

Denvos of Navaria

Part 1 - Along the midnight trail

Deep in the mountainous wilderness that was the Seran-Lenorian borderlands laid the Midnight trail, a winding road that cut through deep forests and rocky hills to connect the two nations. On this road, at the crest of a steep hill that marked the official border, laid a Seran outpost which guarded the passage along the trail. Even though dawn had broken but a few hours ago its guards were steadily doing their rounds, vigilant as ever. The war with the Rakkhari had ended less than two years earlier and the Serans were nothing if not cautious. The early morning peace was broken however, when one of the guards spotted a rider approaching from the northern Seran side at a quick pace, and he immediately signaled the others, who took up defensive positions to block the road. The approaching rider was clad in a long, gray hooded robe which flapped wildly behind them, and it was easy to see that they weren't experienced enough for the steed they rode. Seeing the blocked road ahead, the horse came to a bucking halt, nearly throwing its rider off.

The border officer in charge approached the steed and took hold of its reins. "Border captain Anatos, commandeering officer of the Midnight outpost," he said, his voice hard and unflinching. "Please state your person, and why exactly you approach the border in such a hurry."

The rider pulled back his hood, and for a moment of very unbecoming inattentiveness, the soldiers dropped their guard in surprise. It was a man, but not any man. His skin was almost white as porcelain, and his eyes were deep, black pools of darkness. Sharp, pointed ears were framed by jet black hair which was pulled back in strict braids, and his beard was short and cropped. They had all heard the rumors of the Navarians and their ghostly appearance, but none of them had seen one themselves. Close to two years had passed since the reclusive neighbor state had ended its seclusion, but to most people the Navarians were still just a rumor. And now, one of these eerie strangers sat before them, wearing a very apologetic smile.

"I'm very sorry, officer," the stranger began in a thick, old accent. "My escort got left behind a little while back, when I lost control of my steed. I admit that I may have become a bit enthusiastic about seeing new lands."

He dismounted with some difficulty, and crossed his arms in greeting. “I am Monk Denvos of Navaria, emissary of Her Holiness and Rememberer of the lost Queen. Humbly yours.” The Seran officer looked at him with apprehension. Politicians, spies and merchant he understood, but reclusive monks were a different deal. Sensing that he may have committed some social mistake, Denvos paused. Then, seeing the small ramparts that overlooked the hillside bordering Lenori, he couldn’t keep himself from asking: “Since it might be a little while until my escort arrives, would you mind terribly if I went up and enjoyed the view...?”

Unsure of what protocol was with emissaries of Her Holiness and Rememberers of lost Queens, the Captain hesitated. The monk was unarmed, except for an ornate staff, and hardly seemed like he had blood or violence on his mind. And you could never be sure who exactly would be in charge of escorting such a man. “That’s...quite alright. I’ll see to it that your horse is put aside while you wait, then?”

“Oh, I would appreciate that immensely, Captain,” Denvos said with a humble nod. As the soldiers took his steed to their stable, he made his way up the stairs to the top of the ramparts. Wooden walls reinforced with metal rose three men tall, with two guard towers on either side of the gate. The Seran soldiers watched him with curiosity, but made no effort to hinder him as he made his way up to the top of the tower. He could barely hide his excitement – all of his life had been spent in the dusky valleys of Navaria, and even the dour lands of Serdanos had a been a wondrous sight to behold. But they were venturing southwards to where lands were warmer and sunnier, and he for one could not wait. As soon as he reached the top, he was struck by the sight of endless, leafy forests shining golden in the early morning light. Mists swirled and billowed around slim pillar mountains that rose towards the heavens, and the air was filled with the squeeks and chitters of all manner of winged creatures out for their morning hunt. After a lifetime of bleak valleys, that moment was pure bliss.

He stood there, entranced by the unfolding view until a sharp sigh beside him broke the spell. Only now did he notice that he had been joined by Inella, his long-time friend and companion on the journey from Navaria. She looked neither pleased nor amused.

Her voice was tired and full of reproach. “Sometimes I think you fail to appreciate how patient our good lieutenant has been with us.” Their assigned escort, the noble lieutenant Ementhaso, had indeed been showing signs that his irritation was growing. “And I for one do not wish to test that patience, seeing how much we depend on him in these lands.”

“Oh Inella,” Denvos said with a smile “Even when you’re faced with this lovely sight, you are still worrying. Does it not touch your heart the slightest?”

“It is lovely.” she said with another sigh, stepping closer to the edge. “But if what the lieutenant and his guards have said is true, the land that awaits us is not nearly as placid as this morning would suggest.”

“I was like you when I left Navaria to venture into Serdanos. All tangled up in myself, worrying from dawn to dusk. But so far, I’ve yet to sustain even a splinter!” he said with a dismissing laugh. She grimaced, letting her pointed tongue speak for what she thought of his worriless mood.

Suddenly, the harsh voice of the lieutenant interrupted their moment from somewhere below. “If the venerable monks are good and ready, we would do well to journey onwards! I’d rather not head through the Lenorian deep woods in the dark if I can avoid it,” though his voice had a strict cadence of discipline, it was clear that he had no patience for dalliance this morning. As they knew better than to try their luck before lunch, the two monks headed down the stairs to join their escort. The lieutenant was waiting by the horses together with two other guards, his face a cool mask of strained patience. He was a tall, dignified man, birthed from one of the most powerful families in Serdanos. But he was not a man to brandish that, as his clothes and armor were practical, rather than ornamental. He had gladly accepted the charge of caring for these two Navarians, an honor by any measure. Though he had done so out of a sense of duty to Serdanos and his family name rather than out of any misplaced sympathy for what he saw as relics of a long-dead world.

“Though I appreciate your enthusiasm, I’d like to remind you that we are heading into unsafe lands. I hate repeating myself, but I’ll be damned if I won’t do so until you understand.” he said, .

“So you have said, honored Ementhaso. I apologize for my carelessness once more,” Denvos said with a humbled gesture. “I will take more care as we venture into the south.”

“Very well,” Ementhaso said with a light sigh. “I’d like to reach our goal reasonably early, as I have some business to attend to to ease our journey onwards. And the sooner we leave...”

“Say no more, lieutenant,” Denvos said, gesturing to the steed being brought to him. “Merely a moment and I’m yours to lead.”

“As I recall, it took you quite a handful of moments to mount your steed this morning, but hope remains eternal.” the lieutenant answered dryly, with the hint of a smirk.

Luckily, his patience escaped further testing, and the retinue was soon off again. Passing through the gate, Denvos could feel a shiver of anticipation, having heard a great deal of the nation of Lenori – both good and bad. Looking over, he noted that Inella looked far more gloomy, surely already picturing all manner of horrors ahead. But he was sure her mood would lighten. The ride down the mountainside was uneventful, if a bit cumbersome, and soon they were heading into deeper woodlands. Denvos was surprised at how quickly the slender, dark green forest of the north changed into a thick blanket of leaves that nearly blotted out the sun. A thick morning fog lingered like a cold veil, but as the morning turned to day and the sun once more started to descend it dispersed and covered everything with light dew.

A handful of hours after the retinue had passed over into Lenori they spotted a cart on the side of the road, its passengers sitting besides. Denvos sensed that there was something amiss. He could see no animals for pulling the cart and there was a defeated air about the small group. Ementhaso rode ahead a bit and raised his hand in greeting. One of the people, a Seran man in simple, dark clothing, from the cart got to his feet, raised his hand in answer and came to meet them.

“Lieutenant Ementhaso of Manthaso. Is there a problem here?” the

lieutenant began, polite but cautious. Even for a Seran he was an expert at second-guessing people.

“Treasurer Alethe of Avola, it is a relief to see you lieutenant. Me and my travel companions came under attack by some highwaymen a little while ago,” the man gestured to the others in his group, another Seran man, and two Lenorians. “They took a great deal of our belongings and cargo, and set our oxen loose. So now we are stranded here.” The man was calm, but visibly distraught.

“Dark star’s light...” The lieutenant muttered. “An insult indeed. Did you lose a great deal to the ruffians?”

“Well, most of the cargo was mere trinkets and ordinary wares. The oxen were a big loss, though I still hold hope of being able to find them. However...” Alethe hesitated, seemingly struggling with something. “However, we were transporting the belongings of a certain diplomat, that were of some importance.”

“I understand, my deepest sympathies. Am I to understand you escaped harm?” the lieutenant asked, his voice not reflecting the care of his words.

“By the grace of the stars, yes. They certainly threatened us, but there was no violence,” Alethe said, his hands clasped in a grateful gesture.

“That is a fortune,” Ementhaso said, and nodded. “I regret we are not able to assist you as such, as our assignment requires that we keep on our path. But I will make sure that assistance is sent to you as soon as possible.”

Denvos heard this, and felt like he had to act. Before Inella could do more than hiss a warning in his direction, he rode up to the lieutenant and addressed him. “I’m sorry, lieutenant, but could we not lend them a hand in recovering their belongings?” Alethe and his companions were visibly unsettled by the sight of the two Navarians, but knew better than to voice their concerns.

“Under no circumstances.” The lieutenant’s voice was cold as ice.

“But lieutenant, not only could the thieves be too far away once any help arrives, we”-

“I said, under no circumstance, monk.”

“We were also sent out to remember our Goddess to the people. Who would listen to us, if we showed ourselves to be faint of heart and unwilling to extend a helping hand to the people?” Denvos pleaded, unwilling to leave those poor people behind.

Ementhaso turned to Denvos, his eyes dark and threatening. “Your assignment and mine are vastly different, I’ll have you remember.”

“I am aware, lieutenant” Denvos said, apologetically, trying to disarm the situation. “But these thieves have already attacked your countrymen, and surely it’s in everyone’s interest if they are caught swiftly? And I can think of no better gift to bring the rulers ahead than thieves in chains, can you...?”

The lieutenant stared at Denvos, his face a strained mask of frustration. But he was silent for a good while. Finally, he muttered a silent curse, and turned to Alethe again. “What were these belongings you spoke of?”

“It was a set of boxes with documents belonging to one Diavolo of Avola,” the man began, with a slight nervousness. “Among them was a sealed chest, no larger than a small pile of books. Wooden, with silver ornaments. I was made to understand its safety was... paramount.”

Ementhaso seemed to ponder this for a moment, obviously reading something into the man’s words that Denvos could not. “I see. And how many were the bandits that attacked you?”

“There were only three of them, lieutenant. But they caught us unaware...” the man said, with a tinge of shame in his voice.

“And can any of you use a weapon?”

“Indeed, our two Lenorian friends are quite proficient. Veterans of the

war, both of them. Sadly... we lack weapons.”

Once again, the lieutenant looked at Denvos, and sighed deeply. “We will have words about this, monk. You can be sure of it.”

A little while later, the two were slowly making their way through the forest in the direction the highwaymen had gone. Inella had stayed behind by the road, after a long, muffled rant about the recklessness of it all. But Denvos had been adamant, refusing to move on without at least attempting to aid the unfortunates. While he and the lieutenant followed the tracks they could find, the two Seran guards paired up with the Lenorians, a couple of veterans by the names of Briyania and Danas. Together, the three pairs started combing the forest for the bandits. The sun was slowly sinking, but it was still surprisingly warm for a spring day.

Ementhaso walked first, refusing to put Denvos at more risk than necessary. Though he would have preferred that the monk had stayed behind, it quickly became apparent that he could not be kept there. So now, they stalked through the thick underbrush, as silently as they could. Denvos had quickly realized that he may have overstepped his abilities. It is one thing to offer a helping hand, but actually trying to chase down armed highwaymen was not to be taken lightly. However, he could not turn back now, or he would certainly look even more like a fool in the lieutenant’s eyes.

They had been walking for the better part of an hour when Ementhaso paused to search the ground. It had been a while since they had seen any trace of the others, and the tracks were no longer clear. The forest around them was thick, with great trees twisted by age rising all around them. The land was jagged and steep, with a crevice opening up in front of them. Thick bushes covered the mouth of it, but it seemed to slope downwards into an opening.

“Hold here,” said Ementhaso, looking around suspiciously. “We need to find the others before moving any further. Or start to head back.”

Denvos nodded, and walked closer to try and get a look at the bottom of the crevice. “Do you think we can still find them?” he didn’t want to admit

it, but he was starting to be more than ready to turn back – with or without any captured criminals.

“With time, perhaps. But we’ve strayed to far, and without the others...”

Denvos stepped through the bushes to see if he could see a way down, when something suddenly caught on his foot and tightened around his leg. In a matter of seconds he was being dragged violently down the slope, scraping against roots and rocks. When he finally stopped at the bottom, the world was spinning and his entire body was in throbbing pain. He tried to steady himself, but could barely get up on his knees. When he looked up, he saw an arrow pointed at him, tightly strung and ready to perforate him. A few seconds passed before he could even register the person holding the bow, a wiry wolf of a man dressed in a mishmash of patched clothes and armor. Behind him stood two others with curved short swords at the ready, and up above another two had bows drawn. They were all dressed in rags, but wore a red insignia portraying some type of enraged animal.

The man spoke something in an unfamiliar language – Denvos guessed that it was Lenorian, but he could not be sure.

“I’m...sorry. I do not understand you,” Denvos tried, as calmly as he could although fear was quickly starting to take hold of him.

His captor looked at him with a suspicious gaze. “Seran? You do not look Seran, pale man,” he spat out the words in a brutalized interpretation of the Seran tongue.

“I...I am Navarian. Do you”- suddenly, his captors cried out, turning their attention to something behind him. He could not make out what they were yelling, but their weapons were aimed and ready to fire.

“Leave him be!” Denvos recognized the lieutenant’s voice. He felt a sudden pang of guilt – had he gone and sentenced them both to death? For a moment he considered using his sorcery to disarm the man closest to him, but he quickly realized that the archers above would not hesitate to kill him in mere seconds. “That man is more worth alive than dead,” the lieutenant continued. “Harm him and you’ll face far worse than

imprisonment among your own people.” His voice was severe like iron, sharp like any blade.

Denvos could see his captors pause as they looked at him. “Is that so?” the man with the bow eyed him closely. “So what makes him special enough that we shouldn’t just kill you both?”

For a moment there was silence. “He is a sorcerer, and a powerful one. If you try to harm him, you’ll face a fate worse than any death,” the lieutenant continued, lying admirably. Denvos had always been taught that lies were for simpletons and heretics. But the rules of Navaria were not going to help them here.

“Sorcerer, is he...?” the man with the bow pondered, though his voice was mocking rather than frightened. He let out a small, cruel laugh that made Denvos’ skin crawl. He had a bad feeling. On a hunch, he put his sorcery to use, and the flow of time started slowing down. “Then I’d say he’s worth more dead than alive, thin-ear!” the man exclaimed, pulling his arrow back to fire. He was less than two paces away, and would not miss. But Denvos’ sorcery was flowing and time had slowed down to a crawl. As he saw the man letting go of his arrow, he threw himself to the side as quickly as he could. A slow, sharp pain cut his arm as the arrow grazed him, ripping open his robe. As he tumbled, he reached out and touched the man’s leg, and once again let the sorcery flow to slow the man down. The two other bandits looked on in astonishment and raised their weapons, but he knew the archers would be the biggest threat. Looking up, he saw an arrow sailing through the air towards him, and with a swift turn he managed to avoid it hitting him. But then, a piercing pain shook him as another arrow caught him in the shoulder, knocking him to the ground and breaking his sorcery. In a matter of seconds, the lieutenant was beside him, ready to defend him. The numbers were against him - armed only with his sword facing two swordsmen and two archers. On the ground crawled the last man, yelling strange, slurred obscenities. In shock, delirious from the pain, Denvos could only hear the garbled shouting of the other bandits as he looked up at Ementhaso. With the last of his focus, he reached out to touch the lieutenant and let the sorcery flow again. With any luck, quicker reflexes would keep him alive. But high above, Denvos saw one of the archers take aim, another arrow at the ready.

Then, the archer fell, an arrow puncturing their chest. They landed with a sickening thud, and in the blink of an eye, chaos broke loose. The lieutenant took on the remaining bandits with sword and though he could not possibly have understood what was happening, the sorcery had turned a seasoned warrior into a whirlwind. The bandits were quickly subdued, and Denvos witnessed the other Serans came down the crevice slope to assist him. After that, everything became a blur, until he passed out from the pain.

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When he woke up again, the sharp pain had been replaced with a throbbing one. The arrow in his shoulder had been removed, and the wound was bandaged tightly. He was lying on some pelts inside a small cave while the Serans were rummaging through sacks and crates, taking stock of what the bandits had. The lieutenant noticed that he had woken up, and came to sit down beside him.

“One of the Lenorians took an arrow to the leg. One of my men got his hand broken. It could have been worse. Far worse,” he looked at Denvos with a searching gaze, as if observing him for the first time. “I would call it luck, but I feel like there was more at play here.”

Denvos remained quiet, unsure of how to start explaining.

“Nevertheless, let me offer you a piece of advice. As an offering of respect, if nothing else.” Ementhaso fixed his eyes on Denvos, and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Noble intentions are not to be pushed aside lightly. But to be able to turn intentions into acts oftentimes has a price. You’d do well to remember that.”

Unable to avert his eyes, the monk looked back at the lieutenant. “Thank you. I will...do my best to remember that,” he had been told many times that as different as Serdanos was from his homeland, the world outside Serdanos would be far more alien. A line had been crossed and the future, for good and for bad, was all the more uncertain.