

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."