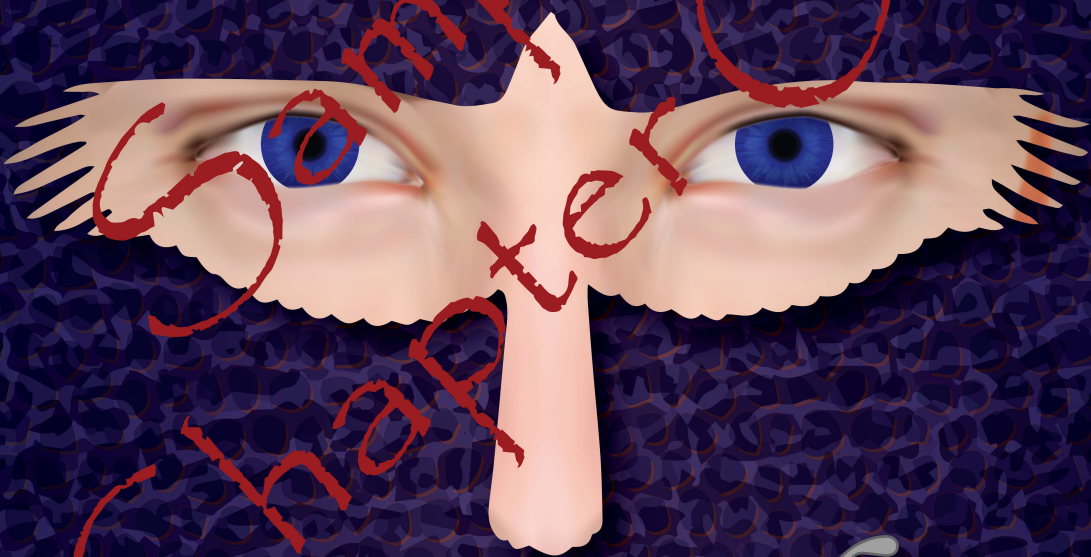


Last of the
Dragoes
Book One



Legends

By
John M. Stoddard

*Last^{of}_{the}
Dragoes
Legends*

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Last of the Dragoes: Legends

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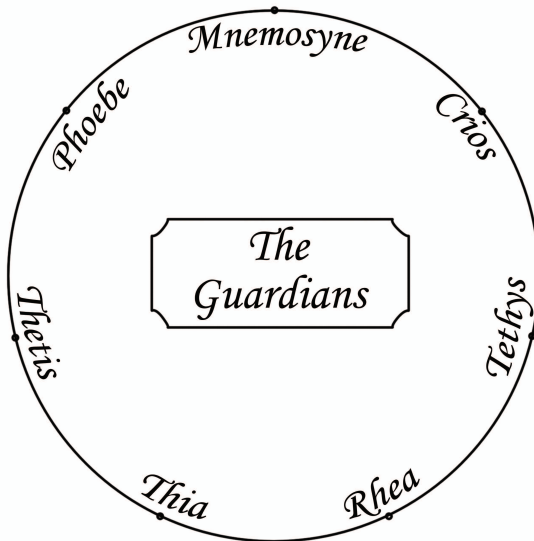
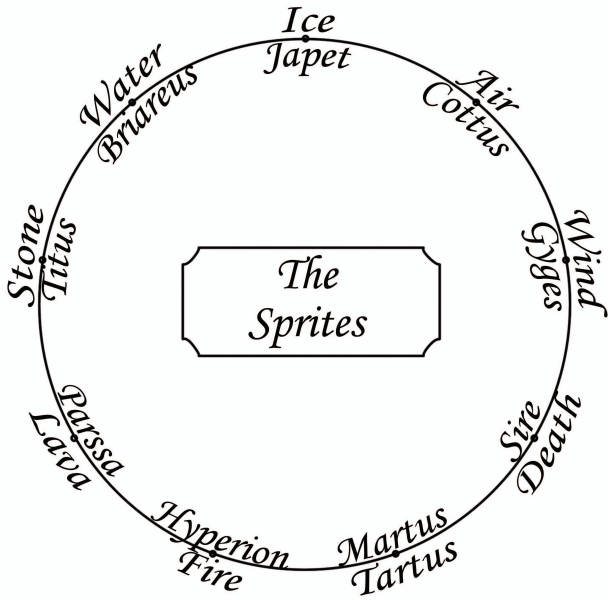
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Dedication

For Dominic Leander Stoddard,
even though your time with us was brief,
you remain engraved on our hearts forever.



The Circles of the World

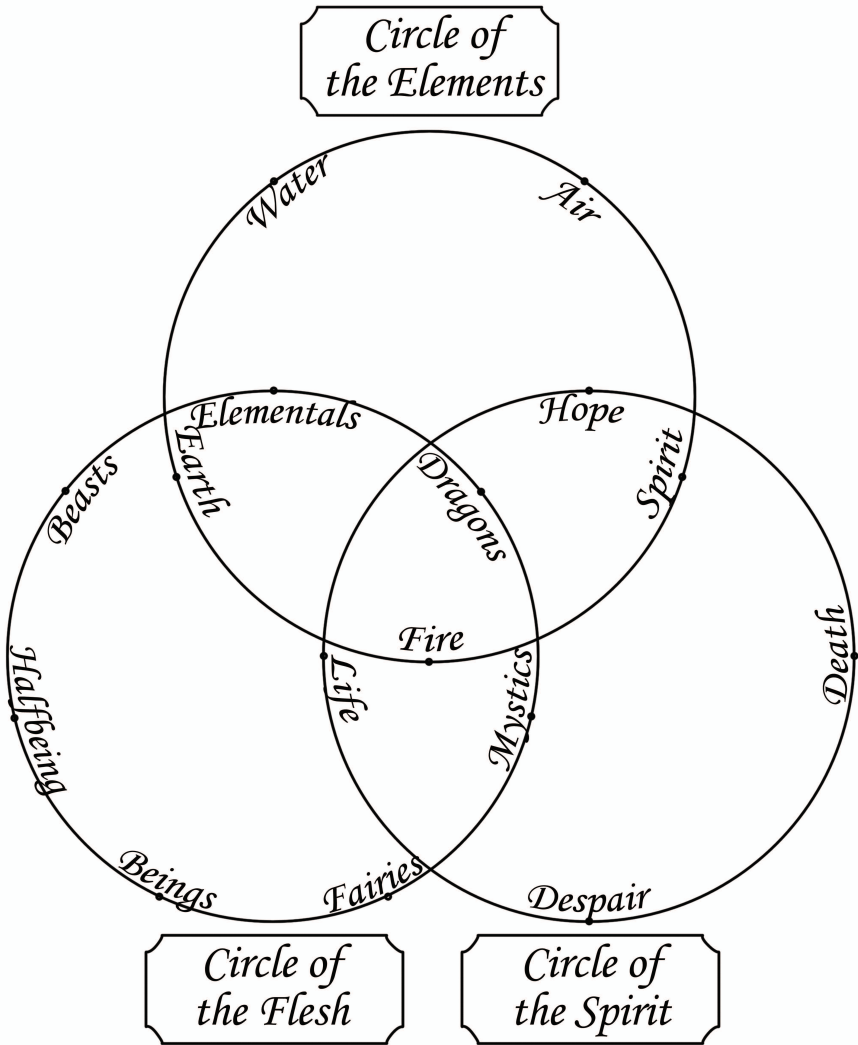


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Chapter 1

Bedtime

Date: 2005.10.34

A piercing cry of delight escaped from Koh's mouth as he entered the hall, which ran towards the kitchen. The boy was five years old, with blonde hair and crystalline blue eyes. He was almost naked, except for his underclothes and the left sleeve of his nightclothes. Over his left shoulder billowed the rest of his nightclothes as he ran.

With a laugh and a last swing of Koh's arm, his pale blue nightclothes flew into the air. Before they could land on the wooden floor, a large, firm hand caught them.

Victor Tornell, the father of Koh, was hot on the child's heels. He was a well-built man with brown medium-length hair parted on the left and his eyes matched those of his sons. A large scar marred the left side of his face, running from the tip of his eyebrow to his chin. Before the scar, he preferred to be clean-shaven, but the scar made it impossible to maintain, so he settled for a well-trimmed beard. He still wore his daytime clothes: a pale green tunic with long-sleeves, leather bracers, brown trousers, and boots.

Victor had been getting Koh ready for bed—bathed and clothed in his nightclothes. During the clothing part of this plan, Koh managed to squirm his way out of his hands. After dashing out of the bathing room, Koh bypassed the stairs and headed straight for the kitchen.

Victor watched as Koh pushed open the door, expecting his mother, but she was nowhere in sight. Without warning, Tina Tornell, Victor's wife, popped out from behind the wall next to the door. Koh let out a gasp and a giggle as his mother scooped him up into her arms.

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Tina was a beautiful woman with strange dual-hued eyes. The color at edges of her eyes was lavender, but the center was the same blue as both the men in their little family. Her strawberry-blond hair appeared more red than golden inside their home, but the opposite in sunlight. She disliked wearing dresses and only wore a tunic with trousers. Like her husband, she too was still in her daily attire: a lavender tunic with blue sleeves, and black trousers.

While Tina shifted Koh to her hip, she took a step into the doorway as Victor reached them. “You know, you said that you could get him to bed without my help.”

“I must have overestimated my ability,” Victor shrugged, “besides, that was before you said I could *not* use magic.”

As Victor held out his own hands to accept Koh, he peered into the kitchen. He saw a magical web that swept the dirt from the floor while another was washing and drying the dishes at the sink. It was exactly what he expected to find.

When Victor turned back to look at Tina, she crossed her arms under her breasts and arched an eyebrow in his direction, daring him to say anything. He responded with a sly smile crossing his face.

Tina pursed her lips in annoyance. “Those webs were already there. I only activated them,” Tina defended. “That does not count.”

Victor lifted his eyebrows in mock surprise but said nothing. After a long moment of silence, she mocked, “Do you need a second set of hands?”

“Not with that attitude, my love,” Victor jibed as he spun a web of his own that took Koh into the air.

Koh giggled and found that the web that held him aloft did not impede him from waving his legs and arms about. A mischievous grin crossed his face before he waved them wildly to discourage any attempts to put his nightclothes on him.

Victor chuckled as he spun another web that took the nightclothes into the air, too. For a moment, they seemed to float effortlessly underwater, suspended in front of him. With no warning and almost too fast to see, the arms of the nightclothes seemed to bunch together and lurched forward. Koh found he was staring through the opening for his head, while the sleeves covered his arms. With a sigh of resignation, Koh slipped his head through the opening and the rest of the garment slipped over him. Victor smirked as Koh came back into his arms.

Tina exhaled as she rolled her eyes and came closer to hug both of them and kiss her husband.

“I will put him to bed.” Tina grabbed Koh and added, “I need you to check on Zekk. He still has not come down for his supper.”

Victor saw a sheepish expression cross Koh’s face. “Koh, do you know anything about this?”

“I did not mean to hurt his feelings, but I found a mistake in his tome.”

A look passed between Victor and Tina. “I will get Zekk,” Victor agreed, “but can it wait? The falcons are waiting upstairs for the nightly wall check.”

“Yes, but directly afterwards. That should give me enough time to join you two, since I am sure Koh wants a bedtime story.”

Koh bobbed his head with pleasure. “Yes, please.”

Tina led the way down the hall and up the stairs. At the top of the stairs was a hallway and their destinations were to the left, but to the right led towards the library and Zekk’s room.

Tina opened and closed Koh’s bedroom door behind her, while Victor continued down the hall to the room he shared with his wife.

Victor looked human, and he was born to the race of humans, but human adults did not have his eye color. Every human was born with crystalline blue eyes, but on their eighth birthday, they change color. By the time they become eight-year-olds, they have been evaluated by the goddess Celestia. If the human child displayed traits the goddess valued, she blessed them with the spark of magic, which changed them and they became a member of the race of dragoes. The majority of humans knew this, but they believed that gods and the existence of other races were nothing more than legends and myths.

Like most dragoes, Victor joined, trained, and became a Master in the Order of the Dragons, but that was his old life. He had made many powerful enemies during his time with the order and he realized that he could never have a family if he stayed. Nine years ago, he left the order to try to start a family. All that remained of that time of his life was his fighting training, ability with magic, and these nightly patrols.

As Victor opened the door, he could hear the excitement in the two distinctive shrieks that filled the air. Victor walked straight through the bedroom to the annex that they used as an office. The large window on the far wall was how the falcons flew in. The glass appeared normal, but was actually a web called a dura dome that only allowed certain things through it. This one only allowed falcons. The falcons knew they could fly right through the barrier.

Victor’s two falcons, Bru and Emma, had perched on a branch he had secured to the wall. The falcons were his familiars. Emma was the

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daughter of two of his previous familiars and had inherited the position. His previous familiars were Sasha, who died three years before Koh was born, and Boris, who died a year later. Bru was the mate Emma had chosen, and he wanted to become a familiar like his mate.

Both falcons scrutinized Victor as he entered, and he grinned. “Are you ready?”

Victor sat down in his chair and closed his eyes as the falcons shrieked their responses. After a deep breath, he spoke the words in Ancient to activate the familiar web. “*Per uth thenstas usudiar.*”

When Victor opened his eyes, he had three different views of the room, one from each of them. He could see his normal perspective, but he could also see the falcon’s perspective as they looked at him in return. He had successfully merged both the bird’s eyesight and minds with his own. The first time he tried connecting with more than one familiar, it took a while to get used to the disorientation of having six eyes.

The connection also allowed for direct communication with their thoughts, separately or together. It was not straightforward though. The falcons did not think in words like Victor did, but with instincts and emotions. The bond acted as a translator between them to fully understand what was meant.

Victor settled his body into an even more comfortable position. **Let us have a look around the city to make sure nothing is amiss.** With those words, his falcons flew off their perch towards the opening.

Bru and Emma did not just fly; they soared from the opening. The pure exhilaration of the wind flowing beneath their wings always gave Victor a thrill. The multi-leveled landscape of Pentor stretched out beneath them.

Pentor was a city carved out of the cliffs at the southern tip of the Partisian Peninsula on the western border of the landmass called Dycorast. The entire peninsula had an upward slope the further it got away from the mainland, with its highest point being the top level of Pentor.

Every time the falcons flew out of his window, the sight reminded Victor of the first time he had seen this great city. A thought came unbidden to him. *By the gods, was it really over twenty years ago? It sure does not feel like it.*

At the time, Victor was five years into his training with the Order of the Dragons and he was looking forward to his upcoming birthday. He spent all his time in the company of his training master, a burly blacksmith with a kind heart. When his training master became a

master, he took the name Smith, but the name by which his family knew him was Fredric Stone.

* * *

Date: 1983.02.30

During all those years with Master Smith, Victor had heard about the city where the order had a permanent and constant presence. After hearing tales of the legendary scope of the city, the two-and-ten-year-old Victor was not impressed as they approached the city of Pentor. He understood his disappointment. Every time he asked for a description of the city, Master Smith would say that he would have to wait and see it for himself. Obviously, he was yanking his belt.

From the stories, Victor expected to see a vast city as he approached the city wall, but the only thing he could see was the wall and a lone spire. He had to admit the eight-man-high city wall was vast, with no end of it in sight. He had expected tall buildings that extended into the sky with more grandeur than other cities they had been to on their travels.

Victor felt foolish. He had been so excited when Master Smith told him about the requested meeting with the council in Pentor, but he felt it waning.

Victor noticed Master Smith looking sideways at him.

“What’s wrong, boy?” Master Smith asked in his brusque way, but there seemed to be a twinkle in his eye. “Disappointed?”

“Yeah, kind of,” Victor confessed with a shrug. “Sure, the spire is interesting, but I expected... I do not know... more.”

Laughter exploded out of Master Smith’s mouth, and the sound of it pushed Victor to become annoyed. After a breath, Master Smith asked, “What do you remember me telling you about Pentor?”

“The city was one of the many wonders of the modern world, and it was vast with everything—all the goods found in both inland and harbor cities. You are the one who told me it was indescribable, Fredric.”

Master Smith winced a little at the use of his real name in that tone. Victor knew it was disrespectful, but he was rather upset at him for making a long-lasting joke at his expense. Master Smith did not respond, and his jovial mood had vanished. Victor decided he did not want to look at him, so he looked off to the side of the road.

When the road split, each leading to the entry point of one of the three gates, Master Smith steered them to the main gate in the middle.

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Victor's eyes were looking for the cliff's edge to the east, but there was land as far as he could see. It did not make sense to him since he knew it was nearby due to how close they were to Pentor. His eyes moved southward, looking for it. An area caught his eye, where he saw an obvious line of green against a brown strip of bare earth. There was no sign of the bay that lay at the bottom of the cliff, but only the opposite land. The sight made him feel uneasy. He looked southwards to see the blue of the ocean, but there was land as far as he could see until the wall of Pentor came into view.

It struck Victor that besides the mountains; he was standing on the highest point of the entire land of Dycorast. Suddenly, not sure what triggered it, but he remembered Master Smith said that Pentor had a harbor. He felt his mind go to the logical question. *If Pentor is so high up, then how could they have a harbor?*

"Master Smith," Victor started, as he put together his question, "you said it had a harbor, correct?"

A huge smile crossed Master Smith's face, revealing that he had faked his sullenness. "That is a wonderful question. The answer is beyond the gates. Then I will finally tell you about the history of this city."

"Have you been planning this from the beginning?"

"Yes, it is traditional. Most dragoes, especially those who have never seen Pentor, get this played on them. Are you enjoying it now?"

"Maybe later. It depends on how good the payoff is," Victor stated flatly.

Master Smith chuckled, and mid-laughter he belted, "Well, I am!"

They had closed the distance to the main gate as they talked, but they had to slow to a standstill as a line to gain entrance into the city formed. The gates were not open for the day yet, though it was nearly midday. Victor realized there was no need to open the gates unless someone wanted entry.

As they waited, Victor took it all in. There were dozens of guards standing on the battlements above the wall. Two guards were searching the wagon of a farmer at the front of the line. Suddenly, the gates opened, and Victor strained his neck to peer in, but all he could see was a stone-bricked wall blocking any view of what lay beyond.

"The structure blocking your view is Pentor's secondary wall." Master Smith informed Victor to forego a question. "They designed it that way to make it safer and harder to breach."

With the gates open, the guards were hastening to get everyone through promptly. The guards were speaking to the wagon in front of them. Victor tried not to eavesdrop but could not help it.

The guard on the farmer's side of the wagon asked, "What brings you to Pentor?"

"I am heading to the market to sell my pipeleaf," The farmer stated.

The guard seemed to perk up at the statement, "Where was the pipeleaf grown?"

"I grew it on my farm in Nuess."

"Ah, nice," the guard said happily. "I was worried no one from Nuess with pipeleaf would come soon."

"Why is that?"

The guard shrugged. "Some farmers have shown up since last year and have planted pipeleaf on the western countryside inside the city wall. It is not as good as Nuess pipeleaf, and I was afraid I was going to have to suffer with it this year."

The news did not sit well with the farmer. "That raises some concerns; am I the first from Nuess that you know of?"

"No, but you are the first one with pipeleaf. I just do not want you to leave without selling me a barrel or two, that is all. I will pay your standard price, of course."

The farmer nodded. "Do you have friends that might want to buy some as well? I will need to find those who value Nuess Pipeleaf above the local blend."

"Of course, where can we find you later?"

The farmer thought for a moment. "You can find us at *The Peasant Maiden*. We will be there for two nights."

The shocked expression on the guard's face was hard to miss. He shifted a hesitant look at the teenage boy next to the farmer, nonplussed. "That's a little livelier place than I thought you would prefer."

In Victor's mind, he finished the guard's statement. *With him, he is just a boy.*

"They at least have clean rooms and low prices," the farmer shrugged. "Besides, there are worse places in the city that my boy Tarn may see."

After a second of thought, the guard understood. "Truer words have never been spoken. I will pass the word around."

The guard waved them through and turned his attention to Master Smith and Victor. Before the guard could say a word, Master Smith held out his fist to show the ring of the order on his finger. The guard stiffened, but with a half-bow, he waved them through too.

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Following the farmer, Victor thought about the barrels in the wagon. There were close to sixty barrels in the wagon and it sounded like the farmer made multiple trips. Let alone, it sounded like he was one of many to come. What did that say about how many people were in the city?

Victor compared it to what he knew. Only one farmer in Thorton, where he was from, grew pipeleaf. He would only plant it in a quarter of his field every three years, and it was only enough to fill three barrels. There were ten people that regularly smoked pipeleaf in Thorton. That meant the wagon in front them was enough to supply six hundred people with regular amounts of pipeleaf for a year or so.

As Victor walked through the gate, all thoughts of pipeleaf consumption vanished. The sight between the two walls was something he did not expect and showed how defensible the two walls were.

The gates were large enough to fit two carts through side-by-side and the space between the two walls was about the same, but the two gates did not line up with each other. They were a stone's throw away to either side, but each had a platform that extended to the other wall. The platforms were barely wider than the gate and a pit was between them. A solid-looking wood and metal drawbridge with hinges along the wall spanned the gap over the pit between the platforms. Perhaps calling it a *drawbridge* was not the right word since they could be drawn up or dropped down. Each of the side-by-side drawbridges were wide enough for a wagon to drive on. Chains stretched across the ramparts into an intricate pulley system that attached to the center corners of the drawbridges, holding them in place.

Victor felt nervous about crossing a drawbridge for the first time. He managed it by staring at the drawbridge and the platform in front of the far gate. Once through the gate and on solid ground, he let out a sigh of relief.

Realizing that Pentor was in view, Victor looked up from the ground. The full scope of the city came into view. He understood everything that Master Smith meant. The disappointment that he had felt earlier vanished completely and was replaced with utter awe.

The sight before his eyes made him think of a storyteller's pit. By digging large circles in the ground, with each level having a smaller circumference, they created a storyteller's pit. The tiers became the seats for the audience, and the deepest level acted as the dais on which the storyteller stood.

The builders of Pentor built it like half of a storyteller's pit dug right into the cliffs of the peninsula. The dais would have been where the

harbor was, while the other half of the pit opened into the air over the ocean. There were two-and-thirty different levels.

“So, Victor,” Master Smith interrupted his thoughts, “what do you think of the city of Pentor?”

“It is like the storyteller’s pit, only scaled for the gods.”

“You know,” Master Smith grinned, “I never thought about it like that, but I like it.”

Victor looked around, still in awe. The top level had a few standalone buildings scattered around, but it was basically grassland. The space from the wall to the edge was wide enough for five or six separate streets with buildings.

Victor looked to the left at a two-story wood and mud building with a thatched roof and gasped. A painted mural on the wall above the door depicted a full-figured blonde woman in her twenties. The woman had one foot on a milking stool and her dress barely covered her knee, revealing a shapely leg. The round wooden hanging said *The Peasant Maiden* in flowery writing.

Victor recognized the name as the place where the farmer was heading. He looked sideways at Master Smith, who had a smile on his face as he stared at the portrait. No, not staring, but leering—definitely a leer.

“Show me the rest of Pentor,” Victor exclaimed. “I do not want to stand here forever.”

Master Smith jumped, slightly startled, but shrugged. “This way.”

They followed the road that went straight toward the edge of the level. Halfway between the wall and the edge, there was an intersection of a road that followed the curve of the edge to either side.

Master Smith gestured for them to go to the right, while the cart in front of them kept going straight. As Victor’s eyes followed the cart, a question occurred to him. “How do they get their carts to another level?”

“Lifts.”

“What are lifts?”

Master Smith gestured forward. “You will see in a moment.”

As the curve of the road got closer to the edge, Victor realized he had a full view of the Order of the Dragons’ tower. The foundation of the tower was solid stone and started at the fifth level, but the tower’s entrances were on the middle level, or the six-and-tenth level.

Oddly, something had caught his eye to the left before the order’s tower. He looked back that way and realized it was not in Pentor at all. It was off in the distance, across the waters and inland to the southeast.

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There was a black tower that appeared to be as tall as the order's tower, but in the middle of a desert.

Victor's thoughts were too strong and blurred as he pointed. "What is that?"

Master Smith looked in the direction that Victor was pointing. "That, my boy, is the abandoned tower of Udre."

"Abandoned?" Victor queried in confusion, "why?"

"It is in the middle of the Udre Desert." Master Smith shrugged but grinned. "Scholars have been arguing for a very long time about whether they built it in the desert or a desert took over the surrounding land. It is all that remains of a place called Udre."

Victor recognized the mention of scholars as a veiled reminder that it was too public for proper answers. Master Smith continued, "I can tell you that the tower has no entrance. No one can get close to it without something turning him or her away, but trying to reach it could be deadly. It appears to be an exact duplicate of the Order of the Dragons' tower, but let me turn your attention back to Pentor. I want to show you this."

Master Smith motioned for him to get off the road and look in the direction he pointed. Victor followed and looked downward to the right. It was obvious where Master Smith was pointing—the huge marble building with a statue of Celestia atop it.

Master Smith took on an instructive tone. "That is the first temple ever built to the goddess Celestia. If you believe the myths, that was the spot where Celestia stood and witnessed the carnage of the War of the Races. Also, the spot where she shed the two tears that turned into the first humans: a man and a woman."

Victor thought about what Master Smith was saying. The two of them were looking at the very spot that the entire race of humans came from. It was something to ponder, but when he looked around, the two of them were the only ones looking at the spot. With a sigh, he realized the novelty would wear off for those that lived nearby.

A moving platform with a cart on it crossed Victor's line of sight and disturbed his thoughts. He watched it as it moved gently downward to a lower level. "Oh, are those the lifts you were referring to? Are they controlled by magic?"

Master Smith blinked as the question caught him off guard, but recovered with a nod. "Yes, that is a lift, one of many, and no, it is not powered by magic. A complicated pulley system powers it, similar to the bridges between the walls."

Victor inquired, “Are you going to tell me the history of Pentor now?”

Master Smith started as if he were reading, but Victor knew it was from memory.

Pentor was older than human’s ability to write, but scholars agree it was the oldest active city in the world. Its irregular structure had inspired many thoughts involving its origins. There were three prevailing theories about its construction.

The most widely accepted version was that man started by living in a cave at the tip of the cliff. Over time, as they had children, they dug homes into the ground. The humans had a desire to catch fish and other creatures of the deep for sustenance. They continued to excavate until they had extended it to the ocean to form the sloping edifice of Pentor.

Those religious enough to believe in the gods and goddesses, but not the prior generation of deities, have a different view. They believe that the gods and goddesses prepared Pentor for their creations. They planned, but when they failed, Celestia shed two tears that formed the original humans. Happy with delight at the accidental creation, the gods and goddesses gave the city to them.

However, those few who believed in all the myths and legends have an answer that makes more sense. The gods and goddesses were, in fact, the fourth generation of deities. Their creation of the races of the dwarvan and elvan were their most notable contribution to the world. The world saw seven millennia of peace before the War of the Races.

During the War of the Races, the dwarvan metalworkers set up defensible places where they could mine ore for weapons. Pentor was one of those places, but it was also the place to put the dead while waiting for their race to perform proper funeral rites. For this reason, it was the best place for the gods and goddesses to come down to see the devastation of the war. Upon seeing it, Celestia shed the tears that became the first humans.

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The humans were so innocent that the other races tried to shield them from the carnage. They contented themselves with instilling humans with basic skills to survive. When the shame of the war settled on the races, they left the humans alone. The stories that the humans had heard from the other races became myths and legends. They passed them down orally, but written versions have always existed.

★ ★ ★

Date: 2005.10.34

The reminiscing only took a few seconds. Long enough for the falcons to feel the exhilaration of being free to spread their wings.

The falcons had made a nest in the eastern cliffs overlooking the bay, but further north to avoid the noise of the city. A few chicks occupied the nest, making it harder and harder to leave.

Making sure the city was safe, in service to their flightless brother, was still important. Since both had settled down and had children, these nightly flights were the only time they had together anymore.

They felt comforted when Victor merged with them. In some ways, it was better than their usual mindset. Not only could they feel Victor's mind, but each other's too. The merge gave them the feeling of a small bundle of each other in the back of their minds, which allowed them to communicate telepathically.

From within their connection, they could sense Victor's mind. **Head to the west harbor and circle upward.** It was more than communication; it was the sending of emotions and intent.

Most people did not pay any attention to the falcons overhead as they angled their flight downward towards the harbor. The many sails of ships berthed for the night gleamed in the slight light of the two moons. The falcons flew over the ships, level, searching for anything that looked out of the ordinary. A few ships were in the harbor heading in, but it was too late for any to show a desire to head out.

After a few minutes of flight, they had gone from the west harbor to the east. From there, they flew inland a bit and angled upwards to be over the first level of the city. For the entire duration of their flight, they did not need to circle back at all.

They had spent close to a half-hour circling back and forth over the two-and-thirty levels, concluding at the eastern wall. As they circled to head north along the cliff to their nest, Victor bid them farewell in his

thoughts. **Thanks for your help. Assuming nothing goes wrong, I will see you both tomorrow evening.**

Victor gently withdrew his mind from them before he severed the connection completely. He found by doing it that way, reduced the momentary jarring effects from the loss of connection to his familiar. He closed his eyes and allowed a moment for him to readjust to only one view.