

THREE

MUCH FARTHER SOUTH, THE DAWN BLED CRIMSON ALONG THE eastern horizon, the color presaging the blood that would be shed that day. At the bow of the heavy transport *Argon*, standing at the airship's rail and looking out over the blasted terrain hundreds of feet below, Dallen Usurient, Federation Commander of the Red Slash, took note. Thirty years in service to the army, a low-ranking officer risen to high command in record time, he believed in luck and foretelling only when it suited his purpose. It did so this day, and a hint of a smile creased his weathered face.

We'll end it here, he thought. Scorched earth and no living creature left to tell the tale.

His command surrounded him, stretched out across the transport decking from port to starboard and bow to stern, five hundred strong, warriors all—men-at-arms who knew no other way. He had selected most of them, chosen them from the ranks of other commands from which they were only too glad to transfer if it meant coming to the Slash. He knew most by name; frequently, he knew the names of their wives and husbands and children. He knew their history, their habits, their strengths, and their weaknesses, although what he knew best and cared about most was the nature of their fighting capabilities. He had brought them together over the years, choosing carefully from

among thousands, building his command step by step until he had the five hundred he needed.

Now and then, some would fall by the wayside or leave the service because they could no longer meet his exacting standards. But there were always those waiting to take their place, their names on a list pinned to the barracks bulletin board where all could view them, study them, and offer their opinions. Only a few ever commented, and then only with a deep sense of caution. They revered Usurient, these soldiers, but they feared him, too. Loose tongues and flippant opinions were not well received. Hard fact and steady arguments were what won him over, and everyone wanted to be in his trust.

He had formed the Red Slash ten years earlier, when he had risen to a position in the army where he could do so, and he had formed it for an express purpose. Like First Response—the units that provided the initial defense against any threat to the Federation cities—Usurient wanted a command that would act against threats to the overall safety and stability of the Federation Empire. Not as a defensive unit, but as an attack force preempting the need for any defense. And one not confined to threats against the walls of Federation cities, but against anything or anyone acting in a way that could prove adverse to the Southland as a whole. His was to be a unit that would preempt unwarranted attacks and invasions from any source, no matter how nebulous or remote.

It had invested him with considerable power as a member of the Federation army. But he had used it boldly and successfully, and complaints had been few and largely ignored.

It would be so here today with the coastal fortress of Arbrox, a nest of vipers that had been preying on the Federation for far too long. He had his orders, and they were broad enough to suit his purpose. Scorched earth and bones was the way of the Slash. Complaints were for weaklings and those who hid behind the walls of their houses.

“Just there,” Desset whispered in his ear, leaning close and pointing ahead to the bank of fog toward which they were flying.

Arbrox. The first hints of its walls and buildings were just coming

into view as the dawn penetrated the marine layer and revealed bits and pieces of the ancient fortress. Thin columns of smoke rose from chimneys and watch fires, and shadows layered the huge stone blocks in dark splashes where the complex sat nestled within the coastal mountains. There were no signs of life, no indication of a presence within those buildings and walls, but Usurient was not deceived. He held up his hand in a prearranged signal, and the huge transport backed off until they were out of sight once more. He would take no chances on being discovered before he was ready.

“Aye, Commander,” Desset had told him a dozen times at least before they set sail. “The brigands are in there, like rats in their nests—young and old alike, vermin in need of extermination.”

Pirates.

“And the sorcerer?”

“Him, too—though you don’t hardly see him much. But that’s his hidey-hole, that one. Down in the rocks, deep in the underground. Oh, he’s there, all right. A blot upon the earth, a sickness to be burned away!”

He ignored his spy’s boisterous words, his suspect characterizations, and his obvious prejudices. He cared only for the accuracy of Desset’s insistence on knowing the pirate lair, and in this he was unshakable. The pirates were there. And the sorcerer, as well—the hated Arcannen. After years of trying to track both through hearsay and rumor, through false leads and dead ends, he had them at last.

The pirate raids on Federation shipping had been going on for months, but the bolder, more recent attacks against the diapson crystal transports had been the last straw. The Coalition Council had been in an uproar, the Prime Minister had turned to the Minister of Defense, and the latter had summoned him personally to deal with the matter.

“I want this settled, Usurient,” he had announced two minutes after the other’s arrival. “I want these raiders found and stamped out. Every last one. No exceptions. The Slash does this sort of work well enough; make sure they remember how to do it. And if the rumors of Arcannen are true, then finish him, as well. The Prime Minister and

the Coalition Council have agreed. To the deep pit with all of them; spare the women and children and the sick and old, but no others.”

So here he was, a few miles west of Arbrox, his command ready, his orders clear. *Search and destroy*. This was an undertaking that would end in the complete slaughter of those he found—though it was not the mandate the Minister of Defense had given him or one the Prime Minister would countenance. Dallen Usurient was a hard man, and he had lived a hard life. Not for him the pleasures of city life and the comforts of bed and family. His family was the corps and his bedmate was his duty. Whatever comfort he found came from knowing he had never failed either and never would. What satisfaction he enjoyed came from his life as a soldier, from the raw taste of battle and the sweet scent of his enemy’s blood. Fighting gave his life purpose and order; fighting was experience and skill and instinct combined to form the heart and soul of a soldier, and in his opinion there was nothing better or more meaningful in the entire world.

The transport was slowing down, and now the warships were moving up alongside. They would wait until the soldiers of the Slash were placed close to the fortress walls, then they would use their big guns to open paths to those who lay sleeping within. A few would be awake even now; a few would be keeping watch on the walls. But no one would be expecting the attack, and no one would be able to stand against it.

Usurient took a deep, steadying breath and exhaled slowly. He would go in first. He always did. You led by example, no matter your rank, no matter the danger. His men took their courage from him. They found their strength in his.

He turned around and faced his men. He was a tall, strong man, standing well over six feet, with a shock of black hair and a scar running crosswise on his face left to right over the bridge of his nose. He made an imposing figure as he lifted his right arm, fist clenched. Five hundred arms lifted in response, mimicking the gesture. Solidarity was everything in the corps. He glanced at Desset, who was looking ahead still, his uneasiness obvious. He was not a part of the corps; he could never be one of them. He was a spy, and his usefulness would end after today. His narrow frame, all bones and angles, his strange

eyes with their cat-like slits, and his narrow chin did nothing to flatter him. He was a necessary evil, and he would not be missed by any of them.

“Be calm,” Usurient whispered to him.

“You’re not the one the survivors will come looking for when this is over,” the other hissed.

Usurient shrugged. “There will be no survivors.”

“Just make sure.”

“Stay aboard, and stay out of sight. Wait for us here.”

The cat’s eyes flicked in his direction. “Not much else I can do, is there?”

The transport began to descend onto a flat that appeared between a swarm of gullies and ridges fronting the mountains ahead. When they were close enough to set the mooring lines, Usurient ordered the ladders thrown out, and the entire command began to climb down. Their progress was quick and efficient. It took less than ten minutes for all five hundred to disembark and form up below, organized by squads—scouts at the fore, heavy weapons at the rear. The squads consisted of bowmen, swordsmen, and spearmen, each with a specific task and all with a single command—to seize the fortress and kill everyone within.

Usurient had thought earlier to amend that order on the chance that useful information might be gleaned from those kept alive. But in the end it was simpler just to kill them all. What information they had was likely of little use, and there was less risk to his people with a kill order than with a capture-and-detain proviso.

He glanced around, standing now at the forefront of his corps. Ahead, the terrain was a barren mass of rocks and fissures. No vegetation, no sign of life. Not even a bird took flight at their arrival. Such a squalid, pointless bit of earth, he thought. How could there ever be anything here worth keeping?

His squad leaders crowded close as he repeated one last time the instructions he had given them twice already. Wait for the assault from the warships. Once it ceased, move forward into the gaps in the walls—swordsmen in the lead, spearmen following, bowmen in re-

serve, and heavy weapons as backup. Find those still alive and kill them. All of them. Ferret them out, if they were in hiding. Leave no one behind.

Then he moved them forward, taking up a point just behind the scouts as he led the way toward the peaks and the fortress they warded, the entire command spreading like a huge, silent stain across the landscape. They fanned out in two directions, forming a vise to imprison and contain those within the walls ahead, their lines staggered to prevent any escape. The roar of the ocean crashing on the rocks and the constant wail of the wind hid their approach, muffling the clank and rattle of metal and scrape of boots.

When they were in position, Usurient sent up the agreed-upon flare, and the warships eased forward to begin their assault. Turning broadside, the big flash ribs mounted on the decking released the power fueled by the diapson crystals, and waves of explosive fire hammered at the now fully visible fortress. Entire sections of the walls disintegrated in minutes, and the main gates went down in splinters of wood and iron. Cries of alarm rose from those within, and men surged onto what remained of the walls to fight back. They stood no chance. The warships attacked relentlessly, sweeping the men away, disabling their inferior weapons, and knocking out the ramparts and towers on which they stood.

When the airship weapons ceased, Usurient howled out to his five hundred, and the whole of his command surged toward the walls, flooded through the ragged gaps in the stone, and charged inside.

What happened next was predictably horrific. The killing was rampant and unceasing as swordsmen and spearmen took out what few remained of the defenders and then went after everyone else. Men, women, and children, old and young, whole or damaged, were cut to pieces. They died screaming and begging. They died fighting and running away. They died where they were hiding or as they were seeking escape. But they died all the same. None was spared and none escaped. Blood and flesh lay everywhere, a lifeless mass of what had once been a human population, decimated in less than an hour's time. The entire assault was executed flawlessly. Less than a handful

of the Red Slash soldiers were killed in the process, and less than two handfuls injured in even the most minor ways.

Even so, there were those who stood stunned in the aftermath, looking down at their handiwork, amazed at how terrible it was. The reaction was decidedly mixed. There were tears shed. There were muttered oaths and soft prayers asking forgiveness. There were wild excuses and insinuations on the necessity of it all. There were boasts and sneers. A mixed pack, but a pack, all the same.

Usurient walked through the carnage wordlessly, his hard face expressionless, taking it all in. He was pleased at how well it had gone, but irritated that his troops did not seem to have found the sorcerer. Desset had seemed so certain he was there, yet there was no sign of him. A canvas of his squad leaders did not reveal Arcannen's fate, and that meant, in all likelihood, that the sorcerer had managed to escape.

"Bring the men out," he ordered. "We're done here. A fine day's work by all of you. The men get an extra ration tonight of any libation they desire, spirits or otherwise. Let them know."

He stood outside the walls as his men filed out, noting the mix of expressions on their faces, noting those who would not look at him and those who stared boldly; noting how they behaved with the battle behind them and the killing done. All sorts of responses, yet every soldier had done his or her duty and that was what mattered. The horror of the moment would fade; the memory of the dying would soften. In the not so distant future, no one would even think on it.

When the heavy armor appeared, he sent them back in with portable flash rips to burn everything that was left, bodies included. "Leave no trace of any of it," he ordered.

He waited until he saw the fires spring up and smelled the stench of burning flesh permeating the sea air before turning and starting back with the others. The remains of this day's work would disappear with the first strong storm off the Tiderace. After that, only blackened stones and shattered walls would mark the ruins of what had once been Arbrox.

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The sun rose from behind the Tiderace in a haze of gray and silver, chasing the marine layer and brightening the blackened ruins of Arbrox. Trails of smoke rose from those ruins in slender threads that were quickly snatched away and dispersed by the sea winds. Gulls and cormorants and other seabirds began to wing their way in from distant haunts, settling down to feast on the remains of the dead, uncaring of the loss represented, caught up in the appeal of easy food and an uninterrupted meal.

West, the Federation warships and transport were just disappearing into what remained of the fading night, winging their way toward the city of Sterne.

The man in the black robes stood outside what remained of Arbrox and its dead, watching. His gaze shifted between the fortress and the warships, dead and living, thinking thoughts so dark that if it were possible to touch them it would be as touching shards of fire.

A single question dominated his thoughts.

How could they do this?

Yes, Arbrox was a pirate fortress, and its people were pirates and the families of pirates. Yes, they had raided Federation shipping as a means of subsistence even though they knew that retaliation was likely and that it would put their lives at risk each time they set out on a hunt. Yes, they lived on the edge of the sword and point of the spear.

But to kill off every last man, woman, and child? To destroy an entire population and raze a village back into the earth as if it had never existed? His fury was all-consuming. This was a mark of such darkness that it must be avenged. Though the hunt had not been for him—or at least not exclusively for him—it felt personal in the extreme. The people of Arbrox had taken him in when everyone in the rest of the Four Lands had been intent on hunting him down. These people had fed and cared for him, they had treated him as one of their own. They had given him back his life, and they had asked nothing in return.

They did not deserve to die as they had. They did not deserve to be wiped out like vermin.

He would have died with them if he had not chosen this night to

sleep apart in the coastal shore watchtower he favored when his darkness most consumed him. He would not be seeing this sunrise if he did not know when it was time to step away and remain apart until the blackness passed and his good humor returned.

Pure chance that he was still alive. And fate, perhaps?

He pulled his cloak closer about his shoulders and looked down one final time on Arbrox and his friends. Someone had betrayed them. Someone had known of their lair and given them away to the Federation. The Slash could not have found them otherwise.

Time enough to settle that score—to settle with betrayer and killers both. But a way must be found that would catch them all up at once and feed them into a chamber of horrors equal to that which had consumed the people of Arbrox.

And who better than himself to find such a way?

Who better than Arcannen Rai?