

Chapter One

Sheets of glistening snow suffocated the boughs of fir trees in an unmolested copse. The lowest branches scraped the ground, laden with fresh, plump snow. One branch slipped free of its weight, showering the ground in a sudden, short snowfall. The eyes of a squirrel, nervous and alert, bounced between the sudden movement and the approach of a woman whose orange cloak flowed behind her. She strode to the precipice of a rocky overhang to watch the same thing the squirrel had come to see.

Below them, a line of soldiers stretched along the winding trail and disappeared behind chunks of snow-covered rocky outcroppings and dense forests of evergreens. In the distance, they could make out a splotch of cleared land filled with homes.

The woman disappeared as quickly and quietly as she had invaded the wintry stillness of the cold morning. The squirrel stayed to watch the marching soldiers, never quite noticing the tail of a horned snow fox hiding among snow-laden branches.

The white-capped fang of a mountain cast its shadow over a neatly divided town. Stone walls, nearly thrice the height of the woman with the orange cloak, surrounded the city. A wooden gate swung open on her approach. A young woman waited for her within the walls, standing at attention before falling swiftly into step behind the older woman.

They passed stables and a smithy on their right. Horses whinnied in protest against the constant ring of hammer and anvil as black smoke puffed intermittently from the smithy. Square stone homes stood at regular intervals on their left, precisely spaced. They made their way down a snow-dusted cobbled path to the grandest building in the town, a chapel built into the base of the mountain which loomed above them. The white-capped peak was barely visible in the clear sky.

All along the street, pockets of Vigilants, armed and armored, grinned and nodded to the orange-cloaked woman as she passed, each busy preparing for a battle they hoped to avoid, but knew to be inevitable. Her shadow took up a position at the base of the stairs leading to the chapel, leaning casually against the tall stone balustrade.

She pushed open one of the heavy doors, kicking the bottom to knock the snow from her boots and announce her presence. Leaving the door open, she stepped further into the dimly lit depths of the chapel.

The woman addressed the darkness, "Keeper, they arrive within the day."

"Thank you."

Her eyes adjusted to the dim light, and she could make out a small figure seated before a large tree pulsating with a light of its own. The tree was the source of the Vigilants' markings. Vigilants were stronger, long-lived, and nearly immune to flame. She stepped nearer the tree, its light tangible against her skin, flooding her with a deep sense of innate warmth; it spread throughout her body, and she felt it affect her thoughts. The worries she had brought with her faded to the back of her mind, replaced by warm memories and a reminder that more had yet to be made.

She shook the feeling away.

"What would you have us do?"

"Ready those that can fight. Send the others here."

"Keeper," the woman bowed low and turned to leave.

"Damara," the voice called, "I still pray we will find no need for the blade."

"Mine shall be ready nonetheless."

She closed the door behind her and looked at the young woman standing by the door, her wiry frame and angled features accented by the sharp cut of her hair.

“Isabelle,” she said sharply, “gather all those who have not been marked, bring them to the Keep.”

“Damara,” the woman complained, her composure breaking, “we haven’t the luxury of hiding soldiers away.”

Damara turned to her sternly, “Swinging a blade doesn’t make a soldier.” she softened her tone as Isabelle stiffened, “Quickly now, many depend on you.”

The young woman nodded reluctantly and took off at a jog, rushing from home to home. Damara steadied herself with a heavy breath and bounded down the chapel steps, her orange cloak bouncing in her wake. She set a quick pace through the grid of stone houses nodding at familiar faces she passed. She made her way back to the stables, where a young boy strung salt licks for impatient horses and a burly, barrel-chested man with symmetrical fiery markings winding up to his elbows filled buckets with water from an icy trough.

“What is happening?” the boy asked.

The large man patted the neck of a brown and white spotted stallion, “An army marches to our door.”

“Then why are we here taking care of the horses?”

“Because,” he started, baritone voice gentle and earnest, “I do not know when we will be able to again.”

“But if we’re attacked, then it won’t matter.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, because we’ll be fighting, isn’t that more important?”

“To you and I? Yes. To the horses? To old Jax here?” The man grinned and stroked a one-eyed horse, “I would say no. These horses have served us well, so we should serve them well, even in the midst of chaos.”

“Hmm,” the boy grumbled.

Damara took a step further into the stables, glancing around at the familiar faces of the well-cared-for horses. “Adrian,” she called out to the boy, “make your way to the keep with the other children.”

The boy looked up, startled, “Yes mother,” stopping only to hug her before rushing away.

Damara held him back a moment, “Listen to your father, think about his words.”

She turned to the large man as her son left, an eyebrow raised, “A peculiar lesson on the eve of battle,” she said drily, idly testing the knot of a salt lick.

The man smiled and chuckled softly as he stepped toward her, “It was a lesson I thought important. At the very least, he will not forget it.”

His large smile tugged forth a subtle grin from the austere woman, she shook her head. “Have you finished here?” she asked.

“Aye.”

She motioned for him to follow and he quickly fell into step beside her as they moved deeper into the town, “How many?” he asked.

“A thousand at least, though I did not see the end of their line.”

“Regalia?”

“None.”

“Do you think they mean to lay siege?”

“I do not know. Gather Markus and Verigul, and have them meet me at the barracks.”

“Done.”

“And Artix,” She grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him toward her kissing him passionately, “Be safe.”

Damara made her way to the barracks. For what it lacked in grandness, compared to the chapel, it made up for in size. The building dominated the northern section of the town. It ran for nearly a hundred paces from end to end and was almost as deep.

Townfolk and merchants gave her a respectful berth and deferential nods as she passed. One of the doors of the barracks hung open, spilling the sounds of those familiar with death into the street. Some paused their lethal preparations to salute her as she strode past, most just nodded grimly. All who bore the markings of the goddess of Life, and called themselves Vigilants, knew the intricacies of combat and courts alike. Brutally effective on the field of battle, their order sought to maintain the tenuous pockets of peace that enveloped Audüm.

She pulled a map of the town from a dusty shelf spreading it across a heavy table dominating the center of the barracks.

A pair of scarred men made their way to the table, standing silently at attention in the bustle of the barracks.

Damara stared at the map, “News?”

“First few dozen ruining the view outside the Keep,” one of them said, his voice ragged and harsh as though it scratched its way from his throat. “No supplies or shelter yet, but they could be at the rear,” the elf scratched at his ears, the pointy tip of one had been severed long ago.

“Markus?”

The short man leaned against the wall, tongue between his teeth as he trimmed a fingernail with a razor-sharp blade. A moment of silence passed before Damara glanced at the elf, who shrugged and kicked the man in the back of his knee.

With a curse, Markus stumbled, catching himself on the table and forcing himself upright. He ignored the amused smirk on the elf's face and stuck his bleeding thumb into a corner of his mouth and spoke out of the other, "We have bundles of arrows spread along the walls and at the towers. Barricades are being set up near the gate and throughout the town leading back to the Keep." He pointed to three different spots on the map, "we can funnel them through here by the smithy easiest and make a covered retreat back toward the chapel, regrouping here and here if we get overwhelmed."

"Our foodstuffs?"

The elf shook his head grimly, "Enough to last the month at full strength. Past that,"

Damara pushed the map away, "Understood."

Markus stepped around the table, "What is the plan for the unmarked?"

"Isabelle is gathering them in the chapel. When the fighting starts, they will flee through the mountain pass."

Markus cast a wry glance at Verigul, "To the elves?"

"They won't find much succor there," the elf growled.

"They will find less here," Damara said with a tone of finality. "Have your apprentices begin rationing supplies for their escape. Give them as much as they can carry. As for yourselves, prepare for battle."

The two veterans nodded and turned to see her orders done.

The Vigilant Commander retired to her private room in the barracks and ran a finger over the glowing blade that hung from the wall. Just above its hand-and-a-half hilt, a small ball of fire spun slowly, suspended in empty space between the edges of the blade. The orb illuminated her room in the barracks, which was bare except for a cot and an armor stand. A single helm sat atop the stand. It resembled a dragon in flight, wings extended downward to shield her head, while the dragon's own snout arched down to Damara's nose.

Damara placed the blade in the sheath at her hip and strapped the helm to a buckle on her side. With a glance around the nearly empty room, she stepped out into the cold evening air.

The town was quiet. Vigilants milled about calmly in the large courtyard before the Keep, standing in small groups laughing and chatting in the shadow of the mountain beside them as the sun dipped below the far horizon. Damara watched them, dusted by snow blown from eaves above her. Tendrils of flame danced in the night as Vigilants moved through the streets, fatigue caught them slowly, and even if they worked through the night, they would be as fresh as any soldier the enemy could field.

A voice to her side broke her reverie, "you plan to send us away?"

"Yes."

"What good will come of that, dying in the cold of winter?"

"Walk with me," Damara said, turning suddenly back toward the chapel. Isabelle stood silent for a moment before rushing to catch up to her.

"All the apprentices have trained for years, since our adoption into the Order. Why cast us aside in its hour of need?"

"You did not train to die."

Isabelle stayed silent as she followed in the shadow of Damara. The two came to the heavy oak doors of the chapel that stood twice their height; Damara started to open them but hesitated, turning back to face her apprentice, “You and the other apprentices have been given a vital task: Live. Do not forget that I am entrusting my child to you.”

Isabelle swallowed an argument and nodded following Damara into the chapel. Damara pressed deeper and moved into the dim chapel, “Adrian,” she called out to the small gathering of townsfolk. Only a handful of people here had no direct ties to the Order, merchants, pilgrims, and traveling tradesmen. The rest were children, unmarked spouses, or apprentice Vigilants. No more than a hundred souls.

Adrian walked silently up to Damara, a hefty book tucked under his arm.

“What have you got there?” She asked.

“Gerwyn’s ‘The Mirror’. Verigul told me to read it.”

“Ah,” Damara let the hint of a smile creep onto her face, “were you pestering him of elves again?”

“No! Well, I just was curious if humans were similar and he gave me that look he gives Sara when she’s badgering him about,” his eyes dropped sheepishly to the ground, “you know.”

“I do. You will-”

“Damara,” a Vigilant interrupted from the doorway, “they’re looking for you at the wall.”

Damara sighed, a pang of guilt and sorrow coursed through her, “Listen closely, I’ve told Isabelle this, and now it is your turn.” Adrian nodded, shaggy hair bouncing around his shoulders, “When the fighting begins, you must flee with Isabelle through the mountains.”

The teenage boy's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to speak but fumbled with his words.

“Collect your mind and speak it,” Damara said gently.

“What of you and father?”

“We will fight here, to give you and the other townsfolk time to escape,” Damara said quietly.

Adrian fought to keep his expression stoic, but fear and uncertainty took hold of his voice

“What will happen to you?”

“It is uncertain,” Damara said after a moment of silence. “We are outnumbered, but we have other advantages.”

The boy squared his shoulders, “I want to stay then. I want to help.”

“That, I will not allow. Go with Isabelle, she will take care of you and the others. You must do this for us.”

Adrian nodded slowly, eyes filled with tears. Damara held him in a gentle embrace for a brief moment before addressing Isabelle, “Do not fail me in this.”

Isabelle nodded sharply, grim acceptance adorned her face. Damara turned from Adrian, hesitation weighing each step she took from the boy. She thought of the tunnel under the chapel. She could flee with him. The thought flashed through her mind so quickly that she took a step back toward him, and her eyes flew to the passage beneath the pearlescent tree of their order.

She spoke to hide her hesitation, “Take some books with you. Maps too. Their weight is worth it.” She nodded sharply to herself and tore her thoughts from where they could claw at her resolve and strode to the town’s wall, where archers argued about where and when they should fall back.

Her fellow Vigilants radiated calm. Quiet confidence pervaded their movements. The multitude of conversations, laughter, and games they played was a sort of desperate façade. They

knew what awaited them; they just didn't know when. It was not fear that drove them to pretend to forget an army sat on their doorstep. Perhaps it was pride. Whatever it was. She embraced the coming battle and worked through the night.

Damara cleaned her hands in a snow-filled bucket and ate a small lunch in the warmth of the midday sun. She swept a critical eye over the barricades and traps. Heavy footsteps sauntered toward her.

Artix crossed his bare, soot covered arms over his broad chest, "Finally eating?"

"I was waiting for Sara to break out her stash of Airenthian cheese," she said drily, waving a slice of generously garnished bread.

Her husband shook a small bottle enticingly, "Well, Markus," he said trying his hand at a seductive smile, "managed to pilfer some of Verigul's elvish wine."

"I could swoon."

Artix laughed, "Can you now?"

Damara eyed him with mock annoyance and took a sip from the bottle he proffered.

They shared a moment of comfortable silence, "You've kept busy," Artix said.

"There is much to do."

"Adrian says he has not seen you since last night," Artix said softly, laying a bare hand against her armored waist.

Damara's mood darkened, "There is no need to weigh him down further."

"Your absence is a heavy weight by itself," disappointment wound its way around his gentle words, "Remember what he needs."

Damara swallowed, folding her arms to hide unsteady hands, "I cannot go," she said simply.

“Why is that?” he asked softly.

They both knew the answer.

“An army sits on our doorstep. It demands my focus!” Damara lied, throwing a hand out toward the gates and barricades.

Artix shook his head, standing silent for a long while, “I will give him your love,” he said finally. Leaving her in the sunlight.

Damara’s stomach twisted as she watched him walk away. She threw the remainder of her meal into the muddy snow and walked the line of the first barricade shouting orders.

The enemy, clad in black leather and steel, marched as the sun began its descent. No banners waved. No parlay sought. They marched with weapons drawn and battering ram readied.

In the diminishing light of evening, the Vigilants waited. Covered by archers scattered across rooftops like crows, the Vigilants formed a wall three ranks deep behind their barricade. On the towering stone walls, a group of Vigilants rained death upon the encroaching horde. At the head of the defensive line stood Damara, her ornate dragon helm seethed. Her face was calm.

A cry of “Wizard!” went up at the wall, followed by a Vigilant being thrown from the rampart by an explosion of fire. The Vigilant landed with a thud, rolling back over her head to find her feet, “Damn bastard, son of a wretched two-arsed pig!” she cursed, rushing back to her perch.

The small gate groaned and splintered with every hit, “Archers!” Damara called, “Fall back to the second line!”

Well trained and ever aware, the archers retreat was immediate. The gate collapsed with a shower of splinters, and a horde of soldiers rushed through the narrow opening, only to be caught in a barrage of destruction from Vigilant archers and wizards. Vines pulled soldiers to the ground

where they were trampled by comrades set aflame. Bolts of lightning and acidic mist added to the confusion at the gates. Those who made it through the gate tried to claw their way back against the tide of their comrades, only to be pushed further into the chaos.

As the tirade of death began to slow, the first soldiers stumbled through, fighting to find cover from the endless barrage of arrows assaulting them. Their reinforcements waded through the smoldering, crushed remains of the less fortunate and charged forward. Weapons held high and screaming.

The Vigilant line was silent. Their blades spoke for them.

Thirsty for battle, the enemy soldiers charged headlong into the V-shaped barricade, funneling themselves into a choke point where they were slaughtered en masse. Long spears thrust into the mass of bodies, no blade missing the mark of flesh. The barricade collapsed under the weight of dead and panicking soldiers pushed forward unwittingly by their comrades.

Damara led with brutal efficiency, hacking through soldiers with quick, short strikes. The Vigilant line held strong but was slowly pushed back by the endless force as it continued its assault. They drove through the Vigilants' second barricade, throwing more lives away as they pressed relentlessly and blindly into every trap the Vigilants set. Despite their training and defenses, the Vigilants began to separate. Many became caught fighting in small pockets throughout the town, while only a handful maintained the last defensive line.

Damara pulled a wounded Vigilant to safety, laying her right hand against their wound to heal them. Artix stepped in front of her as she tended to the Vigilant. Catching a blow on his massive shield, Artix drove a group of soldiers back with a trio of sweeps from his ax. The two worked as extensions of each other as they moved along the defensive line; Damara tended to the wounded while Artix shielded her.

Verigul launched arrow after arrow from the rooftops into the oppressive horde. Markus stood beside Artix as they fought to push back against the enemy. Damara pulled a Vigilant to their feet and joined her husband and Markus with a renewed fury. For a moment, the last stand of the Vigilants pushed back the tide.

Markus ducked beneath Damara's heavy sword, coming up to her left to plunge a pair of daggers through the chin of an attacker while Damara threw a fan of flames over his head to stave off any counter-attack. Artix worked his shield and ax defensively, an anchor in the roiling tide of battle.

Behind them, Verigul fell, landing in a sickening heap of flesh and bone.

"Verigul!" Markus cried, rushing to the side of his fallen lover and abandoning what remained of the Vigilant line.

From the rear of the enemy, black bolts of energy sailed overhead, crashing down in a deadly bursts of magic. Artix brought his shield overhead, catching a bolt but opening himself to the soldiers before him. He swung his ax in a desperate arc and fell back a step, trying to bring his shield down in time to deflect the next blow. But the soldier stopped suddenly, jerking awkwardly as a long knife plunged into their stomach.

"Adrian!" Artix cried in horror, stepping immediately in front of his son. A soldier fainted at the boy, forcing Artix to over-extend his shield arm, opening his defenses once more. Adrian lunged and impaled one attacker but another rushed in, hacking down at Artix's shield arm and severing it at the elbow.

"Damara!" He screamed, desperation giving birth to strength as he bull-rushed the crowd of soldiers trying to push their way forward.

Damara tore Adrian from behind his charging father and retreated from the overrun line. Her eyes locked with Markus as she desperately searched for an escape for her son. His scarred face was bereft of emotion as he stalked back toward the enemy, wicked daggers spinning in preparation for death.

Damara pulled Adrian behind her and rushed into the chapel.

“You are the last?” a wizened voice asked from the darkness.

“Keeper!” Damara shouted, “you must help us fight! You must save Adrian!”

The old man’s fiery orbs pierced through her, “I must fight the next battle, this one is lost.”

“Save him, please,” she begged.

The oaken doors bounced against their lock.

His orbs of fire dimmed, she knew it to be pity, “Goodbye, Damara. May the Mistress of Life be merciful.”

The Keeper closed his eyes and in a flash of fire he disappeared. The tree soaked in the embers left in his place, brightening.

“Adrian,” She yelled, spinning to face her son, “Flee now, find Isabelle!”

“But Father!” the boy began to shout back.

“It is over Adrian. You must escape through the tunnel.”

Adrian shook his head, “I sealed it. Like you showed me.”

Damara collapsed to her knees, “Adrian. No.”

“We can’t leave,” courage and fear shook his voice.

Damara’s mind whirled as she tried to focus through the mix of emotions, “Find somewhere to hide,” she said with as much calm as she could muster.

“No. I’m not hiding.”

“Adrian, do not do this to me.”

“Don’t do this to me!” he shouted back, tears freely streaming down his cheeks.

“What?” Damara asked, taken aback.

“Don’t make me a coward. Don’t make me live by abandoning you and father.”

Damara threw her body at the chapel doors as the lock cracked and groaned. Soldiers beat harder against the doors, cheering with each new crack.

She looked back to her son as she strained against the multitude of soldiers, “Adrian,” she begged, “Please. Go.”

The boy shook his head and ran to help push against the doors. Damara grabbed his collar and threw him away from her, nearly giving way to the soldiers. She screamed in rage and pain and pressed harder against the only barrier between her child and death.

“Hide!” she demanded once again, her voice cracking as her fingernails dug into the wood. The boy refused, drawing his long knife instead. The soldiers stopped pressing against the doors, and Damara heard them calling for the battering ram. Footsteps shuffled about outside as soldiers yelled and jeered, mocking her resistance. Damara fell to her knee, trying to form some semblance of a plan. She looked back at Adrian, “Guard the Tree, but stay in here.”

“What are you doing?”

“Just stay here. Please.”

Adrian nodded, slowly stepping back into the light of the tree.

Damara stood, pulled open the doors to the chapel, and stepped out into the last rays of the falling sun. She closed the door tightly behind her. The mass of crowded soldiers faltered as she stepped out, right arm and sword engulfed in a hungry flame. Her dark gray eyes glared out

from within the dragon helm. She took a heavy step down the stairs toward the gathered troops, the clash of steel on stone echoed around the soldiers who stepped away from her. She took another step down and the soldiers looked at each other, their fear palpable. Damara glanced at the remains of the enemy force. Where over a thousand had marched upon the Keep perhaps a hundred and fifty remained.

“Are you so eager to join the dead?” Damara asked calmly, taking another step toward them. A few fired arrows at her as she stalked toward them. They didn’t scratch her armor, “Every step you ascend will be bought with your lives.”

“Surrender, Vigilant,” a man called out to her from the rear of the soldiers. “Lay down your sword, and live.”

The man moved through the center of the remaining troops, his armor and exquisite saber unblemished from battle. He wore a goatee and short, well-kempt hair. His deep-set eyes gave him a serious demeanor despite the warm smile spread across his face. Behind him, a cloaked figure waited at the rear; beady eyes peered out from beneath his hood.

“No.”

“Your order has fallen, you fight for nothing.”

“One Vigilant remains.”

“Your bravery is commendable.” The man turned to the cloaked figure, “Kill her.”

The mage nodded and raised his hands and began to chant, while the leader returned to his side. The soldiers backed away, glancing fearfully between Damara and the wizard.

The Vigilant readied herself, but as the mage reached the pinnacle of his spellcasting, his hands jerked and spasmed. The chant turned into a gurgle as he clutched at his throat where the tip of a long knife had burst through it and ripped to the side.

It took Damara too long to realize the truth of the moment.

Adrian stood above the crumpled body of the wizard and brought his dagger up defensively as the leader lashed out at him. Their blades clashed loudly on the silent battlefield.

With speed borne of desperation, Damara rushed toward them but was cut off and pushed back up the stairs by the remaining soldiers. She fought in a flurry of fire and steel, each step she took back was bought by the lives of half a dozen soldiers. Her focus was continuously drawn to her son.

Adrian's dagger flew from his hand to clatter against the cobbled road. His eyes searched in terror for his mother as he smacked feebly at the cold blade that slid into his stomach.

Damara's scream split the night air. The soldiers closest to her died in wordless agony, consumed by vengeful fire as she became a second sun upon the world. With renewed fury, she hacked her way through the horrified soldiers, only to be assaulted once more by a flurry of blows. A long spear was thrust through her stomach, driving her backward. She struggled to push back against her attacker, but more soldiers piled onto the spear until a final heave drove the spear into the heavy door of the chapel.

The soldiers cheered and rushed her, weapons poised to finish her, but a voice cried out from behind them, "Hold! Stay your blades!"

The man with the goatee pushed his way through the crowd of soldiers to stand before Damara. The Vigilant half hung, half stood as she faced the man who murdered her son.

"I am sorry. No parent should follow their child to the afterworld," his face twisted into a mask of guilt.

Her mind was cluttered by pain, the least of which came from the spear embedded in her stomach.

“I’m. Not. Dead. Yet,” she growled through her teeth as she pulled a dagger from her side and lashed out at the man, cutting deep into his cheek. A fresh wave of pain rolled through her.

He kicked the blade from her hand and leaned toward her, “Yes. You are,” he said quietly.

Damara glared at the man as he sawed a jagged line through her throat, her head falling limply down as he cut through the tendons.

He replaced her blade in its sheath, “May you find peace with our Lady Death,” he whispered before pushing open the other door to the chapel. The soldiers gave her a wide berth as they followed him.

Her vision darkened.

Past the charred and mutilated corpses of her attackers. Past the river of blood that ran down the steps to mingle with mud and snow. She saw the body of a small boy crawling toward her. She tried to speak, tried to reach for him. But she could only watch as the boy clawed through mud and blood to reach her.

In the haze between worlds she heard the cries of a small boy.

“Mother, help me.”

“I’m scared.”

“I don’t want to die.”

Darkness took her.