

## PROLOGUE

# LADY OF CLAY

The soldier walked to the edge of the compound to sit in the dirt and drink the last of his rum and think about how he came to be in this dismal hole on the final morning of his life. He found a munitions crate on which to rest but he couldn't see much beyond the low mud-brick palisade wall. This sand storm had been raging since dawn and his goggles were already scoured so badly they were practically useless. He perceived his surroundings as uncertain shapes in a red haze. Only the dim circle of the sun offered him some sense of orientation. It hung there like a plague lantern. You couldn't fight in this weather because you couldn't see what was coming for you.

That was probably for the best.

In the compound behind him he could hear his commander barking orders at the other men. They were loading the gunpowder mortars with nails pulled from the wrecked farmstead over by the southern wall, for all the good that would do. Seated on his crate, the soldier scooped up a handful of sand and let it pour out between his fingers until it was all gone. This struck him as a fitting metaphor for a morning like this. He wondered, briefly, if he ought to construct a poem along these lines. He could carve it into an earthen brick so that others would know what happened here in the Adad Godu

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wastes. But then he dismissed the idea. It sounded too much like the sort of thing an Unmer soldier would do. Leave a poem. Leave a legacy. Instead, he took a long draught of rum and spat out sand. Sand got in everything here – your food and drink and even your leathers. You couldn't escape from it. As inevitable as time.

The soldier sighed. This is what happened when you had too much time to think about things and you hadn't yet drunk enough booze to blot it all out. He raised his canteen to his lips again, but halted.

He had spotted movement out there in the crimson murk. His muscles tautened. His hand shifted instinctively to his sword. His heart was suddenly racing. Had he . . . ?

There.

He saw it again. However, this time he was able to relax somewhat. It was only a solitary figure: an archer, probably another one of Queen Aria's mercenaries lost in the storm. The stranger was tall and wore a woolspun cloak wrapped around his head and shoulders to keep the blowing sand from his eyes. He reached the compound's low earthen barrier and vaulted lightly over it. And then he came strolling up towards the place where the soldier was sitting.

The soldier offered his canteen. 'How's things in Jabanin?'

The archer looked down at the canteen, but did not reach for it. He was carrying a white bow carved from a dragon's rib and had a fine and unusual quiver – a black glass cylinder patterned with runes – lashed to his belt. 'I didn't come from Jabanin,' he said.

'I thought everyone passed through Jabanin.'

The stranger did not reply.

The soldier grunted. 'Well, it makes sense, I suppose. It explains why you're here. You won't have heard the news.'

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‘What news?’

‘You’d better take a drink, my friend,’ the soldier said, ‘because I’m afraid you’ve just walked into the most dismal and dangerous backwater shithole in the entire world.’ He thrust his canteen up towards the other man.

‘Have you sighted the entity?’

The soldier blinked. Slowly he lowered the canteen. ‘You know? You know about the slaughter at Arrash and Morqueth?’

‘I know Jonas Marquetta’s sorcerer has summoned one of the entities that you refer to as the elder gods. I know there have been two confrontations at the villages you mentioned. And I know that it’s now headed this way.’

The soldier looked at him. ‘You came here deliberately?’

The archer nodded.

‘The last person I’ll ever speak to,’ the soldier said, ‘and he’s a lunatic.’ His shoulders slumped and he took another drink. ‘Until three days ago I thought we’d won this war. An end to bloody Unmer rule. An end to two decades of slavery.’ He glanced at the archer, but couldn’t see his face behind the wrappings of his cloak. ‘I was sold twice, you know? Twice in three years, to two different Unmer masters, though one of them was a woman.’ He let his mind wander back to those days. ‘And when the Haurstaf fleet arrived in Losoto, I didn’t believe it. I didn’t believe those psychic witches could do what people said they could do. And then I saw it myself.’ He smiled. ‘Two women, just girls really. I saw them paralyse two whole divisions of Unmer soldiers – and their unit commanders and attendant sorcerers. All those armed men writhing in agony on the streets of the capital, unable to think, barely able to breathe under a psychic assault.’ He shook his head. ‘And that was just two little girls.’

The archer continued to observe him.

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‘When they drove the Unmer out of Losoto or rounded them all up into their ghettos, I thought that was an end to it,’ the soldier went on. ‘The Haurstaf’s dominance over the Unmer was every bit as complete as the Unmer’s dominance over us.’ He took another swallow from the canteen. ‘Didn’t figure on this long drawn-out conflict.’ He shook his head. ‘But now it’s obvious why the bastards have been stretching it out, running and hiding. They were buying themselves time for their bloody schemes. Enough time to summon that . . . thing.’

‘The war isn’t over yet.’

The soldier shot him a fierce look. ‘If the stories we’ve heard are true, then the war is very definitely over. The Unmer have a god on their side.’

‘A goddess,’ the archer said. ‘And gods fall as men do.’

The soldier coughed and shook his head. ‘You know how many Samarol were in Morqueth? Didn’t so much as slow it down. You have heard what happened there? You heard what this goddess is riding?’

‘An entropic beast.’

The soldier grunted. ‘A what?’ He frowned. ‘That’s not what I’d call it.’ He paused, his brow still furrowed as he studied the other man. ‘You know, you never did say where you were from. I’ve been trying to place that accent of yours. I’ve heard it before, somewhere, but . . .’

But his ruminations were disturbed, for at that moment a new sound could be heard over the gusting wind and the rasp of the sand. Both men turned their heads towards the north-west. At first it was faint, like a low tone plucked by gales from a cave or a hollow in the rocks, but as the moments passed it quickly became unmistakable: a distant, steady pounding, like something huge stalking the earth. And overlaying this was

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another sound, of a higher pitch – as though the wind itself had grown keener.

The soldier put his canteen to his lips and upended it, finishing the last of his rum. Then he dusted sand from his hands and rose unsteadily to his feet. Back in the compound he could just perceive the dim silhouettes of his brothers in arms rushing to and fro. ‘I suppose this is it,’ he said.

The archer nodded. ‘This entity can manipulate entropy at will,’ he said. ‘This storm is its voice. The men whom it killed have become its teeth. And when it bares them, it will be to strike terror into your hearts. Do not let it, or the beast upon which it rides, touch you. Doing so would condemn yourself to an eternity of unimaginable horrors.’

‘I wasn’t planning on going hand to hand with the thing. That’s what our cannons and mortars are for.’

‘Cannons and mortars can’t harm it.’

‘Well that’s a damn shame,’ the other man muttered. ‘Because cannons and mortars are what we have.’

‘The most sensible course of action,’ the archer said, ‘would be for you to flee.’

The soldier grunted again. He scooped up another handful of sand and then opened his palm, watching as the glassy powder flowed out between his fingers. ‘I’m not paid to run away,’ he said. ‘Besides, I’m hellish tired of this desert. I could do with seeing a bit of action. What about you?’

The archer half-turned as if to reply, but his attention remained on the distant pounding. *Boom. Boom. Boom.* It seemed to have grown louder. The accompanying sound had become louder, too. Now it sounded like a cacophony of wails and screams.

‘What *is* that?’ the soldier said.

The archer strung his bow in one smooth movement and

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removed the cap from the quiver at his belt. A sudden crackling sound came from that black cylinder, and air rushed inwards, drawing tails of dust and sand into the opening.

The soldier stared at the quiver for a moment, then looked up at the archer. 'So, I've finally remembered where I've heard that accent before.'

The archer selected an arrow from his quiver. It had only a threaded metal cap where the arrowhead ought to be.

'What are you?' the soldier said. 'A saboteur?'

'We need to do something about this storm,' the archer said. He reached inside his cloak and pulled out a fist-sized object. It looked like a bulb of amber glass, full of miniature machinery. Among the gears and wires could be glimpsed a phial of liquid. He sealed the quiver again and the torrents of air around him abruptly stopped.

Next, he fixed the glass bulb onto the arrow, screwing it onto the threaded cap. When it was secure, he notched the arrow and raised his bow towards the heavens. The bow string quivered as he released it and the arrow shot high into the air.

After a moment, the dust clouds above them flashed blue as the strange device detonated. A heartbeat later they heard a concussion. 'If you have any powder,' the archer said, 'best see that it's covered.'

As he said this, the first drops of rain began to fall.

The soldier understood that he was witnessing Unmer sorcery. The archer's accent was the same as the accent of the men and women who had owned him.

Lightning ripped across the darkening skies, followed by the boom and rumble of thunder. And suddenly the air filled with the growing rush of water. The rain became a torrent. It drenched the two men and turned the sand to dark mud and hammered the palisade walls.

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And it cleared the air.

The soldier could see his comrades now, crouched by their cannons and mortars. They had covered the barrels and flintlocks with sack cloth or anything else to hand – helmets and shields and crate lids. Other men squatted behind the defensive wall, their rifles and bows ready, staring out across the dirt plains.

Now the soldier could actually see storm clouds overhead and with the rain they brought they pushed a chill wind down across the cracked earth plains. It howled and gusted and drove sheets of water through the uncertain light. To the south lay squat red dunes and bars of sand like the veins on the back of an old man's hand. Striding across the plains towards the soldier's compound was a creature from a nightmare.

It had roughly the shape and the muscular proportions of a pit hound or a bear – a blunt head on massive shoulders – but was far larger than any land beast of this world. It was hairless, with flesh as pale as dead skin but oddly rippled and covered in countless red bruises or contusions. It walked on four squat legs, turning its head this way and that as though sniffing out its prey. Its bristling teeth gleamed in the half-light, although it appeared to have no eyes. There came from it an odd sound, a dire chorus of shouts and wailing as of people in great pain.

Seated in a saddle on the creature's back was a pale woman with long dark hair that blew behind her like a pennant. She wore some type of faceted silver armour – so brightly polished that it flashed as she moved. In one hand she held the reins of her beast, in the other she gripped a whip that crackled and fizzed with constantly forking electrical fluids.

'The Unmer know her as Duna,' the archer said over the screams and cries that accompanied the approaching beast.

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‘Queen of the realm of thorns and at least three other minor dimensions. Daughter of the shape-shifter, Fiorel, whom some people call the Father of Creation and the God of Cauldron and Forge. Those who fear to utter Duna’s name call her Lady of Clay, for it is said her father moulded her and cast her in the furnace that raged at the birth of time.’ The archer’s brows lowered. ‘Make no mistake. She is neither furnace born nor a lady. She is an entropath. And the beast on which she rides is no mortal creature. It is the Agaroath, another of her father’s creations. It is undeniable, unstoppable, eternal and – like its creator – it has the ability to assume any physical form.’

‘Entropath?’

‘The entities you call the elder gods. Fiorel and Duna are entropaths.’

The soldier turned to him. ‘Why is she here?’

‘She has a lust for war,’ the archer said. ‘Perhaps Marquetta’s sorcerers have made a deal with her. I do not know. Whatever her reasons for being here, her father cannot know she is in this realm. Travelling between their cosmos and ours uses vast amounts of energy and the entropaths cannot afford to waste their dwindling reserves. Fiorel would never have allowed her to come here just to sate her battle lust.’

‘How do you know all this?’

The archer unwrapped the cloak from his face and rubbed rain from his forehead. He was Unmer: cadaverous with sharp, almost severe features, a long narrow nose and a prominent bony brow. His skin and hair were as white as salt but his eyes were crimson and intelligent and seemed to burn with a fierce inner light. The soldier recognized him.

‘Conquillas,’ he said. ‘You are Lord Augusto Conquillas.’ Conquillas the betrayer. The dragon lord who had abandoned his own people for the love of Aria, the Haurstaf queen whose

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witches had so recently put an end to decades of Unmer rule. Aria of the Ether – the living ghost – a telepath so powerful she could bathe her mind in the thoughts and dreams of millions. She must have learned of Duna’s coming through espionage.

‘It has long been my ambition to hunt the Agaroth,’ Conquillas admitted. He opened his quiver again. Again, the air around them twisted and became suddenly violent, rushing into the maw of that black cylinder at the archer’s hip.

By now the air had cleared and the goddess, Duna, and her hellish mount had drawn near enough to the compound that the waiting soldiers could see them more clearly. And when those men perceived the Agaroth as it truly was and understood what it was composed of, many of them lowered their weapons and wailed in terror.

The great beast now lumbering towards them was composed entirely of the bodies of those it had slain. Its massive limbs were full of mouths and faces and scraps of armour, swords and shields. A great mess of flesh and metal. And yet those bodies from which it was composed were not dead. Hundreds of slaughtered soldiers gazed out from its knees and its shoulders and gnashed their teeth and screamed.

‘How do you hunt *that*?’ the soldier exclaimed.

‘With bow and arrow,’ Conquillas said. He notched an arrow and aimed it at the approaching fiend, sighting along the shaft. The tip of this missile was a crackling black dot that appeared to be sucking in the very air around it.

*Void arrows?*

The soldier had heard of such sorcerous creations. It was said that only one hundred and eleven had ever been made. One hundred and one of them had been lost forever, fired through the world or sent into the heavens, never to be seen again. Another was in the palace of Emperor Ji-Kai of the

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Golden Domain. He had bought it from a pirate lord, giving the man one full tenth of his empire – an area of land equivalent to a small country. The remaining nine were in Conquillas's possession.

And one of those was now aiming at the beast on the plain.

Conquillas loosed his arrow and it shot away across the ground with a crackle and a shower of black and white sparks.

It struck the beast in the centre of its head and vanished. Although he couldn't chart the missile's progress after that, the soldier imagined it tearing through the creature's skull and emerging from the other side. It would keep on that same trajectory forever, plunging through the Alhama Mountains on the distant horizon and then onwards out into the endless void behind the sky, until it reached the ends of the cosmos and passed beyond.

The beast let out a baleful roar and swung its head towards them, baring its massive teeth. And that alien queen whose name was Duna, daughter of Fiorel, now turned her attention upon the soldier and his companion. She lashed her whip above her head and a sudden burst of lightning poured down from the thunderclouds and connected with that sorcerous cord.

'Would it offend you if I flee?' the soldier said.

'You are only human,' Conquillas said.

'I thought a void arrow could stop anything.'

The archer's gaze remained locked on Duna and her mount. The Agaroth was a maelstrom of living corpses and metal – a great howling juggernaut that loomed high above the flat earth and the pockets of withered scrub. Its huge hooves drove deep into the muddy earth as it came lumbering towards them at a frightening pace.

Conquillas loosed another void arrow.

The arrow shot over the palisade wall and struck the

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oncoming beast again. This time it pierced its chest where, presumably, its heart would be located. But again, the sorcerous missile had no effect. The ground around them shook as the Agaroth's speed increased.

The soldier glanced at his companion's quiver. Strangely, there seemed to be more than nine arrows in there. 'How many of those do you have?' he asked.

'A score or so,' Conquillas said, pulling yet another free and notching it to his bow string.

'I didn't think there were that many left in the world.'

Conquillas sent a third arrow whizzing across the earth towards the goddess and her mount. This struck the beast in the left eye. The Agaroth screamed and huffed and batted the air with one massive hoof, but it barely slowed. A moment later it came charging at Conquillas with even greater urgency. Now that there was less than three hundred yards between them, the other soldiers started firing their mortars and cannons. Concussions sounded all around them. Smoke filled the air.

'I retrieve them,' Conquillas remarked.

'The arrows? From beyond the edge of creation?'

Conquillas raised his bow again. 'Fortunately, time does not exist outside the cosmos,' he said. 'The void arrows are always present.' He loosed the fourth arrow and then a fifth and sixth in quick succession, but each missile plunged straight through the creature without harming it. He frowned. 'Nevertheless, getting them back is not straightforward. It can sometimes take hundreds of years to find them, so I do not like to waste them.'

'How many do you have left?'

The archer lowered his bow and stared at their oncoming foe. Duna and her mount were now less than two hundred

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yards away. Most of the other soldiers in the compound abandoned their guns and fled, despite shouted orders from their commander to remain at their posts. Conquillas ignored the commotion. His full attention remained fixed on the enemy. 'I suspect the Agaroth lacks a brain and any critical organs,' he muttered. 'It is not living in a sense we recognize. But if it is an abstract creation, then it must be formed by the will of its rider. And there lies the problem. The only way to destroy such a fiend will engender grave repercussions, I fear. I must have more time to think of a better solution.'

He reached into a pocket in his padded tunic and took out a small silver whistle, which he proceeded to blow into. It made no sound, or at least none that the soldier could hear.

But he heard the shrieks that soon filled the skies above them.

'Dragons,' he cried.

The winged serpents must have been waiting in the thunderclouds above them. There were three of them, all monstrous, each wearing horned and spiked helmets and dark metallated armour over their scaly red hides, war dragons if ever there had been any. Now, at Conquillas's behest, they tore down through the air, diving towards the oncoming foes at reckless speeds.

'Dah'le ne kustol,' Conquillas muttered. 'Ne kustol.'

'What was that?' the soldier said.

'They must tread with care.'

One of the dragons broke to the west, its vast wings thumping, while the remaining two continued to swoop downwards. These began to loop around each other in helix formation. At the last instant one banked sharply aside, while the other rushed at the goddess, its great black claws seeking to rip her from the saddle of the monster she rode.

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Duna flicked her lash skywards, and there was a flash of white light. As that cord of energy swept up to meet the attacking serpent, it grew to a hundred times its length.

*Crackle.*

The whip passed straight through the onrushing dragon, slicing it in half from neck to rump. The pieces fell amidst a cloud of blood and smacked into the ground behind the goddess, where they lay with the great wings still twitching.

The remaining two dragons shrieked as they wheeled around their fallen comrade.

The goddess lashed her whip above her head in triumph. It ripped through the air like lightning. And then she reined her beast around and brought it over to the fallen serpent, whereupon the Agaroth lowered its head and began to devour the remains.

A chorus of shrieks filled the heavens and both surviving dragons now turned and swept in from the north, flying so low their claws raked the ground.

And the Agaroth began to change.

‘Mercy,’ the soldier said. ‘What’s happening?’

As the entropic beast gorged itself on dragon flesh, it was growing larger with every passing moment. And as it grew it altered its shape. Its head became elongated, developing into a snout full of black teeth. Ears sprouted from its skull. Hooves became claws. Its rump stretched out, writhing snake-like across the earth, until it took the form of a tail. From its back there unfolded enormous fans of bone that shuddered and grew sheets of translucent skin.

‘It looks like a dragon,’ the soldier said.

In half a hundred heartbeats the Agaroth had transformed itself into the likeness of a great winged serpent. Now it thrashed its newly formed wings and lifted itself airborne. Gales blew

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around it, raising clouds of grit and tearing leafless shrubs from the earth.

Conquillas's war dragons did not falter, but came straight at the monster, raking its neck savagely with their claws and teeth.

'Ne kustol!' Conquillas cried.

But it was already too late. As the war dragons engaged Duna's mount, a strange and terrible fate befell them. The entropic beast *absorbed* them. One instant the dragons were involved in savage combat, the next they all but vanished inside the monster. The soldier saw red wings flapping uselessly, a tail thrashed, and then nothing remained in the air but the goddess and her hellish mount.

The Agaroth grew larger still. And from its shoulders it sprouted two new necks and two new heads and two new maws crammed with glassy black teeth. It turned its baleful eyes back towards the men in the compound.

'Shit shit shit,' the soldier said.

'Run,' Conquillas cried.

'What about you?'

Duna and her mount came surging through the air towards them, and the soldier could see that its forelimbs comprised great swellings of corpse muscle and human bones and blood-black organs still dripping. Scores of the living dead gaped out at the world from the beast's chest and shoulders or shuddered and howled and chattered in madness. It came at them, furious, dragging behind it a storm of dust.

All of the other soldiers were now fleeing, the commander included, but Duna did not even seem to notice them. Her dark and savage eyes were fixed on Conquillas.

Who raised his bow.

'Daughter of Fiorel!' he cried. 'Halt there or die!'

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The beast's wings thundered, and it slowed, halting its dive. Its three necks writhed like snakes, its mouths hissing and snapping at the air. And upon its back Duna looked down and laughed.

She was pale and achingly beautiful with a soft, tapering face and elegantly arched brows, and yet to look upon her was to feel horror. There was no glimmer of humanity in her eyes: merely raw and inhuman power. She wore armour fashioned from mirrored silver and sculpted around her small breasts. Her lash crackled constantly and scorched the air around it. Her hair blew out behind her head like silk funeral pennants, lifted by winds that seemed not to exist in this world. The hand that clutched the Agaroth's saddle horn was covered in tiny runes that looked red and painful. The soldier could see scratch marks and old scabs there, as if those imprinted designs caused her endless irritation. On her left hand Duna wore a ring that seemed composed of nothing but white light.

The shape-shifting beast lowered one of its heads towards Conquillas.

'I warn you, Duna,' the Unmer lord said.

'You may yet appeal to my mercy,' she said. 'Kneel now and beg that I might end your life rather than prolong it.' Her tongue tasted the air. 'The worth of such an appeal shall be determined by how entertaining you can make it, Lord Conquillas.'

'I have no quarrel with you, Duna. But you have no right to be in this realm. Return to your garden or I will have no choice but to stop you.'

The Agaroth's wings pounded.

'My very existence grants me that right,' Duna said. 'Power grants me that right. Why do you think you can stop me, Conquillas?'

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‘I will shoot you dead.’

She smiled. ‘And my father will remake me and scorch this world for your insolence. I’m growing bored with this conversation, archer.’

‘Fiorel would not destroy this world,’ Conquillas said. ‘I believe he has plans for it.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘You *believe*?’

The Agaroth was edging closer to them. They would soon be within range of the goddess’s lash.

‘I also believe that, were you to die, he would not remake you,’ Conquillas added. ‘He does not love you, Duna. Your lusts embarrass him. You have risked the lives of your kin by coming here.’

Suddenly her face twisted into a snarl. ‘How dare you!’ she cried. ‘You mortal! You . . .’ Her voice choked off and she let out a growl. ‘You dare lecture me? I am a god!’

And then she swept back her lash, as if to strike the archer.

Conquillas shot his arrow.

It scorched through the air and struck Duna between the eyes and passed through her head without pause. The soldier could hear it fizzing away into the sky even as he saw the goddess topple forwards and lie slumped across her saddle horn.

Without her will to sustain its form, the Agaroth abruptly collapsed into its component parts. A great deluge of bones and corpses and dragon flesh fell from the air and struck the ground before them.

The soldier gaped. ‘You killed her,’ he said.

‘She was arrogant to assume I wouldn’t.’

‘You killed a god.’

‘An entropath,’ Conquillas said. ‘But a young one, and not particularly powerful. I myself am considerably older than Duna was.’

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‘But she was the daughter of the creator!’

Conquillas nodded. ‘That was unfortunate,’ he admitted.

The soldier couldn’t tear his eyes from the goddess’s dead body, which now lay in a pool of gore and dragon guts and among the corpses of soldiers who had been killed at Arrash and Morqueth – men who had at last found peace in death. ‘What do you think Fiorel will do?’ he said.

‘I do not know what he will do.’ Conquillas regarded his bow for a moment. ‘Fiorel is a terrible meddler. He certainly has plans for this world, and possibly plans for me. He might attempt to strike me down tomorrow, or three hundred years from now. Or he might simply ignore the matter. Duna was always causing him trouble.’

‘You think he might just ignore what you’ve done?’

Conquillas shrugged. ‘I will retrieve my arrows, just in case.’