

## Prologue

In the 992<sup>nd</sup> year after the crowning of the first Emperor of Thyatis, the lands of Mystara, known simply as “the Known World” stood in an uneasy peace. Pockets of battle, enough to feed the world’s armies and keep the military coffers full of gold, existed. But Thyatis and Alphatia, the two largest empires, and bitter rivals through nearly ten centuries or war, had retreated from each other, content with the calm and satisfied by their ability to expand away from each other.

Thyatis was set upon conquering the Hinterlands and had no time to war over the Isle of Dawn. The Hinterlands offered seemingly endless land and conquest. The army was able to keep their skills honed and justify the calls for soldiers against the hardy barbarians. The priests of the Thyatian Church were happy to have thousands of barbarians to convert. And the regional governors sent back shiploads of gold, spices and raw material in tribute to Thincol, the Emperor. Times were good for Thyatis.

The times were not so good for Alphatia. While Alphatia was pleased by the relative calm, it was not prospering, as were the Thyatians. Alphatia was ravaged by the forbidden pleasures of Zzonga fruit. The Empire had banned the plum like fruit, yet its influence spread. The fruit was a drug, a magical and intense narcotic, the likes of which Mystara had never seen. Most in Mystara had never seen it as it grew only in Alphatia and its influence was a national embarrassment. From the gladiator pits to the sacred corridors of the Wizard’s Senate, drug addled Alphatians forgot their purpose in life and their glorious past. Gone were the days when Alphatians were the premier spellcasters of this world. Forgotten was the story of how Alphatians came more than 2000 years ago to this planet after conquering then destroying their own. The only thing that mattered was the pleasure of eating the zzonga. As a result, the nation was decaying; dying even. Little significant magical research had been performed in the past decade. What had been done was vile, chaotic and evil. The Senate was in disarray and the Empress held onto power merely because her rivals were so weak. She had called for her father’s abdication and now desired his return if he could only fix the problem of zzonga. But to call him back to power would signal her own fall. Eriadna could not have that. She would find the cure for this curse on her empire.

But the Alphatians had never seen a time when they were so adrift. The people were afraid. The fear led

to suspicion, cruelty and hate. Dark magic was on the rise and the worship of Alphaks, once forbidden, had been growing. Eriadna sat in Sundsvall and wished of ways to save her people but all of her dreams were fleeting and unmemorable.

However, the calm of Alphatia and Thyatis had allowed other nations to build and grow their own power.

Karameikos, once known as the backwater nation of Traladara, was quickly becoming a force with which to be reckoned. All of the major nations – Thyatis, Darokin, Glantri, Rockhome, Alfheim, the Five Shires, the Three Northern Reaches Kingdoms, Ylaruam – had foreign embassies in the capital, Specularum. Grand Duke Stefan (his ties to Thyatis prevented him from being called King, though he was) had suppressed his rivals and was slowly melding the Thyatian and Traladaran cultures. Even a Church of Karameikos had been formed and recognized by the Church of Thyatis. The mixture of Thyatian and Traladaran culture led to a unique adventuring spirit. Karameikans could be found in every city. They spread across the globe seeking opportunity, wealth and purpose. The ideals of Karameikos and Darokin were forging peace across the southern part of the continent. The only black spot: the Black Eagle Barony. Ruled with an iron fist by Duke Stefan’s cousin, Ludwig Von Hendriks, the small barony was closed to outsiders. Rumors of monsters who walked freely, dark magic and evil men, kept many out. And few left its clutches to warn the rest of the world. The only trade partners for the Barony were Karameikos, the Duchy of Hattias in Thyatis and the mysterious black sailed ships of Hule.

Hule was in the far Western reaches. There, darkness was growing. For many years, the Master in his dark temple in his shadowed land, dreamed of war. He dreamt of his massive armies, leaving the secret land of Hule and spreading across the East. But for now, he had to keep his attention elsewhere; away from the riches of the heartland. He was slowly building up his forces in the Sind. His agents whispered in the ears of those whose dreams were only for their own personal wishes and weaknesses. They plotted and schemed to take by deception, guile and sometimes force. They did not have his vision, his cunning, his gods.

In the north, the Heldanners in their religious fervor had all but annihilated the peaceful natives of their adopted new land. The natives were now pushing into the Northern Kingdoms of Ostland, Soderfjord and Vestland. But since being driven from their

homes, the natives were no longer peaceful. They pillaged and burned in revenge. The King of Vestland had declared war on them and was leading his men into battle again and again, crossing the border with the Heldann Freeholds, risking war with the new lords of Heldann. And to the west of Vestland, the Ethengari Great Khan stood watch, ready to do battle across the steppes and to the sea.

But there were others whose dreams went beyond war. Whose dreams were foretold to bring an end to the grand dream of Mystara. If only the right gods were listening. . . .

"I have been pondering your predicament, Garloth."

"Do not torment me master. Please, you must have a suggestion for how to handle this. It has been five years since my father made his horrendous decision. I am the true heir to Castle Corbinet. My father was a fool and my brother is an even greater one. How could the eldest son not be given what is rightfully his; that for which he has been trained all of these years?"

"Let me not even speak of the other travesty. They have no idea the power upon which they sit. They have no desire to seek out the world beyond the castle. No desire to bring true and utter freedom to the masses. Where the strong survive and the world a better place. It is shameful. They refuse to use the Stone which would allow them to . . ."

"Now, now, young disciple. All things come in time: truth, understanding, even freedom."

"You have taught me so much. Opened my eyes to a new way of examining the world and the wretched who inhabit it. They cry out for a true leader and yet the object which would most allow it is left to sit unused in these castle walls. No one ever knows its true purpose. Except you and I it seems."

Garloth stood, his black leather doublet, creaking as he moved. Garloth was a tall man and despite his age, looked very young. Then again, all of the Corbinets looked young for a long time. Through their veins ran the blood of the Immortals. He slammed his fist into his hand.

"I must do something! What master? I have listened to you ever since my father denied me my birthright yet I am still here and do not know what shall be my next step. Please, I must do something, anything!"

"Watch your temper dear Garloth. Everything must be carefully done and in its own time. The natural

state of the universe itself is to move towards freedom, away from the unnatural restrictions of law. However, it can only come to be through time. Many say that chaos wastes time but they are not so diametrically opposed. Time is the friend of chaos. All things move towards that state. Towards being free. You cannot rush it however or it will be utterly destroyed."

"Of course you are right master. But I grow weary spending all of my days in this castle knowing that I was passed over for its rulership. My face grows tight, smiling so saccharinely to my brother and his loyal servants. Even there he is against the flow of nature, against freedom. He has no reason to be their master. Unlike you, he has no skill or knowledge that is superior to them. You have been my guide and teacher. You are deserving of the title master. But not my brother. Pah! I cannot stand to think of him as king!

"Oh but I pay my respects and keep to myself. I have read every book and scroll in the castle. I have tapped into the energy of magic that surrounds this cursed fortress. But I yearn to connect it with the world outside my tower window. Yet, my brother forbids it. He forbids us from growing. How I long to go out and sample something, anything that is not from this castle."

"Well, that is why I have visited you tonight, Garloth. I think it is time that you take your leave of Castle Peshour and see the world. I think that in the morning you should go to your brother and ask for his leave so that you may take a read on the current state of the world. It has been sometime since anyone has come upon the castle and perhaps the world has changed a little since then."

Garloth, brushed aside his long curly hair. "Really? You think it is time for me to leave? But what about the Stone? Surely I cannot leave without the Stone?"

"I do not think you will ever be able to leave with the Stone. It is beyond my power to see you do so. However, the world will teach you many things. Including how to pick the right people to help you remove the Stone and shed its benefits to the rest of the world. That I have foreseen."

"Who will help me with this great burden? If you have foreseen it, surely you can tell me who it is and how I can find him!"

"No Garloth. You will know when the time is right. But first you must learn something of the outside

world so that you will become a wiser ruler than your brother or father. The fate of this world rests upon your shoulders. I will help you make them broad and strong through experience.”

“Yes, master. I know you will. I cannot wait to wake and go to my brother.”

“Then rest my young apprentice. You have much work ahead of you and miles to travel before we accomplish our task.”

Garloth turned over with a smile on his bed but remained asleep. His dreams moved away from his teacher and to other thoughts; of the Stone, of the lands about which he had only read; about people he hoped to meet. He dreamt of himself as the one to bring true freedom to this world. He dreamt of slaying his brother with the spells his master had taught him and holding the Stone in his hands as its rightful owner.

He awoke with a start. Had his dream been real? It had been five years since he had started dreaming of this teacher. And though he only came in dreams and never showed his face, he had never been wrong about what was to happen or what Garloth should do. Why start doubting now. There was the chance that he could get out of this place and see the world. He always looked from his tower window as the castle moved from place to place. He remembers the castle being in deserts, jungles, mountains and forests. But he could never leave its walls and explore. But if his benefactor was right, he would soon be out and exploring his wildest dreams.

He leapt from bed and went off in search of his brother, the king.