

# THE DEATH OF NOCTIS

## Written in year 87 of the Age of Order

**I am now in my ninety-seventh year and all of the new gods are dead as are those who can create them. Without the false gods to rally the realm to war, the world is at peace once more. Guildhall is educating the realm and much of what was lost in the Age of Death is slowly being regained. All glory to Guildhall and the noble dream that gave us our Age of Order. But there was a price . . .**

Beneath the banners of Xanadu, marched the column of armored soldiers. They made their way through the night along the overgrown cobblestone road. Leather belts creaked supporting plates of steel and swords in leather scabbards slapped on greaves. Helmets shone and surcoats red like blood and emblazoned with a black triangle beneath a cross, the dread symbol of the Order of the Rack, swirled in the wind. The heavy footfalls fell as one, pounding to the cadence of a drum.

The armored men and women marched on ponderously through the cursed woods. There was no ground more unwholesome in the realm, a withering place of brown grasses, dying trees and moving things that should be dead and still. The shadows cast by the flickering torches reflected off the soldiers' armor and danced over the gnarled and twisted tree trunks. The dead, leafless branches chattered above the soldiers' heads as a gentle breeze blew them. Nameless things whispered beyond the torchlight, speaking of gods betrayed and glories shattered by mortal hand.

A massive mountain of a man strode at the head of the column. He stood well over six feet tall and was dressed in shining plate armor, on his back was strapped a great sword, and at his waist hung a bastard sword. The shield, he carried ready, strapped to his left arm and bearing the symbol of the Order. He was known to those around him, and to the world, as Sir Gildor, First Knight of the Order of the Rack, sworn sword and shield of Xanadu.

The ancient road ended at a crumbled temple. The moonlight shone down illuminating the ruins. The massive outer walls lay as piles of shattered quartz and the five crystal spires that once strained to reach the clouds, were broken, jagged pillars no higher than the dead forest around them. The wind whistled through the empty courtyard and burned-out cloister within.

“Behold,” spoke Sir Gildor. “This was once the holiest of temples. Here the good people of old Evermoore worshiped the five gods who created our realm: Noctis, the god of Death; his lover and later wife, Lumina, the goddess of Life; Solnus, the god of Order; his brother, Karthis, the god Chaos; and sweet, dear Natallis, the goddess of Nature. See their glory laid low, by the Orcs, Klactons and Phythians, and the false gods they served.”

The soldiers formed into four columns, leaving a space between the center two columns. At Sir Gildor’s command, the four ranks turned to face the center space. Down the cobblestone path walked a slim man and a beautiful woman, behind them came a palanquin carried by four glowing Avatars, new gods of the realm, chained to carry the palanquin. The Avatars glowed with their holy light, but their spirits sagged defeat; they were broken husks, no longer the divine champions of their faith. Their followers had scattered to the winds or were slaughtered by the soldiers of Xanadu.

The man, Vasium Mactabillis, was of medium height and build. His clothing was common and threadbare. He wore a long shadowy cloak with deep hood that shrouded his face. Two short swords hung off his belt; the hilts were well worn. Mactabillis was known, within certain circles, as one of the most efficient assassin in the realm.

The woman’s name was Lady Krysta Ladisias, a noblewoman from Lundelle. She was a striking beauty, with long blond hair and shapely curves. She wore a velvet coat, belted at the waist. At her side hung a slim rapier.

Behind the palanquin marched another unit of armored men, further behind, came the archers dressed in boiled leather, carrying long bows and wearing quivers on their backs. Further still, trudged the baggage train, wagons laden with food and water, weapons and armor, and gold and silver. And last came the levies, the camp followers and the sellswords that clung to the glory of Xanadu.

Mactabillis and Lady Krysta joined Sir Gildor at the edge of the ruin as the four Avatars lowered the palanquin to the ground. One Avatar placed a stole beside the palanquin while another drew back the curtain. From within the palanquin emerged Melizar, the Holy Prelate of the Church of Xanadu.

Melizar was a short man with a broad waist whose black velvet doublet and breaches strained

to contain his bulk as golden buttons pulled the material tightly across his chest and thighs. His pudgy little fingers were covered with golden rings. He wore a short black hooded cape, with the cowl pulled up over his dark hair. He would have looked slightly comical if it were not for his piercing eyes; deep, bottomless brown shining with knowledge, power and religious zeal. In his right hand, he carried a long golden scepter covered with jewels that often doubled as a walking cane and sometimes a mace.

Melizar turned and extended his hand into the palanquin, a stunning red-haired woman clasped his hand and he helped her down. Her name was Lenore. She wore a red velvet dress that left the tops of her breasts exposed and clung to her hips like a second skin. She moved with a grace and poise that could take a man's breath away.

Without a word, Melizar led Lenore past the trio and entered the ruins. Sir Gildor followed a few reverent steps behind. His massive fist resting on the hilt of his sword; his eyes searching the ruins for danger. Mactabillis and Lady Krysta followed. By the moonlight shining down through the rafters of the roof, the group made their way through the shattered stones of the temple to a dias on which an altar rested. The front face of the altar was engraved with a pentacle.

"The symbol of the five gods," spoke Melizar. "It was they who created the realm, each point represented their contribution to this world: Noctis was Spirit, Luminas was Air, Solnus was Water, Karthis was Fire and Natallis was Earth," said Melizar as he caressed the pentacle with his gloved fingers. "You can still feel the power here after all these centuries. Their Age of Life may have ended in bloodshed when the Orcs, Klactons and Phythians sacked the city of Evermoore, but the noble dream that was the Way of the Five lingers on even now in this crumbled ruin."

Melizar gently pressed the center of the pentacle, the whole carving sunk into the stone altar and they heard a click, followed by the grinding of ancient wheels, gears and pulleys and the metallic rattle of chains. The altar slid away from Melizar to reveal a dark staircase.

"This is a long forgotten entrance into the catacombs under old Evermoore," explained Melizar. "These steps will lead us down a path from which there will be no turning back. We know what must be done. They will call us many things after tonight, but tomorrow will be the first day in a great new world."

The wind whistled through the broken stones and a cloud passed before the moon. In the darkness, Melizar gave the order, “Sir Gildor, gather your men. We shall ensure the Age of Order is eternal.”

Sir Gildor’s gaze lingered on the pentacle.

“There is no going back now,” said Melizar. “Our path is set!”

“I do not pause because of hesitation,” whispered Sir Gildor. “I pause because I wish to savor this moment. This will be the first day in a great new world. It will be the vindication of mortal man, freed from the tyranny of false gods.”

The underground chamber was made of stone blocks, massive pillars supported the high arched ceiling and torches in sconces along the wall cast their flickering light out into the room. There were tables and chairs placed haphazardly in one end of the long chamber, and a crumbling dias with a wooden throne in the other; numerous passageways led from the chamber, off into the catacombs of old Evermoore.

Noctis, the Lord of Evermoore and God of Death, sat on his worn throne and idly gazed off into space. His wizened, skeletal face was partially obscured under the folds of the threadbare blanket that shrouded his head and covered most of his body. On his head he wore the golden crown which once marked him ruler of the realm, the gold was tarnished with the dust of ages and the five gems placed into the crown had long lost their sparkle.

Delvanus sat beneath the throne, on the cracked steps of the dias reading a story of the old days to the wayward orphans he had adopted. They were a motley group of young boys and girls who had lost their parents in the fighting above. The orphans helped Delvanus with the chores and their laughter gave Noctis some comfort. They would grow to become clerics of Noctis and learn the old ways of worship, or they would join the Reaversworn, the guards of Noctis, who spent most of their time hunting and fishing, because there was no need to defend the secret catacombs where they dwelled.

When the resounding strikes of a battering ram began to echo from the entrance hall, through

the catacombs to their chamber, Noctis looked up, confused and asked, “Is there someone at our door?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Delvanus whispered softly.

“Well let them in! Call my lady love,” said Noctis as he looked around, not really seeing the chamber before him. “Lumina, come greet our guests,” he called to no one.

“We cannot admit them, my lord,” said Delvanus.

“Demandred,” chastised Noctis. “The gates of Evermoore are closed to none. Ours is a kingdom where all are welcome. A land of peace and love.”

Delvanus moved to stand beside the throne and rested his hand on the shoulder of the old god. “I am Delvanus, my Lord,” he told him slowly. “Demandred was my previous incarnation. He died a thousand years ago and I was reborn as Delvanus. The crystal city of Evermoore was shattered by the Orcs, Klactons and Pythians and lies in ruin above us.”

“But the dream of the Five- an everlasting Age of Life?”

“Lost.” Delvanus would not lie to his god.

‘Lumina?’

“Dead for a millennia, my lord.”

For a moment it looked as if Noctis would remember, but then he turned away and said, “Demandred, I think we need more light in this chamber. And there is a chill in the air. Have the kravyinn stoke the fires.”

Noctis was insane. His mind shattered by the loss of love, the destruction of Evermoore and the transformation of his body into a wizened skeletal being by the traitorous Sematicus. The god of death spent his worst days screaming the name of Lumina over and over again and his best days weeping softly. Only rarely was he lucid enough to sit quietly and listen to news of the world. Delvanus and his other caretakers did their best to make him comfortable.

Noctis rose and shouted angrily, “Why have the doors not been opened?” The orphans at his feet scampered away. Often in his madness he would cause living things around him to wither and even die.

Delvanus held his ground. “My Lord, let your servants deal with it,” he said firmly. “Do not worry yourself. You are scaring the children.”

Noctis looked down at the orphans, and composed himself immediately. Despite his wizened form, there was a regality in his posture and a dignity that shone bright when he stood before his throne. “You are right, Demandred. Let me read to them.” Noctis seated himself and Delvanus passed the book of old stories to him. Noctis told the children, “I am sorry to have frightened you.” He opened the book and began reading aloud. The children gathered again at his feet.

A buxom blond entered the chambers, great sword in hand and a look of determination on her face. She wore a suit of chain mail and a black velvet surcoat bearing a white skull, draped over her shoulders was a white half-cape with a pentacle that marked her as a Reaver, one of the Fivesworn. She was followed by a unit of Reaversworn, armored men and women who served the Reavers and Noctis.

Delvanus met the woman, Cassandra, on the other end of the chamber and they spoke in hushed whispers.

“Melizar is at the great doors with an army,” she told him. “He means to batter down the doors if we do not open them. He outnumbered us at least ten to one.”

Delvanus knew the name well. Melizar had once been a cleric of Noctis and one of the caretakers in the catacombs, but he had been banished by Delvanus and the others for heresy.

The pounding seemed to shake the room, and then suddenly it stopped.

“Oh, they have finally admitted our guests,” exclaimed Noctis. “Demandred, it seems so dreary in here, maybe Karthis and his Jesters could entertain this evening.”

“What should we do?” asked Cassandra.

Hiruma Shiraha swept into the room, his black robes and white half-cape trailing behind him. He was a tall, thin man, with a long, sure step. He looked at Cassandra. “We will fight them,” he answered before Delvanus could speak.

Shiraha’s voice was grim, and filled with reproach when he turned to Delvanus. “We should have killed Melizar years ago. Banishment was a fool’s folly!”

Delvanus looked away, “I do not believe in killing, death is not the answer. The Way of the Five teaches balance, harmony, honor, freedom and love. It asks its worshipers to live together in peace, accepting the differences which make each of us unique and trying to resolve conflicts without the need for violence.”

“Don’t preach to me,” snapped Shiraha. “You can live a hundred pious lives, but you will never erase the horror you gave to this realm when you last served the Five.”

“The crimes of Demandred were unforgivable, but I cannot undo my past lives,” said Delvanus. “However, the future is still malleable and in this life I will serve their dream without exception.”

“But now we have to fight!” sneered Shiraha. “Can you find no middle ground?”

“There is naught but the Way and the dream,” said Delvanus.

“You are a fool!” He turned away from Delvanus. “Come with me,” he told Cassandra. “We’ll gather the other sworn swords as we go.”

Shiraha and Cassandra left Delvanus, and another woman entered the great chamber from a corridor on the opposite side of the room. She had auburn-red hair and wore robes of white velvet and a matching half-cape with a pentacle. Her eyes were soft, under long lashes and she stopped to ruffle the hair of a child before moving to Delvanus.

“What is happening?” asked Mahalia.

“Melizar has returned,” answered Delvanus. “Shiraha and Cassandra have gone to fight his forces with the Reaversworn.”

“We should have killed Melizar,” she spoke.

“You had best take the children and flee,” said Delvanus. “Shiraha and Cassandra will never yield, but try to convince the others that fighting Melizar is futile. He knows our strength and would not have come unless he was assured of victory. This will not end well.”

“Let’s take Noctis! We can all run!” she pleaded. “We can hide somewhere. They will never find us!”

Delvanus touched her cheek, “Sweet Mahalia, how can we hide a mad god that withers the world around him? Go before it’s too late. As long as you and the others live, the Way of the Five will

not be lost to the world.”

Sir Gildor led the way into the great chamber. His shield was battered and blood was smeared across the symbol of the rack. Lady Krysta was on his right, her rapier red with blood; Mactabillis was on his left, hands in his pockets, and seeming to blend into the shadows. Melizar and Lenore followed. Behind them the corridor was filled with the victorious armored soldiers who served the Order of the Rack.

“Demandred, welcome our guests. Have the Kravynn bring us some Elven wine,” said the Lord of Evermoore.

Sir Gildor laughed mockingly.

“I have heard that laugh before, but I can’t quite place it,” said Noctis sadly. “Have we met?”

Delvanus patted Noctis’s arm, “Do not trouble yourself, my lord. I will deal with these.” He turned to the intruders. “You have no place here, please leave.”

“Half your Reaversworn lay slaughtered, the rest have fled. You stand here alone and ask us to leave.” Sir Gildor laughed again. “The mad god is not the only one who is insane.”

“How can you speak so, you who served him once,” spoke Delvanus to Sir Gildor. Then to the others, his voice rising, “All of you have served him through the ages. Each of you, Five Sworn, eternal souls bound to the realm and owing your existence to the Five.” And then to Melizar, “I know your church and I know why you have come! You cannot do this deed. He is the Lord of Evermoore!”

“It is a kindness we do him,” spoke Melizar. “Look at him, his power is the greatest in the realm and it is wasted. He does not even know the Age. With his strength, Xanadu can remove the new gods from the realm. Those same gods that destroyed the Age of Life, who laid low our world, can be destroyed themselves by the power of Xanadu.”

“Vengeance is not the answer,” said Delvanus.

“I do not speak of vengeance,” shouted Melizar. “I speak of ensuring the Age of Order continues forever, and for that to happen the new gods must die. The gods cause wars. In their



names- armies march! Destroy the gods and you will end the wars. All those who know the ritual to create a Divine Avatar must be purged from this realm. We need his power!”

Delvanus placed his body before the Lord of Evermoore. “You will not do this.”

“Delvanus, I bear you no grudge,” Melizar assure him. “When I first suggested my plan to create Xanadu, the others on the council wanted to kill me, but you spoke up and I was banished instead. I will give you the same chance you gave me. Leave.”

“I will not leave his side,” said Delvanus.

“Sir Gildor,” commanded Melizar. “Kill Delvanus.”

“Gladly,” replied the massive knight. As he stepped forward, he said to Delvanus, “I liked you better one thousand years ago. Demandred would thank me for what I do now. He would hate to see the weakling he has become!”

Delvanus closed his eyes and opened his arms. “My life is his shield.”

Sir Gildor sneered and drew back his sword for the killing blow.

“Cease!” hissed Noctis and such was the power of his voice that Sir Gildor’s blade stopped mid-swing and quivered inches from Delvanus’s neck. “When brother kills brother, when sister slaughters sister . . .” His voice trailed off. “What has become of the dream?”

The god of death stepped between Delvanus and Sir Gildor to stand before Melizar. “My Age of Death must end. The world shall know order.” Noctis dropped to his knees. “My power I give to you. Destroy the false gods and bring peace to the world. Let the sacrifice of my Lumina be not in vain. Let her gift to the world have meaning.” But then his eyes grew angry and his face took on a terrible, twisted visage, “I do this for one reason alone, because it brings this world one age closer to the vengeance of Karthis! Let his fire and flame burn you all, traitors and power-mongers and fools alike!” Suddenly, his eyes cleared, his face relaxed, and he seemed not to remember his anger of a moment ago, “I do this for love, love of this world. Take my power and give us an everlasting Age of Order.”

“We shall begin,” whispered Melizar.

Lenore walked forward. He took her hand and kissed it gently. “I will miss you.”

Her hand brushed his face. “You will be part of me forever, my love.”

“I begin this ritual of Divine Avatar,” spoke Melizar as he tossed the red ritual powder into the air. The particles hung suspended, glittering in the air, as Melizar spoke. “The Paths of Pleasure, Pain and Death are the paths of Xanadu.” Melizar continued casting the ritual by invoking the five elements, each in turn and calling on their power. Mana energy began to twist through the chamber: red, blue, yellow, green and white. The elemental colors of mana swirled and spiraled.

“Are you ready?” asked Melizar.

Lenore and Noctis nodded.

“Are you willing?”

“I am,” spoke Lenore.

“Do it,” ordered Noctis. “Quickly, before my madness returns!”

Sir Gildor stepped forward, raised his sword and with one clean stroke severed the head of Noctis, god of death. His body became a swirl of pure mana energy.

Lenore closed her eyes as Mactabillis came to her side. He whispered in her ear, “I will be quick.” Before she could reply, he drove the point of his dagger deep into her heart. Her body vanished, absorbed by the swirling colors of mana.

Their lives and spirits mingled, the pure power of the mad god, the beauty of Lenore, all that was left was to join the power of faith. Melizar continued invoking the threads of mana as Lady Krystal passed him the glass of wine. He took one sip and the deadly poison within coursed through his veins.

His body vanished into the mana swirl, but his voice continued to chant, “I bring forth Xanadu, Mistress of Pleasure, Pain and Death, Slayer of the gods and mother of the mortal world.”

The mana coalesced into Xanadu. She had the beauty of Lenore, the faith of Melizar and all the power of Noctis. She would bring death to the new gods and give the world an Age of Order, where men lived for themselves, instead of dying for their gods.

**The death of Noctis, last of the Five, occurred on the third day in the sixth month in the second year of the glorious Age of Order. For fifty-eight years Xanadu led her church and the Order of the Rack on a bloody campaign to rid the world of the new gods and those with the**

**power to create them.**

**Xanadu slew the last person with the knowledge to create a new god, Slyvar Slithe, a Pythian temple priest in the year sixty of the Age of Order. In the sixty-third year of the Age of Order, Xanadu, having fulfilled her purpose, faded from the realm, leaving behind a world of mortals without the knowledge to create Divine Avatars.**