

PROLOGUE

November

Desolation. Gray earth trod beneath boots on the march, snapped trees waiting for the flames. And soon, the victorious emperor knew, there would be that fire. There always was. Often enough, he brought it, but even when he didn't, it arose. After every battle, something burned—as if the universe followed some unwritten protocol that conflagration should be the epilogue to carnage. It was even more reliable than the crows.

Castle Korstull was taken. The mighty emperor figured he'd lost, at worst, one man in twenty. He'd known it would be so. Tonight, he would sleep on the sheets of a fallen prince, and the only cost had been a week's planning and the blood of men he did not know. If the victory had meant anything to him, he would've called it a bargain.

When had conquest lost its luster? Was it just the ease, or was it something else? The glorious emperor stared into the flames of the torch he bore in his left hand, the famed artifact he had christened the Torch of the Burning Sky. Since the day he had acquired this strange token, born a century before in miracle and catastrophe, he had never lost a battle. It was as if he'd forgotten how.

He feared his own restlessness, and was all the more frustrated to realize that this was about the only thing he feared. What would the mere ache for challenge drive him to? The inscrutable emperor had begun to calculate the betrayal of his oldest ally, and whether it was out of strategy, ambition, or boredom, he could not tell.

That ally, of course, planned to turn on him first. There had been no intelligence of such an act, but it went without saying. His ally went by the unlikely name of Shaaladel, and if the invincible emperor had forgotten how to lose, Shaaladel had forgotten how not to betray.

The all-knowing emperor's foresight fatigued him. He'd spent the final hours of many brave men's lives hoping for some surprise—a sudden ambush, unexpected reinforcements, even a mere change in tactics—that might lend the least excitement to this clash of nations. But like the planets in their courses, his enemies plodded, unwavering, along the path he had laid out to their defeat.

Fate's arsenal had been emptied, it seemed, and no ordeals remained to try the blessed emperor. He had conquered Sindaire tonight, a nation that had already been his in all but name, for no better reason than that they had given him an excuse. Soon, he would test himself against his other neighbors—Ostalin, Dassen—but knew that they would fall just as quickly. He wondered what he'd done to anger the gods before his birth, that they should curse him by giving him only a single world to conquer. Perhaps, he mused, he should avenge himself on the heavens. He peered up through the gathering cloud-rack and contemplated this, until his view was obscured by a high-vaulted arch passing overhead. He trained his gaze forward now, as the warhorse he sat upon ambled through the yawning entryways of the castle.

Built to resemble the maw of some great beast, the front gates of Castle Korstull had impressed the magnificent emperor when he'd first seen them, but he had raised palaces of his own in the decades since. Now they looked to him like nothing more than the hastily assembled sets of some Wayfarers' comedy. He remembered what Leska had told him before he'd left, that some young bard in Ragos had penned a play about his life, probably in an attempt to earn his patronage. He'd laughed at the folly of that, yet he found himself wondering about it now, about how such a play might begin, about what soliloquies this crowing upstart had written into his mouth.

Would there be a scene of his childhood, a half-orc raised among backwoods highlanders, tribesmen who wandered the mountains of the North, having no land to hold as their own? How many acts would it take him to carve out a nation for his kin, how many trumpets and alarums as he turned it into an empire? Which of his enemies would be judged worthy of their own death scenes, which allies would rhyme couplets after his dramatic exits? He was certain Shaaladel would be some handsome scene-stealer, declaiming regally on the nature of their fragile peace as they debated the rebellion in Gate Pass, with no hint of the craven schemer beneath the regal façade. And surely Leska would be cheated of her rightful prominence, as misunderstood by a grasping playmaker as she was by all the rest of his subjects. They all looked at her and saw a frightful mask, unaware that the creature behind that grisly visage was far more human—and more terrifying—that they could have imagined. Leska should've been the subject of a play, he thought. She had all the makings of a tragedy, while he had none. His play would be boring, the legendary emperor decided. After all, he always won.

As soon as he dismounted his horse, he was frightfully attended. Inquisitor bodyguards in their horrific masks and blood-spattered lieutenants with word from General Magdus fell in step behind him as he walked. Within a few moments, they had ascended to the throne room, where he took his dinner and dispatched orders. The throne room and the royal bedroom adjoining it were appropriately princely. They were festooned with tapestries, murals, and other palatial regalia. When the castle was built, these rooms had been prayed over by priests for three days. It was said no one could enter these rooms against the will of the one who sat upon the throne. The great emperor was unimpressed. He placed the Torch of the Burning Sky in a ruby-studded scone, scraped his boot against the corner of the throne to remove a clump of gray mud, then sat down and called for the leaders of the force that had resisted him.

Hoping their deaths would provide some distraction, he ordered their executions on the spot. He watched attentively, eating stew from a brass tureen, as his bodyguards went about their work. Inquisitors all, trained in the art of torture by Leska herself, the men of his personal guard sensed the dread emperor's apathy, and stretched their imaginations to make each prisoner's end more entertaining than the previous one. But this soon descended into farce and common vulgarity; he grew listless again. He called for wine from the castle cellars and sat in silence, drinking the 50-year

old vintages straight from the bottles. Before long, he grew lethargic, and announced that he would retire.

All but a handful of his guards bowed deeply and left. The remaining three would stand outside his chamber as he slept. The immortal emperor extinguished the torch as he pulled it from its sconce and walked towards the bedroom, yet he stopped before the door, turned to one of his guards, and began to speak. He said, "I am more weary than I ever knew a mortal or immortal man could be. This world of half-men and vain posturing, this age of sheep who masquerade as lords, diminishes in my eyes by the day. I thought the gods would not long tolerate ambitions such as mine, but like a pack of beaten whores, they offer not defense but more accommodation. Everything that I once coveted turns stale. I grasp the fruits of conquest and each morsel tastes of ashes in my mouth. In seven months, my pennants could cast shadows over all the nations of the known lands, and yet this spent and whelping bitch they call the world cannot, for all my ravaging, yet birth a cur whose sharpest fangs don't break against my skin. When I bid you to kill those men tonight, I found myself searching their eyes for signs that, in their fatal throes, their dying souls might glimpse another realm, a realm that better suited me. But I saw none. Did you see anything at all?"

The inquisitor, Darius, stared for a long time into those wild eyes, dumbstruck by this strange and sudden candor. In the end, shamed by his lack of a proper answer—or any answer at all—the bodyguard merely shook his head. Somehow disappointed, and knowing himself a fool for it, the doomed emperor walked away without a word and locked his bedroom door behind him. His name was Drakus Coal tongue, and his curse was to be the most powerful man in the world.



The General of the Emperor's First Army camped far from the castle that night. He did not eschew the comforts of the stronghold he had seized out of some sentimental desire to sleep in the same conditions as his soldiers. Even in the field, he had a larger tent, better food, assistants to see to his needs, and finery on which to rest. He simply felt like here with his troops he could get things done, and in the castle he would be up sending messages all night. General Magdus was a practical man, and from the camp he could run his army better.

Yet for all his practicality, he was superstitious. Soldiers were like sailors that way, spending so much of their lives subject to the whims of fate that they sought signs of good and bad luck, not out of imagination, but out of fear. And the general did not like the clouds racing above his head tonight.

A storm brewing would be trial enough. Trudging through rain and muck was enough to demoralize even disciplined men. But these low black clouds moved faster than the wind, it seemed, as if intent on their destination. And they all seemed to be congregating in one place. The black thunderheads billowed highest directly above Castle Korstull. And they were not traveling, but remained stationary, whirling in place like water down a drain.

It was clearly an ill omen, he decided. Magdus was practical enough to grant fortune its place in his calculations. He gave orders to increase the frequency and size of his patrols, and told his adjutant to wake him half an hour earlier in the morning. All the confidence his victory had afforded him was melting away, and he was left with a deep unease. There weren't enough soldiers

between here and the sea to give his army a moment's worry, but who could say what trouble the raging heavens might bring him? As he put his head down to seek sleep, the general was reminded of a strange saying he'd once heard from an old sergeant. "You can conquer a land's people; you cannot conquer its gods." He didn't know if he believed that, or even what it was supposed to really mean, but he did believe this: if the heavens were angry, tonight someone would be paying the price.



Darius saw the other two bodyguards die before he even knew they were under attack. The murder in the peripheral vision to his left he barely saw. It was just a smudge of motion that made a wet sound before it was over. But turned to his right as he was, he caught his other comrade's end. He saw the last half-second of a man stepping from the shadows in the corner, as if walking out of a door, slashing the guard's throat with a curving black blade and receding as swiftly and stealthily as he'd come.

Hefting his mace, Darius drew in air to shout, but there was a sound like a thunderstrike and a sharp pain as something lashed across his adam's apple. He saw a woman in the doorway—had it opened just now or had she been there all along? She yanked the handle of a whip, and he found himself pitching forward, his throat burning and constricted. Her weapon had him by the neck, and he struggled to keep his feet as she pulled him towards her.

Helpless against the tight constriction of his windpipe, he struck out wildly with his mace, bludgeoning the air. The woman was rushing towards him—or he was hurtling towards her—and for a split second he had the incongruous realization that she was beautiful.

Yet the colors of her hair and skin were wrong. Had she dyed them? Something knocked the mace from his hand. Her face came at his. What was happening? Was she head-butting him, was she going to bite him? Had the Emperor been attacked by lunatics?

Still choking, he felt her lips on his. A kiss. Her mouth was warm. Was he awake? She tasted like blood.

When she released him, there was something in his mouth. A grainy liquid, it tasted the way violets smelled. He felt the whip slip from around his neck, and realized the woman had already moved past him, towards the Emperor's bedroom. He spun, looking for his mace, but the world kept spinning when he stopped, and he crumpled to the ground. This was no dream. He'd been poisoned.

When he recovered his breath, he finally called out. There was a clatter as the Inquisitors from the waiting chamber rushed in, but of the attackers he could hear nothing, until the din of clashing blades arose. His vision was too blurry now to see who fought or who fell.

The poison moved through Darius like a shiver. Helpless, the world dimming around him, he thought of the Emperor's question, hours before. Would he see a better world now, he wondered, in what had to be his last moments?

But there were only shadows moving in the blur. Now, as before, Darius could see nothing.



It was instinct that awoke him. There was someone in his room.

The Emperor's reflex was to spring from his bed and find a weapon, but as soon as he had opened his eyes, his torso exploded in pain. He went to move and found himself pinned to the bed. He looked down at his chest.

Someone had driven a stake through his heart.

Another man would have panicked. But Coaltongue had faced death many times before, and while he was alarmed, he could not help being curious. He looked around the room, but saw no sign of his attacker. None of his generals would've pulled this off, not with dog-loyal Magdus, the best of them all, camped so close. Shaaladel would've planned something more intricate, more unnecessarily complex, something he would've seen coming. Leska?

His hands had found the stake—everything was harder now, it seemed, with his heart not pumping blood—and tried to summon up the strength to pull it out at once.

Then, from the shadows, an aged face, dyed with ashes. A black scimitar, edged with smoky diamonds, arcing at his throat.

Him? Coaltongue thought. Of all the enemies I have in this world? Him?

The blade fell. Staked to the bed, the emperor could not roll out of the way, and his arms were too weak to pull it out or block the blow.

The pain of the beheading was not much, he found. Far less than that of being stabbed in the heart. He was less conscious of the blow itself than of the cold air on the insides of his neck. Completely severed from his body, Coaltongue's head rolled over to the left side of his pillow.

His head was still alive, still conscious and bewildered. From the angle at which his head had fallen, he could see a second assailant, her hands lifting the Torch of the Burning Sky from the wall-mount where he'd left it. They were thieves as well as assassins.

The Emperor heard sounds of swordplay from the room outside. There were at least three of them, then. It was all starting to make sense. He even knew how they would make their escape. Suddenly, he became very tired. It seemed to happen all at once. He tried to rub his eyes, but obviously could not, and this simple fact provoked in him a very acute distress.

He was falling asleep. There was no preventing it. The Emperor of Ragesia had gone down without a fight, without even a sword in his hand. In other circumstances, he might have laughed.

As oblivion claimed him, he thought, I have to hand to it to the Fates. This, I did not see coming.

Then there was a sudden pang of regret, disappointment that he would not be there to see the cataclysmic change his death would wreak, the conflict. This, he thought, would've been a world worthy of me.

Then, blackness.



Magdus couldn't sleep. It wasn't just the turmoil in the heavens, he knew. He was a life-long soldier, hardened by decades of warring, yet he often found himself sleepless the night after a battle. The images of slaughter in his memory needed time to fade, and until then they haunted his mind's eye like fever-dreams. He had not attempted to purge himself of this frailty. He thought, perhaps, it made him better at his job.

He threw on a tunic and his boots, and grabbed his cloak on the way out of his tent. His walk through the camp was

punctuated with crisp salutes and the occasional "Sir." Troubled as his mind was, he tried to return them all.

The general jogged up a pebble-strewn path up the side of the canyon to a look-out point. No bodyguards accompanied him, though the men stationed outside his tent had reported his sudden departure to their officers, who noted it but bade them only to sit out the remainder of their watches. Their general was a private man, and they'd grown accustomed to his frequent need for solitude. They did not worry for his safety. After all, Sindaire had been conquered.

At the top of the rise, Magdus met the watchmen he had posted here and gave them permission to stand down and start a fire. The wind had teeth at this high above the camp, and he wished he'd brought furs instead of just a cloak.

The sky looked just as angry as before. The clouds were no longer in motion, but perched threateningly above the towers of Korstull, the obscured moon barely silvering their edges. There was neither lightning nor rain, but the thunderheads seemed to pulse like black hearts beating in the firmament.

Perhaps he had overreacted to this suspected omen. The night, it seemed, was passing quietly. There were few lights from the castle windows.

In his life, he had heard many tales of signs before catastrophe, most unheeded until after the event. Here in Sindaire, just before the first time Ragesian armies had crossed its borders, prize royal horses had fought each other like baited dogs, with the winners eating those they killed. They said a lioness had whelped in the streets of Kistan the night the first Khagan of Ostalin had passed away. Fifty years before, the day before the First Dasseni Civil War had begun, there had been an eclipse of the sun. Certainly, a strange formation of clouds was not so dramatic as these.

Then, Magdus realized what each one of those strange portents had in common, and all at once his blood ran cold. Each one had heralded the death of a king.

As if in answer to his realization, lanterns began to flare in the distant windows of Castle Korstull. From this far he could not hear cries of alarm, but the general knew at once that his instincts were far more than paranoid superstition.

He shouted to the nearby watchmen, "Sound an alarm! Run down to the camp, now, and tell your Captain to take a detachment to the castle at once!"

The men blew their horns, then rushed down into the canyon. Magdus remained, watching the castle. In close succession, three flaming arrows were fired from the battlements, a signal. His fears had been confirmed. There were attackers in Korstull.

The lights in the stronghold's windows were being answered by torches being lit in the camp below. If it were an assassination attempt, there was little he could do from here, but he would mobilize his forces and be prepared to hunt the would-be murderers to the ends of creation.

Hoofbeats on gravel echoed across the canyon, and Magdus saw a clutch of his officers riding up to meet. Adjutants brought his horse and armor, and—he was grateful—heavier garments.

The general hurried to dress and mount his horse. The armor could wait. All of his captains, just jolted out of bed, began to ask questions at once. He quieted them quickly and began to dispense orders.

A yellow-orange light suddenly shone across the assembled faces. Magdus turned to see that the roof of the castle had erupted into a rising column of flame.

The officers stood in silence, mouths agape. The general clenched his jaw, enraged, calculating.

"Prepare for a siege," he called out, not taking his eyes from the fiery pillar atop Castle Korstull. "We have taken this castle once today. We may have to do so again. Tell your cavalymen..."

Magdus never finished his order. The ominous heavens, already roiled with rage, opened up and gave the general a sign no man could disbelieve.

Above Castle Korstull, the sky began to rain fire.

December

Snowflakes fell fast that New Year's Eve, too fast, racing at the earth like falling stars. Watching it come down like that, it was easy to believe what they were saying in the east, that such a punishing winter had to be the retribution of an angry god.

Gate Pass's skyline seemed to sag beneath the mantle of snow. The city huddled between the mountains, looking wary as a beggar in an alley, tucking in under a white blanket and wondering where to turn for a friendly face. Its streets were thick with slush, barely foot-printed. Rumors of war must have been keeping even the drunks at home.

The usual all-night parties and intoxicated revelry weren't spilling out of doors this year, and the folks who were celebrating seemed to have all picked their tavern early in the evening and stayed there. Some cities capered and caroused on the eve of war, a final riot in the face of destruction, but tonight, in the Free City-state of Gate Pass, the celebrations seemed muted, solemn, almost funereal. The city was dark, the waning moon only a thin silver splinter, and there weren't lights in most of the windows. Even a few inns had closed their doors at sundown.

Washing a glass, Viv Finner looked out the window of her closed-down, boarded-up pub and saw the snow still piling in the streets. It would be a long walk to her brother's house tonight, she decided, so she had better hurry.

The Poison Apple Pub was a dive, but a popular one. A shabby, low-class establishment in one of the poorer districts a mile from the West Gate, it had a coterie of devoted regulars and reputation for not watering down the drinks.

Everyone knew the man who owned the place, Trehan Finner, was a magus. They knew it as much from the twinkle in his eye and his perpetual smirk as they did from the fact that he could put a rowdy customer to sleep with a handful of dust. But no one seemed to mind. Most Gate Passers didn't trust magi as a group, but just about everybody who knew Trehan Finner liked him.

When the City Council announced they hoped to appease the approaching army by handing all of the town's users of magic over to the Ragesian Inquisitors—the ruthless mage hunters known locally as the Scourge—in order to spare the town conquest by the Ragesian army, few people complained. But when the city guard came for Finner, the pub's regulars were in an uproar. All over the district, everyone who knew the man could be heard loudly decrying the unfairness of it all.

Everyone, that is, except Trehan's wife.

Viv Finner did not cry when she found out her husband had been taken, nor did she panic. Instead, she quietly bundled up her children and took them to her sister-in-law. She told her eldest to be brave, and to take care of his brother, and told both her sons she might not see them for a little while. That done, the suddenly husbandless mother of two headed down the Emelk Way to the Chapel of the Aquiline Cross. She walked right up to the curate,

announced she knew the Chapel was a Resistance safe-house, and asked how she could go about joining.

After hours of Viv's refusals to leave or take no for an answer, the curate, a Knight of the Aquiline Cross named Buron Watcher, finally said that if she really wanted to help the Resistance, they did need a private place to meet a contact. Viv already knew Torrent, who was an occasional patron of the Poison Apple, and she volunteered her pub for the meeting. But if the priest had hoped that contributing her family's place of business for the night would be enough to satisfy Viv, he was disappointed. On the way out of the temple, she stopped and said, "After the meeting, I'll be back for another mission."

Though her pub was closed, she had taken the meeting so seriously that she'd gone back and cleaned it up until it was as nice as it had been the day she and her husband bought it. Every glass was polished, every corner swept, even the rags were washed and bleached. Viv imagined brave fighters of the Resistance coming here, making plans to fight back against the monsters who had taken her husband away. Such champions, she had determined, would get the best of everything if she could help it.

Finishing the glasses, Viv stole a glance at the melting candle she had lit when she'd started and realized how late it was. Time for her to get going. She planned to be long gone before Torrent arrived. She bundled herself up against the cold, lit a lantern, blew out her candle, and let herself out the backdoor.

On the way out, she paused and looked around the lantern-lit interior of the pub. Had she done everything? Was it all be suitable?

Then she remembered what kind of place it was. It was local watering hole, not much to look at, but tended with love by its owners and loved equally by its regulars. People came here to laugh, to cry, to recollect, to tell ludicrous stories to old friends and hear their approbations or derision. They didn't come because the wood was polished, they came to drink with people they liked and trusted and share with them the joys and woes of being alive.

It was, she decided—as she locked the door and vanished into the snow—a perfect meeting-place for heroes.

