolve to steady my senses, restore my wits and focus on the task at hand. I readied my defensive spells and cast a blessing on the both of us, as we rode to meet this threat together.

Just ahead, I could make out the screams of men dying and then suddenly the horse stopped. I kicked my heels into the side of the summoned creature but nothing transpired, for the horse would not move. How is this possible, I muttered. I looked up and in front of Zara and I, was Saint Valentine. He was operating his hands in some strange gesture, creating or drawing some kind of repeating circles in the air and then the horse vanished as we collapsed to the ground in an unsuspecting thud.

“What is the meaning of this”, I demanded.

“We need to approach on foot”, the judge proclaimed.

Saint Valentine then reached down, next to him, to pick up a bag that was laying there and then tossed it towards our direction. “It is daemon-bone armor”, the judge said, as he set about to answer the question that had yet to be formed. “It is for Zara”, he proclaimed.

That was quite the rare set of armor I thought and then realized that it might just be of some great-use for the girl, as to protect her from any demons that may lie ahead. Again, the hideous laughter rang out, freezing me where I lay, briefly in terror.

“Zara, put on the armor”, I demanded.

“Quickly child”, I insisted and so she did.

The three of us eventually approached the battle playing out and then I asked the judge how we should proceed.

Valentine?

I quickly peered to my left, then my right and then I stood up and turned around from my crouched position. I realized that Saint Valentine was nowhere to be found, for he was gone. He had vanished as if he never existed and so I looked to Zara and said with great apprehension, that it looks like it will just be the two of us for now.

When we reached the edge of the battle, I could make out only two men that were left standing, while the road was littered with bodies. A tamer, whose pet was also dead and Zara’s father, the ranger-scout who was peppering some horrific monstrosity with arrows. Just then the beast turned and crushed the tamer where he stood, as the monster’s strike collapsed his body into the ground, with one fell swoop. The display of violet cruelty put me in brief state of shock, for to see someone’s life taken so effortlessly and with a great suddenness, in such a grisly display, was difficult to process.

“Santa Clause, no!”, screamed Zara

The ranger-scout realized that his little girl had disobeyed his orders, when he heard his daughter’s voice.

He hastily cried out in return, “Zara run!”.

This demonic being turned and laughed an evil-laugh then said:

“Krampus Claws Is Coming to Town”.

He threw his hands into the air and began to summon a small group of his demonic minions, like some kind of twisted version of elves. They made sickening childlike noises of great-evil, then rushed the ranger-scout and overwhelmed him immediately.

“Zara screamed out in terror, “nooooo!”

She set out to sprint to her father, but I stopped her, for I knew the ranger-scout was now dead. The minions turned their attention to us and proceeded to give us the same treatment as Zara’s father.

Zara readied her composite bow, while sobbing uncontrollably and she was barely able to hold onto the weapon that Valkyries had made for her. Her state of grief was a great source of weakness and at the worst possible moment. The minions ran towards us, so I created an energy shield around myself, then yelled for Zara to get inside the protective aura quickly and with haste. The minions reached Zara first, but she was too heartbroken to move.

When they did reach her, they stopped and one by one, each minion laid candy-canes at her feet, as a type of offering. As soon as they finished their mannerisms, the demonic minions quickly ran off into the

woods and not so much as laid a hand on little Zara. What an incredibly odd thing to witness and I briefly considered that the daemon-bone armor somehow was the result of this.

My mana had absolutely run its course and in my old age, I realized I was not the useful companion in the field that I once was. I readied my dagger, my last line of defense and stood in front of the girl, pushing her behind me. The demon laughed with a hideous echo and then it spoke again:

“Your armor cannot protect you from me little girl”.

It then planted one foot forward and leaned in towards us and screamed pure violence into our direction. The overwhelming bellow slung a vicious wave of hate to the both of us, which knocked us down in a great and tumultuous crash. Zara fell backwards and broke her bow and the mechanical device on her arm was also damaged. It was clear to me, as I looked up, that Zara was hurt, so I picked myself up and crawled over to her side. I began to contemplate that this might be our end, then searched for my dagger.

It is a rather interesting notion, looking back to events of great pain and suffering, for how slow everything plays out, as if the wheels of time itself took notice and paid its full attention. The smallest of details present themselves and not a thing can hide or be forgotten. Those small flickers of existence share something of great significance with the moments of our lives that produce a great victory or triumph and for the very same reasons. Both command every one of our senses, so we can mind those perceptions, so we can feel, see and listen with absolute clarity.

Sometimes, those events of great pain and suffering are also the exact same moments of our life that is of a great victory or triumph, for this was one of those moments.

A loud snort from a horse could be heard on the road directly behind Zara and I. I instantly responded to the sound and looked over my shoulder to find Valkyries on her winged companion, with its beautiful rainbow mane, tussling in the soft breeze. There she sat, alone on the road, wearing her blue gem-stone encrusted armor and holding her banner in her right hand. The horse lifted its head up in the air and stomped its hoof on the ground while its wings kicked up the soft dirt below them. Valkyries did not even so much as flinch in her posture, then she held her banner high in the air for Krampus to see and intensified her gaze at the demon. I recognized that bone chilling determination of hers, for it was the same one she gave to me when I first summoned her and I instantly knew Krampus was in for a fight.

Krampus yelled to Valkyries:

“You are out of your place here Valkyrie, for this not your boundary and not your season”, the demon decreed.

As I started to help Zara back up to her feet a familiar voice came from behind Krampus that gave the demon his response.

“No, but it shall be my boundary...Nicolas”.

Krampus turned around to see Saint Valentine hovering above the ground behind him and then I quickly peered down to the girl to make sure she was not too badly injured. The demon howled at Valentine

and then the judge began to draw in the air, like he had done before. His fingertips this time were like the pen of a master story teller, set ablaze with bright ruby-sparkles enveloping his hands, as he crafted his masterpiece. A moment later, a smile began to prop-up my frown, for I realized what he was drawing and briefly predicted the outcome.

He was creating an outline of a composite bow and then I noticed that Zara now had a brilliant ruby gem-encrusted bow in her tiny hands. Somehow this magic that Valentine wielded fabricated in her possession, the weapon that had intended to create for her this entire time.

Krampus turned to our direction in shock and disbelief. When he realized the danger that was in store for him, he started running toward us frantically, while screaming mind numbing blasts of evil shrieks. My smile abruptly changed to a different tone, that of panic and fear.

Fire your arrow Zara, I lamented as Krampus raced to our position.

Shoot the bow, I yelled, as Krampus was soon upon us.

I resummoned my energy shield with whatever little mana I had left around both the little girl and I, then Zara raised her arms, steadied the ruby-bow and gripped onto it as tightly as she could, to focus her aim at the one who killed her father.

“Fire Zara!”, I cried out.

Zara drew the string back and flakes of ruby dust started flickering to the ground all around her in majestic flurries. She could not draw the bow back fully, for she was not strong enough, only partially, then she said:

“Love cures all things”, as she let go of the string.

As she did a bright Ruby arrow appeared and departed from the bow towards Krampus. The Arrow slightly wobbled and then began to fall pathetically to the ground, just as before during her training back at The PAWS Soulforge. My heart sank to my stomach, as I watched in pure disbelief.

As I mentioned before, sometimes those events of great pain and suffering are also the exact same moments of our life that is of a great victory or triumph. For this was one of those moments.

I felt a small breeze to my back and then out of nowhere was a hurricane force wind of immense power landing between Krampus and our location. My energy shield was still active and we only slightly got pushed backwards. I lowered my head under my left-arm and looked away from the chaotic storm.

As quickly as it arrived, the violent winds died down and when I did look up, the dust, leaves and branches were falling back to the ground all around us and I saw laying a few paces in front of Zara, the horrific monstrosity. For Krampus was motionless on the ground and he was clearly dead.

I collapsed to one knee as my energy shield faded, completely exhausted. Zara took off her helmet, throwing it aside and sprinted to be with her father who was also lifeless. She crashed onto him and began crying and I lowered my head in terrible grief, mixed with tremendous joy that only second or two

earlier had invaded my senses. The strong emotions combining together were too much to bear, so I just closed my eyes and stayed silent.

We had won, but it had come with great cost. Too much of a cost, I thought to myself, then I lowered my head with regret for what had transpired that afternoon. It was impossible for me to see at that precise instant how any good could come from what had just happened, but thankfully, this story does not end here.

- Archmage Guildmaster

Chapter 7

Redemption Song

Krampus lay dead along with many paladins, fighters and of course Zara's father. We were no closer to recovering The Book of Virtues and all this seemed like a massive unnecessary set back, as I kept my head lowered, unable to look up to see Zara grieve.

"Good job Archmage", I heard from Valkyries as she carefully walked her horse next to me, as if she was walking through a graveyard, because she was. Valkyries dismounted from her elegant stead and kneeled by my side. She put her arm around me and leaned in to whisper into my ear.

"It's a shame no one is operating the dragon soulforge right now", she said.

I looked up at her and she smiled at me, then I noticed Kumara, for he was entering the battlefield himself. He rode in on the black and white dire wolf, right when he was needed, with his impeccable timing and regal demeanor, as usual. Kumara got off the great beast and walked over to a tree far in the distance from my vantage. I could make out something embedded in the trunk and I realized it was the arrow from Zara's composite bow.

But how?

The arrow must have gotten stuck in that tree and somehow pierced through the demon by the assistance of the hurricane force winds, from some unclear point of origin. I began to think about this at great length, but I could not come up with any reasonable explanation. Kumara pulled the arrow from its temporary resting place, but as he did, I noticed some other object that was attached to it. Kumara walked over to me specifically and as he marshaled, I could make out the second item that he carried, for it looked to be a heart. It was not like any heart that I have ever seen before, because it was pure black in nature, yet that must be the heart of the demonic creature Krampus.

I thought-quickly as Kumara approached my position, that if this arrow pierced the heart of Krampus, as it clearly had, then that shot was one in a million and completely unlikely. Still, there lay Krampus dead in front of me and in Kumara's hand was his very heart.

How could this even be possible?

"This is a Heart Blackened by Despise Archmage and this arrow is Cupid's arrow of twenty-twelve", Kumara said as he stopped at my foremost position. He presented both of the items to me and expected me to take them. Twenty-Twelve, there was that number again, I thought. "Hold onto this heart, as I have a feeling it may be of some great use to us while we search for my brother", Kumara instructed.

I nodded and took the items as Kumara turned his attention to where Zara was and I watched as he casually accompanied her by kneeling down beside the ranger-scout, who was being covered by little Zara, consumed with her misery. After a moment he began to speak and as he did, I paid strict attention to his words.

“Your love has conquered the corruption here today Zara and as you have restored the heart of all virtues, so will I restore the hearts of those that have fallen here today”, Kumara whispered to little Zara.

She looked up, still suffering from her loss and Kumara took his dragon signet, the staff that he normally carries with him and placed it on her father’s forehead. As he did, a jolt of life entered the body of the ranger-scout and in a blink of an instant, the dead and recently departed was once again among the living.

“Papa!” Zara cried out and she broke down in tears of joy.

“Zara my girl”, the ranger-scout replied, in a weakened state and they both embraced each other with a hug.

Kumara stood up and walked to the middle of the battle field and one by one he attended to the dead. As he ambled his way through the carnage his signet breathed life back into the fallen. I watched with Valkyries in absolute delight as the brave paladins and fighters returned to the living. I turned to Valkyries and said, yes, what a shame no one was operating the dragon soulforge indeed, with a beaming smile on my face.

Thank you, my good friend, I said to Valkyries and we both looked on, across the once desolate view, at the wonderful scene that we now witnessed instead. One by one the deceased were brought back to life and as they were, they quickly began to check themselves and each other for wounds, damage or any sign of injury. Once it became clear no one was suffering from any ailments, not even a single scratch could be found, they all entered a state of celebration together.

The Paladins slowly started to gather around Kumara and took a knee in front of him. Kumara didn’t say a word as everyone else continued to celebrate and laugh in their ironically boastful ways. He waited until everyone had finished, while the dire wolf gently meandered over and sat down by his side.

Eventually the great hound, let loose a loud menacing bark from his impatience, then Kumara put his hand on the wolf’s head, to let the animal know that everything was fine, that they were entitled to rejoice. The heroes and champions, being slightly startled stopped speaking and focused on the dire wolf and then to Kumara. Zara looked up and both the ranger-scout and she stood to their feet. Valkyries and I also stood up, waiting for what looked to be some kind of announcement from the ancient dragon in human form, who wore his tabard of justice. When Kumara was satisfied he began.

“You have all fought bravely here today and each one of you have shown great courage, but only one of you had summoned that courage to be compassionate in the face of despair when all hope seemed lost.

For it takes great resolution to overcome that which is truly corrupt and full of despise, then choose compassion as your recourse”, Kumara said. “The smallest of gifts that it might seem, eventually become the mightiest of gifts in the end, for that is the nature of love and that is your nature little Zara”, as he looked down to her. “Zara”, Kumara continued.

“From this day forth, you shall be known as Zara, The Champion of the Virtue of Compassion, for you are truly worthy of such honors”. The paladins Immediately rose up in unison, then drew their weapons into the air, above the girl and shouted together:

“Zara, The Champion of the Virtue of Compassion!”.

Everyone started to cheer and repeated that phrase over and again, so me and Valkyries joined in as well.

In the distance I could make out the judge, Saint Valentine, who was not participating with the celebrations. He was looking rather obtuse as his usual demeanor, so I walked over to him to converse with him regarding the arrow that Kumara had called Cupid's arrow of Twenty-Twelve. Saint Valentine explained to me that twenty is the number of The Book of Angels and 12 is the sum of a champion of virtues, so in Zara's case her virtue was that of compassion. Instantly all the clues started to add up in my head, as I looked to the black heart that I was still clutching in my other hand. Despise, of course. That is the anti-virtue of compassion then I laughed a little, as I should have known that this entire time.

What do you know about the storm we witnessed on the field of battle I asked the judge. Clearly it picked Zara's arrow up as it was falling to the ground, for I was there to see it first hand and that arrow was destined to fall short. Yet, it pierced the heart Krampus and killed the demonic nightmare. "I don't know Archmage, but I have an idea", Valentine said in response.

Kumara walked over to me and handed me another book. I looked down at the tome and then back up to him again. From your sister I asked, expecting a confirmation of my deductions. "Not exactly Archmage", he said. "This book is a small account written by those most loyal to me, in my ranks and within my house."

I opened the book and read the title, Of Clocks & Time By: Archangel Destiny of the Angels. I closed the volume and smiled at Kumara, thanking him. I will be sure to read this.

I had a feeling that the book Kumara just handed me would somehow answer my curiosity regarding the mysterious hurricane force winds. I laughed a little and thought, of course it will and then I thought about Kumara's impeccable timing, which was on display yet again.

- Archmage Guildmaster

Chapter 8

Zara's Arc of Wonder

A few scattered candy-canes, the disturbed mud and earth mixing with the blood and toil on the road, then of course the body of the defiler, Krampus, were the only indications left of a massive battle that had taken place where I stood. This site was once consumed with terror and tears, but found a cure in the unlikeliest of persons. The littlest of angels, with a heart made of pure gold, redeemed this locale and as Kumara had said, “restored the heart of all of the virtues.” I did not consider his words in detail when he spoke them or perhaps, I assumed I had already unpacked his statement in-full, as I looked upon the remains of this once traumatic event.

This story however, was not quite complete and Kumara was implying something more than the obvious when he uttered that phrase originally. For hidden behind his wisdom, that he so freely gave, was one last redeeming quality to be gifted.

I scanned the survivors and realized that Valkyries was no longer with us. She must have returned back to The PAWS Soulforge to resume her duties as the protector of the ethereal void portal and to operate the dragon soulforge.

Zara ran over to Kumara and hugged him.

“Thank you so very much”, she said and I sent a shining smile in her direction with the display.

She visited me next, dolling out her presents of hugs and cheer. We did it Zara, I explained with excitement, but she did not respond.

Zara was quiet for a moment and then spoke-up.

“Not-exactly Archmage”, as she looked down at the corpse of Krampus strewn upon on the ground. “Santa is dead you-see.” “Even though he became something else, this is still a loss that our world will not soon recover from”.

Wise words, from such a little girl, I thought and then I noticed her sentiment also piqued the interest of Saint Valentine, who started to pay a closer attention. For he had picked up on a subtle and nuanced tone, that shifted all of our conscious, but ever so slightly to that of the dead judge, Saint Nicolas.

Kumara also noticed this and with his impeccable timing said to Zara that “you are right young one, for Krampus is dead”. He walked over to reside above the corpse of the one who had been consumed by demise.

“Krampus is dead, but Nicolas remains among the living”, he said as he brought his dragon signet over the body and we all watched the power of the staff breathe life back into the disgraced saint. The mere contact of this mighty relic, the staff that he normally carried with him, transformed Krampus from a

twisted demonic being, back into a jovial fat-man with a white-beard and red over-coat. At this point everyone was closely watching with anticipation and then the recently departed, Saint Nicolas, opened his eyes.

“Stand Judge and be heard so that you may be judged in kind”, Kumara proclaimed.

The group took a few-steps back in awe, with the statement that Kumara had made. Saint Nicolas rose to his feet and lowered his head in shame, then eventually looked to the direction of Zara, the one who judged him, the one who unset his terrible march and the one that he assumed would pass her sentence on him.

“For years I have watched the world treat each other with contempt and then as they turned against each other, my bitterness formed into hatred for them.” My ire for the humans had completely swept me away, as their actions would affect me as some great poison.” “Slowly my beating heart would change into something else and as it did, I became the grotesque monster that you stood against.” A small pause ensued and then the saint continued with his testament to Zara:

“Each year it became more of a chore for me to bring cheer and good will to the people of this realm, who became ungrateful and not filled with the joy of the season. The presents I had left behind for them to explore, only incited complaints from them instead.”

“Then one day I witnessed an exchange between an unscrupulous sort named Arycke, who rode down a young girl, much like yourself, killing her for the very present I had left for her to enjoy, so I could see her smile.”

“This greatly angered me and I pulled out my “Naughty List” to scribe his name down, to be counted among those most unworthy.” “I realized once I began searching for a place to add his name too, that there was simply no more room left, for the list had become completely full.” “I lost heart that day and gave up on humanity entirely.”

Saint Nicolas walked over to Zara and kneeled before her. “You have judged me correctly young girl”, then Saint Valentine cleared his throat, as to signal for Nicolas his miscalculation. Saint Nicolas looked up to Valentine, then back to the girl and peered into her eyes very carefully. As he did, it was as if he could sense her spirit and his demeanor completely changed. He had realized that he was wrong to assume that Zara was a judge herself and when that thought had crossed his mind, he looked back-up to Valentine again. His expression begged of Saint Valentine a confirmation, then he asked:

“She is not a judge?”

“no” replied the saint.

“Zara The Champion of the Virtue of Compassion”, Kumara interjected, “for that is what she is and that is what she will always be.”

Nicolas looked over to Kumara as he spoke, then back to little Zara, who seemed a bit confused as to what was going on. The disgraced saint was overcome with joy and presented to the girl a great smile on his face, from ear to ear.

“Then my dear”, he said.

“I have something that belongs to you.”

He reached into his coat and as he did a brilliant light began to shine from whatever was tucked inside. Saint Nicolas carefully pulled out a beautifully colored snow-flake, about the size of a book and presented it to Zara.

“I have been holding onto this thing here for quite some time and its name has eluded me for the entirety of its’ stay, but no longer shall it be unknown.”

“This precious Arc now belongs to you and its’ name is to be the Star of Zara.”, he spoke.

Zara reached out nervously to receive the gift in amazement and while holding it in her hands she could make out an inscription on the star that read:

“Zara’s Arc of Wonder.”

How it got there was anyone’s guess, but when she read it, a small tear formed on her face.

Everyone leaned in closer to gain a glimpse at this marvelous artifact, that the littlest of angels now held in her hands. No one said a word as we watched the event unfold, for what could anyone add.

Zara ran her fingers across the inscription and then over her own name, etched on the star. She passed her fingers down, across the display of bright colors and lights, coming from the magnificent snow-flake, until she landed on a small anomaly. She moved her hand out of the way to examine the feature, to only find a little hole, which brought upon a puzzled response from Zara. I leaned in to get a better look at this discovery myself and then Zara suddenly seemed to recognize what she was looking at.

“The pendant!”, she blurted out in excitement.

She raced to her neck with her right hand, while still holding the star out for the rest of us to gaze upon. She reached for the pendant that she swore, that was found in the lute of Lolo, while in Valkyries’ Christmas room and that Kumara had told her to wear for good luck, which she did.

She pulled the necklace up and over her head and looked down at the end of the ankh of spirituality, then compared the feature at the bottom of the pendant to the hole on the star.

“A Key!”, she proclaimed, then looked to Kumara.

I looked over to Kumara as well, as he nodded in approval to the young girl, for he must have known this entire time.

Zara inserted the key into the star and it was a perfect match. She turned the key as carefully as she could, as to not become overzealous and impatient. She treated her task as if it was of the utmost of importance. Finally, the key made its’ turn and as it did, an unlocking sound, just as with the lute could be heard. A melody began to play, as is the way of any whimsical music box, but this was no music box.

That melody again, I noted to myself, for that was the exact same tune that Zara had played on the lute, which let loose the pendant, this key, from its' resting place. When the notes finished playing, the star unfurled as if the gates of heaven had also opened and in front of all of us. Everyone around the young champion leaned in as close as they could to gain a glimpse of what awaited.

“Woah”, Zara let loose, followed by similar sounds of astonishment from the occupants on that road that day. For this was truly an Arc of wonder. There seemed to be a whole other world inside of this one little star, with massive structures made from steel and glass. Then as if we were all flying above this place, we were ushered, hurriedly to one particular building, a strange house of some kind. Closer the star took us, until we came to a window, which then opened for the star to peer through and with it, the rest of us.

Through that window was a desk, that was also very odd in composition and I noted the tapestries on the walls. The paintings were of some kind of peculiar and unfamiliar art and then I saw it. Sitting on a corner of this desk, near the window, was a golden book with bindings that I was well familiar with. For these bindings were just like The Book of Dragons and the Necronomicon.

The Book of Virtues, I said out loud and as I uttered my words, Kumara began to speak.

“For only a true champion who is worthy may recover that tome from its resting place.” “Zara, The Champion of the Virtue of Compassion, for you are that worthy champion.” “It is through compassion and love itself that sets into motion all change throughout the entire cosmos and only through compassion may order once again be restored”, he said.

Then added: “So little Zara, claim your prize”.

Zara nervously reached out, into this unknown world with her tiny hand and recovered the book. I quickly asked to see it when she did and then she handed me the volume at my request. It was exceptionally heavy, for the bindings were made from solid gold and I was briefly puzzled that she was able to lift such a burdensome thing on her own. My thoughts didn't stay with me long however, for once Zara removed the book from its resting place, the star sealed once again in a magnificent display of lights, as a type of celebration of sorts. When the display was over, everyone changed their perspective to that of me and the book that I held in my hands. I opened the cover to find the pages completely blank and looked over to Kumara.

“The memories of my brother Ladon should be able to assist us with unlocking this tome”, he said in response to my inquisitional expression.

“Archmage it is time to conclude this portion of our quest”, as Kumara beckoned me over to speak with me in private about this matter in particular.

After a moment, Zara reached over to Saint Nicolas and put her arms around the jovial fat-man and said, “welcome back sir”.

The redeemed saint replied to her by saying that “you have saved me young one and words can never do justice to the thanks that I owe you”.

This is when Kumara reached down to help Saint Nicolas back-up to his feet and then he handed the judge a scroll and said “this is the “Nice List” judge, let’s concern ourselves with keepings records of those who are “Nice” and not so much as to concern ourselves with those who are not.” Nicolas nodded and took the scroll from Kumara. He understood that when we focus on only seeing the negative things in each other, eventually all that is left are the elements within us that breed hatred. In due course, as despise corrupts our very essence, hate will also consume us and completely.

Saint Nicolas smiled and then said, “the nature of itself begets itself”.

Little Zara added to his observation, the words that have served her well thus at the end of his counsel.

“And Love cures all things”.

Saint Nicolas and the rest of us looked down to Zara as she said this and then she continued.

“Oh, and Santa?” “Yes dear?”, replied the saint. “The holiday tree in town needs presents”, as she handed Saint Nicolas her star. “This will make a perfect display for the top of that tree and there are not many days left”, she added.

“There is much work to be done still”, as she looked up to Saint Nicolas.

Saint Nicolas replied with a jovial laugh, as he understood her implied hint, for his work was not yet complete and he, indeed, needed to get to work. Back to the business of spreading goodwill and cheer so that mankind does not so easily forget the importance of this.

“One more thing”, Zara added.

“No more killing of innocent people, for that is not becoming of who you are”, she spoke.

Again, such wise words from such a little girl, I thought to myself in admiration.

Saint Nicolas replied with a smile:

“As you wish, malady”.

- Archmage Guildmaster

Series 2 Finale

The Book of Virtues

After the events that appointed Zara as a new Champion of The Virtue of Compassion, we set about to unlock the secrets within the golden book. Kumara conversed with the memories of his brother, then summoned me to scribe down a small poem when I was ready. He then instructed me to present the work to the citizens of our realm, with a hope that we might enlist their assistance. I asked him why this was so important and why anyone who wished to be included, could be. He responded to me by saying the following:

“The PAWS Soulforge is the keeper of memories from another time, Archmage.” “Before I share with you the song of my brother, so that we might unlock The Book of Virtues, I shall share with you the song of PAWS, to provide you with the purpose, this entire time.”

The Song of PAWS

PAWS began with a dream...

To give the people a stream.

So, they could navigate the currents together...

And forge something that lasts forever.

To remember is to find your way...

And for that reason, I have this to say.

It could be big or small or anything at all, a smile is worth more than gold...

And for this-the story must be told!

And now the actors will act and the stories move on...

So, the wisdom within can strengthen this song.

For virtue is the heart and the heart needs care...

So, pause a bit, it's O.k. to stare.

To be lost in thought and removed from the fray...

And contemplate the wisdom presented this-day.

In doing so our memories become fused with this ocean...

And in that truth, we do find the clock keeps its' sacred motion.

So, to remember is to find your way...

So, no one is lost at sea this day.

Not today, tomorrow or even forever...

For this is our story that we all share together.

PAWS began with a dream...

To give the people a stream.

And that memory belongs to you as-to me...

And to others and everyone who do dare to see.

For this wisdom belongs to no one alone...

But through this understanding we march our way home.

- Kumara

I understood what Kumara was trying to do, for this is the story of our realm and everyone had a part to play. Kumara smiled at me once he saw that I understood and then asked me if I was ready to scribe down the song from his brother's memory.

I nodded and Kumara once again gave me his smile, in his usual warm but wise demeanor.

"Good", he said, "then let us begin".

The Poem of Virtues

A small girl with a heart of pure gold...

Overcame the beast that shows only when cold.

The star that was gifted, found a new home...

And presented its true nature, the virtuous tome.

The Book of Virtues and the blank pages within...

Required a champion, to put ink to skin.

For I cannot seek out and unlock this book...

Only a worthy champion must be the one to look.

So do not lose heart and please remain strong...

Through the memory of my brother, I shall sing you, his song.

Virtue is the sum of the numbers 5, 4, 6, 8 and 7...

The Champion must have truth, courage and love in this visible plane below heaven.

So as virtue is summed a new number is shown...

The episode in question is no longer unknown.

In this episode the Hero seeks an audience, with the lord...

For what you seek is held in your hand, but isn't a sword.

Where 8 splendor beauties present the lord of the house...

Their generosity make room for even the smallest of mouse.

The sum of the letters of the first word, is 5...

The virtuous champion usurps the opposite, as their prize.

the sum of the letters of the second word, is 7...

Evidence of the lord of the houses' favorite possession.

The box 4 down proclaims his final two words...

When the lord explains why the guards have their concerns.

"And all the Guards are mad at me cause they lost", that which you seek...

Through purification of this, is the only technique.

The virtuous champion must seek 6 of these items to find...

So, Valkyries and her forge have enough to fashion her bricks in kind.

And so, the book that was found contain the words of significant power...

Though, only purified by virtue will the pages begin to flower.

So, Bring me your finds and a rune to your home...

And delivered you shall receive...
the virtuous tome.

- Kumara

The End

Star of Zara

** Special Edition **

By: Palm Copenhagen

&

The PAWS Soulforge