

The One who Bleeds

Chapter 1

Call a halt. Call a Halt!" Numian yelled. The convoy of wagons slowly rolled to a stop, smoke puffing from the intricately carved exhausts that rose above the metal boxes like spears. Numian grabbed the lip of the opening before lifting himself onto the roof. He grabbed the exhaust, and leaned forward to get a better view. His gloves protected him from the heat of the exhaust, but he could still feel the warmth through them. Nine Wagons, varying in colour, make, and size lay lined up haphazardly. Numian could already tell, despite not being well acquainted with the vehicles, that at least two of them would have to be left behind. The area they stopped in was decent for a short break, unfortunately they were short on time. The woods provided good cover and concealment, but the elves would still eventually catch up. If they kept up with the last estimates, they had around an hour and a half before they had to run again.

Forge. This isn't going to keep working.

"Tallar! Someone get me Tallar!" He hollered, Voice straining to be heard over the rumble of the engines. The new wagons were effective, Numian couldn't argue with that. They were faster than any horse Numian rode and had more stamina than them too. They still had their problems, mainly that they were unsuitable for any rough roads and they needed constant repairs, so Numian had to make room, which meant less soldiers.

"Numian!" A voice called out. Numian finally saw his friend step out from another one of the wagons, smoke pouring from the windows. To anyone else, the sight of a dwarf would be frightening. The smooth metal exterior, a warm glow emanating from their core, only seen from the eyes, mouth, and joints. They were fully composed of metal, with their eyes being socketed with two gems that reflected the heat inside them. Tallar wore armour painted white and blue, same colours as Numian, with a shield crossed with a hammer proudly emblazoned on the back, the icon of the Ironhearts.

"What the forge happened to your wagon?" Numian asked, voice still straining to be heard over the wagons.

"What? I can't hear you!" The dwarf said, finger tapping his ear.

"Someone turn these forging wagons off! No need to paint a target on our backs!" Numian screamed, coughing slightly as he inhaled some of the smoke coming from the exhaust. He pounded the top of the wagon twice, and apparently the operator finally got the signal, the smoke plumes and noise slowly sputtering out. They really didn't need to keep quiet, whatever magic the elves used to track the convoy was pinpoint accurate, but the thought of having plumes of smoke above them still made Numian uncomfortable.

"Hey. Numian. You call for me?" Tallar said, now at the foot of the wagon, Rubbing his forehead.

Numian kept his eyes on the rest of the convoy, watching as soldiers and civilians alike helped each other. "We can't keep doing this. The elves will catch us by nightfall, maybe earlier if we keep this up."

"Sir!" a rough voice cut through the wind

Numian reflexively caught the flask, the standard leatherskin that was issued to all soldiers.

"Thanks, Ryshar. Get the rest of the men together. Get the boys together and tend to any wounds. We have 90 minutes before the silver eared fools catch up to us." Numian downed the water quickly, before throwing the leatherskin back to the older lieutenant

"Aye sir" the aged soldier replied, catching the leatherskin before folding it and storing it in his officer's coat. "You look like scrap iron sir, you ought to take a break sometime"

"I will, I will." Numian replied. Ryshar was the only one with the leather to criticise him so plainly, and also the one of the only ones he respected enough to listen to.

"Sorry," Numian said, turning back to Tallar. "Anyways we need a new plan."

Tallar blew steam through his nostrils, twin jets shooting out in anger. "Forge, this is a mess" he cursed, kicking the dirt in front of him. "The Ironfather will never admit it, but he can't die here. The alliance of metals is already tenuous and without him to unite them, we'll be at each other's necks before the hammer strikes steel. Those damned knife ears, this was coordinated."

"Don't talk politics to me, Tallar." Numian said, hopping down from the carriage roof, landing softly on the dirt next to the dwarf, before walking down the row of wagons "I'm the soldier, you're the advisor. We could use some forging advice right about now."

"Alright, Alright" Tallar responded, following Numian. "If we can make a distraction, or lead the elves away, we could probably make it to any one of the neighbouring keeps."

An older dwarf, with redder, more molten skin approached the two of them. "Tallar" he said, voice as thick as molten metal, deep and slow. The dwarf said something to Tallar in their native tongue. Over 24 years of living with the dwarves, his entire life and he still couldn't understand a thing. The language was rough, guttural and sounded more like rocks and metal hitting each other than anything decipherable.

Tallar nodded, and the older dwarf wandered away, attending to the wagons and the other survivors. "Numian," He said, voice heavy with urgency, before pausing and staring directly at the young man. "The Ironfather needs to see you."

"Yeah, Yeah-" Numian started, before being cut off as Tallar grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Numian!" He shouted quietly, shaking the young man slightly. "Just because you're favoured by Danadros, and are the Captain general of the Royal Guard, Doesn't mean you get to do whatever you want!"

Numian planted his hands on the leather portions of Tallars armour, anywhere else would have burned him, before gently pushing him backwards. "I'm trying to save us, Tallar." Numian said softly, before tapping the insignia on his left breast, the sigil of the Ironhearts, with a sword instead of a hammer. "This symbol is everything to me, Tallar. I'm sworn to protect the Ironfather, and my honour prevents me from putting trivial matters before saving lives."

"There might not be a next time, Numian!" Tallar said, more emotion leaking into his normally jovial voice. "Just talk to the Ironfather for Davrians sake man!"

"Ok, Ok" Numian said, turning to the Ironfather's carriage. "I'll be quick. After that we need to talk about what to do next." We're at the end of our bellows, Tallar."

"Just go!" Tallar insisted, Palms pushing Numian towards the carriage.

Chapter 2

Numian approached the carriage, Black with the banners of the Ironhearts proudly emblazoned, now dirty with dirt and soot from the messy getaway. Two of his men stood at the doors to the carriage, at rest but vigilant.

"Sir!" they said in unison, crossing their right arm to their chest in salute.

"At ease, Men" He said, returning the salute. "I have enough pressure with the damned elves breathing down my back"

"If you say so sir," The men relaxed their postures and their expressions softened, their concern and fear hidden under false, but believable grins.

"Go get some food from whoever is quartermaster this week. Tell Ryshar to wait here for me" Numian said, before pulling open the heavy iron door of the carriage.

The inside was dark, only lit by the embers of the still smouldering coals. The compartment was separated in two with a curtain, the side numain was on had the compartment for carrying fuel and the two doors.

"Captain general." a measured and clipped voice said, before opening the dividing curtain, revealing another dwarf, with red garbs rather than the standard blue and white of the Steelhearts. "He's lucid right now, but shout for me if anything happens. I'll give you two some privacy."

"Thanks, Tuscan." Numian nodded to the physician, who slid past Numian in the cramped wagon before exiting the wagon.

Numian pulled the curtain back, before sliding in the other portion.

The Ironfather was an imposing figure, even resting on a reclined chair. He towered over any man or dwarf alike, standing over 9 feet tall. Even sitting, the Ironfather was eye level with Numian. His skin was cracked and molten, revealing veins of metal coursing through his body. He lit up the entire room with a soft orange glow, and cast shadows as his head turned to regard Numian.

"Thank the forge" The Ironfather said. "I was wondering if you died during the ambush"

"I'm ok, my lord" Numian said, before kneeling in front of the old ruler.

"Stop with the customaries, Son of Iron" The Ironfather said, waving his arm "Your Captain General for a reason"

"Very well, Danadros" Numian said, taking a seat on a stool beside the old dwarf, Wiping his brow with his sleeve. Even in his weakened state, The Ironfather was as hot as a campfire, and being so close caused Numian to sweat. He didn't complain at all despite the discomfort,

he respected the man too much to complain about such a trivial matter. "How are your wounds?"

The Ironfather moved his hand from his chest, revealing an onyx black dagger embedded right next to where his heart would be, lines of black causing the metal around the wound to cool and rust, like some sort of disease of metal".

"Forging Slag!" Numian exclaimed, eyes widening in surprise. "How are you still awake?"

"The dwarven body is not as weak as that of man, no offence" Danadros explained, finger tracing the wound, charred and rusted. "My secondary heart is still pumping, but I feel myself getting weaker. I don't usually ask for much, Numian, but please, keep the others alive. If I die, promise me you will lead the rest to safety."

"Yes sir" Numian swallowed.

You're the one who needs to live.

"The alliance of metals is already tenuous and without him to unite them, we'll be at each other's necks before the hammer strikes steel."

The words echoed in his mind as he clasped hands with the old dwarf, promising to get them to safety.

"I'm sorry to say, Danadros, but we're in quite the slagging mess. Last time we saw them, I think we were outnumbered 2-1 and they had nobody to protect too. I need some advice." Numian said, frustration evident in his tone.

"Ah, yes. How to escape a faster, better equipped enemy. When I was younger, we had a manoeuvre, based on a particular type of animal. Me and your fa-" The Ironfather began to cough and covered his mouth with his other hand.

"Wait, how are you coughing?" Numian asked. He had never seen another dwarf actually cough before, only fake coughing or laughing.

"It must be the wound." The Ironfather said quickly, "Anyways, when a skink is frightened, it runs away, but it also cuts off its own tail. While the predator is preoccupied with the distraction, the skink can sneak away and live another day."

"Where is the nobility in that?" Numian asked, frowning. "I'm not going to condemn anybody to death just because I want to live."

"There's more to life than nobility, Numian. A life is priceless, so sacrificing one priceless thing to keep 50 priceless things is a worthy action."

"No." Numian said, shaking his head. "What if I surrender?" "I'll take my men and let you escape separately, then surrender. At least then nobody else dies."

“Hah.” Danadros laughed, wincing as the action caused the blade to shift slightly.

“Surrendering to elves. You’d be more likely to get visited by Davrian himself.”

“I’m tired, Numian. I trust you’ll get us out of this mess.” Danadros said, laying his free arm on Numians shoulder. “You’re the best of us for a reason, Son of Iron. Your heart is stronger than diamond, and your determination is brighter than any dwarf’s core.”

“Thank you, Ironfather. I-” Numian said, flustered by the praise, before being cut off

“Take my dagger, Son of Iron” Danadros said, Pushing the hilt of the dagger into Numians hand. “May the Ancestral forge bless you well, Numian”

“Are you sure?” Numian asked, eyes wide at the weapon. The blade was intricately carved, etched with dwarven runes, which Numian assumed proclaimed its ownership to the Ironheart’s dynasty. As he watched, The runes shifted and glowed, before settling in a similar pattern, slightly different but Numian couldn’t read the script, and was unable to guess what it might say.

“Yes, treat it well Numian.” Dandaros said, handing Numian a wrist sheath.

“What does it say?” Numian asked, putting the sheath on his wrist and securing the blade.

“Nothing important right now.” The Ironfather said to Numian. “Time runs short, Numian. May the forge guide you, Son of Iron.”

“Very well.” Numian said, turning and leaving the carriage, understanding that the conversation was over.

Chapter 3

As Numian stepped out of the carriage, he shaded his eyes as they adjusted from the glow of the wagon to the glare of the sun

"Tuscan. What do you know about the wound?" Numian asked, assessing the readiness of the caravan to get moving again. "Dandros didn't tell me much, but that wound did not look natural. Magic involved somehow?"

"Yes." The Physician responded, tone measured but with a slight hint of frustration. "I've never seen such a wound in my entire career, whatever this was, its not physical in malady, The runecasters will know more, if you can get us to safety." The Dwarf stared critically at Numian, as if dissecting his responses.

"I will." Numian said, staring straight at the horizon, not adding anything else.

Tuscan didn't push farther, apparently satisfied with the answer.

Ryshar came jogging up to Numian, and gave a quick salute.

"Sir, Physician." He said, greeting the two. "You called for me, Numian?"

"Yeah." Numian responded, shaking himself out of contemplation. "How ready are we to leave?"

"We're ready to make haste at a moment's notice." Ryshar explained. "The boys can keep going for a few more hours, but I suggest we make time to rest up."

"Yeah, sure." Numian replied, leaning close to Ryshar. "Cram everyone who isn't a soldier into as little wagons as possible. Tell Tallar to get them to the closest keep. We take the rest of the wagons and waste as much time as possible. "

"Sir?" Ryshar said, half asking half stating "Are you sure this is a good idea? I have no problems risking my life, but what if we mess up?"

"We won't." Numian said, "We'll die trying if we need to, but that way we'll buy as much time as possible. Also, we can always surrender. At least that way, we'll all live."

"Whatever you say, Numian" Ryshar said, "We trust you."

Numian nodded to Ryshar, and the older officer ran off to start the preparations.

"You're a fool, you know?"

Numian turned to look at Tuscan, who was shaking his head. "What I learned on the battlefield was that chivalry is the first thing to die. You're going to all die, you know?"

Numian stiffened at the blatant advice. "I'll find a way" he said, swallowing as he did so.

As the last of the wagons were loaded, they separated into two columns. The first, which had 4 carriages, carried his men and a false suite of supplies. The last two carriages, were loaded to the brim with people and dwarves. As the two parties left in different directions, Numian stood atop one of the roofs.

"Numian!" A voice rang out. Numian spotted the form of Tallar, leaning out of one of the carriage windows.

"Strike the Hammer, Shape the fate" Tallar said, Crossing his right arm to his chest in salute. Numian returned the gesture.

I guess we do have to sacrifice someone after all. Ourselves. At least this way we live with honour.

Chapter 4

Numian sat in one of the wagons, watching the forest speed by him through the window. He sat with 5 other soldiers, including Ryshar.

"I don't know about this sir." one of the younger soldiers said to Numian, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "What are we going to do when they finally catch up?"

Ryshar spoke up before Numian could respond. "Son, the Captain General is smarter than he looks." Ryshar took a cigarette from his breast pocket and offered one to the kid, who shook his head. He put the cigarette between his teeth and took a lighter from the same pocket, lighting the cigarette before continuing. "He'll get us out of this mess if it's the last thing he does."

"Yeah." another one of the soldiers said, absentmindedly fidgeting with a coin. "He's saved old Ryshar's life a dozen times."

All the soldiers, including the younger man, snickered at the jab.

"Don't make me remind you of the time you tried to use one of those rifles and shot yourself in the foot."

The laughter grew into a roar, and the soldier that originally threw the insult grew red faced and rubbed his foot.

"It wasn't my fault those forging weapons are so complicated to operate" he muttered. "It'll take the forgemasters a few more months before I'll even think about picking one of those up again."

Numian nodded at the insight. The elvish attackers used rifles, which proved very effective at eliminating targets from range. Numian shivered, remembering the details of the first ambush. A well travelled route, which they had taken many times before. Elvish assassins waiting in the trees, rifles picking off people in the windows. Numian had spotted the trap before they were fully in it, and was able to break through by travelling at max speed on the wagons. They had lost only a few soldiers, but the elves kept coming. Every 90 minutes, Numian assumed that's how long it took for their magic to either locate or teleport to them, the elves would lay in wait and try to stop the convoy. The charade had gone on for 4 hours, before they finally had a plan. They could stand their ground, now that they had nobody to defend. Hopefully Danadros and the others got to safety, and he and his men would follow suit if everything went according to plan.

"Ryshar." Numian said, in a serious tone, looking into the man's eyes.

"Eh?" The older man said, cupping his ear so he could hear over the laughter in the carriage. "You figured out some spectacular plan?"

"Something like that." Numian responded "Stop the carriages near the ravine which is close to the copperarm mountain. We stand as one, against the storm."

"Aye sir." Ryshar responded, flicking his cigarette out the window, and standing up to give the signal. He reached his hand out the window, and knocked on the door that made up the drivers compartment. The wagons had no way of communicating with the driver, so simple knocks had to be used. The wagon turned left at the next intersection, and soon they arrived at a narrow ravine. The wagon sounded its horn twice, and slowly the caravan rolled to a stop. His soldiers, eighteen in total, he had lost a few to the constant ambushes, lined up into rows of six, and columns of three. Each and every one of them had their faces in a mask of determination, no matter how scared they felt on the inside. Even the younger man, that had reservations earlier seemed convinced that he would get them out of this. Ryshar walked up next to him, eyes scanning the soldiers.

"What's the plan?" Ryshar asked, taking another cigarette from his bag, and lighting it. He took a long drag from it, and puffed out 3 rings of smoke. "It better be a damn good plan, I don't want to die here."

Numian ignored the jab, feeling the weight of responsibility on his shoulders. He'd commanded more men at worse odds, right? "We'll put the carriages parallel to the ravine, making a half circle. We'll use them as cover and make a kill corridor. If they can't shoot down at us, they'll have to approach one on one. We'll have spearmen in the back and shields in the front."

"Good plan." Ryshar admitted. "I'll get started."

Numian didn't get any more arguments from Ryshar. Once the man was confident in a plan, he would do everything in his power to execute it.

I've been blessed by Darvian himself, thank god for that man.

Numian watches as his soldiers line up the wagons, making a crescent shape, the open side facing the ravine, with a small opening in the middle, just big enough for two shields to block. The entire project took until nightfall, and eventually all the men sat in the crescent, quietly eating their rations. No fires were lit, that would be too suspicious. Despite the rather uncomfortable atmosphere, his men seemed to be in good spirits. He heard quiet conversations, and even some laughter from them. Despite the high spirits, Numian couldn't shake the sense of unease building inside him. He thumbed the clip that held the newly gifted dagger on his wrist, clicking it in place, then popping it back out. Click, pop, click, pop, click pop. He watches the line of trees ahead of the convoy, staring intently, scanning for any movement.

100 feet of empty ground, it will take them 15 seconds to cross the outcropping before engaging us. Bows will be useless. Too long to draw.

"Ryshar" he called, eyes still scanning the forest, hands fidgeting with his dagger. "Don't bother with archers. Its too close and there isn't enough time to draw strings and aim."

"Aye sir." Ryshar replied, nodding to the four bowmen that they had. "Don't bother with the bows. Use your shortswords if possible though."

Numian turned to Ryshar, "It feels too quiet right now." He said. "Somethings up"

Ryshar grimaced, looking past Numian and into the ring of trees. "Well, you were right."

Numian spun around, cursing as he saw what lay in the trees "As soon as I looked away," he cursed. "They're here"

Chapter 5

The trees shook as multiple brown cloaked figures jumped from the trees, and made for Numian and his men. His men dutifully and efficiently got into formation, two men with large tower shields positioning them on the only entrance to their bubble of protection. The few seconds spent waiting felt like hours. Numian's stomach turned, and the sinking feeling he felt earlier cut through his adrenaline. He waited alongside his men, weapons ready and waiting.

Something's wrong

Numian cursed under his breath. "They should be upon us already" He whispered to himself, sword in a half-ready position.

"I'll check it out," Ryshar muttered, and before Numian could protest, he quickly scaled the sides of one of the wagons despite his aged body, and looked past the barricade. Ryshar cursed and he scrambled down as a bullet flew where his head was "They're making some sort of spell circle around us. We're sitting ducks here.

As if on queue, a column of light surrounded the group. Numian immediately felt a sense of weightlessness, and the ground fell away under him. Numian's breath caught in his throat, and his eyes widened in horror as he watched the wagons, which weighed more than fifty men each rise into the air, the bubble of weightlessness preventing the natural forces from exerting their pressure.

Numian gripped his sword tighter as he futilely tried to manoeuvre himself back to the ground, jerking and flailing around to no avail. As everything in the bubble continued to float higher, Numian saw the contingent of elves slowly start to approach, the barricades now uselessly floating in the air. Numian watched as the lead elf, one with more presence, adorned in black and gold, waved his hands, causing the entire circle to rotate 180 degrees. The column of light slowly dissipated, and Numian and his men, now in disarray landed roughly on the ground, at the feet of elven soldiers that outnumbered them 3 to 1.

Numian, who now found himself at the back of his group quickly scrambled forward, reaching the front of the group and held his men back, who's blades were raised in readiness for the anticipated conflict.

Too many of them. We'll be slaughtered like dogs. We need to maintain some semblance of honour. I won't let them be slaughtered like dogs.

"Peace, peace" Numian said, voice composed, but the sweat trickling down his brow betrayed his true state of mind. "Who's in charge here"

The elves, as if dwarven machines rather than products of nature, lined up, surrounding the group and parted to allow a single figure, the one adorned in black and gold through. The figure was tall, even for an elf. He stood a head taller than most elves, and 2 heads taller than Numian. He held himself as if he was more than an elf, and looked down at Numian with

palpable disgust in his eyes. His face was twisted in an expression between a sneer and a frown, causing the typically beautiful features of an elf to seem weathered and severe, rather than graceful and peaceful.

“Are you in charge here?” Numian asked, trying to keep the feeling of dread from showing in his expression and tone. This man exuded danger, and Numian knew before the man responded an omen was coming. The elf didn’t respond to Numian, but he clinically analysed him with a critical eye. “I’m the leader of this convoy,” Numian began, taking the silence as an invitation to continue. “I wish to avoid any further bloodshed. My men’s lives are worth nothing to you, so I plead with you to accept my surrender.”

“The Ironfather.” The elf began, not bothering to introduce himself or start with any pleasantries. “He isn’t with you. You sent him on his way, presumably with the rest of the non combatants to allow them to survive?” The elf’s tone had a clipped civility to it, as if he didn’t wish to be pleasant but did it out of practice anyways. The tone was neutral and analyzing, but low enough to show the elf wasn’t particularly interested in the answer

Numian was thrown off course with the unexpected bluntness of the Elf’s words. “Uh, yes.” He replied, composure slowly recovering. “I assume you understand we have opposing goals and I used my post as commander to try to protect my people?”

The elf simply shook his head, expression turning into one of disappointment rather than the anger Numian expected of the elf. Numian assumed a deception such as this one would enrage the elf, but the elf just seemed disappointed, like if he lost a game of Ket or got a bad hand in Shet.

A sense of dread started building in Numian as the elf continued to frown at him silently. What would the elf do? Elves usually never came into contact with the fractured dwarven clans and the other free races. They would harass any that neared their borders, but the elves and everyone else had a tenuous, unsaid truce. As long as nobody strayed too close to each other, all would be well. That wasn’t true anymore apparently. Thoughts raced through Numian’s mind as he contemplated how the elf would react. Would he take his men as prisoners? Or would he leave them be and attempt to catch up to the Ironfather? Numian reflexively inhaled sharply, and regretted it instantly.

The elf’s expression became one of grim amusement, watching Numian’s silent suffering, his mind racing at the thought of what will happen next. The elf turned his eyes to Numian’s men, then again to Numian. “They are of no use to me. Kill them all. Keep this one alive, he may have information.”

Chapter 6

Numian's mind froze. "Wait-" he tried to protest, but was cut off as hands grabbed him and towed him away. Numian didn't feel dread or horror. For some reason, he felt confusion, and emptiness. What was happening again? The screams started, shaking Numian from his stupor. He turned his head quickly and the horror did set in. Most of his men were still stunned at what happened, and some had even dropped their weapons. Most of his men were too shocked by what happened, and put up minimal resistance, but some were being rallied by Ryshar and other senior officers. Numian struggled against his captors, he needed to go help his men, he had to fight with them. He screamed as he watched more and more of his men get cut down. Steel connected with flesh, and every cut and life snuffed out he felt in his soul. That was strange. He couldn't hear himself scream. Such a small thing to focus on, but for a moment he existed in silence, watching in slow motion as more blades hit throats, faces, and as bodies crumpled. He pushed against his captors, twisting and writhing and trying to get away. Something inside of Numian, the rational, small part of himself knew it was useless. Elves were stronger, faster, and physically better than humans in every way. His captors didn't even notice his struggle, and he uselessly tried to pull away, kicking and screaming. As his men thinned out, from eighteen to fourteen, to ten, to seven. It was just Ryshar and six more men. They stood together, locked in sword guards with the soldiers, the weight of the world pushed against them. Numian felt hollow. The screams of the dying were for the most part silenced, but Numian still felt sounds of horror and fear echoing in his head. He couldn't focus on anything, he couldn't tell who stood alive and who stood dead. He heard screams, laughter, metal on metal, flesh being cut, bone being crushed. His eyes finally focused as only one man remained. He lay on his knees, the previous six dead before him, a blade pressed to his throat. What was he doing? Numian couldn't make out his words. He watched his lips move, but couldn't figure out what he was saying. That hurt Numian more than anything. He missed Ryshar's final words. The man that had stood by him, practically raised him. He remembered the day he was chosen by Danadros to be Captain general. Ryshar had stood by him, from when he was a recruit, to when he was elevated. The man had saved Numian's life on multiple occasions, and had taught him when nobody else would. With no parents, Ryshar was the only person that taught him and raised him. Sure, Danadros and the Dwarves had provided him with a roof and a home, but Ryshar was the one that taught him how to be a man. How to fight, and how to care for others. Without the man, Numian didn't know who he would be. Now, Ryshar's body was slumped in a field in front of him, dead. It didn't feel real to him. How could this happen?

The image played in his head again and again. Ryshar with a blade to his throat, silently mouthing words that would never be heard. What did he say? The memory, despite its clarity seemed to crack and fracture, the memory became two, then four, then eight. A chill went down Numian's spine as he painstakingly processed what happened. They died. They all died. Ryshar was dead. Ryshar was *Dead!* The scene of Ryshar being killed played again and again, echoes of words materialising. Numian grabbed for the words, desperately trying to find the last words of his mentor, best friend, and brother in arms. Numian couldn't go on without them. What did Ryshar tell him? What was it? It was so close.

"Don't let them get away with this."

Numian instantly snapped back to reality, and he felt a fire range inside him. How could they do this? He did everything right. He climbed the ranks, stood with his men, and surrendered instead of wasting his men's lives, and *this* is how they repaid him. By slaughtering them. He couldn't even stand by them when they died. The fire inside him, which already seemed ready to overwhelm him grew tenfold. His rage, pain, sorrow, and anger became one singular point, a spear of raw emotion ready to let loose on whatever it came upon. His fire, his emotion, aimed at the elves. Not just these ones, all of them. Nobody seemed to care anymore. The pain, the hurt caused by these dancing ethereal beings was ignored by almost everyone. He remembered the haunted voices that spoke of the turning and the sundering, where man turned against man, then when all was ash, the elves came through and took it all over. Forge, they had even taken his name. He was just Numian. No last name, no family. He was Numian, because his family was killed in the sundering. He typically used it as a mark of pride— He wasn't defined by family, like most people. He was Numian, simply Numian, the Captain General. He hadn't even cared that they had stolen his name. Nobody cared. He didn't care before either. He saw it all now. They would keep coming. He wasn't deluded any more. The elves came, destroyed, and they would continue to destroy. He needed to stop them. Ryshar's words.

"Don't let them get away with this."

He wouldn't let them get away with it. He would make sure nobody else suffered like his men did. They had taken his men, his name, and his soul. He would take their lives in return. As emotion, pain, and consciousness all poured into his body he realised more than a few moments had passed.

What next? He would keep going.

Numian blinked bleary eyes, realising nobody was holding him down. They must have left him alone once the fighting had stopped. He slowly rose up on shaky legs, and took a deep breath to calm his nerves. The fire was still there, but instead the raging flame that burnt away his hollowness and pain, the flame simply smouldered, casting his emotions, pain, sorrow, emptiness in embers and shadow. He squeezed his eyes shut, but all that did was make the images more vivid. He didn't have time for this. He took stock of the situation at hand. No weapons, he dropped his sword earlier in the scramble to keep the peace. He was dressed in his normal issue leather armour, blue and white, the colours of the Ironheart clan. He did have one weapon. Numian stared at the blade the Ironfather had given him. Strapped to his wrist, it was inconspicuous, sleek, and light to carry. He looked around, watching his captors. Nobody was actively looking at him, and the elvish "general", the monster that killed his friends, stood back turned as his men systematically made sure Numians comrades were dead. A quick stab through the neck, move on to the next person. Numian felt his pain grow, but he stamped it out. Not now. Not here.

What could he do? He was surrounded by enemies, alone with no means of escape. He couldn't outrun so many of them, and he definitely couldn't take them all on. Maybe he could get rid of one evil in the world. He stared at the elvish general, eyes piercing into the elf's back. Just as Numian was about to unsheath his weapon, the elvish general turned. Numian thought he hid his action quickly enough, but the elves' expression didn't tell Numian if he saw or not.

"Intriguing." the elf said, not speaking to Numian rather speaking at him, hands crossed behind his back. "You were smart enough to outmanoeuvre me, yet you made such a blunder and allowed your men to be slaughtered." The elf's expression became a confused frown, as he shook his head in disbelief.

Numian took a minute to compose a response. His mouth was dry from disuse, and it took him a second to remember how to speak. "Some people have some semblance of honour, of civility." Numian spat, glaring at the elf.

The elf cocked his eyebrow, staring Numian straight in the eyes. "You don't actually believe that do you?" His frown deepened, and he put his hand to his face, lightly covering his grimace "You're living a fantasy, boy. Honour, chivalry. Both are for idiots, children and fools that don't fight real battles. If you lived a little longer, you would learn to not act on goodwill and honesty. That has left you dead. Maybe we could put you to better use. We will see."

Numian glared harder at the elf and spat at his shoes. "I don't think you know me well enough if you think I will join you." Numian wanted to say more, to tell the man that he was wrong, to tell him that he could be honourable and survive, but the words got caught in his throat. He couldn't say them. Not after what just happened. A quick glance at Ryshars body brought back all the pain, which he pushed back.

The elf simply smiled at Numian, not surprised or distraught at Numian's refusal to join him. The elf simply turned around, leaving Numian.

That was the elf's mistake. Numian chose that moment to attack.

Chapter 7

Numian worked with practised ease, hours of sparring with soldiers and friends honing his abilities into something even an elf would envy. He unclicked the latch on his wrist, letting the dagger slip out and dropping his hand to grab it, before pushing off the ground and ducking low to give himself speed. His attacks were powered not only by expertise, and by the raw rage he felt inside. His aim was true, and the dagger drove straight towards the elves' back, where Numian knew it would take him down.

Faster than a whirlwind, the elf turned, grabbing Numian's wrist and slamming him to the ground. Numian grunted, dazed by the swift counterattack. This elf wasn't just a typical general. He was something more.

Numian gasped for air as the elf got on top of him, pressing his knee down on Numian's shoulder blades, squeezing his lungs. The elf had wrapped his hand around Numian's dagger, and he pressed the blade to Numian's neck.

Numian heard the elf chuckle behind him, the first drop of emotion the elf had expressed besides apathy this day. "You have severely underestimated what I am capable of, child. You won't live to make that mistake again." The elf pressed the dagger to Numian's throat with more force, and Numian felt the dagger's razor edge break skin. Spots swam in his eyes, and he felt clouds of darkness close in.

Numian felt someone else. The sense of vertigo he felt increased, but not from the air missing in his lungs. He felt something pass in his mind, a presence. It was a black presence, old and complex that Numian couldn't understand but he felt *something*. Numian started to panic, everything happening overwhelming him. The deaths of his friends, the death of Ryshar, the blade at his throat, not being able to breathe.

Numian felt something wash over him, he tried to fight it but it was a torrent against his emotions. Bloodlust washed against him. His friends' deaths became a source of relish, and the pain he felt became a sweet taste in his mouth. He felt disgusted, but that disappeared in a moment. The bloodlust overrode his fear, his anger, and the rest of his emotion. He felt an odd sense of peace, despite being suffocated with a blade to his throat. As soon as the bloodlust came, it disappeared and he could breathe again.

Numian's head rose by reflex, and he breathed in, savouring the air. Something met his eyes as his head rose. Numian realised they weren't just eyes. Something out of myth itself stood in front of Numian.

A man stood above Numian, Black coat fluttering behind him despite there being no wind. The figure held a cane, embellished with emerald runes from another age. The "man" if you could call him that had a dangerous grin across his lips, and his face was shrouded with his hand, that kept his tophat bowed low over his eyes. His lips were twisted in a wide, grin of malice shrouded in a unsettling level of elegance. The man's pose was one of balance, his legs crossed, leaning on his cane not with frailty rather with a sense of casualness. A physical

cloud or mist of darkness seemed to emanate from the man, the moonlight and flames seemed to shy away from him, as if he was darkness incarnate.

Numian felt the elf release his grip and jump back, and Numian turned on his back, his shoulders still aching from the pressure applied to them. He looked at the elvish general, who stood tall, Numian's dagger held in his hand, swept across his chest elegantly. His expression was opposite to his pose, surprised and guarded rather than elegant and limber.

"It can't be" Numian made out from the elf's lips. The elf's expression was now more guarded, less surprised but still skeptical.

"Ahh, Arsolarin. What luck must I have for you to be the first face I see when I return. You almost make me want to crawl back to the bloodweb." Numian turned his head to see the strange figure lift his tophat up revealing a striking, hawk-like face with green eyes alight with something akin to glee. "I was hoping the first person I saw when I returned was maybe Sypherion, or Kalliakh, or even Dumahar, but I suppose the pathetic excuse of an elf you are will have to do as prey. Seeing you finally bleed out will be a nice way to end my long hiatus." The figure twirled the cane around casually, a smug grin on his face as he stared at the elf.

Numian scrambled away from between the two, the tension between them so thick that an arrow would simply bounce off. Neither of the figures seemed to care, they were both focused intently on each other. Numian got to his feet, and stood awkwardly, unsure what to do.

The elf, which the stranger had called Arsolarin seemed unaffected by the flagrant and condescending jabs. The elf seemed to study the stranger, his eyes focused on the stranger. Then, quicker than even when he had countered Numian, the dagger disappeared from the elf's hand, flying straight and true towards the figure's neck. The figure acted with equal speed, the cane intercepting the dagger, deflecting it upwards. The dagger flew into the air, and eventually came back down, only to be caught on the tip of the cane, balanced precariously by the tip of the blade. With casual expertise, the figure flicked the cane upwards, causing the dagger to soar into his waiting hand.

"Thank you for the gift, it almost makes up for your stale personality." The stranger said, dark shadows seeming to twist around him faster and faster. "But I'm afraid you'll have to let that one over there go." The figure nodded to Numian, and flashed him a surprisingly genuine smile of gratitude. Numian was beyond confused now. "You and I, we have much to talk about." He said to Numian, bowing slightly, before turning back to the elf he called Arsolarin. "Now, I have a score to settle with you." The black mist around him became a whirlwind, and the cane he held burst into the same mist, before the mist seemed to coalesce into a rapier. The ebony blade seemed slick with condensation, and the same green runes that were etched on the cane lay on the hilt of the blade.

Arsolarin breathed in sharply, eyes narrowing and pose shifting to be more defensive. "What are you damned fools standing around for? Get me my sword!" He yelled. The rest of the elvish soldiers, which stood dumbfounded at the exchange, scrambled into action. "Kill the other one too. Don't let him escape." Numian swallowed, taking a reflexive step back as elvish eyes locked in on him.

“You should get to running,” the figure chided in a singsong tune, as he watched Arsolarin with focused, calculating eyes. Numian nodded a thanks toward the figure, before scrambling away, into the forest.

Chapter 8

Numian broke through the brush, leaves and branches battering his face. He spit out a mouthful of leaves, and dove for the ground as he got out. The crack of a rifle resounded at the same moment, and Numian felt air rush by the back of his head as he dove to dodge the bullet. He turned around, only to see the elvish soldier that had been chasing him just a few steps away, rifle aimed straight at him. Numian slumped, glaring daggers at the elvish soldier which had a wide grin across his face.

“What now?” Numian spat, body broken and exhausted from the long chase he had just endured. “You’ve slaughtered my friends, and this chase through the woods is over. Are you gonna kill me or go crawling back to your master?” Numian knew taunting the man would only make his death come swifter, but he didn’t care. He was drained and tired, and had no reason to go on. The weight of the past few hours started to settle onto Numian, he started wishing the elf would pull the trigger on the gun. Part of him didn’t want to deal with any of this, he wished he could just close his eyes and forget about it all. He stamped that part of him out, something he had done several times already. Each time was harder, the part of him growing bigger. There was nothing he could do now anyways, it didn’t matter if he looked forward to it or not, because he couldn’t escape it.

The elvish soldier cocked the rifle, the spent casing coming free as the gun cycled. Numian breathed out as the elvish soldier grinned, bringing the rifle to his eye, scoping in for the kill. Numian didn’t close his eyes. He looked the elf in the eyes, not with acceptance, but with raw hatred.

A black spike came out of the elvish soldier’s mouth, blood following right after. The elvish soldier jerked, the rifle falling from his hands, tumbling to the ground where Numian rolled to avoid it hitting him.

As Numian rose to his feet, the body of the elvish soldier slumped to the ground, and the strange figure that had helped Numian stood behind where the elf was standing. He was neatly cleaning his blade with a black handkerchief, and he nodded to Numian as their eyes met. Numian took a step back reflexively, but didn’t run. Something told him he didn’t want to turn his back to this man.

“Bloodlord! it’s a pleasure to finally meet you.” The man said, taking off his tophat and bowing deeply.

Numian narrowed his eyes at the man, unsure what to think of the man. “Sorry, who are you?” Numian said, the exhaustion catching up to him.

“Ah, my apologies. I forgot you know nothing of these things.” The man said, his rapier disappearing to mist again, and the mist subsequently seeming to sequester around him. “I am Varakir Sevrion, ringleader of the Helion Family Murderjack Troupe.” The man bowed, even deeper than last time, his posture straight as he folded himself in half.

"I assume you understood almost none of that, but allow me to explain."

Numian nodded, his suspicion of the man waning as exhaustion took over. Numian found a rock to sit on, away from the corpse of the elvish soldier that Varakir had killed. "Go ahead." Numian motioned with his hand, face layered with exhaustion of running for his life, of seeing his comrades be killed, of still being alive. The sun was starting to peek over the horizon. Had he really been running throughout the entire night?

"You have a very special hereditary power. Like some humans, your bloodline carries innate abilities that can manifest in different ways. You, Numian Helion are what is known as a bloodweaver. You have access to the dark arts of the bloodweb, and you wield the ability to control the Murderjack troupe." Varakir paused, retrieving something from his jacket, and handing it to Numian. Numian looked at the blade presented to him, and it took him a minute to recognize it.

The ancestral blade that he had been given. "Keep this safe, you don't know how valuable that is. It's more than meets the eye." Numian took the blade carefully, and sheathed it at his wrist. "Wait" Numian said, eyes narrowing. "You know of the old dynasties?"

Varakir chuckled, his hand again going into his jacket. "Bloodlord, I lived in the dynasties. It was only around twenty of your years." He came out with a silver flask, which he unscrewed and took a sip from, before handing it to Numian. Numian took the flask hesitantly, before taking a large swig from it. The alcohol stung going down his throat, and he started coughing up a fit. Varakir chuckled again, watching as Numian took another sip despite the coughing. "Cyndian whisky," he remarked "aged around 75 years now. Vanian left me a large reserve of the stuff. Now, back to business."

"Wait, why should I believe anything you say? You could just be some lunatic for all I know." Numian asked, tipping the rest of the alcohol into his mouth before passing it back to Varakir.

Varakir chuckled again, and strode over to the body of the elf he had killed earlier. "Bloodlord, I am forbidden to harm you in any way and I have no incentive to. I can only enter the physical realm when one of your bloodline lives. Your father, Vanian, was the last one to hold the blessing. I've been waiting in the blood web ever since. Besides, I've gathered that you understand that if I wanted to kill you, you would be dead already." He knelt down, scanning the elf's body with a critical eye.

"So you claim I am the heir to the throne, and have magical abilities only known to the elite in society?" Numian asked, tone emotionless and deadpan. He didn't have the energy to be surprised. This was nothing compared to what he endured already.

The black mist once again swirled around Varakir, becoming a sleek, black knife. "Elvish blood is incompatible with these magics, but I can still make use of this body. Varakir started stripping the body of everything it had, weapons first, then clothes, and finally he started to cut flesh.

"Wait, What are you doing?" Numian asked, slightly disgusted with the treatment of the corpse.

Varakir raised his eyebrow, and paused for a moment. "I'm making use of the corpse." He said matter of factly, spinning the blade between his fingers as he watched Numian's expression. "He won't be coming back for these if we take them. We're in the middle of the wilderness, and you need food to survive. I can use this man's flesh as bait to capture small game."

Numian felt slightly sick. "That's..." He started, voice trailing off as he tried to grasp words.

"Disrespectful?" Varakir finished, slightly bemused. "This man helped slaughter your soldiers, Bloodlord. I wouldn't save any sympathy for him. There are better things to spend it on."

Numian didn't respond, so Varakir continued cutting away at the corpse. He tossed Numian the elf's short sword, which Numian strapped to his leg. Varakir handed Numian the man's rifle, holding the barrel as he continued to cut at the man with his other hand. Numian stared at the rifle, studying the unfamiliar weapon. "I uh, don't know how to use that." He said, not wanting to carry the weapon that seemed so alien to him.

"Rifles were just being developed when the kingdoms fell." Varakir explained gently. "I have gathered that these new ones can fire multiple times without reloading. A weapon with that capability is invaluable to you."

Numian took the rifle, unsure what to do with it. It felt heavier than he expected, and felt alien in his hands. He took the strap and looped it around his chest, letting it rest behind him like a bow would.

"Wait." Numian said, looking down at his uniform. The blue and white armour was stained brown and red from blood and dirt, the sigil of the Ironhearts seeming more grim with red staining the hammer and shield. He stood up, and reverently took off the cuirass, placing it on the rock he was sitting on before grabbing the brown cloak that the elvish soldier was wearing, and turning it inside out, the black inside now on the outside, before putting it on.

"That armour was perfectly fine." Varakir noted, rising from the body, which was now half mutilated and naked. "Why wear the cloak? Are you trying to throw them off your scent?"

Numian stared at the mutilated body, noting that he felt nothing looking at it. He didn't feel guilty, or ashamed or even disgusted looking at the body. A small part of him felt sick, but the feeling was miniscule compared to his exhaustion. "I'm not that man anymore." Numian said, pain in his voice but tears refusing to come. "I'm also not who you think I am, Varakir. I'm not some heir to the throne you think I am. Thank you for saving me but I'm not joining you on some quest to unite the kingdoms."

Varakir chuckled, this time more emotion in his voice, less of the show performer voice he usually used. "I don't care about the kingdoms, Numian. I am a ringleader, my prerogative is just to keep you alive. I will accompany you and assist you however I can." He said, his voice now gravelly and inhuman. He licked the dagger he had used to carve up the man, wiping it clean of blood. "I don't know what you are, and I'm afraid I can't help you with that either. You need to figure that one out on your own."

Numian felt ice creep down his spine, hearing Varakir's tone. Numian felt he could trust the man, or whatever Varakir was, but he also knew things were hidden from him. The chilling, black voice told of something deeper that Numian didn't understand, and he hoped it would stay that way. "I am going to Chafir." Numian said, looking up at the stars, watching as the five moons hung in the night sky. The moon of men was completely unseen. A sign of rebirth, which seemed ironic considering the circumstances. "Blood needs to be spilled." He said, voice growing harder.

"Very well, Bloodlord." Varakir said, voice back to one of a over the top performer, bowing deeply and sweeping his hand to the side. "I think this will be a very interesting journey."

Chapter 9

Ket was a game of scheming. It was as much about figuring out what your opponent was doing as it was about pushing your soldiers forward. You could win a game of Ket with one piece if your opponent was ignorant enough. Arsolarin mused this as he moved the stylized pieces of knights, soldiers, dwarves, and men across the board with one hand, the other holding a shimmering crystal glass of wine. He didn't particularly enjoy either activity, but it gave people a false idea of the type of man he was. Most considered Ket a game of the arrogant, the rules, theory, and cost of playing only accessible to those in high society. Arsolarin moved the *Velzana* piece, or the human, towards his side of the board. This was true, most people that played Ket were arrogant and foolhardy, playing it because the great kings and queens of the old world were said to play it. The reputation of Ket was one of aristocracy and arrogance. Arsolarin did not mind that reputation, as it made people underestimate him. He pushed the *Nira* piece, or the traditional elf, towards the *Velzana*. Many would use the different title for elf, but Arsolarin was a traditionalist. This opening was one of the oldest, the opening of the eternal competition. Elf vs Man, where only one could exist at the end. He took a sip from the glass, and considered the board. He had set it up to mirror the situation earlier. Man pressed forward, yet cornered by pieces on all sides. He sighed, taking a piece from the back board opposite to him, an area hidden to the opponent, where you would build up pieces unseen. He examined the piece. It didn't have a name. It technically wasn't an official piece. All the pieces he had were made of glass, transparent and with small crystals, either blue or red inside to show their allegiance. This one had a black crystal, and was warped. It was one of the beast pieces, but was warped during craft. The imperfection made it worth a fortune, so despite it being unplayable in typical games, he kept it. He placed the piece in front of the human, shielding it from the other pieces. A desperate play that denied the opponent the element of surprise for later use, but a necessary play to survive. He moved one of his pieces, another *Nira* away from the man and the beast. That position was disadvantageous to him, so it was better to reposition for the later encounter. He then moved both the beast and the man back to the back board.

"Sir!" One of his soldiers came bursting into the tent. Arsolarin continued to study the board but shifted more of his focus to the area around him. "Sir." The soldier said, composing himself.

Arsolarin picked up a card, a tool in Ket that allowed one to manipulate the board past pieces and rules, studying it carefully. "Bring them in." He said, not bothering to look at the soldier.

"Yes sir." The soldier said, leaving the tent just as quickly as he entered. He knew the majority of the soldiers in his entourage were terrified or at least unsettled by him, but he didn't mind. It worked in his favour for now, as these soldiers were temporary. His other soldiers were *occupied* for the moment.

Moments later, a man, tall and gruff with a bald head and a dirty grey beard was shoved in roughly. The man was easily a head taller than most humans, but still shorter than most of his soldiers. The soldiers forced him into a seat, the man struggling against him. Arsolarin waved his hand, motioning his soldiers to stop for a moment. He stared at the gruff man,

noting a scar across his cheek. He didn't glare or intimidate the man, he simply studied him but the man still stopped struggling as he returned the stare.

"If you attempt to leave this tent, you will die. If you attempt to harm me or my soldiers, you will die, if you attempt to damage my property, you will die." Arsolarin explained calmly. "I am here to provide you with purpose, if you manage to survive this night without offending me, I assure you, you will be a wealthier man."

His soldiers exited the tent one by one, all sensing the man wouldn't provide further resistance. Arsolarin made a bubble of force around the card he was holding, concentrating the power so it made a barely shimmering field around the card. He let go of it, allowing the card to float in the air. It gyrated, spinning on one plane before switching to another, then another, then back to the first. The human across from him seemed to grow unnerved, but tried his best to hide it.

"Do you play?" Arsolarin asked the human, nodding down to the board, which he reset by pushing force into the board. He didn't like using his powers for trivial matters, but it made people of lower station more malleable and suggestable. He was *Nira*, one of the children of creation. He had the power to manipulate the physical world through his intent and mind. He specialised in manipulating the connection to the earth, changing how things fell and how things moved. He had another specialty, but that one was reserved for specific circumstances.

"I don't play your kind." The man said, Glancing down at the board. There were different kinds of Ket. The Elvish version, the Human version, The Dwarven version, one for each of the gods' children.

"We can play your version." Arsolarin said, finishing the wine in his glass and floating it over to the rest of the glassware. "Pieces are under the board. Choose as you wish."

Ket was a dynamic game. Pieces were not set, so there were an infinite number of ways to build your army.

"So." The man grumbled, eyes scanning pieces Arsolarin couldn't see. "What do you want with me?" He set up six pieces, three men, a beast, and one covered in a shroud. Arsolarin wouldn't be able to tell what the shrouded piece was until he attacked.

"There is a boy." Arsolarin said, breathing out deeply as he explained. "I need you to kill him." Arsolarin put out one piece. The messenger boy, a weak piece that couldn't attack but could move once before a turn and once after.

The man scoffed, at the piece or at the request Arsolarin could only guess. He assumed both. "That's it?" he said, moving his beast forward and his men on the flanks. A book move that protected all pieces and allowed for a quick advance of the vanguard. "What's the catch?"

"No catch." Arsolarin said simply, moving his piece toward the beast. "I'll give you 500 full moons for his head, and 250 to the man that kills him." The man gawked, at both the move and the price. One full moon was an entire week's work, 500 was enough to retire for life. The man surrounded the messenger boy piece with his men, the beast blocking the way forward and the other pieces preventing movement backwards or to the sides. The man chuckled, standing up from the table and shaking his head. The game technically wasn't over, Ket had different win conditions depending on the pieces and win condition. Arsolarin also rose, not bothering to correct the human's assumption, shaking his hand. "The boy is travelling with a vagrant, and will most likely be heading toward Chafir. Kill him and I will contact you again."

The man chuckled, matching Arsolarin's grip. "You drive a hard bargain, elf." He said, still shaking his head. "It'll be done."

Arsolarin nodded, watching as the man left the tent. Guards would escort him back to the other highwaymen, which would be released as Arsolarin continued back to Chafir.

Arsolarin sat back down, resting his chin on the back of his hand, and moved his piece. He had two moves, so he used the second one to get right next to the shrouded piece. He removed the shroud, revealing the ruler piece. It let the player choose extra pieces, but with the caveat that if killed, you lost the game. Arsolarin took the still floating card, and tapped each human piece. The card was *Corruption*, which allowed you to take control of other pieces if you had one win condition threatened. The messenger boy still counted as a threat, despite not having the ability to attack. He knocked over the ruler with one of the human pieces, ending the game.

He grinned for the first time in a very long while. The boy would kill them. He knew that, he planned for it. The boy would *have* to kill them, and doing so would sharpen him further. Ket's direct translation was sacrifice, but most called it honour or nobility. Arsolarin would bleed the boy dry, and eventually the boy would join him. The boy's pain would become his leash, one he could jerk as he wished. More pieces would come into play, a *real* game of sacrifice. How much blood would be spilled before the boy would be ready?

Chapter 10

Numian gasped for air as he woke up. His eyes shot open, and for a moment, it happened all over again. He squeezed his eyes shut, but that just made the scene more vivid. He shouted but no words came out, and he watched as his friends, his soldiers, his men died again. The smell of blood, of iron in the air. One man stood last, a neck to his throat, words lost to a broken mind. What were they again?

How could you let this happen?

Numian opened his eyes slowly. Despite hours of sleep he felt more drained than ever. How could you let this happen? Ryshars voice echoed in his ears, an almost invasive guilt haunting his mind. He had let it happen.

Tired eyes scanned his surroundings. They had travelled through the night, and rested once the sun started to rise. Numian could still see the faint glow of the sun as it passed the western mountains. His old homeland, the great cities of the dwarven clans.

He slept on a tree limb, a rope tied around his torso to keep him from slipping free. He untied the rope, and used it to climb down the tree. Varakir was nowhere to be seen.

The strange man didn't need sustenance or sleep of any kind, and had said he would go scavenge while Numian slept. He would return soon, and hopefully Numian would have some food. His stomach growled, days spent without food finally starting to take its toll. A few more minutes wouldn't kill him. Numian hit the ground, his knees absorbing the impact.

Darkness had finally set in, the five moons of the world rising, giving the forest a silver glow. The leaves rustled in the soft breeze, and the sound of nature, of insects chirping and of animals lurking filled the air with a silent lullaby. Five moons, an intricate pattern in the sky, one moon for each of the gods that had stepped foot on the world. One for elves, one for dwarves, one for men, one for lizardmen, and one for Chilliack, the one of chaos. They all followed their own pattern, shifting position and stage as the year drew on. The moon of Elves was the most predictable, its phase change happening once per month, a full moon at the beginning of the year, a new one at the end. The dwarven one finished its cycle in one month, its full cycle being one change in that of elves. The moon of men was unique, its cycle being once per week, but not in any particular pattern. Some said this was due to the erratic nature of men, but nobody was sure. The moon of lizardmen followed the simplest pattern, a cycle of one month, but the new moon being half of the month, the full moon being the other half. The final moon, that of Chilliack, also followed no pattern. It is said to move with the timing of a century, perpetually half lit since Numian first saw it.

Tonight, most of the moons were lit. The elven moon was in its final phase, one sliver from being full. The dwarven one was half, that of lizards full, and the one of men was new. As always, Chilliack was half full.

The moons meant many different things to those of the world. Each race interpreted them differently. To Numian, they meant nothing. Religion was not enforced in the dwarven holds,

each man, woman, and dwarf choosing as they wished. The priests of Davian said he was a lenient god, the worship of his brothers and sisters, the other gods, permissible. It was said the god of elves was not so lenient, her worship strictly enforced in the elvish lands and Charfir, now a puppet kingdom of the Elves.

Numian squeezed his eyes shut, the moons in the night sky seeming like judgemental eyes. He walked, continuing eastward, towards the great city of Chafir. Varakir had told him he didn't need to worry about getting separated, but didn't elaborate on why. Numian had been too tired to ask. The night was peaceful, the ambience of the wilds a quiet lullaby. His mind, on the other hand, was not. It wasn't the crushing pain of guilt, or the suffocating pain of being helpless. It was the empty, creeping dread of realising it all happened.

He stopped before a lake. Many small lakes like these littered the forests that lay between Elven and Dwarven lands. He kneeled down, the still water perfectly reflecting his face. He stared at that reflection, brown eyes painted silver by the moonlight.

He had a youthful face, most thought he was only nineteen, too young to be a soldier, but he was really twenty four already. His face was pale, and he normally kept himself clean shaven, which is probably part of why people thought he was so young. His youthful optimism, the innocence in his eyes, it was all gone now. His hair was now messy, black locks reaching his neck, and his clean shaven face showing noticeable stubble. He looked like he had aged two or three years.

He splashed water on his face, clearing away dirt and grime, making ripples in the water. The reflection seemed to change as the ripples passed, Numian seeing his old self, and his new self. Who was he now?

The younger version of him was a child. Dwarven conflict was a game. Nobody died, soldiers sparred and generals prepared, but blades only ever clashed during honour duals, where the winner would take all. It was a game, one where lives were never lost and nothing was truly gained or lost. Numian had been a boy playing soldier, and in doing so, he killed good men.

He was a man now. He understood what it meant to lose people, and he wouldn't let it happen again. The reflection stilled again, and Numian only saw one face.

Not a boy, or a soldier. He wasn't a king either. Varakir was dead wrong about him. He was here to kill people, to make sure the blood of better men wasn't spilled. He already had blood on his hands, a little more wouldn't matter. A lot more wouldn't either. He slipped away where men died, so he was just as dead as them, he just had to repay the favour before he let go.

He was the dog that got away.

Chapter 11

Varakir was happy. He was *very* happy. Almost three decades stuck in that *Dreadful* place. He was delighted to be back. That boy, Numian truly was a treat. Vanian would indeed be proud. Quick to react, good instinct, and not a blasted idiot. Most men would kill for one of these qualities. The man he had found lacked all three!

"Now now, quiet down, I wouldn't want you to loose anymore teeth there." He chided, the man still squirming under his grip. "I normally wouldn't mind but every drop of spilled blood lessens your value. You see, we're in short supply."

The man kept cursing, and despite the warning continued to struggle. Varakir sighed, and drew on the mists. It was an odd feeling, as the mists were a part of him. He could sense anything through them, and send them out like tendrils. Calling on it, manifesting it was like breathing out when you had no air in your lungs. Uncomfortable at first, but after your first hundred years you got used to it. He took them in, causing them to swirl around him, then pushed them into his palm. Despite the amount of times he'd seen it, it was still amazing. Small, black shards formed from the mists and snapped in place and turned into a sleek, black dagger. He could make almost anything from it, but familiar things were easier.

He brought the blade to the man's throat, and all struggle vanished.

"That's better." He whispered, face turning into a grin.

"Chilliac himself spawned you!" The man spat, struggling as soon as Varakir removed the knife from his throat.

Varakir sighed, and knocked the man's head against the ground, causing him to go unconscious. "You don't know how right you are." Varakir said, the weight of thousands of years worth of exhaustion slipping into his voice. "Family is something we all try to escape eventually."

He held the dagger in front of himself, the emerald green glyphs understood by only a few now. He shook himself from the blade, its elegant nature something to admire later.

“Fortunately for you, you’ll be dead before that becomes a problem.” he said to the unconscious bandit, patting him on the head. “He’s back now.” Varakirs grin returned, and Numian stepped into the clearing.

“Welcome back, bloodlord!” Varakir said, injecting optimism and happiness in his voice. The performance wasn’t for anyone in particular, he just did it because everyone was just so *dreadfully* gloomy.

Numian looked at Varakir with narrowed eyes. “How the forge did you know where I was going?” He asked

The boy used dwarven curses like second nature. Vanian had made a good move sending him to Danadros, but he had some traits that needed to be trained out.

“We’re heading to Chafir, from the west there are only so many ways to get there.” He explained to the youth. Varakir knew Numian was twenty four, but that was still a child to him. Everyone was, technically, but the boy was especially childish. He needed to grow up fast, he didn’t have time to play around anymore.

Numian nodded, the rifle he carried slung over his shoulder. The boy’s expression was empty, hollow. Seeing men get slaughtered in front of you did that. He would get over it eventually. He would be stronger for it in the end.

Varakir motioned to the small clearing, where he had prepared a small campfire, unlit as to not attract attention until necessary.

Numian walked over, taking a seat on one of the logs. He narrowed his eyes at the unconscious body. “Who’s that?” He asked, suspicion in his voice.

Varakir ignored the question, getting down and lighting the fire with a flint and steel taken from the bandit. “Bandit.” Varakir said when he was done, rising and walking over. “You’ll learn what the title Bloodlord really means tonight.” He said, grin growing even wider.

Chapter 12