

Chapter 1

Edward the Terrible laid his head across the executioner's block for the twelfth time. Jeers, cheers, and rocks were thrown his way in celebration of this momentous occasion. It had been a great many years since he'd found himself on the wrong end of an axe, but this time, it promised to be his last.

It wasn't difficult to guess why Edward had been marked for death. He'd murdered, and pillaged, and burned with impunity. He'd terrorized the land of Cathartia for as long as its people could remember. And yet, it was for a crime far worse and far more terrible than either of these that Edward was to lose his head: on the third day of the eighth month, many moons ago, *Edward the Terrible was born*.

Edward was like most his age. He had ten toes and fingers. He had a soft spot on the top of his head, and ocean blue eyes. Above all else, he had a childish innocence that had yet to be broken by the harsh world around him.

But Edward's parents harbored a dark secret that would loom over him for the rest of his shortened life: little baby Edward was the prophetic Dark One, destined to reign terror upon Cathartia, and bring about the end of times. Every coo, every belch, every terrible, infantious sound that emanated from Edward shook the Cathartians to their very core, and sent them fleeing.

And so, despite his innocence, people shunned him. Despite his innocence, people hated him. Despite his innocence, Edward was all alone.

Prince Owyn, on the other hand, had everyone and everything he could possibly desire, for he was the Chosen One, and he could do no wrong. Before he could even walk, he had servants, and stewards, and gardeners galore. Everything was handed to Owyn on an iridium platter.

And because of that, he was a pompous little shit, ripe for a good beheading.

It's not as if Edward wouldn't go on to try. He would try at six during the Battle of Boehregard. At eleven during the Battle of Chimera. He would even try at fourteen during the Battle of Joy — which was not at all joyful for young Edward, primarily because he didn't get to behead anyone. Each and every time, Prince Owyn was ten steps ahead of him, just on the other side of the castle gate, scared to come out and fight Edward the Terrible and his fearsome Mjerjín.

So, as it was, the great battle between Good and Evil was mostly just a series of failed siege attempts, and beheadings that never came to fruition.

As it was, it was pretty disappointing.

Pretty disappointing was how Garamond the Executioner would describe his day job. Much like Edward, Garamond's job required him to behead people. He was fine with that part, but really, he only took on the role for two reasons: firstly, so he could earn Cathartian citizenship in exchange for his services; and secondly, he was drawn to the cool hoods they wore.

But being an executioner wasn't all it was chopped off to be. The hours were long due to the sheer amount of beheadings Prince Owyn ordered. The summer heat was brutal, as all executions

had to be performed in the town square, where there was no shade. And apparently, the whole executioners-wearing-hoods thing was just a myth.

Garamond had bigger plans. He didn't want to be known as just another mindless executioner, no. When he laid down his axe, and blood spattered on the cheering commoners, he instead envisioned specks of red paint being splashed across a large canvas, tinges of bright color complimenting his broad strokes and warm tone. He was truly a painter at heart.

Unfortunately for him, Prince Owyn quite enjoyed Garamond's work as an executioner, and the Chosen One always got his way — another example of him being a pompous little shit.

Perhaps if I mess up just one execution . . . thought Garamond.

And in a big way, mess up he would.

On the third morning of the eighth month, Garamond sat in an old wooden chair in his quarters, sharpening his axe blade on a whetstone. This wasn't unusual for Garamond, but this time, something felt different.

Garamond liked his axes sharp and sturdy. No dull portions on the blade, nor splits in the handle, everything had to be perfectly balanced to ensure a clean cut. So it was curious, then, that on this day of all days, there was a bit of a wobble on the axe head. Even more curious was the fact that Garamond merely shrugged it off, chalking it up to divine intervention.

He was put on this soil to paint, and by the gods, who was he to question their infinite wisdom? If the axe head were to, say, fly off the handle mid-swing, spoiling Prince Owyn's grand, public execution of the little Dark One, and forcing him to relieve Garamond of his duties — allowing Garamond more free time for other activities — it had to be the will of the gods, did it not?

"They're ready for you," said a burly sentry stationed by the door. Normally, the executioner's quarters weren't guarded at all, but Prince Owyn insisted this time, and ya know, the Chosen One was never told no.

Garamond rose to his feet, a scared but optimistic look painted on his face. The room shook from the roaring applause of the townsfolk outside. The sentry opened the door, letting in a warm sun beam that lit up Garamond's face, and Garamond headed toward the light.

Outside, a raucous crowd awaited, gathering to bear witness to the spectacle. Noblemen were huddled in a corner under the shade of their servants, smug looks of approval on their faces, while on center stage, young Prince Owyn, not yet of eight years, stood, egging on the townsfolk.

Prince Owyn had long, blond locks that were more wavy than curly, and had hazel eyes that were the most beautiful the gods had ever created, according to those he compelled to say that. He was mommy wommy's little perfect prince, and today, he was to put an end to the vile *Dark One*.

"Great people of Cathartia," exclaimed Prince Owyn. "The time has come for blood and retribution!"

His fiery words ignited the crowd. This pleased him greatly, as he had a gift for showmanship. And of course, anyone who disagreed was just asking for a beheading.

"We have a dark creature among us . . ." he said in an eerie, hushed voice. "One who would bring an end to our precious Cathartia. But today, we will end this threat. Today, we will show that Good will always triumph over Evil!"

The commoners erupted in cheer. Prince Owyn gestured to a guard, who brought forth little baby Edward, and placed his head on the executioner's block. He turned to Garamond. "Make it bloody," whispered the prince. "The people came here for a show."

Garamond stepped forward uneasily. He lay his gaze upon the child, who giggled upon meeting eyes with Garamond, sending shivers down his spine. He'd never beheaded a child before, and if all went according to plan, he would never have to. Still, there was a certain evil in the child's eyes that made Garamond content with whatever the outcome was.

He raised his axe as high as he could, and thrust down hard, eyes closed, unable to watch. The crowd gasped in horror. Garamond looked up, expecting the worst, only to see little baby Edward fully intact, and his axe head not broken off, but rather completely shattered.

Garamond was unsure whether to be happy . . . or *terrified*.

Suddenly, a tornado of thick, coarse, black smoke encapsulated the child and let out a monstrous shriek, discharging shockwaves throughout the town square. The Mjerjún had bonded with their master; all hope was lost. Little baby Edward's eyes turned a hazy black, and he giggled once more.

Terrified it was.

Chapter 2

The only thing more terrifying than the grisly Edward the Terrible was how others in the village of Rooksport treated him. Sure, he was the Dark One, destined to reign terror upon Cathartia, and bring about the end of times and all that nonsense, but that didn't mean people had to be so mean about it. And yes, while he did quite enjoy a good beheading or two, and rumors swirled around that he would drink the blood of his enemies, who cares? The fact of the matter was, some people quite *deserved* a proper beheading, and those who were deceased didn't really need their blood anyhow.

None of that mattered to the villagers, however. As they saw it, Edward was thrust upon them after Prince Owyn couldn't figure out how to kill him. He was merely an inconvenience, and a dark, evil one at that. Why couldn't Prince Owyn have just locked him in the dungeons or something all of those lifetimes ago?

"You can't play with us," said Dickory, a gelatinous boy holding a stick. "Go play with your imaginary smoke friends!" He stuck his tongue out at Edward, and nearly lost it just as quickly to the Mjerjín, who burst out of Edward's body, and began slashing at Dickory's tongue.

Dickory dropped his stick, and quickly ran away with the other children of the village, leaving Edward all alone, like always. Edward picked up the stick, and gazed at it longingly. What had he done to deserve such hatred and isolation?

He stood there brooding for a moment, before tightening his fist and snapping the stick in two. “Come,” he said, summoning the Mjerjín back to him. “We’ve work to do.”

The Mjerjín wrapped tightly around his body in the form of a black, hooded cloak. This was pretty much expected, what with him being the Dark One and all. He pulled the hood over his head, and cracked a mischievous smile. Then he pulled it back down because it made him look like some toffee-nosed nobleman.

Alderman Unsgar was a man of nobility. Not in the sense of having titles or an estate, but rather he was fair, honest, and virtuous in every way. Unfortunately, Alderman Unsgar made quite the exception to the Dark One and his beasts, and when he’d heard that poor Dickory and his family had fled the village after their frightening encounter with them, he’d finally had enough. For three days and three nights, Alderman Unsgar rode on horseback until he finally reached the Royal Palace in Khalahad, where he was to call upon Prince Owyn’s personal army: the Shadow Infantry.

“This . . . *thing* has made a mockery of my village for too long!” he shouted at one of the Infants. “Will Prince Owyn do nothing to stop its atrocities?”

“Are you questioning your prince?” asked the Infant.

“No, no, of course not. I just meant that—” he sighed. “Well, with a diminished workforce, we barely have enough sustenance to survive the winter as is, and the Dark One keeps scaring away the villagers!”

“Perhaps some of ‘em need scaring, Alderman.”

“Are there no workers to spare? Is there nothing to be done about the Dark One?”

“Those workers are property of the crown,” he replied. “And there’s nothing that *can* be done about the Dark One. He can neither be defeated nor imprisoned, only put out of sight — just as can be done with those who question the prince.”

Alderman Unsgar pursed his lips. He wanted to retort, but held his tongue for fear of reprisal. The mines were no place for someone like him. He bowed out gracefully, and scurried off.

The Infant watched closely as he left, glaring, before walking over to Prince Owyn’s chambers.

In his chambers, Prince Owyn, now much older, a bit taller, and ever more haughty, stood over a glass sword hanging on a mantle. This was the Mirror Sword. A strong reflective surface with intricate engravings along the length of its blade, and a nice, textured hilt complimenting the decorative pommel of Prince Owyn’s family sigil, the Mirror Sword was his prized possession. It was long, heavy, and could cut through anything — except the Dark One.

The Infant entered.

“What did you tell him?” asked Owyn, his eyes fixated on the Mirror Sword.

“The truth,” said the Infant. “Just not all of it.”

“Good. He needn’t know more.” He dismissed the Infant with a nod, then wandered over to a nearby window. He looked out upon his empire, a clear view for nearly fifty miles. Mountains, rivers, forests, cities and villages. Cathartia was all his. And no one could take it from him; not even the Dark One.

Or so he had hoped.

Chapter 3

Hope was a dangerous thing in the Salt Mines of Torrenhall. Asking questions even moreso. Most of the men there were born and raised in the mines, their families having been enslaved there for several hundred years before them, while others were forced into labor by the Infants as punishment for their petty crimes, real or imagined. It was hard work, and making it to the next day wasn't always guaranteed. But there was one thing that was for certain in Torrenhall; one immutable truth that lingered in its air: it wasn't salt they were looking for.

“Whaddaya fink they got us digging for?” asked Anur, poking at his food in the lunchroom.

Sitting across from him was Yarim, who chuckled, and ran a hand through his curly black hair. “Certainly not salt.” His expression morphed into a slightly worried one. “But I do wonder.”

“Ya know what *I* fink it is? I fink it's for gold. S'what I'd be searching for.”

“It's not for gold,” said Yarim.

Anur scoffed, then put his fork down. “And how would you know? Wannit you who was just agreeing you didn't know what we was digging for?”

“I know because they've got enough gold. It's not for gold.”

“Alright, you rancid dreck, back to the mines!” shouted Greinor, a towering Infant who burst through the door with two other soldiers. “*Nom!*”

One of the soldiers grabbed a young man, and threw him to the ground, before jabbing him with the blunt end of his spear. “Stop eating, all of you!”

Everyone put down their forks, and stood — except for Zella, a little girl of seven, who continued to devour the porridge in front of her, spoon clacking on the bottom of the bowl and all. Greinor stood over her, waiting patiently for her to notice. Feeling someone over her, Zella turned to Greinor, her sunken eyes meeting his cold ones.

“Are you deaf, girl? I said back to the mines!”

“But I haven’t finished eating.”

Greinor bent down and got right in her face, breathing his terrible, hot breath on her cheek. He grabbed her plate, and dropped it on the floor. “Oh, look, it’s gone spoiled. *Back to the mines!*”

Zella gritted her teeth, and took a swing at Greinor. He grabbed her arm mid-swing, and squeezed tightly. “Wrong move, girl.”

“Let her go,” said Yarim, stepping forward.

Greinor turned to him, glaring. “You got a problem, boy?”

Yarim knew the rules. After all, he had worked in the mines for much of his life. He was sent there when he was eight after having been caught stealing apples from a merchant in one of the surrounding villages near Khalahad, and was given the option to either lose a hand, or lend one. The rules were quite unfair to Yarim, and as such, he didn’t like them very much.

Anur got in front of Yarim, and held him back. “Nope, no problem, sir. Sorry.”

Greinor grunted, then slapped Zella and threw her to the ground. “Clean that up first, girl!” He gestured to the other guards, and they all left the lunchroom. Yarim pushed Anur off of him.

Zella looked at her elbow, which had a large scrape on it, and winced in pain. Unlike Yarim, she'd not been at the mines very long. She'd recently been orphaned, and her options were to either lose a hand, or lend one. The Infants really liked cutting off peoples' hands.

"Need a hand?" asked Yarim, standing over Zella. He smiled warmly, his kind eyes contrasting an otherwise weathered face.

She smiled back at him, and took his hand. With her other, she grabbed a fork, and stabbed him in the hand, jumping to her feet, and taking a defensive position with her back to the wall. "Stay away! I'm not afraid of you!" Her breath as shaky as her hands, Zella's eyes fled back and forth, making sure everyone was keeping their distance.

Yarim grabbed his hand, holding in the pain. He wanted to be angry with her, but when he looked at Zella, all he could see was someone not malicious, rather scared. He approached her slowly and delicately. "It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you. My name's Y—"

"I don't care about names! My father had a name, and now he's dead. Names get you killed." She stabbed at Yarim, making him jump back.

"Is you a lady?" asked Anur.

"What kind of question is that? Of course I'm a lady. Are you a man?" she asked threateningly, posturing up to him.

He put his hands up, and backed off. "Not in the face of a sharp object, no."

Yarim reached into his pocket, and retrieved a piece of bread. "The bread for the fork. C'mon, it's a fair trade."

Zella pursed her lips. She was skeptical, but oh so hungry. She laid down her fork, and quickly grabbed the bread, putting it in her back pocket.

"My name's Yarim."

She scoffed. "And I'm still not telling you mine."

Chapter 4

Names could tell you a lot about persons in Cathartia. They could tell you what their parents' occupation was, from which region they hailed, or even whether or not their parents were pretentious nonces. In Prince Owyn's case, it was the latter. Why oh why did his father insist on putting a 'y' in his name?

"Because I'm the king, damn it!" shouted King Bauldron, spit sloshing around his mouth as he banged his fist on the council chamber table. "And if I want Elven whores beside me on my nameday, I will have them!"

The king's advisor, Lord Frederic, cleared his throat. He was tall, olive-toned, and had a cunning disposition — and knew when not to press the issue. "Yes, Your Majesty, of course."

He meant this very loosely, for elves did not exist. Nearly nine hundred at this point, kept alive only through sheer stubbornness and a dash of magic, King Bauldron was quite off his rocker, and it was generally far easier for Lord Frederic to lie to the king than to argue with him. He turned to a royal messenger, whispering. "Let Prince Owyn know his father would like some . . . company at his nameday."

“Yes, My Lord.” The messenger turned to leave, but before he could, Lord Frederic grabbed his arm.

“Oh, and to have them dress as elves,” he added. The messenger nodded, then scurried off.

“Now,” said Lord Frederic, turning to the other members of the council, “what is our next order of business?” He paged through some documents relating to recent complaints, requests for aid, and other such kingly matters. “How are things in the mines, Lord Blackwood?”

Lord High Constable Blackwood sat up straight in his chair, which was right across from Lord Frederic’s. He was a seasoned warrior-slash-bureaucrat, tasked with leading Prince Owyn’s infamous Shadow Infantry, and he much preferred to be out in nature, slaughtering civilians and burning down their villages, rather than being stuck in cold, wet mines, slaughtering workers and burning their corpses. The only thing he hated more than being stuck down in the mines was being stuck in the council chambers with Lord Frederic and his apple-polishing twats. “It’s cold,” he grumbled. “And wet.”

“And the workforce?” asked Lord Frederic.

Constable Blackwood shot him a menacing look. “Not enough.”

“Frankly, I’m not sure why we continue to send money to the mines,” remarked Lord Treston, a frail old man who was the Master of Accounts. “Nine years we’ve been there, and it’s brought nothing of value to the crown. It’s an irresponsible use of our assets!”

“It’s what the prince desires,” said Lord Frederic. “And you don’t take him for a fool, no?” He raised an eyebrow and grinned.

Lord Treston squirmed in his seat. “Oh, of course not, Lord Frederic. The prince has one of the finest minds I’ve come to know!”

Constable Blackwood snorted.

“Where *is* my son?” asked King Bauldron. “It’s important he sit-in on these meetings.”

“He’s in his chambers,” sneered the constable. “The prince has little interest in the crown's affairs, unless his little sword tells him to.”

Prince Owyn looked down the length of the Mirror Sword, admiring its beauty and power. His gaze was obsessive and all-consuming, much like his desire to fulfill the prophecy, and kill the Dark One. Cathartia was his home, and he couldn’t let it succumb to Evil. He would go to any lengths necessary to ensure its survival. But there was one thing standing in the way of Prince Owyn liberating his country from darkness: no matter how many times he tried, no weapon could kill the Dark One. No blade, nor arrow, nor bolt, nothing could get past the Mjerjún.

But something told him that this would change soon.

“Your Highness, I have urgent news.”

Prince Owyn turned to see an Infant standing before him, saluting. “Out with it, already.”

“They found something.”

Prince Owyn grinned. He grabbed the Mirror Sword, a