

1.

Village of Alderswood: Northern Territory

Alther Kalanus, named king of the Gothos looked over the countryside that was laid in ruin. The village was burning and bodies lay strewn across the grassland. It was a horrible altercation that he knew would have happened sooner or later. His mount, a strong, well-muscled war horse shifted under him. The king placed a gloved hand upon the mane of the horse to calm its restlessness. The stallion was once a wilding that roamed the woods was caught and broken by his very hands at the age of sixteen. He was dressed in gray-green armor with the sigil of an eagle surrounded by a snake eating its own tail. The chainmail was darned in a few spots revealing the bandages his arch-healer; Demius dressed the wounds when the battle had fallen into a hush. The king rolled his shoulder to test the damage inflicted on his shoulder and arm that often held his sword. A shot of pain rolled through him and muddled in his chest like heady mead. The cloak wrapped around his shoulders was tattered at the threads and spattered with blood, and ash.

The Northern Territory of the land called Gothos by his ancestor Ser. Kranos the Red Fire had come to this land with his family by boat so many centuries ago after being betrayed by his brother Lord Methadius of Blaugh Island. King Ursa, the legendary peacemaker king, was Ser. Kranos's grandson. His pride would not get the better of him on this day or any day for he knew that without the six mystical and powerful stones that protected his land and kept things in harmony he could not have crushed the rebellion in the Southlands. Reaching up he stroked his copper colored beard, the smoke hiding the great grief rising within him. His son the great and beloved boy prince, Robert Kalanus had been killed at the ripe age of fifteen and would never step into his robes and rule the land and keep the four territories at peace. There was always warfare, it was unavoidable but in his many years as king he had kept it to a minimum. The battle between the four territories was not the greatest threat at the moment. The Scythian race, beings that could be physically beautiful or terribly monstrous had shown themselves to be the biggest threat to the land. These creatures that drank blood from humans needed to be eradicated, but he feared it would not happen in his own time. The moon had reached its zenith and all had fallen quiet and hushed. Exhaling deeply his gloved hand patted his mount and started to trek down the hill back into the ruins of hell itself. The deep feeling of loss was palpable as he neared the huts that once held cheerful residence. A man of fifty-five and built like a warrior, the sight of such destruction aged him very quickly.

His son had been laid to rest in the great hall of the largest building that had once been a tower keep. Upon the great table the body of the boy laid after being washed and dressed clothing for his cremation. To their tradition the funeral would occur as soon as possible, lest his spirit haunt the place restlessly.

Anger and despair were the only emotions his royal highness could feel as he stood firmly before the front of the table gazing down at the lifeless form of his only son. Emily, his dearest wife and queen had passed from this world giving birth to little Robbie leaving him with two sons. He was grateful and blessed to have two heirs, but he had hoped his youngest would be named his successor instead of his brother Damon. The eldest coveted his position and ignored the knowledge stubbornly that his father might not choose him to be heir to the throne of Golthos. Alther tried to comfort himself with the knowledge that Damon was loved by his men who he trained and fought with and would be rid of the Sythians and all other enemies that would take up arms against him. The king could not though ignore the fact that Damon was also known for his cruelty and calculated nature. The prince would have surely killed his father if he wasn't so sure that he would inherit. For now the young man now eighteen would be content in his stone fortress of MacCoven, raising arms for battle as often as possible. It was common knowledge that the prince has called together a group of warriors called the Gogothian Knights that would mount a crusade to extinguish the demons that howled at night for human blood. It would of been a great victory for the king in his years that he knew were now short he wished vainly that he had been the one to take on these creatures and not burden his son with the responsibility. All he wanted now was peace that deep inside he knew would not come. Shaking his tired head he turned from the body of his dear son and called aside his Captain, Lucrus Arelius giving him orders to send men out to secure the area and send a message to the Guards of the Great Stones of what has transpired. Not being a man of words he didn't want to draft the letter himself the anger still hot in his veins at the loss of his son. The blame could not go to these men and women who administered their gifts and energy into protecting the overall health of the land. No, they could only do so much, the Guard of the Stone of War had been the council at his ear and he knew he would not have succeeded without it. The stars were bright in the sky as he stood at the entrance of the great hall awaiting the arrival of his only living son and heir, Prince Damon.

The King's eyes were fixed on the horizon when a group of his men arrived on their horses with a young man perched upon his black stallion, armor gleaming in the moonlight marred with the blood of the poor and wretched soul that had crossed his path in battle. Upon getting closer the prince dismounted from his horse and gave a formal bow to his father and king. The crown prince was not a tall man but not a short one either. His build was medium with broad shoulders and well-muscled arms under the gleaming armor. As his younger brother had been fair haired and skin, he was dark with tanned flesh from being out in the sun. His dark brown hair was pulled back over the nape of his neck and his eyes were the color of onyx. Even as he rose from his bow he surveyed his father with that cold and calculated blackness. The men always compared the prince to a hawk with a slight curve of his nose down taking up most of his face.

"My lord king and father. The rebellion has been quelled. I have made sure that it will take many, many years before they can mount another attack on us" The young man said, the corner of his mouth turning into a smile that would cause a shudder through a weaker man. Alther stood firm acknowledging that even through his grief that his elder son had been the bringer of this victory. It didn't lessen the blow of the news he would have to impart on his child.

"My son, your brother has fallen in battle. You are my only living heir and will rule when I die" he said, his voice tight with emotion he was trying hard to keep back. To his surprise he saw an expression he did not expect from the child of his lineage. He could see a glimmer of joy rising in the other man's eyes.

It will soon be mine! Damon thought as he stood there gazing at the graven face of his father, the high king. Try as he might he could not keep his joy at bay. Seeing that his father had picked up on these emotions with all of his might he forced himself to look contrite, hoping his father would think himself mistaken if he had seen it at all.

"My poor, dear brother. He was not a man of battles but that of court and of wooing ladies "he said silkily. "His body at once must be burned, lest bad humors and spirits fill this hall "he added solidously. The truth is he had always since childhood despised his little brother. The creature that not only robbed him of his mother by taking her life in birth, but would have taken the inheritance that was rightfully his! Now fortune had smiled on him and given him the opportunity he had prayed for. When he became king he would appoint new guards of the sacred stones who he could mold and manipulate to use their powers for his own ends. In their fealty to him they would make him a god among men. The prince kept his thoughts and intentions hidden guarded close to his chest as the next day came and standing next to his father, surrounded by his men as a large pile of wood was built as a funeral pyre and his brother's body was laid upon it. Even as the torches were put to the logs, Damon was already plotting out the assassination of his father. His father was a doddering old fool if he thought the knowledge of being the next in line would satisfy him. It was his luck that his brother had died in battle and would save him the time and coin carrying out a similar plan for him. Robert was always astute even as a child and knew of his brother's nature and was always quick to protect his father, but now all of the doors were open to him.

Turning his head he looked at his father standing solemnly at his side noticing the lines in his father's face traced by grief. The man was in good health, but with the death of his dear wife he had not been the man he once was, and now with the death of his brother his father would be an easy target. Hiring an assassin would be not needed in this case. In this case it was only a matter of when and where. He planned to bribe one of the maids to drop a bit of poison in the king's goblet the old man slept and make it look like he died in his sleep overcome with the stress of battle and the loss of his youngest. Unable to help himself he smiled with his head bowed to hide it. Everything was going his way now. The only one who could of any weight in this was only an infant, a boy born by a village woman near their castle who was not legitimate. The woman named Eilan was greatly adored by his father and he planned on killing her and the brat once he is king of the land. The prince turned his thoughts from his little half-brother and to the larger fish to fry.

The Sythian beings who had once by legend been peaceful creatures, feeding on livestock were now humanities greatest enemy. Even now they encroached on the land like large bat winged monsters, swooping down when the sun goes down. They seemed fearful of the sun's rays and of fire. It was not enough; he would need to find a greater weapon against them. He hoped once he had the guardians under his sway he might discern this weapon. His fingers wrapped around the leather strap holding his sword in its sheath, stroking it lovingly with his forefinger as he watched the body of Robert burn away.

The king was laid to rest in the underground crypt that held every members of his bloodline through the generations. Finally the troubled mind, plagued with the unrest and sadness of the loss of his son would finally be joining him in death's sweet release. Prince Damon dropping his façade of contrite grief pushing the date of his coronation before the body was even cold. Taking up the throne he would pay little heed to the objections and rumors in response to him breaking old traditions.

The main hall was filled with people from nobles and gentries, to workers and peasants. The flags of the former king remained fluttering in the breeze from the open doorway. Damon was pushing the boundaries by having his coronation now, but he wasn't a fool. Formality had to be respected. Malvius Aleris, the protector of the sacred stone of wisdom, stood in a robe of dark gray with silver on the ends. Pushing fifty-seven he would be performing the ceremony. The protectors of the Hall of Clothos of this generation chose insular solitude to study their protective crafts, only leaving their hall when Gothos needed their powers. The protector of the stone of time was always by tradition the master of ceremonies.

Damon was dressed in his finest armor of sculpted steel fitted against his lithe form. A fresh pressed crimson cape was pinned to his shoulders, falling down his back with his personal insignia of the prince, a jackal's head. The prince had bathed and had his hair cut before the ceremony and stood in front of the throne. His sword had been taken to the blacksmith the day before now clean and shone in the leather holster that was also cleaned and oiled.

The whispers and murmured from the unorthodoxy of the day, and the rumors that the king came to his death under suspicious means were silenced when Malvius started the ceremony. On the nearby table he picked the chalice up and presented it to the prince.

"Damon, Prince of the Four Territories and son of the Bear; Do you swear fealty to the kingdom? To protect and care for the people who look up to you?"

"I swear in the name of the Great Builder, god of the land and of the sea. I will protect the people of the Northern Kingdom, and unite all peoples of Gothos" Damon replied repeating the words that his forefathers had said at their coronation. Taking the cup from Malvius he brought the cold goblet to his lips, the alcohol bitter to his lips. Returning it to the old man he straightened up and turned and looked out at the crowd. Malvius took the crown of entwined silver and iron, crimson rubies and placed it upon the new king's head.

Captain Lucrus was standing along with his soldiers, the personal guard to the king called the Fangs by their enemies, an extension of the Gogothian Knights. A chill seeped into his bones at the sight of the crown on Damon's head. A part of him wanted to pack up his things and go off to the east and find his fortune. That thought was dismissed as quickly as it came to mind. His honor would not allow him to run off like a thief in the night. His father rose to the ranks of the Gogothian Knights that King Alther's father Melos Kalanus had made him Captain of the guard. Since he was a lad, Lucrus has done everything in his power to follow in his father's footsteps. To leave would label him as a deserter and make him a criminal in the eyes of the kingdom. If only he could find evidence that the King Alther was murdered at the hands of his only living son then he would feel peace of mind.

“Lords and ladies of Gothos. I present to you King Damon, Lord and protector of the Four Territories.” The protector of the stone of wisdom announced causing the crowd to erupt in cheers and applause.

The king’s forest was scouted by hunters the day before and the rivers were pouched. Roe deer was roasted on giant stone slates with onions, peppers, and rubbed with garlic. Water birds were de-feathered and coated in a sweet and sour sauce made of spices from the Hebric Trading Route the permeated in the air. Portabella mushrooms were roasted with chicken breasts with a current sauce. Oysters were brought up from the Northern coast and laid out after being steamed, accompanied with a butter sauce. The wine cellar was opened and barrels of red wine and mead were overflowing. The king and honored guests were seated at the high board. A traveling band of minstrels found that good fortune smiled on their passing into the city when the coronation was hastily planned. The whole event was unusual, but with the libations going around and cheer in the air no one seemed to think twice about it. The atmosphere was relaxed when the King called the captain to his side. Abandoning his drink and the company of a beautiful young lady at his side, a low born lady and walked around the table to where the king sat.

“Ah, Captain I need you to do something for me.” King Damon said with mirth in his rich voice. He seemed in a jovial mood that Lucrus thought for a moment that the rumors of patricide might be unfounded. That perhaps his dislike for the new emperor was misplaced. The king took a sip of his wine and placed his cup aside with ease. “I know this is a day of celebration but I have something important that needs to be done. It is imperative to protect the kingdom. “

“Then speak it, Your Highness and it will be done” Lucrus insisted, straightening up in his armor knowing that it was a joke among his men that he never took his armor off, even sleeping in it.

“Good man. I need you to go to the east side of the village and execute a traitor to the crown. Eilan Floki, a craven whore conspired to steal my crown and place her wailing bastard in my place. You will take a few of your men and execute her and her brat. Come back to me when you have it done.” He said with almost a venomous delight in his tone.

“Your highness...” Lucrus started to protest strongly, knowing who the woman is in the scheme of things being the eyes and ears of the former king. The doubts about his gut feeling evaporated like snow in an early spring.

“I thought you were a loyal soldier. You are my right arm and I expect you to do as you are told. Unless you want to displease me.” There was sharpness to his tone that would not allow further objection. Lucrus had no choice but to give a bow to the king and leave the great hall. His stomach rolled with each step he took, knowing that he would be doing the one thing he felt the regime before would never fathom. Killing one’s own flesh and blood was absolutely inconceivable. This blatant disregard for life made the shadow of sureness stretch further over the darkened door. Walking with a heavy heart to the barracks he stood in the stone archway observing some of his soldiers coming from guard duty, the unfortunate that had been assigned instead of being allowed to enjoy the festivities. They came to attention when his presence was realized. Curtis Hexus , one of his most loyal soldiers rose from where he had been sitting playing cards. An ambitious man whose wife had borne two sons that would

someday be trained to be knights, and perhaps be in the king's guard. It was truly ambitious to preen and groom not just one son, but two for the high honor of a Golgothian Knight.

"Ah, c'mon Captain we don't even gets to enjoy a drop of mead or enjoy the music from the party?" Eldger Boone complained, being a stocky man with a sour disposition known for his boozing and whoring when he wasn't on his shift.

"This is the king's direct order. We are to go to the home of Eilan Floki and execute her and her child under the crime of treason." The words struck in his throat and his tongue felt like sand when he spoke these words. It was wrong and he knew it, but he had his orders to follow. This caught mousy, Alder Fauts attention, climbing off his bed his face filled with tired confusion.

"I guess we have no choice." His voice was resigned as he bent over and picked up his boots and started to pull them on. The room was warmed by the roaring fireplace, but the orders had brought a chill that permeated in the air. The horses were saddled and ready for use when they arrived at the stables. This was not surprising because all of the chargers were trained for battle and travel at a moment's notice. The three of men fell into silence as they led the horses out of the stables and out into the empty road. The revelry of the coronation had been contained to the taverns and private homes, and thankfully their presence would go unnoticed. The Green Horn Inn was filled with singing and drinking toasts to the health and happiness of the new king. The lone road's quiet lived up to its name sake as they approached the edge of the woods where Eilan Floki lived. The house was covered by a thatch roof with a single door. Smoke billowed from the chimney, the picture of tranquility before being dashed by a storm. Slowing their horses they dismounted and approached, their armor along with the horses shuffling in their wake. Lucrus stepped up to the door and raised a gloved hand and knocked.

A fresh faced young woman opened the door wearing a faded green gown with a weather beaten apron over it. Her expression was warm and inviting, unaware of the danger.

"Captain, what brings you here on this joyful day? I heard of the coronation of the new king. You're here with your men so come on in. I have fresh bread and some honey mead." She told them and stepped aside. The interior was a two room with a front room for the kitchen and dining area, and a bedroom in the back. A fire was roaring with a kettle and pot warming. A wooden cradle laid by the fire where her infant son slept peacefully. Looking upon that innocent face caused an ache rise in the captain's chest. Forcing himself to look away from the boy he knew was the brother of the king, the bastard.

"Eilan Floki, you are hereby charged with treason to the kingdom. I have no choice but to carry out the sentence. King Damon has decreed that you and your child are too executed without trial." The words stuck in his throat like a piece of aged bread. The color drained from Eilan's face as the word sunk in. Shaking her head she stared at the captain, her eyes begging him that it is not so, that she misheard. Curtis reached for his sword and unsheathed it taking a step toward her. Eilan cowered as the other two started toward her. Captain Lucrus turned from the sight of the frightened woman who begged for her life. Going to the cradle he looked once again down at the sleeping face. Reaching down he gather up

the infant in the blanket and held him against his chest and exited the home. Walking toward the horses he could hear the deafening sound of Eilan screaming. Holding the child against his chest he felt the actual chill starting to set in. The child started to whimper awakening at the cried of his mother pressed against his steel armor. Turning his back from the house he took his horse by the reins in his gloved hand and started into the forest. Carefully he remounted his horse and slowly walked it through the trees heading east. Lucrus didn't know what he would do with the crying infant in his arms. This child was the son of his best friend. The crime he committed lay heavy on his heart as he rode, blind to a destination. The Great Builder must have been smiling upon him when he saw merchant's cart filled with goods nestled in hay. Dismounting from his mount he didn't see the merchant just the attached donkey and cart. He nestled the child in on his right arm, rocking it lightly as he came to the back of the cart. The merchant was carrying ceramic glazed pots and wares of bronze and copper. Carefully he placed the child among the goods and bundled him up warmly.

"Cabel, son of King Alther of the Four Territories, I leave you here into the wilds. As a bastard you have been born with a disadvantage. The king acknowledged you as his own, but he's now dead. You're a threat to the crown. With that knowledge I give you a chance. Grow strong and survive. Follow the footsteps of your father and become a good man." Straightening up he gave one last look at the child and returned to his horse to return to the palace. The sun had gone down by now and by now both the king and his guests would be drunk and getting ready for sleep. Adjourning to his room he removed his gloves and poured himself a strong drink. In the morning he will see the king and tell him that the deed was done.

The next morning Lucrus prepared exactly what he was going to say to his sovereign, knowing that every word would be a lie. His boots felt like they were made of lead as he walked down to the throne room. Seated upon the cold onyx black throne, King Damon observed his usurped kingdom. He pressed his back against the stone, enjoying the discomfort of the chainmail draped along his torso, grinding against the stone with a clink. Being the king he wore the silver plated chest piece with an eagle emblazoned in gold behind a crimson background. The young man grimaced at the feeling seeing it as a reminder of his place in the world and the vengeance he had the right to take upon those who might cross him. The stone of the throne was hard as he must be on those who got in his way. Leaning his elbows upon his knee he was also keenly aware of the saber at his side held in its molded leather scabbard. Damon felt that no weapon in the Four Territories or distant islands could match the cold steel in battle, so like him.

"Captain, I see you have returned. I hope its good news" He said in a voice of confidence his head tilted up looking at stain glass window not looking at the older man.

"Yes, you're Royal Highness. The deed was done without a hitch." The Captain of the Guard replied in a dry tone of voice, unable to mask his pure disdain for situation he had been put in by the new king. Captain Lucrus felt it that the new king's sudden rise to power was no accident. If he could kill a woman and a child of his own blood he had no doubts about the death of good King Alther. He didn't have evidence of this of course, but knew he must make inquiries very carefully or meet the axe of the

executioner. Lucrus had respected the former king after being liberated from a Fantus prison when the nomadic tribes were banded under the wild queen, Maura the Blood Sheera. The king had brought down eighty archers and horsemen into Dragon's Ridge, surprising the queen and her nomadic raiders. The dust finally settled after the fourth day leaving a battlefield of carnage. The queen's men and women of the nomads were brutal and savage, but the king's men were well trained and came out the victor. Maura, instead of letting her be captured drank wormwood poison.

King Alther on his large black charger, Megero moved in front the slaves that were lined up by the knights. Lucrus was kneeling among his fellows smeared in dirt and bleeding from the corner of his mouth. His chest was bear with scars old and new from the neck down to his waist like a road map over his flesh. He looked up at the king with an expression of defiance unsure if he would be enslaved by another soulless regime.

"Do you know who I am?" The shining sovereign asked in a calm tone of voice, stopping in front of the dirty man catching the look he was getting. It intrigued him.

"You're King Alther, of the Four Territories. You are the legacy of the Great Bear." He replied in a croaked voice, light blue eyes squinting as the sun glinted off his armor. On his knees he shifted causing the shackles around his wrist to clang. The older man gave a small nod of his head.

"I can see in your eyes that you have not let your shackles drag you down. I have come to liberate those taken by the crazed harlot queen. I give you your freedom, but give you an opportunity to become one of my knights."

The offer surprised Lucrus greatly but he gave a small chuckle. "I was born a slave. My mother and father were of the Wooded Place enslaved by that queen. I have spent my life trying to carve a place in the world. You are offering me an honorable place among your chosen. How so you know I am not going to kill you in your sleep and take off with your best whore and gold?" he asked boldly. A silence fell over the soldiers until the king started to laugh till his whole body shook. The others joined in uncertainly.

"That is the spirit I'm counting on. You serve me well and you will hurt for nothing. You will have to go through training, but if you can survive it then you will be rewarded. You can go off into obscurity into the east you are now a freed man, but I think you are worth more than that."

"How could I say no to such an offer?" He asked calmly and raised his shackled wrists up. The two men stared each other down until the king unsheathed his sword and brought it down on the chains between the iron shackles.

Not only did the king free him from slavery, but had him taken into the fold of the knighthood to be trained. After five years of hard training he proved his worth in a tournament on May Day winning the highest honor of the land. Lucrus was put in the seat of captain despite the objections from those born in the Golgothian knighthood. The long years to come he protected the king from his enemies and gained to admiration from the men in the guardship. Now the king he had come to love as a brother

and serve as his sovereign was dead at the hands of his own son. It left a bitter taste in his mouth as he looked upon the smug young man sitting on the throne smiling at him.

“Very good, Captain. You have proved your loyalty to me enacting my first order. I will keep that in mind in the future” he said easily, dismissing him. The knight wanted to tell the king that he didn’t think it was right what they were sent to do, but he knew what would happen. It was a coward’s choice to hold his tongue that he would accept to survive. The beaten and defeated man who once won his sword was now a weary man wondering what he was doing with his life.

Underground of Crag Arch: Western Territory

The Council of Five has been convening for seven days since the king of humans had died. The Sythians, the eldest and most noble race were driven to the brink of going underground with his crusade to wipe them out. His knights, the Golgothians have been taking up arms against them since the vow was broken between their sovereign King Fabian and the human sovereign, King Ursa. Two of them were there at that dinner party that changed the fate of their people forever.

A great feast was held in the Hall of Uriseas in the great city. King Fabian a handsome man of three-hundred years sat next to his best friend the human sovereign. He was tall and imposing, in his silver and aquamarine armor with the symbol of a trident on his armor. The Sythians were once fishermen and harvesters of the fruits on the trees. It was when the Shadow People came down from the mountains to raid and pillage that the great priest of Sarena, goddess of the earth and of the underworld, went to the sacred river and prayed for their people to be saved. The goddess heard their prayers the moment when things looked the worst. Serena gave a double ended blessing; they would be given immortality and the abilities to destroy their enemies, but they are also cursed with blood lust. King Fabian had seen the tide turn in the battle, but the cost was disheartening. It took centuries to find peace with the human race that they were taken away from by fate.

King Fabian sat upon the high throne next to King Ursa as dinner was served. There was mirth and joyful sounds as mugs were slammed down upon the table as bawdy talk went around the High Table. Broiled fish seasoned with crushed garlic, barley, and lemon. Wild Elk was caught and trussed up with roasted vegetables and saffron. For the Sythians, roe deer was sliced open on a table next to the High table. The blood was served in wooden goblets before it congealed. Wine and sweet mead was poured for the human guests. Goblets never were empty.

As dinner was about to be served King Ursa rose from his seat and placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder and moved behind his seat slowly falling into shadows, the fire playing off his features. Fabian briefly looked over his shoulder, bringing his goblet to his lips, shoulders moving with amusement at a joke one of his compatriots made. The smile was still on his lips when the wood suddenly splintered from the middle of his chair, the glistening of a sword came through coated in blood and through

Fabian's chest. The metal had shattered on the sides, metal pieces caught in his heart. The dawning realization hit the table that King Ursa that it was King Fabian who wielded the bloody weapon. A hush had fallen over the room as if sucked out of the hall. Then volley of voices and raised bodies rose up like a wave rushing upon the rocks. It was Fabian who quieted them all.

"There is only one ruler in the Four Kingdoms. I am the son of the Great Bear! Knights, leave no witnesses." King Ursa commanded. What brought upon this betrayal was known, but out of the clashing of sword and blood shed on both ends only two survived, slipping out in the chaos, Faltas Mordel and Adric Talus.

Now the two of them stood with the remains of the Sythian court centuries later. Prince Argos surprisingly harbored no hatred toward the human race. He had loved his father greatly, but his anger was directed at the men who betrayed him instead of the whole human race. This merciful outlook was not shared by the remaining council members, but with the death of the human king who kept his men out of the Western Territory now dead. His son Damon on the other hand from the rumors that had reached them would not be so merciful. This meeting was put together to determine how they would respond to this.

"I don't think we should jump to conclusions" King Argos said raising a hand up slowly. His wings fluttered as he leaned back in his high stone chair. All of the Sythians had long chiropteran wings, similar to the bat but unrelated.

"But if they do your highness...what then?" Faltas Mordel asked, standing at his right with a knit brow. He loved the boy almost as his own, but sometimes questioned his merciful judgment. The elder felt that that honorable point of view was a bit of a weakness, and why their kind is almost extinct. He didn't speak of this not because he feared reprisal, but he didn't want to burden the prince with further guilt. The prince never got the chance to step into his father's robes all the way due to King Ursa's crusade against their kind. By the time King Alther came to the human throne there were too few of their scattered people to rule over. It was a hardship they have had no choice but to survive. Now the threat was impending.

"The sword that has taken the blood of many tribes and kinds will bring peace..." The voice came from down the table from the only woman on the council. Zee Mordel, the sister of the council member was a seer who looked into the ponds of the sacred and read the stars. Women in their culture were given the same rights as their men, and always held a place on the high council and in the king's court. Everyone stopped to listen to what she had to say believing it is the words of the goddess being channeled. When she said nothing more Argos leaned back putting his fingers to his chin in thought. Zee was dressed in a dyed wool draped over her thin form.

"The sword? It must mean the sword of King Ursa that was recovered from the king's side in the Battle of Shadow's End. The battle where the King fell at the hands of the warrior, ser. Talbet Drak. Ser. Drak was slain soon after. The sword of the king the Highborne was kept by the Sythians. "What does that accursed blade have to do with challenging the human regime?" Talet Drak commented calmly. "The sword was forged in the heart of Dragos Rock by the mountain people as a gift from being liberated

from the Shadow King, a strange being from beyond the wild woods. There are spells attached to that blade. It was a miracle that we got it.” Adric Talus argued fiercely, blotting his forehead with a handkerchief.

“With the six sacred stones of the Hall of Clothos backing them up we have very little power to rise again. We have been beaten down so far I don’t know how we are to recover.” Said another member of the council commented. He was a paunchy man with a pale face and watery eyes, his robes barely fitting his well-fed body. Alaister Gres was had been a wealthy cattle owner in his unblest life, now he sat on the council with the prince.

. “We will use the sword and cut down our enemies” Talbet dedared, slapping his hand on the table with a smile on his lips.

“No!” the old seer spoke up raising a gnarled finger in the air.

“No?” Everyone in the council except the woman who objected and the prince were quiet looking pensive. The prince looked lost in his thoughts and looked at the old woman who spoke with a look of drawn curiosity.

“NO!” she repeated in a firmer voice. “The sword is to be given great magic, but will be placed in a safe place for its true bearer.”

This caused uproar in the room until the prince silenced them with a shake of his head, rising to his feet slowly.

“It will be done. Where will it be safe enough to await this hero?” Argos asked the woman with the greatest respect. His father had taught him the power of the goddess was not one to be mocked or looked down upon.

The woman was silent as she sat there, her hands placed upon the stone table. “The only safe place is the falls where neither man nor Sythian will dare travel. The fall of dragons and nymphs where magic runs clean and feeds the great rivers” was her reply in a rasping voice. Dragus falls was known as an orphic place of supernatural wonder.

Prince Argos looked around the table from where he stood.

“The sword will be moved from the vault, imbued with every magic we have and placed at the Falls. It will be done as soon as possible. The goddess is patient in life and even in death.”

2.

Catacian Complex: Northern Territory

Captain Lucrus stood in the middle of the courtyard with his arms crossed over his chest, his brown eyes fixed on the two children practicing. Years at the side of the king he couldn't shake the events twenty years hence. The straw that broke the camel's back was the burning of the Hinderland two years ago. The screams of women and children mingled with that of Eilan's cries of suffering as she died. Unable to continue his service he asked the king to take a different position. The king refused him of course not wanting to lose his right hand. It was on the eve of the king's natal day that the king, in a good mood told the captain that he was to stay in his position, but would train the young of the knighthood to choose one to take his place.

Now Lucrus stood there watching the youths practicing in their swordsmanship. These boys were taken from their homes as the chosen few who would someday put on the armor of a knight, and perhaps a royal guard. The lanky boys were like pups trying to fight like wolves. Only two of them caught his interest, the two boys of the house of Hexus.

Markus was tall and stocky well his younger brother Dominic was thin and lanky. They were practicing their swordsmanship with wooden swords, clanking together with each move. The older boy was a bit slower than his brother, but hit like a battle axe. Dominic was like the sword he held moving with each blow his brother dealt and parried. The house of Hexus was known for pumping out great soldiers since the time of King Ursa. Out of all of the boys he would bet his gold on the younger boy fitting into his armor someday. He saw Markus as being too kind for the role and not as clever. The captain of the guard must always be clever and strong. In this line of business kindness was not rewarded favorably, he knew from personal experience. Shaking his head to do away with the cobwebs he again looked at the two boys.

"Enough for today." He called to the boys who were practicing in the field and turned to walk back into the shady compound.

Dominic looked at her brother and smiled, his black hair falling in his eyes a bit. Markus rubbed the dust off his face, the sun glinting against his eyes.

"Are we going in?" Markus inquired to his brother, being eleven years old. He was dressed in a leather tunic with long pants and boots. His dark haired brother smiled and shook her head slowly. "No, there is a lovely tree I want to get to the top of. If we get high enough we can see into the lady's maid chambers" the younger brother commented, smiling. At ten years old, Dominic was already showing interest in the fairer sex.

"I don't think we should. Captain Lucrus would give up a sound beating if we are caught. The older boy was more cautious than the younger, always reserved and gentle spirited. He had all lot more honor and nobility than those his age. Dominic was already up the tree when her brother turned to address him.

The boy was an apt climber since he could walk. There were always more to see when up high. The younger boy was already near the top of the trees, his fingers wrapped around the branches as he lifted himself into position to look across to the high window. Markus sighed loudly and started to climb the tree after him. The brothers were always getting in trouble, but it was Markus who was cleaning up after his younger brother. He was not as nimble as his brother as he joined him in the high tree, feeling apprehension at his brother's welfare and that of himself if they were caught. Dominic leaned against the trunk of the tree, leaning forward a bit. He was always more intellectual than most his age who were obsessed with chasing dogs and sneaking food. His mind was always like a steel trap.

"Dominic, we should go inside" his brother advised him as he felt his grip starting to slip. He leaned closer to the tree trying to catch his breath. He could hear Dominic laughing as he glanced down at his elder brother. The pleading had gone on deaf ears as they climbed. Markus's eyes were fixed on his brother's form as he felt the grip coming undone. "Dom..."he said, but was lost his footing. His hands grasped the branch. Markus looked down at him seeing him dangling. Instead of helping him he gave a shrug of his shoulder, seeming fascinated by the prospect of his brother falling.

Markus lost his grip and he fell, the sky spreading before him as he crashed to the ground in a heap, his right leg and ribs cracking...

Hall of Clothos: Northern Territory

The rain was pounding the marble floors making it slippery to the unwary. The young girls stood side by side with hands raised to receive the cold droplets that would cut the humidity that has rolled across the land of North Territory. Sera being nine- years old was almost identical to her twin sister Asura except the color of her eyes that was a dark blue well her sisters were light. Both girls wore blue orange tunics with matching loose trousers, their hairs done in four plaits, two hanging in front and the two behind their skinny shoulders. Their feet were adorned with matching kid sandals made of imported silk from the Isle of Galos that the feared King Damon ruled and used greatly as a port and trading market.

They were standing hand in hand looking out at the breathtaking valley below them as they did when the weather was like this. It was strange behavior for two little girls to do, but since their dear mother passed on in a sickness and their father who died in the great Battle of the Southlands they only had each other in the entire world. The cold and rainy days was a reminder in spite of the relief it gave. The fate of the two girls would have been to begging and drudgery for them if the great astrologer of the king, Talbus took one look at the little lasses and knew they were special. After confirming his hunch he concluded to the king that they were to be chosen as guardians of two of the sacred stones. After that announcement from the wizen man the king had seized their assets; their father's land, home, and property for payment for the lessons and care the girls would undertake and thereby erasing their

former lives. The residence they took up was called the Hall of Clothos, a structure of stone nestled on the edge of mountain protected by steep cliffs and one road leading to its entrance. The measure that the builders made seemed unnecessary since no one, even the enemies of the former king would dare attack this sacred place. Here the six great stones of Alynpia lay in a silent circle and its hall is where the guards would be trained.

The six children both male and female studied and learned in a palace filled with rooms for study and contemplation and vast gardens where herbs were grown for medicine and the serenity was enjoyed. The children would learn the skill that was chosen for them for the good of the land.

"Sera, Asura! Don't stand there gaping at sky like turkeys. All of the others are waiting for you" Amerus, their gray haired tutor chided them, standing in his crisp white toga and leather sandals. Asura let out a long sigh and squeezed her sister's hand and turned running up to the old man and standing there.

"We were wondering where the rain comes from" Asura said her lower lip pouting a bit, her light blue eyes looking up at the scholar. He chuckled and studied her for a long moment. "They are mysteries that no one fully has to the answer to" he replied his light gray eyes flickering to Sera still standing there gazing out thoughtfully. He walked up to her slowly and placed a hand on her shoulders. Her eyes were soulful as she looked up at him pensively, always the more serious of the twins.

"Amerus, I always wondered if they were the tears" she said very softly. Amerus bent down very slowly due to the weakness in his knees and looked at her.

"If they are tears then who sheds them?" he asked her, studying her face. The little girl shifted slightly where she stood and gave a slight shrug of her shoulders. "Mysteries" she replied after a long pause. "Perhaps they are" he said, the corner of his eyes wrinkling with amusement. These moments were ones that made him question if healing was the skill best for little Sera. It was her twin who was the Guard of the Stone of Wisdom which was only somewhat fitting. Asura had a mind for studying, but she never questioned the world around her which was a pity in itself. He mused further as he led the two girls to the heavy wooden double doors that were open to invite the cool breeze from the rain. At the round table sat on lounging pillows were three boys and one girl, turning their head coming to attention as the teacher joined them with the two girls trailing. It was unusual that there were three girls and three boys to be Guards of the stones but didn't change the trials that would be ahead of them.

Amerus went down the three steps and approached his cushion and sat down arranging his robe. The children were dressed all alike in orange robes, the color of initiation. When they were trained fully in their own specialties they would don the shades of the stones they were sworn to protect. These study sessions were to teach them history, geography, math, and other important learning before they would focus on their own skills. Asura plopped down next to a sour looking young boy with black hair cropped cut to the back of his neck. Emrick was destined to study and protect the Stone of Time to his irritation. At the age of nine he felt he had all the time in the world and couldn't see the wisdom that would come with his soon to be status. He would rather be Guard of the Stone of War, or slashing a sword in the training hall of the Gogothian Knights, the protectors of the land from its enemies. The other three were Retuna, a shy girl who would Guard of the Stone of Elemental. Next to her was Calus, a kind faced young

boy who was to guard the Stone of War not yet fitting the role he was to take over in the future. Finally sitting across from Sera sat Talos, Guard of the Stone of the Unseen that would be a challenge of its own for the somewhat sheepish boy.

Amerus snapped his fingers and a wordless servant brought him the large rolled scrolled and blended back into the scenery. With great care he unrolled it upon the round table, the scent of age wafted in the air.

"This is a map of the world we live in that separates the civilized from the barbaric." he said in a quiet voice. He didn't need to raise his voice as the six children looked down at the old map.

"The four provinces of the land, broken up by war and natural erosion" he told them, flattening the old scroll with his wrinkled fingertips. "We live in the Northern Territory that is protected by the Gogathon Knights. They have kept the peace and protected you children until you are ready to harness the power of the stones" he said stretching his hand out, pointing to the place on the map where they are.

"The Eastern Territory is filled with simple people and fields that give us the goods we use every day. We must pay respect to the farmers and gardeners that provide the things we need" he said calmly eyes sweeping over the young ones listening intently. He took a moment to make sure there weren't any questions posed before continuing.

"The Southern Territory is a land of uncultured nomads and outlaws." he said. Calus leaned his elbows on the table, resting the side of his face against his cheek. "I have heard rumors from the servants that they are criminals and thieves" he chimed in his voice filled with curiosity. The elderly instructor peered over at the boy at the other end of the table with his pale colored eyes.

"Yes, that is true. They are people who have been driven to the point of desperation after the great battle that claimed the king's brother Prince Robert the Kind" he said calmly.

"I have heard that creatures live in the Western Territory that snatch people in the night" Emrick asked leaning forward a bit on his cushion, quirked a curious brow causing all the students to rise to attention, all eyes on the scholar. For a few minutes the room was silent as Amerus removed his glasses, polishing them with the front of his robe before replacing them on the bridge of his nose.

"So you have heard the stories about the darker race. It is best that I tell you the true story to dispel any rumors you might have heard."

the scholar turned his back to the group and stared silently at the mural of an old palace spiraling to the sky.

"Centuries ago in this very city the old civilization lived. Sythians and humans lived together in harmony and understanding" he said which caused many whispers behind his back. "The story that has been passed on from our ancestors was that the Syths started the battle which caused great bloodshed and fed their unnatural hunger for blood. Before that moment the Sythians fed off of animals and did not indulge in the arcane feeding on the blood of humans. This great change was a great and terrible event.

The Sythians almost destroyed the human race until the great King Ursa called upon a sorcerer, a mage named Bulrius who told him to seek a great stone in the palace of the Sythians. That stone would have the power to weaken the Syths. Ursa was given the map and created a small force of men. They stormed the castle and found the stone on the table under the great hall in a secret chamber. Using the spell that was given to him the king charged the stone and fought the Lord of the Sythians and killed him. The story goes that the Sythian priest, Darius took up the Lord's sword and with all his magic and skill shattered the stone into six pieces so it could never be used again by us humans. They were wrong of course because the six stones from that great stone became those that you protect and serve" he told them finally.

All six children looked at Amerus with a look of absolute awe.

"What happened to the Lord King's sword?" Calus asked cocking his head to the side.

"No one knows and those who have sought it have never found it." the teacher replied fixing them with a weary glance. "The sad part of this story is that the Sythian Lord and King Ursa were friends once. This great battle turned friends into mortal enemies."

When class ended Asura looked at her sister and walked out of the room with the others to the garden to play and relax. Sera stayed behind to talk to Amerus and approached him from the other side of the table, her fingers sweeping along the smooth surface.

"Amerus, did the Sythian's really start the war?" She asked her blue eyes taking him in. Such a question from someone so young surprised the old man causing him to grimace lightly.

"History is written by the victor, young one. We will never know who started the conflict but we know that it still wages on in our time". Amerus placed his hand on her shoulder and walked out of the room, leaving her pondering the carefully put words.

The sun was shining outside when Sera stepped out causing her eyes to ache from its brightness. Before her was the large marble courtyard filled with rushing fountains and colorful flowers. Stepping down the steps Sera saw her sister sitting with Talos, whispering secretly. It puzzled her at that age why the two of them spent so much time together. Jumping down the steps she walked up to the nearby fountain that was a woman holding a pitcher, pouring into the lower fountain. Sitting on the side of the stone she gazed down at the water at her reflection.

Feeling a slight jolt of a hand pushing her forward she swallowed in a breath as she fell into the water. The young girl didn't realize that she was being held down until she couldn't rise. She heard running feet and with her arms waving she finally caught her breath. Emrick was standing over her, his eyes narrowed.

"You know I should report you to the knights. They say that if you do not drown you are a witch. "He said in a low voice and turned and ran off into the garden hedge maze, leaving the others baffled. There were no adults around to tell of Emrick's behavior. Calus, his brown ponytail moving against his shoulder placed a hand on her arm lightly.

"Are you alright?" He asked frowning a bit. Seras nodded her head, but knew that Emrick hated her but she did not know why. If she knew then the lengths that Emrick would go to destroy her she would have been wearier of his machinations.

The next few days were hard work as the lessons continued and the afternoons were unusually warm. The trying lessons and training were to be rewarded when the Festes Festival was underway. Since the day at the fountain Sera has avoided Emrick the best she could. She couldn't all together hide from him as they rode down to the village to take in the festivities as was tradition of the Northern Territory.

The festival of Festes was to celebrate the creation of the Gorgothian Knights that protected the land. The village people had prepared things for the large celebration. The men had swept out the streets and the women had set about washing the windows till they shined with the morning sun. Men with carts and wire brushes were sweeping and scrubbing down the cobblestone for the large parade that would commence. Sera, her sister, and the other protectors were placed on horses to be part of the procession. She felt a fearful twinge in her stomach. This would be the first time she would be in the parade since the festival was only every ten years for reasons she did not know. When the time came she sat upon a white mare nervously tugging at the front of her dress as she sat side saddle. The dress she was wearing was unusually colorful due to the festivities.

She was garbed in a forest green gown that tied in the back with a cream under dress. Her long golden hair was braided in its usual fashion, but woven with ribbons. Sera wiggled in her saddle having to ride it side saddle that was uncomfortable and made her bottom itch. Looking over at her twin she marveled at how she could sit still with pose even at their young age. To Sera's bemusement her sister, Asura looked quite natural upon her honey colored mare, her eyes forward and calmed. This was always the difference between the two sister were their temperaments. Shifting slightly in her seat she looked out at the crowd on either side of the cobblestone street who were cheering and waving the flags of the four territories. Confetti fell from the upper windows of homes and shops and music could be heard from miles from the band. The senior officers of the Gorgothian Knights had the honor of being part of the procession. The others stood on each side of the street in strict formation, but had the luxury of watching the others go by.

The knights were garbed in their shining silver armor with a red embroidered shirt and woven black pants under it. The sword issued to them hung at their sides glinting in the sunlight. Captain Lucrus was standing among the new recruits, branding a nasty scar along his jaw from the war. Being hailed as a war hero he was rewarded with training the next generation of warriors. Standing at his side was his most promising soldiers. At the age of thirteen in the youth recruit program, Dominic Cain was at the top of his class and most obedient member of their close knit warrior community.

Even King Damon had made the young boy part of his court, impressed by his maturity and won over by his flattery. The dark haired looking young man was watching the parade as his superiors passed with an unreadable expression on his face. The older man watched the boy always uncertain what was going through his mind. His eyes flitted to those passing and a smile split over his lips.

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