

TALES OF KANIGAARD, BOOK I

CHILDREN OF KANIGAARD

By

Nikolai H. Woolf

CHAPTER 3 :

AJUN, KING OF SAIRANAN

WATER SURROUNDED THE CITY of Sairananhal on three sides. The castle town lived upon a peninsula reaching into the southern part of the Oelstrom Sea, in the upper tropics. From the harbor, one could see the mountains on the edge of land to the north, the islands of Laysan to the south, and the last ragged bit of remaining jungle to the east served as a small barrier before the expansive desert. The western horizon gave a view of many rocks jutting high from the water, protecting the western side of the city.

Once, Sairananhal thrived as a port of trade, merchants from the world over would travel to her harbor to trade their goods for exotic foods, metals, and gems produced by the formerly lush land. Now, as Zekarich approached, the harbor sat half full, the wharves half empty. In the past, one could barely walk upon their boards, crowded as they were with merchant tents and fishermen's bounty. Low walls surrounded the perimeter of Sairananhal, for few had reason to wage war upon her. The city had long since sprawled beyond their boundaries, stretching to the end of land, covering much of the peninsula.

The aridness came suddenly in the Dark Prince's perspective. His last visit saw so much life, a land of bountiful abundance. Now, the people moved slowly, sadly, their bodies withered, their hearts broken, their crops unwilling to grow. The seas still offered their bounty to those willing to harvest, thus meaty

fish of the sea had become the staple of the people's diets. The ragged bit of jungle still offered a slim selection of bananas and mangoes, and the occasional scrawny monkey. The merchants from afar would bring them grains and fruits, so many rotten from the long journey at sea, and exchange them for the gems still mined in the southern mountains.

Long ago, there were many who dug into the earth, extracting precious stones and rough jewels. They would cut and polish them with great skill, and were known the world over for their beautiful creations. These men had given Sairananhal her early wealth. Now, few roamed into the desolate hills, so far from human life, to mine the jewels. Those who found the courage to do so, however, were well-rewarded for their efforts.

Those who did not fish or mine trained for war. In fighting abroad, the young men believed, they would find a better life. To die in battle was a much nobler death indeed than death through lack of substance or starvation. Only the upper ranks, the king and his nobles, knew of the arrangement made with the Dark forces. The men went to war for they had so few options for their lives. They would go, and they would fight. Most were certain they would die. They were not aware that they would be perpetuating the very evil which had destroyed the bounty of their homeland these past few centuries. Even if they had been aware, they would not have cared. Their apathy towards life had taken root in their souls.



As dragon and man neared the seaside city, Kyldar flew low, very close to the ground, so he would not be noticed by the people and called upon for salvation. He knew there would be no end to their pleas if they saw a dragon in their midst; they would ask for magic or vengeance, or some wild animal for a roast, if not requesting him to smite the king. As deep was his longing to help them, he knew they collectively exceeded his ability to do so. Where once lay fertile hills producing tremendous bounty, they saw only barren dunes of wind-swept sand. Kyldar plummeted to the earth, settling down behind a high dune blocking them from view.

Zekarich climbed from the dragon's back, chilled from the speedy ride and the sun's absence. He pulled the deerskin shirt from his waist, once more adorning it. He looked up to the dragon and embraced its long neck, ignoring his father's incessant berating words echoing in his head.

"Thank you, Kyldar," Zekarich said, unable to let go of the dragon's neck. "Thank you for all you've done."

"The pleasure is mine," Kyldar replied, wrapping his wings around the man, "likely more than you know."

“Perhaps in the next eternity we may be brothers,” Zekarich said as he stepped back to see the dragon’s face.

“We are brothers even now,” Kyldar replied gently. “Even in spite of your black heart.”

Zekarich smiled, and reached again to touch the dragon, who leaned forward to receive.

“If you ever need me,” Kyldar spoke with slight hesitation, “do not be afraid to call. I will come.”

“Thank you, friend,” Zekarich said. He turned to go, but stopped as the dragon again spoke.

“Zak – I have a terrible feeling we may not meet again in this plane as it is. I wish to offer advice, if you are willing to accept it.”

“Please,” Zekarich replied.

“In the time that passes before you must return to the hells, do as you wish. Live as the man you long to be. Atone if you must, but live now as if you were born as any other man. Seek love, seek compassion, grant wisdom where you may. Fulfill your duty as you must. Let no experience be wasted or neglected, it may be an eternity before you have the chance again.”

Zekarich wiped a tear from his eye and returned to the dragon’s side, embracing its great neck once more.

“Thank you,” he muttered, pressing his face against the warm scales. “Thank you.”

He did not look up again as he turned away from Kyldar and ran up the sliding sand of the dune. Kyldar watched until Zekarich had passed to the other side before silently turning away for the long and lonely journey home.



High in the central tower of Sairananhal, King Ajun gazed with empty eyes upon the destitute city below. He was once a powerful prince, when his grandfather was still king and the land still fruitful. After his grandfather passed to the otherworld and Ajun’s father Anun took the throne, Sairananhal became weaker every day. Ajun was but a boy then, worlds away from the withered and war-weary old man he had become. Under Anun’s rule, the kingdom saw her population reduce by half, the fields grow dry and the Light all but disappear. When his father died, Ajun was left to tend to a dying kingdom overwhelmed by Darkness. Upon his rite of passage into manhood, Ajun was told everything, the family’s well-kept secrets were finally revealed to him. His grandfather was

renowned the world over as a most compassionate ruler, a king adored by his subjects. He glowed, his heart fully secured in the Light. He shared that light with his kingdom. Anun was different; he had earthly desires and an incredible greed for power. When Anun was a child, his heart dwelt in a delicate balance of Light and Dark, easily swayed in either direction. Anun's father tried in vain to influence his son to dwell in the Light, but Anun's desire for conquest was too strong. Anun had encountered Xanaia's ministers shortly after his own passage into manhood. Deep in the caves of the southern mountains, upon his solitary quest inherent of such passage, he was awed with empty promises. He gave his pledge to do the bidding of the Darkness in exchange for an empire thrice the size of the one he would inherit. Anun was frustrated by his father's passive rule, for the king seemed so content with the kingdom as it was. Anun's father, Arinan, had made the choice to build within, to nurture that which they had. When Anun was offered the possibility of inheriting so much more, he eagerly accepted it, and anxiously waited for Arinan to die.

The moment Arinan died, Anun placed the crown upon his head and ordered the cremation to commence immediately. The city gathered as near as they could around the sacred pinnacle on the westernmost spit of land. There, overlooking the mighty stones west of the mainland, all the kings of the past four thousand years had been lifted to the heavens by the purifying fires. As the sun dove to the horizon, the smoke of the pyre filled the air. By the time night had set upon the land, only a few bones remained, and the Darkness had sealed its hold on Anun's heart. The bones would be reverently placed with those of his ancestors in the cave below the pinnacle, accessed by a small opening on the seaside cliff face. The Darkness would then break its vow and wrench apart Anun's inheritance.

The day after Arinan's death, Anun began assembling armies. His first quest was entirely selfish, he wished to conquer the Isles of Biergad southeast of Sairanan. With eighty percent of his regular forces and a few thousand recruits – trained for only the time of two great moons – he sent an armada south, hoping for quick conquest. The warriors of Biergad were all raised upon the sea. Anun suspected the gods of Light had warned them of his navy's coming. Sairanan's armada was met in the night by a hundred ships, armed to the teeth and over-manned. Anun lost eighty-two warships, six thousand seven hundred and fifty three men, and his most skilled admiral before the sun rose. The remaining sixteen vessels and the men they carried retreated as day broke, fleeing in defeat. Anun cursed the Darkness for their lies, yet his heart was inextricably bound to do their bidding.

Biergad's navy was not so easily left on the seas of battle. Their fleet followed the retreating ships to Sairananhal, sinking two more as they entered the harbor. Anun had prepared for such an event by constructing a linked chain across the mouth of the harbor, which was lifted immediately as his last vessel entered. One Biergad warship was caught within, the others sat in the

sea, unable to enter the harbor, so high, deep, and heavy was the chain barrier. The solitary ship was attacked and sunk, every man killed – Anun’s sole ‘victory’ in that vicious battle. The remainder of Biergad’s fleet split apart and followed the coast, burned every village they could find, raped, pillaged, and murdered without mercy. Under Arinan’s rule, Sairanan and Biergad had been allies; they fought together against foreign invaders, prospered together in abundant trade. Anun’s betrayal was enough to inspire Biergad’s fearful wrath. The fierce men of the sea circled the island-continent, ripping the land apart. When those who had sailed west met those who had sailed east on the southeastern shore, they joined again and sailed together from Sairananhal to their island homes, content with their revenge.

The destruction of so much of his kingdom inspired a greater hatred and desire for power in Anun’s darkening heart. He pulled men from the fields and mines, so many against their will, and inscripted them into his army. Soon, the land was untended and dying, the wealth of the kingdom slowly diminished, and their army was great. Anun vowed to gain victory over Biergad, unwilling to rest until he had gathered a suitable army. The part of him that once longed for the Light of his father’s heart was swiftly killed, as Xanaiat consistently sent his ministers to console and inspire him.

“The battle with Biergad had not been part of the agreement,” they told him. “Your selfish endeavor held no support from us. Even so, Xanaiat wishes to see success with Sairananhal’s conquests. The Lord of the Darklands shall send many to your door, young Anun. Men who wish to fight, who wish to join in conquering. The intended battle shall come. The intended victory shall be. But rest now, and wait, for the time is not yet come. Any more of these foolish attempts at war will surely bring you to your knees.”

Ajun’s family tended towards longevity. He was a father himself, well past his middle years, when Anun passed on and he accepted the crown as his own. Though his own heart was not so bound to the Darkness as was that of his father, he had little choice but to follow the path Anun had set before him. The Darkness had taken over so much of the kingdom that the idea of fighting them and returning the Light to the land seemed entirely futile. Ajun did not believe he had a chance at resurrecting the kingdom, and made his own agreement with Xanaiat to follow through on his father’s pledge. The army grew, with new recruits arriving almost daily. Ajun himself was quite skilled in battle both on land and at sea. But his heart was gentle, he had no desire to kill nor conquer. His only wish was that the horrors of the past few centuries would simply vanish, as if nothing had ever happened. He knew that was a vain desire and so hid it deep within his heart. He treated Xanaiat’s ministers with great hospitality, and followed the guidance they offered.

Ajun had never actually met Zekarich, though he was aware the dark prince made frequent tours of observation. His father had told him, only days

before the old man died, to await a messenger unlike any who had come before. A god in man's clothes who would lead the army into the great battle to come. An unparalleled warrior would arrive from the south, wearing a deerskin tunic and bearing a crescent sword. This dark man would teach ancient secrets to the army, and under his tutelage, the men would become soldiers, ready for certain victory. Ajun had grown old in waiting. His own son had become a father. He imagined he would have to pass the message to Arinan, his child, to await this man. He would rather die with the secret than pass on the ties to Darkness. He had named his son after his grandfather who glowed so brightly, hoping that the boy would grow into the Light, and thus sever this curse from their family and their kingdom. His own heart was as pure as a heart tainted with an inherited pledge to evil could be. He had not killed recklessly, though he had sent many men to die while protecting the kingdom from further invasion. He had ruled peaceably; he had even attempted to mend the broken ties with Biergad. His attempts at reconciliation were met with contempt, viewed merely as pathetic pleas of a defeated king. Ajun's heart was empty and barren of desire. His life lacked vitality. He could only wait for the inevitable battle to come.

His army was strong, and building stronger. It was all the king could do to keep them fed and armed. He had to resort to slavery, imprisoning any dissidents and forcing them into servitude. It worked well, and saved the royal treasury a bundle. The fighting ships alone were draining his kingdom's wealth, especially now that the lumber had to be floated up from the Sudnan jungles.

His navy was spectacular; black-clad ships with black sails. His man-of-war ships were floating fear in the eyes of their enemies. The harbor was filling up frequently with new vessels as well as those commandeered on the high seas. When it reached capacity, he sent the ships out to collect new men to fight and set up outposts in the Laysan Isles or the eastern coast. They would be ready to conquer.



"Sire," Ajun's steward spoke from the door. "A man has come from the southern lands. He wishes an audience."

Ajun's eyes sparked alive. He slowly turned to see the man standing in the doorway. "Could it possibly be?" he muttered.

"Please, beg him enter," Ajun spoke, his voice suddenly full of regained confidence.

The steward left. Ajun quickly composed himself, straightening his garments and fixing his visage as regally as he could. A brief moment passed, and the door creaked open.

“Sire,” the steward said, bowing to the king. “I offer you Sir Zekarich of the Sudnan.”

Ajun watched, his heart racing, as a towering dark man stepped into his chambers. The stranger’s features hid in the shadows cast by the flickering oil lamp, but Ajun could clearly see the crescent sword hanging about the man’s waist. Zekarich entered and the steward closed the door.

“Please, come forth, that I may see your countenance, good sire,” Ajun spoke, hiding his nervous anticipation.

Zekarich walked to the king, into the light streaming from the window through which the king had gazed for hours. Ajun looked in awe upon he who stood at least a head taller than himself. His body was clearly bred for battle, with muscles bulging on every bone. His dark skin glistened with the sweat of his travels. His face revealed no emotion.

The great man stepped within an arm’s length of Ajun, and knelt before him, showing his respect. Ajun touched the crown of his head, and bestowed a blessing upon the man he had so long awaited.

“Rise,” Ajun said with a softness not befitting a kingly command, “and speak your need.”

Zekarich stood, towering over the old king. He pulled the mantle from his head and stuffed it inside his deerskin tunic.

“I have come at my father’s bidding,” Zekarich spoke, his deep voice echoing through the chamber.

“Are you the one I have so long awaited?” Ajun asked.

“Yes,” Zekarich spoke. “I am Zekarich, son of Xanaiat. Prince of Darkness.” He spat these last words from his lips.

Ajun knelt before the giant, kissing his feet.

“Stop that,” Zekarich said, stepping back. “It is you who deserves to receive reverence. I am not worthy of your homage.”

Ajun stood quickly, shocked at this strange outburst of humility. He looked deeply into Zekarich’s dark eyes, and tried to hide the horror he felt at what he saw within. He went to a corner of the chamber, where a large marble table held bowls and water upon it. He retrieved a few items and filled a pitcher with water. He returned to Zekarich and pulled up a chair, having set the bowl and pitcher upon a small table.

“Please,” he said, “sit.”

Zekarich sat in the chair, and watched in amazement as this old king untied his dusty leather boots. He tried once to stop him, but the king glared so harshly that he thought it best to accept this odd gesture with gratitude.

Ajun removed the Dark Prince's boots, and let the leather straps dangle free. He placed the bowl of water on the floor. With pitcher in hand, he began to wash his guest's feet. Zekarich held back his emotion. He was not worthy to receive such a deep gesture of respect.

With the greatest care, the King of Sairananhal washed Zekarich's feet, pouring warm water over them, scrubbing with flowered water, rinsing, finally drying them. Each foot received several minutes' worth of attention. Zekarich felt a burden lift from him as he endured this blessing, this act of such humility from such a king. Though the king thought, no, he knew, he was not great. He did, however, wish to remedy that. Perhaps the fulfillment of his father's dark vow would be enough to attain greatness.

When Ajun had finished washing Zekarich's feet, he quietly returned the bowl and pitcher to the corner where he had retrieved them. Without a word, he pulled another chair near the dark man and sat, looking upon him.

After much silence, Ajun finally spoke. "I was almost certain I would die before you arrived."

Zekarich looked at him, seeing into the king's soul. He saw the man's desire to die with the secret, not wishing to pass the burden on to his eldest son.

"If I had chosen to not return for this duty, certainly you would have."

Ajun saw a great sadness grow upon Zekarich's face.

"You do not wish this duty?"

"Would you?" Zekarich replied quickly. "You do not wish your own hereditary duty. Do you?"

Ajun replied without words, lowering his eyes to the floor as he slowly shook his head. He glanced back to Zekarich, an idea lighting his eyes.

"Is there a way to release it?"

"Alas," Zekarich replied, his voice heavy, "the only release is the fulfillment of the vow. I am here to play my part. I will perform to the best of my ability in training your men."

"That I may lead them to their deaths?" Ajun's anger at last surfaced. "You know as well as I that these men will not live through these battles. They fight for they have no other option in life. My father desecrated this kingdom – you can see it! The lush river valleys of Baleal are now barren deserts. There is nothing left to fight for! Nothing they wish to protect. The young men in my army wish only to leave this place. They wish only to find a better place, or die in battle, that they may receive their reward in the otherworld."

"Their fates are much deeper than that," Zekarich said.

"How much deeper? Will we win this war?"

“My wretched father has devised the darkest plan this world has ever seen. He will stop at nothing to win the earthly realm for the Darkness. Your young men, your warriors, will not be free to meet the bliss of Eversummer until he has succeeded. And if he does succeed, they will not see Eversummer for a very long time.” Zekarich’s voice faded into silence, realizing he should not speak so much about the days to come.

“I refuse,” Ajun spoke strongly. “I refuse to send my army into Xanaiat’s curse. And cursed be my father!”

“Oh,” Zekarich replied, “you can be sure he is cursed. Though he is now ‘safe’ in my father’s care. I’m afraid there is no way out for you, nor for me. I have brought upon myself another curse, another time of no time, an unspeakable duration of time from your perspective – simply for asking a dragon’s forgiveness.”

“Perhaps I speak rashly and self-serving with these words coming from my mouth,” Ajun said, his voice low as if ears were about. “If you have already so cursed yourself, can you not take on further damnation for this kingdom’s salvation?”

“You speak so boldly, Ajun,” Zekarich said, a pensive cloud upon his brow. “Would I be willing to incur a further curse, perhaps an eternal curse, in order for your kingdom to be free of the curse my father put upon your father? Are you asking compassion of me?”

“I have heard the stories,” Ajun said, his eyes sparkling with wisdom, “your father’s messengers have offered much to my ears. I heard of the many millennia you spent in penance for your softness and compassion. Your words today prove to me even that sentence did not break you. You may be born entirely of the Darkness, but there is Light in you that cannot nor will not die. I can see it in you.”

“Enough!” Zekarich boomed as he stood up, towering over the seated Ajun, as if to intimidate. He slowly sat back down. “Enough...”

Ajun watched Zekarich, partially bound in fear. If the dark man wished to kill him, he could do so in an instant. Ajun was also aware of Zekarich’s refusal to kill, which comforted him, though Zekarich had achieved his desire of intimidation.

“My father is ever listening, ever watching,” Zekarich told the king. “No word may I speak, no action may I perform that his ears do not hear nor his eyes see – save that which comes to pass within a dragon’s lair.”

“I happen to know a dragon quite well,” Ajun said, standing up. “Let us go to his home and communicate as we both know we must.”

Ajun proceeded to change his royal garb for his traveling attire, and donned the uniform of a simple soldier. Zekarich watched in awe before

realizing his own feet were still bare. By the time his boots were laced, Ajun stood before him, ready for departure.

“Father forgive me,” Zekarich muttered in the face of the inner torrent of angry words. They left the royal chamber.