

**CHAD CORRIE** 

# SHADOW REGENT

# SHADOW REGENT

**CHAD CORRIE** 



### The Shadow Regent

© 2023 Chad Corrie. The Tralodren logo is a trademark of Corrie, Inc. Dark Horse Comics® and the Dark Horse logo are trademarks of Dark Horse Comics LLC, registered in various categories and countries. All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the express written permission of Dark Horse Comics LLC. Names, characters, places, and incidents featured in this publication either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), events, institutions, or locales, without satiric intent, is coincidental.

Published by
Dark Horse Books
A division of Dark Horse Comics LLC
10956 SE Main Street
Milwaukie, OR 97222

DarkHorse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Corrie, Chad, author. | Burgess, Dan, illustrator.

Title: The shadow regent / writer, Chad Corrie; cover art, Dan Burgess.

Description: Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, [2023] | Series: The Wizard King trilogy; book three

Identifiers: LCCN 2020202320 (print) | LCCN 2022022321 (ebook) | ISBN 9781506734033 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781506734040 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3603.O77235 S53 2023 (print) | LCC PS3603.O77235 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23/eng/20220725

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022022320

LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022022321

First edition: March 2023 Ebook ISBN 978-1-50673-404-0 Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-50673-403-3

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2 Printed in the United States of America

## ALSO BY CHAD CORRIE

## THE WIZARD KING TRILOGY

Return of the Wizard King Trial of the Wizard King Triumph of the Wizard King

## **GRAPHIC NOVELS**

Sons of Ashgard: Ill Met in Elmgard

### STANDALONE NOVELS

The Shadow Regent

## **PROLOGUE**

G urthghol kept his eyes shut, concentrating. Not that there was anything to see in the midst of the Void anyway. There was just an empty blackness for infinity. It was the one place even the two Cosmic Entities, Awntodgenee and Nuhl, feared to tread, having formed the cosmos to escape it. And yet, even as that cosmos swelled in size and dominion over the desolate, benighted expanse, it was gnawed on from every angle. The very substance of reality was crushed and torn into the most basic of components, which were further brought out of existence.

The Void was the place where all things met their end and the original state of reality. And he, the god of chaos and darkness, was its prisoner. The only thing keeping him alive was Vkar's throne. It had the power to sustain him for as long as was needed. And right now he would use it to the fullest extent. His father had crafted it to overthrow the old order—to topple and destroy Awntodgenee and Nuhl—but had failed. Gurthghol had thought he could finish the task but fell short himself and now suffered his fate.

The black chains encircling him and the ancient white marble seat had been formed from part of Nuhl and as such were alive in their own way. He could feel them biting into him like jagged metal, irritating him just enough to annoy and perhaps eventually drive him mad, but not enough to do any real physical harm. This was all part of the torture. He was to remain seated in the throne, chained in the midst of the Void, until his captors came to finish the job or he helped things along on his own.

But he wasn't about to surrender. He'd been so close—had tasted victory at hand and would have attained it had he acted bolder at the first. In his mind's eye he relived the final battle between the Cosmic Entities. They had stood across from him, actually willing to face him in direct conflict, and he gladly gave it to them. The throne had tapped into their very essence and was siphoning it from them and into itself—just as Vkar had created it to do.

He had felt their fear. They were seeing what a god could do. They were witnessing the end of their age. And had he been faster to act, the cosmos would have been freed. But he'd just come off of his battle with the upstart human wizard Cadrith, who thought he could take out the entire pantheon on his own. But Cadrith himself wasn't anything but a puppet deluded into thinking if he did Nuhl's bidding he'd be able to seize even greater glory.

In the end a simple goblin did Cadrith in, wielding what Gurthghol now understood was an ancient wonder created by wizard kings of old to weaken and even defeat a god. It sucked all the fight out of the wizard, returning him to his former lich state. And from there it was an easy thing for Gurthghol to send him off to Mortis.

While he'd delighted in the victory and took that confidence into the next fight, Gurthghol now realized that same confidence had made him too sure of himself. If he had just shut up and concentrated on unraveling the two entities, they wouldn't have been able to take him. He would have prevailed, and the pantheon, Tralodren, and the rest of the cosmos would have been safe and himself hailed as their champion and savior.

He willed himself to tap deeper into the throne. He'd learned some things while seated upon it millennia ago, following his father's death. Then he'd taken it by sheer coincidence of necessity. His daughter had been corrupted by Nuhl and turned against her family. Once she slew Vkar, the throne was left vacant and the cosmos in peril. For the throne

wasn't created to remain empty. And the longer it did, the more the cosmos suffered destruction.

Gurthghol had found himself racing for the throne before he knew what he was doing. He took his seat and saved the cosmos, but the cost was high. Trapped on the throne, he could never leave lest the cosmos shatter. But he'd learned some things while its prisoner—saw some potential for future glory for the gods as well as learned more of the throne's hidden nature. It not only augmented the power of the one seated upon it but could also drain the Cosmic Entities of their power. And that's when he'd caught a glimpse of his father's grand plan. A plan he supported more eagerly now than ever before.

And he could still do it. The pantheon could still win. The cosmos could still be liberated. If he could just get free of these chains, he could finish where he left off. For the chains not only kept him on the throne but subtly leeched enough of his own power and essence away to keep him below his full strength. The throne would then have to supplement what lacked, which kept it weaker as a result. The chains also served as an anchor to the Void. He couldn't leave, no matter how hard he tried. And he'd done nothing *but* try since being deposited into this yawning ocean of nothingness.

Once more he latched on to the throne's core, taking a firm hold with his mental and spiritual hands and attempting to pull it up and into himself. Nothing. Same as the last time . . . and the time before that.

He snarled as he swelled his chest and arched his back.

Nothing. The chains held him fast.

Enraged, he bellowed his hatred into the Void. But even this was in vain. The sound was consumed as soon as it left his lips, leaving only a muffled anger in his ears.

He would be free.

He would prevail.

## CHAPTER 1

T wila watched the Chimera lead the Tularin down one of the main hallways in Anoma, Gurthghol's grand palace. She pushed herself into the shadows of the hall, further cloaking herself as the two incarnates passed. This wasn't that hard, since the palace, like much of Altearin, had plenty of shadows to spare. And her nature as a Lady of Darkness further augmented her efforts.

One of the many strange beings to inhabit the plane of Altearin, Chimera were as tall as Tularins but with goat legs, a humanoid torso, a snake-like tail, and a lion's head with ram's horns. Like the Tularin, this one had wings, but his were more bat-like; the Tularin's were covered in white feathers which matched his platinum hair. Gurthghol had often used Chimera in various guard duties, and this incarnate was allowed his heavy plate armor and spear. The Tularin, by contrast, wore only a white robe with a golden sash around his waist and a long sword strapped over that.

Tularins weren't commonly called upon to fight, as they were more often seen as administrators and messengers between the gods. Even still, they were a rare sight on Altearin. Unlike the other gods, Gurthghol didn't keep any in attendance, making Twila all the more alert as to just what sort of tidings accompanied this particular visit. Long aware of the workings of the palace since finding her way into and up the ranks of Gurthghol's harem,

Twila knew this was something of potentially great importance. Something she wanted to be sure she was able to use to the fullest possible advantage.

Neither of the incarnates spoke. Each was taken with their duty: the Chimera to seeing this new messenger to his purpose, and the Tularin to delivering his message. Such dedication was impressive but not uncommon among the incarnates. The titans and titan lords, however, were another story. She waited until the pair were well down the onyx-paneled hall before following after them, making sure to keep clear of the occasional sconce or torch along the way.

Keeping to the shadows was easy enough, as was making sure she remained quiet. Being twice their size didn't prove as detrimental as one might have thought. The palace was built for titans, and most who inhabited it were used to the size difference between titan, incarnate, and others. It was the stealth where she had to be mindful. This was still the residence of Gurthghol—the ruler of Altearin—and most of the guards probably wouldn't take too kindly to someone attempting to sneak through it. She followed them to a closed door at the end of another hallway, where the Chimera turned back to the Tularin.

"He's in here," Twila heard the Chimera say in his native Entropis, which apparently the Tularin understood. "I'll let him know of your arrival."

"Thank you," said the Tularin in the same language as the Chimera entered the room.

Twila knew it was a library—one of a handful in the palace. But just who was awaiting the Tularin's message wasn't clear.

If this was a diplomatic message from the pantheon or another god, then it would have been delivered to another god. But Twila knew Gurthghol was on Thangaria with the rest of the pantheon. So why send this Tularin? The only other persons of rank in the plane under Gurthghol would be Erdis, Shador, and Mergis. And she knew both Shador and Mergis weren't in the palace, so that just left—

"Erdis will see you now." The Chimera emerged from the library.

Wasting no time, Twila tapped deeper into the cosmic element of darkness and enveloped herself fully into the hall's flickering shadows,

hurrying to a special spot in the hall's wall that, when pushed just right, allowed a slender opening to appear. Sliding inside, she made her way through the winding tunnel until coming to rest at the end of another stone wall. Here again, if you knew how to push the right stones, you could silently create another opening that would take you into the library itself. It was one of several such secrets she'd collected through her efforts. Some from friendly palace workers or members of the court, others from Gurthghol himself. All had served her well.

And no sooner had Twila stepped into the back part of the library then she set her ears and eyes upon the two incarnates speaking at the front of the room near the door. Being an incarnate himself, Erdis and the Tularin were the same size, meaning Twila would have to listen extra carefully to catch all the details. She wasn't about to try to get any closer, staying within the cloaking darkness as much as possible.

"Welcome to Altearin. I'm told you have something important to relay." Erdis greeted the Tularin in Entropis. His robes were a rich mix of teal, white, and dark blue, which complemented his olive complexion.

"And you are Erdis, Gurthghol's chamberlain?" The Tularin kept to the same language, no doubt honoring the preferences of his given audience. Erdis often didn't speak Entropis, from what Twila knew. The official language of court and for much of Altearin was Titan.

"I am." Erdis' oval head was shaved save for a brown ponytail at the back, allowing his pointed ears to clearly be seen. The high forehead made his faint features stand out. His thin lips were almost nonexistent, and his nose was so flat it nearly blended into his face. She used to wonder how his people managed to breathe, but somehow they'd found a way to thrive, like all the other chaotic incarnates, of which the Kardu, his people, were a part.

"Then the pantheon has sent me with a message for you and the two viceroys."

"And you have my word I will inform them as soon as we finish speaking here," said Erdis. Twila had no doubt of that. The Kardu had a long record of integrity and loyalty to Gurthghol and his duties.

"The pantheon thought it right to inform you of recent events at Thangaria . . . and of some new challenges Altearin shall be facing in the future."

"Go on."

"As you may be aware, Nuhl, one of the two Cosmic Entities, recently sought to use a human wizard named Cadrith Elanis as a pawn to bring about the end of the pantheon and the world of Tralodren, which they created. Gurthghol and all the other gods decided to make their final stand against the assault on Thangaria, where, millennia prior, Vkar saw his end by Nuhl and another agent."

"Yes, I am keenly aware of that," said Erdis. "As are all of those who have a hand in keeping this realm governed."

Twila was too, of course. She made it her business to stay informed on all important matters of state and the lives of those from whom she received such information. It could be tiring work but was well worth it—especially in times such as this.

"And were you aware of Gurthghol's plan to reclaim his father's throne?" The Tularin's question gave Erdis pause.

"Vkar's throne," Twila whispered in surprise.

She, like just about all titans, knew of it. How could you not know about the most powerful item in all the cosmos? But it was always out of reach—to both god and divinity alike. Gurthghol himself had seen to that. But now to have him laying claim to it again was truly something of note. Even more so since he never shared the matter with Twila—or rather she hadn't been able to discover it through her normal channels and methods.

"Is this the pantheon asking or you?" asked Erdis.

"I make no accusations. I simply want to make sure you receive all the information I was sent to convey." The Tularin's reply lightened Erdis' features.

"Then yes, I had an idea that was what he was about. One doesn't take a small force of warriors to Galba for a simple chat. I had my concerns about him breaking the pact between them, but it was not my place to try to stop him from his decision, even if I had my doubts." He sighed. "Did he succeed? Is that what this is about?"

"Gurthghol reclaimed Vkar's throne and used it in the battle with Cadrith and Nuhl on Thangaria."

"And won?" Erdis was as surprised as Twila.

"Yes. With the throne and some help from a goblin, he was able to put an end to Cadrith and the threat Nuhl posed through him."

"A goblin?" Erdis was clearly intrigued. "The throne of the first god of the cosmos wasn't enough to take out the threat?"

"The goblin had a scepter that helped weaken Cadrith, allowing Gurthghol to make quick work of the former wizard."

"That sounds like a rather powerful scepter. One, no doubt, the other gods will be interested in now as well, assuming Gurthghol hadn't claimed it for himself."

"No, he didn't. And he didn't end his fight with Nuhl once Cadrith had been defeated. Instead, he pressed on and sought to destroy both Awntodgenee and Nuhl in their true forms."

"He did what?" Erdis barely managed to soften the shout.

"He sought to use Vkar's throne like his father before him, seeking to destroy the Cosmic Entities. He claimed it was the only way to finally be free of their threat over the pantheon and the entire cosmos."

"I knew he was seeking something bold"—Erdis lowered his head in what Twila could only assume was a form of mourning—"but to take on the Cosmic Entities? It's madness." His eyes locked on to the Tularin's. "Did—did he survive?"

"None of the pantheon know for certain," said the Tularin. "But he was taken captive and, it's assumed, will meet his end in time."

Erdis hung his head once more with a heavy sigh.

Twila could feel the weight on her own shoulders. And then there was the pang in her heart. She'd grown rather fond of Gurthghol. Her repeated efforts to raise herself in his favor and in rank in his harem had brought them closer in some ways than she'd expected. And yet, even as this all set in, her mind was racing. This opened up so many avenues to explore . . . if you had the right means to explore them, that is.

### THE SHADOW REGENT

"I've been sent to let you and the twin viceroys of Altearin know as soon as possible so you can make the proper arrangements and prepare for spreading the news to the rest of the realm."

"But he's not dead. You're sure of that?"

Twila inched closer, intent on not missing a single syllable.

"I can only share what I've been told," said the Tularin. "And when I left, none of the pantheon were sure if he lived or died. But my understanding is he will not be returning anytime soon, if at all. You and your viceroys will have to work through what comes next until additional arrangements can be made."

"Additional arrangements?" Erdis raised an eyebrow. "Like having the pantheon try to take command of Altearin? This is still Gurthghol's realm—whether he's here or not. As long as he draws breath—"

"I will leave those matters to you and your viceroys. They are not of my concern. And I have spoken what needs saying."

"What about Vkar's throne?" asked Erdis. "What happened to it?"

"It was taken along with Gurthghol."

"So now they have the throne as well—I'm sure that hasn't pleased the pantheon."

"I believe it was said that what has happened has happened and cannot be changed."

Erdis snorted. "Sounds like Saredhel. So then the rest of the gods are going to be busy, I take it."

"There is much that needs to be done. And they are even now in another council seeking to be about it."

"Which gives us time," said Erdis with a dismissive nod. "If you're finished, you may go."

"And you will tell Lords Mergis and Shador this news?"

"You have my word. As soon as you leave, I'll send out messengers and summon them to the palace. *Discreetly* summon them to the palace. We don't need to raise too much concern until we've decided on the best course of action."

"Then I will leave you to it." The Tularin took his leave, closing the door behind him.

Once alone, Erdis hurried to a nearby desk and began searching for some ink and parchment. He was so engrossed in the activity he never saw the shadowed figure of Twila stealthily tread to the hidden portion of the wall and slip back inside, closing the secret door behind her. If she could beat Erdis' letters, she'd have a leg up on any competition. But she had to be wise as well as rapid; what came next needed to be delicately and decisively implemented.

• • •

Thick clouds cloaked Altearin in a purple covering similar to perpetual twilight. No stars nor any other light filled the dark canopy for miles. Yet even within this darkness, Shador didn't feel secure. He'd taken to his keep outside the realm's capital and surrounded it with his Swarthinian honor guard.

The Lord of Darkness paced before the large fountain in his courtyard, thinking. The heels of his boots clicked on the flagstone like anxious hooves. Dressed in a purple-trimmed black robe with a pure-black cloak, he blended in with his surroundings. He'd left the hood down, leaving his clean-shaven face and deep violet eyes visible to anyone lurking about. Like the rest of the Lords of Darkness, Shador had an unusual skin tone. The dusty grayish-purple grew more gray in the light and a deep purple in the darkness.

He'd fortified himself as soon as he'd encountered Rheminas' emissary in Haven. It had taken him years to recruit and carefully cultivate his cult until it was sizable enough to undertake his desires. And all that had been extinguished in mere moments. But what was worse than losing his worshipers was knowing it wouldn't have happened if the gods hadn't been privy to his actions. Which also meant the destruction of the cult was just a prelude to the real assault.

He'd taken careful study of others who tried rising above their station through the use of Tralodroen cults and thought he'd done everything right. He'd even built into his cult the desire to keep things secret and hidden, promoting himself as a divinity able to share power and wonderful

secrets with those he found worthy. It was mostly lies and ritualistic jargon he made up as things progressed, but it had worked well enough, and the cult's ranks swelled.

They'd finally grown in strength and influence to such a point that he was starting to gain the ability to infiltrate and affect the administration of governments and even the faint edges of the major religions in the region. And that was what he wanted: the ability to act on Tralodren without being seen by the gods or their allies.

Because Tralodren was far from just the jewel of the pantheon, as the gods would have all believe. No, it was also a treasure cache waiting to be exploited—both of items and of people.

The titans had once ruled the planet, as had the dranors after them. And each left forgotten wonders behind one could exploit if cunning enough to find and engage them.

And this was to say nothing of the potential one could gain in taking some spirits of their own—just like the gods did—whenever their followers died. While Shador hadn't yet figured out how such a thing could be done, he was sure it was achievable and kept building his cult with as many young and healthy people as possible to allow more time for solving the mystery.

But none of that was going to happen now. The gods knew of his actions and had little love for those who were pulling others away from their worship or even playing on their private planet. The pattern for retribution was simple enough: send in a Galgalli after the cult and then follow up with the main offender. Except it got even more challenging when the culprit was part of the administration of one of those gods. Here it could possibly fall to the offended god—in this case, Gurthghol—to deal with the matter over the Galgalli. And given that the agent who'd so recently slaughtered his followers wasn't really a Galgalli but a mere human instead, things weren't as cut and dried as they normally would be.

But even while Gurthghol might have been a more hands-off ruler in many things, once word reached him one of his trusted officials—a viceroy too, no less—was working his own will on Tralodren, Shador was sure Gurthghol wouldn't let it stand. And Shador was certain that was just what was going to happen when he'd earlier received word from Erdis about needing to meet with Gurthghol for some task on Tralodren.

He was sure Gurthghol was calling him to his final judgment but quickly discovered it was to fight with another entity called Galba instead. But once Galba sent those he'd assembled back to Altearin, he only heard the rest through snips and pieces while deciding to flee the city. There was talk of a battle being waged on Thangaria. By who or what wasn't clear, but if it took Gurthghol's attention, it bought him some time. But that wouldn't stop the inevitable. And so he remained holed up in his keep, racking his brain for some way out of this mess.

He stopped his pacing, shifting his gaze to the nearby fountain. It was a lavish affair: a lifelike rendering of four barghests howling atop a large rock. The rock was of rough basalt, the barghests formed out of polished onyx. The creatures were once native to Umbrium but had arrived on Altearin with the creation of the realm. They were large tailless dogs that grew about waist high to a titan with powerful jaws and claws that made quick work of anything that got in their way.

Streams of water flowed from their open mouths, filling the fountain's basalt-ringed pond built around the rough rock. In the past the sight was a restful thing that helped soothe him during trying times. But that peace today was elusive.

Reaching into the pocket of his robes, he pulled out the silver necklace given him by the high priest of his now-defunct cult. The large circle of lapis lazuli at the center of the silver pendant shimmered in whatever light it captured. It was easily dwarfed by his larger palm, making it appear as some child's trinket. The necklace was said to enhance one's access to magic—or in Shador's case, the cosmic element of darkness. And having such an increase in ability would be an immense boon in the days ahead.

All that trouble and planning and plotting . . . Yet it had been worth it. And all he had to do was show up to collect his prize. That was the beauty of using guises. They got you through the Grand Barrier around Tralodren, allowing you to take a form that further cloaked your actions

### THE SHADOW REGENT

from any curious eyes. But the best part was that things could be brought into and out of Tralodren. The barrier only blocked divinities and gods from coming and going in their true forms. Anyone or anything else wasn't hampered. This meant Shador could go and pick up whatever his cultists offered him, and none would be the wiser. Yes, it was a wonderful situation, until recent events . . .

The sound of a descending Swarthin pulled him from his thoughts. Though half the size of Shador's fifteen feet, any gap in height was easily overcome by aid of the other's wings. Like the rest with him, the bat-like darkened incarnate wore dark brown brigandine armor with short swords on his belt. Each also kept a crossbow slung over their back. A bandoleer across the chest kept more bolts at the ready.

"Someone is approaching from the east," the Swarthin said in Stygian, the language birthed in the ancient plane of Umbrium—the former plane of darkness.

"Just one?" Shador asked in the same tongue.

"There isn't any sign of anything else for miles."

Shador slid the necklace back into the hidden pocket of his robes. "Are they on foot?"

"No, they're mounted on a black stallion and keeping to the road, pressing hard for the keep."

"A messenger?" Perhaps the pantheon wanted a parley. That could buy him more time.

"They carry no banner, my lord."

"Keep watch, and when they get closer—"

A sudden flurry of motion near the large barred gates stopped Shador in midspeech. "What do you think you're *doing*?" he shouted at the handful of Swarthin lifting the thick wooden rail holding the doors shut. "I said to keep the doors barred!"

"Urgent messenger, my lord," one of the Swarthin lifting the wooden bar grunted. "They had to speak with you at once."

"And so you just disobey my orders?" Shador yelled, throwing back his cloak over his left shoulder, revealing his sheathed sword.

"No," said a new voice in Stygian, "he obeyed mine."

Shador spun on his heel, taking note of the black stallion making its way through the small opening barely allowing it inside. Already the rider was looking to dismount. As she did, Shador only grew more uncertain.

"Twila?"

Now free of the horse, it was clear the figure was indeed a woman. And she was definitely a titan, sharing his height and build, but her black cloak and hood hid the rest of her person from further scrutiny.

"Were you expecting someone else?" She removed her hood, revealing her short black hair, along with a face and manner that were hard to forget.

"Close the gates," Shador ordered. "And this time keep them shut.

"You rode all the way here?" He eyed her carefully, trying not to miss a single detail. Her complexion was slightly lighter than his own but still helped to blend her into the darkness.

"I didn't want to draw any attention using the portals," she replied, "and I thought if I used other methods you might mistake me for someone else before I could properly make myself known." It was clever thinking that reminded Shador again of part of what had drawn him to her in the first place.

"And it looks like I was right." Twila scanned the courtyard. "Are you preparing for a war?"

"And why wouldn't I be?" He didn't share her levity. "The pantheon wants my blood, and I'm not yet ready to surrender it."

Twila raised an eyebrow and turned up a corner of her lips. "You seem pretty convinced of that."

"It's pretty much what's in store, given the last I've heard." He watched Twila draw near.

"And just what have you heard?"

"Something about a battle back on Thangaria—a threat to the pantheon," he said, half watching the flying Swarthin returning the wooden bar across the gate with a thick thud.

"That's it?" Twila was clearly amazed.

"What? I had some other pressing matters on my mind. And as the other Lords of Darkness were expelled from Tralodren in the first fight with Gurthghol, I haven't spoken with him since."

### THE SHADOW REGENT

"But you still had time to raise the troops," she added. "You must have known something."

"Just what I told you. I let Mergis see to most everything else. The preparations allowed the perfect opening and cover so I could secure this place."

"And you're supposed to be a viceroy of Altearin?" It was the first time in a long while Shador actually heard some disappointment in Twila's voice.

"There's something greater than Altearin at stake here," he attempted to explain. Instead his words only birthed a blank look from his longtime lover.

"You're right," she finally said. "Nuhl returned to try to destroy the pantheon. Tralodren would have been next, I guess."

"Nuhl . . ." The name wasn't something you spoke lightly. All knew of its history and desire for destroying anything and everything it could. And while it had tried and failed once before in taking out the pantheon back in the days of Vkar and Xora—the first god and goddess of the cosmos—none really imagined a second attempt was possible.

"Did it win?"

"No, but it did create some interesting developments."

"I don't have time for your games, Twila. Just spit it out."

"The threat to the pantheon has been eliminated . . . but so too has Gurthghol."

"What do you mean?"

"He's gone, and Vkar's throne with him."

"What?" Shador lurched forward, grabbing hold of Twila's arms with a death-like grip. It was almost too impossible to believe. "Tell me everything."

"After you and Mergis summoned those other lords to Arid Land Gurthghol won against Galba. And after besting her, he reclaimed the throne."

"Why would he break the pact and take up the throne again? He hated it from the beginning."

"He wanted to use it to destroy Awntodgenee and Nuhl."

Shador paced for a few steps, attempting to wrap his mind around everything. "He couldn't succeed. He must have known that."

"From what I hear he thought he'd finally found a way to be done with them both for good."

He spun back around, facing Twila's still-unreadable features. "But he wasn't."

"No. He was taken prisoner instead—at least that's what the story was when I left the city."

"But he defeated the first threat then—the reason for the battle on Thangaria?"

"Oh yes. He even had some help from a goblin," said Twila.

"A goblin," Shador snorted. "Is that right?" He'd had plenty of opportunity getting acquainted with them during his exploits on Tralodren.

"Not just any goblin," she continued. "He had a scepter that weakened the human wizard whom Nuhl had been using for its attack, allowing Gurthghol a greater advantage."

"Weakened him even with Nuhl's backing?"

"That's what I hear."

Now this was something *very* interesting. Nuhl's original agent had bested Xora and Vkar in the past. The whole pantheon had apparently summoned their best forces to face off with another such agent, leaving one to assume victory wasn't going to be so easily won. And yet one goblin with a certain scepter could change the whole dynamic . . . What would it do to any other god—even one that now sat upon Vkar's throne?

Twila's smile was dripping with mischief. "You can see why I spared no expense in letting you know."

"And where did you hear all this? I know you weren't at the battle on Thangaria."

"I have my ways. But it's genuine and vetted, rest assured."

"And where is this scepter now?"

"So far it's being kept on Thangaria."

"And they're in another council, no doubt, to deal with all this," he mused.

### THE SHADOW REGENT

"The last I heard." Twila was clearly enjoying watching Shador gather all the loose threads.

"So then I might have some time. But we'll have to act quickly."

"What do you have in mind?" She flirted with her violet eyes.

"Something bold and daring," he replied, brushing a hand down Twila's soft cheek. Already he was feeling like his old confident self again. No longer fearfully lurking but now confidently plotting.

"I like it already," she purred.

Shador wasn't saying the half of it. If he could get all the pieces to line up, he could soon find himself in the best place he'd ever dreamed possible. Forget about what his ambitions had been before. With Gurthghol gone and the gods locked in debate, he could see himself rising to some *incredible* heights. And the best part was if done right, the pantheon couldn't do a thing about it.

"Let me guess," said Twila. "Does it involve a plot to take Gurthghol's throne and finally rule like you've always wanted?"

"Not an open plot, no. We need to be tasteful in our coup—discreet and honoring of our beloved lord and master. And it has to be something that smacks of legality so the rest of the pantheon can't come after me once I've risen to the challenge."

Twila ran a hand through his short dark hair. "And here you were worried they might be coming to do you in."

"And they still will be once this current crisis has passed. Even if things go well, there will still be some calling for retribution."

"Then it sounds like you're still going to need an inside person," she said, placing a hand on his chest. "Someone with connections and ways to help sway the others more fully to your cause."

"Someone who, no doubt, will want to share in any success."

"It's only fitting, I would think," Twila purred. "If we *are* truly to be partners in everything."

Shador nodded in thought. "Too bad. You were so close." His comment caught Twila off guard.

"To what?"

### CHAD CORRIE

"Being his favorite," he replied, referring to the past dealings between Twila and Gurthghol as she worked her way through the ranks of his harem. While others might have been troubled by the action, Shador knew the truth. It was never anything serious and just part of the game they both played: attempting to gain greater place and power. Though now with Gurthghol's absence, he was looking forward to having Twila more to himself.

"I think I'll have something to compensate the loss soon enough." Her dark eyes again flirted with his.

"I wouldn't have it any other way." He brought her close, face to face—holding her taut with his arm.

"Then let's get started."

## **CHAPTER 2**

Thangaria, former seat of a planetary empire, once more was quiet. The clamor of battle that had rocked its foundations over an hour before had ended. The gray shroud of atmosphere draped across the sky set a fitting mood for all below.

The survivors rounded up the dead. All those whom the gods had assembled on the floating chunk of rock to face the former threat went about the dreary business with a solemn sternness. Those who'd fallen wouldn't be returning to life. Nuhl was the opposite of life, and its failed vessel shared the same nature. All those killed by the former lich turned upstart god would have had their spirits erased from existence. Once their bodies had been destroyed by rot or fire, they would be nothing but memory. All who took up arms knew that possible fate, but their sacrifice would not be so soon forgotten.

If one could look past the debris and the fallen—gloss over the sight of the patches of blood and burn marks scattered across the barren rock and stone—Thangaria would have appeared as it had for countless centuries: a faded monument to the once-great glory of the mighty Thangarian Empire. But Khuthon, the god of war, knew better than to try to look past what it really was: a crumbling shrine to fallen glories and past battles—some fresher than others.

But it still made for a safe-enough place to gather in council. And since the fall of Vkar and the shattering of his empire these councils had been far and few between. But in the last few days the council had gathered more frequently than any of the gods would have once thought possible. And yet there seemed even more business that needed attending than ever.

"I still think we should have waited," Khuthon told Ganatar as the rest of the fifteen gods entered the council chamber.

Khuthon didn't bother changing from his armor. Most of the other gods didn't either. They also kept their weapons at hand. Both were offenses that once would have barred a god from visiting Thangaria, let alone attending a council, but they'd taken many liberties of late.

"It was the right thing to do," said Ganatar. "Altearin needed to know their lord's fate." His porcelain face glowed with a faint white aura like the rest of his body, illuminating the chamber as they entered and highlighting his snowy hair, mustache, and connecting goatee beard.

"And we could have told them more still once other things had been decided," Khuthon argued. "Sending off that Tularin with only the faintest grasp of—"

"We can't change what's done," said Ganatar, "and we have plenty that needs our attention right now."

Each of the gods took up their respective seat. Aerotripton, Drued, and Panthora, the shortest of the pantheon, had a place at one end of the long table closest to the doors and opposite the head of the table, which led to the granite steps of a dais and the three titan-sized golden thrones upon it. Two thrones flanked the central one, which stood a step higher than the others.

Dradin would take the throne to the right of Ganatar, who took the central seat. Khuthon joined the rest of his siblings—Asorlok, Olthon, Asora, and Saredhel—on the left side of the table's head. Opposite them sat the other gods, their children—Causilla, Endarien, Rheminas, Shiril, and Perlosa.

While the council was getting seated, Khuthon ran through the final parts of the recent fight, processing things again in greater detail, hopeful

of remembering everything closely for later study. He'd originally planned for something grand and glorious—a conflict that hadn't been seen in millennia—but the gods had hardly taken part in it thanks to Gurthghol's sudden arrival with Vkar's throne. And like the rest of the pantheon, he couldn't help but note the empty throne on Ganatar's left. It was reserved for the head of the Dark Gods, the now-absent Gurthghol.

Already, that absence was weighing upon the pantheon. For as odd as it might have sounded, the god of chaos and darkness did much to bring order and stability to the proceedings and the pantheon itself. After all, it was he who'd formed the council to begin with and who brought the gods together for their first meeting, calling for the creation of Tralodren. Such an action, he thought, would bind them all together in a more productive way. And he was right. They just proved as much by banding together to save Tralodren from destruction. And if Gurthghol's presence and participation had brought a sense of purpose and unity to the pantheon, what did his absence foreshadow?

"If everyone is ready." Ganatar peered out across the rest of the gathered gods with his powder-blue eyes. He'd put aside his helmet but left on his golden plate armor and black cape. Upon seeing there were no objections, he added, "Then I call this council to order."

"We've already sent the Tularin to Altearin," Ganatar continued, "but there's still much we have to work through."

"Agreed." Khuthon began directing the conversation, mindfully working all the various threads of his plan through the loom of the forthcoming discussion.

"And where do we start?" Endarien's yellow eyes circled the table. He'd placed his hawk-faced helmet on the table like the others had done with their helms, letting his shield and spear rest opposite each other against the back of his tall chair. The weapon's sparking and cracking white tip didn't seem to bother anyone. Khuthon always imagined both Endarien and his mother, Olthon, must have been uncomfortable sitting for periods of time, given their wings. But yet he'd never seen or heard either complain.

"We need to keep a level head, for one," Ganatar advised. "Moving too rashly won't serve any good or interest."

"But do we even know what happened?" Causilla had changed her attire for the council. It wasn't a total surprise. She wasn't really at home in weapons and armor. Khuthon was amazed she'd even brought a weapon, let alone donned armor, for the previous battle. She now wore a cream-colored gown with golden sandals and a rose sash tied about her waist. She'd also pulled her curly brown hair into a ponytail and let it drape over her right shoulder. A pearl necklace and earrings provided the finishing touches.

"We survived," said Rheminas. "And now we tally our losses."

"It's too soon for that," said Khuthon, launching off of his son's foundation. "We need to prepare."

"For what?" asked Asorlok, amazed Khuthon would even make such a suggestion. The god of death seemed more thoughtful than normal. It wasn't entirely out of character but did make Khuthon pause to polish his reply.

"For the new reality before us and what new threats will most certainly arise," he continued, running that next thread through the loom. Everything needed to run smoothly. He couldn't raise too much resistance too soon.

"Nuhl and his champion are defeated," Olthon calmly stated. "We've had our battle, Khuthon. Now it's time to deal with the aftermath."

"Exactly," he replied. "And that means dealing with Gurthghol's demise."

"And avenging his death," Rheminas added, making his coppery hand into a fist.

"A wasted effort." Asorlok found Rheminas' yellow eyes with his own piercing blue orbs. "Gurthghol isn't dead."

"But we all saw him being taken by Nuhl." The very pregnant Asora voiced everyone's amazement. Her white gown was seemingly stretched to the point of bursting due to her plump stomach. And to think just moments before she was ready to fight in such a condition. Maybe Khuthon was having a greater influence over his wife than he knew.

"But he hasn't crossed over to Mortis." Asorlok's eyes narrowed, making his hawkish nose seem even more so. Khuthon hadn't been expecting that, but he could still adapt things to his favor.

"Are you sure about that?" Drued's charcoal-gray brow wrinkled. He'd placed his double-headed axe next to his helmet. His brown beard was threaded with silver and twelve braids he'd capped in gold.

"Yes." Asorlok's steady gaze stilled the dwarven god from any further questions.

"Then maybe he escaped," offered Endarien, a small sense of hope in his voice. "Maybe he even made his way back to Altearin."

"Or maybe he's playing us all for fools." Rheminas raked his fingers through his orange beard. "We all saw him with the throne. He could have just used this whole battle as an excuse to reclaim it for himself."

"Why?" Causilla gently pushed back against Rheminas' rising conspiracy. "He'd never take up something he never wanted in the first place. Maybe, instead, we should just take what he said at face value: that he believed a sacrifice was needed to defeat the threat."

It was just what Gurthghol had told them before he was taken by Nuhl. It was even the premise of their own actions and preparations against the recent threat. Even so, Khuthon still wasn't sure what to make of the matter—he doubted any of them really knew, not even Saredhel, who first proposed it. And that was saying nothing of how they all had first launched Endarien against Cadrith, the original threat, thinking it was the sacrifice they had to make as a whole. And that had dearly cost them the last of Vkar's essence, a loss only compounded by Gurthghol's actions.

"Or he's hiding something," Rheminas continued, his words chilling the air.

"Unless you're making an accusation"—Ganatar leaned forward on his throne—"I'd remind you that Gurthghol has just conducted a selfless act in order to save all of us *and* Tralodren. We don't need to sully his deed by casting baseless claims."

"True enough." Khuthon gave Ganatar a small nod. Endless talk on conspiracies and other matters outside his objective wasn't helpful. He needed to keep steering things in the proper direction, guiding his words along with the others' thoughts. Those threads were nearly all aligned. "But it'd still be wise to send someone to check on the status of his realm."

"And we just sent a Tularin." Olthon frowned at the thought, marring her fair features.

"But not in an official capacity to really search things out," Khuthon replied. "Delivering a message is one thing. But to have the authority to make inquiries and search other matters out as they arise—"

"I believe the word you're looking for is *spy*." Dradin's green-eyed gaze locked hard upon Khuthon. The god's short white beard added a paternal demeanor to his words.

"Confirmation." Khuthon quickly reclaimed the conversation. "Tularins have some influence and respect but nothing like an official delegation would have."

Perlosa's pale lips curled into a cold smile. "And just who might you have in mind to lead said delegation, Father?" She always knew how best to rankle him, but he let it pass.

"I'd be the best candidate should the need for any type of confrontation arise." He kept his voice and manner measured.

"And why would you think there'd be a need for confrontation?" Olthon's green eyes were like jade daggers.

Khuthon's simple smile didn't blunt them one bit. "I've learned it's best to be prepared for anything."

"Including an invasion of Altearin?" Olthon pressed.

"Do *any* of you know for certain what's going on or what we face?" He suddenly fixed his sights on Saredhel. "Do *you*, Saredhel?"

The bald goddess' solid white eyes were unreadable. "There is much in transition at the moment," she answered in her normal serene manner. "The more time I have to sort through the matter, the clearer things will become."

"But can we wait?" Khuthon let the full weight of the question have its intended effect.

"I think the real matter here is why can't *you*?" All gathered found Shiril. Her often-silent presence in councils past made her words even more arresting. This was the second time in as many days she'd been so engaged. But whether this was a new pattern was yet to be seen. "Are you

so hungry for another war that you're willing to make one yourself?" Shiril didn't pull any punches as she kept her silver gaze focused on Khuthon.

"Got some fire in you, haven't you?" Rheminas chuckled to himself. "I like that."

Shiril ignored him. "Haven't you learned *anything* from today?" Silence fell as her words sunk into the other gods' heads and hearts.

Khuthon quickly recalibrated his thoughts, wondering if he was going to need to stand against another he wasn't planning on facing in the upcoming verbal fray. He gave her a hurried once-over, making sure his previous reading of her still stood. Black haired with a brown complexion, she resembled more the Lords of Earth she ruled over than the rest of the gods.

And yet while there was indignation, there wasn't a direct threat to anything Khuthon was planning. She was upset—they all were to various degrees—but her momentary challenge had been more rebuke than outright resistance. She wasn't someone who'd stand in the way—not in the end. Changing his tone, but not his outlook, Khuthon took to his feet. It was time to make his move.

"Today has been a trying one for all of us," he began, attempting his most statesman-like voice and manner. "We've faced an old foe—one who destroyed the very planet whose ruins we're meeting upon today—and won. But that victory hasn't come cheaply, and it falls to *someone* to at least make sure all is well in Altearin. We owe that much to Gurthghol and we can't have rebellion fermenting in these delicate times."

Perlosa rolled her eyes at her father's rhetoric. Asorlok peered down at the table, shaking his head softly. The others were more courteous, at least allowing Khuthon their attention. All except Rheminas, who tried snatching fleeting glimpses of Shiril when he could. It was supposed to be subtle, but Khuthon didn't miss it, even if the other gods and Shiril herself did.

"We need order," Khuthon continued, sending a deferential nod Ganatar's way. "Order in the realms as well as here."

Dradin leaned forward. "And what are you proposing, exactly?"

### THE SHADOW REGENT

"To keep order we need to keep the pantheon and do so in a balanced way." He slowly approached Gurthghol's empty throne as he spoke, letting the tension of the moment build. "And right now that balance is lacking." He stopped at the base of the dais and turned so he could face the others. "And it's also clear to me everything we're discussing or will discuss is tied into one common element."

"And that is?" Drued was unmoved.

"We need a new head of the Dark Gods."

"But Gurthghol isn't dead," Panthora interjected.

"No," said Khuthon, "he isn't, but we can't afford to have the position remain empty while we await his possible return—*if* he ever should return."

"What happened to putting yourself forward as an *ambassador* to Altearin?" While there wasn't a hint of sarcasm to Causilla's question, it was still punctuated with a sharp-enough point. Khuthon was impressed. Maybe there was more steel beneath that alluring veneer than he knew.

"You just want the seat." Olthon brought the thought already in everyone's mind to the fore. She wasn't surprised—saddened at how rapidly her brother had made the play, and maybe a little disappointed. But that was to be expected . . . and countered.

"It has to fall to one of the Dark Gods." Khuthon searched out Rheminas and Asorlok, the only other Dark Gods besides himself. "Who are just as welcome to put in their bid." Though the Dark Gods were the smallest of the three factions of gods, they still held some sway in various debates and matters, but now, without Gurthghol, the faction was further diminished in influence. But the seat still had clout.

"And given I once held the seat before—"

"Very briefly before," added Olthon.

"Maybe so," he acknowledged, "but I did have the seat."

"And now you want it again."

"Is there another bid?" Ganatar examined Rheminas and Asorlok in turn.

"Not from me," said Asorlok.

"No," said Rheminas.

This didn't surprise any, for none—including Khuthon—thought Rheminas would upstage his father. And no one thought Asorlok was ever interested in it. He, like Shiril, tended to keep more to himself and his own plans and ways.

"So you'd really have us vote on replacing our brother's seat when it's still unclear what his current position is?" Dradin's words made clear he wasn't fond of the notion but still realized they were all stuck with following formalities and protocols. "I would think there'd be other matters that need discussing first. Like what to do with that scepter, for one."

For a moment Khuthon considered Dradin's staff. He'd never seen him without it close by or in hand. There was always the faintest of whispers circling the glowing green crystal globe at the center of the rune-covered angular curve of gold that crowned the wooden shaft. It was assumed and believed such whispers were the secrets of the cosmos Dradin could call upon when needed. Khuthon had never been able to prove that entirely but often wondered at times—like now—just what he might be hearing in those whispers.

"You're going to need a leader of the Dark Gods for any votes going forward," Khuthon reminded Dradin along with the rest of the council. "And once we know what happened to Gurthghol—and if he wants to reclaim the position—I'll gladly return it."

"Forgive me if I find that a little hard to believe." Olthon's response didn't surprise him. Mildly offended him, but didn't surprise him. After all, she knew him maybe better than most, which made it all the more important to keep to his script.

"I'm merely helping to keep things from falling apart," he returned. "Once we have a united council, we can vote on and discuss the rest of the matters before us."

"Very well." Ganatar sighed. "If it will get us on to other matters. All who are willing to allow Khuthon to become leader of the Dark Gods in Gurthghol's absence—on the condition the position reverts to Gurthghol upon his return—raise your hand."

Rheminas' hand shot up first. Asorlok's rose second, followed by that of Drued, who grumbled something into his beard. This was followed by Aerotripton and Shiril. Five. Only two more and he'd have the majority, counting himself. Asora's hand ascended next. Her other rested on her bulging stomach. Khuthon noticed her normally relaxed face was lined with some growing unease and discomfort. For a moment he was tempted to immediately stop and inquire. But it was only for a moment. This was the more important matter—and he was within arm's reach of securing it. Next came Endarien's hand. Seven. And with Khuthon's it made for an even eight—the majority.

"It seems we have a new leader." There was neither joy nor disappointment in Ganatar's announcement. But it didn't matter. Khuthon had won what he'd wanted.

"Until Gurthghol returns, that is," Olthon quickly added.

"The babies are coming." Asora's words pierced through Khuthon faster than any sword.

"Now?" He was less than pleased by the news even as he hurried to her side.

The Tularins who had been keeping watch over the door to the chamber flew to her aid, seeking to offer what comfort they could. As the honor guard of what remained of Thangaria, they had the duty of serving the gods, and they'd do no less at this moment than any other.

"Babies?" Endarien wasn't the only concerned one around the table. "I thought she was having only *one* child."

"As did we," added Perlosa, watching the Tularins assisting Asora to her feet—Khuthon aiding where he could.

"Sometimes the best-kept secrets are the ones hidden in plain sight," Saredhel dryly mused.

"Yes." Rheminas stared hard at Saredhel. "Seems to be a lot of hidden things about these days."

"Look who's talking," Asorlok quipped.

Before any more could be said, Ganatar rose from his throne. "In light of the present situation, this council is adjourned until Asora has recovered enough to return. Her delivery will give us all time to tend to

our realms, providing us all a better understanding of what needs to be done upon our return."

It was a suitable decree given the circumstance. But had it come any sooner, Khuthon's plans could have been stymied. As it was, he'd achieved his victory and was able to shake up the pantheon once again with the forthcoming birth. Everyone would be too busy to focus on it to do much of anything else. And this, in turn, would leave him free to solidify the rest of his agenda. He couldn't have wished for anything better if he'd planned it all himself.

Descending the dais, Ganatar asked, "Do you need any help returning to Bios?"

"No." Asora shook her head. "The labor isn't that great yet."

"Then go in peace and enjoy this time with your family. At least *something* good shall come out of today's darkness." Turning to the others around the table, he added, "I'll send word again soon." He vanished in a flash of golden light. The rest of the pantheon and their possessions followed in various bursts of colored light until it was just Asora and Khuthon who remained.

Khuthon brushed Asora's cheek with the back of his hand. "I'll join you shortly." Even in her labor she was such a lovely sight. He didn't think he'd ever truly grow tired of it, though this hadn't stopped him from exploring new views in times past.

Asora took hold of Khuthon's wrist while it was still near her face. "I'll be waiting. As will they." She released his grip and vanished in a flash of white light. Free from their need to aid Asora, the Tularins turned their attention on Khuthon.

"I wish to be alone."

"Of course," said one with a bow. Both flew from the room, closing the large doors behind them.

Khuthon let the shrine-like stillness of the place rest upon him like a mantle. Moving back to Gurthghol's former throne, he reflected on how well things had flowed into his hands. He'd learned long ago to never let a crisis go to waste if you could use it to your advantage. Just hours before he'd been preparing the battle plans for the pantheon's last stand, and now here he was, newly elevated as the head of the Dark Gods and given a higher rank and greater voice in the council.

He'd been able to figure the actions of the others almost perfectly, and the drama birthed by Asora's labor only added to the ease by which he claimed his victory. Whether or not Gurthghol returned wasn't important. If Khuthon knew anything, it was that Nuhl and Awntodgenee weren't ones to be so kind in terms of punishment and retribution. If Gurthghol wasn't dead yet, he would be soon enough.

Having reached the throne, he took a seat with deep delight. While he had thought about taking the position for a while, he never saw a way until now. It was unlikely Gurthghol would ever relent, and Khuthon wasn't about to challenge his brother directly. But with the added authority his new position afforded, he could make bigger steps for greater vistas of power and standing in both the pantheon and elsewhere.

He let himself rest in the golden chair, savoring the feel of it and noting the new view it gave of the room. A room he had no doubt he would be seeing more of soon. There was still much that had to be done—and even more that was already going on behind the scenes. As much as they might have tried to put on the display of proper protocol, he knew the others were already at work with matters in their own realms and probably elsewhere, Khuthon chief among them.

Thinking on such plans, his right hand started glowing with a blood-red aura. He slashed it through the air in front of his face. A red gash spread like a bleeding wound until a two-foot-wide opening hovered across from him. Two dimensional in nature, it resembled a pool of blood, reflecting a slightly distorted image of Khuthon before another form took its place. This shape was humanoid and, suddenly aware of being seen by the god, brought himself to attention.

"We have nearly recovered from the battle, Majesty," Torgin, the gigantic commander he'd put in charge of his forces for the previous battle, informed him.

"How did the others fare?"

"Not as well as us, but seeing as the fight didn't escalate as much as we'd first thought, that isn't too much of a surprise."

## CHAD CORRIE

"I suppose not." Khuthon imagined an alternative reality wherein he and the rest of the pantheon would still be in the middle of their conflict with Cadrith and maybe even Nuhl—and then Asora starting to go into labor in the midst of it all. Perhaps things had worked out better than they knew.

"You've earned your rest," he told Torgin, "you and all the men. All of you are to return to Kratos, where there will be much to celebrate."

"As you command, Mighty One." Torgin brought his right fist over his heart in salute. The bloody viewing pool faded, leaving Khuthon once again alone in the council room. Taking a moment more to enjoy the throne, he sighed. Other duties called for his attention.

He rose and vanished from the chamber in a flash of red light.

# **CHAPTER 3**

**B** efore there was the realm of Altearin, there were the planes of Umbrium and Anomolia—both of which were destroyed when they were merged into Gurthghol's new realm. And as one could imagine with such an act, there were those who didn't take too kindly to having their lives disrupted and their whole reality reforged into some new vision they had little say or control over. Chief among these discontents were the Umbrians.

Named after the plane of Umbrium they once called home, these humanoid darkened incarnates seemed to have been crafted from pure darkness. Every part of their being was a deep black. It was just another mark of pride they used as proof of their direct siring from the cosmic element of darkness. With such a grand pedigree, they scoffed at the Lords of Darkness, who thought themselves masters of the cosmic element. Such arrogance was humored for a time when the titan lords arrived on the plane under Vkar's orders, but since the rise of Gurthghol and the creation of Altearin, any such tolerance was replaced with open contempt.

The titan lords might have shared an ancient birth line, but they were only freshly arrived into the ways of darkness, while the Umbrians were its children. This was made all the more apparent when the Lords of Darkness sought to adapt to the new realm of Altearin by embracing pockets and blending of light. Such a thing was an abomination to those

who were now forced to either live an adulterated existence or seek to preserve their old ways and lives however possible.

Not surprisingly, most Umbrians fled to the deep recesses of darkness, underground, or other benighted areas and regions. This often meant focusing on the areas ruled by the Lords of Darkness, since such areas were the most light-diminished places in the realm. It was a far cry from the freedom they previously enjoyed, even with the original rule of the titan lords back on Umbrium. But it allowed them a place away from prying eyes and perchance brief moments of bliss where they could pretend they yet were the sole masters of an unblemished Umbrium.

And such were the ways and mindset of those who called the city of Ulan home. The ancient metropolis was massive, housing a million inhabitants deep within the depths of Altearin. The very rock had been worked into the colossal walls and giant towers protecting the city. The gates reinforced with wrought iron were the very essence of their ancestral homeland. All of it was devoid of light. For the Umbrians, like Lords of Darkness, could see in the dark as if it were day.

Behind the walls the streets were filled with people; the shops, taverns, and other spaces were crowded with dark-clad figures—all of whom blended in with their dusky surroundings like shadows with night.

Each of these watched the procession of guards leading a figure easily twice their size down the main street and straight for the palace. The guards' long black halberds helped narrow the height gap between them, while their suits of pitch-black chain mail with matching open-faced helmets let the titan know they were willing to give him a fight if allowed the excuse. None who viewed the scene had a kind expression for this new arrival, and more than a few muttered curses under their breath.

The soldiers guided their prisoner up and into the palace, winding through the aged corridors until coming upon their prince's throne room. The large double doors were easily the same size as the guards' prisoner and were a mixture of onyx and black walnut panels, reinforced with more wrought iron. The two guards at the lead opened the doors and moved inside, alerting the one seated on the throne of their arrival.

Rilas, prince of Ulan, was bedecked in a fine black tunic, pants, and boots. A sable-colored cape draped around his shoulders, while an onyx crown studded with black diamonds and pearls completed his attire. As in all Umbrianic cities, the prince was the highest ruler—the Umbrians never having taken to a king or queen, thinking a prince or princess regal enough for their needs. Rilas' throne was a blending of wrought iron, black walnut, and midnight-stained silk. It rested upon a dais of dark marble, which brought him eye to eye with the titanic prisoner.

"Why have you brought me *this*?" Rilas sneered at the hooded titan. "He was found outside the walls saying he wished to speak with you." The captain of the guard spoke in Stygian, the only language any spoke in the city. The only *true* language any child of darkness *could* speak.

"And what would a titan want to speak to me about?" He attempted to peer into the other's hood. Even on the dais the additional height netted no advantage.

"We've gone to great lengths to keep ourselves as far *from* you and your kind as possible," he continued. "We have *nothing* to speak about. You've wasted your time by coming here."

"I don't think so," the titan returned in a strangely accented Stygian. "And neither does my master, who sent me."

"I'm more interested to know how you found us," said Rilas. "Ulan has been hidden for centuries, and yet you come strolling right up to our gates. So how did you do it? Who sent you and why?"

"My master showed me the way," said the titan.

"And who is your master?" Rilas' interest in the matter was piqued enough to inquire further. If the accent could be believed, this wasn't your average Lord of Darkness, perhaps not even your average titan lord.

The other extended a golden-skinned hand from under his black cloak. In it was a steel disk with some sort of design carved in relief. "His emblem." The titan handed it to the captain of the guard, who in turn brought it to Rilas.

"No Lord of Darkness has golden skin." Rilas watched the titan during the captain's approach. "Who are you?"

"My name is Bron. I'm a simple servant doing his master's will."

"Bron." Rilas tested the name aloud. "Not a common name among the Lords of Darkness—assuming it *is* your real name."

The steel disk found its way into Rilas' hand. Crafted for use by a titan, the object was closer to the size of a saucer, larger than the impression he'd had of it in the titan's grasp. The emblem, however, was quite easy to make out: a silver amphisbaena ouroboros with both heads facing instead of devouring each other. The background was purple. Both the two-headed serpent and the emblem it formed were easily identified. They were part of an empire that still held parts of the cosmos in its death grip.

"You know the mark, I trust?" Bron asked as the captain of the guard returned to the titan's side.

"You won't find too many who don't." Rilas raised his gaze. "Especially among the Umbrians. But an old emblem doesn't prove anything."

"It should prove I'm not on the Lords of Darkness' side."

"Which is why you're still standing before me, but you've shown nothing else." Rilas wasn't getting any of this. It made no sense. Why would this titan come all this way to see him? He had nothing to offer, and the titan, as far as Rilas could tell, had nothing to offer him. It was a waste of both their time and possibly even the titan's life.

"Gurthghol has been removed from his place in the pantheon and Altearin." The words caught all off guard. "You'll hear about it shortly through your normal channels of spies."

It took Rilas a moment to regain control of his jaw and tongue. "Even if what you say is true, you still haven't shown me why I should let you keep talking." Rilas did well in hiding the surprise from his voice.

"My master has foreseen some great changes are about to take place for you and your realm—the pantheon too—and would like to take advantage of the situation," Bron continued. "Many who already know of Gurthghol's removal are working to secure a place in the new order. My master has foreseen the rise of Shador, the current viceroy over the Lords of Darkness, as taking that place."

"Shador." Rilas spat out the name like a soured wine. The Lord of Darkness had been a viceroy for some time. He was better than some of his predecessors but still an enemy holding court and supposed power over them. "We've no love of him nor his kin—*or* Lords of Chaos for that matter. And he'd be wasting his time; the pantheon would rise up to stop him."

"Not if what my master says is true."

"And why's that?"

"Shador already has a plan to keep them back from Altearin, allowing him free rein over the realm." Rilas didn't believe it but let the titan continue, curious to see how far he'd take his wild tale. "But that isn't my master's main point of interest. In the process, Shador will be seeking to lay hold of a certain scepter to use in securing his power. My master wishes to stop him from claiming it and take it for himself."

"And all this concerns me *how*?"

"By taking the scepter you'll be given an opening for your own plans to succeed." Rilas could sense the smile in Bron's voice. "My master is seeking to rid the cosmos of the current order in favor of a new one. And you"—Bron jabbed a golden finger at Rilas—"have the opportunity to join him as an ally."

Rilas studied the emblem again. It didn't seem too old, but it also wasn't freshly forged. But it was still an echo of something long since passed. A faint shadow of something that had no real meaning anymore.

"Everyone knows your so-called master's long since left the cosmos." Rilas raised his head. "I don't know who you are, but I've humored you enough." He motioned to the guards. "Get him out of my sight."

Bron stood firm. "Gurthghol is gone, and Shador shall arise. If he's allowed to gain the scepter he seeks, the Umbrians will just exchange one master for another. But should you side with my master and the new order to come, you'll have your freedom." The guards pulled hard upon the titan, forcing him to turn to leave the room. "When you're ready, simply speak your agreement to the emblem, and I'll return."

"If you do return, you'll find a cell in my dungeon waiting—"

Rilas stopped upon witnessing something truly wondrous: somehow Bron had managed to collapse in upon himself. He didn't fully know how to comprehend it. One moment Rilas was chastising him, and the next the gold-skinned titan was condensing in upon himself as if his body

## THE SHADOW REGENT

was being compressed by two massive hands. A violet aura glowed around him as he rapidly grew thinner and thinner until he was gone—completely removed from reality.

The guards sought their prince for answers. He had none—not yet. This was all for some purpose, for sure, but whose? The Lords of Darkness? Were they trying to bait him into some foolish action and then close the trap, dooming him and the city to destruction? Or was what he'd just heard—as far fetched as it sounded—actually true? And if so, what then? The best course of action, it seemed, was to sit back and wait. If what was spoken did come to pass, then that was one thing. As to the actual offer . . .

Rilas dismissed the guards. "Go. And double the guard around the walls. I don't want any more unexpected visitors. And make a search of where you found him—we need to know if there are any more surprises in the area." The others departed as ordered, leaving Rilas to his thoughts and the emblem resting on his lap.

• • •

Mergis strode into the dimly lit audience chamber of Gurthghol's palace. His short white hair made him hard to miss. The Lord of Chaos was the second viceroy over Altearin, a rather high position that saw him and Shador share rule over about half the realm each. Though there were other factions among various other incarnates who sought their own autonomy, the viceroys' command was basically uncontested. After Gurthghol, the next most powerful were the Lords of Darkness and the Lords of Chaos. These titan lords ruled very much like minor lords in their own right, which Gurthghol allowed. Each was even tasked with various administrative duties—both to keep them occupied and to keep the rest of Altearin in line.

Mergis wasn't the first to hold his position. There were others throughout the millennia, but he was always eager to make sure he was the longest serving. This meant he was ever listening to those he ruled over—both covertly and overtly—ready to cease any hint of anything that might disrupt his established command. While it was perhaps odd to think of a Lord of Chaos so concerned with keeping the status quo, he was doing nothing less than Gurthghol himself, who despite being the god of chaos and darkness desired and enforced a form of order across all he ruled. And these last few days had much to keep one busy in the area of maintaining that control.

Recent events had been both rather rapid and confusing, to say the least. There were a lot of wagging tongues about, and plenty of information to accompany them. Information that was equally far fetched and troubling. There was news of a war in Thangaria—which he'd been able to verify since he'd sent some titanic warriors there to help fight in it. And then there was talk of something taking place with Gurthghol. What it was, exactly, though, he hadn't a clue. When he'd received the summons from Erdis to appear at the palace, he was hopeful he'd get some answers. It wasn't wise to allow too much speculation to run wild.

Mergis wasn't alone in his visit. With him were two of his most trusted advisers and assistants: Lagella and Cirgin. Lagella's rich purple skirt matched the short-sleeved tunic draped over it. Her long brown hair was left free flowing. Cirgin's tunic was a light brown, the same color as his boots. His pants were a deep purple. Since this was also a courtly call, all three had donned the regalia marking them as titan lords: a half cape, silver cuirass, and bracers. Each was also crowned with an amethyst diadem specially designed for and by each of the three titans.

Mergis himself wore a rich burgundy long-sleeved tunic over a pair of finely crafted black pants with pale silver stitching forming the Black Sun—Gurthghol's crest—in a vertical pattern up the outside legs. Deep brown boots finished the outfit. It was simple but clean enough to showcase his place amid the rest. He wore no weapon nor any jewelry outside an onyx ring marking his place as leader of the Lords of Chaos.

The audience chamber was one of two side chambers flanking the main throne room. Rectangular and rather large, it had walls lined with wrought iron sconces burning with flickering tongues of plum-colored flame. Opposite the trio of titans was a black walnut door, which granted access into the main throne room beyond. On either side was a red hydra. Carved of solid red agate, the statues were lifelike in every detail. Even coiled up, they were easily the same height as the approaching titans. Above their fat coils, each had eleven serpentine heads that studied every part of the chamber. Arched above these heads were their tails, capped with scorpions' stingers.

"Odd that we're the first to arrive," said Mergis, his amethyst eyes taking in the statues' finer details. "Shador is usually fairly prompt about such things."

"Let's hope Gurthghol notices," said Lagella, the corners of her lips creasing with a faint grin.

"For what purpose?" The graying temples of Cirgin's red hair matched the streaking in his thick mustache.

"It's always wise to garner favor with Gurthghol," she replied.

"And to show up Shador and his bunch," added Mergis.

A round of soft chuckling followed them as they stopped before the two statues and waited for the doors to open. In the strange light Mergis could almost imagine those fat coils slowly moving, that pointed stinger carefully swaying as each head stared down their approaching prey. Though Mergis had only seen a hydra once in his life, the sculptor of these statues had captured nearly every detail to perfection.

"How bad do you think it was on Thangaria?" asked Cirgin.

"You know as much as I do," said Mergis. "But we're still here, so it couldn't have been too bad. I'm more curious to see what became of the matter with Galba on Tralodren."

He and Shador had been asked by Gurthghol to send some of their best titan lords with Gurthghol for some sort of confrontation. He wasn't privy to all the details, but from what he could recall of his own history, Galba had never been an enemy; the two instead were allies in many things.

Lagella raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that breaking the pact they'd made?"

"Maybe, but he was the one who made it with her in the first place. So I suppose he can rewrite it when needed." Being Lords of Chaos, none was too worried about altering deals or pacts. All things changed over time. To believe otherwise was foolishness—even more so if one tried to stand against the change. In some ways the recent flurry of actions was a rather welcomed event. Everything had started becoming a little too mundane for even Mergis' endurance. This was just the sort of thing to spice it up and maybe even work out some greater benefits and boons in the process.

"Once we're done here, I'm going to need a report for the regions," he continued. "I've been hearing talk about some pockets of Anarchs trying to stir things up. We don't need that after all this."

"You think—"

Cirgin was interrupted by the sound of doors opening.

Behind the thick wood wasn't another titan lord, nor even Gurthghol, as Mergis was expecting. Instead, the regally garbed Erdis stepped into the chamber.

"Is he ready for us?" Mergis' question slowed the Kardu's step and furrowed his brow.

"I'm afraid not." Erdis' tone was solemn.

"Then when will he be ready?"

"I don't know," he replied. "He isn't here."

Lagella exchanged a glance with Cirgin.

"I didn't expect the pantheon would take so much of his attention."

"He isn't with the pantheon."

"But you sent a summons saying Gurthghol wished to speak with Shador and me at once."

"I know." Even under Mergis' stare, Erdis remained the calm, professional figure he'd long known him to be. "I regret having to use such deception, but it was the only way to make sure you both arrived without having anything sensitive leaking out among others."

Mergis crossed his arms. "And just what sort of sensitive things are we talking about, Erdis?"

"Gurthghol and the future of Altearin."

"Go on."

## THE SHADOW REGENT

Erdis sighed. "I was hoping to speak to both of you at once, but it appears Lord Shador hasn't taken my summons as seriously as you."

"I guess some of us just know how to show the proper respect." Lagella flashed some teeth that had Mergis questioning if she wasn't flirting more than driving a dagger into Shador's back. Whatever her intention, Erdis remained unmoved.

"So what exactly is this all about? And where's Gurthghol?"

"He's not here, as I said."

"Then where is he?" Mergis didn't like this back-and-forth. There was a certain part of the court etiquette he was expected to maintain, he understood, but this wasn't it. Things needed to be out and in the open—especially now.

"I don't know." Erdis' words chilled the air. "No one knows."

"What do you mean, no one knows?" Cirgin nervously half chuckled.

"Gurthghol is gone." Erdis was matter of fact. "I've been informed by the pantheon that he was taken captive by Nuhl after the battle at Thangaria, and no one knows where he is or what's become of him."

"Is this a joke?" Cirgin was far from amused.

"It's the terrible truth," Erdis solemnly continued. "Nuhl took him and the throne he reclaimed from Galba. He was using it, I'm told, to try to destroy the Cosmic Entities."

"How did he think he'd succeed?" Cirgin blurted.

"I don't know," said Erdis. "But Vkar's throne is a wonder of the ages, and he might have known or seen something we don't."

"And yet even using Vkar's throne he failed?" Mergis said to himself more than anyone else.

"From what I understand, yes."

"Then he's dead for sure," said Cirgin. "If Nuhl has him—"

"He's its prisoner," Erdis hurriedly interrupted. "He's not dead."

"But the original threat has been dealt with?" asked Mergis.

"Yes. Nuhl's agent was destroyed, and the threat with him. The pantheon survived, as did Thangaria and Tralodren."

"And there won't be any reprisals?" Mergis worked his way carefully through everything, making sure he saw all the facets of the situation.

"Not that I was told of. The pantheon is in another council and will most likely remain so for some time."

"Giving us time to act," Lagella muttered to herself before realizing she had spoken aloud. "For whatever the pantheon will do next," she quickly told both Mergis and Erdis.

"And you're sure Gurthghol isn't dead?" Again, Mergis would have everything in the open—nothing in nuances.

"The last I heard, he wasn't counted among Mortis' ranks," said Erdis.

"So he could still return." Lagella was neither relieved nor saddened.

"That would be the hope." Erdis nodded.

"But not that likely if Nuhl really does have him." Mergis burst whatever bubble of hope had been swelling in their midst.

"So then what do we do in the meantime?" Cirgin sought Mergis.

"That is what I summoned both you and Lord Shador here to discuss. Word will get out as the warriors return from Thangaria, and a god's absence can only be covered up for so long. We need to stand together during this time—to decide how best to keep things together until Gurthghol's return."

"Which could be never," Mergis continued his bubble bursting.

"I'd prefer to not surrender all hope just yet," said Erdis.

"And I assume this all came through a Tularian messenger?" asked Mergis.

"Yes, not too long ago. He would have spoken to all three of us, but only I was in the palace at the time. I trust you can keep this matter between yourselves until I've been able to speak with Lord Shador? It's better to have such things coming from the leadership, speaking with one common voice, than the cacophony of the masses."

"Of course."

"I'm sure Shador will reach out to you once he's been informed," Erdis continued. "You two will need some time to coordinate things. And then we can all make the final decisions."

"I'll do my part," said Mergis. "You have my word on that."

"I hope so. Gurthghol wouldn't want to return to anything less than something as close to what he left as possible." Mergis wasn't sure about that, but he wasn't going to argue with the Kardu.

"Then where does that leave us?" Lagella cautiously inquired.

"That's for us to decide," replied Erdis. "But we need to be unanimous in our efforts—whatever they may be."

Mergis was already starting to lose himself in his thoughts. Everything was rushing over him so rapidly it was hard to latch on to any one thing, yet there were so many wonderful options now bobbing about his mind. If Gurthghol *was* truly in a place none could find, let alone free him from—even if found . . . Oh yes, this could definitely spice some things up nicely.

"I'll do my part. I can't vouch for Shador and his bunch, though. But I'm willing to work with them to figure something out."

"Good." Erdis nodded. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a few other matters that need my attention."

"Of course." Mergis gave a small nod and stepped aside, clearing a path for Erdis to pass. "I won't keep you from it."

Mergis and the other titans watched Erdis make his way from them, not speaking again until he'd reached the door on the opposite end of the room through which they themselves had entered just moments before.

Once he was gone, they kept their voices low.

Cirgin went straight to the point. "What do you think?"

"We can trust Erdis," Mergis reminded them. "He's nothing but loyal to Gurthghol."

"But is the news he's hearing accurate?" Cirgin continued.

"If it came from a Tularin, it can be trusted," said Lagella. "They don't lie. And it's not like Gurthghol to pull stunts, and he isn't one for court intrigue either."

"No, he isn't," said Mergis, thinking. "But we do have an advantage over Shador at the moment with this news."

"Then we should use it. You don't really trust him *not* to take advantage of this, do you?" Lagella was stating the obvious.

"No less than he'd be a fool to think *I* wouldn't," he replied. "But *we* have some time to plan and prepare."

"But to do what?" Lagella studied Mergis carefully, no doubt trying to read his intentions before he shared them. She'd gotten good at it over the years but still wasn't able to anticipate his thinking entirely, for which he was thankful—especially at moments like this.

"We have a rare opportunity for some real freedom." He grinned. "We need to be wise in how we use it, or we could lose it just as quickly. You'll both need to gather the other lords." He raised his voice just loud enough for the others to hear him. Though Erdis had departed, he knew most walls had ears in the palace, and he'd keep them deaf for a while longer. "Have them gathered at my keep by the end of the day. Let them know it's urgent."

"Even the Anarchs?" Cirgin's mustache bristled with his sneer.

"Yes. They'll especially want to hear what I propose."

"Which is?" Lagella inquired softly.

"You'll see." Mergis had shared all he would for the time being. He had to be sure he had everything thought out before revealing too much. But what he had envisioned so far was in quite some detail. He just needed a unified force behind him in carrying it out. And if he could get all or most of the Lords of Chaos on his side, he could push forward an agenda without any real opposition.

"Get everyone possible," he continued, following Erdis' path from the room. "And don't be late."

• • •

Rilas walked the long, dark corridor in silence. It was empty except for the occasional door or patrolling guard. This part of the palace wasn't much used but was still preserved and kept watch over, though with a lighter force than in the rest of the city. There wasn't much trouble to be expected from the old tomes and scrolls that resided behind the doors the Umbrianic prince was passing.

Coming to rest before a doorway on his left, Rilas put his hand to the wrought iron handle and shoved the door inward. Behind it was the smell of dust, old parchment, and dry leather. In keeping with their ways and nature, there was no light, but that didn't hinder anything from being seen, nor did it prevent an older sage seated at a table from reading from the hills and valleys of scrolls and books before him.

"Well?" Rilas approached the table.

The sage lifted his head in greeting. "I think I've made some progress." He was dressed in a black open robe over an iron-gray tunic and deep brown pants. His full black beard swallowed much of his face. Rilas had sought the sage early that morning, handing him the seal his titanic visitor had left, along with the titan's description. Now evening, he'd returned for some answers.

"Is the emblem real?" Rilas stood opposite the sage.

"It's of some age," the man said, retrieving the object from where it rested within arm's reach. "But it isn't as old as something from the proper time period."

"So it's a fake?" He watched the sage examine the metal disk.

"If it is, it's incredibly well done." He handed it to Rilas. "You'll note the slight wear on some of the surfaces—fine things here and there, really—but enough to show it hasn't recently been created."

"So an old forgery . . ." Rilas returned the disk to the table with a small clunk. He wasn't interested in trying to pry anything further from the object. He'd done all he could already and come up empty. It was what brought him to the sage in the first place.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps it's just an old reminder from another age. The crest *is* accurate—from the records we have on hand."

"What about the titan?"

"Yes, the golden-skinned titan. The notes were old, but I found some texts that confirmed them. Golden-skinned titans were either titans of the first generation or titan lords—Lords of Space."

Rilas pondered the first option. Could that really be possible? A titan from the first generation surviving into the present day? It could explain the connection to the crest, but it wasn't plausible. The emblem had come much later—well after the passing of the first generation from history and all of existence.

"I'd lean more toward a Lord of Space myself." The sage's words fished Rilas from his thoughts.

"It would also explain his disappearance and how he probably got here in the first place," added Rilas. "But why would he have come to Altearin—and *here* of all places? What's his game, and why has he chosen *us* to play it?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer those questions, only say that the Lords of Space aren't known to travel outside their plane for almost anything. And it just raises more questions about the crest."

"Such as?"

"Why would a Lord of Space supposedly be in service to the very one who was said to have once tried to remove all the Lords of Space from the cosmos?"

Rilas nodded, recalling his history. It had happened so long ago, though, it could just as easily have been myth. So much of what took place before the coming of the pantheon was left to the shadows of legends and myths. It made things easy to exaggerate, distort, and use to various advantage . . .

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you anything more."

"At least I know more about who I'm dealing with." Rilas retrieved the disk from the table, making ready to leave. "As to what he *really* wants, that remains to be seen."

• • •

Mergis peered out across the gathered throng of titan lords, mentally counting every olive-skinned face crossing his view. The audience chamber of his personal residence could barely hold everyone. Even so, having them gathered to his private keep was the best option. It was the most secure and best suited to host the gathering. He'd made sure it was richly decorated, befitting the topmost ruler of the realm under Gurthghol, but also that it paid homage to their historic roots. This was achieved mainly by means of the mural of Lords of Chaos and other denizens of Anomolia, the ancient plane of the cosmic element of chaos, that wrapped around the room in a fat stripe.

"You did well," he told Lagella, who stood beside him. "Both of you," he told Cirgin on his opposite side.

"Some were actually interested in what you were planning," said Cirgin, "but others were just bored and wanted something new to look forward to."

Mergis chuckled to himself. It would be impossible to take offense. How could you when you knew it was the very nature of those bound to the cosmic element of chaos? Had things gone a different way, he might have been just like them, but Gurthghol had helped steer his future with an invitation into the viceroyship, and now the god of chaos and darkness was helping steer his future again with his recent absence. He supposed it was fitting.

"I am surprised the Anarchs are here." While Mergis was wise enough to leave most things be, he often kept a closer eye on the Anarchs. Thankfully, they were a minority among the Lords of Chaos but were often known to be rather unpredictable. And right now he could do with as little of that as possible.

"Not all." Lagella watched a few of them among the gathered bodies, clearly not that impressed.

"But enough," he countered. "And that will help make a good showing."

While the group didn't include all the Lords and Ladies of Chaos across Altearin, these were the ones who mattered—the ones who had higher ranks and places of influence over others. They also were closest to the capital, allowing Mergis a steady base who were supposedly more loyal and invested in the capital and the general governance of the realm. This made what he had to do next all the easier. The more control he had over what followed, the better he could mold things in his favor. Those not with him were few, and thankfully any influence lost because of them would be minimal. He'd carry the majority, which was the most important thing for now. The rest he could smooth over in due course, when everything else had been dealt with.

"I'm pleased to see you were all able to come so quickly," he began, bringing the murmuring to an end. "I'll be to the point. Gurthghol is missing and might possibly even be dead."

The room erupted in an explosion of excited voices.

"Naturally"—he endeavored to be heard over the noise—"you can see why I've summoned you."

"So is he dead or not?" asked one of the Anarchs, this one more wild eyed than the others. Mergis didn't know his name. Perhaps he was from farther out of his usual circle. There were plenty of titan lords across Altearin, after all.

"I don't know—no one does . . . But what *is* known is that he won't be returning to Altearin for a time . . . possibly ever. And as such, we need to act. Because I was told this news by Erdis before he could pass it on to Lord Shador, we have a unique opportunity before us.

"With Gurthghol absent from the throne, the reins of power will fall between Erdis, Shador, and myself. If we can act quickly enough and keep a unified front, I'm confident I could secure a more senior role in upcoming affairs, giving us more freedom to finally take greater command of our place and lives."

"So you want to be in charge now, is that it?" This came from the same Anarch. Mergis wasn't sure if he was approving or disapproving of the idea.

"I want to give us greater freedom to return to the lives we once had before Gurthghol took Anomolia from us. But that won't happen if Shador steps in to make his own bid, or if we leave things without an appearance of order, leading the pantheon to appoint someone else over us instead."

"And what about Erdis?" asked a fair-looking Lady of Chaos from the crowd. "You think he's just going to let you have your way?"

"He'll be brought around easily enough," he assured them. "Outside the palace he wields little influence." And that, for the most part, was truth. Though chamberlain, Erdis was really more a manager, not anyone of any great power—not outside the palace and official places of power. And the further one got from the palace, the weaker his sway. No, he needed Shador and himself more than they needed the Kardu.

"So what would you have of us?" asked another lord. Mergis thought he recognized him as a lesser person of rank from the outer rim of the capital's reach. Since he rarely directly interacted with those outside the city, having his own administrators take the lead, he drew a blank on the other's name. He made a note to fix such things for the future. If he was going to rule with a stronger, wider reach, he'd need more interaction and improved relationships with the population.

"To support me in my bid for sole rule over the realm. If we act fast enough, we can call a meeting of all the titan lords before Shador knows what's happening and bring it to a vote. I'm confident we could bring more than enough Lords of Darkness over to get the majority."

"And why would Lords of Darkness vote for you?" The question was posed by Melinda, a richly garbed Lady of Chaos whom he'd known more intimately in times past. It was a good question, and thankfully Mergis had a good answer.

"I have a plan." The words didn't engender much confidence; instead he noted more than a few foreheads furrow in doubt. "Trust me," he hurriedly added. "It will work. I just need to know you're all behind me and can get others to support the effort."

"And if we are and do, what then?" asked a gruff-looking titan he thought was named Quain.

"I'd be able to put on the face of order and control for the pantheon and have a legitimate rank over Shador to keep the rest of the Lords of Darkness in their place. All the while you'd be truly free to live your lives like our forefathers did. And the longer Gurthghol remains away, the greater chance we have of regaining more of our old ways. We might even be able to finally separate Anomolia from Altearin."

"Bold words," Quain snorted, "but can it be done?"

"If I have your support and we move fast enough, I believe so," said Mergis. "But we do need to move swiftly. So what would you decide?" The room again was awash with murmuring and discussion.

"Get some parchment and ink ready," he told Lagella in a low voice. "We'll need to craft a letter for Shador and his side."

Lagella excused herself from the room.

Cirgin watched the other lords, his face a stoic display. "How long are you going to let them talk?"

"Patience. I can't be too hasty, or some might suspect something is off. Things will find their level soon enough." The murmuring increased as they waited. Discussions spread from person to person. Soon enough they'd form larger clumps and, with them, consensus. And when that happened, Mergis would move in and hammer out the final details of his plan.

"Let's hope so." Cirgin continued his stoic staring. "'Cause if word gets out before you're ready, things could quite easily go in a different direction."

## CHAD CORRIE

"They'll back me. They just need to think it's their own decision, not something they're being channeled into. And the more convinced of that they are, the better for what lies ahead."

"So then we wait," returned Cirgin, flatly.

"We wait."

Chad Corrie has enjoyed creating things for as far back as he can remember, but it wasn't until he was twelve that he started writing. Since then he's written comics, graphic novels, prose fiction of varying lengths, and an assortment of other odds and ends. His work has been published in other languages and produced in print, digital, and audio formats.

He also makes podcasts.

ChadCorrie.com | @creatorchad



Scan the QR code below to sign up for Chad's email newsletter!



Enjoy podcasts? Chad also produces the following:

# Cauldron of Worlds Corrie Cast

Further information about the world of Tralodren can be found at Tralodren.com as well as on social media (@tralodren). Chad also produces two monthly podcasts delving into the setting, stories, and what's happening in general with current and forthcoming works as well as sharing additional insight and information:

Tralodren: Behind the Scenes Tralodren: Legends and Lore

All these podcasts can be found on his website and wherever else podcasts are available for listening and/or subscription.



# A GOD HAS FALLEN. A THRONE SITS EMPTY. AND AMBITIOUS SCHEMERS PLOT IN THE SHADOWS.

THE BATTLE HAS ENDED, but the pantheon has survived at a terrible cost. Bereft of both Gurthghol and Vkar's throne, they're now weaker and more defenseless than ever. Yet even as the pantheon seek their footing, three new gods will be added to the family, further disrupting the former order.

And then there are the others—both inside the pantheon and out—eager for more power, who will make their moves for greater glory and dominion in this time of divine recovery and realignment.

Plots and plotters, schemers and plans—all will have their day and way. And the cosmos shall never be the same. To the victor shall go the spoils. To the pantheon comes a new order. And for Tralodren, a new age shall arise.

WELCOME TO TRALODREN, A WORLD RICH IN HISTORY, FAITH, AND TALES OF ADVENTURE—OF WHICH THIS STORY IS BUT ONE OF MANY.

## PRAISE FOR CHAD CORRIE

"Here be roaring monsters to be fought, characters who come vividly to life, and fell magic . . . A wild ride. Highly recommended."

—Ed Greenwood

New York Times bestselling author

"Those looking for something new, yet familiar in the fantasy genre will find plenty to enjoy."

—Geek'd Out



