

# BLOOD LAW

(BOOK TWO OF THE HOLLOW WORLD)



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## CHAPTER ONE

AN ARMY OF legend and nightmare marched on the world of man. From the cover of a forested hilltop, General Viddenier watched them come. They advanced along the Long Purple Road, an endless, homogenous horde. A river of warriors trailing beyond sight to where the highway bent around the hills. Scouts had put their number at close to ten thousand.

Though they walked on two legs, they were more like beasts than men. Powerful, savage, brutal. Each one towered over seven feet, bulging with veins and muscles. Their skin was an ashen blue, their eyes pupilless from centuries beneath the ground. Thin black tentacles burst from their skulls, writhing, probing the air.

The theed.

Until a few weeks ago they had been thought to be a myth, a tale to frighten children. Now, three towns lay obliterated in their wake. Every citizen slaughtered; women, children, even infants. Their path had led here, to the very heart of civilisation: Syrentium, crown city of the Circle of Kingdoms. Viddenier and his men were all that stood between humanity and oblivion, and they were outnumbered three-to-one.

“It is time,” Viddenier told the rider beside him, his breath steaming in the cold air. “Tell the commanders to be ready for the signal.”

The rider nodded, spurred his mount, and rode off through the woods. General Viddenier watched him go. Atop his mount, Viddenier appeared calm and powerful, the gold-trimmed cloak that marked his office draping proudly from his shoulders. His rigid posture made him seem a man of twenty years younger, even despite the grey that flecked his short-cropped hair and beard.

He looked back over his shoulder, checking the force lined silently behind him. Here and there the pale Deep Winter sun punctured the forest canopy, glinting off the soldiers' armour. They rode bantaks, large reptiles that strode on powerful hind limbs: the preferred mount across the continent of Calambria. Every man was armed with blade and shield, the golden star of Syrentus emblazoned across them.

All was eerily still in the shaded forest. The only sound was the deep rumble of ten thousand advancing foes. The theed marched along the misted valley below – along the Long Purple Road – a highway that led to the gates of Syrentium itself. On the other side of the highway were the rocky beginnings of the Andapine Mountains. Viddenier had five contingents secreted in those hills too. Six more were on this side of the valley in Robbers Wood.

Less than half a mile away, at the end of the highway, loomed the walls of Syrentium. Behind them soared the city's towering skyline; impossibly high towers that seemed to touch the heavens, adorned with minarets and spires.

Viddenier had dedicated his life to protecting his city. He had faced barbarian hordes, D'ziryan raiders, even an enraged ar'gar

hive guarding their pregnant queen. Today the general's blood ran colder.

Right now, inside the city, Regent Brecan and his men would be preparing a traditional siege defence. But Brecan's plan was anything but traditional. That was why virtually all of Syrentium's forces were stationed *outside* the city. It wasn't an honourable strategy, but it was the only one with even half a chance of succeeding.

A restless wind whistled through the valley below, shifting the morning mist. The front line of the enemy would be in range in moments. The theed marched at a measured pace, making no effort to protect themselves. Their weapons, a chaotic assortment of every cruelty imaginable, were sheathed. Perhaps their confidence was justified; Viddenier had seen just one of these beasts punch twelve-foot iron gates off their hinges.

"General?"

Viddenier nodded. "Sound the attack."

The rider beside him raised the horn to his lips, and blasted. Its call echoed triumphantly through the morning air.

Nothing happened.

Viddenier paled, his eyes sweeping the valley. He held up a hand to halt the troop behind him. Eight contingents were supposed to have charged at that signal, rushing down the hillside, flanking their foe. Only the dead or the deaf could have ignored the sound.

"General!"

Viddenier turned in his saddle. A moment later his blade was in hand. Shadows were swirling through the woods towards him and his men, winding sinuously between the trunks. Columns of

darkness slithering from every direction, coalescing like a gathering storm. Some of the men exchanged glances, others drew blades. Soldiers tugged on the reins of their nervous mounts.

“What manner of sorcery is this?” Viddenier growled.

But the shadows were only part of it... It was as if every kind of forest animal had converged on their location. Furred quillas were climbing down from the treetops, their little teeth chattering. Jebbits bounded through the shadows, following the ranger’s trail. Birds were perched on every available branch, watching Viddenier and his men. Another unseen creature was snorting its way through the undergrowth. Beyond the gathering gloom he saw other, deeper shadows. Larger creatures slinking through the woods, encircling them. His eyes tracked a serpent as it slithered out from a nearby trunk.

The shadows continued to thicken, lapping about the men’s saddles in a swirling lake of darkness.

“Hold,” Viddenier commanded, drawing his shield and turning his mount around.

A moment later the shadows erupted.

Viddenier snatched his head to the side as the lake of darkness whipped into a furious storm. It roared through the forest, tearing leaves from the trees. A hundred rushing spectres in one turbulent entity. The last thing he saw was a flock of birds take flight. Then his world was smothered and blackened. Silence, immediate and utter, as surely as if his head had been dunked underwater, a striking contrast to the rushing shadows.

Eyes appeared before him in the dark. A weight hit his back. Suddenly, claws were raking at his neck and shoulders. Something

was pulling on his cloak, dragging him under, clutching at his legs. His bantak bucked beneath him. It all happened in utter silence.

Viddenier reversed his grip on his blade. He sliced a backhanded crescent. The eyes in front of him fell away, swallowed by the gloom. With his shield-hand, he reached back, grabbed the creature attacking his neck and flung it.

“Men! To me! To the valley!” he shouted, but the sorcery snatched away the words before they had left his mouth.

A sword lashed out from the gloom. One of his own men; in the chaos of the turbulent dark they would slay each other. Viddenier took the blow on the shield. He sheathed his sword and grasped the wrist of the soldier who had struck. Turning his bantak toward the valley, he led the soldier with him.

They broke through the tree line together, the world bursting back into light. A thousand sounds erupted at once. The footfalls of the theed thundered in the aftermath of the sorcerous silence.

A long-beaked bute swooped out of the darkness, diving talon-first at Viddenier’s face. He batted it away with his shield.

“Round up the others!” he shouted to the man he had saved, a sharp-featured soldier named Garid. “Get back in there and start leading men out!”

Garid nodded, spurring his mount. Viddenier saw nothing more. A weight crashed into him, bowling him out of the saddle. The sky turned over as he tumbled down the grassy hillside.

He curled, letting his momentum bring him to his feet just in time to see a rush of startling red fur. Viddenier tugged his blade from its scabbard and swung. The beast was too quick. It leapt away, snarling, but it gave Viddenier a chance to regain his footing.

He swept his cloak from his shoulder, widened his stance and circled, giving him his first real look at the beast that had attacked him. Viddenier cursed.

*A fendree.* The beast was hunched low on its sharp-jointed limbs, its red fur bristling. The scales that fanned out from the back of its neck pulsed from purple to blue; a fendree claim to territory.

It let out a low and whining caw then sprung. Viddenier twisted out of the animal's path. He sliced as it flew by, nicking its tail.

The fendree turned slowly back around, snarling. Its black eyes were level with Viddenier's. The beast hunched lower, coiling for another leap, its tail whipping angrily back and forth, spraying beads of blood.

Viddenier took a step back, then, with a jerk of his elbow, launched his shield. The disc shot through the air. It smacked the beast right between its eyes, dropping it with a metallic clang.

Viddenier's head snapped from side to side. For the moment, his immediate area was clear. On both sides of the valley, soldiers were emerging from their hiding places, shielding their eyes, or swatting at diving birds. But there were far too few of them. Viddenier could make out nothing else. Between the trunks was utter darkness. Shadows seeped from the woods like smoke.

Below, the theed marched arrogantly on. A river of monsters, flowing ever closer to the city. They showed no interest in what was happening above. Only one looked up at Viddenier, its white eyes curious. The foe was less than two hundred yards from the gates.

Viddenier marched over to the fendree, glad to note that the beast was still breathing. He bent to retrieve his shield when an earth-rumbling groan washed up from the city.

Slowly, Viddenier stood and turned, shock stiffening his spine. He looked on, frozen, his cloak billowing on a gust of wind.

The city gates were opening.

Framed at the head of the valley, Syrentium's walls stood tall and silent, the morning sun streaming over the battlements. The royal gates were grinding slowly apart, thirty foot slabs of timber and steel opening their arms to the enemy.

Without a single shot being fired, from bow or catapult. *What the hell was Brecan doing?* Their plan had been to let the gates fall, eventually, not to simply open them.

Viddenier squinted up at the battlements, shielding his eyes against the Deep Winter sun. That was when he realised. The archers weren't holding their fire; they weren't there at all. The battlements were empty. A cold weight sunk in Viddenier's stomach.

Syrentium had been betrayed.

The only one in the position to do so was Regent Brecan, a man who Viddenier loved like a brother. A man who loved Syrentium as much as Viddenier. It seemed impossible, but there was no other explanation: either Brecan had betrayed them, or Brecan was dead.

Below, the theed marched ever closer, their pace measured, assured. Marching like conquerors, not attackers. Viddenier's throat moved, but he found he had nothing to swallow. A dark hollowness overtook him, seeming to suck the air from the world.

He was dimly aware of the sound of riders behind him, but his gaze was locked on the city. The theed column drew closer with every passing second. Once they crossed those gates, nothing would stand between the theed and the people of Syrentium.

Viddenier's jaw tightened. He turned as the riders pulled up beside him and saw that it was Garid. The soldier had re-emerged from the woods with two others: a massive fighter called Rosk, and Olen, one of the archers. Commander Blane rode with them, leading the reins of Viddenier's bantak.

"Start rounding up the men, Commander," Viddenier told Blane. "Take Garid with you. Regroup at the head of the valley. Charge as soon as you have a large enough force. Do what you can to disrupt the enemy line. Do not wait for my return."

"Your return, General?"

Viddenier's eyes moved back to the city. "I'm going to shut those damn gates." He leapt up into the saddle and wheeled his mount around. "Rosk, Olen, follow me. H'ya!" With a whip of the reins, his bantak exploded into motion.

The riders thundered towards the city along the forest's edge. Trees whipped by in a blur on their left. Viddenier squinted into the woods as they rode. Between the trunks was a maelstrom of darkness. Below in the valley he could hear Blane and Garid shouting orders.

The theed were less than a hundred yards from the gates. Viddenier flicked his reins and spurred his bantak. The talons of the warriors' mounts drum-rolled behind. In a few seconds they were ahead of the enemy line.

Rosk pulled up beside him. "We're not heading down to the highway, General?"

Viddenier ignored the question and rode. For one mad second he *had* considered riding straight for the gates, but riding between ten thousand theed and their goal was worse than suicide. Besides, there was more than one way back into the city. On this side of the valley, the woods led all the way to the city walls; woods that were teeming with beasts and shadows. There was no safe way through, but if Viddenier's theory was correct...

He tugged on the reins and then the ground was falling away beneath him. The riders charged down the embankment, their bantaks' talons scoring the gravel. They did not ride down to the valley, but into Rogue Canyon, a steep chasm that cut into the woods through the hill, at right angles to the highway.

Viddenier turned a hard left as they hit the canyon floor. Then they were galloping along the canyon, its steep rock walls towering on either side. There was an old rangers' trail at the end of the Rogue Canyon, one they could use to skirt the shadowed forest to the city walls. He just hoped they found an ally when they got there.

Viddenier glanced up as they rode and saw that his theory was right: The canyon was free of shadows. Black clouds floated above them, seeping out from the trees and over the canyon into the woods on the other side.

"What evil is against us?" Rosk shouted, riding alongside Viddenier.

Viddenier just shook his head. None of it made sense. Breca's apparent betrayal, this darkness, the accompanying plague of beasts. Fendree were fiercely territorial, but they were more likely to

run from a fight than seek one. It was unheard of, almost... The herald from Ludport said the town had been assailed by fendree...

The strange reports of the last few months suddenly took on a more sinister meaning: the scarcely intelligent voer fighting alongside raiding D'Ziryans; dark armies moving through the Rolwood Forest; ships being torn apart by unseen creatures; this theed invasion. Was it possible they were all working together? What kind of power could even command such an alliance?

Ahead, the canyon was quickly coming to an end, shallowing out as the ground rose and opened into a forest clearing. It appeared they had moved beyond the range of the darkness; this part of the forest was clear of shadows.

Viddenier squinted. Ahead, in the clearing, a circle of runes had been etched in the dirt. They were moving.

Viddenier tugged on the reins. The bantaks' talons gouged clouds of dust as the riders jerked to a halt at the head of the clearing. The ground within the circle of runes was bubbling and spluttering like boiling stew. Chunks of rock crumbled upward and rolled away, sliding across the ground as if gravity had turned sideways.

Viddenier caught a glimpse of something moving beneath the bubbling earth. Foreboding ran up his spine like a cold finger. His hand moved to the hilt of his blade just as the ground exploded.

A gigantic form burst from the soil, landing with a boom in the clearing's centre. For the first time in decades, Viddenier's bladder threatened to betray him. Before them was a thing of nightmare.

A monstrosity, it loomed as tall as three men and as wide as ten. A matted fusion of black flesh and bone. Limbs sprouted all over its bulbous body. No two appendages were the same. Some had scales, others had hair. All had something for killing; barbs, hooks or talons. At the centre of its slime-covered body was an enormous maw, an abyss of teeth surrounded by hook-like appendages that flexed and beckoned. On either side, two large crimson eyes smouldered with intelligent hatred.

It hissed and scuttled forward, quickly, haltingly. Olen fired. The arrow pierced one nightmare eye. The monstrosity reared, screeching with ear-splitting rage. One of its appendages rose threateningly, twitching and spasming.

“Fan out,” Viddenier shouted, riding around on the monster’s left. Rosk dismounted and crept forward, heading to the right of the clearing. Olen remained mounted and rode centre. He loosed an arrow.

The monster sprung. Its speed was startling. Olen dove from the saddle as the beast landed, crushing his bantak. Its giant maw closed over the animal’s head. With an awful tearing sound, the monster ripped free the bantak’s head. The body crashed through the treetops twenty yards away.

The monster scuttled around to face to the humans. Its red eyes – one pierced by an arrow – watched them hungrily. It twitched and shuddered, then scurried straight at Viddenier. The general watched the beast come. At the last moment he leapt from the saddle toward the monstrosity.

Viddenier soared, his sword gripped overhead. He twisted as he came down, stabbing his blade, burying it hilt-deep in the

monster's flesh. The beast reared, screeching. Viddenier's arms were wrenched overhead as he fought to hold on to his blade; the monster's muscles – or whatever was beneath its slimy exterior – had contracted around the sword, trapping it firm.

The veins in Viddenier's neck bulged as he tugged, but the sword would not come free. He was dimly aware of Rosk moving in behind him. Then a club-ended appendage slammed into Viddenier's chest, hurling him to the clearing's edge. He crashed against a trunk and slumped into the undergrowth.

Rosk was already swinging. His massive war-hammer slammed into the beast's blubbery hide. It bounced back twice as fast. Rosk stepped sideways. His wrists swivelled, circling the weapon and swinging again. He landed a blow against a crooked limb, shattering a patch of scales.

Lightning-fast, a hooked appendage struck. It punctured Rosk's shoulder from behind, its tip exploding out through the big man's chest. Rosk gasped in agony, his eyes wide with fear. His hammer dropped from his useless arm. Slowly, the hook curled around, dragging Rosk toward the gaping maw. The warrior thrashed as he was pulled, his heels gouging the soil

Olen loosed an arrow. It bounced off the creature's scales. He fired again. This one caught in the monstrosity's side. A long tentacle lashed out, snaking around Olen's ankle. Suddenly Olen was dangling upside-down. The tentacle whipped down, slamming the archer into the ground, his skull smacking the earth. Olen pushed himself up from the dirt then slumped back down, barely conscious.

On the clearing's edge, Viddenier staggered to his feet in time to see the monstrosity's maw snap closed. The half of Rosk that wasn't in the creature's mouth fell to the dirt in a bloody mess.

The monstrosity roared, a horrible chorus of rasping hatred. The slurry of flesh that had been Rosk tumbled from its mouth.

The beast scuttled toward Viddenier. The general took a step back, his eyes scanning the clearing.

The ground was slick with blood where they had injured the monster. Puddles of thick, dark liquid that seemed to shimmer, a rainbow of colours leaching into one another. Olen was rising shakily to his feet. Near the canyon mouth, Rosk's bantak was shuffling nervously.

The monster was bearing down on Viddenier. He took another step back and gave three sharp whistles. The monstrosity's shadow loomed over him.

Viddenier's bantak sprang. The reptile's powerful hind limbs propelled it into the air. It came down on top of the monster, the bantak's massive talons burying into flesh. A second later, Rosk's bantak joined the fight. The monster thrashed and spun, trying to shake the animals off.

"Flame arrow!" Viddenier shouted to Olen, pointing at the oily puddles. "See the beast's blood!"

Olen nodded, chest heaving.

Viddenier widened his stance. From under a thick brow, he watched monster and bantak struggle. His eyes followed their movement, tracking his sword hilt, still buried in the creature's flesh. On his periphery he saw Olen drawing his bow and the fiery

arrow's light. The sword-hilt came back into to view as the creatures turned.

Viddenier sprinted.

He dove, catching the sword-hilt, and swung. The blade twisted in the wound like a key in a keyhole. There was a sickening pop as the muscles contracted around the blade released. Viddenier plunged. He dragged the sword down with him, slicing through blubbery flesh.

He slammed to the ground on his back, his sword still in hand. A wave of oily blood sloshed over him. He had opened a gash five feet long in the monster's side. The monstrosity howled and twisted. Rosk's bantak was flung clear. Viddenier's bantak leapt away.

"Olen!" Viddenier shouted, rolling as a giant barb lanced the spot where he had lain. "Now!"

Olen fired. The flame-tipped arrow disappeared into the beast's open wound with a squelch.

A second later its oily blood ignited. Dark purple flames burst from the monster's side. The shriek of agony the monster emitted was deafening. It spasmed violently, then scuttled away into the forest, crashing through the trees, leaving a trail of blood and puffs of purple flame.

Olen held out a hand and hauled Viddenier to his feet. "Do you think we killed it, General?"

Viddenier heaved a sigh and shook his head to say he had no answer. He wasn't even sure such a monster *could* be killed. But the immediate threat was over. His gaze moved to Rosk's bantak. The beast was lying near the clearing's edge, broken. The general's own mount had bolted.

A swirl of movement turned Viddenier's attention back toward the canyon. His eyes narrowed. The shadows were dissipating, leaking away through the trees. They poured over the cliff-face and down into the canyon from both sides, draining toward the valley in a stream.

Then, from somewhere in the distance, came a deep, booming toll. It rang once, twice, and again, each long note allowed to fall silent before the next note sounded: the Bells of Syrentus. Viddenier and Olen shared a grim look. A custom in the Circle of Kingdoms, the city bells were only used to welcome important visitors.

"We need to move." Viddenier sprinted from the clearing, his armour jostling. Olen followed on his heels. In his mind's eye, Viddenier could see the theed horde crossing Syrentium's threshold. He pushed the image away and kept running, leading them up a trail into the forest.

In full armour, the uphill path was gruelling. Viddenier barely had air to breathe, but he forced his legs to keep moving, one step in front of the other. Behind him, Olen's breaths sounded as ragged as his own. By the time they emerged from the trees, exhaustion had slowed their pace to a jog.

The trail led into another clearing, this one perched upon the bluff that overlooked the Bay of Syrentus. Below, the wooded hills rolled down to the city walls. From here, Viddenier could see out over the forest, all the way from the city gates to where the Long Purple Road bent around the curve of the hills.

The sight that greeted Viddenier was enough to drop him to his knees. He was too late.

Syrentium was burning.

Not the city itself, but its walls. Towering flames leapt from the battlements, doubling the height of the sixty foot walls. There could be no doubt the fire was born from sorcery. Although they spat and lashed angrily, the deep crimson flames were as sculpted as a well-groomed hedge maze. They spewed thick black smoke that swirled up into the heavens, slowly closing over the city in a dome of gloom. Viddenier could barely make out the smoky outline of Syrentium's towers and minarets.

Slowly, the general pushed himself to his feet. An eerie wind was rippling though the valley below. Along the forest line, no more soldiers were emerging. Only the sorcerous dark was seeping from the woods. Wispy strands leaked out from between the trunks and down the hillside like draining water, coalescing in the valley's centre in a river of shadows.

And at the end of the highway, the final ranks of the theed were crossing into the city, the serpent of darkness streaming in behind them.

The men who had managed to escape from the woods just stood where they were, their gazes locked on the city. Even from his distance, Viddenier could read their haunted expressions. He had seen that look on men before, but never his own. It was the mask of defeat and cold despair.

Viddenier's gaze moved back to the blazing city, and to the white tower of Syrentus growing dimmer through the smoke. For the first time in living memory, Syrentium, the capital of the Circle of Kingdoms, had fallen.