



THE MINOTAUR WARS
VOLUME I
NIGHT OF BLOOD

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PROLOGUE
BY MARGARET WEIS

Following the devastation of the War of Souls, the people of Krynn will look to a future that is uncertain, unknown. Of course, one might say that the future is always uncertain and unknown to those who cannot see into it. In the history of Krynn, however, every event that occurred in the world had some basis in history. The future of Krynn was built up on the secure foundations of the past. Events may have been catastrophic, but—looking back—one could say that they were predictable based on what had gone before.

When Takhisis ripped the world from its moorings, she set it adrift in time and space, so that what was is no more and what will be is unfathomable. Not even the gods can see what is to come.

They call this time the Age of Mortals. At the beginning it was so named because the gods had departed. After the War of Souls it will keep its name because the gods themselves are in turmoil. The river of time has overflowed its banks and washed away the stars.

The gods will have some say in the future of the world, of that there can be no doubt. But they will grope and feel their way through the darkness, the same as mortals. Evil will flourish in this atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. But the deeper the darkness, the brighter the light will shine.

This is the time for minotaurs to make their mark upon the world, a time for new villains and heroes.

Richard A. Knaak's trilogy is the first step into that future.



A CHRONICLE OF THE HISTORY OF THE MINOTAURS
(EXCERPTED FROM THE ARCHIVES OF PALANTHAS)

Although the minotaur race has spoken little of its past to outsiders, fragments of history have been gathered that speak of a realm fraught with upheaval and rejuvenation, collapse and survival. Despite their violent existence, the minotaurs have endured and even prospered.

Legend disagrees on their origin. Most believe that in the waning days of the high ogres' civilization, when decadence began to corrupt them, a more immediate danger materialized in their realm—the Graygem, an artifact of fearsome magic with the power to transform anything and anyone. In the case of the ogres, it twisted their bodies, remaking more than a quarter of the race into the horned behemoths feared to this day.

In contrast, the minotaurs' account paints a stark portrait of the ogres' decline and the benevolence of one god. Sargas took the form of a giant condor, gathering up and flying those ogres he found worthy to a land on the eastern edge of Ansalon. Here they would start anew. He then placed upon each his sign, transforming them into minotaurs, and by doing so ensured that never would they and their cousins be one again.



Historically, the minotaurs appeared three thousand years before the First Cataclysm. They settled on the eastern coast of Ansalon and named their home Mithandrus, the Land of the Bull. From their beginning, they dreamed of their own empire, one resurrecting the early glories of their forebears, but marked by their own particular beliefs.

But the minotaurs made the blunder of invading the dwarven realm of Kal-Thax. The dwarves took umbrage. They razed Mithandrus and dragged thousands of minotaur slaves back to Kal-Thax. For over two hundred years, minotaurs worked the dank mines, suffering under the yoke of harsh dwarven rule. Only when civil unrest split Kal-Thax in two—creating the rival kingdom of Thorin in the process—did the slaves, under the leaders Ambeoutin and Belim, revolt. They slaughtered the dwarves and destroyed Kal-Thax.

With Belim dead, Ambeoutin led his people back to their homeland, which his followers named after him in his honor. Yet, fearing for his people, Ambeoutin prayed to his god for guidance.

It is said Sargas appeared to Ambeoutin in a vision as a giant, fiery minotaur seated upon a throne carved from an extinct volcano. The god raised Ambeoutin into the air, the king drifting like a leaf in the wind.

“I have heard your pleas, Ambeoutin, and understand your fears. They are the grounded fears of a worthy warrior, and so I shall answer them. I will teach you, and you will teach my children.”

Honor was given as the first and foremost virtue of the Horned One’s children, for without honor there could be only savagery, as indeed had happened to the ogres.

“Honor without the strength to defend oneself is nothing more than an empty, fragile shell, easily crushed,” the deity said. “My children must be strong, for they will endure much hardship as they struggle toward their rightful destiny.”

The rest of the vision is lost to time, but Ambeoutin, once pale

brown, is said to have stepped out of his chambers that next morning colored as black as soot. He had met the god of fire and volcanoes face-to-face, and the mark of it would stay with him forever.

So Ambeoutin taught the minotaurs the codes that shaped every aspect of their existence: Honor to one’s family, one’s clan, one’s race. A minotaur’s word was inviolate, something he would sacrifice his life to defend. Those who lacked resolve brought dishonor to all.

To teach the physical strength necessary to defend one’s honor, the king introduced the first of the armed tournaments. He then decreed that all major decisions be adjudicated through formalized duels. For this purpose, he had the first arena—a simple, round structure—built.

After a reign of sixty years, Ambeoutin died. Despite his declaration that all minotaurs were equal and might rule, the people turned to his twin sons, Mithas and Kothas, who agreed to meet in the arena to decide who would lead. Yet, despite battling for over a day, they were too evenly matched. In the end, both fell, exhausted.

The people clamored equally for each to be proclaimed victor. Fearing civil war, the brothers split the kingdom in two, with Kothas ruling the southern half and Mithas the northern. They also agreed to regular tournaments between the two new kingdoms, ensuring that the fates of their realms, named for them, would forever be entwined.

Yet the twin kingdoms did not last. Kothas perished ten years later, his neck broken in a fall. Mithas moved to maintain stability in the south, but his actions were misinterpreted as an invasion. As he marched his forces there, he left his other borders thinly-defended. The ogres, recently reconstituted under a charismatic khan, invaded in great numbers, crushing the minotaurs and sweeping away both realms.

After overthrowing the ogres at the end of the Second Dragon War (2645 PC), the minotaurs rebuilt the twin kingdoms. However,

this time the gathered leaders agreed that, for better security and coordination, the minotaur people needed one absolute ruler. With this in mind, they launched the first Great Circus and declared that within a year an inaugural imperial duel would decide the first emperor.

After days of struggle, Bosigarni Es-Mithas seized victory in a duel that left him with the appellation “Bos of the Blood.” Avidly promoting the minotaurs as the future rulers of Krynn, Bos set up the temple of Sargas to spread the god’s word. He then created the Supreme Circle, the governing body overseeing the everyday workings of the empire.

With Bos’s death, the minotaurs commenced on a series of disastrous forays. Repulsed by dwarves and humans, the empire collapsed again. For several generations, the race suffered as slaves to first the dwarves, then the ogres. To better control their servants, the conquerors maintained the pretense of an emperor, but one who would answer to them, not any god.

Freedom came again in 2485 PC, when a gladiator named Makel succeeded in slaying the Grand Khan. Leading his people on a bloody swathe through their masters’ domain, Makel—later called OGREBANE—nearly wiped out the ogres.

As emperor, Makel made Nethosak, the largest northern settlement, the permanent imperial seat. Within a year, construction began on a palace. Makel ruled for forty years, dying—in a manner uncharacteristic for a minotaur—in his sleep.

His death ushered in the Age of the Pretenders, so termed because of their brief reigns. Not until the archer Jarisi did the minotaurs have a true leader again. Jarisi defended her crown for fifteen years and expanded sea exploration. In 2335 PC the minotaurs claimed their first island colony, naming it Jari-Nyos in her honor.

Jarisi’s successors once more tested the resolve of a neighbor. They looked to the lush eastern border of elven Silvanesti, which was entangled in conflict with the human empire of Ergoth to the west. But chaos erupted within the border. Mapped paths changed.

Patrols vanished. The emperor died on horseback, strangled when a vine wrapped around his throat. Unable to cope with such magic, the minotaurs retreated. The defeat again weakened them, and a reinvigorated ogre realm crushed the empire, enslaving the race for another two hundred years.

Coinciding with the defeat of Ergoth by Vinas Solamnus in 1791 PC, a minotaur named Tremoc appeared. Tremoc had crossed Ansalon four times to hunt down his mate’s killer. His dedication stirred the realm, so much so that when Tremoc entered the Circus to challenge for the throne, his adversary conceded without combat, the only time in minotaur history.

An unprepossessing ruler, Tremoc changed forever one night when, alone in the temple, he was disturbed in his prayers by a booming voice.

“Tremoc . . .” the voice called, echoing from everywhere. “You pray for your lost love, but do you love enough?”

Tremoc rose and shook his fist at the condor icon above. “There is no love more true than mine, neither on Krynn nor in the heavens!”

“Love of a mate is honorable,” the god said, “but what of your people? They are without an emperor. My chosen have free will, but with it comes responsibility. As ruler, your responsibility is greatest. Honor your mate, but love your people. They are your family now!”

A glorious red light touched the emperor, filling him with the blessing of Sargas. Tremoc emerged determined. He had a newer, vaster Circus built and strengthened the realm. Once again minotaurs established themselves on outlying islands. The kingdoms prospered.

Tremoc desired a passage through ogre lands that would give his people access to the richer, fertile human realms. The temple and the Supreme Circle preferred to avenge themselves against the elves, but Tremoc would not listen. He prepared his armies, certain of victory, but the day before battle, Tremoc was found dead, an elven dagger in his chest. He was brought in state to a grand

pyre set before the palace. It is said that the skies thundered for vengeance as the body burned.

A series of imperial duels quickly followed, as many sought the legacy of Tremoc for their own. But before the minotaurs could go to war, fresh disaster swept over their homeland.

The earthquake of 1772 PC is chronicled as the worst in minotaur history. A huge fissure split Nethosak in two. The arena caved in, killing thousands in attendance. Aftershocks ravaged the region. Despite minimal damage, Morthosak fell to disease and chaos as refugees filled it. Rebuilding would take years. Tremors continued to besiege the realm, leaving it ripe for conquest by a new nation—Istar.

Desiring trade routes, labor, and resources, Istar invaded in 1543 PC. Nethosak was razed again. General Hymdall, Istar's military commander, headed south, certain that Morthosak would easily fall.

Instead, two days from his goal, a small army commanded by the minotaur Mitos awaited him. Hymdall sent in his massive cavalry to cut down the weak lines, but from the ground suddenly arose camouflaged framework barriers covered with sharpened stakes. The swift-rising barriers gave the cavalry no escape. Horses and soldiers were impaled or thrown. Men panicked. The enemy cavalry splintered.

General Hymdall urged his infantry to the rescue, but after his men crossed the field, minotaurs emerged from hidden pits behind them. The Istarans had marched right over the enemy and now stood trapped.

Hymdall was forced to surrender. Ransoming the surviving enemy, Mitos obtained the release of the minotaurs already taken to Istar.

Beginning with Mitos's reign, the minotaurs withdrew from the rest of Ansalon. Their art and their culture were forgotten by the outside. Most recalled only their monstrous image. Terrifying tales spread. Without raising a weapon, minotaurs became more feared than ever.

When the dark goddess Takhisis unleashed the Third Dragon War in 1060 PC, her commanders saw the minotaurs as the perfect beasts of war. Serving as slave soldiers, the minotaurs became the right arm of the Warlord Crynus's legions as he swept toward Solamnia. But there the advance came to an abrupt halt as the heirs to the legacy of Vinas Solamnus mounted a steadfast resistance.

In a unique sidelight of history, one minotaur, Kaziganthi de-Orilg, slew his ogre captain and fled into the Solamnic lands. There he was saved by the legendary knight, Huma Dragonbane. An unlikely friendship developed. Kaz followed Huma through the war and would be the one to carry his body from the site of battle after Huma defeated Takhisis.

There are many tales of Kaz's later life. It is said he returned home and battled a fearsome red dragon who had secretly manipulated the minotaurs in the name of Takhisis. However, the legend takes place eight years after the Third Dragon War. As records prove, all dragons vanished at the end of the war. Still, minotaurs insist on the credence of this tale.

Once again, the minotaurs returned to their isolation. But, though the minotaurs wished to avoid the outside world, the world would not ignore them. In a dispute with the elves over sea routes, Istar inadvertently aroused the minotaurs. The empire refused to accept the presence of either side and, in 645 PC, launched an aggressive drive in the Courrain, sinking both human and elven vessels. However, by 460 PC, with all but a few regions now bowing to its dominance, Istar pushed the imperium's sea power back to its own territories, penning in the minotaurs.

With the Proclamation of Manifest Virtue in 94 PC, the King-priest, absolute ruler of Istar, declared nearly all other races inherently evil and commanded that they either be exterminated or brought into the Light. Sargas's chosen were again led from their homeland in chains. A handful of colonies survived independently through piracy, but as a nation the minotaurs ceased to exist—until the disaster that all other races lamented returned to them their birthright.

To any other land, the First Cataclysm is a time of godly fury and earth-rending horror. In response to the Kingpriest's declaration that he be worshipped as the supreme god, the heavens burned and a flaming mountain plummeted from above, plunging Istar into the depths. The Blood Sea was born. Disease and famine ravaged the continent, and war erupted.

Yet, amidst the horror, the minotaurs rejoiced. Many perished with Istar, but the majority, working distant mines and fields, survived. They overthrew their remaining masters and in fragmented groups headed home.

Home was now two vast islands on the eastern edge of the Blood Sea. Nethosak and Morthosak were nearly intact, a sign, so all believed, that Sargas had delivered his children from the Cataclysm.

Under their new leader, Toroth, the minotaurs looked to the east. Toroth expanded the new island empire, claiming stretches of the Courrain never before explored. Even after his death in 21 AC while fighting sea barbarians, Toroth's vision guided his people for generations to come.

Emboldened, the minotaurs also began to resettle the coast of Ansalon. Unfortunately, contact with the continent would bring them to the attention of a new tyrant, the dread Lord Ariakas.

A servant of Takhisis, the charismatic Ariakas gathered disenchanting humans and others into the dragonarmies in 340 AC. Ogres, goblins, and more joined his ranks. The minotaurs, too, came under his sway, albeit more reluctantly. Taken in as "allies," their position was more that of the slave-soldiers of old.

As Ariakas advanced over Ansalon, the minotaurs pushed through Balifor and, in 353 AC, prepared to attack the elves. They struck several times at the border, but were stopped short. With Ariakas's death that same year, the dragonarmies collapsed and the elves routed the minotaurs.

Left in flux, the empire did not stabilize until the rise of Chot Es-Kalin in 368 AC. Chot tightened the reins on the legions and reestablished ties with the temple of Sargas. He built the most

elaborate Circus ever. Following Toroth's lead, Chot expanded the empire's reach. By the fifteenth year of his rule, minotaurs had spread to fourteen colonies.

But in that fifteenth year came the Summer of Chaos.

In 383 AC the very gods battled amongst themselves. Horrors never before seen walked Krynn. Dragons of molten lava, shadows capable of erasing a person from time—these and other monstrosities ravaged Krynn. The Maelstrom, the whirlpool in the midst of the Blood Sea, ceased to be.

For the empire, the threat manifested in the form of the crustacean Magori and their serpentine master, the Coil. The Magori swarmed over ships and slaughtered colonies. Not until Mithas did the creatures encounter resistance. There, Sargas, god of the minotaurs, and Kiri-Jolith, the bison-headed god of just cause, put aside their differences and protected their people. The Knights of Neraka, who had come as conquerors, joined the minotaurs. Mortal heroes appeared, most notably Aryx Dragon-eye. From the east came the Kazelati, followers of the legendary renegade, Kaz.

Sailing to Ansalon, Sargas and a small band of minotaurs and humans vanquished the demon serpent, but in the terrible struggle Sargas vanished and was feared slain. Bereft of the Coil's control, the Magori were easily routed. The minotaurs had won, but at the cost of half their people.

However, distrust between the humans, the imperium, and the Kazelati grew quickly now that no threat bound them together. Chot sought to force the Kazelati into the empire but failed. The Kazelati sailed off to their uncharted homeland, vanishing. An unsteady peace existed between the empire and the knighthood.

Any dreams of expanding its tiny hold on Ansalon were shattered by the coming of Malystrix, only a year later. Even the minotaurs knew better than to face the great leviathan. But, for reasons unexplained, the isles went virtually untouched by the dragon, and the minotaurs turned ever more to the east and the unchecked growth they might find there.

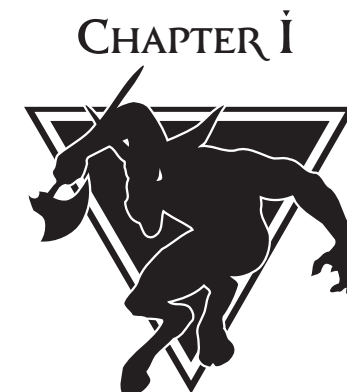
The most recent history of the empire is known only from hearsay. Chot still rules, but his reign has grown corrupt. Despite his age, he has succeeded in dispatching all challengers.

A new sect has arisen in the absence of the gods, who departed after the Summer of Chaos. The Forerunners have expanded their numbers rapidly throughout the imperium. Their vague tenets suggest that the lost loved ones of a minotaur remain around them, guiding them. The high priestess claims to speak directly to the dead and bear their messages.

There is contact with Neraka again. Much of it may rely on the health of the emperor, though, for others of rank do not trust the humans.

With the dragon overlords in control, Ansalon need not fear the minotaurs. No doubt they will be content to continue spreading east and, if so, they will become less a factor in Ansalon, eventually perhaps vanishing from the continent's history forever.

Martinus of Palanthas
35 SC



NIGHT OF BLOOD

Zokun Es-Kalin, first cousin of the emperor, Ship Master of the House of Kalin's merchant fleet . . .

They found Zokun at his estate on the wooded, northern edge of the imperial capital of Nethosak. He was fast asleep in his plush, down-filled bed. Although in command of a mighty fleet of some two hundred ships, he himself had not gone to sea for years and had no desire to do so. Zokun preferred the rewards of power to the work, and many of his tasks were handled by well-trained subordinates who knew their proper place in the imperium.

A bottle of rich and heady briarberry wine, one of the finest produced in the empire and coveted even by the lesser races beyond, stood empty next to three others previously-drained. A slim, brown form beside the fat, snoring minotaur turned over in her sleep. This was not his mate, Hila, but a younger female who hoped soon to take Hila's place.

And so she did, dying along with the Ship Master. The helmed assassins dispatched her with one stroke—compared to the four needed to gut her drunken lover. Both perished swiftly.

No servants heard them cry out. None of Zokun's family came

to his aid. Most of the former had been rounded up and taken away. The latter, including Hila, had been slain at exactly the same time as the venerable Ship Master and his mistress.



The feminine hand took the long quill pen, dipped it in a rich, red ink, and drew a line through Zokun's name. The wielder of the quill took care not to spill any of the ink on her silky gold and sable robes. She moved the pen to another name—

Grisov Es-Neros, councilor to the emperor and patriarch of the house most closely allied with that of Kalin . . .

Grisov was a scarred, thin minotaur whose fur was almost snow white. His snout had a wrinkled, deflated appearance, and over the years his brow had enveloped his eyes. Despite his grizzled countenance, the patriarch was hardly infirm. His reflexes were still those of the young champion of the Great Circus he had been years before the bloody war against the aquatic Magori. His well-schooled, well-paid healers encouraged him to sleep at a proper hour, but Grisov continued to take his late-night walks, a cherished tradition to him and others in this area of Nethosak. Grisov liked to survey his fiefdom, reminding himself that, as long as Chot was kept in power, the children of Neros would profit. He had no qualms about what part he had played over the years in propping up the emperor; the strongest and most cunning always triumphed.

The street did not seem as well tended as when he was young. Grisov recalled immaculate streets of white marble with nary a sign of refuse. These days, all sorts of trash littered the avenues. Bits and pieces of old food, broken ale bottles, and rotting vegetation offended the patriarch's sensibility. One large piece of trash, a snoring, drunken sailor, snuggled against the high, spiked wall of the abode of one of Grisov's nephews, a wastrel who lived off the hard work of his uncle.

It was all the fault of the young generation. The young could be blamed for everything. They had never learned the discipline of their elders.

Two able warriors clad in thigh-length, leather-padded metal kilts, colored sea-blue and green—the official clan colors—accompanied the robed minotaur. Each carried a long, double-edged axe shined to a mirror finish and etched with the Neros symbol—a savage wave washing over rocks—in the center of the head. Grisov thought the guards a nuisance, but at least this pair knew not to speak unless spoken to. The guards knew his routine well, knew what stops their master would make, knew what comments he would murmur and how they ought to respond.

Yet, there was one change in the routine this night. Grisov had no intention of letting drunkards invade his domain.

"Kelto, see that piece of garbage on his way. I'll not have him sully this street!"

"Aye, patriarch." With a look of resignation, the young warrior headed toward the snoring sailor.

A whistling sound made the patriarch's ears stiffen. Recognition of what that sound presaged dawned just a second later—a second too late.

A gurgling noise made the elder warrior turn to see his guard transfixed, a wooden shaft piercing his throat.

As the hapless warrior fell, Grisov turned to Kelto—only to find him sprawled on the ground, his blood already pooling on the street.

Peering around, the elder minotaur discovered that the drunken sailor had vanished.

A decoy.

Grisov reached for his sword and cried, "Villains! Cowards! Come to me, you dishonorable—"

Two bolts struck him from opposite directions, one piercing a lung, the other sinking deep into his back. Blood spilled over his luxurious blue robe, overwhelming the green Neros symbol on his chest.

With a short gasp, the patriarch dropped his blade and collapsed beside his guards.



A young minotaur, clad in plain, ankle-length robes of white trimmed with red, approached the senior priestess, bringing a silver flask of wine for the empty chalice sitting next to the pile of parchments. The priestess looked up briefly, then flicked her eyes toward the half-melted candle by which she checked her lists. The servant glanced that way but saw nothing. The servant finished refilling the goblet, then quickly backed away.

“Tyra de-Proul?” asked the senior priestess. She was a chestnut-colored female, still attractive in the eyes of her kind. Her words were whispered to the open air. She fixed her gaze in the general direction of a lengthy silk tapestry depicting a white, almost ghost-like bird ascending to the starry heavens. “You are certain?” the priestess asked the emptiness.

A moment later, her ears twitched in clear satisfaction. She nodded, then looked over the lists. Many lines were already crossed out, but she soon located the one she desired.

A smile crossed her visage as she brought the quill down. “Another page complete.”



On the island of Kothas, sister realm to Mithas and a two-day journey from the capital, Tyra de-Proul stirred from sleep. Her mate had been due to return this evening from his voyage to Sarg-onath, a minor minotaur colony located on the northeastern peninsula of Ansalon, but he had not yet arrived. Feeling pensive, Tyra pushed back her thick, gray mane and rose.

Jolar’s ship might just be late. That shouldn’t bother her at all, yet some vague dread insisted on disturbing her asleep.

The tall, athletic female poured some water. As appointed administrator of the emperor’s interests, Tyra made constant sea trips between the imperial capital and this island’s principal city of Morthosak. Jolar’s lateness could readily be attributed to any number of innocent causes, even foul weather.

A muffled sound beyond her door brought her to full attention. At this hour, no one in the house other than the sentries should be

awake, and the sentries knew to make their rounds without causing clamor of any sort.

Tyra seized her sword and scabbard, then headed toward the door. Weapon drawn, she opened it—

And was stunned to see a frantic struggle taking place between Jolar and three helmed minotaurs at the foot of the steps.

One of the intruders had a hand over her mate’s muzzle, but Jolar twisted free and shouted, “Flee, Tyra! The house is under siege! There is no—”

He gasped, a dagger in his side. Jolar fell to the floor.

Like all minotaurs, Tyra had been trained from childhood first and foremost as a warrior. As a young female, she had helped fight back the vile Magori when the crustaceans rose from the sand and surf, the destruction of all minotaurs their sole desire. Never in her life had she turned from a battle, whether on the field or in the political arena.

With a savage cry, Tyra threw herself down the steps, her sword cutting the air as she descended.

The nearest foe stumbled against her mate’s corpse. Tyra thrust the blade through the helmed assassin’s unprotected throat. Before he had even dropped to the floor, she did battle with the second, a young female who moved with the haughtiness of one who thought that before her stood merely a decrepit elder. Tyra caught the intruder’s blade and twisted it to the side. She kicked at her opponent and watched with satisfaction as the latter went flying back into a nearby wall, knocked unconscious.

In the dim illumination, she made out two dead bodies in the lower hall. One also wore a helm, but the other Tyra recognized even though he lay muzzle down.

Mykos. Her eldest son. In three days he would have become the newest addition to the Imperial Guard. General Rahm Es-Hestos, the commander of the emperor’s elite, had personally recommended Mykos, a moment of great pride for his mother.

An axe had done him in. His blood still pooled beside his hacked torso.

Tyra screamed, swinging anew at the last of her attackers. He continued to back away from her.

“Stand still so I can smite the head from your body, you dishonorable dog! My mate—my children!—demand your blood!”

Still edging away, her opponent said nothing.

Too late did the obvious occur to the outraged minotaur. Tyra de-Proul wheeled quickly, but not quickly enough.

The female assassin whom she thought had been knocked unconscious stabbed Tyra through the heart.

“Stupid old cow,” the assassin muttered.

Tyra slipped to the floor and joined her mate in death.



So many names crossed out. So few remaining.

She looked over the pages, noting the survivors. Some looked to be of no major consequence, but a handful tugged at her, urgently.

A chill wind suddenly coursed through the stone chamber that served as her private sanctum. She quickly protected the candle.

My Lady Nephera . . . came a voice in her head, a voice rasping and striving for breath.

Nephera glanced beyond the candle, seeing only glimpses of a shadowy figure at the edge of her vision. At times, she could make out details—such as a hooded cloak—and within the cloak a minotaur unusually gaunt of form. Of the eyes that stared back at her, she sometimes made out the whites, but this monstrous phantasm had no pupils.

The cloak hung in damp tatters with glimpses of pale flesh beneath. Whenever this particular visitor appeared, the smell of the sea always seemed to accompany him—the sea as the eternal graveyard.

As she reached for a grape from the bowl set by her side—the only sustenance she would permit herself this glorious night—the elegantly clad High Priestess of the Temple of the Forerunners waited for the ominous figure to speak again.

The shade’s decaying mouth did not move, but once more Lady

Nephera heard a grating voice. *Four of the Supreme Circle now join me in death.*

She knew three names already, but the addition of a fourth pleased her. “Who? Name all four so that I can be certain!”

General Tohma, Boril, General Astos . . .

All names she had. “Who else?”

Kesk the Elder.

“Ah, excellent.” Pulling free one of the parchments, Nephera located the name and gave it a swift, inky stroke—as lethal to the council member in question as the axes and swords that had actually killed him. The elimination of the highest-ranking members of the Supreme Circle, the august governing body under the emperor, gave her immense satisfaction. They, more than most, she held responsible for all that had happened to her and her husband—and to the empire.

Thinking of her mate, the Forerunner priestess scowled. “My husband’s hand-picked warriors move quick, but not quick enough. This should be finished by now!”

Send out your own, responded the gaunt shadow. *Your trusted Protectors, mistress?*

She would have dearly loved to do so, but Hotak had insisted otherwise. This had to be done without the temple. The military would not look with favor on her husband if it appeared that the Forerunners influenced his actions.

“No. We shall leave this to my husband. The triumph must be his and his alone.” Lady Nephera picked up the stack of parchments, her intense black gaze burning into each name. “Still, the temple will have its say.”



Throughout the length and span of the empire, the Night of Blood continued relentlessly.

On Mito, three days’ journey east of the imperial capital, the governor of the most populated island colony rushed forth to greet two massive vessels that had sailed into port. An honor guard had

quickly been arranged, for who but an important dignitary would arrive without warning and with such a show of force? The captain of the first vessel marched a squad of helmed warriors down to salute the assembled well-wishers—and then executed the governor where he stood.

On the island of Duma, the home of General Kroj, commander of the empire's southern forces and hero of the battles of Turak Major and Selees, became the scene of a pitched battle. The fight went on until dawn, when the barriers of the general's estate were finally broken down by his own troops, who joined the attackers. Kroj committed ritual suicide with a dagger even as helmed fighters burst down the door to his study. They would find his family already dead, their throats slit by Kroj just prior to his own demise.

In Mithas, Edan Es-Brog, the high priest of the Temple of Sargonnas, would be discovered dead in his sleep, a mixture of poisons in his evening potion.

Veria de-Goltyn, Chief Captain of the eastern fleet, drowned as she sought to escape her burning ship. Her own captains had been paid to turn on her.

Konac, imperial taxmaster, was stabbed more than a dozen times at the door of the emperor's coffers. A stronger figure than his rotund appearance indicated, Konac would outlast his guards and two assassins, making it to just within a few yards of the Imperial Guard's headquarters before dying. No one within heard his final choked warning.

A massive fleet, organized quickly and secretly over the course of weeks and combining the might of over three dozen turncoat generals and captains, spread out over the expanse of minotaur interests. Some of them had been on their journeys for days already. Before the night would conclude, twenty-two colonial governors, their principal officers, and hundreds of loyal subordinates would be executed. All but a handful of the major territories and settlements within a week's reach of the main island would be under the iron control of Hotak's followers.

All of this, Lady Nephera saw as it happened. She had eyes everywhere. She knew more than her husband's lackeys. Even the emperor, with his complex and far-reaching network of messengers and spies, knew but a fraction of what the high priestess knew.

Thinking of the emperor, Nephera turned her brooding eyes to one particular page, reading the only name still listed. No furious stain of ink expunged this name's existence, yet by her estimate, only minutes remained before she would have the ultimate pleasure.

The high priestess read the name over and over, picturing the puffy, overfed countenance, the vain, ambitious, clownish visage.

Chot Es-Kalin.



In his younger days, the massive, graying minotaur had been the scourge of the Circus, the unbeatable champion to whom all had deferred in admiration. Chot the Terrible, he was called. Chot the Invincible! Over the span of his life and decades-long rule, scores of would-be rivals had fallen to his bloody battle-axe. No minotaur had ever held the title of emperor for so many years.

"More wine, my lord?"

Chot studied the slim, dark-brown female lounging next to him on the vast silk-sheeted bed. She had not only the energy of youth, but the beauty as well. Chot's last mate had died over a decade ago, and since that time he had preferred enticing visitors to a regular companion. The much-scarred emperor knew that this added to the list of grievances his political foes spouted about him, but he did not care. His foes could do nothing so long as he accepted the imperial challenges and faced down his opponents in the Great Circus.

They could do nothing so long as each of their champions fell dead at his feet.

He shifted his great girth and handed his mistress the empty goblet. Years of living the glory of an emperor had taken some toll on his body, but Chot still considered himself the ultimate warrior, the envy of other males, and the desire of all females.

“Is that enough, my lord?” his companion said as she topped off his drink.

“Enough, Maritia.” Chot took a gulp of the rich, red liquid, then looked the female warrior over, savoring the curve of her lithe form. Some female minotaurs looked too much like males. Chot preferred curves. A female should look like a female, especially when she had been granted the glorious company of her emperor.

His bed companion replaced the squat wine bottle on the carved, marble table. The well-cleaned remains of a roasted goat sat atop a silver tray next to the bottle, and beside that stood a wooden bowl filled with exotic fruit shipped to the capital from one of the farthest and most tropical colonies.

Maritia leaned forward, rubbing the soft tip of her muzzle against him. Curiously, the image of her father flashed into his mind. Chot had recently solved the problem of her insufficiently loyal and increasingly irritating father by sending him far, far away on a mission of some import—and some danger as well. If he succeeded, his glory would reflect on Chot. If he died in combat—a more likely outcome—so much the better.

Chot belched, and the world briefly swam around him. The emperor rolled onto his back, snorting. Enough entertainment for tonight. Time he got some sleep.

There was a fuzzy sound in the distance.

“What’s that?” he rumbled, trying to rise.

“I heard nothing, my lord,” replied Maritia. She rubbed her graceful hand over his matted brown and gray fur.

Chot relaxed again. It would be a shame when he had to banish her, but she would never forgive him once she found out what he had done to her father.

“Sleep, my lord,” Maritia cooed. “Sleep forever.”

He jarred awake—in time to see the dagger poised above his head.

Drunken, tired, and out of shape, Chot nonetheless reacted with swiftness. He caught her wrist and managed to twist the blade free. The dagger clattered on the marble floor.

“What in the name of Argon’s Chain do you think you’re doing?” he roared, his head pounding.

In response, she raked her long, sharp nails across the side of his muzzle.

Roaring, Chot released the fool. Maritia scrambled away from the bed as the emperor put a hand to his bloody face.

“Vixen!” Legs protesting, the immense minotaur rose. “You little cow!”

She glared at the last insult, one of the worst things anyone could call a minotaur. Chot stood a head taller and still carried much muscle under his portly girth, but the female seemed strangely unafraid.

The emperor snorted. Maritia would learn fear.

Then he heard the same fuzzy noise as earlier, only closer.

“What’s that?” he mumbled, forgetting her for the moment. “Who’s fighting out there?”

“That would be your Imperial Guard, my lord,” Maritia said, pronouncing his title as if it were excrement. “They are busy falling to the swords and axes of your enemies.”

“What’s that?” Chot struggled to think clearly. His guards. He had to call his guards. “Sentries! Attend me!”

Maritia smirked. “They are otherwise detained, my lord.”

The emperor’s stomach suddenly churned. Too much wine, too much goat. Chot put one hand on the bed. “I must think. I must think.”

“Think all you like, but my father should be here shortly.”

“Your . . . father?” Battling against the nausea and the pounding headache, Chot froze. “Hotak’s here? Impossible. I sent him to the mainland weeks ago!”

“And despite your treachery, he’s returned. Returned to demand the justice due to him, due the entire imperium!”

With a roar, Chot lunged for her. Maritia eluded his grasp. The emperor turned, seized his favorite axe, and swung wildly. He came nowhere near the treacherous female, though he did drive her back.

“Assassin! Traitor! Traitors!”

Maritia attempted to retrieve her dagger, but Chot swung again. The heavy blade of the twin-edged axe buried itself in his bed, cutting through expensive sheets, through the rich, down padding, and even through the oak frame.

As the bed collapsed in a heap, the emperor stumbled back. Through bleary eyes he glared at Hotak’s daughter.

“Slay me if you can,” Maritia sneered. “But you’ll not live more than a few minutes longer.” Her ears twitched toward the window behind Chot. “You hear that?”

Keeping his gaze on the female at all times, Chot stepped back to the balcony. He glanced over his shoulder just long enough to see that the palace grounds swarmed with dark figures heading toward the building.

“Father will be here very soon now,” Maritia called to him.

“Then he’ll find you begging him to save your life . . . cow!”

Chot stumbled toward her, reaching clumsily with one hand while with the other he threatened her with the axe. Maritia dodged readily, leading Chot on a merry chase through the room, mocking his growing rage and taunting him with her derision.

He swung wildly. Rounded crystalline vases, minotaur statuettes of emerald, tapestries of spun gold, marble icons of dragons and other fearsome beasts—the treasures he had accumulated through his lengthy reign—scattered in shards.

His own body finally rebelled. Even as fists began to pound upon the door, Chot the Invincible fell against the broken bed, his head spinning, his insides a maelstrom.

“Chot the Magnificent,” he heard Maritia mutter. “Rather you should be called Chot the Pathetic.”

“I’ll . . . I’ll . . .” The emperor could say no more.

He heard her open the door, heard the sounds of armed and armored figures marching into his chamber.

“And this is supposed to be the supreme warrior, the epitome of what our people seek to be?”

The emperor fought to raise his head.

They wore the traditional silver helms. Nose guards ran along their muzzles. Their breastplates were also silver, with the ancient symbol of the condor clutching the axe emblazoned on the chest in deep crimson. Well-worn, padded-metal kilts with red tips at the bottom completed their outfits.

These were his soldiers, warriors of the legions—and they had dared such treachery!

In the forefront of the traitorous band stood their leader. Although otherwise clad as his companions, he also wore the richly crested helmet reserved for the highest generals of the empire. The crest, made of thick, excellent horse hair, hung far back. Over his shoulders hung a long, flowing crimson cape.

Dark brown of fur, slightly over seven feet, well-muscled, and with very angular features for one of his race, the leader glared down at his lord with distaste. A pommel-handled sword hung in the scabbard at his side; a large battle-axe was in his grip.

“Chot Es-Kalin,” announced the newcomer, nearly spitting out the name.

“Hotak de-Droka,” responded the emperor. The de- before the clan name indicated House Droka had its roots on the island of Kothas, considered, especially by those who bore the more regal Es-, the lesser of the two kingdoms making up the heart of the empire.

Hotak looked to his daughter. His expression turned even grimmer. “You’ve sacrificed far too much, daughter.”

“But it wasn’t so terrible a sacrifice, father,” she responded, turning back to smile coldly at Chot. “Only passing minutes.”

“You . . . damned vixen!” Chot struggled to rise. If he could just get his hands around her throat—

The emperor fell to his hands and knees again. “I feel sick,” he murmured.

General Hotak kicked at Chot’s side. The immense, graying minotaur dropped flat, moaning.

Hotak snorted. He took a step toward his emperor. “Chot Es-Kalin. Chot the Invincible. Chot the Terrible.” The one-eyed

commander raised his weapon high. In the light cast by the torches of his followers, the symbol of the rearing horse etched into the axe head seemed to flare to life. “Chot the *Fool*. Chot the *Lying*. Chot the *Treacherous*. Time to put your misery and our shame to an end.”

Chot could not think. He could not stand. He could no longer even raise a finger. This had to be a mistake! How could this happen?

“I am Chot,” he mumbled, looking down in utter bewilderment. He felt the contents of his stomach finally coming up. “I am your *emperor*.”

“No more,” said Hotak. “No more.”

The axe came down.

When it was over, the general handed the bloody weapon to one of his aides then removed his helmet. Dark brown hair with a touch of gray flowed behind his head.

Nodding toward the body, Hotak commanded, “Remove that blubbery carcass for burning. Make sure nothing remains. As for the head . . . see to it that there’s a high pole set up at the very entrance to the palace grounds. Make certain that anyone who passes by will be able to see it from some distance. Understood?”

“Aye, General—aye, my lord!” the warrior said, correcting himself.

General Hotak de-Droka looked at the soldier, then at his daughter. Maritia smiled and went down on one knee.

One by one, the rest of those who followed him knelt before he who had slain Chot the Terrible, knelt before the new emperor of the minotaur race.