

**RENLON
FALLEN TREES
8 DAYS PRIOR TO THE TRAGEDY OF NORTSHARD**

The undergrowth suffocatingly besieged the jungle floor. By itself, the plant life made travel difficult, but the humidity hung like a weight pressing down on Renlon's lungs and shoulders. He had grown so accustomed to the paradisiacal air of the coastal city that the harsh conditions of the jungle assaulted him with all the force of an iron war hammer to the chest.

Green hued sunlight filtering through the foliage cast the surrounding area in virescent shades, making it nearly impossible to discern where the ground ended and the plant life began. Renlon remembered how rough the trek through the jungle had been on their way to Osirath, how they had almost walked into a myriad of snakes and insects on numerous occasions. He had not mentioned it to the other men, but he was in constant fear that some leech or spider was crawling along his exposed skin or working their way beneath his armor to the warmest parts of his body.

The forest transitioned to its midday cadences, blending pterahawk squawking, monkey mating calls, and distant howling from some creature Renlon was sure he had not met yet.

As he brushed aside fronds as wide as his torso, the world opened up into a small clearing. He bent one knee and froze to covertly scout the landscape.

The clearing was primarily the result of a dozen fallen trees that had shattered at their bases and collapsed into their neighbors, demolishing thousands of branches on their way down. After all the destruction, it was not clear what had caused them to fall or when it had occurred, but it had made for a convenient landmark to set up a rendezvous.

Renlon elicited a predetermined impression of a pterahawk. He knew it sounded awful, resembling more a pterahawk being choked out while simultaneously being punched in the stomach, but a moment later an archer stepped out from behind one of the collapsed trees, pointing an arrow in his direction. Even from forty meters away, Renlon recognized the archer as Deikand.

Renlon lifted his hand from the hilt of his sword and deliberately stepped through the fern he was using for cover. He kept his palms visible and stood as erect and nonthreatening as he could manage.

Deikand lowered the bow, allowing his grip on the arrow to slacken.

Renlon took that as an invitation to run over to Deikand's position. The archer led him around the tree to a sparsely populated encampment.

Just over half a dozen of the men were present. One of them vigorously scrubbed empty bowls that had been filled with soup, the likely ingredients being taken from the fleshless pterahawk skeleton laying nearby. Three more men were cleaning and sharpening weapons they would need for hacking through the jungle undergrowth, and three others were sleeping.

Renlon stopped in front of a swollen mound of mud near where the men slept. A pile of armor and weapons sprawled out beside it.

"What happened?" Renlon asked.

Deikand walked up next to him. "Something bit him. Must have been venomous."

Renlon felt his internal body temperature boil. They had all known the risks of trekking through a jungle, in particular, a strange one they had never before ventured. Losing a man this way seemed such a waste.

"Who was it?" Renlon asked, dreading the response.

"Johns," Deikand answered.

Renlon's hands balled into fists. He had not known Johns well, but he had enjoyed a few brief conversations with him. Johns had struck him as a devout man of the empire.

"Renlon," a new voice called out.

It was Sir Bahrin, the commander of this group in Gage's absence, approaching from behind. Bahrin was one of the most athletic and bumptious Renlon had ever fought beside. His face was framed in a full bronze beard cascading below his neckline and his piercing amber eyes burned with the passion of a dedicated knight. Like the others, Bahrin wore hardly any armor, covering only one of his shoulders and portions of his extremities, leaving his sizable chest and ripped stomach exposed and glistening from the jungle's moisture.

“Sir Bahrin,” Renlon greeted.

“You have news from Sir Gage?”

“I do. He orders us to move onward to support Drecken.”

Bahrin straightened at the news. “They were able to procure ships?”

“They were. They sail tonight.”

“Then there is no need for us to stand our post any longer.” Bahrin gestured to one of the men. “Thomelin, send word to our patrols. We leave in ten minutes.”

Thomelin slammed a fist to his chest and left without a word.

Bahrin then pointed to Renlon. “Does the bag you carry have another container?”

“It does,” Renlon confirmed. “Sir Gage ordered me not to let it leave my sight.”

“Then travel in the center of our formation. I don’t want to take any chances with—”

A sudden shrill cry cut off Bahrin’s words.

Renlon’s hand instinctively reached down and unsheathed his weapon. The familiar sing of a half dozen other blades scraping against leather sheaths rang around them.

Renlon ran along the side of one of the trees, straining his eyes to scrutinize the edge of the forest to determine where the screaming originated.

The ground pounded with increasing intensity. Renlon sat on his haunches, endeavoring his senses to fixate on the strange vibration from the earth.

A rumbling growl that gained momentum sounded from the distance. The overgrowth beyond the clearing shook with vigor.

Then the screaming abruptly ended and the foliage above ground level lessened its swaying.

The tremors stilled. All the voices of the jungle dispelled in unison.

“Renlon,” Bahrin’s voice whispered from behind.

Renlon did not dare take his eyes off the forest. It took all his training to keep his heartbeat regulated even though every primal instinct told him that something was very wrong.

He heard Bahrin shuffling closer. “You sacrifice yourself for this position. Do you understand? You hold it no matter what it costs you.”

Renlon closed his fist behind his back so that Bahrin saw his acknowledgment of the order. He heard the man moving behind him.

The tension in Renlon’s legs built, and he shifted his weight, making the motion as slow as he could manage.

The overgrowth at the edge of the clearing shook. Soon the quaking in the ground returned and became synchronized with a repetitive thunderous pounding and the cracking of branches.

Behind him, Renlon heard one of the bags being opened.

The rustling branches abruptly stopped. The ground halted its shaking seconds later. Renlon questioned whether he had imagined the ground moving at all.

Something within Renlon told him to turn and make a run for the city, but his body spurned the command. A voice in his head warned him that if he moved, then something out there would see him.

The branches of the distant trees parted. At first only a large snout broke free. Its skin was pebble textured and camouflaged well with the colors of the jungle. Then two eyes came forth, their gaze locked unwavering on his position.

Renlon’s legs begged him to get away as they shook furiously. Even the weight of the sword in his hand seemed to no longer provide him any comfort or feeling of strength.

An elongated jawline attached to a large square head capable of swallowing a man’s torso broke through the foliage. Razor-like fangs the size of hands visibly pressed down on the animal’s lower jowls.

Gods...

The animal worked its jaw opened and closed with an echoing *clacking* noise. It pointed its nose to the dusk sky and snorted.

For a moment it hesitated, as if it preferred the concealment offered by the trees. Its head hung half exposed, with only a silhouette of a much larger body hiding behind it.

Then the beast began making a rumbling sound. At first it lacked menace. Its head cocked curiously to the side as it stared at Renlon, as if trying to decipher what this human was and its purpose.

The ground shook hard as the enormous animal took another large stride forward. Its tree trunk sized leg broke through the ferns, the noise of quivering leaves smacking against each other drowned out by the thunderous crunch of the beast's foot crashing into the open clearing. The torso was large enough that it took a couple more steps for it to fully leave the tree line, an equally long tail trailing out of sight. Even from this distance and through the veil of the ferns Renlon saw the animal's bulging muscles and clipped feather stubbles atop forest-shaded, pebbly skin.

Most noticeable of all were the leather armor strapped to its side and the saddle on its back. A lightly armored knight holding a long spear rode with a confidence that sharply contrasted against the sudden terror in Renlon's gut.

The *thud* of his sword falling to the ground snapped Renlon out of his temporary paralysis. He cursed himself for his momentary lapse, wiping his palms on his sides before reaching down and retrieving his weapon. As much as Renlon wanted to deny it, he knew exactly what creature stalked them.

The tyrannosaur opened its jaws again. This time, the noise that came out was a bellow of a roar.

"What the fuck..." one man murmured.

"It's a fucking *tyrannosaur!*" someone else exclaimed.

The pounding on the ground intensified and a second tyrannosaur broke through the jungle ten meters to the first one's right. Although riderless, it still wore leather armor along its sides to its neckline. The jaws of this one dripped with ragged flesh and a dark red liquid.

The first tyrannosaur stayed fixated on Renlon as the other one began walking. It did not approach their position, but instead moved along the edge of the clearing.

The tremors in the ground became constant. A third tyrannosaur burst through the jungle. Like the second, it marched along the edge of the clearing, circling the fallen trees.

A fourth and then a fifth soon joined them. The tyrannosaurs equally spaced themselves with remarkable precision.

"Fuck us," someone shouted. "There are *five!* Where did they come from?"

"How did they *find us?*" another asked.

"Everyone cool their blood," Bahrin said with unexpected poise. "We aren't the ones who are fucked."

Deikand removed a wooden cylinder from a bag and set it on the ground, the tips of dozens of arrows stuck into multiple boards spread out across its interior. Deikand quickly screwed them onto the arrows while the tips were still embedded into the cylinder, careful not to touch the edges directly—they were heavily coated in toxin.

"They're the fools who are exposed," Bahrin continued, walking over to Deikand to help him prepare his arrows. "While we use these trees for cover, Deikand can take them out from a distance. With the toxin on these arrows, it should take no more than two hits to bring each of them down."

Renlon felt a surge of hope. The tyrannosaurs continued to circle, as if waiting for them to make the first move.

The only exception was the first tyrannosaur. It remained standing in place, its rider sitting as stationary as a statue.

Then a small contingent of soldiers broke free from the obscurity of the jungle. Each wielded only light armor and brandished an assortment of weapons, including bows and arrows.

"They have arrows too," Renlon warned. "Cowards probably want to keep us pinned down until the tyrannosaurs can get at us."

"How many?" Bahrin asked.

"Thirteen sword and spear wielders on the ground, three more with bows," he answered.

Bahrin snorted. "I doubt any of them can hit us with the accuracy of Deikand."

Renlon certainly hoped so. He heard the other infiltrators shrinking back into the cover of the fallen trees.

Renlon wiped his palms onto his clothes, switching the sword from one hand to the other.

"Move aside," Deikand instructed, grabbing a bundle of arrows and moving to Renlon's position. Renlon stepped back, allowing Deikand to stick each arrow into the dirt. Renlon counted twenty in total.

The tyrannosaurs seemed unconcerned about their quarry and whatever defense they would mount.

“Hold fast, men,” Bahrin said with as much bravado as he could muster. “*Do not move from your position!* The enemy has no idea what is coming to them.”

Deikand took a couple steadying breaths and finally reached down to pluck an arrow from the dirt. He brought it up into his bow, lightly gripping the back of the arrow as he drew it back.

The man let out a surprised grunt as something heavy landed on him from above and flattened him roughly into the ground. His arrow traveled a mere two meters before skipping off a rock.

The animal on top of him lashed out, kicking violently with clawed hands and feet into the archer’s back. Deikand let out a shrill scream that painfully stung Renlon’s ears.

The creature reached down and bit into the back of Deikand’s neck, ending his cries.

It was no larger than half a man, with a similar saurian build to that of the tyrannosaur except that its arms were more proportional to its body and it had very distinctive long, curved claws on its feet.

“Son of a bitch!” Renlon screamed, swinging his sword toward the raptor with all his strength.

The raptor ducked, the blade narrowly missing the top of its skull. It leaped aside to get out of Renlon’s range, but he continued to rush after it. It let out an irritated barking sound.

The air became polluted with the discordant, high-pitched shrieks of men as raptors rained down. A few more bounded between the cracks and spaces between the trees, moving with a grace and swiftness that made them difficult to track.

Renlon realized too late that the tyrannosaurs had merely been a distraction while the raptors moved with stealth through the underbrush and into the trees above them. The coordination and ferocity of the ambush was unlike any Renlon had experienced before.

The raptor he was chasing turned and vaulted toward the tree line. Renlon let it go as another of the creatures raced toward him.

Renlon jabbed his blade at it, forcing the raptor to abruptly stop and bob back at the last possible second. It nipped at the sword in an almost mocking gesture.

Something unexpectedly heavy hit him from behind. The impact gave him instant whiplash, and the sword went spinning from his hand. He felt his face grind hard into the ground.

Whatever had hit him jumped off. Renlon got up on his hands and knees and crawled away, surprised that the raptor had not bothered to finish him.

He decided to make it pay for its benevolence with its life.

He got within range of one of Deikand’s arrows in the dirt and pulled one out. The raptor lunged at him with open jaws.

Renlon slashed in a short arc for the creature’s head. It pulled back with centimeters to spare, the edge of the arrow slicing into empty air.

The raptor snapped again and again, hopping to the side and pulling back each time Renlon swung. On one lucky effort, the tip finally nicked the animal’s lower jaw.

Without a noise, the raptor collapsed in a disheveled heap. The sound of its body landing with a heavy *thud* gave Renlon brief satisfaction.

The two raptors behind it snarled. They backed away, unsure of how Renlon had slain their packmate.

“Take him alive,” someone shouted from behind.

The two raptors hesitated. Renlon rolled away and grabbed the hilt of his sword laying nearby. A surge of adrenaline inspired him to let out a war cry.

“Temper your blood!” one of his enemies shouted. The man stood only a few meters away, his sword pointed to the ground and hand held palm outward. “You’ve clearly lost!”

Another man with a silver cape strode from behind the shouting enemy and spoke next.

“Whoever you are, I am Commander Crant of the Osirathian Sentinel Guard. You have my word that if you surrender, no harm will come to you and you shall be judged fairly by the king himself.”

Renlon looked over his shoulder. Four of the raptors created a semi-circle around him to block his escape. The bodies of all his men lay in shredded, bloody masses in every direction.

Rage overtook him. He stepped toward the raptors and swung carelessly. They easily dodged, always jumping out of range.

A large shadow fell over him. Renlon stopped his barbaric assault and craned his neck to see that one tyrannosaur had squeezed itself between the fallen trees and now stood staring down at him. It released a guttural, rumbling growl, its foul breath washing over him.

“Surrender yourself and let King Gadrion judge you,” Crant repeated. The soldier on Crant’s side walked further into the space between the fallen trees, his boots snapping the various branches at his feet.

One of Renlon’s men abruptly rolled over and embedded a dagger into the approaching soldier’s leg, evoking a distressed cry.

“Kardan!” one of the other enemies shouted as his friend collapsed.

Bahrin, who had been playing dead, grabbed Kardan and pulled him to the ground while simultaneously withdrawing his dagger. The two men grappled with one another, Bahrin trying to maneuver the blade into Kardan’s chest or neck. Kardan barely held the blade back by holding onto his assailant’s wrists.

The tyrannosaur roared and stepped forward, ignoring Renlon for a precious few seconds.

Renlon dove toward his bag and pulled it open, revealing the container. He heard Bahrin scream.

While Renlon twisted the cap off the container, he glanced up in time to see Bahrin being hoisted into the air, his right leg caught in the jaws of the tyrannosaur. It shook him vigorously from side to side until his leg tore off, sending the rest of him tumbling through the air and out of sight beyond the trees. Renlon heard another tyrannosaur growl and move toward the direction where Bahrin had landed.

Renlon turned his attention back to the lid of the container as it wobbled loose.

The raptors screeched and fell upon him, their scythe-like claws extended. Renlon removed the lid right before the first raptor pinned him. Something sharp dug into his back.