

The Bronze Man

By Andrew Warwick

That breaking dawn revealed unto the watchers a vast multitude spilling forth from the bright bowed ships. Chelosian sea-raiders bearing shields of burnished bronze, wild Vačec with their furs and axes, bright chariots and rearing horses, full forty score in number. They came not for simple raid, nor plunder, but to conquer.

The slope was dim in the predawn light, while a chill lingered in the early spring air. Tall trees, their bark smooth and grey, grew upon the slope, ghostly in a light mist that hung amongst them. A last few stars flickered in the sky above that was devoid of clouds.

Two men scrambled up the slope, weaving amongst the trees as they climbed. Despite clinging brush and loose earth beneath their feet, the tall, rangy men moved quietly, using bronze-bladed spears to support their ascent. Both were clad in jackets of tanned hides, while hide boots were lashed tight over trousers of dull, woven cloth.

As they neared the summit of their climb, the taller and older of the pair raised a hand, motioning his companion to halt. He stooped down, crawling the last few metres to the summit, the second man following his example.

Brush grew thick at the summit. The pair pushed aside the brush, to peer down into a wide bay that spread out beneath them. The slope they had climbed had led them to the

top of a broken cliff face, where the nests of sea birds and craggy shrubs clung tenaciously to precarious ledges. The cliff was part of a promontory that jutted out into the sea, while across the bay was another stony headland. Between them, the white sands of the beach arced around, sheltered from all but the worst of storms.

The lands sloped gently up from the beach, over a series of sandy dunes to airy woodlands. A stream flowed serenely through the woodlands and down into the bay, originating further up in the valley that the woods hid from view.

The first crimson light of the dawn began to spill over the horizon far out to sea, the sun illuminating the beach and the activity that took place upon it and out in the bay. Upon the white sands half a dozen ships had been run up, their sails furled and oars stowed. Men spilled from them, joining those already on the beach. More ships were being rowed into the bay, towards the beach. The bows of the ships were brightly painted, in a riot of colours. Red, greens, yellows and blues, they were in the form of stylised animals, more the idea of the animal than an actually representation of them.

They were Chelosian ships, come from the lands and islands further north. Raevak studied the ships below with pale eyes, his leathered face showing concern.

"I count twenty Jal," he told his younger companion, voice soft, despite the distance that lay between the ships and them. It was not the distance that kept his voice low, but the sight that had appeared before them.

"There must be hundreds of them aboard," Jal replied, eyes wide. He was young, little more than a boy, with only a few wisps of facial hair. Raevak gave a soft grunt in agreement with the young man, before pointing towards another band of men that

were leaping from one of the newly beached ships, splashing ashore through a gentle swell. They were a short but stocky group, wrapped up in furs and carrying crude bronze axes or stone-headed clubs, with dark hair and thick, bushy beards.

“Vačeci. Mercenaries no doubt, come for the plunder.”

“The Vačec fight for the Chelosians?”

“Some do, if they are paid.” The Vačec were a wild and primitive people from the mountains and forests to the north. Fierce warriors, they were as likely to fight each other as they were to fight anyone else, but some allowed themselves to be hired by the Chelosians.

More men continued to join the growing horde upon the beach as further ships landed, and a camp began to grow. Small bands pushed up off the beach to scout ahead. The Chelosians were, for the most part, short but not bulky like the Vačec. Each had a large, round shield of bronze and hide, tunics of woven cloth that hung to their knees and carried bronze-bladed spears. A few, those with wealth or power, had armour of bronze or hide, and bronze greaves. Horsehair crested helmets helped further mark them out, dyed, for the most part, bright red.

“Over there,” Jal said, pointing towards one of the largest of the ships. Men were at work trying to coax a number of horses from the ship, while others were putting together a handful of chariots for the kings and champions to ride upon. The chariots were few in number, there being little room to store them aboard the ships.

“Jal, get back to the village as fast as you can and warn the chief,” Raevak said. “Tell him there are twenty Chelosian ships at White Sands.”

Jal nodded nervously, before asking, “What will you be doing?”

“I will be keeping an eye on them. Hopefully I can learn some more of what they are planning.”

“Will you be safe?” Raevak laughed at the boy's obvious concern.

“Son, no Chelosian has caught me yet. Now go.” Jal nodded again, then wordlessly he began to scramble back down the slope and the long ran for help. Raevak turned back to watch the Chelosians, shaking his head at the fearsome sight spread out beneath him.

Unto the raiders fate had thrown stones of ill fortune, for there lived in those lands a giant of a man. Full five measures tall he stood, mighty Awn the Red. The assembled host daunted him not, for he took up his spear of deadly bright bronze and went forth on his chariot alone to confront the foe. And word went out to the king that the Chelosians had landed.

Rath Arn was a small village, situated in a pleasant, green valley. The Rath originated in hill country far to the west, flowing down through the valley, its course meandering eastwards through the woodlands that obscured the view of the sea. Rath Arn had grown up around a ford across the Rath, near the juncture were a smaller stream from the north entered the Rath.

The collection of huts scattered on either side of the stream were of wood, with thatched roofs. Rising up above the village was a small hillock on the south side of the Arn, and upon it stood a large hall, its roof made of wooden planks. Alongside its wide doors stood two

roughly hewn statues of large wolves, teeth bared.

A rough palisade of wooden logs had been thrown up around the village, though it lacked the height or strength to keep any but animals out for long.

Fields spread out around the village and the stream, separated by low walls of piled stone. Some of the fields had been freshly dug, while in others cattle or sheep grazed placidly in the early morning.

The smoke from cooking fires drifted up from the village, while chickens roamed amongst the houses, pecking at the ground for insects. The occasionally bark of a dog was all that broke the calm that hung over the village.

In the distance down the valley, young Jal emerged from the woods, long legs carrying him in a loping stride as he raced for the village, to break the calm.

A small grove of willows grew downstream from the village, their long branches brushing the surface of the water. A small path wound through them, while moss covered stones lay upon the ground, amongst lush, green grass. Two grey horses drank at the river, chariot mounts of small stature.

Seated upon one of stones was a man of vast height and strength, watching over the horses. His hair was a rich, golden red, hanging loose to his shoulders. Most men of his people cultivated beards, but he was clean-shaven except for a thick moustache.

He wore trousers of woven green cloth, though his chest was bared and tanned, marked with numerous scars. Glinting in the early morning light were

bands of bronze about his wrists, neck and upper arms, intricately decorated. The neckband was in the form of a two-headed wolf, either head facing each other as they clasped around his neck, while further wolf images were upon the arm and wristbands. A bone-handled dagger was thrust through his belt.

Pushing himself up from his seat, the giant man strolled over to the horses, patting one on the neck. The horse nuzzled at him a moment, before returning to his drinking. While standing there, he gazed downstream, spotting Jal off in the distance, running. The man collected the reigns of the two horses, and led them back up out of the grove, waiting for Jal to arrive.

It took a couple more minutes for Jal to reach the man with the horses, sweat soaked and his chest heaving as he heaved down huge lung fulls of air.

“What news, young Jal?” the man asked in a deep, rumbling voice.

“Chelosians, Awn,” Jal gasped breathlessly. “Twenty ships of them.” The face of the man Jal had called Awn tightened at the news.

“Strike me, that many?” Jal simply nodded, too exhausted to speak any more. “Here, mount up,” Awn told him. “We’d better go find my cousin and let him know the news.” Awn helped Jal up onto the back of the larger of the two horses, before setting out, leading the pair behind him.

They passed quickly through the sleepy village, climbing the track up the hillock to the great hall that perched atop it, overlooking the lands around it. Awn quickly tethered the horses to one of the

stone wolf statues, grinning as he patted it for luck. Pushing open the doors, he strode into the hall.

A woman with braided blonde hair was tending a fire pit in the centre of the room, the smoke from it lingering in the air. A pair of children was running around the floor that was covered in rushes. Long wooden benches ran down either side of the hall, and seated at the one to the right was a man, drinking from a clay mug. His hair and beard were of a similar colour to Awn's, though he lacked both the height and breadth of the giant man. The drinking man looked up bleary-eyed from his mug, blinking at Awn and Jal.

"What brings you here at such an un-earthly hour cousin? Can't it wait?"

"Afraid not, Taenar. We have some problems. A lot of problems," Awn added. "Jal and Raevak were down at the bay and spotted twenty Chelosian boats full of problems." Taenar set his mug down on the table, trying to take in the report.

"Twenty?" Awn nodded soberly. "They will have, what, eight hundred raiders then?"

"More or less I would imagine," Awn agreed.

"They will attack here then."

"You would think so. They may only be resupplying down at the bay and not know we are here, but we should expect the worst."

"All we can gather from the village is forty men." Taenar's fingers drummed on the table as he tried to gather his thoughts, to organise a response.

"Sounds almost a fair fight," Awn replied with a wry grin.

"We will have to abandon the

village," Taenar went on, pointedly ignoring Awn's comment. "Get the women, children and livestock to safety while word goes out to the king and the tribes."

"That will take time, and may take too long," Awn told Taenar. "If they are able to establish themselves in the valley and dig in, it may be a challenge to drive them out."

"True. I'm open to suggestions."

"I'll delay them."

"By yourself?" Jal blurted out incredulously.

"Yes."

"You are mad," Taenar told him with a shake of his head.

"Have any other ideas?"

"Not this early in the morning. Let my head clear first."

"There aren't any other options, cousin. One thing more, my mother, make sure she gets out safe." Taenar rose to his feet, offering Awn his hand. The two men shook, Taenar clasping his left hand to Awn's shoulder.

"I will Awn. Take care of yourself." Awn laughed heartily at Taenar's comment.

"Trust me, cousin, trust me."

"That is what I am afraid of," Taenar replied quietly as he watched Awn leaving the hall.

The two horses in tow, Awn arrived at one of the village houses, a simple thatch-roofed building. A tall tree grew before it, shade from its branches covering the entrance. A simple wooden

bench sat beside the trunk.

“Palidas,” Awn called out from the front of the house. “We have work to do.” A young man soon emerged from the house, short and slender, his hair dark and curly. He had an aquiline set to his face, while his skin had an olive complexion that he had inherited from his mother.

The young man was of unusual heritage, his mother being a Chelosian. Calandria was the daughter of Adrasto of Saenos, one of a rare breed of Chelosians who preferred trade rather than pillage. It was during one of those trading trips that Calandria had met Awn’s brother.

“What is it uncle?”

“I need the chariot harnessed. We have uninvited guest down at the beach that I need to greet.”

“Let me get my armour.”

Awn shook his head. “Your mother may not approve if I put you in danger, especially against kin.”

“I am your chariot driver, uncle. It is where I am meant to be.”

“Good lad,” Awn replied with a laugh, pleased by the lad’s response. “On the positive side, if things do go badly I shan’t have to face your mother.”

When Palidas returned, he was wearing an armoured shirt of bronze scales, gifted to him by his uncle when he took up the role of chariot driver.

“Small raid is it uncle?” Palidas asked while the pair was leading the horses to where Awn’s chariot waited. The village was still mostly quiet, the news of the Chelosian raiders yet to spread.

“A rather large one,” Awn told him, “But we are going ahead first.”

“Just the two of us?”

“Raevak is there, but essentially yes.”

“What is your plan then?”

“I shall challenge their champions, one by one, until such time as the king is ready, for as long as it takes.”

The champions, they rose up to meet the giant Awn, clad in their glittering array. First one, then another, with bright spears and swords they stepped forward. One after another Awn met them, spear on shield. One after another he struck them and there was blood upon the sand until no more the champions came.

The chariot rumbled across the grass, dust kicked high from hooves and wheels. Awn stood tall in the chariot, gripping tight his great bronze spear and shield as Palidas urged the horses forward. Chelosian raiders watched them curiously as they rode down from the trees towards the beach.

There lay between their people a curious form of honour, Awn noted. They may raid and plunder and kill; yet a lone chariot could descend into the heart of the enemy like this untouched.

Palidas reined in the chariot where the dunes began to rise, staring down at the bay, bright under the morning sunlight. Never had the two men seen such a gathering of ships and men, spread along the length of the beach. Palidas shook his head slowly in wonder, though there was also fear upon his features.

“There are a few of them,” Awn noted dryly.

Palidas nodded in agreement.
“Yes uncle.”

Awn laughed aloud, with genuine amusement. “Think of the glory, lad.”

“I am uncle. I can also count though.”

“There is nothing for you to worry about. Even the likes of these do not make war upon a chariot driver. Drive on.”

The chariot lurched forward again, edging through the dunes to the firmer sand below. A gathering of Chelosians was moving towards them, men in the red crested helmets that marked them as kings and champions.

“Halt here,” Awn ordered Palidas. The chariot ground to a halt, Awn jumping out. He drove the haft of his spear into the sand, letting it stand there. “I’ll need you to translate for me.”

“Yes uncle.”

“Come and meet me, sons of sea goats!” Awn bellowed, sweeping his arm around at them. “I am Awn the Red in whose steps the Night Wolf walks. I am Awn the Red, slayer of thousands. I am Awn the Red who vanquished the Dragon of the Hills of Caernarn. I am Awn the Red and I defy you, worms, craven honourless snakes.” Awn began to warm up, pacing along in front of the beach, a broad smile on his face as the insults spilt forth. Palidas rapidly spoke in Chelosian, translating the intent of the message.

“Get all that, Palidas?” Awn enquired after his lengthy tirade.

“More or less,” Palidas admitted.

“You abbreviated it, didn’t you?”

“Yes, uncle.”

Awn laughed at Palidas’

apologetic expression. “The insults are an expected part of the challenge,” he told him. “I hope you left some of them in.”

From amongst the Chelosians one of them stepped forward. He was a powerful built, stocky man wearing a breastplate of bronze.

“Maedari dog,” he sneered, speaking in Maedari. “Your threats are as hollow as your boasts. This day the women of your village will see what a true man looks like. I am Kiriastas who wrestles giants.”

“You see,” Awn pointed out as Kiriastas continue with his challenge, “He is a man who knows how to conduct a challenge.”

“Yes uncle,” Palidas replied meekly.

Awn sauntered over to Kiriastas as the man concluded his speech.

“Still alive I see, Kiriastas.”

The Chelosian’s answering smile was friendly. “Still alive Awn, and it will remain so this day. Your young man was polite in his translation.”

Awn laughed as the two men shook hands. “I am still training him. What brings you to my lands?”

Kiriastas seemed apologetic. “Not my doing, Awn,” he replied, then nodded back over his shoulder with his head. “It is Alastos. He is ambitious. Seeks new lands for himself. I am afraid he has chosen yours. You can not stop us,” he added regretfully.

“Eight hundred of you and one of me? Think of the glory though.”

Kiriastas shook his head, slowly, his features those of bewilderment. “You Maedari are mad. Do you accept my challenge, Maedari?”

“I do, Chelosian.”

The two men faced off against each other on the beach, tall, bare-chested Awn and the stocky Kiriastas. They circled, slowly, slowly, watching the other warily, studying their challenger’s moves intently. Shields were raised and bronze spears at hand, poised, ready to strike.

Awn was the first to move, letting out a monstrous yell as he darted forward, spear stabbing through the air. Kiriastas’ shield came up, turning aside Awn’s blow, before he jabbed forward with his own.

Awn jumped aside, the bright spear tip narrowly avoiding his bare flesh.

Kiriastas grinned at him. “Slow, Maedari.” Awn simply laughed, returning to the slow circling.

The two men feinted back and forth, trading blows, blocking and stabbing. Minor cuts soon marked their bodies, sweat flowing freely, seeping into their eyes and stinging as it entered wounds.

The duel dragged on, neither man able to get the upper hand, the pair wearying from the constant exchange of strikes. Fate in the end was not with Kiriastas. Moving to avoid a low stabbing blow from Awn, he stumbled in the sand, loosing balance, partially from weariness, partially from the unevenness of the field. The spear drove into his leg, striking deep. Blood flowed freely down his leg, dripping to the sand.

As the spear slid free, Kiriastas sunk down to a knee, the spear coming up to rest lightly at his neck.

“Do you yield?”

Kiriastas set his shield down at Awn’s feet. “I yield.”

Awn dropped his spear, offering Kiriastas his hand, helping the injured Chelosian up when he took it. “Fate did not smile upon you this day, old friend. Can you walk?”

“Yes. It is not as bad as it appears.”

Awn smiled with relief. “Good. Take up your shield and return to your own people.”

“On my honour and that of my ancestors I swear that until this conflict is ended I shall take no further part in this fight,” Kiriastas replied. Awn handed him back his shield, helping him limp back towards the Chelosian lines, where men pounded spears to shield in honour of the men.

“There is one man amongst you,” Awn challenged them. “One man worthy of my admiration. The rest of you, you are but sand beneath my feet, to be crushed as I please. Do any more of you dare challenge me, Awn the Red, who has defeated your mightiest champion?”

Another Chelosian stepped forward, speaking in his native language, pointing his spear at Awn.

“He says that he takes up your challenge,” Kiriastas translated, “And that he only lowers himself to meet you to give you the honour of having been defeated by the great Lastrasios.”

Awn grinned at the man, nodding his head. “Tell him I accept his challenge.”

“I fell sorry for poor Kiriastas,” Awn told Palidas when he had returned to him.

Palidas handed him a clay mug of water, which Awn grateful took. “Why is

that uncle?"

"It was not I that defeated him, but fate. There will be no more honour for him this conflict."

"Is there not honour enough having crossed spears with you, uncle? He can take comfort from that." Palidas replied.

Awn laughed easily before draining the mug. "There is, yes, but I still feel sorry for him." He rubbed at his left shoulder, where a dull bruise was beginning to form. "Rim of the shield took me here. It is going to cause some problems."

"You are going to fight again?" Palidas sounded incredulous.

"I have no choice. If I withdraw then there is nothing to stop them advancing on the village. It is only honour that can compel them to stay here, and honour which keeps me here."

Three more times that day Awn strode out to face the Chelosians in challenges and three times he emerged victorious. Twice men yielded, amongst them Lastrasios after a long and wearying duel. The third, a sullen, sneering faced man refused to yield and in the end Awn was forced to lay him out upon the sands, dead from a thrust to the throat.

Awn could see the frustration in the Chelosian's faces as they dragged the dead man away by his heels, leaving a trail of blood across the sand. They wished to press on, but were honour-bound to face Awn and to respond to each challenge, until such time as he yielded or was slain.

Awn sunk tiredly to the ground after the fourth fight. More blood marked him; his body ached from the strain of the

fight and many cuts, while his hair and trousers were drenched with sweat. Palidas poured water over him, washing away dried blood and sweat. Awn was breathing heavily.

"Not sure if I can last much longer," he admitted. "That last one thought he could outlast me, which is why he would not yield. Stubborn. Too stubborn."

Another Chelosian was striding forward, unusual in that he wore a shirt of bronze scales as worn by the Maedari and not the bronzed breastplate of the Chelosians. Awn pushed himself to his feet, taking up spear and shield again.

"Once more, nephew, once more and this day is done."

And unto the high places of the Hathaeear did they go to make their stand against uncountable numbers, for the Chelos pursued them to bring them to an end. It was there Awn took his stand and blocked the way, and he struck down all that came against him until the night fell.

Horns blasted out from the woods, long and mournful echoes amongst the trees. Men and chariots crested the dunes, standing atop them. Spears beat against shields, again and again.

"Awn!" the cry went up. "Awn! Awn! Awn!"

Awn rose to his feet, holding his spear aloft, intensifying the chants. Turning, he pointed the spear at the approaching Chelosian champion. The man stopped, studying the Maedari lining the crest of the dunes, then turned and walked back towards his own lines.

A chariot rumbled down to join Awn, riding on it his cousin Taenar.

“Your timing is perfect,” Awn told him.

“Hard day?” Taenar asked him.

Awn nodded. “Yes.”

“How many?”

“Four?”

Taenar raised a brow in surprise. “Only four?”

“I’m getting old,” Awn admitted. “Palidas, get the chariot ready.”

“Yes, uncle.”

Taenar scratched at his golden-red beard, watching the Chelosians. A small group of champions and chiefs were standing around, talking and pointing back towards the Maedari. “I think they are going to attack.”

“The duels are at an end,” Awn agreed. He looked up to the dunes, to where a couple of dozen Maedari could be seen, pounding their shields still. “I don’t think they are aware of how few we are, but they will know we are outnumbered.”

Shouts of command came from Chelosians and a small band of warriors broke from them, jogging across the sands towards the Maedari, their shields raised before them.

Taenar raised his hand, gesturing to the gathered Maedari. “Back! Back!” His chariot turned and headed back up over the dunes. Awn leapt into his.

Palidas snapped the reins and the horses surged forward, following Taenar. Cheers rose from the Chelosians and en mass they began running, chasing after the fleeing Maedari.

Men and chariots streamed back through the woods, following well-worn paths alongside the stream. Deer and rabbits scattered, startled by the noise, while birds erupted from the trees, their cries protesting the sounds of shouts, of rumbling chariots and pounding hooves.

The Maedari burst from the tree on the far side, Taenar gesturing southwards with his spear as they did. In response his chariot driver swerved his vehicle in that direction. Five chariots and three-dozen men followed, scurrying across the grasslands of the valley, making for the Hathaeat. On the southern slopes of the valley a winding, narrow path climbed upwards to a broad ledge. Sheer cliffs on all sides, rising or falling away steeply, bound it. Only via the path could it be reached. There was no shelter there, nor sources of water, yet in times such as this it could be used as a place of refuge.

Chelosians began to emerge from the trees behind, their chariots appearing first. They were not many in number, yet they were enough to trouble the small band of running men. Awn tapped his nephew on the shoulder, gesturing for him to fall back behind the running men, angling towards the Chelosians chariots.

The chariot swerved at Palidas’ command, changing directions. Awn took up a lighter javelin, balancing his grip on it as the chariots thundered towards each other, hooves and wheels churning up the earth, closer and closer.

“Now!” Awn yelled, straining to be heard over the pounding of hooves and

wheels. Palidas pulled at the reins and, unexpectedly, the chariot arced around, cutting in front of the enemy chariots. Awn judged his moment, and then hurled the javelin at a tall Chelosian who stood in the lead chariot.

The bronze tipped javelin slashed through the air, glittering in the afternoon light. The Chelosian gave a startled cry, trying vainly to duck. His reactions and the less than true aim saved him, for the javelin struck his shoulder, the tip piercing through and emerging through the other side. Bright blood flowed freely from the wound, spilling down his arm and chest.

Awn laughed loudly as other Chelosians retaliated in kind, throwing javelins of their own. Only one came close, Awn batting it away with his shield as their chariot raced away to rejoin the running Maedari. The Chelosians slowed their pursuit, waiting for the men on foot to catch up to them.

Exhausted from their run across the valley, the Maedari scrambled up the rocky path towards the Hathaear. Panting with exertion, their sweat ran freely beneath armour and helmets. The chariots had to be lead up by hand, for the route was not an easy one, and not one that could be ridden up. Awn, Taenar and a handful of others were the last up, walking behind the chariots, observing the movements of the Chelosians. Some were fanning out across the valley, heading for Rath Arn, but most were congregating below, at the foot of the path to the Hathaear.

“They will burn the village, more likely than not,” Taenar noted morosely.

“It can be rebuilt,” Awn stated.
“You got everyone out?”

“Yes, with whatever they could take. They headed south, through the pass, along with a message to the king.”

“Good. Let us just hope he can arrive soon. I don’t fancy a long stay up here,” he added with wry understatement.

Taenar laughed. “No shelter, little food and water, numerous enemies? I would have thought you would be in your element.”

Awn grinned at his cousin. “Certainly, but I left my best spear at home. Now some Chelosian bandit is going to get it.

Taenar clapped a hand to his cousin’s shoulder. “You will just have to go down and ask for it back.”

“They are coming,” the greying haired Raevak commented quietly. A mass of men were making their way up the path, lead by the fur clad, stocky Vačec.

Taenar glanced up into the sky, and then gave a thoughtful grunt. “It’ll be a while before dusk. Let us hope we can hold until then.”

The Vačec were yelling in their harsh language as they slammed into the Maedari who blocked the path. Only two or three men at a time could fight, the rest piling up behind them, pushing them forward. Axes and clubs slammed into shields, resounding clangs echoing above the cries. Spears stabbed, blood flowed across the stony ground and men screamed as they were sent reeling back.

Awn towered over the fighting, bellowing as he turned aside blows with his great bronze shield, spear darting forward to stab again and again at the

milling Vačec.

A man went down alongside Awn, head split open as a bronze axe buried into it. Awn slammed his shield into the Vačeci's face. The man staggered back, dazed, into his companions who pushed him forward again. Awn's bloodstained spear flashed forward, ripping through the man's throat. He fell, thrashing, dark blood pouring from the wound.

Fresh warriors stepped up to replace the fallen in the vicious, scrappy fight going on, trampling over the dead and wounded and the path became slick with blood. Time and again the two groups slammed into each other, pushing, shoving, stabbing and hacking.

Then the Vačec broke, retreating back down the path in the face of the Maedari resistance, leaving their dead and dying littering the path, some sobbing in pain, others crawling back down the path.

Awn leant on his spear, breathing deeply, surveying the scene. There was fresh blood on him from a dozen minor nicks and cuts.

Taenar joined him, blood on his brow from where a slash had caught him.

"Nasty place for a fight," Awn commented.

Taenar nodded wearily. "We have five dead," he told Awn, "And another dozen wounded. We are lucky that they sent the Vačec in first, but once the Chelosians attack I do not think we can hold long." Palidas arrived, handing a water skin to Awn. Awn drank a few mouthfuls then handed the water skin back.

"It may not come to that." Two Chelosians were coming up the path, their shields and weapons left behind, and heads bare. "They come to talk."

For unto them came the Chelosians kings. Surrender or die was the choice they offered unto the stalwart band, surrender or die. Brave Awn boldly laughed and fear was struck into the hearts of the kings, for they crawled away, cowered by his might. Yet brave as they were, their only hope was to resist until the coming of the King.

One of the two approaching Chelosians was the injured Kiriastas, favouring his uninjured leg as he climbed the winding path.

"You have fought well," he told them when he arrived, sitting down on a boulder to take the weight off his leg, thick bandages wrapped around it. "Alastros has admired your courage, yet points out the futility of further resistance. You are few in number, with no where to go and no supplies."

"We can hold out for a while," Taenar stubbornly pointed out.

"For how long?" Kiriastas asked him. "A few days? Until we pour our men up here to overcome you in bronze and blood? There is no honour to be had in that. It is futility."

"And what does Alastros suggest?" Taenar asked.

"Lay down your weapons and shields. You can continue to live on your lands, to work the fields, but Alastros will rule here and you shall be his subjects."

Taenar scowled at the suggestion, shaking a finger at Kiriastas. "We are

Maedari. We shall never be subjects of the Chelosians.”

Kiriastas sighed at Taenar’s belligerent attitude, massaging his injured leg. “Some of your people in the north have done just that.”

“Bah,” spat Taenar. “Haekari. They deserve not to be called Maedari.”

“That is your final answer?”

“It is.”

Kiriastas shrugged, rising to his feet again. “We shall return in the morning, to see whether the night has cooled your belligerence, brought you to your senses.”

“I doubt it.”

“Then I fear that this is your last night alive, for which I grieve. Farewell Awn. It was an honour to have crossed spears with you.”

“Take care of yourself, Kiriastas,” the tall man replied.

“You think we can hold out until the king arrives?” Awn asked Taenar after the Chelosians had left.

Taenar shook his head. “Not really. But it is better this way than to be slaves of the Chelosians.”

“They will remember us.”

Taenar chuckled wryly. “Will they? Taenar and Awn at the Hathaear. It is a nice thought, but I can not see the Chelosians remembering it for any great reasons.”

“We shall just have to win, then,” Awn told him.

The night was cold, a chill wind blowing down from further up in the hills and across the exposed ledge. The night’s sky was shrouded, no stars shining through the clouds. The Maedari huddled on the ledge, trying to find some warmth. There was no wood for fires. Few of the men could sleep, and for those that did, it was a fitful, drowsy sleep.

The following day was heavy on their thoughts, for they knew what was coming. There was no escape, only a battle they could not win, a battle in which they would sell their lives at a high cost.

“Brothers,” Taenar had said to them as evening fell, “Darkness is coming and night falls, our last night. These Chelosians seek to take our lands, our homes. Our families. To make us slaves to their whims and desires. This cannot be allowed, must not be allowed. If we are to die here, then let us show these Chelosians how true Maedari die, show them that while the Maedari live that they shall be opposed, until the Night Wolf comes with bloody vengeance. My brothers, let us make such an end that for ages to come the Chelosians will tremble at the mention of Rath Arn. My brothers, for Maedar!”

Spears had pounded on shields and the chilling howls and cries of the Maedar had risen into the darkening sky in response.

Awn had been the first to rise in the morning, before even the sun had shown itself. He walked around the ledge, between slumbering men, trying to drive out the cold that had seeped into his limbs.

He could see a few fires burning below, scattered across the darkened plains, marking where the Chelosians lay. Further sources of light could be made out in Rath Arn, evidence the Chelosians had moved in.

Taenar soon join Awn, grunting as he surveyed the fires.

“Was I a bit hasty last night?” he asked Awn quietly. “Should I have taken their offer?”

“That is why you are the chief and not I, to make those decisions, but in my mind, no, you were not. If they were just raiding, sure, but that isn’t what they are here for. They are here to take our lands, and not just our own, but our neighbours. We have no choice but to fight.”

“You are right. Still,” he began then simply shook his head as he studied the view.

It was still early when the Chelosians came, a wall of shields and spears that solidly marched up the path towards the waiting Maedari. Once more two Chelosians came forward, unarmed to parley with them, though Kiriastas was not one of them.

“Will you surrender?” one of the pair demanded, stabbing a finger at them. “If you resist you will die, but if you take up oaths to Alastros your lives will be spared.”

“That is no choice,” Taenar replied calmly. “We would rather die as free men than grovel as slaves.”

“Then so be it. You have sealed your fates.” The pair returned to their own lines. A brief discussion was held amongst them before the Chelosians resumed their inexorable march. Awn gave Taenar a tight grin before striding to the front of the Maedari position on the narrow path.

“Come to me Chelosians!” he bellowed at them, holding his spear high. “The Night Wolf is upon you!”

There was a loud cheer from the Chelosians and they surged forward, running at the defenders. Shields went up and the two opposing sides crashed into each other, shield to shield. Neither side swayed as they pushed, trying to force the other back. Spears sung as they jabbed between shields and men went down, blood and screams painting the path.

A spear glanced off Awn’s thigh, his foe overextending. He slammed his bronze shield into the man’s face, blood flowing freely as the nose broke. As the Chelosian staggered back another spear darted forward to strike him and he fell, gurgling as blood frothed at his mouth. Another Chelosian stepped forward over the body to continue the fight.

The attack ground on and slowly, step by step, the weary Maedari were forced back despite their valiant efforts to hold the path. Even Awn, with all his prodigious strength and indefatigable endurance, was forced back, soaked by sweat and blood. A sword had slashed across his chest and the blood flowed freely from it. Palidas had managed to pull him from the lines, fresh warriors taking his place, long enough to bandage the cut and give him a sip of precious water.

Taenar joined him, breathing heavily. His helmet was gone and there was a fresh cut over his brow, the blood matting his hair.

“How long?” Awn asked.

“Not long now,” Taenar replied wearily.

“Hate for the king to miss out on all the fun.” Awn commented with a wry grin. “He always turns up late, have you noticed?”

“Perhaps you can ask him why that is, uncle,” Palidas replied.

“What?”

Palidas pointed back down the valley where. “There.” A large group could be seen, making their way down the valley, dust kicked up in their passage by the dozens of chariots that spread out before them.

“But that’s impossible,” Taenar spluttered. “It should be days before they should arrive, and with so many.”

“Let us not question it,” Awn replied, taking up his spear and shield again. “We can ask how he did it after the Chelosians are beaten.”

And so it was that with great fury did the Maedari King fall upon the Chelosian. They were ridden beneath the wheels of his mighty chariot, while the giant Awn sallied forth from the impregnable heights of the Hathaear to visit upon the foe his own response, in blood and bronze. In that battle did step forth warriors not of the Maedari, warriors not even the mighty Awn could match in size; the bullmen of the hills.

A low spur ran out from the northern hills, obscuring the path through them from which the Maedari king and his army had travelled. The Chelosians had set neither guard upon it, nor troops upon the spur, intent instead on reducing the remaining defenders who still infested the Hathaear. It was only when the chariots swept around from behind the spur,

thundering across the valley that the Chelosians were made aware of the army coming towards them.

“Where did they come from,” Alastros screamed. His face was a rictus of horror that unnerved the commanders clustered around him. Moments before they were discussing plans for when the remaining Maedar in the hills were reduced, but in a moment those hopes were dashed.

“It appears from the north,” replied a burly man who wore a dark beard streaked with grey.

“That is impossible,” Alastros protested, watching as the clouds of dust kicked up by hooves and wheels and feet grew larger, closer.

“What do we do now?” another man asked. Alastros didn’t answer, eyes locked on the approaching doom. “Sire?”

“Back, back to the beach!” Alastros’ voice was thick with panic. The commanders exchanged worried glances. “Back!” The panic getting the better of him, Alastros ran for his chariot, intent only on reaching safety. All around Chelosian warriors were becoming aware of the approaching threat, the response of Alastros heightening the concern.

“Hold, hold!” another voice bellowed out. “Stand your ground Chelosians.” Kiriastas hobbled forward. “Hold! If you run you will be defeated. Only by standing firm do we have a chance.” He approached the bearded Chelosian. “Skanaos, you will have to command. Alastros has lost his head and my honour prevents me from taking part in this fight.”

Skanaos nodded, brows furrowed as he watched Alastros lash at his horses, his chariot bounding away heading for the beach. “Achalos, Lachanon, take half the

men north to block the Maedari. Melator, pull back the men assaulting the heights, but continue to block the path down from now. Stranois, the rest we will leave with you as a reserve. I hope we will not be forced to retreat, but if so we will need you to lead the way.”

There were ragged cheers from the Hathaear as the Chelosian attackers broke off their attack and slowly retreated back down the path. Many had died and not one of the weary defenders had escaped injury, yet they had survived.

“That’s right, go and run,” Awn roared, shaking his spear at them.

“I hardly think it was our doing,” Taenar said with a wry smile, before moping the mingled sweat and blood upon his brow.

Awn gave him a broad grin. “No harm in taking a little credit for it.”

Palidas hobbled over, trousers torn and legged gashed from an errant Chelosian spear thrust. Dried blood caked the leg and stained the trousers.

“How is the leg?” Awn enquired.

“Just a scratch,” Palidas replied.

Awn raised a brow. “Your mother is going to have words with me.”

Palidas gave an amused smile. “More than likely.”

“The King is starting his attack,” Taenar observed, pointing down below to where the two sides were closing. From where they stood, it had appeared that the Chelosians had been on the verge of breaking at the appearance of the King, and indeed one chariot had sped away, yet someone had steadied them and reacted, organising warriors to face the approaching Maedari. If

they had fled, the chariots would have been able to ride them down as they streamed across the plain, and only by holding could they prevent a disaster.

The chariots rumbled forward, hooves pounding, dirt flying, bearing down directly on the Chelosians, who waited shields and spears set. Awn, Taenar and Palidas watched as at the last moment the chariots veered away, streaming down before the Chelosian lines, flinging javelins into them, aiming to break up their formations. Again and again javelins were hurled into the waiting men. Most of the javelins were deflected aside by shields, but even from their vantage point they could see Chelosians stumbled away or fall where they stood. Then the chariots were gone, racing back to rejoin the rest of the Maedari warriors. The men from the chariots leapt from them and the whole mass assembled, a long line of men.

“Are those Minotaurs?” Taenar asked, pointing to the centre of the Maedari lines. Awn stared intently, trying to make out the figures despite the distance. They were certainly taller than the men around them, but it was hard to make out who or what they were.

“Could be,” Awn hazarded. The distant Maedari were banging spears to their shields, chanting something that the watching men could not pick out.

Then they charged, a disorganised mass of men streaming across the valley floor to the waiting Chelosians.

“They are,” Palidas confirmed as the Maedari forces grew closer, led by a dozen tall, bull-headed men wielding immense mauls. The two sides collided with ferocious impact, the Minotaurs laying about with vicious abandon, their giant mauls rising and falling, smashing aside shields and men both.

The Chelosians line wavered under the impact, but held, and Awn’s brow

furrowed as he studied the battle. He motioned to a large body of the Chelosians who were held back from the fighting. "That group, there," he noted, "Are liable to be a concern."

Taenar gave a grunt of agreement. "True, but not much we can do about it."

"We could at least lend out support," Awn replied.

Taenar looked around at the men still standing and in a condition to fight, little more than a dozen in total. "We aren't exactly in a position to affect the outcome of the fight," he pointed out.

"It is no reason to sit aside while others continue the fight."

"Fair enough," Taenar replied, picking up his shield. "You'll be the death of me yet, cousin."

"We all die, Taenar," Awn replied simply. "At least if you die this day then it will have had meaning. Nor will the events of this day be forgotten."

"It will not be my name they remember, Awn."

Ravaian, King of the Maedari, pulled back from the fighting, stepping up onto his chariot to get a better view of the flow of the combat. His helm was inlaid with boar tusks, while about his arms were fastened bands of gold in the form of a wolf's head, the eyes sparkling red gems.

The fighting was fierce, yet the Chelosians appeared to be holding from what he could see, except for where the Minotaurs had hit them. He had heard of their prowess, but never seen it first hand. The Chelosians were falling back before the carnage they were inflicting, their great stone-headed mauls smashing aside men with each fierce

blow. The mauls were made of cylinders of carved stone, often with intricate designs upon them, through which a wooden handle ran. They were hefty weapons which even the strongest man would have trouble wielding, yet the Minotaurs had the height and strength to use them to full effect, shattering shields and men with each great blow. Each Minotaur carved his own, the mark of his worth as both warrior and worker of stone. It was at times hard to reconcile their sheer ferocity in battle with the delicate stonework of which they were capable.

"Recall the charioteers," Ravaian ordered his chariot driver, who stood holding the chariot ready. The man nodded and raised a horn to his lips, letting forth a series of loud blasts. Men broke from the fighting, trotting back to their chariots.

"We are going to swing around to the east," Ravaian told them, "Threatening their flanks. We need to put some pressure on them."

The warriors clambered aboard their chariots, and the drivers cracked their reins. The chariots swung around and bounced forward, a mass of them sweeping east towards the sea. Following Ravaian in the lead chariot, they worked their way to the flanks of the Chelosian force and continued on south, taking up a position between the sea and the Chelosian warriors.

The giant monsters, those beasts that walked like men but with heads like those of bulls, crashed their way through the Chelosian lines, leaving a trail of crushed bodies behind them. Skanaos watched as Lachanon tried valiantly to rally his men to halt the relentless onslaught, only for one of the hefty stone mauls slam down onto his head, reducing it to a bloody pulp. The Minotaurs were not unstoppable, for he had seen two go down, but none could stand

against them on their own, and already warriors were backing hurriedly away from them. They had forced a gap in the lines, through which howling pale-haired Maedari warriors were spilling. Skanaos turned to Stranois, ready to order him to move the reserve forward to plug the gap. Movement to the east caught his eye though before he could speak, chariots streaming south to cut their retreat towards the sea.

Then from the south, the Maedari who had been holed up in the heights came charging down the path, led by the giant man with the long golden-red hair who had defied them so long on the beach. It was all beginning to go wrong Skanaos could feel. It shouldn't be, for they still held an advantage in numbers, yet the warriors had been unnerved by the panicked flight of Alastros, and it had only been heightened by the assault of the Minotaurs and the Maedari warriors attacking on numerous sides.

It was the Vačec who broke first, flinging aside weapons to unburden themselves, racing for the beach. For a moment Skanaos thought the Chelosians would hold, but then their resolve snapped. Slow at first, and then in growing numbers they abandoned the fight, fleeing headlong back down the valley toward the beach. Shields, weapons, helmets, anything that could weight them down were cast aside, littering the valley amongst the fallen bodies.

They fled eastward, bearing down on the Maedari chariots. The charioteers hastily slashed at their horses, galloping away for fear of being swamped by the panicked mass. Some, braver than the others, stayed on and fought, but their position soon became hopeless and one by one they were slain or forced to surrender, laying their shields before their vanquishers. They held up the Maedari though, long enough for the routed warriors to outdistance the Maedari warriors who were on foot.

The chariots, once safely out of the path of the fleeing Chelosians, turned and rode after them, racing along their flanks and funnelling them tighter together, driving them towards the beach. To the trees they raced, the Chelosians scurrying under them to seek shelter from the thundering hooves and wheels of the chariots.

Ravaian motioned for the chariots to halt, his own skewing to a stop before the trees. "Best not be blundering around in there with no room to move," he said to his chariot driver. The burly, thickly bearded man nodded in agreement. Under the trees, even a fleeing enemy could be dangerous for a chariot with nowhere to turn.

"We'll head back to rejoin the others. We'll go through in a group down to the beach."

*Upon the sea raiders was visited
great and terrible slaughter, and they were
driven forth into the sea where but a remnant
were able to escape upon their painted ships.
And they gathered forth the spoils of victory,
and piled them high; weapons and armour,
gold and silver beyond counting.*

Awn helped the grimacing Taenar to his feet, one hand clenched tight to his left arm where blood flowed freely.

"How bad is it?" Awn asked.

"Spear went right through," Taenar replied through clenched teeth. "Bind it up before I bleed to death."

A chariot pulled up nearby and Ravaian dismounted, striding over to join them. "Taenar, Awn, I see you survived."

"Only just," Awn replied with a half

smile. "Only just."

"They have fled back to the beach. Best to take the men and see them off before they regroup." He paused. "Will you be okay Taenar?"

"Should be. Should keep the use of my arm too."

"In that case you can take care of this lot," he announced, gesturing to where surrendered Chelosians milled about, "And also gather up the spoils. Coming Awn?"

"Wouldn't miss it. There are a lot of spoils to collect."

Taenar laughed, before he visibly winced. "Don't worry cousin; you will get your share."

They travelled undisturbed down to the beach, through the woods that no Chelosian remained in. The beach had been abandoned, but much of the camp remained. A dozen ships lay still upon the sands, the rest rowing out to sea.

"Not enough men left to save all their ships I see," Ravaian noted.

"Surprised they didn't burn them then," Awn said, bending down to pick up an abandoned shield. He inspected it then tossed it aside, adding to a growing collection.

"They appeared in something of a rush. May not have had the time to torch them."

Awn nodded, watching as a half dozen Minotaurs walked along the beach, blood stained mauls across their shoulders. One, slightly shorter than the others and with a hide of pure white, now splashed with blood, led them. All were daubed with war paint, across their faces and horns. "I did not expect to see any of them here. I did not expect to see you either."

"I had hired a clan to work on a building for me. Best stone workers you can find. When word came to us of the Chelosians, they offered to help and wouldn't take no for an answer. We had heard the Chelosians were planning a raid, a big one, so we had already assembled before they landed here."

"We were lucky you had, though I must say I am a little disappointed you didn't call for us."

"We were going to. As we moved south, we gathered more men. When the ships passed us, I thought we were to be too late, but they landed here instead of further south where we could not have reached in time." He grinned then called out. "Kwaza!"

The white Minotaur turned, before changing direction towards Ravaian and Awn, the other bulky Minotaur warriors following.

"Kwaza Matoba" Ravaian greeted respectfully, "I have not until now had a chance to thank your people for their aid. Without it this victory would not have been possible."

Matoba's ear twitched and then he spoke, his voice deep. "You honour us High King, though I believe you over state our efforts."

"Nonsense. I doubt even Awn here could match your warriors."

Matoba turned to study Awn, and then inclined his horn-tipped head slightly. "You are the one they call Awn the Red?"

"I am."

"We hear you are a great warrior."

"So some tell me, but from what I saw, even I would struggle against a warrior of the Minotaurs." A number of the Minotaurs tapped the ground with their

hooves and Matoba laughed, different from that of a human, but a laugh still.

“High King, we have been discussing the best way to mark this battle, in remembrance of those that fell and as a warning for those who may wish to try again.” He gestured to the headland that overlooked the bay. “We will build there a statue of stone so that all may see it and know of the deeds of this day.”

“That is a worthy suggestion, friend Matoba. We have collected up great spoils from the foe, shields and spears and swords beyond count. We will beat them down and once your statue is complete we shall cover your statue so that it will blaze in the sun like nothing seen before.”

Awn laughed loudly. “I like the idea. But what of the ships?” he added.

“To tell the truth, I had not thought much of them.”

“I have. For as long as the Chelosians have ships, they can raid our lands at will. Why not take these ships and use them ourselves? This bay is suited to house them, so we could sail from here to meet them at sea, or even raid their lands.”

Ravaian stared at Awn then slowly shook his head. “You are mad Awn. Do you know anything about ships and sailing?”

“No, but how hard could it be.”

Ravaian laughed with genuine amusement. “Harder than you could imagine, I shouldn’t doubt. But if you are set upon it, we shall make it work.”

Awn’s grin was broad, even predatory. “The wolves will go out to the sea and the Chelosians will come to know fear.”

Ravaian laughed again, clapping Awn on the shoulder. “Come then my friend, if we are to do this then there will much work to be done.”

So it came to be that upon the high places that looked over the sea a Man of Bronze was raised, a beacon of hope but a portent of dread for any Chelosian who happened passed and saw it gleaming far out to sea. And from beneath its unyielding gaze did venture forth the ships of Awn to visit upon the foes of the Maedar retribution, for the Wolves of Maedar had taken to the seas.

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