

Inner Expanses Excerpt

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INNER EXPANSES EXCERPT

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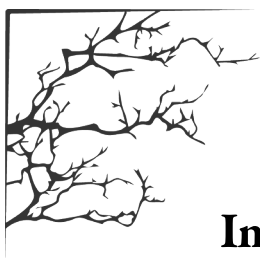
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NIGHT BRINGS DEATH



INNER
EXPANSES
REYADH RAHAMAN



Chapter 1

Impending Darkness

JIM LOBE WAS ON HIS way home after another frustrating day at work. His left sleeve rolled up to the elbow as his arm hung out the window, holding a cigarette. Jim's car was the only one on the road as far as he could see, though the dim streetlights weren't the best and barely helped to light the way. Accidents happened more frequently here than most other streets in the area, but Jim didn't care. He sped along at almost double the speed limit, ash being blown off the end of the cigarette as he drove.

Vaguely, Jim realized that he shouldn't be pushing his old, rusty Chevron Chevalier, but he didn't care about that either. His only concern was the lack of sales at work. Being paid by commission for each product that he sold wouldn't have been that bad, except the products he was meant to sell were very close to being garbage. And in the small chance he managed to get a sale, the commission for the sale wasn't even very good. Selling cathode ray tube TVs in the year 2020 was a terrible way to make a living.

Jim had made one sale today. And that was only because the inner mask of the TV he was trying to sell, the part that separated the beams of light and guided the red, green, and blue light towards the proper destination on the screen, was faulty. The customer was an artist and liked the way the picture on the TV was displayed. He said it was very similar to some of Georges Seurat's paintings and decided to buy it for inspiration. But because it was a damaged product, Jim couldn't even sell it at full price.

The decrepit dark orange Chevalier rolled into the gravel driveway of Jim's small house. He got out and slammed the door of the car so hard the window vibrated and flecks of rust and paint, almost identical in colour, fell off. Grumbling in annoyance, he made his way into his house. Or at least he tried. The lock on his front door barely allowed the key to turn and it took a full two minutes of jiggling the key into the perfect position to get the door to open. Jim lit another cigarette to try to calm himself down enough to not smash anything. Not that there was much to smash in his living room. It was bare except for a single arm chair, a small, dirty beige rug that had once been white, and a twenty inch CRT TV sitting on a cinder block. Jim shuffled into the kitchen to make his dinner. He opened the fridge to see his options. He had a choice between half a jar of pickles or the stale sandwich that had been sitting in there for the past week. He had been meaning to either throw it out or eat it, but he was accustomed to eating fast food for all his meals so he rarely even ventured into his kitchen. With his hands in his pockets while contemplating his choice, his left hand felt his wallet, reminding him that he couldn't afford to waste food.

After an unsatisfying dinner and a blurry re-run of Three's Company with no sound, Jim crawled into his bed fully clothed and wished that he wouldn't wake up the next day. That would make it so much easier. He briefly considered killing himself as he did every night before going to sleep only to come to the same conclusion again and again. He would never be able to end his own life. He was too much of a coward. He had tried in the past to slit his wrists with a broken light bulb, but when pressing the glass to his skin he froze. Unable to go through with it, he had cried himself into unconsciousness that night. He also tried to hang himself, but he was terrible at tying knots and ended up just falling off the chair and banging his elbow on the hard wooden floor. He cried himself to sleep that night as well. His most recent attempt was to drown himself in the river behind his house, but every time he tried to let the air out of his lungs, he couldn't do it. He occasionally got water in his nose during

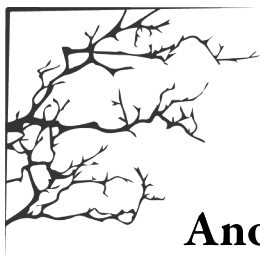
showers or baths and could hardly stand that. Drowning himself would be like that, but exponentially more painful. He retreated out of the water and lay on the bank of the river and once again cried until he couldn't stay awake any longer.

Just thinking about his recent attempts to free himself from this pitiful life made him emotionally exhausted. Then, like every night, after the contemplations of suicide came the ominous feeling that something terrible would happen when he went to sleep. In the mornings when he would wake, he would find that he felt slightly different. But at night, he always went back to being the sad shell of a man who was empty of all but regret and disappointment.

Jim tried to remember a time when his life was of steady mind and content heart. He had been an excellent salesman for a large electronics company when he was in his twenties. He had held the company record for most consecutive months as employee of the month. Back then he made six figures every year and commission on top of that. Women would constantly eye him as they passed, and children laughed and giggled when he held them. It was like he had figured out some great secret of success in his younger days that had evaporated into nothingness as he grew older.

That was thirty years ago. Thirty years where his life was slowly, but surely, slipping down into the trash. He left further contemplation of how to attain the success of his youth for the morning, as he usually did. Jim had a certain times to think about things. His mind had segmented when he would think on certain thoughts. It was most likely his subconscious letting him only think of things when he could understand their value and purpose. Thinking about hope when he was depressed and contemplating suicide was a waste of effort and would only serve to confuse an already confused and hollow man. So his subconscious sorted his thoughts in such a way to avoid issues. Though, it only worked to a small extent.

The ominous feeling he got between being awake and going to sleep was growing more significant as he descended into the abyss of unconsciousness. Too tired to do anything about it he let the feeling wash over him, engulfing him in a sense of dread. Then he fell asleep with the darkness deep and surrounding.



Chapter 2

Another Night, Another Battle

YARUT STOOD AMONG THE others. He looked around at those who gathered for tonight's battle. The crowd of those vying for The Control was standing in a ring around the current Controller. Basil, the current Controller, stood upon a raised platform to gaze down at his surroundings. There were about fifty or so beings gathered for today's battle. Yarut looked at the eye in the sky to determine when the battle would commence. The giant eye in the sky rotated slightly to lock its gaze with Yarut, giving him a thoughtful blink. As it did so, the land went dark for a brief moment. The eye hovered near the horizon and would retreat below it soon. In about five minutes, when the eye set, the battle would start like it did every night at this time.

Basil was growing restless on his high stone platform and descended into the crowd so that he would not be surrounded when the battle began. His eight legs stomped his large reptilian body away to get in better position. As the current Controller, Basil's physical strength and magic were much stronger than that of most who gathered here. No one knows what makes a Controller more powerful, but the instant one is chosen at each eyerise, his or her presence simply becomes more significant in every aspect.

All the beings began to separate to find their own space in which to begin the battle. Some started to flex their arms and take practice swings with their weapons. Others snapped their jaws, hissed, squawked, or trumpeted in anticipation.

Yarut looked to those closest to him to gauge how the beginning of the battle would go for him. A few metres to his right was Janida. Janida was primarily a large blue-green shell with various limbs coming out of the eight holes in its shell. Four legs protruded from the lowest four holes in the shell, each leg ended in a webbed foot with two pointed toes. From two of the upper holes emerged his arms; two spindly things each with two long fingers tipped with sharp claws. The hole closest to the front, or what Yarut assumed was a front, held Janida's face. His face was little more than a large vertical mouth lined with jagged, pointed teeth with a beady eye on each side that could move independently of one another. Though, this was only what Janida looked like currently. He was able to retract all his limbs and his face and stick them all out of completely different holes depending on his whim.

Janida was usually difficult to fight since the majority of his attacks were very difficult to anticipate, therefore more difficult to defend against or avoid. His shell was almost impenetrable; it was two metres long and completely covered everything except his limb holes. Though that made Janida quite a handful to deal with, he had one large weakness. The eighth limb hole. Seven holes were occupied by the four legs, two arms, and face, but the eighth hole housed nothing. It was just an opening in the shell that exposed a stretch of skin. No matter how Janida arranged his limbs there would always be one limb hole that exposed nothing but skin. If Yarut could strike at that spot with his longsword, it would almost certainly cause a fatal wound. That was easier said than done, though, since Janida could change where the spot appeared, and would be unlikely to leave it open to attack.

Mulling over a strategy to defeat Janida if he went up against him, Yarut looked to his left and saw Mercae. A somewhat powerful wizard, Mercae wasn't someone to ignore in a battle. Able to shoot large blue and white fireballs at opponents was something not to be considered lightly. Mercae wore a long dark blue robe that almost matched his dark blue skin. His wizened face constantly wore a bored and annoyed expres-

sion. Atop his head were two delicate horns that protruded forward then curved back around the top of his skull. Mercae noticed Yarut's gaze and turned to meet it. He then nodded with an expression that said 'I have enough problems of my own; I don't want to add you to the list', then turned to survey his own surroundings.

Yarut turned toward the eye to see how much of it was still peeking over the horizon. Barely a sliver. After it fully descended, the entire rocky plain the combatants were on would be plunged into almost total darkness, the only light would be from various glowing plants that opened their flowers at night. Most of those who gathered had excellent night vision or incredibly good hearing, so the darkness was only an issue until one adjusted to it.

Three...Two...One...Night. No sight, no sound, the abyss was dense and impenetrable. Yarut blinked and tried to focus his eyes in the direction he saw Janida, but he didn't see anything but rocks and dirt. He began to look around, but just as he did so he heard something running towards him from the right. He turned to see Janida only a few metres away running right at him. Yarut rolled out of the way just in time to avoid Janida's mad charge. Janida turned around and glared at Yarut. Standing up, Yarut said, "You're going to have to do better than that, you aberration".

"That was merely a test." Janida hissed, "Before long, I'll rip you in two!" Janida advanced slowly, while rapidly changing the arrangement of his limbs. As he drew closer Yarut tried to spot the open spot where he could strike. He glanced it a couple times, but then Janida was upon him. It quickly reached out with one of its pincer-like hands and tried to grab Yarut, but he backed away just in time. Half a moment later, Janida swung a pincer in from the right, in a slashing motion. Yarut parried the blow with his now drawn longsword and slashed at Janida's face, which appeared in the limb hole closest to Yarut. The aberration's face quickly retreated to be replaced by a leg that kicked at Yarut's sword. He swung around, moving with the motion of the kick and managed to slice at the

side of Janida's knee. Janida winced in pain and backed off. Crouching on all four legs, he then jumped into the air and retracted all his limbs in an attempt to body slam Yarut from above. Yarut rolled out of the way and slashed at the shell as it landed. The sword bounced off the shell to no effect. Two arms then sprung at Yarut from within the shell in a double thrust. Yarut leaned his left shoulder into the left pincer to take that attack while he made an overhand slash at the other arm. With a deft blow he severed one of Janida's arms. The beast bellowed in pain and rolled backwards away from Yarut, the stump of his severed arm bleeding a thick violet liquid. "Aaaaahhh, my arm!" Janida trumpeted with his dual voices.

"Why did you attack with both arms at once? You left yourself completely open to a counter attack." Yarut asked.

"I didn't think you would willingly take a blow to the shoulder." Janida replied in an angry voice. Yarut's skin was very similar to stone, so physical attacks did not affect him as much as it would other beings. Yarut's body was covered in the stone-like skin from head to toe. Even his eyes were rough in texture, like round pieces of marble.

Janida was bleeding heavily, his independently moving eyes were glazed in pain as he stumbled and shifted the locations of his remaining limbs warily. Yarut wouldn't have to do much to end Janida's life now, with the amount of blood he was losing he would be dead within the hour, but Yarut would not leave Janida to such a slow and painful death. If it were himself in Janida's position, he would want to die quickly. Without warning Yarut sprung at Janida and thrust his longsword into the hole that accompanied one of the creature's legs. His sword struck right in between the joints that connected the leg to the body. As the blow landed Janida screeched in agony and his remaining limbs buckled. Janida fell to the ground with the blade still within him. Yarut pushed his sword deeper into Janida until the hilt rested against the shell. Violet blood sprayed out around the wound and Yarut knew he had struck at

least a few of Janida's internal organs. He pulled his blade out of Janida, who gave a grunt of relief at having the blade removed from his body.

"So...it is over...for tonight..." Janida gasped out.

"For you, yes. Sleep well." Yarut replied. A moment later Janida let out his last breath with a shutter, and then his body went still. Yarut stepped back as black vines emerged from the ground. They were as thick as Yarut's arms and wriggled up as if just beneath the surface was a tentacle monster. They wrapped around Janida's corpse and started dragging it into the ground. The rocky plain on which the battle took place was solid and had no pockets of quicksand or swampland, yet the area just beneath Janida's corpse suddenly became like water as the mass of flesh and shell was pulled under. Once the body was gone the ground returned to normal as if nothing had happened. Yarut was certain he would never get used to that sight. Whenever someone died, the same thing would happen. The black tentacle-like vines would always appear to claim the dead.

The stone man paused and contemplated the fight. He had found a new way to defeat Janida. A way to do so without having to wait for the appearance of the unused hole would surely be useful in future battles with the fiend. Yarut let out a deep breath and cleaned his sword with the edge of his dark orange, one-shouldered cape. His burnt-coloured toga blew in the slight breeze as he looked around for another opponent. Aside from rocky hills sparsely covered with grass and various boulders, there wasn't much to see. He closed his eyes to strengthen his hearing. He then heard a roar in the distance. He started towards it to see if he could engage the producer of the roar in battle.

After a few minutes two figures became apparent in the darkness. Upon approaching, He easily recognized the first as Ebur. He was a massive lion's head with five goat legs emerging from the neck in all direction, like the points of a star. On the side opposite of the lion's head grew a large yellow flower with five petals and an orange center. Ebur sniffed at the air, then turned to face Yarut. As he did so, Yarut noticed that Ebur's mouth was dripping blood and that there was a figure lying just beside

him, torn in two. It was the dying body of Anamo. Anamo had the head of an owl with great, deep green pools that were his eyes. His torso was that of a wolf, with sharp claws and thick grey fur that was matted with blood. He was torn at the waist, but what would have connected to there would have been a long, serpent's tail that would have made up half the length of his body. The severed tail twitched and thrashed on the ground, covering the grass in deep red blood. Anamo's eyes locked onto Yarut and he smiled. "I saw it Yarut, you...you do well tonight. I think you might be the last one standing."

"You had a vision of me winning the battle?" Yarut asked, genuinely curious. Anamo had the power to see into the future. He could not predict things exactly as they would happen, but his visions always contained something that would inevitably come to pass in one way or another. For him to say that Yarut would be tonight's victor wasn't something to ignore, but from Anamo's current condition it could just be that the blood loss was causing his mind to fade. Yarut looked at Ebur who nodded and took a few steps back to let him and Anamo speak.

"I didn't see you win, but I saw you kill Basil. It was near eyerise. That's all I saw though-"Anamo coughed and spurted blood from his beak. "I...I'm dying again. I cannot see anything...anymore...it is all...it is all darkness". Anamo's head then slumped down and he was dead. The black vines emerged to do what they always did and a moment later Anamo's torso and tail were gone. The only things left to indicate where he died were the pools of blood.

"That's good news for you, Yarut. Anamo is rarely wrong." Ebur said without moving. Yarut turned to face him and tensed his muscles in case Ebur decided on a sudden lunge. Ebur did not move, but continued to talk, all while his chin dripped with Anamo's blood. "He knew he would die if he fought me, but he did it anyway. Foresight is usually useful, but it failed him this time. Tell me Yarut, have you seen Basil yet tonight? I'm curious as to how well he is doing." The side of Ebur's mouth turned up in a mocking grin. He didn't think Anamo's predictions were to come

true. At least not in the way Anamo thought. It could be true that Yarut would kill Basil, but it might not be tonight. It could be a year from now when it happened, and by then it was unlikely that Basil would still be The Controller. “Don’t put too much faith in Anamo’s words.” Ebur continued, “During our battle, he claimed to know what I would do before I did it, so you know what I did then?” He glared at Yarut.

“What did you do then?” Yarut humoured, though he kept his guard up.

“I did nothing. I cleared my mind and waited for him to strike first.” Ebur smirked.

“But wouldn’t Anamo have foreseen that?” Yarut questioned. There was a lot about Anamo’s powers that were unclear. The timing of the visions was never specific, nor was the circumstances in which they took place. Seeing a situation without knowing the context means that said situation could be misinterpreted very easily.

“No, because he likely saw us fight sometime in a future battle and not tonight. He did see me wait for him to strike first, but I’m certain he anticipated me trying to bite him, as is what I usually do to my opponents. But tonight, when he struck at me I kicked him in the head. While he was stunned, I then bit him in half.” Ebur said proudly.

“Well, congratulations. You won’t have such an easy time with me though.” Yarut said while drawing his sword. “It’s time. Enough talk, let’s get on with it.”

Ebur nodded calmly and stretched his jaws and flexed his legs. The flower on his back began emitting a scent similar to that of fermenting barley mixed with hot spice. Similar to a popular drink served in taverns and pubs that was renowned for making those who drank it want to fight or act out unpredictably if consumed in large amounts. Then scent filled the air and though Yarut had no nose, he could smell it through the vertical slits on his face. The aroma did indeed make him want to fight, but he could not afford to be careless around Ebur. From his feet that touched the ground to the top of his mane, Ebur was about two

metres tall. The majority of that being his face, and more dangerously, his mouth. Ebur's mouth was like a small cave filled with stalactites and stalagmites. Even with skin like stone, Yarut's body would be ripped into chunks if Ebur could clamp his jaws around him. Yarut's left shoulder was also still wounded from his fight with Janida, which would make movement both slower and more painful.

They gazed at each other for what felt like a long time. Neither one moved. Striking first could mean landing a solid blow and impairing the other, but if that first strike missed, there would be an opening for a counter attack. Both combatants were very fast and strong, though Yarut was at a disadvantage with his shoulder wound.

Then, suddenly a screech was heard overhead and both fighters looked up in surprise. Down, out of the night sky, swooped a winged beast. Its black skin and wings mixed with the sky to make it look infinite in size for a brief moment before it landed between Yarut and Ebur. "Gant, what a pleasant surprise" Ebur growled with sarcasm. Gant flexed his wings and clicked his spindly fingers together in response. Gant was taller than Ebur by half a metre, but was incredibly skinny. So much so, that he looked almost frail, though Gant was anything but. Gant's body is composed of two legs and two arms attached to his torso in a similar fashion to Yarut's own body composition. Two massive wings emerged from his back, like those of an enormous bat. They allowed Gant to fly silently on any wind, which is how he approached Ebur and Yarut without them hearing him. His thin neck was topped with an oblong sphere, like an egg and almost equally as featureless. The only thing that adorned Gant's head were two horns that appeared on his crown and gently curved upwards.

"I know you can speak Gant, what do you want? Is it that you would like to join our fight?" Ebur continued after Gant clicked his fingers. The mouth on the back of Gant's neck split opened. He let out a screech similar to the one he made when he swooped down. The gaping, toothless

maw was more like a wound than a mouth, but it performed the function of speech moderately well.

“Fight...Yes...” Gant said, his long, whip-like tail lashing casually. The tip of his tail ended in a spade shaped point. A strike from it was like getting hit by a whip that had a bladed tip. Yarut and Ebur exchanged glances then prepared for an interesting fight. No one moved for a moment, but then Gant suddenly took off into the night sky. Ebur roared then charged at Yarut. Gant swooped down at Yarut as Ebur approached rapidly. Yarut rolled between where Gant struck the ground and Ebur charged, narrowly avoiding both before striking at Ebur’s leg with a rising slash after coming out of his dodge roll. Ebur lost his balance and sprawled onto his back. He roared in surprise then quickly got to his feet to launch a counter attack, thinking it was Gant who had struck him, but the winged being was gone again into the darkness. Yarut, seeing that Ebur was distracted, stuck at the beast’s flank with a horizontal slash from his longsword. Ebur noticed Yarut just in time to jump back, if a little late. The attack had connected, but the wound wasn’t as damaging as it would have been if Ebur had not moved.

The flower on Ebur’s back started giving off the scent of eyeflowers. Yarut ignored the change in scent and proceeded to go on the offensive, slashing at Ebur face. The creature’s mane bristled in anger, but backed away as Yarut pressed the attack, occasionally glancing up at the sky to try to spot Gant. The winged foe then dropped out of the sky for an attack at Ebur, but peeled away right before he made contact. Yarut then realized that Ebur had mimicked the scent of eye-sunflowers to deter Gant from attacking him because Gant hated anything to do with eyelight. He was a creature of the night and rarely ventured out during the day because the light burned his skin. Gant swooped back down for another attack, but this time he aimed at Yarut. Ebur attempted a bite at Yarut’s head, but the stone man rolled backwards to avoid the chomp. As he did so, Gant’s dive-bomb struck him hard, sending him flying a few metres back. Yarut

landed on his back and groaned, though he immediately got back on his feet in time to see Ebur cartwheeling towards him.

Yarut aimed a thrust at Ebur's face as he drew near, forcing the creature to veer to the right to avoid the sword. Ebur then shifted his weight to get into a stance for a lunge. Yarut backed off a few metres to prepare for the assault. Ebur jumped at Yarut in a lunging bite and Yarut jumped back and made a horizontal slash to avoid Ebur's jaws and attack at the same time. The slash from the hefty longsword cut through one of Ebur's massive teeth. He recoiled in pain as blood spurted out of his mouth. He reared his head back and roared in fury. As he did so, Gant dropped out of the sky and landed on Ebur's forehead and reached down to grab Ebur's tongue and ripped it out before the roaring being to react.

As Gant jumped off his head to retreat back into the abyss, Yarut flung his sword and it sliced through one of Gant's wings. Gant let out a screech and dropped back to the ground a few metres away from the now tongue-less Ebur. The lion-headed creature's mouth was bleeding profusely. The flower on Ebur's back started to wilt as he stumbled. With a beastly growl he then fell to the ground. His breathing heavy and laboured, he locked eyes with Yarut. He could no longer speak, but his low growls conveyed his sentiments better than most words could. That growl was deep, but simple. It said 'Damn you, I'll be the victor next time'. Then Ebur closed his eyes and let out one final, ragged breath from a mouth still heavily bleeding.

Yarut turned his attention back to the flightless Gant who stood rigid, barely showing any signs of pain from his grievous wound. He then reached up with his right hand to his left wing, the one that Yarut's sword had sliced almost in half. It was hanging limply; it would not be of any use now. The fight had been moved to the ground, making the playing field more even. Off to the side, Yarut noticed the black vines emerging to claim Ebur's corpse. Gant's right hand gripped the wing at the part where it joined with his back, right over the shoulder. Yarut thought he was gripping it in pain, but he was incorrect. Yarut let out a gasp of shock

as Gant proceeded to rip off the damaged wing. It did not look quick or easy. Yarut could hear the sinew and muscle tearing and saw black blood dripping as Gant slowly pulled at the wing. Yarut did not interrupt him; he decided to let Gant continue to injure himself. It would make the fight easier, and he was already injured from his earlier fight with Janida and winded from his bout with Ebur. Finally, after a few long moments of wrenching at the wing, Gant tore it off with a satisfying sound similar to that of ripping a massive, thick, wet piece of paper. He then cast the wing a few metres away as if it was a torn fingernail. He centered the remaining wing to as close to the middle of his back as he could, then strode forward towards Yarut.

Yarut realized that Gant tore off his own wing not for some masochistic reason, but because he could not fold it in. It was obstructing his balance, so he removed it. Yarut fell into a fighting stance and waited for Gant to make the first move. Gant was fast and had long reach with those sinewy arms that were topped in wicked claws. The tackle that Gant had hit Yarut with earlier had forced him to land on the shoulder that Janida had previously pierced with his claw. The wound ached and his left arm was getting numb. He needed to end this quickly before he lost function of it. He didn't need both arms to wield his sword, but it definitely would help. His longsword still rested on the ground a couple metres behind Gant, near the creature's severed wing. He doubted he would be able to beat Gant without it, but the tall fiend stood directly between him and his blade. It was a brash move to throw his only weapon, but if he had not injured Gant's wing the flying fiend would dive-bomb him relentlessly.

Ink-like blood still oozed from the gap on Gant's back where the left wing used to be. For some reason, it was not bleeding nearly as much as Yarut would have assumed. A wing that size would take a lot of blood to be functional, therefore the veins and arteries would need to be large, but the wound didn't bleed anymore than a small gash would. It was then that Yarut heard a slurping. He understood then that the mouth on the

back of Gant's neck was drinking the blood from the wound, recycling it back into the body. Yarut had no idea if Gant had a stomach or not, or even if he ate, but if Gant had a way to replenish his own blood that quickly, then the wound on his back meant nothing except the lack of flight. Gant would not bleed out from the wound, so there was no use stalling.

Yarut decided that if he would die it was best to do it quickly. He charged at Gant and jumped into the air aiming a punch at the being's featureless face. Gant stepped forward into the attack and thrust his horns into Yarut's chest. Gant then twisted his head sideways and flung Yarut to the ground. Yarut bled copiously from the two holes in his chest where Gant had gored him.

It was a reckless attempt and Yarut now paid for it. He could barely move, but he still managed to lift his head and looked at Gant, who walked over to gaze on Yarut's almost motionless body with an eyeless face. He crouched down and wrapped one of his massive hands around Yarut's throat and began to squeeze the life out of him. Yarut grabbed Gant's hand with two of his own and tried to pry it off, but Gant's grip was too tight and Yarut was too weak from his wounds. Then, Yarut noticed that Gant was standing on part of his toga. He used the last of his strength to roll away from Gant and tugged the toga from underneath Gant's feet. The tall foe lost balance and fell back onto his bony rump. Yarut then grabbed a nearby rock and tossed it as hard as he could at Gant's skinny neck. It connected with a thud and Gant's backward facing mouth coughed and the fiend clutched his throat. Yarut, with a rush of adrenaline, scrambled around Gant as fast as he could to try to reach his sword. Gant turned around and grabbed Yarut's leg to stop him. Yarut grabbed another convenient rock and hurled it again at Gant's neck. This time Gant was ready and caught the stone, but the distraction was all Yarut needed. He was less than a metre from his sword. With one last leap he gripped the hilt in his hand just as Gant pounced on him for another attempt at strangling.

Yarut rolled over and swung his sword at the same time, cleaving straight through Gant's thin neck. His head flew about a metre and landed with a plunk, then rolled a short distance away. The slit of a mouth let out an incredibly loud shriek as the neck spurted black blood like a macabre geyser. Gant's body fell forward and landed right next to Yarut. A grey worm-like tongue emerged from the mouth slit to try and salvage some blood, but the wound was bleeding too much. Yarut was vaguely surprised that the body was still somewhat working without a head, but there were a lot of things he didn't understand about the others who lived here. The grey tongue retreated back into the mouth sluggishly and Gant's body stilled. Blood still leaked from the stump of a neck, but the flow turned to a trickle. Yarut slowly rose to his feet with much difficulty. The wounds in his chest were severe and he was bleeding out almost as fast as Gant did, though he still managed to make his way over to Gant's severed head.

He was curious to see what would happen if the black vines emerged and weren't able to find part of a dead body. Would they instinctively know where it had gone, or would they search blindly? Yarut picked up Gant's head, which was heavier than it looked, and stared at it. Yarut's deep red blood coated the horns and dripped down Gant's blank face. Yarut knew that he should try to stem the bleeding from his chest wounds, but he was tired. So tired that he didn't really care. The last time he died, it had been because he was torn in half. This didn't seem nearly as bad in terms of dying. He would wake up the next day like he did every morning in his abode, probably placed there by the black vines that collected dead bodies, and would ponder at his task. Tonight had been a good night though; he felt he had gotten pretty close to gaining The Control. Tomorrow night's battle would be a different story, the setting determined by whoever had won The Control tonight.

The black vines slithered up through the ground and claimed Gant's body greedily before disappearing into the soil again. Then a few appeared out of the ground at Yarut's feet. For a moment he thought that

he was just about to die and the vines were there to drag him down, but they writhed their way up and wrapped around Gant's head and pulled it out of Yarut's hands before returning to whence it came. "So, they know where the parts are, even if they aren't touching the ground" Yarut thought out loud. He wondered how they knew. The vines didn't have eyes, noses, mouths, or ears. And their sense of touch wouldn't help if they weren't making direct contact with a corpse. But how could they identify a corpse from a sleeping body, a plant, or a rock? Obviously, some sort of magic was at work, but Yarut didn't have a mind for magic. He was a swordsman, and that is all he knew. He tried to perform magic in the past, but was never able to successfully cast spells, curses, or enchantments of any kind.

Yarut sat down as his legs were beginning to tremble. He had lost too much blood and his body was starting to become uncooperative. He could feel the energy leaving his body as his blood leaked out. He became lightheaded and felt very tired. Yarut lied down on his back, gazing up at the night sky. "What is it all for?" he asked out loud. "Why must we fight for control? For what purpose? Why do we need it to accomplish our tasks? But no, no one has ever completed their task, even with The Control..."

"One's task does not require The Control to be under your influence...or for you to be under The Control's influence, whichever it is. One's task can only be accomplished by the aspect in which it was created for." Mercae said as he walked up to Yarut. "Though one's task is not easy, it can be accomplished. Theoretically. Why would we have been set tasks that are impossible? That would not make sense."

Yarut turned his head to look at Mercae while still lying on his back. "None of this makes sense, Mercae. Why do we do the things we do? How long have we been killing each other every night and toiling over some inane task during the day?" He asked, barely aware of what he was saying.

“For as long as we have existed I suppose. Or at least as long as we have had awareness of ourselves. Tell me, friend, what would you do otherwise? What would you spend your time doing aside from killing your fellows and working on your ‘inane’ task?” Mercae responded.

“This conversation we’re having is all questions and no answers. I would rather die with some peace of mind this time around, if you don’t mind.” Yarut said with a grunt, which made him cough up blood.

“Fair enough. You seem to be taking a long time to die, considering your wounds though. Would you like me to put an end to your suffering?” Mercae asked with genuine kindness in his voice.

“If you could make it quick and painless, I would appreciate that. These wounds are more painful than they look.” Yarut said with his eyes barely open.

“Of course, friend,” said Mercae while creating a blue ball of fire in his hand that was slowly growing in size. It reached the dimensions close to that of Yarut’s head before it stopped expanding. “I’ve made this fire-ball quite large, when I throw it at your head, it will explode. It’ll be very quick, you won’t even have time to realize that you’ve been immolated.”

“Wait” Yarut told him as he rolled over onto his front with great difficulty. He struggled to get to his knees, which lead Mercae to sigh in irritation.

“Yarut, there’s no need to stand up” the wizard said.

“I must...If I am to die on my own terms, I’d rather do it on my feet” Yarut claimed as he shakily made it to his feet while leaning heavily on his sword.

Mercae sighed again, “Well, if you must...”

“Alright, I’m ready,” Yarut said after a few moments of trying to steady himself. Every breath was agony, but he managed to get into a fighting stance and pointed his sword at Mercae. He wasn’t intending to attack; it was simply a force of habit that he let himself indulge in. He doubted he could even take a single step without falling to the ground at this point. Mercae took a few steps away and aimed at Yarut’s head. Yarut

could feel the heat from the fireball where he stood, despite there being a three-metre gap between the two of them. Mercae took a deep breath, leaned back, and then pitched the ball of fire at the wounded swordsman. The last thing Yarut saw was a flash of blue-white light approaching him, and then nothing.



Chapter 3

The Power of Intimidation

BASIL ROUNDED ON HIS target and slammed him to the ground. Guson hit the grassy earth with a thud and a grunt. He rolled onto his back and pointed the bead necklace he carried in his right hand at Basil and cast a spell. Needles made of light shot out from the necklace, each bead launching one light needle at a time in rapid succession. Basil turned his body and took the attack in his left side to avoid damage to his face. The light needles pierced his hide painfully, which made the large being roar in anger and pain. When Guson's attack ended Basil turned back to face him.

Guson had the body of a man, cloaked in a priest's robe and had the head of a baboon. He carried three rosaries, but in place of crosses was carved stone eyeballs. The beads were made of small, polished rocks; He wore one around his neck and carried one in each hand. The one around his neck was made up of blue stones, the one in his right hand was red and the left was green. All three rosaries glowed with the respective colours of their stones. His robe was a simple one of beige colouring, now somewhat covered by dirt and his own blood. He was bleeding slightly from his right temple and it coloured the light gray fur on the side of his head red.

Guson slowly got to his feet, wary of Basil in case he charged again. Basil was considerably larger and stronger. The beast was three metres long and had eight powerful legs that moved the large body surprisingly fast. Then there was the fact that Basil could turn his enemies to stone with a concentrated blast from his eyes, though it took a lot of magical

power to do so. To add to the list of things that made Basil a formidable foe was that he was also the current holder of The Control, meaning that all his normal strengths were increased significantly. Guson had landed a direct hit on Basil's side, but it did not do much.

"Guson, do you really think you stand a chance?" Basil growled.

"No, but I won't stand idly as you tear my head off" Guson replied with dignity. Basil gnashed his teeth aggressively then reared his head back to look up at the ceiling of the dank cave they were currently in. He was leaving his neck exposed to attack, but it was quicker to charge up ocular power this way. It took a moment for Guson to realize what the beast was doing and he began to launch needles from his right rosary, but it was too late. Basil whipped his head down and shot a beam of blinding white light from his eyes at Guson. The beam struck the man a split-second before the needles reached Basil and stuck into the side of his face. The light from the attacks faded as quickly as they had come and all that remained of Guson was a statue with an expression of terror frozen on its face. Basil sauntered up to the stone figure and with one swipe of his powerful tail he smashed it to bits. He then took a few paces away and lied down. The magical energy he used to freeze Guson took a lot out of him. That was the third time tonight he used that skill. Without The Control, he usually could only use it once every couple hours, but with it he could use his stone gaze more than usual. It still took a lot of magical energy though, so between uses he preferred to rest.

Dark tendrils appeared and claimed the shattered stone remains of Guson before disappearing back into the ground. Basil watched them passively and noticed that the sky was beginning to lighten. The eye would rise within the next hour or so. He exited the cave and looked up at the sky. He did a quick count and only saw three stars winking at him from above. So there were only two more beings besides himself left alive. Hopefully they would kill each other and the weakened one would find their way to him, but just as the thought crossed his mind he saw one of the stars blink out of existence. "Well, that was convenient..." Basil said

under his breath. He then heard the trumpeting of horns in the distance. He listened closely to determine whether it was caused by a voice or an instrument. He turned towards the sound only to see an arrow rapidly approaching. It struck him in the chest before he could react and let out a grunt of surprise. The arrow dug into his scales and drew a little blood, though with his thick hide, the arrow was little more than an annoyance. He used his teeth to pull the arrow out by the shaft and gazed at the origin of the projectile, flitting his forked tongue to gather scent information. Out of the darkness, the trumpeting came again and was followed by another arrow. This time Basil swatted it out of the air with his tail and started moving towards the source.

Basil marched into the dark plain but couldn't see, hear, or smell anything. The trumpeting seemed to only sound when an arrow was loosed. "Bartos! Come out of the darkness and fight me like a man!" Basil called into the night. It had to be Bartos, no one else used arrows like the one that was recently shot. Basil knew Bartos wouldn't appear before him willingly. Being able to attack a creature that could turn you to stone with a glance from long range was the ideal strategy for a ranged fighter. Bartos would not risk getting within range of Basil's stone gaze. This fight would be determined by one thing, if Basil could find Bartos before the latter's arrows wore down the former. Bartos had a quiver of arrows that infinitely replenished. They didn't have any powerful enchantments on them, nor were they that large or heavy, but having an endless supply of any ammunition would be a great advantage. Basil would be able to take many arrows, but eventually it would wear him down. As he was thinking of a strategy around this, the trumpeting picked up and another arrow came at Basil, but this time from behind and struck him in the back of the neck. Basil roared in frustration and shook the arrow out. He then turned around to try to spot Bartos, but it was in vain. Then Basil saw the cave where he fought Guson. Basil made his way towards it quickly, and took a few arrows in the back in the process. The trumpets mocking him as he made his tactical retreat into the cave.

He went about ten metres into the cave, deep enough that Bartos would have to appear at the entrance to take aim at him. Then Basil waited. And waited. And waited some more. Half an hour had passed, but Bartos did not appear. Basil came to the conclusion that he was waiting just outside for Basil to appear again. In the distance he saw a glimpse of the near-morning sky. It had begun to grow light as eyerise was approaching. Though, as long as more than one of them was alive, the eye would not rise. It had happened in the past many times; two combatants would be locked in a duel for hours after the night should have ended, but the sky would be stuck at pre-dawn. No one knew why the eye in the sky refused to rise when there wasn't a clear winner to a night's battle, but that was simply the way it was.

The question now was who would act first. Bartos was incredibly patient, Basil knew he would sit there and wait for all eternity if he had to. Basil's blood grew hot from frustration. He started to pace around his cave, and then turned towards the blackness of the tunnel that led deeper into the rock face the cave was in. Basil had never been here before, he did not know where the cave would lead if he went further in. With a quick glance back at the entrance he grunted in annoyance and walked into the abyss of the cave. Even though the sky outside had gone from an inky black to a deep blue, it was still too dark to spot Bartos at the distance he was keeping. Basil was hoping this cave would lead to an opening somewhere else on the small mountain he was currently in. This could allow him to circle back to the cave entrance from a different location and get a surprise attack on Bartos. If Bartos tried to enter the cave after Basil, as small a chance as that was, he would hear the archer's approach from the trumpets that blared whenever he fired an arrow.

The cave wound into the rocky expanse. Left, right, left, up, left, up, and on it continued in a seemingly endless fashion. For an hour Basil trudged through the tunnel, never encountering another tunnel or anything of interest. It was like a giant worm dug out this tunnel. Basil was certain there wasn't a being that matched that description, but the tun-

nel still had to have been created artificially. It wasn't natural. Basil ran one of his feet along a wall and they felt ribbed, as if a giant drill had bored through the rock. Likely done by some form of magic in the past where someone wanted either to get away from something or lay an elaborate trap. Strangely enough, that was how Basil was currently using it. He then felt a cool air from somewhere up ahead, so he quickened his pace. The cave was inclining sharply upwards and after a few minutes he saw the dark blue of the pre-dawn sky contrasted against the blackness of the cave. Basil emerged from the almost vertical opening of the cave and climbed out. He looked around and gathered that he was somewhere about halfway up the small mountain. On one side the mountain continued upwards, and on the other it sloped down towards the base. Basil walked over to the downward sloping side and squinted to try and peer through the darkness and flitted his tongue to get a sense of direction. From the way the tunnel lead Basil figured out the broad direction of where he came from and proceeded to climb down the mountain's face towards the entrance of the cave he initially used to evade Bartos.

After an hour of climbing downwards, Basil spotted a figure crouched on top of the cave entrance. Bartos sat atop a rock, waiting for Basil to emerge from that entrance and was prepared to strike from above. Basil had to suppress a growl of satisfaction. It had taken a long time and he was tired from the hiking and the climbing, but it had paid off. He silently crawled into a position a few metres above Bartos' position on the mountain face. He then stopped and gazed at his target.

Bartos was a man-shaped being who was long in many aspects. He had a long face, long hair, long limbs, and long, loose leather clothes and wielded a longbow. Emerging from the front of his neck were four thin, sinewy veins that were connected to four simple trumpets made from bone. The connected muscular veins were about two metres in length and allowed the trumpets to move around Bartos in an odd fashion, like children still attached to their mother by an umbilical cord. Each trumpet had a fleshy throat behind the bell, which was what allowed them

to produce sound. Each had vocal cords of a different pitch, giving each trumpet a unique sound.

Basil pounced from above and was prepared to crush Bartos under his massive weight. When he landed though, he did not feel Bartos' body crumple beneath him, Bartos just vanished. Then massive blue-white fireballs shot towards him out of the darkness. Basil leaped out of the way of the first two, but the third struck him out of the air in mid-jump. The explosion that occurred on impact smashed Basil against the rocky mountain and he tumbled down to the ground. Covered in burns and blood, Basil rose and gazed around in anger. He had no idea what happened, how had he been ambushed and where was Bartos? Just then a few smaller, head-sized fireballs came at Basil. He rounded and slapped at them with his powerful tail. They vanished in small pops that stung at his tail, but were nothing compared to the larger ones of before.

"Blue fire...Mercae, is that you out there?!" Basil roared in anger. Mercae stepped close enough to be seen, but just out of range of Basil's stone gaze.

Semi-concealed in darkness Mercae began to speak, "You're too predictable, Basil. You may be intimidating, but not very clever" The blue wizard gloated. "My ambush seemed to have worked quite well, did you like it?" He continued.

"This is nothing, weakling. Normally, this might have annoyed me, but with The Control it barely passes as an attack." Basil glowered. He was mostly putting on a strong face. The fireball ambush had hurt Basil greatly, his entire right side was burned and two of his legs held broken bones from the impact with the mountain. He could still move and attack effectively due to the extra power The Control lent him, but he had to deal with a large amount of pain while doing so. "How did you conjure up that illusion anyways? I thought your magic was just confined to shooting fireballs," Basil asked, in an attempt to stall for time. He was almost ready to use the stone gaze again, he just needed a few more minutes and to be a little closer.

“Just before Bartos died, I grabbed one of his arrows and made a magical copy of it. As it turns out, Bartos’ arrows are considered part of his body as much as those obnoxious trumpets. Therefore, I was able to cast an illusion spell that looked like Bartos.” Mercae answered with a smug grin.

“That doesn’t explain what happened when the arrows struck me; illusions don’t have any physical substance, they’re just images.” Basil inferred.

“You’re more observant than I gave you credit for. The arrows were indeed illusions, but I concealed a small fireball inside each arrow illusion so that when they struck you, you would feel them. As for why those didn’t burn you, fire isn’t always hot” Mercae explained while growing a white fireball in his hand and threw it casually at Basil.

Basil blocked the slow moving white ball with one of his feet and felt a cold sensation, like a small frostbite. He came to the conclusion that if Mercae could make fire cold, then he could probably make one feel like a physical object. Basil mentally cursed Mercae for being clever enough to lure him into this trap, but it will all have been for naught in a few moments. Basil took a few slow steps forward, trying to imitate that he was approaching for more conversation, but Mercae was not fooled, as Basil drew closer Mercae moved back an equal distance, being certain to keep a set amount of space between himself and Basil.

The large being stopped and growled in annoyance. He realized he wouldn’t be able to ruse the wizard like this. He would have to make a sudden dash to get within range and while moving aim a stone gaze at Mercae. It would be risky; Basil was quite low on magical and physical energy. If the attack failed, he would be wide open to a counter attack which would likely involve many fireballs shot point-blank at him.

“How did you kill Bartos anyways?” Basil questioned, trying to lower Mercae’s guard

"I didn't, actually. I came across him bleeding out from having his lower half seemingly bitten off. I think it was the work of Fornus," Mercae mused. "But that begs the question, what happened to Fornus?"

Basil had no idea what had happened and he didn't really care, he sensed that he was finally able to use his stone gaze again and he prepared to make a mad dash towards Mercae. The wizard sensed that something had changed, though he did not know what. The idle chatting had subsided and now the two combatant locked eyes.

Then, without warning, Basil rushed forward in great leaps and bounds towards the blue, robed man. Basil closed the distance in mere seconds, giving Mercae little time to react. The wizard created a blue fireball in each hand, both about the size of his hands. Basil was about a metre away when he shot the stone gaze beam from his eyes. With little alternative, Mercae through the fireballs in his hands. The blue flames struck Basil in the face while the stone gaze connected with Mercae. Basil reared back in pain, the azure flames burning his eyes, blinding him. Basil let out a roar of frustration as he realized he could no longer see. He then quieted himself to hear if Mercae was moving.

Nothing. No movement. That likely meant that the stone gaze had hit and Mercae was now nothing more than a statue. Basil tried to smell where the statue was with his tongue, but the charred smell of his own burning flesh made that difficult as well. After a few moments of groping nearby, he found the statue. Only, it was slightly moving.

"Please...kill...me..." Mercae let out in a voice that was barely a whisper.

"How are you still moving? My stone gaze hit" Basil asked, still reeling from the pain of having his eyes burnt out.

"Interrupted...your stone gaze...while casting...damage to...your eyes..." Mercae let out a rattle-like breath and then continued "Your eyes...source of the power...broken, so the spell...was broken as well..." Mercae wheezed as if speaking had caused him a great deal of effort.

Basil interpreted Mercae gasping words to mean that he had struck home with the stone gaze, though he was not able to focus long enough on his target to fully turn Mercae to stone since he lost his eyes in mid-attack. That had to mean that Mercae was only partially turned to stone.

“By the eye in the sky...I didn’t even think it was possible to turn someone partially into stone. How is it possible to be half statue and half living being at once?” Basil mused.

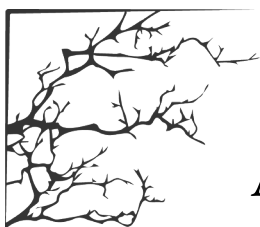
“It’s possible...and extremely painful...please put me out of-“ Mercae shuddered and wheezed harder than before “-out of my misery...”

Basil walked towards the voice until one of his clawed feet brushed something on the ground. It was moving very slowly and Basil recognized that the movement was Mercae. He leaned in close and nudged along the wizard’s body with his face to find Mercae’s neck. When he found it he immediately closed his jaws around it and squeezed. It felt like biting into rock, but he felt blood flow out as his teeth punctured the surface. Mercae let out a death rattle then ceased moving. Basil licked the blood from around his mouth and stepped back a couple metres. He couldn’t see them, but he knew the black vines had emerged from the ground to do their business. He couldn’t smell or hear them either, but he knew they were there. The air around him changed. He never noticed it before, whenever he saw them in the past, but with his eyes gone he must be using some other sense. It was likely that it was The Control heightening his magical senses.

After a few moments Basil felt the warmth of eyerise. The eye in the sky had risen and was undoubtedly casting a light orange-pink light over the area. Bracing himself for what would come next didn’t stop him from flinching when it struck. A beam of light shot out from the eye in the sky and hit Basil. It stunned him so that he couldn’t move, but he could feel his strength returning and his body healing from all the wounds he had sustained during the night. He opened his eyes and realized his sight had returned. He looked up towards the sky-drifting eye and noticed he was still in a column of pale white light. Then, as quickly as it appeared, it re-

treated back into the pupil of the celestial eye. It locked gazes with Basil as he looked up at it, but after a few seconds filled with a contemplative stare, it turned its attention elsewhere.

Basil stretched his limbs and quickly focused his eyes on a few different rocks nearby and everything seemed to check out all right. He then let out a sigh and started the long walk back to his place where he would spend another day attempting to complete his task. It would inevitably end the same way it did every day, The Control being under his will or not, he would fail his task and proceed back here for another battle over the right to use and hold onto The Control. The cycle would continue no matter what happened. As Basil continued to walk towards his place of residence he began to ponder what would happen if he simply did not return to work on the task set to him. What would happen? Or, what wouldn't happen? He stopped and looked up at the eye in the sky again and continued to contemplate.



About the Author



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This excerpt is from Inner Expanses.

*Links to the full book can all be found on Reyadh's website:
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