

THE REALMSIC CONQUEST:

# THE HERO OF LEGEND

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# Chapter One

Rain poured from the sky like a flood of emotion, as water washed the overhanging balcony where King Maebus stood. Reflecting upon his situation, his heart pounded as tumultuously as the thunder echoing in the distance. Several hundred feet below him, the currents of the Northwest River battered the rock ledge that supported the Realmsic Castle. The violent waters mirrored Maebus' soul. He dreaded what was soon to come, yet he was determined to ensure that the falling rain would not mirror the tears of his people.

Sighing heavily, he surveyed the horizon of the only magical kingdom in existence. This was his land. The Realm. There was such beauty on its surface, but such tragedy within its heart. A crack of thunder again boomed from the heavens. From the corner of his eye, Maebus thought he saw a flicker of lightning. The dark clouds had gathered quickly on this day. Yet weather had nothing to do with the impending storm that now worried him.

Like the volatile atmosphere above him, the Realm's natural condition had been an unyielding state of war for thousands of years. The discovery of magic initially divided the Realmsic people and now it was magic that would decide its fate. Maebus' mind flew to the seemingly simple object that held the Realm in thrall and compelled enemies to attack. The *Realmsic Crystal* was the source of all magic; the prize that maintained and threatened the Realm's very existence. Secretly, he loathed it. Yet duty obliged him to protect its power at all costs.

"Magic," came a voice behind Maebus, as though the speaker had read his thoughts. "It is both our blessing and our curse."

Maebus turned swiftly to discover a dark-hooded man standing just a few feet from him.

"Did I interrupt you, brother?" The man removed his hood, revealing a tempered smile.

"Never," laughed Maebus, relieved to see Grand Wizard Kelm. "But I didn't hear you come in."

Kelm was not only Advisor to the kingdom, he was Maebus' life-long and trusted friend. Maebus sometimes wished they really *were* brothers. The two men clasped hands.

Kelm walked past Maebus and leaned forward against the balcony. He stared through the rain. "How appropriate," he said. "A storm is actually coming."

"Unfortunately, the storm which you are referring to is already here." Maebus joined Kelm and pointed in the direction of the distant Western Nations. "War is upon us."

The Grand Wizard chuckled. "When is it not, Maebus? For two thousand years, our history has been an endless string of sporadic conflicts and conquerors."

"True. But not like this. Not like *him*."

Kelm's silence was evidence of his anxiety. Maebus knew that Kelm shared his unspoken fear that their defeat was inevitable. Never in history had the kingdom fallen. Yet, never had there been an enemy such as Damian.

The Wizard's gaze intensified on Maebus, as though he could see through his friend's worn features into his soul.

"Does he worry you?" Kelm asked.

Maebus shook his head. “It’s not the man who worries me,” he replied. “It’s the fervor in his voice. It’s the intensity of his influence. Almost overnight, one man spawned a *Legion of Warriors*. With them, he now unleashes merciless destruction. Where previous conquerors have demonstrated haste, this man is poised. His tactics, while seemingly erratic, are calculated, intricate, and unsympathetic. Our Realmsic Army is sharpened by centuries of physical combat. But it isn’t men they now fight against. It’s ideology.”

“Yes,” Kelm said sharply, “but at the basis of all ideology, there exists one fatal flaw. Man’s desire to be more than he is. The Warlord’s tactics are different, I agree. But his motives are the same as those who came before him. Beyond his pretty words and promises is nothing more than common greed.”

Maebus walked from the balcony into his chamber, his brow furrowed in contemplation. He’d only recently become King and still found the royal chamber to be uncomfortable. The décor, passed down from generations, felt foreign to him. The overcast skies did little to illuminate the dim interior. Aside from a single candle flame flickering against a cold draft, the room was blanketed in shadowy darkness.

Maebus sighed yet again. “To his people,” he said, “this man’s greatness is indelible. It’s with that passion that they fight.”

Kelm stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the drab grayness of the world outside.

Maebus continued, “It would be wise for us to acknowledge the unity they’ve created. Think of it, Kelm ... thousands of individually focused minds, all in one harmonious agreement to kill us.”

Kelm laughed uneasily. “I would consider the union of minds a beautiful notion, if it didn’t mean our own demise.”

Maebus smiled half-heartedly before lapsing into silence.

“Maebus...” Kelm began. His dark eyes filled with concern. “An attack upon the kingdom is imminent. Swords and magic will not be enough to face the sheer numbers that Damian will bring with him. How are we to defend our home when this man comes?”

Maebus thought a moment before he answered. “I have a plan, but I need to speak with the council.”

Kelm pointed to the door. “They’re already waiting.”

## Chapter Two

The storm raged outside the castle as Maebus carefully double-bolted the doors of his chamber. He then moved along the main corridor with Kelm. Maebus heard the rain lash the castle walls like whips upon flesh. But he was unbothered by the gale. This domain had withstood far greater assaults.

The castle's very presence was a bittersweet epitaph that seemed as familiar as misery in the Realm. Each brick of its foundation, walls, and corridors was a headstone memorializing those fallen in the pursuit of elusive peace. Its ashen exterior had perhaps never been white.

Maebus thought briefly of its history. Like magic within the Realm, the castle was a cursed blessing. Erected during a time of fierce conflict, it remained as much a beacon of hope as it did a symbol of despair. Just as its towering pillars stood magnificent and beautiful, a closer look revealed their true dilapidation.

Maebus then thought of his own personal history and wondered if he and the castle shared similar characteristics.

"What are you thinking about?" Kelm asked as they rounded a corner. Maebus briefly glanced at the corridor ceiling, noticing smudges that had been there since his childhood.

"There's so much I want to say to the council," he said, trying to control the emotional tone of his voice. "I remember growing up within this castle and being afraid of them. I never thought I'd one day be King and lead them. None of this would have happened had Grand Wizard Kyora not taken me in; hadn't made me study as her Disciple of Magic."

Kelm shook his head, walking alongside him. "I think things unfolded as they should have, Maebus. My mother saw great potential in you at such a young age, although you couldn't perform a lick of magic."

"What did you expect?" Maebus chuckled. "My family and I were Laymen. We lived without magic. Perhaps my parents even feared it. That's probably why I failed as your mother's apprentice."

"Well, I doubt you ever really wanted to be a Wizard," Kelm replied.

Maebus leaned closer to Kelm's ear. "I didn't want to be King either," he whispered.

The Wizard laughed. "You think *I* wanted to replace my mother as Realmsic Advisor? But someone had to protect you from *you*."

"Indeed, brother. We do what we must." Maebus said as they arrived at a set of double doors that led to the public side of the main corridor. He stood aside as Kelm opened them.

Once through, the castle bustled with activity as the two made their way towards the Great Hall to visit the Realmsic Council. Despite congestion on the walkway, each person moved aside as the King and his Advisor walked by. This subservience still unsettled Maebus. He'd been King less than a week. Many of the castle staff were the same people he'd known for years and had even grown up with. Now, they looked to him for guidance and protection.

Maebus had no issue with giving orders to people he so recently took orders from. However, what bothered him was the reality of what was soon to come.

“Maebus,” Kelm said, breaking through his reverie. “Do you realize this will be your *first* crisis council meeting?”

Maebus glared at his Advisor. “You don’t say, Kelm!” He didn’t need to be reminded of the importance of the proceedings.

The Grand Wizard continued to speak of their upcoming meeting, but Maebus’ head echoed the word *crisis*. He swallowed hard while trying to think of something else ... anything other than that dreadful word. His attention was brought back by the sudden snap of Kelm’s fingers.

“Really? Did you just drift off during the middle of my talking points for the meeting?”

Maebus squeezed his eyes, attempting to force out the remnants of his malcontent. “I’ve been losing focus a lot lately. It’s frustrating. Not long ago, I could concentrate on an issue with pinpoint accuracy. But now I can barely hold on to a single thought for longer than a few moments. To think of all the years of mental strengthening exercises I endured as a Disciple, now wasted.”

“It’s actually quite understandable,” Kelm said. “Your own consciousness is protecting itself by strategically evading a fear it doesn’t want to comprehend.”

Maebus’ temples began throbbing as forcefully as his beating heart. “Kelm ... is it right for a King to be afraid? Or is it cowardice to pretend I’m not afraid?” He felt the tension grow in his own voice as he spoke to Kelm. “Every gesture, every motion, even the slightest raise of an eyebrow is interpreted by a thousand people.”

Kelm held Maebus’ elbow, drawing him to halt. He gazed hard into his friend’s face. “The Realm has fought many battles, has known many conquerors and, above all, it has survived. You are a new King. You are not afraid for yourself, but for your people. You don’t want to be the first King to lose it all. And that is bravery. Just remember that Damian is merely a man.” Kelm’s voice was harsh.

Maebus resumed walking and Kelm followed at his shoulder. “I do not fear men,” he said. “Yet, this Warlord’s charisma is uncanny. It’s common knowledge that Laymen and Magicals have fought one another since the discovery of magic. Yet despite compromises during the historic Conference of Amity, which led to the establishment of our kingdom, many Laymen still deeply despised magic. They view the kingdom as the source of their oppression, and they’d fight to defeat us as fiercely as we’d fight to protect the Realmsic Crystal.”

As they finally approached the entrance to the Great Hall, Maebus squared his shoulders, preparing himself.

Kelm patted his friend on the shoulder. There was the whisper of a wry smile on his lips. “By staying consistent with our message, I think we can minimize the anxiety of the council, if not our own.”

Maebus nodded. “I don’t think our defensive strategy will be a hard sell.”

“True. But just be mindful that the council is scared. The knowledge of certain annihilation affects people in unpredictable ways.”

With a magical wave of Kelm’s hand, the massive double-bolted doors swung open. Together, he and Maebus entered the chamber as the Realmsic Council rose to its feet.

## Chapter Three

The Great Hall, although massive, was used only for council meetings. Its décor, like many aspects of the Realm, had arguably seen better days. The abraded concrete walls and blotched flooring seemed the perfect setting for the battles that were discussed within its enclosure. And evidenced by the decolorized blood in many areas, the Great Hall had been host not only to battle “discussions.”

As King Maebus entered with Grand Wizard Kelm, the council stood both out of tradition and out of respect for a person who, not six days earlier, had accepted the certainty of facing the Warlord Damian. The abandonment of former King Theodo was made even starker by Maebus’ dutiful acceptance of the crown. For surely with the impending conquest, there was nothing to gain by becoming King. None of those in attendance had been willing to do so.

Maebus scanned the faces of those before him as he moved towards the council table. The Realmsic Council was composed of a relatively small number of dignitaries: three administrators of policy, three administrators of military, and three Wizards who were administrators of magic—all of whom had equal standing on the council.

They watched in rapt silence as Maebus approached the elongated, semi-circular table in the middle of the chamber. By their stony expressions, he could only imagine that none of them envied him. Easing into the center throne seat for the first time, its back ramrod straight, Maebus’ stomach wrenched as if absorbing the pressures of all who commanded the kingdom before him. He then rested his hands upon the table’s stone surface.

Maebus’ gaze quickly found the hawkish stare of Councilman Jawn, an administrator of policy. He whispered something to Councilwoman Landi who stood beside him. Maebus caught the smug twisting of Jawn’s lips, reading the word, “fool.”

A hissed “Ssssh!” flew from Landi’s mouth, silencing Jawn. For that, Maebus was grateful. He had always been fond of her.

From both sides of the chamber, the doors thundered closed as Grand Wizard Kelm sealed the Great Hall.

“Please be seated,” Kelm ordered. As he stepped swiftly towards the council table, the only sound in the room was the rustling of his robes. Maebus silently observed the council as Kelm stood slightly to his right-hand side. Kelm’s mother Kyora, now retired, held the position of Realmsic Advisor for thirty-two years. Only recently did she step down so her son could assume the role. Her single piece of advice to him: Wear comfortable shoes. Maebus quickly glanced down at Kelm’s firm leather boots that wrapped his ankles and calves in buffed cowhide. His mother would be proud.

The full committee took its seats around the circular side of the table. Commander Khroy, who represented the Realmsic Army’s Joint Officer’s Corps, nodded his greeting at Maebus when their eyes finally met. The two had first become acquainted many years ago while they both studied military strategy. Although not yet a council member, Maebus had specially invited Khroy. The Commander was a decorated military officer who so far had been an integral part of his plan. Khroy was a muscular-bodied soldier with olive-colored skin that was clean-shaven, like most officers.

As the Great Hall settled into silence, King Maebus took one last precious moment to collect his thoughts.

“Realmsic Council,” he projected. “My brothers and sisters in crisis. For two thousand years, the Realm—our kingdom—has fought an endless war to defend against countless conquerors and those hostile towards our magical culture.

“Because we are the only kingdom where magic exists, I daresay war is to be expected. Some would even argue that it is the price we must continually pay for the gift of our precious Realmsic Crystal.

“Given to us by the primordial First Wizards, the crystal is the source of all magic within our Realm. In the wrong hands, its limitless power would be disastrous not only to us, but to the entire known world. Therefore, defending the crystal means preserving our culture. From what our kingdom has endured, we are strong! I have no doubt that we will shine through the darkness now looming before us.”

A man suddenly rose to his feet. “King, Advisor. Has there been any additional intelligence regarding this Warlord Damian?”

Kelm nodded. “Yes, Councilman Sheld. From information we’ve obtained through the efforts of Commander Khroy, we’ve learned that Damian is the son of a defeated conqueror, Ramsus Bane. Many of you are unfamiliar with this name, as so few remain from the time he challenged our Kingdom. Although he perished during his *coup d’etat*, Ramsus Bane came closest to conquering the Realm than anyone ever has. The remnants of his message have seeded teams of new supporters in the generation that followed his demise.”

“So the Warlord is simply looking to avenge his father?” asked Councilman Sheld.

“Or perhaps looking to finish the job his father started,” laughed a voice from the far end of the table.

“Do not speak lightly, Councilman Jawn!” Kelm snapped.

Maebus raised his hands to reclaim order. “Men such as Damian are not usually motivated by vengeance alone,” he explained. “He possesses an obsessive and charismatic mind. By first uniting with those sympathetic to his father’s cause, he inspired a following. Then, using the wealth obtained from his father’s conquests, he visited the most ravaged lands of the region and provided support to those battered by constant war. In return for their continued support, he promised them riches beyond imagination.”

“Those who despise the Realm are immersed in longstanding, deep-seated hatred,” Kelm interjected. “Who among them would turn down such an offer from the son of Ramsus Bane?”

A torrent of murmurings surged through the Great Hall. Maebus sighed, wishing Kelm hadn’t said that.

Another council member stood from his seat to be recognized. “Advisor, what do we know of the Warlord’s military campaign?”

Commander Khroy rose to his feet. “Councilman Ferst, I can answer that. Damian began his military conquest by attacking the nation of Feesa, located on our northwestern border. Prior to his attack, he studied their history. He knew their tactics as if they were his own. At each moment of the battle, the Warlord remained two steps ahead of their military. With his Legion, he outflanked the nation’s army. With his magic, he crushed them. After his dominating victory, Damian then attacked the nation’s civilians.”

An older woman stood from her seat. “He is ruthless and merciless!” Councilwoman Elva proclaimed. Maebus could hear the pain in her voice. “I’ve traveled to what remains of Feesa. Once a neutral safe haven from the wars, it now lies in ruin by the hands of that monster! Not one soul was spared!”

“This is true.” Khroy continued. “Damian is a master of both military and magic. He has learned from the mistakes of his father, and even of those who challenged the kingdom before Ramsus Bane. Using history as a weapon, he has defeated many of the mighty cities in the eastern, southern, and western lands, proving to his followers that he can do what so many others have not. He can win.”

As Commander Khroy took his seat, Councilman Greeve, an administrator of military, stood to address the Hall. “King, Council. I’ve fought many battles, and can attest that these conquerors are all the same. They simply want our crystal. So I say fine! If they want it, then let them have it, and get *blasted* by it!”

Several people applauded and cheered. Maebus, however, shook his head, resisting the urge to sigh. Greeve, being a former infantry soldier, had climbed the ranks to council. Thin, gray, and somewhat elderly, he still possessed a fire within his belly, which oftentimes made him gregarious and rather reckless.

“No, no, no. I’ve told you all before. The Warlord is different!” Maebus exclaimed.

“Also, what you suggest is not advisable,” Kelm added. “Throughout Realmsic history, weaponizing the crystal has repeatedly proven to be unstable. It’s over two thousand years old, and we know nothing of its full power. So let us not be ignorant! Utilizing the crystal as a weapon to destroy our enemies may ultimately destroy *us*.”

Maebus watched as Councilwoman Landi rose to her feet. He tried to suppress his smile. Landi was the youngest female on the council but had already excelled as an administrator of magic. He lost himself in her dark, curly, shoulder-length hair and soft facial features. Her slender frame was as strong as her mind, which rarely conformed to the formalities of the council. Her outfit was a long, lavender sundress instead of the standard olive-green uniforms and burgundy capes the other council members wore. Maebus had always admired her ambition and beauty. She too seemed receptive to his subtle advances. But now being King eliminated any chance of a romance they could have had. Often, he thought about their dynamic. She was a Magical, and he was a Layman. If the emotions they felt for one another were real, could not the two Realmsic cultures one day learn to love each other also?

*Focus Maebus!* He mentally scolded himself for drifting again.

“King, Advisor,” Landi began, “What are we to do? What *can* we do to protect ourselves from the Warlord and his Legion of Warriors?”

Maebus understood her concern, though he could only imagine the feeling he, too, would have sitting as a council member, listening to what appeared to be certain death. Therefore, he carefully chose his words before speaking.

“Even as we are gathered here, word from the Western Nations has confirmed that the Legion marches towards us, destroying everything in their path. They are coming here to destroy us. To me, the answer to your question is simple. We must fight!”

“But this is a battle we will not win!” Councilman Jawn interrupted. “Why do we fight? Why do you commit us to suicide?”

Maebus resisted the urge to yell, resisted the urge to grab Jawn by his scrawny neck until his weasel face turned blue. Nor would he then snap Jawn's thin frame into two. No, Maebus would deny himself such satisfaction. Instead, he abruptly rose to his feet.

"Are we to run like King Theodo? Are we to abandon our kingdom during its greatest conflict to date? Look!" Maebus commanded, pointing to a massive map that draped the wall of the Great Hall.

"This is our home. We are all that stands between it, the Warlord, and absolute domination. So *why* do we fight? Because we don't have the luxury of a choice!"

Maebus heard his last word reverberate through the chamber. Councilman Jawn sat heavily, obviously deflated.

"Now," Maebus continued, retaking his seat. "What I'm about to disclose to you may seem extremely unorthodox. But time is against us. Therefore, this new strategy Kelm and I are proposing may provide our best chance for surviving what is to come.

"The words spoken in this room today have set in motion a series of events from which there is no turning back. Upon retiring to your personal chambers, each of you will find a sealed message addressed only to you. This message will contain written instructions. You are to follow these instructions to the letter. Under no circumstances are you to share the contents of your personal message with others."

Maebus fell silent while assessing the reaction of each council member. After a split second of stunned silence, the chamber erupted into a tumult of raised voices. Maebus and Kelm exchanged frustrated glances, which conveyed comprehension that they must not back down.

For the next hour, Maebus fielded the council's barrage of questions, addressing their concerns. Without compromising his agenda, he answered as thoroughly as he could until the room had settled into some semblance of order.

"This is a most troublesome time," Maebus stated. "Maybe the most dangerous time in all of our history. I know what I'm asking of you is unusual. But I sincerely thank you for your understanding and your trust. Know that what I will share with each of you individually is all that I *can* share with you. The rest will eventually come. We each have a role in an unfortunate play, and now we must perform. May we trust in each other for guidance, and may the First Wizards bless our souls."

As Maebus stood from his throne seat, the Realmsic Council rose as one. With a wave of his hands, Kelm unsealed the double doors of the Great Hall, which swung open with a low grinding moan. The council formed two rows and filed out of the chamber. Maebus stole one last glance at Landi, who conveyed her affection with a subtle smile. Behind her trudged Commander Khroy.

"Commander," Maebus said. "A word with you."

The officer immediately pulled himself from the precession and stood off to the side. After the last council members exited the chamber, Maebus signaled for Kelm to reseal the doors, and the three took their seats once again.