

## Chapter 1 - A Farewell to Kings

Streetlamps made the dimly lit stone visible as their fires flickered in the night. The gentle breeze of the mid-summer twists up remnants of garbage and dust not yet caked into the streets from the day's revelry. Steins, food trays, torn clothes, and other debris litter the well-traveled pathways after a day of excitement. In the late hour, festival goers still straggle nosily along the winding roads of the capital city. Inside The Bird of Prey, Serge's hunter green hair spilled past his pastel face and matching mustaches to his waist while he sat at the table with his companions, each heavily in their cups from a long day of celebration. Every year at the Summer Solstice, there is a celebration for all the peace and freedom that has been brought to Aetatis over the past twelve hundred years by The Kings. The Festival of Kings in full swing, the entire **City of Kings** was deep in merriment.

Jugglers and acrobats still occupied some of the street corners, in attempts to take advantage of the more intoxicated partygoers. For as the night ages, the more generous their coin becomes. Serge looked deep into his wife's glazed over eyes with passion, as he laughed at the antics of Jeifer and Ylle in their drunken glory. Her fire red hair framed her snowy face perfectly as if fell loose past her chest. The top students of the University had reason for celebration aside from the recent marriage of Serge and Corelle, the eight of them were the brightest The University had seen in centuries.

The Bird of Prey was loud and rowdy as the winds picked up outside; no one was aware of the stirring in the shadows. No one inside even batted an eye at Jeifer's loud and offensive

obscurities as he slammed back steins with his friends. The beads of sweat ran down his stubbly face like rain drops tree bark as he made his mates gasp in laughter. Serge caught the anxious look on Aezi's olive toned face as he scanned the room in between his cackles at Jeifer's buffoonery, always on alert. He looked odd not wearing his tall pointy hat which could always been seen sitting atop his long black hair. I detect nothing in the room that would draw anyone's suspicion but remain on guard. "Serge?" Gimza interrupted, clearly picking up on the uneasiness in the air. Maybe it was just the knight in them. The room erupted once again in glee as music filled the common room of the tavern.

The elation was severed as the windows shattered like deadly confetti of broken glass into the room. Gimza and Serge jumped to their feet as Corelle and Qeles leapt onto the table from which they all just drank. Aezi and Zid immediately got into a defensive stance. Jeifer and Ylle emptied their cups, but not to waste a drop before entering the fray. Shadowy figures danced into the room undeterred while Serge, Gimza, Zid, and Aezi hacked away at the intruders. Corelle and Qeles tried to strengthen and rally the patrons to fight off these cursed invaders, but to no avail. The crue worked to keep each other alive, the common folk fell to their deaths like glats at the slaughter. As the seconds ticked on, it became more and more clear that the common room was now a death trap and if they wanted to make it through the night, they would have to escape the tavern immediately. Serge and Gimza whistled as they swung around towards the front door and chopped a path for the others to follow.

The scene outside was worse than inside the tavern. Blackened creatures beat down the streets' wanderers as if in a chicken coop. Common folk could provide no sort of resistance against this sort on onslaught. Serge could make out the figures of what looked like great wolves and the

unmistakable/recognizable look of skeletons (its assumed they are walking upright but it does need another descriptor). From the ground beneath him, big rats, the size of feral cats bit at his legs. The red of the wolves' eyes was the only distinct feature that separated their black grizzled fur which camouflaged them so well into the night's darkness. The only other light was the fire that shined fierce from the eyeholes of greyish smoke colored skeletons, slashing away to the sounds of screams that bellowed from within the evening's murky shadows. Evil lurked this night.

Serge could see Gimza's attention turn toward the city's castle; his shoulder length blonde hair hiding the grim look on his face carved from stone - both his residence, and where his father, **King RAZORNIPPLES**<King> would be under minimal guard on this festive night. But the twisting path to the castle was already too dense with fiends, and smoke could already be seen twisting up from the castle towers and windows. The city was being overrun, and if the friends did not find a place to endure the night, they would fall with it. Still, Serge led the eight on an attempt to make it to the castle walls, but it was for naught. Even Aezi's fire magicks seemed to only provide a slight discomfort to this evening's unwanted guests. They needed to get what they could from the manor and leave the center city.

Their manor sat on the outside of the city, just away a few blocks from The Bird of Prey. Outside of the main avenues, the screams of dying partygoers could be heard from where the slaughter was worst. Screams and the glow of burning flames could be heard from the other manors as the chaos littered its way up the long main road to the battered castle gates. The castle was starting to crumble under the assault of the night's onslaught and the screams began to get louder, apparently getting closer now to the outskirts of the city. The manors along the road shared by

theirs, seemed untouched by conflict; but that would not be for long as the rebellion grew nearer still.

The eight companions all lived in that manor, except Gimza who was heir to the throne and was required to live on castle grounds, but most of his time was spent either at the manor or at the University training and bonding with everyone. The other seven grew up in a crumbling house in the slums which they warmly referred to as ‘the orphanage’. All orphans of a previous war, they were as good as blood. All started attending the University soon after establishing a family together. Gimza quickly joined their crue as they became inseparable over the ensuing years. As bad as things were years ago, it seemed like a dream compared to this dreadful eve. Serge’s attention drawn quickly back to the terror at hand, he gathered what he could in great haste, as he hears banging and scraping now at the manor door and walls. The sound of their livestock coming to an end signaled their time here was up and all rushed out of the residence with everything they could fit in their packs and under their arms. The comrades all hopped on their **kyoros** and rode off towards the outskirts of the **City of Kings**.

As they raced towards the fringes of the **City**, the screams grew fainter, but never died. The outskirts were unharmed, there seemed to have been no order to the assault aside from amassing as much death as bloody imaginable. The atrocious activity would be contained to the most populated areas as these fiends lusted for blood in the most substantial way possible.

“*Diablos!*” Zid spat in disgust. “I’ve heard of the like before.” He spat again. Zid was the eldest of the crue and a mild historian at that. In the history books there were vague mentions of such evils that would terrorize civilizations in ages past. But none had been seen by man for over a

millennium. They were as good as folk-lore, things to scare children. But we had all seen this with our own eyes.

“Diablos!”, Jeifer japed. “Next you’ll say they rode in with Chandrian, Trollocs, Wulfen, and the Fae as well! What do I look like, a damn half-wit Zid.”

“Now we all saw what happened Jeif. Those weren’t the Sons of Hope. And we all saw the comet the other moon to the North past Zek. I’m not a little child either, but you can’t ignore what we see!” Ylle rushed to the defense of Zid. Now the party had come to a halt to have a discussion.

“If we go by logic, it is more likely some mad wizard whom finally figured out how to summon an army of the dead got some balls. It’s really not that hard if you just tri-“

“A mad wizard? That makes no sense” Jeifer said, now more argumentative than earlier. “I say it was a dragon and a princess’s wart dun crossed with a fallen knight on the wrong moon cycle.”

“Dio’s ashes!” Serge blurted in. “Do I always have to do this? Who the bloody hell knows what that was! We only got a quick glimpse. Now, everyone! Do we want to stand here all night and argue while these scum catch up and bugger us to death? Or are we going to find shelter, you blithering fools?”

Gimza nodded in agreement.

“Yes, yes, you’re right”, Zid said.

“Yes sir” Jeif slurred

“Of course, we must be on our way at once.” Aezi thought out loud.

“Now who’s going to get buggared to death?” an unfamiliar voice interrupted.

“What’s it to you?” Jeif scoffed.

Serge gave Jeif a look that shut him up. “What he meant was; what are you doing here? It’s dangerous. Are you heading into the city?”

“Aye – well I was but it seems I’m too late. I just couldn’t get here fast enough. I came from...”

he trailed off as his eyes met with the fires of what was the city’s castle. “I was heading to the castle but” he sighed “there’s nothing that can be done now.” The man was shrouded in the night as he sat atop his equally camouflaged kyoro. His eyes the only thing visible in the smoky evening.

“You are not from here – what business do you have at the castle?” Gimza eyed the mysterious man cautiously as he considered the stranger.

The man eyed the center city. “I ride from Zek carrying dire news, yet I am too late. I –“

“From Zek?!” Jeif laughed. “Did you bring back some scrael as well? He must have been drinking more than I! We can’t be jerk’d-“He was cut off as a sledge mallet slammed into his shoulder. He fell from his kyoro as a boney intruder whaled a wicked cackle. Before it could finish the kill, it was drove to the ground by yet another unseen interloper.

What was left was a pile of dull grey bones and a happy bark. “That’s my boy, **Wind!**” The man exclaimed as he hugged what can now be seen as a wolf on the ground. “We need to get to a safer place before we are overrun. The edge of the city is unharmed, we will be ok if we can make it there.” Before the last word was out of his mouth, a flash glimmer left his hand to discover a wicked beast not five yards from Qeles, completely unaware. “We must move, now!” “Right right” Gimza echoed for everyone to hear. “On me” he rode as everyone followed, the newcomer taking up the rear in the shadows.

They rode for an hour, hard, southwest. After another few minutes, Gimza halted at an uninhabited barn, the years hadn't been kind, but it stood strong in the evening fog. Its well-rusted frame caught shines of the moonlight as the dilapidated building stood before them. "We're here" Serge proclaimed. He knew the structure. He and Gimza had trained uncountable nights here on the fringe of their city. "As good a place as any, I suppose. We should fortify the perimeter." He eyed Jeifer and Zid before they could argue with one another about how to do it. "Just do it." They obeyed without banter, this was no time for frolicking or choosing who to take orders from.

Everyone started about their own so to establish a perimeter around their safehaven, when the familiar sound of commotion disrupted the otherwise silent immediate area. "I said no cockery you t-" Serge was interrupted as he saw that the noise was not his friends, rather the unwelcome invaders from beforehand were afoot. Not too concentrated around their newfound refuge but they had been too noisy in their work, however the murky night may conceal additional devils. "We have company" Gimza was heard across the perimeter. They were surrounded as expected when the encompassing circumference alit in flame. Aezi, Qeles, and Ylle had united their magicks to form a ring of flame around the comrades. A perfect collaboration as the three linked fire, nature, and wind just as in exercise, augmenting their combined learnings in hostility was accomplished without faltering. The trespassers enclosed inside the fiery boundary were easily hacked down by Gimza, Zid, Serge, and Jeif. Corelle could be seen keeping the company invigorated near the heart of mêlée. Collaborating magicks together was as easy as having a conversation with one another. A conversation that takes place mentally. And while multitasking with another charge, as simple as all focusing on the same object or joining

altogether, mid-conflict, fixing on several separate adversaries simultaneously. Serge understood it at the basics and had even done so in exercise with Gimza and some of the others. His thoughts were once again drawn back to the skirmish at hand as a flamboyant intimidating battle-cry came from the northeast of the periphery. A skeleton, the height of mid-aged Yral wood tree stood at its source. Rather than taking a moment to realize that nothing like this actually existed in all of Aetatis, Serge and the rest of the crue formed a regiment in perfect nonagonal imposition; the new member of the cohort included, as he'd fought alongside them hitherto.

The ash blackened skeleton roared in the night as the company engaged it in its lunacy. Its furnace ridden eyes blazed as the frame of the atrocity towered over their congregation. It let out another screech as flame ascended directly toward them amassing from the mouth of its colossal head. The coalition split in two, surrounding the goliath; Serge, Gimza, and Zid focusing on the torso and head as Jeif aligned himself perfectly behind it for maximum efficacy. Aezi, Qel, and Ylle were still allied in their entwining as Corelle was now illuminating down direct light unto the terror. It was always taught in class that any magick intended to restore life would by hook or crook harm the dead. Well the dead never walked, but this creature juddered in agreement as the light washed down on its bones. Still the scoundrel battled adamantly as glimmers of radiant pewter could be seen striking their mark on the foe's joints initiating from their shadowed friend, his wolf companion galloping upon the skeleton tearing at every stride. No one could easily say how long the battle raged. But at last, the creature fell to the ground in one final gasp for air as a hammer of flame crushed it to the earth.



From the cloud of embers out arose the four warriors, covered in grey head to foot. “It’s right dead!” Zid announced happily. His white teeth could be seen through the smoke colored film concealing him otherwise.

Before the dust could settle, Aezi darted to the corpse, taking samples from what seemed like each and every bone. “There isn’t even a brain.” He called from the haze, which seemed to be diffusing out to the entire grounds by now. Aezi could be heard muttering to himself where the soot was dense in the still air. It was not ash that enclosed the night, but a heavy veil of fog which appeared to encase the entire city.

“Don’t tarry man!” Serge directed to the wizard, who now did don his immense sunburned hat; it could be faintly seen now as the dust, char, and culm almost completely settled to the ground around the corpse. “We’ve to reinforce the barn so we can get some rest.”

The newcomer was already inspecting the exterior of the barn, placing several items at the corners and medians of the walls. “I’ve got that.” He said to the group. When a few of them gave him a sideways look, he replied back, “Wards. They can be casted as a spell on the spot or enchanted into an item. *Diablos* would rather run headfirst into a fire than approach these wards. I’ve the best in the land.” He muttered some incantation and appeared satisfied. “Tis safe.”

“Just who are you?” Jeif asked the man apprehensively. “Wards and all – Aezi, can you even make a ward?” Aezi is the most skilled wizard in the University or was until tonight when the whole of it likely lay in cinder and ruin.

“I’ve studied wards, but there’s been no use for centuries except to thwart eavesdropping or prevent spying or the like. Who’ve thought we’d need it for the next thousand years? I suppose it

is a blunder on our part. If the city was warded against *diablos* this would have been impossible,” he said as he looked back on his fallen home.

“Yeah *who* would’ve thought” Jeif accused as he eyed the newcomer once again.

“Enough again. We need to get inside the barn.” Serge complained as if talking to a child. “You can bitch in there where it’s safe.”

“Why should we believe it’s safe in there after he said some words to some *relics*? It could be a trap. Aezi or Qeles should see it’s safe for sure.” Jeif barked back.

But Aezi was already considering the wards, unable to contain his excitement. “These are incantations even I can’t comprehend, they’re considerably more advanced than I’ve encountered even in the libraries of the University. Just astounding!”

“But are they safe? Can we-” Jeif was cut off as Gimza cut in.

“Come now, you simpleton, they’re safe. Look, he and Serge are already inside. Have a hint.”

Gimza stated as he followed the rest of the group in ahead of Jeifer.

Inside, a fire blazed in the hearth and the two had already arranged seating about the inglenook.

“Have a seat, listen to what ... We haven’t got your name.” Serge motioned to the outsider.

“I guess now is an appropriate time to introduce myself. I am Egde, I am from the once established republic of Taedas.”

“Taedas? Is that a real place? Isn’t that where ninjas were supposed to have once trained? I always thought it was fiction, you know, from the novels.” Zid asked.

“I never paid attention in history.” Jeifer scoffed “A village of ninjas? What is this – *The Chrono Tales*?” he laughed.

Egde cleared his throat to quiet the room. “My village of *yes, ninjas*, once resided in the eastern forest of **PLACE**. We lived in peaceful seclusion from the rest of Aetatis until about four years ago. That was when something happened. It was almost as if the forest around us was rejecting our residence; as if as a whole it was consciously inhibiting our existence. We sent out scouts to the rest of Aetatis, myself included. I returned eight moons later with what I experienced, but I could not find Taedas. Like it had never existed! I traced over its location to my wit’s end, but to no avail. It was not easy, but I tracked *something* northeast into Zek. My senses told me that it was not my companions, but I had to follow it anyway. Once in Zek, physicks act awry, causing it nearly impossible to track anything and the sensation of always being watched is ever evident. The trail was almost immediately lost, but I saw it headed north towards the mountains. The closer I got to those mountains, the more skewwhiff the environment became, twisted trees and stunted shrubs; mutated rabid animals with glowing eyes of all colors. I spent many moons in and out of Zek with my boy Wind; one cannot spend an extended amount of time within the confines of that cursed land or you will go rabid like those animals. Alone, I could never make it through the northern areas of Zek and certainly not into those snow covered mountains. The closer I got, the thicker the shrubbery and more fiendish the animals became. Rats the size of bobcats and wolves with blood red eyes- exactly what I saw here tonight... *Diablos*. Then the green comet pierced our world and struck the northern mountains. I could obviously not investigate, but I knew the significance. I rode immediately to get an audience with the king, but even in all haste was too late. I saw the shadow of *Umbræ* with my own eyes and it is spreading. It will consume this city before long.” He studied his spectators. “I’ve not seen another of my kind since I left my village.” Sadness filled his being as he finished his tale.

“A horrid tale.” Qeles spoke for the first time. “I’ve never seen a ninja.” The word was still foreign on her tongue. Everyone had read about ninjas in the history books and their amazing acrobatic way of life. The flames painted his cowl crimson as he studied the men and women studying him. None of us had seen a ninja in person before. We all assumed they existed, but to see one in person was almost too much to take in at once at the moment of realization. It was said that you could be staring honestly at a ninja and not even notice their presence. I’d never believed in their stealth until seeing this man in front of me tonight, his movements deceptive to the eye. I would not have believed a lot of things had I not seen them with my own sight tonight. “So, where do we go from here?” Zid asked no one in particular. The screams had become fewer as sounds of the ungodly scoundrels causing mischief came and went. The city was dying and as the night aged into morning, any hope of fighting the reaper’s stay with the cries for help which faded to insignificance.

“These *diablos* have an aversion to the light. They don’t avoid it completely but are much less active and prefer to rest during the day hours in any darkness they can find. Hence the ever-enshrouding mist which darkens the forest of Zek, north of us. It’s like a living entity attracted to these creatures of the night. One will form over your city as well if they form a residence here. I picked up a, what I would call, faint radiation of this mist in where Taedas once stood. I don’t know what happened there but there was an *Umbrae* presence at some time to cause it. The morning’s light should allow a search of the city. We’ll be safe to rest inside these wards.” He eyed a sleeping Jeifer and within an instant the man was asleep with his wolf. He looked as if he would spring up at any time, even in his rest.

One by one everyone made their arrangements, the eight of us all nestled in the safety of one another. During this mid-summer night, a certain coldness had taken to the air. The gales of wind in the night had overtaken the howls of the fiends for a time, and rest was finally given to all.

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As the cerulean sun's rays awoke the sleepers, the stark silence was resounding. Serge, Gimza, and Aezi were already outside staring at the ruins of a once proud city. The stench of filth and ash dominated all incoming scents. The city was dead and there was not a living soul inside it.

"There will be no rescue mission." Serge stated dismissively. "No one lives in there anymore. We must leave at once."

"Shadow?" Was a question from Ylle.

"Gone with the morning. I'm not surprised. The nearest town is **Tomal**." Serge looked back at everyone, then his wife Corelle.