

## Chapter 1

Lord Zierath looked out across the rolling hills that surrounded his castle. He leaned heavily on the balcony rail. The gray streaked marble glistened in the morning sunlight. The reflections from the six other towers of his castle made his eyes wince a little. Three hundred feet directly below him, the inner courtyard was lined with oak and pine trees. Squirrels played continually, chattering and chasing each other.

But Zierath was not watching them. He was watching a herd of bison beyond the inner wall. The large beasts were wandering across the Eastern Road. As he watched their lumbering carefree habits, Zierath sighed and shook his head a little. A lopsided half smile appeared on his face. In his long life, he had always envied animals. They didn't have to deal with the same mundane problems that sentient beings did. That simple freedom made his heart ache. The Lord of Zierath then looked beyond the rolling hills towards the outer wall.

The outer wall was about five miles away, encasing the wildlife preserve that the castle was centered in. Beyond the outer wall was one of the largest cities on the known ring. The buildings reached above the walls at irregular intervals. The chimneys of the Foundry, the largest steel manufacturer in Castle Zierath, steamed mildly to the east. The tall corporate and mercantile buildings, some towering ten stories, were to the south. The smaller residential buildings could be seen to the north and south. Throughout the city, massive niurb trees with dwellings built into them stretched up, some of them taller than the ten story buildings of the merchant quarter; their broad leaves provided shade from the bright sun for many of the blocks below. Zierath looked off to the northwest. If he squinted, he could see the Tower Dorms on the campus of the University of Scottlund off to the northwest. Zierath sighed again. He would much rather be buried in a library there studying social theory or literature than going to the meeting that he had called.

Lord Zierath was a man of average height and slightly more than average bulk. He had wild wavy brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, and his beard and mustache were a mix of brown, red, and blond. His green eyes were sharp, and his mouth slipped easily into a smirk or into a full smile.

Zierath was one of those rare individuals known as Imrhys. Imrhys considered themselves the *Guardians of the Achar*. They lived incredibly long periods of time; the oldest of the Imrhys had been alive more than 15,000 years. Zierath himself was just over 4,000, and was still considered relatively young. Imrhys had great control over energy and were able to use it in ways the other sentient beings could only dream.

This day, Zierath wore his traditional uniform of knee length chainmail shirt and blue and red surcoat. A deep blue cape was held on his shoulders by gold medallions with his Z symbol etched into them. His black riding boots came up to his knees. A thick black belt encircled his waist, with a dagger sheathed on the right

and a hand axe on the left. The famous Emerald Claymore was strapped to his back and the green pommel jewel shone brightly in the morning sun.

"Milord?" a soft voice echoed across the parapet.  
"The Council is ready."

Lord Zierath looked over his shoulder at his vizier. Ambrosius, a king in his own right, stood at the doorway with his long black cape blowing in the breeze. His rust red tunic and the silver badge of office seemed to glow. Dark glasses shielded his brown eyes. "Is it as bad as we thought, Zierath?"

"It is, Ambrosius," Zierath put his hand on his vizier's shoulder. "It might even be worse, but that's to be expected." Zierath flashed his friend a grin. "If it wasn't, I'd be suspicious."

Ambrosius barked a rough laugh and turned to fall into step next to the Lord of Zierath. The two of them walked down the long spiral staircase from Zierath's private quarters and balcony in silence. The jingling of

Zierath's mail shirt and the heavy clomp of their boots echoed off the marble walls.

Zierath glanced at his Grand Vizier. Ambrosius, like most of the nobles of the Zierathan Alliance, was an Imrhys. Ambrosius was a little older than Zierath. As with most Imrhys, the only clue to their genetic heritage was their eyes. While the two Imrhys appeared to be in their late twenties or early thirties, their eyes had thousands of years of wisdom, joy, and pain behind them. Only one human out of a couple billion humans became Imrhys.

The office of Grand Vizier for the Zierathan Alliance was both a blessing and a curse. Zierath's oldest friends took turns as the Grand Vizier, each appointment lasting about a decade. Ambrosius always grouched a little about it when it was his turn. Given a choice, Ambrosius would be off in his own land, living almost as a hermit. He had created for his small country a semi-autonomous government so he would have to deal with the governmental bureaucracy as little as possible.

They approached the massive doors leading to the Hall of Nobles. Two powerfully built Zierath knights stood on either side of the door, their armor reflecting the steady light of the Wangese light filters that surrounded the torches. The knights touched both of their shoulders with a clenched fist and then their foreheads.

"I'll go ahead, milord," the vizier murmured. "It'll give the nobles a chance to settle down." The knights opened the door, and Ambrosius slipped into the hall.

Zierath pursed his lips. He paced back and forth between the two knights. He finally leaned against the stone doorframe next to one of the knights.

"Please remind me, Sir Angus," Zierath said sourly, "Why did I allow all this ceremony?"

The knight raised his visor and grinned at his lord, his hazel eyes twinkling. "Well, milord, ye moost rrememberr, yer nobles have a tendency tae be a wee bit unfocused." Sir Angus MacBain was from the hylands near the city of MacBain. Zierath loved listening to the

brogue. The natives of Castle Zierath and Zierath himself had traces of the melodic accent, but only the hylanders had the complete melody. "Withoot all the ceremony, nothin' would e'er get done."

"Thanks, Sir Angus," Zierath half smiled. "I forget that even though the ceremonies take a couple of hours, we used to take days to decide what toppings go on the campies."

"Well, milord, if ye live forever, time really doesn't mean that much tae you, does it?" the hylander knight asked.

"I'm not gonna live forever, Sir Angus," Zierath said calmly. "Even the Imrhys are finite. And, at any rate," he said, grinning at the knight, "I really don't want to spend eternity in an administrative meeting." Zierath rolled his eyes and then looked back at Sir Angus. "I'll make sure a couple of campie slices get sent out here for you and your friend." Campies, short for cheese-and-meat-pies, were large round bread covered with a red tomato sauce and topped with white cheese and different

meats and vegetables and baked until the cheese melted and the doughy bread hardened. It was ideal for feeding large groups, and it was a tradition for the Counsel of Nobles to have campies at their meetings.

"We would appreciate that, milord," Sir Angus said as he replaced his visor. "It's been a long time since breakfast." His voice echoed in the helmet.

"Lunch is still a couple of hours away, Sir Angus," Zierath said.

"I know your nobles. The Wang and Carlin have probably already ordered the campies," Sir Angus snorted. "That's almost tradition now, too."

Zierath laughed and started pacing again.

The Grand Vizier of the Zierathan Alliance walked through the big double doors. "They're beginning to settle down a little bit. Baron Kunce is baiting Queen Annie, Earl Carlin is sharpening his sabre right next to Empress Melissa's ear, the Mad Hatter is telling Stavius and Sir Paco the most absurd theories of who Druachit Modia is, and The Wang, The Karland, and Duke Dykstra

are discussing whether magic is a warping of natural energies or if it is a focusing of psionic energy."

"So everything's normal," Zierath said as he straightened his cape.

"Exactly." Ambrosius's brown eyes twinkled.

Zierath followed Ambrosius into the Noble Chamber. The chamber was circular, taking up the bottom half of one of the larger towers. The nobles were in three raised rows along the wall. Broad wooden desks were built into the floor in front of each comfortable chair. Two thirds of the chairs were filled with an Imrhys lord or lady; the other ten were managing their respective countries.

The Council of Nobles was part of the Administrative arm of the Zierathan government. It was made up of the rulers of the members of the Zierathan Alliance, a massive empire that stretched across two and a half continents. They worked as the advisory council for the leader of the Zierathan Alliance, Lord Zierath himself. Each was a ruler in his or her own right, but most

of the time, they deferred to Zierath when it came to international affairs.

As leader of the Zierathan Alliance, Zierath sat in a throne on a raised dais. He slid the Emerald Claymore out of the long sheath on his back and into a slot at the top of his large marble throne. When he sat, the emerald embedded in the pommel of the long sword glowed a deep green. As he sat, Zierath was quite thankful for the red cushions on the throne. Marble was pretty, but not comfortable for long periods of sitting. The throne was toward the back of the dais, and it faced the nobles' seats.

The Speaker's Podium stood in front of the raised dais. Directly across from the podium sat The Karland of Kilian, the elected parliamentarian of the Council of Nobles.

"All hail Z!" Bruno, the heavily muscled Count of Dietz said, banging the butt of his pole arm on the marble floor.

All the nobles stood, touched their shoulders and then their foreheads. "All hail Z!" the many voices echoed.

Ambrosius stepped forward.

"The floor recognizes Ambrosius, the Grand Vizier of the Zierathan Alliance, King of Ambrosius, Holder of the Silver Badge, Preceptor of the Ambrosius Knights, and General of the Ambrosius Regulars," The Karland said in his precise scholarly voice.

"We'll have to do something about our dear vizier," The Wang said conversationally as he leaned back to make eye contact Baron Kunce directly behind him. "He only has five titles. The Karland doesn't even have to take a second breath."

The narrow-faced baron smirked. "Is that a reflection on Ambrosius or The Karland?"

The Wang thought for a moment, adjusting his purple mantle. "I'll get back to you on that one."

The Karland looked over at the two Imrhys lords. "If our esteemed island colleagues are done entertaining

us for the moment, we shall hear what Ambrosius and Zierath have to say." The tall man touched his broad forehead with long slender fingers. "Are you gentleman finished?"

"I don't know," Baron Kunce said. "Are we finished, your excellency?" he asked as he looked at the broad golden-skinned man sitting the row in front of him.

"For now, your grace," The Wang answered.

"Yes, we're done, your honor," Baron Kunce told The Karland.

General laughter rumbled through the chamber. The Karland pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a smile. "Ambrosius," he said, turning back to the Grand Vizier. "The floor is yours."

"Thank you, your honor." Ambrosius stepped off the dais and stood behind the podium. "Nobles of the Zierathan Alliance, we are calling a Time of Crisis," he began.

"Oh, not again," Empress Melissa of the Old Empire interrupted, her eyes flashing. She sat at the far right

side of the first row. The auburn-haired empress had startling eyes. Her eyes could range from blue to green to brown, depending upon her mood. If she was angry or annoyed, gold flecks appeared in them; there were plenty of gold flecks at this moment. "What is it this time? Imaginary flying ships? A mantean uprising?"

"The mantean are always uprising," the soft voice of the Mad Hatter of Abatwar said. One of the younger fifth age Imrhys, the Mad Hatter had a slightly wild look deep in his eyes. He tugged at the red fringe beard that framed his face. "Abatwar wouldn't know what to do if our mantean weren't revolting."

"I know what I'd do if your giant praying mantis people weren't revolting," the Earl of Carlin said acidly. He put his sabre down. "I'd sleep better at night." Carlin had a border with Abatwar. All of Abatwar's neighbors were a little nervous.

"Maybe rogue dragons," Baron Kunce said lightly. "Or maybe someone's going to invade Fantasy Island." He glanced slyly over at Annie, Queen of Abode and Fantasy

Island. The curly haired queen turned a slow baleful look at the wiry baron.

"Were you volunteering to invade, Baron?" Stavius, the Thane of South Hollearn, asked. "That sounds like an entertaining spectator sport." A grin appeared on his face.

"You wouldn't care to join in an invasion force?" Kunce asked, rubbing his stubbled chin.

"And face Queen Annie?" the broad shouldered lord lost his smile and threw a look at the curly-haired queen. "My soldiers and I are tough, but we're not suicidal."

"For a such a young Imrhys, he has a grip on the realities of the situation, doesn't he," The Wang said, looking toward Annie on the far left. "Only five hundred and can recognize imminent danger."

"Oh, yes, I'd say so," Queen Annie said sweetly. "Baron Kunce has always been fairly predictable. He always tries to find someone gullible to come close to my

borders so he can sneak in and steal my jewels." She touched the jeweled tiara that encircled her head

"I always give them back," Kunce protested.

"Usually after you've sold them and stolen them back a couple of times," Duke Dykstra said laconically. He ran his fingers through his long blond hair.

Lord Zierath sat on his throne, drumming his fingers on the armrest. Finally, he stood up, drew his sword and jabbed the point into the floor of the dais. A shocking green light shot out of the emerald on the pommel. Zierath stood there for a moment, basking in the green light.

"It only took fifteen minutes today," Count Bruno of Dietz murmured to Countess Kuker. "That's at least half of his former record."

"Something's not quite right, Bruno," the countess whispered back. "He didn't smile once during the bantering."

"Nobles, your attention please," the voice of Zierath echoed across the marble chamber.

"He's being so melodramatic," Empress Melissa said, her eyes again flashing gold in the green light.

"Of course he is," Ambrosius said, taking his seat next to her. "It's the only way to get your attention." He smiled slightly. "Anything less than drama is ignored, while melodrama brings out scorn. Your scorn irritates him, but at least he has your attention."

Melissa glared at the vizier, but Ambrosius ignored her golden eyes.

"Evil once again has touched our section of the Achar," Zierath said loudly. "And we must prepare for it again."

"Ever notice how pompous some people get when they gain power?" The Wang asked Baron Kunce.

"I've noticed that tendency in him for about the last three millennia or so."

Duke Dykstra leaned forward, intensely looking at Zierath. "Dan'l, Kunce, look at him. He's serious." The pointed power in the soft-spoken duke's voice took the next flippant remark out of The Wang's mouth. The Wang

sat back, one eyebrow raised and his head cocked to one side like a curious puppy.

"Do you think you're overreacting, milord?" Baron Kunce asked, idly playing with a long dagger, his voice oddly quiet.

"Lord Zierath," Queen Annie said from her seat on the end of the row. "You are surrounded by the largest collection of Imrhys on the ring." She motioned to the nobles around her. "If we were to combine our powers we could dry up the Hovde Ocean or stop the sun in the sky. What could possibly endanger us?"

"The Gnarrhys," Zierath said flatly.

All the color drained from Annie's face. The Wang's eyes widened and The Karland was visibly shaking. Duke Dykstra blinked, shut his eyes and slouched back in his seat.

Empress Melissa's eyes were almost blue. "Are you sure?" Her whisper echoed across the suddenly silent hall.

"Not completely," Zierath admitted as he pulled his claymore out of the floor. The green light faded as he put the sword back into its sheath.

"We've lost contact with the far western countries," Ambrosius said. "Everything west and north of DeVita, Pribbenow, Deanne, and the Rickster. They don't answer any call, neither long-distance hologram nor any other magical means."

"Ambrosius, those lands are four continents away," Xiola, Malik of Hulsing said. Like her younger brother, the Mad Hatter of Abatwar, she was tall and had bright red hair. "Can something that far away affect us?"

"Your generation was spared battling the Gnarrhys last time," The Wang said, leaning back in his chair, absently straightening his purple mantle. "Only Bruno, the first of the Fifth Age, really participated in it," he continued, looking over his shoulder at the solidly built Count of Dietz.

"I know many romantic stories have been written about the last Gnarrhys War and about my Awakening,"

Bruno said, looking over at Xiola. "They are pretty enough stories, but what really happened three thousand years ago was much, much uglier. Feel very lucky you weren't there."

"A lot of power was harnessed and released in those battles," Melissa said, shaking her auburn hair. "Many of us were badly hurt - - maimed, broken --- killed." Melissa's eyes were haunted as she looked up at Zierath,.

Zierath's face was bleak. "The reports from DeVita and Pribbenow ended abruptly. The last holo-report from the Rickster was garbled, as if he was sending through eight minds instead of just from his." He sat on his throne, rubbing his eyes. "The coherent glimpses we received were of a battle of the Rickster's tribesmen charging into shadows and then the image shattered."

"We'll have to send someone to look into that," The Wang mused. "Any time we have shadows attacking and

being attacked, it does point to the Gnarrhys, the Black Chaos."

"I agree with you, your excellency," Queen Annie said. "I think you should take a couple others with you, though."

The Wang looked at her with wide eyes. "What?!" he demanded.

"I think you should take Duke Dykstra and the Earl of Carlin with you when you leave," Annie said with a straight face.

"You think I should go?" The Wang stammered. Zierath was actually enjoying this. It had been a couple of centuries since The Wang had been knocked so badly off balance.

"Weren't you volunteering?"

The Wang clamped his mouth shut and leaned back. "I guess I was," he said sullenly.

"I thought you did," Annie said brightly.

Bruno and his wife Kuker were conferring. "Just to be on the safe side, we should start mobilizing the army,"

the broad Imrhys said as they finished their quick conversation.

"Are we jumping at shadows now?" the Thane of South Hollearn asked, his voice disdainful.

"You weren't at the last war," Empress Melissa said pointedly. "We didn't jump at shadows last time, and the Gnarrhys caught us completely unaware. I won't make the same mistake again." Melissa looked directly at Zierath. "Lord Zierath, I am activating the Melissan Reserves. In less than a week, you will have eight thousand of my Reservists at your camps."

There were gasps around the chamber as the younger nobles stared at the scarlet and black garbed empress.

"She's never volunteered any of her reservists for any of our expeditions," the Earl of Carlin whispered to Xiola on his left. "This is serious."

Bruno, Count of Dietz, stood, his massive armor jingling and groaning. "If it's serious enough for her imperial majesty to enter the war, I think the Dietz

Dragonriders will all be on alert and gathering wherever you decide, milord."

One by one, the nobles of Zierath added their soldiers to the common defense.

Lord Zierath sat nodding, a lop-sided half smile on his face. Things would work out fine at this end. Bruno and Baron Kunce could handle the military aspects, while Queen Annie, assisted by Ambrosius and The Karland, could manage the country until his return. With The Wang and Dykstra checking out the western countries, it freed Zierath to search other places for information and mobilize the rest of the Achar. He knew they would need help to defeat the Gnarrhys.

He only had one trouble. How to tell Annie she had to stay in Castle Zierath and run things. The Queen of Abode and Fantasy Island was a very powerful and influential Imrhys woman who saluted Zierath only because it allowed her to ignore most civic concerns. On the occasions that Zierath did leave, she was the one who sat in the throne, and she always made a fuss about him

leaving. The curly haired queen would even find other people to do the traveling for him so he didn't have an excuse to leave.

A big grin appeared on Zierath's face as he realized the answer.

He simply wouldn't tell her until he'd already left.

Yes, it was going to work out just fine, Zierath thought. All these problems solved and the campies hadn't even been delivered yet.