

# PROLOGUE

Helm, He of the Unsleeping Eyes, God of Guardians, stood vigilant, watching his fellow gods. The assemblage was complete. Every god, demigod, and elemental was in attendance. The walls of the great pantheon that hosted the gods had long ago vanished, but the windows remained, hanging on the empty air, and through them Helm looked out onto a universe crumbling into decay. The pantheon, with its many unfinished altars, was located in the heart of the cancerous decay; it had been constructed on an isle that was only large enough to house the meeting place of the gods.

A path made of crumbling gray stepping stones floated outward across the sea of decay to a destination that lay beyond the vision of the gods. It was the only avenue of escape from the pantheon, but none of the gods had been foolish enough to take the first step upon those craggy stones, fearing the path might lead them to a place even more terrifying than this one.

The air around the isle was a white canvas dotted with ebon stars. Streaks of light, so bright that even the eyes of a god could not look into them for long, burned into the ivory tapestry. The streaks formed runes, and Helm shuddered as he read them.

All that has been, is gone. All we have known, all we have believed, is a lie. The time of the gods is at an end.

Then the runes vanished. Helm wondered if one of the summoned gods had sent the cryptic message in an effort to frighten the others, but dismissed the idea. He knew that the runes had been sent by a power greater than any of the gods around him.

Helm listened to the dull roar of thunder as mammoth gray clouds with veins of black lightning rolled in and shadows fell across the pantheon. The pure white sky was obscured by the clouds, and the stepping stones that drifted outward from the pantheon crumbled and fell away into the vast sea of decay.

Helm had been the first to be summoned. One moment he was in his temple, ruminating over his recent failings as guardian to Lord Ao. The next moment he was standing alone in the pantheon. Soon his fellow gods began to appear. The gods had seemed disoriented, weakened by the journey to this place that was apart from all that was known.

The summons had come wearing the face and form of that which each of the gods feared most. To Mystra, Goddess of Magic, it appeared as a harbinger of magical chaos. To the beautiful Sune Firehair, Goddess of Love and Beauty, it appeared as a haggard, cancer-ridden creature, crying out against its fate while delivering Sune to hers. To the Black Lord, Bane, the summons came in the guise of absolute love and understanding, its light searing his essence as it carried him from his kingdom.

Helm had only to shift his gaze slightly to see Lord Bane, Lady' Mystra, and Lord Myrkul in a heated discussion that climaxed with Mystra storming off to seek more appropriate company. Glancing in another direction, Helm saw Llira, Goddess of Joy, wearing a slightly worried expression, wringing her hands without thought, then catching herself and staring down at her hands in horror. Standing beside her, Ilmater, God of Suffering, could not contain a steady stream of laughter as he danced in place, whispering knowing comments to no one in particular.

As Helm studied the faces of the gods, a small group of deities who had not been affected so traumatically by the summons surrounded him. The God of Guardians tried to ignore the pleas of these gods, whose dignity apparently no longer mattered to them, as they whined and clawed at him for more information.

"My home was destroyed! My temple in the Planes was shattered!" God after god repeated the complaint, but Helm was deaf to their words.

"Ao has issued a summons. All will be made clear in time," Helm told each of them, but he soon grew tired of repeating himself and eventually warned the small group of gods away. Change was coming. Of that there could be no doubt. Helm concluded as he pondered the will of his immortal liege, Ao.

Ao's will had been so great that he rose from the swirling mist of Chaos at the beginning of time and set about to create a balance between the forces of Law and Chaos. From this balance came life: first with the creation of the gods in the heavens, then with the mortals in the Realms. Ao, Maker of All Things, had chosen Helm to be his right hand. And Helm knew that it was the power of Ao that brought the gods to this place of madness and confusion.

As Helm stood quietly in thought, Tales, God of Storms, surged forward. "An end to the trickery, I say! If our lord wishes to make a point, let him speak, let his wisdom fill our bankrupt hearts and empty minds!" Talos said "wisdom" with as much contempt as he could muster, but the others were not convinced. His fear was as evident as theirs.

The challenge of Talos was not met, and all who stood within arm's reach of the God of Storms moved away from him. In the silence that followed Talos's outburst there was an answer more unnerving than any proclamation; in the silence was heard the finality of Ao's judgement. It was then that the gods understood that their fate, whatever it would be, had been sealed long before this summoning. That terrible silence filled the great hall, but it was soon shattered.

"Keepers of the Balance, I address you one and all!"

It was Ao's voice, and in that voice was heard the power of a being so great that the gods fell to their knees in response. Lord Bane alone managed to place only one knee on the pantheon's cold floor.

"Most noble was your heritage! Yours was the power to stave off the ever-present threat of imbalance between Law and Chaos, and yet you chose to act like children, resorting to petty thievery in your quest for power..."

Bane suddenly wondered if the being who had given the gods life long ago had called his creations to this place to undo his mistake and begin anew.

"Extinction may be your future yet, Bane," Ao proclaimed, as if the Black Lord's thoughts had been spoken aloud. "But do not let it concern you, for that fate would be most merciful compared to what shall soon befall you — and the other gods that betrayed my trust."

It was Helm who then stepped forward. "Lord Ao, the tablets were in my keeping, let it be —"

"Silence, Helm, lest you suffer a fate such as theirs."

Helm turned and faced the assemblage of gods. "You should know your crime, at least. The Tablets of Fate have been stolen."