

SORCERERS OF WAR

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PROLOGUE

THE PRECURSORS

Wizards and other magi were known to be powerful, and had been since the dawn of time. But the sorcerers of the human Empire of Torsan were by far the mightiest creatures in the world—far higher than the greatest spellcasters of the elves or the most skilled rune-priests of the dwarfs. The Torsanese sorcerers were said to be descendants of the gods themselves, and their powers were legendary. They could conjure any object or creature into existence and dismiss it again just as quickly; they could change shape and form as often as they wished, and read each other's thoughts across gigantic distances. They were, for all practical purposes, immortal, for at their slightest whim, the laws of space and time would bend or even break. It is difficult to conceive of an aspect of reality which a Torsanese sorcerer could not alter if he were to put his mind to it.

The sorcerers' abilities had not come easily, however; they were the culmination of centuries of frenzied study and reckless experimentation. Attaining the mastery of sorcery had been exceedingly difficult, and wizards of many generations had delivered themselves to early graves while attempting to hone their own skills to perfection. Magical power was not, after all, something which mortal men were ever intended to wield. But in the end, the Torsanese succeeded. They reached beyond the bounds of their ordinary mortal existence, and with outstretched hand, they touched the infinite. Even when the Empire was at its height, however, the majority of sorcerers did not fully understand how this arcane knowledge had first been acquired, and those sorcerers were therefore less than careful in its use. They knew only what they had been told by those magi who had come before them—that their ancestors, the first lowly conjurers and magicians, had unlocked a door which lead to realms behind and beyond the physical universe.

Torsan was inviting its own doom, of course, and that doom came about because the analogy was imperfect. The early Torsanese wizards had not unlocked a door at all—they had smashed through it with a sledgehammer. As the years rolled on, the descendants of those first wizards continued to steal arcane powers from the world behind the eldritch door. Terrible mistakes were made, and no living man remembered how to correct them. With each subsequent generation, the sorcerers of Torsa became more arrogant, more ambitious, and less cautious. They lurked in cold, windowless towers and dabbled in secret powers which were meant to be hidden from

the eyes of men, and it never once occurred to them that sooner or later, in the timeless darkness behind worlds, something might awaken which felt that its territory was being intruded upon.

The door of sorcery had been opened centuries since, and could not be closed again by mortals. The vast and incomprehensible inhabitants of the realm beyond took it upon themselves to close that door, and at the same time punish mankind for its presumption. Some men resisted, and even struck the occasional blow against their ageless, formless foes. But in the end, the struggle of the Torsanese against the things from beyond the gate was the struggle put up by the condemned man when he is already dangling from the gallows. Torsan was destroyed; the seed of the sorcerers was all but wiped away. Nothing of the Empire remained, save for a few folk-tales whispered among the primitive tribes of survivors which escaped the cataclysm. The vast majority of the high knowledge of mankind was forgotten. In time, some of that knowledge might be regained, but with Torsan's great cities a smoking ruin and its greatest citizens lying dead amongst the fallen columns, civilization was effectively forced to begin anew, untainted by the knowledge of what had gone before.

That was a thousand years ago.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BLACKSMITH'S BOY

The sun scaled the forbidding peaks of the Dorse Mountains, illuminating the roofs of Crysus in hues of molten gold and crimson. Freckles of ice dotted the green grass on this early winter morning. As horses stirred in their stables and townspeople yawned in their beds, farmers worked the fields in the chill dawn.

Duncan sat on the front porch outside his bakery, watching the sun rise. As was his morning ritual, he surveyed the small village as it awoke. Suddenly, a bright sparkle caught his attention. In the distance, two large men in burnished armour rode toward the town. Duncan swore, and then stumbled across the street to the blacksmith's shop.

The insistent pounding on his front door roused Blaine from peaceful sleep. "All right, all right, I'm coming," he grumbled, throwing off a heavy blanket and reaching for his cloak at the foot of the bed. "What's the hurry?"

"We're being attacked!" said a voice from behind the door.

Blaine flung open the heavy oak door as if it were made of matchsticks. His forearms were as thick as palisades and his legs the width of tree trunks. Some villagers boasted that Blaine could wrestle an ogre to the ground with one hand tied behind his back. Although he was nearing fifty, the blacksmith was still in formidable physical shape.

"Blaine!" Duncan squealed, "We're under attack! An army approaches!"
"Where?"

Blaine squinted as the huge men approached his house, then marched forward to confront them. Duncan thought it best to melt into the shadows—caution being a key ingredient in his recipe for longevity.

"Hail and welcome, my lords!" said Blaine. "I'm just about to warm the forge." Blaine knew these riders were not plunderers. Their great helmets and the crests on their shields marked them as warriors of honour. They were Knights of the Code.

For generations, warriors from the northern Kingdom of Yaul made the long journey to visit Crysus's famous blacksmiths. The Hikes family was storied for its skills in forging splendid armour. Legend held that even the dwarfs sought tutoring in the family's secret arts. Only warriors who achieved the rank of knight, however, received permission to travel to Crysus for the prized armour. Each year, no more than three warriors were elevated to this lofty rank, a privilege granted by the King of Yaul alone.

“Welcome, my friends,” said Blaine, opening his door to the strangers. “Congratulations on your knighthood: you have arrived just in time—before the onset of winter.”

“Thank you,” said one of the knights. “I am Sir Donaldson of the East Gateway, and this is Sir Gustead of the Pure Heart.” The knights dismounted, and entered the blacksmith’s house.

“Forgive my impatience,” said Gustead, “but how long will it be before you can fashion our armour?”

“You will be here most of the winter, I’m afraid. A full suit of armour takes three weeks to complete, and once mid-winter arrives, passage through the Dorse Mountains is impossible. You’re more than welcome to stay here. This will speed the fittings, and you’ll find no warmer hearth in the whole town.”

“You are very kind, sir. Lord Richard sends his regards,” Donaldson said.

“Ah ha!” laughed Blaine, “that old man is a right treat - except he almost drank me out of house and home. I’ll have someone attend to your horses. Let’s start taking your measurements.”

Blaine’s son, Conrad, approached carrying two pails of water. He was a pleasant boy, who worked hard and prided himself on doing the right thing. Like his father, he was solid and possessed great strength. As the blacksmith’s son, Conrad had little time for anything but learning the family trade. But although smithing was in Conrad’s blood, it was not in his dreams. He aspired to be a warrior: a knight—and in particular a holy paladin. Thanks to his mother, he was very pious. His faith in the gods was plain to all. He never failed to help those in need - or, for that matter, anyone who simply needed an extra hand. When not working beside his father, Conrad visited the small temple to help the priest with any manual labor. Prayers were never far from his lips.

Blaine’s booming voice shattered Conrad’s daydream. He ran to the house, sloshing water from his pails.

“Coming, father.”

“Tend to the horses out the front,” Blaine yelled.

“Yes, father.”

Throwing down the pails, Conrad ran to the front of the house. There he found two beautiful stallions dressed in armour emblazoned with the emblems of the Knights of Yaul. As the horses nodded and turned to him, Conrad stood in amazement. “They have come, they have come,” he whispered to himself, trying to restrain his excitement. The boy led the horses to the stables, where he brushed them down and fed them grain and water. He addressed the horses as if they were knights themselves.

“Excuse me, gentlemen. I must go inside and report to my father that my task is complete. Please let me know if there is anything else I can do for you.”

As the knights sat down to a hearty breakfast served by Blaine's wife, Sheila, Conrad came crashing through the door. The boy stopped in his tracks, and stared at the burly men.

"Well, who do we have here?" asked Donaldson.

"Conrad, my lord... Conrad Hikes," the boy stuttered.

"Ah, a young apprentice to your father," said Gustead.

"No," Conrad said sharply. "No sir. My dream is to become a Knight of the Code."

"I see," said Donaldson. "Well then, my best wishes. May your dreams come true."

"Not if I have say in the matter," grumbled Blaine. "He comes from a long line of blacksmiths, and bloody good ones at that."

"Father, I will become a knight. I just know I will."

"The first thing a knight must learn is to respect his father," mumbled Gustead through a mouthful of food.

"This is true, my boy," added Donaldson, "It is a matter of honour."

"Thank you, sirs," said Conrad. "Now I beg your leave, as I have chores to finish."

"Headstrong," said Gustead, after the boy had left.

"He'll grow out of such ideas," Blaine huffed.

"Maybe," Donaldson whispered. "Maybe."

The next morning was cold and wet, with a light drizzle that reduced the dirt roads to a muddy slush. Being the holy day of rest, adults chose to remain inside by the hearths, while their children played outside.

Conrad was searching for friends to practice swordplay - mock duels with sticks and brooms were a favorite game - when he noticed Trisanna, the barkeep's daughter. She was dancing in a puddle, eating a stick of candy. Justin, the local bully, approached her. He tried to snatch her candy, but Trisanna refused to let go. As Conrad closed in for a better view, he saw the teenager strike the eight-year-old girl in the face.

Conrad sprang to Trisanna's defence, but the older boy shoved Conrad into the mud and began pummeling him with his fists. Conrad's vision was blurring as punch after punch connected with his head. Suddenly, the beating stopped. Conrad pushed himself to his knees, where he saw a pair of large boots planted in front of him. Justin had fled, but a crowd witnessed Sir Donaldson as he helped Conrad to his feet.

"It takes a man of honour to defend the innocent," said Donaldson. "Indeed, you have the qualities of a knight, for your heart is in the right place." Donaldson lifted the boy in his arms and carried him toward his house.

Donaldson entered the house and placed the boy on a bed.

Sheila rushed to her son's side. "What happened?"

"Your son saved a young girl from a beating, my lady."

"Who would beat a girl?" Blaine exclaimed.

“An older boy. Master Conrad ran to her aid, but his opponent was a few sizes larger than he.”

Sheila ran for her mortar and pestle, and began putting dried herbs into the bowl. “He’ll need a poultice for those bruises.”

“He should mind his own business, and stay away from silly scuffles,” said Blaine.

“Like his father at the battle of Tiarus?” Gustead winked.

“That was a long time ago, and I fought for the very survival of the people.”

“For people who couldn’t defend themselves,” added Gustead. “Innocent women and children.”

“And little girls,” said Donaldson.

“Well, that was completely different. I don’t see how you can compare—”

“There is no difference,” interrupted Donaldson. “Your son has the heart of a knight, a paladin, and the strength of a giant—thanks to you. He would make a fine page, should you allow him to apprentice as a knight.”

“A page... in Yaul? But... who would continue my family’s legacy? It would be the end of us. It’s a tradition that goes back hundreds of years!”

“The road to knighthood is long and strenuous,” said Gustead. “Many hear the calling, but very few are chosen. Perhaps, it wouldn’t hurt to give the boy a chance to live his dreams.”

“Dreams,” grumbled Blaine. “Nothing but eggshells and fairy dust.”

“Maybe,” said Donaldson.

That evening, Conrad was feeling well enough to join everyone for supper.

“Recovered from your mighty wounds, have you?” Donaldson joked.

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“You did a very noble thing today,” said Gustead. “Many a man would have looked the other way.”

“Do you still dream of becoming a Knight of the Code?” asked Donaldson.

“I intend to become a great paladin.”

“With your father’s permission, I will send you scripts of the Code to read and learn,” said Donaldson, looking to Blaine for approval.

“I can’t read,” said Conrad, eyes cast down.

“Then that shall be your first quest on the road to knighthood,” said Donaldson. “Consider the problem, and the solution will present itself.”

That night, Conrad lay sleepless. Who could teach him to read? Few people in the village could read: Harris (the general store owner) and a handful of wealthy landowners came to mind. But Harris was always too busy, and the farm owners wouldn’t have the time or inclination to help. The clerics and priests in Lartiny, the largest town in the countryside, could

all read and write! But that was too far away. He'd never have time for his chores, and the religious men would insist he become a priest as a condition of the tutoring.

Just before dawn, the idea came to him. There was an old man who lived outside the village. "The townspeople speak of him every so often," he thought. "They claim he's a scholar or magician. Surely, he can read and write!" But would he help?

"He must be very busy, because he very rarely comes to the village for supplies." Conrad recalled that there was a boy who picked up the old man's supplies. "The village children say the boy travels to see the old man every day. I'll bet he could ask the old man if he'd teach me to read."

The next morning, Conrad made his way to the boy's home. It was a small but tidy cottage in the heart of the village. When Conrad knocked on the door, a well-dressed lady answered.

"Good day, my lady. Um, is your son home?"

"You mean Kallum? Just a moment." A few seconds later, a boy his own age came to the door. He wore a black robe, and had long dark hair.

"Yes. What do you want?" asked Kallum.

"I need to talk to you about the old man you see."

The boy looked around, quickly, then shot Conrad a glance, as if assessing him. Evidently he made some sort of decision. "Let's talk outside." Kallum gestured for Conrad to sit on a log near a stack of firewood. "What is it about him that you would like to know?"

Conrad told Kallum his story, after which he asked, "Do you think the old man would teach me?"

"No," said the other boy, bluntly. "He wouldn't have the time. He teaches many subjects, and his time is completely filled. However... I will teach you to read."

"You will?"

"In return, there is something you can do for me."

"Anything. Anything you want!"

"Every day I travel to see my master. He teaches me many things: reading, writing, history," now he whispered, "and spellcraft."

"The old man is a wizard?"

"And I am his apprentice. You can travel with me each day as my protection. In return, I will teach you to read."

The morning after, Conrad awoke early. He met Kallum outside the bakery, as planned. Kallum bought milk loafs for the journey, and gave one to Conrad. The boys ventured from the village along a narrow trail, chewing as they walked.

They hadn't ventured far when a thought occurred to Conrad. "I don't mean to be rude, but you look very different from your parents."

“Figured that out, did you?” Kallum smirked.

“I...”

Kallum slapped Conrad on the back—so hard that a chunk of bread flew from his mouth.

“I’m just joking. You are very observant—a good quality in a student. And behind your observation is a sound reason. My real mother gave me away when I was just an infant—before she vanished.”

“I’m sorry,” said Conrad. “I didn’t mean to—”

“No need to be sorry. It was the will of the gods.”

“I see.” Despite the light-hearted reassurance, Conrad wished he hadn’t opened his mouth.