

SIEGE
OF THE
NORTHLAND



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PART ONE:
AWAKENING



LONG AGO IN A DISTANT LAND ...

1

In the northern territories of the Eastland, a small party on horseback gathered on a hilltop beneath a dull descending sky; below them, and for as far as the eye could see, a slaughter was underway of men, women and children. The crackle and roar of burning homes and flesh, accompanied by the clamour of terrified livestock and the unceasing cries of those dispensing the terror, only added to the mournful chorus of human despair that fouled the air.

Volger, breaking away from the party, urged his horse forward a few paces, his attention taken by the progress of a man being dragged by his hair up the rocky hillside by two armour-clad warriors.

“Dear God!” cried Volger, holding a red silken handkerchief before his nose. “I will never get used to this infernal smell.”

The man was dumped without ceremony before Volger’s horse; drawing back his black fur-rimmed hood, he leant forward to view the prisoner more closely. Volger’s long, pale face and somewhat over-large jaw bore an expression of indifference as he continued to redirect the stench away from his nostrils.

“Ah, at last – I take it you are Greschwen, King of the Eastland?” He wrinkled his offended nose. “Dear me, you seem to have lost your crown.”

Greschwen’s lips quivered, parting slightly, but no words came.

“So,” Volger continued, “what is your pleasure? Will you surrender or do we continue till dusk?”

Greschwen spread bloodied fingers wide and pushed against the earth. Breathing heavily he raised his battered body to rest upright upon his knees; his grey bedraggled hair sitting wild about his shoulders.

“My Lord Volger,” he gasped, “what in God’s name do you want of me? Will you not call a halt to this slaughter, this unimaginable violation of life?”

A discerning eye would have caught the slight twitch of Volger’s head as he began in a slow, quiet voice, so quiet that Greschwen struggled to hear. “I thought I made it quite clear what I want.” A second, more pronounced tremor, accompanied a rapid transformation as his rising fury almost choked him. “*Your Kingdom*,” he screamed, spittle bubbling at the corners of his thin-lipped mouth, as he glared with cold, grey eyes into Greschwen’s upturned face. “I do not intend to remain here any longer suffering these intolerable conditions. The stench of you Eastlanders is worse than those of the Westland – but,” he sneered, breathing deeply behind the scarlet cloth, “at least they offered some resistance. I had not expected to take your entire land within a matter of *weeks*.” Volger’s head twitched once more as his party supplied the expected mocking laughter.

“So Greschwen,” he continued, straining now to compose himself and master the inner rage, the heat and the dampness of his skin, “after all, we might as well dispense with the ‘King’ bit – indeed, I will have to give much thought to your new position under my rule of the Eastland.”

Greschwen tried desperately to stand, but his legs would not hold and he stumbled ungraciously back upon his knees. “Have mercy, my Lord, this slaughter is unnecessary, we are not warlike, we are a peaceable people, we have...”

Volger thrust his jaw forward. Members of his party exchanged anxious glances; their horses becoming restless as his rage refuelled. “A peaceable people!” He spat out the words. “You have no business being a peaceable people. You have failed in your duty as King. You make no preparations for war against an enemy as formidable as me. *It is an insult.*”

Volger clenched his teeth with such force that he grimaced at the pain which fired up through his jaw and into his temples. His nostrils flared as he dragged air frantically up into his head, as if to cool his burning brain: the heaving chest and scarlet flush upon his neck betraying the cost of the effort.

Though his impatience was still evident, he spoke in a softer, almost soothing tone. “Of course, this is of no consequence to you now,” his breathing had become easier and the heat within his head was abating, “therefore,” he continued, “I suggest you prepare to meet your maker, or whatever it is you do, and then we can depart this place – for there is *no* position for you under my rule of the Eastland.”

Greschwen stared with raw, hollow eyes. “Dear God, you are truly as they said you were. You are without mercy and without sound mind. God deliver us, you are mad...”

“*Take off his head,*” screamed Volger.

2

Kinfallon Castle rested on a craggy hillside, nestling in a purple carpet of late autumn heather, as the early morning mist snaked its way up from the river below.

A richly furnished bedroom high within the castle was dimly lit by the embers of a dying fire. Lord Aran, a dark curly-haired young man, lay sprawled upon a large, ornate, wooden-framed bed. A restless night of tossing and turning had left him tangled amongst the bedclothes, when he suddenly woke to the sound of approaching footsteps. Kicking his legs free of the clinging covers he grabbed a pillow, leapt from the bed, and positioned himself in readiness behind the door. Every second rendered him ever more awake as the stone floor chilled his feet.

The door opened slowly and a muscular blonde-haired youth crept into the room and approached the bed. Aran sprang from behind the door and began to batter his intruder with the pillow. Accompanied by much laughter the two tumbled head-first onto the bed and with thrashing arms and legs continued to wrestle.

Within minutes a laughing Matty shouted, “I surrender!”

“Totally and absolutely?” asked a grinning Aran, his chest heaving with the exertion.

“Totally and absolutely – never!” yelled Matty wriggling to be free, but finding himself held firm as Aran bound his upper body in the sheets.

Breathless, but happy with his conquest, Aran leapt from the bed and staggering across the room came to stand by the window. He marvelled at the changing images within the ethereal mist, as it continued to rise and thin before his eyes. Now he could just make out the hazy outline of the great pine trees that lined the edge of Felden Forest; unaware that eyes the colour of bronze were fixed upon him.

Having finally disentangled himself from his bindings, Matty lay at full stretch upon the bed.

“Only one week, Aran, to the final race of the season – all are to gather on the south side of the river and we have doubled the length of the course. The knights are game for the challenge and we have opened it up to all-comers – and Morven,” Aran watched with amusement as Matty’s face became heated, “has agreed to start the race and declare the winner – which has brought even more male blood to try their hand.”

He rose quickly from the bed, stretched out his aching limbs, and joined his friend by the window.

Aran grinned. “I will win, you know.”

“You may indeed win, my friend and master, but you will not be allowed to win, just because you are the son and heir, my Lord.” Matty performed an exaggerated, grovelingly low bow, grabbed Aran behind both knees and threw him back onto the stone floor. Unable to contain his joy, Matty scrambled to his feet and made his escape through the open door.

Aran lay winded. He grinned. “I will win,” he called after him. “So prepare to be a gallant loser or my sister may spurn your advances.”

Enjoying the sensation of the cold stone cooling his skin, Aran remained upon the floor until his breathing eased. Eventually he rose and stood once more by the window. The mist had lifted, leaving nothing but a fine trail of gossamer lingering over the treetops, when an unexpected movement caught his eye.

It was the girl; the girl with hair the colour of amber, who stepped from the forest and looked up towards his window. Aran stared; his pulse lifting. She held his gaze with a gentle smile until a giant red stag, resplendent with fully mature white-tipped antlers, appeared behind her. Reaching out with a steady hand she pushed her fingers deep into the dense grey and white speckled fur that swaddled its throat. He watched in wonder as she turned her face towards the beast, looped her arm around its mighty neck and swung herself effortlessly up and onto its back. Aran felt his breath catch in his throat as she threw him a final glance, tossed her head towards the forest, and steered the mighty beast out of sight.

3

In the last room at the very top of Kinfallon Castle, the sorcerer Torpen was slumped in his ancient oak-carved armchair, amidst the most unimaginable chaos. His richly embroidered bright blue robes lay in folds over the tall, but now slight frame of an ageing body. His head nodded gently as if he were dozing, but his hands, long, bony and wrinkled with age bore witness to the tension coursing his veins as they gripped the smooth worn arms of his chair. At his feet lay his dog Ferneth: obedient, faithful old Ferneth, a beast as black as night but for white-tipped whiskers.

“Why should we of the Northland be so cursed?” muttered Torpen. “Why has there not been a son of the Tribe of Skea born to our land, to aid our people?” He shook his head and Ferneth flinched as the old man’s agitation grew.

“I must have been blind. Indeed, we have all been blind. For how could we have missed the son, born to bring us hope, to stand with us in adversity?” He sighed then, so troubled a sigh that Ferneth raised her head and rested it gently upon his knees. The tension within the old man’s body eased as he laid an ancient hand upon her soft ebony coat.

“Ah, of course, we need food. Too much fretting and not enough eating; we will fade away.” Torpen gave a

half-hearted smile, raised himself from his seat and threaded his way across the chaotic circular room. His chamber was cluttered with books of spells, of histories, mathematics and fables from afar. Tables were laden with potions and lotions and minerals both precious and otherwise. He stopped for a moment, having forgotten why he had risen from his seat, and then walked aimlessly on towards the window, drawing himself up to his full height as he leant upon the sill. His body stiffened: there was something in the woods to the south. Even with tired eyes he could clearly see something moving amongst the trees.

Ferneth pushed her cold wet nose up against the old man's gnarled hand and he shuffled backwards from the window, a mere flicker of a smile playing upon his lips as he began to retrace his steps.

"When the last race of the season is finally over, I must insist on speaking to the King. This inertia is a disease. As Volger moves ever further north, our plight grows deadlier. It is only a matter of time before he turns his attention to us."

Letting himself drop back once more into his chair, he pulled a green leather tome onto his knees; its fragile spine was fractured in many places and yet the faint gold inscription could still be seen: *The Legend of the Tribe of Skea*.

He opened the book and smoothed its aged pages with twisted fingers. "I do fear some disablement of our King that he should remain unmoved to prepare us for war." He straightened his crooked back as best he could.

"To oppose the King is treasonable, but, I ask myself, is it not worse to be remembered forever as Torpen, the Sorcerer of the Northland who failed his people? Who failed to find the one destined to be our saviour – to lead us into battle, to fight with us for our very existence?"

Ferneth sat before Torpen and placed both paws with some force onto the open book. Catching her eye, the old man chuckled, patted her affectionately and rose again, remembering at last that breakfast was long overdue.

4

For three days Balac had watched the sky above his house tell a sorry tale of death and destruction. The smoke, first black and dense, then grey and wispy, carried a multitude of ashen particles up to the heavens. They hung in the air gathering and jostling as if at play, until soft gusts of cooler air began to toss them about, transporting them every which way across the soft rolling hills of the Eastland, before drifting downwards to litter the land for miles around.

Having some years ago turned his back on the company of men, Balac had no desire to acquaint himself with the story behind this unnatural sky and the ash which fell to the earth around him.

He swung the axe with ease for the umpteenth time, but now his shoulders were beginning to ache. He was thankful that only half a dozen logs were left to be split and then he would have a stack big enough to get him through the winter. The light was just beginning to fade and his stomach tightened in anticipation, as the faint aroma of the hare stew simmering on the stove drifted through the air.

As he positioned the last log before him, he caught sight of the first wolf in his peripheral vision. It was a he-wolf, large and dark, standing at the edge of the woodland peering out across the clearing which surrounded Balac's home. Balac sensed more movement amongst the trees and knew

in his heart that this was a pack of some size. He rolled his shoulders backwards, easing out the tired muscles, and drew air in deeply through his nostrils.

He smiled inwardly and muttered under his breath, “May as well get the job done.” And with that Balac lifted the axe high, swung it through the air and brought the blade crashing down, straight through the centre of the log. The two halves flew upwards into the air and fell some way off. Hoping this would act as a distraction, he turned ready to run, only to find himself confronted by a she-wolf who stood teeth bared and spinal hair on high, blocking his route to safety.

She was a magnificent beast with a golden chest and dark snout which she lifted provocatively, as if inviting him to appreciate her beauty before she pounced. As his startling green eyes met her own, she launched herself into the air and with one leap pinned him to the ground.

“You are such a hussy,” Balac yelled, as she covered his face with long lingering licks from her rough hot tongue. “And what in hell’s name have you been eating to give you such foul breath?”

Balac twisted his face this way and that, struggling to free himself from her grip. “Hey, Kyler,” he called, “get over here and give a man a hand. Your woman has no modesty.”

Balac began to laugh out loud and Akir stopped her passionate licking, stretched her jaws wide and belched full in his face. By the time Balac had finally managed to free himself from Akir’s embrace, Kyler had led the pack out into the clearing. Balac wandered amongst them, laying a hand upon each, speaking nonsense in low soothing tones.

As darkness fell, Kyler and Akir lay beside Balac as he sat on the steps leading to his door, greedily devouring the contents of the steaming pot. He assumed the pack had had good hunting, as not one of the beasts approached him in

anticipation of a morsel of food. However, he could not help but be a little perturbed by the passing thought that perhaps his cooking was so bad that they would rather go hungry.

Balac frowned, and reaching forward, picked a speck of ash from Akir's soft golden throat and rubbed it between his finger and thumb. The dark grease spread and stained his skin.