Tales of Rashpén

Tale of the Black Marshal

T

hey called him the Black Marshal. The Hero of the Empire; The Champion; Durángo; Pelandór; Lagásh-Nur; Aminsálte; Monjardianémon. A warrior on a hundred battlefields, with the strength of a thousand men. Armies would break into a rout before him, and generals would tremble from the sound of his name. The side which had him among their ranks was ever victorious and the others could but wallow in despair. And yet for him, none of it mattered.

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Tales of Rashpén

The Eighteenth Emperor

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lerdín Canélsi was born in 1260 er, the eldest son on Alrejistár III, Prince of Méyria. As was customary for Imperial royalty, he was sent at the age of 5 to spend his childhood in Northern Albredóna, at the court of Grand Duke Sérphric — to strengthen the political bonds between the two families.

At the time, the Emperor of Elmanár was one Tóemric Mildáwa, Prince of Astoria and a renowned military leader who reigned by the name of Rassán V. He followed in the footsteps of his three predecessors in centralizing the Imperial government and military at the expense of its constituent states. The 1246 er campaign against Nor Licht saw the creation of permanent imperial legions - for the first time since the Old Empire - and the setting up of recruitment quotas from each state. Many in the states' governments were frustrated with this direction and formed a coalition for state rights in the Imperial council. Alerdín's father was its leader.

Following the Compromise of 860 er, soon after the unification of the different states of Elmanár into the New Empire, the office of emperor was not hereditary. Rather, at the event of death or abdication of the emperor, the Council of Princes — the mightiest rulers in the Empire — was convened to elect his successor, usually from among their number. Soon after, a custom known as the *imperial rotation* has emerged, by which the next emperor was always the next prince in a cycle of the 12 principalities of Elmanár. Only once this rule was broken, when King Álbre II of Albredóna ascended the imperial throne in 1189 er and tried to establish a hereditary Imperial dynasty. A civil war broke out in which he was swiftly defeated, and his kingdom divided into the Principality of Albredóna, ruled by a rival dynasty, and the Grand Duchy of Northern Albredóna, ruled by the erstwhile kings.

Lord Séymour Chuolióri was the second son of the Grand Duke of Northern Albredóna. Being closest in age to Alerdín, he was his best friend and most trusted confidant in the court.

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Tales of Rashpén

The Legend of Saira

I. The Wingless Daemon

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igh in the mountains of the Main Sáharac Ridge was the hidden city of Anijéro. Its towers rose out of the primordial rock, their pinnacles thrusting hundreds of feet into the sky, as if in defiance of both gods and men. Its golden temples, shimmering in the midday sun, stood silent witness to the great civilization that built them in the days of old. The city was abandoned when that ancient culture collapsed, and laid desolate through many centuries until Thrázia, goddess of love and war, brought her man — her forbidden  
love — to take refuge within its walls. He was weary from a long wandering, from watching yet another love of his life grow old and wither, from fighting in yet another pointless war for a greedy tyrant, only for another of the same to take his place. She was saving him from a world that couldn’t cope with him. She gave him respite and taught him to let go of vengeance, and together they begat hundreds of offspring and created their own little kingdom, far from the tumults of the world.

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Sáira was born on a bright night, bathed in the light of the twin full moons — Félwan's gold interwoven with Altaír's blue. She was a somber, lethargic child, speaking in an unsettling monotone voice. Her jet-black hair tended to be draped sloppily across her shoulders, contrasting with her pallid skin. A full-grown woman at 16, her slender body barely showed any signs of womanhood, and she had yet to have sprouted wings from her back.

It was usual for a daemon of Anijéro to get their pair of wings, dark and leathery like those of a bat, by the age of 14, right in time for their commencement ceremony in the Temple of Divine Light. Not many were surprised when a winter has passed, and then another, and little eerie Saira was still without hers. It only served as another reason for her brothers and sisters to pick on her. She had few friends among the daemons or the human and Náyte laborers who tended to the menial jobs in the city, but books were always her friends, and the librarian — a kindly old lady from Ságeroth — was always glad to let her peruse the thousands of books and scrolls in the Grand Library for as long as she liked. Most of all, it was books about the arcane that piqued Saira's interest.

Maybe in books, she thought, she will find the key to become strong, to get back at her hecklers and abusers. To prove them all wrong.

II. The Sapphire of Anijéro

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he waves of the Bay of Hircána glimmered softly as she soared above them, carried on her stunted wings. A late bloomer, she was 30 now, and after four long years of following clues, she was finally closing in on her target. She left the city one late summer day. It was easy — no one cared for bookish little Saira and her weird hobbies. She lived among the Naytír for a while and learned their ways. She trained in the art of the sword, proving surprisingly nimble and swift. Then one day, she learned of the shipwreck that lied beneath the waves at the mouth of the bay, where the Spit met the Hircána Archipelago. The ship, the royal barge of the Queen of Manthrón, was carrying gifts to the King of Alteryán, among them was a stash of jewelry, and within it — one very special gem.

The ship sank in the bay soon after the Divine War, centuries ago. She learned it from a scroll in the library. The gem, one of a set of twelve, contained a fragment of the will of chaos itself, and was intended, as were the others, for the great kings and leaders of the world's powers, for safekeeping. That she read in the *Histories of the Wars of Gods and Men*, one of only three surviving copies of the original work. Knowledge gave her power, she thought. But the stone — if the *Annals of Holy Tess on the Jut* were to be trusted — could grant her what her heart has longed for. It could amplify her daemonic powers and at long last, make her a force to be reckoned with.

It was so close now, she knew, as she plunged beneath the waters and swam towards the barge. A hundred fathoms, a hundred more, she held her breath as she descended to the depths. By now she has learned — weak as she was, the abilities of her race meant her strength, speed and stamina were far more than of any mortal. The locks on the chest yielded easily to her claws, and there it was — shining brightly even in the dark of the deep, blue as the waves of a stormy sea. She grabbed the gem and began rising to the surface, a light smirk on her face.

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The top of the palace spire came crashing down into the reflecting pool below. Daemons and mortals alike stood down and stared at the sky in awe as an enormous pair of wings bloated out the Sun. She came down slowly, sending a roaring ball of fire across the main plaza of Anijéro, laughing heartily as she landed. Her beauty was striking, comparable only to Lady Thrázia herself. Saira, the Princess of Anijéro, has returned. And she was powerful.

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Her newfound powers soon earned her respect, and she was invited to join raiding missions and the reveling in the hunters’ lodge after them. No longer she had to bear japes and pranks and whispers behind her back — she walked proudly among her daemon siblings as more than their equal, boastfully wearing her precious sapphire around her neck. Before long, Saira would lead raiding parties, and organize the daemons under her command into a highly efficient fighting force. She led them to many victories against the hated daemon-hunters of Mni Threglívyen, as the might of Anijéro slowly but steadily encroached on the lands of the neighboring Kartvélian Empire. Saira was known among her troops to take special delight in subduing the enemy commanders, making them beg for their lives or professing their undying love for her, only to be ripped apart on her wings, or clawed to death, or dropped from a great height. A lucky few got a taste of her daemonic lust just before departing this world, a silly grin on their faces.

Saira’s deeds gained her renown among the elite of Anijéro, not the least in the eyes of her father, the great Némon Pelandór. The man who turned god seldom took interest in his many children, but Saira was exceptionally smart, a talented and inspiring commander, and most importantly — she possessed one of the sacred gems, just like his own onyx, and was able to harness its powers. Nemon, the cynical warrior who has seen everything, was genuinely impressed. He felt a sudden urge, one he hasn’t experienced since he set foot in Anijéro, to expand his rule once again into the surrounding lands, to enable his daemons to roam freely, no longer be hunted but hunters, the apex predators they were born to be.

Nemon has made Saira his second-in-command. She wasn’t the eldest of the daemons nor the strongest physically, she wasn’t even the most learned. But she was her father’s favorite, and henceforth became known as the Princess of Anijéro. She was privy to his battle plans — the lands of Anijéro were to expand across the vast plains known as the Nimolyonnír, and from there the road to the mighty kingdom of Serandón would be clear. Its royal line, the legends said, was in possession of another one of the sacred stones. “All the power you ever dreamt of, within your grasp”, he promised her, but the whispers in his head each time he stood near her claimed otherwise. Three stones were only the beginning. When all twelve are gathered, when the soul of chaos will be one once more, he’d be finally able to reshape this world to his desires. To dispense with all the restrictive rules of gods and men, to reign freely, untethered by the wills of others.

III. The Skies of Alteryán

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ower corrupts”, it said in *The Great Book of War* by *Álbre Elmánnas*. Along with similar platitudes such as “those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it”. She scoffed at the idea as she ascended to the throne, the severed head of the erstwhile king still lying at its steps. “In *my* great book of war”, she thought, “first chapter, first paragraph will simply read: never mess around with Sáira, Princess of Anijéro, Bane of the Kartvélians, Liberator of the Nimolyonnír and now also Queen of Serandón”. “Or, perhaps, I should rename it *Sáira*-ndon”, she mused, drunk with her recent victory. “Look daddy, I have my own empire now”, she imagined herself saying when she next meets him, “aren’t you proud of your little girl?”. She stared at the sparkly amber that she pried out of the former queen’s cold hands mere minutes ago and contemplated her next move. Her two gems, amber and sapphire like the lights of the two moons, were softly humming in sync.

The Anijerái empire stretched from the Gulf of Kartvélia in the southwest all the way to Mólar Mis in the northeast, shaped like a great menacing hook. Two of the great kingdoms of the Naytír, the elegant race of warriors and artisans who dominated the western continent, were subdued by the daemons and their magnificent commander. Saira’s gaze now turned to their last free kingdom — Alteryán, standing defiantly beyond the eastern jungles, controlling the trade routes with the lands across the Ocean Sea. Its arrogant rulers have dared to declare war upon the daemon host, the rightful conquerors of the continent. A grave mistake, Saira thought as she examined a tapestry that depicted the map of the known world.

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Scorpion bolts pierced the clouds as the First Daemon Squadron flew over the edge of the forest, nearing Sinquadín, the capital of Alteryán. The first part of the campaign was easy, almost too easy — the armies of Alteryán kept falling back through the forests, haunted by the seemingly invincible force of half a thousand daemons of Anijéro powered by Saira’s twin stones. Her amber gave her daemons power to produce lightning with ease, burning hosts of enemies to a crisp while they’re stunned by the power of her sapphire. But that all changed at the outskirts of Sinquadin.

Her enemies were learning. The open fields around the capital were peppered with tall lightning rods, as per the suggestion of the surviving Náyte combatants fleeing to the city. Without the cover of trees, the daemons were vulnerable to redirected lightning strikes, and were falling by the dozens. Saira’s stun attacks were repelled by hastily forged mirror shields, while the way back through the forest was blocked by reserve artillery brigades from the Nimolyonnír, operating Scorpion engines forged especially for killing daemons. To add insult to injury, a second army of disgruntled citizen warriors of Serandón, who had no intention to live under daemonocracy, were now moving south to gain on Saira’s host, with the skeleton crew of 300 daemons left in Serandón unable to stop them without risking a major revolt in the capital. For the first time in a long while, Saira was afraid.

A moment of distraction by the bleakness of the situation and five bolts were heading her direction, followed by a large net of barbed wire. She was able to dodge all but the last of them — losing balance for a moment as a rod of sharpened steel pierced through her left wing. She looked below: there was no place to take cover in the open field beneath her. She would have to fight through. Only when she landed, immediately starting to thwart hordes of enemies, did she realize that she no longer had her amber. Around her she saw her fellow daemons getting captured and dragged by beasts of burden to the capital. She wanted to scream. “Father, help”, she heard herself whisper lightly. Is this how her tale was to end, on a foreign field, surrounded by enemies, humiliated, *powerless*? “No”, she resolved. “Never”.

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A distant call, and a plea for help. Nemon felt his daughter’s plight through the black stone around his neck. A searing pain, and the realization of a great loss suddenly hit him. He no longer could sense Saira’s amber. The fear of impending defeat jolted him into action. From his tower at the Grand Palace in Anijero he instantaneously clipped through the aether, emerging on the bloodied field opposite Sinquadin, rushing to protect his precious daughter from the swords and pikes of the Naytir. She was in his arms again, bruised but safe — as long as she was with him, no weapon could reach her.

But then he saw the bodies of his murdered children dot the plain. Scores of them. The bitter tang of the ruination of his house clouded his mind and poisoned his thoughts, and he felt uncontrollable rage course through his veins like a thick, black venom. He stamped his hand on the ground and the grass withered from his touch. Around the place where he sat, still holding Saira firmly in his arms, grey patches of wilted grass began spreading out like spores of rage radiating from his body. Wherever the sickness touched, corpses of the dead — Naytir and daemons alike — were rising, emitting a tormented growl and a sickly light through their eyes, compelled to exact their master’s terrible revenge. Hundreds, then thousands. The living had no chance that day, the city of Sinquadin fell, and the army of the dead, led by an enraged father mourning his fallen children, began its gruesome march across the continent, killing and razing all in its path.

IV. The Limitations of Power

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ith the Creator alone lay the power to grant life. No mortal nor any god beside him was able to return a soul to a body once dead. Nemon had to find it the hard way after losing his brother, back in his days as a fugitive prince learning the Arts from the sages of Ságeroth. No necromancy could change this one pesky fact. Not even the divine powers he gained could help him with that. As a god, his task was to help guide restless souls to the aethereal halls, but his fixation on bringing back his dead brother caused him to quickly shirk his duty. He tried countless times to bind lost souls to dead bodies, but every time they were rejected, and all he could create were lifeless automatons forever bound to his will. Over time, he developed great talent in this ghastly art, and was able to control hundreds of dead at a time. The great gods, ever solemn and uncaring on their aethereal thrones, left it to their terrestrial servants — the Patrons — to deal with Nemon’s mess, but the lesser gods were reluctant to act against one of their number. They remembered how they had to take down Mircalén, the Goddess of War and empress of the Saltír, when she birthed daemons and raised the dead to conquer half a continent. And now Nemon was following her footsteps.

When the host of divines terrestrial came to confront Nemon, he didn’t resist. He was still overcome with grief, and pleaded them for forgiveness for his grave deeds, and for a continued safe existence for his children in Anijero. Thus, he was locked away for eternity in a dark room inside the Grand Temple of Vréesnen, with the ever-vigilant Tibrándi priests guarding it around the clock. The city of Anijero was allowed to exist, as long as its daemons shall never leave the mountains surrounding it. Eventually Anijero and its daemons, along with the Black Stone of Vréesnen — the name Nemon’s onyx was given, were relegated to myths and folk tales.

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Within Anijero, Saira had to learn the limitations of power. She was humbled by her defeat, and weakened by the loss of her amber, which was never found again. Without the leadership of their father, the daemons elected Saira and her brother Démios, the strongest of their number, to rule the city. Saira’s ambitions were now confined to protecting Anijero and occasionally raiding the towns and villages in its vicinity. The realization that there are always even bigger powers that can knock her off her pedestal, and the great losses the daemons have suffered under her reckless leadership, have made her careful, and all-in-all she has grown to be a decent ruler to her people. She learned to seek advice when in doubt, and books have once again become her friends.

But the Will of Chaos did not rest, and its fragments kept seeking one another. At times, Saira could feel the sapphire around her neck yearn to her father’s onyx. And the Black Stone of Vréesnen bode its time, until another power-hungry fool would come and barge the doors of the temple open, freeing it and its bearer at long last.