

GRUDGEBEARER

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J. F. LEWIS



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For Jonathan and Justin

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PART ONE
THE AERN AS DEVOURERS

“The most frustrated rants contained within my father’s notes and journals pertaining to his creation of the Aern deal with the unexpected side effects of their unique skeletal composition and the link existing between the Aern and the items they in turn created. While Uled never solved the riddle of the various tokens, bonded weapons, and warsuits fashioned by his most celebrated creations, I believe that near the end of Uled’s life, he began to suspect the Aern were hiding the depths of their connection from their maker and their masters.

One wonders why he did not ask those questions of Kholster himself, the Firstborn of Uled’s race of servant warriors. At the time, Kholster, like his brother and sister Aern, was soul bound and would have been compelled to answer. It is my firm belief Uled feared that answer more than he desired it.

When he sealed away the Life Forge, it was therefore not to protect it as our history books tell but rather to prevent the death knell of his own people.

Certainly, any action taken at that time was already too late. From the first hammer blow purposed with the creation of Kholster and his first one hundred Armored brethren, the deed was done. The blow was struck. Some might call it folly, but I see it as the most protracted suicide attempt ever conceived by mortal artifice. I think my father knew exactly what he was doing but was simply too proud of the idea to let it go unexpressed . . . Even the later destruction of the Life Forge could not undo what Uled had done.”

An excerpt from *The Patrimonial Scar: Uled's Legacy of Death* by Sargus

CHAPTER 1

OATH BROKEN

A crack split the silence of six hundred years. Wood surrendered to iron followed by the steady golden light of a vow close to breaking. A globe of mystic flame hung pendulously in the air, a fist-sized bead like burning oil scattering the dark and casting jagged shadows of splintered wood along the interior of the long sealed chamber. The intruder caught a flash of metal, a gleam of red. He spied the half-seen outline of an armored boot. This had to be it. There was nowhere else to check. It had to be.

Crowbar and axe worked together: a symphony of opening and rending—the clarion call of discovery and doom. As the breach widened, light filled the stone chamber, banishing shadows and picking out spikes of color. Smears of crimson gleamed like the eyes of predatory animals lurking in the atramentous gloom as pair after pair of red crystals lit up within the ancient barracks. Five thousand pair, if the historical records were to be believed. Dolvek didn't think that they could be. The records had been kept by the Aern; who knew if they'd been accurate? The Aern were little more than animals, after all.

“Yes.” Dolvek leaned forward, the tip of his pale nose twitching as he sniffed the air. “I think this room was the command barracks. Not that the Aern were kind enough to leave a map.”

Suits of armor, like animal-headed statues, stood in even rows. Each loomed tall and imposing, a warpick at its side, each weapon a work of art. The stylized helms seemed to glare out at the prince, their gazes an accusation.

I half expect to hear them shouting “intruder,” he thought to himself. Though to call me an intruder anywhere in my own kingdom . . . ha.

“No cobwebs, Prince Dolvek,” said the squat man wielding the crowbar and wearing rough-spun workman's attire. He peered into the room, sweat standing out on his brow and running down his face in thin rivulets.

A larger man, bald and burly with a lantern jaw and a twitchy eye, made the sign of the Four Square in front of him with the head of the axe he held. “No dust neither.” He chewed his lower lip and drew blood without noticing. “This is dangerous fruit, your highness. Red berries on dead lips, this is.”

“You prove a positively poetic coward, Bran.” The globe of fire drifted farther into the room, swelling to the size of a skull, illuminating the undecorated stone walls and floor, eliciting a startled gasp from the man with the crowbar. He dropped the length of iron, turned, and ran.

“Begging your pardon,” Bran said as he lowered his axe and left it in the doorway. He backed out of the room, eyes locked with the gaze of the most prominent warsuit. “N-no-no disrespect.”

“Idiots.” Dolvek stepped fully into the chamber. The swish of his blue robes seemed to echo like a threat. A simple golden circlet adorned his brow in stark contrast to the raven tresses which touched his shoulders. “Empty armor can’t harm you.”

Even so, Prince Dolvek had to admit that, as the illumination grew even stronger, those archaic artifacts which had frightened his human workers proved an intimidating presence; the fearsome specimen directly in front of him in particular. Licking his lips in anticipation, Prince Dolvek smiled triumphantly.

“Bloodmane’s armor,” he mouthed, stepping closer.

I’ve found it!

More a work of art to the prince’s eyes than an implement of war, the full suit of Aernese plate armor showed no sign of the centuries which had passed since its interment. Astonishing detail work covered its surface, yet as he traced the amber-colored lines with an outstretched finger, the metal felt smooth and unmarked.

Functional, too, then, he thought. *Enameled in some way?*

“I can see why the sight of you running into battle would strike fear into the hearts of those rutting lizards.”

Not that anyone had been troubled by the Zaur for a hundred years despite how fervently General Wylant might argue to the contrary. She never had been the same after the defeat of the Aern at the Sundering. The shattering of the Life Forge had twisted Eldrennai magic itself. Who knew what it had done to Wylant, who had, according to all the records, been the one standing over it, the one whose weapon had unmade it? Dolvek could hear her voice in the back of his head.

“Build whatever exhibit you have in mind, majesty,” she had argued, “but do not tamper with arms and armor of the Aern. If Kholster finds out you’ve so much as touched them—”

“Your concern is noted, General,” Dolvek recalled saying. He couldn’t remember if he’d even looked up at her. He didn’t think so. The sight of her bald head offended him. “And your caution is appreciated. But the exhibit will be closed to the public . . .”

The general had opened her mouth to say something, or he imagined she had, but he’d raised his voice and bulled on. “—and I see no reason any of the royals would ever send a tattletale message to any Aern, much less Kholster

himself, *or* why Kholster would even deign to read such a message, if he, as you say, hates us so much and *if*, indeed, he can read.”

“If?” Wylant’s mouth had dropped open. “He. Can. Read? Highness, be reasonable. At least discuss it with King Grivek—”

If the Aern could read, Dolvek supposed Wylant would know. He’d heard that Wylant had been . . . involved . . . with the leader of the Aern back at the time of the Sundering. Ancient history, as far as Dolvek was concerned, since she’d fought on the side of her people. Still, her past history probably affected her present judgment. And she was, after all, a woman.

“Discuss the king’s surprise present with the king, Wylant?” Dolvek had sighed. “No. Nor shall you. I forbid it. Thank you again for your diligence and desire to protect the kingdom and my royal person. You are dismissed.”

She could strut about with her little cadre of malformed knights in their drab metal armor and their wretched elemental foci all she wanted as a precaution against the Zaur and the Aern and their supposed magical resistance . . . but Dolvek felt forced to draw the line at Wylant’s interference in affairs of state. She was an old general only and not of royal blood at all. What, he wondered, did his father see in her?

Smiling at the memory, Dolvek gestured, and the globe of fire floated closer, illuminating the armor more intently. If the breastplate was impressive, the helm was more so. Carved in the likeness of an irkanth, a horned lion—the so-called king of the Eldren Plains—its mane was crimson and unfaded, the crystals set into its eyes seeming to glow from within, its mouth gaping open in an angry roar. An obvious trick of the light. *Magical flame does seem to favor dramatic touches*, the prince thought. *Perhaps I should have some plain candles brought in.*

“Bran,” Prince Dolvek called. “Get your men. I want to mark the ones I need moved to the royal museum for the special exhibit. And bring some candles.”

Bran did not answer.

“Oh, of all the superstitious—”

What did I expect? They are only humans, he reminded himself. *Did I expect bravery and courage? Loyalty? Reliability? Yes. Well, I had hoped. I’ll look around first and then hire some more humans in the square.*

The globe of fire drifted after him, and he walked down the rows, marveling at the weapons of a different time. On either side he was greeted by row upon row of glowing crystal eyes set into the helms of the Aernese warsuits.

“Magnificent.”

*

While Prince Dolvek's seemingly innocent actions doomed his people, the implement of their destruction was asleep at home, eyes closed and dreaming. His bunk, if one could call it such, was little more than a shelf of stone carved in the barrack wall of South Number Nine, the current capital of the Great Dwarven-Aernese Collective. The berth he occupied ran twenty-one hands long, seven hands deep, and another seven hands from the slab of one berth to the bunk above it. Dwarves often sighed at the sight. "Like bees in a hive," Glinfolgo was fond of saying.

Kholster smiled in his sleep, the grin lending a predatory cast to his features (even at rest) as it revealed the doubled upper and lower canines so distinctive to Aern.

The light caught him by surprise.

Eyes snapped open in the dark, jade irises shuttering into thin circles, bound by the black sclera of his eyes, as the amber pupils dilated wider to capture and enhance the available light, then narrowed to pinpoints as his vision wavered, registering the switch to thermal imaging—the base of his eyes growing cold. He felt the other Aern around him, waking wordlessly, making the same questing looks in the dark, searching for the source of the unexpected luminescence.

"Light?" he asked, his voiced clipped and professional.

"Not here," Vander answered.

"Where?"

"Close your eyes," Vander instructed.

Trust an Overwatch like Vander to pick up on it first of all, while even the warsuits themselves are still confused. Kholster closed his eyes and frowned as the light returned and he saw a pale-skinned Oathbreaker peering down at Bloodmane, Kholster's warsuit.

Bloodmane, what's going on?

An Oathbreaker has unsealed the command barracks, rang a voice in Kholster's head.

Seeing through the eyes of his armor, Kholster saw Eyes of Vengeance, Vander's warsuit, standing across the hall, its helm fashioned in the likeness of a sea hawk, its hooked beak and fierce eyes ablaze with the light of candles being put in place by human workmen.

"What the hells are they up to?" Vander asked.

He said something about a museum exhibit, Bloodmane told Kholster.

A what?

An exhibit. Must I attack them?

Give me a moment. Kholster slid out of his berth and ran a hand across his face, the stubble rough under his fingertips. *I like to take a candlemark or two to mull things over before committing genocide.*

Of course.

Of course, Kholster snorted, hiding a grin. As if he'd asked for a few more moments to ponder the menu selection at one of those strange Hulsite eateries with all the options. He shook his head as he watched through Bloodmane's eyes the humans scurrying about their work in an effort to please their Eldrennai masters, but with exaggerated care, some of them apologizing directly to the warsuits each time they drew too close or feared they might bump up against one.

That was the right attitude, the one the Oathbreaker himself should have had. Kholster sneered at the fool giving orders when he came back into view. A human with a piece of colored chalk followed behind him making "x's" on the floor in front of warsuits the Oathbreaker indicated. The idiot had the stamp of Zillek and Grivek all over his face, the pale skin, the short ears with barely a point to them at all, and the dull black pupils of his eyes . . . beady, like a rat dropping stuck in a mound of bird squirt.

"No, I said to mark the armor itself," the Oathbreaker hissed, "not the floor in front of it."

It didn't seem right to laugh, but Kholster marveled at how anyone, even an Oathbreaker prince, could be stupid enough to risk the wrath of the Aern over something as unimportant as—

A museum exhibit? he asked Bloodmane.

Yes.

On what? Do they have a new "beings-we-created-and-enslaved-and-then-almost-got-killed-by-when-we-freed-them-by-breaking-an-oath" wing of the Royal Museum?

Bloodmane didn't answer.

Surprised by an inward sense of movement, like the phantom sway he often felt when sleeping on land after a time at sea, Kholster clutched the stone edge of his berth to steady himself. Bloodmane was in motion.

Closing his eyes again, Kholster was treated to a view of the ceiling as four humans carried Bloodmane out of the barracks as they might carry a wounded king on a stretcher between them.

"So they aren't moving our armor," Kholster muttered. "They're making humans do it."

"Can they do that?" Vander asked.

Kholster looked down the room and saw that same question echoed on

the faces of the other ten Aern who shared this billet. More than that, though, he sensed a growing clamor of conversation going on among his Armored, the five thousand exiles he'd brought with him out of Port Ammond after the Sundering. After the Vael had negotiated a peace between the Aern and the Oathbreakers. Words filled his mind, the edge of conversations relayed from Aern to warsuit, warsuit to Aern.

Thousands of miles away, crystalline eyes flashed bright, then dim, then bright again as the warsuits relayed the chatter of Kholster's army.

"They are doing it," Kholster answered.

"But are you going to allow it?" Vander asked.

I don't know yet, he thought directly to Vander.

Bloodmane, he thought, addressing his warsuit. *Tell the One Hundred to meet me at the Laundry.*

Sir?

We're going to wash clothes and discuss this . . . loophole.

Yes, Maker.

Kholster, old friend, Kholster thought back. *We've been through this more times than one can count. Call me Kholster.*