

CHAPTER ONE

The Shield

Bahn had climbed the Mount of Truth many times in his life. It was a green, broad-shouldered hill with gentle slopes, not overly high; yet that morning, hiking up the path that wound its way towards the flattened summit, it seemed steeper than it ever had before. He could not fathom why.

‘Bahn,’ said Marlee by his side, her hand in his tugging him to a stop.

He turned to find his wife was gazing back along the path, her other palm shielding her eyes from the sun. Juno, their ten-year-old son, struggled some way behind. He was small for his age, and the picnic basket he carried too bulky for his short arms. Still, he had insisted on carrying it on his own.

Bahn wiped sweat from his brow. In the moment his hand drew clear, and cool air kissed his forehead, he thought: I do not wish him to see this today. And he knew then that it was not the hill itself that was steeper that morning. It was his own resistance to it.

An apple toppled from the basket, red and shiny as lip paint, and began to roll down the foot-polished stones of the path. Both parents watched as the boy stopped its progress with his boot, then bent to pick it up.

‘Need a hand?’ Bahn called back to his son, and tried not to dwell on the money it had cost him for that single apple, or the rest of their precious picnic.

The boy replied with an angry glare. Dropping the apple back into the basket, he hefted the load before continuing.

Thunder rumbled in the far distance, though there were no clouds in the sky. Bahn looked away from his son, tried to exhale the worry that seemed always to curdle in his stomach these days. He forced a smile on to his face, in a trick he had learned during his years of fighting in the Red Guard. If he stretched his lips just so, his burdens would seem to grow a touch lighter.

‘It’s good to see you smile,’ said Marlee, her own brown eyes creasing at the edges. On her back, in a canvas sling, their infant daughter hung open-mouthed and asleep.

‘It’s good to have a day away from the walls, though I’d rather we spent it anywhere but here.’

‘If he’s old enough to ask, he’s old enough to see it. We can’t shelter him from the truth forever, Bahn.’

‘No, but we can try.’

She frowned at that, but squeezed his hand harder.

Below them, the city of Bar-Khos roared like a distant river. Gulls soared and dipped above the nearby harbour, wheeling in their hundreds like a snowstorm in the far mountains. He watched them, a hand across his forehead to shade his eyes, as they took turns to speed low and fast across the mirror-flat water, their reflections flying upside-down between the hulls of ships. Sunlight speared back from the surface, the dazzles painting it in burning gold. The rest of the city lay beneath a glamour of heat, the figures of people small and indistinct as they made their way through streets cast into deep shadow. Bells rang from above the domes of the White Temple, horns sounded from the Stadium of Arms. In air hazy with dust, mirrors flashed from the baskets of merchants' hot-air balloons tethered to slender towers. Beyond them all, beyond the northern walls, an airship rose from the pylons of the skyport, and began heading east on its hazardous run to Zanzahar.

It seemed strange to Bahn, even now, that life could carry on seemingly as normal while the city teetered on the brink.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Juno panted, as he caught up with them.

Bahn's smile was now a genuine one. ‘Nothing,’ he replied to the boy.

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On days like this one, a crisping hot Foolsday at the high point of summer, it was common for people to climb their way out of the baking streets of Bar-Khos to seek refuge on the top of the Mount of Truth. There a park rose in terraces around its flattened summit, and a breeze blew constantly fresh from the sea. The path levelled off as it reached the park itself. Young Juno, feeling more confident now with his load, took this opportunity to increase his pace, overtaking his parents before dodging past others who were strolling more sedately. Together, they skirted a narrow green where, amongst a group of children playing with a kite, a fight was breaking out over who should fly it next. Beyond them, on a bench overshadowed by a withered jupe tree, an old beggar monk sat with his bottle of wine while talking incessantly to his dog. The dog seemed not to be listening.

Again, a peal of thunder rolled through the air, sounding more distinct now they were closer to the city's southern walls. Juno glanced back towards his parents. ‘Hurry up,’ he urged, unable to contain his excitement.

‘We should have brought his kite along for later,’ said Marlee, as behind them the children ceased their squabbling long enough to send their box of paper and featherwood sailing into the wind.

Bahn nodded, but said nothing. His attention was fixed on a building that stood on the summit of the hill and occupied the very centre of the park. Surrounded by hedgerows, its tall walls were dotted with hundreds of white-framed windows, reflecting either sky or blankness depending on where he looked. Bahn himself reported to that building almost daily, in his capacity as aide to General Creed. Even without choosing to, he found his gaze running across the flank of the Ministry of War, to where he knew the general's office was located. He sought sign of the old man perhaps watching from one of the windows.

‘Bahn,’ chided his wife, as she tugged him onwards.

At last they came to the southern fringe of the park. Juno moved ahead, weaving his way between the crowds of people sitting amongst the long grasses, but slowing with every step as he took in the vista appearing below. Finally he stopped completely. After a moment, the basket tumbled from his hands.

Bahn went over to join him and began to gather up the spilled contents of the basket. All the while, he watched his son closely, much as he had once watched him take his first tentative, risky steps as a young child. The boy had always been banned from visiting the hill on his own, but in the last year he had begun to ask and then to plead to be brought here, fired up on the stories told by his friends. He had wanted to see for himself why the hill was named the Mount of Truth.

Now, from this moment on, he would always know.

On this southernmost edge of the tallest hill of the city, the sea could be seen to run both east and west along the coastline – and directly ahead, the long, half-laq-wide corridor of land known as the Lansway, reaching out like a road towards the continent lying beyond, which today was a mere suggestion of contours and cloud barely visible in the distance.

Across the waist of this isthmus, in sheer grey stone, rose the great southern walls of Bar-Khos known as the Shield.

Those walls – which had protected the city from land invasion for over three centuries, and therefore the island of Khos, breadbasket of the Mercian Isles – towered some ninety feet in height, and taller still where turrets rose from the battlements. They were old enough to have given the city its name of Bar-Khos – ‘the Shield of Khos’. There were six bands of wall in all, or at least there had been until the Mannians had arrived with their flags waving and their declarations of conquest. Now just four stood blocking the Lansway, and two of those were of recent construction. In the original outermost one still standing, no gates or gateways remained: all such entrances had been sealed up with stone and mortar.

The Mount of Truth offered the highest vantage point in the city. It was from here, and here alone, that the ordinary citizen could witness what confronted the walls on the other side. The boy, doing so now, blinked as his gaze roved out from the Shield towards the Mannian besiegers arrayed like a white flood across the plain of the isthmus; the full might of the Imperial Fourth Army.

His young face grew pale, his eyes widening with every new detail they absorbed.

The Lansway was entirely covered by a city of bright tents, neatly arranged in rows and quarters by the streets of wooden buildings dividing them. The tent city faced the Shield from beyond countless lines of earthworks – ramparts of dirt raised up across a plain of dusty yellow – and meandering ditches choked with black water. Behind the closest sequence of these earthworks, like creatures basking in the heat of the sun, squatted the siege engines and cannon, belching smoke and constant noise as they

fired at the city in a slow, unending regularity that had lasted – beyond everyone’s expectation – for the last ten years.

‘You were born on the very first day they assaulted the walls,’ Marlee said from behind them, in a voice seemingly calm, as she unwrapped a loaf of honeyed keesh from their basket. ‘I went into labour early, and you came out no bigger than a farl. It was due to the shock of losing my father, I think, for that was the morning he fell.’

The boy gave no impression of hearing her; what lay before him had seized his full attention. Yet, in the past, Juno had asked more than once to be told about the day he was born – only to be given the barest facts possible. Bahn and his wife each had their separate reasons for not wishing to recall it.

Give him time, Bahn thought, sitting himself on the grass to study the vista with his own more experienced eyes. Memories were stirring, unbidden, in the wake of his wife’s words.

Bahn had been just twenty-three when the war had begun. He could still recall exactly where he had been when news had first arrived of refugees flooding towards the city from the continent. He had been seated in the taproom of the Throttled Monk, still thirsty after his fourth black ale, and drunk already. His mood had been foul that afternoon: he’d had altogether enough of his job as a shipping clerk at the city skyport, putting up with a foreman who was a stumpy-legged little dictator of the worst kind, and all for a wage that barely saw him and Marlee through to the end of each week.

The news, when it broke, was delivered by a fat skins merchant just returned from the south, the man’s portly face a bright scarlet, as though he had run all the way home just to say what he revealed next. Pathia had fallen, he declared to them all breathlessly. Pathia, their immediate neighbour to the south, was the traditional enemy of Khos – the very reason the Shield had been built in the first place. Around the taproom his words fell upon a sudden silence. As they now listened, shock and wonder grew in equal measure. King Ottomek V, despised thirty-first monarch of the royal line of Sanse, had been foolish enough to be captured alive. The Mannians had dragged him screaming, twisting and turning through the streets of conquered Bairat behind a galloping white horse, until the skin had been flayed almost entirely from his body – along with his ears, his nose, his genitals. Near death, the king had then been cast down a well, where he had somehow clung on to life for an entire night, while the Mannians laughed down the shaft at his cries for mercy. At dawn, they had filled the well with rocks.

Even amongst the most hardened men in the taproom, such a fate drew muttered oaths and shakes of the head. Bahn grew fearful: this was bad news for them all. For the full length of his life, and more, the Mannians had been conquering nation after nation around the inland sea of the Midèr̄es. Never before, though, had they been so close as this to Khos. Around him, the debate rose in volume: shouts, arguments, thin attempts at humour. Bahn pushed his way outside. He hastened for home, back to his wife of barely a year. There he rushed up the stairs to their small damp room above the public bathhouse, and blurted all of it out in one desperate, drunken tirade. She

tried to soothe him with soft words, then she made him some chee, her hands remaining miraculously steady. For a time – Bahn’s mind needing a release from itself – they made love on the creaking bed, a slowly passionate affair, her gaze fixed constantly on his.

Together, later that night, they stood on the flat roof of the building, and listened with the rest of the inhabitants of Bar-Khos to the cries of the refugees pleading to be let in, thousands of them huddled beyond the walls. From other rooftops, people shouted for the gates to be opened; others demanded, in hot anger, for them to let the Pathians rot. Marlee had prayed quietly for the poor souls, he remembered, whispering under her breath to Eres, the great World Mother, her painted lips moving blackly under a strange light cast by the twin moons hanging over the south. Oh mercy, Sweet Eres, let them in, let them have sanctuary.

It was General Creed himself who had ordered the gates to be opened the next morning. The refugees flooded in bearing stories of slaughter, of whole communities put to the torch for their defiance against the invaders.

Even confronted with such alarming accounts, most in Bar-Khos considered themselves beyond harm. The great Shield would protect them. Besides, the Mannians would be busy enough with the newly conquered south.

Bahn and Marlee carried on with their lives as best they could. She was expecting again, and therefore taking it easy, cautious of risking another miscarriage. She drank infusions of herbs the midwife gave her and would sit for hours watching the busy street below, a hand splayed protectively over her belly. Sometimes her father would visit, still clad in his reeking armour, a giant of a man, his face hard, without flex, squinting at her with eyes dimmed by age. His daughter was precious to him, and he and Bahn would fuss over her until she finally snapped and lost her temper. Even that did not dissuade them for long.

Four months later, news came of an advancing imperial army. The mood in the city remained much the same. There were six walls after all, tall and thick enough to protect them. All the same, another call went out from the city council asking for volunteers to fill the ranks of the Red Guard, which had thinned considerably during the previous decades of peace. Bahn was hardly cut out to be a soldier, but he was a romantic at heart and, with a wife and child and a home to protect, in his own way he was stirred to action. He quit his job without fuss, simply not turning up one morning – a warm thrill in his belly on thinking of the foreman having a tantrum at his absence. That same day Bahn signed up to defend his city. At the central barracks, they handed him an old sword with a chipped blade, a red cloak of damp-smelling wool, a round shield, a cuirass, a pair of greaves and a helm all much too large for him . . . and a single silver coin. He was then told to report every morning to the Stadium of Arms for training.

Bahn had barely learned the names of the other recruits in his company, all still as green and untrained as he was, when the Mannian herald arrived on horseback to demand the city’s surrender. Their terms were simple enough. Open the gates and most would be spared; but fight and all would be slain or enslaved. It was impossible,

the herald announced to the high wall looming before him, to resist the manifest destiny of Holy Mann.

A trigger-happy marksman on the ramparts shot the herald off his mount. A cry rose up from the battlements: first blood.

The city held its breath, waiting for what was to come next.

At first their numbers seemed impossible. For five days the Imperial Fourth Army assembled across the width of the Lansway, tens of thousands stamping into position in an ordered procession, then spreading out to erect their colony of tents, earthworks, guns in numbers never seen before, mammoth siege towers – all before the collective gaze of the defenders.

Their barrage finally began with a single screeching whistle. Cannon shots pounded into the wall; one arched high and landed in a shattering explosion among the reserves of men behind. The defenders on the parapet hunkered down and waited.

On the morning of the first ground assault, Bahn was standing with some other raw recruits behind the main gates of wall one, the heavy shield hanging from his arm, a sword in his trembling hand. He had not slept. All night the Mannian missiles had crashed down around them, and horns like wild banshees had sounded from the imperial lines, fraying his nerves to tatters. Now in the early dawn he could think of only one thing: his wife Marlee at home with her unborn child, worried sick over both her husband and her father.

The Mannians came like a wave cresting over cliffs. With ladders and siege towers they attacked the ramparts in a single crashing line; Bahn, from below, watched in awe as white-armoured men launched themselves over the battlements at the Red Guard defenders, their battle cries like nothing he had ever heard before, shrill ululations that seemed barely plausible from human throats. He had already heard how the enemy ingested narcotics before battle, primarily to dispel their fears; and indeed they fought in a frenzy, without any regard for their own lives. Their ferocity stunned the Khosian defenders. The lines buckled, almost broke.

It was butchery, murderous and simple. Men slipped and pitched headlong from the heights. Blood flowed from the parapet gutters like the run-offs of a crimson rain so that soldiers had to run from underneath them with shields held over their heads. His father-in-law was up there somewhere, in amongst the grunts and hollers of collision. Bahn did not see him fall.

In truth, Bahn failed to use his sword even once that day. He did not even come face to face with the enemy.

He stood shoulder to shoulder with the other men of his company, most of them strangers to him still, every face that he saw a stark white, drained of spirit. The din of the battle robbed him of breath; he felt a sickness take hold of his body, like a dizzying sense of freefall. Bahn held his sword in front of him like a stick. It may as well have been a stick, for all he knew how to use it.

Someone's bowels had loosened nearby. The ensuing stench hardly inspired courage in the other men; it inspired only an urge to run, to be away from there. The recruits trembled like colts wanting to bolt from a stable fire.

Bahn did not know what it was that breached the gates in the end. One instant they were there before them, massive and stout, seemingly impregnable. Rall the baker was jabbering by his side, something about his helm and shield being his own, how he had bought them from the bazaar, a jumble of words that Bahn could barely hear. The next instant, Bahn was sprawled on his back, gasping for air, his mind stunned to numbness, a high-pitched ringing in his ears as he tried to remember who he was, what he was supposed to be doing here, why he was staring at a milky blue sky obscured with rolling clouds of dust.

As he lifted his head, grit pattered down all around him. Old Rall the baker was shouting in his face, eyes and mouth open wider than they had any normal right to be. The man was holding up the stump of his arm, the hand still dangling from a narrow length of tendon. Blood jetted in an arc that caught the slanting sunlight, becoming almost pretty in that moment. Pain descended on Bahn then. It stung the torn flesh of his cheeks, and at once he could feel the explosion of breath from Rall's screaming against his face, though he still could not hear him. He looked over to the gates, between the legs of men still on their feet, and found himself staring over a carpet of raw meat, of gristle, with hideous movement in amongst it. The gates were gone. In their place stood an unfurling curtain of dark smoke, parting here and there where white figures slipped through, howling as they came.

Somehow, he staggered to his feet as survivors from his company ran forward to fill the breach. That seemed like madness to Bahn: farmers and stall-keepers in ill-fitting armour rushing straight at killers intent on hacking them down. His eyes burned with what he saw: the impetus, the nerve of those men, when all about them their comrades lay exposed to the sky, or stumbled about, unhinged from their senses, jostling to get away. It roused something within Bahn. He thought of the sword in his hand, and of running to help those fellows, too few of them trying to stop the tide. But, no, he no longer held his sword. He looked about for it, frantic, and saw old Rall again, on his knees, screaming up at him.

What does he want of me? Bahn had thought wildly. Does he expect me to fix his hand?

At the gates themselves, the defenders were being cut down like wheat. They were inexperienced recruits. And the Mannians were not. Somewhere behind Bahn, a sergeant yelled for the men to stand firm, spittle flying from his mouth as he shoved at their backs and tried to form them into a line. No one was listening to him, and those around Bahn were pushing against him, cursing, crying out, wanting only to flee.

He knew it was hopeless then; besides, he couldn't find his sword. There were other blades lying amongst the debris, but not one with the right number on the hilt – and it was vital to him, for some reason just then, to find the right one. Perhaps if he had done so he would have died that day. Instead, in those scattered moments he spent searching in vain, the urge to fight drained out of him. Instead, he wanted more than anything else to see Marlee again. To see their child when it was born. To live.

Bahn grabbed old Rall and hauled him clumsily over his shoulder. His knees buckled; but fear loaned him extra strength. With the rest of the panicking men, he allowed himself to be jostled back towards the gates of wall two, faces glancing back over shoulders, over Bahn's shoulders, no talk or shouting from them now, simply wordless panting. Even Rall stopped yelling and began thanking him, would not stop thanking him. His words emerged jerkily to the bounce of Bahn's footfalls.

It was a full rout, as hundreds of men raced back across the killing ground, casting their weapons and shields aside as they went. The distance was several throws to reach the safety of wall two. The old baker grew heavier on his back, so that Bahn's stride inevitably slackened and he fell behind the main mass of escapees. Rall shouted for him to move faster, warning that the enemy were close behind. Bahn hardly needed telling. He could hear the Mannians baying in hot pursuit.

They were the last to get through, just before the gates were slammed shut and sealed. Less fortunate men remained trapped on the other side. They pounded for the gates to be opened. They shouted of how they had wives and children at home. They cursed and pleaded. The gates stayed closed.

Bahn lay in a heap and listened to the shouting on the other side, more grateful than anything else in his whole life that it was not him still out there.

He had closed his eyes, overwhelmed. For a long time, lying facedown in the dirt, he had wept.

Now a gust of wind swept across the Mount of Truth, warm and humid. Bahn exhaled a breath of stale air and returned his attention to the hill and the summer's sunlight, and his son staring down at the walls.

'Drink?' asked Marlee, as she handed her husband a jug of cider, her motions slow and careful so as not to wake the child on her back. Bahn's mouth was parched. He took a drink, held a mouthful of the sweet liquid before swallowing. He then followed his son's gaze.

Even now, as he and the boy silently watched, an occasional missile struck or rebounded off the still intact outermost rampart facing the imperial army. A giant glaciis of earth fronted the entire wall now, deflecting or absorbing such shots – one of the inspired innovations that had allowed them to draw out the Mannian siege for this long. Still, this rampart was sagging in places, and the battlements behind it gaped like toothless mouths where sections of stone and crenellations had fallen. Along these ragged defences, an almost imperceptible line of red-cloaked soldiers huddled behind the surviving cover; amongst them, crews operated squat ballistae and cannon, constantly firing back at the Mannian lines.

Behind the other three inner walls, more heavily garrisoned in comparison, cranes and labourers could be seen erecting yet another one. So far, four walls had fallen to the never-ending barrage of the enemy – at a staggering material expense to the Mannians. In response, the defenders had succeeded in building two new ones to replace them, but they could not hope to erect ramparts indefinitely. The latest construction lay close to the straight channel of the canal which cut across the

Lansway to connect the two bays. Not far beyond this canal, the Lansway ended at the Mount of Truth, and beyond that sprawled the city itself. It was clear they were running out of room.

Bahn's son was peering down at the wall currently under fire.

Along its battlements, between the cannon, ballistae, and the occasional long-rifle firing in reply, men laboured with cranes as they raised great scoops of earth and rock. Some kept dropping out of sight as they were lowered on ropes over the far side, while others merely tipped the contents of the cranes' scoops over the outer rim. Even as they watched, a group of men pulling on ropes collapsed amidst a cloud of flying debris.

Juno gasped.

'Look there,' said Bahn, quickly drawing his son's attention away from the sight, and instead pointed out various structures dotted around the prospective killing grounds between the walls. They looked like towers, though they were open on all sides and not very tall. 'Mine shafts,' he explained. 'The Specials are fighting every hour down there, trying to stop the walls from being undermined.'

At last Juno looked down at his seated father.

'It's different, from what I was expecting,' he said. 'You fight there every day?'

'Some days. Though there are few battles any more. Just this.'

His words appeared to impress the boy. Bahn swallowed, turning away from what he recognized as pride in his son's eyes. Juno already knew that his grandfather had died defending the city. Even now he wore the old man's short-sword about his waist; and, when they returned home, he would no doubt insist that his father give him further lessons in its use. The boy talked often of how he would follow in his father's footsteps when he was old enough, but Bahn did not wish to encourage such ambitions. Better his son ran off to be a wandering monk, better even to sign up on a leaky merchanter, than stay here and fight to the inevitable end.

Juno seemed to read his mood. Softly, he asked, 'How long can we hold them off?'

Bahn blinked, surprised. That was the question of a soldier, not a boy.

'Papa?'

Bahn almost lied to his son then, even though he knew it would be an insult to the boy's growing maturity. But Marlee was sitting just behind them, his wife who had been raised to face the truth no matter how unpalatable it might be. He could sense her ears listening keenly in the silence that awaited his reply.

'We don't know,' he admitted, as he shut his eyes momentarily against another gust of wind. Bahn tasted salt on his lips, like the remnants of dried blood.

When he reopened them, it was to see Juno staring again at the walls, and the Mannian host that confronted them. He appeared to be studying the countless banners that were visible: to one side, the Khosian shield or the Mercian whorl on a sea-green background, dozens of them fluttering along the ramparts; on the other side the imperial red hand of Mann, with the tip of the little finger missing, emblazoned on a field of pure white – hundreds of them staked out across the isthmus. Intent on this scrutiny the boy's skin clung thin and tight to his face.

‘There is always hope,’ said Marlee reassuringly to her troubled son.

Juno looked to his father once more.

‘Yes,’ agreed Bahn. ‘There is always hope.’

But even as he said these words, he could not meet his son's eyes.