



# THE CHOSEN

AERYN RUDEL

“IOSANS,” the dragon said into Kryssa’s mind, naming the enemy rushing through the trees toward her. Their white armor made it seem as if the snow itself had gained animation and sought to strike her down. The Iosans and their war machines—“MYRMIDONS,” the dragon provided—had surprised her with their numbers, but she was confident in the trap she had set.

Thagrosh had warned that the Iosan patrol may have discovered their camp higher in the mountains and if allowed to report to their larger enemy force to the south, the Iosans would return in strength. She had been sent to stop them here. She commanded a full unit of legionnaires and two units of archers. The enemy was more numerous, but her infantry was more skilled and better armored, and the patrol had limited ranged support. She’d already stung them with her archers, harrying the Iosan force from the rear and driving them toward her infantry.

“Battle line!” Kryssa said as she held her spear up. Her legionnaires formed a tight line, their heavy armor making little noise as they turned to face the enemy. Each was armed with a long, slashing blade: a Nyss great sword, a weapon from the days before Everblight. These and the smaller claymores wielded by Nyss swordsmen were an important part of Nyss warrior culture.

“Archers,” she said next, and two units of Nyss wielding compound bows took up positions behind the armored forms of the legionnaires. The blighted warriors moved with silent efficiency, and their heavy bows creaked as they drew them back. The steel arrow tips gleamed in the wan sunlight filtering through the trees. “Loose!” Kryssa said as she brought her spear down.

A storm of black arrows whistled into the charging enemy. The Iosans' heavy armor deflected many, but others found the gaps between helmet and pauldron or the unarmored strip just beneath the breastplate. A number of Iosans fell, but the volley did not stop their advance.

Her legionnaires braced for contact with the enemy, but the Iosan soldiers were not Kryssa's most pressing concern. It was the towering constructs of white-enameled metal and glowing blue runes behind the Iosan line that posed the greatest threat. The names and battle capabilities of the myrmidons were made known to her: their reliance on a mortal controller, the energy fields that protected their metal bodies, and the deadliness of their weapons and mighty fists. This information came to her without words, just flashes of memories not her own. For the first time since she'd taken the shard of Everblight's athanc into her body, a strong emotion came rushing through her connection with the dragon—anger, hot and bright.

Kryssa reached out and touched the cold, receptive minds of her warbeasts: a lithe neraph and two shredders, smaller dragonspawn the size of war hounds. She would use her own strength and that of her beasts to destroy the enemy machines before they could reach her warriors.

She sprinted around the legionnaires, urging her shredders to run ahead of her. They raced by, their enormous maws hanging open as their powerful hind legs churned up the snow. The neraph, huge and serpentine, moved behind Kryssa. Its strength was a tiny echo of the dragon's, a small portion of Everblight's immense power given flesh and form. Its large, eyeless head was locked on the enemy, and its four wings whipped the snow into swirling eddies as it launched itself into the air.

To her left, the enemy had made contact with the legionnaires, and the clatter of steel on steel echoed through the forest. The shredders had reached the first myrmidon, a Griffon, which swung a massive halberd at one of them. It leapt aside, avoiding the weapon. Kryssa mentally pushed both Shredders to attack. Fighting in tandem, one lunged forward and snapped its jaws while the other flanked to the right. Azure light flashed as the beast encountered the myrmidon's power field and fell back, snarling. The power field flickered and failed, and she stoked the second shredder's rage to incite it to attack while the Myrmidon was vulnerable. The beast ripped into the machine's left leg, tearing through the steel with powerful jaws.

Kryssa then sent the first shredder sprinting toward the one Iosan who had not joined the battle. He was shouting commands at his second myrmidon, a much larger Manticore with a pair of scythe-like blades mounted to its

arms. It had been moving toward her legionnaires, but now it turned back as its master saw the danger he was in. Kryssa urged her neraph to attack it, and the beast sped by overhead.

She reached the crippled Griffon. It had killed the shredder but was off-balance, wavering on its remaining leg. Unable to bring up its shield when she launched herself forward, leaping over the myrmidon's halberd, the machine took the full brunt of her attack as she slammed the point of her spear into its chest. The dragon's power added strength to her blow, and blue sparks burst from the sundered steel. The Griffon fell over backward, its body jerking in mechanical death throes, and the glowing runes spiraling across its limbs faded.

She pulled her spear free and charged forward, running at the Iosan controlling the machines. He had killed the other shredder, but the blood pouring down his white armor told her it had accomplished what she'd sent it to do. As she ran toward him he retreated, spell runes forming around his outstretched hand. A bolt of energy lanced toward her, but she did not alter her course. The bolt struck her on the right shoulder, and pain flared through her body. The wound was not mortal, though, and it barely slowed her. She was upon him an instant later, her spear driving toward his chest with all her weight and momentum behind it. The long, barbed head of the weapon passed completely through his body and burst from his back in a spray of crimson.

Kryssa let the Iosan fall, then planted one foot on his chest as he gasped out his final breath. She yanked her spear free and was moving again. The neraph's rage flowed through its connection with her as it slammed into the Manticore, and a pair of bright flashes illuminated the forest as the beast's attacks met and overwhelmed the machine's protective energy field. She let more of the dragon's power flow through her and into the warbeast, blessing them both with Everblight's fiery breath. Bright yellow flames flared to life around their bodies, and as the neraph raked its barbed tail across the Manticore, goutts of fire erupted from the torn steel.

She ran toward the battling titans. She angled to the right, effectively flanking the myrmidon. It had opened terrible wounds in the neraph's hide, and ichor stained the snow black.

Kryssa siphoned away some of the neraph's rage to augment her attack, and her flaming spear licked out to puncture the machine's metal skin. Then the neraph gouged a hole in its chest and pushed its entire head into the cavity, biting and tearing apart the Manticore's inner mechanisms. Flames consuming its frame, the great machine shuddered and stopped moving. It

tumbled backward, an inert lump of torn and burning metal.

Intense satisfaction rushed through Kryssa, heightened by Everblight's pleasure at her victory. She drew in a deep breath and turned to survey the rest of the battle. It was over. Her legionnaires had triumphed, and a host of the enemy had fallen beneath their blades.

She went to count the dead.



The camp was buzzing with activity as Kryssa and her warriors returned, dragging Iosan bodies behind them. Soon the Nyss who tended the spawning vessels converged on the heap of corpses, hooking the bodies with their barbed staffs and dragging them away one by one. The enemy would now serve Everblight in death, their flesh and blood providing the raw fuel to create more warbeasts.

Kryssa left her warriors to find food and tend their wounds and made her way to the edge of the camp. There she found the mightiest of Everblight's servants, Thagrosh, the Messiah, standing on a low rise overlooking the spawning vessels. Changed from his ogrun form by the blessing of Everblight, he loomed over her, the horns on his skull-like head spiraling upward and his vast wings folded against his back. One oversized draconic claw held his immense blade, Rapture.

A pair of legionnaires stood behind the great warlock, and they nodded to Kryssa as she approached. They knew her well; she had served as an officer among Thagrosh's personal escort before becoming one with the dragon. Kryssa moved past them and bowed before Thagrosh.

"My lord," she said as she straightened, "the enemy has been destroyed. Their flesh has been gathered for the spawning vessels, but I lost six legionnaires, twelve archers, and two shredders in the battle." The weight of reporting directly to Thagrosh in this manner made her tongue thick; her orders usually came from Vayl Hallyr. The Messiah had sent her on this mission personally, however, instructing her to return to him once it was completed.

"And how many of the enemy died?" Thagrosh asked, his voice rumbling.

"All of them: more than forty warriors, a sorcerer, and two myrmidons."

“You have done well,” Thagrosh said.

“The victory belongs to my warriors, my lord,” she said. “It was they who crushed the Iosans for the glory of Everblight.”

“You led them. We all saw the battle.” The dragon was in all of Everblight’s warlocks, and what they did was shared. “I saw you destroy the two enemy machines. I saw you use the strength of your warbeasts with the precision of a *ryssovass* wielding his blade. I saw you prevail.”

“I regret the loss of so many warriors, my lord,” she said. “I might have preserved more of them.”

“Casualties are inevitable,” Thagrosh said. “None of the others could have avoided them. The athanc shard in your chest shows Everblight’s faith in you. So I ask again: who destroyed the enemy machines?”

Kryssa was uncomfortable taking credit for this victory, though part of her knew all would have been lost without her. “I did,” she said.

“Who defeated the enemy for the glory of Everblight?” Thagrosh said, leaning forward, his eyes glowing with balefire.

“I did,” she said. “I defeated the enemy.”

Thagrosh nodded. “Do not doubt yourself. Do not doubt the dragon. Our *individual* strengths make him even more potent.”

Kryssa nodded. “I understand,” she said, though she still doubted. She had not received her shard of the dragon’s heartstone the same way as the others. During a terrible battle she had recovered it from the body of a slain warlock so it would not be lost; desperation had driven her to open her own chest and push the glowing shard inside, if only to give her strength to carry it to safety. She had never expected to keep it, to join the ranks of Everblight’s chosen. She was a skilled warrior, yes, but she did not feel ready to stand among those who had come before her.

“Your spear is as lethal as Lylyth’s bow,” Thagrosh said, answering her thoughts. “Your leadership in battle is as valuable as Vayl’s sorcery. You are their equal, even if the task you have been given is different. What holds you from that?”

She looked away before finally giving voice to the doubt that had plagued

her for so long. “I was not chosen as they were,” she said.

“No? Look into Everblight’s mind. Look into the piece of his being you carry within you.”

Kryssa closed her eyes and turned her mind inward to the great presence that was now always with her. The dragon showed her a vision: a vast army of soldiers, legionnaires, archers, and beasts marching across the snow, the world burning behind them. She saw Vayl and all the others at the head of this army, and then the vision tightened to focus on a single individual marching beside Thagrosh, her spear wet with enemy blood, a bright light burning within her chest. Pride and acceptance flowed through Kryssa, a staggering wave of acknowledgement from a power more immense than any she could imagine. She opened her eyes and met Thagrosh’s burning gaze without flinching.

“What does the dragon tell you?” he said.

She spoke without hesitation. “I will lead Everblight’s chosen to victory.”

Thagrosh nodded. “Of that, I have no doubt.”

