

Prologue

The battle smelled wrong by the third day.

The first day, it had smelled of soil and sweat, trampled grass, churned mud, leather armor heating in the sun, blade-oil warming on sheaths. Arrows hissed overhead, and spells cracked like snapping bones. Dragons screamed in the sky as our lines surged and buckled, men shouting in a dozen dialects as they slammed shields shoulder to shoulder. It was chaos, but it was chaos I understood, clean, hot, full of motion and purpose.

By the second day, everything smelled of smoke. Whole stretches of forest along the ridge burned in sheets of fire. Trees toppled in bright, roaring cascades, their branches spitting sparks. Ash drifted across the field in gray veils that clung to skin, hair, armor. Even the dragons coughed flame reluctantly, their throats raw, their scales soot tarnished. Their bright colors were dulled, their flight sluggish from flying through smoke thick enough to chew.

But the third day...

The third day the air turned sour and heavy. Rot rose from the ground. Blood turned sweet in the heat. Flesh opened by magic and blades alike began to bloat in the sun. The wind carried the copper tang of spilled life and the stinging bitterness of burnt bone. I could taste death even when I breathed through cloth.

That morning, just before dawn broke across the jagged hills, I stood alone on a low rise overlooking what had once been a fertile valley. The sky above was a bruised purple smear, the last of the night clinging stubbornly to the horizon. Smoke curled upward from a dozen fires, drifting like ghosts across the ruin.

Behind me, the inky black box containing the Ond Stela sat half-buried in churned mud, its surface dull and cold. It didn't glow. It didn't hum. It didn't pulse. But its presence was a

weight against my spine, a silent reminder that I had built something I was not certain I would ever dare use.

“Thomas,” a voice rasped behind me.

I didn’t turn. I knew Silva’s voice too well, knew the scrape in it from shouting commands, from breathing ash, from going without sleep for too long. He came to stand at my shoulder; armor streaked with days of dirt and blood.

“They’re faltering on the eastern flank,” he said. “If Chron pushes there again, we lose the line.”

“They’re already lost,” I murmured. “They just don’t know it yet.

Silva ran a hand through his sweat-clumped hair. Below, in the valley, our soldiers shifted and braced and limped, dragging shields into position. Some leaned on their spears to stay upright. Some no longer had enough strength to lift their heads. Only the dragons still moved with purpose, circling above like weary guardians.

“You could use it,” Silva said quietly, nodding at the black box. His voice tightened. “The Ond Stela. One strike. You know it could turn the tide.”

I closed my eyes.

The truth sat like iron in my gut.

“I know what it could do,” I said. “And I know the cost.”

Silva said nothing. He didn’t have to.

The cost was the reason the box remained closed.

The cost was the reason Ziost’s warning still echoed in my skull, his ancient voice stripped of its usual calm, made sharp with fear.

Thomas... when it is used, the price will not be yours alone.

The memory of that conversation was still too clear.

We had been standing in the courtyard of the Outpost, stars swirling around us like cold fires. Ziost's face had been unusually tight, his jaw clenched, his eyes ancient and troubled. Serafina stood nearby, arms folded, her dark hair glowing faintly in the thin-dimensional light. She said nothing, she simply watched, her expression unreadable.

"I designed it," I had said then. "I know what it can do."

"You know what you *think* it can do," Ziost corrected. "But you have never wielded the full force of creation magic before. Not like this. Not concentrated. Not weaponized. Once activated, the Ond Stela's song cannot be silenced."

Serafina had spoken then, her voice a delicate blade.

"And when it ends, something will be gone. Something you cannot replace."

They had refused to tell me what that "something" was.

Serafina said knowing it would tempt me too soon.

Ziost said knowing it would break me too early.

I didn't know which answer frightened me more.

Now, watching my people struggle below, I felt the weight of that unknown price like a stone on my chest.

"I'm not afraid of what it will do to me," I said.

Silva studied me. "I know."

"I'm afraid of what it will do to the world," I whispered.

That, he didn't answer.

Because what could he say?

We watched in silence as a cluster of Chron's twisted constructs lurched across the field,

once-men and once-beasts, warped by the First's will until they barely resembled living things.

One lumbered forward with a skull split open, black light leaking from inside like rotting starlight. Another dragged three legs behind it but still moved quickly, unnaturally coordinated.

A dragon dove low, releasing a cone of fire that turned the nearest abomination to ash. The creature didn't scream. It simply collapsed, its limbs folding inward like a spider crushed in a fist.

Silva swallowed hard. "We're running out of men."

"We ran out yesterday," I said. "They just haven't fallen yet."

He turned to me. "If the Stela can end this,"

"If I open it without preparation," I cut in, "I tear the Veil apart. And what Chron started, *I will finish.*"

Silva looked away, swallowing whatever argument he'd wanted to make.

The sun pushed weakly above the ridge, light spreading across the ruined valley. It illuminated things I wished had stayed hidden, limbs tangled in shields, spears jutting from torsos, bodies crushed under the weight of toppled war-beasts. The glint of armor. The pale curve of a cheek turned skyward.

And the boy.

I hadn't noticed him earlier.

A young soldier slumped half-buried beneath a fallen riderless horse. His armor was too large for him, the straps tightened as far as they would go. His sword lay in the mud, its blade clean, never used.

I moved toward him. Silva hesitated, then followed.

The boy's chest rose shallowly. His eyes fluttered as I knelt.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

He tried to answer. Blood bubbled at his lips. I slid my hand beneath his head and lifted it slightly.

“Easy,” I whispered. “I’m here.”

“...Lorn,” he managed. “...from Gatewater.”

Gatewater. A tiny fishing village on the river, far from this cursed field. I had eaten smoked trout there when I was a boy. The memory bit deep.

“You fought bravely, Lorn,” I said.

He swallowed. His voice was thin. “Did we... stop him?”

“For now,” I said. “You helped hold the line.”

A tear slid down his cheek. “My mother... she’ll be waiting. Don’t... let her think I,”

“She’ll know,” I said. “I’ll make sure she knows you fought with honor.”

His breath grew more ragged. “Tell her... I wasn’t... afraid.”

“You weren’t,” I said, though I saw the terror in his eyes. “You were stronger than most.”

He exhaled once, shuddering. His eyes unfocused.

Then he didn’t breathe again.

I closed his eyelids gently with my fingers.

Such a waste.

An endless, senseless waste.

I should have been fighting the First *with* these men, not watching them die one by one under the weight of a god’s hatred.

Silva placed a hand on my shoulder. He didn’t speak.

He didn’t need to.

We stood there as the morning settled into a grim, oppressive light.

Then a distant roar echoed across the plane.

Not a dragon.

Something else.

Something older.

Something twisted with a piece of Chron's presence.

The constructs surged forward as if sensing a shift. The ground itself trembled beneath their advance.

Silva stiffened. "He's pushing again."

"Then we hold," I said. "One more time."

We climbed back up the rise, just in time to see the charge break the center line. A wave of Chron's warped soldiers crashed into our defenders, scattering them.

A soldier stumbled, falling to one knee. A spear drove through his chest. He collapsed atop another body, his blood darkening the mud.

The world narrowed to pain and survival and the slow, inevitable grind of defeat.

By the time the killing finally stopped, twilight washed the field in a soft gold that only sharpened the horror. Bodies lay where the charge broke, where shields failed, where luck ran out.

Five thousand dead, men and women whose names I could recite in the dark.

We had held the First back.

That's what the survivors said.

A victory.

But the word tasted wrong. If *this* was victory, what would defeat look like?

The wind shifted, blowing the stench of everything dying into my face. I forced myself not to turn away.

They were mine. My people. My responsibility.

And across the field, moving like a shadow given shape, came Ziost.

Elder God. Ally. Friend. Born of the earliest human belief, shaped by stories older than written language. His presence always made the air hum faintly, like the world itself was aware of him.

He reached my side and surveyed the carnage; his expression carved from stone.

“This cost too much,” I said.

“It always does,” he murmured.

“We can’t keep spending lives like this,” I pressed. “We’re holding Chron back, but the price, Ziost, we can’t keep paying it. We have to make the Ond Stela work.”

Ziost’s gaze traveled across the scorched horizon. Smoke drifted in waves, curling around broken trees like mourning veils.

“Thomas,” he said quietly, “I have warned you. Drawing that much power demands a price you cannot pay twice.”

“I know,” I said. “I know the theories. I calculated the strain. I shaped its core myself. I know what it *can* do. But I also know what happens if we don’t try.”

Ziost turned to me fully. His eyes were too old, too calm.

“And I know what will happen if you activate it without the right containment.”

His voice dropped.

“The Veil will tear.”

A small, bitter smile touched my mouth. “The Veil is already tearing.”

“Not like this,” he said.

I ran a hand through my hair, pushing sweat and grime back from my face. “I’m working on a way to direct excess energy. To bleed it off safely. But I can’t do it alone. I’ll need your strength, and Serafina’s understanding. She knows the Source better than any of us.”

A faint smile ghosted across his lips. “Serafina has studied magic since the moment humanity dreamed her into being. But however much she understands, you were the one who shaped the Stela. Only you can command it.”

His expression sobered again.

“But know this, whatever price it demands, it will demand from *you*.”

“I’m ready,” I lied.

“No,” Ziost said gently. “You are willing. That is different.”

We stood in silence, the dying groans on the wind filling the spaces between us.

At last, I said, “Between the three of us, maybe we can repair the Veil instead of tearing it further.”

Ziost looked out at the field again, at the endless bodies, at the smoke turning the sky a dirty orange.

“Be certain, Thomas,” he said. “When you use the Ond Stela, creation itself will listen. And creation... does not listen gently.”

A shiver ran through me.

“It’s the only way,” I whispered. “I won’t watch my people drown in this suffering.”

Ziost’s face softened with something like sorrow. “I wish there were another path.”

“So do I,” I said.

Above us, dark violet lightning began to gather at Ziost's feet, the mark of Elder God travel, light and shadow intertwined. The air vibrated as reality thinned.

He clasped my forearm.

"When I return from the Outpost," he said, "I'll bring Serafina."

"Until next time," I said.

"Until next time," he echoed.

He stepped into the lightning and vanished, erased and rewritten elsewhere in a flash of violet brilliance. The air sealed itself behind him with a soft, unnatural sigh.

Terrifying every time.

I turned back toward the command center carved into the cliff face. Stones groaned beneath my boots as I walked the last stretch, then ported the remaining distance, a small trick the gods had taught me, nothing like their crossings but enough to bypass a few hundred steps.

As I neared the entrance, the air thickened.

Power crackled across my skin.

Something snapped.

A force like a hammer struck me from nowhere, slamming me into the ground. The world flickered. The sky twisted. Stars shone in bright patches where there should have been smoke.

A tear in the Veil.

A big one.

Pain arced through my skull as I pushed myself upright. The hair on my arms stood on end, dancing with static.

Only three beings could wield magic on both sides of the Veil strongly enough to close a

rift:

Ziost.

Myself.

Chron.

And Ziost was gone.

I reached for lightning, my connection to the Outpost.

It flickered uselessly, like a dying spark.

I tried again.

And again.

Each attempt collapsed into nothing.

The path was sealed.

Chron had trapped them.

My stomach dropped. The cost, the number of his own creatures and followers he must have burned away to make that possible, did not bear imagining.

Chron didn't care. Chron wanted everything gone.

A shadow fell across the entrance as Silva burst out, eyes wide.

"What was that?" he gasped. "The whole cliff shook."

"Chron," I said. "He sealed the rift to the Outpost."

Silva's face drained of color.

Inside the command center, maps rustled in the draft. A lantern flickered. I ripped off my gauntlets and hurled them across the room.

"The Gods can't help us anymore," I said.

Silva sank onto a bench, defeated.

“We’ve tried everything.” Even the dragons can’t get close enough to wound him. He’s the First. No one’s ever touched him. And now...” He shook his head. “What do we do?”

“We don’t fall apart now,” I said, though the words scraped the inside of my throat. “We still have fight left in us. The Gods strengthened us, but *we* were always the strength.”

My gaze fell on the black box on the table.

Now that the Outpost was closed, the Stela might be our only chance.

Or our doom.

“Shengara,” I called.

Her voice answered in my mind, warm and resonant.

I am just outside.

A thunderous impact shook the cliffside. Dust drifted from the ceiling.

We stepped out.

She waited on the ledge, golden scales edged with red, her massive body coiled like a storm held in check. Scars crisscrossed her wings and chest, old and new.

“Shengara,” I said. “You are a sight for weary eyes.”

She lowered her head, molten eyes gleaming.

“What do you need, Prince Thomas?”

“You know what’s happened. Chron sealed the Outpost. The Gods are trapped. We can’t face him again without a plan. I need to work on the Stela. I need my notes. I need the Palace.”

“Of course,” she rumbled.

She lowered herself, and I climbed into her harness, fingers tightening around worn leather. Silva watched from below, his expression bleak but determined.

“Hold the line if he pushes again,” I called down. “Fall back to secondary positions. Do

not face him head-on."

Silva nodded sharply.

Shengara launched us into the sky.

The battlefield shrank beneath us, fires flickering like dying stars, bodies strewn in patterns I would never forget. Smoke stung my eyes. The cold wind choked any breath I tried to take.

Far below, the world bled and broke.

We rose higher.

And the weight of everything rose with me.

Shifting Realities

I can barely remember my life before all this. One day I was there and the next I was gone. I've been gone so long now that I am sure whoever was left has just written me off. I am only thankful that I had no close family left to miss me when I disappeared. The thought of them thinking I abandoned them would have been too painful to imagine. I wasn't married and my parents had passed almost ten years ago now. Almost a year apart from each other.