

Elimination

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Map

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Shadow

Silence crept over the army. The hooded figure stepped out of the shadows opposite them. Then, he roared, and rode across the valley, his half-force of fifty thousand charging with him. The battle for Anerta had begun.

Garthow stepped out and looked at Arantes and Roknär hoeing the field.

"Dinner's almost ready," he called out to the two young boys, each about 17 years old.

"Come on, let's hurry, or else I'll eat all the Culom" said Arantes.

"Not before I knock your mouth off."

"Oh yeah?"

The two boys started tussling around, Arantes picking up a small branch, and Roknär lifted up the base of the hoe. Roknär struck first. Arantes blocked him, once, twice, and then he swung at his brown-haired older cousin. Roknär ducked barely in time. Arantes seized the opportunity. He swung around and knocked Roknär soundly on the forehead. The result was a muffled thump. Both boys burst into laughter, and Arantes stated, "I have killed you." After bursting into laughter again, both boys walked into the house. Garthow set the meal before them.

"Sorry boys, no meat today. Couldn't catch anything. Either I'm getting slower or those darn deer are getting faster."

"It's okay, I'll hunt tomorrow."

"Thanks, Arantes, that would help a mighty lot."

"Sure."

The boys finished eating their meal, and then thankfully accepted the sweet Culom.

"Boys, we can't have Culom every day, you know that, right?"

"What?" Roknär joked.

"It's too expensive, especially with the empire, and our wonderful king."

"Why hasn't anyone the brains to resist the empire yet?"

Arantes broke into the conversation and muttered, "They have."

"What?"

"Many attempts have been made to overthrow Sartrentus, all failed."

Then Garthow said, "Aah, there is one organization that is building up right now," then in a more quiet voice said, "The Nartex." "Let's say that Sartrentus is not exactly loved; however, most are too scared to fight him."

Aranthes whispered, "Except the Nartex. The Nartex have been trying to recruit new men. All men in the Nartex are highly trained, so we have a chance, as Sartrentus's soldiers are kidnapped and given weapons, and then told to fight. I've heard from many that the soldiers complain they are tortured."

Roknär stood up and banged the table with his fist. Rubbing his hand he cried, "Then let us fight, for our country Anerta, for our village of Kenstér! Let's fight along side the brave men who have the smarts to resist our evil lord! I say we join the Nartex and overthrow Sartrentus."

"Hush Roknär, people can hear you from twenty miles away," Garthow reprimanded. "Are you out of your mind?!"

Aranthes whispered, "I agree with Roknär. Why don't we join them? I can't stand living in contentment in Kenstér while people are dying!"

"Aranthes! I haven't said that it's a bad idea. However, are you sure you want to make this decision?"

"I, Roknär, Garthow's son, do believe to unite with the Nartex."

"And I, Arantes, agree with Roknär to fight with the men of the rebellion."

"Then I, Garthow, Onicarus's son, agree with the both of you."

Roknär shouted, "Then let's quickly pack and go!"

Garthow replied, "Who said anything about going anywhere? Remember the troop of soldiers coming in three weeks to get recruits for Sartrentus?"

"What are you implying?" Arantes asked.

"I think I know," Roknär said, grinning.

Garthow replied, "And I think you do know, Roknär. It would be great to practice some of my swordsmanship."

"No," Arantes said in disbelief.

"Yep," Roknär responded.

"We'll be useless with only ourselves against the twenty troops coming to our town."

"We've got three weeks to convince people to help. Kenstér will be remembered for its bravery."

"You sure you want to fight so soon?"

"Aranthes is actually right, Father, let's not fight uselessly."

"I see your point. But, if those vermin so much as even touch our boys, they shall be slaughtered."

"Then let's rest and prepare for the first battle. Kenstér will be the first to strike."

Aranthes watched Roknär walk into his bedroom. As the creaking of the cot was heard, he asked his uncle the long awaited question that may not have had an

opportunity to be asked again. "Garthow, do you know who my father or mother was?"

"Your father, I don't know, but your mother, she was a great sister." At that Garthow broke into tears and turned around. Aranthes questioned no more and walked to his cot. He heard Garthow mutter, "Why, why dear Mother of Anerta did she have to die? Why Kāthlê'en?" And Aranthes fell asleep hearing Garthow's troubles.

Garthow wasn't himself the next day. He was more tired-looking and grouchier than usual. His eyes had a hollow, haunted look to them. He seemed nervous and once or twice shouted for some small mistake that Roknär made in the field. As they sat down to lunch, Garthow said, "Bad news, the soldiers are coming tomorrow."

Roknär grunted, "Let's tell everyone to help make a blockade."

"I'll help."

"Okay, Aranthes, you work with Roknär and the other young men, while I have the older men help me make defense machines and weapons."

"Does the rest of the town know we're doing this?"

"Yes, I went around town last night, and over half had the same idea, and most of the remaining joined when they heard about it."

"Okay."

"Let Kenstér have victory!"

"Aye."

"Aye."

Sweat dripped down Aranthes's forehead, making stripes in the mud and dirt on his skin. He looked past the person digging next to him and over to Roknär, who was currently bringing back, with a couple of other boys, a cart full of logs. The three boys were straining to support the load. Then Aranthes switched his view to some of the older men working to put the logs up. He grunted, and picked up the shovel, and started to dig once again.

The trench, the log walls, and most of defense systems were finished. Kenstér now looked like a military base, with the smooth rock cliff blocking the west

from intruders, while the gate at the north end was made of logs, with barbs sticking out at random places. The east was protected by a small log wall, supported by bricks, while next to it was the banks of the river. The south end was open, with men bringing logs and food in from the forest next to the village. And all around the village was the trench, now with spears sticking dangerously up to the sky. Men walked back and forth across the bridge laying over the trench to the south, and guards were everywhere, spears and swords in hand. Armored figures walked around, directing orders, while mothers cooked food, or helped clean up. A fire was flaring in the town square, while the catapults were starting to take form. Kenstér was ready. Arantes proudly looked over the defended village, then the glowing afternoon, with the setting sun. "Good," he thought, "Let them come."

Roknär pulled on the cartload of logs. He nodded to the two men on each side of him, and the trio dumped it into the pile. Then they pulled the cart back into the forest. They released the cart at the edge of the forest, and then went their own ways.

Roknär walked to a random part of the forest, and swung his axe at the huge oak in front of him. The axe-blade sunk deep into the trunk. Roknär swung again, and then he stopped. He heard a rustle behind him. Roknär crept around the trunks to the source. A soldier, with the empire's insignia of the serpent on his chest, was creeping towards the village. Roknär stepped out from behind the bush. The scout looked up. He smiled. Then, the scout said, as he was trained, "Join the empire."

Roknär replied, "Never."

The scout unsheathed a knife from his pouch. "You sure?"

"What do you think, fool?"

The scout leaped forward at this insult, knife in hand, staring at Roknär's throat. Roknär dodged and snarled. The scout leaped again. As the figure was almost on top of him, he slashed outward. The clash of metal against metal frightened him, and instinctively he sliced through the air. The axe's movement slowed as the edge hit flesh, the skin holding a split-second resistance, and the scout's head fell to the ground. Roknär looked upon the headless body, and shuddered. The head on the ground seemed to smile.

"No," he thought, sinking to the soft mud and pine needles on the ground,

"Darn Mother of Anerta, no! I have killed a man. I'm a murderer. What have I done?"

As if in answer, a guard who Roknär did not notice, staring upon the sorry sight said, "You were defending yourself. All humans would."

Roknär jumped at the voice. Then shaking, he stared into nothingness. The guard lifted the limp body up and carried Roknär inside the village.

Aranthes woke as the guard came inside the house. The man placed Roknär on the cot. Arantes breath caught for a second, and he blurted out, "Is he dead?" The guard laughed, "Dead. I think naught. He's traumatized."

"Why?"

"He killed a man."

Aranthes sat up. "On purpose?"

"No, he was defending himself."

Aranthes sighed. "All my life I wanted to be in war, but now that the time has come to fight, I feel like I'm a hundred years older."

"Aye. Experience helps. But every month, some random night, I dream about the men I've killed. They beg me for mercy, and then, *I chop off their heads.*" The man's voice caught on the last few words. The guard quavered and walked out the door.

Aranthes knew what was wrong with the guard. He knew why Roknär was acting strange. He knew why everyone in the village was nervous and dazed.

The time had come for no mercy, for a fierce rampage through Anerta, for blood, for death, for killing. A monster would be stirring which was not for a thousand years. The monster was war.

Kenstér

Fifty soldiers marched across the river. At the lead stood two garbed figures holding no weapons. Looking at the log-filled barricade, one of them raised his hand and a single log splintered, sending shrapnel across the town. Roknär ducked under a flying piece of wood.

"Magicians," he cursed.

Aranthes bolted and rolled as a second log shattered. A sliver of bark barely missed him as it shot past his neck. Running full speed, he unsheathed a sword and leapt to stab one of the magicians through the heart; and, was repelled back by a barrier. He flew back and pain shot through his ankle. A flap of skin hung over a bleeding wound. Angered, he stumbled over and struck at the magician again with all his might. Again he was repelled. The magician took barely any notice. He fell back and the other raised his hand.

Roknär suddenly came flying around the corner. He jumped up, pierced the shield, and beheaded him. Arantes looked up. "How did you do that? A few shields were erected all around him."

"There were?"

"Yeah. Maybe ask Kestron later. Another magician should know what happened."

"Sure." Roknär swiftly sliced his sword through the air. A soldier's head thudded to the ground. "Is your leg hurt?"

"Yes."

"Let me see what I can do." He looked at the cut, and feeling a sudden urge, placed his hand on the slash and softly said, "Heal."

The wounded almost knitted back together. A soldier screamed as flesh was suddenly ripped out of his thigh.

Aranthes stared at Roknär.

"What did you do?"

"I don't know!"

"Stop whatever your doing."

"Okay."

The other magician snuck up on Roknär and clubbed him with the pommel of a stolen sword. As Roknär fell to the ground, the soldier smiled and slashed at Arantes.

Aranthes blocked the attack. Careful not to touch the glimmering shield, he stopped the next assault. Slowly stepping back, he continuously tried to counter the strikes with his blade. Then, tripping backward on a dead body, he raised his arms, waiting for the coming attack. The magician raised his hands, and stood still. Arantes stared at him. Then, a sword point appeared in his chest. Roknär threw aside the dead man.

"Thanks," Arantes groaned.

"No problem."

All men were fighting the soldiers, and with the magicians gone, soon all lay slain across the village. Arantes sheathed his sword as beads of sweat cleared the dirt caked on his face. Roknär limped over and breathed heavily. "If all troops have magicians like that, we're doomed."

"Luckily, there aren't that many magicians in the world."

"Aye."

"Why don't you go see Kestron?"

Roknär limped away.

A man stopped him. Holding the string of his bow taut, he said to the men around him, "He's coming with us."

"What. We can't waste time dragging a weakling like that around."

"Satrentus will award us. Hur..."

As soon as Roknär heard the name of the dark lord, he grabbed a flagpole, and swinging around, he kicked the leader on the head. The man slumped unconscious. Unsheathing his sword, Roknär blocked all five swords swinging towards him. Then, he raised his hands to see if what happened to Arantes was caused by him. Thinking the word 'kill', he released some of his pent-up energy. All five men dropped dead, as a sword which a few seconds ago had lain on the ground, flew through the attacker's necks. Roknär, thoroughly shaken, ran to the house of Kestron. As he turned the corner, he saw the old man waiting for him.

"You wish to learn magic."

"Magic. Why would I want to learn about that? I'm just wondering why cuts heal and men die when I command them too?"

"That is magic."

"No way." Roknär considered the impossible implications of the old man's statement.

"So you wish to learn magic."

"I guess."

"Then come inside. It is a very difficult subject, and it will be dangerous if anyone was to hear us. For anyone, if they know the right technique, can become

a magician. But few are highly skilled. From what you say, your blood runs thick with it."

"How is that possible?"

"Come inside." Kestron opened the door to his shack and looked back. "Come." Roknär hesitated. Did he want to learn magic? Did he want to find how to morph it and shape it to his needs? Would he use it for good, or become overwhelmed by greed and turn against the world. Finding his answer, he stepped inside.

Kestron sat waiting in front of his small fireplace, drinking some tea. As Roknär sat opposite him, the magician softly said to him, "Do you swear that, until someone finds their magic by themselves, and that you know they will not use it for evil, not to reveal anything I say to anyone? Even Garthow and Arantes."

"I swear."

Kestron laughed, and sipped some more tea. "Magicians have a certain way of swearing promises and fealty. Only this spell and the spell for light require the language of the ancient race of Feiuster. Have you heard of them?"

"No."

"I see. You have much to learn. Where should I start? Okay. The Feiuster is a race separated into two groups. The Evast Feiuster and the Kdeat Feiuster. The Evast Feiuster have more magicians than the Kdeats. The Evast live in the Ulfesot Forest. The Kdeat Feiuster stay in the Lekna Mountains. The Lekna Mountains is a large chain of huge peaks, directly south of the Ulfesot Forest. The Kdeat's capital is spelled C-E-V-Q, and pronounced 'seh-vook'. The Evast's capital is spelled F-E-S-T-O-N-A, pronounced 'feast-yawn-a'. Though they have many different beliefs and customs, their appearance is almost identical. As is their language. So it is difficult to know which clan was their origin until you ask, which is very rude to them.

"Now that you've learned about the Feiuster, I must teach you how to promise in magic. The words are 'Yesta! Nieka! Latona! Xetqwis!' Yesta means I, Nieka is promise, Latona-fealty, and Xetqwis can be translated into "I shall be held to my word". Latona is only necessary when you're swearing fealty. Now you must swear what I said before." Kestron taught Roknär the words for 'I promise not to reveal what you shall say unless who I am talking to is worthy of hearing it.'

"This long phrase, used so often, was cut down to two words, 'Grasop, Fim'."

Roknär there after repeated the words to Kestron, "Grasop Fim, Yesta Nieka Xetqwis."

Kestron then probed Roknär with a simple spell to find if his intentions were malicious. After, he snuffed out the candle in the room. The orange firelight

gleamed across his bushy eyebrows. Sighing, he light a pipe, finished his drink, and looked at Roknär.

He suddenly looked ten years older as his eyelids dropped and his chair creaked as it tilted backward.

“This is the study of magic.”

Magic

War

The figure charged toward the small army. His army of fifty thousand men yelled, holding up their axes and maces, their bows and spears, and their short deadly swords.

The figure stopped at the bottom of the hill. The man reached his burly hand under the hood which covered his shadowy face. He flipped the cover off his skull.

Black hair covered his sharp forehead, his cave-like eyes burning yellow-red. His jaw jutted out, and his cheeks were hollowed.

The man carried a large curved sword with a black jewel in the hilt. He unsheathed it and raising his broad shoulders, lifted the weapon. He bellowed, his deep voice echoing across the mountains, and spurred his ebony horse toward the fighters.

The commander of the army raised his sword and shield. He cried, "Fight, my fellow men of the Nartex, we have waited years to battle! It is our time! We shall destroy them! Ride, my comrade warriors, with the swiftness of the wind; kill, as one possessed! Charge!"

Aranthes limped across the room. He sat down and examined his leg. The flesh near his ankle was torn, rivers of blood streaming down his skin. Roknär appeared in the doorway of the house. "How goes it?"

"Not good."

"Let me see." Roknär bent down and looked at the cut. He took a cloth out of the closet and covered Arantes's wound with it. He tied the ends around the back of Arantes's leg.

"Thanks."

"No big deal, besides, it's temporary until the healer comes."

"Should I hunt the deer?"

"You told Garthow you would yesterday, but everyone's so absorbed into protecting the city, meat is secondary."

"I'll hunt."

"Fine with me. Mind your leg."

Aranthes limped out and said, "Aye, brother."

Aranthes aimed the arrow at the deer. The deer was peacefully eating grass. The next second, it was dead, an arrow sticking out of his gut. Arantes picked up the deer, hung it over his shoulder, and started to walk home.

A figure jumped out of the bushes, attacking Arantes. Arantes slashed out with his sword. He stared at the figure on the ground. The man stared back.

"Who are you?"

"A messenger from Queen Uzack, warning

The Second Assault

The man sliced through the army. He struck out and killed five men with one blow. He stabbed at a man, swung the corpse off his sword, and sliced through another. Then he turned toward ten men, and raised his hand. The men dropped dead. He slowly eliminated the army.
