

KNIGHTS
— *of* —
ARALIA

Book I: Remnants of Light

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Sauragia

Journey to the Red Mountain

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KNIGHTS
— of —
ARALIA

Book I: Remnants of Light

J. S. Allen

For my mother.

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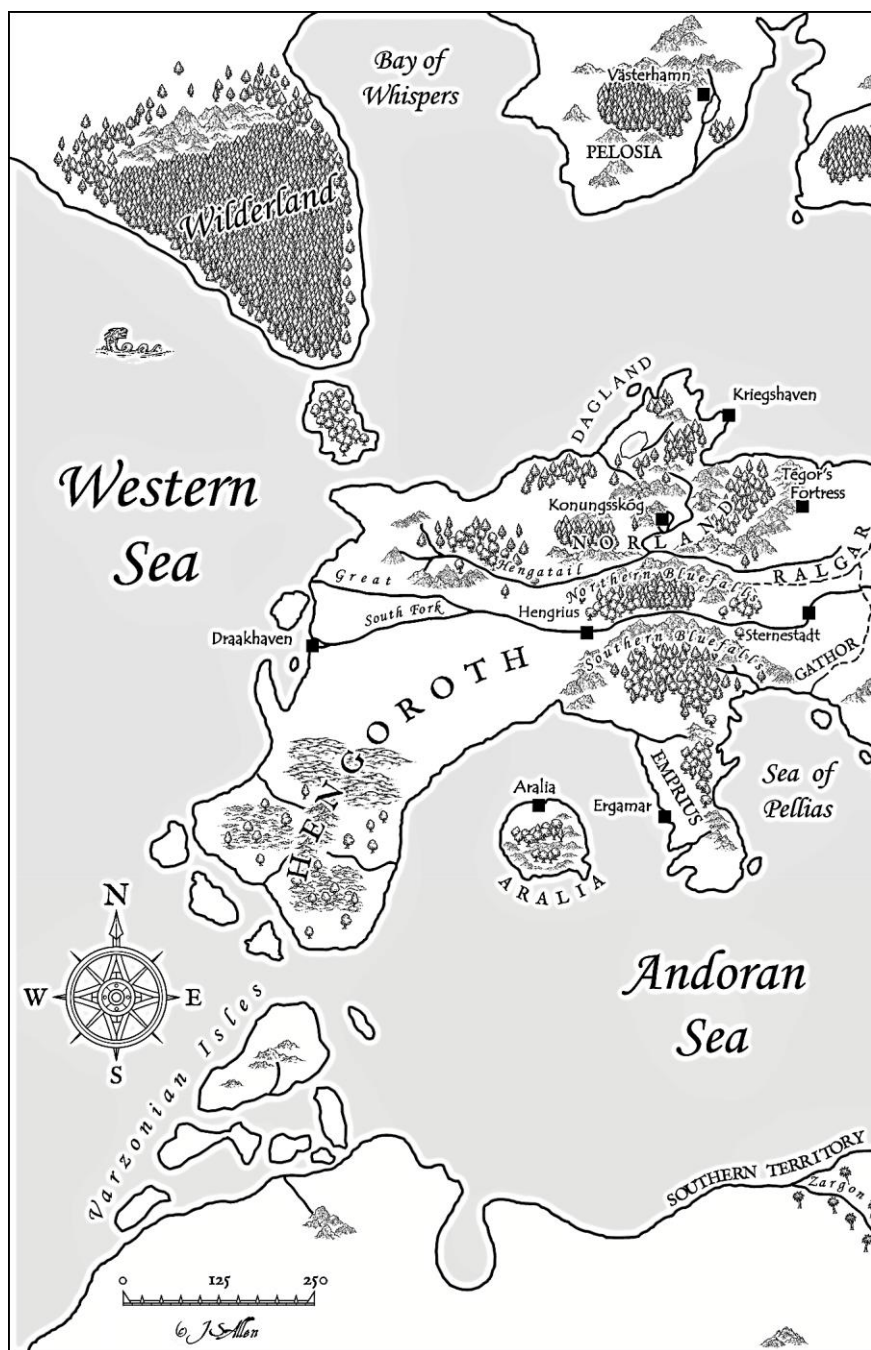
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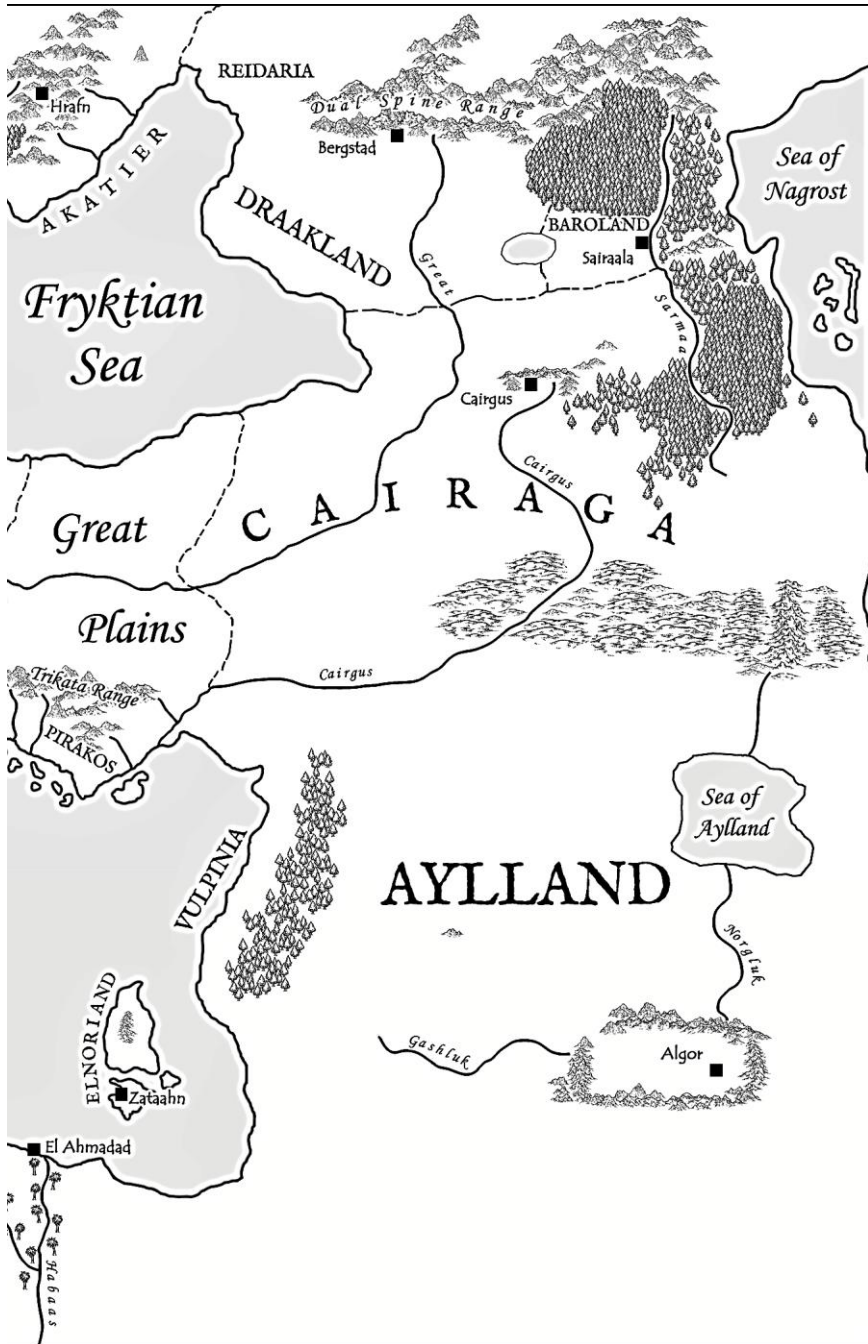
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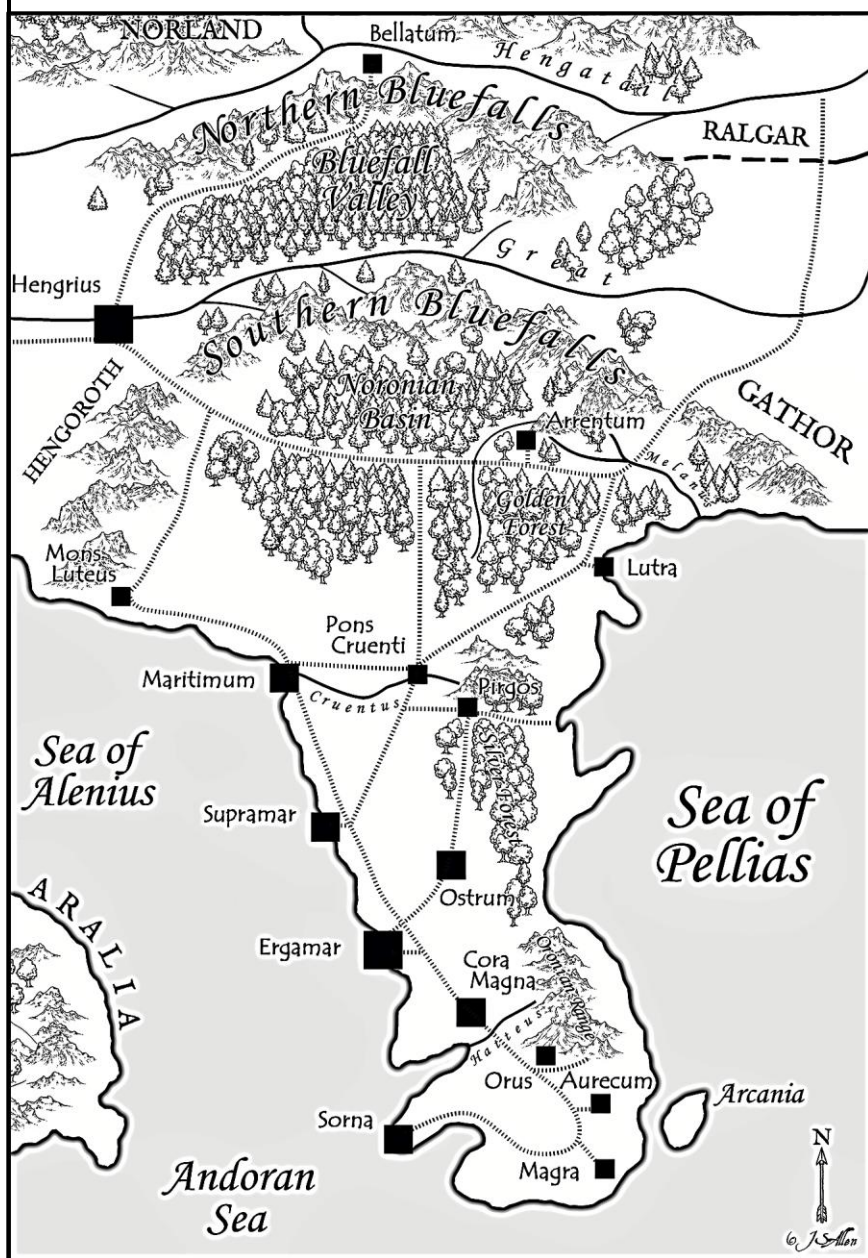
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THE REPUBLIC OF EMPRIUS



THE KINGDOM OF ARALIA

Sea of Alenius



Andoran Sea



G. J. Allan

Prologue

The smoke of burning timber choked the air as the great fire raged in all directions, instantly disfiguring everything it could wrap its fearsome coils around. A crackling cacophony echoed in the eardrums of the soldiers as they swarmed through the ancient streets of stone below, driving them to the brink of madness with its tremendous power. The mightiest claps of the thunder in the oncoming clouds a hundred times over could not have rivalled the volume of this inferno. Yet, Fordain hardly seemed to notice as he gazed down into the brilliant swirl from the rooftop. It wasn't possible, he told himself. It simply wasn't possible. But there was no denying what he had seen with his own eyes.

A sound then came from behind—a voice? A fiery gust of wind? A trick of his own confused mind? What was it? Time slowed and Fordain's senses failed him. As the flames crept up to consume the weakening structure on which he stood, he could not help but find some wry amusement that things should end in a way so very alike to how they had begun....

Chapter I

The Burning

“Father! Come look at this, quick!”

Ólund rushed to the side of his son, Amon.

“See there? Riders!” Amon went on, pointing toward the southeast road.

They were joined at once by Fordain, Amon’s elder brother by a whole ten minutes. He cast his gaze in the direction indicated by Amon and tried to discern the supposed horsemen from among the blurred colours of the fast-approaching twilight. Sure enough, there were shapes there, silhouetted against the forest by the fading daylight. Even with his less keen eyesight he could tell they were Imperial soldiers, based on their outlines and ordered manner. Yet, something about their uneven gait and hurried approach struck him as off. The dread gnawing at him expanded into an uncomfortable mass within the pit of his stomach, and his muscles tensed up instinctively. Something was not right.

Ólund had likewise been studying the oncoming shadows. He counted eighteen...nay, twenty total. The emblem on their armour looked right—an Imperial Eagle with wings outstretched. But it was the wrong colour. It was not gold, but white. His heart sank.

“What is it, father?” asked Fordain.

“The spawn of a demon,” he muttered without explanation. “Back to the house. Hurry!”

The three of them hastened toward the little farmstead just beyond the outer fringe of the village and ran inside without bothering to close the door. Thora, the boys’ mother, met them in the sitting room.

“What’s wrong?” she asked with the twang so common in this region.

“Horsemen. Raiders!” exclaimed Ólund.

“Primus Emprius?”

“Yes. Caltha must have fallen.”

“But surely they’d have warned us!”

“Only if any escaped.”

Thora breathed deeply and nodded solemnly. She embraced first Amon, then Fordain with remarkable calm.

“I’m sorry it must end so soon, my dearest sons. But alas, farewell. Be brave in the days to come.”

She then hurried away toward the rear of the house. Fordain and Amon found themselves looking this way and that, seeking desperately for a chance to ask the countless questions running through their heads. But there simply wasn’t time. Ólund turned to his sons.

“Flee toward the edge of the forest,” he told them. “Find a place to hide along the ridgeline and stay there. If you are spotted, make for the trees. Whatever happens to us or to the village, do not come to our aid. Not even if our lives are threatened. Keep yourselves concealed. Is that clear?”

Fordain nodded despite his confusion.

“But...”

“No backtalk, Amon! If we fall, someone must escape to warn others of our fate.”

Amon nodded too, and Ólund took a good last look at his sons before patting each warmly on the shoulder.

“I could not be prouder of what you have become,” he said with a flicker of a smile. “You will bring great honour to this tribe and to our people someday, I know.” A cry rang out from the village. “Now go!”

Fordain obeyed and made a hasty exit, Amon trailing reluctantly behind. Ólund watched them go and shook his

head in what could only be described as awe.

“Arden guide you both,” he muttered before grabbing his old military gear from its place of display near the mantel and running to join Thora.

The two brothers shot out the back door and made their way south across the field toward the lane. They crossed the road and sped on up the hillside. Though he had always been swift, Fordain could not remember a time when he had run so far so fast. The tall, rough grasses opened up miniscule lesions as they whipped across the ruddy brown skin of his feet and legs. He came to a dip in the ground just thirty paces away from the forest’s edge and jumped into it, motioning for Amon to join him. The boys lay prone upon the ground, propping themselves up slightly on their elbows so they could see what happened below. Two large, fang-like rocks protruding upward from the grass further obscured their forms from view.

For several tense minutes they watched, side by side, as the riders came up to the settlement. One would hardly know they were twins, different as they were. They had the same stormy blue-grey eyes, bronze skin, and dark blond hair, but there the similarities ended. Amon was a bit taller, bulkier, and by most accounts the more handsome of the two. Fordain was not quite as striking, but was leaner and lithier than his counterpart. In their attitudes, however, they were worlds apart.

By now the rest of the village was aware of the riders’ approach and reacted accordingly. Some attempted to flee across the open fields only to be stopped and led back by horsemen on the outer flanks. A brave few armed themselves for a fight. Some were ex-soldiers like their father, and so wore their old armour for the occasion. The rest were naked in the manner of a people to whom cloth was neither abundant nor requisite to modesty. But most merely cowered in their homes, hoping for the trouble to somehow pass them by.

The soldiers rode in at a slow canter from two sides, and while their arms were not yet drawn, one could hardly mistake this for a friendly social call. Another group came up along the southeast path escorting several enclosed wagons. Fordain counted himself and Amon very lucky not to have been spotted, having just crossed that path a moment before.

A final group of horsemen then came around on the south side of the village, completing the encirclement and making sure no one else escaped. The more courageous villagers stood in a cluster at the centre of the settlement as the soldiers halted at a sign from their apparent leader. When his men were in place, the lead rider spoke as one who had given the same speech many times:

“Hail, good people of this village Rodinia! In the name of the New Senate and its leader the Emperor, you have been liberated from your oppressors by the Primus Emprius. From this day forth you shall no longer serve the wicked and depraved men of the south. Men who have so long held your people in contempt as savage barbarians, rather than fellow citizens. Instead, you shall join together with our noble leaders in the New Senate and their glorious cause to bring peace, order, and justice to this Republic of Emprius and to the world. As a token of our appreciation and sincerity, we bring much-needed provisions. For your own good and protection, we must ask that you and your families come out of your homes to allow us to take a proper inventory so we may distribute these supplies equitably. We thank you in advance for your cooperation.”

“And gladly do we cooperate!” came a shout from among those gathered. A short, unkempt man with black hair and a blacksmith’s tabard stepped forward.

“Ergos, you traitor!” exclaimed Fordain quietly.

Amon merely grinned smugly, as though no words were

necessary to prove his side was right here. For it was well known that he, like many in Rodinia, sympathized with the rebellious Primus Emprius in spite of their father's strict stance against it.

"We ought to go down and join them too," he suggested, though neither made a move to do so.

The blacksmith, who was in fact the ringleader of the pro-rebel faction, continued:

"Long have we toiled for what we believed to be the greater good of Emprius and a better future for our people. But instead we have only served to make a few wealthy men in the central cities even wealthier. Men who come to our isolated corner of the map to help themselves to a cut of our labour, then turn a blind eye to our plight and heap scorn upon us for the rest of the year. We will gladly serve alongside the Imperator in his quest to reclaim what is ours by right!"

The lead rider nodded ever so slightly.

"And a welcome addition you shall be to our cause, good smithy," he said. "Let all those who would stand by us willingly come to this side."

About half of the villagers went over to stand beside the Primus Emprius without question.

"Be warned, the rest of you may suffer severe consequences should you remain defiant."

"Your threats do not sway us, Captain," responded Ólund, whose appearance in uniform was imposing despite his age. He had lost very little of his musculature over the years, and his voice still echoed of his days in command of an entire cohort. "We of the Noronir may not have much left to our name, 'tis true. But we have enough to survive, and we owe our souls to none but our creator. We are content to remain under our own governance, even if these others are not. Let them join you if they will, then begone! You'll have neither our bodies

nor these lands that are hallowed by the bones of our ancestors, whatever you and your traitorous New Senate might say.”

“You know not of what you speak!” said the leader in as forceful a tone as he could muster. His modified Imperial helmet gave his voice a metallic resonance that was impressive given his diminutive stature. “We serve the true line of Emprius. Those who labour every day in the hope of a better tomorrow. Those like yourself, good chieftain. Join us, and you need not spend your days toiling for the profit of others merely to keep these lands which are, as you say, rightfully yours.”

But Ólund stood his ground firmly. “I know perfectly well what I say. Anyone who would impose his will upon others under threat of force is a tyrant, however noble his ambitions. We are Noronir, yes, but we are likewise citizens of Emprius. And it is written in the constitution of this Republic of Emprius that we shall resist such intent in like manner if necessary.”

He drew his short sword and raised his oval shield. At this cue, the remaining villagers raised their weapons, however primitive, in defiance of the interlopers. The officer’s tone changed accordingly.

“Very well. Then you will die like the loyalist rats you are. We cannot help those who will not help themselves.” He addressed his command. “Execute the armed dissenters. Leave the rest unharmed.”

At this order, several soldiers dismounted and closed in on their quarry, weapons drawn. The foremost one, wielding a short sword, approached Ólund as if to jab him. As he acted, however, he found himself swiftly flung onto his back, disarmed. Ólund then finished off his grounded attacker. A fearsome melee ensued, in which a number of villagers and soldiers alike were felled. Ólund and Thora were at the very heart of this conflict, warding off blows from every direction and countering with a few of their own.

The two brothers watched from atop the ridge in awe. They had known their father and some of their neighbours were well trained in the art of warfare. But the idea that their mother, so kind and soft-spoken on most occasions, could wield a blade so effectively was a complete shock to them, even if she had once served in the Home Defence Legion. Fordain felt his heart quicken as he watched the spectacle of battle unfold for the first time in his life, and had to fight the instinctive urge to run down and join in even unarmed as he was. Yet, he forced himself to remain here and watch, wondering if Amon was beginning to share his sentiments about the rebels.

Even without the advantages of horses, armour, or abundant weapons, the Noronir offered up strong resistance. Yet, the leader of this raiding party did not seem at all concerned, having brought reinforcements aplenty. As a few more went down, he waved in another group of horsemen. These ones came forward armed with bows and began unleashing volleys into the defiant peasants. With ruthless efficiency they cut the number of villagers resisting dramatically, leaving a few isolated individuals to take on the whole lot by themselves. Soon Ólund and Thora were the only two remaining, and the Imperials closed in on them with overwhelming force. Ólund evaded a couple of thrusts aimed at his uncovered feet, then countered with a slash to one attacker's leg. Ere he could do more, the others had joined in the contest and piled onto him, puncturing with spear and sword alike until he writhed no more and fell lifeless to the trampled, bloodied earth. It was a gruesome spectacle, yet Fordain could not but watch it all in horrified fascination. Beside him, Amon also watched, though his expression gave away nothing.

Thora tried to join in, fighting with words as well as weapons, but her insults were cut short by an arrow from the

company's archers. She lurched back and fell to her knees, gasping for air. As the leader drew his sword and walked over to finish her off, she managed to say with her last ragged breath, "Long live the Emperor!" The leader then ended her pain quickly and efficiently.

"Brief live the fools who defy the march of progress," he said, wiping his blade off before replacing it in its scabbard. He heaved a bored sigh. "Now then, let's have some order around here. And get Ebro back on his horse."

But no sooner had two soldiers assisted their wounded comrade back to his mount than another ruckus broke out. It emanated from the direction of the mill and the house attached to it. Heavy smoke was drifting out from the windows, and the newly widowed miller's wife stepped out bearing a torch in each hand.

"You win the battle, but you won't have Rodinia!" she cried. And with that, she hurled one torch across the street, where it landed on the roof of a house. It caught as only dry thatch could. She touched the other to the eaves of her already burning home, then tossed it onto the nearby blacksmith's forge.

"No!" cried a horrified Ergos.

"Stop her!" ordered the raiding party leader. They promptly riddled the miller's widow with arrows, but they hadn't noticed her eldest son run around behind the buildings setting roofs ablaze as he went. Fordain smiled bitterly at the boy's audacity until he, too, was brought down by a volley.

"Put those fires out!" cried the leader frantically. "Now!"

Villagers and soldiers alike scrambled to fetch water from the central well, but the flames were already far ahead of them, abetted in their destructive path by a westward shift in the wind. Soon just about every building was alight and glowing brightly. It wasn't long before the officer threw down the cloak

he was using to try and dampen down the fires out of sheer frustration.

“It’s too late!” he cried. “We’ll just have to rescue what we can.”

Panicked villagers ran around trying to haul out what furnishings and valuables they could from their dwellings while a rider sped away up the southeast road. Fordain gazed upon the unfolding chaos in anger and utter perplexity. How could something like this possibly happen? What had they done to merit such desolation? Neither question could he answer. He cast a glance at Amon, who as yet showed no emotion, though he could not yet tear his eyes away from the spectacle.

Several more wagons then came rolling down the southeast road, each pulled by a pair of bulky workhorses. They stirred up a lot of dust as they trotted to a halt in the centre of the village where the bodies lay strewn about. With Ergos advising them on who the loyalists were and weren’t, the soldiers rounded up the survivors, binding the limbs of the former and tossing them none-too-gently into the backs of what appeared to be prison wagons with barred windows. They then went back to salvage what they could from the flames. The collaborating Rodinians stood by and watched with evident glee as their loyalist neighbours finally got what was coming to them, tempered though it was by the loss of their own property. They had said this day was coming, but the fools would not listen.

A few Primus Emprius troops sank to stripping the corpses of anything useful, both Noronir and their own. Fordain shook his head in disgust as the leader himself inspected Ólund’s sword and scabbard. The blade, though still sharp, was far from new, and the scabbard somewhat tatty from all its use in the old days. Nevertheless, the Primus Emprius was not a

choosy organization when it came to their equipment, and he passed it to a subordinate to load up with the rest. With this, the soldiers finished stacking anything of use into the wagons, then looked to their leader for orders.

“May as well throw them in,” he said, indicating the corpses that were once the parents, friends, and neighbours of Fordain and Amon. “It’ll save us the trouble of burying them.”

This was done, and the soldiers said a collective prayer consigning their fallen comrades to the flames. They remained rooted in place for a moment afterward, transfixed as the whole village was consumed by fire, then looked to their mounts.

“Such is the fate of any who would bar the will of the people!” proclaimed the leader before turning back to his own horse. Fordain was now alight with fury on the inside. Red mists gathered before his eyes, tempting him to charge forth and attack the enemy while they were distracted. The scent of burning hickory and the wails of several villagers infused him with a violent and vengeful rage that was difficult to quell. For though they had not started the fire themselves, these soldiers were nevertheless the cause of it. Their very presence was an affront to him.

He fought hard not to lose his sense of reason, grasping tightly the circular amulet that had hung around his neck for most of his youth as though seeking guidance from the souls of his ancestors to whom it had belonged. What, he asked himself, could he do against so many foes at once, unarmed as he was? He would end up just like his father or those villagers in the backs of the wagons. But reason had an uphill fight in one of his bloodline. Then came the final straw.

A sonorous whinnying erupted from the family barn as the wind carried the flames to its roof. The officer gestured wildly at the structure, though his words were lost in the bedlam.

Soldiers came rushing toward the commotion and Fordain's heart nearly froze. Solus was his family's one and only remaining horse, a remnant of the line his mother's family had brought with them from their home country several generations ago. He hated the idea of Solus perishing amidst the flames with everything else, but wondered if it might not be a better fate than service to the Primus Emprius.

They entered the barn. More whinnying followed, and Solus burst forth into the open air, several soldiers hot on his heels. The mighty steed was giving them no end of trouble. As two tried to rope him from the front, he reared up and delivered a crippling kick to one, dodging the rope of the other. With more closing in, though, the horse didn't stand a chance, so Fordain did the only thing he could through the haze of fury clouding his senses.

Ere Amon could stop him, he stood straight up and shouted at the soldiers to "Leave him alone, you cowards!"

The momentary distraction was enough. Solus stamped and snorted angrily, then took off towards the woods to the north as fast as his powerful legs could carry him. A couple of soldiers made a pretense to give chase, but were checked by their leader.

"Let him go," he ordered. "That one's a Ralgarian. We'll never catch him. Get those two up there, quickly!"

Fordain watched with simultaneous pain and satisfaction as his family's horse—the one destined to belong to him in a matter of days—disappeared into the shadows of the distant trees. But of more immediate concern were the three riders coming straight for him and Amon.

"Come on! To the trees like father said!" urged Amon, tugging at his brother's arm.

Fordain obliged despite his instinct to stand and fight, and took the lead in their flight. They were nearly to the trees when

Amon tripped upon a rock and fell. He quickly sat up and began rubbing at his ankle.

"What is it?" asked Fordain, kneeling beside him.

"My ankle. I think I sprained it."

"Well, come on, mate. They're closing in."

Fordain made to help him up, but Amon shook his head.

"You go on without me."

"What? No!"

"Go on, Fordain! Get out of here, or they'll catch you too."

Fordain could see he was right. The riders were nearly at the top of the hill. With a deep breath, he nodded.

"I promise I'll come for you."

Amon shrugged. "Whatever. Now go!"

Fordain hurried off into the underbrush. Not a couple seconds later, two of the horsemen stopped to take hold of Amon, who did not even pretend to resist. Fordain did not see what happened next, as he was too busy running from the third. In the forest, he was sure he could lose a mounted man easily. All he needed was a proper place to hide. He was not as familiar with these woods as he was with the ones to the north, so he had to do a bit of searching. Eventually, he decided to simply climb one of the trees whose spring growth was further along than the rest and wait there.

The rider worked his way through some of the clearer patches, but eventually it grew too dense for further pursuit. He stopped to scan the foliage one last time, then turned back to join his comrades. Fordain waited until the sound of hoofbeats died away completely, then began to work his way back down. He had to get back and see what was going on in the village. Not that he could stop it, but it might provide some useful information nonetheless. Had he kept his mind on the present task, he would have noticed the next limb was too small to support his weight.

Crack!

A whirl of leaves was all Fordain saw as down he went, twigs prodding and scratching his body along the way. To the ground level and farther still he fell, as though the very earth had opened up to swallow him whole. He had not the chance to take in more ere his head hit a protruding tree root and darkness enveloped his sight.

Chapter II

Destiny's Call

Ethereal visions and sounds flitted through Fordain's mind. There were voices shouting punctuated by women screaming, and the echo of battle in the air. He caught a glimpse of Solus, the hated Primus Emprius eagle, and flames. Everywhere tendrils of fire dancing about madly and reaching ever upward. Then out of the fire emerged a single figure, followed by two more. He could not see their faces, and their forms were unfamiliar to him.

The fiery forms twisted violently about, finally coalescing into a single all-encompassing shape. It was the shape of a very large tree with a twisted tangle of branches. It was an awe-inspiring sight: a golden tree glowing brighter and brighter against the black miasma of his subconsciousness until Fordain sought to shut his already closed eyes against its burning intensity. Then a voice spoke from the darkness:

“Waken, warrior! Arise and seek thy destiny.”

At once the vision faded, then all was calm once more.



When he awoke, Fordain's world was still dark, though not quite so much. As he opened his eyes and sat up, he quickly remembered everything that had happened and felt the bump on the back of his head. It was sore, but thankfully he came from hard-headed stock. He could barely see the earthen walls surrounding him, but felt them well enough with his hands. There was that accursed root! But it was also a decent hand hold to help him stand up.

He looked up and saw leaves rustling gently in the breeze above through the wide pit mouth. It must be near dawn, he

sensed from the moisture in the air and the faint purple glow in the sky. The pit was not that deep, and thanks to the many roots enmeshed in the walls, climbing out would be relatively easy. So, after investigating every side for the best hand and footholds, the youth hauled himself out onto the forest floor. The warm, gentle breeze aboveground was refreshing compared to the cool, stale air in the pit, and helped him recover much faster.

He sat on the edge of the pit for a moment as he tried to get his bearings. This place looked very different in the pre-dawn dark, but his general sense of direction remained intact, whack to the head or no. And so, heaving a sigh and touching his amulet, which was thankfully still there, he rose and made for the forest's edge. It didn't take but a couple minutes to emerge into the open, where his last hopes that perhaps the nightmare from the day before had been only that were dashed for good.

The inferno had by now died down to nil, and the village of Rodinia was reduced to smoking heaps of blackened timber on the valley floor. The inhabitants and soldiers alike were long gone, of course. But then he heard a grunting noise from behind and froze. Had they come back for him as well?

He gathered his courage to turn around, and gasped with surprise.

"Solus!" he cried, patting the familiar beast's nose with more joy than such a reunion would have ever brought most. But the thought that he still had at least one friend in the world was a massive comfort given the circumstances, even if that friend could not respond to his uncontained sobs.

"Oh, Solus! They're gone, my friend. We're all that's left. What are we to do now, eh?"

He knew he would look a complete fool to any casual observer, had there been any about, but he didn't care.

Somehow, burying his tears in the familiar white coat assuaged his troubles more than anything else could. Only after a moment of this bittersweet reunion did it occur to him how miraculous the stallion's return was. He had always been very attached to the horse, and Solus had always returned his affection in kind. Perhaps the good horse had actually sought him out?

Either way it made no difference, he supposed. At least he was no longer alone. So, wiping the last of his tears away on his dirt-encrusted wrist, he decided to go down and investigate the ruins of his former home. He led Solus down the gentle slope and across the lane as the first rays of sun crept over the treetops to the east, then stopped in the centre of the still smoldering rubbish heaps. He could hardly believe that this had been the place where he had grown up. Where the blacksmith's had once stood—and the miller's, and the carter's, and the baker's—everything was naught more than piles of hot, smoking ash. He paused momentarily and again wondered why.

As he walked past the fire pit at the village centre, Fordain thought back to the countless celebrations he had seen there over the course of his nearly sixteen years. Weddings, harvests, and more had been joyous occasions for the entire community. Had the mid-spring festival really been just a couple weeks ago? What a nice time everyone had had, though he had objected strongly to the dancing bit as usual. Had he only known then...

He shook his head to clear it of such wistful musings, but was once more tormented by the question of what to do now. He was free of any obligations he had once had to friends or family, for what it was worth. And with his horse, he could finally explore the world beyond the peaks of the fabled Bluefall Mountains to the north. At last it was within his grasp

to see with his own eyes those miles and miles of rolling grasslands known as the Great Plains, home to the finest riders and most exquisite horses in the world—Solus’s kin. Perhaps he could even make it all the way to the High North, the ancestral home of Humans and Reptilians alike!

And yet, now that he was free to fulfill his lifelong ambitions, he no longer desired to try. He just wanted everything to go back to the way it had been before, and scolded himself for even trying to find hope amidst a sea of despair.

“Probably wouldn’t get far anyway if the Primus Emprius are taking control of the whole region,” he muttered bitterly to himself.

Thus, he considered his other options. He knew how to do a bit of woodworking from his father, and he knew how to raise things. Looking over the fields, which had remained miraculously untouched by the raiders, he supposed he could rebuild a smaller shelter for himself and Solus and carry on farming. After all, the land technically belonged to him now that his parents were dead and his brother gone, although the papers to prove as much were destroyed in the fire. The Primus Emprius would remain a threat as well, but it was all he could think of for now.

Then again, perhaps he should go and seek shelter with another tribe. As the message runner for his village for the past three years, he knew all the Noronir settlements for miles around: which ones were loyalist, which ones in rebellion, and which ones were neutral. The Falonians to the west had always been especially friendly to the Rodinians. Their chieftain, Dagrund, had more than once offered him a warm bed for the night on his overland journeys to deliver messages. And he had a very pretty daughter besides. Yes, perhaps he would go and stay with them while he decided what to do next.

Solus gave him a quick nudge and a soft whinny.

“What is it, boy?” he asked, stroking the creature’s muzzle. “Thirsty, are you? Well, we’ll get you a drink, then.”

He spotted the horse’s water trough, which had been overturned but undamaged, then thought better of it. Why fill up the trough when he could let Solus fill himself?

“Come on, mate,” he said, mounting the horse. He rode a little way into the forest to the north where the stream ran through and stopped. He allowed Solus to drink his fill, then took a drink himself. It was only then that he realized how filthy his hands were—his whole body, in fact. There, at least, was one thing he could fix.

Fordain removed the amulet from around his neck, but hesitated briefly before setting it aside. It was made of pure silver, and its thin chain threaded through a small loop at the top. An intricate design was etched delicately into the slightly convex surface and accented with black. Though faint from head on, when one looked at it from an angle, it appeared to be the image of a rough circle within a triangle with wavelike scrolls on the sides. A light scratch marred its otherwise burnished surface. But most importantly, it was the only link he had left to the family now gone forever, the meaning of which he could only guess.

Finally, he hung it on a tiny tree limb, wrapping the chain around a couple times so no birds drawn to its shiny surface would be able to easily carry it off. He then breathed in sharply and jumped into the slow-moving water. He remained submerged for a few seconds to accustom his body to the cold, then stood up and began to splash about in an effort to rid himself of a couple days’ worth of grime. It had not rained for nigh a week, so the water at its deepest came no higher than his navel, but it was sufficient. All the while he contemplated his situation, trying hard not to remember the times when he

and his friends had done this in the past.

Looking at the reflection of his torso against the background of the sky, he felt his confidence begin to seep back. He was still very strong of mind and body thanks to years of physical labour and the tutelage of his uncommonly learned parents. His unfaltering gaze bespoke one who was not easily defeated either. And nor was he!

After a couple minutes, he clambered back onto the bank. He had nothing with which to dry himself, but that was all right. It was a warm, sunny day. So, he shook himself off as best he could, replaced his amulet around his neck, and hurried away from the chilly shade of the trees into the bright grassy fields with Solus close behind. They returned to the burned-out village, where Fordain set about sifting through the mess with a kind of odd obsession. He did not know what he expected to find. There might be something useful to him in the ruins, though most likely not. The fire and raiders had indeed been very thorough. And yet...

There! Beneath the charred rubble of what had once been a house, he saw a glint.

The earth was still warm around its base, and smoke still rose from the sooty heap. Every sign indicated that it would be a bad idea to tread on it for most. But a lifetime of unshod wanderings over rough ground had given his feet soles as tough as any shoe leather. And as his curiosity would not be sated otherwise, he stepped as lightly and sparingly as possible over the rubble toward the glint. He worked as quickly as he could, brushing aside the dust and ash to reveal an Imperial dagger of the sort soldiers carried. It was not his father's, as it lacked the signature dent in the pommel, but some other ex-soldier's, or perhaps even a raider's weapon.

Whatever the case, it had miraculously survived both recovery by the raiders and destruction by fire, and now lay

sheathed and singed before him. He reached down to touch it, but recoiled at the heat still surging through its metallic form. He cast about to find something with which to make lifting it easier. Most everything was burnt up and unusable. Then he spotted a dusty scrap of thick cloth, like that from a torn blanket, waggling a corner in the wind as though beckoning him over. It was trampled and worn, but would suit his purpose well enough.

Taking the woolen scrap in his hand, he reached down and lifted the dagger by the scabbard. He could still feel a good deal of warmth through the cloth after wrapping it about the hilt, but again it was just bearable. He practically hopped his way out of the rubble pile. The touch of cool earth against his lightly seared feet came as a welcome sensation, and he let out his breath with evident relief. But it was of little consequence as he returned his attention to the dagger. It was likewise cooling quickly and growing easier to handle. Taking firm hold of the hilt, he unsheathed the dagger and held it upright with a quick, natural movement.

Its blade, as deadly as the day it had been forged, gave off a marvellous sheen in the sunlight. Across its polished surface he saw his reflection staring back at him. Wielding the dagger made him feel more complete, and a sensation of power coursed through his veins such as he had never known until last night.

He then remembered the other skill his father had taught him. As an ex-soldier and a tribal leader, it was only natural that Ólund should instruct his sons in the ways of the warrior. From their earliest days Fordain and Amon had practised with sticks and rocks in the hope of joining the legions themselves, as they had indeed been days from doing. And then he realized that he had another option after all. There was no guarantee that the Falonians or any other tribe would long remain safe

from the spreading influence of the Primus Emprius across this region. Nor could he farm the land that had been in his family for generations beyond count. Thus, there was but one thing left. It was bold—foolhardy, more likely—but it was all he had.

“By the amulet of my forefathers,” he pledged to no one in particular. “I swear that I, Fordain Abendroth, will avenge this if it be the death of me!”

Until that moment, he had disliked the rebels for intangible reasons he did not fully understand. Because his father had disliked them, mostly. Now that it had become personal, he hated them with a passion—especially that traitorous slime he had once called his friends and neighbours. Now he was out for justice if he had to administer it himself. He sheathed the dagger. It would not be enough on its own, but it was a start. He set it aside along with the singed leather belt, and continued his search.

After more rummaging about, he came up with some scraps of material, as well as a couple satchels. He set about gathering nice smooth stones from the streambank and appropriate-sized sticks from around the woods. He placed these things in one satchel and produce from his family’s subsistence garden in the other. By the time the sun had risen to its mid-morning position, Fordain had used his dagger to fashion six medium-sized javelins from the sticks, a leather strap to bind them to his back, and a sling besides. He lit a low fire over which to harden the javelin tips, then tested his new weapons on some charred wood bits. Truly, his father’s lessons had not been in vain.

As he secured the blackened leather strap tightly across his chest, he looked out to the southeast road and sighed. It had never seemed so intimidating before. He wondered briefly if what he was doing was smart. Ferrus had always been so fond

of the rebellion, so perhaps he should simply let him enjoy their company. He had practically brought it on himself by tripping like that, after all!

But no, he realized. *He* was the one who had made it necessary for both of them to run in the first place. It was his fault at the end of the day, and he had to make it right. For the memory of their parents, if not for Ferrus himself. Still, could he really take on the might of this Primus Emprius, which had for years now been a nuisance to the legitimate Imperial government, by himself? Probably not. But he would try. For the sake of justice and for his own honour he would go after them. Whatever it took, he would find that wagon and free his brother from his captors or die trying. He was not fit to call himself Noronir otherwise.

With that simple but heartfelt resolve, he mounted Solus once more. His enemies had half a day's lead on him, it was true. But they probably didn't know they were being followed, and that gave him a distinct advantage. They would move slowly and carelessly through the woods with their wagons, likely full of other unfortunate captives and refugees from settlements throughout the region, while he, alone on a single swift horse, could catch up to them in two days at most.

Without further hesitation or another look back, Fordain struck out on a steady course to the south and east in search of his brother and revenge.