

Marshall L'Amour

Songs of Exile



Sons of Exile

Children of Cataclysm: Book One

Marshall L'Amour

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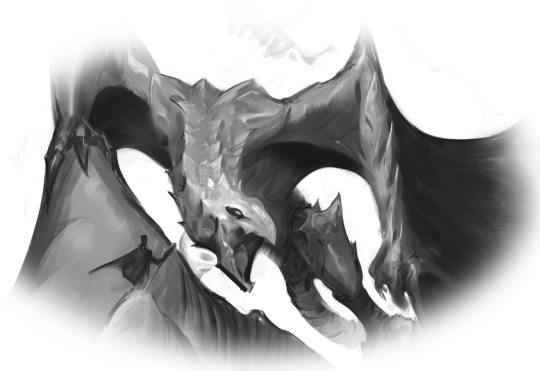
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*“One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give
birth to a dancing star.”*

-Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”

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Part I: The Prince

Rite of the Skyborne

The desert is a circle.

From clear skies shown the even curve of sandblasted slopes which formed the annular inner edge of Oros. A bulwark mountain chain nicknamed the *rimlands* for its circumscription of the flat dry desolation which was the land of Nod.

The failing blue of the starry dome beneath which the seraph soared splashed up a thin haze wherever it met the horizon on all sides. Everywhere but for the icy murk shroud of the Orosian peaks and the billowing plumes where the earth had burst such peaks asunder. Still that ominous fury which had seemed to loom ever at their back in crossing would melt into the horizon's dim glow as their flight advanced deeper into the barren expanse.

His father had veered the seraph eastward from where their route carried them forth over the northern rim and over Tethyan abodes nestled at its foot. On and on they flew to what seemed Nod's very center.

Until then had they spent the morning racing the sun to no great avail over the Orosian Marches as far as where the Allegen crags turn the Marches north. North from where they branch off the ring of greater Oros. North along the black sea of the Vargwood's expanse which joins the mountain chain to divide Borea's north from the wild land of Laurentia to the Allegen's west. North and away from

their course upon which they veered south to cross into Nod's damnation.

Pitting their flight's course headlong against the ascendant noonday sun would the Prince once again glimpse Oros clawing its way out from the horizon's eternity.

Even a seraph could reach no height great enough to behold all of Nod nor its rim. Or so it was said and now seemed true enough to the Prince. But what he could see of its even curve and great compass would vindicate the Magister's marveling at the uncanny symmetry of the range's formation. Seeming the very iris of the great globe upon which was carved and etched his map of the known world. Neither he nor those men whose maps he pored over had ever been so privileged as to ascend upon wings the bitter and stifling heights known only to those *neverliving*. Or so long had it been until this very day.

This day had Anak finally deigned to permit a son born of mortal womb to mount the ancient seraph Vitra second to him. His son. Born very much alive and squalling. A bastard sired upon a mother whose name had never crossed his lips in the boy's hearing.

The seraph let forth a terse and fiery roar as it dipped its beak and folded the web of its wings for their descent. The Prince lay prone and teary-eyed as he clutched the knobby cantle of his father's saddle against the wind's assailment. No skyborne rider yet was he. Cocking his head to the side against the rush that he might compel his eyes to dry and see clearly their course.

Along their course was a painted splendor of gray

and orange ringed hills carved out from beneath the level lands to their north. Valleys bespeckled sparsely in shocks of green where vegetation wound through. He knew the spectacle almost at once for the Lowlands. Birthplace to his father from a time so far buried in the annals that it preceded their earliest record by millennia. A time when the whole of Borea and Angara to its east had been bound in snow and ice. A time before the *storm which brought the sea* had come to drown the fertile lands of Tethys forevermore.

Farther on was a glint of the first waters of the Dae-vayasna which there the lowlands drank down to but trickles. Beyond were farmlands green as any the Prince had seen over Borea.

The river converged and fattened up along its course and soon bore through the straddle of two hulking pyramidal tombs long ago erected for the Prince's own ancestors. Though any remains of Anak's parentage which might have graced the bowels of the monuments were to be found neither within nor anywhere present. The young prince marveled all the same and would yet more to behold the many granite wonders farther east where the farmlands parted to nestle the city sprawl of Theianya's encroachment upon the river's edge. A necropolis of sacred and stately feats of engineering protruding and towering over a huddling of adobe dwellings.

The city bore little resemblance to any now of the empire it had birthed and finally purged. Yet it seemed still to stand a crumbling testament to the dominion once held

upon these lands. More lately had a citadel been erected apart from it and of a size comparable to that of Anakium's own. Truly a remarkable enough structure. But no more than a mortal's fancy. Whosoever ruled the confines of Nod without command of a seraph's flight and might would rule nothing else besides.

Even as the river which was their life and livelihood drew forth from where conspired the earth's shattering and the tireless work of Orosian snow melts and the very sea of Tethys itself each to cut through the eastern rim, a mortal would find no easier passage through Oros there where Tethyan tides ceaselessly fill and purge the Yasna of its salt and bounty. There from whence the horde had sprung and into an empire blossomed. There through which was once the empire's passage to the city of Exodus by the sea. There even so would prove no better passage than any way rougher going. All about the rim was the domain of the Seraph'm. The Yasna was no exception and was even visited upon by many seraphs in common who sought for its waters and bounty. No less there would they abide any quarry of Nod to pass from within unharried nor unsmitten lest guarded by one such as to match their might. Such guard as was providence solely of the empire and granted the peoples of Nod no longer.

The Prince had not noticed the leveling of their flight along the wispy invisible plane of sparse cloud cover. So taken had he been with the histories laid bare before him. Tales of the Magister's telling frozen in their diminution from the flight's vantage.

They veered southward once again and peeled away from the Yasna.

He righted himself upon the seraph's back and saw Oros once more looming large before them. The foot of its slopes curving gently into the desert sands. A wall extending endlessly in either direction but hardly an insurmountable obstruction. He would be compelled to climb its steeps and penetrate the rimlands. Just as all cadets of the Anakim were compelled likewise that they may undergo the rite and claim their place among the ranks of the skyborne.

No prodding or further admonition would his father expend to oblige the Prince to his task. The perils of the Orosian rimlands were many but of an element favorable before those of Nod. The chiefest peril of Oros were the Seraph'm. A tamable calamity and more-so than the very land of Nod which none of the Blood would lately dare traverse without an army at their back. Nor so lately with an army.

Still would few cadets survive a seraph's quarry. The seraphs in service were won by naught but spear and blade and the enthrallment which a reiph's bloodswork would exert upon those seraphs soundly slain. Failing such and likely so would a cadet be rent and roasted unto a merciful end hopefully met before boiling in the seraph's belly.

A seraph was truly won only by the blessings of Blood upon the warriors of the Reiph'm. The strength and speed and cunning of those neverliving and bearing fangs and born to the hunt as had been their sire Anak. The Prince

bore such fangs but had come late to the hunt. Bastard-born as is the lot of the Naphl'm had he inherited the burden of infancy in the manner of a mortal's spawn.

His trueborn brother Ahiman before him had won his seraph and given it the name of Ammut in an age when their father yet held domain of Nod. Anak would expect no less of any offspring to follow. Discrepant though they be by Blood.

His father made no motion for his seraph to descend to the foot of Oros however. And soon it was upon the murk which hung oppressive and eternally over the rimlands that Vitra beat its wings.

The Prince bore no notion of what course his father would set him upon if not that which had been deemed for the rite in times past. He bore less still when Anak suddenly delivered an elbow into his son's chin to knock him loose of his saddle's cantle.

He tumbled across the seraph's back but seized hold of a segment of its armor to situate himself once more. He found his feet with a defiance he understood as little in its conception as in its object. Anak took to his own feet steadily upon his saddle and turned unwavering against the rush of sooty wind at his back. Unwavering even against the fierce undulation of Vitra which ceaselessly threatened his son's own footing with each whip of its tail and beat of its wings.

A steel countenance shown upon his father's ghostly hairless visage. He sought to hurl the Prince from the seraph's back and down upon the abysmal and cragged

rimlands over which they soared. The Prince knew it just as soon as to meet the cold and pale yellow eyes which mirrored his own. As much in form as in their gleaming an end to the paternal auspices so lately enjoyed. This was to be the young prince's point of departure. But he never anticipated one such as this. Done as in the manner which a warrior of the Anakim might be abandoned to languish upon the sands of Nod in exile.

What hope he had to elude so cruel a fate as Anak would see him dealt seemed to matter little and less with no hope to be had at all in any such defiance.

The Prince would assume his fighting stance and give no ground. Until Anak had left his feet and given himself to the winds. Sailing. Bearing down upon him with a jutting knee. Suddenly seeming as though to linger in the air as the Prince left his own footing and extended his limbs to catch the wind then retracted to seize the end of the seraph's flicking tail. Mustering all his might to extend his heel into his assailant's chin. Anak narrowly but effortlessly dodged and carried forth to bury an elbow into his gut.

Vitra vanished into the murk before the breathless Prince had gleaned his grip struck loose of the seraph's tail. Anak then seized him by the jaw and hurled him overhead.

The Prince flew headlong. In a daze did he gaze past his upended feet and through the cold void. As thickly beset by wrathful winds as the void below and through which he plunged eternally. He gazed through and beyond the void to fix his eyes upon his father. Standing erect as though planted firmly upon the earth and with arms crossed. Stern

and scrutinizing as ever the Prince had known him. They lingered a moment floating apart from one another until the shadow of Vitra materialized to whisk its rider away. His wits had only then returned to him.

He was falling. Fast.

He righted himself and spread his limbs to catch the wind and slow his descent. The ground still quickly approached. Much too quickly. He rode the wind such that he caught a mountain steep but struck hard upon his side with a sickening crunch from which and what number of his bones he cared not to imagine. The pain of it shot through him as he burst through a snow drift and bore the knuckling sting of scree rolling under his battered and naked torso and against the skinned soles of his bare feet which dug haplessly to slow his slide until his heel finally lodged in a shallow fissure only to wrench free immediately and tumble him over to abruptly dash his head against the side of a boulder.

The Prince awoke to suffocating blackness in a tomb of dust and stone shards. In a panicked frenzy did he claw his way free from the loose earth of his shallow grave.

He sat up and groaned and hacked and carefully brushed the dust from his eyelids as he purged sticky blood and muddied dust and shattered teeth from his throat. He gasped and blinked widely and frantically. He stretched and probed to find his shattered and bloodied body mended. Teeth, bones, flesh, all. Nary more than matted hair encrusted in dry blood would remain proof of the fatal wound dealt in his fall.

He stood in the rubble of a small pit. Apart from him stood a black spear with a woven leaf-shaped blade for its head which was fixed upon a freshly hewn shaft of fire polished yew. Its butt planted in the loose earth of the pit. The rubble and the boulder both bore signs of scorching. Scrubbed of any trace of blood where he struck so violently.

The pit had been hammered for his healing. He recognized the practice well enough from his father's teachings. A seraph had claws upon its powerful winged forelimbs with which to pierce stone and upon its beaked head a crest with which to hammer it asunder. The spear he recognized as of etzch'm make but recognized also as that which his father had kept fast under the skirt of his saddle. Parting gifts. His father's own blessing. He was indeed to commence the rite of the skyborne.

He rummaged through the gravel from whence he emerged and unearthed his blades and returned them to

their sheaths. He grabbed onto the spear and pulled himself to his feet and from his grave. Brushing dust and grit from his person as he surveyed the world into which he had been cast.

The rimlands. They seemed a hell. Sulfurous sooty murk enshrouded the grey stony expanse. Brought to life only by sporadic saffron bursts of molten earth in the distance and the sparse pockets of loam where flora dared take root and search its whole life long for a sun which would nary shine. A low booming rumble saturated the air. A constant prelude to the reverberating concussions of distant eruptions.

No creature in earshot would make itself known to the Prince. Neither by sight or sound nor by their scent masked in the acrid odor of the devastated land. He knew that the rim's vargs would soon be upon him if yet they were not. He would need to move fast before too many amassed upon him. Before they became emboldened in their numbers to claim their quarry. Before their ruckus might lure the seraph upon him unbidden.

His surest way to the seraph would be to travel away from Nod. Away from the dim glow of the setting sun. Into the starless black of the rimlands' night. He would attempt an escape toward the Narrow Shore at the edge of the Tethyan Sea.

He would not in truth escape nor truly intend to escape the seraph's domain. Though the notion suited him. The seraph was a reliable warden keen of senses and unrelinquishing in pursuit of its prey.

Still yet did the thought suit him. Eluding the seraph and following the Shore. Perhaps even south to gain entry into Gondraeva. A land he had ever dreamed of.

It was the land which cradled the earliest human settlements and first saw Anak compel men to work and war against the Etzch'm. The *saplings* who sought then so ravenously for the extermination mankind only to later make accord against Anak and his own mortal subjects. Now it was among the vast fringes of the imperial domain. Wild and lawless as such but ruled still by those of the Blood.

He feared not the sojourn however perilous and would in truth fare better by so heedless a fancy followed than by such desolation as he had come to by his father's hand. But it was not from woe of circumstance that he longed for the southern reaches.

So long had he been confined to the royal grounds. It was only in the tales and tomes the Magister provided him that he ever felt as though freed from his protective solitude. A life spent as much gazing into his mind's eye as gazing from balconies between lessons. Gazing upon the cadets of the academy enacting such tales in the training yards. His lot always ever so distinct from their own. Bound to his father's own custody and course of study for his conversance in arms and the hunt. He would not be permitted to venture among reiph'm spawn nor anywhere beyond the company and confines allotted him.

The Magister had ever assured him that he would one day grow to match any of those born as imps to the Blood:

Those born lifeless only to stand risen of their own will and bloodwork; those abandoned to the wilds just as soon as they are born; those made hard and vicious by the perils of the hunt as much as such peril found even in the auspices of life in a pack among their impish peers and cohorts.

Nary could he imagine such a life as the Reiph'm youth might lead until his coming to Oros. Though he knew as much as felt that there was little more freedom to be had between Nod and a seraph's wrath and wondered at his fool's envy of the reiph'm lot. An envy which had ever compelled him to excel in the rigors of his father's tutelage.

For what he had strived was unclear to him even now. A prince born half to the Blood would never occupy such stations as his fullblooded brothers. Even his eldest brother Sheshai who would never command a seraph and bore no fangs having been born a sprite to an iyr'n mother. His brother was halfblooded among the Reiph'm but still fullblooded among the Anakim. And furthermore had he risen to his station in times of old when only his father had ever yet dared take command of a seraph.

The naphl'm prince however had only to persist in the rite and discover what favor and freedom a seraph's submission might earn him.

He strode out through ravines and along narrow ledges and took cover in whatever overhangs or cavities the crags would offer. Briskly he proceeded and vigilant against any sign of a seraph's flight as against the vargs already in pursuit and numbering three by his estimate. His patience would flee sooner than he might have hoped and nearly

compelled him to cry out and hasten his fate.

Instead he struck for the dim glow of molten earth. A fiery stream little wider than his stride. He took his cover behind a boulder fixed upon a steep apart from it. At a vantage from which the vargs might expose themselves against the luminous stream. He fastened one of his blades to its groove in the bronzework butt of his spear by loosing and rewinding the seraph-sinew cord of its handle. And he waited.

The enshadowed beasts soon appeared with their snouts to the dirt and scuttering about for any sign of their prey.

The Prince dashed out low and silent with his spear fixed. Two of the beasts trotted out of the way of his charge to flank him while the other strafed anxiously along the fiery stream. The Prince wheeled around as he took a wide swing with the bladed butt end of his spear. Lopping off the varg's foreleg where it caught the crook of its elbow. It yelped as it fell forward into the dust and writhed a bit before scrambling to its feet and limping back into the darkness from whence it had emerged.

The other two had his back to the stream and close enough to feel its radiance acutely upon the bare skin of his back. Their eyes and teeth and slaver glistened by the flickering fires of the stream's exhaust. Snarling gray beasts. Each as great and heavy as a grown man. The Prince made ready his spear and braced his footing. Heedful of the bubbling death to his rear.

A howl cut through the night. Echoing from a distance too great for the injured varg to have sounded. A howl

which might have signaled an onslaught of vargs upon him. Instead it beckoned the two before him back into the shadows and farther yet as they scurried off.

Fire traced along the night sky above the direction of their retreat. It might have seemed some fiery debris of an eruption not yet heard or a meteor burning through the heavens had he known no better. His heart raced as he discerned the immense shadow which produced it. He stood yet clenching his spear as though to crush its shaft. The shadow grew larger yet.

He stirred himself from his dread's captivation and scrambled for cover. A ravine or a cave or anything which might stay the thing even for a moment. He stopped in remembering to unbind blade from spear that he would be readied for the assault.

The flap of seraph's wings too soon upon him as he returned the blade to its sheath startled him so that he wheeled about where he crouched. Falling to his back and couching his spear with its butt fixed sturdily in the dirt below. The seraph took hold of his spear as it passed over him. He grasped its shaft desperately under a flapping wing as the ground fell from beneath him.

An enormous shadow quickly obscured his survey of the land below. Two seraphs. One more enormous than the last. The seraph in pursuit proved larger even than Vitra. So large even that the Prince had already known it by name.

Aethon.

A seraph not a single seasoned warrior of the skyborne had ever managed to fell. And not for lack of hopefuls. To

claim a second seraph had never been a custom permitted by the skyborne. But Aethon was ever the exception. And perhaps the first and only seraph ever to taste the flesh of a skyborne reiph beyond the countless fledglings of their ilk.

He settled his mind that Aethon was the seraph from which he had fled. The one which had plucked him from where he lay had somehow come upon him undetected in its approach. He thought on this but not long as Aethon closed the distance rapidly in attempt to pluck its quarry from the intruder.

The seraph maneuvered into a stall. The Prince felt his skin desiccate and tighten from the heat of Aethon's breath at its approach. The end of his spear caught his eyes whilst they anxiously track the narrow passing of his pursuer. He noticed then that it was a hand which held the spear fast. That of the seraph's rider.

The rider gave the spear a yank. The Prince assisted with a swing and released his grip to grasp a segment of the seraph's armor as he came around its back. The seraph pulled out of the stall just as soon as he had situated upon it and slammed against him when finally it beat its wings against the stall. Breathless did he clutch tightly as much against the wind's rush as the great gain in speed.

He clutched tighter still as Aethon resumed its pursuit. Snapping its toothy beak at the whipping tail. Fire trailing out from within its gullet. Its sunken red eyes and illuminated visage giving the appearance of a fearsome grinning skull in the murky black obscurity.

His first flight astride Vitra had little prepared him for the violent jostling of the chase. He was sure of his grip but expended great effort in straining against the retreat of blood from his vitals into his extremities. The seraph's flight would not even out until finally they had broken through cloud cover.

Aethon emerged after them but lingered a moment as they soared on and away overtop the moonlit frozen and rippling sea of the clouds below. It would merely give forth a piercing roar as it let out a jet of flame before diving back into obscurity below the murk.

The Prince righted himself and peered upward with a trembling sigh. Awash in relief and glad to see stars in the night sky and gladder still to take in the fresh air however thin and frigid.

"Not even old Aethon tarries long beyond its domain," bellowed the rider over his shoulder.

The Prince regarded him a moment. The rider was yet a boy in stature. Clad in varg furs and set upon a rude saddle. No initiate of the skyborne. Yet riding a seraph all the same. He hoisted two spears under the flap of his saddle. The Prince's own among them.

The rider continued. "I fear we must have lured the ornery old beast upon you. Saw you were dropped from Vitra itself. Right into Aethon's domain no less. The hell'd you do to deserve such? And by Anak's own hand no less, eh?"

He found his breath and belted forth his answer against the winds' roar. "I was born his bastard... and named a

prince.”

“All hail, brothers. We have Prince Talmai Baranak in our midst.”

The Prince stood before a gang of boys. Some his age, some a bit older, dressed alike in ragged leathers and bespeckled gray varg pelts, fanged and ashen of skin, and fierce to boot with his father’s own yellow eyes peering out from each face as hard as the heart too cold to redden it. Reiph’m all. He had not expected otherwise.

The seraph’s rider removed his saddle as he disembarked then simply released his mount as though back into the wild. They all hoisted such saddles upon their backs. Anakean cadets by the Prince’s reckoning. Deserters by their state and number and manner of congregation. He knew not how else or why they would persist together and for so long as it seemed if not to evade the duty of their fate.

Yet they ride.

An older boy spoke up. “The naphy bastard? If he was abandoned to Aethon’s mercies, surely he was left for dead. I know your mind’s hunger Vakna, but no naphl’m has ever ridden. What good is he to us?”

“Come now, Brax. There are far simpler ways to discard of unwanted offspring. No. Anak meant him to break Aethon. He may or may not have succeeded, and we would have discovered the outcome if not for my folly of baiting the beast upon him. The Prince, here, he was flung from on high and to dash against the rocks. Certainly so. But Anak

had his seraph pound out a pit for him to heal under cover of gravel and even scorched his traces.

“What’s more is that he left such a fine spear for the Prince.”

The rider called Vakna presented the etzch’m spear. His fellows were aghast in examining the weapon. Talmai had not taken it for any more than a captured spear from his father’s collection.

“No doubt. This is Arba’s spear point.”

Grandfather’s spear?

“Anak has either lost his wits or this halfblood is more than he seems.” Vakna furrowed his brow and stroked his chin in further contemplation of the omen apparent before him.

The spear’s head was a relic of some renown. It symbolized the very origin of the Anakim and skyborne besides. The stroke of luck by which Anak had received the wound whence his blood let forth into the body of Vitra. Already then slain by his own hand. The spearpoint had been lodged in the flesh of its throat as Vitra devoured Arba. Anak buried his blade deep into the seraph’s neck in his great wrath. The arm which followed the blade so deeply into the wound he dealt chanced to snag on the broken spear’s point as Anak extracted the limb. A fortuitous event which would determine the whole course of Aeva’s history for millennia beyond count.

“What matter’s such sentimentality? I had heard the bastard never once left the palace since the day Anak brought him squalling into the citadel. I saw him myself,

leering from a balcony over the yard of the Academy. A human child. Disguised with the reiph'm cast but weak in flesh. Did you cry and wail upon your birth or lay still in death's dignity, bastard? You certainly did not stand risen nor stand at all upon your fat sausage legs but were swaddled, rather, and given to your mother's bosom." The young reiph who had just then spoken so venomously moved in with a couple of brisk long strides and gripped Talmai firmly about the jaw. "Have you fangs at least, bastard?"

The Prince leapt upon the young rider who's name he knew not. Breaking loose his grip and staggering him backward. Having drawn no blade he instead sunk his fangs into the rider's neck only to tear them back out again. Blood spurt forth. He released his clinch and allowed the rider to stumble to the dirt.

Talmai's face was reddened by the spurt of blood upon it. What blood had crossed his lips he spat upon the ground in insult. He uttered, "How do *you* find my fangs, deserter?"

The felled rider could do naught but gurgle and writhe in his own blood as he grasped the oozing wound. Unable to muster a retort let alone a retaliation.

The moment's satisfaction passed then as blades flashed and fell upon Talmai from all directions. He felt his life's blood spilling out and hot against the bitter cold of his flesh. Only then did he realize he had erred. And gravely so.

The Prince awoke to darkness. He wondered whether he had only dreamt the night's events. The riders, Aethon, all of it. He could not move nor draw breath unlabored. Neither had he any feeling in his limbs by which to animate them. Nor elsewhere to assure him his wholeness. Whether he was yet in his shallow grave or whether buried once more it seemed of little matter. He was risen and none the better for it.

He recognized Vakna's voice. "Coming around, eh?"

He heard still more than his voice and resonant as though through a cavernous space as the troop moved and murmured busily thereabout.

At his side did Vakna speak once more. "You ought not to have attacked our brother. But folly enough though it was, it was the insult you dealt him and us in common that brought our wrath upon you. We did not desert the empire, bastard. For not a one of us was ever to rejoin the ranks of the Anakim.

"It is only by our brothers that we live, it is only by our brothers that we ride, and it is only by our brothers old and new that we remain.

"We do not slay the seraphs nor likewise raise them to servitude. Our life would not be possible in this place if we did. We ride freely upon free seraphs, and the seraphs take us so. A privilege, truly. Wouldn't you say? One none among the skyborne can claim."

Vakna paused a moment.

Talmi's sight began to sharpen against disuse and

death and darkness such that he discerned the rocky ceiling of a cave from where he lay upon his back. His skin also tingled back to life enough to feel the rough matted varg's fur beneath him.

Vakna resumed. "Worry not. The sting of your insult will not linger among us. Most of us. Still, you ought not to have attacked Aeta. You have no name among us and know not the proper course of combat here.

"No less would I advise against even chancing to consume such surly *Borsblood* as Aeta's. Especially would I to a fucking *prince*. Imagine, Anak's own get bound to that of some petty suebe *plainsthegn*. Not to say his Blood would so surely get the best of you. Royalty or not, you naphy lot best tread gingerly among trueblood."

Talmai knew not what stigma lay upon those descendants of the Bors ruling the Plains. But he cringed for his heedlessness all the same. The mode of his attack was as ill-considered as its very commencement.

He had much to learn of life among his peers. Perhaps still yet his betters despite his father's best efforts in the undertaking his son's training. No light matter were the blessings of Blood truly wrought. Surely no lighter a matter was their mastery of the Seraph'm and the rimlands which would seem the riders' own dominion.

Talmai could not yet offer response. Vakna would carry on in its absence. "Dawn approaches. Your wounds have mended. Clean cuts all of them, but it will take some time yet for the blood to replenish. No matter. We do not move during the day and will take our rest here. We will not abide

you to take your leave of us when you are able, however.

“None of us venture alone until proved. You live by our mercy only and will yet so long as it is due. And our mercy is only due those who would be our brothers. Those who would ride as we ride. Do you understand?” He would not wait for a response but inferred one.

“Know this then: Prince Talmai Baranak is no more. He died upon the crags of Oros and was left to the ravages of the rimlands. Some no account halfblooded bastard was then plucked from Aethon’s clutches only to be slain by marauders. Now some nameless orphan of the Blood lies hapless upon the floor of some desolate cave in the heart of a land which has claimed many such lives. But those who ride will be named anew and will have gained brothers beyond count.”

Talmai noticed then the song of a flute played softly somewhere in the cave. A haunting melody seemingly the song of the cave itself as it joined to the dull rumbling drone of Oros. The flute a mere mouthpiece of a cavernous instrument which needed not the meager winds born forth of fleshly toils but indulged them preciously all the same. Perhaps there were many such caves with as many melodies.

He succumbed once more to the weight of his eyelids as he listened and caught a glimpse of Aethon’s ghastly visage. Flames curling out from the corners of its fearsome grin.

The Prince had never known the freedom of choice. Nor would he have it now. Aethon had become the

surest sign of his ensnarement. The point for which his life's course had always been set and alone that from which it would spring. What sorry sort of prince he had ever been had truly died upon the crags and would not rise again but upon that monster's back. He had not survived. Nor would he yet but by Vakna's good graces.

"What will it be then?"

Talmai opened his eyes and found he was able to move his jaw. He opened his mouth and produced a rasp which drew Vakna near then uttered the words.

"I will ride."