

# LAKHLEI

M. H. BONHAM



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*Lachlei*

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## DEDICATION

To Larry, as always.

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## CHAPTER ONE

The world was gone.

Rhyn'athel, the god of warriors stood on the charred mound that was once a towering peak within the Shadow Mountains. Nothing but burnt and smoldering ruins and corpses filled the land to the glowing red horizon and beyond. The acrid smell of burning flesh and death reached his nostrils. To a mortal, the stench would have been overwhelming.

But there were no mortals. There was nothing living now. All the races were gone along with the green fields, the majestic forests of pine, oak, and elm, the streams, the rivers, the mountains and the valleys. All laid waste in one single battle.

Rhyn'athel doubted anything could have survived the torrent of flames and the massive destruction that followed. He sheathed his sword, *Teiwaz*, in anger and pulled off his helm and mail coif, revealing the red mane streaked with gold.

Such waste! The gods of light would have to begin again.

Rhyn'athel was a tall god, but he could see no further than perhaps a mile. The thick clouds of smoke were too dense and piles of burning corpses too tall to see beyond. His silver eyes scanned the battlefield.

He caught movement and drew *Teiwaz* once again. Had the demon god returned? What could Areyn Sehduk, the god of death, want with this world now? Areyn had razed the world with the *Fyr*, the Eternal Fire, and nothing could stand in its way.

*Teiwaz*, the Sword of Power, glowed a menacing blue-white against the blood-red sky. Rhyn'athel relaxed when he saw the movement was a silver wolf padding through the piles of ashes and charred remains.

"Ni'yah," Rhyn'athel said.

The wolf transformed into a god wearing mail. He was shorter than Rhyn'athel, with a wolf-gray mane and brass-colored eyes. Still, the familial resemblance remained. "Brother," he greeted the warrior god. "Where is Areyn Sehduk?"

"Back in the world of the dead, I hope," Rhyn'athel replied. "What of the other worlds?"

"Much the same as this," Ni'yah said. "Except our own world, *Athelren*. The other gods and goddesses were able to hold off the Eternal Fire to protect the Hall of the Gods."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

Rhyn'athel shook his head. "Then the *Eleion*..."

Ni'yah grinned wryly.

Rhyn'athel stared. "Why do you smile? Areyn destroyed everything! Everything!"

"Not completely, my brother."

*Lachlei*

Rhyn'athel blinked. "What?"

"You don't think I would let the *Eleion* perish, do you?" Ni'yah asked. "They were, after all, my idea."

A grin spread across Rhyn'athel's face. "Who's alive?"

Ni'yah shook his head. "I couldn't save all. But it's enough to return the *Eleion* and the *Ansgar* races to this world. There's enough of each of the Nine Kindreds. But yes, your son, Lochvaur, is alive."

"You brought them to *Athelren*—to the Hall of the Gods?"

"It was the safest place—considering there were no safe places," Ni'yah said. "So, what did you get out of Areyn?"

"A truce," Rhyn'athel said. "We've divided the Nine."

"Equally?"

Rhyn'athel nodded.

Ni'yah frowned. "Next time, have me negotiate. We won, my brother—we should've gotten the majority."

"I tried—but even with *Teiwaz* run through him and pinned to the World Tree, Areyn wouldn't concede his four," Rhyn'athel said. "And this world, the fifth world, can't be touched by either side until the end of time. It's neutral ground."

"What of the *Eleion* and *Ansgar*?"

"This will be their world now."

"No bargain," Ni'yah said. "The *Jotunn* and demons can still walk these worlds—they'll decimate our people."

"Neither the *Jotunn* nor the demons can enter this world— not while under the truce," Rhyn'athel said. "But neither I nor Areyn can enter this world as long as the truce is in effect."

"I didn't agree to this," Ni'yah said, crossing his arms.

"You will abide by it."

"No."

Rhyn'athel glared at his brother. "You dare defy me?"

"Yes," Ni'yah said. "This is foolish—you brokered no peace, brother, you simply delayed the inevitable."

"And what would you do?" Rhyn'athel demanded. "Areyn can't be destroyed anymore than you or I. Without a reasonable offer, Areyn has no motivation to keep the truce and then, we are back to this." He waved a gauntleted hand at the desolation.

Ni'yah shook his head and said nothing. His brass eyes hardened as he gazed at the destroyed world. "What Areyn did is unforgivable."

"What would you have done?"

A silence ensued. At last, Ni'yah nodded. "I would've brokered peace the best I could," he admitted.

"Which I have done," Rhyn'athel replied. He gripped his brother's arm affectionately. "I know it's a delay, but what else can I do?"

"Let's hope it's enough," the wolf-god replied.

## CHAPTER TWO

### TWO THOUSAND YEARS LATER

The air smelled of death.

Areyn Sehduk watched the small band of warriors ride towards him. The death god smiled as their horses skittered nervously to an uneasy stop. He had chosen to wait here for them—here along the King’s Highway—amid the fir trees and dark pines under a moonless night. Few traveled this stretch of road that wound from the North Marches to the city fortress Caer Lochvaren. They weren’t far from the *Silren’s* border—no doubt the *Silren* would take the blame for what Areyn Sehduk was about to do. That suited the death god just fine.

There were five in all. They were none other than *Chi’lan* warriors—men sworn to serve Areyn Sehduk’s enemy, Rhyn’athel. They wore red and gold, the colors of Rhyn’athel. The colors of the *Lochvaur* kindred.

The colors of the enemy.

One warrior rode forward. He was handsome with a lean, muscular build and a flowing red mane streaked with gold, typical for the *Lochvaur*. He wore a gold circlet on his brow, denoting his rank. His piercing silver eyes met the death god’s gaze.

*This one is Fialan*, the god thought.

“Who are you?” Fialan demanded. “Why do you seek to waylay us?” He drew his sword.

Areyn Sehduk laughed. Even in his mortal guise, the laugh grated on Areyn’s ears. The body he took was of a tall, lanky *Silren* with a long, white mane and ice-blue eyes. It fit him well, although he preferred the dark hair and eyes of the *Eltar*. His mail was dark, but he wore the traditional colors of the *Silren*: a silver eight-rayed star adorned his blue surcoat. “I will waylay whomever I please.”

“I am king...”

“I know who you are, Fialan,” Areyn replied coldly. “Your precious titles mean nothing to me.”

At that, the other four *Chi’lan* drew their swords. *Not that it mattered*, Areyn thought. With a single glance, all four horses and riders fell over dead. The horses screamed and thrashed, bloody foam spewing from their nostrils as they collapsed. The men screamed once before collapsing with their horses. Their swords clattered uselessly to the ground.

Now, Fialan was alone.

Fialan stared at the dead men and then back at Areyn Sehduk. Fear crept into Fialan’s eyes for a brief instant, but the *Lochvaur* king steeled his gaze, much to his credit. “By Rhyn’athel’s sword, who are you? What manner of wizardry is this?”

Areyn Sehduk grinned. *This would be great sport*. “Why don’t you come down from your horse and find out, *King?*” he taunted, drawing his dark blade.

## Lachlei

There was no hesitation now. Fialan dismounted, drawing his adamantine blade. Areyn had seen the look in the king's eyes before many times. Fialan showed no fear, but it mattered not. It was still the look of a dead man.

Fialan circled warily, keeping his guard up. Areyn lunged, swinging his sword. Fialan parried and riposted. Areyn parried.

They broke off and circled.

"Who are you?" Fialan demanded. "Silvain and my father signed a treaty nearly a hundred years ago. The *Silren* and the *Lochvaur* are at peace..."

Areyn chuckled. "No longer, it would appear..."

Fialan attacked now, swinging the long sword. Areyn slid to the side and parried, but too late — Fialan's blade sliced through Areyn's armor into flesh. Pain shot through Areyn, but he ignored it. Instead, the death god laughed.

Fialan stared. Blood poured from the *Silren's* chest as Fialan pulled his long sword away. The blow would be a mortal wound to any *Eleion*—even to a first-blood, those born with gods' blood in them.

"What are you?" Fialan demanded. "Demon?" Sweat dripped from his brow, and Areyn knew Fialan was afraid.

Areyn grinned. "I am your death," he replied. "I grow weary of this game."

With that, an invisible force ripped Fialan's sword from his hands. Areyn Sehduk approached, and Fialan found he could not move; some infernal power rooted him to the ground. Fialan could do nothing but watch helplessly as the death god, almost lazily, plunged the sword into his chest.

Fialan collapsed, writhing in pain for a moment before lying still. His silver eyes stared unblinking into the dark sky. Areyn chuckled. "I suppose it is some consolation to know that you would've won," he remarked. He pulled the dark blade from the dead king and gazed at the blood as it rolled down its edge. "But no mere mortal will defeat me."

Areyn Sehduk turned and for a moment saw movement in the dark forest. Ice-blue eyes scanned the silent pines and caught a glimpse of a wolf padding away. He turned back to the dead king and grinned. "And now, the fun begins."



The wolf waited until the death god had passed. It watched as Areyn Sehduk turned and walked northward along the King's Highway. Then, it slowly crept from its hiding place to survey the damage.

It was a large beast—nearly twice the size of a normal wolf — with black-tipped agouti fur. It padded around the bodies of the dead *Chil'an* and then halted as it stood before Fialan, gazing with his brass-colored eyes at the dead king.

"A terrible loss," the wolf said to no one in particular. He turned and disappeared into the forest.

## CHAPTER THREE

Lachlei awoke shivering.

She huddled in the thick blankets, her silver eyes staring into the blackness of the room. She ran her hand through her red-gold mane and tried to remember the dream. Lachlei had dreamt of a battle—a slaughter. Five *Chi'lan* cut down in cold blood.

*It was just a dream*, Lachlei told herself. *A terrible nightmare*. But Lachlei's dreams had a habit of becoming reality. It was the price of being first-blood, and the price of having the Sight.

Lachlei slid out of bed and wrapped herself with a robe. With a single word, the candles in the room jumped to life, filling the darkness with a soft glow. She strode to the cradle where her son, Haellsil, still lay sleeping. Lachlei looked down on the infant and smiled. Haellsil looked much like Fialan. So much so that nearly every *Chi'lan* warrior had proclaimed Haellsil would become a great warrior in his own right. *How could he not, being Fialan's son?*

*How could he not being Lachlei's son?* Lachlei added silently. Lachlei glanced at her old sword, hanging on the wall. She too had been *Chi'lan*. Lachlei had been a good warrior, serving the old king, Lochalan, before he died in battle. Fialan, Lochalan's son, had proven himself in battle and the *Lochvaur* Council had made Fialan king after Lochalan's death.

Lachlei had fallen in love with Fialan. She had accepted his proposal, giving up her sword to become the *Lochvaur* queen. She hadn't regretted the choice in the three years she had been Fialan's consort. But occasionally, Lachlei missed being *Chi'lan*.

Yet now, something was amiss. Lachlei dressed and slid from her private chambers to the mead hall where the *Chi'lan* warriors slept. The room was dark save for the ruddy glow from the firepit's dying embers and the stars that glowed above through the hole in the roof where the smoke could escape. The mead hall was hewn from thick oaken logs, with exposed beams and rafters. On one end were hers and Fialan's private quarters, behind the small dais where massive oaken thrones sat. The firepit lay in the middle. The mead benches and tables that usually stood around it were pushed to the side to make room for those *Chi'lan* who were the king's personal guard to sleep. Lachlei stepped carefully over sleeping warriors and past the great battle hounds. One dog looked up at her curiously, and she ran her fingers through its coarse, curly fur as she passed by.

Lachlei pulled on one of the oaken double doors that led from the mead hall to outside. At the door stood a *Chi'lan* sentry. It was Cahal—a tall, young *Lochvaur* who had recently made *Chi'lan*.

"Lachlei, my queen," Cahal stammered.

## Lachlei

Lachlei raised a finger to her lips and he fell silent, his silver eyes almost smoke-gray in the darkness. “When is Fialan expected to return?” she whispered.

“The day after next,” said Cahal and then hesitated. “Certainly, you know that...”

But Lachlei’s eyes widened. “Fialan!” she gasped. “No!” Pain shot through her as she felt the mind-link sever between herself and Fialan. Lachlei collapsed, but Cahal caught her before she hit the ground.

“What is it?” Cahal said, holding Lachlei as she wept.

The torches within the mead hall sprang to life. *Chi’lan* warriors poured from the hall, some with swords drawn. They stood in bewilderment to see Cahal holding Lachlei.

“What happened? What is it?” Voices babbled around her.

“What is it, Lachlei?” Cahal asked, this time gently.

Lachlei shook her head. “Fialan,” she whispered. “Fialan is dead.”



“It was Areyn Sehduk,” the wolf said. He glared at the god, his brass eyes glinting menacingly.

Rhyn’athel, the warrior god, sat on his throne in the Hall of the Gods, his silver eyes revealing his doubts. God of the *Lochvaur*, the kindred bore his silver eyes and red-gold mane. He wore mail and sat on his throne beside the other thrones of the nine gods and goddesses of light. All were empty now, save his. “How can you be so certain it is our old enemy, Ni’yah? After all, you say you saw a *Silren* kill Fialan.”

“It was Areyn,” Ni’yah repeated stubbornly. “No *Silren*, not even Silvain, could use that magic. When will you learn, my brother, that Areyn uses the Truce to keep you out of his way?”

Rhyn’athel frowned. “And when will you quit meddling in the affairs of the *Eleion*? You will bring the war back to the Fifth World if Areyn recognizes you in your current form.”

“Then, let him!” Ni’yah snapped. “This charade has gone on long enough, my brother. Areyn is in *Ehren*, and you are a coward for not standing up to him.”

Rhyn’athel’s face darkened. He stood up, his hand straying to the sword hilt at his side. “Who are you calling a coward, Ni’yah?” he growled. “I don’t slink around like some common cur, meddling in affairs I have no business in.”

Ni’yah transformed to his god form. He was shorter than Rhyn’athel nearly half a foot, but the other god’s impressive stature did nothing to intimidate him. “Are you threatening me?” Ni’yah demanded. “If you are, then you choose your battles poorly, my brother. You can’t defeat Areyn Sehduk without me.”

Anger glinted in Rhyn’athel’s steel eyes, and for a moment the two brothers stood, gazes locked. Then, Rhyn’athel began to chuckle. “Damn you, Ni’yah!” he said, shaking his head. “You’re incorrigible! If you were anyone else...”

Ni’yah smiled wryly. “You’d teach me a terrible lesson—but you won’t.”

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Rhyn'athel gazed at his brother. "Someday, you may get yourself into trouble that not even I can get you out of."

"Perhaps," the wolf-god shrugged. "But that time is not now. Fialan is dead. Areyn killed him..."

"You don't know that."

"I know the mark of an immortal's work. Who else would desire to destroy the peace we've achieved?"

Rhyn'athel shook his head. "It could be followers of Areyn ..."

"As long as the Fifth World remains under both your and Areyn's control, there will be no peace. Areyn will not settle for the Nine Worlds being equally divided." Ni'yah sighed. "With Fialan dead, the power will shift—you know that."

"Fialan was my champion," Rhyn'athel agreed. "There will have to be another."

Ni'yah frowned. "You said that when Lochvaur died—and there has been no equal to him. That was another time when you gave into Areyn's demands..."

Rhyn'athel's gaze hardened and Ni'yah knew the barb had hit its mark. "Don't you think I rue that decision, Ni'yah? Lochvaur and I agreed that for the sake of the Truce, he should remain in Areyn's realm. You, I remember, talked me into it."

"You've given too much for peace, brother."

Rhyn'athel's face was expressionless, but Ni'yah knew he had pushed the warrior god past his limit. "Don't you think I regret every day that Lochvaur stays under Areyn's power? Don't you think I regret that my *Chilan* feed that demon god's power? Ni'yah, if it were not for the living..."

"And now, without a champion, we risk that, too. There's no other living right now who could rival Fialan," said Ni'yah. He paused and a glint entered his eyes. "Save one."

"Who?"

"Lachlei." Ni'yah's eyes gleamed now. "She could do it."

Rhyn'athel scowled. "Fialan's consort?" He searched his memory for the *Lochvaur* woman's image. None came readily to mind.

"Lachlei is *Chilan*," said Ni'yah. "She trained under Lochalan; she's a distant cousin. And she's half *Laddel* as well. Her mother Ladara was Laddel's granddaughter..."

"Then, she's first-blood," Rhyn'athel mused.

"Oh yes, she is," Ni'yah grinned. "She's *twice* first-blood, from both the *Lochvaur* and *Laddel* lines. Very powerful—if she'd use her magic. She was an exceptional warrior before she became Fialan's queen." He paused and glanced sideways at his brother. "She's beautiful, too."

Rhyn'athel stared at Ni'yah. "You've been among the mortals for far too long."

Ni'yah chuckled. "I have—I won't deny it. I've learned to appreciate what the Fifth World has to offer." He paused. "But Lachlei can't handle Areyn Sehduk alone, my brother. She'll need your help."

Rhyn'athel shook his head. "I'm sworn by the Truce to not become involved."

*Lachlei*

“Then, at least come to *Elren* and see what Areyn has done,” Ni’yah said. “Observe what has happened first hand, and then tell me this is not the work of the death god.”

Rhyn’athel hesitated. He knew Ni’yah had a good reason for being persistent, even if his brother was a rogue. Rhyn’athel stood for a moment, arms crossed, vexed at the choice he had to make.

Ni’yah smiled slyly as he watched his brother weigh the options, his brass eyes glittering with mischief. “Observe—that’s all,” Ni’yah said. “You don’t need to act...”

“Observe,” repeated Rhyn’athel. It sounded harmless, but it was Ni’yah and Rhyn’athel knew it wasn’t. Ni’yah had one final trick to play. He sighed. “Very well,” Rhyn’athel said, at last. “I will observe—that is all.”

“That’s all,” said Ni’yah, triumph ringing in his voice.

Rhyn’athel fixed him with a stare. “That *is* all,” he said with finality.