

Prologue

A chestnut kaleidoscope rippled in the silent water as the dusty horse, haloed by a cacophony of flies, dipped its neck into the crystalline creek. Its rider, a young man aged old by life, looked with sullen eyes at the valley ahead. About him mingled another six men on horseback in gambesons of blue and green, all stretching their stiffened legs that had turned numb and wooden after a day and night on horseback. Before them lay a thin valley decorated with a shining lacework of a river and its estuaries stretching across silky grass. East, to the left the ground rose, pulled upwards by the roots of trees stretching to the sky. A wall of stony mountains stood to the west, as steep and inaccessible as a noontime sun.

Peculiar was the music of the valley that day. Not because of anything new or out-of-place, it was just absent. Wet grass muffled their heavy footfalls, and no voice spoke, as if the cold, wet air cooled their throats and stole all will to make sound, entrapped by an innate foreboding. Boar and stag were silent. Neither did birds sing to charm nor rabbits thump to warn. Only the wind dared to compose music, breaking the ominous silence in the leaves through the valley, making, from the farthest distance to an arm's reach away, songs out of shimmering leaves and grasses. Pouring through the high valley walls like a cascade of water dumped into a trough in rhythmic gusts.

A crescendoing murmur grew from the east. So mild at first that it felt recognizable, as if it were one's own heartbeat—a sound that had always been in the periphery. Like thunder cleaving gray skies it grew. Slowly, slowly, then quickly it grew. It was too massive, too mighty, too godlike to come either from man or beast. The sound came out from the hills around them, and the earth beneath them. Rising in volume, the calm waters of the creek became ripples dancing and jumping together. The men and their horses, their weapons and their armor, all shook as if shivering from icy chills. Trees swayed as the earth itself buckled and wept, abdicating loosened trees from their holds. The sky filled with panicked birds, their cries consumed by the bellowing, shrieking thunder. The men covered their ears in futile attempts to curb the sound—a dam of grass against a flood. Quickly the deafening pandemonium abated to a quieter, albeit still maddeningly loud, roar. It's force raced along the eastern foothills like lightning, echoing back and forth between the valley's mirrored mountains. Just as quickly as it dissipated off into the distance a new sound claimed its place. It cracked and it popped, as if the whole world had become a collapsing tree pulled down by an immeasurable weight. Yet where nothing fell, something rose.

A fissure erupted at the base of the eastern mountain, several miles distant, and shadowed the valley in coughing plumes of dust. As bursts of dust, debris, and ancient silt veiled it, the dark crack shot along the mountain's base, pursuing the sounds that

preceded it along the valley's edge. All eyes within the valley that were not fleeing from it were looking at it. At the rising dust-clouds, the speeding crack, the arching mountain peaks as they rose and loomed higher into the sky. Rain of dirt and stones fell upon the grassy sea beneath, crashing and foaming in rapids of earth. Awed silence slowly took hold once the thunderous roar died away, disrupted only by the distant, echoing crashes of raining dirt.

Behind the shower of earth and the rising dust-cloud from it, the mountain peaks moved and rose, twisted and swayed, some crests tightened as others grew apart. Like dozens of fingers flaring and squeezing skyward, the entire length of the mountain slowly shook from side to side like a wet dog delayed in time. Two massive dark shadows began to loom behind the wall of dust. They grew taller and narrowed in time with a piercing groan that turned the valley into an amphitheater bemused by a whale's dismal singing. Each shadow was hundreds of feet in height, a third as wide, and upright like trees, their canopies supporting the titanic weight of the mountainous shape above them. With stones and dirt of innumerable years having been shed as easily as flies, an animalistic form of the behemoth took shape, piercing the sky itself with its back. Encrusted in white marble glinting in the light, layer laid upon layer—like plates of armor enshrouding a knight—from the barbed neck to the long, tapered tail that rested high above the ground. Eyes traced the massive form and, as the men rotated down the way they had come, they could see at the forefront a giant draconic head. Horns and spikes of quartz jutted from its head, a mane of opal and sapphire clustered around the neck beneath four large, long horns of quartz pillars nearly parallel to the body. The long neck twisted slightly and turned its face towards the valley behind, peering at its own extended form and revealing its own sapphire eyes. Each one a veritable small sea.

Seated upon his dusty horse, the man nodded to the youngest among them who turned and raced back the way they had come.