

Chapter 1: Dust and Dreams

A small cloud of dust rose in the air as the broom moved back and forth over the stone floors. The dust hovered like ghosts in the rays of light that leaked in through the stained windows lining the church. Old wooden benches stood empty, the eight altars around the circular chamber bare. I stood alone in the main church floor, sweeping away at day old dust.

The chamber exploded in a burst of purple as a bolt of lightning cracked against the earth. Days like this, the Storm Plains lived up to its name. The rain pounded against the stone exterior, begging the walls and ceiling to collapse and crumple under its might. Lightning shot down in bursts, leaving craters and smoke in its wake. Yet even after these years, the ancient stone walls held strong, as did the resilience of the plain's residents.

Storms like these always left me anxious. Trapped inside the church, surrounded by different shades of grey stone, seemed to fill me with insatiable unease. I needed to feel the air and wind, the sun light warm against my skin. I needed to see the stars in the sky while basking in the light of the two moons as they shown above, the soft blue lights of Aelandria's Gift and the dark red glow of Darthos's Eye. But when the storms raged on, the only safe place was inside.

I looked about me as I swept, checking for the old priest or any other soul who may have been trapped inside. As was the case when I began my chores, the monastery was empty; I was alone with the broom.

I twirled around and picked up the broom, lowering my hands as I flipped it about me, bristles up in the air. I imagined the stone walls disappeared; the broom handle replaced with a mighty sword. I spun it about me in a circle, then steadied it parallel to the floor, my feet spread wide in a battle stance. I stared down my opponent: the swirling cloud of dust that taunted me in the dim light of the windows. I waited, circling around it as I went, watching my opponent, dissecting its weakness.

I danced back and waited for it to strike. I did not have to wait long, for a burst of purple lit up the church as the dust lunged for me. I rolled then and landed awkwardly on my knees. I spun around and swung my weapon, cutting through the dust, dissipating it into a swirling mass. I turned, swinging my weapon again in downward arc. The bristles of the new blade whistled in the air and cut through the dust once again, creating a new cloud all together.

Satisfied my enemy was defeated, I lifted the broom and spun it over-head. But my young hands were still clumsy, and it moved awkwardly as I fumbled for control. It fell, falling atop my brown mop of hair before clattering to the ground, releasing a new pile of dust into the shaft of light.

“I see you’re working very hard today,” a voice from the hall entrance echoed about the chamber, startling me from fantasy.

I turned as the old priest came forward, his beard grey and cut short, his head bald. His robes hung over his shoulders more and more as age and sickness consumed the man, but his

grey eyes still shown with a joy and enthusiasm that captivated his small audiences and young trainees.

“Sorry Thadi,” I mumbled and bowed before picking the broom off the floor. I resumed my sweeping immediately, as I felt my face turn a bright red in embarrassment.

Thadi laughed and sat down at the wooden bench closest to me. He leaned back in the seat, closing his eyes with his two arms held behind his head, a small smile crossing his face.

“It’s alright my boy, no need to apologize for being young.”

I did not speak as I resumed my sweeping. Another burst of lightning crashed in the air. I always felt uncomfortable around Thadi. Maybe it was because I had been raised by the man as long as memory allowed. Maybe it was the stern education and mentoring that Thadi put me through. Whatever the case, something about him always put me on edge.

Despite my worry and unease, I had to admit I was the only person in all Winhelm who felt any unease towards the man. Thadi Herbin had grown up here, and if the stories were true, had left to be a soldier in the army. Years in the army had led him to gods, or so he says. When he returned to Winhelm, it was not as the young soldier, but a newly ordained priest. The town had welcomed him back with open arms, and he quickly rose to be the head of their little church, as well as the entire town. In little villages like Winhelm, government and rule meant little. Depending on the place, they left the communications and political way of things to the church or resident magic user.

“The storms put a restless spirit on edge,” Thadi chuckled to himself. “In your case, that spirit is especially restless today.”

I did not want to speak with Thadi, so I continued to do my work in silence, hoping that maybe he would understand and let me be. But as was always the case with the man, he never seemed to take a hint.

“I noticed you swung your broom about rather recklessly,” he continued to patter on. “I can’t say I’ve seen someone so focused on sweeping they’d try taking the dust out of the very sky itself! A marvelous proposition, though quite a foolish method if one truly thought on it.”

I knew that Thadi was simply joking, attempting to make light of the situation. But it felt like he was patronizing me. I blushed a deeper red and increased the ferocity of my sweeping. The dust crawled higher and higher, a small pile beginning to gather by my feet.

“And yet, as I sit here, your broom has not left the ground,” Thadi sat forward, his hands now holding his head as his greying eyes looked into mine. “I think you saw something in the dust, and that broom was your weapon yes? The weapon of a boy soldier?”

The broom stopped moving as my hands slumped down, my head bowed low. The village had a few soldiers here and there, but otherwise it was a peaceful place. No weapons were ever seen in the open, especially in the church. The only exception was the ancient sword on Aelandria’s altar. I was not sure why this distance from combat was so prevalent in the village, and no one had a good explanation either. No member of the village had left for the army or attempted to enter any service of combat since Thadi left nearly fifty years ago.

“I’m sorry, Thadi,” I managed to whisper, my eyes still locked on my shoes.

“Bah, don’t apologize for being young,” Thadi smiled. “When I was your age, I had already picked up a sword and knew the different between a broom and a spear. A shame you’ve never been able to discover those differences yourself.”

I looked up at him and saw his eyes had closed. Thadi was leaning back, deep in thought over something, though I could not tell what. Unsure of what else to do, I resumed my sweeping and used it as an excuse to drift slowly away from the elder man.

Eventually, his thoughts turned to dreams as he fell asleep on the church pew. I continued to inch away until I was completely out of the main monastery. I placed the broom back in the closet and rushed off to my own room.

The room was more of a closet, barely big enough to fit a simple cot to sleep on, a small wardrobe filled with three sets of religious garbs, and a wooden night table. Along that table were three books: one a history book on the founding of Elysium; one filled with descriptions of all the gods, both below and above; and a biography.

Alone and safe, I pulled out the biography, an account of the life of the First King: Anduin of the Storm. I flipped through the pages until I found my favorite story:

King Anduin was alone, deep in the heart of the Storm Plains. For decades now, Anduin and his armies had rebelled and fought desperately against the orcs that had enslaved them. The humans had always been slaves, never having any true kingdom or empire of their own to claim. Yet, out of the shackles, Anduin had risen to power, a self-proclaimed king forming a network of cities and villages for humans to live in prosperity. However, that all seemed doomed to fail.

They were on the edge of the grand river, now known as the Anduin River. The armies of humans were outnumbered, the orcs rushing in a desperate rage of fury against the humans. Left and right, Anduin watched his men fall to the blades of the orcs, his army on the brink of a crippling defeat.

Anduin took matters into his own hands and charged forth, cutting through orc after orc on his march towards the chief. But Anduin never reached the chief, for the orc had summoned a demon from the infernal realm of Emenyial, that rose forth to challenge Anduin. The great demon knocked the king aside with ease, raising its might fists to kill all hope for the humans.

In what appeared to be the young king's final hour, a flash of pure white light shone across the battlefield. A hero dressed in pure silver armor with a shining white cape appeared out of thin air. That hero cast a ring of magic about the battlefield, healing the humans and burning the demons and orcs. She drew her magical weapon, a sword of divine power, and smote down the demon that so threatened Anduin's life. This mysterious hero changed the course of battle and cemented Anduin's empire in the annals of history forever. In memory of this brave hero, Elysium was founded, a city that grew to be the center of magic and the divine among all the Free Citites.

The hero of that story, this anonymous warrior of light, was my idol. Whether they were real or not, it did not matter. For me, I believed that if some unknown person could master magic and the sword, it gave me hope I too would find my way out of the little village of Winhelm.

I closed the book and laid back in my bed, allowing my eyes to close as I attempted to sleep. That night, I dreamt of silver armor, of paladins and champions clad in golden robes, with riches as far as the eye could see. I dreamt of castles and princesses passing on their charms and praise. All about me, people chanted my name, "Daelin! Daelin! Daelin!"

When I awoke, the storm was still raging, the lights had grown dark, and I was alone again, in a little stone church.