

THE SONS OF ORNON

CHAPTER ONE: THE RITE OF THE TWENTY

The Day of the Relinquishment had arrived.

The most knowledgeable merchant in the marketplace of the City of Kings knew this, as did the untutored peasant in one of Shadzea's distant rural provinces. None had been called to witness the proceedings, for this unique time belonged to a select few. But none felt slighted; on the contrary, it gratified them to know that the Rite of the Twenty, the oldest and most significant tradition in the long history of Shadzea, had progressed this far, for this was as it should be.

One by one the princes of Shadzea, Ornon's many sons, filed into the courtyard of the palace with their respective mothers, whom they would see that day for the last time. Ornon himself had come to observe the Relinquishment, though the morose king, his mind focused on more pressing matters of his reign, barely acknowledged the passage of the silent youths. That he had followed the same path years before meant little to the fourteenth Survivor of Shadzea, whose chest would not swell with pride until all but one of his sons lay dead.

What did these unsmiling youths, all just past the end of their eighth year, know or care of the traditions that had brought them to this place and time? It had not been the task of their mothers to instruct them in the history of Shadzea, but rather to guide them swiftly through the earliest years of their existence, and also to implant in their impressionable minds the most rudimentary seeds of awareness regarding what the gods had predestined for them. They would learn all else of necessity from their mentors, under whose wing they would fall from the Day of the Relinquishment until the time of their deaths. Yes, they would learn.

They would learn of Offow, ruler of a smaller, less powerful Shadzea that struggled for its existence centuries ago. Under Offow's strong rule the kingdom held its own against its fierce neighbors, even expanded its blood-soaked boundaries upon occasion. But Offow himself knew that the demise of Shadzea lay as near as the last beat of his heart, for the heirs given him by his weak-willed queen were two simpering, cowardly sons. Left in their limp hands, Shadzea would become a forgotten paragraph in the history of some other land, unless Offow rectified the situation—something that he swore he would do.

While still a vital man of thirty-five, Offow initiated the Rite of the Twenty. This ceremony, so well honed to perfection that even through the reign of Ornon it remained virtually unchanged, commenced with the Mating Week, when fifty of Shadzea's most suitable young women were selected for him by his advisors. After a self-imposed abstinence of a month he carried out his obligations—hardly unpleasant ones—the fruits of his efforts soon evident as all but two bore his seed.

Months later, during the Birth of Princes, Offow and his advisors examined each infant. All males that showed deformity or sickness were sent to the red priests of Doj and Bao for sacrifice, as were the female infants. Only the healthy males were considered suitable. After the birth of his twentieth son, Offow declared the Birth of Princes at an end. The red priests carried off all subsequent children, regardless of gender or health.

The Twenty now embarked on their singular path in life, the path that would lead to death for all, save one—the Survivor. For the first eight years each child remained with his respective mother, whose duties, according to the dictates of Offow, were to help the child grow, to begin instilling in him the earliest

instincts of survival. They shared no love, no emotion, and no woman objected when the child was taken away. They simply returned to their original lives and duties after the Day of the Relinquishment.

Individual mentors now guided the destinies of the princes for the duration of their lives, however long or short. The princes ate together, played together, and slept beneath the same roof. Friendships were discouraged, though the hatred and suspicion of others imparted to them so early by their mothers was more than enough to prevent this. The mentors taught them to use their minds, while soldiers trained them in physical prowess and arms. Some would-be Survivors fell early in rough play, never to stand again. To the others this was as it should be, and none would proffer as much as a second glance at their “brother” as he was carried from the courtyard.

The first of the Princes’ Trials came near the end of the maturing youths’ fourteenth year. Shadzean soldiers escorted them, along with their mentors, to Lake Porsat, at that time within the borders of their enemy. Upon a galley designated for the occasion they were rowed to the center of the deep lake, where each dove below to retrieve one of the brilliant blue porsat blossoms, the flower that gave the lake its name. It seemed simple enough, and yet two never again saw the surface. None could say for sure that these deaths were anything more than the accidents they appeared to be.

The second and third Princes’ Trials occurred at the end of the seventeenth and nineteenth years, each more difficult and dangerous than the preceding one, and by the end of the third trial the ranks of Offow’s sons had dwindled to six. Now the princes were afforded more time with the king, who instructed them in matters necessary to the survival of Shadzea. Father and son shared no love, for each knew his responsibility; each understood his purpose in life.

The fourth Princes’ Trial, by far the most telling, occurred at the end of the twenty-second year. Unlike the first three, where all performed the same task, the fourth trial, also called the Trial of Death, was an individual one. Each prince left the city on his own after announcing to Offow and his council the nature of his trial, and after receiving the king’s sanction. No two were alike, although all held their own perils. When this trial ended, only three of the original Twenty had endured.

Those who survived the fourth Princes’ Trial had but one obstacle left to overcome, the final step on their path to being proclaimed the Survivor. The Day of the Reckoning occurred near the end of the remaining princes’ twenty-fourth year. In the vast courtyard, where as children they had played together, the princes met in combat. When the last drop of blood had been spilled, only one remained. Drenched in his own blood and that of his brothers, Boga stood in the center of the courtyard and proclaimed himself the Survivor, the one most capable of ruling Shadzea. His name echoed throughout the troubled land, so that all might know of their future king. Offow then approached the first Survivor, and he embraced him symbolically. The Rite of the Twenty, begun with the Mating Week, had ended.

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They would learn, the young sons of Ornon, about Boga, the first Survivor, who became king of Shadzea not long after the Day of the Reckoning, when Offow died. It quickly became evident that the long ritual conceived of by Offow had not been in vain, for he had left the kingdom in more than capable hands. Boga was ruthless, possessed of great intelligence, and even greater strength. To the enemies of Shadzea, whom he began to methodically crush, he proved merciless. Many met unspeakable deaths, though the tortures they endured at his hands made that death a welcome release.

Boga slowly extended Shadzea’s borders outward from its capital, which would later be rebuilt in splendor and dubbed the City of Kings. Then, to the disbelief of many, the first Survivor formed a strange, terrifying alliance between himself and Sothor, the black magician, all but assuring Shadzea’s dominance for centuries to come, so he thought. All feared the shadowy Sothor, who claimed as his place of origin an unheard of land far to the south, for they believed, contrary to what he claimed, that he had risen from the deepest pits of unholy Esh. His subsequent actions did little to dissuade them.

Under the aegis of the unlikely pair, the Shadzean army spread across the land like a swiftly moving shadow. Sothor’s enigmatic powers first terrified the enemy, addled his brain and weakened his will. Then, no longer able to resist, he fell easily to the crushing death blows of Boga and his fierce minions. Cities were pillaged, razed and rebuilt in the name of the Shadzean empire. Powerful kingdoms were pummeled into submission, until nothing remained, not even their once feared names.

For countless decades Shadzea had fought for its existence; now, in little more than a year, there were none left to challenge it. The kingdom that Boga had carved for himself extended for great distances in all directions from the site of the proposed capital. To the west it spread to the shores of the Telliun Ocean; to the south, as far as the unscalable Torreon Mountains; northward, to the edge of a vast forest; to the east, as far as the Kobur River. His new subjects, all weak-kneed submissives, were now honored to call themselves Shadzeans.

Before death cut short his long reign, Boga saw the completion of the City of Kings, and he received the second Survivor, his assurance that Shadzea's might would go unchallenged for another generation. But in his waning years the king was once again confronted by Sothor, who had practiced his dark arts in the catacombs of the city since sequestering himself there after the conquest. Boga, though uneasy in his presence, knew all too well that the sorcerer's appearance portended the long-awaited collection of his dues, for had he not promised him anything short of his soul for his help? Yet what could one such as Sothor—ageless, with little fear of death—desire of mortal man?

Within a week Boga commissioned his artisans to begin work on a new city, for such was Sothor's request. The City of Necromancy would be devoted solely to the teaching of the black arts to eager and willing acolytes, so the sorcerer said. The very prospect of the cryptic place, less than two hundred miles northeast of the City of Kings, made the unmoving Boga shudder, but he had calmly nodded his assent. If only he had not lived to know of its completion . . .

They would learn, those who filed into the courtyard uneasily before the cold stare of Ornon, about Dain, the second Survivor, and of the valorous deed that still shines above the many performed over the centuries by the long line of Shadzean monarchs. Dain, on his bloody path to the throne, had curried favor with the oft-maligned red priests who, in exchange for the promise of greater power, made numerous sacrifices to Doj and Bao on behalf of their champion. He had even proposed the building of huge temples, perhaps even a city, to honor the ancient Shadzean deities, and to learn of the construction of Sothor's foul city before this one nearly drove him to action. But he acceded to the advice of his mentors and bided his time.

Boga finally died. Dain, within minutes of scattering his father's ashes to the wind, summoned the red priests, and by nightfall the contingent, armed with amulets and urns, had ridden many miles from the capital. They continued to ride steadily, and before dawn of the fifth day they reached the low hills surrounding the City of Necromancy. Dain knew that the dark arts were practiced in the night, when the demons of Esh were the most receptive. The early morning hours would find Sothor resting, where he would be vulnerable.

The priests surrounded the unguarded city at evenly spaced intervals, and by the time the sun had cleared the highest of the hills, all was ready. While Blaht, the head priest, mumbled sacred incantations, his underlings held torches to the strange mixture in their urns. Dain, watching silently from the base of a hillock, saw blue strands of smoke curl upward, until the City of Necromancy, which had been bathed in early morning sunlight, became shrouded in darkness as billowing black clouds blotted the warm rays. The names of Doj and Bao were intoned over and over, and with each repetition the voices of the priests grew louder, until the eerie crescendo stirred scores of slumbering acolytes, who lay along the base of the walls. They rose unsteadily to their feet, and when they absorbed the scene around them they became terrified. They pounded frantically on the gate to gain admission.

Suddenly a great thunder arose, and the ground beneath their feet trembled. Bolts of searing fire rained down upon the City of Necromancy, one striking a group of cowering acolytes at the wall and reducing them to charred bones and reeking flesh. From within the city loud wails arose, and the voices of the acolytes invoked the name of Sothor to save them from this assault. But the sorcerer did not immediately appear, and the destruction loosed on the city continued to reduce its populace.

The heavy gate suddenly swung open, crushing a pair of acolytes to pulp against the stone wall. A gaunt, shadowy figure emerged from the city, and for the first time in years Dain saw the hated sorcerer. Sothor, spotting the king, strode toward him, all but ignoring the pleading, clutching hands of the terrified acolytes as he passed. Thunderstrokes continued to pummel the earth around him, and more of his followers were charred beyond recognition; but no bolt touched the sorcerer's body. His hatred for Dain was revealed in the fire that pulsed from his malignant eyes.

“You dare to wreak destruction on the sanctuary of a son of Esh?” he shrieked. “Know this, Dain, you and your accursed gods: I, Sothor, who would have practiced the arts of my ancestors in peace, and would have been content to offer the knowledge to those who sought it, now swear to you that the fate of Shadzea is sealed! May it take a hundred years, I will someday succeed in calling upon the minions of Esh to crawl up from the pits of blackness and cover the land, until there are none left to stand before them. All shall suffer the wrath of the Dark Ones, until time itself is no more. Even death will not free you from this, for we will know where to find your moldering soul. You most of all, Dain, will suffer the vengeance of Esh!”

But the king stood his ground, and he did not cower before the threats of the sorcerer. As he passed between two of the chanting priests the enraged Sothor raised his gnarled fingers to the heavens, and the pair fell to the ground, where they shriveled into black dust. With this atrocity Dain stepped forward, until he stood at Blaht’s elbow. The head priest fumbled in his robes for a moment, finally withdrawing a flat box covered in red velvet. He lifted the box ceremoniously above his head and, after mumbling something unintelligible, he handed the contents to Dain. Around his neck the Survivor hung a long silver chain, at the end of which dangled a large, gaudy amulet. He began to walk purposefully toward Sothor, and when the sorcerer saw the amulet he halted, his bony legs now unsteady. He knew that he had lost.

“The Stone of Bao!” he gasped as he stared at the blazing red jewel that highlighted the amulet. “I—I thought it to be lost these hundreds of years! Where did you find it?”

But Dain chose not to break his silence, and as he drew nearer the sorcerer cringed. Weakened by the night’s unspeakable activities, Sothor struggled to summon the powers of Esh for one last futile defense. He staggered to his feet and thrust his hands toward Dain, and the king saw thin jets of searing flame emanate from the sorcerer’s palms. But the Stone of Bao absorbed the brunt of this meager offering, while the remnants of the energy were reversed. Sothor was struck in one leg, this causing him excruciating pain. As he writhed on the ground, his acolytes rushed forward to help him. It was then that all heard Dain speak.

“You, Sothor, and your followers are banished forever from Shadzea. You will go to the great northern forest, farther even, if indeed anything exists beyond it. This is the closest you will ever come to our land. Doj and Bao have shown you that the powers of Esh are no match for them. The Stone of Bao will protect us from the likes of you forever. Now go quickly! Take nothing with you.”

And Sothor was banished from Shadzea to the distant northern forest, the ragged remains of his acolytes along with him. Now Dain would not dare question the powers of Doj and Bao, and he devoted his reign to them. For more than a year the red priests remained in the City of Necromancy, until they felt certain that the city was cleansed of its past foulness in the eyes of their deities. Dain renamed it the City of Gods, and he chose to rule Shadzea from there, instead of the City of Kings. This caused much grumbling on the part of his advisors, though none dared challenge the will of the king. Dain, known to all his descendants as the Pious One, at first even refused to initiate the next Rite of the Twenty. But the advisors would not stand for this, since the preservation of Shadzea was at stake. After Dain’s death the next Survivor, much lacking in piety, left the City of Gods to the red priests and returned to the City of Kings. All have since ruled from there.

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Yes, they would learn much, these current princes of Shadzea. They would learn about all of the monarchs in the strong Shadzean chain, and they would someday judge for themselves who was the greatest. Those well versed in the history of the kingdom might have sung the praises of Kerno, the fourth Survivor, whose last Princes’ Trial had taken him to the Forest of Sothor, the vast northern forest so renamed during the rule of Kerno’s predecessor. Rumor had it that the exiled sorcerer had rebuilt his City of Necromancy deep within the forbidden wood, that his acolytes were great in number. But Kerno performed his self-assigned task, the retrieving of the fur of a rare and deadly beast. This trial took him deep into the Forest of Sothor, and he was a changed man when he emerged. He methodically destroyed five princes on the Day of the Reckoning, and his rule was marked with many other notable feats. He died without ever revealing to anyone his experiences in the grim forest. No other would-be Survivor, through the rule of Ornon, had returned from his Trial of Death to this dark place.

The weakest of Shadzea’s kings, as the princes would doubtless learn, was Nhob, the thirteenth Survivor, father of Ornon. Nhob stood in the courtyard alone on the Day of the Reckoning, all his half brothers having been killed by the end of the fourth Princes’ Trial. A woman slew him in her bedchamber

four years after the Mating Week, and a regency council governed Shadzea until the fourteenth Survivor could be determined. All feared that Nhob's weaknesses would be transmitted to his offspring, but none had counted on Ornon, the ninth son, and this prince did not disappoint them.

Those with vivid memories of the fourteenth Rite of the Twenty could recall few who doubted that Ornon would one day claim the throne. As a determined youth he had accounted for the "accidental" deaths of four other princes even before the second trial had come to pass. His Trial of Death had taken him through the dreaded Terven Marshes to the City of Rogues on a deadly mission, which he performed admirably. Prior to the Day of the Reckoning he sought out and destroyed one of his two remaining half brothers, even though the latter had been deeply sequestered. The second one he dispatched during the final conflict, his whistling sword, seemingly charged with a life-force of its own, carving his mountainous kin, who by right should have been a far more formidable opponent, into many pieces. Some whispered among themselves that Ornon had employed sorcery to achieve this, for rumor had it that years earlier an acolyte of Sothor had found his way to the City of Kings, and into Ornon's confidence. But no one could prove this, and none dared make the accusation.

Upon assuming the throne, Ornon's first act was to gather the combined forces of the Shadzean army and march to the distant City of Fishers, where through the decades the people of this region had complained the loudest over the taxes imposed upon them. It was believed that these disgruntled subjects had aligned themselves with a large island nation far across the Telliun Ocean, that even now great galleys arrived to disgorge more outlanders along Shadzea's coast. As Ornon saw it, this portended nothing but danger for his kingdom, and he was determined to see it rectified.

The new king of Shadzea struck quickly; the leaders of the planned rebellion were executed in the public square, while the foreign invaders were locked in the holds of their ships. These were hauled out to sea and sunk, the helpless prisoners drowned like rats. Ornon handpicked a new governor and then returned to the capital. Most of the people in the City of Fishers felt relieved that they had escaped with their lives.

A second threat to Shadzea's dominance occurred not long after. In an uncharacteristic move many thousands of the nomadic Fashaars, bloodthirsty devils from the scorching Desert of Craters, had crossed the Kobur River and laid siege to the City of Slaves. They denied any exit from the city, and they commandeered all arriving caravans, killing both merchants and drivers. Their demands included all the wealth and the female slaves within the city, a price that, once starvation and despair set in, would have to be met.

By good fortune, a merchant that the Fashaars thought to be dead had merely been wounded. He lay silently on the ground all afternoon, not daring to breathe, not even able to cry out when a horse trod across his back. Long after dark he managed to steal a mount and ride to the nearest town, arriving on the verge of death. Another sped to the City of Kings to bear the message, and once more the legions were called. By the time they reached the City of Slaves the governor, now faced with a starving citizenry, was ready to meet the demands of the turbaned rogues. But Ornon would have none of this. His army denied the Fashaars any means of escape, and in a one-sided battle the nomads were routed. Those who surrendered were lined up with their hands tied, all save one, a minor seikh. Ornon called this fellow before him.

"You will return to your scum across the river," the king announced. "But before you depart you will see how Shadzea welcomes its desert neighbors. Tell the other seikhs that this will be the fate of any Fashaar who sets foot upon our soil again."

Upon his signal a hundred swords fell in a whistling arc, and a hundred Fashaars were beheaded. The fortunate seikh blanched at the sight of the melding geysers of blood that spurting from the stumps of those who had been his comrades, and he gagged uncontrollably at the feet of the staid king. When the carnage was completed the Fashaar rode away, and he did not look back. Ornon provided the city with enough supplies to sustain them until the caravans came, and he led his army back toward the City of Kings, leaving the beleaguered city to dispose of the corpses in any way they saw fit.

Of such incidents was the legend of Ornon, the fourteenth Survivor, based on, as the princes of Shadzea—his own sons—would eventually come to learn.

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They stood side by side in the courtyard on the Day of the Relinquishment, the sons of Ornon, while behind each boy hovered the woman who had given him life. There were eighteen now, one having died in infancy, a second having been hurled to his death by his deranged mother, who immediately killed herself.

But even when their numbers dwindled to fourteen, and nine, and four, they would still be referred to as the Twenty, for such was the tradition begun by Offow.

In front of the scrubbed, sullen princes, about ten paces, stood the stern mentors. Adhering to the age-old customs, each mother turned her son twice before pushing him gently toward the one that had been assigned to him. This ceremony was enacted with little or no emotion on the part of most, though even a casual observer could not have missed the antithetical performances on the parts of two. The mother of Buz, Ornon's first son, had practically shoved the scowling youth at his mentor in her haste to depart. This woman, still young and probably once beautiful, appeared haggard, her long hair unkempt, her eyes glazed. But the mother of Dulok, twentieth and last of the king's offspring, nearly betrayed herself by hesitating after she and her son parted, and it took all her strength of will to keep from releasing the flood of tears that welled in her soft eyes. Had those in the courtyard looked even closer they would have been appalled to note the similar mask of despair on the face of the would-be Survivor.

Dulok and Buz; or perhaps Buz and Dulok, as befitting the order of their birth. More must surely be said of these two sons of Ornon, whose names would figure prominently in this chapter of Shadzea's long history.