

## MAGUS OF THE GODS

### PROLOGUE

Having left the comforts of his home, Shaton found their trek far more miserable than he believed could be possible. He continued to grumble quietly to himself about the blistering heat and conditions of the land. The difficulty of leaving his homeland had continually been made worse by the oppressive conditions held by the Korvak Wastes. His group had entered these accursed lands about six weeks ago, and as each day passed, the land provided fresh new torments. It was a scorched land that looked as if the gods themselves had fought across it. There were rocky outcrops, huge depressions, and unless he missed his guess, every annoying and irritating insect that inhabited the world.

Yes, it was a stark contrast to his home in the cool depths of the Airdin Forest. There Bolisieta, the elven capital city, had managed to remain hidden from the world until they had faded into myth. Shaton remembered a time when that was not the case. That was back when he served as the ambassador to the Odcisk, those who now called themselves the Resztaki. Back then, the Odcisk had refused to heed a warning he had delivered. Now his fears were that they were still as stubborn as they once had been. If so, history might repeat itself, only this time it would be on a much grander scale.

A woman named Fumika had been blessed with the gift of foretelling, though some considered it a curse. The first time her talent had surfaced was when she was at his side during his time as Ambassador to the Odcisk. She had foreseen the coming cry of the Coneg. Though a type of banshee, the Coneg's cry does not announce one or two deaths. Instead it announces a death to a way of life or the end of an age.

Shaton had tried to make the Odcisk see the danger of what was coming, but to no avail. Being the first race created by the old gods did not leave the Odcisk void of arrogance. When it was clear that the Odcisk would not listen and time was running short, he and all the elves had been summoned back home to the Airdin Forest. Two days after their departure, the Coneg cried, and on the following day, the corruption of the Aversin by the Deceiver became apparent.

War between the Aversin and the Odcisk raged on for the better part of half a century before it looked as if the Odcisk might defeat the Aversin, who were slowly becoming Neanderthal-like and primitive. That was when the humans, who were shorter and smaller in stature than the Odcisk, began to arrive on the coast from across the sea. With their seamlessly never-ending numbers arriving, the battle complexion completely switched once more. The war continued for another forty years before the Odcisk finally fell.

Even the fall of the Odcisk was a strange event that defied explanation. For reasons scholars and mystics could not explain, the land erupted. Everywhere around Orsiepa Zymkowy, the Odcisk's capital, the land rolled and churned slowly, destroying everything for hundreds of miles. What had once been the lushest land on this world had been turned into the Korvak Wastes. Far stranger was the fact that in the center of all this destruction, a large oasis had been spared. Orsiepa Zymkowy had once been at the center of this oasis but had somehow mysteriously disappeared during the breaking of the land. Of the Aversin's capital, Gamal Zymkowy, no trace remained. It had been the mirror image of Orsiepa Zymkowy but had been located west of its sister city. Its fate was all too easy to guess, most likely having been destroyed or swallowed by the land in its breaking.

Now the Coneg was supposed to cry once more according to Fumika. This time her foretelling claimed that all the races that inhabited this world were in danger. There would be no sitting and watching from the safety of the forest for Shaton and his people.

But Fumika's foretelling also gave a glimmer of hope. She had seen a young Resztaki warrior bearing the mark of what the elves called the Talisman of Vastat, a symbol of a bloodline that they had long thought lost to this world. Her visions claimed that if this man failed, the world would fall into darkness, with nightmares coming forth to corrupt all in its path. And while this provided that sliver of hope, there were still things that troubled him, the first of which was how far these people had fallen into

barbarianism.

Shaton's love of history and access to the Odcisk's vast library had provided him with a deeper understanding of this mark. The Talisman of Vast was actually two unique marks—or znaks, as the Resztaki called them. The first was the Talisman of Sca, who was the chief deity of the Odcisk and the one who supposedly granted them their magical abilities. The second part was slightly trickier. The crown being merged with the Talisman of Sca was only mentioned in the vaguest of texts that he had ever found. From what he could glean, it was the mark of the royal bloodline, a mark granted only to true descendants of the first king of the Odcisk.

If the bloodline had returned, then perhaps it was true that all the magic of the people was returning as well. If that was indeed the case, then there might truly be hope for them all. The magic that had been employed by the Odcisk was far more powerful than that of all the other races. This was due to their ability to somehow connect directly to the elemental planes from which all magic was pulled from. Other races needed to syphon slivers of power with incantations and components to do a fraction of what the Odcisk could do almost by a simple act of will. But there was a balance to all this. Only a handful were ever granted this ability by Sca. Furthermore, if that individual failed to follow the callings the gods placed upon them, they were labeled Roamers. Dispute his studies, Roamers were not spoken about openly back then. The only thing he had been able to discover was that those who had failed to flee and go into hiding were immediately put to death.

Though there was no denying he was intrigued by the chance to learn more about the Odcisk after their fall, he had not expected the Elven High Council to order him to serve as the ambassador to these people once more. They had crossed only a few villages, but it was easy to see how far these people had fallen in comparison to the Odcisk.

One of the biggest surprises to him was how they were greeted at the villages. Entering with half the elite Elven Royal Guard and supporting faction drew quite the excited response. But that excitement only lasted for a short while. A light of awe and hope shone in these people's eyes; they spoke of someone named Staszu. They claimed he was a great warrior that wielded the magic of old. The stories had been filled with impossible feats and exceedingly heroic acts. While Shaton remembered enough to know that those bestowed with the magic ability by Sca had never been warriors, their description of the magic gave him hope that it had truly returned in some form from this land.

Cursing as he swatted another small biting insect, he weighed the thought of living in this land as an ambassador with what he might learn if they survived. He was increasingly unsure it was worth the effort. His only solace of mind from the heat and insects was that they were getting closer to the one they sought.

Niagara had somehow been blessed with a vision of the Resztaki and another boon as well. He was experiencing an inner pull toward the one they sought. Oddly, this was very similar to what the Odcisk or Resztaki experienced when they were ready to master their znak. Only the pull drew them toward challenges or places they needed to be to prove themselves. Once done, they would usually work in that field or one relating closely to it. Sometimes additional znaks would be received, though this was more common in warriors than other ways of life. As for the Magi, they only received one. Though some tales told of Magi with multiple znaks.

Even with the knowledge that they were drawing extremely near to the one they sought did not stop him from desiring to request a halt for at least a short spell. He would never make that request of General Fanto. General Fanto was a soldier to the core. He either failed to realize that not everyone on this expedition was not a soldier or didn't care about those who were not. It was Shaton's guess that General Fanto held to the latter belief. Thankfully, he noticed that the wide column had been called to a halt. With luck, they would even set up the tents for shade and nets to keep out the insects. Unfortunately, that was not to be just yet. Noticing one of the scouts arriving, Shaton urged his mount forward to join the growing knot around the general.

"General Fanto sir!" the young soldier began with a sharp salute. "Sir, Captain Yamana has ordered me to report that we have spotted a large walled city."

Fanto sat there patiently for a moment before he responded in a harsh and frustrated tone. "Is that all

he ordered you to report back with?”

“No ... no, sir!” the scout began as if regretting that he had to deliver the message. “The city is strange and difficult to explain at the very least. The walls are smooth and look much like dwarven construction, according to Captain Yamana, but are not. The problem is that they are not made of stone but instead are some type of hardened earthen works that stand well over twenty feet tall. In addition to all this, our mages cannot use their magic to scry beyond the walls. Something is blocking them. It is strong enough to deflect them even beyond their combined ability.”

General Fanto sat quietly in his saddle for a moment. Even as far back as Shaton was, he could almost see Fanto’s mind racing behind those icy crystal-blue eyes. Finally, he turned toward Nagara with a hesitant but expecting look. The dislike the general held for their “guide” bordered on pure hatred, and it was no secret, though in Shaton’s opinion, the general treatment of all the nonsoldiers was little better.

Adding fuel to all this was the fact that Nagara often went out of his way and appeared to take great pleasure in provoking the general. After a short staring match, he finally spoke up.

“The pulling is very strong, and the direction is correct. If I was laying wagers on it, I would say it was as close to a sure bet as you could get. But since I doubt your stiff lifestyle allows for gambling, do as you wish.”

With a bow that went well past mocking, Nagara turned his horse and back on the general, riding away toward the rear of the formation.

Shaton held his breath as he waited for the familiar explosion he was sure would follow the slight. Completely to his surprise, and the general’s credit, the redness from his face slowly washed away as Fanto took several exaggerated deep breaths. His exterior might have now appeared calm, but his voice sounded like gravel being churned as he spoke to the scout. His orders were simple. Captain Yamana was to take four men and go to this odd walled city. Once there, he was to try to arrange a meeting between the city’s leaders and the emissaries from Bolisieta. If possible, he would like to bring an honor guard of twenty men. Anything outside that, he could bring back counterproposed terms.

As Shaton watched the soldier ride off, he felt his own irritation with the situation growing slightly. He had easily caught how Fanto had emphasized the term emissaries. He was not ready to give up control of this quest yet, nor stop seeking excuses to return home to Bolisieta. It was understandable for him to feel this way with everything that was happening. It was only his devotion to his duty that had held him to this point. And while that much was clearly evident, the biggest test still lay ahead for Fanto. Though directly ordered by the high council, Shaton was not sure how that would go when the time came.

Pushing those thoughts aside, he went back to what he heard in the scouts report. It was not much, but it did help to shed a little light in what they had heard in some of the villages. There had been claims that this Staszu had somehow returned Orsiepa Zymkowy. While a dirt-walled city might appear to be a great capital city to these people, it was hardly what they thought. Shaton had walked those fabled streets of their capital long ago. It was with great reluctance that he admitted to himself that its beauty and splendor was even greater than that of his beloved Bolisieta.

That still left the city’s magical defense against scrying to be unraveled. Again, he felt hopeful that the magic of these people might be returning, though that still brought some difficult questions to the surface. Who would be able to teach a half-barbaric race how to use a magic that had been gone from the lands for several millennia? Trying to learn on their own could easily kill them. After giving it several more moments of thought, he decided it was something that he would just have to wait and discover. Pushing those thoughts aside, he decided to take advantage of the halt and went to seek out some shade and refreshments.