Chapter One

*Blood and Rain*

Ancient Lands, Old Continent

Twilight drained from the vast city in strange shapes of brown shadow and soft golden hues. Evening slipped deeper into night and lanterns bloomed in their thousands, hanging from tall poles to light the streets. A wind smelling of rain gave a song to the bustle of the city; signs and doors groaned against their hinges, and shutters trembled over their windows. The song was one heard a thousand times over, telling of a storm more legend than wind and more myth than rain. It whispered of a man that would rock the world off its axis.

 He appeared with the fury of the storm, a wide brute holding two hammers the size of young oxen. One hammer head looked like a shard of unpolished red stone beveled and flat on one end and sloping to a vicious point on the other. The other was fashioned as the head and maw of a ferocious beast, darker than black, with fangs and mane as sharp as the spikes of a Morningstar. Rain drenched abandoned buildings as if poured directly from the seas and dripped off those spikes like polished onyx; the wind howled like a live thing as he plodded down the main street to the first gate. Tall walls and portals of ironbound hardwood protected the new city from the ruins of the old. Guards were posted at the half-closed gate, checking all those would enter the city of Osmiridium. His eyes were pools of rainbow, shallow wounds covered him in blood that oozed and mixed with the rain. The intruder mumbled as he walked and the sound reverberated into the legs of the three guards who moved in to challenge him. They were big men as most Old Landers are, seven foot tall and taller and counted their bulk in quarter tons. They carried great swords and spears, half again as long they were tall and knew how to use them.

 “Halt in the name of King Ultrahard!” One of the guardsmen bellowed, pointing the tip of his sword at the brute’s chest.

 To the guard’s surprise the man stopped.

 “Did you know?” His voice seemed to shake the smooth flagstones beneath them.

 “Know what?” The guard responded more than a little wary,

 “No I suppose not,” He said, leaping forward and lifting one massive arm as if to swat a fly.

 The black hammer in his right hand hit the guard like a bolt of lightning, sending his corpse flying over the wall. The remaining guards froze as chunks of wet flesh, a splash of red and bits of armour rained on them. Fear and rage twisted their bloody faces as the people around them rushed the other guard at the gate; but, they did not move against him.

 “Stand here and die or run and live, your choice!” Said the man,

 “Sound the alarm, get the Elite guard!” One of the two men-at-arms roared at the panicked crowd,

 The second took a step back, eyes flitting from the hulking man to escape just inside the walls.

 “Hold Nomar,” Hissed the second guard, it was the last thing he said.

 The red hammer flashed in front of the brute taking the man from his hobnailed boots with a resounding crack and the ring of metal. The second turned and ran, shoving the people who were too slow out of his way.

 “You’ve had your chance coward,” Growled the man, and then he bellowed to the pedestrians before him, “MOVE!”

 As if one mind the crowd parted off to the sides exposing the fleeing guard. The black hammer appeared between his shoulder blades as if summoned by magic, tearing him off his feet with a booming clang and a burst of red mist. Pieces of the guard’s body bounced off the rooftop as the hammer hit the flagstones with an explosion that rattled windows on both sides of the street, and sent chips of stone and wet dirt flying. Men, women, and children picked themselves up and staggered into the city, keeping well out of the way of the giant. The guard who stood at the gate vanished into an alley. The brute stomped past the gate to crater where his black hammer rested, picked it up and resumed his trek deeper into the city.

The Great Archer held the corded string of his ten-foot tall bow until his body screamed for release and the stave groaned in kind. He took half a second to track the target after setting up the shot; the tip of the spear-sized arrow shaking only a little from the strain. He loosened and the projectile shrieked like the battle cry of a dragon. He caught a flash of the arrow moving within a small cone of air before it vanished headed for its target’s heart. Even his quick eyes could not keep up with the target’s movement as he struck the arrow. Wet stone and chips of mortar flew as pieces of the projectile bounced around the warrior. It should have been impossible; the Archer was one street over, a mere forty strides away. He could hit a rat at the same distance in worst weather with his Greatbow.

 The storm pushed, pulled, and soaked him as he backed up to the position he started from and picked another arrow from quiver at his back. He stood on a platform, atop a three-story tavern near the walls of the Inner City. Spacious merchant homes, high-end inns, and rarity shops clustered near the gate of the Noble Quarter, and all begged the King to have a Great Archer posted on their roofs for protection when they heard that a Dragonhunter was attacking. The Great Archer took a few seconds to give his aching arms a rest and to study the target. He was a mountain of a man even among the old-landers, nearly as tall as the Great Archer shorter by at most a hand and wider than a man had any right to be. The two hammers he wielded were so massive that it would have been a wonder if he lifted one with two hands; the ease in which he wielded them both spoke of mindboggling strength. He was badly wounded, literally covered in a mass of bruises and cuts that more resembled a single mammoth wound than a thousand lesser ones, and still no arrow could touch him. The archer and his brothers had been trying for over an hour to do so. As to his identity, the archer knew few men of his size and fewer still with eyes the color that a single guardsman managed to convey; he was an Ultrahardt, as sure as the sun was fire.

The Archer got a chill as he thought about it. The family of Ultrahardt was second in status only to the royal line, and Nanorod was their patriarch. The man wasn’t a living legend, he was a myth cloaked in flesh and only the worst gossips could even get close to his true exploits. He slew dragons as heroes would deer and was honored by High Kings. He was the greatest Dragonslayer of this age, and only his wife Meyrlane and his sons came close to his skill. So why was he trying to slaughter the man with a weapon intended to kill dragons? The short answer was simple; the Old King commanded his death. The long answer was too complex for him to consider with such an extraordinary target before him. There were also other things to not consider; like whether or not the King used the ancient enemies of all Hunters, a Rider, to aid in putting Nanorod’s blood to the sword. The thought was dangerous, true or not, mentioning it out loud would cost him his head and so The Great Archer banished it from his mind.

Despite his fame, Nanorod was a notorious demophobe and few enough people could claim in truth to have seen him up close. It was said that Nanorod looked as if he strolled from the uttering's of lore, conversely, it was also said the man looked as if he was dipped bodily into ink and loved to have words scrawled all over his body. He knew better than to listen to gossip of old soldiers, and loremasters. The Great Archer closed his eyes to clear his sight and still his thoughts. When he opened them again, He had only a second to feel regret as his and the brute’s eyes met.

The Ultrahardt coldly watched the piece of jagged stone smash the Great archer’s skull to bits. As the body dropped into the alley, he picked up his hammer and continued on down the street. Ten bodies littered the ground no matter where he walked, crowding his feet and nearly tripping him. Those faces were bloodied, crushed, melted like wax, or bloated and purpled as if dipped in foul ink. He described them to the wind, so that those who were responsible might hear the reason for their demise. His voice was perfected for this; his ribcage was massive and the lungs that filled them like bellows.

 “Meyrlane,” He roared, as he walked the evacuated streets, “Arek…Nuerod…Luxand…Urnos,”

 Ranks of Elite Guards with the pierced dragon sigil of House Ultrahard on their breastplates, formed up before him. Hunters in full stone armour clattered in the street behind him.

 “...My sweet Meyruen, my skilled Mythor, strong Lorhand, mighty Loln…Aorian, my firstborn! I’ll pay them back a thousand times for what they have done to you!” Said he, lifting both hammers as the two companies charged, “I’ll pay them back A thousand times a thousand for what they have done to the Ultrahardts!”

 The Hunters came from behind in twos and threes despite the street being wide enough for several times that number; their swords were long and just as deadly to friend as foe; whereas the guardsmen huddled with their great shields from store front to tavern wall and poked at him with Siege Pikes. He fell into them a whirlwind of violence, every swing crumpling shields, breaking limbs, and pulping armoured men into in bleeding mush. He moved faster than the eye could follow, slipping past weapons like a stormy wind and still Ultraswords cut into his open wounds and spear heads sought out his weeping flesh as if to drink him dry. His blood flew like red ribbons, painting his foes as he crushed them into the ground and swatted them airborne. Elite Guardsmen filled the early night with dying screams whenever a hammer struck them. Hunter Knights wearing unwieldy stone armour were lifted into the air by his blows and thrown, leveling small buildings with their mass. In minutes he stood alone, a hillock of flesh amid the ruins of buildings and broken street. The Gates of the Inner City loomed before him, the lanterns around it dark and its immense doors slightly ajar.

 “They’ll pay blood for blood,” He growled as he took a step forward, “…And flesh for flesh!”

 The Dragonslayer arrow shot from the darkness tearing halfway through his right leg. He stumbled but before he could fall another arrow took him through the meat of his neck, cracking the stone at his feet and trapping the brute where he stood. He gurgled, dropped his hammers, and spat a drizzle of blood. His breaths came in a labored hiss that sounded as if he was trying to breath underwater. Nevertheless he shifted his weight to his uninjured leg and snapped the haft of the arrow in his neck. Standing he looked up at the archer who could wound him so and froze. Even as the rain fell in blinding sheets around him the Ultrahardt recognized her form, and the closer he hopped to her the better he could make out her features. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen, despite being covered in oozing wounds, half her face a patchwork of shiny pink flesh and one socket empty and dark.

 “Mmmo…Meyrlane,” The name hissed and gurgled from his throat.

 Tears streamed down the un-ruined half of her face as she notched another arrow and pulled it back as far as she could. She mouthed words, before she loosened; two words that could have been those of hate, love, anguish or thanks. The blow from the arrow slammed him on his rump as the arrow fractured and scrapped his breastbone and sunk two-thirds its length into his chest. As he fell a strong gust of wind howled down the streets of the city, chilling everyone touched by it. It rose with the sound of the Archer’s cry of sorrow and fled north towards the lands of ice and death.