

SYMPHONY OF STORMS

THE AGE OF RECKONING

BOOK I

BY

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It comes with blood and shadow. It comes with quakes and flame. The ocean will swell, and winds will churn; the Reckoning begins with an end.

The fifth age dawns upon a shattered Foundation, and all shall be hollowed by the void. When fault lines widen into fractures, only darkness and ruin shall thrive.

Long will we wait for salvation, to be summoned at the Heralds' call. Divinity needs flow but a trickle, and the Elementene will serve once more.

Rising from the ashes, forged in a world of steel and smoke. Four to heal all that's broken, four to repay what was lost.

— The Psalm of Remaking, as foretold by the first Oracle Queen

891, The Age of Sundering

PART ONE
WORLDS APART

Upstart

Stephen

“Sins are like women,” Stephen said into his wireless. “Why limit yourself to one when there’s so many to choose from?”

Static crackled in response.

“You still there?”

A voice broke through the buzz, distorted over the waves. “Lucky we’ve known each other since we were scraps. Otherwise, I’d cut you off. I’ve got sisters, y’know!”

“Don’t worry, Watt. The poor lasses look too much like you to ever become one of my sins.”

A stream of garbled curses burst through the speaker, and Stephen smiled ruefully. With such a well-placed jab, not even his childhood friend would suspect his guard was up, shielding an old wound. It was a rare thing to be an only child amongst the Dræsta—a lonely thing too.

“You about done? I’m almost there.”

Padding across a neat lawn, Stephen crept towards the mansion. Everything about it was pristine, from the snow-white plaster to the gleaming windows, all lined up in neat rows.

“Why do you even need me on the waves?” Watt asked. “You’ve gotta be miles from the wall.”

“Company.” It was always a bit too quiet on the outskirts of town, away from the relentless whirl of machinery. “Sides, you can warn me if any tick-tocks make a sweep.”

“Think they’ll bother?”

“Nah, not while His Lordship’s away. Still, it pays to be careful.”

A laugh crackled in the night air. “Never reckoned on the word ‘careful’ coming outta your gob.”

Me neither, Stephen thought, climbing the stone steps leading to the front entrance.

Like the house, the porch was built on a grand scale, though the door’s lock wasn’t nearly as fancy as it looked.

Arrogant gits!

The Brega so blindly trusted in their rules and their walls to keep the likes of him out. They never figured someone might find ways around them. Dangerous, risky ways, but Stephen enjoyed the challenge. Craved it. There was nothing quite like the rush of stepping into forbidden territory.

“Ey-up, lad!” The wireless erupted, and Stephen almost leapt out of his skin. He’d grown so used to Watt’s timid squeak that Rowe’s voice blared like a trumpet.

“Keep it down, will you!”

“Why? The whole rotten lot are outta town for at least another month,” Rowe said, unabashed. “What’s this Season lark, anyways?”

“Damned if I know. Toffs can do what they like so long as they’re not doing it here.”

Stephen realised his mistake a moment later when Rowe squawked. And then the ranting began. He crouched until he was level with the keyhole and sighed.

Here we go again.

Like a song stuck in his head, Rowe couldn’t help reciting all that was wrong with Carseld, the castes, and the Brega most of all. He was right, of course. But Stephen managed to keep tight a lid on the raw, bubbling anger churning in his gut. After all, he had a locked door to open.

Stephen set his tin lantern aside and clipped the wireless to his belt, Rowe still raving in the background. Thumbing two small tools out of his back pocket, he slid the L-shaped bar into the

keyhole, turning it until he met resistance. Then Stephen inserted the pick and, very carefully, began lifting the binding pins. Within seconds, there was a *click*—one down, four to go. His cheek bulged as he continued working until, finally, the oversized door swung back on its hinges.

Stephen peered inside, and the faint glow of his lantern peeled back the nighttime shadows to reveal a chequered floor and the vague outline of marble pillars.

“Hullo! Anybody home?” he called. When there was no response, he grinned. “Shame.”

The Brega migrated to the capital every spring, leaving their country homes empty. It was easy pickings for anyone with nerve enough to cross the district walls and dodge the City Watch. Luckily, nerve was never Stephen’s problem.

He strode across the threshold as if he were invited, announcing his arrival with the *clomp* of his heavy boots. “I’m in,” Stephen said into the wireless, cutting off Rowe’s tirade. “Heading to the office.”

“That was fast,” his friend muttered. “Ever consider usin’ those unholy skills for some greater good? Might actually make a difference.”

“To be honest, mate, the lesser bad is more my thing. Better leave the difference-making to the Lígetsliht. Far more trouble than it’s worth.”

There was a beat of silence before: “Alreet, clanker. I’m leavin’ you with Watt. He’s eyeballing some schematics but’ll listen out for any chatter.”

“Cheers, slaghead. Sithee in class tomorrow.”

“Certain sure, I’m not sufferin’ alone. So don’t stay out too late, ‘cause I’ll drag you outta bed m’self.” And with that, Stephen was left with the low crackle of static as he stepped into the study.

Motes of dust shimmered gold in the flickering lantern light, the air tasting damp, stale, on Stephen's tongue. The room reeked of abandonment—the fireplace swept bare, furniture draped in white sheets, and cobwebs gilding corners of the ceiling.

Stephen approached the desk and winced. Shrouded in white, it reminded him of the altar he knelt before every Héahtíd, uttering unanswered prayers to Ædris.

But this was no time for piety. Stephen was breaking at least three commandments just by standing there. So he snatched the sheet clean off the desk, and a cloud of dust burst in his face.

Hell!

Bent double, Stephen shook as he tried to clear his angry throat. For a moment, he understood what textile workers must feel when their chests became clogged with fluff. Strangled, breathless. But while those poor souls faced a death sentence, Stephen recovered quickly.

He gave the cotton sheet a couple of kicks as he rubbed his watery eyes. Much good it did. Huffing a deep breath, Stephen raked a hand through the short golden bristles he called “hair.” It was time to return to the task at hand.

Carved from dark wood, the desk was as grand as its surroundings. Stephen placed his lantern at an easy distance, setting the polished surface aglow as he knelt to study the drawers.

He grinned and rubbed his hands together. *Crackling!*

The locks were the same simple cylinders as last year, meaning his previous raid had gone unnoticed. Stephen stuck to small trinkets as part of the only rules he lived by—his own. Take nothing sentimental or too valuable, in and out without a trace, and nobody gets hurt. He made these rules mostly to avoid getting caught, rather than soothe an uneasy conscience. Why feel guilty robbing these toffs, who had so much when the Dræsta had so little? Was it even stealing if they didn't notice anything missing? No, shame was for the gullible sheep who accepted their misery as the will of Ædris, constantly threatened with eternal damnation.

Well, if I'm gonna burn, I'd better make sure it's worth it.

Bristling with nervous energy, Stephen groped for his back pocket, retrieving his lock picks. One by one, *click* after *click*, pins fell into place, and the locks yielded to his skill. The drawers slid out smoothly, revealing bottles of ink, yellowing ledgers, and reams of thick, gilt-edged paper.

Rummaging deeper, Stephen extracted a gold-plated paper knife, a tiny box inlaid with silver and enamel, containing clumps of pungent brown powder, and something he'd only ever heard about—a glass pen.

His eyes danced over the iridescent shaft, containing a maelstrom of blue and green whorls. Stephen then removed the lid and admired the spiral-shaped nib, reportedly far more precise than the rough-hewn quills used by the masses. A recent invention, glass pens were worth far more than any Dræsta could earn in a lifetime. Twenty Dræstas, probably.

Nothing too valuable, remember, Stephen told himself.

Rowe often needled him for lacking ambition. Why scabble for crumbs when he could try cracking the family safe? He had a chance to pay back the Brega on behalf of everyone they crushed beneath their squeaky-clean boots.

It would be satisfying to take something they held dear. Something precious, beloved. But that warm, rosy feeling would only last until he couldn't sell it. No self-respecting fence in the Bellows would be interested—too much trouble should the owner come looking. The City Watch mostly turned a blind eye to the shady dealings in the black market, but if a highborn lord or lady kicked up a fuss, there would be raids and mass arrests followed by floggings and time in the stockade. Stephen had seen it all before and decided no reward was worth stirring up that kind of slagheap.

Until now.

Going AWOL

Cassandra

“Ouch!”

Cass grimaced as she wrenched her braid free from a knotted branch. The wilderness growing behind her dormitory was near impassable. Supposedly, a barricade of overgrown thornbushes and tangled trees would keep Rícenna College safe from the outside world.

A naïve hope.

Perhaps the sisters had been cloistered away too long or had forgotten what it was to be a teenager—if they ever knew. But branches and brambles were a trifling inconvenience for the determined. The desperate. Especially compared to risking the armed guards patrolling the campus perimeter, protecting their prestigious students. Even from themselves.

Cass carefully picked her way through the briar, keeping her long skirts close to avoid thorns. Many were festooned with scraps of cloth, like bunting, each patch of silk and velvet marking a victim of temptation. The path was wreathed with it, a barbed snare of want. And Cass was no stranger to temptation. She’d walked this path more than any other.

Something rustled, and Cass suddenly stilled. Again, she heard the crunch of leaves underfoot and twigs snapping.

Forks!

No time for hesitation. This was hardly her first encounter with a fellow traveller. And she had never, yet, been caught.

Cass dashed to the nearest tree and climbed. As she rose higher and higher, her indigo skirts caught the breeze and bled into midnight shadows. Any bystander might suspect she escaped the mausoleum, but no self-respecting wraith would find themselves halfway up a tree and clinging on for dear life.

Cass bit her lip, stifling a trill of giggles. There was something absurdly unreal about her situation, and she had to pinch herself.

No, definitely awake.

That was the problem with her dreams. They were far too vivid, and wearing gloves didn't help. How could she know what was real if she could never truly touch it? And yet, she wouldn't remove them because nobody respectable bought tarnished goods.

Material ripped in a brutal rasp, instantly grounding her. A string of oaths followed in a decidedly masculine tone.

Amateur.

Clearly, the fool had no inkling of how to traverse the briar. And worse, his curses were unforgivably dull compared to the pointed terms Cass wielded. A meagre threat and an unworthy suitor.

Moments later, a lithe figure crashed through the brush, clad in charcoal-grey. Either clumsy or too eager, the man risked his neck and his lady's reputation by treading so carelessly.

Curious, Cass thought.

She waited until he was out of sight, then began her descent. Once on solid ground, Cass secured the harness strapped across her back before continuing along the path as hastily as she dared.

The wilderness soon transformed into cultivated parkland, marking the campus border. From there, Cass darted from tree to trees, her boots squelching on the sodden ground. A summer

storm had almost scuppered her plans. Fortunately, the thunderclouds cleared an hour earlier, as if Ædris Himself blessed her expedition.

Cass reached the treeline, and immediately her eyes found the towering city walls, as cold and pale as ice. She inhaled sharply, then stepped into the ancient majesty of Heofonfýr. The city slept as she crept through the paved streets, merely another night-time shadow amongst the palaces of white stone.

Despite impatience nipping at her feet, Cass stepped cautiously, staying ever-mindful of her surroundings. Yet the closer she came to the walls, the more she became distracted by thoughts of what lay beyond. The gilded cage awaiting her, and the world—dirty, chaotic, real—kept far from reach.

Focus, Cass chided herself—she couldn't risk being seen. Ruin would not grant the freedom she craved, only limit the few choices that remained her own.

Eventually, she reached an archway built into the city walls and barred by iron railings. There, leaning against the stone, was a bulky figure, his dark uniform merging into the twilight.

“Evening, Miss Cass.”

She beamed. “Must we do this every time, Fowlkes? You can drop the ‘Miss.’”

“Fraid not, *Miss*,” he said, shaking his head. “The General was firm about treating females with respect. Even highborn chits who don't do what they're told.”

“My-m...” Mere mention of her father formed a lump in Cass's throat, so cold it burned. Tears pricked as she swallowed, and she edged into safer territory. “After all these years, all your training, I assumed my gender had proved irrelevant.”

She received a huff in response, and the figure stepped out into the moonlight. Sergeant Fowlkes had weathered his forty-plus years surprisingly well for a veteran. Only a slight

crinkling at the corners of his eyes and mouth hinted at his age, though salt and pepper seasoned his dark hair and moustache.

“You’re late,” he said, arms folded across his broad chest.

She shrugged. “Traffic.”

“No soldier of mine would dare try that excuse.”

“Am *I*?” Cass’s eyes flared, her breath catching. “One of your soldiers, I mean.”

“Humph. A fine thing for a lady to wish for.”

“Indeed, it is. Why should men have all the glory?”

“Forget glory. You’re courting disgrace if we tarry here.” His eyes roved warily, targeting every entry point. “Did you bring your weapon?”

Cass thrust up her chin. “Need you even ask?”

“I s’pose not.”

Reaching for the hilt peeking over her shoulder, Cass warmed with a sense of rightness, completion. She drew her sword from the leather sheath strapped across her back, the slender blade glinting in the moonlight.

“Alright, Miss.” Fowlkes swept his hand through the gate. “Time for your lesson.”

Stranger Than Fiction

Emily

The door opened with an ominous creak, more suited to a gothic manor than Grandmother's comfortable townhouse. Emily tensed, half expecting to find a glowing spectre waiting for her on the other side. Instead, she walked into the library plagued by neither ghosts nor vampires, not even a highwayman to bar her path.

While a little disappointed, Emily knew she could do no more than scream if faced with any such danger. Armed, as she was, with a single candle and furnished with all the protection of a thin cotton wrapper. Besides, her courage stretched only so far as midnight excursions to the library, hardly the risky ventures undertaken by her favourite literary heroines.

Through the door, the library presented nothing but darkness, vast and unyielding, pressing against the pale glow of her candle. Creeping forward, Emily shivered as her feet met polished floorboards. Where were her slippers?

Beside the bed, right-side, placed parallel.

Emily sighed but pushed onward, teetering on tiptoes. She located the long table where she endured daily lessons with her governess, Miss Weatherby, and lit one of the paraffin lamps, casting the room in a twilight haze.

Despite the creeping shadows in the corners and angles of the room, comforting warmth radiated beneath Emily's skin. Books lined every wall, the scent of paper and worn leather teasing her nostrils. Gilded titles gleamed in the lamplight, each a siren song clamouring to be read. Devoured.

“Hello, my friends,” Emily whispered.

For they *were* her friends, willing to share their secrets, their advice. They were practically family, with her parents long dead, leaving only Grandmother, whose judicial career took precedence over her familial duties.

There was always Celia, Emily’s maid. But as servant and employer, they were expected to maintain a degree of separation. Still, Celia would forever hold a place in Emily’s heart for introducing her to the wonderful—and wholly illicit—world of fiction.

Scrupulous to a fault, Emily made an unlikely lawbreaker, stashing contraband beneath her mattress. But novels were her abiding sin. These tales of romance, adventure, and mystery gave insight into a world beyond the confines of this townhouse. Into relationships, which stirred so much expectation and longing. Too much.

Sharing this burning secret encouraged Emily to confide in Celia, though it was a mere fraction of what churned beneath the surface. It was easy to chirp about fancies and frivolities, of heroes and happy endings, while Celia preened her. Harder was confessing deeper thoughts, of complex theories and equations, let alone her doubts and fears. Or the unshakable anxiety which haunted Emily’s every conversation, forcing her to choose each word with precision or still her tongue entirely.

“Shy,” they called her. If only it were that simple.

Those hours spent pouring tea, nibbling biscuits, and scrounging for appropriate things to say were the longest of her life. And so often, she simply watched and listened, studying her guests like a mathematical problem, barely speaking at all.

Only books offered the companionship and diversion Emily craved. A sanctuary from the judgement of her governess and the forced civility of her peers. And now, gazing along the shelves, Emily considered her choices.

“History, no...perhaps economics.” Much more effective than counting sheep.

Thankfully, the library contained a wide-ranging selection, catering to even Emily’s ravenous appetite for knowledge. Grandmother also subscribed to various periodicals to nurture her granddaughter’s particular fascination with alchemy.

What is that?

Emily stilled, all her focus centred on a single spot, a shimmering emblem, taunting her from one of the topmost shelves. Once drawn, she couldn’t pull away from that mesmeric gleam.

Almost tripping over the hem of her nightgown, Emily wheeled the stepladder into place. She ascended only to discover the glimmer had vanished. A minor hindrance. The precise location of the book was still etched in her memory.

Arm stretching, Emily grasped an unassuming tome, bound in brown leather. She gasped at the unexpected weight. The book was almost as large as the household ledgers, much larger than Emily had initially estimated. And her estimates were usually accurate, if not to say, exact. She also seemed to have imagined the silvered markings on the spine, which, under closer inspection, appeared entirely blank.

Sleep deprivation can cause hallucinations, Emily thought, recalling a five-year-old treatise on insomnia.

She considered returning to bed. However, the book still claimed her attention. Demanded it. Emily gripped the soft leather as if someone might snatch it from her.

Just a peek... But when Emily opened the book to a random page, she knew at once that sleep would have to wait. That sleep might not come at all.

Rows of symbols filled the timeworn pages, practically leaping off them, inked in various colours. The sweeping curves and stark lines were strangely familiar, their meaning tantalisingly close, on the tip of her tongue.

There is power here.

A kind of dangerous, intoxicating power, which drew her in like a drug. Emily didn't question how she knew this. The knowledge was bone-deep, undeniable. Yet, that was the limit of her understanding.

Studying the symbols, Emily assumed they must form some sort of alphabet. Unless each mark represented a specific word, like the ideographic languages of the Northlands. However, Emily had never studied their dialects and couldn't explain why these symbols were so familiar.

The runes flowed together in a regular pattern, a motif. However, without a cypher, she might never interpret the code. And Emily had to interpret it. Her inquiring mind simply wouldn't allow such a puzzle to go unsolved.

This could be a long night.

Studying the Opposition

James

Chamber music echoed across the ballroom in soft notes, interspersed with the rustle of satin and the clack of jewelled heels. Pairs of dancers spun sedately around the room, an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of purple and gold.

James watched Angelica from a distant corner, grateful for his considerable height, allowing him to peer over the heads of those assembled. Unfortunately, he had already claimed his two allotted dances and any more would be unseemly. Common civility prompted James to partner several other ladies, but there was only one he wanted. Only one who threatened to send his heart bursting from its chest.

Angelica glided across the dancefloor despite her lumbering partner—an earl of significant fortune, passable looks, and a galling lack of purpose, beyond shooting pheasants and racing horses.

“He must be twice her age,” James muttered to himself, attempting to quash his mounting jealousy, and failing.

I cannot expect her to refuse other dance partners.

James couldn’t deny Angelica anything, even at the cost of his pride. And he resisted the urge to demonstrate any of the possessiveness he felt. Endured.

Six months.

Six more interminable months before their engagement could become public. Until they might wed, provided James could convince his dubious parents.

“You are too young to make such a lasting decision,” his father said, only last tinnih. It was a rational argument, difficult to dismiss. “Allow yourself to experience all the world has to offer before making a choice you cannot take back. Other women exist, you know?”

James shook his head. *Not for me.*

He fell in love with Angelica on a rainy summer’s day three years ago, when he came to her rescue. Afterwards, James became a regular caller at the Fiske household.

Finally, upon Angelica’s eighteenth birthday, James proposed. She accepted, *thankfully*. However, given he was nine months younger and without parental consent, they agreed to keep the betrothal a secret. So, to the world, James confined himself to the role of devoted suitor, never pushing the bounds of what was proper, appropriate, mindful of both their positions.

Even now, his eyes gravitated towards Angelica, stripping away the fashionable trappings to ebony curls, rose, and cream, all lamentably concealed beneath false hair and thick paint. Wholly absorbed, James barely noticed the figure approaching, nor the elegant indolence of his gait. The man bowed with deliberate flourish, almost mocking in its extravagance.

“Rich!”

As always, the Ambassador of Rodina was tricked out in the first stare of fashion, wearing a short-waisted jacket and waistcoat with tight-fitting pantaloons. Rich’s cravat was elaborately tied, his paint immaculate, and hair powdered to perfection, tied with a golden ribbon at the nape. However, James observed a simplicity to the man’s style, much like his own, disdaining the gaudy frills and jewels flaunted by many of their peers.

“Knew I’d find you brooding, Rook. Admiring the Incomparable, are we?”

James’s eyes widened. “A-are they truly calling her that?”

“Lud! As if there could be another. This Season is a veritable desert, such a drought of beauty.”

“Why should you care? You’re not thinking of putting your head into the noose.”

“I have a keen appreciation for exquisite things,” Rich said, smoothing the mulberry silk of his coat sleeve, luxuriant and perfectly tailored. “Not everyone yearns to shackle themselves to the first damsel they behold. Incomparable though she may be.”

James stiffened. To deny the implication that he was still a child—his desires, the whims of naïve youth—was to fall into the trap. The only way to combat Rich’s condescension was to appear unaffected, reasonable. Detached. An easy task for someone so practised in concealing their emotions, crushing them, and donning the painted mask of Brega civility.

James brushed an invisible speck off his lapel. “Given that both you and Society acknowledge Lady Fiske as the finest female on the market. Surely, it’s only logical to seize the opportunity before another man makes an offer.”

“Market.” Rich sniffed. “Offer.’ How well you speak the language of love.”

“It is the language of marriage,” James said, resisting a grimace.

Seldom did the two coincide amongst the Brega, his parents excepted. And it was one of the reasons James proposed before he had any right to. Angelica was so beautiful, so admired. If he waited, he might lose his one chance at a love match.

Rich removed a golden quizzing glass from his waistcoat pocket and set about polishing the lens with a handkerchief. “Seventeen years old and already so certain of your destiny.”

More teasing remarks. Yet, for all his urbanity, Rich remained fascinated by James’s conviction and the determination with which he planned his future. A future dazzling in its ambition.

“It isn’t destiny, which allows me to thrash you at chess,” he said, permitting his lips to curl at the corners. “It’s strategy. Perfectly planned steps that take me inexorably towards my goal. That is how I always win.”

“I concede, you are the superior player. However, I do not play the game with the sole object of winning.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Wielding his freshly polished quizzing glass, the ambassador squinted up at James, employing an infuriatingly superior expression. “Have you ever considered, young Rook, that there might be something to learn from losing?”