
THE LONGSTRIDER CHRONICLES
The Graveyard Beneath the Ash
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CHAPTER 1

Black Glass at Dawn

He woke with ash on his cheek.

The taste of it sat dry on his tongue, fine as powdered glass, and for a moment he did not move. The dream was still unspooling behind his closed lids. Dragons. Always dragons now, their wings casting shadows across a city whose towers rose not toward the sky but downward, inverted, as if the whole of it had been pressed into the earth like a seal into wax. They circled without landing. They never landed. And the city beneath them breathed heat up through its buried streets until the dream shuddered and broke apart.

Eadwig opened his eyes. The Obsidian Plains stretched away in every direction, black ridges folding into one another under a sky just beginning to pale at the eastern edge. Dawn came slow here. The glassy stone that gave the plains their name held the night's cold long after the sun cleared the horizon, and the light that did reach the ground arrived bent and scattered, as

though the land itself was reluctant to be seen.

He sat up, brushing ash from his cheek with the back of one hand. His bedroll was spread across a slab of fractured masonry, the only level surface in a camp chosen more for shelter than comfort. A low wall, half-collapsed, curved around him on three sides, its stones marked with runes too worn to read in this light. He had camped here before. The wall broke the worst of the wind that came down off the northern ridges, and the overhang kept the dew from settling on his gear. He knew the place the way a fox knows its earth, which is to say he trusted it only so far and no further.

The histories he had grown up hearing, the fireside tales that passed for truth among the scavenger bands, said the dragons were dead. Slain. Hunted down in the empire's founding wars by men whose names were carved into monuments in cities Eadwig had never seen. The wyrms were monsters, the stories insisted. Mindless. Hungry. A scourge that the first emperors had wiped from the world so that civilization could take root. There was no ambiguity in the telling. No suggestion that anything had been lost in the killing.

But the dream kept coming.

He rolled his bedroll in four quick motions and secured it to the top of his pack. His boots, patched at the toes with leather taken from a different pair of boots, were stiff from the night's chill, and he worked his feet into them with the careful patience of someone

who had learned that haste tore stitches. The slate at his belt, a rectangle of dark stone roughly the size of his two hands spread wide, hung from a leather thong alongside a worn chisel and a pouch of chalk. He checked the slate by habit, running his thumb across its surface. Still blank. Still his.

The ruin he had chosen for the morning's work rose from the plain about a quarter-mile east of his camp, a low sprawl of broken walls and tilted columns that might once have been a way station or a watchpost. It was not the largest ruin on this stretch of the plains, nor the most promising, but Eadwig had learned early that the largest ruins drew the most attention, and attention on the Obsidian Plains rarely meant anything good. Other scavengers. Roving patrols from the border lords who claimed these lands without ever setting foot on them. Things that moved in the deeper passages and did not welcome company. Better to work small. Better to be quick.

He crossed the distance as the sun broke over the ridges, painting the black stone in shades of deep purple and dull red. The glassy surface of the plains caught the light and threw it back in sharp glints, and Eadwig walked with his weight forward, testing each step before he committed to it. The rubble underfoot was treacherous. A wrong step could turn an ankle or open a gash that would fester before he reached clean water. He had seen it happen. He had seen men die of less.

The ruin's outer wall stood no higher than his shoulder in most places, breached in three spots where the masonry had slumped outward and spilled across the ground in fans of shattered stone. Eadwig chose the eastern breach. It was the smallest of the three, barely wide enough to admit him if he turned sideways, but the stone on either side looked sound. No fresh cracks. No dust sifting down from the joints. He paused at the opening and laid his palm flat against the wall, feeling for the deep vibration that meant the structure was settling, shifting, preparing to give way. The stone was still. Cold and still.

Inside, the ruin opened into a chamber that had lost its roof centuries ago. The walls rose to uneven heights, their tops jagged against the brightening sky, and the floor was a chaos of fallen blocks and wind-drifted ash. But it was the runes that held him.

They crossed the stones in lines too deliberate to be decoration, their grooves cut deep and clean despite the weathering of ages. Some ran horizontal, following the courses of masonry. Others climbed vertically, ignoring the joints between blocks as though the wall itself was incidental to whatever message they carried. Their shapes were angular, precise, a script that reminded Eadwig of the patterns frost made on still water. He could read them. He had always been able to read them, in the way that other men read cloud signs or the tracks of animals, without knowing how the knowledge had

arrived.

The meanings came to him with the plainness of a road sign. *Boundary*, said one line, its characters spaced wide. *Threshold*, said another. A third, half-buried under a fall of rubble, read *do not*, and Eadwig did not need to see the rest to know what it had once commanded.

He moved deeper into the chamber, stepping over a fallen column, and stopped before a section of wall that was less damaged than the rest. The runes here formed a panel, a deliberate composition rather than a scattering of marks. And at its center, cut with a care that set it apart from the surrounding script, was an image.

A city. Not the city of the empire, with its straight roads and its walls built high to overawe. This was something older. The lines showed towers descending, streets spiraling inward toward a center that the carving did not reveal. The whole of it was enclosed by a curved boundary, a single unbroken line that circled the city like a wall or a moat or something stranger still. And beside the boundary, cut in a different hand, were emblems. Ruler emblems. The sort of marks that kings and lords used to claim ownership of land they had never walked.

Eadwig's breath went shallow. Not from fear. From recognition.

The city in the carving was the city from his dream. The towers descending. The streets coiling inward. The sense of something vast and breathing held just beneath

the surface of the stone. He had never seen this ruin before, had never entered this chamber, but the image was as familiar to him as the lines on his own palms.

He stood very still, his pack heavy on his shoulders, and let the silence of the ruin settle around him. A bird called somewhere out on the plains. The wind moved through the breach in the wall and stirred the ash at his feet. The runes did nothing. They were just marks in stone. They had been marks in stone for a thousand years and more, and they would be marks in stone long after he was gone. But they were also something else, and he knew it, and the knowing sat uneasily in his chest.

He reached for the slate at his belt.

The chalk was cold in his fingers. He knelt, bracing the slate against his thigh, and began to copy. Not the whole panel. He was not fool enough for that. The memory of his first encounter with a ward rune was still sharp in him, the way the mark had flared and the world had tilted and something had been taken. His mother's voice. He knew she had sung to him as a child. He knew it because he had written it down, years ago, before the ward took the memory itself. But he could no longer call the sound to mind. Could not summon the tune or the timbre or the way her voice had shaped his name. The fact remained. The feeling was gone.

He copied the city. The descending towers. The spiraling streets. The curved boundary that held it all. He

copied with care, his strokes deliberate, his pressure even. The chalk left white lines on the dark slate, precise and legible. But he did not copy the ruler emblems. Those he left where they were, cut into stone that had nothing to do with him.

And he did not answer.

The runes murmured as he worked. It was a sound at the edge of hearing, a layered whisper that might have been the wind moving through the ruin's cracks or might have been something else entirely. Eadwig had heard it before. It meant the runes were aware of him, aware of his attention, aware that someone stood before them who could read what they said. They wanted a response. They always wanted a response. But wanting was not the same as commanding, and Eadwig had learned, in the years since the ward had taken his mother's voice, that the difference between the two was the difference between a tool and a trap.

He finished the copy and straightened, brushing chalk dust from his fingers. The slate went back onto its thong. The chisel he left in its pouch. There was metal to be pried from the fallen masonry, copper and iron and sometimes the dull gleam of lead, and he had not come here to stand staring at old carvings while the day wasted. He turned from the panel and began to work his way along the chamber's northern wall, where a section of collapsed roofing had exposed a tangle of corroded brackets and what looked like the remains of a door

hinge.

The work was slow and familiar. He braced his boot against a loose block and levered it aside, then knelt to work a strip of copper free from the mortar that held it. The metal was green with age but still sound, and it would trade well enough at the next gathering of scavengers. He pried it loose and slipped it into the pouch at his belt, then moved to the next bracket.

The sun climbed. The light in the roofless chamber shifted from purple to gold to the flat white of midmorning. Eadwig worked steadily, his hands moving through tasks they knew by heart, and tried not to think about the city on the wall.

He failed.

The dream had been with him for weeks now, arriving without warning, departing without resolution. Always the same. The dragons circling. The city buried. The sense that something beneath the plains was waiting for him to find it, or for him to be ready, or for some condition he did not understand to be met. He had told no one. Who would he tell? The other scavengers would call it sun-sickness or bad water or a sign that he had been alone too long. And they might be right. He had been alone a long time.

A draft rose through a crack under the ruin floor.

It was faint at first, just a breath of moving air against his ankles, but it carried a smell that did not belong to the surface world. Damp stone. Old metal. Something

organic, long decayed, reduced to a sweetness that was almost but not quite gone. Eadwig stopped with his chisel halfway under a bracket and looked down.

The crack ran across the chamber floor in a jagged line, no wider than his thumb in most places. Through it, the draft came steady now, and with it came the murmur he had heard while copying the runes. Louder this time. More distinct. It was not one voice but many, layered over one another like the harmonics of a struck bell, and though he could not make out words he could feel the shape of them pressing at the edge of his understanding. The runes were speaking. Not to him, precisely. To the air. To the stone. To whatever lay beneath the floor and had been sealed away before the empire was more than a collection of warring tribes.

Black dust lifted against the wind.

It rose from the crack in a fine plume, defying the draft's direction, and hung in the air above the floor like ink spreading through water. Eadwig backed away, his chisel still in his hand, his pulse a steady pressure at his temples. The dust did not follow him. It held its shape above the crack, coiling and uncoiling, and as he watched it resolved into a pattern he knew.

The city. The descending towers. The spiraling streets. The curved boundary that enclosed it all. The dust showed him what the carving had only suggested, filling in details the stone could not hold. The towers were not merely descending. They were reaching. The

streets were not merely spiraling. They were leading somewhere, inward and downward, toward a center that the dust did not reveal any more than the carving had. And around the boundary, where the ruler emblems had been cut into the wall, the dust showed nothing at all. A blank. An absence. A silence in the shape of a claim.

Then the draft died, and the dust settled, and the pattern was gone.

Eadwig stood with his back to the northern wall and his chisel gripped in fingers that had gone cold despite the climbing sun. The runes' murmur faded to a whisper, then to nothing. The chamber was just a chamber again, roofless and ruined, full of broken stone and the slow creep of daylight.

He did not move for a long moment. His mind was working, turning over what he had seen, trying to fit it into the framework of the histories he knew. The dragons were slain. The empire had killed them. That was the story. That was what everyone believed. But the dream placed dragons above a buried city, and the runes placed a buried city beneath the plains, and the dust had just shown him a pattern that matched both. The histories said one thing. The ruins said another. And Eadwig, who had made his living from what the ruins chose to reveal, knew which of the two he trusted less.

He sheathed the chisel. The copper in his pouch was enough for a morning's work, and the sun was high

enough now that the inner passages would be warming, their stones expanding, their ancient stresses shifting toward the day's first real risk of collapse. He had planned to go deeper. The brief had mentioned an inner passage, unstable but passable, and he had thought to explore it before the heat of the day made the stone treacherous. But the draft and the dust had changed something in the air of the place, and he found that he did not want to go deeper. Not yet. Not without understanding more than he did.

He turned toward the ruin's inner passage anyway. Not because he had decided to enter. Because he wanted to see it. To mark it. To know where it led so that when he came back, and he would come back, he would not waste time finding his way.

The passage opened at the chamber's western end, a low archway half-choked with rubble. Beyond it, the darkness was absolute. No light reached that far. No wind moved. But the air that spilled from the opening was warmer than the air in the chamber, and it carried the same smell the draft had carried. Damp stone. Old metal. The faint sweet trace of something long dead.

Eadwig stood at the threshold and looked into the dark. His hand rested on the slate at his belt. The copy he had made was still there, the chalk lines sharp and clear. The city. The towers. The boundary. The emblems he had chosen not to record. He had half the inscription. The other half was still on the wall, waiting for

someone to read it. Waiting for someone to answer.

A sharp stone caught his palm.

He looked down. A shard of black glass, no longer than his thumb, had lodged in the meat of his hand just below the first knuckle. He had not felt it happen. He must have put his hand out to steady himself against the archway, and the stone had been waiting, sharp as a blade, patient as a trap. Blood welled up around the shard, dark against his weathered skin, and began to drip onto the rubble at his feet.

He pulled the shard free with a single motion and pressed his other thumb against the wound. The pain was bright and clean, the sort of pain that focused the mind rather than clouding it. He tore a strip from the rag he kept tucked in his belt pouch and wrapped it around his palm, pulling the knot tight with his teeth. The bleeding slowed. The rag darkened. He would need to clean the wound properly before nightfall, but it would hold.

Then he heard it. Deep in the passage. A grinding sound, low and sustained, the sound of masonry shifting against masonry under a weight it had borne for centuries and was only now beginning to question. Dust sifted down from the archway. A pebble rattled loose and bounced across the chamber floor.

Eadwig stepped back. The grinding continued for three heartbeats, four, five, and then stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The silence that followed was

worse than the sound. It was a waiting silence. A silence that promised the next shift would be larger.

He turned from the passage and walked back across the chamber, past the panel with its city and its boundary and its ruler emblems, past the crack in the floor where the dust had risen and shown him a pattern he could not explain, past the eastern breach and out onto the Obsidian Plains where the sun was high now and the black stone threw the light back at the sky in sharp white glints. His hand throbbed under its wrapping. His slate bumped against his thigh with every step. The dream was still there, lodged somewhere behind his ribs, and so was the question the runes had asked without asking.

He did not answer it. He walked east, toward the next ruin and the next morning and whatever the plains would offer him, and he did not look back.