

*****Here follows an Excerpt from the best Chapter of The Warrior*****

He stood at the same spot where he had first sworn to bring Death to Nargost, where he had screamed in rage at the Enemy that had taken everything from him.

Tears glittered in his eyes as he looked upon the familiar land once more.

For there lay Insulfa, his home!

Nothing remained of the small town of Insulfa except a pile of ash. The surrounding wilderness had been burned and charred beyond recognition. Fire had consumed the lush grassland and vegetation which had once lent Insulfa its sanctity.

The Nargostians had ushered into the world a dark, desolated, desecrated valley, filled with ash and dust. It was a desert and a barren wasteland, and it was a sight which induced sorrow and dread in even the most stoic of men.

Aurien's beloved home, an oasis lightened by love, friendship, beauty, excitement, and laughter, had been replaced with a thick layer of ash, a choking cloud of dust that swirled toxically through the air, and a lone wolf, who sniffed hungrily at a pair of shattered, charred wooden poles that extended from the ground. These wooden fragments were the burnt remains of what had once been the sturdiest structure in Insulfa.

Aurien knew that the body of Arnaxes, and those of Arnaxes' Warriors, had been incinerated, along with the beautiful environment that had leavened Insulfan existence.

Long did Aurien stand, weeping uncontrollably upon the hills, as he looked down upon his immolated home.

The Insulfan Warriors joined him in mourning the loss of their home for a final time.

Even the hardened Soldiers of the Order gasped when they observed the dreadful scene, and they quietly allowed the Warriors to grieve.

With a herculean effort, Aurien managed to control his sobbing.

"So 'twas here that the War began..." whispered Aurien to himself. "May the Aromenon look upon this ghastly sight with the utmost horror lingering in their hearts! May it ever remind them of the fate which awaits them, should they abandon Humanity's ancient virtues! And may it remind me of my duty, which has ever been the service of my fellow People! I must stop this War, ere this fate is invited upon every place on this earth! Yes, I must prevent this, lest Aromu itself becomes a broken, charred, silent wasteland."

Although the Warrior spoke to himself, his words were also heard by another.

Aurelia stood behind him, and she listened to his choking, emotional words. The words of her love shook her, and the vision of the future that he described to himself saddened her immeasurably.

Now, Aurelia began to weep quietly, even as the Warriors did, and her beautiful face was twisted in pain. As she continued to think about the fate of Aromu, she fell weakly to her knees, and tears splattered the rocks below her.

If Humanity is not lifted out of its despair and despondence, it will certainly remain on its knees, its head bowed in defeat.

Aurien, hearing Aurelia's sobs, turned suddenly, and a new strength erupted within him.

Wiping away his tears, he grabbed Aurelia by the arm and lifted her onto her feet.

She continued to look at the rock below her, unwilling to meet his eyes.

Tears continued to roll down her cheeks.

He lifted her chin, so that she looked at him, and he wiped away her tears with a trembling finger.

He smiled as he looked into her bright eyes once more; the sight never failed to inspire him.

"No, my friend! My most beloved, greatest *friend*! Do not despair! For never has happiness existed in a person who was bereft of hope!"

He smiled more broadly at her, and she, moved by his love, rewarded him with a swift kiss that took his breath away.

Aurien, holding Aurelia tightly by the hand, began to walk down from the Klement Hills.

And now the Insulfans stopped their lamentation, and looked on in amazement at the two lovers.

Drying their eyes, the Warriors followed Aurien and Aurelia, as they ventured fearlessly forth.

The Order silently followed them. Together, they entered the wasteland below.

The helmets of the Soldiers protected their faces from the swirling, choking ashes. Summoning their courage, they marched laboriously through the bleak waste, their feet sinking deep into the black ash that coated the ground.

Aurien saw a whirling cloud of dust coagulate several meters away. It was a vast, revolving mass of sand and dust, and Aurien could see that this dust storm was thick enough to bury his Soldiers.

A sudden gust of wind blew through the land, and the storm raced towards them with frightening speed.

He yelled frantically, "Shields!"

The Soldiers immediately dropped to their knees and placed their shields in front of them.

A second later, the initial shockwave of sand crashed upon their shields. Then, the storm came roaring upon them, and for an entire minute it rained ash and dust against their armor and

shields. They were caught inside a suffocating, dark entity that constantly twisted them from one way to the other, and threatened to tear them from the ashy ground and bear them away on its chaotic path.

When the storm finally swept past them, the sunlight shone bleakly through the canopy of dust that swirled ominously above the wasteland. Many of the Soldiers coughed and spluttered, and smote their shields with their swords to remove the thick veneer upon them.

Aurien yelled, "Empty your helmets of sand, and continue marching! Be swift, or another storm will crash upon us, with more force than any army we have ever faced!"

So they continued, wary for another storm, and their dread grew as they passed through the ruins of Insulfa. Here, the ash layer was thickest, and the air was foul and poisonous to breathe.

Yet they passed through. Coughing and panting, the Soldiers managed to escape the dust storms.

Even beyond the storms, the wilderness was still burned, and ash yet coated everything on the ground. They were now a mile from the epicenter of the flame, but they saw now that the destruction was even more widespread than they had initially believed.

Aurien remembered how the army from Nargost had set the wild country around Insulfa ablaze, and, instead of the customary anger and hatred, he felt nausea and disgust.

As the Order continued to march, the ground escaped from the layer of ash, and trees and animals could once more be detected, and, allowing the Soldiers to continue past him, Aurien stopped suddenly, and looked back at the waste of Insulfa once more.

He saw a lone building, standing outside the influence of the ashes and rolling waves of dust and grime. Its garden was destroyed, and it was coated in the grey powder that swirled through that forsaken, inhospitable land. Yet it was the only building left intact.

Ahh, my home!

Indeed, 'twas Aurien's house, the building in which he had enjoyed a quiet and happy lifestyle with his father the Chieftain, Arnaxes the Wise, and with his caring, matronly mother, Helena.

I shall return to visit Insulfa again. And I will look upon my house once more. Haha! Glad of heart am I now, for I hath seen thou, beloved building of mine childhood! Yea, even the host from Nargost could not overcome thee! Thou art as tough as my father!

Smiling, he turned away, banishing the memories of his childhood from his mind.

For another hour, the stubborn Order marched, although any other army would long ago have been exhausted, and cried out for rest.

Night had cast its cloak comfortably upon the land, when the Soldiers finally fell asleep.

Herodonis and Aurien slept for but three hours, and Herodonis awoke a few minutes before Aurien.

The two men sat on opposing sides of the mass of sleeping Soldiers. Only Herodonis and Aurien, of all the Soldiers, possessed the willpower to resist the enchanting enticement of the dream-world.

Occasionally, they glanced at each other. These looks communicated respect, but Herodonis also appeared somewhat troubled, as Aurien sat directly next to Aurelia.

Herodonis eventually turned his attention to the luminous sky. Aurien watched it as well, but he also cast a wary eye about the area, fearing scouts and spies, or a sudden ambush by enemy soldiers. The rapid marching of the Order had left behind the settlements of Eridulon, and the Soldiers were now near to the border between the two nations.

When the sun suddenly appeared over the horizon, and sent a single ray sweeping across the land, illuminating the trees and rivers and mountains, and lending them an orange, fiery tinge, Aurien scrambled to his feet and awoke the Soldiers with a shout. Herodonis did the same.

So began another grueling march. When the sun set once more, after hours of rapid walking, and one brief break for the consumption of food and water, the Order had finally reached Nargost.

The border between the two principal nations of Aromu was marked by a wall of towns and villages that stretched for a hundred leagues from north to south. This was the iron defense of Nargost, the impermeable barrier between the two nations, which had been created immediately after the Separation.

The towns that formed the solid, defensive boundary of Nargost shared a close companionship. Not only did they engage in trade often, but members of Nargost's elite fighting force also moved periodically from one town to the other, all along the three-hundred mile stretch. Moreover, each of the towns in the coalition had several hundred battle-ready soldiers.

Aurien knew that, despite these defensive measures, the Order would conquer the settlements of Nargost with ease, and without remorse. The Soldiers were cunning, experienced, and skilled, and they had trained for the invasion of Nargost under the renowned Commander of Aromu. Lumbard himself had perfected the art of warfare, and he had studied the conquest of cities with interest. With the knowledge of Lumbard aiding them, it would be simple for the Order to capture or destroy the towns of Nargost.

"We are weary!" yelled Aurien, hoping to delay the invasion. "We must rest, ere we advance into Nargost!"

"Nay, let us take our revenge now!" a Soldier called back, and several of the Order cheered his words.

The Order stood upon the crest of a hill, and a steep slope led down to the forested plains below.

It was on this wooded land that the towns of Nargost were situated. These towns were lit from within to combat the pall of the night. Hence, they appeared as shimmering, yellow dots of fire in the countryside, an array of lights that extended beyond the range of vision to the north and south.

Aurien looked again at his Soldiers. They were eager to charge down into Nargost and begin slaying.

I must convince them otherwise...

“Nay, ‘tis folly! If we attack now, we will be overcome! The Nargostians place more guards on the battlements during the night than during the day, and they have a system of lanterns that will reveal our position, should we make the foolish attempt to besiege their towns. Yea, I tell you, it would be wise to wait until the dawn. We should eat and rest, regaining our full strength, ere we advance into the nation. Only then should we strike. The bright rays of the sun shalt guide us forth through this rough land, and they will still be sleepy when we come crashing down upon them, like a thunderstorm borne on the westerly wind!”

Aurien waited for the Soldiers to react to his words.

He feared that he had not given them ample reason to restrain their bloodlust, and that they would sweep past him and storm Nargost.

“Aurien is correct. It will not avail us to attack the Nargostians now, while we are yet weary. And the night may prove to be our enemy, rather than our friend. Nay, let us wait! We will camp here tonight, so that we may first plan our attack upon the eastern defenses of Nargost, and not leap into battle like clueless sheep. Come! Make fire, and place the meat so that it is tender and juicy over the flames! I, for one, am quite hungry tonight!”

So spake Herodonis, and Aurien stared at the fearsome Soldier in shock.

Aurelia, who stood nearby, whispered excitedly to him.

“He *has* changed! He has decided to aid us!”

Then, Herodonis glanced at Aurien, and, upon seeing Aurelia with the Warrior, the Soldier’s expression became baleful. Herodonis turned away swiftly, so that he would not have to gaze upon the sight that caused him such pain.

“No, Herodonis is not yet truly committed to the idea of peace,” Aurien replied thoughtfully. “Too much anger yet resides in his heart, and the changes that are taking place within him are slow and painful. Natheless, his words gladden me.”

“And me as well, for look, Aurien! He has convinced the Soldiers!”

The stern, commanding words of Herodonis had indeed persuaded the Order to abandon their plans to immediately invade Nargost.

While the Soldiers laid down, stretched their stiff limbs, and prepared food, Aurien sat amongst his twenty-three Insulfan Warriors.

“Hail, Chieftain! Too long has it been since we spoke properly. This endless marching leaves one bereft of the will to speak.”

Aurien smiled at Serkat’s greeting, but he was troubled by the fact that Serkat had called him “Chieftain”.

Bluppa is now the Chieftain of Insulfa...but I will forever be Chieftain to my Warriors. Perhaps, as long as I carry the Circlet, I remain the rightful Chieftain of Insulfa. Yet I am removed from my kinsfolk now, and my brothers here are the only Insulfans whom I may ever see again.

These thoughts saddened Aurien.

Yet, he was not allowed to continue brooding, for Phoenix interrupted Aurien’s reverie with a soft chant.

*“When the bright sun decides to rise,
The men of earth it will surprise,
Another day, it says, and smiles,
And it shines upon the long miles,
Once, we looked at earth and rejoiced!
Our emotions could not be voiced.
But now we forget the beauty of earth
And we destroy it, for fire in the hearth.”*

The Warriors were pleased by Phoenix’s poem.

“Well!” said Serkat, and he applauded, as did the other Warriors. “How learnt thou so beautiful a rhyme?”

“I composed it myself, even as we marched,” replied Phoenix. “As we walked out of the ashes of Insulfa, I was struck by sudden inspiration, and I was also reminded of my own name. For I am a Phoenix — I was born in the ashes, and I have survived the great fire, to be reborn and remade. And I am glad, for I know that I am not the *only* Phoenix.”

Phoenix gazed at the other Warriors, and he smiled contentedly to himself.