

## CHAPTER ONE

### The General

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“Clear the room.”

“But, General, we haven’t yet—”

“Leave me,” General Bordan repeated. He did not look up from the parchment in his hand. It took every ounce of willpower not to crush the paper and the poisoned words which were written in a neat, tidy hand upon it.

Around the polished wooden table, the men and women of the General’s staff exchanged guarded looks.

“We’ll reconvene this evening,” Bordan repeated, choking down the sadness which tightened his throat and threatened to strangle his words. “Messenger, you stay.”

The staff stood, gathered their papers, and shuffled from the room. No one spoke. Bordan calmed his heart and schooled his features into the mask of a professional soldier, someone who had sent hundreds to their deaths and would do so again.

“You’ve done the Empire a sacred service,” Bordan said, scraping the wooden chair across the stone and standing as the door closed.

“Legion Arcterus commanded me to make best speed from the front lines and deliver the message to you alone, General,” the messenger said. “He would not trust it to the magicians.”

“And you’ve carried those orders out?”

“Yes, General.” The messenger nodded. “I have spoken to no one of my mission.”

“Not at any of the inns or way stations?” Bordan cast the messenger a glance and hooked his free hand into his belt.

“No, sir,” the messenger said, a proud smile breaking across his face.

“You know the contents of the message?” Bordan asked.

“I was in the camp, General,” the messenger said, his eyes focusing on the past. Bordan watched as a glassy sadness crept into them.

“And how fares the army?”

“It was a shock, General,” the messenger said, his gaze returning to the present.

“I’m sure it was,” Bordan replied, his own voice thick and the words catching in his throat. “How was the journey?”

“The weather held, and no one questions an Imperial Messenger on the roads.”

“Excellent,” Bordan answered with a smile, and stepping forward, drove his pugio deep into the messenger’s heart.

The man’s eyes widened in shock and with a cough of blood he slipped to the floor. His hand trailed along Bordan’s arm from shoulder to wrist before his fingers lost their strength and the light faded from his brown eyes.

General Bordan, most excellent leader of the Empire’s army, sighed and stepped over the body. Pausing, he retrieved a square of cloth from inside his tunic and wiped the

blood from his hand and the blade of his dagger. Taking a deep breath and holding it to calm the racing of his heart, he opened the thick wooden door.

The guards to either side snapped to attention, spear tips pointing to the ceiling and their gazes fixed upon the painted wall opposite.

“The messenger has taken ill,” Bordan said. “See to his comfort.”

“Yes, General,” the guard on the right said without inflection.

Both guards were *Immunis*, specialised troops whom he had selected personally from amongst the ranks of soldiers and paid double. They were loyal and trustworthy.

“Ensure it is done with the minimum of fuss,” Bordan added, stepping past them.

“Of course, General,” the guard replied.

The long corridor was decorated with plaster painted with squares of vivid orange and red, a reminder of the setting and rising sun which encompassed the reach of the Empire, and the flame which warmed them all with life. Between each square, a small alcove in which the stern but benevolent bust of a past Emperor looked out upon all who walked the military corridor of the palace: a line stretching from the founder of the Empire to the latest Emperor. They had overseen centuries of prosperity, of wealth, and a culture the likes of which the world had never seen.

As Bordan passed the first bust his posture straightened, his spine unbent, and his shoulders broadened. This is what it meant to be the General of the Empire’s Army. To defend all that it was from any threat, external or internal; to maintain and expand its borders, and bring all under one banner – no matter what the means, methods, or costs. The years fell away, but the stone of sadness remained heavy in his chest.

He stopped at the most recent bust, that of the current Emperor, and spent a moment inspecting the carved face, letting the memories of the man’s life swell in him. Below this bust, as with all, a small flame flickered at the end of an oiled wick. A representation of their Flame, of their ever-lasting life: it held a promise and reassurance. Yet today, he felt neither reassured or the promise of a brighter future.

Doors of iron-studded wood sourced from lands which had once been outside the Empire, and constructed over two hundred years ago, opened out onto the courtyard of the palace. A great square of hard-packed grit and sand where soldiers paraded and Shields, the lowest of the officer ranks, shouted and screamed at their small units.

“Atten-tion!” A loud voice echoed around the square and every soldier snapped to attention.

Bordan, the warmth of the sun taking the chill from his blood, nodded to the officer who had spotted him as he stepped from the shadows of the doorway. She saluted and Bordan returned the gesture.

“Carry on, Cohort,” Bordan said, his words carrying clear across the square without strain. A practised voice from the pit of his stomach, not used often in the past twenty years, but he was glad he had not lost the knack. Another day, another victory over age.

“Resume march,” the Cohort shouted.

Keeping to the covered walkway which surrounded the square, Bordan ignored the sight of the soldiers drilling and forced his mind to consider his next words. They must be chosen with care, sympathetic but professional. Now was not the time to panic. Plans must be made. Cool heads must prevail.

In his mind the words spiralled and twisted in a sombre dance, but its rhythm and steps escaped him. He tore sentences apart and forged them anew. Formal gave way to informal and a moment later reasserted itself. These few words would be spoken to people he had known and cared about for more than three decades – a fact which made the task harder, not easier.

Passing through the palace towards his destination he did not see the stares directed at him, the puzzled looks, the salutes, or the servants scuttling out of his path. At the final door he paused, offering a simple prayer that the past could look after itself if he, with enough thought and planning, could control the future. The words settled into his mind, a thousand seeds drifting to the soil where the sentence would grow and flower.

“General,” the guard said, “the family is at lunch.”

“I’m sad to say I must disturb them, though I wish it were not so,” Bordan said.

“Of course, General,” the guard answered without emotion. His part had been played: he had challenged the need for the meeting and his superior had spoken. No blame could fall upon him.

“Ensure we are not disturbed,” Bordan said.

“Yes, General.” The guard knocked three times on the door and swung it open. He called into the shadowed interior of the rooms beyond, “General Bordan requests entrance.”

“The General is always welcome,” came the quiet reply.

“Thank you,” General Bordan said, favouring the guard with a nod.

Stepping through the door, Bordan caught sight of the second guard inside as they slipped back into their dark hole. If he had not been announced and granted permission, the guard would have killed him – run him through with a sword without hesitation or care.

Conversation and a sudden eruption of high-pitched laughter sounded ahead. The scent of spice caught his nose and tickled the back of his throat before the aroma of cooked meat brought a hot wash of saliva to his mouth. Breakfast seemed a long time ago, though he had thought his appetite had been driven away by the messenger’s note.

Turning the final corner, Bordan found the source of laughter surrounding a long dining table laden down with food from every part of the Empire. Roast fowl, steam rising from its crispy brown skin, competed with haunches of beef swimming in rich gravy. Sizzling dishes of thinly sliced meat bubbled away next to bowls of pasta drowned in a deep red sauce. Bread – long and thin, thick and dotted with seeds, or twisted into convoluted shapes – rested on large silver plates. Shrimps, prawns, lobsters, and fish decorated a large serving bowl embossed with the dream of the coast.

The imperial family and their guests sat either side of the table, though the chair at its head was empty. Next to the empty chair sat the woman he had come to see and, close by, her son and daughter. All heads turned as his heels clacked on the tessellated floor.

“General,” called the Emperor’s son. “If we’d known you were hungry, we would have invited you to our small lunch.”

“My Prince, I would have been honoured to attend, but my duties did not permit such an honour to befall me,” Bordan replied, focusing on keeping his tone neutral and his face calm, while behind it his mind raced and his heart beat loud enough that he was sure everyone could hear. It would do no good to betray the news to this gathering. Every noble, every power-hungry parasite and schemer who sat at this table with the imperial family had cause to hate the General, and many more would soon join that number, he mused.

“Yet here you are,” the Empress said, her voice smooth with long practice.

“Indeed, Your Highness,” he nodded. “I was unaware you were entertaining.”

“You have something for us,” the Princess, a young woman with golden hair caught in curls upon her head, said a smile of welcome upon her face.

“Yes, Princess,” Bordan agreed. “Though it can wait until you have finished.”

“Perhaps the General would like to pull up a stool,” Duke Abra offered, looking not at Bordan but at the Empress whom he sat next to.

“General?” the Empress enquired.

“That is kind of the Duke to offer me a seat at your table, Empress.” Bordan stressed the words, ensuring the Duke knew he was aware of the implied insult. Only peasants and the lower ranks sat on stools. “However, I would not interrupt. I will await your pleasure, Empress, in the Emperor’s study.”

“It must be important to bring you from your duties,” Abra said.

Bordan noted the tightening around the Empress’s eyes and the stares of her two children.

“This is my duty, Duke Abra,” Bordan answered stiffly. Transferring his gaze from the hard eyes of Abra, Bordan looked to his Empress. “With your permission, Your Highness.”

“You have it, General. Please make sure the servants provide you with a drink. I do not think this meal will last much longer,” the Empress answered, her face resuming its mask. “My appetite has quite suddenly fled.”

Bordan covered his half-smile with a bow in her direction as a hush fell over the table. A smart turn and he retreated to a room close by, one he knew well, settling into a familiar chair and accepting the glass of wine offered by the servant.

He was satisfied when his hand did not shake.