

THE PROPHECY OF THE FOUR

ANIEL'S STORY



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Prologue

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As the early dawn shimmered across the horizon, eighteen year old Aniel breathed in the crisp, cold remnants of the night's eerie fog, all the while stretching his medium built, bony frame. Standing on top of a flat stone located high upon a great hill, he took his fill of the view below him. *How could he have forgotten such great and utter beauty? Had it been that long since they had been away from home?*

His gaze roamed the valley draped in countless shades of thick, luscious, golden yellow, green and blue hues. At its center, a large circular bare mound rose up, smooth as a pregnant woman's belly. High atop, as a crown upon a king's head, the sun's rays illuminated the massive cromlech — the large stone circle — ever so slowly revealing its domineering greatness. With the seductive promise of a new day, light chasing dark, the night folded itself, gently leaving in its wake hidden streams and forest in the gorge below to be seen once more.

He soon found the numerous colored tents with coat of arms that represented each family; lion's, bears, deer, wild boars and the like. Never had he seen so many Celts united in one place. The memory of the scent that followed mankind wherever it went toyed with his senses. His mouth watered, thinking of the hot, bright, orange flames of a campfire twirling about happily as it roasted a piece of wild game upon a spit. Days of feeding on dried fruits and nuts were over, at least for the duration of the Samhain celebration. His recurring dream of biting into a juicy, honeyed piece of wild boar began to haunt him in a most perverted way. An insistent growl from his stomach ordered him not to walk to the awakening campsite below, but to run.

The cool, moist air of early dawn teased the freshly shaved sides of his head, while the short, unruly, brown locks on top played freely in the gentle breeze. Aniel's long, coiled braid slept, nestled in the folds of his dark green tunic. It had been difficult to keep it free of dirt since he had risen this morn to help prepare his master; Anarawad. But he had managed somehow; the cloth survived their journey without a blemish. He never cared about his appearance but today was not like any other day.

A thorough, nervous inspection of his attire had his long, bony fingers skimming all that he carried. He prayed to the goddess that he have some semblance of distinction, Anarawad's persistent reminder rattling about in his head. *Always remember Aniel; a mark upon you is a mark upon me as your teacher.* The dagger, resting upon his right hip, having been sharpened with great care last eve, cut through the flames of the fire as it eagerly wished to caress the cold metal.

He adjusted, for what seemed to be the hundredth time since he had risen this morn, the pouch in which he carried all that was necessary for a druid to have with him at all times. It was his duty as an apprentice to

carry his mentor's essentials: crystals, powders, crushing tools, bowls, leaves, food and wine. Should he fail in attending Anarawad's needs during the most important celebration of the year — with the high council of the elder druids in attendance — it would surely bring forth great shame to a man he deeply cared for.

Eleven long years, they had been away from the soil that knew his first footsteps, forever on a quest, seeking out the many sacred sites where Anarawad and other mentors taught him the knowledge of those who served the goddess, revealing her most guarded secrets. Through their travels, Aniel went to the depths of the earth, learning how to enter the goddess' womb, where the magic of the great mother lay hidden. He slept alongside stone monuments built by the hands of the first people of this land. He had experienced so much in his lifetime, and for that he was thankful.

Since becoming an apprentice at the age of five winters, he had spent most of his life living at one with nature. Aniel's in-depth knowledge of the life that surrounded him, from the smallest insignificant insect, to the twilight of the first star in the sky, made him acutely aware of the importance of every living creature and the role each one needed to play in order to survive.

But being absent from the communal living found in towns and villages, Aniel knew his skills to communicate with those less fortunate might prove to be an obstacle. Anarawad, like many elders of the council, preferred the sanctuary of the forest and hidden caves. He loathed having to interfere in the pitiful squabbling of chieftains, who yearned and coveted more lands and riches. Early on, like many children, Aniel was educated in the ways of the goddess, who blessed every living entity with a gift, a purpose for which they were given life, something everyone carried within

themselves to be shared. The elders spoke of the hidden power that slept in the dark corners of the heart and mind that awakened when it was time for it to be witnessed amongst its people.

To be chosen by an elder druid to be an apprentice was an immense honor for the family of the selected and his clan. But the accolades and festivities of the newfound pupil are often short-lived as great sacrifice comes with the privilege. Needing to devote themselves to their destiny, the usually very young apprentices leave their loved ones behind to follow the life ordained by the goddess. His mother having died in childbirth and not knowing who his father was, Aniel's childhood was not one he remembered fondly, vague images of an elderly woman, who seemed to complain a lot about him and his friend Brassal. It seemed the pair had always been able to find themselves in some form of trouble or another, memories of the serious beatings in the aftermath of their rambunctious escapades left him with a certain distaste. He shook his head, wanting the sad images of his past to flutter away to where they usually stayed hidden. He had had no misgivings about leaving his home ... that was until now.

He had no complaints about leaving his village to follow his destiny. Anarawad was a great mentor who grumbled every now and then, especially when it came to intervening between feuding chieftains. Everywhere they went the man's reputation preceded him. Known as a Cli amongst the Celtic tribes, druids of his status were highly sought after for the depth of wisdom they possessed. Which was why — to Aniel's great annoyance at times — especially when the weather became harsh to anyone without a shelter, his master often avoided well travelled roads upon their journey. There was less chance of meeting people along the way. If truth be known about his mentor's distaste for the usual pecking discord of chieftains, the council of the elder druids would renounce him at once. Keeping the peace between land brothers was foremost in a druid's purpose, for with

brothers divided, the land upon which we sleep would never be at rest and therefore produce a bad harvest. That was why they had been away for so long. Anarawad loathed such skirmishes.

“Land was land and it belonged to none other than the goddess,” he would often say. “Even a human being belongs only to himself; slavery is a great dishonor towards the goddess’s creation of man. Are we not all born in the same fashion? Does a king or queen not come forth into this world screaming and crying to his mother’s grunting and wailing just as the farmer’s wife’s bears her own brood? It is a very foolish man who thinks to possess the spirit of his brothers or sisters. But man being man, corruption and greed breeds inside their breasts, those who get a taste of this power become slaves to it. Unfortunately, too many chieftains care more about their land, wealth and how many slaves they have while the flesh of their flesh are salivating as to when it will be their turn to own everything they can set their gaze upon. It is a wheel that has been turning for far too long, I pray one day this nonsense will stop.”

“But a teacher such as you, gifted in the arts of knowledge and wisdom, should you not be amongst the chieftains more often in order to stop brother fighting against brother?”

“I am not as young as I used to be Aniel; I have done what I can in keeping the alliances peaceful between clans. Now, it is time for me to be your mentor and teach you the secrets of the goddess so you may one day do so as well for your own apprentice.”

As much as his teacher enjoyed the quiet serenity of the forest, the imposed seclusion at times perturbed Aniel. He found himself wishing for the company of others whose hair was not always of white and silver. Lately, he found himself thinking and dreaming of women, craving the

intimacy that existed between a man and his wife. Seeing through his desire, Anarawad laughed at him.

“Have no fear Aniel, these wanting and cravings for all that is female shall pass. No woman can compare to the love of the goddess and the power she can offer you. You must stay focused on the gift that was given on to you. You are a chosen one. Never forget that.”

The wind shook him gently, as if urging him forward. He was nervous; he could feel the agitation of things to come coursing through his entire being. He took another deep breath, holding it in for as long as he could in a desperate attempt to find tranquility. A druid no matter the occasion always had a peaceful, manner of being.

His excitement about the festivities of the Samhain this eve was almost palpable. Another quick inspection of his gear had his fingertips unconsciously graze the tender sensitive skin of his left forearm where an owl rested deep within his flesh. His eagerness for the day and night ahead turned to dread. Had Anarawad made a mistake in branding him with such a powerful marking? After all he was but an apprentice. To wear such an important image, especially one as rare as this, was of great significance in his world. Once seen, there would never be any turning back. To have this sacred symbol revealed for all to see, would announce his higher purpose amongst the council of the elder druids and the Celtic clans. Should anyone take notice of it once he entered the campsite, his fate, his destiny as a Vate would begin. As ecstatic as he had been upon the revelation of his gift, he now feared its knowing in the light of day.

Many elders professed having been blessed with the gift of sight but a man ordained by the goddess to become a Vate; that had not been seen in hundreds of years at least not by Anarawad's account. Not only was he supposed to be able to see the future, but he and he alone, could decipher

the intricacies of the prophecies druids have debated over since the first star touched the night sky. A man with such wisdom was bound to be a powerful one. Doubts filled him; he had yet to have a vision of things to come and as for the prophecies, Aniel knew little of them as druids rarely discussed them openly. Of course there were those told around a roaring fire in by someone or other to entertain guests and children. His teacher had been quick to disclaim them, telling Aniel that when the time came, all would be revealed to him.

Anarawad's insistent warning had crept up his spine like a hurried thief ever since his gift had been discovered three nights ago. An owl with black and silver plumage had come down from where it hid in the trees. It landed at Aniel's feet, who, surprised, had barely let go of his breath. Anarawad had stared, stunned as the huge bird flapped its wings and circled his apprentice seven times, as its high pitched cries echoed in the forest. It vanished quickly, only to resurface moments later, landing gracefully before the young apprentice. It approached the human with dignity, gently leaving the offering of a dead animal before taking off once more. Anarawad had marked Aniel's skin the very next day, ecstatic to see his pupil be given such a great honor. Still, the elderly man had been quick to caution his student. *Now remember when we will have reached the campsite. Keep your marking hidden; do not let anyone see it. I will tell you when it is time for you to reveal yourself. You are not ready to be seen and approved by the council; you have not finished your training.*

From that moment on, Aniel fervently prayed to the goddess to bless him with the wisdom and strength to be able to carry him forward with grace for whatever awaited him in the not so distant future. He desperately wished to be worthy of her gift. Unruffled by Aniel's thoughts, the young man's stomach growled loudly, letting its needs for nourishment be known. The prospect of being able to find something to eat at the campsite had

him licking his lips. Images of tender, juicy, pieces of meat made his mouth water, pushing his worried thoughts to the back of his mind. Soon, he told his hungry belly, *soon*. The subject of discontent replied with annoyance; *If only Anarawad could walk faster we would be there already and I would not have to scream as such!* He looked behind him at his travelling companion and tried not to sigh. He could swear that with each passing day Anarawad became slower in everything he did. Getting him up and about this morning had been an exercise in patience. His teacher had a certain way in which things needed to be done and normally he did them efficiently but today was different. Tonight they would celebrate the Samhain and Aniel did not want to miss one moment of the day's festivities. He took in his mentor's white robe and deep, red-wine-colored cape with the golden intertwining dragon brooch holding the beautiful, thick, luscious fabric together. Good, not a spot of dirt on them. At least he would not have to sponge them again and delay them from entering the campsite. He remembered how his fingers painfully shook from washing their belongings in the ice cold river, he had scrubbed away every last piece of darkness that lived at the bottom of the robes and on each side of the man's thigh level. Anarawad had no care for clothes and wiped his hands upon his attire often, except when he met with other druids. Then, everything needed to be pristinely white. The elderly man had chosen to braid his aging hair, intertwining it with his long and winding beard that still held some of his youthful, dark black locks.

The wind blew around him once more, a swift reminder that winter would soon be arriving. He hugged himself and blew in his hands to warm them up. His gaze went to the vast horizon before him once more and back to the man making his way to him ever so slowly. Anarawad seemed pleased with his cape as it kept him from the chills; the teasing wind kept twirling about him. It had been a gift from two warring chieftains grate-

ful to his teacher for settling their dispute. One of the indebted rulers had taken the piece of clothing from his own shoulders, and with great ceremony, had placed it upon those of Anarawad. Not to be outdone, the other chieftain had given his golden brooch decorated with the bodies of twisting dragons with the tiniest of red, precious stones for their eyes using it to close the offered piece of cloth. The acceptance of such elaborate gifts by his teacher had troubled Aniel; druids were never to accept offerings unless they were food or shelter. It went against the wishes of the goddess and their ways. A druid was meant to have a life devoid of comfort. For a druid, to receive payment for a task they have done in the name of the goddess was something almost sacrilegious, even though it was rumored some druids sold their knowledge, it was greatly frowned upon. Anarawad had always been quick to dispense those who did. Therefore it made no sense to Aniel for the man to accept the chieftain's offering. He had yet to muster up the courage to ask him why he had done so. Exasperated and trying hard not to show it Aniel did his best to smile at the man's progress, curbing his tongue as he did so. No matter how much he wanted to complain he knew it to be futile, since his mentor always had an explanation for everything; *Why the hurry to walk somewhere only to arrive and go somewhere else? Every step you take upon your journey is a lesson our great goddess puts upon your path for you to learn. If you are in a hurry, how can you be a good pupil to her teachings?*

The facial hair residing upon Anarwad's upper lip twitched concealing a smile; he knew his apprentice tried his best to veil his need to rush down below. *Had he been as such in his youth as well? Probably.* Memories of his own exuberance filled him. He felt as if it was just yesterday that he participated in his first Samhain, the most significant ceremony in a druid's life. It meant the time of the quiet stillness was upon them. It announced the cold, cruel winds to come, that the earth beneath their feet was to

harden and the warmth of the sun would leave them. This ceremony was the goddess' way of saying to her children: Now was the time for them to stop roaming about, to be still as a star in the night's sky. To listen to the soft approaching silence of the world as it fell asleep. The elders believed if you stood quiet long enough, you could hear the voices of the departed, living in the far off lands of the Sidh. His body was old and crumbling, but his mind was still alert. More and more, he wondered how many winters he had left? Travelling to far off and distant places was becoming quite the hardship for him; maybe it was time to find a seat next to a chieftain. He looked forward to reaching the campsite; maybe there he would find someone agreeable to give him shelter in exchange for his knowledge and wisdom. He realized this to be a selfish wish but he now craved the warmth of a soft bed and cozy fire in his old age. This gathering of the clans to pay homage to the goddess was a blessing. Especially now, since the Romans had started to rape their shorelines. Many wondered what the future held for them. Tonight their great mother would speak to them of things to come, he was sure of it. Anarawad was convinced this up and coming Samhain would bring forth great changes in the Celtic people. He had dreams of the coming of the prophecy of the Four being brought forward. Would the council finally be made aware as to whom the prophecy spoke of? Excitement coursed through him, reinvigorating his old bones. Inspired by Aniel's youthful energy he found himself hurrying his steps as well, but the years of his shell of a body protested quickly. Oh, how he wished he could move as swiftly as his student, envious of his agility. He chuckled at his own foolishness, gazing back at Aniel. A sense of pride filled him, he had chosen his apprentice well so many years ago and yet it felt as if it was just yesterday. The boy held great power within him. Something the young man had yet to discover. He showed great promise for his destiny as a Vate.

Even though his pupil had seen eighteen summers since his birth and was more man than child Anarawad still saw him as young, scrawny boy. Thin with not much meat upon his features, anyone staring at him would have agreed. Aniel could never have become a warrior or worked the land. Nothing of his stance showed potential for this sort of gift from the goddess, even though he was swift with his hands and very agile. Anarawad had seen what the others had not. This child held knowledge in his gaze; it just needed to be brought forward. His little apprentice had not disappointed him in the least. Not able to bear witness to his companion's palpable desperate wanting to rush down to the valley below, Anarawad waved his pupil on with a smile.

“Go on Aniel, do not wait for me. I will join you in my own time.”

Aniel faced the elder with great disbelief, he blinked once twice unsure of having heard correctly. His mentor waved him forward, with a white, thin hand once more.

“Go on, I command you to. I can hear your stomach grumbling at my slow pace. Go, have no fears I will find you.”

Pleased, Aniel hurried on ahead, his shouts of happiness echoing upon the morning breeze.