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GOODKIND

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SIEGE OF
STONE

SISTER OF DARKNESS



THE NICCI CHRONICLES

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and the great but fragile empire broke apart into squabbling kingdoms. . . .

Now, as Nathan watched through his shimmering air lens, he marveled at the countless soldiers, all of whom still thought they were marching for Emperor Kurgan. They couldn't possibly know how much time had passed.

But he wasn't worried about the long-dead emperor. He muttered, "General Utros was always the greatest threat. He's right here, and he is the one we should fear."

The first ranks of enemy soldiers marched forward, their lines disorganized, and then they began to yell, a horrifying, hollow sound that boomed louder and louder. The thunder of their footfalls crashed across the grassy plain as they closed in on Ildakar.

Long ago, deep trenches had been dug around the outer walls, moats filled with spikes and sharp rocks, but over the centuries those trenches had become weathered and overgrown, as the people of Ildakar grew lax. Now hundreds of soldiers made their way up to the thick stone walls that loomed over their heads.

"What are they going to do?" Bannon asked, peering down at the hordes pressing against the wall.

"We'll see soon enough," Nathan said.

The enemy soldiers formed lines along the stone barrier, two or three deep. When they pressed close, they raised their gauntleted hands and pounded against the blocks, shouting with their cave-wind voices, hammering and hammering on the walls.

Before long, the first line stepped back, letting the second ranks replace them and continue the pounding. Several minutes later, they backed off to allow the third line forward. The monotonous pounding echoed throughout Ildakar, a nonstop rumble.

Elsa stood next to Nathan, nervous. "Our walls will hold," she said. It sounded like a prayer.

For now, Nathan thought, but did not say it aloud.

3

When he awoke, the world had changed.

General Utros, commanding the grand army of Emperor Kurgan, had reached the city of Ildakar, his target. The army should have been an unstoppable force. Hundreds of thousands of conscripted warriors from across Iron Fang's empire had laid siege to the legendary city, the true prize of these southern lands, and he meant to crack it open like the rind of a ripe pomegranate so they could feast on the sweet treasure within.

On that cold, clear day, with his ranks of soldiers filling the plain, Utros had faced the high walls of the city. He noted the beautiful towers, the stair-stepped districts, the crowded buildings and enameled tile rooftops that shone like the scales on a dragon's back. He would conquer it in the name of his sworn emperor.

His innumerable soldiers were restless, but Utros would try to prevent the men from ruining too much, knowing the city's value. He wanted to keep his reputation as well as this prize. A peaceful conquest benefited Utros as much as the people of Ildakar. Once the army breached the walls, though, even the strictest discipline could never stop the ransacking.

The conquest would not be simple or straightforward. This was *Ildakar*.

Facing his goal, he had stood bare-armed in the cold afternoon sunlight, feeling the chill of oncoming winter. He stared, always calculating, searching for any chink of weakness. His thoughts were one continuous war-council meeting in his head. Utros had advisors, particularly the beautiful twin sorceresses, Ava and Ruva, but he always made up his own mind. He had already developed several schemes to bring down Ildakar.

Then wizards had appeared on the high walls, a large group of them in colorful silken robes, working some kind of magic. He had heard of the powerfully gifted here in Ildakar, but Utros was not afraid of them.

Unexpectedly, he had felt his body stiffen with a sudden weight around and inside him. He could barely think as some horrific power washed over his form, seized him, hardened around him like drying clay. The sounds grew muffled in his ears, and the last thing he heard were outcries of dismay from thousands of throats, his soldiers shouting in confusion as they froze in place.

Outside his imposing command tent, Ava and Ruva turned white, as if they had become statues. His vision dimmed, focusing down into a pinpoint, like the bull's-eye on an archer's target, and the last thing he saw was the city of Ildakar, taunting him.

Utros knew nothing for an unknown period, nor did he experience the passage of time.

An instant or an eternity later, the bright afternoon suddenly switched to predawn darkness. For a moment, he thought he had gone blind. A crackling sound, like ice

breaking on a pond, rattled all around him. A buzzing rang in his ears, as if the thoughts had been dammed up inside his brain and now were unleashed all at once.

Utros found himself still looking at Ildakar, but the details had changed. The lights of the city glowed into the night, washing out stars overhead, but a haze of dawn rose straight ahead of him to the east.

Before he even moved, his thoughts searched for possibilities and explanations. General Utros did not take brash, uncalculated action. He had the largest and best-equipped military force in the world, and he'd already conquered most of the continent for Iron Fang, but the army's greatest asset was his mind.

The air around him felt much warmer than the cold afternoon he remembered only a moment ago. Instead of a crisp winter, this was early autumn at best, which meant the better part of a year had passed. How could that be? The grasses were brown and dry, but wildly overgrown around him, and that simply couldn't be true. In their relentless siege, his huge army had trampled the entire plain into barren dirt.

Utros took a step forward and instantly felt an unnatural stiffness in his skin, the tightness in his arms, his neck, his face. His body, which had always been so limber and strong, felt like a grinding wheel that had sat for too long without grease.

He looked at his bare arms and the oddly tarnished copper wrist guards marked with Kurgan's flame. His flesh tone had a chalky cast. He poked his biceps with an exploratory fingertip and found that the skin itself was tougher than normal, as if infused with half-hardened clay. He felt the pressure of his fingertip, but the delicate sensitivity of his skin was gone. Utros flexed his arm, felt his elbow grudgingly bend. His muscles bulged like boulders.

He touched his face, felt the full beard there, the square jaw, the prominent cleft in his chin that even the beard could not cover. He felt the smooth waxiness of the burn scar across the left half of his face, but it no longer ached. He remembered when his captive silver dragon had escaped, destroyed part of the camp, and burned him with the searing acid of dragon fire. Now the scar felt smooth, with even less sensitivity than before.

Around him, Utros heard gasps of astonishment, murmured questions that rose to shouts. He turned to look at his entire camp, only to find that it was gone!

Countless thousands of warriors milled about. The soldiers had been in position, some posted as sentries, most gathered in clusters according to their assigned companies. Hundreds upon hundreds of tents had covered the plain, along with wagons, horses, pickets, big bonfires.

And now . . . nothing.

He remembered his large command tent, the bright and defiant banners of Iron Fang, the grain stockpiles, the armorers' tents, the sword-sharpening stations, the fletchers' camp. All had vanished. Nothing remained but the people themselves, pale and stiff, still wearing their armor, carrying their swords and shields. Some horses wandered around loose, their corrals and paddocks gone.

"Keeper and spirits," he said under his breath. "What has happened to us?"

The confused army was like a cloud of swirling gnats, but the general concentrated hard, as if in a trance. With total focus, he could dampen the sounds across the camp. He doubted

anyone in his army knew more about the situation than he did, but he had to learn their circumstances.

Utros took a few steps. His body felt as if it was still partially stone, not entirely thawed back into soft flesh. He still wore his leather vest, studded with rectangular metal plates for extra protection, and his fearsome helmet adorned with the horns cut off a monster bull that Ildakar had unleashed on them. He remembered the day that beast had charged through the camp, wreaking havoc. Utros had killed the monster himself and taken the horns as trophies.

He turned to his two willowy sorceresses, who were just as confused as he. Ava and Ruva were shapely and slender, clad in blue gowns that fit tight around their narrow waists, emphasizing their ample breasts. The twins looked identical, but Utros knew them as well as he knew his own hands, and he had used his hands to study every inch of their bodies. They gave him strength, but not sex.

Now, he needed that strength.

Ava and Ruva were pale, their skin showing less warmth than a corpse's. The two were completely hairless, through their own fastidious efforts, using razor-sharp knives to scrape smooth their scalps, their eyebrows, even the thatch between their legs. Ava and Ruva took care of each other. In normal times, they painted their creamy exposed skin with swirls and designs that helped channel the gift they possessed.

In the brightening dawn, the women stared at each other and turned to Utros, their expressions full of questions. Without speaking, he joined them, and both folded around him, touching their bodies to his. He felt the shared strength grow.

As the confusion increased across the camp, Utros said to his sorceresses, "We have to learn what happened." The grumbling outcries began to shift, uncertain and fearful. "I need to tell the soldiers something."

"Then we will have to lie, because we know nothing," said Ruva. "Yet."

Ava disagreed. "We know it was a spell, a powerful one. And we can be sure the wizards of Ildakar wielded it against us."

Ruva touched the general's face, ran her palm along his beard, his scarred cheek. It seemed a loving caress, but she was investigating. Ava reached out to do the same thing to her sister. "Stone. We've been turned to stone."

"And back," said Ruva.

"Not all the way back. We are still flesh and blood, but there's a hardness throughout." Utros glared at the walled city backlit by the rising sun. Now that his shock was dissipating into a sea of questions, he noticed subtle changes in Ildakar. Some of the buildings inside were burned, and tendrils of greasy smoke smeared the sky.

He said, "Their wizards petrified us with some kind of spell, but the magic they would need to immobilize so many thousands of warriors is beyond my comprehension." He gestured toward the raised city above the river. "Look at Ildakar now. Something's happened there. Those fires . . . maybe there has been a civil war."

"Could that be what awakened us?" Ruva asked.

Ava said, "Maybe the wizard who cast the stone spell is dead, so the magic faded."

Thousands of his front ranks, responding to their desperate confusion, marched forward to throw themselves against the wall and the gates in what seemed to be a futile gesture.

“They are angry,” Ruva said.

“Let them be angry,” Utros said.

His men had been trained so well they could mount an assault in their sleep. As they crashed toward the walls now in an instinctive reaction, Utros knew there was no purpose to the charge, but he wouldn't call them back. He did not like unplanned operations, but the sortie would occupy them for a time and give him a chance to decide what to do. If his entire army had been petrified for months or even years, he needed to know more.

His thoughts spun along different paths, suggesting answers and tracing consequences. He couldn't explain why all the tents, campfires, and supplies had vanished. He remembered vividly how the entire plain had been trampled by so many soldiers, all the machinery and materials that accompanied such a huge military operation.

In the previous week, his army had endured three days of cold rain and even an early-season snow. The ground had been a nightmare of muck that should have frozen each night, but all the campfires and troops kept it churned into a mess. Smoke from tens of thousands of fires made the air heavy and bitter. Simply to provide firewood, crews had stripped the hills of trees for miles around, but the distant forest looked thick and healthy now. The landscape had recovered completely.

He began to suspect that more than a few seasons had passed. How was that possible?

“General Utros,” said a familiar gruff voice, his battle-scarred first commander, Enoch. Enoch had been with Utros since early in the general's career. Though ten years older and bearing the scars of many more engagements, Enoch was entirely faithful to Utros. He was a man who understood tactics and quickly grasped the plans his leader gave him, but not so ambitious that he had anything to prove. Enoch did not seek glory for himself, because serving General Utros was entirely sufficient for him. His loyalty to Emperor Kurgan was secondary. The first commander also looked pale and chalky, still partially stone.

“What happened, General? Something changed, something terrible.”

Utros stood straight. “You know as much as I do, for the moment, First Commander. Ildakar attacked us with some kind of spell.”

Enoch frowned, thinking of his specific duty. “Until we learn what's happened, sir, confusion among the ranks will grow, and that will destroy our military discipline.”

The general knew the complexities of managing such a huge force, even under the best of conditions. “Do you think the men will be frightened enough to abandon the siege? Is their confusion such that they'll panic and scatter?”

Shocked by the suggestion, Enoch gave him a disappointed grimace. “Of course not, General. They will never desert. Each man is yours, heart and soul. But they'll look to you for explanations. You have to give them something before too long.”

Utros's smile was muted by his skin's stiffness. “Send messengers among the troops and tell them to wait for word from me.” As he scanned the crowded ranks, he noted the few loose horses. “Send riders throughout the valley, have them inform each company that General Utros still leads them and that we will be victorious. I will avenge whatever needs to be avenged.”