

Great Barbarism #1

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Chapter One: Arch Banuk's Hut

Bridging the distance felt like too much of a feat. On his way here, Galouch had been brooding over the orders. Having tried to reason it out with Aerol, and failing, he was resigned to the fact that his life could well be forfeit. Arch Banuk's rumoured powers to construct matter had seemed to be exaggeration, and yet everybody who spoke of him did so with fear in them, as if a large crooked shadow had fallen upon them. Just his name invoked fear, with eyes looking from side to side as if he was watching or listening. Aerol dismissed it as mindless rumour leading to irrational behaviour, but Aerol had not seen the sorcerer, and neither had Galouch. What if they were right and they were trifling with a force they should not? Perhaps Arch Banuk's threats and reputation were to be taken seriously, and it raised a new dimension for Aerol's plan to march to the mega-fortress and occupy it in his name. What if Arch Banuk forbade it and it was sorcerer versus Aerol? Galouch did not wish to be trapped in that situation.

On his way to open communication with the notorious sorcerer Arch Banuk ahead of Aerol's planned march to the mega-fortress, it was not without misgiving that Galouch peered at the hut from a distance. It was an odd structure for the surface, with uneven curves jutting out and haphazard triangular peep holes, or were they large enough to be windows? It wasn't easy to tell from this distance. It was squashed between a building and a featureless platform. Venturing over there was foolhardy, but he armed himself with his intellect and hoped to prevail, as he excelled in that area.

Having entered the hut, Galouch did not know what to think. It was empty and abandoned, just as it had been on the outside. There was nothing here; just featureless walls that pressed in on him with a force he did not understand. There was a rear section with a low overhang, and just as he was about to venture there he spotted a single strange feature he had not before: it was a stone creature hanging from the wall in a squatted position, with pointed grey wings attached to the wall. Its miniature arms were held beneath its chin, as if in speculation, and its eyes were stony with little black pinpricks. Fascinated by such an architectural wonder, Galouch moved his head to look closely, eye-to-eye with it.

'Not ever have I seen such an oddity on Majesty, nor read about its like in the past, save on the mega-fortress. The sorcerer? What purpose could a stone creature have?'

The pinpricks of eyes expanded, like a thick oozing liquid spilling out of a container, and in horror Galouch's own eyes widened and as they were fixed on the unfolding terror, he stumbled back and was pulled by a force perhaps of his own making, to the opposite wall, stricken.

The stone creature's wings stretched and it flapped in the air like a hideous demon, making little chanting cursing noises and happily hovering towards Galouch who had sweat pouring down his head and appendages. His twenty-fingered hands were wringing in the air.

The stone creature descended, planting itself at Galouch's feet.

'You await my master. When he arrives the spell will be undone and you will see his hut as it is.'

'What are you?'

'I'm a gargoyle; a creation of Arch Banuk's sorcery. I can watch, make noises and take shape. I'm here to keep my eyes on you while he comes.'

Its eyes were black orbs that expanded and contracted above a muscular chest that would not, in shape, have looked odd on a Tekromun. Its little body bobbed up and down. Galouch had half a mind to kick it and flee, but his terror at seeing the unearthly animation of the stone compelled him not to move.

He slumped down on the wall, and looked past the hut, where there was a small irregular triangular window that the gargoyle was attempting to fly up to now, while wobbling in the air, as if its energies had tired. Galouch got up, worried that the creature would escape and he wouldn't have his audience with the sorcerer. Reaching out with a single hand, he tried to grasp it, and when his fingers clasped around the shaking hard body, it turned to a sooty mess and smoke blinded his vision, causing him to rub it out of his eyes frantically, and look down.

When he was able to see again, there was only a small pile of soot on the ground, and he felt guilty at having killed the gargoyle.

‘That was a living being, a marvel even, and I’ve just killed it with my bare hands.’

Through the light of the window came a howling noise, and Galouch looked up in trepidation. Blackness filled the window and throbbed forward; a shadow of encompassing scope. It leaked into the hut and took shape in the form of an individual Tekromun, male, wearing a black cape behind sorcery robes, a medallion, and gems on rings on his fingers. The dark blue eyes fixed him as much as his dress did, and Galouch gasped.

‘You can repay me for your murder of my creature later. For now, we have things to discuss, emissary. Or should I say, Aerol’s mentor?’

‘I have a question, about your stone creature, gargoyle,’ Galouch said.

They made their way to the back room under a low hanging arch, and Arch Banuk bade him to be seated with a flourish of his hand. At least the sorcerer had manners. Galouch found the chair was the second feature of the interior of the hut, and a few more surrounded him in this back part of the hut. There were dark rectangular holes, with unknown purpose, with no light pouring from the outside, which suggested they weren’t windows. A large brown bag was held by Arch Banuk’s right hand as he sat in the opposite chair, which was furnished with a material for comfort that Galouch was not familiar with at Aerol’s fortress. It looked like Nemean luxury.

‘My instincts tell me you have more than one question, Galouch, but do continue before I ask my questions.’

Arch Banuk has questions. Of course, I have arrived here for a purpose he was not meant to know.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s a creation of mine to watch, move, and memorise external information.’

Arch Banuk’s pale face with red freckles moved up and down strangely, as if he was not used to communicating, or only did so awkwardly. Was he even Tekromun?

‘Why did you make it in that shape and size?’

‘It blends in with the buildings of the surface. I suppose it surprised you.’

‘Was it truly a living being?’

‘Does it matter?’

Galouch was struck by the sorcerer’s heartlessness.

‘Yes, because I want to know if I can kill such things or if I should have felt bad about it.’

‘It serves a purpose, and that’s all I need to know. For your benefit, though, living beings have memory and form. It also has memory and form.’

‘It is safe to assume it has a soul.’

‘It is loyal, and reliable. It has a bit of personality and character. If we’re speaking about souls then we are speaking about living beings that should be safeguarded and respected; left alone to self-determine their lives?’

‘I’m speaking about its essence, emotion, personality, and thought processes. They can not be disregarded on a whim,’ Galouch said.

How far can I disagree with the sorcerer and hope to remain unscathed? I don’t want to anger him.

‘I was not the one who killed it,’ Arch Banuk said.

It was said with a note of finality and a subtle implication of accusation, and the guilt flared up in Galouch. Frightened as he was by the sorcerer’s unknown abilities, he saw he was being preyed upon emotionally, and he was unable to manage his own behaviour. It was not like him to be like this; he was one to keep his head. It was as if something was sucking away at his aura of control and his intellectual calm.

‘Now, I think it is my turn to ask why you are here, on Aerol’s behalf, on this day?’

‘My warlord, Aerol, intends to march to the mega-fortress and he wants to make sure you are content with this or to further understand you. You have quite a reputation among his soldiers and civilians and he wants to lay their fears at rest.’

‘Thank you for your honesty, Galouch. Aerol is not my friend. His soldiers snoop on my abode and torture others for information about me. Their violence leads to guilt, and they cover this guilt by blaming me for my immense powers. Aerol’s ego and sense of superiority in attempting to enter the mega-fortress is his ambition. I don’t see why you would think it has something to do with me, unless you’re all afraid I will attack en route.’

‘Aerol was unsure what your motivations were.’

‘Aerol was, but what about you, mentor? Aerol is a brute, but you’re a scholar and you know more about battle strategy and study than Aerol, as far as I’m aware of *your* reputation.’

‘I thought it was unwise to come here. I thought Aerol was playing with fire. I still have reservations about the effectiveness of becoming familiar with you, for Aerol’s sake.’

‘You disagreed with him, and yet he went ahead and ordered you to come here, alone. Does he want you dead? Or, it could be that he knows his soldiers will return of unsound mind because of their nasty habit of investigating where they should leave me alone. He can’t have thought much about your welfare.’

‘Aerol’s decisions are sometimes disappointing, but that is why I’m his mentor—’

Arch Banuk held up a hand to cut him off, and it seemed to physically cut off Galouch’s speech. Galouch looked at the black gloved hand in a fixed expression. His entire breath was being held by that palm.

‘You see me as the enemy, and that is because I am different. However, I see Warlord Aerol as the enemy. His strength and unusual abilities in combat have not gone unnoticed and he uses these to his advantage. I have a few questions to ask about Aerol, and I hope you will help me answer them. Then, I will convince you why Aerol’s approach to improving the surface will not work.’

Galouch nodded in strong agreement. What Arch Banuk said made complete sense, and yet he wondered why he had left his questioning mind behind in an ignored corner of his mind, and why it felt so good to be in agreement with this reassuring sorcerer’s presence. Was it because he spoke with an intellectual authority Aerol lacked, or maybe it’s because he understood things Aerol could not, would not?

‘Tell me about your master, Aerol.’

‘I cannot,’ he said automatically.

‘He interests me. Would you not want to speak of his great achievements?’

‘I could, I suppose. It can’t do any harm to speak of his achievements.’

‘Begin with his history. How did he become the great Warlord Aerol?’

‘He used to lead packs of warriors; like soldiers but without formal military training. Training to be a warrior, itself, was highly competitive and groups of them would work together to bring down the weakest or those they disagreed with. When Aerol had a disagreement with the current warrior leader, orders were given to take Aerol down ahead of the final challenge, when they were due to fight to settle their disagreement. Aerol survived, but not without difficulty. The experience changed him, and turned him paranoid, antagonistic, vicious. He often told me how it had changed him, and made him see life on the surface for what it was: barbarism. Aerol used his determination to change how things were, to control unrestrained brutality and barbarism by strengthening leadership and applying a code of doing things that all warriors were bound to. All warriors were to undergo formal military training, and were taught obedience and goodwill to differentiate themselves from warriors.’

‘Did it work?’

‘Yes, to an extent. Aerol’s soldiers are better behaved than his rivals and leaderless soldiers, unless Aerol’s nasty edge gets the better of him.’

‘Continue ...’

‘None dared challenge Aerol one-on-one after he cast the warrior leader down, earning him the title of “Warrior”, with a capital. However, none joined him out of choice, and so he relied on finding trusted Tekromun to help him lead.’

‘Such as yourself?’

‘Yes, I suppose.’

‘And this legendary sword that is referred to in tomes?’

‘It was his father’s sword, and was meant to symbolise courage, heroism, and leadership; traits Aerol found difficult to aspire to. His father was well known for having vanquished villains and legendary monsters. Aerol doesn’t know much about it, but we scholars believe his father was protecting him from evil by not letting him know about such creatures.’

‘Creatures?’

‘I refer to the beasts.’

‘Continue ... does this sword have any special powers?’

‘No, Guardian breaks every time it is met by a formidable foe or weapon, and had to be remade by Aerol’s mother. Aerol’s mother has now deceased, and so has his father. One more break and it is history.’

‘Tell me of his Shifter abilities!’

‘I do not know of what you speak. Shifters are not known to exist: there is no known proof of their difference on the surface.’

‘You and I both know what shifters are, as experienced scholars, and that Aerol is likely one of them. There is no cause for pretence in my company.’

‘Very well. I have, I confess, noticed some of his preternatural abilities. I believe he inherited some of them from both of his parents who possessed fantastic practical skills and abilities. Combined, in his blood, it has made him stronger than either. His powers have increased with time, and certainly since he has become a warlord, but this could be due to age and practice. Some of the records of his conflicts suggest he grew stronger having fought against groups of enemies – senses, speed, strength, dexterity, and combat mastery – because of the challenge, perhaps.’

‘What else do I need to know?’

‘The higher in rank he became, the more inflexible he has become. It becomes increasingly difficult for him to factor in other Tekromun’s advice.’

‘His skills have made him arrogant?’

‘No, it’s not his skills. His discipline has made him arrogant, and his tolerance for those who betray him is low. Suffering the warriors’ attack and losing his parents didn’t help. As a leader, he becomes ever efficient, and ruthlessness is his tactic.’

‘So he does have weaknesses. Other Tekromun may be his weakness. I find this interesting. Your information will help me save the surface from his barbarism, which is clearly no different from the other types you described. When his ruthless despotism has ended, the surface will be free from fighting and suffering, as you intend.’

‘You will be able to work in peace, and I will teach you ways of protecting yourself on the surface to safeguard the knowledge that is the cornerstone of all Tekromun life. Peace, knowledge, and understanding lead to wisdom. Barbarous violence and masculinity only have one destination, and that is the chasm.’

‘Your concerns about Aerol are not unfounded. Do not hesitate or believe you are betraying your ward. You are doing what is best for all Tekromun, just as Aerol thinks he is, but the latter is misguided. Not all Tekromun are fit for active military duty; I never was. As you said, his inflexibility will mean he will never understand you; he listens to you “less and less”, you said. With me, you will be safe. We scholars have always studied life and been made outcasts for it. Together, with our combined knowledge and my skills in sorcery, we can change that.’

‘How? What about the mega-fortress? Aerol will spill blood to get inside.’

‘That is his nature, I’m afraid. I will stop Aerol and we’ll both enter. There may be blood, but I will do my best to limit it. I don’t want Aerol’s death; I just want to stop him from seizing the mega-fortress. It’s not likely he would have succeeded, but with his unusual abilities, we can’t be sure. Take this key. You see this large pile, don’t you? Take it and tell Aerol you have brought him the key. Keep hold of it; Aerol trusts you after all. Then, when the time is right and I have Aerol distracted, you will use it and we’ll enter the fortress. Aerol won’t be able to use the key – my experiments have assured me of this.’

‘I see, you are sceptical, but the steps you are taking are non-violent and simple. After all of this is over, I can promise you a place untouched by the surface as well; a place for study.’

‘What about the future of the surface?’

‘Great things await!’

Chapter Two: Warlord Aerol and the Apprentice

Five Days Before MF Day

‘I don’t want to hear about the sorcerer and his immense power, Galouch. In five days it’s MF day and I need everybody disciplined and calm. Spiralling out-of-control rumours won’t do anything to help.’

‘Yes, Aerol, from a military point of view, but we need a discussion about this villain before we make hasty decisions. We’ve never dealt with or confronted Arch Banuk directly. This isn’t my fear speaking when I say it may not bode well.’

Aerol threw his hand out in reaction and walked to the side of the room, looked away, and then looked askance at Galouch.

‘We’re marching today. We’ve had this on the calendar for a while. Nobody is going to stop that.’

‘I’m not asking you to stop it Aerol, As your friend and mentor, I’m asking you to listen and consider alternatives. I don’t wish to influence your mind.’

‘You’ve just said the word “influence” Galouch.’

‘It’s a key word I heard, as with “you”.’

Galouch held out his hands, in what could have been persuasion, or personal offence.

‘Have I displeased your, Aerol? Why the distrust?’

Aerol placed his palms down on his thighs and forced out a few breaths.

‘I’m tired of the collective behaviour in this fortress. It has done enough already to sabotage this march, and we haven’t even left. I don’t want to listen to a mentor who tells me that what I’ve ordered and planned is not possible because my soldiers can’t pull themselves together.’

Aerol waved his hand upward, in a sweep of accusation towards his soldiers.

‘And if it wasn’t MF day? Without all the pressure around you, would you just ignore the sorcerer?’

Breathing and staring at the wall for inspiration, Aerol regained his breath and calm.

‘I don’t know how to deal with the sorcerer. Who does?’

‘He’s a threat, Aerol. Your soldiers return with stories of his powers. We must confront him before we march to the mega-fortress.’

‘And allow another rival to make MF day theirs by reaching the fortress before us?’

‘We’re on your schedule, Aerol. None of the other rivals can amass a force large enough to stop us. We’ve achieved that much.’

‘No, Galouch, I won’t do it. If you’re so brainwashed into thinking the sorcerer poses a threat, then you can confront him yourself. Go on, to his hut, far north of the mega-fortress and then return and let me know what his plans are.’

‘The journey is long ... two days each way, nearly.’

‘You’ll be back by the morning of MF day, before we march, if you prepare now.’

‘Protection?’ Galouch said.

He was already preoccupied visualising the final preparations for the fortress and had lost interest in the conversation, seeing plans beyond the realm of the visible. It was just Galouch and he was being as weary and irritable as the rest, recently. It’d be better once he was out of sight.

‘The sorcerer does not enjoy soldiers. Your protection is without them.’

‘Bandits could find me, and capture me, ahead of our ordeal. Would you ransom me?’

‘We don’t have any other choice. Just do it, Galouch. I’ve plans to finalise, and you bother me with that ingratiating smile.’

‘As you wish, Warlord Aerol.’

Aerol didn’t see him turn, and when he looked back to see if he was alone, Galouch had disappeared, leaving a cold draught behind him.

In Aerol’s situation room, he was thinking fast, Today was the day his fortunes would change forever. The end was in sight, and the efforts he had made to build his warlordship and fight back against the torrent of warriors, soldiery, and barbarism would reap rewards. He had never been in a stronger

position. On a golden plate the mega-fortress sat, waiting to be assailed ... and opened. Its secrets would be revealed. No one else deserved this reward but him.

In a corner of the situation room was a stockpile of theoretical models – plates used as model battlefields, slotting inside one another in such an arrangement as to resemble a puzzle the height of a shelf of tomes. Much had been built. He slid a few out with two fingers, in delicate precision, and then slotted them in a higher location, and then stood up straight to regard the rectangular mega-fortress model at the top. His great palms hovered towards it and he could feel the warmth of them radiating around the model's outer rectangle – a force-field of control. Everything in his situation room and personal chamber was inside his control. It made him content.

Such models were the work of phantom enemies conjured in visualising meditation – the same phantoms he used as guides to train his mish-mash of soldiers, who were all complex and individually taught by him, and then expected to follow orders in groups and conform to his rules. It wasn't always so simple – a lack of control brought out agitation and aggression in him. And yet, the entire warlordship, his soldiers, his triumphs, and today's march, were products of his control.

Aerol found his meditation mat, and sat cross-legged with his hands on his knees, and he closed his eyes. He could see the path to the mega-fortress in his mind and his vigorous determination and tense manner in keeping his soldiers on a tight leash. The more he pushed them about, the more they fought back and broke rank, and he couldn't march in this way. He was everywhere, trying to solve every single problem. Too many of them were tired from being abed with females, and couldn't listen to his orders without stifling yawns. They reached half way before in-fighting on a large bridge.

Eventually Aerol regained order and he took a few breaths to maintain control. They set off again, but distracted and slow, they became the target of smaller raiders buzzing around their flanks. Furious with the turn of the day, Aerol took matters into his own hands and smashed heads together, cracking skulls, but he used a lot of aggression and muscle power, and as soon as they reach the mega-fortress at nightfall the next day – a journey that shouldn't have taken this long – they camp. He's stabbed in his sleep by a soldier who wanted more liberty to march without rigid guidelines. He kills the soldier, but the stab is deep, cutting, and painful; affecting his focus and restricting his movement.

The soldiers break apart, and what small resources they have isn't enough to sustain them as they feebly assailed the mega-fortress, before breaking apart and deciding that their goal was futile. Rumours of enemy movements worry them into organising a retreat and coming to the conclusion that the mega-fortress was too unassailable for the likes of such temperamental soldiers, and Aerol is wroth at their attempt. MF day is a failure.

In conclusion, the tense atmosphere of these earlier days would affect the outcome of the important ones, First, the females had to be locked away from the males and before anybody else had to calm down, he had to. It would start with his breathing, and then he would extend it to a feeling: not the discoloured brown-red of chaos and bloodlust, but the light grey calming energy of the present enjoyment of air and daytime – those natural feelings of pleasure he ignored when he was angry. It blossomed out from his still, seated, form and spread. His eyes opened, and he experienced a moment of clarity.

He decided his first course of action, at least for the time being, had to be to lock the females away. His soldiers could not be trusted. He moved with decisiveness, past the tens of muscle-laden soldiers who stood sentry down every claustrophobic corridor giving a nod of familiarity, a salute, as he passed. Down corridors and steps he went. None of the steps were in logical places and he swooped down the levels of the fortress, past corridor after corridor of soldiers with impressive stature – all the varied tools that were his accomplishments.

Once he reached the ground level, he had to go to the other end of the fortress, out of his way, to get to the circular rooms where the females frequented – a life far removed from control and soldiery and one he did not understand his place in. The white rooms spun into alcoves, by dividing headrests, away on each side as he went past. He had to make a conscious choice to pick out the short corridor among the circular maze-like rooms, which were curiously empty, to find the right door. His first knock was gentle, but the next ones were with greater frequency. Eventually, they opened and he smiled widely at the female who opened the door. She was civil with him when he suggested locking the door ahead of MF day or there may be consequences for the entire dominion.

'The soldiers' can't control themselves.'

'You made them what they were.'

Such insolence he allowed them – they were not soldiers and he was too captured by their beauty to confront them.

‘I didn’t prepare them for your wiles.’

‘You didn’t prepare yourself either, Aerol.’

‘Is that why you all shun me?’

‘Perhaps. I’m only an administrator – it’s only my point of view.’

‘And a damning point of view it is. Your opinions are alike where I’m concerned. Perhaps my appearance or authority scares you all. I don’t know your name, but you must know that I’m not wasting energy on any one of you anymore. It distracts me as much as the soldiers, and for nothing in return.’

‘You can’t keep us locked away from your soldiers forever, Aerol. The excuse of “hard times” will only work so many times. We’re sick of being shut out, cut off from the real warlordship. We have as many rights as your soldiers do—’

‘Of course you do, and I offered to train you all one-on-one, but you all walk away in the end. It’s too much for all of you; I’m too much for all of you.’

‘Don’t turn your soldiers into you. They have lives, and whims, and personalities. Deny them this and they won’t be happy. They’ll be starved.’

‘I see, it’s only acceptable if I’m starved. None of you are good enough either!’

He cut her off and stormed through the circular rooms that regarded him like spectators, on his way to the fortress proper. The door was slammed and locked behind him with decisiveness by the female. He was brought immediately back into requiring his situation room. Unfortunately, before he reached it his guard captain sought him out with some civilians behind him to discuss a serious matter. Not now!

‘Somewhere private, I think. We’ll discuss this in the audience chamber. Is it empty, Famirel?’

‘Yes, Warlord Aerol. I had the chamber cleared but the civilian didn’t give me much time,’ Famirel said.

‘My name is not “civilian”, it’s Worsario, and I won’t wait to discuss this. Everybody needs to know that the great Warlord Aerol is a thief and a scavenger.’

‘Lower your voice!’ Aerol said.

How was he going to control this Tekromun? The guards three corridors away would hear.

The Tekromun’s partner looked just as furious, with her hands balanced on her hips. They took this matter seriously.

This was usually Galouch’s job, and in his absence Aerol was surprised how ill-equipped he felt.

‘Famirel, you’re dismissed. Make sure nobody is listening to our conversation. We’re nearly at the audience chamber.’

‘Are you sure, Warlord Aerol?’

Famirel was worried, but he wasn’t going to butcher them, he didn’t think.

‘Just out here, and through another door, and then we’ll talk,’ Aerol said.

The civilians held their tongues and compromised, knowing they’d soon be able to rant.

They slipped out of an open doorway and outside into the bright day. The light felt good and healthy on Aerol’s bare torso. They were at the hidden south end of the fortress. Off the walkway they were on a vast stretch of empty sky encompassed the horizon, and the chasm below could not be seen or heard, for now obscure.

Aerol opened the door and they walked in with their contained anger, and then he locked the door with the bar from the inside, and bid they sat. He couldn’t stop a smile from decorating his face.

Worsario began.

‘You saved me and my partner from those bandits, and we were safe. Then, your soldier insisted, almost with coercion, we follow them back to the fortress, for safety they said. Now, Woddo and I think we know the real reason. You wanted our coin for your protection. We were misled into believing the hero Aerol was saving us, and now we’re confronted with a charlatan.’

‘Is the problem that you cannot afford the payment?’ Aerol said.

‘The problem is the principle. What if we left and spread stories? We could ruin your reputation.’

They wouldn't leave alive anyway, even if they could escape this fortress. Fate conspired against them. It was too dangerous elsewhere and they knew it. His smile was painted wider on his face.

'Are you able to pay?'

Worsario didn't want to reply. Perhaps he thought there would be repercussions. There might be.

'Not the fees you're asking,' Woddo said.

'Then you'll pay what you can, and then you'll shut up and be happy with the accommodation I've given you. If not for plenty of coin, none of you rescued want for anything else. It's not Nemean luxury and pleasure, but it's far more than you had before, in most cases. What use can you make of coin anyway? There is nowhere you can spend it. I need it to be able to protect you and other civilians and scholars all over the surface of Majesty.'

'So that's what you've been doing: stockpiling our coin and pretending to rescue poor wayfarers, with an ulterior motive, and then forgetting to tell anybody where their coins have gone and what they're being used for.'

'You're not a stupid Tekromun, Worsario, but I don't have to listen to your speculations and judgements on my warlordship. This is Galouch's job. You will pay and you'll be satisfied. I can do no more for you. There is no position for Tekromun with big mouths in my warlordship. I need soldiers and mentors, not gossipers. Leave now, before I lose my temper!'

A flare of Aerol's anger was enough, They both bolted, knocking over chairs and panicking with the door latch.

They knew that part of his reputation too.

He would tell Famirel all petitions would end until Galouch's return.

MF Day

'Today they would march to the mega-fortress and change lives for the better. The cycle of barbarism would end, and the soldiers and civilians would be free to guide their own destiny than have it dictated by the cruel brutal circumstances they lived in on the surface. This was Aerol's dream and nothing would stand in its way.'

Mythic Scroll – new entry on MF day

Aerol's stone chair was warming up a bit with his body heat, but not enough to make it comfortable. He had been sat in it longer today, waiting for his mentor Galouch. It was the only seat in the entrance hall of his fortress, and it made him feel alone when his mentor was not at his side. His arms were held outward on each slab of cool stone to keep his body and mind in discipline, prior to the important march today.

Confound those apprentices! Their movements still infuriated him, even with his eyes closed, and a chasm of emotion erupted within him that violated the original plan to remain in calm discipline.

As he usually did when his thoughts had dwelled too much on the negative, one mental freedom came when he thought of an escape from the source of his agitation. One day soon, after the soldiers had entered the mega-fortress, he would have no need of the apprentices and the peaceful atmosphere and controlled space within the fortress could continue as it had before. Only treachery would have to be dealt with, and that didn't happen with the same predictable stupidity. Confound Galouch for insisting upon their recruitment and then habitation next to the fortress! It was MF day, for goodness' sake! Did they not realise that focus was of the utmost importance, on this day of all days? They're ruining it all!

Here they were again, going back and forth with their bundled edicts, held by hands on the dark gold metal handles to each side of a ream of rolled scroll paper. They were carried with reverence that was at odds with the careless running about that the apprentices did before Aerol's eyes. They were heedless of his presence, and a few times even the soldiers had to stand aside at corners or exits, before shaking their heads in disapproval. It wasn't meant to be like this! Aerol was just about to stand up and make an angry edict of his own, until he was rudely distracted by one such apprentice,

who dropped a heavy scroll and it made a loud clanging noise on the stone, causing everybody to stop and look at Aerol, who they could see was seething with a force they dared not anger.

It had been only a matter of time before this happened. Any Tekromun with a degree of common sense would have known that to rush about carrying heavy objects too heavy for weak legs, was foolishness. Any Tekromun with sense ...

This was it. It was time to give them a piece of his mind.

Aerol stood up, towering over the culprit.

‘Were you born stupid, or did you learn it?’

Silence was in the entrance hall. The air was so still, none dared move less Aerol’s eyes focus on them. Even the apprentices showed concerned visages masking haughty expressions. The soldiers knew something was about to happen, and Aerol would be the one to make it happen. He hated it when he was triggered into making a scene, and he had been loath to spill blood in the entrance hall, but it didn’t matter now.

The apprentice didn’t reply, perhaps too worried anything he said would be used against him.

‘Pick it up then!’

The apprentice made unusual bold eye contact with a sidelong glance, before nodding and bending, reaching down with his arm to grasp one handle. It was as if the apprentice had trouble bending properly and using both arms. Was it an injury or an affectation of manner? An odd heavy wind then blasted through the embrasures, and the scroll ran away from its owner, hurrying towards Aerol’s bare feet. The air tingled with an unexpected energy, and the scroll rolled back and forward as if fate had delivered it to Aerol’s feet, where it touched his big toe. Its handle was smooth, cool, and heavy with a rounded knob, and yet this one seemed to be different from the others he had seen, imbued as it was with life.

The scroll’s owner paused in expectation.

Aerol reached with purpose and sat the scroll on his lap as he sat back down, interested in this scroll, which would be the first time he showed an interest in the works of these apprentices. He extended the pages with his long-fingered hands to read the large symbolic inky black etchings that usually left him perplexed. The letters made no sense to Aerol, but still he continued to unravel the scroll in the hope he would find something meaningful that his visual eyes could perceive. Now that the scroll was extended to its full length, set to the side of the apprentice so that Aerol could see the text next to the owner, he felt something along the scroll’s length move, and the black inky letters began to run, wet as they were. Some of the symbols faded or were warped, and a black inky taint covered his chest and legs and spread all over his bare body, leeching onto him.

Revolted, Aerol stood back up, threw the scroll to the side, and dusted himself off, but the inky stuff clung to his hands. He would have attributed it to witchcraft, had he not been able to explain it rationally as an effect of the ink, but at the moment he did not know what was happening to him, only that he was humiliated and insecure before his soldiers and the detested apprentices. He glared at the apprentice, whose mouth had curved in what could have been the beginning of a smile. Giving up on getting the inky stuff off him, which would still cover him for the rest of this day, he moved with intimidation and intent towards the object of his wrath. Images of ripping the limbs off the apprentice and throwing them down the chasm one by one entered his mind.

‘What is your name? Tell me now!’

Again Aerol towered over the apprentice, and yet the apprentice had not moved, either in terror or to show a front of defiance that was not unprecedented in these minds unschooled in physical warfare.

‘Say something now, before your last moments.’

Aerol fully intended to rip the being’s head off.

Seconds passed that were like lifetimes, until the apprentice finally looked like he was about to respond. In that time Aerol had noticed much more about the apprentice: his painted white face was dripping off, oozing from his cheeks, revealing black moist rectangular holes; and his shaking was unnatural, perhaps produced by stress. The eyes were black and fathomless, and the cheeks were high, irregularly so. The hat he wore was a scholar’s hat, even though he was only an apprentice. It had those curved rims at the edges. Fingernails were long and painted burgundy, and paint was unusual

for anybody but those with wealth. The ribbed purple robes appeared to be of finer quality and distinction than the ones usually granted to apprentices, but the difference was subtle; likely invisible to other eyes. There should not have been white paint on his hands too.

These apprentices had been recruited by Galouch from an institution in poverty that had taken its teachings from an ancient order before being abandoned by the civilians who had helped them. Then, the attacks had begun and they were left without a building, for fear their library would be burnt and their few possessions taken. Galouch had found them in this pitiable state until he had suggested Aerol bring them in and make use of their knowledge to help arm him against rivals. There had been no mention or sign of valuable possessions ...

Their use had been a question of dispute between him and Galouch, but Aerol had listened and been patient with Galouch's positive outlook, but now he was irate. Their inability to make themselves clear before soldiers and their transparent fear were despicable to behold. His tolerance for the lack of backbone these apprentices showed grated on him and their growth in numbers had yet to serve their purpose in his eyes. Had they been recruiting more? Why had he not broached this with Galouch? He had been too tolerant!

The apprentice's black pupils darted left and right as he shook, and his arms grasped a scroll that was no longer there. These mannerisms looked affected too, as if showing the right amount of fear necessary before a warlord. They did not know him at all. All he wanted was clear answers for incompetence and for having suffered their presence. The apprentice had been about to open his mouth and respond, but then it stopped. Instead Aerol heard a gasp that sounded far away, as if of air being sucked, and he paused with his ear cocked to the side. Then he addressed the apprentice again.

'You have a nervous look about you, and one that I distrust.'

The atmosphere calmed down, and so did Aerol. The wind had spooked him, and distracted him from his inky plight and subsequent anger.

'I was just carrying edicts, Warlord Aerol. The ink had not dried. I'm sorry for the disruption.'

In these sentences it was as if nothing unremarkable had occurred, and this was just an apprentice who had made a mistake and incurred his wrath. Could it be that his anger had made him too sensitive to the environment and he had overreacted?

'Your finger is bleeding?' Aerol said.

It was not an exaggeration. Blood was running in a steady flow down the apprentice's index finger.

A quick look back at the scroll on the floor showed that there was indeed a small splotch of blood on the back of the blank side of the scroll, which had showed when Aerol had dropped it. It was a good thing Aerol had a visual memory for such things, but its significance at the time, in the presence of his anger, had been compartmentalised.

'It was nothing. I cut myself. We've been working quickly because the sorcerer Arch Banuk—'

'What of him?' Aerol interrupted.

He tired of hearing of the sorcerer, but he observed the quickening of the pulse and reactions of the animated apprentice now.

'We learnt today that he is recruiting soldiers from other fortresses. Coincidentally, a nearby fortress has suffered an insurrection. That edict is a message from their fortress, for Master Galouch's eyes. Today we received reports that suggest—'

'You know much about this event, which is not normal. I ordered all apprentices to remain in the fortress, and I haven't heard anything of this "other fortress". Of course, now I know what it is: it's fear-mongering. I've told you all before about this. You will shut your whiny voice and return to your building, out of my sight. Your irritability is affecting my soldiers' discipline and they need to be mentally prepared, as well as physically, for the ordeal ahead.'

In response to Aerol's order a few more scrolls clanged to the ground and the noise irritated Aerol further. Their clumsiness! Was it deliberate? Some of them did look shocked or offended. Aerol entertained the idea of pumping his fist through one of them and seeing what kind of offence they would take if they saw the blood of their own snaking towards them.

'You are all to return to the building and await Galouch: he's the reason I even decided to allow you all to set foot in this hall. Otherwise, you'd be elsewhere, out of my sight. And if one more scroll drops, I will unleash painful punishment on that apprentice.'

Having taken his eye off the other apprentice for a brief second, he had not seen him move in a secretive way to pick up the scroll he had dropped and he saw him now bend over awkwardly. The

way the apprentice's clothing had brushed past Aerol made him squirm in indignation and it was eerie how the apprentice had positioned himself without Aerol's senses being able to detect. Usually his senses were keen.

'Do you have an injury?' Aerol asked.

Why did he pick up the scroll? The symbols were now useless. The apprentice had shown no anger.

'Yes, it's an old injury. It takes out my back and legs, and makes bending extremely painful.'

On cue, the apprentice cursed and held his lower back, and then limped away with one leg dragging.

'Then why bother picking up the useless scroll?'

The apprentice turned to answer.

'It can be rewritten, just like history.'

It was a puzzling comment, and there was an ominous tone to it.