

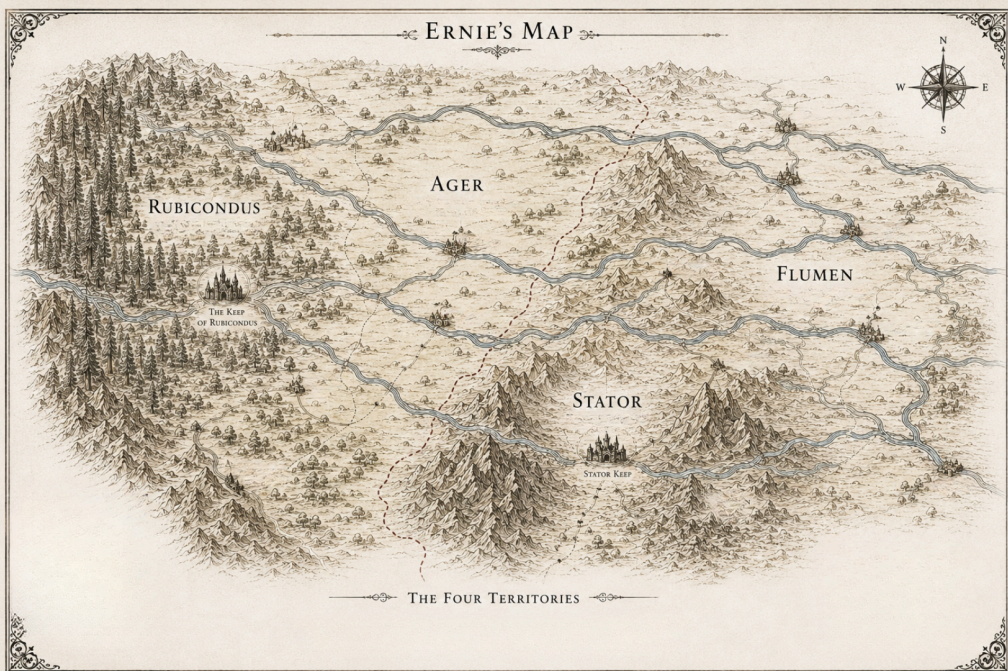
BLOOD & COVENANT

COLLAPSE

BOOK 4

A. Standing

Blood & Covenant



Book Four: Collapse

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Chapter One

O'sah looked up at the large walls of Ager Keep. They had been weathered grey stone when she was a child; she passed them each year while her tribe wandered. Now they were covered in Ager sand, giving them a soft golden glow. She could not imagine how the Keep had been built so high; even the towers at the top looked small, though she knew they were not. Quietly, she rode in the back of the cart.

O'sah was a Ghost Human, and traditionally, humans did not work in the Keep. It housed the royalty, both Lycan of Blood and Mage of Covenant. Humans had traditionally been wanderers. After a thousand years, her people now lived in the Ancient Tree in Ager, as foretold by the ancients who planted it.

She gulped as the guards looked at her. They then saluted, pounding their closed fists against their hearts before pointing straight up toward the moon. She looked away. She was not worthy of such honour; this appointment had been demanded by Ghost Prince.

Her long white hair was loose, so she quickly tied it back in a braid to hide her nervousness. She was thirty suns old. Looking toward the Keep, her breath was taken away.

“I had no idea,” she said. “The ancients built this?”

“Newly repaired, still under renovation in some areas, but the kitchens were first to be brought up to date. You will be delighted by all the features they have added.”

O’sah was uncertain if this was true. Ghost Humans traditionally cooked over open fires; she was not sure what Ager Keep cooked on. She thought back to Ghost Prince. On bended knee, he had pleaded she take this position. Spending the last several months in neighbouring Rubicondus, she trained with the Keep's Cook, Everest, an older but most delightful woman and mage who often forgot O’sah was human.

Her hands gripped her report book. She had read it three times, as she had been told she would have three a day. It detailed the wolves and mages on guard, the royals and their guests, travellers to and from the Keep. It had the storage numbers, purchase orders, and recipes needed to complete each task. The Keep had over 100 staff members, and 26 of them reported directly to her. She was unsure how witches and wolves would feel about taking orders from a human.

“It is said she is skilled,” one maid said as she swept the kitchen floor for the third time that morning. “I have smelled Ghost Human food. It always seems pleasant.”

“Well, the Keep recipes are not Human and need to be more than pleasant,” another gruffed as he put the large sack of flour on the pile with the others. He closed the door. “We are Lycan and Mage. I am not sure why the Blood King is insisting on this appointment of a human.”

“Because she can cook,” several of the women said to him in unison, and he knew to stop talking.

Going outside, he walked toward the flour cart and picked up a large barrel of butter. It was the last item, and he waved goodbye to the merchant, who pulled away. Before he turned to go inside, he saw a woman. She was delicate and beautiful, her long white hair flowing to her waist in a thick braid, and he knew she must be the new cook. Only Ghost Humans had that kind of bright white hair, earned through a ceremony marking their coming into adulthood.

“I am O’sah,” she smiled softly as she passed him, and he stared at her.

“I am,” he stammered.

O’sah nodded and looked at the barrel of butter with a smile. “I will walk behind the heavy items, not in front of them.”

“Oh.” He looked at the barrel of butter on his shoulder as though it had done something wrong. “Right, this way.”

Leading her down the hallway, she noticed the walls and floors were covered in warm Ager sand, which gave both light and heat. The kitchen was the size of half a ballroom, so she had been told, and it proved true as she walked in on the top floor. She looked down at the cooking stoves. They all depended on fire, breathing a sigh of relief. She was not a mage and could not use magic as Everest had many times. She took a deep breath and noticed some of the pans were stacked, but not put away. Other people began to stare as she walked down the steps, she was confident they had duties to attend to.

“Teal’c requires tea,” O’sah said aloud so they could all hear her.

“As he is the Blood King's advisor, we will make sure to deliver it promptly. As well, the Covenant Queen will need to be woken for her routine.”

The kitchen began to hustle and bustle with nods and ma’ams.

“Charlie,” the man shouted as he set down the barrel of butter, and the kitchen stopped for a moment and looked toward them.

O’sah smiled and gave him a nod as she began to cut the kindling.

“Next, we prepare for War Admiral Nollen and the Blood Kings, both visiting Ager.”

“There will be two guests in the visiting King's company,” Isabella said, thinking of her sisters and the choices they had made to bring shame and embarrassment upon their family.

“Ah, perfect. We can make a triple batch of the cherry jublee muffins,” O’sah said, and Isabella stopped.

“The kind that Everest makes in Rubicondus with?”

A maid lowered her voice, “Alcohol for breakfast?”

Everyone paused in a very theatrical silence and looked at her skeptically.

O'sah set down the axe and took up the apron.