



CHAPTER I: DAWN

Karis

Beyond her window, the city burned. The thatched rooftops of houses went up. Quaking crackles of fire through the fog became a roar of red and orange. She ran to her night table and took her short sword in hand with its scabbard, belting them and a dagger at her waist. With a flick, she drew the blade.

She stared at her door. Oak trimmed in iron, thick hinges, a hanging handle. With a pull, it opened, juddering inward. She stepped out and scanned her surroundings. Did a foreign power besiege the city? Had the Undeath finally come? What lay elsewhere, soldiers or the risen dead, did not frighten her as much as the chill in the air.

Snow dusted the trees of her foreyard, their branches gnarled in a way they had not been the day before. The grass, once green and brown, had blackened and withered. Screams soared in the distance, shapeless terror, immaterial frenzy. Beyond these, a hostile force, felt distinctly, as if it reached with aching fingers for her, beckoned.

The mist lived as it wafted around her. A clamor of hissing

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and shrieks held in the air. Her fingers clutched tight to the hilt of her sword. Overhead, stars rained down in hazy shimmers. Clouds covered the ring line of the world, running east to west, churning, drawing into lumps, stretching out in bands.

She came upon a body in the path. The blood in her veins turned to fire in defiance of the ice in the air, flowing through her heart and exploding there like bombs. She fought to contain her fear as it swelled, growing in the light of her eyes as the night against the rays of the moons. Her feet carried her further across uneven cobbles, through the breeze dense with sickening scents of death and sulfur, until she could discern the corpse's face, and the emblem on its bisected cuirass.

A chevalier.

Before Karis lay a paladin of the capital's military, torn open from throat to navel, breastplate ripped asunder. Red hair, undone and matted, wrapped around her mangled face, twisted in horrified death. She rested in a murky pool of her blood, which ran out through the snow and soot. Something with long claws or fangs had ripped at her exposed flesh. Her eyes were missing, as though deliberately plucked from their sockets, and her left leg had been torn from her body, gnawed in a circle at the stump where it once connected, revealing inches of bone; muscle and bubbled clumps of fat from the feast rested, regurgitated, a few feet away. The woman's hand gripped a sword, snapped in half at its center. In her other hand, her service license, bearing the insignia of her rank and name.

Karis looked at her for a while before she knelt and took the paladin's license. *Andrea Selianas*. She turned it over. *Companion-at-Arms*. The lowest rank of paladin in the military,

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above squires training to become chevaliers and below knights who managed companies. Karis slipped the license into the right pocket of her trousers.

Her comrades must be nearby.

A set of prints led up the way, rings of blood in the snow. She followed them, feeling a looming fight. Her swordplay fell shy of mastery, but she had the skill to hold her own.

Too soon after the paladin's corpse, she came upon a slain man. Descending beside him, she placed a hand on the small of his back, cold flesh. By his level of decay, he had not died long ago, but the stench of death had already spread its noxious pall over him.

With a grunt, she turned him over, covering her nose with her arm. He was an eldred man, dressed in common garb, brown trousers, thin at the seams, a laced tunic, frayed at its hems. Attire one would wear during a fair day as they strolled about the shared market. At his hip, a leather pouch, bound to the holster of a knife on the same side. She lifted and dropped it to a jingle. *Coins.*

Her eyes traced up his stomach to his face. He had a light trimmed beard, thick eyebrows, and well-kept hair of brown and grey. Across his cheek traveled a scar from his jaw to beneath his left eye. She lifted his wrinkled lids with her thumb, one after the other. His eyes remained, unlike the paladin's. Roots of red veins framed his green irises.

No wounds presented on him. No blood pooled around him. She could not distinguish his manner of death, did not recognize him, and he had no identifying wears.

She carried on.

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Karis peered into the silence and dreariness at every side, limbs tense, back rigid, cold sweat beading down her temple. She walked past burned houses, crowded by snow and desertion. On the ground at one edge of the road sat a charred saddle with neither rider nor steed. Turning occasionally, she swam through an air thick with battling odors. Fire, death, strange metals. An unfamiliar morass of offensive sensation.

A sonorous hiss arose at her back, pulsed in her ear. She stared over her shoulder. Nothing. Then came another hissing at her front, like the tailwinds of a thousand arrows. She turned once more. Again, nothing. The noise stopped and started in revolution—throbbed, sentient and ethereal—until it roared around her, rising in its volume like the glowing embers of a flame struggling to life.

Ahead, at last, stood a woman. Tears in her red and black dress exposed portions of her back, upper arms, and one of her legs. Blood darker than the hues of her dress smeared her white-grey skin. The woman's gaze affixed on the sky.

"You there," Karis called.

The words almost hung in her throat.

"Are you all right?"

Motion rigid, the woman's head turned. Karis gasped, stepping back a few paces. The right side of the woman's face was torn away from the ear to the nose.

Their gazes locked. The woman did not appear to register her presence. A static hush swooped down as a bird on its prey. The world around them fell immobile. Then the woman released a rasping shriek, exploding from her place at a run.

A wave of horror crashed over Karis. Its full force did not

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strike her until the woman drove her to the ground. The city street reverberated with wild rage, screaming against her blade. With no expression of pain, the woman's flesh sank into her sword, sour blood rilling out around its edge. Karis struggled to reposition, trying to lift the woman off of her with her feet, lacking the space.

She grabbed the woman under her blade and dragged the edge sideways across her throat. Another ribbon of black blood followed. Foul fingertips dug into her shoulders, burning. She moved her sword away, pommel to the soil, and drove it over and inward again. The sharp tip lodged deep in the woman's face.

This did not kill the woman, but intensified her thrashing and wrathful sounds. She twisted, tremored, screeched, snarled. Filthy, snapping teeth caked with slimy viscera grew nearer and nearer to Karis's cheek and lips. Her forearm and bicep weakened, soon to give out. The lone brown eye looming over her flared in its loose socket; inflamed, senseless, furious. She barely mustered the strength to hold her attacker away.

Karis removed her sword, tried once more. This time, the tip landed in the woman's temple. Everything went dark as blood fled from the wound and spread across Karis's face. The woman convulsed, impaling her rotten skull further, spasming in an effort to liberate herself. Finally, she fell motionless, head to the ground. Karis lay under the body, soundless, breathless, her own life source and air congealing around her heart, threatening to crush it.

She watched the clouds. In their blackness, they looked as a heavy cloak stretched over the Earth, shattered rarely by scars

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of lightning which streaked through in flashes and dissolved. This was a sky fit for the end of the world. A lightless, swirling gloom which consumed everything in its rolling terror.

As she released the hilt of her blade, she shoved her assailant off of her. The woman fell to the side, arms and legs limp. Initially, the sword wedged in her skull stood straight up, then slowly pulled the woman's head around until the handle lay over Karis's chest.

She remained unmoving, save shaking inhalations, exhalations, and the flutter of her eyelids as they batted away tears. After that exchange, she needed to compose herself. She had never killed anyone before, if she could call that woman *alive*. Her work as a private examiner had forced her on occasion to observe horrible scenes of crime, but nothing as awful as this. That had marked the first true use of her blade in a fight beyond sparring.

Her arms and body exhausted, and despite the weight on her chest, Karis moved out from under the sword and sat up. Fingers tangled through her blonde hair, matted with gory clumps, to brush it from where it stuck and scratched at her forehead, eyes, and cheeks. She looked at one of her hands. Blood crusted every line, no doubt hers and the woman's and whomever else's the woman spilled before her, if there had been anyone.

With a groan, she rose to her feet. Her slender legs were stout and muscled, but in that instant, they hardly existed. She took her sword in hand, boot to the woman's nape, and yanked. It pulled free with a crackle and sucking noise. Blood, ebon and diseased, gushed like a busted sewage pipe in its extraction,

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discharging a sinister aroma like rotten meat that nearly made her vomit. She wiped the sides of the steel off on the woman's ragged dress.

Wretched.

Karis swallowed and sighed. If another reanimate like the woman appeared, she may not survive. This skirmish had drained her, shaken her deeply.

Reality had become a waking sleep, night terrors unleashed in a vortex of madness. The common body of Imbredon had heard. Many, excluding her, had prayed for safety or divine intervention. She favored worldly solutions to prayer, but this made her reconsider, if only in a fleeting breath.

The capital had done its best to keep their losses quiet, yet the deaths of thousands of chevaliers in the underlands, in the vile maw of this encroaching Undeath, were impossible to conceal. Evacuations to the north had been imminent, too late. Another misstep of many, if murmurs of the Ennead's failures spoke truth.

News told that the Undeath had taken a number of the southern territories, from Erlan to Ostland and Ghora. Imbredon, Arkala, Abela, and other holdings around the Black Canal had thus far gone untouched. In recent weeks, they had received additional chevaliers to fortify their guard. Yet these had fallen short. Whatever this was, this scourge of the God of the Dead, it had torn apart the Empire's Silver Knights like an axe through strands of hair. It left little in its path, and what it did leave was worse than nothing.

To what end?

The slick stones beneath her shone through dapples of

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blood and moisture. She went down a slope in the street, passing a severed arm wrapped in a leather sleeve, abandoned by its former host. Some feet advanced, she glanced back and it had vanished.

Had it been there at all?

The light of the world died as she walked. Focus forward, she had no idea where she headed. She had no horse on which to flee the city, and no one came in sight to aid her.

At the base of a willow tree by the end of a hollowed shop, scorched from the ground up, she came upon another body, another dead—thankfully, she regretted—who cared not for her presence. She did not stop this time, but kept onward through street after street in search of anyone alive, between rows of shuttered dwellings, empty stalls, small meadows. She felt outside of herself, a spirit trapped in its shell.

So hushed the world had been that she had heard nothing but her beating heart for a time, until everything flooded in like the bursting of a dam. A noise in ranges swept up in an agitated mass around her, muddled words and metallic tones. Sleet cascaded, but its wetness fell silent on her skin. A terrible cry flew in the distance, but she could not sense its direction. She squeezed her blade tighter, sending her eyes every way.

Faint light arose against the blackness behind her. She halted there and waited, breathed in the night which grew colder in every flicker of her pulse. The glow neared. She raised her sword further, as if to threaten it away. The vision of it caught her steel. “Come no closer!” she said. The sense of a presence slid past her. She turned her head slowly.

A man. A creature. Deathly white and horned. His eyes,

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boundless, empty pits. Before him stood a young woman in a tattered grey dress, sheltered in a dark air which shivered and danced against the whiteness of her skin. Something shadowy and misshapen bent into Karis's peripheral, and she spun to see a figure at her right. Then another form stirred to her right again, and again, and again. Insidious things encircled her, the living dead, expelling low clicks and gurgles, twitching and vibrating with a nervous, constrained energy. She returned to her foremost stance to face the first pair.

The creature's arm raised, and with it, all but the girl crept closer, eerily graceful and symmetrical, eyes milky and spilling over with dim light. He opened his mouth, and with it, the mouth of the young woman's pale oval countenance, framed in long brown hair, opened. Then she closed her lips and smiled.

So long, she mouthed silently. Her voice leaked into Karis's head, low at first, but increasing with each word, louder than any thought. *We have waited, and wanted, and sought. So long, and we've finally found you.*