

Sunderer

By : **Malnormalish**

"Their forces are building right under his nose." Anacor is rising, and the other kingdoms of Lyrycul are preparing for the largest war in history. The C'theran mages, a crucial asset to the war, have been Called by a mysterious force to the ruins of Euphadeos, gathering at the molding citadel they used to call home. Here they vow to stay out of the coming war, refusing to fight. Except one. Nyson Anthony is a fourth tiered C'theran at the age of eighteen, and he did not hear the Call while visiting the kingdom of Atlivia. He goes against the six Disciplines of the C'theran, the force which keeps his kind from turning into a fallen one, or Mor-dryk. He vows to become like the legendary Solomon Darsuul. But back in the Before Ages, when the world was shrouded in darkness, even a C'theran like Darsuul could not withstand what waited for him at the Marchessies of the Hells. To accomplish his goal of defeating the world's most deadly threat, he must risk becoming a crippled Mor-dryk, face the terrifying monsters of Lyrycul, and reclaim what is rightfully his. And, reach the tenth tier of mastery, which no C'theran has done before. Not even Solomon Darsuul.



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Sunderer : Chapter 1

"The world is young still."

These were the words spoken by the kings of old, when the country was still united under one rule, and peace reigned on land and sea. When hope shined in every man's face.

But with light, darkness soon follows to engulf all that is good.

And so with day comes night, and with night, the deeds of man may be hidden from vision, but not forgotten entirely. And with their deeds a new force was birthed.

The child of sin, of greed and hate, was begotten long ago, and the six kingdoms frayed, turned against one another as the world shrank and the population expanded. With people came violence and hate; fodder for the downfall of the kingdoms.

Yet all was not lost; even in the darkest of nights, when all is shrouded in darkness and despair, a single, small light may illuminate the shadows; for it is when it is darkest that light may shine its brightest, and the dark will not abide it. Light keeps the dark at bay; light brings forth the folly of man.

That light was born into the High King Solomon Darsuul, the King of all kings who sought to vanquish the darkness. But corruption can reach even the brightest of lightâ

The books of the Before Ages tell of the defeat of evil, and that the High King drove the darkness back and forever brightened the night sky with stars to illuminate the weary travelers' way. Yet the tale does not end there....

For a thousand years the wanderer feared

That night would swallow day;

Yet in the dark a light was lit

And a babe was donned High King.

He grew to loathe the darkness near

And o'er a time his heart grew brave.

Out he rode over hill and stone

With sword and spear and magic lore,

With an army so great that legends sing

Were thrice the size and more

of cowardly Anacor.

As night drew nigh and the battle thickened

His heartbeat steadily quickened;

For up rose a beast so foul,

From the Hells the creature blazed,

And fought in form of thousands told

It fought the King for days.

At last! The earth split, and the demon, engulfed by earth;

Roared and thrashed and fought;

The King plunged his sword

Into its cold dark heart

and undid what had been wrought.

Hurrah! Hurray! cried the Wanderer

As the earth shook under his shoes;

And the world broke apart

To seal the demon within

And people rejoiced at the news.

Yet to this day, one thing remains

A reminder of what lay within;

A split in the earth where the King once stood

The Hells that have opened again.

So, weary wanderer,
You think that night is safe;
Yet look in places so dark
That light cannot escape;
And there you will find what the Kings of old
Feared most in their darkest dreams,
For deep in Abyss you may glimpse the souls
Of men and hear their screams.

Warlord Ibesa Ra'shasti ran a cloth down the length of his sword, which glistened crimson in the flickering campfire light. The man who had attempted his assassination now lay without a head next to the camp, his body sprawled carelessly in the mud.

As he wiped his blade absent-mindedly, his men rammed the severed head onto a sharpened spear and set it out on display.

The warlord stood and sheathed his still dripping blade, drawing in a deep breath, face wrought with concentration.

Not a moment later, he began chuckling. That chuckle turned into a manic fit of laughter, echoed by the one-hundred and forty men about him.

His dark skin glowed in the campfire and the sweat on his forehead glistened as he laughed. His tight dreadlocks were gathered into a ponytail and his beard was recently trimmed. He was a hulking man with a deep, powerful voice that was designed by Nature to command.

The man was a fierce warrior and had killed many before that night, had severed heads and broken limbs off men twice his size. That is what made his manic laughter that much more chilling.

His laugh died down and with it the unsure laughter of the men, and for the longest time no one spoke. Then the general turned around, a gleeful shine in his eyes.

"Men, we have been through many trials together, and I thank you, for such fine warriors and dedicated friends are hard to come by these days. But the Byzosinian bastards have taunted Rhodaini, our homeland, and with this attempted assassination, it will not be ignored."

He paused, looking at the beheaded corpse that lay fifty paces beside him. From the looks of it, the man must have been in his mid-twenties, a husky build for an assassin. His skin was a light tan, his dark hair coarse and long, protection for the biting cold.

Ra'shasti calmly walked to the corpse and flipped him over on his stomach; then, carefully, removed his clothing.

The left shoulder blade bore the crest of two airborne hawks with a snake entangled between their beaks, talons out and clawing into one another. Below the fighting birds was a crown, with the words Decus, Fides, Sanctimonia engraved in it. Honor, Trust, Virtue. The Byzosinian House Crest. This man served King Xengeos Byzosin VI, sent by the King himself to kill Ra'shasti.

Ra'shasti's hands trembled. His hands did not quiver from fear, however; his body shook with rage, his face turning red through his dark complexion.

"Take his possessions. Burn the corpse, and I want the head returned to Byzosin as a warning. An attack on us is an attack on the country. Be sure to tell that effeminate lout Omyr Callan that our shaky peace treaty is over, that he and his King can choke on the steel of our swords." He spat on the cadaver and walked away, his fists balled so tightly his fingers began turning white.

Those Byzosini bastards had no class, he thought. The wild men of Ilista's Wood, trained in the art of archery, called warriors and assassins. The mere thought enraged him! How could Xengeos send such an amateur assassin to kill Ibesa Ra'Shasti, commander of Sahan Sah Rhodan's finest warriors? These century long feuds between Rhodaini and Byzosin had to end, and as General of the Armies, he would be the one to get the glory for their downfall.

That was why he and his men had decided to travel the many miles from their small island, battling the oncoming winter. He had started with a group of three hundred men, and their numbers had dwindled considerably-due to an infestation of the deadly Ebon Rib Adders, the most lethal vipers that flourished anywhere on the continent. Since Rhodaini did not have very many mages, there had been no way to heal

those who had been bitten, and many perished. Ra'shasti was forced to set fire to the bodies, to burn any traces of his cavalry's passage into Byzosinian territory.

He and his small contingent were to meet up with a larger army of three thousand that would arrive in two days' time, giving his party enough time to scout the woodlands surrounding Byzosin.

Ra'shasti tried to look at the important task at hand; secure the woods, wait for the rest of his army, and slaughter the royal family. This task, which at first seemed impracticable, now was within reach. They were but a day's journey from Bythesini, the kingdoms capital.

Just then, a guard named Ikeki Sohrabi ran up to him, back from a scouting trip that had set out earlier that day. He looked as if he had something important to report.

"What have the scouts found east?"

Ikeki looked unsure for a moment, then replied, "All is well, General. If all goes according to plan, we will 'ave successfully overtaken Bythesini within three days."

Ra'shasti stood quiet for a moment, examining the guard, whose shaved head bore the many swirling tattoos of his clan. His eyes were deep green, common to Rhodainians, and he was a hulking man, his wide chest bare to show off his muscles.

Armor wasn't worn in Rhodaini, believed to weigh the soldier down and encumber rather than be of any assistance. Ibesa was proud to be known as a stubborn Rhodainian.

"That is all?" he asked, noting the worried look on the man's face. Ikeki looked as if he had more to say.

"No, that is not all. We have found two dead bodies of Anacorans at the Rising Knights Inn, just a few miles south of here. Theyâ they had been thrown with the garbage behind the Inn," he said.

The general's eyes grew wide, and his look was mirrored in the guard's face as well.

"Anacorans? Here in Byzosin? What would those elitist maniacs want here? This is a problem that I am sure you know, Ikeki. They, and their deluded Emperor, must be seeking to war again. That is only what those bastards are good for."

Ra'shasti knew that the sight of an Anacoran boded ill; Anacorans never left their realm, because they believed themselves too good for the rest of the kingdoms. They stayed secluded, behind their mountains, and raised armies. For decades, those armies hadn't been put to good use, and due to the century year old treaty drawn up by the past Kings, the rest of Lyrycul's kingdoms had let them be.

But it was too late; Sahan Sah Rhodan had foreseen this, and all of his prophets had seen a man's face in their visions. That man was Emperor Qin Zhao, and the visions had predicted the downfall of the nation's Kingdoms, one by one collapsing, just how the once bountiful Kingdom of Euphadeos had been destroyed years ago in what had come to be known as the greatest war mankind had ever known.

This war had involved the six Kings and their struggle to be named High King, presiding over all others. In fact, that was what Rhodaini's own King had been named after. Sahan Sah literally translated to "King of kings", a presumptuous exclamation that Rhodaini's fearless leader had bequeathed unto himself.

Since that terrible war, which nearly destroyed all of the Kingdoms, and had completely obliterated the legendary Euphadeos realm, the remaining five Kings had vowed never to war again.

Ibesa was sure that Rhodaini would have been the first to break this vow, considering they had been enemies of Byzosin for many years. But Anacor had been withdrawn through the years, quietly building an army, making all of the country's leaders uneasy.

Ra'shasti stood beside Ikeki for awhile, deep in thought, staring into the camp fire. Then he looked the man in his eyes.

"Ikeki, I need you and fifty men to travel back to Rhodaini. Go to Sumygur, and tell Sahan Sah Rhodan about these Anacorans. Tell him that our enemy is not Byzosin; tell him that Anacor will wage war with Rhodaini, possibly every kingdom, and may be stronger than we think."

Ikeki's eyes grew wide. "But, that is mad! We have traveled many miles, lost many men. Byzosin has tried to assassinate you, do not forget this. And you tell me that Byzosin is no longer an enemy!"

Ra'shasti grabbed the huge man's wrist, gripped it tightly, and looked into his eyes. "No one has seen an Anacoran outside of their realm. Obviously they were spies. Whoever has killed them may already know this. I feel it is the right thing to do."

In fact, every inch of his body felt that Anacor was the enemy. "This has gone on too long," he whispered.

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Ikeki looked into his general's eyes, saw the worry there. He nodded.

"I will do this, but please tell me; what do you plan to do?"

"I will go to Byzosin and request their help. I will tell them what you have seen. Perhaps they can forget our troubles for now, also."

Ikeki turned and called out to the men. Soon, fifty men had mounted their horses and were beginning to leave the camp, returning to Rhodaini.

How I wish I could go back and smell the sea air, to kiss my wife, thought Ibesa, for he knew that he may not live through the coming war.

Chapter 2

King Xengeos sat in his polished wooden throne, his queen at his side and his two daughters before him. He was worried, and the lines on his face grew deeper than ever as he frowned. The King was nearly sixty, and although his auburn hair hadn't yet turned grey, his face was etched with age.

Usually, the King had a kindly sparkle in his hazel eyes, but today they were dulled and distant. He was weary.

"What have you called us in for, father?" asked Azriel, his youngest daughter. She stood before him, nervously pulling her fingers. She knew even before then that her father was worried. She was a perceptive thing.

"Daughters, you know that it is a dangerous time for our traders. As they carry lumber to the northern kingdoms, they get ambushed and attacked by Rhodainians. I have tried to change the routes, our schedules, but those barbarians find ways to stop us."

His daughters knew well how troublesome the Rhodainians could be. They were a ruthless island race, stubborn in all of their pride, and took every chance they could get at sabotage.

"It vexes me to deal with them, for as you know, our main export is lumber. They work around the peace treaty and do not war with us; they merely try to collapse our economy. This, I cannot allow. So, I have had Lord Omyr Callan send out an assassin, to slay Rhodan's general," the King said calmly. His wife sat silent beside him, her tan skin now turned ashen in the dim light. She knew what the assassination would mean. War. The first genuine war in one hundred years, and King Xengeos had started it. Although Rhodan's men had provoked the war, his people would know that whatever the outcome, Xengeos has stricken the first blow. Azriel's face mimicked her mother's. She clutched her fingers for so long they became colorless as she silently stood.

"But, father, we cannot afford war at this time of year. Not to mention that our armies are not yet ready to go against the Rhodainian soldiers. We'll be slaughtered," Triana Byzosin spoke slowly, her eyes betraying no emotion. The older daughter was always cool of mind and calm in action, poised and as graceful as any princess.

But she was a pessimist, and wasn't as perceptive as her sibling. Her long, flowing brown hair was almost always swept up into a tight ponytail, her calculating eyes always searching. She was known through the kingdom as a gossip.

"Triana, please do not act like you do not know of our troubles. This must be done, or else I fear we will never be free of those islanders," Xengeos studied his eldest, noticed the slight twitch of her mouth.

Azriel looked at her father, and then at her sister. Her bright red hair flowed loosely down her back, wavy and wild, just like her spirit. She was barely fifteen, and did not yet understand all the mechanics of war. However, she had an intelligence behind those eyes that so resembled her father's.

"I think it is the right thing to do. Father is right, we have been bothered by them long enough," Azriel squeaked, her voice quiet. She was always hesitant to speak in front of her sister, fearing she may say something stupid. Triana cast a sidelong glance at her sister.

"Dear Azriel, of course it isn't. Sister, do you not remember when our men traveled to Rhodaini and sank thirteen of Rhodan's vessels? If you ask me, we have invited their troops here. But a war right now, so close to the holiday and with the state our kingdom is in, would be foolish."

The king looked expectantly at his youngest, urging her to debate her sister, to show some authority. She merely stood awkwardly, clutching at her fingers again. The habit was very unladylike.

Xengeos stood, walked over to his daughters. He put a hand on each of their shoulders. "That is the very reason we should go to war," he spoke to Triana. "We are vulnerable, we are weak. But not as weak as Rhodan believes. Our C'theran are the finest mages in the country, and Rhodan's armies rely on brute strength alone. Our castle walls are fortified, our archers fine men. Now is the time to act."

He turned around, began pacing. "The attack on Rhodan's vessels was just a ruse to draw his men out, bring them to our territory. I had hoped to assassinate General Ra'shasti, to weaken their forces," he added.

Triana looked hurt. She hated to be wrong, but hated even more to not know what was going on.

"You mean to say you provoked them? You drew them to our home? How very childish! Now they will come and slaughter our people, instead of our armies waiting until the right time to bring the war to their doorstep. Our people will die and know who killed them; King Xengeos Byzosin IV," she stomped out of the room, furious. It was an unusual thing to see Triana lose her cool, and Xengeos was momentarily stunned by the insult.

Azriel stood before the King and Queen, and she looked upon her father's worried face. He crossed the room again and sat down on the throne.

"Tell me, have I done the right thing? I drew the enemy to my doorstep. Triana is right.... it was foolish."

Queen Ilista took her husband's hand gently. "No one can know what is right and wrong at this moment. All we know is that we must end this with Rhodan," she said. She turned to her daughter. "Azriel, I want you to go and tell Omyr Callan to gather all of the C'theran; we need to protect our kingdom. I believe that within a few days, Rhodan's soldiers will be here."

Azriel looked at her father once more, saw his aging face deep with worry, and turned to go out of the room. Before she left, her father called out, "Fetch Nyson Anthony, also. Tell him we shall pay him handsomely." She left the throne room, leaving her parent's some privacy. As she walked down the long halls, she thought of the war with Rhodan's armies. They were known as having fierce armies and strong navies.

War had always fascinated her. She'd wanted to be a soldier when she was younger, but knew that women usually never got to handle a sword. Her maids had often told her that she was an odd child, so delicate and thin, wanting to be a warrior. Her sister had teased her when she was a child.

As she walked, her skirts bothered her. She couldn't help but think that if the castle went under siege, she wouldn't be able to fight well in them.

She turned to a staircase that led to Lord Omyr Callan's room, her father's counselor. He was quite an oaf, a short and stocky man with a balding head. He was a good man, however. He had been her father's friend since before she had been born. He was trustworthy.

Nyson Anthony, on the other hand, she thought bitterly, is quite a pig. He flaunts himself as being the youngest C'theran who has reached the fourth tier, being only eighteen years old. He and his lascivious apprentice, Sinclair, had not vowed to serve the King like the rest of the C'theran. They, instead, took money to do various deeds; heal, deliver, assassinate.

In truth, Nyson Anthony was a bit of a nuisance. He was skilled in earth and water magics, owning quite a few apothecaries, was known for his abilities to heal burns and scars.

He had taken jobs to assassinate wealthy dukes and other men, all in the name of money. The only thing that kept him and his trampy apprentice from being thrown in the dungeon was that they were valuable C'theran. Of course, Azriel had never met him. She had heard many things from her sister about the C'theran and his apprentice. Triana had told Azriel that the only reason Nyson ever took a woman apprentice- the only one in all of Byzosin- was because she traded his teachings with sexual favors.

The thought made her skin crawl. She had disliked Nyson Anthony ever since her sister had said that, after she had seen him at one of the many parties held in the castle during the year.

"Nyson Anthony is such a crude man," she had gossiped. "I was at the party and had been talking to him- you know, asking him all kinds of questions about C'theran- and his ditsy little plaything scampers over and the two slink off into the shadows together for the rest of the night."

Azriel had no respect for such people. As far as she knew, her father shouldn't even try to buy off Anthony's services. He probably wasn't even as good as he made himself to be.

Azriel came to the huge doors that led into the Counselor's Hall and knocked. There came a shuffling of feet, and the counselor's guard opened the vast oak doors. "Hello, Princess Azriel," said Garreth, a man with wisps of graying hair even though he was only in his mid-thirties.

"Good afternoon. Is Lord Callan here?"

From behind him came a booming voice, "Let the girl in, Garreth!"

The guard let Azriel through, and immediately she saw the long banquet table that occupied the center of the room, littered with papers.

Lord Omyr Callan sat furthest away, his plump body dwarfed by the large wooden chair he sat upon. He was talking to another guard, handing him a set of documents.

"Now, this goes to the King to be signed immediately," he said. "These papers here are the deeds to the newly appointed lords, and these are the newly made maps from the cartographers, as requested" he stated as he handed the guard a pile of papers and shooed him off. He turned to Azriel with a smile once the guard had left.

"Ah, what a pleasure it is to be visited by the lovely Princess Azriel. Come in, dear. Please, excuse the mess. Everything gets so hectic when the holidays approach."

Azriel swiftly crossed the room, but didn't bother to sit down. "You are not going to like this, Lord Callan," she said. Callan was sifting through more papers, busily signing things and crossing them out. He looked up. "What was that, milady?"

She sighed. He really wasn't going to like this. Gathering all of the C'theran was going to be expensive, and if it was one thing Callan didn't like to do, it was financing.

"We are waging war with Rhodaini. King Xengeos has asked you to gather all of the C'theran and bring them here. He has also requested you summon Nyson Anthony," she said quickly.

Callan's face drooped a little bit.

"War? With Rhodaini? So close to the holidays? And you want me to gather all of the C'theran? What does King Xengeos think I am, a miracle worker? Do you know how many C'theran live in Ilista's Wood alone, young lady?"

Azriel simply stood and watched as the stout man hopped off of his chair and began pacing. He was as tall as Azriel, but that was short by men's standards. Although he didn't look it, he was one of the King's smartest counselors.

"My, my my. It's not all together impossible, of course not," he said to himself. "But the money involved! We will need mounts for all of the C'theran, of course. But your father's stables should provide enough. What I'm concerned with is housing all of them!"

He strode back and forth, calculating the costs. Then he stopped and looked at Azriel.

"What did you say about Nyson Anthony?"

"Father told me that we were to fetch him and pay him for his service," she said quietly. Secretly, she thought that Callan was acting quite comical.

"What?! Nyson Anthony, that ruffian! He's killed off another two lords! Anyhow, don't see why the King would want him. He's not even the most powerful C'theran in Byzosin," Callan began to mumble to himself, and started shuffling through papers. "To think of the costâ that boy charges too much for his service!"

Azriel turned to leave him, but Omyr grabbed her hand. She looked at him, and he turned a deep radish color. "Sorry, milady. But I just wanted to tell you to be careful. Rhodainiansâ are ruthless. It would be best to stay in the castle for the next few days."

Azriel had deep respect for Callan, and agreed to stay inside.

She left the Counselor's Hall, and walked down the spiraling staircase, wondering what war with Rhodan's armies would really be like.

Chapter 3

The Rising Knights Inn was quiet today, the usual waves of traders and passerby that frequented the small place less than normal. Because of this, the Innkeeper kept casting sideways glances toward Nyson every chance he got.

He sat in the back, quietly drinking his mug of Atlvian-style lager, wanting to get drunk quickly so he could leave.

Three other mugs sat on the table before him, and yet he still did not feel the drowsing affects the ale normally had, which made him grumpy. The quietness of the Inn and the way the old coot kept staring at him didn't improve his mood, either.

The Innkeeper's old crone of a wife waddled over, her back slightly hunched over from years of bending over a hot stove and cleaning.

She, too, acted cautiously around him, perhaps afraid he might run off without paying again.

"My, Helena," Nyson said in his best gentleman's voice, "you are looking ravishing today. How about another pint?"

She glared at him as she snatched his mugs away. "I think you've had enough, you still haven't paid me for the last time. I would have Urnold gut you, if it weren't for his age."

Nyson rolled his eyes. Like the old couple could really do anything, he thought. The only reason why they still had the Inn and kept it running was that their granddaughter helped them.

Their granddaughter was a lovely woman, one who Nyson enjoyed to see now and again. This night, it appeared that she, too, was not present.

"Why is the Inn so empty on this night?" he asked.

Urnold, who had crossed the room to wipe down the tables, grunted, "Who knows? All I know is, you better get going. We're closing up early tonight for the start of the holidays."

Nyson couldn't help but scoff. "The holidays are a bunch of superficial beliefs based around old children's stories," he said, rising from the table.

"That's why I don't celebrate them."

Helena rushed past him, shuffling across the rough wooden floor. She was eager to get him out of the Inn.

"You are such a thug, Nyson Anthony," she chided. "You have no value, you run around with that woman who has no dignity, and you think yourself too good for anyone. Tell me, do you care about anyone but yourself?"

Nyson pretended to consider. "No, actually I don't. How about you hobble out back and feed the pigs like you are supposed to, and stop preaching to me about values, you old hag."

The old woman looked hurt, and quickly left the room without another word.

"Now, I won't have that! Get out of here, and don't you come back!" cried Urnold, waving a broom at him.

Nyson shrugged, put his dark cloak on, and exited the Inn.

He began down the road, preferring to walk to most places instead of riding a horse. It was more peaceful.

The Rising Knights Inn was only a short distance from Bythesini, anyway.

As he walked in the dark, he began thinking about what the old woman said. It was untrue that Nyson cared only for himself; in fact he cared for many people. He was surprised that he felt bad about what he said. He was wont to be rather quick of temper when he was frustrated, and he supposed he had stepped out of line. However, he did believe the holidays were foolish. They revolved around one of the more popular children's tales of a being called the Blind Seraphim.

It told of a young princess, blinded since birth, who stayed day and night in her chambers. Her father had kept her in her room for years to keep her safe, and she never once left the confinements of the castle.

But, inevitably, she fell in love. It was told that one winter's night she and her lover had ventured out of the castle, and he had described to her the sights of her kingdom. He promised he would marry her the next day. Sadly, she had died in her sleep that morning from illness, and her father wept over her bed. Her lover swore he would never marry another, and he grew old, holding to his promise.

The holiday celebrated the bond between lovers, which reaches far beyond the flesh and into the afterlife. It showed how frail life was, and how to enjoy every moment of it as if it were the last. There was even a superstition, that at the darkest hour of night, if it was snowing, one could see the outline of an angel in white, the Blind Seraphim, watching over a lover's house. It was an omen of everlasting love.

Nyson thought it was all superstition, finding it childish to believe in such a thing. But, then again, he had no lover, and so the holiday was of no use to him anyhow.

As he plodded down the road, he saw two men emerge from the forest. As they drew nearer, Nyson could see that they were huge in proportion to him. Each man was at least three heads taller than he was, heads shaved and beardless, which was uncommon for those who live in Byzosin, especially at this time of year.

So they're foreign, Nyson guessed.

The men walked with an unfamiliar gait, seeming to glide rather than step on the road. They walked together in unison, as if firmly disciplined to do so. Even from the distance, Nyson could tell they were eyeing him suspiciously.

Perhaps they know I'm a C'theran, he thought. Some could tell the difference between C'theran and common people. For one thing, C'theran smelled of their element, so those with a good nose could guess at what the mage practiced by simply noting the odors.

A fire mage smelled of ash, of the burning wood from a campfire, while a water mage smelled the scent of a stream or ocean. Earth mages smelled of soil and mud, a pungent smell that was the strongest of the elements. Air mages were the only elementals that didn't have one distinct smell, yet many.

Another way to tell if a person was a C'theran was by their mastery rings. Usually, a highly accomplished C'theran wore the rings of whatever tier he had reached. Nyson never wore his, mainly because he didn't want his enemies to know how powerful he was. He wanted them to underestimate him, and he did not care for the envy of strangers, unlike what the people said about him.

But Nyson knew he must smell like he had been lying in dirt for days, so it was a possibility these men knew what he was. As they drew nearer, he could see the outline of their cloaks.

They were embroidered with a bird taking off in flight. Nyson recognized the bird, called an Ouzel, and nearly stopped in his tracks.

No wonder why he didn't recognize them. They were from Anacor.

Nyson had learned many things when he had been apprenticed. He had learned the symbols for every kingdom, had memorized each House crest painstakingly, to better understand who his allies were and who his enemies were.

The Ouzel represented Anacor almost perfectly; it was known for a tenacious and deceptive personality, appearing harmless, but revered for its ability to staunchly defend itself and its flock.

By stopping in surprise, he had caught the two men's attention. They stopped, also, and waited in the middle of the road, seeing if he would make a move.

What am I to do? He thought. No one has seen Anacorans in this part of the country for over three decades. What could these men want?

Then, one spoke, "You there, why have you stopped? Do you fear us?"

The man said this in an amused tone, clearly pleased by Nyson's reaction to their presence. The other man began to snigger.

"That symbol on your cloak is a pathetic choice," he dared to taunt, "for I believe you should have a rhinoceros embroidered on the cloth. It would better represent your country, seeing as rhinos have thick skins, tiny brains, no necks, and are excruciatingly ugly."

This made the men quickly stop laughing. Nyson knew Anacorans had deep pride for their kingdom. That was why they had the audacity to wear their own symbols on their cloaks, without having fear that someone would spot them and kill them as spies.

Just as the words slipped his mouth, one of the Anacorans darted forward with almost inhumane speed, grabbed him by his neck, and hefted him into the air, bringing Nyson to eye level with him.

"You forget that rhinos are surprisingly fast, earth mage," he spat. "I detest C'theran. You think you are so much more powerful than everyone else. And you reek of soil," he said this as an insult.

His hand gripped Nyson's neck tighter, closing his esophagus. Nyson gasped for breath.

"Look at him squirm, Gozai. Byzosinians are very weak."

The other Anacoran guffawed once more, walking up to his partner to get a better look.

Gozai grabbed Nyson's hair and pulled his head back.

"Ah, but then again, you do not hail from this land. Byzosinians do not have blond hair, now do they?"

"And you are so young to smell so strongly, C'theran," the other man said. "You must only be but seventeen or eighteen."

Nyson tried to be calm, to remember what to do in this situation. The fact was that he didn't know what to do, because the enemy was unknown to him.

He didn't know their strengths, their weaknesses. All he could do was wait until he saw an opening. These men obviously weren't normal.

The one thing that bothered Nyson was how he didn't detect an accent in their voices. Normally, one could judge a foreigner by their accents.

These men spoke perfect Byzosini, as fluently as if they had been born there.

"Kimeru, perhaps we should end him quickly. We need to get off of this road before dawn," said Gozai.

Kimeru simply stood there, fist clenched around Nyson's neck.

"No, first I would like to see some magic. Conjure something, earth mage."

Nyson knew he couldn't use his magic here. They were trying to harass him into acting without thinking. They wanted him to show the extent of his power before they killed him.

Suddenly, he had an idea.

He managed to gasp, "Let me down, then."

Kimeru glanced at Gozai. "Do you think this is trickery?" he asked. Gozai shrugged. "It is not like he can do much," he said.

Kimeru slowly lowered Nyson to the ground, and when he unclenched his hand, Nyson began to feel lightheaded.

He swayed on the spot, sucking in his breath. He cursed his indulgent drinking earlier, for he was starting to feel the numbing affects that alcohol usually did not have on him. And at such a convenient time, he thought.

He lifted his arms, held them out from himself dramatically, hoping the trick would work, hoping that Anacorans weren't familiar with C'theran magic.

"By the Powers that control the earth and all of its domains, grant thy power to me," he spoke in a dark and low tone, as if using his whole being to conjure a mighty power.

He lowered his arms, splayed his hands out above the ground. The two Anacorans stood in front of him, taking the bait.

As he lowered his arms, his dagger slipped from the sleeve of his cloak into his hand. Its tip was coated in Adder poison, the lethal substance known to stop a man's heart within thirty seconds of contact. Nyson knew he could kill one Anacoran; the other would be more difficult. He hoped that the other one would be too stunned to act as quickly as he'd seen before. He prayed.

In one fluid motion, he let his dagger slice across Kimeru's neck, drawing a thin line of blood that stretched from ear to ear, ripping the flesh apart. Blood came forth, which then began to pour down onto his chest, dampening his cloak. Kimeru's eyes grew wide and then rolled to the back of his head as the Adder poison sank in. The brute fell with a loud thud onto the dirt road, his once masculine figure reduced embarrassingly to a crumpled body.

Gozai, on the other hand, had reacted quicker than Nyson knew any normal man could.

He raced forward and punched him in the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him. Nyson flew backward fifteen feet and landed on his back, gasping for breath.

The strength of the man was incredible; it was like getting kicked by a horse without any armor on, any type of protection to dull the blow. Nyson could feel his ribs crack, could hear his heart beat fast. The trees on either side of the road rustled as the wind kicked up.

"You dirty little mutt," a voice spoke faintly in his ear, as if through a tunnel. Nyson turned his bleeding head and saw that Gozai had raced next to him as he had fallen. The man lifted his foot and brought it down onto his stomach with a crushing force. He could feel his organs shifting inside of him, could feel the effect of the booted foot immediately.

Sunderer

Nyson barely had time to think, his head dizzy, but then his adrenaline kicked in. He clutched Gozai's leg with all of his strength and drove the dagger deep behind his shin guard, into the unprotected calf, forcing it through muscle and almost out the other side.

Gozai screamed, his voice echoing through the hills. Nyson didn't know how much poison still resided on the dagger, so he yanked the knife out and managed to stand up as the Anacoran stumbled backward. He struggled to remain standing, clutching his chest. It hurt to breathe.

It would be much easier with my magic, he thought vaguely, as he stepped towards the wounded man.

Gripping the knife firmly, he launched himself at Gozai with the rest of his strength, knocking him onto the ground.

He pinned the man down, took the dagger, and rammed it into the man's left eye. His scream became louder as the dagger dove deeper, until Gozai became silent. Dead.

Nyson rolled off of him, onto the hard ground. He wheezed for a moment before sitting up, inhaling deeply through the pain in his chest.

Already, he could feel his ribs healing. In time, all the pain that would be left would be the soft throbbing in his gut.

His cloak was covered in blood and dirt, his hair a tangled mess. He needed to do one more thing before he left.

He stood after some minutes and collected the men, hefting Kimeru onto his shoulder and dragging Gozai behind him. They each seemed to weigh a ton.

He turned back the way he came and slowly made his way back to the Rising Knights Inn, which had long been closed and now stood dark and quiet. By the time Nyson was done depositing the bodies behind the pig sty, the moon was slowly descending, and the first few rays of sun were to begin rising over the forests within hours.

Nyson made his way toward the castle, tired and hungry.

Chapter 4

It was dawn when Nyson arrived at the apothecary, dirty and worn out. He quickly cleaned up and put on a new tunic and pants. His apprentice hadn't yet woken up, so he stayed as quiet as he could.

Nyson opened a cabinet and grabbed one of the many vials that lined the shelves with only the ease of someone who categorized could. He was keen to be a neat person, finding it easier to keep his things organized should a situation call for fast acting.

He withdrew his dagger and began carefully pouring the Adder poison into the tip. His skilled hands did not shake as he held the vial, and soon the dagger was replenished.

In the next room over, his apprentice sighed in her sleep.

It was true that Sinclair was a very lusty woman. She was two years older than him, and tended to wear clothes that left little to the imagination. But, unlike what the rumors said, that was not why he chose to take a woman for an apprentice.

People thought that the only reason he took her was for what her body could offer, but this was also untrue. Nyson took her because he saw potential. Not that he would ever tell her that. It would inflate her ego even more.

The fact was, for his age, Nyson was much more advanced in magic than any other C'theran living in the kingdom. There was but one other his age that was almost at his skill level.

Rhys Deroth was, in every way, Nyson's rival. He was a third tier C'theran, skilled in air magics. He apprenticed a sixteen year old boy named Colten Demaise, who was an annoying little shit that mocked Nyson and Sinclair yet ogled her every chance he got. At the third tier of air, Rhys could conjure small tornados, whip up a hurricane, and create thick mists that could shroud miles of land, a valuable military tactic that King Xengeos loved to exploit.

At the fourth tier in earth, Nyson could create tremors in the ground, grow almost any kind of plant in any kind of soil, navigate blindly through a forest, and become nearly invisible at night using shadowplay. His powers were also valuable, but unlike his C'theran brothers, he had not yet taken oath to the King.

There wasn't much of an outwardly difference between tiers, but a C'theran knew that the higher in tiers they went, the more in tune with their element that they became, and therefore their mastery increased. The key to becoming more powerful was knowledge over the element. That was why most C'theran were practiced scholars and philosophers who studied the relationship between elements and C'theran themselves.

Nyson had once met another C'theran in Atlivia who was at his sixth tier, and who smelled so strongly of the sea that one could almost see the white beaches of Salovas Island, even though it was late December in the mountains. He could create whirlpools and manipulate the rain, could even flood a city if he so wanted. But C'theran were highly disciplined; one had to be to become powerful through control over his element.

If a C'theran who was not disciplined became too powerful, he was in danger of becoming a Mor-dryk, or fallen one. These mages did not learn self control, and their element gained the power in the relationship, twisting their bodies and misshaping them. Some were horribly crippled, blinded, or even went insane with power.

Most Mor-dryk's didn't live long, but there was one who still lived. His name was Henrish, and he lived at the edge of Ilista's Wood, a few miles north of Castle Bythesini. Nyson had wanted to travel there for a long time to ask him how he'd survived the effects of power, how he'd evaded being killed by his own magic.

Nyson heard a stirring in his pupil's room, could hear her getting dressed. He sheathed his dagger and went about opening the shop, carefully setting out various herbal remedies he sold for extra money on the side. People believed he assassinated to earn so much money, for he did own many apothecaries throughout the town. But he did not like to do the dirty work of others. Rhys took jobs to assassinate, and yet somehow people believed he had.

Maybe it was Nyson's tendency to not care, and to be so withdrawn from the lives of mortal men that he seemed mysterious and deadly. Whatever the reason, he let people believe what they wanted.

Sinclair opened her door, and the aroma of flowers wafted from her room, which mixed with the earthly scent of the wormwood and ghoulbane he had set out.

She sashayed from her room, wearing her C'theran tyro attire; a white, sleeveless tunic over pale green tights, a leaf green under shirt with sleeves, and a wrist guard. She was pulling on a belt as she walked from her room, knowing that such frivolities would anger Nyson.

She stood next to him, and he could smell the primrose more clearly. "Good morning," she said.

Nyson turned from her without saying a word, and began pulling out crates of herbs and spices. As he began unloading it, she said, "What's wrong? Woke up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"No, I didn't go to bed at all last night," he said, not bothering to hide his annoyance. "And what did I tell you about smelling like that? If the situation called for disappearing, we'd be found based simply on the fact that you smell like a field of flowers."

Sinclair rolled her eyes, a deep amber color that was stunning. Her dark hair feathered out from her face, framing it and complementing the rosiness of her cheeks. She was a beautiful woman, and if she wasn't so annoying and immature sometimes, Nyson might have fallen for her.

"There is no need for you to be so bitter," she pouted. "I'm a woman, for heaven's sake! I can't go around smelling of dirt and grime, it's so uncouth!"

Nyson rolled his eyes as he finished taking the last vials out of the crate. He moved to the front of the shop and unlocked the door.

"If you truly want to be a C'theran, then you cannot cover the smell of your element. It is a sacrifice you must make, because once mastery is reached, nothing will ever cover the scent. And also," he added, walking towards her, "take this silly belt off. It will get in the way."

She frowned, but didn't oppose as she unlatched the belt and laid it on a table. She knew that one day she could not worry about fashion and style, because being a C'theran meant discipline. That was why Nyson's clothes were simply grey or black robes or tunics, and occasionally the light-blue variety of an herbalist.

"You act so strictly for your age," she sighed.

He ignored her comment. "Today, you will cut your hair. Detach yourself from earthly frivolities."

Sinclair glared at him, running her hands through her hair protectively, the locks slightly curling around her fingers. He knew that her hair was her most cherished thing, yet he could not stand vanity of any sort, because wielding an element took vast amounts of concentration. She must rid herself of her hair, and once she did, she would be able to begin heavy training.

He drew scissors from his pocket and advanced toward her. She backed away, eyes wide in surprise.

"Put those down, Nyson!" she cried.

He stopped advancing and looked at her for a moment. Then he began looking at the scissors, opening them and closing them slowly.

"Did you know I killed two Anacorans today?"

She stopped backing up, yet her eyes stayed wide open. He could see her lower lip quiver, as it always did when she was afraid of upset. He could estimate her feelings easily.

Women, he thought, are so predictable. You can read their emotions on their faces because they have no control over themselves, it's always tears and tears.

"Anacorans in Byzosin? You jest, certainly. No one has seen those masochists since the last Great War in Solomon Darsuul's era."

He merely stood there, slowly opening and closing the scissors, pretending to study the blades. Although he acted indifferent, he was frightened down to his bones. He could feel the tension in the air, like the calm before a storm, and it was building to a crescendo. Something was happening, plans were being set in motion, and he was urged to do something, to take action. But now, he must wait.

"You call me a liar? I'm certain that Emperor Zhao has sent spies to Byzosin, and possibly to the other provinces of Lyrycul. My mind tells me that these were not the first Anacorans to be spotted from their homeland. We will see later," he said as he walked toward her.

She did not back up this time, perhaps knowing the seriousness of the situation. A war with Anacor would mean that every able C'theran would be expected to fight for their king, and although she had chosen not to take the oath that bound many of the King's C'theran like Nyson, the lower class C'theran were obliged to serve their Kings until mastery.

This meant she had to get serious, or risk dying.

Sunderer

As Nyson cut the pampered tresses from Sinclair's head, with each snip of the scissors bringing fresh tears to her eyes, he thought.

Chapter 5

It was no secret that Anacor had been building armies, but the only thing that kept the kingdoms from attacking them was the treaty drawn up after the catastrophe of the Great War. It had ended when the kingdom of Euphadeos, once the richest and most prosperous of all cities and capital of the country's C'theran, fell and was reduced to the ruins that now stood there to this day.

King Rothan Atliva, leader of the Atlvian kingdom, had upheld his duty as the descendent of Solomon Darsuul, and made sure that war had not broken out on the country. As the most thriving kingdom, he had made certain that no great wars broke out across the continent. Sure, small battles had been waged between Rhodaini and Byzosin, but these were merely minute quarrels in comparison with what was to come. The evidence of the age-old treaty was everywhere in each kingdom; it adorned the hilts of swords, the armor, the palace walls of every castle. It was called the Sigil of Five, and it consisted of a ruby stone, representing the proud nation of Rhodaini; a sapphire, representing the peaceful Myrintheos; an emerald, representing the fallen country of Euphadeos, literally translated as the Emerald Empire; an amethyst, representing the quick-witted Byzosin; and a diamond, representing the powerful nation of Atlivia, once known as Darsuul. Anacor had been left out of this treaty, refusing quietly and withdrawing back to its homeland.

Back then, Anacor had been the provokers of the Great War, the bloodiest, longest war in all of history. They had summoned legendary beasts from the infinite crevasse known as the Marchessies of the Hells, which was surrounded by arid, unforgiving deserts. It was said that the Marchessies were the gateway to the Underworld, a portal for demons to rise to the surface world. Only the legendary hero Solomon Darsuul, as a C'theran of the highest tier, had vanquished the monsters and weakened Anacor. It was said that his might was such that he split the very earth from the country and created Salovas Island.

There were, of course, many variations of this story. Some told that Solomon had summoned beasts of his own, fashioned from earth and stone and fallen soldiers, and had wiped out Anacor's armies with these creatures. Some said that he had used the combined magics from many C'theran from different elements and had killed the armies one by one until finally challenging the Emperor himself to a duel. But, these were obviously children's tales, and Nyson did not think such a person could have existed, ninth tier or not. Nyson snipped through the last bit of hair, and he hadn't noticed when Sinclair had stopped crying, but she now sat straight. Her jaw line jutted out and her high cheekbones seemed more prominent without the feminine curls framing her face, making her seem more mature. Although her eyes were red, she seemed more peaceful now, more sure of herself.

"Anacor will strike again," she said softly. "Do you think King Atliva can live up to Darsuul's legend?"

Nyson set the scissors down and began sweeping up the hair clippings, gathering them into a bag.

"I do not think he can, seeing as all those tales about Darsuul are impossible. That war happened so long ago that the only man would know about that is Henrish, and everyone says he is insane."

Henrish, that old Mor-dryk, shriveled and crippled beyond years. How many secrets would such a man hold? Just as Nyson finished sweeping the hair, the door opened and the little bell tinkled as a person entered. The first customer of the day had arrived.

"Ah, Nyson Anthony, good morning," said a cheery voice.

He looked up to see the smiling face of Duke Eberglot, one of his regulars, a man who owned many of the stables in which the King housed his mounts and a man who also took a wife half his age. He was one of the richer dukes, and he had seven children who all worked in King Xengeos's castle. He came every week for a tonic against arthritis.

As he was wrapping the tonic, Nyson couldn't help but see Eberglot staring at Sinclair, who had gotten from her chair and was now moving towards the back room to take inventory. Once she left, Eberglot turned to Nyson.

"My, she's a pretty one. Shame that she's a C'theran, though, because it is such a waste to see such a beauty ignore her god-given blessings." Nyson handed the package to Eberglot, carefully studying his face. The old pervert.

Sunderer

"One must sacrifice to gain, sir," Nyson said blandly, accepting the gold coins the duke handed over. "On the subject of sacrifice, how's the old lady doing?"

"Oh, she's doing fine. Although she does use her time to spend my money as soon as I make it, but that's women for you, eh?"

Nyson nodded as the little bell tinkled once more. Expecting to find another customer, he leaned around Eberglot to get a better look.

Two Byzosinian guards and a captain strolled in casually, looking around them at the many jars lining the shelves and instruments cluttering the counters. The captain walked toward Nyson with a face that was utterly emotionless, betraying no message. This was serious business.

"Captain Reginold Antonius, on orders from King Xengeos Byzosin to retrieve one Nyson Anthony for the amount of eight hundred sixty-four gold to serve the royal House. Do you accept?" Captain Antonius was a young fellow, perhaps a year older than Nyson, auburn hair shoulder-length. He stood with a confident air about him, an authority that he knew he had. Nyson raised an eyebrow at this.

"The King has made it clear that I am not wanted, so why does he send for me?"

The captain frowned for a moment, obviously not anticipating anything other than immediate acceptance. Eight hundred sixty-four gold was a great sum, after all.

"All of the C'theran are being summoned to wage war against Rhodaini. The King has sent an assassin to kill General Ra'shasti and retaliation is imminent. Your expertise is needed, and since you serve under no oath, you will be compensated. Do you accept?"

Eberglot gasped. "War? At this time? I was going to celebrate with my wife and children during the holidays! You cannot go to war now!"

Nyson waved his hands, telling Eberglot to get lost. The old duke took offense and huffed out of the apothecary, cursing under his breath about the King. The guards took no notice.

"I will come; but I promise my service to none until I speak to Xengeos."

The captain nodded. "Come with us, Nyson Anthony. We shall escort you."

Chapter 6

The halls of Castle Byzosin were wide, open spaces accented by carved arches of marble, the stained glass windows showing scenes taken directly from Byzosinian landscapes; the great Ilista's Wood, once known as Panopon, a god from a long forgotten religion, depicting tall pines and oaks dwarfing any other; Port Mithrydell, just west of Bythesini, the illustration showing bustling fisherman and ships in the cold cobalt waters, fishing for big-finned Trout; and lastly, one of the more famous scenes, the likeness of King Saraul Byzosin, the first Byzosinian ruler and one of the most beloved Kings of Lyrycul. He sat proudly atop his huge roan horse, the sun rising in the east behind him.

Nyson studied these details as Captain Antonius led him down the halls of the castle, recognizing the history in the stained glass and noting the intricate detail of the arches. True, he had not been born in Byzosin; yet from what he gathered, his mother had been of its descent while his father had hailed from Atlivia. That was why he had the brown eyes and angular jawbone of Byzosinians, while his light blond hair and slight frame was attributed to those found in Atlivia. This combination of traits, usually not exhibited due to minimal contact with kingdoms for centuries, signaled to everyone that he was of mixed race.

This was one of the many reasons why some people despised him.

As they neared the end of the hallway, Nyson could see the towering wooden doors ahead, and about thirty guards congregating around the entrance. They all began to file in as Captain Antonius reached the entryway, and all of the clamor and noise that had echoed through the hall ceased as he raised a hand.

The guards immediately parted and the talking stopped as Antonius led the way through the small crowd. Nyson followed close behind, looking at the golden hawk embroidered on the back of his plum surcoat, trying not to draw too much attention. But it was too late for that.

Rhys Deroth and his shady tyro stood among the guards, along with a few other C'theran Nyson knew. There was Laif Polk, a thirty year old man who hailed from Myrintheos and a third tier earth C'theran who Nyson liked to consult periodically about Myrinthian herbs; one of the only other women C'theran in Byzosin besides Sinclair, Leleine Draken stood chatting with one interested looking guard who kept glancing at her well-endowed chest; and the only other C'theran Nyson recognized was Bolph Biffin, a first-tiered water C'theran in his early forties, an idiot of a man but a kind brute who Nyson had met years ago when he had traveled through Ilista's Wood for a gathering of C'theran.

Bolph stood next to Rhys and the two seemed to be having a heated argument over something. Colten leaned against a wall, snickering, watching as Bolph's face grew red and as spittle flew as he yelled.

"You think you are better than me?" he screamed in his thick northern accent, causing a couple of guards to cast annoyed glances at him. "You and your cheeky tyro think that just because Bolph Biffin is in his first tier that he is weak? That King Xengeos would not need him?"

Rhys stood silent, a smile spread across his face. He turned to Colten. "Did you hear that? Cheeky, are you?" Colten's laughter grew louder as he saw a vein stick out on Bolph's forehead. "Yes, and perhaps he is jealous because I know more than him?"

This set Bolph off, and he stomped into the throne room, cursing loudly as three guards tailed him. The sight was spectacularly comical, for the big man was double the height and width of the three guards and he seemed to intimidate them somewhat.

As Antonius and Nyson passed, he drew the attention of Rhys just after Bolph had left. His smile grew wider as Nyson walked past him.

"Speaking of people the King doesn't need," he quipped, "enter Nyson Anthony, the half-breed with the slut for a tyro."

Colten laughed again as he said, "Where's the little hussy anyway, Anthony?"

Nyson chose to ignore these two, feeling that responding to their idiotic remarks would only give them what they wanted. Some C'theran have no discipline, he thought, and that is a shame.

"What, do you think you're better than us, just because you're being escorted in by the Captain?" Colten called.

Antonius glared at him. "The King has summoned Anthony specifically, for his services are important," Antonius put emphasis on important. Nyson decided he liked the captain.

This wiped the smirk off of Rhys' face, for he had taken an oath three years ago that was one of the most honored to the king; that he would serve until death, would protect the royal family themselves. He had thought he was on the King's good side.

"I guess the King knows who he needs," chimed Nyson as he walked into the throne room, leaving Rhys to think about that for himself.

The throne room's high, vaulted ceiling gave the area an open atmosphere, the mural of the castle painted there charming.

The King sat in his throne, his wife and daughters at his sides, watching silently as C'theran and guards filed into the large room. Within twenty minutes, everyone had taken a seat and the doors had been closed. The King stood. It got silent.

"I have called you here today because my kingdom is in need of assistance," he said. "Yesterday, at about midmorning, an assassin was sent to meet Ibesa Ra'shasti of Rhodaini, the General of Rhodan's armies.

"This morning, as the sun rose in the east, a messenger arrived at my door with the head of that assassin, and a warning that Rhodaini would declare war."

The C'theran and guards gasped, and even Omyr Callan, the King's counselor, looked exasperated. War. The first in many years.

"I have expected this, however. That is why I have summoned you, my oath-bound C'theran. I have an errand I would like you to run, and it is simple: gather your brothers, find them in the Wood, tell them of the war to come. Tell them to fight for their kingdom, that if they do, they will be under my complete protection hereafter."

This promise, Nyson knew, wasn't a very strong one; the C'theran usually lived in Ilista's Wood, away from cities and towns, preferring the quiet and peace to conduct studies. But it certainly was a tempting one, for the King had invited them to come live in the city, inevitably with free housing and land.

"Milord," said a woman's voice, "may I rise?"

Xengeos glanced toward the voice and nodded.

Leleine Draken rose gracefully to her feet, her long black hair straight and flowing, her C'theran mastery rings glinting in the early morning sunlight streaming through the windows.

She wore long circular earrings that swung when she moved her head, and her lips were a dark red color. She was a native of Salovas Island, yet her tan had faded to a light brown through the years she lived in Byzosin.

"How can the C'theran fight against those brutes? They are hardened men of war, trained in the art of battle, and C'theran are disciples of the elements, peaceful, knowledgeable philosophers. How can we fight?"

"You forget that many C'theran have magic abilities useful to war, Leleine. Many of us can move earth, call storms, create fires, even summon Lich Ghouls. We may be philosophers, but we control powerful magics," Laif Polk called from across the room.

The rest of the C'theran began to murmur, to talk amongst themselves, and King Xengeos looked thoughtful as he listened. Then, Rhys stood.

"Your majesty, I think that all the talk about philosophy is old-fashioned. True, a century ago, the C'theran were thinkers. But today, we have developed new techniques and strategies useful for war. Rhodaini does not have any mages. Our pyromancers and waterborn can wipe out Rhodan's armies easily," he looked smug as the King looked at him, listening intently.

Nyson couldn't be silent any longer, and after listening for a few minutes the insane ideas many of the council members had, he rose.

"Majesty, may I speak?"

Everyone grew quiet. He could hear some whisper questions about why he was there, since he had not taken oath to the kingdom. He heard accusations and rumors, but he ignored all.

The King nodded, somewhat curious. His two daughters looked at Nyson, the small redhead staring directly at him. Her older sister, Triana, studied Nyson also, but with a little more subtlety.

"Do you really believe Rhodan is the enemy?"

This comment was answered by many cries of outrage, someone shouting that he was an oblivious idiot, most likely the little shit Colten.

"True, we have had tension with Rhodiani, but what I'm asking you now is if they are the ones behind the attack. What provoked it? We have sunken their ships before, they have killed some of our traders, but the treaty has never been broken," he said calmly, studying all the faces of the royal family. Xengeos' eyebrow rose, as if he hadn't thought of this.

"What are you saying, Anthony?" he questioned, allowing Nyson to speak further.

Nyson pulled out a torn piece of cloth from his pocket, holding it up so everyone could see the scarlet Ouzel that adorned it. The crowd grew silent once more, a few people gasped.

"I have killed two Anacoran spies late last night. I believe they are going to declare war on Byzosin, perhaps all of Lyrycul, in an attempt to finish what they started centuries ago," he waited for the cries of terror and surprise to die down before continuing.

"Perhaps this has made Rhodan summon the courage to launch his own attack, or maybe he is a secret ally of Anacor. I suggest that we call for the aid of Atlivia and Myrintheos. Our armies aren't as developed as King Atliva's, and we all know how well King Roanora's infantry is developed; together with our navy and C'theran, I'm sure we can stop this siege before it happens."

This was met by more shouts of protest. Laif stood to his feet.

"Preposterous! No one would ally with those portentous Anacorans! Not even Rhodan!" A guard stood and called, "He is lying, your majesty!"

Everywhere around the throne room, people erupted into debate. It got so loud in the room that Nyson couldn't hear himself think. The high ceilings acted as a megaphone, amplifying the shouts to an almost deafening tone. A fight broke out between two C'theran, presumably between Bolph and another older mage, and four guards had to pull them apart.

Then, a booming voice filled the area, silencing all, "Enough! Quell your protests, desist your ranting, I will not have insubordination in my castle!"

The King's face was red with anger. Normally a peaceful man, everyone seemed uneasy at the change in attitude. Queen Ilista stood and put a comforting hand on her husband's shoulders.

"Now, people of the council, please be open minded. We do not know who really threatens our kingdom. We know that Rhodan will attack us by tomorrow, and we need all the C'theran we can get," she glared at Nyson as she said this, as if he had caused the panic by telling lies.

"Nyson Anthony, if what you say is true, and that piece of cloth is authentic, then I think that your plan will do. But we cannot send for help to other kingdoms without knowing first, and-"

Her words were cut off when a scrawny man dressed in grey messenger garments burst through the door, followed by an entourage of guards. "Your majesty!" the man called, breathless.

The King turned to look at the frantic man, who ran up to him as he said, "Rhodainians have come, Ra'shasti leads them!"

The council's eyes collectively grew wide, it seemed. Nyson stood surprised at the early arrival of the Rhodainians.

"Secure the walls, send out the knights!" King Xengeos began to command, turning around and starting toward the halls.

The messenger cried, "Milord, they carry a white flag!"

The King stopped in his tracks, wheeled around and was next to him in a flash. He grabbed the messenger by the tunic, looked down at him.

"White flag? What is the meaning of this?" As he said this, the doors opened once more, and a hulking man wearing leather armor, followed by twenty others who were escorted by at least one hundred Byzosinian guards, streamed into the throne room. They carried a white flag.

Ra'shasti looked horrifying, his body lean and hard with muscles, standing six feet tall with blazing eyes which studied the walls. His dark skin gleamed with sweat, his face dirty with soil. He stopped twenty feet away from the king, looked at him, and bowed.

"King Xengeos, I come not with intentions of war. I come to tell you that Anacorans have been spotted in your kingdom; I have come to warn you." Ra'shasti's accent was thick

The King stood speechless as the Queen backed away and stood next to her daughters. Ra'shasti took no notice to the council members surrounding him and his men, fidgeting and wary.

Xengeos glanced at Nyson, who nodded and produced the cloth again. Ra'shasti looked up at him.

"So, you were the one who killed them. Their bodies were found by Rising Knights Inn."

The King shook his head. "Enough! What news you bring me, Ra'shasti. I thought you would wage war against Byzosin for the assassination attempt, which I see you have thwarted."

The bowing Rhodainian smiled, then stood his full height again, standing at least a head taller than the king. He laughed.

"We would have been in war, if not for the Anacorans. We have two thousand soldiers three miles from this castle right now," with the look on King Xengeos' face, he quickly added, "but I have called them off. We shall be in a truce for now, until we crush the Anacorans." He said crush with such ferocity, a smile spread wide on his face. His men began to chuckle behind them.

The king looked concerned for a moment. Nyson could guess what was going on in his head; the Rhodainians were weaponless, it would be a perfect time to strike. Yet, with news of Anacorans in the kingdom, he may need their strength. He finally nodded.

"Well of you to come, then. You shall stay in the castle, and we will discuss war tactics. That is, if you agree to put aside our differences for the time being." He turned and addressed Ra'shasti's men personally.

"Welcome to Byzosin, you will live under my hospitality and see the sights of a country you know little about."

To this statement, Ra'shasti began to chuckle himself.

The king looked at him as if he were crazy. "Do you mock me in my own home?"

Ra'shasti shook his head, turned to his confused looking warriors. "They do not speak a bit of Byzosinian, Sah Xengeos." He began speaking to his men in his native language, a deep, guttural tongue.

"Lejoor yihn da Sah Xengeos, om'un rah ke Byzosin usingizi nchi na pasipo." The warriors all nodded, smiling at the faces of the council, and especially to that of Omyr Callan, who had gone pale and pasty.

Ra'shasti and Xengeos took each other's wrists and shook vigorously, walking side by side back to the King's throne. Xengeos waved a hand to dismiss the council, and the C'theran and guards began filing out of the throne room. Before Nyson could leave, however, Queen Ilista stopped him.

"Do not leave yet. We must talk." She took him out of another door, into a quiet hall, where no one was present. She looked at him intently. When she didn't speak, he did.

"Why exactly do you need me, majesty? There are many C'theran here. What purpose do I serve? And, for that matter, why do you insist on paying me?"

She looked taken aback. "You have sworn no oath, and you claim you only work to earn. So, you will earn for doing a royal assignment. If you succeed, you will be paid even more handsomely than you ever thought."

Nyson considered. He did need money to fund his shops, and he did like money, that much was true. But at what risk would it be? From the sound of it, the "royal assignment" was a dangerous one, and that was why the Queen had stressed that he would become richer when he completed the task.

"What do you ask of me?" he dared to question. The Queen nodded, taking that as a yes.

"You will travel to the Marchessies of the Hells, go to Anacor, and find out whatever you can on what they plan to do, what kind of forces they have. The other C'theran, in the meantime, will gather their brothers. We will ask for the assistance of Atlivia and Myrintheos."

Ilista knew what she was asking him to do. It was a veritable suicide mission to go into an enemy country, one who so many knew little about, and to do a reconnaissance mission there. And she was asking him to go alone. He hesitated.

"Your majesty, with all due respect, I am not a strong C'theran in the least. I may be advanced, but strong? No. Why must you ask me to go?"

She smiled, as if expecting him to say that. "You have great ability, Nyson Anthony. Go to edge of the Wood, near the northern entrance of Bythesini. Henrish lives there, in an old cottage. I'm sure you know of him. He holds many secrets, knows many things that will help you on your journey. He has been to Anacor before, he

can tell you of what to expect. Be careful though, for he is a Mor-dryk, and his mind has been deteriorating." Nyson did not ask how the Queen knew this, merely nodded. She said no more and entered the throne room once again, leaving him alone in the hallway.

He stood there, contemplating the task at hand. He would die, surely he would die. Anacorans weren't the only things that he worried about; there were stories of beasts that lived in the remote areas between the kingdoms, that creatures like the onyx butcher Ghoul, taller than ten men, roamed the mountains. Splinter-head serpents, with two to five heads, plagued unexplored areas of the continent. Needler beetles with their poisonous barbs lived in the barren desert of the Marchessies, along with certain sentient plants filled with the magical residue left from the battle waged there years ago, said to thrive in those arid dunes and feed on unwary travelers. Not to mention tales of the manticore that lived by the Marchessies crevasse, known to devour creatures to add to its mismatched body parts, said to be made of thousands of different species. And what about the fabled race said to live in that desert? The so-called "diviners" whose magic was older than those of the C'theran, who were said to resemble abstract deities rather than humans? No, Nyson couldn't survive such horrors, unless they were all just tales. Even then, he hesitated to take the chance.

He jumped when he heard a sound behind him, whirled around in time to see a flash of red disappear around a corner.

"Halt!" he called, chasing down the eavesdropper. He wheeled around the corner and saw the skinny princess running down the hall. She looked back at him, eyes wide, and continued faster.

He knew he must have looked stupid just standing quietly in the hall, thinking. Perhaps he'd frightened her? He chased her still, struggling to catch up. He uttered a short incantation which gave his feet more purchase on the slick floor and raced down the hall. In no time he had caught up with her. He grabbed her arm, stopping her instantly. She gasped at the sudden halt, and he felt her shoulder pop as he stopped her.

"Ouch! Who do you think you are?" she demanded, suddenly bringing up the courage to stare him in the eyes.

"Forgive me, milady," he said, letting her hand go. "But a beauty such as yourself is worth chasing after, are you not?" This made her face turn red, almost matching the color of her hair. She still looked as angry as ever, however.

"What were you doing with my mother, alone in this hall?" she said, looking at him as if he were a vile person. So, he thought, she'd heard the rumors.

"I was doing this." He pushed her up against the wall, pinned her there. She struggled, trying to pry his arms away, but he was much stronger than she. Finally, she tried to scream, but he planted a kiss on her mouth before she could resist, silencing her cries.

She thrashed underneath him, her eyes wide as he continued his kiss. He could feel her holding her breath, opened his eyes to see her own staring back at him. He felt her heart race beneath her chest. Then, he let her go, backed away.

She dropped to the floor, breathing harshly for a moment, but she did not run. She merely stared at him, her face flushed. He waited for a few minutes, letting her regain her composure. Then, she stood, walked toward him, and slapped him hard in the face.

"Who do you think you are?!?" she asked again. "How dare you touch me like that!"

Nyson smiled, his cheek turning a light red where her palm struck him. The girl stared angrily at him, scowling. She looked alarmed, yet something told him she wasn't altogether disgusted with his sudden and frank attack. He looked around the hallway, making sure her screaming hadn't alerted the guards.

"You liked it," he teased, "you're not running anymore."

Rage filled her face, she looked as if she would cry. But she did not. She stood up straight, composed herself, acted like a princess should. It took a few more moments before her breathing became regular, then she looked him in the eyes.

"If it weren't for my mother asking your help, I'd have you sent to the dungeons."

Nyson laughed. "Oh, Princess Azriel, how you joke." And with that, he shrouded himself in shadow, becoming a mere flicker. Azriel's eyes grew wide, but she did not seem too alarmed. She had met many of her father's C'theran, after all. She must have seen one use shadowplay before.

He left her alone in the corridor and strolled back through the great doors, past the throne room, which was now devoid of people. The only sound in the room was the low, almost-silent chanting that came from the moving displacement in the air making its way out of the castle.

Xengeos and Ra'shasti were most likely forming attack plans and building defenses, the King's counselor Omyr Callan sending off the C'theran as quickly as possible. Even Nyson, one of the only C'theran who had never pledged, now had an order he would have to take, money or not.

Anacorans meant trouble for everybody, and Nyson couldn't just run away like he always had. When the whole world was in danger, there was nowhere to hide. He had to act. His first stop was to go to Ilista's Wood and seek advice from Henrish. Then, he would travel to Atlivia and warn King Rothan. From there, he would have to make the perilous journey past the Marchessies and into Anacor.

Nyson left the large room, descended the marble staircase which lead to the atrium, and swiftly exited the palace, making his way back to the market district.

People were beginning to stir, early shoppers buying the newly caught fish of the day, the smell of baking bread carried on the breeze. Carts of vegetables were hauled by braying donkeys, the loads of produce brought in and out of the castle every day clean and newly harvested.

Out in the morning sunlight, the shadow Nyson used to shroud himself became a thick, obsidian form weaving in and out of people, so he became silent, ceasing his chanting, and his form slowly began to become clearer until he was whole again.

He detoured down an alley between two closely packed shops, preferring the less crowded paths so that he did not get stopped from any passerby. He was not one for idle conversation.

His mind was quickly sifting through his past experiences, past journeys to other kingdoms to recall the safest route to take. He had been to Atlivia twice before; once when he was young and had lived there until the age of five, and once to fortify Rothan's castle walls and battlements when he turned sixteen.

He had once travelled to Escion, capital of Myrintheos, to meet with the annual Tyro Gilde, an assembly of apprentice C'therans of all races who gathered to exchange knowledge and socialize with one another. Nyson had only gone once, deemed it childish, and had yet returned.

The only other journey he could recall was the one he took the year before, to Fort Havenworth, east of Bythesini, and that was merely to buy special herbs that could not be transported into Byzosin. It had taken six hours to travel there and back, hardly a journey, if ever one.

This meant that he had little to no knowledge of the geography of the country beyond Myrintheos, and this was a major problem. He needed someone who knew the terrain.

He had reached the apothecary in less time than he anticipated, and was surprised when he saw Sinclair saddling up two Bay horses, her short hair hidden under a silky jade bandana and a short sword sheathed at her side. She had just finished saddling her horse when Nyson stopped beside her.

"What are you doing?" he asked, watching his horse chomp on oats from a trough.

"I heard that Ra'shasti is in the kingdom," she said bluntly, messing with the knot that tied the horses down. It came loose after a moment, slipping to the ground with a dull thud.

"I have also heard that you were summoned to take on an assignment issued by the Queen- and such an assignment would require travelling, am I correct?"

"You are one sharp woman," said Nyson. "Yes, I have taken it upon myself to do the bidding of Queen Ilista, and it requires quite a bit of travel." He saw that she had already fastened bags to the horses, but had forgotten a few essential things. Women are forgetful, he reminded himself.

"I will be right back."

Nyson turned from her and entered the apothecary. He headed to the back of the shop and collected a satchel of moleskin and began rummaging through cabinets, collecting vials and medicinal herbs, magical talismans and charms, and swiftly went into his room once these items had been gathered.

His sword sat on a shelf, sheathed in a handcrafted leather scabbard. The blade of the sword was fine, crafted by a quality blacksmith named Eliel Pern, who lived at Fort Havenworth. He fashioned steel that could withstand the force of a war hammer; not that Nyson would be using it in war, of course. He was just taking it as a precaution.

Sunderer

He drew the sword and looked at the hilt, which was engraved with the words Decus, Fides, Sanctimonia. On the blade, the name "Pern" had been etched near the hilt in a scrawling hand; no doubt made by the very man who had formed the steel. It was a good blade, a reliable one he had had since he first became a C'theran. Fastening it to his belt, he moved on.

The last thing Nyson did was overturn his hay mattress to reveal a sack of coins, which he dumped into his satchel and sealed as he walked away with his sword in hand. He grabbed his cloak from a hanger and locked the shop after drawing the curtains.

He turned toward the darkened building, certain that it may be his last time seeing it, and uttered a prayer before mounting his horse. Sinclair watched him with solemn eyes, sensing his apprehension yet not knowing completely what troubled him. She knew that it was a grave situation when Nyson Anthony prayed to a God who he did not believe in; knew that she, too, may not ever see the small shop ever again.

He led her in silence through the city, heading north toward the wood. She had never been there before, but had heard stories of travelers getting drawn deep into the forest by a corporeal light that would suddenly extinguish once they had been thoroughly lost, finding themselves alone in the heart of a vast forest.

Other tales told of vengeful wraiths- the spirits of men and women who had once been burned alive in those woods centuries ago for being C'theran serving under Solomon Darsuul's rule centuries ago- who would attack any human to step foot on the hallowed ground of their resting places.

She shivered at the thought, hoped they wouldn't have to travel through that forest, but deep inside her she knew that was where they were bound. There was no other reason why they were heading this way.

They reached the northern entrance to the city and waited for a few guards to raise the portcullis to let them through. Heretofore they had ridden in silence, Sinclair allowing Nyson to keep to his thoughts. Yet she had to ask, lest she go mad with curiosity.

"Where are we traveling?"

It was not until they had left the walls of the city of Bythesini and were on a road when he answered.

"We are going to the edge of the Wood to meet a man who I am sure you know about. He is an old, decrepit man named Henrich, and he lives in a small cottage near there. I must speak to him, and then we travel to Atlivia to warn Rothan of the Anacoran invasion."

Sinclair did not understand. She had believed that Rhodaini was the enemy- yet just this morning she had seen their general waving a white flag, escorted through the city and into the castle. She had a feeling that there was much more Nyson was not telling her.

The day steadily moved on, the once grassy and flat lands surrounding the city turning quickly into wooded areas, and surprisingly other than the both of them, there were no travelers about. Usually merchants would be carting to and fro by midday. This was noticed by Sinclair, but throughout the day Nyson had been silent, muttering to himself and withdrawn.

Finally after three hours of riding, they reached the small town of Blackford Point, one of the only other towns in Byzosin so close to Ilista's Wood. Beyond it lay miles of unsettled woodland, and beyond that the terrain gave way to the harsh and unforgiving mountains of Atlivia.

Nyson spoke for the first time in hours, "Be wary; a Mor-dryk lusts for power, however feeble he may look. Be on guard, Sinclair. This man will be tricky."

Chapter 7

Azriel stood in the hallway for some time, trying to slow her heart. She was alone in the corridor, and could hear many voices in rooms over. She closed her eyes, opened them, yet the shimmer of the man that stood before her had faded away. She quickly exited the deserted corridors and made her way to the Counselor's Hall where she found her father and the Rhodainian leaning over a large map, newly inked and ready to use. The map showed all of Lyrycul, and it was made to hang in the throne room. It stretched from one end of the table to the other, and a scrawled writing marked the places and kingdoms of the realm. In fact, three cartographers stood at the opposite end of the table, hastily filling in the blank spots of the map as the King studied it.

The Rhodainian was a beast of a man, and Azriel was wary of the long time Byzosinian rival. Ibesa Ra'shasti was his name, and he was a fierce warlord who worked directly under Rhodan. She never liked Rhodan, thought him to be a cruel dictator who mistreated his people. She thought him egotistical, for he demanded to be called "Sahan Sah", which in the Rhodaini dialect meant "King of Kings". But it was a strange thing to see her father talk to this man as if they had never before been enemies. This worried her, for it meant that the issue was grave indeed.

The rest of the Rhodainians were grouped in the chairs behind her father and their leader, and looked on in curiosity. Many of them had piercings covering them, and one man had six hoop piercings in his left cheek, each hooked to the next with a small golden chain. It was an exotic sight, one she had never before experienced. The men also had many tattoos, most of them all bearing the same intricate swirling pattern on their right arms. A few had them on the left, but the meaning of this escaped her. The only man in the room who had tattoos on both arms was Ibesa Ra'shasti himself.

"If the reinforcements you have requested from Rhodan do reply, then we must march to Virevos pass to meet with Atlivia's army. Myrintheos will then send two thousand infantry to wait at Euphadeos. Hopefully they will not suspect the Myrinthians to be hidden in the ruins when we draw them out."

Ra'shasti began to chuckle, but caught himself before his laughter could be heard.

"Sah Xengeos, you must understand, we cannot rely on hope alone. This is a foolish thing. What the Anacorans will do is stay in their homeland, they will not be drawn out. They have mountains protecting their front, and many scouts positioned on its peaks. It is a common military tactic. Why move from your supplies when you have the perfect advantage?"

Her father replied, "So that the battle is not waged on your doorstep; so that your people do not get hurt."

Ra'shasti did not have as much self control as Azriel thought; he burst into laughter at this.

"You are too kind a man, Xengeos. You think of your people; what is to say that Emperor Zhao cares for his people like you do? What's more, I have heard rumor that Anacor no longer holds regular citizens. I have heard that every person who is there is a hardened warrior, from the young to the very old. I have heard that Zhao uses every man, woman and child to build weapons of destruction unknown to us, to build his army. I have heard that he has many fire mages, and a whole army of Lich Ghouls and other monstrosities. What have you against this man?"

The King did not respond, merely looked back down at the map. Azriel could see the defeated look on his face, the struggle to find a plan hastily. It angered her how this outsider had made him look a fool.

"The only weapons I have against such a man as Zhao are the C'theran, and even they may not stand against these speculations of a massive army and netherworldly beasts."

Azriel could be quiet no longer; she had to speak up.

"Your homeland has many warships; your people are capable of handling the roughest seas, I have seen that much," she squeaked, her voice quiet at first, yet growing as she talked. "Perchance you and your warriors could lead an attack at sea, take them by surprise? The waters by Anacor are rough and cold, and are said to hold many monsters, yet an attack from behind would catch them off guard, giving us an advantage. It would be a boon to our people if your country's finely made warships could maneuver those choppy seas."

Her father looked taken aback at this bold assertion, but Ra'shasti looked at her almost as if he had been expecting it. The group of Rhodainians in the back sat a little higher in their seats.

"Ah, so you know of our sturdy ships. What a smart princess, what a smart idea. I never would have expected so much from a Byzosinian. The Anacorans would never expect an attack from the sea in those waters," he said encouragingly, and he slapped his right hand to his left arm, a rather odd mannerism, yet his enthusiasm had a short of charm. Azriel decided that he was not as bad a man as she once believed.

"We shall send word requesting ships once my messenger, Ikeki, returns with news from Rhodaini."

Xengeos turned from the map and stared at his daughter. Azriel knew that her father did not like when she talked about war- he preferred her to be safe and to lead the life of a woman, not some soldier. Yet she had to speak up, to voice her opinion.

Xengeos waved the cartographers off, and they left the room in quiet, shuffling footsteps. He turned to Ra'shasti.

"May I have a moment alone with my daughter? Once we are through, I will give you an inventory of all our provisions and estimate the soldiers I can produce."

Ra'shasti nodded and with a wave of his hand the group in the back stood and followed him out of the room, leaving Azriel alone with her father except for the presence of Omyr Callan, who had hastily been writing down notes. The Counselor's Hall seemed too large for the three of them, too open. Azriel felt as if she were vulnerable, a peculiar feeling that she had never gotten in her own home before.

Her father looked worried, the lines on his face deeper than ever. His skin looked ashy in the light of the hall, and he seemed tired, his usually neat beard unruly.

"You shouldn't trouble yourself with the gruesome plans of war. My only wish is that you stay safe."

Azriel sighed, blowing a loose strand of hair away from her face. She knew her father meant well, yet he had sheltered her for her whole life. She felt put down by his statement.

"Father, I am not a child any more. I know of war and I know that this may be an important one. I know that you know little of war, also. You are a man of peace. I know you depend on those warships, and the troops from Rhodaini. This is also my biggest fear. What will happen if the plan fails?"

Her father sighed, his frown prominent beneath his coarse red beard. She feared for him, for her people. She could feel it approaching, an omen that meant death. She felt dark times approaching.

"Nothing is certain as of now, Azriel. Currently we are awaiting the arrival of three-hundred and ninety C'theran mages from all over this province, and should our plan to attack from the seas fail, we shall strike with their combined magics."

Azriel kept herself from retorting. She knew that her father was aware of the many warlocks and conjurers of Anacor; and somehow she knew that the C'theran would not be enough.

Her father smiled weakly to her, an act of feeble reassurance, and strode out of the room, leaving her there with Omyr Callan. The stout man looked up from his lists and stared at Azriel.

"You know, you are a bright young woman. You will make a fine Queen one day," and with that he returned to his papers.

Azriel turned from him and left the room, angry that no one wanted her knowledge. She knew something was up, and it wasn't just Anacor. Something deeper and darker was taking place, something that would strike a huge blow to her people.

As she strode out to the hallway, she caught the group of Rhodainians converging in a side corridor, one hardly used by the royals. It was meant for the servants and actually led to their quarters on the east wing of the palace.

She ducked behind a stone statue of the great Byzosinian leader Saraul wielding the legendary sword GilÃndril and listened.

The leader, Ra'shasti, was speaking to them in his own tongue, in quick and sharp bursts, as if he was concerned or frightened. He pointed down the servants' corridor and two men ran in that direction.

At once Ra'shasti turned to where Azriel sat and stared for a moment. Then he spoke in English.

"You may come out of hiding in your own home, Princess. But run to your father and tell him my messenger Ikeki approaches."

Azriel stepped from behind the statue and looked at him. He seemed calm, but something troubled him, that was clear. She ran to her father, just as he said.

Chapter 8

Ibesa was worried when his scout Johl returned and said he saw Ikeki traveling alone. This meant that he did not bring reinforcements, or worse; he had.

But Johl also told him that Ikeki looked of ill health, and that was apparent minutes later when the beaten messenger limped up the steps of the throne room toward a waiting Xengeos, his Councilors and acolytes, and the company of Rhodainians.

"Ikeki, what news have you brought us?" Ra'shasti asked, although he didn't have very high hopes that it would be good news. The shape that Ikeki was in, it looked as if he had been ambushed.

"My lord," Ikeki gasped as he dropped to his knees. He was bloodied all over, lacerations covering his neck and shoulders, his elbows surely broken from some sort of fall.

"Ikeki, you return too soon. What has happened?" Ibesa asked.

The messenger took moments to calm, his breathing raspy and quick. That's when Ibesa noticed the blood-soaked cloth covering a wound on his chest. The man's lung had been pierced.

"Rhodan has betrayed us!" he shouted suddenly. "Traitors all! The closer I came to Rhodaini, the more armies I saw gathering there. Our armies, Lord Ra'shasti. Our armies, and those bearing the flag of the Scarlet Ouzel."

The councilors gasped and there was a panicked murmur in the group of acolytes. Omyr Callan stepped forward, his chubby face dotted with sweat.

"You say that the Scarlet Knights were among your nations armies? Explain this!" he said, turning to Ra'shasti. Ikeki stood.

"No! Do not take us for foul, cowardly traitors as well," Ikeki gasped. He spat on the ground, and the phlegm was red. He didn't have long.

"My friend, you say Rhodan has betrayed our country? You say he allies with Anacor now?" Ra'shasti asked as he helped support his dying friend.

Aziel stood behind her father and next to her mother and sister, eyes wide. If Rhodan had betrayed the rest of the country, then they were doomed. His warships would smite any that Byzosin sent out. And with all of the magic and secret weapons Anacor was sure to have, Byzosin would be the first to go, for Rhodan hated them most.

"They saw me," Ikeki said to Ra'shasti as he led him to a chair. "They knew we were stationed at Castle Byzosin, somehow, and they attacked without warning," Ikeki gasped, but struggled to get his information out. "They killed most of the party you sent me with, and took others as prisoners to be sentenced for treason. I made it out to tell you that Rhodan's armies will be here at dawn."

Blood dripped from the cloth, and as Ikeki took another breath it slipped from his chest, and made a wet plop on the ground. Blood poured from a deep puncture in his side, and the man shook violently.

Xengeos looked at the dying man, and shouted, "Bring Healers and my best C'theran Herbalist, can't you see he is dying?" The order snapped everyone out of their daze, and people ran about, knocking chairs over and giving orders themselves. In minutes the puncture was treated and wrapped with fresh cloth, but everyone knew the man wouldn't live to see the attack at dawn.

Ra'shasti sat with the messenger as Xengeos called out to his guards.

"I want all the available C'theran to gather at the castle gates by dusk," he yelled. "Gather the Knights and draw the bridges. Station archers along the perimeters of the castle, and damnit, I want every available man ready to fight for his family by midnight!"

So the gates were closed and bridges drawn throughout the evening, and as the sun sank lower on the horizon, people began to gather around the courtyard. There were only one hundred and twenty C'theran available, and the Knights were few as well.

Many on the King's Guard were handing out swords and spears to the townsfolk, men ages sixteen to forty who were summoned to make up for the meager amount of troops Byzosin had to offer. Without any major wars over the years, the need for a strong army had dwindled, until only the essentials were needed.

Many people had believed mining and foresting to be more useful, yet as the sky darkened and the women locked themselves away with their children, cries of fright and sorrow filled Bythesini's streets. Archers lined the battlements and armor that hadn't been used in ages was donned.

Azriel sat in her room in the west tower and looked out into the night with a terror she had never experienced before. She saw the guards filling cauldrons of molten copper, and saw a line of people covered in shadow carrying dots of torches streaming into the main gate. The farmers and small villagers outside of the town walls were being shepherded into the safety of stone.

She feared that the stone walls encircling the town and the castle were going to hinder rather than help. There was water behind half of the city, and the armies of Rhodan and Scarlet Ouzel would be gathering on the other half. The outcome looked bleak to Azriel.

It was eleven o'clock when the main gate was shut for good, and whoever had lingered would find no succor. Fortifications were checked and rechecked, and the city turned silent as they waited for dawn.

That was when her father entered her room with a worried look on his face. She turned to him and looked into his brown eyes, which usually shined, but were now watery and dull.

"Azriel, you can feel the tension and fear as well as anyone," he said, but then shook his head. "Better than anyone, actually. I have a request to make of you."

She leaned forward, eager to hear that she had something to do instead of sit around and fidget. She hoped it was something important.

"Father, I will do anything you ask of me."

He sighed, and took her hand in his. "There is no way we will win tomorrow's war. We are too few and do not have enough supplies to wait out a siege. Sooner or later, even if we can hold the enemy out, we will starve. As King, I am going to wait this out with my country and people as long as possible," he paused and looked away. She knew he was fighting back tears.

It was awkward for a moment, because she had never seen him cry. But he regained his composure and looked at her.

"We will not go without a fight," he finally said. "Your mother agrees, and wishes to stay with me through this."

She took her hand back, and slowly met his gaze. "Then, naturally, so will I."

His face turned hard, and he stood.

"Azriel, you cannot and will not stay here to die. You and Triana will use the emergency escape out of the castle to get away. I want you to go to Myrintheos and tell them we seek aid as quick as possible. Get to safety, and stay there."

Azriel stood also. She would not leave her family to die alone. She would wait with them.

"I will not leave you!" she cried.

"You will leave, Azzy," his tone softened and he clasped her shoulders.

"You and Triana are my everything. I wish it were so that I could go with you, and that your mother could come as well. But I am a King, and I must stay with my people."

"But they are my people too!" Azriel cried, jerking away from him. "I will not save myself to look back and see my home aflame! You cannot make me."

He looked hurt, but once more his resolve hardened.

"You will leave with your sister," he repeated. "The tunnel exits behind the castle. There, Garreth will be waiting in a boat. He will take you to Myrintheos. You will seek aid, and if the Myrinthians do not abide, you will stay there until this war is over."

Azriel erupted into a burst of tears, trying yet failing to hold them back any longer. "Father, I wish to help you with something important. I don't want to leave you and mother behind just to save myself."

Xengeos gathered his daughter into a hug and held her tightly. "Azzy, this is important. You and Triana will not only ask for reinforcements, but alert the rest of the country to traitorous Rhodaini and Anacor. This may be even more important than fighting," he said soothingly. "And besides, you aren't just saving yourself. You're saving Triana."

She looked up at him, her will to argue dissolving once she saw the sincerity and fear in his usually confident face. He believed it was an important task, and asked her, his youngest, to take it up. Usually, her parents gave

Triana important tasks. This gave Azriel courage.

She let him go, and wiped the tears from her eyes with her sleeve. Leaving behind the only place she knew would be difficult. She had never left the boundaries of Byzosin, and even then had only explored a fraction of it.

Her father handed her a piece of parchment and told her to keep it safe, and hidden. He also slipped her a dagger, just in case, he said. Before she left, he kissed her forehead.

"The messenger from Rhodaini died a few hours ago. Ra'shasti has promised not to join Rhodan on his cowardly conquest, and to help serve Byzosin to the best of his abilities. He has lent his most powerful bodyguard to travel with you and Triana, along with Garreth. Just be careful, Azzy."

With that he led her downstairs, to a seemingly empty room. Its walls, however, were covered with art; there were paintings and rugs hanging on the walls, and magnificent tapestries depicting battles of ages past.

One of these tapestries, its edges maroon and gold, showed a scene of Solomon Darsuul clad in ivory armor, resting with his mount on a hilltop as dark tendrils stretched out of an abyss near the bottom. In the abyss, forms of naked men and women with pained and contorted faces seemed to writhe. Behind Darsuul, rays of golden sunlight fought back the darkness, and his sword was held high, covered in black blood. At the bottom, the phrase *Itas luxes inacio Atirum absentis* was woven with silver thread. It meant, "And so, the light cast away the darkness", a popular line taken from one of the oldest legends in all of Lyrycul.

Behind this tapestry was the entrance to a stairwell leading deep under the castle, and it wove on until it came to a sewer grate about seven feet in diameter, which served as a hidden escape route. From there a rocky ledge would lead Azriel and her sister to Garreth, who was to be waiting in a boat on the beach.

Azriel had never been through this passageway, yet she knew the grate well. She and her sister used to play by the beach when they were younger, and the darkness of the sewer always frightened her.

She had little time to steel herself before Ra'shasti appeared with their bodyguard, a hulking giant compared to the already large Ra'shasti himself. Each of the man's arms was almost as big around as Azriel's waist.

He wore a thin, sleeveless shirt which appeared to be a sack, and his shorts were a faded black with rips at the bottom. His face was covered in piercings, and he had what appeared to be five different clan tattoos along his arms. He had a curved blade at his side and held a long spear in one hand, a torch clutched in his other. He was a brute, indeed, and his square jaw was set with silent determination.

"He does not say much, and knows only a few words of common speech, but he is strong and loyal to me. He will let no harm befall your daughters," said Ra'shasti to Xengeos. Beside her father, Queen Ilista stood silently, her shoulders shaking once and awhile, her muffled sobs painfully loud in the small room. Azriel felt torn, and tried to fight her tears back.

"Baakir," Ra'shasti called. The giant stepped forward and bowed.

Triana scoffed at the display. "I still cannot believe you entrust our lives to the kin of the traitor, father," she preached, "but I trust your judgment." Azriel heard her sister faintly mumble, "For now."

"Well, you must be off now," he father said, "if you are to make it out by dawn. Be careful, and watch out for each other."

With the orders from Ra'shasti, Baakir lifted the tapestry to reveal a door, its edges barely noticeable. Xengeos traced his fingers around until he pulled a latch, and pushed the door inward. It opened with a loud creak which echoed in the darkness, years of rust on the hinges. It was a marvel the thing still opened.

Ilista could not take it any longer. She grabbed her daughters and pulled them into a tight, and actually uncomfortable, hug. She cried on their shoulders, forgetting for once in her life that she was a queen.

It took two tries to pull the distraught mother away from her children, and by the time she regained self-control, they had disappeared behind the tapestry.

Chapter 9

Blackford Point was a small town with less than two hundred citizens, its log homes built from solid cypress and oak, making its atmosphere quaint and inviting. There were watchtowers positioned so that the sentries could spy travelers coming down the road, but other than that the town had no walls or other protection. Nyson knew this to be a friendly little village. He had come through here on his way to Fort Havenworth to stop and rest. It was a waypoint of sorts for weary travelers. The people who lived in this town were strongly built, and always were warm and welcoming.

Woodsmen lived here; strong, broad shouldered men with auburn hair could be seen journeying into and out of the forest, some carrying logs thrice their size and others bearing saws and hammers on their able shoulders. Fires burned at even intervals to keep the chill away, one or two of them roasting a tremendous wild boar or a plump chicken, fully plucked and dressed. Children scampered about now and again, but most of the villagers were young men and women. It was a sturdy town, which the old rarely lived past the age of forty. Lives were humble and the people hardworking.

The arrival of Nyson and Sinclair was of little interest to these busy people, and so they crossed the town without much notice, save for a few curious glances. Nyson looked around for someone who didn't seem preoccupied, but everyone seemed to be at work. There was a blacksmith forging in his shop, the hammer striking the anvil and making a pleasant ringing noise; he smelled pastries baking in a small cabin, and the men who had been carrying the logs back had now reentered the forest. A tree toppled somewhere in the bushy copse, and the flapping wings of birds could be heard overhead. Yet something was wrong. Sides of some cabins seemed to be scorched, and the earth was compacted in places, as if many horses had trampled upon there.

They rode for a little while longer when Nyson saw a young man, not much older than fifteen, exit a cottage. The man had short brown hair, a dirty face, and was tall and broad shouldered, like the rest of his people. He wore a dirtied apron that seemed to be smeared with grease, and fingerprints dotted the cloth. He seemed surprised when Nyson beckoned him.

"There's an inn yonder, sir," he said as he walked toward them, pointing in the opposite direction, mistaking them for travelers seeking a place to stay.

Nyson shook his head. "Thank you, but we are not looking to stay. In fact, we're just passing by."

The boy shook his head. "Aye, people these days do not stay too long here. Been 'aving people pass through here many times, though. Traders, merchants an' whatnot. Especially at night."

The boys' eyes settled on the sword at Nyson's side, a little too long for his comfort. He shifted his weight on the horse, trying to hide his blade and seem less threatening. Obviously something had happened in this village, but Nyson did not know what.

"No, we are not merchants. We have come to seek the advice of a man named Henrish. Do you know of him?" The boys' eyes grew wide, and Nyson noticed him back away slightly. Apparently he had heard of him.

"Henrish is an infirm old wretch who lives at the edge of the wood, away from the town," he said. And then, his face changed. It was a sad look, a pathetic one. "You aren't with the Scarlet Ouzel, are you?"

This question startled Nyson so much that he nearly fell off of his mount.

"Scarlet Ouzel? No. What do you know of the Scarlet Ouzel?"

The boy's face lightened, yet he looked worried still.

"I know not much about the Scarlet Ouzel or where they come from. Imagine I did not mention it." And he would speak no more of the subject, Nyson knew. Instead, the boy straightened himself and changed the subject.

"Henrish never comes out of his cabin and some of us think he's a warlock, sir. It'd be best for you two not to seek him. He has a garden that has plants that would never thrive in this kind of climate, yet they blossom year round. A bit fishy if'n you ask me," he said as he wiped his dirty fingers on his apron. "It's best for both of you if you go on your way. Best for the town, also." He eyed the sword once more. Did this boy know that the Scarlet Ouzel meant the presence of Anacorans? The appearance of Anacorans here was highly improbable for any grand scheme. What would they want with a small town used as a checkpoint?

Nyson had enough of this. He was not going to be scared away by some hamlet boy. This town did not know that they had a Mor-dryk in their midst, a very dangerous and unpredictable person to be around. Henrish may not have any part of his mind left, and that made him more deadly than an agitated ebon rib adder. For now, Nyson decided to push the Scarlet Ouzel away from his mind.

He nodded the boy off and continued on his way, Sinclair following close behind him. Soon they reached the outskirts of the town, where there was only road and forest keeping the chill of the wind out. The warmth of the fire did not reach out here; it was a lonely place to live.

Not far from the town, Nyson spied the corner of a small cabin, half hidden by two enormous trees. He knew it to be Henrish's house immediately; in front of it bloomed an array of colored flowers, from the bright blues of morning glories to the brilliantly white roses which blossomed extravagantly. Interspersed in the beautiful flowers, however, one could spy much more devious things. He saw the purplish hood of aconite, a poisonous flower for which there was yet no antidote; the small, white clustered flowers of hemlock, known to cause paralysis and death; and hellebore, another poisonous plant, with its five white petals that resembled those of the harmless rose.

He smiled. Henrish had been a skilled C'theran earth mage. His intrigue in poisonous plants was mirrored in Nyson, and he wondered if he could snag some samples before the day was over.

Perhaps we are not so different, he thought.

They reached the small cabin, and both Sinclair and Nyson dismounted. He handed his reigns to her, telling her to wait outside with the horses, and to not enter the house, even if she heard screams. He did not know what poisons Henrish may have in the cottage, or what the old man would do if he sensed a C'theran in his presence.

Nyson rapped on the splintered door, and even before he finished knocking the door swung open. Inside was dark, and a musty smell emanated from within. He could see a fire burning low and dim in an ashy hearth, could hear and smell some type of soup boiling. He took a few steps inside and the door slowly closed behind him, dimming the small rectangular room even more. He couldn't make out many of the shapes and stood there for a moment, letting his eyes adjust. When he could see, the only furniture he could make out was a table and a stool, a wobbly old chair, and a bookcase with a considerable amount of books lining the shelves. Nyson didn't bother to turn around; he could hear raspy breaths coming from behind him, next to the door. Instead, he took a seat at the small table and waited.

He heard feet shuffling, and saw the old man in his peripheral vision, scooting a stool up to the table. The bent old man sat at the other end, wheezing and sputtering. It was a long while before his breaths returned to normal. Then, he spoke.

"You have come from Bythesini, C'theran," he said slowly. "You smell of the forest, and yet I sense something else hidden under the scent. Tell me, what name do you go by?"

Nyson waited before he answered, deciding not to reveal his identity just yet. "My name is unimportant; yours is. Henrish, you have been alive for years. You have a firsthand account of what happened in Darsuul's time. Tell me of Anacor."

The old man laughed so abruptly that it startled him. His shoulders shook up and down, his long beard wagging as he shook. Nyson could make out his cataracts, could see liver spots covering his pockmarked face. He could even see the dull brown linens the old man wore. The cabin seemed to be brighter for a moment. But at once the laughter stopped, and it was as if a cloud had passed under the sun, and the dimness returned. Nyson shivered.

"So, you come to me with the news that Anacor has risen again? I knew so, I told Darsuul, Saraul, and the entire arrogant king's of old. I knew this time would come. Anacor withdrew from the war, yes, but they did not surrender."

Then, faster than Nyson expected from such a frail being, the old man stood and strode to his side. He stared at Nyson, although he was sure the old man was blind. Nyson could feel his breath on the side of his face.

"You are a powerful boy. Only eighteen and at your fourth tier," he said this in a fatherly tone, as if he were praising him. Doting on him. It sounded eerie.

"I was like you, once. I was part of Darsuul's court, his chief C'theran mage. I fought with him on the day he defeated the Egorcus, did you know that? Did you know that I once knew how to summon one?"

The Egorcus were the foul demons from the Hells that Anacoran wizards had summoned so long ago to control. Legend described them as beings of solid darkness that eternally shifted their shape, withering in light but multiplying at night. They had a way of pulling men towards them, by means of which no one knew, and once the dark tendrils touched flesh, it sucked its prey into itself, becoming larger. Nyson had heard that when a person got this close, they could hear the screams of the thousands of people who had been dragged into those personal hells of living darkness, could see the thousands of eyes staring at them from the depths of some unknown abyss. One popular story told that Darsuul fought a great Egorcus which took the form of a bull, one so huge that it swallowed the whole kingdom of Euphadeos in its enormous mouth.

"Egorcus cannot be killed by mortal means," Nyson quoted. "They are not corporeal; they are ethereal beings with no one shape or form. To kill one would mean being something above man."

Henrich laughed once again, yet this time the light and warmth was not present. It was a bitter laugh, a resentful one.

"You think Darsuul was a mortal, do you? True, he was a C'theran king, but he was much more. He was the Sunderer, the High King, the true king of kings. He defeated that beast using magics far surpassing that of any C'theran or Mor-dryk. He was above man, and was nearly immortal. In the Before Ages, the Anacoran fools summoned those monsters to command, but they could not leash what cannot be controlled."

"He was a fool, Darsuul was. He killed the Egorcus, yes, but he also could not save Euphadeos. The most accomplished C'theran lived in the shining kingdom, including my family, and they had been wiped out, fodder for those demons. The carnage," he said, and he grabbed at his heart as if the thought was too much to bear.

"He was a fool if he thought that was the end of the war. In truth, the war never ended. It's been going on all of these years."

Henrich looked sullen, worn out. Nyson saw a shadow pass over his face, but decided it was just the light playing tricks on his eyes. The fire flickered in the hearth, and cracked as it burned the wood.

"Did the Egorcus Darsuul fought really take the form of a bull?" he asked, studying the way the old man hobbled back to his stool. Once the old man sat back down, he resumed speaking.

"It took the form of many things, some of which I could not say ever walked this earth. It took the form of a thousand-armed beast, a winged demon, and even the towering figure of Solomon Darsuul himself, shrouded in darkness. If it ever took the form of a bull, I cannot tell, because at that time I had become very wretched indeed."

He had started to become a Mor-dryk by then, it seemed. The curse would have taken its toll.

"A C'theran becomes a Mor-dryk by ignoring the six Disciplines," he said in almost a whisper. "He ignores all self-restraint, and although he gains tremendous power, it deforms him. Look at me, Nyson Anthony."

Nyson was startled, not knowing how the old man found out his name. He became wary of Henrich, for his face seemed masked in darkness, his features indefinable.

"I ignored the Disciplines of Stoic, Will, Vigor, Spirit, Mind, and Fate. I became entwined with mortal worries; of enemies and allies. I lost the love of C'theran craft as it was, unhappy with my slow advancement up the tiers of mastery, unhappy with my own flaws. I failed to work hard, and stopped practicing the sciences and religion; and most importantly, I questioned the Creator, the Sage, and cursed the fate of the world."

He stroked his beard, looking off to the side, staring at the bookshelf. "I turned away from all that I once loved and began siphoning power from others, taking like the Egorcus the lives and powers of those around me."

"I grew powerful enough to summon an Egorcus myself, and the feat cost me everything. I gave up my life for Darsuul, to fight for him. I became what I am by indulging in power, and for some time I was invincible. I fought the Egorcus, slaughtered Anacoran armies, but it all caught up with me. You see, C'theran powers are a symbiotic relationship; a man must not take more than the element, both must work in harmony. When a mortal reaches out and grasps too much power in his greedy palm, his wickedness shows in the physical realm, while in the spiritual he is lost beyond hope."

Nyson nodded. He knew too well how the temptation of power could sway even the most responsible C'theran; he himself almost succumbed to the power, once. But it was interesting to hear that this man, Henrich, had become twisted in order to help fight the Egorcus. He had gained power to summon the very thing he had been trying to fight.

Sunderer

"Didn't you know, then, that you could not control them? You say you gave up your life, that you learned how to summon those demons. What use were they to you, if you could not handle such beasts?"

"Darsuul could! Darsuul needed them, could sway their raging minds and quell the maelstrom that was their blackest souls to do his bidding, the one thing that the Anacorans could never do!" His voice rose in pitch and volume, his breath becoming strained.

"Did you know that Anacorans arrived here just this morning? Did you know that they, too, were looking for me?"

Nyson's mouth dropped. So, the boy had not been mistaken; he had actually seen the Scarlet Ouzel. From the looks of the earth around the road, there had been many of them. Where have they all gone?

"Yes, I can see your eyes widen!" the blind man shouted. "They searched for me; they needed me to tell them the secret to raising Egorcus, for that tainted art has long died in their culture. They brought pyromancers and enchanters and would have burned the forest to ashes. I care not for the quarrels of mortal men, and dearly love the Wood. So I told them how to raise the Egorcus!"

"You fool!" Nyson nearly screamed as he leapt from his chair. He fought the urge to slap the man, feeble as he may be. "You damned old fool! They will unleash Hell unto earth and with it the millions of lives swallowed by those beasts will be on your shoulders!"

The old man cackled once again. He began rubbing his twisted hands, almost as if he were washing them. He clawed at his hands angrily, scraping at whatever invisible stain marked them. The shadow grew on his face, spreading to his arms. Then he leapt from his stool, sending it flying backward.

"Ye miserable cur! Darsuul was a half-breed like you, and yet the gods chose him to be Sunderer. He did not deform as Mor-dryk's do; he was allowed ultimate power! He walked like a man, but had the pleasure of power second to none. Why must I be confined in this prison of a body, for acts which I did solely to serve him, to serve all of Lyrycul?" He overturned the table with inhuman strength as Nyson jumped from his chair. He drew his blade, poised for defense. The old man turned to him.

"You, you are not from here. You are an Atlivian mutt, yet you are not a C'theran as you have believed for so long. You smell like him!"

Suddenly, the floor began to crack, and roots began to push into the cottage. The fire blazed in the hearth, a raging inferno. The Mor-dryk was losing his sanity inside his own home.

"Once again, the old Sage has chosen a weak substitute for a hero. A poor choice for his creations, in the end. The Egorcus will rise again."

The fire seemed to explode behind the old man, flaring out and turning the wood it was burning to ashes instantaneously.

"They promised me ultimate power, so long as I brought them the head of the next Sunderer!"

The fire revealed a crazed look on the man's face, for it was warped beyond comprehension. His mouth was wide, stretching from ear to ear; his eyes misted over yet emitted a supernatural glow. Nyson slashed at the writhing roots, which squirmed through cracks in the floor, cutting off limbs and tendrils which began to gush a sappy liquid that saturated everything. The roots clawed at his cloak, grasped for his neck, but he continued to slice through root after root. The floorboards began to part, revealing a network of squirming vines and stalks beneath the small cottage. The plants were snaking up the walls, coming toward him.

One vine slashed at his ankle, and Nyson could feel the thorn on the stalks cut in. Another root came up to trip him, but he jumped up and backed away in time.

Nyson whispered a counter spell but it barely had effect, for his Discipline would not be a match for the sheer power a crazed Mor-dryk could unleash. He must restrain himself from using his abilities to its fullest, which was one of the reasons that there were not many C'theran anymore.

Yet something strange came over him, an unusual sense of thrill, something in him began to stir. He felt that breaking the Discipline was the right thing to do, and he opened the reach of his powers wider.

The vines shrank back, sucked of their energy, and crumpled to the floor. Roots which pushed up from the floor began to squirm and burst all around him. He muttered a possession spell and ceased the animated plants, returning them to their dormant and normal states.

Henrich began ululating in a bizarre tongue, no doubt calling on his powers. He began talking, most of his sentences just random sound, but one sentence stood out clearly: "The Sunderer has returned, embodiment of

Sunderer

all man and magic, and yet Lyrycul will fall."

Suddenly, the chanting of Henrish ceased as he grasped at his chest, and the old man collapsed on the floor, his mangled body twitching.

Nyson was sweating wildly, unsure of what he had just experienced. Did the old man mean that he was a reincarnation of Solomon Darsuul? There was no way he could be the Sunderer; he was just a regular man, a mutt, a merchant.

Nyson knelt at the old man's side, saw that he was still breathing. He bent low to hear the whispered words he was saying. "Darsuul reached the ninth tier and still did not have enough strength to conquer the Abyss waiting in the Hells. He was something else, and so too are you. In a fit of vengeance I hath wrought the world and sealed its fate, the Egorcus will take over. Only the Sunderer can save us. Forgive me; I leave you now to a fate which has been coming to me for centuries."

In an even lower whisper, he said, "Go to the desert by the Marchessies. Seek the Diviners. They are not merely myth, they are beings older than time. They have seen many times, many dark things have crossed their paths. They will give you answers, but be aware. They are a strange race," and with a final heaving breath, he said, "Forgive me for betraying you, Darsuul."

Then he died, the last breath of life escaping him, the shadow fleeing from his face. His body seemed to crumple inward, his brittle and porous bones caving in. He literally withered, his body becoming nothing more than dried soot. It was a rare sight to see a Mor-dryk die, to become one with their element once again, after such a long separation. It was also a frightening thing. His mind had shattered once he made contact with Nyson, and it was his presence that killed the old man, he was sure.

Nyson stood up and hastily walked outside, and was nearly blinded by the light filtering through the treetops, even though evening had fallen. Sinclair stood with the horses twenty yards away, and when she saw him emerge from the cabin, she began sprinting toward him.

"What in the Hells happened in there?" she called. "The trees around the cottage began to shake, and I could swear I heard them whispering. These woods trouble me!"

Nyson didn't bother explaining. He strode past her and jumped on his horse.

"Get on your mount. We travel to Atlivia."

Chapter 10

The Wood grew thick early on, and the small path that had been made by the men of Blackford Point was only wide enough for three men abreast, for in the small town, horses were few. So, Nyson led his horse while Sinclair followed behind, and kept an eye out, scanning through the overgrown trees for any sign of movement.

If speculation was to be trusted, given the state of the town, knights of the Scarlet Ouzel had trudged through into the forest not a night before. Either that, or they had trudged out, but the direction seemed of little importance. The presence of the Scarlet Ouzel was alarming enough.

The Scarlet Ouzel, an order as old as Solomon Darsuul's era, was the highest and most elite order in Anacor. They were fearsome knights, bestowed with magic and strength, created to be the perfect warrior. Invincible, if the old stories were to be taken seriously.

Legends of old sang their terror, how their footsteps scorched the earth beneath them as they marched. They wore heavy armor which covered their entire bodies and helmets which hid the features of their faces, save for the mouths, which were said to contain teeth filed to points.

The armor was a deep red, mottled with black, and the helms were said to be detailed with intricate spells, rumored to make anyone who set eyes on their faces quake with fear. The helms ended in three sharp points at the top, and the eyes of it were said to glow an otherworldly red.

Many of the descriptions may have been exaggerated for the thrill of tale, yet Nyson knew whatever exaggeration may not be too off base. The two Anacoran spies he had killed were strong enough, and they had merely been pawns.

So he rode silently, yet his eyes never stopped scanning the forest. Sinclair tried once or twice to strike up conversation, or question him about Henrich, but Nyson could not be bothered.

It was not until the sun began to set when Sinclair began to scare. The Woods at night were said to be dangerous, that spirits and other creatures rose to attack weary travelers in the shadows. Every sound that the forest made, whether it be a branch falling, a twig snapping, or the fluttering wings of some far-off bird, Sinclair would jump.

Nyson chuckled. "I never knew you would become so afraid over the sounds of the forest," he said, slightly looking back at her. He saw her frown and knew she would not let her fright show as easily.

"Do you think the stories were true? That back in the Before Ages, shadow could take form?" she asked him. He sat for a moment, and when Sinclair began to think he wouldn't answer, he replied, "I believe that back then, there was much evil in this world. I think that today there is still evil, perhaps even more, but it is not left unchecked. You have nothing to fear this night."

She was not satisfied with his answer, it seemed. "It is so dark out tonight, how could I have nothing to fear?"

"Darsuul lived long ago, and he fought the darkness with his own light, his inner light. He fought for the freedom to not be ruled by night. "So long as stars shine and moon is high, the world shall not fear the darkness." Look up, through the trees, and you can see the stars. They are protecting us," he said, although he didn't believe it himself.

This seemed to calm her for the meantime, but as the path curved left, Nyson halted. Sinclair, obviously not paying attention, almost drove her horse into his.

"What are we stopped for?" she asked impatiently. "I do not like to be still in these woods."

Something moved to the far left, out behind a tree choked with vines. But the movement was not the reason why he had stopped.

Along the path, a large tree trunk had fallen, or so it seemed. Although he knew his Bay horse could clear it, it was the other side that worried him. The dirt there looked disturbed, as if hastily patted down, unlike the compacted dirt of the path before, beaten by so many men's shoes.

It had been a trap. If he had decided to let his mount jump the log, it would have crashed into a pit concealed, most likely, by a tarp covered with sand and leaves. The attacker stood just behind a tree, an arrow knocked and ready to be released.

"Show yourself," he called to the tree. All was quiet, and Nyson knew that if a man was not behind it, Sinclair would never let him live it down.

But he heard and felt the arrow fly by rather than see it in the darkness, and knew at once that there was indeed a man hidden in the shadows.

"Ambush!" cried Sinclair as she drew her short sword, but Nyson quickly stopped her, unsure whether the man was friend or foe. A voice called from behind the tree, deep and threatening.

"Those with the Scarlet Ouzel shall not enter this wood; and will suffer death from the hands of Raighne Sidestep, son of Owen Strongspear. Leave these woods and your life will be spared."

The name sent an image to Nyson, and the face of a small boy with dark brown hair and a forever dirty face came to mind.

"Raighne? Raighne Slowstep?"

The man stepped out from behind the tree, tall and thin, a head over Nyson's height. He clutched a bow in one arm and was fumbling with his quiver of arrows, returning them.

"How do you know that name? I have not been called such in years, and that was only byâ" he trailed off, and began to walk over to where Sinclair and Nyson stood. He stepped on the displaced sand and over the log, right up to the horses. So, the trap was a ruse.

"Nyson Anthony, by the Sage I have not seen you in over twelve years! What brings you to these woods so late in the night?"

But Nyson could not answer, because he was laughing too hard. He clutched his side and fought to stay balanced on his horse. "Sidestep, eh? Last I saw, you couldn't even step sideways without falling on your ass." Raighne was one of Nyson's oldest friends who he met long ago in Atlivia. He had always wanted to be a C'theran, but he hadâ little talent for it. So instead, he had practiced becoming an archer, his hand steadier than his legs, which had always given him trouble. The other children would make fun of him, calling him names, but Nyson always had called him Slowstep out of respect. He knew one day Raighne would overcome his clumsy legs.

Raighne grabbed Nyson's hand and shook it, smiling in the dark. "You always were an ass yourself, my friend. But I could not let you wander at night. There has been rumor of knights of the Scarlet Ouzel wandering about. Come with me and you can stay the night at my cottage. We have much to talk about."

Raighne led Nyson and Sinclair for a while, wandering off the trail, until they came to a small house in the middle of a grove of trees. The cottage sat in the middle of a clearing, and seemed to be well hidden from view. A small lantern sat in the window, giving off dim light.

Raighne helped them tie their horses next to his own on two posts, and welcomed them inside his home. There wasn't much to see, for there were only two rooms. But his house was covered with the pelts of bears and horns of deer, and he had a collection of spearheads and arrows, a bookshelf, and intricate carvings of animals.

"Did 'em myself," he said when he saw Sinclair looking at them.

He stoked a fire until it burned merrily, and brewed herbal tea for them to sip as they talked.

"What brings you out here, my friend?" he said as he scooted three chairs over to the hearth. "I haven't seen sight of city folk for weeks."

Nyson sat down and accepted the tea, which tasted pungent and over-brewed, but kindly sipped anyway.

"I am sent on a royal assignment and must travel to Atlivia immediately. I had come this way specifically. I'd hoped your father was still around, but from the looks of it you have inherited his cottage."

"My father died some time ago. About five years ago, and he caught a chill that wouldn't go away. Anyway, what is it that you wanted from my father?"

Sinclair sat silently staring down at her tea, not wanting to take another drink. She politely set it on the table.

"We must travel through the Wood to stay out of sight on the main road. I have not been in these woods since I was eight, and I hoped your father could show us the way to Atlivia. He knew the trails and forest like it was his home."

"Well then," said Raighne, downing his tea in a gulp, "Why not let me show you to Atlivia? I know these woods just as well. Although, nowadays it might be safer to travel by the road, what with the sightings of the Scarlet Ouzel sniffing about."

"So, the rumors are true?" Nyson asked, knowing well that they were.

"Can't say they are, for sure," he replied, fetching more tea for the three of them. He took a bottle down from a high shelf and looked at it. Satisfied, he poured the contents in the tea and handed them each a cup. "Rising Knight rum," he said.

The rum masked the pungency of the tea, and made it easier to drink. This time, Sinclair gulped it down.

Sitting back in his chair, Raighne said, "People are mighty afraid. There has been talk about Anacor rising again, and another Great War. I s'pose that is what your assignment is about, Anthony?"

He nodded, sipping the tea. "I must go to Anacor and find some answers. How in the Hells I will accomplish this, I don't know. I am going to Atlivia to warn Rothan that Byzosin is going to be attacked. I have a feeling they will be the first to fall."

"Byzosin, fall? One of the greatest cities, with some of the best ale and women," he cried, looking from his tea to Sinclair, his eyes slipping down her neck.

"Well then, it is settled. I am to take you to Atlivia. But on one condition," he said.

Nyson looked up at him. His friend did not seem to have changed much in twelve years. He was glad.

"What is it, Raighne Slowstep?"

Raighne got up and began to dance, darting left and right, jumping over his chair and back flipping over it again. He grabbed a sack from a shelf and began kicking it into the air while hopping about, never letting it fall to the ground as he moved. Then he kicked it high into the air and caught it behind his back. "Sidestep, now, my friend," he corrected.

Nyson laughed while Sinclair clapped and raised her glass, pouring herself a helping of rum, this time without any tea, and downing it in one gulp.

"What a great show, Master Sidestep!" she cried. He walked over to her and kissed her hand, making her blush.

When they quieted, Raighne took his seat once more. He looked up at Nyson, and then sighed.

"All my life I've wanted more than living out here in the woods, secluded and living away from adventure.

What use is being handy with a bow if all you get to use it on is wild game?"

"For years I practiced with that sack, to improve my balance. And now I can fight with the best of them," he said. "Nyson, take me with you to Atlivia. I'll go with you through the deserts of the Marchessies and even into the Anacoran fortress if I have to. You are one of the only people I can truly call a friend."

Nyson pretended to think while he watched his tea swirl in his wooden cup. He would take Raighne, for he was a great bowman with even greater dexterity, that was sure. He knew the forest as well as his father, and could be trusted. And he was a longtime friend. But he didn't want to lead him, or Sinclair, to Anacor. He decided that he would take him, as with Sinclair, as far as Atlivia. The deaths of his only two friends were not going to be because of some royal assignment.

"I will take you, Sidestep," he said at last.

Both Raighne and Sinclair erupted in cheers and they drank to Nyson, to his health, to Atlivia, and laughed and joked deep into the night.

When they finally passed out, Nyson got up and stepped outside to think. The early morning dew was beginning to collect on the leaves of the trees, and sunlight would be showing within an hour. The peace of the forest only made his fears increase.

The War was coming, he felt it. Byzosin would fall without the aid of the C'theran of this forest. He had not seen messengers in Blackford Point, and that meant they had not sent for aid from the C'theran that lived here. Yet, he could not risk the delay in personally requesting their support. That would take hours.

He thought until the sun's rays brightened the forest, and finally reached a decision. As the sunlight streamed through the windows, Sinclair and Raighne begrudgingly began packing their horses.

Nyson pulled his friend aside as Sinclair saddled her charger.

"Raighne, I know I promised to take you with me to Anacor, but there is something of importance I need you to do. If you don't do this, thousands may die."

Raighne nodded, yet his face showed he was disappointed. He had really wanted to go with Nyson.

"The messengers failed to call the C'theran of Ilista's Wood to Byzosin's aid," he said. "Without them, Byzosin will not have any kind of chance. You know these woods, and you know where each C'theran lives. It would

not take you long to convince them, either, because your father was highly respected by them. Sinclair and I must reach Atlivia in three days, and we have no time to do this."

Raighne frowned, but nodded again.

"But there is one more favor to ask of you, friend," Nyson said. "We still do not know the paths of the forest, and must ride the quickest way. We need a map."

Raighne took a few moments to scrawl on a piece of parchment, and when he was done he handed it to Nyson with a grunt. The map was crude, the handwriting messy, but the paths were clearly marked and dangerous areas crossed out.

"Thank you," Nyson said as he looked over the map, smiling at the small house symbol with "Raighne's house" written under it.

"Once you gather the C'theran, you must lead them to Byzosin. Many might not have ever ventured from the forest. From there, I will meet you in Atlivia."

Raighne smiled a bit, and clapped Nyson on the back. "I will help in any way I can. And since this task is so important," he said with a grin, "it will make my father happy. Just be sure that I will have some sort of adventure, will you?"

"Oh, I'm sure your name will be written in the history books in the greatest of adventures some day," Nyson assured.

Raighne helped them saddle their horses and once they got on he bowed to Nyson. "I have not seen you in over a dozen years," he said, "but I know a true friend when I see one. We will meet in Atlivia."

Then he turned to Sinclair. "Milady, an already fine C'theran tyro are you. A beauty of a woman with a fierce spirit, you drink like any bull-headed man I know. I will meet you, too, in the kingdom of Atlivia."

Sinclair bowed her head and chuckled.

With that they went their separate ways, Raighne mounting his horse and riding off full-gallop through the forest with ease, a bow and quiver on his back. Nyson and Sinclair, on the other hand, had to keep a steady pace so as not to make their horses stumble.

They rode for hours, making their way steadily uphill as they neared the border of Atlivia's realm. Still with a few miles of forest left to traverse, they had not met much opposition. At high noon they crossed a small river, and stopped on the other side to rest. Nyson laid his sword on the ground when he spotted figures carrying swords and spears off toward his right emerging from the forest. Figures clad in red armor.

Chapter 11

The sun rose slowly over the horizon, almost sickeningly slow as its first rays shed light on the land. The sentries positioned on towers at all four corners of the kingdom heard Rhodaini's troops before they saw them. They came, three thousand strong at least, blowing horns and pounding on war drums to the beat of some unknown song, chanting in their fearsome dialect. They moved as one, and their marching feet kicked up dirt and stone as they tromped towards the castle. They carried flags of yellow that showed off a simple symbol; a war hammer shattering a skull to pieces.

The sentries sounded horns of their own, and the guards ordered the archers to ready their bows. Inside the city, mothers held their children close and sobbed.

On the castle walls, behind the gates, men held their spears and swords and sobbed. They could not win the war, surely.

One hundred and twenty C'theran were placed on the inner walls of the city, ready to fight at a moment's notice if the outer walls were breached. King Xengeos stood at the front with his men, facing Rhodan's troops with his own war hammer in hand.

Inside the castle, Rhys Deroth and his tyro guarded the Queen's chambers, where inside Queen Ilista looked out as her people scurried around in fear, tears streaming down her own face.

Ibesa Ra'shasti stood by the main gate in front of his small company of Rhodainians, about ninety at the most, and gripped his spear with silent purpose. He would gore his traitorous, weak brothers for betraying all of Lyrycul and allying with Anacor scum.

Behind them, about four hundred men from the city stood, holding whatever weapons they could find.

Pitchforks, crude spears, rusted machetes, anything they could scarp up. Of course, many of the richer inhabitants had fled the city long ago to seek succor in Myrintheos, but these men had not the money to uproot their families and leave. So, they stood and fought, farmers and peasants and a few merchants, not as soldiers.

It would be a bloodbath.

As Rhodan's troops advanced, three short blows from a horn sounded, and the three thousand men stopped in their tracks as one. King Xengeos scanned the army, but did not see a hint of scarlet within their ranks. Or Rhodan.

"So, your fearless leader is hiding in his home while his men do the work for him?" boomed Xengeos. His men looked at him as if he were crazy.

"Sire, do you wish to provoke them more?" asked an archer.

Xengeos looked at the man. "Byzosinians are not cowards. Their King fights with them. Even if we do not win this battle today, we will not go out without a fight. We will slaughter them as they slaughter us, and maybe Rhodan will think twice before not showing up to his own party," he scowled.

"Cowardly Rhodainians, show us what you are worth!" he screamed, and behind him his men hooted in approval. They had gained some courage as their King spoke bravely.

But their burst of enthusiasm drained when, to the west, troops were emerging from a line of trees. These troops carried red flags with golden Ouzels taking flight. Anacoran foot soldiers.

These troops gathered and stood at the front of the Rhodainian line, swordsmen and axe wielders taking the front, and archers bringing up the rear. Four figures clad in red robes stood before the army, their faces covered by the crimson cloth, masking their identities.

Ra'shasti could hear a man shout orders in Rhodainian tongue, and knew it was the replacement warlord. He would kill the man personally.

Suddenly, the troops burst into a full run, shouting war cries and running in formation towards the main gate. Captain Antonius stood on the outer walls and watched as the upper half of the army surged forth. He saw a cluster of men take the middle, hidden by his brothers on either side, and he knew what was coming.

"Brace the gates!" he shouted.

The men behind the only two north facing gates pushed against the huge wooden doors and brought down a beam to protect the door from splintering. But it was not enough, as the Rhodainians charged forth. They parted to expose the middle cluster, warriors carrying a large battering ram and running as one, the ram

heading straight for the northwest gate.

"Archers, release!" screamed Antonius, and a wave of arrows shot through the air, taking down ten men in the front who were hauling the ram. But once they fell, ten more replaced them, and they continued their sprint to the gates, their cries deafening.

"Do not let them near! Ready the cauldrons," Xengeos shouted.

The bottom wave of soldiers veered left, and made their way toward the northeast gates. Rhodainians had few horses and many of the men were just foot soldiers, but the warlord and the accompanying generals sat high on mighty horses and shouted orders.

The second wave brought with them long wooden ladders, to be used for scaling over the gates instead of smashing them in. The archers released their arrows once more, but the men raised long shields to protect them, covering them from the barrage of arrows as they ran.

"What is this? Rhodainians have never used steel for their shields before," Xengeos said. But he looked once more and saw the shields and what was on them, and he became wrought with fury.

"So, you have new weapons and armor supplied from Anacor, eh you bastards?"

The soldiers hauling the ram finally made contact with the gates, smacking full-on into the wood. The men braced on the other side, but were thrown back from the force of it. Ra'shasti was thrown back also, but he charged forth with the fury and more of those on the other side, and with him the people of Byzosin helped bar the door. But Rhodan's ram-bearers drew back for another hit, and the gate was already cracking.

As the ram drew close once more, cauldrons of molten copper were poured from huge vats overlooking the gates, and the bright hot liquid coursed over the bodies of the soldiers. They screamed in shrill voices, their skin smoking and melting, but they did not slow.

The ram hit the gate once more, and this time its metal head punctured it, smoothly sliding through. Ra'shasti drew back as the steel head of the ram splintered the gate. A steel boar's head topped the ram, its face alight with fury and its horns sharp.

But the gate held, splintered as it may be, and Ra'shasti charged forth once more as the ram was pulled back out.

On the other side, the soldiers that had gotten hit by the copper lay smoking in heaps by the gates, but many of the others who were hit, clad in some type of special metal armor, had withstood the lava and were drawing the ram back once more. Anacoran armor could withstand the heat of the copper. What other secrets did Anacor have up its sleeve?

The answer came when another wave of arrows was loosed by Antonius' men. As the arrows flew towards the line of advancing Anacoran foot soldiers, the four robed men raised their arms.

Out from the ground, dirt and rock and sand rose, and compacted in the air, forming a giant arm, and then a leg. Soon a large form rose before the soldiers, the arrows sticking fast to its body. The head formed last, but instead of just one head, there formed four. A lion took shape on its shoulders, and next to that formed the horned head of an ox. Behind them the beaked head of a hawk began to take shape, and the last head to form on the body was that of a man.

The rock demon let loose a furious roar from its human head and charged full on at the castle walls, its thunderous steps shaking the earth. It whipped past the Rhodainians beginning to set the ladders on the walls and with a huge balled fist slammed the stone wall. Its earthen arm shattered from the compact, but it formed another immediately, and continued its barrage.

The ground shook beneath Antonius and his men, and many of them screamed in terror at the sight of the beast. Some could not handle the might of the ghoulish creature and threw themselves over the wall, crashing into a heap at the foot of the castle. The ghoulish creature stepped over them and rammed into the wall.

Antonius turned to his men. "Fire at will. I am going to escort the King to safety."

The men, although afraid, nodded. They branched out, half shooting arrows at the rock demon, and half firing at the Rhodainians, which now were climbing the four ladders that had been set up in the distraction.

Antonius ran to the King by the west gate, who was shouting orders himself. His archers were firing arrow after arrow at the ram-bearers, but nothing could pierce their newfound armor.

"My lord, I must take you to the castle. The gates will be breached soon, and you must protect your wife," he called, bowing.

Sunderer

Xengeos turned to him, an answer on his lips, when below the ram struck and pulled the gate down. The men braced on the other side shouted and backed away, many of them drawing their weapons.

Below, Ra'shasti drew his spear. "For King Byzosin IV!" he shouted. Behind him, the peasants shouted in answer, calling Xengeos' name, their faces set with determination. "King Xengeos!" they called, and rushed forward. They slammed over the gate and as Rhodainians began to pour in, started stabbing and slashing at them with all of their might. The fight was on.

Xengeos turned to Antonius, his eyes full of respect. "I cannot leave these people. They know we will not win, and yet they fight with my name in their throats."

But the force of the rock demon's fists shook the walls once more, and all Xengeos could think about was his wife, and the thousands in the castle still. He solemnly nodded, and Antonius escorted him off, dodging around archers and racing toward the castle before more Rhodainians could enter through the northwest gate.

Chapter 12

Ra'shasti and his men held off the Rhodainians for some time before they rushed the gates, using their numbers to push past their defenses. Once they entered the city, the real fighting began.

Ra'shasti took his spear and stabbed his way through man after man, reveling in each of their traitorous deaths. Many of the men he recognized as his own, and he especially took care to kill them slowly. But there seemed to be more and more flooding the entrance, replacing those he fell. Behind him, he heard a peasant shout Xengeos' name before having a spear rammed into his throat.

Ibesa dodged around the soldiers clad in armor, his eyes set for larger prey. The warlord and generals stood a safe distance from the castle, guarding the four robed figures controlling the earth giant. If he could get to them, he could break their chant and weaken the demon, and also kill the new warlord himself. He smiled. He leapt over the ruined gate and charged forward, slashing at men as he ran. A barrage of arrows flew over his head and stuck to the ground as he dodged them. He whipped faster towards the warlord, his eyes set on nothing else, when a blunt object smacked him on the side of the head, throwing him to the ground.

He could feel blood pour from the wound, his head swimming, but fought for control. He stood on shaky legs, the force wracked through him. He looked up to see a man twice his size, gripping a large wooden club in his meaty hands.

The man was a brute, his muscles bulging dangerously on his arms, as if they were about to explode any minute. But his size would not deter the ex-warlord so easily.

"I have seen larger Atlivians, traitor," he called in his native tongue.

The beast made a deep sound which may have been a chuckle and stepped forward. His voice was low and harsh.

"The only traitorous scum I see is Ra'shasti," he said as he swung his club once more at Ibesa's head. He dodged underneath the blow, feeling the wind it created on his face, and jumped sideways out of reach.

He and the giant circled, both men locking eyes.

The giant wore a helmet of Anacoran steel, the rest of his armor the light, tanned leather preferred normally in Rhodaini. His arms and legs were exposed, but that did not mean taking down the brute would be easy.

Ra'shasti used his spear to launch himself into the air, springing around the giant to find its large back exposed. He extended his weapon, using it as an extra limb, and stabbed the man in his shoulder before he could turn around.

The giant let out a roar of pain and whipped around, faster than expected. He grabbed Ra'shasti's spear and broke it in two, pulling it from his hands and tossing it aside as he laughed. The man advanced, his shoeless feet using the ground to balance himself.

Ra'shasti was not done yet. He drew his sword and faced the man, determined to finish him off and get to the real prize. But behind him he heard a sword being drawn.

He whipped around and, fast as a cobra, cut the head off of an advancing soldier, who had been hoping to sneak up on him.

But the distraction was just what the giant needed. He charged, grabbing Ra'shasti and hurling him into compacted dirt and stone.

Ra'shasti hit the ground hard, the wind escaping his lungs. His head smacked the dirt, his bundled hair the only thing protecting it from being cracked open. He fought to regain balance, but the world pulsed beneath him. It felt as if he was on the ocean, the ground moving up and down as a wave. He became disoriented, but stood none the less. The giant seemed far away in his vision, but the vibrations from his thundering steps told him otherwise.

Ra'shasti raised his sword, waiting. The giant charged once more, but Ra'shasti was quick. He stepped to the side, letting the giant's own momentum bring him down as he clawed. The man hit the ground and in the split moment he laid still, Ra'shasti was on him, hacking at the fleshy back.

The man roared, and tried to flip around, but Ra'shasti had him pinned. With a final slash to the back of the neck, the giant went limp, either unconscious or dead.

Ra'shasti slid off of the man, his head still fuzzy, and lifted the fallen man's head, sliding his sword across his throat to be sure.

He kicked the giant's head and fought for control of his body. In the battle, he had veered off course, the warlord and general now hidden by the motionless Anacoran soldiers, who seemed to be waiting for something.

He looked behind him and saw that the archers on the wall had been overpowered, and now men were scrambling up the ladders to get into the city. At the northwest gate, which was there no longer, men streamed into the city and fought the peasants who stood ground there.

And the earth giant had made tremendous cracks in the wall, which was about to burst apart. With every punch the demon's arm exploded into dust, but as it did another replaced it to continue the beating. If it got into the city, it would kill everyone.

Ra'shasti ran, stumbling a bit but still able to balance himself, and made a wide berth of the soldiers who hadn't seemed to notice him. The warlord was two hundred paces away, and Ra'shasti picked up speed. He raised his sword as he ran past the robed chanters; their heads down, focusing their power on the rock demon. He turned and readied the sword, but before he could swing an arrow pierced his shoulder, where his flesh was exposed.

He turned round and caught the warlord grinning, a guard holding a knocked bow aimed at him.

Ra'shasti stepped forward, his shoulder ablaze with pain. He tried to raise his sword, but his arm would not move. He began to panic.

"Ibesa Ra'shasti, warlord turned traitor to Sahan Sah Rhodan, we are well met," the warlord said, advancing atop his charger, guards on either side.

Ra'shasti looked upon the man's face, and felt a surge of remembrance from it.

"Makame Ab Rafe, you were sent with Ikeki to call off the attack," Ra'shasti said, hatred burning in his eyes.

The man had the audacity to sit higher in his saddle, looking down proudly at Ra'shasti.

"Yes, and when we arrived we were attacked. Every one of my brothers were killed before my eyes. But I was taken to the dungeon, and at night Rhodan came to me. He came with strange men that I had never seen, and promised me freedom and power if I told him where you were, and other things," he said with a cruel smile.

Ra'shasti gripped his arm, which stung and burned, pained coursing through his body. He let out a low moan.

"You enjoy the poison, Ra'shasti?" Makame called, lifting his chin. "Anacoran poison, lethal when used in high amounts. But don't worry, it won't kill you. But you may notice a slightâ change in your arm." He chuckled, and the guards dared chuckle along.

"We will leave you to live as a crippled outcast. Once a fine warrior and now, now what?" he said, looking at Ra'shasti. "Now you are as weak as the people of Byzosin. They fall tonight because of your actions."

This was the lowest insult to give a man in Rhodaini. To be called weak and be responsible for the deaths of others meant Ra'shasti would be known as a coward and be forever banished from his homeland. He could care less.

He shifted his sword from one hand to another through the pain, and Makame's eyes grew wide. But instead of attacking the warlord, he turned around and cut into a chanter's neck, almost cutting his head off with the force of his swing.

The man's body stood for a moment, and then his knees buckled and he crashed to the earth into a bloody pile, his neck spurting and his arms twitching. His robes became damp underneath him, his bowels loosening.

The three other chanters lifted no finger, opened no eye to their comrade. But behind him, Ra'shasti heard a deafening roar. He turned to see the earth giant stumble backward, gripping one of its heads. The hawk head burst apart, sending rocks flying in all directions, impaling a few Rhodainian soldiers scaling the walls. It lost balance and fell, sending dust and grass flying into the air underneath. It shrieked even higher, the lion's head roaring, and stood again. It charged the wall, and with one mighty blow knocked it down, the wall crumbling under the force. Archers and soldiers on both sides fell down into the hole, crushed by the huge stones.

The demon roared in triumph and stepped into the hole, crushing those still alive in the debris. Then it ran into the city, out of sight, its roars still audible.

Behind him, Makame laughed. "No matter, Ibesa. The beast still lives. And, even if it didn't, the poor excuse for a defense would crumble just like that wall."

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