

## PROLOGUE

Darkness hung like a black curtain beyond the battlements of the city. King Andvari, ruler of the great northern realm of Aryares, paced restlessly back and forth on top of the wall. He could see the silhouettes of his men standing determinedly in defense of their land and their king. Their whispered fears drifted to Andvari's ears. He empathized with each one of them, but as king it was necessary to internalize his own anxiety. The people needed to see strength, they needed to see resolve. If he did nothing else this night, it was imperative that he move among his men to inspire strength and courage. There was not one in the realm who could say what dawn would bring. Somewhere, beyond the wall, in the darkness, a great army marched toward them; an army that moved aggressively, unprovoked; an army at whose head rode Andvari's brother, Andisil, who ruled the southern realm of Melnir.

Andvari struggled to understand his brother's change of heart toward him. It was not as if both realms did not prosper equally. The brothers were twins, born to the High King Arianell of Ilmarinen and his wife, Queen Eilis. As the young princes grew, so did their bond. It was common to see the boys moving as one through the palace, on horseback in the king's forest, or sweating and bleeding together as they trained with the royal guard.

In the winter of their twenty-first year, their father fell ill. The king's strength waned quickly. His remaining time with his family and subjects appeared limited. One evening, Arianell summoned his sons to his chamber. The people of Ilmarinen needed leadership and Arianell knew that he could no longer provide this for them. It was time to pass the kingdom on to one of his sons. Rather than choose one over the other, Arianell decided that the kingdom

would be divided equally into a northern realm and a southern realm. Together, the brothers would be responsible for deciding who would rule which kingdom.

Andvari, satisfied with either of the two, offered first choice to his brother. Andisil had always loved the great river, the rolling plains, and the tranquility of Shylah Forest in the south of Ilmarinen. So it was that Andisil came to rule the southern realm. He named it Melnir, which in the ancient tongue meant, Bountiful Blessing. The northern realm, Andvari named Aryares or Light of Heaven.

Before spring's first blooming, Arianell departed his kingdom, leaving the realms fully in the hands of his sons. As the brothers established their own kingdoms apart from one another, their interests developed in separate directions. Melnir, under Andisil's rule, became well known as a land of plentiful crops and abundant game. Andvari swiftly secured Aryares as the center of art and learning.

Despite the differences of the two realms, Andvari and Andisil remained close often visiting, exchanging ideas, and trading goods. Ten years into their reigns, however, a change came over Andisil. An ambitious spirit rose up in the Melnir ruler's heart in relatively short measure. Andvari suspected that Andisil's friendship with King Mizdal of Garridan was the source of many of the changes in his brother. Andisil had spent much time of late in the counsel of Mizdal.

The little Andvari knew of Garridan and its king came from two trade attempts through emissaries sent to Aryares from Mizdal, as well as myth and rumor that had been whispered since the early days of King Arianell's rule. The Garridani were cold, calculating people in their dealings with those outside of their own race. They had followed their leaders long ago into barbarism, shunning the way of Leois, the *Simil An*,

the Eternal One.

Since before time, the evil prince Habrok, once a servant of Leois, had sought to turn the hearts of all created things inward where a bitter and lustful spirit could take root. He had found great promise in men, who were particularly prone to listen to his well-conceived lies through crafty persuasion and manipulation. Habrok found it relatively simple to urge a greedy heart into the desired direction with the smallest of pushes.

Habrok's rebellious spirit and pride eventually caused Leois to banish him from the world of men into the bowels of Mount Ifrinn in the Kathal mountain range, his rebellion thrown down with but a word from Leois. He had dwelt deep within the mountain prison since the early days of men upon the earth. Even from his captivity, he commanded his servants to continue his mission to separate men from their Creator, Leois. He would remain bound until the time when Leois would restore all creation to its original glory. From his confinement, Habrok sought to corrupt the hearts of any man who would listen to his lies.

Weak, ambitious men were swayed into worshipping Habrok and performing ghastly rituals and ceremonies to earn his favor in their endeavors. Habrok relished in his self-imposed godhood and increased his efforts, hoping that one day he could raise up an army of followers large enough to dethrone Leois as King of All Created Things.

The Garridani had been led willingly into dark loyalty to Habrok. Mizdal had been groomed since birth to continue the legacy of those before him. He was a cruel, heartless man, but clever and brilliant as well. Because of his fealty to Habrok, he had been bestowed with the mantle of minor godhood himself, second only in command to the dark prince. He had also at his bidding legions of foul creatures that had been twisted and malformed by Habrok in the days before he had risen in defiance against the Great Creator.

Habrok's venom had been sent deep into the hearts of the Garridani. The long passing of years had only served to increase their depravity. Word had come to Aryares of the unspeakable acts and rituals of the black arts committed by Mizdal and his people within their jungle realm to the south of the Kathal mountains.

It was because of these stories and the Garridani's open defiance of Leois that Andvari had wisely made the decision to refuse trade between the two kingdoms. Andisil, on the other hand, had not been as discerning. He saw trade with Garridan as a means for Melnir to establish allies outside of Aryares.

As Andisil's friendship with Mizdal grew, Andvari observed a veil descend upon his brother's heart. The counsel of Mizdal infected his brother as their interaction with each other increased. Andisil began to see Andvari as the enemy. He began to see deception and intrigue where there was only openness and care.

Each moment spent with the Garridani king darkened Andisil's mind and corrupted his heart. A hatred for his brother arose within his soul. He began to hunger for Andvari's realm. That hunger gnawed at him until the brother whom he had loved became his despised adversary. He allowed the deceptive darkness of Mizdal's counsel to cloud his mind, spill into his spirit, and consume his very soul. He was convinced that Aryares should be his. It would be taken or utterly destroyed if he could not have it for his own.

In return for Mizdal's alliance and support, he swore to serve Habrok, forgetting all he had embraced since childhood in exchange for gain. Andisil at last cut off all communication with Andvari. Every entreaty from Aryares was met with silence. Now Andisil had combined forces with Mizdal. The great army marched tirelessly toward the northern realm in an attempt to wrest Aryares from Andvari's hand.

Four days prior, Andvari had sent two of his best men to broker peace with Andisil. Andisil's answer had arrived just that morning. The mutilated remains of his men had been left at the gates with no other response. Times such as these caused the mantle of king to weigh heavy on a man's shoulders.

"My lord?"

The voice of Andvari's top aide and close friend, Forald, broke into the king's musing mind.

"Yes, Forald?"

"The last of the farmers and out-dwellers are safe within the walls, my lord. Shall I give the order to seal the gates?"

"Yes. That would be wise, my friend. Give the order."

"It will be done, my king."

Forald turned to leave Andvari to his vigil. He took a few steps toward the stairs that led to the foot of the battlements and glanced over his shoulder. Andvari's head was bowed. For a brief moment, only noticeable by a friend such as Forald, the king's shoulders sagged and trembled slightly. Filled with compassion, he returned to Andvari's side.

"We know not what dawn may bring, my lord. Leois' hand may yet move."

Andvari looked up, forcing a smile for his friend.

"That is exactly what I was petitioning for, Forald. We have seen much, you and I. It would be foolish to give up hope now."

"Aye, my king. Well said."

"Wait and hope, Forald."

“Aye. I will give the order to seal the gates, then return to stand beside you to wait, my lord,” Forald paused, and then continued. “And hope.”

“A king could want for no better company, my friend.”

Forald looked to the east where the first azure bands of sunrise, tinted with pale rose, lightened the sky.

“Dawn approaches, my king. I will return swiftly to join you at vigil.”

“Here, you will find me, Forald.”

The aide nodded reverently toward his ruler. Forald spun on his heel, hurrying off to deliver the king’s order.

Andvari gazed into the distance. Where once there had been blackness, now vague outlines of familiar landscape were taking shape. The men along the battlements stirred as the sky lightened. Soon all of night’s shadows would be chased away by morning’s light. Perhaps the day would lessen the dread that seemed to permeate the nightlong wait. Andvari saw many of his loyal soldier’s strain their eyes to peer into the distance as the darkness faded.

Beneath his feet, Andvari could feel the vibration of the great iron gates beginning their methodical journey toward shutting them off from the outside. His order had been given and swiftly carried out. The sound of booted feet on stone brought Forald back to Andvari’s side. The two stood in silence watching the light touch all around them.

“Look, my lord,” exclaimed Forald. “A cloud of dust to the south!”

The king followed Forald’s gaze. The telltale sign of a great army on the move loomed over the southern horizon. Its size and lack of clarity indicated that the force was yet many miles distant. This detail was lost on the soldiers as fearful murmurs arose down both ends of the battlements.

Andvari looked to the heavens to voice one last petition. It was important that he be seen as a spiritual leader, as well as a commander of men. If he could inspire faith in the men gathered on the wall whatever came next would be faced easier.

“All in All, shower mercy upon your people. Grant us strength to stand firm in the face of this doom.”

Silence hung over the battlements. Each man appeared to be deep in thought, silently voicing his own petition. The stillness was peaceful. The king let it float over him like a soothing balm. Soon, he would long for a moment such as this when the invaders crashed against the battlements like a raging storm.

Suddenly, the silence was broken as a great shout went up from the soldiers on the wall.

“My lord, the sky!” Forald shouted, pointing at the clouds.

Andvari opened his eyes. A great wall of flame, several leagues across, descended from the heavens. It moved with speed toward the cloud of dust in the south. Because of the distance, those gathered upon the battlements could not discern where the fire finally met the earth. For many moments, the wall continued on its southern path. Even though it receded in size, to the eye it was, without question, a massive conflagration. At length, Andvari and his men watched in awe and wonder as the wall of fire rolled up like a scroll back into the heavens from where it had descended. Where it had moved across the land remained only scorched and bubbling rock the color of ebony. No sound was now heard. It was as if no created thing had ever existed in that place.

Before they could begin to sort out what they had seen another wonder unfolded before them. A deep rumbling, like the noise of one hundred thousand hoof beats, pulsated in their ears. Vibrations rolled through the stone foundation, causing the king and his men to cling to anything

that would keep them from being knocked off of their feet. Cries of alarm and bewilderment mingled with the ominous rumble as the men struggled to make sense of what was happening.

Just beyond the battlements, Andvari watched as the land sank deeper and deeper until the sea rushed in, covering it completely. When, at last, the rumbling ceased, the view to the south was of nothing but undulating waves for as far as the eye could see. Aryares had become an island. Unknown miles of dividing sea now protected it.

There was no doubt in Andvari's mind what had just transpired. The wall of fire, the rumbling of the earth, and the crashing of the sea had all been the tools of deliverance. Andvari turned to those around him, speaking loudly to be heard by as many as possible.

“My people, you have witnessed Leois' protective hand this day. He has spared us from great peril. Sadly, it appears those who moved against us do not share our fortune. Let this day be marked in our hearts and minds. From this day, Aryares shall ever remain true to the All in All. This realm will shine forth as a Bright Land.”

Andvari raised his open palm toward the heavens and cried,

“Leois, Cor Dion A'! Leois, Our Defender!”

All those within earshot of the king followed Andvari's lead, raising their open palms and lifting their voices as one,

“Leois, Our Defender! Leois, Cor Dion A'!”

The sky brightened still more. A brilliant shaft of sunlight washed over the battlements and bathed the entire assembly in its warmth. Leois in His great wisdom and power had insured that the realm of His faithful servant, Andvari, would remain free from invasion for many years to come.

That day became known as The Great Cataclysm, a day when Habrok had, once again, been prevented from tasting victory in his effort to place himself upon the throne of the Eternal One. Indeed, a new day had dawned upon Aryares; a new age had begun. Aryares, separated from the main land by the sea, became a place of legend. Over the years that followed, those who remained in Melnir came to call it the Bright Land and told tales of a time when a king would return from there to rule both lands once again with justice and mercy.

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