

Prologue

The Rainbow Moon

June 19, Year 253 of the Human Dominion

The sky above Eastburg was cloudless — a rare gift in a season known for rain. What few hazy shrouds remained hung low on the horizon, catching the last light of the dying sun and burning with the soft oranges and purples of approaching dusk.

Helias Valkeran, night watchman of the Bell Tower, leaned against the parapet and watched the sky do something he had never seen before.

The Bell Tower stood at the eastern edge of Military Town, the precise center of Eastburg. Helias had stood watch here for eleven years. He had seen Gayna rise full a hundred times, had watched the great ring — that frozen river of ice and stone arching across the firmament — scatter moonlight into silver ribbons across the Knabington River. He had grown so accustomed to the city's rooftops and spires that he no longer noticed their beauty. A watchman's job was not to admire the view. It was to watch for smoke, for fire, for the telltale glimmer of a thief's lantern in a merchant's window.

But tonight, the smoke was in the heavens.

The low-sky illumination refracted through the ring's particles, scattering into spectrum. A rainbow, but not like any rainbow Helias had ever seen. It radiated *outward* from the ring, a halo of impossible colors that spread across the sky like ripples in a pond, washing over the rooftops of Greygate to the southeast, over the smokestacks of Ashen Ward, over the winding streets of West Slums and Green End.

His pipe hung unlit in his hand. He had forgotten to light it.

And then the moon rose.

Gayna, the larger of the two moons, crested the eastern hills just as the sun dipped below the western horizon. She was full — the first robust full moon of summer — and she was enveloped in radiant hues.

The spectrum from the ring had painted her.

Below the Bell Tower, in a tavern near the border of Greygate and Salt Cliff, six friends sat at a table outside the Cozy Chalice and watched the sky.

"The ring," Nora breathed, her grae-elf eyes wide. "I've read about this. Refraction at dusk. But I've never *seen* it."

"It's beautiful," Sitz said softly. The nhoblit, a man who stood a mere three feet when not seated, was perched on the edge of the bench with his knees drawn up, his small hands wrapped around a cup of mulled cider. "Like the world is showing off."

Marko said nothing. He was watching the sky with an intensity that had nothing to do with beauty and everything to do with meaning. His grandfather had written prophecies about signs in the heavens. The rainbow moon — if that was what was coming — would be a sign.

Draenock drained his ale and set the tankard down with a heavy thunk. "If this be an omen, I be hopin' it's a good one. I've done become tired o' bad ones."

"Since when do dwarves believe in omens?" Arlen asked. The teen archer sat apart from the others, his back against the tavern wall, his bow propped within reach. Old habits — as old as one could be for a human boy of just fifteen.

"Since I be travellin' wi' a prophet's grandson an' a man who be talkin' in his sleep, ye ken."

Rik did not rise to the bait. He sat at the end of the table, his copper-colored hands resting on the worn wood, his eyes fixed on the horizon. The gold jewelry was warm on his finger — warmer than it should have been, given the mildness of the evening. The voice in his head was silent. It had been silent since being given the ring, but he still had not learned to trust the silence.

Jakosuth, he thought, and the name no longer felt like cinders on his tongue. It felt like a promise. Or maybe a threat.

The six of them watched in silence as the great moon turned from silver to gold to rose to violet, a radial gradient of hues that shifted and flowed like oil on water. The light spilled down onto the city, coloring the rooftops, the cobblestones, their own faces.

"It's just light," Arlen said. But his voice was uncertain.

"It's never just light," Marko replied.

Nora reached across the table and took Rik's hand. He did not pull away.

"The Confluence," she said quietly. "My sorcery master mentioned it. The thinning of the barriers between worlds."

"Is this that?" Sitz asked.

"Part of it. A symptom." She looked at the colored moon. "Or a cause."

The effect lasted only a few minutes — less time than it took to smoke a pipe — but in that handful of minutes, something shifted in the air. A pressure. A weight. The sense that the world was holding its breath.

Then the moment passed. The moon returned to silver. The ring's halo faded. The sky darkened into a normal summer evening, and the sounds of Eastburg — the cart wheels, the raised voices, the distant clang of a blacksmith's hammer — returned to fill the silence.

Rik stood up.

"Very well," he said. "Let's go inside, talk to this little lady Sitz has his eye on."

"Best be careful with those 'little' jokes, Rik," the nhoblit warned in jest, as the group funneled into the restaurant.

Rik paused, looking at the horizon where the moon still hung, pale and ordinary. He had the strange, unshakable sense that somewhere in the world, something had just begun.

Three months earlier...

Part One

Brigands

Chapter One: The Girl

Bridwath was a peculiar city. It was known as a laborer's home, with several opportunities for the hard worker or craftsman. Working at the quarry or in the gnomes' foundry were two of the most common forms of employment in Bridwath, but there was a plethora of other places for one with a brawny back. All of which had grown the population of the city to an impressive size — not a metropolis, but the walled municipality had guards, police, a local government of full-term officers, and all the support trade to keep its economy going.

What Bridwath did not have was a good supply of food. Years ago, poor planning and a rich House obtaining property prevented the most fertile of the land outside the walls from being farmed. There were still farms and homesteads, but with the nearly twenty thousand residents inside the walls of the city, it was difficult for the local agriculture to keep up with the demand. In recent years, the mayor had been more interested in gentrification than maintaining the proper supply reserves; thus, last winter became a difficult one for the bodegas and taverns, as food was in short reserve.

Making matters more difficult were the raids on food caravans from western city, Eponwath. Over the winter, only around two of every three merchant supplies were being successfully delivered. It was known that highwaymen were stealing either from the wagons filled with wares from Bridwath to be sold or stole the food goods directly from other caravans approaching the city.

However, when Angor Schneider, a middle-class merchant, had his supply chain attacked and the bandits took not only the wares but also his daughter, the line was crossed. Angor put out a notice to hire mercenaries willing and capable of retrieving the girl.

Four different people answered the call.

First was Sitz Fleischman, a young nhoblit from a modest home, who had been blessed by the small community of his kin. He had studied the teachings of the Shire Matriarchs, but his devotion was specifically to one: Frayft, the nhoblit deity of teamwork, trust, and the home. Her holy symbol was a simple copper circle, and Sitz wore one on a leather cord around his neck, hidden beneath his tunic.

He stood barely three feet tall, with chestnut-brown furry hair that curled at the tips of his ears. A pair of worn leather gloves were tucked into his belt — a gift from his aunt, his mother's sister, before she passed. His bare feet made no sound on the cobblestones as he walked to the meeting, a lifetime of practice having hardened the keratin-and-cartilage undersides to the equivalent of soft leather boots.

Though he lived among humans, in a small enclave of perhaps sixty nhoblits, he had learned to adapt. The shrine to Frayft in his neighborhood was also a grain store — as was tradition — but its supplies had been low throughout the entire winter. Frayft taught that the gifts of the goddess were meant to be shared, and sharing grain with hungry neighbors was as much an act of worship as any prayer.

A short-bearded dwarf named Draenock Strongbrew was another to reply. He was stout even by dwarven standards, with arms like iron cables and a face that seemed permanently caught between a scowl and a smirk. His hammer hung across his back, its head scarred from

years of use — though most of those scars had come from training alone, not from any true battle.

He had been serving at the Church of Jhudiel for nearly a year by this point, running errands, cleaning floors, doing whatever the priests asked of him. But he had not yet been officially ordained. Perhaps it was prejudice — a dwarf among humans, asking to serve a human god. Perhaps it was something else. Whatever the reason, the robes still hung in a closet, unworn, and Draenock had begun to wonder if they ever would.

Worse, he had not yet discovered his ability to use divine magic through chanting prayers. The power was there, somewhere beneath his calloused skin, but it had not yet woken. He prayed nightly and heard nothing back. He was beginning to think the gods were as indifferent to him as his own father had been.

"You be lookin' for a soldier o' fortune?" he had asked the human priest who told him of this job. "I be ready for whatever comes. An' if it be coin at the end, all the better."

The truth was more complicated. He was not ready. He had never been ready. But staying at the church had begun to feel like surrender, and Draenock Strongbrew had been surrendering his whole life.

Then there was the ill-tempered Arlen Stonebow — or at least that was how most perceived him. He was an apathetic teen and the son of a low officer of the city guard; however, he was a true marksman with the bow. Tall, blond, yet barely fifteen, he stood out in any crowd, though he seemed to prefer it when no one noticed him at all. His mother's death still hung over him like a storm cloud that would not break, and his resentment toward the clergy who had sent her on that fateful mission had curdled into a general distrust of anyone who claimed to

serve a higher purpose. He leaned against the wall of the meeting house, his bow cased but his eyes never still.

Finally, an enigmatic son of a farmer and local toughman, Rik Musik, came to the meeting as well.

He was neither tall nor short, with a solid build — the kind of strength that came from years of farm work rather than any formal training. But it was his face that drew attention: strong jaw, clear eyes, and long dark curls that framed his features in a way that seemed almost careless. He was attractive in a manner that appeared unaware of itself. His hands were calloused, and his eyes held a weariness that belied his years. Those who looked at him might have guessed he was nineteen, maybe twenty. No one knew they were off by a decade.

Rik had returned to Bridwath only a few months ago, after an absence that no one seemed to remember clearly. He had simply appeared one morning at the edge of town, walking down the road from the north with no horse, no pack, and no explanation. The neighbors who had known him as a boy didn't even realize who they saw. His former betrothed, now married to another man with a child on the way, had stared at him from her doorway and said nothing.

Rik pondered what to do. No one recognized him. No one remembered him.

Perhaps one would — his mother. But that chance would never happen.

His mother had died a few years before his return — while he was lost in some dream that he could not properly recall. He remembered it was beautiful, but he struggled with the details. Despite all the warmth of this vague memory, Rik would have traded it to have been present when his mother passed.

Her grave had been overgrown. Planted flowers grew among the weeds. The image turned his stomach.

It was at this moment Rik chose not to try to reclaim his life. There was nothing to reclaim. He couldn't explain much of his disappearance. And if he could have, no one would believe him. And even if they did, they wouldn't thank him for the revelation.

So, he had taken a new name — his given name, Rik, without the family surname and found work where he could. He was a good laborer. Strong. Quiet. He did not complain about the hours or haggle over the wages.

But at night, when the taverns closed and the city fell silent, Rik sat alone in whatever room he had rented and listened.

The voice was not yet a voice. It was a warmth. A pressure behind his eyes. A sense that something vast and ancient was watching him from a great distance, waiting for him to remember something he had agreed to in a place he could not fully recall.

There in the humble tavern, the agreed upon location to meet, the four stood before Angor Schneider: two humans, a dwarf, and a nhoblit. The merchant was a portly man with a red face and the kind of desperation that comes from having exhausted all other options.

"My daughter's name is Nora," he said, his voice trembling. "She was taken three days ago. The trail leads into the forest north of here. I have no one else to send. Name your price, and if she is returned safely, you will have it."

The four exchanged glances.

"When do we leave?" Rik asked.

The morning sun was still low when they set out, following the road west out of Bidwath. Sitz walked at the rear, his bare feet silent on the