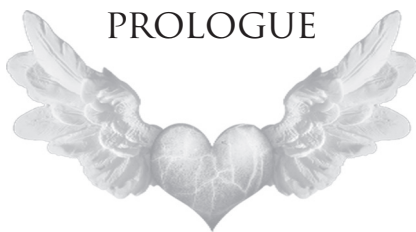


## PROLOGUE



# The Burial



THE COLD, UNBLINKING EYE of a full moon cast its gaze upon the forest floor. Its pallid light gave form to the mist that coursed like a river of smoke over the damp earth, breaking against ghostly columns of ancient oak and cedar. The wind, chilling as the touch of a blade, moved with no sound. But the stillness was broken by a rustle of footsteps, signaling the arrival of two men as they approached a glade within the heart of the forest.

The men were draped in identical dark cloaks, faces swaddled in the shadows of their hoods. They slowed as they entered the clearing. Before them stood an empty grave—freshly dug, marked by a monolithic granite headstone.

“Here it is.” One of the men drew toward the headstone. He shook his sleeve off his gauntlet to palm the stone’s surface. “Lay the coffin next to it.”

Another four men clad in the same sinister garments emerged from the darkness of the trees. Together, they bore the weight of an august wooden coffin, elaborately carved as if it carried a king. One of them lugged a burly rope with which to lower the coffin into the grave. When the men reached the clearing, they set the coffin down next to the headstone.

“The rest of the troop will arrive shortly,” said one of the two who had first entered the glade. Then the six men kneeled around the coffin, hands on their laps. The face of the casket shimmered in the moonlight like quicksilver.

“Our master is dead,” the first man proclaimed sorrowfully. “The greatest power ever known to this world has departed . . . and our invincible empire falls to rubble.”

A silence passed before the next man spoke, burying his face in his palms. “I do not understand . . .” he muttered. “He was a lich. You cannot kill the immortal!”

All eyes sank toward the coffin, as if in a unanimous resignation. “There were powers afoot within that temple that we cannot begin to comprehend,” said another man. “Our master was dabbling in forces beyond even his control. Too often did we witness their danger; it must have been no less than those forces that cost him his life.”

Before long, another wave of footsteps descended on the glade. An even larger gathering of cloaked men began making their way through the veils of tangled branches, stalwartly filing into the clearing where their master’s coffin rested. They were trailed by the last three of the men—bearers of tall, murky-gold candles that were etched with skeins of glyphs labyrinthine as the ridges of a fingerprint.

The candles were set on the ground—one at the casket’s head and one at each side of its base. As the men came to kneel around the coffin, one raised his hand and, as if by magic, with nary a touch to the wicks, the candles burst alight.

The assembly bowed low to the coffin, hoods wilting over their faces. They imbibed the fateful silence and, with folded hands, commenced their grim requiem.

“Master,” one of the men began to speak, “we are eternally indebted to you for ushering us into a new era of power and glory. Under your indomitable rule, our empire rose to conquer the mightiest kingdoms and dethrone the insolent monarchies that plague this world. You brought death and terror to our enemies; you rendered us powerful and feared by all. You always remained loyal to us, just as we remained loyal to you. You embodied the very essence of the Treus Aetherae, which you once conquered and wielded as your almighty weapon, but which ultimately turned against you in their untameable ways. Now, as we lay you down into this sacred earthen bed, we ask you, if you wish to show us—speak to us—one last time before you sleep. For even to the grave, we will always remain loyal to you, our Lord, Master, and one true leader.”

With shut eyes and fallen heads, the men awaited their master’s response. When the wind picked up and stirred the dead air, the assembly held their breath to listen, as if they were trying to divine words out of the rustling. The airstream coiled around them, cold like snakeskin; then it convulsed and burst into a squall. As the assembly opened their eyes, smiles spread across their faces.

With that sudden boast of wind, the topmost candle was knocked onto the edge of the casket. Its flame began to lick along the coffin, scoring its way up to the lid, where it lingered, burning the wood in a single place. The men gazed into the fluttering ember in anticipation, as if they expected a phantom to burst forth from the smoke, or the casket lid to lift by the hand of the corpse within. Instead, the flame moved. It drifted across the coffin, etching a faltering string of symbols into the wood. After it came still again, ashes settled in the black groove of its trail; and indeed, the symbols were letters, forming words:

***I am not dead***

The men leapt, quailed, and gasped. It was some time before anyone felt brave enough to end the silence. “I do not believe it . . .” murmured a wide-eyed man. “He truly is a lich!”

The next man laid a trembling hand on the lid of the coffin. “Master,” he quavered, “we ask you, what fate has befallen you, if you say you are not dead?”

The flame was mute at first; it appeared as if the force that had driven it were waning, unable to deliver its response. Then it moved again, creeping across the wood to produce a shivering inscription:

***I am alive  
But my soul is trapped***

“Trapped!” one man exclaimed. “How is that possible?”

“That is not important!” interjected another, raising a hand for silence, then lowering it onto the coffin lid. “You say, Master, that you are not dead, and that your soul is trapped. What can we do to free you? Will you ever live among us again?”

The flame spiked fiercely, spewing sparks. This time without delay, it scrawled a promising answer:

***When I regain my power***

The assembly fell silent for lack of a reply. Still, the flame burned staunchly, as if in expectation. “How?” one man finally asked.

The flame moved slower this time; twice, it threatened to gutter out early. But it persevered long enough to engrave, as if in a whisper, a last response:

***My future followers  
will lend their power to me***

The fire unraveled to fingers of smoke that reached for the night sky and dissipated. The followers were awestruck, bound still to their places on the forest floor. Said one of the men in a hoarse murmur, a grin flaring over his face:

“Our master, Drakathel, is alive.”