

SUCCESSION

◀ *Quest of Fire* ▶

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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either fictional or historical, is purely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to the glory of God, without Whom there would be no words worth reading and with Whom the darkest paths can be trod with courage.

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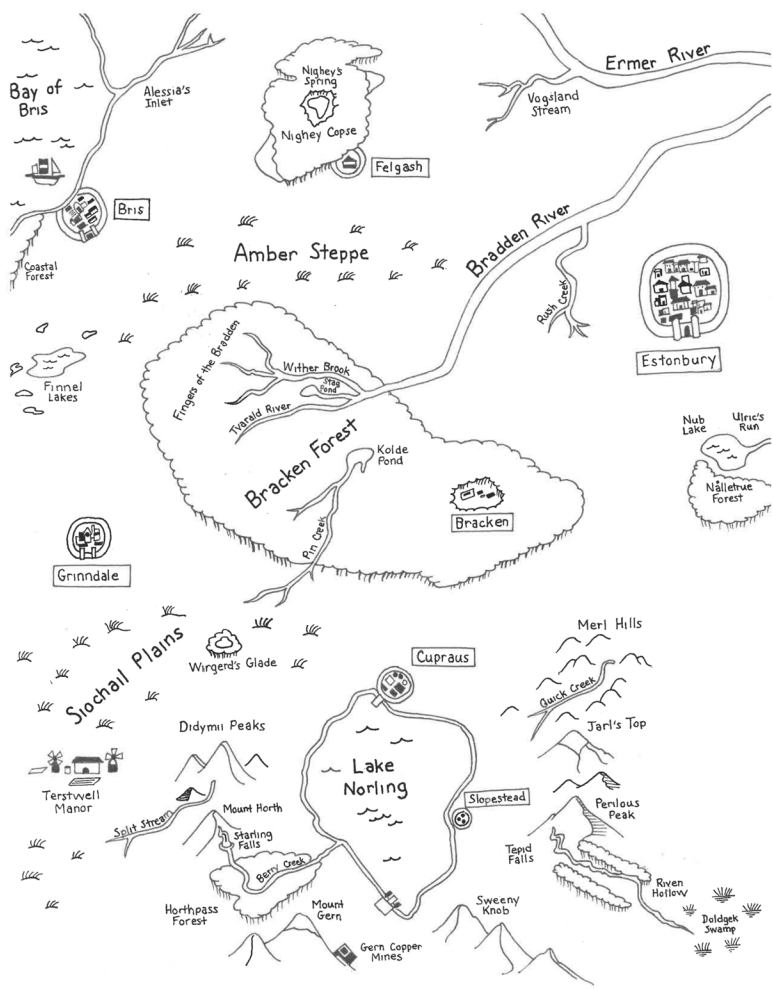
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Northwestern Lowlands





PART I

OLD WOUNDS



Year 1557 of the Middle Era

“I have a bad feeling about this, Father.” Meredoch felt a scowl contorting his face.

“I’ll bear that in mind. But you really mustn’t fret. You’re only twelve, so I’m sure this is frightful, but it has been decades since any serious tensions came between the Ords and Ecthels.”

His father seemed to sigh for two when Meredoch didn’t brighten. Hollowed into Mount Fiorsruthain’s side, the narrow room had an annoying echo.

Meredoch’s father crossed to stand nearer him. The room was almost too small for the man to rise to his full height. Wearing his most ornate armor, it barely contained him at all. Scents of cinnamon apples from his mother’s cooking in the next room only added to Meredoch’s discomfort. Their home, one of the more luxurious in the city of Ordumair, offered no place for Meredoch to escape this conversation or its dread.

“Then why do they need you to negotiate for them?” Meredoch fussed with the wool sheets on his bed. A tuft of straw stuck out, and he tucked it back under. He stared up at his father.

If the large man smiled, it was lost in the tangle of his bushy beard. His voice resonated with his continued amusement. “I arbitrate. As Defender of the Realm, I’m impartial and responsible for the peace of all the northlands.”

Meredoch crossed his arms over his chest and slumped against the wall of his room. This had all been explained to him before. Except this time involved real danger. Everyone in Ordumair was talking of open war.

Sir Augustine MacCowell rubbed his son’s head, mussing his dark, shaggy hair. “You know lad, I have been doing this for quite some time now. Long before you were born, in fact.”

“I don’t know how you made it this long,” Meredoch snapped.

A fit of laughter seized Augustine. Meredoch was even more annoyed. His father should be austere and thoughtful like his best friend Duncoin’s father. Not laughing and making light of this. *Who is the child here, anyway?*

Augustine grabbed the boy into his arms and gave him a squeeze. “Well then, thank the Great King, I have you now.”

Meredoch wrestled free and tried to keep up his stern front, but it was faltering. His hand slid along the bed and gripped his pillow, ready to strike a sneaky blow.

Rapping on his room’s heavy oak door intruded. Though his father tried to mask it, Meredoch could see a somberness come over him.

“Yes?” the older MacCowell answered.

The door opened and Meredoch’s mother, Lynna, strode in with two of the Thane Denhard’s honor guard. “Augustine, they’re ready,” Lynna announced, her eyes on her son.

“Very well, then.” Augustine strode towards the door. Before reaching it, he turned back to Meredoch. “Lad, look after your mother and sister till I return.”

“Yes, sir,” Meredoch answered, eager and reluctant in one. A tear stung in his eye, but he willed it not to fall. When that failed, he turned his gaze to the wall by his bed.

Through shadows on his wall, he saw Sir Augustine nod and walk out with the two guards. Meredoch’s mother stood halfway between the door and himself. Unable to help it, he swiped away the stubborn tear and looked at her. She wore a mothering look, as though she understood every bit of his anxiety about this meeting. But she couldn’t know about the dreams, even if her expression held a shadow of his dread.

Meredoch’s sister, Lydia, stirred at their mother’s side, tugging on her dress.

Taking one of the young girl’s hands, Lynna left the room. The remaining guards followed.

Meredoch sat on his bed, alone, staring at the huge grey stones forming the wall of his room. He gnawed at his lip, considering his windowless wall. Its thick stone kept him safe, wrapped securely in the arms of a mountain clothed in an imposing fortress. Safe, but blind.

Outside those walls, horse hooves pounded, and lines of warriors in gleaming armor marched. Trumpets announced the gallant rulers and all the regal airs demanded by the hour. Something else existed beyond the wall. Meredoch’s gaze roved to a shelf on the far wall of the room. There his book of Ord history lay, fresh opened. If he hadn’t been so eager for a childish game, he could have reminded his father what he read. What the Ecthels are in truth. “Traitors. Murderers. Monsters,” he muttered and slung his pillow against the wall.

Not the kind that hid under a bed or scampered in the woods on full moon nights, but real monsters. The sort who

killed for what they wanted and never found their want satisfied. Meredoch knew no force in the world could hurt him here. Save for his heart, which went with his father—out of the city, the fortress, and the mountain’s hold, to reason with the unreasonable and tame a beast no Knight of Light or Ord had in over 300 years.

With a huff, Meredoch lay down on his bed, hoping to sleep through the horrid wait ahead. He rolled first onto his left side, then rolled onto his back, then his right. He huffed again and got up. From his shelf, he retrieved a weighty old tome and, back on his bed, cracked it open. *Eachdraidh, Histories*. The stories of the Orderer people, Ords for short, from the Ancient Era till present. Everything one could hope to know about the Ords’ past was recorded here, including recent events, those chapters being freshly penned.

Huge, heavy, and thick with the scent of mold and memory, Meredoch had *liberated* it from the archives of the Ord’s court historian.

Though the same instructors had tutored him as the Thane’s son and the nobles of Ordumair, Meredoch wanted a fuller picture. The one from the source document itself. Looking over the scrawl of blockish characters, he had to focus. It was written in old Ord, something most Ords couldn’t read now. He whispered aloud the first words with their rolling, consonant heavy sounds. Things soon flowed for him, and he began with the first entries, “Confluence of the Painted Warriors.” A half-hour later, sleep claimed him, and once more, he found himself caught in a dream where his father stood at the head of the Ord armies, pushing their frontlines back. Augustine shouted, “Peace! There can be peace!” just before an Echthel sword ran him through from behind.



“MEREDOCHE, it’s time to get up,” a soothing voice called. His mother.

Meredoch mumbled, “Urfff,” and ignored her. Three nights had passed since his father left, and every night the dreams of his father’s demise tormented him.

His mother gave his uncovered arm a light shake. “Oh, my darling son, it’s time to get up.”

He didn’t budge, sure he could outlast her.

“Oh, my sweet darling baby boy, do you need Mommy to help you up?”

Eyes open at a slit, he took in his mother’s face. She smiled, but the tightness around her eyes let him know she wasn’t as merry as she sounded. Something was off.

Meredoch heard a snicker from farther away. He stiffened and bolted upright. His best friend Duncoin, son of Denhard and heir apparent to the throne of Ordumair, stood in the doorway. By the looks of the huge grin on his slight dwarf face, Duncoin found Lynna’s fawning hilarious.

Turning red, Meredith grumbled. His mother’s hands reached to grab him like a baby. He shooed them away. “Mother! Stop!”

Something akin to contentment shone in her eyes. Her small mouth quirked up in a smirk. “Oh, all right, darling little Merrydoch.”

She stepped back and walked out of the room. Meredith moaned after her, “Mother, please. I’m Meredith, not a child.” If Lynna heard, she gave no indication, not even looking back to receive Meredith’s fierce scowl.

For his part, thirteen-year-old Duncoin kept his amusement stowed away. Meredith shot him the withering look. Heir apparent or not, Meredith had a good head’s height over Duncoin. A quick scrap would resolve the merrymaking at his

expense. Pound for pound, in a fair fight, Duncoin would win. But Meredoch wasn't known for fighting fair, only for winning his share.

"Hale morning," Meredoch greeted and rolled out of bed.

"Hale, indeed," Duncoin replied, a ghost of his grin returning. "Forget about our sparring practice, did you?"

Meredoch's eyes widened. Both their fathers had set forth to neutral lands seeking the accord. No word had been sent back yet. Meredoch wondered how Duncoin could be so unconcerned about their fathers' fate. Then again, Meredoch was the one dreaming of death and sorrow. Foresight's specter sent a chill down Meredoch's back, and he shivered. From the way Duncoin's brow arched, his friend had noticed. He had to cover for it.

"How could I? You won't let me," Meredoch replied. Duncoin's expression told Meredoch he was not very successful. Quirking up his mouth in a smirk, he added, "I've never seen someone so eager to lose before."

To his relief, Duncoin took the baiting and spent the remainder of their trip through the fortress's wide, winding passageways boasting of how absolute his victory over Meredoch would be.

Duncoin was so absorbed in his jeers and bragging, he seemed oblivious to his friend's silence. Meredoch embraced the break from wearing a mask and thinking of the "right" things to say. He reminded himself the lack of word from the mediation wasn't unusual. Were it not for his dreams, he might have been able to relax.

"Hey, *Merrydoch*, is your head upon the summit?"

Glaring at Duncoin, Meredoch grumbled, "Doesn't it bother you, us stuck here while they're out there?"

"Who? Father and the soldiers?"

“Of course, them. They’re about to face those beasts, and if we were older, we could be there, being of some use.”

Duncoin stopped abruptly. “Instead of here, where we’re training to join them when we are ready?”

Meredoch realized they were standing before the doors of the elite academy, where nobles among the Ords trained in war and command. On either door, the silver inlay of two combatants crossing blades loomed over them. Within, a private ring reserved for the Thane and any he deemed worthy centered the room. Duncoin had the freedom to use it, though this was the first time he stretched that rule and allowed Meredoch to spar with him.

The structure spanned two levels of the city. If it stood in an average town, it would have towered over a small castle. Broader than most Ordumair structures, the academy was built high into an outthrust of rock and deep within the mountain.

“Closer to the mountain’s heart, the closer to glory,” Meredoch recited. He drew in a breath and smiled at his friend.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s a proverb from the originator of the fortress and city, Thane Lowdrar, the Mad.”

“Huh,” Duncoin huffed. “And where did you learn that? I’ve never read anything about it.”

Meredoch shrugged and focused his attention on the marble arcade that ran along either side of the doors. He gnawed his lip and hoped Duncoin didn’t press about the source. His having the history book was something of a secret. At least his father had instructed him to keep it so. He blurted out, “See the blue tiling of lapis lazuli? Only the most venerated sites in Ordumair use them. The academy must be treasured, at least by those wealthy and important enough to see it.”

Duncoin rolled his eyes. “Right, if you’re done telling me all about my own people, perhaps we can go inside.”

Despite his eagerness, Meredoch hesitated. “All the Thanes and Ord nobility since the fortress’s construction trained for battle here. I’m not sure I’m allowed.”

Duncoin slugged him in the arm. “Do no’ worry. You are with me,” the proud Ord reassured.

“I’m only worried about what they’ll do when I totally disgrace you in our match.” Meredoch jibed back, giving Duncoin a shove.

The doors swung open. A burly Ord with chestnut hair cut short and a beard down to his waist exited. The man’s eyes narrowed at Meredoch, whose hands hung in the air from the playful shove. He quickly dropped them.

The Ord grunted. He turned toward Duncoin and gave a nod. “Your honor.”

“Hale morning to you, Elder Ulster.”

“Hale morning, indeed,” he grumbled. “A haler morning, perhaps if we were both out on the lines facing our Ecthel foes instead of wringing our hands here while these Knights play parlay.”

Meredoch swallowed and dropped his gaze. Ulster was only five or so inches taller than him but loomed over him like a giant.

“I’m sure my father only wishes the safety and hale of all,” Meredoch replied, his gaze still down, and his voice not much more than a whisper.

Ulster bristled like a cat arching its back before hissing. His words were much harder than a hiss. “Your Order is strangling us. We are warriors, conquerors. Your father is as much an enemy to us as those blighted green fiends!”

“That’s enough,” Duncoin spoke up, his voice just as stony. “You forget my father is a Knight of Light himself, as are most

of the elders on the Council. Prudence might be your best recourse right now.”

Meredoch shot an appreciative glance at Duncoin. His friend’s studies and grooming as his father’s successor showed.

Ulster’s sneer let Meredoch know he wasn’t impressed. He turned to face Duncoin squarely and battered Meredoch with a broad shoulder as he did. Ulster’s voice dropped an octave. “You presume much, young Duncoin. There are many lessons left before you can speak of such weighty matters with the Elders.”

Duncoin swallowed, unable to hide his nervousness. Meredoch watched in silence. He locked his gaze on Ulster’s dark eyes. The older man turned, again bumping Meredoch aside, and strode away.

Both boys let out shaky breaths. “Thanks,” Meredoch said. He attempted to smile but failed. “My father wouldn’t be pleased to know I’ve crossed the noble left as the reagent of Ordumair in the Thane’s absence.” Meredoch’s father was Defender of the Northern Realm, the senior-most Knight in four countries—Albaron, Ordumair, Vogteremark, and Knorland. The territory spanned thousands of miles. Even so, the title had limits. “I know our being here isn’t as welcome as in days past.”

“You are the only non-Ords permitted to live in Ordumair,” Duncoin affirmed. “But it’s not you. He’s trouble,” he added, his voice low. “My father told me Ulster has been pushing the limits of the Council’s powers. When I’m Thane, I know precisely where I’ll stuff his lousy carcass.”

Chuckling, Meredoch jabbed Duncoin. “Your father isn’t the only Knight of Light. We aren’t to speak so of others.” Though secretly, Meredoch felt Elder Ulster might qualify as an exception.

Duncoin looked around and nodded. “You’re right. We better get inside so I can crush you before lunch.”

Meredoch frowned. There was something off about Duncoin just then, but he couldn’t place it. Nor did he want to. “Okay. Everyone is entitled to fantasies.”

Duncoin snorted, and the two laughed, and for the moment, put the encounter with Ulster behind them.