

Precious Insights

Yogesh hurtles across the Higher plains, her white and brown hair flying behind her like doves flapping desperately against a storm. Ute rides ahead of her on his auburn mare, his small frame folded forward on the saddle to lessen the air pushing against him. His short white hair whips around his face, the pale scars across his cheeks disguising themselves as white freckles. A savage smile grows on Yogesh's face, she spurs her dark black stallion forward to surpass Ute. She catches a glimpse of his surprise, his red eyes standing out for a millisecond against the green background of the sprawling plains. Yogesh laughs as she zips past him, looking forward to admire the wide open landscape while she leaves Ute in the dust. To her left are colossal effigies of kings and queens of old, as well as the occasional knight that earned the highest of honors. They cast ominous shadows that blanket miles of the plains, darkening the long grass and patches of flowers. She recognizes a few, coming to a stop in front of one in particular. The statue's face is impossible to see from her position hundreds of miles below their crowns, but she knows what he looks like from his portrait in the castle. Every day she would pass it while going to training with Ute and without fail she would take a moment to admire the painting of the old hero. Strong eyes that pierce the soul and a beard braided down to his chest, with hair as white as snow with patches of blond and light brown weaving around in his braided hair, just like Yogesh's. Floraphan the thunderous, a great knight of old, savior of the Northern sceptors. He was a dragon rider, back when there still were dragons. He had ridden his dragon, Aggon, across the Cord Mountain range, to end the great war between the South and the West regions. Yogesh has always wondered if maybe she could be a descendant of the great hero.

Her attention is ripped back into reality as her stallion whinnies with delight. She looks over as Ute comes to a stop beside her, craning his neck to look up at the statue. He's her same

age but is about a whole head shorter, even if they aren't counting the pair of striking purple horns sprouting from Yogesh's forehead. She hates them, but she recognizes they are how she became friends with Ute in the first place. They are both outcasts, Ute with his impressively red eyes and Yogesh with her peculiar horns and abnormal hair color. Both are cursed in the eyes of the common person, and both hope to be more than others assume them to be.

"He never had kids, Yogi," Ute says, abruptly interrupting Yugroshs thoughts once again. Her frown is a contrast to her sparking orange eyes.

"I know, I know. I'm already a bastard, what's the harm in daydreaming about who my father could be?" She asks, shifting in her saddle.

"He died way before you were born, there's no way he could be your dad." He says blatantly, pulling his horse to stop.

"You're such a killjoy," Yogesh pouts, getting off her horse. "I'm not saying he's my dad, he lived like, a thousand years ago or something. I'm just saying I could be descended from him!"

"No, I'm just being realistic," Ute replies as he tosses her a sandwich before spreading out the blanket he packed onto the grass. "I know you like your stories and daydreaming, but... Yogesh, think about it. We're being knighted tomorrow morning. That's only 10 hours away, and once we're knights, you won't have time for fantasies anymore. With the war in the West, political unrest in the capital, and King Baleful of Rorgrish going on a rampage, I don't think you'll have time to daydream. Well, maybe you will, but... Yogesh, for my own peace of mind, stay present. Ok?" Ute pleads, sitting on the blanket as he looks up at her. Yogesh notices the slight tremble in his hands, and the tenseness in his shoulders. He's always been so nervous about things, his hands constantly fidgeting with his shirt or hair. Even now he's twisting the

fabric of his tunic in his hands. Yogesh sighs and sits beside him, leaning back on her hands to look up at the brilliantly blue sky, her eyes shaded from the sun by one of the intimidatingly huge statues that tower into the infinite sky.

“Fine... fine. Maybe you’re right, and I should grow up. It won’t do me any good to daydream,” She says as she closes her eyes, enjoying the feeling of the light breeze in her hair.

“I always am. I don’t want you to get killed by some brute sent by Baleful of Rorgrish while wondering who your father could be,” Ute snaps, causing Yogesh to open her eyes and notice a bead of sweat running down his forehead as he rips a bite out of his sandwich. She raises her eyebrow, surprised at his slightly raised voice. “So far he’s destroyed seven towns and fell Danoria all within the year, now it’s our job to face him and his forces,” Ute rushes to get his words out, leaving Yogesh to ponder on his sudden outburst. Yogesh takes a slow bite of her sandwich, watching her shivering friend anxiously nibble at his food. They sit in silence as they eat, the only sounds flitting through the air are birds, the grass dancing in the wind, and their horses occasionally snorting as they enjoy their lunch. Yogesh breaks the silence after she’s finished her bland sandwich,

“We probably won’t ever have to see King Baleful, let alone fight him. I don’t want you worrying about that,” Yogesh says in a serious tone, putting a hand on his back. Ute sighs, setting his half-eaten sandwich aside. He doesn’t feel hungry anymore.

“I just can’t stand the idea of you dying...” Ute says meekly, picking at the grass.

“I know. But we’re gonna be knights Ute, we’ve been training for this for years. I’ve always known the risk, and so have you. Besides, I’m practically invincible! Remember that one time when I fell off the border wall and people were convinced I died?” She says with a mischievous grin, lightly punching his shoulder. “I didn’t even have a scratch on me. Just a

couple of bruises and a concussion,” she says with a reassuring grin. “It’s gonna be hard to take me out.” Ute smiles a little,

“Hehe, I guess you’re right. That was a pretty high fall too, I was really worried,” Ute says, itching his hand.

“You’re always worried!” Yogesh laughs, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

“I know,” Ute says with a sigh, lying down in the grass. “I don’t wanna talk about you getting hurt anymore.”

“If you say so,” Yogesh says as she joins him, putting her hands behind her head.

“Is sir Kliden still giving you a hard time?” Ute asks, looking over at her. Yogesh lets out a deep, dramatic sigh at the mention of her assigned knight Kliden.

“Of course he is. I’m being knighted tomorrow and he still treats me like I’m fourteen!” She exclaims, throwing her hands in the air. “I can’t wait for the day I don’t need to shine his armor,” she pouts, picking a flower by her side and holding it in front of her face. Ute laughs, looking over at her.

“I’m sorry he’s so hard on you. I’m sure it’s all in good faith though,” Ute says in an attempt to reassure her, “yeah he pushes you, but he never really yells at all or hits you as some of the other knights do to their squires.”

“That’s not the point,” She says, tossing the flower to the side, seeming frustrated. “He never gives me good criticism. All I get are ‘hms’ and ‘ok’.”

“I think you’re pretty lucky, compared to what you could have gotten,” Ute says with a shrug. Yogesh sighs, looking up at some birds twirling around in the skies like ballerinas.

“Ute... you’re pretty worried about that King Baleful guy, huh,” Yogesh says, looking over at him. “You keep fidgeting. What do you know that I don’t? I thought that guy was just

some new uprising that would be dealt with in no time.” Yogesh says as she sits up, looking down at him. He frowns up at her, his cat-like pupils are slits.

“Well... I overhear things, from my knight. King Baleful is becoming more of a threat every day, he’s using tactics we’ve never even seen before. I’ve even heard that he’s found access to the old magic,” Ute says with a shiver, a dark feeling spreading through his bones. Making Yogeshs frown deepen.

“Old magic? Like, back when dragons were still around?” Yogesh asks, feeling the cold that infected Ute grow in her. Worry tingles in her fingertips as Ute nods, confirming that it is true. “That’s... that’s really bad, isn’t it?” Yogesh asks, running a hand through her hair.

“Yeah... yeah, it’s really bad. I’ve heard that we don’t know where he is, either. He could be anywhe-” Ute is cut off by a hand over his mouth, Yogesh grabbing him and motioning for him to be quiet with a finger to her mouth. Ute nods, still looking confused. Yogesh slowly points over the plains and rolling hills, a black wave making its way through a crack in the mountains. The waves of darkness move at an inhuman speed, faster than even the fastest stallions of the pillared valley. Overhead, only a pinprick at first appears a flying creature of gargantuan size. Yogesh can only guess what it could be...

Ute scurries over to his horse, clambering onto its back. Yogesh does the same, sprinting over to her horse and slinging herself onto the saddle. Yogesh spurs her stallion forward with the command word, the dark stallion screaming with delight at the thought of battle as it bolts toward their outpost. The wave of darkness crashing towards it, making quick progress.

“Wait! Yogesh, what are you doing?” Ute shrieks, causing Yogesh to quickly pull the reigns to her now annoyed and confused stallion to stop. It snorts and stamps at the ground, glaring at Ute.

“Ute, what are you doing? We need to go! They’re going to attack the outpost!” Yogesh shouts in retort, about as confused and annoyed as her horse.

“No, are you crazy? Yogesh, we need to hide! That’s King Baleful, it’s suicide trying to fight him!” Ute shrieks, his horse prancing anxiously. Ute looks terrified, sending a spark of pity through Yogesh. She feels a burning flame take seed in her chest, and she furrows her eyebrows at her friend before looking at the wave of darkness. The dragon overhead has gotten closer, its massive wings rhythmically moving up and down as it slinks toward the outpost.

“You can hide. But I’m gonna fight or die trying,” She says, pulling the reins around and kicking her stallion forward. He rears, and bolts were guided, whipping his head around with glee at the thought of battle. Yogesh leaves Ute in the dust, expecting him to follow, as he always has before. But he doesn’t, Yogesh alone ripping across the plains towards the outpost where other knights and squires are waiting and preparing for battle. She can only imagine their fear at the sight of the dragon. She wonders if their hearts are also racing in terror and if their souls are also screaming at them to run. To hide from the demon that approaches, guiding the dark waves coming to wipe them out. She roars, encouraging her courage to take the place of fear.

The overpowering scent of smoke and death overpowers her senses as Yogesh tramples soldiers bearing the crest of the enemy, her powerful stallion crushing skulls beneath his hooves. Her stallion screams as he kicks and bucks, his heart swelling as bones are shattered under his mighty hooves. Her stalwart warhorse roars as he is slammed in the chest by a spear, Yogesh rolling her landing, and grabbing a fallen soldier's sword. Her amber eyes spark as she moves with the momentum of her fall, slashing off the arm of an enemy soldier. The enemy soldiers don’t even look human. Maybe they were once human, but they’re not anymore. Their muscles

are too large, their eyes just a little too big, and instead of talking or shouting they make horribly gutterly noises. She ducks under an attack, lunging forward to drive the sword into a beast's chest. Blood splatters across her hands and face as it shrieks and falls. Taking her sword with it. She quickly slides over to the body of a fallen knight, taking his sword, figuring he wouldn't need it anymore anyway. "Rest well Adam," she mumbles, seeing the knight's face. He was a good guy, quiet, but a good guy. She roars, throwing herself back into the fray of battle. She feels one of her purple horns grabbed and she shrieks, barely able to wrench her head away as an axe comes down. Scraping off the tip of one of her horns, she rolls away. Crouching as she looks at her attacker, preparing to spring forward and drive her sword ferociously through an enemy's chest. Instead, she is immediately frozen by fear, ice running through her veins and locking her in place. Standing before her is a tall figure, clad in black-plated armor and shrouded in a deep purple cloak with golden embroidered designs. Resting on his head is a crown of immeasurably black horns that fade to purple at the tips. His sword drips with red gore, painted by blood and mud. Human heads and scalps are tied to his belt, swinging around as the terrible king impales an approaching night to his right, his eyes staying trained on the young woman before him. Around his belt are more horns, a rainbow of colors. Some still have dried blood at their bases. Beside him is a small figure on a horse with dazzling red eyes, a look of shame twisted on his pale features. A blazing brand glowing on his forehead, the same brand emblazoned on the back of the terrifying man's hand.

"Ute!" She roars, fear pounding in her chest. She's not sure what the marking is, but she doesn't like that he's beside the monster of Rorgrish. She swings at the figure, who easily blocks. Stepping toward her, unfazed by the weak attacks. Time seems to stop for Yogesh as she watches him take his helmet off, feeling unable to lift her sword. Her hands tremble as King Baleful

reveals his purple horns sprouting from his forehead. Realization hits her like a battering ram as the horrible king throws his head back in a cruel laugh. . .

“No, no!” She screams, unable to believe that this monster is her father. The king chuckles darkly as he returns his helmet to his head. Yogesh looks at Ute and sees shining tears spilling down his face, his lips trembling as if trying to speak. Yogesh heart races as she grips her sword, the dark dragon flying overhead. It sprays liquid fire over the wooden shelters, lighting them ablaze in a glorious inferno. She feels like she’s in a nightmare, unable to move as she sees the king raise his axe over her head.

Sir Kliden roars as he slams into the king from the side, his sword glancing off of King Baleful’s slick black armor. His axe barely misses her, snapping Yogesh back to reality as Sir Kliden’s blade clashes with Baleful’s axe, sending sparks flying! Her feet move before she can process what she’s doing, and she joins her knight in battle. Slashing and cutting at her father, who seems unphased. To her astonishment and fear, he seems to be having fun as he fights his two opponents. Surrounded by fire and blood.

Yogesh screams as a sword is sung into her arm, lodging itself in between her armor and digging into her flesh. She turns to face the new attacker and sees a pair of bright red eyes staring back at her. Tears falling down the pale face, Ute pulls his sword out of her arm.

“Kill her Ute! Take it’s horns!” Baleful roars with a laugh like a lion's growl. Yogesh stumbles away from him, her eyes wide as she tries to comprehend why Ute would do this. She raises her sword, attempting to deflect as she sees Ute lunging forward with his sword. He easily knocks her sword away, her wounded arm spasming. Yogesh roars with pain as his sword barely misses her head, slashing across her face. She feels hot blood start to pool down her face as she

nearly loses her footing. Kliden slides in front of her and slashes at Ute, his eyes ablaze with determination to protect his squire.

“No!” Yogesh shouts, watching Ute fall, a large gash in his chest. He gargles on the ground, thrashing in agony. Yogesh is forced to look away, barely deflecting an attack from King Baleful. She grunts as Sir Kliden picks her up, making a run for it. The pain in her arm and face shrieks at her, the adrenaline numbing it less than she had hoped it would. “Stop! Sir Kliden stop we need to go back, Ute is back there!” She screams, kicking and thrashing as he runs through fire and crumbling buildings. He nearly slips on blood as he ignores her protests, silent as he attempts to lose King Baleful in the forest. Yogesh knows he won’t stop. She looks up, her eyes locking with King Balefuls. He stares at them as they leave, a building crumbling behind him as his dragon lands by his side. It picks up Ute in its mouth as King Baleful laughs at them as they run from him.

“I’m going to kill you!” Yogesh roars, her voice cracking.

“Arise, Dame Yogesh; knight of the order of Frothin,” Kliden announces, placing the tip of the sword on either of Yorgrishs shoulders. She stands, bandages around her face. Kliden stands before her, one of his arms tightly wrapped and hung in a sling. Around them is a group of 18 knights of Frothin, survivors of the attack on the outpost two days ago. None of them came out unscathed. Yogesh thought that this moment would bring a sense of pride, which she still does in a way, but now there’s a deep set of rage and despair. Her best friend isn’t beside her, earning his sword. She takes the sword from Sir Kliden, and the two bow to one another. The knights around them erupt in cheers, and Kliden pulls the surprised Yogesh into a hug.

“I’m so proud of you,” Sir Kliden says to her, pushing her back by the shoulders to get a better look at her bandaged face.

“Thank you,” She says, the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. Sir Kliden pats her on the back and pushes her into the crowd to receive her congratulations. Despite the celebration, everyone can feel it; the sense of dread and sadness filtering through the joyous crowd. Many died and King Baleful is still rampaging across the Gorrin Isles. Yogesh looks down at her new sword, her grip on the hilt turning her knuckles white.

‘I’ll save you Ute. I’ll get you back,’ she swears, gliding her hand across the pristine metal blade, ‘and I’ll kill my father. He will not have my horns, and he will not have you.’