

NO KINGS NO GODS NO MERCY

BOOK ONE

Kingdoms Will Burn



AURELIO MARTEGANI

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**First Published by OrcaPod Media
2011**

ISBN 978-0-9571190-4-8
Revised edition 2020

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PROLOGUE

In The Beginning...

God looked upon His Creation and wept.

It was so achingly beautiful, the greatest act of Love, but already Corruption was turning it into something else.

In the Beginning there had been no Time, only perfect stillness, forever pure. But immutable and, eventually, unbearably dull. And so there was Time and with Time came all things.

Only belatedly did the Maker realise that the First Law of Time is that ultimately everything corrupts. So not only did all the Maker's creations engender some unforeseen perverse results, but the very essence of God was subject to a transition and Evil was born.

Since the very dawn of Time, the Unmaker unleashed Its wrath over the fabric of the Universe, calling into existence legions of beings much later known as demons, and since that very first moment the Maker fought Evil to a standstill.

He sought to get rid of the disease, as if it was something alien to Creation. But eventually He came to accept He was fighting His equal and opposite and grew tired of the mindless destruction their struggle brought about, so He resolved to remove His own self from Time and by so doing to banish Evil forever.

Creation would not be perfect, could not be anymore, but would lie in balance and He reluctantly accepted the necessity of it.

He forged the Second Law of Time to enforce such state of things then estranged Himself from our Universe, dragging the Unmaker with Him.

But Evil hadn't been idle.

Anticipating the Maker's intentions and not content with balance, It crafted a tool, a Dark Gem, to convey Its will through Time and space so that eventually all Universe would corrupt to fulfil Its own grand design.

Most of Its servants were exiled as well, but some of the most powerful, having rebelled against all authority long before the banishment, kept roaming unfettered through the outer dimensions.

Those beings cared nothing for Order, whether it was born out of Good or Evil.

They were Chaos.

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Creation was their hunting ground, and they fed upon its energy. They located the Gem, drawn by its otherworldly power, and strove to master it, but those who dared were consumed by its might.

Daunted, the survivors cursed the Gods and dispersed, biding their time.

The Universe slowly aged, but the Gem withstood the test of Time, working its malice relentlessly. And where the Gem went War followed, as races rose and fell vying to control or destroy it, until a unique spell fractured the crystal in five shards.

Broken, diminished, its fragments dispersed, it lay forgotten... though not by all.

17 Years Ago...

The girl sobbed in rage and fear.

The crazed shouts of the mobsters burnt like venom, though it wasn't with words that they were taking the lives of their helpless victims, but with stones.

Making a living in the small hamlet, merely a group of miserable barracks that passed for houses tucked high-up a valley in the Rauckonos range and clustered around a crumbling shrine of the One-God, was difficult. Especially so for an unmarried woman with child, with few good pastures available and the surrounding heights teeming with wild animals and even wilder Trollshem.

Death lurked among the crags of the towering peaks. It was a fact of life that the girl had come to accept, but on that day ordinary men – fellow villagers turned into murderous fiends by greed and bigotry – were responsible for their suffering.

Already her mother had stopped moving and a trickle of blood oozed from her fractured skull forming a small crimson pool by her gentle face, her mouth still open in a mute appeal for mercy. She had implored them in the name of God, she had beseeched their cleric, but he had been one of the first to hit her.

A few coins had spilled on the ground from her mother's robe and the mobsters had scrambled to collect them, forgetting momentarily about

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her, but someone was now pointing a threatening finger in her direction. She curled up cat-like in a futile attempt to protect herself and failed to notice the approach of the red-robed stranger until he came to stand between her and her tormentors.

'Begone stranger!' spat one of the men, 'lest we deal with you in the same way as these whores.'

'The girl is a virgin.' he replied matter-of-factly.

'How would you know? Have you tried her and recognised your impotence?' A round of harsh laughter followed.

That was the last human sound she heard from those throats. The next moment they were screaming in horrible agony and death came to them as a blessing.

She was alive, but in that instant she realised she would be alone. She was as good as dead. But the red-robed mage knelt beside her. He whispered a few words then stood and extended his hand, staring at her expectantly.

She felt the intensity of his gaze as she had witnessed the power of his arts, and hesitated. In her innocence she could sense the Darkness behind her saviour's might, but she was tempted.

What good had God done to her mother anyway?

She cursed God and took his hand.

I - KHARGMOOR

'What do you see?'

Although no words were actually uttered and no sound had troubled the silence of the vast chamber, the voice came potent and clear to the small group of mentalists and far-seers who sat cross-legged in a tight circle at the centre of the polished stone-tiled floor. The shading of the tiles suggested occult patterns, but these were difficult to grasp for the untrained eye and not necessarily pleasant once recognised. The mentalists, however, had neither time nor curiosity to spare for the hidden geometries of the place as their attention was fully absorbed by the task at hand.

It had often occurred to Vaerinus - their senior member - that they might have achieved the same results sitting more comfortably somewhere else, but their Master appeared to have a sense of the theatrical. Unfortunately he also indulged in a taste for cruel and inventive retribution.

Vaerinus shuddered inwardly at the sound of that voice, as always, but was careful not to let his concentration slip. They were so close to their goal he knew; he could almost sense it just beyond the furthest reaches of his mental probing, and yet as distant as ever.

Once again, at great expense of energy, the mentalist let the shadowy images flow through him and reform into more coherent shapes before the eyes of his mind.

'Shadows, Master... huge stone doors... and a great staircase cut in sheer rock... All is shrouded and misty...'

'What else?' insisted the first voice impatiently.

'I don't...'

'What else, I said!'

This time the voice came like a low rumble, and the five figures backing Vaerinus' efforts felt a bolt of fear run down their spine. Each one of them was a skilled magician in his own right and would not ordinarily have taken orders lightly from anybody, no matter the amount of payment promised. By this stage though, they had belatedly come to understand the extent of the power of their employer.

They remembered all too well what had happened the last time the Red Prophet had lost his temper.

At the time there had been eight of them.

They redoubled their efforts and channelled their combined psychical strength through their leader, who struggled to keep his balance, nearly overwhelmed by this new surge of energy.

'Flights of stairs carved in stone in almost complete darkness, few torches burning low. The stairs appear to go on forever ... No, wait! A landing, another set of doors... iron-studded ... massive ... but I can't see through them. Some powerful wards thwart our probing. Let us rest before we attempt ...'

'I need to know more!' thundered the deep voice, oblivious to the other's plea. *'Don't waste your energy on the wards. Return to the stairs, by the lights. Look for details.'*

The force of the startling command rocked Vaerinus and he lost focus for a heartbeat.

For months they had been struggling to overcome the mystical shields that shrouded the object of their search, getting painfully nearer with each try, only for him to be asked now to retrace his steps. He was quick to regain his concentration though, and shifted his scrutiny to the stairs, backing away from the subtle emanations that until then had guided his senses.

It was almost as if whatever waited beyond those doors wanted to be found. In fact that was precisely what the Red Prophet had been convinced of from the beginning. Progress had been agonisingly slow though, and the Master was at the end of his tether.

Vaerinus started to scan the steps leading to the imposing iron doors. The stones were old, that much was obvious, smoothed by centuries of use. It was a long staircase, drab and monotonous. It didn't look like a promising place to investigate.

However, when his mind had raced up the stairway earlier, he had sensed that the wards were weaker there, probably because the surroundings were so featureless that they made it difficult for a prying eye to pick up any clue.

The fact that the entire area was mostly cloaked in darkness didn't help either.

He concentrated on the lit areas around the sparse torches, shifting his focus from one empty pool of light to the next in mounting frustration, rapidly draining his newly replenished energies in the process.

Suddenly something attracted his attention. Something small and shiny lay on a step, casting off a pale reflection just at the edge of the torchlight's perimeter.

He tensed, betraying his anticipation, and by doing so, again lost focus.

'What is it?'

Vaerinus knew he had better come up with something quickly not to disappoint his Master, while he frantically tried to reform the fleeting vision in his mind. An old legend flashed before his eyes and he improvised.

'Some small reflective surface ... a metal of sorts ... an engraved ring!'

'A ring?' asked the voice in a sceptical, dangerous tone. *'I would advise you not to mention elves and fairies next, Vaerinus!'*

The seer felt droplets forming upon his brow, but just as he was about to panic, he was back to the staircase. Images of walls made out of skilfully cut blocks, so closely fitting together as to present an almost unbroken surface, crystallised in his mind. Dwarf manufacture probably, as he had suspected for weeks.

For some reason the Red Prophet had initially seemed reluctant to accept this possibility, as if he had expected his prize to lie amid the ruins of some ancient Leithinic keep, long fallen into disrepair following the centuries-old demise of its mysterious winged inhabitants. But whatever the place was, it didn't look in disuse to Vaerinus and the burning torches appeared to confound the Master's conjectures.

That was good.

More than once, while searching for an otherworldly relic that might or might not have been bestowed on some obscure long-dead race, Vaerinus had found himself questioning his own sanity. He felt now somewhat comforted to be standing once more on firm ground as there was no doubting the existence and skills of the dwarves.

His relief was short lived though, his brief hesitation almost proving fatal.

'Vaerinus? ...' There was no mistaking the edge in the unfinished question. It was high time to find out what the shining object was. He managed to visualise it and utter the answer just as the Red Prophet's telepathic prod painfully closed upon him like an iron vice.

'No! Not a ring... A gold coin! It is engraved with a symbol, a hammer and a felled bear skull... Master, it hurts, please...'

'You have done well!' exclaimed Gaelyon triumphantly, speaking out loud at last. *'I am pleased. You may rest now. Your efforts, and unconditional loyalty,'* he emphasised the last words *'will be richly rewarded.'*

Then he briskly left the room, his long crimson robe skimming the floor, while Vaerinus slumped on his back, staring unseeing at the distant

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ceiling. The mentalist was only five and fifty, but felt drained and exhausted as if he were a hundred years old. The others let out a collective sigh of relief and sagged, pressing their foreheads to the flagstones and so remaining long after their Master was gone.

Only Trychomion, the youngest far-seer of the group, quickly regained his composure and straightened up, casting a disdainful look upon his fellow mages.

Sooner rather than later, he knew, the weak would have to be weeded out so that the strong might shine.

Gaelyon climbed several flights of stairs towards the highest levels of the fortress, his mind racing.

'That symbol, the Hammer and the Bear ... could it be so simple?' he pondered. Could it be that the object of his life-long quest had always been so tantalisingly close and that the dwarves had proven so carelessly stupid after all?

He could feel the excitement rushing through his veins like a whirlwind, leaving him almost breathless and electrified as never before. True, his arts had granted him an exceptionally long life, but even so at times he had started wondering whether he would live to see the day his goal would be fulfilled, or whether he would eventually fail, as all his predecessors had since the time of the Fall. It had been a terrible thought that had gnawed away at him and had slowly sapped his nearly unbounded self-assurance and confidence: He, the most powerful being in Thresiae, destined to abject failure and oblivion.

But this needed not happen now; he would be the one to reap the benefits of the long years of patient searching and planning.

He passed by a door left ajar and paused briefly.

In the gloom beyond the threshold he could just discern the curves of a young woman's slender silhouette. She was practicing and he knew she'd be naked, to better grasp the mysteries engraved on her skin. The arcane words of an incantation drifted out on to the landing as if coming from afar. Except for the faint echo of her voice, a perfect stillness seemed to pervade the room.

Gaelyon considered briefly breaking the news to his pupil but thought better of it. Best she concentrated on her training. Soon her skills would be put to the test and he'd hate to be disappointed.

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Still walking briskly he passed under an open arch at the top of the last flight of stairs and stepped into a large sun-lit terrace, jutting out high above the chasm of the crater upon which the inner ramparts of the fortress were perched.

The main walls of the gigantic structure had been erected facing the outer edge of the ancient volcano's rim, although a better description would be that the fortress appeared to have been actually carved, rather than built, on the rock-face of the mountain. Its forbidding bulwarks, stretching in a convex moon crescent along half the circumference of the volcano, towered hundreds of feet above the sole access road to the front gates, at the apex of the crescent.

The fortress was tiered, so that even if foes were somehow able to break through the lower gates, they would end up facing another set of gates and walls overlooking the ones just penetrated, and then yet another one above that.

In fact no one had ever attempted to storm the place, and almost no outsider even knew of its existence. Aptly, it had been named Khargmoor, "the Grim".

At times, Gaelyon had thought it was almost a waste that such mighty walls would not be tested and washed by the blood of his enemies but, if anything, the events of the Fall had taught him that nothing stood forever. Only the Unmaker did, but he had exiled himself on a different plane of existence to do so.

He walked to the balustrade, leaned and looked down into the misty depths and immediately saw them far below. From their position, perched on a large flat basalt ledge breaking out of the steep incline of the crater's inner walls, he must have been invisible, or a mere speck on the cliff face, but Merakis immediately sensed his presence, reared her head and unfolded her wings in eager readiness.

'Hush! No need to come.' Mentally instructed by the Red Prophet, Merakis relaxed and settled again.

Gaelyon cupped his hands and blew in softly. When he opened them a large black butterfly with delicate red patterns spread its wings where previously there had been only empty space. It hovered briefly around the mage before silently disappearing into the fortress through the arch. Gaelyon let his gaze follow it for a moment then turned his attention back to the creatures in the crater.

The sight brought back memories of another time, almost sixty years before, when he had felt almost as elated looking upon them for the first

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time, sensing he had found the tools he would need to fulfil his quest. Obviously they had looked very different then. For a start they had not been alive yet, just fragile promises of life encased in a shell.

They had been eggs, and they had been buried.

At the time he had been scavenging, in mounting despair, the crags and valleys around the ruins of Gholghota - the Unmaker's fallen Tower - looking for clues of the fate of the Dark Gem and finding none.

The tower had been immensely high and strong; the seat of Dagoth the man-demon founder of Gaelyon's own peculiar order, but eventually it had succumbed to the combined onslaught of all the major races of Thresiae, some of whom were completely extinguished in the attempt.

The ruins spread for miles around the charred base of the tower and the broken ground made his search even more arduous.

While intent on examining some stone blocks piled on the edge of a ravine, he had felt a rock break loose under his feet and before he could react found himself tumbling backwards down the steep incline. It was a concussed Gaelyon who, aching badly, slowly managed to sit up and stare at the mouth of a cave, half-hidden in the gloom at the bottom of the gully. A sharp pain stabbed at his right side, a broken rib as he later found out.

Rubble, mostly earth and rocks, obstructed the cave's mouth, but he could see a passage large enough for him to squeeze in. Driven by curiosity, once the throbbing pain subsided a little, he pushed himself through the narrow opening to find a larger chamber, bare but for a shallow depression at its centre filled with fine black sand upon which five large egg-shaped stones of various colours had been placed, their lower half partially buried.

He reached out and to his surprise the sand revealed a faint trace of warmth to the touch, although the air in the cave felt cool.

As he shed more light with a simple spell, he noticed the shapes silhouetted within the shells and suddenly comprehended that what he was looking at were no ordinary stones, but something of such rarity and fabled power that just one could have bought him a kingdom had he wished. But that wasn't what he had in mind, and with the five of them he would have a whole world to rule.

Dragon's eggs!

In that instant of realisation he knew that his lifelong quest would eventually succeed, no matter how deep and far his enemies had hidden the shards of the Dark Gem.

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Dragons were supposedly extinct, or at least no one had seen any full-sized adults for at least two centuries, but no one knew for sure that they were all gone. In fact, it appeared that a mature individual had chosen that very location to bury its eggs and had obstructed the entrance to prevent predators harming them.

She or he (little was known of dragons' breeding practices) would probably have stayed outside the cave, a fully grown adult almost certainly too bulky to get in, and placed them in the sand pit one by one, holding them gently clenched between its teeth and stretching its long neck through the opening into the cave's centre.

He paused, considering the risks involved in taking his find with him and whether there was a chance that the adult would return to look after its offspring, but decided against it. Had the dragon intended to come back it wouldn't have piled so much rubble at the entrance. So he had collected the eggs, individually lifting them from their resting place and carrying them up the ravine with the utmost care. Five times, up and down, and then the long walk back to the camp, his broken rib throbbing painfully all the way. By nightfall, he had finally slumped exhausted beside the fire, the precious cargo carefully wrapped.

Over half a century later he certainly didn't regret the hard work. The eggs had hatched and the creatures had grown, and although not yet quite full-sized, they were magnificent. And more importantly they were his to command.

He had been able to establish a mind-link with the younglings in the early stages of their development and mould them into the physical embodiment of his will. Dragons were intelligent and powerful creatures and imposing his supremacy hadn't been easy, even with younglings. Had they been adults he might not have succeeded.

It was rumoured that in ages past some dragons had voluntarily established a link with a chosen rider, but that was then and this was now, and there were no more dragon riders in Thresiae, other than him and a very small number of his followers he had specifically trained for the task.

He heard hurried footsteps at his back and then the rustling noise of an armoured man snapping to attention behind him.

'Master!' a deep voice called out, 'Did you send for me? Has something happened?'

Gaelyon turned to face his First General.

'Yes, Karsinaar! The day we have awaited for so long is finally upon us...'

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Forgetting himself in a rush of excitement, Karsinaar dared to interrupt his Master.

'The mentalists,' he exclaimed, letting a note of contempt slip into his words, 'did they find something at last? The Leithinii?' As soon as he uttered the sentence he realised his mistake and bowed his head. 'Forgive me, Master.'

Gaelyon looked for a moment at his crestfallen general and had a brief vision of the occasion he first saw him, nearly twenty years before. He had been conducting a series of small-scale raids against the human settlements high in the valleys of the Rauckonos range for the purpose of training his fast-growing dragons. He could not even recall the name of Karsinaar's village, and in any case by the time the dragons had swept over it, drenching the small huts in a deluge of fire, there was nothing left worth remembering. The few survivors who hadn't already gone insane with dragon fear had been quickly surrounded and killed by his raiders.

Only one man had been able to stand and resist both panic and force of arms. He had fought like a demon, killing scores of his men, knee-deep in blood and gore, until a dragon had swooped upon him, charring his body and blinding him. He could have let him die, but in that man, in that simple mountain warrior, he had sensed something more, something worth shaping into yet another tool for the fulfilment of his ultimate goal. And so he had saved him, restored his sight and healed most of his injuries, although some ran too deep not to leave terrible scars on his body. And Karsinaar had proved both useful and loyal afterwards. The man was a born-warrior and possessed an uncanny talent for leading others in battle, besides having an imposing physical stature, made even more impressive by the disfigurement of his battle scars.

Such a powerful, defiant, violent man now cowering before him... how much he enjoyed this!

'Raise your head, General! The mentalists have indeed found a clue to the whereabouts of what we are looking for, and it's not the Winged Ones after all. We had suspected for some time now that at least one of the fragments had been buried by the dwarves. The images that the seers were picking up seemed to confirm this but the exact location remained elusive, until today. And the irony is that it is almost right on our doorstep. Vaerinus described a coin he saw in close proximity to the energy source we've been tracking all this time and, incredibly, it bore the coinage of the Kings of Kharweann. This means that one shard must lie somewhere in Quaradrimm, deep within King Thornbalin's halls, hardly

more than a hundred leagues from here.'

Gaelyon scratched his chin as if somewhat puzzled. 'I must say I feel almost disappointed by the dwarves,' he continued. 'I thought they'd choose their hiding place at the farthest reaches of the world. How could they possibly expect we wouldn't find out eventually? On the other hand it does make sense. The halls of Quaradrimm are sufficiently vast and far from Gholghota to have appeared a suitable choice back then. After all this fortress didn't exist at the time of the Fall, and they couldn't have foreseen we would be so close that we'd be able to pry through all their protective spells and pick up the faint trace of the shard's emanations. We have been waiting long enough. It is now time to make our opening move and start the preparations for war.'

'Master, is this wise? We don't know for sure if the source the mentalists are tracking is truly what you seek. And even if it is, it would only be one fragment. We still don't know the location of the others...'

'Ah, but we have no need to know. There are men who possess that knowledge, although they may have forgotten for now, but give them a little display of our might and they will soon remember. And the beauty of my plan is that it will be them, unwittingly, who will lead us to our goal. We cannot fail and for as long as it takes for those fools to find what we seek, we will help them not to fail either.'

'But if we attack now, news may reach the great kingdoms of Men. If they unite and field their combined armies, our forces may not yet prove strong enough to overcome the odds.'

'So be it. Does the thought of war make you falter, Karsinaar?'

'No, of course not, but...'

'Of course not, Karsinaar. And you know why? Because you were dead and I called you back to life. Because you were weak and I gave you strength. Because you were blind and I gave you sight. More – I gave you *vision!*

Karsinaar beat his chest with a mailed fist in agreement, but the mage continued without pausing. 'The world is rotten, inhabited by wretched races eternally quarrelling over petty matters of power and greed – trading hypocrisy and ignorance for faith. Envy rules, not Kings. The kingdoms of men will not unite. They will *burn!*

'We offer the chance to overthrow this contemptible state of things and to restore those who have been sidelined. You will raise my standard and to this banner first all outcasts will rally and then entire nations. We will scourge the earth like wildfire, a cleansing bonfire. There will be no Kings,

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no Gods, no Mercy! King Thornbalin will be the first to fall...'

'No Kings, no Gods, no Mercy!' bellowed Karsinaar, striking his chest fiercely once more.

Gaelyon stood watching as his field commander turned away and quickly disappeared through the archway, off to direct the countless small tasks required to spark a single great act: to unleash Armageddon.

A man motivated by vision served far better than one driven solely by fear and for that reason the mage had decided to share a little of his wisdom and a great deal of his plans with his First General. A great deal certainly, but far from all. When the flames of war would eventually burn out and the ashes settle there would be a God after all: a powerful, hungry Dark God, and he, the Red Prophet, would be His Avatar.

Nevertheless, Karsinaar had a point.

Gaelyon knew that his armies would soon grow but for now their numbers were still relatively small even accounting for his brutish Trollshem allies. Overawing the Trollshem had been easy. They knew and followed only raw force and he had plenty to show them. Karsinaar's mountain men on the other hand were fierce and steadfast, their loyalty ensured by that of his First General, while money had bought mercenaries from Marmorica. Others had been cajoled by his prophetic promises and persuasive rhetoric, *compelling* most would agree. And he could always rely upon his dragons, of course. But he needed even more powerful allies to accomplish his goals, and he knew the time had come to summon one such the world had never seen before.

Gathering concentration, Gaelyon left the terrace and descended towards the deepest recesses of the mountain, down into areas that were already old when the great blocks of the mighty fortress had been raised. Not many of his servants had ever set foot in those dark corridors and even fewer dared linger there.

He paused in front of a heavy iron door, opened it with a word of command, and entered a large chamber carved out of the bedrock, covered entirely by intricate runes and lit by the orange glow of a score of torches.

He walked calmly to its centre and spread his arms.

'Let us begin!' and all the lights were gone as darkness engulfed him.

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