

GEORGE CARACOL

HOLY EMPIRE

THE CURSE OF THE BLESSED



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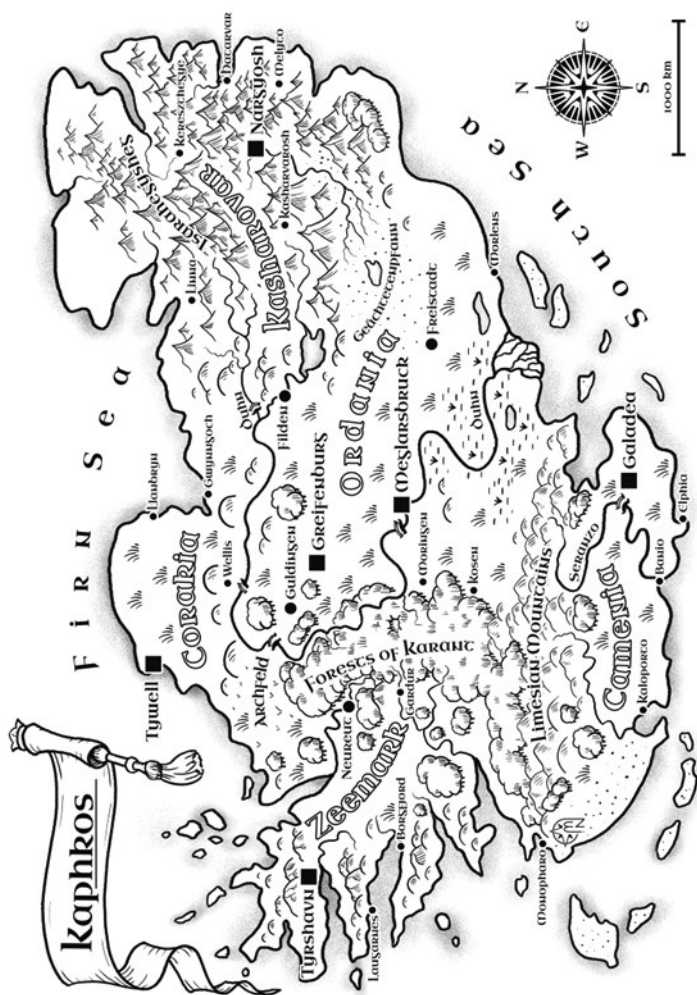
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Holy Empire

Book 1: The Soul Pendant

Book 2: The Curse of the Blessed

Book 3: The Key to Eternity



FOREWORD

WELL THEN, HERE WE ARE AGAIN. Before you start reading this book, I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has stood by my side for all these years, everyone who believes in me and who is dear to me. I don't want to waste too many words here. You know who you are and the countless things that I owe you, which cannot be valued in material terms and which I will never be able to repay. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

Simultaneously, however, this foreword is not intended to serve as a tribute to my supporters, or even as a self-adulation. I will now use this moment to contextualize my literary creations, which should help immensely in understanding them. The first volume of "Holy Empire" is the first book I ever wrote myself. Although there were some other ideas that I had begun to formulate in writing at a very young age, I soon dropped them, as I began to understand how one-dimensional, infantile and derivative of other works my ideas and narratives were.

I let a lot of time pass before I created something new again. And this new thing found its beginning in "The Soul Pendant". However, it is not the ending, and this fact is very important. I've spent all these years, decades in fact, thinking carefully about my ideas and themes and asking myself the question: "Where do I want this narrative to go?" The answer wasn't entirely clear when I started writing the first book, but as I went along, I became more and more aware of what I wanted it to be.

The first book is by far the most straightforward of the three (planned) books. It starts out simply and introduces the readers slowly and step by step to the story. It gets them acquainted with the characters and world-building elements in an easily digestible, almost didactic manner. This is intentional. The work looks to build a solid foundation for the plot, and ultimately the themes I want to explore, before it gets more complicated and challenging. The second book, which we are about to start here, is already very different from the first.

Sure, it still uses the typical three-act structure that you can find in most such works, especially in film. But that's only the case if you look at the story from a very broad perspective, because upon closer inspection, it doesn't really stick to it. In truth, my stories only use structures to make picking up the reader easier, and to achieve something specific from a narrative point of view. My stories are not written around the already preconceived framework of a plot structure, but rather the structure follows the necessity of what I have planned and determined in advance in terms of events in the story. In this respect, my work is more the result of the interplay between the logical progression of the story itself and my ideas about where all this should end up.

“The Curse of the Blessed” will be a completely different book from the first volume in this series. This statement should, in part, be taken as a warning! This book will not do what you expect it to do. No matter what your expectations of the sequel, based on what happened in the introductory volume, are, you will still not be able to guess in the slightest where this journey will take us. And that, too, is intentional. I want to surprise the readers; I always want to try new things and make the unexpected happen, as this creates suspense. The first book also had a few surprises in store, but nothing really comparable to what awaits you in this sequel. Again, this is to be understood as a heads-up.

Moreover, it is noteworthy, that my works are not trying to appeal to a specific target audience, which is why they are not subject to genre limitations. If I want to include a romance, I will. If I want to describe a battle, I will do so with just the same ease. And likewise, nothing and no one will stop me from radically changing the focus of the work and the general mood it conveys time and again. I want variety, no, I in fact NEED it. If I wrote a book three times in a row with the same thematic ideas and the same storyline over and over again, it would be extremely boring for me. If you think along similar lines to me, meaning you don't want to read a certain type of story - just with different characters and not entirely identical plot - over and over again, then my story may be for you.

So, here's what you need to bear in mind about my story: it's constantly evolving. It will become increasingly complicated, and ultimately it will also grow in depth. None of this was the case in the first volume. That was just the introduction. So, be prepared. I won't say it for a second time. "The Curse of the Blessed" is not a shallow adventure in a largely realistic, medieval fantasy world. Anyone who approaches it as a simplistic story to escape from our dreary everyday lives, who reads it to escape reality and wants to insert themselves into the main characters, will be disappointed. This is not a feel-good novel.

But if you want to read a work of fiction that grows progressively more sophisticated, more profound, more complex and more mature, one that purposefully subverts the reader's expectations, you will certainly get something out of it. My works are intended to be more than just superficial entertainment. They want to address difficult subjects, and they want to do things that no other work has done before in this way. In the end, only others, and not I myself, can decide whether I have succeeded in this. And with that, I would like to express my gratitude once again, and hope you enjoy the book!

CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO THE EMPIRE

"I have defeated all my enemies, yet always new ones emerge. It is the unavoidable course of fate, which keeps testing me. Inexorable, my vast armies march across the Empire. Inexorable, yet so fallible if led by the wrong man. Only I can be that man. For I am the eternal, the one and only Chosen by God."

- Melgar the Great, from the remnants of the collection of apocryphal texts of the Grand Library of Greifenburg

SLOWLY BUT STEADILY, the ground disgorged the sun again. Its rays hit a bunch of sweaty men who were working the mountain in front of them with pickaxes, chisels, and large hammers. When this happened, a few of them turned round to briefly look at the rising sun. "Don't let up! Come on, lads, keep going!", someone called out to them. They immediately turned back to their work. So, what exactly was this work now? The miners of Szinesbanya were busily quarrying the marble from the open-cast mine in the largest possible pieces and transporting them away for further processing. Strong arms lifted the tools into the air, and once they had reached the highest point, they were swung back down to hit the rock with as much force as possible. This was one of the largest marble deposits in Kaphkos. It was known for the fact that the stone here took on many different colours and shades. There was white, black, blue, and

red marble. Often there were also sections in the rock faces where the colours mixed and took on fascinating patterns and hues. At other open-cast mines, different colours ranging from yellow to green could also be found. Most of these were located in the appropriately named "Rainbow Mountains" in Kasharovar. In any case, the vast majority of this natural resource was to be found in the eastern kingdom.

The material was now needed in large quantities. In recent years, a gigantic number of new buildings had been commissioned, but above all an immense quantity of statues, which were of course to be made from the precious raw material known as marble. All the defaced and destroyed statues of saints in all the towns and churches of Kaphkos were now being systematically replaced or restored, causing an explosion in demand for this rare earth. In short, the miners had their hands full. The clashing of their metal tools against the hard rock could be heard continuously, so that it basically became an omnipresent background noise for the miners.

After many hours of hard labour, it was time for the lunch break. The work colleagues sat down and ate their modest meal together. The mid-day heat was now beating down with full force and the men could certainly feel it. "And how is your house looking now, Györg? It should be finished by now, shouldn't it?" The addressee turned to his colleague and replied with his mouth full, "The walls are up, and the roof is on, that's the most important thing. I'll always be working on additional things, new rooms and so on, anyway. My wife is always coming up with new ideas. You know how she is." The others had to laugh at that for a moment. His colleague then said, "I've finally got my head above water for once. Luckily, things have been getting better and better over the last few years." The group unanimously agreed with him. "Since my house was destroyed by the Hordes the last time, I haven't seen or heard anything at all from them anymore," Györg stated unprompted.

But his friend immediately added, "They're still there, believe me! But as far as I've noticed, they're getting weaker and weaker. In the past, they used to have a reason to fight. But now that we have our own parliament and with the old customs dying out, more and more of them have decided to lay down their arms to simply lead a peaceful life." His statement was met with some discomfort from the others. They preferred to leave this subject alone. After a moment of silence, however, Györg himself said, "Those who are left have no chance anyway and will simply die off at some point. The march of time cannot be stopped." The group of men silently agreed with him. The break was finally over, and it was back to work. After all, the marble didn't mine itself and their salaries wouldn't get paid for doing nothing.

Many years had now passed since the end of the revolution. Peace had returned everywhere, even if a few still put up hopeless resistance to the Empire's rule on the fringes. Law and order had come back to almost all towns and villages and the healing of all the deep wounds caused by the war and the oppression that had preceded it was in full swing. But even if everything was getting better again, nothing would return to the old, neither to the time of the Melgarions nor to the brief interlude of Alethic rule. There now was an Imperial Diet and several national diets, which dealt with matters of varying relevance. Gone were the days when the ruler alone decided the ministers, politics and, well, basically everything in the state. A new era had dawned, one that had been given birth to by the revolution. A new dawn had broken over the Empire. A huge number of people of all kinds were here witnessing it.

In the first two years directly after the revolution, there was little to eat. Many farmers had died in the war, and many had also moved elsewhere in the turmoil. Moreover, a pestilence was going through the country at

the time, which also carried off a number of people. Fewer fields were being cultivated and, therefore, there was less grain to eat. In times of need, many people resorted to a bag of tricks. Baker Fritz, for example, often mixed sawdust into his bread. Everyone soon noticed this, and he was gossiped about everywhere. He earned the nickname "Mr Drybread", a name, which he has not been able to shed to this day. Even though, he was certainly not the only baker who "stretched out" his bread. Unfortunately, he was the one who got noticed the most for it. The problems steadily decreased over the following years until everything was back to normal. If one could call it a return to the old at all, that is. Normal life remained the same, but the witch craze was now history.

Dietrich, who was himself a journeyman baker, was now on his way to work early in the morning. He briefly got goosebumps, when he felt the still icy cold morning air, as he walked along the streets. Neureut, a small town to the east of the Karantian Forests, had essentially remained the same sedate place. Even at this time of day, there was already a lot going on. The craftsmen set to work, and the merchants began setting up their stalls, while a few soldiers wandered about or simply stood around to keep an eye on things. They also gave Dietrich a cursory glance as he strolled past them. He walked along Courtyard Alley and crossed the so-called Martyrs' Square. This square, relatively close to the city centre, had only been renamed last year. In its centre was still the fountain after which the square was originally named. Now a small statue of a warrior had been erected on a pedestal next to it. As one can imagine, this was a memorial to those who died in the revolution.

This was of little interest to our journeyman as he walked past the monument, which he now saw every day. His mind was already on his work anyway. Kneading the dough for the bread was hard, strenuous work. Anyone who did this job knew that. Just around the corner in the

alley was the small Bakery Utz , named after its owner. The elderly master baker was already up when his assistant entered the shop. Dietrich immediately changed his clothes and set to work. By lunchtime, most of the work was already done. When the man stepped outside the bakery to get a breath of fresh air as a change from the flour dust, he realised that something was going on at Martyrs' Square. He quickly made his way there, as a few others apparently had done. When he got there, however, Dietrich realised that he had long since missed the events here. A few interested people were still milling around, just like him, but otherwise there was no sign of what had happened. There was a large red stain on the ground a few metres from the statue, that was all. It was obviously blood, but the man had no idea what had happened, so he asked a lady who was also standing around.

"Did I see what happened? Yes, I did. A guy tried to blemish the monument, and the city guards intervened. He punched the blokes, and you can imagine what happened next." Dietrich was surprised, but not particularly shocked. Then he looked over at the statue and saw that there was a black splodge on the ground directly in front of it. It was the paint the vandal had tried to deface the monument with. "What a stupid reason to sacrifice yourself!", Dietrich thought to himself. "You should know that the soldiers here can't take a joke." Of course, it was crystal clear to the journeyman baker that many of those who served in the city guard had also fought in the revolution. Their commander had even been in the Martyrs' Brigades back then. These men wouldn't take a joke when it came to this sort of thing. After this incident, Dietrich went back to the bakery. The others would surely ask him what had happened in the square, and he would tell them. Time and again you heard of people being cut a head shorter, because they said or did the wrong thing. That was nothing new. Everyone knew it.

Ludo was a very quiet boy. There were a lot of things that were always going through his mind, but he preferred to keep them to himself. This had less to do with the fact that he didn't dare express himself in front of others, and more to do with the fact that he simply didn't feel the desire to share his thoughts with them. There was simply no reason for him to say much. The priests always interpreted his reticence as a sign that the loss of his parents at such a young age had traumatized the little Ludo. The boy was unaware of this and simply thought that the priests wanted to be as nice to him as possible. If he had been aware of their assumptions about him... ,well, actually it wouldn't have changed anything. He probably wouldn't have told them, that he didn't even remember his parents' deaths. The only thing he could remember was walking hungrily and aimlessly through a small town when the priests found him and took him away.

The boy now lived in an orphanage with a number of other orphans. He certainly wasn't alone here. But there were only boys, no girls. "This is an institution for men, not women!", was what Father Gregor had said to him when he once asked why there were only men here. That made sense to him. Everything had to stay nicely separated, as God wanted it! Every day the boys would do various jobs that had to do with maintenance and accommodation: growing vegetables, fruits, and grains, repair work on the building, raising livestock, cleaning, and much more. However, time was always given for studying the Testament and praying. This was EXTREMELY important to the priests and caretakers. In the few months that he had been here, Ludo had already learnt how important worshipping God and adhering to his laws was. Nevertheless, the clerics relentlessly drilled the message into the boys; this was even more important to them than the work that had to be done in this self-sufficient facility. Ludo also knew all the prayers inside out.

Hail, Melgar, sacred Chosen of God!

Hail, precious treasure of creation!

Hail, your never extinguishing light!

Blessed be your progeny!

Blessed be your glory!

Praise be to God our Lord!

Melgar was the Chosen One of God. The Lord had given him the power to work miracles. It was he who had prepared the way for the kingdom of God on earth. There would only be one future for them, one in which Melgar's will and the heavenly laws would be enforced in the earthly realm. These thoughts were actually running through young Ludo's mind as he stood in the empty dining room. Broom in hand, he energetically swept between the old, worn-out wooden legs of the tables and chairs. He swiped up all the crumbs and other rubbish that accumulated here every day from eating and swept it into a larger pile. He was too lazy to move the tables and chairs aside, but picked up what he could so that the floor appeared clean to the eye. "The place is cleaned every day anyway. I don't need to bust a gut here," were the boy's thoughts. Wildly and with the intention of finishing work as quickly as possible, he swung the wooden stick with straw at the end around.

Watching over all this was the picture of Wenzel hanging on the wall above. It was a very flattering depiction of the Emperor, which hung in all the public and religious institutions of the Empire. It was always to be found side by side with the icons of Melgar, although there was a huge difference between these two people. Emperor Wenzel didn't want to be an object of veneration; on the contrary, he personally had a strong aversion to such things. Nevertheless, his portrait and the icon of Melgar hung next to each other like Janus. Two faces of the same entity: The

Chosen One. The child sweeping the communal dining hall had no idea of this, of course. He gathered all the dirt into a bigger pile again. Then Ludo fetched a shovel to see it off into the dustbin.

"En garde, you scoundrel!", it suddenly screeched as the double door swung open abruptly, crashing against the wall with far too much force and making a lot of noise. Nico came thundering in. Apparently, he had already finished his task of cleaning the corridor outside. When Ludo turned to him, he was holding his broom at the lower end above the bristles. The long handle protruded upwards at an angle and the boy now pointed it in the direction of his "opponent". "Wait, I'm still not!" Before the challenged boy could finish his sentence, his friend, who in this case was his enemy, was already swinging his "sword" at him. "Oh, God!" Ludo had no choice but to defend himself. He also changed his grip on his broom, turning it into an imaginary sword. Then the duel began. It was a fiery exchange of blows and thrusts. Left, right...up? "Ow!", Ludo cried out as his opponent's sword smashed directly on his head. He then paused for a moment. But suddenly Nico felt something on his shoulder. It was Father Gregor's strong hand, as the boy instantly realised when he turned to look at his grim face.

"Really? Really, you two?", he snapped at them in a judgemental tone. "Look at what you're doing here!", the old man said as his wrinkled finger pointed at the ground next to them. The two boys looked over and saw that they had trampled over everything Ludo had swept up, and had whirled it around again. Nico and his friend immediately winced and apologised meekly. But that wasn't enough for the priest. He told them to finally finish the work in here, and as punishment for their stupid mucking about they would have to do an additional task afterwards. Dejectedly, they complied and together, under the supervision of Father Gregor, began to clean up the mess they had made. Secretly, however, the

priest wasn't really angry with them. He knew that this was just how boys were, and that it was actually quite desirable that they were interested in fighting. All orphans in the Empire were traditionally taken in and raised by an offshoot organisation of the church. They would and should even serve the Lord and the kingdom when they grew up. Therefore, religious education was very much in focus here. One day the broomsticks would become real swords, and then it would be good, if they knew WHO they served.

The meadow behind the stables was filled with the sound of a tremendous hubbub. Children's laughter mingled with their loud cries. Stepping closer, one could see one of the boys indicating, that he was going to throw a stick he was holding up in the air. He made three trial swings, all of which looked very funny and weird. Each time he swung his thin little arm upwards, whereupon it swung limply back again. His whole body went with it and swayed so much that one might think he would fall over at any moment. The fourth time, he finally let go of the stick and threw it as high as he could into the air. Then he quickly tried to pick up a whole lot of sticks that were scattered all over the short-mown meadow in front of him. The game ended when the stick he threw up hit the ground again. That was the "stick game". And there it was already. Unfortunately, Faramund had only managed to collect five sticks. The others thought that the sixth one no longer counted as the stick had already come down.

"How do you know that so precisely? You didn't even hear it hit the ground!", the boy annoyedly proclaimed. He was right, because you could hardly hear the little stick touching the grass. But his playmates didn't want to hear any of it. "No, the last one doesn't count! You only had five. You can't cheat here, Faramund!", Viktoria told him imperi-

ously. He looked over at the girl and snorted, "You're stupid! No wonder nobody likes you!" - "Stop it with that! You don't need to get so angry about it. It's just a game!", her friend Isolde tried to defuse the situation. The little hothead calmed down again straight away. Then it was Viktoria's turn. She took a long swing, but also swung the stick from below in a strange way, just like the others had done before her. Only her throw was powerful, and the twig flew up impressively high. In a mad rush, the girl literally threw herself on the ground and gathered as many sticks as she could. The thrown object seemed to take an unusually long time to come down again. When it finally fell onto the meadow, Viktoria had picked up all of the sticks.

Gunna and Isolde were totally impressed, but of course, Faramund had to complain again. "That's not possible! You must have cheated!" - "How am I supposed to have cheated here, ha? It's just a simple stick that all of us have thrown up." The boy, unsure how to rationalise his accusations, simply replied, "You know what they say about you!" - "Faramund! No!", it came from Isolde directly behind him. "But isn't it true?" At this statement, the girl looked at him even more grimly than before. But when he turned his gaze back to Viktoria, he began to feel anxious. She was standing there in a dominant pose with her legs wide apart. Her penetrating gaze struck him sharply. A fire was burning in her eyes, a fire as hot and red as the crimson of her hair. "Wi...", before the boy could even finish the word, the girl gave him a good shove, making him fall on his bum. She actually wanted to smack him; everyone could see that. When someone made her angry, she became a fury that no one could tame. But the child held back this time and simply turned round.

Suddenly, a couple of adults came around the corner of the stable. There weren't just two of them, but several. "Gunna! What are you doing here!" Dumbfounded, the boy replied, "We're playing the stick game. I..."