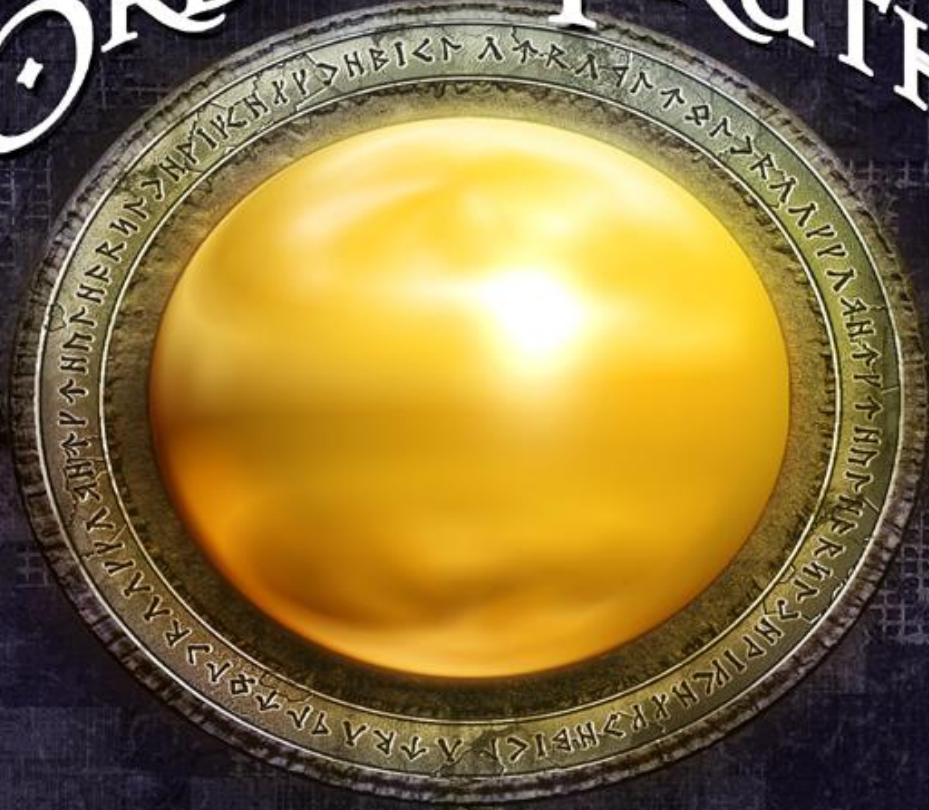


# THE ORB OF TRUTH



BRAE WYCKOFF

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**BRAE WYCKOFF**

[www.theorboftruth.com](http://www.theorboftruth.com)

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The Orb of Truth

The first book in the Four Horn series.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Thank you "Bridazak" for coming into my life over 25 years ago...I look forward to the many adventures waiting for us all!





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## PROLOGUE

### The Tree

Its leaves were like clear glass, and when the sun broke the horizon to announce the new day, a kaleidoscope of colors danced, dazzling the people who had gathered. It stood twenty feet tall, a glorious beacon of light, attracting all in the vicinity. Silver and purple woven wood harmonized to form the base, stretching up and then gracefully out. Hundreds of branches waved gently in the breeze, causing the crystal petals to chime, creating a beautiful chorus, like angels singing, harkening those with ears to hear.

On this day, the Tree was found on a grassy hill overlooking a small village. Residents of Brook Haven slowly emerged from their dwellings and began to assemble. The crowd of men, women, and children swelled until the entire community formed a half circle around the base of the knoll. None would approach the Tree any closer.

A man—carrying his sick child, pale as snow—broke through, streaks of tears running down his cheeks. “Please help me,” he whispered as he laid his boy on the grassy slope.

One of the thousands of crystal petals snapped free from the strong branch and descended like a feather. As it fell, it slowly disintegrated, leaving a trail of shimmering dust which lingered, suspended in the air until the prismatic pattern faded. Each brief flash of reflected light was like a

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strum on a lyre. Everyone was entranced by the hypnotic action, including the father. They refocused on the debilitated child when they heard the boy speak, “Papa?”

“My boy!” he said as he lunged for him in a tight embrace, kneeling on the ground beside him. He peered up to the Tree, “Thank you, for my son.”

Witnessing the boldness of the desperate man gave another the courage to step forward. “Pardon, um, Great Tree, I, well, I could use some advice.” He lowered his head and grew altogether quiet for a moment, not noticing another petal falling. Then his posture and demeanor slowly changed. He turned and faced the hushed crowd of onlookers, but looked lighter and freer. Whatever burden had been bothering him had clearly lifted as he trotted off back to their town; another petal descended.

More people brought requests before it, and throughout the day a leaf would fall for each granted miracle. Finally, the brilliant, golden light of the setting sun illuminated the relic with a blinding halo. The people shielded their eyes from the intensity, and within seconds the aura dissipated, and the Tree, along with it, had vanished.



Sheets of blustery snow swirled around the shallow cave entrance and the howling wind echoed within. A mound of white fur huddled in the back recesses for warmth. Hot breath escaped in uneven heaves from the several gathered

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creatures. The cold air whipped at their backs. Their faces were hidden from the elements.

An intense light blared to life outside, followed by soothing warmth. The snow flurry settled and the wind calmed. A head popped up from the tangled fur, surprised by the phenomena. The large, rounded white pupils of the Yeshi reflected the sparkling petals of the Tree of legend.

One of the beings approached, crunching snow underfoot, tenderly holding one mangled, fur-patched arm. A not uncommon injury, the result of a recent battle within the inhospitable mountain range they resided in. He extended his bloody appendage, and watched a single petal fall as the damaged limb was restored to health. The creature turned and called out to the apprehensive clan in its language of Yeshi, “We host the Tree of Lore! Come while you can! Bring your requests and offer them without fear! Hurry before it departs!”

The lumbering, beast-like creature turned and fell to his knees before the amazing spectacle, bowing repeatedly. After years of suffering turmoil in these harsh mountains, never daring to hope the Tree would come so far to aid them, it had arrived. From this day forward, his clan would never be the same.

## **This Time it's Different**

A cool breeze weaved through the dirt street, bringing with it a mixture of smells from manure, spices, cooked meats, and dust to the many patrons of the Gathford market. Sparse clouds and the midday sun warmed the small trading town. Nestled at the edge of a pine forest, three dirt roads connected the community where weary travelers could find rest and supplies to continue on their journey. Gathford was predominantly a Human community, now. This woodland location used to be Elven-occupied, where people of all walks would travel through for trading. In recent decades the tyranny of King Manasseh and his regime had pushed the other races away; the Dwarves and Elves had taken the worst over the centuries. Wars had decimated their numbers and now what remained of them were hidden in the mountains or forests. Then there were others who, driven by adventure, continued to taunt danger by mingling within the Human establishments.

A four-foot-tall, blonde Ordakian stood between one of the many vendor carts. He wore blue robes with a metallic sheen and a green scaled belt—simple but regal attire. His attention was focused on a nearby vendor who was selling rare feathers from creatures across the realm. The merchant made eye contact with the Ordakian from underneath his hooded brown cloak and gave a slight nod.

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Emerging from the meandering crowd was a group of bodyguards surrounding a fat Noblewoman. Her blush silk dress caught every jiggle and shift of her excessive weight. A light blue, wispy shawl covered her shoulders and draped over her blubbery breasts. Diamonds adorned her from top to bottom—dazzling earrings, a sparkling necklace, and multiple rings on each finger. One ring in particular cradled the largest gemstone, and tilted to the side of where it rested on her enlarged knuckle. She stopped in front of the feather vendor.

“My people have informed me that you have a rare collection from Everwood,” she said in a deep, husky voice.

“Why, yes I do, my lady,” came a cheerful reply from the vendor. “What kind of feather are you lookin’ to buy? I have the scary Nine-Tails going for ten gold pieces, or perhaps the intriguing Serapliss from Griffs Peak is more your liking? I have more, but some of them are quite expensive.”

“Cost will not be an issue. I’m in search of a Varouche.”

“Oh, that one. I’m sorry my lady, but I sold it just a bit ago.”

Her pudgy brows wrinkled as she glared at the vendor, “Who could have possibly been looking for a Varouche and bought it before me?”

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“He paid for it, my lady, but hasn’t picked it up yet. He should be back for it soon. Oh, wait, here he comes now,” the vendor pointed.

“Good day to you, Sally,” greeted the Ordakian.

“It’s Seelly,” the vendor snapped back from under his hood. His voice was awkwardly raspy.

“Right, whatever. I’ve come for my purchased item.” The Ordakian’s voice was heightened.

“I have it right here for you.” Seelly reached under his cart and pulled out a bright yellow feather covered with beige spots.

The woman was startled and stood motionless; her eyes widened as the plume was displayed out in the open for all to see. She took a step forward as the Ordakian held it up, carefully studying the rare coloring.

“Do you know what you are holding in your tiny hand?” she asked.

“A feather from some woodland area in the North, I believe,” he responded.

“I am Lady Birmham of the House of Urmthong. I will give you what you paid and you can buy a replacement.”

He paused at the offer. He almost felt sorry for her, until the sparkle from the large diamond ring on her hand caught his attention. Before he could respond she continued her

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plea, “The feather you hold, my dear little-one, is not just from the deep forest of Everwood, but symbolizes the greatness of such a mysterious and wonderful world that we cannot possibly imagine. The history of this creature is almost as legendary as the Unicorn. The Varouche is said to have great powers within the woods—to animate the inanimate or release a birdsong so fascinating that it would slow the heart to sleep forever. You see, I have been in search of such a plume for almost ten years now, and I don’t intend on letting this one escape from my sight. I am sure we can come to some arrangement to complete this quest of mine.”

She ended her petition and stared intently into the Ordakian’s beautiful teal eyes. The rolls of fat around her neck bunched together as she peered down at him.

“Well, that’s a great story and all, but I’m not sure you can afford what I paid for this, my lady.”

“Preposterous! I have very deep coffers. Might I inquire what you intend to do with it?”

“Well, it is a personal matter. I use exotic feathers to help me fall asleep.”

“How does a feather help you do that? Is it magical?”

“Oh, no, no. Nothing like that at all.” The Ordakian leaned in a little closer and whispered, “I use them to lightly touch my feet,” he reached down with the feather, wiggling his wide, hairy toes for embellishment.



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The woman reeled back, appalled, “Stop! You’ll ruin it! My dear child, that is disgusting!” She regained her composure. “I will purchase for you any two other feathers to help you with your sleeping disorder.”

He paused, “It’s common to mistake an Ordakian for a child, Lady Birmham, but I am almost three-hundred years of age. My apologies for being so blunt, but I really don’t think your coffers go that deep, after having insulted me.” The Ordakian started to turn away.

“No! Please wait. I wish to make it up to you. There has been a grievous misunderstanding,” she pleaded.

He turned, “I still *could* possibly be persuaded.”

“I will pay you double what you paid, in addition to what I already promised.”

The hooded vendor slightly gasped at the proposal, but quickly turned the surprise into a cough, keeping his head down.

“That is indeed an offer I cannot refuse. It would please me to accept. I paid three hundred gold pieces for the Varouche, and will take two feathers of the Lamshan in its place.”

A smile of joy overwhelmed her face. She quickly snapped her sausage fingers and waved her servants over to take care of the transaction. Seelly handed the Ordakian the Lamshans and the aids relinquished two small bags of coinage equaling double the amount he paid. He handed

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her the feather slowly. Her eyes were transfixed, and she held her breath until her hand was finally grasping the reward she had sought for so many years. A sigh of relief purged through her body as she realized what the little-one had done for her sake. She focused again on him and then bent over, planting her fat, moist lips on his forehead, as if he really were a child.

“Thank you so much. Oh, how I have dreamed of retrieving this, the rarest of my catalogued specimens,” she said as she stood upright, holding the feather up higher to admire it more.

This was the perfect time to make his move. The Lady and her bodyguards, who had been scrutinizing the transaction, were now watching her new prize, and not him. They all looked upon this thing as though it had some spiritual significance—as if it were holy.

“You are very welcome, my lady,” he said quietly as he gently grabbed her large hand and laid his dry lips on the back.

As he retracted his face, his small, dexterous paws slid away from hers, along with the loose-fitting diamond ring. The job was a success so far. He kept his eyes on the lady and took a step backward. She was still fondling her treasure and paid him no attention.

“Well, I must be off now. Thank you and well met, my lady.”

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“Yes, yes. Thank you again.” She barely took her sight off of the Varouche as she waddled away with her entourage.

The Ordakian thief turned and instantly bumped into a leather-clad guard patrol.

“Didn’t I tell you men that we would find something interesting in the market?”

The patrol erupted into laughter. “What’s the password, Halfling?”

He gulped, “Hail King Manasseh?”

“Good try. Where are your other misfit friends?”

“C’mon Thule. We’re not worth the time.”

“You got that right, Bridazak. Do you know what this insignia means?” He pointed at the patch on his chest of a black dragon.

Bridazak glanced at the feather vendor, who kept his head down.

“I’ll tell you what it means. It says that I can tell you to leave my town or I’ll have you arrested. Why don’t you run and hide in the mountains and forests, like the rest of your kind?”

“Yeah fine, we will leave first thing tomorrow.”

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“You’ve said that before, but I will have the power to do something about it. Tomorrow I get sworn in by the official magistrate of the King, and then you and your other outcasts will be all mine. I will do my part and make sure there are three less of your kind in the world. C’mon, boys.” Thule spit on the ground. His phlegm splashed in the dirt and sprayed Bridazak’s hairy pads.

The squad followed their leader. Several of them bumped into the Ordakian on purpose as they passed, knocking his shoulder to the side. He sighed, glanced back at the hooded vendor with a slight nod, and then disappeared into the crowd.



Bridazak entered the small cottage and leaned his back up against the door as he closed it. He let out a deep sigh and shut his eyes. A strong smell of pipe tobacco hovered in the bare room. Only a single bed, a dining table with a couple of chairs, a charred fireplace, and a few knick-knacks adorned the chamber. Two sets of blankets from travelling bedrolls were on the floor in one corner.

“What’s got you all rattled?” A deep voice asked from the opposite side of the room.

Bridazak opened his eyes and looked at the red-bearded Dwarf leaning in a chair against the wall, smoking his pipe.

“Thule and his goons,” he sat at the dining table.

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“They deserve a good Dwarven beating. Did you sell that damn feather you and Spilf concocted?”

“Yes, the noblewoman came through. We will have enough to live on for a while.”

“Good. I need a good drink tonight, so cough up some coin.”

Bridazak tossed a leather pouch filled with gold pieces onto the table and the coins jingled loudly. The Dwarf tilted forward in surprise of the amount, showing more of his face in the dimming light. He had a large scar on his left cheek that was partially buried by his thick, foot-long beard.

“Whoa, you made how much for that feather?”

“Three-hundred,” he fibbed; Bridazak was distracted with other thoughts and responded mechanically.

“I’m impressed, you came out ahead this time, what with all of your costume regalia purchases. Where is your sidekick?” Dulgin moved to the dining table and inspected the coinage by feeling the weight in his ruddy hand.

Just then, the door burst open and another Ordakian, several inches shorter than Bridazak, came through. He held a large cloak rolled up in his arms. His short brown hair matched the color of his eyes.

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“Do you know how hard it was to balance myself on those wooden crates? That was incredible Bridazak,” the excited Ordakian said. “I wish you could have seen it, Dulgin.”

“Ah, it’s not my way, and you know that.”

“You should have seen Bridazak in action. He played his part like a pro, except when he called me Sally. I told you it was Seelly.”

Spilf was smirking toward his long-time friend, but he could see that his mind was elsewhere. “What’s wrong, Bridazak?”

“What? Oh, nothing. You did well today, Spilfer Teehle.” Bridazak gave a half-hearted smile.

“It’s Thule, isn’t it? He got to you this time,” Spilf pressured him.

“It was something he said that really bothered me.”

“What?”

“He said he would make sure there are three less of our kind in the world.”

“I’d like to see him try,” Dulgin interjected.

“I don’t know. It’s just...”

“Just what?” Spilf asked.

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“He needs a drink is what he needs.”

“Good idea, Dulgin. C’mon Bridazak, let’s get our table at The Knot.”

“Not this time. I’m going to sit this one out and get some rest. You guys go on without me.”

“Suit yourself. C’mon Stubby,” Dulgin said as he grabbed the loot off the table.

“You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“You’d think you would be used to it, after two decades of travelling with me.” Dulgin headed for the door.

Spilf followed, “I don’t mind a nickname but pick something with some pizzazz, like Amazing or Magnificent.”

“Sounds good. Let’s go Amazing Stubby,” the Dwarf laughed.

The door shut behind them and their voices trailed off as they made their way down the path toward the tavern. Bridazak was now alone with his thoughts. His long-time friends were right; they had heard all the ridicule among the Humans before, so why was it bothering him this time? Thule brought up his kin in hiding. Why was he not with them? Why had he not succumbed to the pressure, like the Elves and Dwarves?

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“Thule did have one thing right; we are misfits,” he thought aloud as he hopped down off the chair and made his way to the bed. As he lay there, his mind began to race. Snippets of feelings came to the forefront of his memory and sparked to life. He closed his eyes and allowed them to continue. Ruauck-El had changed over these many decades, especially as the Horn Kings continued to dominate the good folk of the realm. A century ago seemed like yesterday—when he first met Dulgin on the road through Ogre’s Pass, and their years of adventures across Ruauck-El since. The Dwarf had been his only family until they found Spilf, another orphaned Ordakian, stealing food from a vendor on the streets of Baron’s Hall. Bridazak connected with Spilfer. He was alone, abandoned, and looking for something more to life than hiding their existence from the world—a true thirst for adventure. Spilf had been a younger brother to him these last twenty-seven years. Bridazak drifted deeper and soon fell asleep.



His eyes opened, but he knew that he was still sleeping. Above him was a soothing, brilliant white light. He turned his head and peered down the side of his bed. Below him was darkness—a pitch-black that had no end. A cold fear forced him to look away. His bed hovered between the nebulous dream realms. The silence was broken by whispering above. He squinted his eyes, as he saw amorphous beings approaching. Bridazak felt waves of peace emanating from the aura above. The two ethereal figures were outlined by the light flooding from behind



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