

CHAPTER 1

Steam lumbered across the trampled battlefield as dying men moan into the wind. The ringing of sword against sword can still be heard as black-clad Eldresh Guard continue the fight, accepting death over judgment. The slaughtered lay draped across the ground, some hands still clutching magicked swords, blades gleaming dully with green witchfire.

The land and sky seem to meet as one, both shades of gray. Smoke swirled and eddied from the pockmarked earth, fires natural and otherwise meeting their last to the dour heavens. The horizon was broken by a distant, hulking cube, a rumbling war machine stopped in its course. The dire treads were caked with mud, armor, blood and bone. A greenish fume vented from a rent on top, spewing its foul life away.

In the midst of the bloody field squats a castle, smoke rising from its ramparts. Ruin lay thick upon its walls, the iron gates smashed like broken teeth, men riddled with arrows draped across battlements. Inside a haranguing can be heard as a crowd cheers, their voices just carrying across the carnage outside.

The Great Hall within stank from the acrid smoke wafting through the windows. A circle of soldiers in muddy chain mail and smeared swords hailed again as King Helzar was grappled to the ground, three men straining to keep him still. A dozen nobles and their ladies, their finery contrasting with the bloody cloaks of the soldiers, ranged the

walls, watching in horror at the fall of their sovereign.

The Hall had played host to centuries of kings and born witness to ceremonies of the highest royalty. Its walls still sang with the memory of past glories, born upon flags and standards from the golden lion of king Theonborn the True to the crimson banners of King Jayne adorned with the green Tree of Life, a testament to the monarch's charity. Paramount in the Hall that day, however, as every day for more than a century, was the purple flag of King Helzar. His sigil was a clenched fist with an unblinking central eye, a proud reminder of his wisdom and strength. That eye now gazed down across an empty throne and upon the king, forced to kneel at the point of a sword.

A young soldier stepped forward and stood over Helzar. He was High Commander Wellis, and his name would enter the histories as the general who defeated Lord Helzar, ending a cold reign of three-hundred years. The soldier had dreamt of this moment for months, ever since the Tribunal had approached him with the mad idea of deposing the sorcerer-king. Wellis had envisioned only triumph and glory, the masses cheering his name as he rode at the head of his victorious army.

Standing in the ancient hall the greatest host of his men lying in a waste outside, the only sensation Wellis felt was the burning desire to be done with it all. His youthful eyes had witnessed more blood and death in one day than most soldiers see in an entire career. All had hinged on that last fateful charge. Supplies were nearly depleted, the men standing on their last nerve. Wellis had gambled it all on one last thrust, shoving all of his men and tools to the fore while King Helzar did the same. The greatest single battle in the history of Eldreth, made all the more horrible as the sorcerer piled on the last dregs of his own power. With fire and Ryme, powered war machines and animals twisted beyond anything evolution would ever have dreamed all stormed across a meadow turned into nightmare.

Facing the onslaught, the soldiers' courage had wavered, but Wellis stood firm. And he won.

But looking down at the vanquished, all Wellis felt was fatigue and a boyish desire to find his mother.

“Lord Helzar, your reign is over,” a voice intoned. An old man in a red robe strode through the ranks of soldiers, who hushed their cheering. He stopped next to Wellis and before the fallen king. An aged face peered from behind the hood, which he pushed back to look more directly at Helzar.

“You are trying to use your power, even now when you are defeated,” the old man whispered. “I can feel you trying.”

Helzar managed a crooked smile, his forehead beaded with sweat. The men continued to hold him, arms locked behind his back forcing him to his knees. Helzar’s eyes, like his hair, were dark, nearly black. “Nobleman Rodicker. I see you found a way to hold me in check. How, may I ask?”

The noble wanted to smile, to act gracious in his moment of supreme victory. But even though the King was beaten, his armies scattered, and his power shackled, Rodicker felt as though he were gazing into the eyes of a timeless serpent. His skin crawled.

Rodicker motioned to a group of robed men standing in a far corner of the Hall. They clung to each other like mourners and a low chanting could be heard emanating from their circle. “Desperate men, Sire, find a way. You may have had centuries to perfect your arts, but the people of Eldreth have suffered for centuries under them. Those men chanting in the corner, and hundreds more outside these walls, have cocooned you in a shell of Ryme that will block even your powers.”

Helzar chuckled, the sound cool and menacing. “You know I cannot die,” he said. The words hung in the air and the room grew as silent as a tomb.

Rodicker’s mouth went dry and Wellis shifted uncomfortably beside him, his armor clanking in the silence. This was the pivotal moment, the one discussed ad nauseam in their secret war chambers. All the forces in the world and all the blood that could be spilt would come to naught if the king’s “special condition” could not be resolved. Men of greater mettle than Rodicker had died to find a solution. What they had devised was either a product of genius, or madness that would lead to grim folly.

“We have ... a solution to that,” Rodicker said as he withdrew a parchment from his wide sleeve. He paused before reading, eyes lingering on Helzar. “Before I proceed, however, there is a point of law to contend with. Eldreth will once again enjoy the rule of law, and now is as good a time as any to begin.”

Helzar shook his head in amusement, not taking his eyes from Rodicker.

“The Tribunal of Eldreth, which now asserts its dominion over all the lands of the kingdom of Eldreth, has granted me, Johann Rodicker of Innspoor, powers of judgment over King Helzar and his crimes.”

The King snorted derisively. Rodicker ignored him and began. “The first count, from the solar year 892, recalls the forced relocation of the village of Burnbury. Though lost now in the sands of time, written accounts that survive to this day document hundreds of abuses upon the Burnbury citizenry, most of whom were never seen again by mortal man.”

The scroll slowly unrolled in Rodicker’s hands as he read down the enumerated accounts, indictments spanning three centuries. Many charges were based on nothing more than legends handed down through the years, for that was all the record they possessed for the early times. Later years, when the resistance had grown more organized, were catalogued with greater accuracy. Men from a century before had penned careful notes of witnessed crimes so they could one day be used against the tyrant. Even in the darkest days, men and women had lived who believed that even an immortal evil could not go on forever.

Rodicker’s voice grew dry and bureaucratic, befitting the legal role he had assumed. The Tribunal had vested in him the power to try and punish Helzar on the spot of his capture, instead of waiting for a formal trial. Time was not the Tribunal’s ally in this matter and would only afford Helzar an opportunity to use Ryme against them. Rather than stigmatize their rule with an assassination, they had agreed that the ceremony would be as legal as possible. Rodicker, whose ancestors had suffered much under the thumb of King Helzar, was trusted with fulfilling the duty.

Dark of Winter

The details of the charges were well known to the nobles and soldiers in attendance, indeed to most of the country. Their recounting, even while the stink of the dead and dying wafted under their noses, electrified the affair with a terrible reality. In dry legal tones, Rodicker told the tale of a King who had seized the throne through war and maintained it with arcane arts, subjecting peasants to experimentation to further his skills. He spoke of nobles murdered at the King's whim and his lust for more land. Entire clans had been eradicated for not bending their knees fast enough to Helzar, and some because they gave in too easily.

To the people of Eldreth, their King was an enigma whose life span stretched back into the days of their fathers, grandfathers and beyond. Helzar's ancient excesses became tales of dark myth, all the grimmer since their perpetrator still sat atop the rose-red throne.

The nobles standing in the room blanched with dread as they listened to the old man and his tale. They had all stood by Helzar over the years and their families had grown rich from the very acts which were now dooming their once-invincible leader. Several touched their necks, wondering what the rope would feel like.

Rodicker reached the final page of his scroll, reading faster, eager to be done. "For these crimes, the Tribunal sentences you to eternal destruction," he finished, shouting the final word. The old man looked up, suddenly aware that he was panting. With a visible effort he stilled his breath and stood tall.

Helzar, who had hung his head through the recitation as if he were falling asleep, looked up. He grinned, his eyes genuinely amused. "I have died before and I always come back. How do you propose to make it different this time?"

Rodicker laid the parchment on the floor and withdrew a dagger from his robes. The blade was only four-inches long and gleamed like crystal. "You will not come back from this, devil." As he stepped forward Rodicker heard a gasp behind him. He turned to see the robed chanters shaking as if violently ill. One keeled over with a whimper and tumbled to the flagstones.

Rodicker turned to Helzar whose face had become a rictus mask of strain. Teeth clenched, muscles jerking, his eyes began to blaze with a molten light.

He is straining against our counter-rymes, Rodicker thought with wonder. And he is winning!

“Impossible. Impossible,” Rodicker muttered, fear lancing his heart. An icy wind blew through the hall seeming to flow directly from Helzar’s flaring nostrils.

“Do it! Do it now, you fool!” Wellis screamed at Rodicker.

Galvanized by Wellis’ panic, Rodicker grasped the king’s hair with his free hand and drove the dagger into Helzar’s forehead.

A scream erupted from the king that echoed within the skulls of all in the castle. The soldiers holding him ^{held} back as if their hands burned, but Rodicker held the king upright from the blade sheathed in his head. The women in the hall screamed in terror, their cries mingling with Helzar’s in a hellish chorus. Rodicker gazed into Helzar’s eyes as he held the blade in place, lips trembling.

The moment went on without end, casting all in attendance into a purgatory of suffering. Unable to take it any longer, High Commander Wellis stepped forward and pushed Rodicker back. Helzar’s body flopped to the ground, the dagger still embedded in a strangely bloodless wound. Wellis’ blade sang as he whisked it from his scabbard and struck down, separating Helzar’s head from his body.

In that instant the cry ended.

Among the horrified nobles stood one who watched with clenched fists. His eyes never left his fallen liege, even after the final blow. The man’s lips were thin lines of hate, a mere crack across his face. “I will avenge thee, my lord,” he whispered in tones that begged to be shouted. “I will rebuild what has been lost this day.”

Outside, a light snow began to fall. As though unable to bear the outcome of men’s struggles against himself, the sky poured a blanket of pure white gently over the mortal ruin. The fighting was over. Crows circled like flies in the sky, delighted by the devastation. The hollow sound of a drum beat slowly over the bloody field like a stricken heart.