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SHADOW KNIGHT

Aaron Dembski-Bowden



THE DARK PATH

Gav Thorpe

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The Dark Path

Shadow Knight

by Aaron Dembski-Bowden

The sins of the father, they say.

Maybe. Maybe not. But we were always different. My brothers and I, we were never truly kin with the others—the Angels, the Wolves, the Ravens...

Perhaps our difference was our father's sin, and perhaps it was his triumph. I am not empowered by anyone to cast a critical eye over the history of the VIII Legion.

These words stick with me, though. The sins of the father. These words have shaped my life.

The sins of my father echo throughout eternity as heresy. Yet the sins of my father's father are worshipped as the first acts of godhood. I do not ask myself if this is fair. Nothing is fair. The word is a myth. I do not care what is fair, and what is right, and what's unfair and wrong. These concepts do not exist outside the skulls of those who waste their life in contemplation.

I ask myself, night after night, if I deserve vengeance.

I devote each beat of my heart to tearing down everything I once raised. Remember this, remember it always: my blade and bolter helped forge the Imperium. I and those like me—we hold greater rights than any to destroy mankind's sickened empire, for it was our blood, our bones, and our sweat that built it.

Look to your shining champions now. The Astartes that scour the dark places of your galaxy. The hordes of fragile mortals enslaved to the Imperial Guard and shackled in service to the Throne of Lies. Not a soul among them was even born when my brothers and I built this empire.

Do I deserve vengeance? Let me tell you something about vengeance, little scion of the Imperium. My brothers and I swore to our dying father that we would atone for the great sins of the past. We would bleed the unworthy empire that we had built, and cleanse the stars of the False Emperor's taint.

This is not mere vengeance. This is redemption.

My right to destroy is greater than your right to live.

Remember that, when we come for you.

He is a child standing over a dying man.

The boy is more surprised than scared. His friend, who has not yet taken a life, pulls him away. He will not move. Not yet. He cannot escape the look in the bleeding man's eyes.

The shopkeeper dies.

The boy runs.

He is a child being cut open by machines.

Although he sleeps, his body twitches, betraying painful dreams and sleepless nerves firing as they register pain from the surgery. Two hearts, fleshy and glistening, beat in his cracked-open chest. A second new organ, smaller than the new heart, will alter the growth of his bones, encouraging his skeleton to absorb unnatural minerals over the course of his lifetime.

Untrembling hands, some human, some augmetic, work over the child's body, slicing and sealing, implanting and flesh-bonding. The boy trembles again, his eyes opening for a moment.

A god with a white mask shakes his head at the boy.

"Sleep."

The boy tries to resist, but slumber grips him with comforting claws. He feels, just for a moment, as though he is sinking into the black seas of his homeworld.

Sleep, the god had said.

He obeys, because the chemicals within his blood force him to obey.

A third organ is placed within his chest, not far from the new heart. As the ossmodula warps his bones to grow on new minerals, the biscopea generates a flood of hormones to feed his muscles.

Surgeons seal the boy's medical wounds.

Already, the child is no longer human. Tonight's work has seen to that. Time will reveal just how different the boy will become.

* * * * *

He is a teenage boy, standing over another dead body.

This corpse is not like the first. This corpse is the same age as the boy, and in its last moments of life it had struggled with all its strength, desperate not to die.

The boy drops his weapon. The serrated knife falls to the ground.

Legion masters come to him. Their eyes are red, their dark armour immense. Skulls hang from their pauldrons and plastrons on chains of blackened bronze.

He draws breath to speak, to tell them it was an accident. They silence him.

"Well done," they say.

And they call him *brother*.

He is a teenage boy, and the rifle is heavy in his hands.

He watches for a long, long time. He has trained for this. He knows how to slow his hearts, how to regulate his breathing and the biological beats of his body until his entire form remains as still as a statue.

Predator. Prey. His mind goes cold, his focus absolute. The mantra chanted internally becomes the only way to see the world. *Predator. Prey. Hunter. Hunted.* Nothing else matters.

He squeezes the trigger. One thousand metres away, a man dies.

"Target eliminated," he says.

He is a young man, sleeping on the same surgery table as before.

In a slumber demanded by the chemicals flowing through his veins, he dreams once again of his first murder. In the waking world, needles and medical probes bore into the flesh of his back, injecting fluids directly into his spinal column.

His slumbering body reacts to the invasion, coughing once. Acidic spit leaves his lips, hissing on the ground where it lands, eating into the tiled floor.

When he wakes, hours later, he feels the sockets running down his spine. The scars, the metallic nodules...

In a universe where no gods exist, he knows this is the closest mortality can come to divinity.

He is a young man, staring into his own eyes.

He stands naked in a dark chamber, in a lined rank with a dozen other souls. Other initiates standing with him, also stripped of clothing, the marks of their surgeries fresh upon their pale skin. He barely notices them. Sexuality is a forgotten concept, alien to his mind, merely one of ten

thousand humanities his consciousness has discarded. He no longer recalls the face of his mother and father. He only recalls his own name because his Legion masters never changed it.

He looks into the eyes that are now his. They stare back, slanted and murder-red, set in a helmet with its facial plate painted white. The blood-eyed, bone-pale skull watches him as he watches it.

This is his face now. Through these eyes, he will see the galaxy. Through this skulled helm he will cry his wrath at those who dare defy the Emperor's vision for mankind.

"You are Talos," a Legion master says, "of First Claw, Tenth Company."

He is a young man, utterly inhuman, immortal and undying.

He sees the surface of this world through crimson vision, with data streaming in sharp, clear white runic language across his retinas. He sees the life forces of his brothers in the numbers displayed. He feels the temperature outside his sealed war armour. He sees targeting sights flicker as they follow the movements of his eyes, and feels his hand, the hand clutching his bolter, tense as it tries to follow each target lock. Ammunition counters display how many have died this day.

Around him, aliens die. Ten, a hundred, a thousand. His brothers butcher their way through a city of violet crystal, bolters roaring and chainswords howling. Here and there in the opera of battle-noise, a brother screams his rage through helm-amplifiers.

The sound is always the same. Bolters always roar. Chainblades always howl. Astartes always cry their fury. When the VIII Legion wages war, the sound is that of lions and wolves slaying each other while vultures shriek above.

He cries words that he will one day never shout again—words that will soon become ash on his tongue. Already he cries the words without thinking about them, without *feeling* them.

For the Emperor.

He is a young man, awash in the blood of humans.

He shouts words without the heart to feel them, declaring concepts of Imperial justice and deserved vengeance. A man claws at his armour, begging and pleading.

"We are loyal! We have surrendered!"

The young man breaks the human's face with the butt of his bolter. Surrendering so late was a meaningless gesture. Their blood must run as an example, and the rest of the system's worlds would fall into line.

Around him, the riot continues unabated. Soon, his bolter is silenced, voiceless with no shells to fire. Soon after that, his chainsword dies, clogged with meat.

The Night Lords resort to killing the humans with their bare hands, dark gauntlets punching and strangling and crushing.

At a timeless point in the melee, the voice of an ally comes over the vox. It is an Imperial Fist. Their Legion watches from the bored security of their landing site.

"What are you doing?" the Imperial Fist demands. "Brothers, are you insane?"

Talos does not answer. They do not deserve an answer. If the Fists had brought this world into compliance themselves, the Night Lords would never have needed to come here.

He is a young man, watching his homeworld burn.

He is a young man, mourning a father soon to die.

He is a traitor to everything he once held sacred.

Stabbing lights lanced through the gloom.

The salvage team moved slowly, neither patient nor impatient, but with the confident care of men with an arduous job to do and no deadline to meet. The team spread out across the chamber, overturning debris, examining the markings of weapons fire on the walls, their internal vox clicking as they spoke to one another.

With the ship open to the void, each of the salvage team wore atmosphere suits against the airless cold. They communicated as often by sign language as they did by words.

This interested the hunter that watched them, because he too was fluent in Astartes battle sign. Curious, to see his enemies betray themselves so easily.

The hunter watched in silence as the spears of illumination cut this way and that, revealing the wreckage of the battles that had taken place on this deck of the abandoned vessel. The salvage team—who were clearly genhanced, but too small and unarmoured to be full Astartes—were crippled by the atmosphere suits they wore. Such confinement limited their senses, while the hunter’s ancient mark IV war plate only enhanced his. They could not hear as he heard, nor see as he saw. That reduced their chances of survival from incredibly unlikely to absolutely none.

Smiling at the thought, the hunter whispered to the machine-spirit of his armour, a single word that enticed the war plate’s soul with the knowledge that the hunt was beginning in earnest.

“Preysight.”

His vision blurred to the blue of the deepest oceans, decorated by supernova heat smears of moving, living beings. The hunter watched the team move on, separating into two teams, each of two men.

This was going to be entertaining.

Talos followed the first team, shadowing them through the corridors, knowing the grating purr of his power armour and the snarling of its servo-joints were unheard by the sense-dimmed salvagers.

Salvagers was perhaps the wrong word, of course. Disrespectful to the foe.

While they were not full Astartes, their gene-enhancement was obvious in the bulk of their bodies and the lethal grace of their motions. They, too, were hunters—just weaker examples of the breed.

Initiates.

Their icon, mounted on each shoulder plate, displayed a drop of ruby blood framed by proud angelic wings.

The hunter’s pale lips curled into another crooked smile. This was unexpected. The Blood Angels had sent in a team of Scouts...

The Night Lord had little time for notions of coincidence. If the Angels were here, then they were here on the hunt. Perhaps the *Covenant of Blood* had been detected on the long-range sensors of a Blood Angel battlefleet. Such a discovery would certainly have been enough to bring them here.

Hunting for their precious sword, no doubt. And not for the first time.

Perhaps this was their initiation ceremony? A test of prowess? Bring back the blade and earn passage into the Chapter...

Oh, how unfortunate.

The stolen blade hung at the hunter’s hip, as it had for years now. Tonight would not be the night it found its way back into the desperate reach of the Angels. But, as always, they were welcome to sell their lives in the attempt at reclamation.

Talos monitored the readout of his retinal displays. The temptation to blink-click certain runes was strong, but he resisted the urge. This hunt would be easy enough without combat narcotics flooding his blood. Purity lay in abstaining from such things until they became necessary.

The location runes of his brothers in First Claw flickered on his visor display. Taking note of their positions elsewhere in the ship, the hunter moved forward to shed the blood of those enslaved to the Throne of Lies.

A true hunter did not avoid being seen by his prey. Such stalking was the act of cowards and carrion-eaters, revealing themselves only when the prey was slain. Where was the skill in that? Where was the thrill?

A Night Lord was raised to hunt by other, truer principles.

Talos ghosted through the shadows, judging the strength of the Scouts' suits' audio-receptors. Just how much could they hear...

He followed them down a corridor, his gauntleted knuckles scraping along the metal walls.

The Blood Angels turned instantly, stabbing his face with their beam-lighting.

That almost worked, the hunter had to give it to them. These lesser hunters knew their prey—they knew they hunted Night Lords. For half a heartbeat, sunfire would have blazed across his vision, blinding him.

Talos ignored the beams completely. He tracked by preysight. Their tactics were meaningless.

He was already gone when they opened fire, melting into the shadows of a side corridor.

He caught them again nine minutes later.

This time, he lay in wait after baiting a beautiful trap. The sword they came for was right in their path.

It was called *Aurum*. Words barely did its craftsmanship justice. Forged when the Emperor's Great Crusade took its first steps into the stars, the blade was forged for one of the Blood Angel Legion's first heroes. It had come into Talos's possession centuries later, when he'd murdered *Aurum's* heir.

It was almost amusing, how often the sons of Sanguinius tried to reclaim the sword from him. It was much less amusing how often he had to kill his own brothers when they sought to take the blade from his dead hands. Avarice shattered all unity, even among Legion brothers.

The Scouts saw their Chapter relic now, so long denied their grasp. The golden blade was embedded into the dark metal decking, its angel-winged crosspiece turned to ivory under the harsh glare of their stabbing lights.

An invitation to simply advance into the chamber and take it, but it was so obviously a trap. Yet... how could they resist?

They did not resist.

The initiates were alert, bolters high and panning fast, senses keen. The hunter saw their mouths moving as they voxed continuous updates to each other.

Talos let go of the ceiling.

He thudded to the deck behind one of the initiates, gauntlets snapping forward to clutch the Scout.

The other Angel turned and fired. Talos laughed at the zeal in his eyes, at the tightness of his clenched teeth, as the initiate fired three bolts into the body of his brother.

The Night lord gripped the convulsing human shield against him, seeing the temperature gauge on his retinal display flicker as the dying initiate's blood hit sections of his war plate. In his grip, the shuddering Angel was little more than a burst sack of freezing meat. The bolt shells had detonated, coming close to killing him and opening the suit to the void.

"Good shooting, Angel," Talos spoke through his helm's crackling vox-speakers. He threw his bleeding shield aside and leapt for the other initiate, fingers splayed like talons.

The fight was mercilessly brief. The Night Lord's full gene-enhancements coupled with the heightened strength of his armour's engineered muscle fibre-cables meant there was only one possible outcome. Talos backhanded the bolter from the Angel's grip and clawed at the initiate.

As the weaker warrior writhed, Talos stroked his gauntleted fingertips across the clear face-visor of the initiate's atmosphere suit.

"This looks fragile," he said.

The Scout shouted something unheard. Hate burned in his eyes. Talos wasted several seconds just enjoying that expression. That passion.

He crashed his fist against the visor, smashing it to shards.

As one corpse froze and another swelled and ruptured on its way to asphyxiation, the Night Lord retrieved his blade, the sword he claimed by right of conquest, and moved back into the darkest parts of the ship.

"Talos," the voice came over the vox in a sibilant hiss.

"Speak, Uzas."

"They have sent initiates to hunt us, brother. I had to cancel my preysight to make sure my eyes were seeing clearly. *Initiates*. Against *us*."

"Spare me your indignation. What do you want?"

Uzas's reply was a low growl and a crackle of dead vox. Talos put it from his mind. He had long grown bored of Uzas forever lamenting each time they met with insignificant prey.

"Cyrion," he voxed.

"Aye. Talos?"

"Of course."

"Forgive me. I thought it would be Uzas with another rant. I hear your decks are crawling with Angels. Epic glories to be earned in slaughtering their infants, eh?"

Talos didn't quite sigh. "Are you almost done?"

"This hulk is as hollow as Uzas's head, brother. Negative on anything of worth. Not even a servitor to steal. I'm returning to the boarding pod now. Unless you need help shooting the Angels' children?"

Talos killed the vox-link as he stalked through the black corridor. This was fruitless. Time to leave—empty-handed and still desperately short on supplies. This... this *piracy* offended him now, as it always did, and as it always had since they'd been cut off from the Legion decades ago. A plague upon the long-dead Warmaster and his failures which still echoed today. A curse upon the night the VIII Legion was shattered and scattered across the stars.

Diminished. Reduced. Surviving as disparate warbands—broken echoes of the unity within loyalist Astartes Chapters.

Sins of the father.

This curious ambush by the Angels who had tracked them here was nothing more than a minor diversion. Talos was about to vox a general withdrawal after the last initiates were hunted down and slain, when his vox went live again.

"Brother," said Xarl. "I've found the Angels."

"As have Uzas and I. Kill them quickly and let's get back to the *Covenant*."

"No, Talos." Xarl's voice was edged with anger. "Not initiates. The real Angels."

The Night Lords of First Claw, Tenth Company, came together like wolves in the wild. Stalking through the darkened chambers of the ship, the four Astartes met in the shadows, speaking over their vox-link, crouching with their weapons at the ready.

In Talos's hands, the relic blade *Aurum* caught what little light remained, glinting as he moved.

"Five of them," Xarl spoke low, his voice edged with his suppressed eagerness. "We can take five. They stand bright and proud in a control chamber not far from our boarding pod." He racked his bolter. "We can take five," he repeated.

"They're just waiting?" Cyrion said. "They must be expecting an honest fight."

Uzas snorted at that.

“This is your fault, you know,” Cyrion said with a chuckle, nodding at Talos. “You and that damn sword.”

“It keeps things interesting,” Talos replied. “And I cherish every curse that their Chapter screams at me.”

He stopped speaking, narrowing his eyes for a moment. Cyrion’s skulled helm blurred before him. As did Xarl’s. The sound of distant bolter fire echoed in his ears, not distorted by the faint crackle of helm-filtered noise. Not a true sound. Not a real memory. Something akin to both.

“I... have a...” Talos blinked to clear his fading vision. Shadows of vast things darkened his sight, “...have a plan...”

“Brother?” Cyrion asked.

Talos shivered once, his servo-joints snarling at the shaking movement. Magnetically clasped to his thigh, his bolter didn’t fall to the decking, but the golden blade did. It clattered to the steel floor with a clang.

“Talos?” Xarl asked.

“No,” Uzas growled, “not *now*.”

Talos’s head jerked once, as if his armour had sent an electrical pulse through his spine, and he crashed to the ground in a clash of war plate on metal.

“The god-machines of Crythe...” he murmured. “They have killed the sun.”

A moment later, he started screaming.

The others had to cut Talos out of the squad’s internal vox-link. His screams drowned out all other speech.

“We can take five of them,” Xarl said. “Three of us remain. We can take five Angels.”

“Almost certainly,” Cyrion agreed. “And if they summon squads of their initiates?”

“Then we slaughter five of them *and* their initiates’

Uzas cut in. “We were slaying our way across the stars ten thousand years before they were even born.”

“Yes, while that’s a wonderful parable, I don’t need rousing rhetoric,” Cyrion said. “I need a plan.”

“We hunt,” Uzas and Xarl said at once.

“We kill them,” Xarl added.

“We feast on their gene-seed,” Uzas finished.

“If this was an award ceremony for fervency and zeal, once again, you’d both be collapsing under the weight of medals. But you want to launch an assault on their position while we drag Talos with us? I think the scraping of his armour over the floor will rather kill the element of stealth, brothers.”

“Guard him, Cyrion,” Xarl said. “Uzas and I will take the Angels.”

“Two against five.” Cyrion’s red eye lenses didn’t quite fix upon his brother’s. “Those are poor odds, Xarl.”

“Then we will finally be rid of each other,” Xarl grunted. “Besides, we’ve had worse.”

That was true, at least.

“*Ave Dominus Nox*,” Cyrion said. “Hunt well and hunt fast.”

“*Ave Dominus Nox*,” the other two replied.

Cyrion listened for a while to his brother’s screams. It was difficult to make any sense from the stream of shouted words.

This came as no surprise. Cyrion had heard Talos suffering in the grip of this affliction many times before. As gene-gifts went, it was barely a blessing.

Sins of the father, he thought, watching Talos's inert armour, listening to the cries of death to come. *How they are reflected within the son.*

According to Cyrion's retinal chrono display, one hour and sixteen minutes had passed when he heard the explosion.

The decking shuddered under his boots.

"Xarl? Uzas?"

Static was the only answer.

Great.

When Uzas's voice finally broke over the vox after two hours, it was weak and coloured by his characteristic bitterness.

"Hnngh. Cyrion. It's done. Drag the prophet."

"You sound like you got shot," Cyrion resisted the urge to smile in case they heard it in his words.

"He did," Xarl said. "We're on our way back."

"What was that detonation?"

"Plasma cannon."

"You're... you're joking."

"Not even for a second. I have no idea why they brought one of those to a fight in a ship's innards, but the coolant feeds made for a ripe target."

Cyrion blink-clicked a rune by Xarl's identification symbol. It opened a private channel between the two of them.

"Who hit Uzas?"

"An initiate. From behind, with a sniper rifle."

Cyrion immediately closed the link so no one would hear him laughing.

The *Covenant of Blood* was a blade of cobalt darkness, bronze-edged and scarred by centuries of battle. It drifted through the void, sailing close to its prey like a shark gliding through black waters.

The *Encarmine Soul* was a Gladius-class frigate with a long and proud history of victories in the name of the Blood Angels Chapter—and before it, the IX Legion. It opened fire on the *Covenant of Blood* with an admirable array of weapons batteries.

Briefly, beautifully, the void shields around the Night Lords strike cruiser shimmered in a display reminiscent of oil on water.

The *Covenant of Blood* returned fire. Within a minute, the blade-like ship was sailing through void debris, its lances cooling from their momentary fury. The *Encarmine Soul*, what little chunks were left of it, clanked and sparked off the larger cruiser's void shields as it passed through the expanding cloud of wreckage.

Another ship, this one stricken and dead in space, soon fell under the *Covenant's* shadow. The strike cruiser obscured the sun, pulling in close, ready to receive its boarding pod once again.

First Claw had been away for seven hours investigating the hulk. Their mothership had come hunting for them.

Bulkhead seals hissed as the reinforced doors opened on loud, grinding hinges.

Xarl and Cyrion carried Talos into the *Covenant's* deployment bay. Uzas walked behind them, a staggering limp marring his gait. His spine was on fire from the sniper's solid slug that still lodged

there. Worse, his genhanced healing had sealed and clotted the wound. He'd need surgery—or more likely a knife and a mirror—to tear the damn thing out.

One of the Atramentar, elite guard of the Exalted, stood in its hulking Terminator war plate. His skull-painted, tusked helm stared impassively. Trophy racks adorned his back, each one impaled with several helms from a number of loyalist Astartes Chapters: a history of bloodshed and betrayal, proudly displayed for his brothers to see.

It nodded to Talos's prone form.

"The Soul Hunter is wounded?" the Terminator asked, its voice a deep, rumbling growl.

"No," Cyrion said. "Inform the Exalted at once. His prophet is suffering another vision."

The Dark Path

Gav Thorpe

Fields of golden crop bent gently in a magical breeze as the palace of Prince Thyriol floated across Saphery. A shimmering vision of white and silver towers and dove-wing buttresses, the citadel eased across the skies with the stately grace of a cloud. Slender minarets and spiralling steeples rose in circles surrounding a central gilded needle that glimmered with magic.

The farmers glanced up at the familiar beauty of the citadel and returned to their labours. If any of them wondered what events passed within the capital, none made mention of it to their companions. From the ground the floating citadel appeared as serene and ordered as ever, a reassuring vision to those that wondered when the war with the Naggarothi would come to their lands.

In truth, the palace was anything but peaceful.

Deep within the alabaster spires, Prince Thyriol strode to a wooden door at the end of a long corridor and tried to open it. The door was barred and magically locked. There were numerous counter-spells with which he could negotiate the obstacle, but he was in no mood for such things. Thyriol laid his hand upon the white-painted planks of the door and summoned the wind of fire. As his growing anger fanned the magic, the paint blistered and the planks charred under his touch. As Thyriol contemplated the treachery he had suffered, and his own blindness to it, the invisible flames burned faster and deeper than any natural fire. Within ten heartbeats the door collapsed into cinders and ash.

Revealed within was a coterie of elves. They looked up at their prince, startled and fearful. Bloody entrails were scattered on the bare stone floor, arranged in displeasing patterns that drew forth Dark Magic. They sat amidst a number of dire tomes bound with black leather and skin. Candles made of bubbling fat flickered dully on stands made from blackened iron. Sorcery seethed in the air, milking Thyriol's gums itch and slicking his skin with its oily touch.

The missing mages were all here, forbidden runes painted upon their faces with blood, fetishes of bone and sinew dangling around their necks. Thyriol paid them no heed. All of his attention was fixed upon one elf, the only one who showed no sign of fear.

Words escaped Thyriol. The shame and sense of betrayal that filled Thyriol was beyond any means of expression, though some of it showed in the prince's face, twisted into a feral snarl even as tears of fire formed in his eyes.

Faerie lights glittered from extended fingertips and silver coronas shimmered around faces fixed in concentration as the young mages practised their spells. Visions of distant lands wavered in the air and golden clouds of protection wreathed around the robed figures. The air seemed to bubble with magical energy, the winds of magic made almost visible by the spells of the apprentices.

The students formed a semicircle around their tutors at the centre of a circular, domed hall—the Grand Chamber. The white wall was lined with alcoves containing sculptures of marble depicting the greatest mages of Ulthuan; some in studious repose, others in the flow of flamboyant conjurations, according to the tastes of successive generations of sculptors. All were austere, looking down with stern but not unkindly expressions on future generations. Their looks of strict expectation were repeated on the faces of Prince Thyriol and Menreir.

“You are speaking too fast,” Thyriol told Ellinithil, youngest of the would-be mages, barely two hundred years old. “Let the spell form as words in your mind before you speak.”

Ellinithil nodded, brow furrowed. He started the conjuration again but stuttered the first few words.

“You are not concentrating,” Thyriol said softly, laying a reassuring hand on the young elf’s shoulder. He raised his voice to address the whole class. “Finish your incantations safely and then listen to me.”

The apprentices dissipated the magic they had been weaving; illusions vapourised into air, magical flames flickered and dimmed into darkness. As each finished, he or she turned to the prince. All were intent, but none more so that Anamedion, Thyriol’s eldest grandson. Anamedion’s eyes bore into his grandfather as if by his gaze alone he could prise free the secrets of magic locked inside Thyriol’s mind.

“Celabreir,” said Thyriol, gesturing to one of the students to step forward. “Conjure Emendeil’s Flame for me.”

Celabreir glanced uncertainly at her fellow apprentices. The spell was one of the simplest to cast, often learnt in childhood even before any formal teaching had begun. With a shrug, the elf whispered three words of power and held up her right hand, fingers splayed. A flickering golden glow emanated from her fingertips, barely enough to light her slender face and brazen hair.

“Good,” said Thyriol. “Now, end it and cast it again.”

Celabreir dispersed the magic energy with a flick of her wrist, her fingertips returning to normal. Just as she opened her mouth to begin the incantation again, Thyriol spoke.

“Do you breathe in or out when you cast a spell?” he asked.

A frown knotted Celabreir’s brow for a moment. Distracted, she missed a syllable in the spell. Shaking her head, she tried again, but failed.

“What have you done to me, prince?” she asked plaintively. “Is this some counter-spell you are using?”

Thyriol laughed gently, as did Menreir. Thyriol nodded for the other mage to explain the lesson and returned to his high-backed throne at the far end of the hall.

“You are thinking about how you breathe, aren’t you?” said Menreir.

“I... Yes, I am, master,” said Celabreir, her shoulders slumping. “I don’t know whether I breathe in or out when I cast. I can’t remember, but if I think about it I realise that I might be doing it differently because I am aware of it now.”

“And so you are no longer concentrating on your control of the magic,” said Menreir. “A spell you could cast without effort you now find... problematic. Even the most basic spells are still fickle if you do not have total focus. The simplest distraction—an overheard whisper or a flicker of movement in the corner of the eye—can be the difference between success and failure. Knowing this, who can tell me why Ellinithil is having difficulty?”

“He is thinking about the words and not the spell,” said Anamedion, a hint of contempt in his voice. He made no attempt to hide his boredom. “The more he worries about his pronunciation, the more distracted his inner voice.”

“That’s right,” said Thyriol, quelling a stab of annoyance. Anamedion had not called Menreir “master”, a title to which he had had earned over many centuries, a sign of growing disrespect that Thyriol would have to address. “Most of you already have the means to focus the power you need for some of the grandest enchantments ever devised by our people, but until you can cast them without effort or thought, that power is useless to you. Remember that the smallest magic can go a long way.”

“There is another way to overcome these difficulties,” said Anamedion, stepping forward. “Why do you not teach us that?”

Thyriol regarded Anamedion for a moment, confused.

“Control is the only means to master true magic,” said the prince.

Anamedion shook his head, and half-turned, addressing the other students as much as his grandfather.

“There is a way to tap into magic, unfettered by incantation and ritual,” said Anamedion. “Shaped by instinct and powered by raw magic, it is possible to cast the greatest spells of all.”

“You speak of sorcery,” said Menreir quickly, throwing a cautioning look at the apprentices. “Sorcery brings only two things: madness and death. If you lack the will and application to be a mage, then you will certainly not live long as a sorcerer. If Ellinithil or Celabreir falter with pure magic, the spell simply fails. If one miscasts a sorcerous incantation, the magic does not return to the winds. It must find a place to live, in your body or your mind. Even when sorcery is used successfully, it leaves a taint, on the world and in the spirit. It corrupts one’s thoughts and stains the winds of magic. Do not even consider using it.”

“Tell me from where you have heard such things,” said Thyriol. “Who has put these thoughts in your mind?”

“Oh, here and there,” said Anamedion with a shrug and a slight smile. “One hears about the druchii sorcerers quite often if one actually leaves the palace. I have heard that any sorcerer is a match for three Sapherian mages in power.”

“Then you have heard wrong,” said Thyriol patiently. “The mastery of magic is not about power. Any fool can pick up a sword and hack at a lump of wood until he has kindling, but a true woodsman knows to use axe and hatchet and knife. Sorcery is a blunt instrument, capable only of destruction, not creation. Sorcery could not have built this citadel, nor could sorcery have enchanted our fields to be rich with grain. Sorcery burns and scars and leaves nothing behind.”

“And yet Anlec was built with sorcery,” countered Anamedion.

“Anlec is *sustained* by sorcery, but it was *built* by Caledor Dragontamer, who used only pure magic,” Thyriol replied angrily.

He shot glances at the others in the room, searching for some sign that they paid undue attention to Anamedion’s arguments. There was rumour, whispered and incoherent, that some students, and even some mages, had begun to experiment with sorcery. It was so hard for Thyriol to tell. Dark Magic had been rising for decades, fuelled by the rituals and sacrifices of the Naggarothi and their cultist allies. It polluted the magical vortex of Ulthuan, twisting the Winds of Magic with its presence.

They had found druchii sorcerers hidden in the wilder parts of Saphery, in the foothills of the mountains, trying to teach their corrupted ways to the misguided. Some of the sorcerers had been slain, others had fled, forewarned of their discovery by fellow cultists. It was to protect the young from this corruption that Thyriol had brought the most talented Sapherians here, to learn from him and his most powerful mages. That Anamedion brought talk of sorcery into the capital was a grave concern. Saphethion, of all places, had to be free of the taint of Dark Magic, for the corruption of the power in the citadel could herald victory for the Naggarothi.

“I am glad you have found us,” Anamedion said with no hint of regret or shame. “I have longed to shed our secrecy, but the others insisted on this subterfuge.”

The mention of the other mages broke Thyriol’s focus and he took in the rest of the faces, settling on the blood-daubed features of Illeanith. This brought a fresh surge of anguish and he gave a choked gasp and lurched to one side, saved from falling only by the burnt frame of the doorway. He had been disappointed but not surprised by Anamedion’s presence. Seeing Illeanith was one shock too many.

It was as if daggers had been plunged into Thyriol’s heart and gut, a physical agony that writhed inside him, pulling away all sense and reason. The mages who had come with Thyriol began to shout and hurl accusations, but Thyriol heard nothing, just the arrhythmic thundering of his heart and a distant wailing in his head. Through a veil of tears and the waves of dismay welling up inside

of him, Thyriol watched numbly as the sorcerers drew away from the door, adding their own voices to the cacophony.

“Everyone but Anamedion, leave me,” Thyriol commanded. “Menreir, I will call for you when I am finished, we must discuss the latest messages from King Caledor.”

The mage and students bowed their acquiescence and left silently. Anamedion stood defiantly before the throne, arms crossed. Thyriol put aside his anger and looked at his grandson with sympathetic eyes.

“You are gifted, Anamedion,” said the prince. “If you would but show a little more patience, there is no limit to what you might achieve in time.”

“What is it that you are afraid of?” countered Anamedion.

“I am afraid of damnation,” Thyriol replied earnestly, leaning forward. “You have heard the myths of sorcery, while I have seen it first-hand. You think it is perhaps a quick way to achieve your goals, but you are wrong. The path is just as long for the sorcerer as it is for the mage. You think that Morathi and her ilk have not made terrible sacrifices, of their spirit and their bodies, to gain the power they have? You think that they simply wave a hand and destroy armies on a whim? No, they have not and do not. Terrible bargains they have made, bargains with powers we would all do better to avoid. Trust me, Anamedion, we call it Dark Magic for good reason.”

Anamedion still looked unconvinced, but he changed his approach.

“What good does it do us to spend a century learning spells when the druchii march against us now?” he said. “King Caledor needs us with his armies, fighting the Naggarothi sorcerers. You speak of the future, but unless we act now, there may be no future. For seven years I have listened to the stories of horror, of war, engulfing Tiranoc and Chrace and Ellyrion. Cothique and Eataine are under attack. Must the fields of Saphery burn before you do something?”

Thyriol shook his head, fighting his frustration.

“I would no more send lambs to fight a lion than I would pit the skills of my students against Morathi’s coven,” said the prince. “There are but a dozen mages in all of Saphery that I would trust to fight the druchii in battle, myself included.”

“Then fight!” Anamedion demanded, pacing towards the throne, fists balled. “Caledor begs for your aid and you are deaf to his requests. Why did you choose him as Phoenix King if you will not follow him?”

Thyriol glanced away for a moment, looking through the narrow arched windows that surrounded the hall. He did not see the greying autumn skies, his mind wandering to the ancient past. He saw a magic-blistered battlefield, where daemons rampaged and thousands of elves died screaming in agony. He saw the most powerful wizards of an age holding back the tides of Chaos while the Dragontamer conjured his vortex.

His memories shifted, to a time more recent but no less painful. He saw Naggarothi warriors, skin ruptured, hair flaming, falling from the battlements of Anlec while he soared overhead atop the back of a Pegasus. Depraved cultists, dedicated to obscene sacrifice, wailed their curses even as lightning from Thyriol’s staff crackled through their bodies.

War brought nothing but evil, even when fought for a just cause. Shaking his head to dismiss the waking nightmare, Thyriol returned his attention to Anamedion, his heart heavy.

“Your father thought the same, and now he is dead,” Thyriol said quietly.

“And your cowardice makes his sacrifice vain,” Anamedion growled. “Perhaps it is not Dark Magic that you fear, but death. Has your life lasted so long that you would protect it now at any cost?”

At this, Thyriol’s frayed temper finally snapped.

“You accuse me of cowardice?” he said, stalking from his throne towards Anamedion, who stood his ground and returned the prince’s glare. “I fought beside Aenarion and the Dragontamer,

and never once flinched from battle. Thirty years ago I fought beside Malekith when Anlec was retaken. You have never seen war, and no nothing of its nature, so do not accuse me of cowardice!”

“And you throw back at me accusations that I cannot counter,” Anamedion replied, fists clenching and unclenching with exasperation. “You say I do not know war, yet condemn me to idle away my years in this place, closeted away from harm because you fear I will suffer the same fate as my father! Do you have so little confidence in me?”

“I do,” said Thyriol. “You have your father’s wilfulness and your mother’s stubbornness. Why could you not be more like your younger brother, Elathrinil? He is studious and attentive... and obedient.”

“Elathrinil is diligent but dull,” replied Anamedion with a scornful laugh. “Another century or two and he may make an adequate mage, but there is no greatness in him.”

“Do not crave greatness,” said Thyriol. “Many have been dashed upon the cliffs of their own ambition, do not repeat their mistakes.”

“So says the ruling prince of Saphery, friend of Aenarion, last surviving member of the First Council and greatest mage in Ulthuan,” said Anamedion. “Maybe I have been wrong. It is not battle or death that you fear, it is me! You are jealous of my talent, fearful that your own reputation will be eclipsed by mine. Perhaps my star will rise higher than yours while you still cling to this world with the last strength in your fingers. You guard what you have gained and dare not risk anything. You profess wisdom and insight, but actually you are selfish and envious.”

“Get out!” roared Thyriol. Anamedion flinched as if struck. “Get out of my sight! I will not have you in my presence again until you apologise for these lies. You have done nothing today but proven to me that you are unfit to rule Saphery. Think long and hard, Anamedion, about what you want. Do not tarnish me with your vain ambitions. Go!”

Anamedion hesitated, his face showing a moment of contrition, but it passed swiftly, replaced by a stare of keen loathing. With a wordless snarl, he turned his back on his grandfather and strode from the room.

Thyriol stumbled back to his throne and almost fell into it, drained by his outburst. He slumped there for a moment, thoughts reeling, ashamed of his own anger. Righteousness contended with guilt, neither winning a decisive victory. What if Anamedion was right? What if he really was jealous of the youth’s prowess, knowing that his own existence was waning fast?

Closing his eyes, Thyriol whispered a few mantras of focus and dismissed his self-examination. The fault was not with the prince, but with his grandchild. For decades he had known that there was something amiss with Anamedion, but had turned a blind eye upon his deficiencies. Now that Thyriol had finally given open voice to his doubts, and Anamedion declared his own misgivings, perhaps the two of them could move on and resolve their differences.

With a sigh, Thyriol straightened himself and sat in the throne properly. Anamedion’s small rebellion was a distraction, one that Thyriol could not deal with immediately. He had Caledor’s messenger waiting, eager to return to the Phoenix King with Thyriol’s answer. The world was being torn apart by war and bloodshed, and against that the petulant protests and naive philosophies of a grandson seemed insignificant.

Thyriol twitched a finger and in the depths of the palace a silver bell rang to announce that the prince of Saphery wished to be attended.

Anamedion felt the other sorcerers opening the portal they had created for just this situation. The shadow at the back of their hiding place deepened, merging with the shadows of a cave some distance from the palace’s current location. Something seethed in the shadow’s depths, a formless bulk shifting its weight just outside of mortal comprehension.

Hadryana and Meledir lunged through the portal without word, fearful of Thyriol’s wrath. They were soon followed by the other students and Alluthian, leaving only Illeanith and Anamedion.

“Come!” commanded his mother, grabbing him by the arm. Anamedion shook free her grasp and looked at his grandfather.

Thyriol was a broken creature. Anamedion saw an elf near the end of his years, frail and tired, his own misery seeping through every fibre of his being. There was no fight left in him.

“I am not ashamed,” said Anamedion. “I am not afraid!”

“We must leave!” insisted Illeanith. Anamedion turned to her and pushed her towards the shadow-portal.

“Then go! I will send for you soon,” he said. “This will not take long, mother.”

Illeanith hesitated for a moment, torn between love of her son and fear of her father. Fear won and she plunged through the tenebrous gateway, disappearing into the dark fog.

When Anamedion returned his attention to Thyriol, he saw that the prince had straightened and regained his composure. For a moment, doubt gnawed at Anamedion. Perhaps he had misjudged the situation. Thyriol’s look changed from one of horror to one of pity and this threw fuel onto the fire of Anamedion’s anger. His momentary fear evaporated like the illusion it was.

“I will prove how weak you have become,” said Anamedion.

“Surrender, or suffer the consequences,” growled Menreir, blue flames dancing from his eyes.

“Do not interfere!” Thyriol told his mages, waving them back. The pity drained from his face and was replaced by his usual calm expression. In a way, it was more chilling than the prince’s anger. “I will deal with this.”

Anamedion knew that he must strike first. He allowed the Dark Magic to coil up through his body, leeching its power from where it lurked within and around the Winds of Magic. He felt it crackling along his veins, quickening his heart, setting his mind afire. Uttering a curse of Ereth Khial, Anamedion threw forward his hand and a bolt of black lightning leapt from his fingertips.

A moment from striking Thyriol, the spell burst into a shower of golden dust that fluttered harmlessly to the bare stone floor.

Only now did Anamedion see the counterspells woven into his grandfather’s robe. The sorcerer’s cruel smile faded. The prince’s body was steeped in magic, subtle and layered. Dark Magic pulsed once more, bolstering Anamedion’s confidence. Thyriol’s defences mattered not at all; the wardings were many but thin, easily penetrated by the power Anamedion could now wield.

The view was breathtaking from the wide balcony atop the Tower of Alin-Haith, the vast panorama of Ulthuan laid out around the four mages. To the south and north stretched the farms and gentle hills of Saphery, bathed in the afternoon sun. To the west glittered the Inner Sea, barely visible on the horizon. To the east the majestic peaks of the Anullii Mountains rose from beyond the horizon, grey and purple and tipped with white. Thyriol noted storm clouds gathering over the mountains to the north, sensing within them the Dark Magic that had gathered in the vortex over the past decades.

“I am going to tell Caledor that I will not open the Tor Anroc gateway,” the prince announced, not looking at his companions.

The three other wizards were Menreir, Alethin and Illeanith, the last being Thyriol’s daughter, his only child. Thinking of her led the prince’s thoughts back to Anamedion and he pushed them aside and turned to face the others.

“I cannot risk the druchii taking control of the gateway from the other end,” Thyriol explained.

The palace of Saphethion was more than a floating castle. It was able to drift effortlessly through the skies because the magic woven into its foundations placed it slightly apart from time and space. From the outside the palace appeared beautiful and serene, but within there existed a maze of halls and rooms, corridors and passages far larger than could be contained within normal walls. Some of those rooms were not even upon Saphethion itself, but lay in other cities: Lothorn, Tor Yvresse, Montieth and others. Most importantly, one of the isle-spanning gateways led to Tor Anroc, currently occupied by the army of Nagarythe.

As soon as he had found out that the city had fallen into the hands of the druchii, Thyriol had closed the gate, putting its enchantments into stasis. Now the Phoenix King wanted Thyriol to reopen the gate so that he might send agents into Tor Anroc, perhaps even an army.

“Caledor’s plan has much merit, father,” said Illeanith. “Surprise would be total. It is unlikely that the druchii are even aware of the gateway’s existence, for none of them have ever used it.”

“I wish to keep it that way,” said Thyriol. “The wards upon the gate can resist the attentions of any normal druchii sorcerer, but I would rather not test their strength against the magic of Morathi. Even the knowledge that such gateways can exist would be dangerous, for I have no doubt that she would find some means to create her own. On a more mundane point, I cannot make the gate work only one way. Once it is open, the druchii can use it to enter Saphethion, and that puts us all at risk.”

“The Phoenix King will be disappointed, lord,” said Menreir.

“The Phoenix King will be angry,” Thyriol corrected him. “Yet it is not the first time I have refused him.”

“I am not so sure that the druchii are still unaware of the gateways, prince,” said Alethin. “There are few that can be trusted these days with any secret, and I am sure that there are Sapherians who once served in the palace now in the employ of the cults, or at least sympathetic to their cause. Even within the palace we have found texts smuggled in by agents of the druchii to sow confusion and recruit support.”

“That gives me even more reason to be cautious,” said Thyriol, leaning his back against the parapet. “Tor Anroc is shrouded in shadow, protected from our augurs and divinations. Perhaps the druchii have discovered the gateway and guard it, or even now work to unravel its secrets. The moment it is opened, it will be like a white flare in the mind of Morathi—I cannot hide such magic from her scrying.”

“Forgive me, prince, but to what end do you tell us this?” said Menreir. “If your mind is set, simply send the messenger back to Caledor. We are no council to give our approval.”

Thyriol was taken aback by the question, for the answer seemed plain enough to him.

“I had hoped that you might have some argument to change my mind,” he said. Sighing, he cast his gaze back towards the mountains and when he continued his voice was quiet, wistful. “I have lived a long, long time. I have known the heights of happiness, and plunged into the depths of despair. Even when the daemons bayed at the walls of Anlec and the night lasted an eternity, I had hope. Now? Now I can see no hope, for there can be no victory when elves fight other elves. I wish an attack on Tor Anroc, an assault on Anlec, could end this war, but there is no such simple ploy. Not armed force or great magic will end this conflict. We are at war with ourselves and the only peace that can last must come from within us.”

“Do not do this,” Thyriol warned.

“You are in no position to give me commands,” snapped Anamedion. A sword of black flame appeared in his fist and he leapt forwards to strike. Menreir stepped in the way, out of instinct to save the prince, and the ethereal blade passed through his chest. In moments the mage’s body disintegrated into a falling cloud of grey ash.

Anamedion swung back-handed at Thyriol, but a shimmering shield of silver energy appeared on the mage’s arm and the flaming blade evaporated into a wisp of smoke at its touch.

“You cannot control the power needed to defeat me,” Thyriol said. He was already breathing heavily, and Anamedion heard the words as nothing but an empty boast.

Dispelling the warding that surrounded the room, Anamedion reached out further into the winds of magic, drawing in more and more dark power. A black cloud enveloped him, swirling and churning with its own life, flashes and glitters in its depths. He urged the cloud forward and for a moment it engulfed Thyriol, cloying and choking.

A white light appeared at the cloud’s centre and the magic boiled away, revealing Thyriol unharmed, glowing from within. Anamedion could see that his grandfather’s pull on the winds of

magic was becoming fitful and saw a chance to finish him off. Taking a deep breath Anamedion reached out as far as he could, a surge of sorcery pouring into his body and mind.

Thyriol felt a hand upon his back and turned his head to see Illeanith next to him.

“Anamedion told me that you have banished him from your presence,” she said. “He is stubborn, but he is also brave and strong and willing to prove himself. Please end this dispute. Do not make me choose between my father and my son.”

“There are no words that will lift the veil of a mother’s love for her son,” replied the prince.

“You think me blind to my son’s faults?” snapped Illeanith, stepping back. “Perhaps I see more than you think, prince. Other matters are always more important to you. For over a thousand years you have lived in the mystical realm, you no longer remember what it is to be flesh and blood. I think that a part of you was trapped with the other mages on the Isle of the Dead, a part of your spirit if not your body. Anamedion has not seen the things you have seen, and you make no attempt to show them to him. You think that you guard him against danger, but that is no way to prepare him for princehood. He must learn who he is, to know his own mind. He is not you, father, he is himself, and you must accept that.”

Illeanith glanced at the other two mages with an apologetic look and then disappeared down the steps from the balcony.

“I miss her mother,” sighed Thyriol, leaning over the wall to peer down at the courtyard of the palace where armour-clad guards drilled in disciplined lines of silver and gold. “She helped me remember how to stay in this world. Maybe it is time I moved on, let slip this fragile grip that I have kept these last hundred years. I wish I had died in peace, like Miranith. One should not be born in war and die in war...”

The other two mages remained silent as Thyriol’s words drifted into a whisper, knowing that Thyriol was talking to himself, no longer aware of their presence. They exchanged a knowing, worried glance and followed Illeanith from the tower, each fearful of their prince’s deterioration.

“Sorcery is not an end in itself, it is just a means,” said Anamedion. “It need not be evil!

“The means can corrupt the end,” replied Thyriol quietly, his hoarse whisper further proof of his infirmity. “Just because we can do a thing, it is not right that we should do a thing.”

“Nonsense,” spat Anamedion, unleashing his next spell. Flames of purple and blue roared from his hands, lapping at Thyriol. The ancient mage writhed under its power, sparks of gold and green magic bursting from him as he deflected the worst of the spell, though it still brought him to one knee. “You’ll have to kill me to prove it!”

“I will not kill my own kin,” wheezed Thyriol.

“I will,” said Anamedion with a glint in his eye.

Anamedion could feel only Dark Magic in the chamber and knew that the prince’s resistance was all but over. All he needed was another overwhelming attack and this would be finished. He would become prince of Saphery as was his right, and they would take the war to the Naggarothei.

Grasping the fetish at his throat, the rune-carved knuckle bones burning his palm, Anamedion incanted words of power, feasting on the sorcery that was now roiling within every part of his body. He visualised a monstrous dragon, drew it in the air with his mind’s eye. He saw its ebon fangs and the black fire that flickered from its mouth. Thyriol attempted a dispel, directing what little remained of the winds of magic, trying to unpick the enchantment being woven by Anamedion.

Anamedion drew on more Dark Magic, swamping the counterspell with power. He focussed all his thoughts on the spell, as Thyriol had once warned him he must. He had no time to appreciate the irony, all his mind was bent on the conjuration. He could see the shimmering scales and the veins on the membranes of the dragon’s wings. The apparition started to form before Anamedion, growing more real with every passing heartbeat.

In a moment the dragon-spell would engulf Thyriol, crushing the last breath from his body.

Thyriol waited patiently in the Hall of Stars, gazing up at the window at the centre of the hall's ceiling. It showed a starry sky, though outside the palace it was not yet noon. The scene was of the night when the hall had been built, the auspicious constellations and alignments captured for all eternity by magic. Thyriol had come here countless times to gaze at the beauty of the heavens and knew every sparkling star as well as he knew himself.

A delicate cough from the doorway attracted Thyriol's attention. Menreir stood just inside the hall, a cluster of fellow mages behind him and a worried-looking servant at his side.

"We cannot find Anamedion," said Menreir. "Also, Illeanith, Hadryana, Alluthian and Meledir are missing, along with half a dozen of the students"

Thyriol took this news without comment. The prince closed his eyes and felt Saphethion around him. He knew every stone of the palace, the magic that seeped within the mortar, the flow of energy that bound every stone. The golden needle pulsed rhythmically at its centre and the winds of magic coiled and looped around the corridors and halls. He could feel every living creature too, each a distinctive eddy in the winds of magic. It would not take long to locate his grandson.

But it was not Anamedion that Thyriol found first. In a chamber beneath the Mausoleum of the Dawn, there was a strange whirl of mystical power. It flowed around the room and not through it, masking whatever was within; a warding spell, one that Thyriol had not conjured. It was subtle, just the slightest disturbance in the normal flow. Only Thyriol, who had created every spell and charm that sustained Saphethion, would have noticed the anomaly.

"Come with me," he commanded the mages as he pushed through the group. He showed no outward sign of vexation, but Thyriol's stomach had lurched. Mages were free to use their magic in the palace, why would one seek to hide their conjurations? He suspected sorcery. Despite his reasons for being in the Hall of Stars, this was more pressing than his division with Anamedion. His grandson would have to wait a while longer for their reconciliation.

Thyriol whispered something, almost bent double, his eyes fixed on his grandson. Anamedion did not hear what the prince had said. Was it some final counter-spell? Perhaps an admission of wrong? A plea for mercy?

For the moment Anamedion wondered what Thyriol had said, his mind strayed from the spell. The distraction lasted only a heartbeat but it was too late. The Dark Magic churning inside Anamedion slipped from his grasp. He struggled to control it, but it wriggled from his mind, coiling into his heart, flooding his lungs. Choking and gasping, Anamedion swayed as his veins crackled with power and his eyes melted. He tried to wail but only black flames erupted from his burning throat. The pain was unbearable, every part of his body and mind shrieked silently as the sorcery consumed him.

With a last spasm, Anamedion collapsed, his body shrivelling and blackening. With a dry thump, his corpse hit the ground, wisps of thick smoke issuing from his empty eye sockets.

Thyriol knelt down beside the remains of his grandson. For the moment he felt nothing, but he knew he would grieve later. He would feel the guilt of what he had done, though it had been unavoidable. Thoughts of grief recalled the death of Menreir, his oldest friend. Thyriol had barely noticed his destruction, so engrossed had he been in his duel with Anamedion. Another link to the past taken away; another piece of the future destroyed.

"What did you whisper?" asked Urian, his eyes fixed upon the contorted remnants of Anamedion. "Some dispel of your own creation?"

Thyriol shook his head sadly at the suggestion.

"I cast no spell," he replied. "I merely whispered the name of his grandmother. His lack of focus killed him."

Thyriol stood and faced the mages clustered around the blackened doorway. His expression hardened.

“Anamedion was young, and stupid, and ignored my warnings,” said the prince. “Ileanith and the other sorcerers will not be so easy to defeat. There will be more of them than we have seen. The war has finally come to Saphery.”

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