

@~@~@ The Circle Begins @~@~@

Link 1 ~ Scene 2

The god-king

Joshua was never a man of great mystery or fame. In fact, if one were to ask him, he would just say that he was, “merely a member of the King’s personal guard.” In the Kingdom of Men, this title had always been highly sought after, yet Joshua had risen to the position on account of a happy accident but ‘much to his own surprise.’

He had never sought the position willingly, yet found himself there just the same. Today was a day that the entire Kingdom had been waiting for these past nine months. The queen was to give birth to the king’s firstborn, who would one day, become the heir to the throne. Joshua however, had reason to be wary of this happy occasion, having been near the King’s side, day and night, for the past three years.

For it was during the past year that the king had changed. The king that Joshua had served his first two years as Captain of the Guard was a man of empathy, humility and charity as well as a powerful warrior. He was a man of convictions, deep and meaningful spirituality, and spent a large amount of his time ‘amongst the people,’ so as to personally ensure their happiness and well-being.

Then a distasteful man came to town, a man that Joshua had not liked from the beginning, a man that many had said had a, ‘seemingly sinister, and evil nature.’ Yet Joshua had not a single incident to cite as

evidence to this theory to this very day, on that accord. Pharamond was a brilliant man to behold and was well-spoken during the many dinners that Joshua had attended, while standing guard over the royal family. It had not taken Pharamond long after his arrival within the capital of the Kingdom of Men to find a position as a 'special advisor to the throne,' thus making him a heralded member of the community. Joshua's duty to Kingdom had always included keeping himself up to date on the latest happenings within the capital. Pharamond's arrival had come to his attention only a few hours before the king himself met with this soon-to-be advisor for the first time.

There was only one other man in King Corian's employ that had agreed from the start with Joshua of Pharamond as odd and off-putting. Zarin 'The White' was one of Joshua's closest friends, known for his tremendous wisdom and spirit. Zarin had become vocal in his protestations of Pharamond to both the king and the Kingdom at large.

Joshua tied his lapel and slipped on his boots before attaching his sword at his hip. Thoughts continued to race through his mind as he exited his personal quarters and was joined by two of his best men, Amadis and Lucas. The guards had been waiting to escort him to the newborn Prince's birthing chambers, which were situated next to the King and Queen's bedchambers.

"Sir!" both men said, as Joshua exited his private room. The Captain of the Guard nodded in recognition and surveyed each man for tidiness. One thing that Joshua was famous for was his attention to detail, and on this precious day, he would leave nothing to chance. He wanted the King and Queen to remember the day without so much as a single element out of place — at least as far as the elements that he had any control over were concerned.

“Report!” Joshua said commandingly to them, while nodding his approval at their spotless attire. Then he headed off to the right before making his way down the enormous and lengthy hallway that led to the main castle, guards flanking him on either side.

“Sir,” Amadis started, “West End is without incident currently, sir!”

Joshua nodded. “Excellent. Did you bring the gift?” Amadis produced a small package wrapped in the most ceremoniously, elaborate fashion and handed it to Joshua. “Wonderful,” he began. “And Lucas?”

Lucas, however, gave a distressed look before answering Joshua. A fact for which did not go unnoticed. “Sir, the East End, is without incident, sir...” the guards voice trailed off at the last word. It seemed obvious to Joshua that Lucas had more to tell. He shot Lucas a look that the guards knew meant, ‘please continue... now!’

“Perhaps,” Lucas began again; only this time Joshua noticed that he was obviously conflicted. Possibly upset at news for which the Captain surmised that he did not know how to express to Joshua without reprimand.

Joshua picked up on the guard’s unspoken words, “Pharamond is here, isn’t he?” he said. Lucas nodded the smallest bit. Over the past year, Joshua had become quite aware of the High Guard’s morbid fascination with Pharamond. Many rumors abounded about the ‘king’s special advisor’ in general, so why

should his personal guard, the illustrious Blades of Nine, be any different? Surely a man of Pharamond's dubiousness would be a matter of whispers and speculations, no matter where he laid his head to rest.

Joshua and his guards ascended a dizzying amount of steps, eventually arriving at the main castle. Finally they rounded the last bend, continuing their staunch march down the King Quarter's final stretch of hallway leading to the birthing room. Approximately 200 yards out from their destination, the trio heard a terrifying, blood-curdling scream.

A woman's shriek came from down the hallway and began echoing eerily around them. Joshua did not hesitate even for the blinking of an eye. He broke into a full sprint, armor clanking, as he tore down the hallway and into the chamber. Yet when he arrived, he instantly wished that he could be someplace else.

"By gods!" said Amadis, arriving on the scene mere seconds behind Joshua. The two guardsmen were gasping for breath, though the run had not winded Joshua in the slightest. However, the scene they were witness to now left him breathless just the same. What they found was as gruesome as it was terrifying; The King was covered in the blood of his wife and her handmaiden. On his head sat a twisted and wicked-looking crown unlike anything that Joshua had ever seen. It looked as if he had murdered them mere moments before their entrance.

In the King's hand, was a blood-drenched, sacrificial dagger and a corrupt looking staff loomed over the bodies of the fallen before him, syphoning blueish vapors from the dead below it. Around him stood five dark and brooding black-cloaked figures clad in hoods that masked their faces in utter darkness. From out of their mouths issued menacing words chanted in a language that Joshua had never heard.

Joshua felt his mind teetering on the edge of sanity, almost as if it were about to plunge into the madness of the moment. He could not fathom that which was before him now. Even as he gazed upon the violent disregard for life, he could feel the sadness, anger, and confusion rise within his soul. It felt like his head would explode from this lunacy alone.

Despite his current emotional state at the atrocities before him, Joshua focused himself and brought his mind to bear on the situation at hand. He shot a dangerous glance in the guards direction to silence them. Then he quickly turned his glance back towards the King, almost giddy with sadistic delight at the bodies of his dead wife, midwife and newborn child lying beneath his bloodied hands.

Finally the homicidal King seemed to comprehend he was being watched. He swung his head quickly towards the Captain and his men as they stood in the doorway. The soldiers steadied themselves; wondering if somehow the murderous menace before them was some kind of impostor in the king's stead.

“You are not looking at your King anymore!” the being screamed, his voice rising with each word. He continued with a maniacal edginess, usually reserved for the insane, “Now, behold your new god-king!”

Joshua braced himself and rose to his full height. This was a stance that Joshua was known for far and wide. Usually it was the last thing many a soul would ever see. Joshua muttered a prayer for the departed under his breath and for the first time in his life the gods answered him with their power! Joshua's sword exploded around its edges, shining with brilliant and mighty magical power!

The sword, now ablaze with the power of the righteous gods of Onsol'ak was not alone in coming to life. Joshua felt something stir deep within his being. 'Could this be the power of the gods?' he thought. The powers that be coursed through his veins like wildfire, bringing him courage and steadying him, whilst simultaneously reinforcing his resolve!

Joshua shouted out, "You are unworthy of even a place in hell! I will strike you down for the demon you have become!"

The god-king smiled a heinous smirk at Joshua's proclamation. His disfigured visage was no longer the face of the King that Joshua had once known and admired. Instead, it was replaced by nightmarish and dead looking skin. The flesh that had once been whole upon it had now become demonically discombobulated. His former King's eyes, had been replaced by dead orbs filled with fire. This flame was not the warm and welcoming firelight of a travelers campfire, Joshua knew full well that it was the very fire that only hell can stoke — hot, and sinister enough to bring fear into those who gaze into its hypnotizing flames.

Joshua had just finished his decree, as the god-king leapt towards him at an impossible speed. Joshua had been nearly 25 feet away, when the god-king launched into his flight towards him. He stood, arms akimbo with his sword arm readied as the god-king descended upon him. In this moment he did not fear. His face showed his measure of focus: returning this foul demon to the hells from whence it came.

Joshua's reaction to the god-king's attack was purely instinctual. His sword and body became one fluid movement as he brought his weapon to bear upon this proposed 'god-king'. The air itself rippled

electric with the zeal and finesse reserved for the shining knights of old. Then, as quickly as the fight began, it was over. The king lay dead behind Joshua, who like a ghost had somehow dodged the fiendish swing of his blade. The king had not been so lucky, as the Captain's sword had struck hard and true.

The god-king, was dead.

The guards were still shaking as the former king's body lay upon the floor bleeding out. Yet, they were not shaken from the his death. Joshua's passion brought them back to their senses, inspiring them with faith in the great powers from beyond mortality. The guards looked up at the noise still being made by the hooded figures near the rear of the room. Quickly, they sprang into motion, rushing towards the four remaining black robed figures who were cut down, before they could enact any more injustice upon the day.

Joshua, however, was not shaken in the slightest. He took a moment to be sure that the corpse laying dead at his feet was truly dead, removing the god-king's head with a swift thrust of his fiery sword. Then he rushed over to check on the women and the newborn child. Yet, there was nothing he or anyone else could do. They were all dead.

Joshua was in a daze. This had to be a nightmare. How could everything have come to pieces like this so quickly? The kingdom! What would become of the kingdom he had given his entire life's service to? What would the neighboring countries do in reaction to this sudden shift in power? What would he do?

"Joshua!" one of his guards said for the third time. The Captain shook his head to come back to the moment before answering him.

“Yes?” he asked Lucas simply. His sword began to let out thin wisps of smoke, and the two men took notice that his blade no longer blazed with the fury of the gods.

“We only found four of the five cloaked figures, sir,” the guard reported, saluting their General. “They have been dispatched. Shall we call all the guards and search the castle grounds for the last one?” Lucas asked hurriedly. Joshua had trained them well. He had always been wise enough to surround himself with those who were smarter, better able, and sometimes, more capable than himself. Lucas was a prime example in this regard, but duty did not matter anymore. Joshua’s face depicted a man deeply engrossed in the agony of the moment, as he pondered whether the evenings disturbing events would bring the Kingdom to an end.

“Yes, see to it directly,” he told the soldiers. They rushed off to call the other castles guards into action, during the Kingdom’s darkest and most dour evening in living memory. Together they then continued their search off into the very edges of the night, seeking out the lone survivor, yet no trace would ever be found.

For tonight was much as a stone tossed into the vast and still waters of the void, causing ripples would be felt for all time yet to come.