

THE FOURTH AGE:
SHADOW WARS

BOOK 3

MYTHS

BY

DAVID N PAULY

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All characters in this work are fictitious. Any resemblances to any persons living or dead are purely coincidental.

Dedication

To my loving wife, Minh Ha, who made this possible, and my brother James, the first to believe.

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CHAPTER ONE: PLATONIA

Huw Gilliand prepared to leave the gardens surrounding the Well of Life in the center of Platonía an hour before sunset. He was to meet his friends, Berwyn, Reginard, and Rolant, at Berwyn's inn, the Bull and Boar, for supper. The gardens grew all around him, flowers and more beds of flowers in a rough circle, surrounding the ancient well. The well was more spring than well, but it had been called a well for hundreds of years, as waters from deep within the earth rose up and over moss-covered stones set low upon the ground. Brilliant blue water of a hue unknown outside the gardens streamed to the surface, pouring over a low stone lip worn smooth by countless centuries and splashing into a pool twelve feet wide and twenty feet long before forming a narrow, deep channel that flowed to the southern end of the gardens. There it sluiced away under a small arch to form the Stream of Life, slowly winding its way to the southern end of Platonía, where it merged with the great river Beadle and flowed into the sea.

Huw gazed about the gardens, surveying the new young plants in their fresh beds, replacements for the luxuriant flower beds destroyed by the Vandal, as he was known. Recalling the crime, Huw remembered the Man who had penetrated the safety and security of Platonía, laying waste to several flower beds: flowers that grew nowhere else, as far as Huw knew. How this Man could have invaded Platonía and why he had destroyed these flower beds was unknown, as he had refused to answer any questions. The Gracies took him to the eastern edge of Platonía and placed him in a boat to give him to Frederick, Prince of Amadeus, for trial.

Huw, as chief acolyte of the gardens, had been in the boat as Gracie rowers pushed away from the shore. Suddenly the Man, who had been silent for three days, began repeating a mantra that sounded much like a Shardan prayer Huw had heard once during his education with the Elves of Phoenicia. The boat was surrounded by water spirits, creatures that took corporeal form

by amalgamating river foam, from which their name, Bubblers, was derived. They tipped the boat on its side and pulled the Vandal into the cold, swift-flowing water of the Beadle. He did not surface. As the rowers brought the boat back to the Platonian shore, Huw had been uneasy in his mind: such devotion to the destruction of a few plants made no logical sense to Huw.

A pacific people, the Gracies were shocked by this murder by their protectors, miscreant or no. Recalling the story brought sadness to Huw, though it was nearly a year since the incident. He was about to turn and leave the gardens, when he heard the unmistakable sounds of a Bubbler rising to the surface. Turning, he saw a bearded head form on the surface of the water, its translucent arms appearing and disappearing as the water fought to stay above its own surface in an endless dance.

'Huw, come to me now and listen,' said the Bubbler in a high-pitched voice, like that of a child making noises under water.

Shocked, Huw moved toward the Well; no living Gracie had ever heard a Bubbler speak outside the river Beadle, and even then, they offered greetings, not conversation. Striding back to the edge of the pool, Huw knelt and offered the traditional obeisance of an acolyte. Swiftly the Bubbler said, 'Platonian is in danger. We Bubblers are reaching the last of our strength.'

'You can't fail,' said a shocked Huw. 'You are the Bubblers, immortal river creatures who have always protected Platonian.'

'We are immortal, but if we cannot renew ourselves here in the Well of Life, we will become no more, and this we can no longer do.'

'Why not?'

'There is no time to explain; you must aid our renewal, or we will be lost, unable to protect Platonian against the greed of Men and the other races.'

'What can we do?' asked a stunned Huw.

'You must save the Gemwings, our only source of hope, or we will disappear in less than a year.'

'Gemwings,' asked Huw, thinking of the legendary insects, presumed to exist, but never actually seen. 'How can I save the Gemwings? Do they even exist?'

'You will come to know that from the Gemwings themselves. Only they can tell you how to save them, us, and Platonía. Fail and you doom Platonía to the destruction of Men.' With that the Bubbler dissolved back into the waters of the well.

Rising, Huw moved woodenly toward the entrance of the gardens, in shock from the conversation. Simple wooden doors were there, ritually closed at sunset and opened at dawn, when the acolytes would gather around the Well of Life, dipping into its unique waters and feeling the life force of Nostraterra course through their bodies.

Becoming an acolyte was a choice made by Gracies at any time of their lives, but their desire had to be granted by the Bubblers. Gracies wanting to serve the Bubblers would immerse themselves in the icy waters of the Beadle each spring equinox. Those chosen by the Bubblers were touched on the shoulder by a Bubbler, but those rejected would have only minutes of life before the icy cold waters leached the heat from their bones.

If you served as an acolyte you were respected greatly, and you could drink the Waters of Life every day; an excess usually frowned upon by Gracies. The Waters of Life extended a Gracie's lifespan from the usual hundred years or so to nearly two hundred years.

Now Huw, chief acolyte during his time, had the impossible task of securing the safety of Platonía by saving the legendary Gemwings. Every midsummer's night, the gardens were closed and all were forbidden from entering, even if their need was compelling. During the dark of the

moon, when only the stars shone down, the acolytes listened for the high-pitched buzzing of many wings, which according to history signaled the arrival of the Gemwings into the gardens. Once an ambitious Gracie hid within the gardens to see the mythical Gemwings, but all heard a terrible shriek within the gardens and all nearby felt a dark foreboding and dared not enter the gardens that night. The next day, no trace of the Gracie was found; only later, along the shores of the southern end of Platonian, were his clothes found.

The Gemwings were a mysterious implacable force to be reckoned with; their secrets were their own, undisclosed even by the Bubblers. Huw shook his head when he thought that he was charged to seek out the creatures of myth and legend, much less make contact with them. Leaving the gardens, he closed the doors behind him and strode off, shaking and trembling in fear, toward Berwyn's inn to have dinner with his friends.

Huw paused on a simple country lane covered in white gravel as evening drew down upon him, fifty feet or so from the Bull and Boar, unsure of what to say to his friends, with little idea as to how to find the Gemwings, much less save them. Approaching the inn, he smelled the delicious nutty odor of fresh-baked bread, roasted potatoes, and the somewhat disquieting aroma of roasting meats. Huw, while abstaining from meat of any kind, did not criticize those who consumed it, but the thought of eating something that had once drawn breath made him shudder.

Striding forward, Huw entered the inn and saw the usual crowd of Gracies come in from their farms and orchards. Late spring meant many of the folk were exercising their elbows after finishing the last of the planting or pruning. Hearing his name called from across the room, Huw saw his friends, Berwyn, Rolly, and Reggie, gathered at a far table in the corner away from the fire. Huw tried to force the fear and uncertainty of the Bubbler's news from his mind as he

ordered another full pitcher of ale from a Gracie server, then joined his friends with false cheer, hoping to enjoy 'an ale and a tale,' as Berwyn said.

Berwyn, his oldest friend, glanced up at him and, seeing the poorly hidden concern, asked, 'Huw, are you alright?'

'Fine, fine,' said Huw in a slightly breathless voice. 'I see that business is good.'

'No worse than usual,' replied Berwyn dourly. 'You are just in time to hear the tale of Reggie and Rolly now that they have returned from their camping trip.'

'Camping trip, yes, I forgot for a moment—you've been gone over a week. Where did you go?' asked Huw in a thin voice.

'We were on the Flowery Plateau,' began Rolly, when Reggie hushed him and said, 'Let's not be overheard.'

Huw knew that the flowery plateau was formed by the divergence of the river Beadle at the north end of Platonía and encompassed nearly a hundred square miles of wild flowers and grasses. A dense barrier of trees over a mile wide divided the farms and grazing pastures of the Gracies from the plateau, which was best reached by boat rather than through the tangled forest.

Huw received another concerned look from Berwyn, but ignoring it said, 'Overheard? What are you talking about?'

Rolly said, 'I don't want people laughing at me again.'

'Laughing about what?' asked Huw.

Rolly's ears began to flush when Berwyn, the least imaginative of the group, said, 'Oh you're not on about that giant dragonfly again, are you? On the Plateau? One of the mythical Gemwings?'

'Yes,' replied Rolly heatedly. 'And if you want to know, it was to get another glimpse of a Gemwing that Reggie and I spent a week camping and quietly walking around the plateau.'

'Enough. Let's adjourn to the roof before we continue this conversation.' said Huw. Taking their tankards of ale with them, each of the Gracies grabbed a fresh pitcher from the bar and then followed Berwyn up the inner stair to the wooden deck surrounded by a wooden lattice fence, where several tables and chair stood. Tonight it was a bit cool, and they had the deck to themselves.

'Now lock the door,' demanded Huw of Berwyn.

His friend moved to do so, muttering under his breath.

'What do you mean *another*?' asked Huw. 'When did you see one the first time?'

'I saw one last month, or at least I think so, from one of my family's ferry boats that I used to fish above the landing,' said Rolly defensively. 'It was a Gemwing, I tell you.'

'A Gemwing, are you certain?' asked Huw with a leap in his heart.

'Well, the spring floods haven't started yet with the cold weather, and the usual ferry traffic slowed down the past weeks, so I had time to see if there was really a Gemwing up on the Flowery Plateau. Reggie wanted to come along, and we just got back.'

'You could have been killed, both of you! You know what happened to the last Gracie that was caught by the Gemwings, don't you?' demanded a flustered Berwyn.

'Of course we know! But that Gracie just disappeared, didn't he?' retorted Rolly. 'No one knows what actually happened to him. Besides, chasing myths makes a welcome break from work.'

'And did you see one?' asked Huw.

'No,' said Rolly.

'There, I told you,' began Berwyn with a look of smug satisfaction.

'It was Reggie who saw the Gemwing this time,' said Rolly. 'Go on, Reggie, tell them.'

Sheepishly, Reggie said, 'It was late in the evening three nights ago. We had finished our meal and had some ale from our packs, but I couldn't sleep, so I got up and walked away from the fire a few yards and saw the full moon just begin to rise in the east. I listened to the water in the river for a few minutes and began to get sleepy, so I turned back toward the fire. Suddenly the tip of my nose was burnt, and I saw a flash of color and giant wings disappearing into the night.'

This elicited a dark laugh from Berwyn. 'Serves you right for drinking and walking in your sleep; lucky you didn't fall in the river instead.'

'Ignore him, Reggie,' said Huw. 'What happened next?'

'Nothing,' said Rolly. 'I put some salve on my nose and lay down to sleep.'

'So you think that was a Gemwing?' asked Berwyn dubiously, ignoring Huw's glance to keep silent.

'Yes,' replied Reggie mulishly. 'How do you get your nose burnt from cool, damp air when you are a dozen feet from a campfire banked in its own ashes?'

'Huw, help me here,' implored Berwyn. 'You spent years amongst the Elves and are the chief acolyte of the Gardens. Did you ever hear of anything more outlandish than this tale?'

'Yes, as a matter of fact. Today I spoke with a Bubbler.'

Briefly Huw explained his encounter with the Bubbler in the Garden. Seeing even Berwyn's skeptical face go pale, he finished his tale by stating that he had to go in search of the mythical Gemwings.

'How are we supposed to find a mystical beast that doesn't want to be found, much less help it in some way?' asked Berwyn. 'Wait—you've never treated us as fools despite your education. You're not starting now, are you?'

'No,' insisted a still shaken Huw, though the strong ale he was gulping was helping steady his nerves a bit. 'A Bubbler has never spoken to a Gracie outside the river. Either the Bubblers have gone mad or we are in real trouble.'

'Trouble, how are we in trouble?' asked an astounded Berwyn.

'Weren't you listening?' demanded Reggie, who had gone white as a sheet. 'As go the Bubblers, so goes Platonía, or so say the legends. My father has reports of groups of brigands roaming up and down the east bank of the Beadle, looking for a way to cross into Platonía.'

Reggie's father, Ifan Colchester, was the First Speaker of Platonía, and amongst his many duties was the security of Platonía, which involved keeping the other races out.

'The Mayor of Alton sent a message warning of groups of brigands coming through town causing mischief, stealing food, trying to steal tools and horses. There was a small fight, and three brigands were killed, along with a sheriff of Alton, before they were driven off. But the Mayor fears they will be back sooner rather than later. He has sent to Amadeus, asking the prince for his help in sending these violent layabouts packing, but his messenger has not returned yet. Regardless, we are on our own for now, and if the Bubblers disappear or lose their powers, then nothing will stand in the way of an invasion of Platonía.'

Huw knew that Alton was the only town outside Platonía where Gracies were welcome and freely traded with the other races without fear of persecution.

'Invasion? End of the Bubblers?' sputtered Berwyn. 'Huw, you and Reggie seem to have lost your wits! Do you believe this nonsense, Rolly?'

'I saw a Gemwing last year,' said Rolly. 'Reggie got his nose burnt somehow, and, no, we didn't drink enough ale for him to imagine his story. If Huw says that the Bubblers are dying and need to be saved somehow, I believe him. Reggie's story about Men encroaching makes sense. My ferryman reported Men trying to negotiate passage into Platonia at a very high price, but they are always refused, according to our law. Also, several boats of Men, or what was left of them, were recently found in the great swirl that exists where the rivers of the Beadle come together again south of Platonia. Clearly, Platonia is in danger, and maybe, as Huw says, finding the Gemwings could help.'

All Gracies knew the characteristics of Men, a race that embraced the wholesale destruction of woods and wild meadows, and slew beasts for sport. No Men had ever been allowed into Platonia, and none ever would be.

'Regardless,' said Huw with false cheerfulness, 'if the Bubblers were simply telling me a cautionary tale, or if this one Bubbler was mad, we can all use a break from our routine.' He had recovered much of his composure, thanks to the effect of the ale upon his nerves. 'Let's plan getting away for a week, and this time we can cover the entire Plateau with horses.'

'While you are my good friend, and I will help if I can, remind me again why I want to come along?' asked a confused and frustrated Berwyn. 'I have a new batch of beer to brew and accounts to be overseen that will take me at least the next two weeks.'

'Fine,' replied Huw. 'You stay here and run the tavern and see what sort of adventures you will miss by not being with us. Remember the time you didn't go with me to visit the Dwarves?'

Grumpily, Berwyn remembered that day. He had thought that Huw was just going to walk for a short while with a traveling company of Dwarves from the Ocean Range, but the Dwarves had invited his friend to a feast in their mines, and Huw had been gone for two weeks. When he

returned, he had stories to tell for months about the Dwarves, their customs, language, and, worst of all, their remarkable ale. Berwyn would have given his eyeteeth for a chance to sample this most mysterious ale and try to cadge a few tricks of its making from the Dwarves. Instead, he had been too busy running his tavern to go with Huw. That had been last fall, and he had rarely regretted anything more than that misstep.

'Alright, alright, I will go with you,' said Berwyn. 'Let me just tell my brother that I will be away for a week or so. When do you want to go?'

'Well, we need to leave as soon as possible,' replied Huw. 'We must be ready to depart at midday tomorrow. It will be full moon in two nights, which should help us find the Gemwings as reputedly they only fly at night.'

'How are we supposed to help the Gemwings? What are we supposed to do?' persisted Berwyn. 'The Dwarves I understand, but dragonflies?'

'You didn't understand the Dwarves at the time, and look what happened,' replied Huw. 'Now we must keep the purpose of our trip secret, for if the Brigands learn all of this, they might try to interfere. After all, if the Gemwings really do exist, and we fail to help them, the Bubblers will die, and without their protection, the Brigands will be free to attack Platonía. Besides, we do not want to panic the Gracies into thinking our protectors are dying.'

To this they all agreed. Huw descended the stairs and, leaving coins enough to pay for their ale, went home to consult his father and the books of lore that they kept. Reggie and Rolly also left to organize gear and horses for a week's camping expedition.

Berwyn descended the stairs to find his older brother, Glynn. Outwardly pragmatic, Berwyn reflected the dour personality of his father, Largo Loudberry, when it came to life in general, but inwardly he thought that life in Platonía was too tame and dreamed of someday

journeying to the lands of legend, Kozak and Eldora, and maybe even meeting an Elf in his travels.

Walking over to Glynn, a non-descript Gracie, graying at the temples, who stood behind the main bar, he said, 'Can you run the inn for a week or so? Rolly, Reggie, Huw, and I are going to Alton to look for new business opportunities.'

'It's a good idea,' said Glynn. 'Right, you go and have a look see and let me know what you find.'