

## CHAPTER 1

# ENEMY OLD, ENEMY NEW

A SIMPLE SPELL BROUGHT him unnoticed past the guards, out from the main gates of the greatest city in all of Avonseas, mighty Carlisle on Stratton. Under cover of a moonless night, the man rushed along, fighting the rebellion, the inner turmoil, of his other self, the impatience of a being too long imprisoned.

“Now!” implored a silent call within him, the willpower of Dansalignatious. “Now.”

Greensparrow growled. “Not yet, you fool,” he warned, for he knew the risks of this journey, knew that to reveal himself to the Avonese populace, to show his subjects who and what he truly was, would surely overwhelm them. Dansalignatious, the other half of this man who was king, didn’t agree, had never agreed, through all the years of Greensparrow’s reign, through all the centuries before that since the time when the two, wizard and familiar being, had become one. To Dansalignatious, the revelation would only make them grovel all the more, would make Greensparrow greater in their eyes, would even cow the kings of neighboring countries into paying homage to the ultimate power that was Avon.

But then, Greensparrow reasoned, Dansalignatious would think that way; it was the way of his kind!

Through the fields the king ran, his feet hastened by a simple enchantment. Past the outlying farms, past the small huts where single candles behind windows showed that the folk were still awake. He felt a tug on his spine, an itch across his powdered skin.

“Not yet,” Greensparrow implored Dansalignatious, but it was too late. The beast could no longer be contained. Greensparrow tried to run on, but a painful crack in his leg sent him sprawling in the thick grass. Then he was crawling, inching his way over a ridge, to roll down into the shelter of a grassy hollow.

His screams brought the farmers of three nearby cottages to their windows, peering out cautiously into the dark night. One man took up his

ancient family sword, a rusted old thing, and dared to go out, moving slowly toward the continuing sound.

He had never heard such torment, such agony! It came from ahead, on the other side of a grassy bluff.

But then it quieted, suddenly, and the farmer thought that the man must have been killed.

Only then did he realize his own foolishness. Something behind that hill had apparently just murdered a man. What made him, a simple farmer with no experience or training with the sword, think that he would fare any better? Slowly, he began to back away.

Then he stopped, stricken.

A huge horned head lifted out of the shallow, rising, rising, ten feet, twenty feet above him. Lamplight orbs, yellow-green in color, reptilian in appearance, locked on to the man, showed him his doom.

The farmer's breath came in labored gasps. He wanted desperately to turn and run, but the sheer magnificence of the beast held him fast. Up came the dragon to the top of the bluff, great claws rending the earth as it moved, its wide-spread wings and tremendous bulk, eighty feet from horned head to swishing tail, blotting out the night sky.

"It feels good, Greensparrow," the beast said suddenly.

"Do not speak that name!" the beast then said, in the same thunderous voice, but with a different tone altogether.

"Greensparrow?" the farmer managed to whisper, confused, overwhelmed.

"Greensparrow!" insisted the dragon. "Do you not know your king? On your knees!"

The sheer power of the voice knocked the trembling farmer over. He scrambled to his knees, bowing his head before this most awful of creatures.

"You see?" asked the part that was Dansallignatious. "They fear me, worship me!"

The words were barely out before the dragon's face twisted weirdly. The voice that signified Dansallignatious started to protest, but the words were blasted away as a huge gout of fire burst forth from the dragon's mouth.

The blackened corpse beside the melted sword was not recognizable.

Dansallignatious shrieked, outraged that his fun with the peasant had been cut short, but Greensparrow willed himself into flight then and the sheer freedom of the cool night air flowing over leathery wings brought such joy and exhilaration to the dragon king that all arguments seemed petty.

A crowd of farmers gathered about the side of the bluff the next day, staring at the scorched grass and the blackened corpse. The Praetorian Guards were called in, but, as was usually the case where the brutish, unsympathetic cyclopians were involved, they were of little help. Reports of the incident would go back to Carlisle, they promised, snickering as they watched the dead man's grieving family.

More than one of the folk gathered claimed to have seen a great winged beast flying about on the previous night; that, too, would be told in Carlisle.

Greensparrow, comfortably back in the slender, almost effeminate form that his subjects had come to know so well, the dark side of him that was Dansallignatious appeased by the night of freedom, dismissed the reports as the overactive imaginations of simple peasants.

"To be sure, even the fishing is better these days!" howled an exuberant Shamus McConroy, first hand on *The Skipper*, a fishing boat out of the village of Gybi, the north port of Bae Colthwyn on Eriador's windswept northeastern shore. So named for its tendency to leap headlong through the high breakers, half-clear of the water, *The Skipper* was among the most highly regarded vessels of Bae Colthwyn's considerable fishing fleet. She was a thirty-footer, wide and with one square sail, and a crew of eight, salty old seadogs all, with not a hair among them that wasn't turning to gray.

Old Captain Aran Toomes liked it that way, and steadfastly refused to train a younger replacement crew. "Got no time for puppies," the crusty captain grumbled whenever someone remarked that his boat was a doomed thing—"mortal as a man" was the saying. Toomes always accepted the ribbing with a knowing snarl. In Bae Colthwyn, on the Dorsal Sea, where the great killer whales roamed in huge packs and the weather turned ugly without warning, fishermen left widows behind, and more "puppies" drowned than reached manhood. Thus, the crew of *The Skipper* was a reckless bunch of bachelors, hard drinkers and hard riders, challenging the mighty Dorsal Sea as though God above had put the waves in their path as a personal challenge. Day after day, she went out farther and faster than any other boat in the fishing fleet.

So it was this midsummer day, *The Skipper* running the breakers, sails full and straining. The weather seemed to shift every hour, from sunny bright to overcast, that curious mixture on the open water where a body was never quite comfortable, was always too hot or too cold. Younger, less experienced sailors would have spent a fair amount of time at the rail, bidding farewell to their morning meal, but *The Skipper's* crew,

more at home on the water than on land, took the dramatic changes in bowlegged stride.

And their spirits were higher than normal this fine day, for their land, beloved Eriador, was free once more. Prodded by a rebel army that had pushed all the way to the Avon city of Princetown, King Greensparrow of Avon had let Eriador out of his grasp, relinquishing the land to the people of Eriador. The old wizard Brind'Amour, a man of Eriadoran stock, had been crowned king in Caer MacDonald as the season had turned to summer. Not that life would be much different for the fisherfolk of Bae Colthwyn—except of course that they would no longer have to deal with cyclopan tax bands. King Greensparrow's influence had never really carried that much weight in the rugged land of northeastern Eriador, and not one in fifty of the people along the bay had ever gone further south than Mennichen Dee on the northern edges of the Fields of Eradoch.

Only the folk of southern Eriador, along the foothills of the Iron Cross mountain range, where Greensparrow's tyranny was felt in force, would likely see any dramatic difference in their day-to-day existence, but that wasn't the point of it all. Eriador was free, and that cry of independence echoed throughout the land, from the Iron Cross to Glen Albyn, to the pinelands of the northeast and the splashing, rocky shoreline of Bae Colthwyn, to the three northern isles, Marvis, Caryth, and giant Bedwydrin. Simple hope, that most necessary ingredient of happiness, had come to the wild land, personified by a king that few north of MacDonald's Swath would ever glimpse, and by a legend come to life called the Crimson Shadow.

When the news of their freedom had come to the bay, the fleet had put out, the fishermen singing and dancing on the decks as though they honestly expected the waters to be fuller with fish, as though they expected the dorsal whales to turn and flee at the mere sight of a boat flying under the flag of Eriador old, as though they expected the storms to blow less fierce, as though Nature herself should bow down to the new king of Eriador.

What a wonderful thing is hope, and to all who saw her this season, and especially to the men who crewed her, it seemed as if *The Skipper* leaped a little higher and ran the dark waters a little faster.

Early that morning, Shamus McConroy spotted the first whale, its black dorsal fin standing higher than a tall man, cutting the water barely fifty feet off their starboard bow. With typical abandon, the eight seadogs hurled taunts and whisky bottles the great whale's way, challenging and cursing, and when that fin slipped under the dark water, mov-

ing away from the boat, they gave a hearty cheer and paid it no more heed. The least experienced of them had spent thirty years on the water, and their fear of the whales was long since gone. They could read the dangerous animals, knew when to taunt and when to turn, when to dump a haul of fish into the water as a diversion, and when, as a final stance, to take up their long, pointed gaff hooks.

Soon after, all signs of land long gone, Aran Toomes put the morning sun over his right shoulder, running *The Skipper* southeast toward the mouth of the straits between Eriador and the Five Sentinels, a line of brooding islands, more stone than turf. Toomes meant to keep his boat out for the better part of a week, putting a hundred miles a day behind him. His course would take him out to the north of Colonse, the largest and northernmost of the Five Sentinels, and then back again to the bay. The water was colder out there, the old captain knew, just the way the cod and mackerel liked it. The other boats of Bae Colthwyn's fleet knew it, too, but few had the daring of *The Skipper*, or the confidence and sea know-how of Aran Toomes.

Toomes kept his course true for three days, until the tips of Colonse's steep mountains were in sight. Then he began his long, slow turn, a hundred-and-eighty-degree arc, bringing her around to the northwest. Behind him, working furiously, drinking furiously, and howling with glee, his seven crewmen hauled in side-nets and long lines loaded with fish: beautiful, shiny, smelly, flopping cod and mack, and even blues, nasty little predators who did nothing more than swim and bite, swim and bite, never stopping long enough to finish devouring whatever unfortunate fish had given them the mouthful. Shamus McConroy worked a belaying pin wildly, thunking blues on the head until those tooth-filled mouths stopped their incessant snapping. He got a nasty bite on the ankle, cutting him right through his hard boots, and responded by hoisting the ten-pound blue by the tail and whacking it repeatedly against the rail, to the hoots and cheers of the others.

For the seadogs, this was heaven.

*The Skipper* was lower in the water halfway through the turn, her hold nearly full. The crew went down to one line, two men working it, while the other five sorted through the load, pulling out smaller fish that were still alive and tossing them over, wanting to replace them with bigger specimens. It was all a game at this point, a challenge for fun, for a dozen smaller fish were just as valuable as the eight bigger ones that would fill their space in the hold, but the old sailors knew that the long days went faster when the hands were moving. Here they were, full of fish three

hundred miles from port, with little to do but keep the sail in shape and steer the damned boat.

“Ah, so we’re not the only boat with the gumption and heads to come out for a full hold,” Shamus remarked to Aran. Grinning at old Aran’s skeptical look, Shamus pointed to the northern horizon, where a darker speck had become evident within the line of bluish-gray.

“A pity we’ve not a bigger hold,” Aran replied lightheartedly. “We could have fished the waters clean before ever they arrived!” The crusty captain finished the statement by clapping the crewman hard on the back.

That brought a chuckle from Shamus.

*The Skipper* continued along its merry way, the weather crisp and clear, the sea high, but not choppy, and the fishing more for sport now than for business. It wasn’t until later that afternoon that Aran Toomes began to grow concerned. That speck on the horizon was much larger now, and, to the captain’s surprise, it showed no sail on its single, square-rigged mast; thus it was no fishing boat from Bae Colthwyn. It was moving, though, and swiftly, and it seemed to be angling to intercept *The Skipper*.

Toomes brought the fishing boat harder to port, turning more westerly.

A few moments later, the other boat corrected its course accordingly.

“What do you know?” Shamus asked as he came forward to join Toomes at the wheel.

“I don’t know,” Aran Toomes replied grimly. “That’s what’s got me to thinking.”

By now, the crew of *The Skipper* could see the froth at the side of the approaching vessel, a turbulence that could only mean a bank of great oars, pulling hard. In all the Dorsal Sea, only one race normally used boats that could be so oared, as well as sailed.

“Huegoths?” Shamus asked.

Aran Toomes couldn’t find the will to answer.

“What are they doing so far to the south and east?” Shamus asked rhetorically.

“We don’t know that they’re Huegoths!” Aran Toomes yelled at him.

Shamus went numb and silent, staring at Toomes. The captain, who could laugh at a dorsal whale, seemed truly unnerved by the thought that this approaching vessel might be a Huegoth longship.

“Huegoths be the only ones who run so swift with oars,” remarked another of the crew. The long line was forgotten now.

Aran Toomes chewed at his bottom lip, trying to find some answer.

"She runs with beauty," Shamus remarked, his gaze fixed on the longship. It was true enough; the design of the ships of Huegoth barbarians was nothing short of beautiful, finer than anything else on the northern seas. The graceful longships, seventy feet in length, were both solid and swift and cut the swells with hardly a ripple.

"Empty the hold," Aran Toomes decided.

The expressions of the other seven ranged from eager to incredulous. For several of the crewmen, this command seemed impossible, ridiculous. They had risked much in coming out this far to the southwest, so long from port, and those risks had been accepted precisely for the prize of fish in the hold. Now the captain wanted to throw away their catch?

But the other four men, including Shamus McConroy, who had dealt with savage Huegoths before, agreed wholeheartedly with the call. Laden with several tons of fish, *The Skipper* could not outrun the longship; even empty, they could only hope to keep ahead of the Huegoths long enough for the oarsmen to tire. Even then, the Huegoths could put up a sail.

"Empty it clear!" roared Aran, and the crew went to work.

Toomes studied the wind more carefully. It was generally from the south, not a good thing considering that the Huegoths, who did not depend on the wind, were coming down from the north. If he tried to turn *The Skipper* about, he'd be running into headwinds, practically standing still on the water.

"Let's see how good you can turn," the captain muttered, and he angled back to the north. He'd go in close, cut right by the Huegoths. If *The Skipper* could survive that single pass, and avoid the underwater ram that no doubt stuck out from the front of the barbarian ship, Toomes would have the wind at his back while the longship turned about.

A few hundred yards separated the vessels. Toomes could see the activity on the barbarians' top deck, huge men running to and fro. He could see the tall, curving forecastle, carved into the likeness of a wolf.

Then he saw the smoke, rising up suddenly from the longship's center. For an instant, the captain thought the longship had somehow caught fire, thought that perhaps one of the galley slaves had sabotaged the Huegoth raiders. But Toomes quickly realized the truth, and knew that his dear ship was in worse trouble still.

"Get you behind a wall!" the captain yelled to his crew when the ships were less than a hundred yards apart, when he could make out individual Huegoths leaning over the rail, their expressions bloodthirsty.

Shamus ran forward with a huge shield that he kept in the hold. He placed it to cover as much of the captain at the wheel as possible, then crouched low beside Toomes.

Toomes had meant to go much closer, to practically dance with the Huegoth boat before executing his sharp turn, to port or to starboard, whichever way seemed to give the most light between the jockeying vessels. He had to commit sooner, though. He knew that now, with the black smoke billowing high.

He turned right, starboard, and when the longship's left bank began to drag in the water, pulling her to port, Toomes cut back to port harder than he had ever tried to turn *The Skipper*. The good ship seemed to hesitate, seemed to stand right up in the water, beams creaking, mast groaning. But turn she did, and her sails dipped for just an instant, then swelled with wind, racing her off in the new direction, which by comforting coincidence put *The Skipper* straight in line with Bae Colthwyn.

A barrage of flaming arrows soared out from the longship, a score of fiery bolts trailing black lines of smoke. Many fell short, most missed widely, but one did catch on the prow of *The Skipper*, and another found the starboard edge of the mast and sail.

Shamus McConroy was there in an instant, batting at the flames. Two other crewmen came right in with buckets, dousing the fires before they could do any real damage.

At the wheel, eyes locked on his adversary, Aran Toomes wasn't comforted. Now the longship's left bank pulled hard, while the right bank hit the water in reverse, pivoting the seventy-foot vessel like a giant capstan.

"Too fast," old Aran muttered when he saw the incredible turn, when he realized that *The Skipper* would have a difficult time getting past that devastating ram. Still, Aran was committed to his course now; he could not cut any harder, or try to pull back to starboard.

It was a straight run, wind in the sails of *The Skipper*, oars pounding the waters to either side of the longship. The little fishing boat got past the longship's prow and started to distance herself from the still-turning Huegoths. For an instant, it seemed as though the daring move might actually succeed.

But then came the second volley of flaming arrows, crossing barely thirty feet of water, more than half of them diving into the vulnerable sails. Shamus, still working to repair the minor damage from the first volley, took one right in the back, just under his shoulder blade. He stumbled forward while another man swatted his back furiously, trying to douse the stubborn flames.

That fire was the least of Shamus McConroy's problems. He reached the wheel, verily fell over it, leaning heavily and looking close into Aran Toomes's grim face.

"I think it got me in the heart," Shamus said with obvious surprise, and then he died.

Aran cradled the man down to the deck. He looked back just once, to see *The Skipper's* sails consumed by the flames, to see the longship, straightened now and in full row, banks churning the water on both sides, closing in fast.

He looked back to Shamus, poor Shamus, and then he was lurching wildly, flying out of control, as the devastating ram splintered *The Skipper's* rudder and smashed hard against her hull.

Sometime later—it seemed like only seconds—a barely conscious Aran Toomes felt himself dragged across the deck and hauled over to the Huegoth ship. He managed to open his eyes, looking out just as *The Skipper*, prow high in the air, stern already beneath the dark canopy, slipped silently under the waves, taking with it the bodies of Shamus and Greasy Solarny, an old seadog who had sailed with Aran for twenty years.

As he let go of that terrible sight, focused again on the situation at hand, Aran heard the cries for his death, and for the death of the five other remaining crewmen.

But then another voice, not as gruff and deep, overrode the excited Huegoths, calming them little by little.

"These men are not of Avon," said the man, "but of Eriador. Good and strong stock, and too valuable to kill."

"To the galley!" roared one Huegoth, a cry quickly taken up by all the others.

As he was lifted from the deck, Aran got a look at the man who had saved him. He wasn't a small man, but certainly not of giant Huegoth stock, well-toned and strong, with striking cinnamon-colored eyes.

The man was Eriadoran!

Aran wanted to say something, but hadn't the breath or the chance.

Or the clarity. His life and the lives of his remaining crewmen had been spared, but Aran Toomes had lived a long, long time and had heard tales of the horrors of life as a Huegoth galley slave. He didn't know whether to thank this fellow Eriadoran, or to spit in the man's face.