

## Chapter 1

Decius stood on the walkway of the watchtower and peered southeast into the darkness. The Krysvor river shimmered below the full moon, and the white-granite tower cast a pale reflection across its waters. Dense black forest grew everywhere along the river's banks, except here, where a clearing some 1,200 feet wide marked a shallow ford.

The legionary admired the image of the watchtower on the waters by moonlight. It resembled the pillars erected in Aura to commemorate the Tarkauns' triumphs, and made him feel as if he stood his watches on a monument to Imperial power. Even here, at the very edge of the world, the Winged Sun ruled. Even here, Law held sway.

The sound of wood snapping broke his reverie. Shadowy figures were beginning to leave the cover of the forest and approach the ford. For a moment there were but a handful, then dozens, then hundreds, thousands. The figures came towards the far bank, and Decius saw the misshapen, bestial forms of beastmen – creatures bred for war by the ancient sorceries of Zahar.

The beastmen bristled with weapons, black spears, curved swords, spiked shields, and helms of iron, and a full third of the monstrous warband were mounted on shaggy black wolves the size of horses. "Wargs," spat Decius. He hastened from the walkway into the watchtower, rushing past its unlit pyre to clamber down the ladder to the ground floor.

Decius landed with a clomp of booted feet on the packed earth floor. Albus and Caro were asleep, so he kicked them, hard.

"Wake up, you dogs. Trouble's found us." Albus stumbled to his feet. Caro scrambled around for his sword-belt in the rugs. "Beastmen are crossing in force. Get your horses saddled and go. Alert the Emperor at Arganos." The men stood wide-eyed and not moving. Decius pushed open the stable doors. "Go!"

"What about you, sir?" said Caro. Decius had already begun to scale back up the ladder. He called back to them. "I've got to light the beacon."

Albus and Caro looked at each other and began to scramble towards the door to the stables.

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Ubar led the way into the chest-high water, beating his chest and shouting with bloodlust. He was a colossal beastman, larger than a bear, and his brown fur was crisscrossed with countless scars. Ubar had taken many wounds, but he had never fallen. When he had killed his first foe, the village shaman had foreseen that Ubar would be a mighty chieftain with a hundred warriors. He would have a great harem of the finest breeders, and he would father many whelps, and his strength would be in them. This raid would bring him the plunder he needed to be great among the qarrādu.

He called at the warriors behind him. "You know me! I am a champion of the qarrādu. I have eaten the flesh of a dozen warriors. Follow me! Tonight we will dine on man-flesh. Follow me!" There was a roar, and then the sound of splashing water as the beastman horde waded in behind him.

The river was fordable here, but the going was still treacherous. Soon the water was to Ubar's waist, and to the chest of the smaller beastmen at his rear. Every step demanded concentration lest he slip on a rock or twist in the current. He looked back to see if any of his warriors had been swept away. One beastman had slipped, and been carried off – but he had been a runt, and weak-blooded, so it was little loss.

The wolf-riders were coming up to the river bank now. The snarling black beasts plunged into the water, slowing only as it became hip deep. For a moment Ubar envied the wolf-riders, carried above the river. Ubar was too large to ride the wargs. He spied his friend Ruduk among them, with his blood-red fur and tall spear. The red beastman was laughing, the battle-joy upon him, and Ubar laughed with him.

The archers were behind the wolf-riders. They were squat and runty things, barely beastmen at all. Ubar knew that the bow-whelps were important to the warband but he thanked Bel, the Slaughterprince, that his fate was not so pathetic.

He saw that Gamesh was with the archers. The warlord was seated on a great warg, so large it might even have carried Ubar. It was said that Gamesh had raised the wolf himself, sharing with it the dead flesh of his most formidable foes, so that it would share in their strength. Gamesh had killed over a hundred, most of them chieftains, and now he ruled all of their tribes. Even from the river, Ubar could hear the warlord's voice. "“Arrows at the ready! Let no one escape that watchtower.”"

Ubar was half-way across the river when the a light suddenly blazed atop the white turret. The legionaries had lit a beacon fire. It was visible through the tower's windows, a fiery spearpoint in the dark sky. After a few moments, other fires begin to flicker in the distance, forming a chain of light that spread across the hilltops of the borderlands. Ubar wondered at the great chieftains of men, who were able to rule with such foresight.

Doors opened at the foot of the watchtower, and a pair of riders emerged. They were unarmored, but their horses were fast, and dirt flew from hooves as they galloped away. Ubar cursed. He would never catch them afoot, and the wargs who could were still in hip-deep water.

Then hundreds of arrows vaulted into the sky. The arrows soared over the champion's head and rained down on the riders. One by one they fell, stabbing into the soft soil of the far bank in a staccato rhythm – all but one, which sank into the neck of the leftmost rider. The man cried out, slumped, and toppled off his horse. His comrade did not even glance back, but galloped out of sight.

Ubar pressed on towards the watchtower. Gamesh would be angry that a rider had escaped. He thanked Bel again that he was not an archer.

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The first elements of the warband had reached the near bank of the Krysvor. They were formed in a loose wedge, and at their head Decius saw a beastman the size of a bear, carrying the massive scars of countless battles. As its feet touched dry soil, the champion bellowed a dreadful war-cry and began to charge up towards the watchtower. Its comrades echoed the champion's cry, and the air was filled by the sonorants of ancient Zahar issuing forth from thousands of bestial tongues.

Behind him, the signal-fire was blazing. Decius could feel the segmented back-plates of his armor warm to its heat. He was crouched low, peeking over the parapets that surrounded the walkway. His hands held a composite bow, and his eyes sought a target. Decius forced his gaze past the oncoming beastmen and peered deeper into the darkness. A horde this size could only be held together by a strong warlord. If he could kill the warlord, the horde would crumble.

He found his target at the center of the beastmen's battle line, near the archers that had slain Caro. The creature was well-formed, for its kind, and it sat on its lupine mount as if it were a king. As Decius watched, the beastman raised a scimitar high with its clawed fist and roared commands. The words were inaudible to Decius under the tumult of nearby war-cries, but he had been in enough battles to recognize the exhortations of a commander.

He stood, notched an arrow, and took aim at the beastman warlord. "Salutations from Aura, your highness," he whispered, and loosed the arrow. It soared from his bow, flying over the heads of the charging beastmen and across the waters of the ford towards its mark. But as the shaft passed over the line of archers, a night wind blew out from the forest, strong enough to sway the branches of even old oaks, and the shaft's path swayed with it. The arrow veered left and sank harmlessly into the dirt alongside the warlord.

Decius dropped back down into cover behind the parapet and cursed. The caprice of Naurivus was legendary, but Decius would never have thought the Lord of the Winds would take the side of a beastman! He fumbled at his quiver.

Before the legionary could notch another arrow, he heard a loud grunt below, and the sound of wood being battered. The beastmen had reached the base of the watchtower. He dropped his bow on the walkway and ran inside, drawing his sword.

From the top of the ladder, he could see the door to the ground floor being forced. The oaken door bulged, and for a moment held steady – then splintered and broke in twain. Beastmen warriors poured into the tower.

Decius decided to die well.

"Come on then, you curs! Who falls first?" he shouted downward.

A black-haired beastman answered his challenge and began to clamber up the ladder. As it reached the top rung, it roared at him, and Decius stabbed the thing through its open mouth. The beastman toppled downward, its face a ruin of gore, and its brethren on the floor below scattered.

Now the champion he had seen earlier pushed its way forward. In its hands it held a short-hafted iron axe adorned with painted ochre cuneiforms. The champion smiled up at him, revealing a mouth filled with fangs, and hurled the axe.

The whirling weapon struck Decius's helmet, and the legionary stumbled backward, stunned by the pain. He recovered quickly, but that moment had given the beastman enough time to clamber to his level. Decius chopped at the creature's shoulder as it came to him, and felt the blade strike bone, but the blow didn't even slow it. The beastman slammed into him with the force of a chariot, and then Decius felt a horrible wetness at his neck as great fangs tore a hole in his flesh.

He stabbed the creature again, and the blade bit deeply, but his strength was fading fast. His hand slipped from the hilt before he could strike a third time. The creature cried exultantly as his body spasmed. Its teeth were red and gory, and Decius realized it was eating him. Beastmen warriors always ate a valiant foe.