

CHAPTER 3

In the Beginning, when the universe was a black and lifeless sea, and Heaven like a lantern of pure crystal hung in splendor above the Dark—Hieron, God of gods, Immortal Truth, proclaimed, “Go thou my Light—impregnate the Abyss!”

And when he spoke his rays like flashing spears leapt from his mouth and pierced the fathomless cold waves which shuddered, roared, and shined.

Thus transformations, metamorphoses, expansions and contractions, heatings, motions, battles, energies, incarnations, beings, Stars and Moon and Sun were born, with the immobile solid Earth fixed at the Center like a jewel.

And Hieron, Lord of Light, beheld the glorious tumult, and smiling said, “Yes, it is good. The Miracle is begun!”

—from the *Book of Originations*, 1:1-4

Her life began upon an altar drenched in blood.



No box made of lead or utter darkness bound her, for she emerged into a space of polished marble walls ascending forty feet with windows round as suns, white carpet dense as fur, and a massive chandelier that gently trembled, softly hummed, in harmony with her mother’s dying screams.

Nor did she descend abandoned, buried, or alone to face the world, but Telkepp Tribal women scrambled, wept, and begged for her and for her mother’s sake. Some pinned her mother’s writhing arms and legs atop the Altar while others sponged her pallid face which glistened with saliva, sweat, and tears. A dozen more, transfixed by prayer or panic, lay prostrate on the floor.

Bright dots of blood spattered the Altar. One old woman with long hair gray as raining clouds cried out in a strong voice for the *Lord of Heaven's grace* and fiercely wiped them up. But when the blood expanded in a relentless dark red crescent the Tribal women screamed and throwing up their arms they madly danced and tore their clothes and shrieked in terrifying voices for the ancient heathen gods—for in their horror Hieron was forgot.

And so to cries of *Electbuona—Barakatba—Valokola'mi drovail!* the cloud-haired woman plunged into her Mistress with her bloody hands and arms and seized the baby by the head and drew her screaming with a face and sodden hair as red as fire and clenched hands swinging—even feet, they later claimed, balled somehow into fists which left a bruise upon the cloud-haired woman's arm—and just as her young mother's last breath rattled from her throat, Syndraelia Aulisia Helarin Aurelaus seized her first.

In an ecstasy of grief and joy the Telkepps raised their bloody bodies and rushed them to the mansion's glass *Conservatory* where shrubs and flowers of long-annihilated countries grew. A tub of fresh hot water waited (for this was Syndra's mother's favorite room, where she'd intended to give birth) and here the women washed the lifeless girl and baby kicking on her swiftly cooling breast and chanted pagan prayers for both their spirits: for the *just-departed* to evade the draw of wicked astral powers on its flight to reach the *Gardens of the Moon*; for the *arrived* to seize its newfound body with all its might and lodge so deep no *Demon's* claw could drag it out.

The women took the whitened bodies from the water. They dried them with clean cloths and blowing breath and laid them on white blankets side by side and still conjoined. Plots of palms and roses flourished close on either side. The ghostly light of Energy-powered lamps shone dimly from the cedar grove outside. December sleet (the only sound) dashed faintly on the pure half-dome of greenhouse glass.

The women stood and watched the child and mother in a half-believing, half-disbelieving daze—until, at last, the grey-haired woman knelt and took their binding cord into her

mouth and severed the still-living from the dead with yellowed teeth.

Now the Telkepp women gently wrapped each body in soft bands of coiling linen. They swaddled little Syndra from her feet up to her shoulders; her mother from her azure-painted toes up to the top of her red-haired head. But first, before the mother's face forever vanished, each Tribal woman kissed it, and the cloud-haired woman closed the girl's dry green half-open eyes.

The following night the white-robed *Phanes* arrived to take the mother to the Helarin family tomb deep in the *Catacombs* of Hieron's massive *Temple*. No Tribal servants were allowed. There was no talk of Demons or the Moon. Instead a Phane whose fingers, neck, and earlobes dripped with gold proclaimed, "Aulisia Iphene Helarin Aurelaus has fallen in God's Cause, a Martyr to her Lords! The first her husband on the earth; the second Heaven's deathless King. *Rejoice!* Her loyal soul—*this very hour*—kneels in bliss near Hieron's Throne!"

Syndra's soul, meanwhile, remained inside her body, despite the fact she would not eat for seven days. And in that span, she neither cried nor fussed nor strove against her swaddling bands but glowered at the world with lips tightly compressed and blue eyes sparkling beneath her heavy wetted lashes. In desperation, the cloud-haired woman (Galya, a servant of House Aurelaus since childhood) dared unwrap her fearsome limbs for good, and set the small child free. And as she held her close (the first and only time) she brushed her cheek against her own and sang a song of wandering, mystic Leuthion:

*Who shades the heat from valleys?
Whose wings give us their flight?
Whose arch bridges all waters?
Who fills the world with light?*

And with this the baby girl relented and drank the warm sweet milk of a Telkepp wet-nurse. And for three whole days

she slept so deep that more than once they thought that she was dead.

The night Syndra was born, Galya climbed the steps of the black tower that erupted like a spear from Aurelaus Mansion's marble heart. She reached the top and opened its heavy iron door and entered the *Circanium* filled with trophies to inform her Lord he'd gained a daughter and lost a wife.

The aged man was seated before his window, looking almost child-like in his over-sized black armor and enormous fur-lined leather chair. His unwashed tangled hair hung to his waist; he wore no shoes; despite the close-set iron fireplace shaped like a roaring dragon's head his bloodless lips shivered.

When he heard the news he stared across the snow-swept *Tiers* of the Quarter of the Knights toward the Citadel Mount two miles away.

"And what of my son?" he finally inquired. "Has *he* arrived as well?"

"No, my Lord," said Galya. "Seradin is still dead."

A ragged sigh slid from the old Knight's shaking mouth. He raised a bony hand to hide his eyes and turned to face the fireplace. On the dragon's metal tongue a three-foot sphere of Crystal spewed smokeless green-blue-yellow flames.

"Very well then," he mumbled. "Go away."

Galya bowed and turned to leave. As she walked back to the door she glanced around the ring of little altars sunk into the tower's curving wall. Each niche contained some treasure: Barbarian axes, *Scrolls of Honor*, antique weapons, goblets, coins and gems from long-dead lands; sacred relics, tomes, and statues of heroes, saints, and kings; the heads and skulls of extinct beasts; even the ancient skeleton of a Devourer—no larger than a hare—posed like a gleaming black chameleon on the shaft of the spear that killed it.

For a moment the servant lingered near a portrait of a younger, fuller version of the man now muttering in his chair. The same black suit of armor fit his robust frame like glistening skin. His strong arms held a gleaming sword and

mirrored shield. Behind him smoked an Expedition's crushed remains, its enormous wagons smashed to bits and yoked *Urkoda Beasts* ripped to pieces. Yet still his blue eyes glared—upturned and fierce and fearless—at something looming in the sky. A shape like a great mountain made of shadow reflected in the shield. . . .

“*Telkepp!*”

Galya spun to face her Lord.

“Lord Thaeliad!” she gasped, rushing back to stand beside the chair.

The old man was still seated, but his gaze—now focused on his reflection in the window—had hardened to a glare.

“From this day onward, Telkepp, I proclaim it: no more wives.”

“Lord?”

“*No more wives!*” he bellowed, fist slamming into an armrest with such fury it drove his servant to her knees and shot a puff of dust into the air. “No more wives or wives-aspiring! No painted children reeking with perfumes or mothers posing them like dolls or fathers lusting for my halls! No more scheming, no more politics, no weighing dowries all in vain! No more Temple of mocking Hieron! No more parasitic Phanes!

“For I see—oh *see at last* how God betrays me! But still I can't see *why!* Why give me honors, power, wealth, fame—my very life when all my comrades died—but not the single thing which makes the prior gifts complete! The *final gift* bereft of which the others are a curse!

“Woman, how can it be? To Commoners, Barbarians, and Tribals he freely gives what I desire! He spills his *Blessing* upon beasts! Yet I—a scion of the Emperors—I prayed until my knees were scabs and blood *and still no answer's ever come!* Now all is finished! My line pours out like water in the sand! My curse cannot be broken!

“Oh Telkepp, tell me why? Consult your Demons underground! Is it his *Justice?* Because I chose no wife for twenty years but loved to watch the Houses flutter, asking *when and who will Thaeliad Aurelaus the Great and Famous choose?*”

“Or is it that I’m punished because *I alone* survived? Is *that* what God demands? That I throw away my life and leap into the jaws of a Devourer? But I was young—barely a man! I didn’t wish to die for nothing! So he takes my only son? Refuses me another? *If so my curse on Hieron! MY CURSE UPON THE LORD!*”

And with these words his servant caught the hollow *plink* of tears against the old Knight’s armored breast. But Galya did not answer. Nor did she look up. She only gazed upon her master’s dust-black naked feet.

“Oh Daughter of the Telkepps,” Thaeliad resumed, choking out his words, “listen well for you shall never hear my voice again. This chamber seemed my refuge—now I see that it has always been my tomb. *So be it!* I command you on your *Oath*—on the honor of your Tribe—on *Penalty of Damnation* to leave and shut my door forever!

“As for my land, only members of my Household may come and go about its business. See to it that my *Conduit* is maintained and my Energy undisturbed. Beyond this no one—not even the *Paladar-King*—shall be admitted. *And I grant you leave to kill Helarins on sight!*”

“Do you comprehend me, Telkepp?”

“I do, my Lord.”

“Shall you obey?”

“My first memory, Lord Thaeliad, is of obeying you. May it also be my last.”

And now the cloud-haired woman rose, and glancing neither left nor right she crossed the tower chamber, stepped outside onto the landing, and firmly shut the iron door.

What transpired next was spoken of throughout the Quarter of the Knights as well as mentioned in the *Land of the Barbarians*, the precincts of the Pentalian Senate, and the *Quarter-Watch* pages of *The Covenant Weekly Sphere*. For Thaeliad Aurelaus—the most famous living citizen of Covenant, who’d encountered a Devourer outside the Final Wall and lived—had locked himself away inside a tower without establishing an heir.

His only son had perished on the first day of the *Tribal Insurrection* in what should have been the glorious *Year of the Millennium*. On receiving the news his wife of twenty-five years hanged herself from their garden's flowering dogwood tree. Three more wives in succession failed to provide Lord Aurelaus a new son. And now the last—fifteen-year-old Aulisia Helarin—had died birthing a girl.

The matrilineal family of his final wife and only living child—the House Helarin—was therefore poised to inherit the old Knight's wealth and large estate. Yet according to an ancient compromise in which the Knights of many lands and orders, in return for their submission to one Liege (the Paladar-King), retained the right of Kingship in their own homes, Thaeliad's final words were law.

Until, that is, it was determined he was dead. *But how?*

The Lord of Aurelaus Mansion had forbidden all interpersonal communication, while his chamber had been fitted with a Conduit through which a yearly stipend of Energy was shunted to the Crystal carried in the jaws of the dragon-head fireplace. This first-rate sphere could reproduce whatever Thaeliad required—water, food, wine, heat—even music, vocalizations, or other sounds which had been *impressed* in it by Merchant-Engineers and Proteors as it was forged. It could absorb all forms of waste. It had probably been fitted with *chronometrical controls*, meaning that the sphere could perform its varied functions entirely on its own. It could even potentially flood the chamber with poison gas or heat or a repulsive force if the iron door were ever opened.

Yet the Helarins were not deterred. The very hour Aulisia was interred they demanded her baby girl as well as entry to the estate to petition Thaeliad to name an heir. But Galya refused, citing the final orders of her Lord and stating that, as long as Syndra's father lived, she could never hand his child to others.

The Helarins appealed to the *Iron Crescent*—a juridical council meeting in a round and iron-domed chamber in the shadow of Hieron's Temple. The judges sat behind a single massive table of yellow stone shaped like a horseshoe, their

chairs of honor lifted ten feet above the floor. Into the horseshoe which was floored with dirt like an arena the paramount Helarins came to plead their case, as did Galya, who, as the highest-ranking Telkepp servant, had been *Summoned* to explain what had transpired.

“How can it be, my Lords?” Vyrdrathane Helarin exclaimed when she had finished her account. “Must a great estate stand hostage to the word of a mere *Telkepp*? Let us enter and hear these words from him ourselves, if it is true that he has said them!”

“Noble Lord,” Galya answered, hands hanging loosely by her side and grey eyes focused on the floor, “I have obeyed Lord Aurelaus since I was four, and long before your birth I swore the Oath of all who serve your Order on pain of Endless Fire. I am his Squire—as sworn to defend his life and hearth and *Word* as any other bearing crossbow, axe, and blade. His mansion is his realm, wherein he is still King, and if any come against his will they *will* be answered.”

A very thin Helarin with dark circles beneath his eyes and long red hair looked at her hard.

“Truly, Telkepp,” he darkly urged, “be sure there. For unless he is immortal, and *that’s* how he survived the monster, you shall eventually be ours.”

But Galya would not relent.

In the end the Crescent decreed a compromise: the Helarins would consent to wait while Galya would agree to climb the tower steps each month in an attempt to ascertain the status of her Lord. She’d also swear upon her Oath that if she found good reason to believe that he was dead that fact would be reported *immediately* to the Crescent.

And so it was that on the first of every month the cloud-haired servant climbed the tower’s winding steps to sniff and listen near the door for any sound or sign of rot; and every month on that same day the dour Helarins—as many as a dozen, with twice that many servants and armed Squires—overran the public park across the cobbled road to stare at Aurelaus Mansion, its expansive grounds and garden, and any Telkepp who appeared, hoping for *good news*.

But month after month slipped by, accreted slowly into years, and each month Galya climbed the steps of the black tower and sensed nothing. And each month simultaneously the Helarins came and watched and drank and sometimes pounded on the front gate and drew their swords and cried for Galya to appear and stick her head out through the bars.

The woman never answered. Though once they'd gone, she'd always check the gate to ensure it was still locked, and with the House's largest servant (a hulking but faint-hearted gardener named Dron) inspect the mansion grounds and fifteen-foot-high wall, a short bone-handled dagger palmed blade-upward in her hand.

Secluded from the outside world, Syndraelia Aurelaus was raised by Galya and thirty other Telkepps sworn to serve her father's House.

For her first six years her diet was strictly monitored and varied; her bedtimes, naps, and wakings precisely scheduled; her play parameters prescribed with both exertion and passivity equally forbade. She was exposed to a sensibly graduated series of toys: first plush then wooden animal figurines; a game called *Blocks & Bars*; canvases, paints, and brushes; balls; plats of patterned and textured fabric; and, finally, realistic-looking dolls resembling infants, children, mothers and grandmothers which Syndra was encouraged to dress and name and assemble into traditional familial settings.

At all things she excelled—although her physicality at play and ferocity of focus in acquiring words and concepts raised concerns, as did her swiftly germinated passion for raising mansions, barricades, and castles out of silverware, blocks, and pillows; organizing her small army of dolls in columns and formations; and exploring the mansion and its garden as if in search of some lost treasure the little girl could not yet name.

One day Syndra's exasperated play-tutor—a rotund and red-faced woman named Ispilia—asked Galya for advice.

"I agree that Syndraelia is intelligent and strong," the head servant replied. "But these are qualities which, when

harnessed, can be boons. For strength is but the exhibition of good health, much-looked for in a wife who must give birth to Knights. And even intelligence, I think, can be a gift once schooled to know its place. So do your best, Ispilia, to hold the line till she is seven, when her schooling shall officially commence.

“For then, I trust, she’ll find the destined way.”

21 December 1016 arrived. At once a horde of tutors accomplished in the arts of Weaving, Theology, Composition, Etiquette, Music, Horticulture, and History seized little Syndra’s reins. To their astonishment, the girl took little interest in etiquette or weaving, was only moderately engaged by music (studying, half-heartedly, the flute) and indifferent to flowers—but *instantly* obsessed by books concerning Knights and heroes, their battles, histories, and codes. Every day she’d have one hour to spend as she desired, and every day she spent it in one place: the mansion’s ground floor library.

This ornate chamber had been fashioned like the wheel of a huge chariot with eleven aisles of shelves forming the *spokes* and an enormous marble table—graven with an image of the sun—making the *hub*. Above it hung a shining copper dome inscribed with constellations, moons, and seven wandering stars known as *the planets*. The dome was fringed with language: for titles of great works; inspiring lines from famous poems; names of philosophers, saints, and heroes; and sacred words in ancient scripts from at least a dozen long-dead tongues had all been carefully inscribed in a dense band inside its rim. Half the chamber’s broad circumference abutted a lovely garden (visible through a bank of mahogany casement windows) where an aged dogwood bloomed in clouds of blazing ivory petals.

Planted at the center of this space Syndra immersed herself in histories of Kingdoms, chronicles of heroes and their Houses, geographic catalogs, symbols, icons, coats of arms, picture-books, Scriptures, maps of vanished lands, and epic poems extolling the terrible glory that was war. In the years that followed, not even more pragmatic tracts and manuals concerning armaments and engines, tactics, strategy,

fortifications, traditions, leadership, horses, laws and codes escaped her interest, but every aspect of the sacrifice and striving of the Knights—*her people!*—filled her with devotion.

Inevitably, it was *love*. Love that made unrolling a previously untouched scroll, or opening a book that had been closed for fifty years, or conning a complex map and bending low to inhale its scent of ink and paper an act of dizzying delight. That made engravings, tables, diagrams, chronologies, catalogs of weapons, armor, martial clothing, pennants, standards, orders of battle of great armies, chains of lineage and command, harnesses, horse breeds, the very lines and shapes and colors on the maps, even words appear to shine with their own light. Love that gave its liquid life to frozen images of Knights in throne rooms, castles, courts and halls and made them burn like meteors through her mind. That resurrected the Old World and let its antique cities, landscapes dotted with peaceful villages and farms, ocean-going vessels, and mountain, desert, and forest wildernesses shine in her ignited imagination's ardent light.

And not beauty alone, but chaos, suffering, and terror were admitted to her mind. In studying the copious illustrations of the *Chronicles of East-fire* she was there, fifteen centuries away and battling *The Horde* as the Barbarians overwhelmed six Southern Kingdoms and the already-ancient Empire of Synnethia, which is where her House was born. She *saw* the Knights; she *saw* the Horde; she *walked* the burning plains on which they fought, her senses throbbing with the ferocious clash of arms, the howl of wolves, the charge and countercharge of horses, and horrendous shrieks as blood gushed in a tide and rolled with severed arms and legs and heads!

An ancient tract entitled *Dispatching the Devourer* obsessed her, despite the fact the monsters had only reached the size of horses when the treatise was composed. The author recommended no fewer than a dozen men attacking simultaneously from all sides with weighted nets, enormous shields, hand-drills, and eighteen-foot-long pikes. And she was with them, handing the fearless hunters fresh unbroken

pikes and drill-bits, as well as helping throw the heavy nets with all her might.

For once committed, the anonymous, long-dead authority advised, *surrender hope for a retreat should the engagement go against you, but reconcile yourself to being consumed, and take comfort, Hieron willing, you've weakened your devil enough to let another take it down.*

Now Syndra, all this time, had obeyed the Telkepps without question or complaint and nearly reveled in her routines. She was always up and dressed before they came to wake her; corrected them whenever they misremembered her prior lessons or her schedule; refused to eat if they exceeded her daily allotment of food. Even her less-than-exciting subjects and activities she performed with flawless if uninspired precision. Yet her *favorites*—such as History, Theology, ancient languages, and the fantastic statuary, landscaping, artifacts, paintings, and architecture of her House—were *assaulted* with such stupendous concentration that at times her lightly freckled cheeks and forehead shone with beads of sweat.

Galya and her tutors admonished her for the *indelicately intense* of these efforts.

“For the essence of feminine action,” they informed her, “is to neither try too hard, nor yet too little. For as the Scriptures tell us, *Exertion is adverse to a good woman's equanimity and health, while Sloth is a disgrace.*”

They said this in the middle of her eighth year. But the girl's intensity endured despite their admonitions, and she soon was growing weary of playing flutes and styling her long red hair an hour every day and clipping flowers in white gloves and learning how to be a Noble wife. For always, wherever else she was (even in bed), the Mansion's glory and the wheel-shaped library called.

Yet still she did as she was told.

Until, upon the advent of the ninth year of her life, Galya sat her down in the Blue Parlor on a chair of azure fabric rimmed with gold. A sharp-winged kestrel—symbol of the House of Aurelaus—was embroidered on its backrest in gold and scarlet thread. For a long time Galya stood, hands

crossed before her, while Syndra waited patiently with her elbows extended awkwardly on the chair's adult-sized armrests.

"This, Syndraelia," Galya solemnly declared, "is a momentous, sacred day. For today you have attained the age of reason, and no longer are a child. According to the *Synnethian Code* (which has been followed for three millennia by your House), you cannot officially stay my ward. And so the time has come to take your place among the Nobles of your Families—both Aurelaus and Helarin—as well as the other scions of the Order of the Knights.

"Now typically, Syndraelia, a maiden of your station would answer to her father, her mother, her elder sisters and any brothers. But your mother died giving you life. Your brother Seradin was killed in fighting for the City in the Quarter of the Tribes. And your father remains in his high tower where his Word—as sure as God's—forbids us to disturb him.

"These circumstances are most unusual. But it is time you know the truth, which till now we've given you in hints. For only then may you become the Noblewoman you were born and bred to be.

"Moving forward, your father's servants must continue your education. As we do, I hope and trust that *you* continue to accept my counsel and direction. For you are still quite young, all but unversed in the true world, and it will be some years, I think, before you're ready to exercise the full authority to which your age and birth entitle you.

"Thus I ask you to submit to me and to my judgements, and have faith, just as you have till now."

"*Ask?*" Syndra repeated.

"Yes," Galya answered. "We are sworn to serve the Nobles of this House, you are of age, and now you are the only Aurelaus to be seen."

Syndra squinted.

"So—my schedules. . . I don't *have* to follow them?"

"I think you need to."

"But you won't *make* me?"

Galya paused. “I cannot *make you* do anything, my Mistress. Not anymore.”

Syndra blinked and slightly cocked her head. Tentatively, she lowered herself from the large chair and stood before the Telkepp, studying the grey-haired woman closely for any sign her words might be a riddle, test, or game. But Galya’s thin, lined face was grave. Nor as they waited did she say more. She merely stood, her hands still crossed, looking back at Syndra.

Slowly, Syndra backed away. Keeping Galya in her sights she moved in the direction of the nearest hallway expecting—with every backward step—the Telkepp to proclaim *it’s Garden-Hour, Syndraelia! Time to get your veil and gloves!*

But Galya said nothing—only watched with a slight frown as Syndra kept retreating till she’d left the room entirely and stood alone in the dim, wood-paneled hall where portraits of her father, Seradin, and grandsires going back eight-hundred years shone in the light of little Crystal orbs. For a time, she lingered in their gazes to see if Galya or another servant would pursue her.

But no one came.

Finally, Syndra stepped back into the parlor. To her surprise she found the Telkepp standing exactly where she’d left her, though now her gaze was pointed at the luxuriously carpeted floor.

“Galya!” Syndra said in a loud voice.

The woman’s head shot up.

“Mistress Syndraelia!” she replied.

“I’ll be taking my lunch and dinner in the library.”