

The Gift of Ruin Prologue

The Elemental Era Book One

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Chapter One



Prologue

The Siege on Serif—Year 8980 E.A.

A FIRM PRESS OF my boot dislodged the broadsword from the youth's chest, leaving a gaping wound in its place. Blood seeped down his front into the grass, staining it a gruesome crimson. I turned around, barely hearing the thud his body made.

Nearby, Samuel was fighting a man twice his size while Eliza circled above, scorching everything in sight. The battle raged loudly, with soldiers covered in mud, blood, waste, and ash. A disturbing symphony of screams and colliding metal emerged, drowning out all other sounds.

Three men approached from the left and closed in around me, a glimmer of fear in their eyes. These weren't soldiers; they were farmers, tradesmen, and some Ciphers.

I dove quickly for the one in the middle, landing a kick to his right side and breaking his ribs. I killed him by pushing my right palm upward against his nose, breaking the bridge as I jabbed him in the abdomen with my sword. Blood splattered on my face; the taste of iron slipped down my throat. The other men looked at me in fear as they quickly surmised who they had encountered.

I removed my sword to deal with the other two, but they ran away from the battle in opposite directions. “Shit,” I whispered to myself as I took off after them into town.

This small town was just like any other in the east, near the mountains. The brick houses were built one on top of the other, with small alleys between the dangerously leaning structures.

I chose one of the men to chase. He drew me closer to the city’s center and into a residential portion. We dashed left and right between houses and buildings, through alleys and yards. Finally running into an alley, I realized he was cornered in a dead end.

“You think you’ve won.” The man spat on the floor before me, gasping for air. “We know all about you and your emperor, and would rather burn to the ground than join the bloodshed.”

I sheathed my sword, looking him in the eyes. He was a short man with long, dark hair and striking green eyes. “Let me guess: You’re the regent, mayor, or whatever your village calls a leader?”

His chest puffed with pride while I looked at him in the queerest way. “What does it matter to you?” he asked gruffly.

“I find you interesting; you choose to fight like a mere Cipher when I can feel power coursing through you. What is your name? What element do you wield? There could be a future for a man like you by my side.”

“My name is Vanne Letham, and I would rather die than surrender to you.”

“Now, now. Letham, you say? Why are you so desperate to die?” Calmness laced my tone. He was resolute yet stalling—as was I; our location was no coincidence. I looked around, taking in my surroundings. The alley was three buildings deep, lined with windows and balconies on either side, and wide enough for an ambush to occur. A red brick wall stood behind the one called Vanne.

The first sting came from my right shoulder, then my left flank. Darts. I pulled one out, trying to inspect it. Simple yet effective, full of poison, with dull gray feathers on the ends. Smart but pointless. “How many of your people are inside waiting to attack me?” The sting turned into pain rapidly. “I am giving you the choice; only you can decide if they live or die. Now tell me what I want to know.” I tossed the dart to him.

“You’re in no position to negotiate, General,” he spat. “You are surrounded, and the poison in your body will soon render you useless.”

I could feel my right fingertips starting to tingle and lose sensation. “I grow bored of our exchange, Vanne. There are ten windows leading to this alley. How many are hiding on both sides? Maybe fifteen or twenty more people?”

“You are as thorough and strategic as the rumors say,” he said with no discernible change in his tone.

To my left I heard a light exhale, and I stepped out of the blow-gun’s way as the dart whizzed past me. This village had proven itself well-prepared and full of stubborn citizens. “Care to negotiate yet? Or are you still bent on dying and killing your people?” I asked as the man glanced at three windows, giving away his soldiers in response to my questions. “Fine, old man, have it your way.”

The first window was three stories above me to the left. Darts kept landing on the wall around me as I lunged toward a balcony on the second floor. I pulled myself up through the window, landing inside with a roll to avoid the sword coming straight at me. Getting to my feet, I looked at the trembling youth standing before me, who dropped the sword and began to cry.

It was all over quickly: a knife to the throat, and the body thrown into the alley below. The loud cracks of bones breaking were fol-

lowed by a thunderous growl, stifling the screams of the occupants as the warmth of dragon fire spread through the opposite building. I needed to move, get to Ronan for an antidote. My right arm was now useless and dangling at my side, and my left side seared with pain from my thigh, causing me to stumble with every step.

Taking deep breaths, I left the small room and ventured inside the building, down hallways and flights of stairs, defending myself from anyone in my way. Each movement caused more pain than the one before. Pushing through the front door, I turned a sharp left, but the man named Vanne was nowhere to be found.

I saw movement out of the corner of my right eye and drew my sword, ready to attack again, my breath ragged.

“General, there you are. We have been looking everywhere for you.” Samuel’s voice was a reprieve from the pain now consuming my left leg and abdomen.

“What is the status of the city?” I asked.

“We have taken all outposts, and Eliza is holding all the surviving soldiers and villagers in the town square with the dragons and our troops. However, all the surviving dragon riders have flown away. We sent some of our own in pursuit.”

“Great, I need to get to Ronan now,” I said as Samuel and I walked briskly between run-down buildings. Some were in ruins before we had arrived; Aegore, Melody, or Ronan had burned or rammed others down to mounds of bricks.

“Déjà vu, huh?” Samuel said as screams came from the town center.

I nodded in agreement; every town, every city, every settlement we encountered suffered the same fate.

We stepped out from a side street, and while Sam whistled for Aegore, I walked over to Ronan. He stood proudly in the center of

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the town, his black claws gripping the ruins of a building next to Melody and Eliza.

“Good work,” I said, turning to Eliza. She just smiled and nodded. I put my foot in the stirrup and lifted myself with my left arm onto Ronan’s saddle, then grabbed an antidote from the side holster and downed it in one gulp. “Samuel, survey the adults for loyalty and elemental powers for conscription. Take all children under thirteen to the Citadel for elemental testing. Kill who you must, and do it quickly,” I added as Aegore landed, crushing an entire tavern beneath her weight.

Samuel nodded as the crowd began screaming in panic, mothers holding onto their children, men begging. No warriors, just simple men and women trying to protect their families. Déjà vu, indeed. Another city, another battle, families torn apart, and more deaths.

I pressed my heels into Ronan’s sides, and we took off, leaving my lieutenants to carry out the emperor’s orders. The cold breeze on my face was refreshing and a sense of calm washed over me as the screams behind us faded to faint whispers in the wind.

Chapter Two



Year 9005

“A Very Brief History of Alaria”- By S. Quinnspyre

IT HAD BEEN APPROXIMATELY thirty years since the emperor and our forces had began the war, taken over the entire continent of Alaria, and changed the course of our world. Some called it a revolution, while others a coup d'état. It didn't matter what anyone believed; the truth was absolute and dictated by Emperor Alastair, and nothing else could be publicly entertained. He saved Alaria from the tyrant king and gave the people a voice that had been silenced for millennia.

The moment the king was executed, the world changed. It was a radical, bloody, and messy revolution that shook the foundation of long-held beliefs and shattered social norms. Regular humans were now called Ciphers, and those with magical powers were dubbed Elementals. Dragon riders, known for their long lifespans and powerful magic, reigned supreme over all others.

The early years combined guerrilla warfare and invasions of outer municipalities. For twenty years, battles were fought on all fronts as nobles clung to their lands with an iron grip. Elementals, Ciphers, dragons, and more creatures than I can remember died

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unnecessarily because of power-hungry, entitled bureaucrats and misplaced loyalties. Many lived in opulent excess at the expense of vast numbers of people. All feudal titles were contested, and the monarchy was brought to trial and execution. Most of the continent was subdued by the end of the first decade.

The most truthful account of the early years existed in only two places: palace archives and my personal journals. Every battle, drop of blood, and move was recorded in an entry. I became obsessed with reliving my battles to improve and constantly escape reality.

After my decisive victory in the Battle of Torrenth, I rose as the face of the revolution and was promoted to general for my services to the revolution. That was only the beginning of the bloodshed and birthing pains of a new world.

My face was plastered on posters across major cities as a hero, while in smaller towns, I appeared on wanted posters as a criminal.

I wore my pride and vitriol as if they were medals of honor on my uniform. This changed me, making me cruel, thoughtless, and extremely dangerous.

My name is General Sydney Quinnsprey. I sent the world plummeting into chaos and ushered in the Elemental Era.

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