



THE CITADELS

the
Shield of Weeping
Ghosts



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prologue

-946 DR

The Kingdom of Ashanath

Winter winds moaned across the plain as the children trudged along the well-worn road. Broken spears and abandoned siege engines jutted from the white field, a dead forest of sticks and bones. Small, bare feet pressed shallow prints into the frozen mud. Hollow, haunted eyes stared at the path ahead, rolling as thirst and hunger gnawed at empty stomachs. Chains rattled at their wrists, manacles digging into their tender flesh and dragging little trails alongside their footprints, as the children pushed on toward Shandaular.

The old road had been quiet for several tendays, disturbed only by bold scavengers and the first snows of winter. The children had no one to call out to, no caravan or even brigand to witness their journey. The oldest of them was thirteen, her long dark hair once well-kept and smooth, now tangled and dirty. The youngest was almost seven, and she was the first to spot the high walls ahead, the pale light of dawn rising behind them. She lifted a trembling hand and sobbed quietly as they came into view.

She pulled at the chains, running faster than the others despite her size. The other children wheezed through lips a bruised shade of blue as they struggled to keep up. Seeing the

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tall gates and small figures patrolling the city's perimeter, the youngest girl glanced nervously over her shoulder. Somewhere beyond the western horizon, in deep shadows that stabbed her with fear, she imagined their pursuers gaining with each passing breath. As if sensing her anxiety, her six companions picked up their pace as they shambled ever quicker through the new fallen snow.

Soldiers' voices called out from the walls, breaking the grim silence of the field beyond the city gates. Startled carrion birds took wing, disturbed by the sudden activity and voicing their displeasure as they left their rotting meals. The gates swung open slowly, pushing drifts of snow ahead of them as several soldiers ran out to meet the children with blankets in hand.

The youngest tried to smile, her face stiff and aching, tracks of frosted tears cracking on her cheeks. She could see the horror in the soldiers' eyes, hear their whispered oaths to merciful gods. The soldiers wrapped a blanket around the youngest girl's shoulders, and spoke soothing words in her ear as they lifted her in their strong arms. The chains stretched taut, connecting her to the other children, and more soldiers were summoned to carry the strangers she had traveled so far with.

She looked back over the man's shoulder. The western horizon shimmered with darkness as if a black sun heralded an unnatural dawn to mirror the east. The monsters hid in the dying night, beneath fading stars. The chains began to squirm on her skin. Soothing voices died away, overtaken by a sibilant whispering that tingled painfully in her mind.

She shivered as the pain grew and tears welled in her eyes. The gates loomed high, their shadow falling over the children who began to shake and weep in unison. One cried out, falling from his rescuer's arms, dragging the others low as the chains pulled tight. The chains glittered, tiny runes etched on the links flaring to life, matching those burned into skin, on the napes of their necks and down their spines.

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Waves of rolling heat flowed from the chains and melted the snow. The soldiers fell back, mouths agape as the first fallen boy convulsed, his eyes blazing with sudden light. The young girl swooned, eyes fixed on the west, imagining the cruel standard that chased them: the dead tree stripped of leaves on a crimson field. A warm breeze caressed her skin as power erupted around her.

Wood splintered and stone shattered, flames poured outward destroying all that they touched. The children sat unharmed at the epicenter, dazed as the magic forced upon them spoke itself. Plumes of smoke rose into the predawn sky, charred forms crashed back down to earth, steaming in the snow as the children stood on aching legs. The chains, writhing and whispering, pulled them beyond the gates and into Shandaular.

The snow blackened and hissed like acid poured on the ground as they passed. More soldiers came, but they fell back screaming as the aura of magic touched them. Others shouted orders, and some blew horns, notes of alarm echoing across the city.

The young girl fell under a shadow and looked up at the tall northwest tower of the fortress within the wall. Her breath came quickly and she did not understand what was happening. The skin of her arms crawled as if something moved beneath her flesh. She led the others on, recognizing the northwest tower somehow, unsure of her memory. Small faces pressed through the children's skin. Little horns and needle-fangs responded to the call of magic in the chains; clawed hands pushed for escape.

Blurry figures ran screaming from small homes, following the shouts of soldiers. Smoke drifted through the streets. The flames spread despite all attempts to quell them. Soldiers ran to the broken outer wall as the sound of beating drums thundered from the west.

The young girl tried to walk faster, fearful of the dread army that followed. She scratched at her arms, digging deep

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and sobbing as chaos erupted in the city streets. The northwest tower looked down upon her and her shambling companions as they neared the main gates. She stared at the massive entrance, closed and unusually quiet.

The other children shuddered to a stop, the whispering chains growing louder.

More explosions and spiraling coils of smoke heralded the clash of the attacking army and Shandaular's defenders. Arrows clattered on cobblestone streets, raining from the sky, carrying pitch and flames.

The old wood of the castle gates bore the symbol of a stylized archway within the shape of a tall shield. The young girl struggled to understand, memory trying to assert itself past the pain that rippled through her body. She had returned here, though nothing remained of why she had been taken away. One of the boys fell to his knees, roaring in a voice that was not his own. She reached out, skin boiling, her fingers brushing against the gate as she recalled its name.

"The . . . Shield!" she croaked, her throat raw as power surged through the chains and used her voice to scream.



The Shield stood as mute witness to the fall of Shandaular.

Flames rose so high that they appeared to burn the sky. Crowds of frightened people ran toward the city's center as a single mass, screaming and clutching at one another. Prayers drifted on the air alongside ash and smoke. And children, bound in chains, shattered the fortress gates with foul magic, demons bursting through their skin as they marched into the silent courtyard.

Mostly empty halls awaited them. Ice grew in the old cracks, frost spreading from corridor to corridor. Torches still burned, but only weakly, their light lessened in the odd gloom of the

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citadel's towers. Breezes stirred strange mists into streams that flowed outward from the northwest tower.

The children came first, their dazed eyes burning with smoke and the madness of pain. Their chains scraped along the stones of tall steps, their hands spreading shadows and corruption. Whispers and screams surrounded them; tears and blood stained the floors.

A powerful explosion rocked the city, shaking the outer walls and filling them with cracks. The invaders rode forward on horseback, slaughtering and razing as a tornado of flashing lights and smoke merged with the sky, rising from the city's center.

A man entered the gates, soldiers in his wake. Clad in armor, he stared with piercing blue eyes upon the fortress and its tall towers. The coat of arms on his cloak bore the crimson field and barren tree of Narfell, the conquering empire. Lips set in a cruel smile, he ascended the blackened steps and glanced once, casually, upon the ruin he had created.

History was carved into the stone walls by their battle, memory written in cracks, the encroaching ice, and the moaning shadows left in the children's footsteps. Blood soaked into the cold stones, swallowed by something that shouldn't have existed. The Shield did not recognize the passage of time, unable to comprehend the nuances between one moment and the next. The difference between what was and what is, it would never know—but because of one moment, one curse of fate, the Shield remembered.

*They came at dawn to break the wall, by Seven
were they led.
To frozen walls and to weary core, Seven cross'd
the plain,
To gates of Shandaular, of fallen kingdom, Seven
came.
Shattered souls, bound in chains, by Nentyarch's
crown, the Seven came
The army charged with chilling song, the Seven at
their head,
By flame and fiend the path was forged, the end of
Shandaular.
In tears did they drown; Seven they were, weeping,
to the Shield.
Within the walls, inside the halls; to break the
bones, to shake the stones
Of the Shield and steal its Breath.
Of the Shield and steal its Breath.*

—excerpt from the Firedawn Cycle, canto X



chapter one

Nightal 1, 1376 DR, Year of the Bent Blade

At night, the deep blue waters of Lake Ashane became a black mirror of stars and clouds. Sheets of thin ice floated here and there, cracking against the hull of the two-masted felucca as it sailed toward the western shore. The winter wind cut like a knife through all but the thickest cloaks, chilling bones and creating a crust of frost on the serpentlike bowsprit.

A scent of smoke drifted on the air, carried from bonfires still burning in the villages and cities of Rashemen. The fires burned once every year to mark the singing of the realm's memory, the Firedawn Cycle. The air hummed with the ancient tune, though the passengers of the ship were miles away from the solemn festivals and the voices of the wychlaren.

In fur cloaks, long swords, and thick hide armor, the Rashemi warriors sat stoically in the cold. Berserkers of the Ice Wolf Lodge, they emulated their totem spirit and would show nary a shiver to complain of any discomfort. Some manned sails and rigging, pacing the deck and warily eyeing the icy waters. In the stern sat their ethran, one of the wychlaren, for whom they would lay down their lives and obey to the strictest measure.

These warriors, thirty or so, sitting to starboard and port of the ship, were the heart of Rashemen. The wychlaren were its spirit.

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The ethran sat high in the stern, her painted mask covered in symbols of magic, brown hair flowing in the wind. Only her eyes were visible through the mask, and they shone like steel. She had spoken only once since they'd begun their journey and this to the helmsman to inquire as to the length of their voyage. Satisfied with his answer, she had been silent ever since, casting not one glance at the bow or the figure huddled in the curve behind the bowsprit.

No one looked at him. Instead they watched the waves and smelled the lake's scent frozen in the winter breeze. A few whispered quiet prayers and bit their thumbs, entreating the spirits of the lake to allow them safe passage, despite their ungrateful cargo. Faith was easy to come by in the world of the Rashemi; survival was another matter entirely. Each knew their prayer did not fall on deaf ears, but that in turn those who heard them were under no obligation to protect them. Swords were close at hand, armor was fitted tight, and eyes remained alert for any sign of movement.

Through his own mask Bastun watched and listened, observing how strange and foreign his own people had become to him. Behind the bowsprit, he sat in their presence yet so far away from them in mind and spirit he wondered if all his years had happened someplace else, some other country. Bastun's escorts to the lands beyond Rashemen were as full of rumors about him as if he'd become a myth, one of Rashemen's great beasts of legend. Absently, he traced the dark mask that covered his face, so similar to Thaena's and yet garnering a pale reflection of the respect an ethran was afforded. From forehead to jawline it covered his features, carved of a light but durable wood and inlaid with silver whorls and tiny designs resembling thorny vines. It marked him as a vremyonni, the title of all male wizards who chose to remain in Rashemen.

Enchantments in the mask enhanced his hearing, enough that he could detect the faintest intake of breath or the quietest whisper among the warriors. He observed them

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intently, for when he'd been younger he desired to become one of them. Tales abounded of the berserkers' strength and ferocity. The wyclaren, too, were venerated in songs and epic poems, their magic forging the realm of Rashemen from the ashes of an ancient war. In all of the vaunted tales and stories, the vremyonni were a footnote—a wise sage here, a forged blade there, and rarely a name to remember or speak of. There would be no tale of Bastun to tell around a campfire on a cold night.

Children had no need to hear stories of treason or murderers.

Leaning forward, Bastun regarded the staff across his lap, feeling the old wood and leather wrappings on its grip. Though spells and incantations had no true master, no real signatures, being forces of the Weave bound only by the will of the caster, Bastun swore he could sense the presence of his teacher in the grain and the knots.

A few of the warriors noticed the movement and tensed, their breathing interrupted. Bastun paused, smirking beneath his mask as they calmed and settled back into their seats along the rail. He did not care about the rumors they spread or what they believed, but if he could not gain their respect he would accept their fears and assumptions. Staring at the staff, feeling the old wood in his hands, the magic it held tingled beneath his fingertips.

Light thumps against the hull of the ship signaled another series of ice sheets slightly thicker and more tightly packed than the others. Thaena stood from her seat in the stern and looked out across the surface of the lake.

"All is well, helmsman?" she murmured.

"Yes, ethran," the man answered. "The ice will slow us some, but little else."

Bastun could hear the nervousness in Thaena's voice and see the determined focus in her eyes. It was unusual for an ethran to be put in charge of a fang, even on such a mission as this, but Thaena had always been ambitious. Even as a child,

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sitting around the bonfires for the Firedawn Cycle, she had sworn that one day she too would be a hathran. Though the othlors, the oldest and wisest of the wyclaren, truly ruled Rashemen, the hathrans were the face of that rule and the ethrans their dutiful students.

He could almost remember the face behind the mask, despite the years that separated the adults they had become from the children they once were.

While studying the ethran, Bastun noticed the warrior beside Thaena looking at him—Duras. Tall and lean, Duras had also been there in that village just south of the Ashenwood in the heart of Rashemen. He and Bastun had sworn that they would join the Ice Wolf Lodge together, blood brothers to defend their homeland and make great legends of their lives. Duras nodded and looked away, appearing uncomfortable. Bastun turned as well, peering over the rail toward the western shore, still not visible beyond the veil of mist and clouds that gathered there.

The wind strengthened and the sails strained as they rocked the felucca through waves that had grown choppy and splashed higher along the front of the hull. Bastun leaned back into the curving hollow behind the bow and pulled his cloak tighter, cradling his staff against his chest. Near the head of the staff, a curving section covered in runes and tipped with a sphere of heavy steel, Bastun traced the dark line of a scar in the wood.

Closing his eyes, he set the world aside, freeing himself to meditate and look to the future. It was an odd concept, the future. So much of his time lately had been wrapped up in the past. The recent past clung to him like shreds of heavy shadow, darkening his steps wherever he went. The far past, so long hidden in his soul, was rushing back to tap him on the shoulder and make him turn around. Though he marveled at the differences between then and now—the boy he had been and the man he'd become—he still could not help but feel

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regret. Questions lingered there in the moments between the moments—questions he'd rather not ponder and answers he felt he knew all too well.

Fatigue waited behind his eyelids and took away his worries into a half-sleep filled with dreams and memories, one merging with the other until the difference no longer mattered. The Firedawn Cycle was sung to him and his friends, the warmth of the bonfire glowed under the stars and possibilities spread from one end of the heavens to the other. The epic tales, the battles of Narfell and Raumathar, and the great wizards of legend, dark and terrible, appeared in the flames as the lyrics summoned them.

*The army charged with chilling song, the Seven at
their head,*

*By flame and fiend the path was forged, the end of
Shandaular.*

*In tears did they drown; Seven they were, weeping,
to the Shield.*

*Within the walls, inside the halls; to break the
bones, to shake the stones*

Of the Shield and steal its Breath.

Of the Shield and steal its Breath.

Bastun could see that first spark of ambition alighting in Thaena's eyes as she watched the hathran and the dancing flames. She was so beautiful to him. Duras and he took up sticks from the ground that instantly became swords of legend in the hands of mighty berserkers. The older warriors smiled and cheered them on, until the sticks broke and it became a wrestling match or some other test of strength. Duras was strong even then, but Bastun was quick and sly. Sitting near the fire, a broad smile on her face, was Bastun's mother, humming along to the tune of the Firedawn. Sleeping on her lap, up far later than her bedtime, was Ulsera, Bastun's younger sister.

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The song faltered in his dream. Bastun stirred and opened his eyes, the image of his sister burned into his mind. He sat up, wondering how long he had slept. A heartbeat passed before he realized he could still hear the song.

Alarmed, he looked to the others. The helmsman had slumped at the wheel. The warriors' eyes were closed, but their heads still swayed to the strange tune that filled the air. Thaena's head had drooped to her chest and Duras lay on his side, his face a grimace of anguish as if in the throes of a nightmare. The wind still held strong and ice thumped and cracked at the bow, but another sound had joined the others. Something scratched at the hull, like claws pulling at wood. Something that was not ice thumped at the boards beneath his feet, from under the ship.

Standing carefully and quietly, Bastun peered over the side, scanning the surface of the water for any movement other than the waves. As he did so the helmsman groaned and slid sharply to one side, turning the wheel along with his weight. The ship leaned into the turn, throwing Bastun off-balance but awakening Thaena. Regaining his footing, Bastun met the ethran's confused gaze and watched as she took in the scene. The music drifted in and around the masts and the felucca's passengers like an invisible serpent, its call still tempting Bastun's mind back to the dream. Awaiting him in that dream was Ulsera, staring back at him, and he knew he would not succumb to the insistent charm again.

Thaena stood and rushed to the helmsman, pulling him away from the wheel to lie upon the deck as she righted the ship. Bastun leaned on the railing, staring into the water as Thaena tied the wheel into place. That done she strode to him, staff in hand.

"What have you—" she began, but the scratching grew louder, the thumping on the hull more demanding.

Looking closer in the glow of a hooded lantern, Bastun saw the pale face of a beautiful woman just beneath the

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surface of the water. Her blood red lips mouthed the words of the song, a mockery of the Firedawn Cycle, as she reached toward him with bone white arms. Yellowed hair haloed her head, drifting with the waves. Other forms became visible, entwining themselves with the first, swimming under and around the felucca. Unclothed, they slid through the water like ghosts singing their beguiling dirge.

Thaena shook Duras awake, whispering a ward to release him from enchantment. He started and sat up. Before he could draw the long blade at his side, one of the warriors had turned and leaned over the starboard rail, reaching for the water spirits below.

“No!” Duras yelled. He grabbed the man’s legs and hauled him back to the deck, but the warrior only struggled all the more to reach the singers. The sound of the cry and the struggle awoke more of the fang and they rushed to assist.

Thaena began to chant, brandishing her staff at the water. She called upon the power of the wychlaren, the ancient command of Rashemen’s spirits to drive the fey away from their vessel. The warrior roused from his dream and pulled himself to the port rail, his face serene as he looked into the waves. Thaena finished her spell, flourishing the staff to end the mystical attack, but nothing happened. Her eyes widened and she stared at Bastun, a brief moment of vulnerability that spurred him to action.

White hands appeared at the port rail, caressing the face of their victim. The fey, a water spirit known as a rusalka, smiled and cooed as she dragged the man’s shoulders further over the rail. Reaching into his robes, Bastun produced a small amulet which he gripped in his fist, willing the magic to come forth and answer his call. His hand flashed with light and a whip of crackling blue energy lashed out at the rusalka, scarring her shoulder and eliciting a shrill scream that burrowed in his ears. Her victim screamed as well, falling back and gripping the sides of his head.

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Duras stood and drew his long sword. Those not caught in the song followed suit as more of the rusalka crawled up the side of the boat to grasp at their victims. Another man to starboard slipped past his would-be rescuers and leaned far over the railing. Those nearby caught his cloak and he strained against them, his hands splashing in the waves as white arms reached upward to accept him.

Bastun rushed to starboard, his amulet lashing into the lake and sparking across the skin of the gathered water spirits. They screamed and pulled harder, both groups struggling to hang onto the thrashing warrior who reached for the singing maidens and batted at the hands that had found a grip on his shoulders. The continuous whip of magic slowly broke apart the rusalkas' deadly covey, scattering the fey away from the ship. The final few released their beguiled prey and sank back to the depths of the Ashane.

The man wailed as he was hauled back onboard, his mournful cries fading as his mind slowly returned to him, leaving him shivering and bewildered among his brothers in arms. Breathing heavily, Bastun backed away, his eyes still searching the waves for more of the spirits until he was sure they had gone. The amulet had dug into his palm, drawing a line of blood that dripped from his knuckles. Releasing his grip, he held his hand up and noticed several warriors staring at him, the old look in their eyes. Bastun sighed, about to return to his place at the bow when Thaena's voice stopped him.

"You have been forbidden to cast spells in this company, exile. Have you forgotten?"

Bastun tried to read her eyes behind the mask. Stunned by her accusation, he merely held up his hand and let the amulet swing on its silver chain for her to see.

"It is a mere tool, ethran. I have cast no spells."

Duras walked up from behind her, his sword still drawn and his eyes still watching the lake's surface. "Are they gone, Thaena?"

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“Likely,” she replied, her eyes on Bastun’s amulet a moment longer before turning to the warrior, “though they should not have attacked in the first place.”

At this last she angled her head, almost imperceptibly, at Bastun, before returning to her place at the stern. Though her words stung, Bastun couldn’t help but see the beautiful young girl he had once known. Duras looked apologetic as he sheathed his blade. Bastun returned the amulet to within his robes.

“She just doesn’t understand, Bastun.” Duras glanced at the others, shaking his head slightly before continuing. “None of them understand.”

Bastun turned away, eager to regain his place in the shadow of the bow, but looked sidelong at Duras before he did so.

“And you do?”

Duras didn’t answer, and they both walked away from the question.

Bastun sat back into the bow’s curve and stared westward, even though his thoughts lay just a short distance to the east. He contemplated using his mask to eavesdrop on Thaena and Duras, but decided against it. He had heard enough. It was already decided that the rusalka came for the vremyonni, that the land would reject him at every turn and that not even the ethran could quell the spirits’ anger. It was all the same to him, the evolution of an idea that would never lift from his back.

The faint image of Ulsera still hung in the back of his thoughts, his long-lost sister haunting him once again. It felt strange that he had forgotten what she’d looked like. In some way he had the rusalka to thank for reminding him. It was shortly after Ulsera’s funeral that he had been taken to the vremyonni and hidden away among the Running Rocks. No rusalka dream-song could lull him to rest by summoning memories of that time in his life.

The western shore, though still a few hours away, was just visible on the horizon. The Firward Mountains rose to the

north, giant silhouettes in a deeper black against the night sky. Dark clouds hung over the horizon, harbingers of the winter storm that had stirred the waters of the Ashane. He could make out no details of that shoreline, but he could imagine them. Broken walls, hollow buildings marked by char and ice, and the lonely streets winding through ancient ruins walked only by the dead. Shandaular's conquest had solidified the rise of the Narfell Empire over two millennia ago. It was left abandoned and forgotten by most, much like its conquerors.

Bastun was curious to see the city himself, to witness the towers of the Shield, though he would have little time before the hathran that watched the citadel made good on his recent request. The trial seemed like a lifetime ago—as did the events that had preceded his being questioned. His master had handed to him the staff he carried just moments before succumbing to mortal wounds. It was there, sitting in the snow somewhere on the edges of the Ashenwood, feeling more alone than he had since Ulsera's death, that he had made his decision.

Quiet now, the journey continued uninterrupted. Those enchanted by the rusalka were already being clapped on the back and teased about their longing for the water maidens. The nearness of Shandaular, however, kept their jests and challenges short. All of them felt the shadow on the horizon and the prayers returned, whispers and folk-magic to ward off the attentions of evil spirits. Shandaular, the City of Weeping Ghosts, was no place to forget one's faith.

It had been his master, Keffrass, who had taught him the secrets of Shandaular and inducted him at a very young age into the brotherhood of the vremyonni. Bastun promised himself that he would see the city, at least once, before sentence was passed. The wyclaren, having founded an outpost at the Shield, once called Dun-Tharyn, used it for purposes such as this. The trial was long over, and Bastun had been given a choice. It had always been so in Rashemen that there were two choices for a male who found the path of the wizard—go to the

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vremyonni, shut away from society at the Running Rocks, or accept exile.

Bastun had chosen the latter, eventually.

Now that self-imposed exile was mere hours away. For all the choices he had made, he would never look upon Rashemen again.

He could not shake the nagging details of their encounter with the rusalka. Perhaps it was coincidence, merely the proximity of his thoughts to a particular location, and perhaps not—but out of all the hundreds of lyrics and stanzas of the Firedawn Cycle . . . the rusalka had sung about the Shield. Pondering this, he settled back into his seat, pulled his hood low and his cloak tight, and awaited the ship's imminent arrival with a troubled mind.