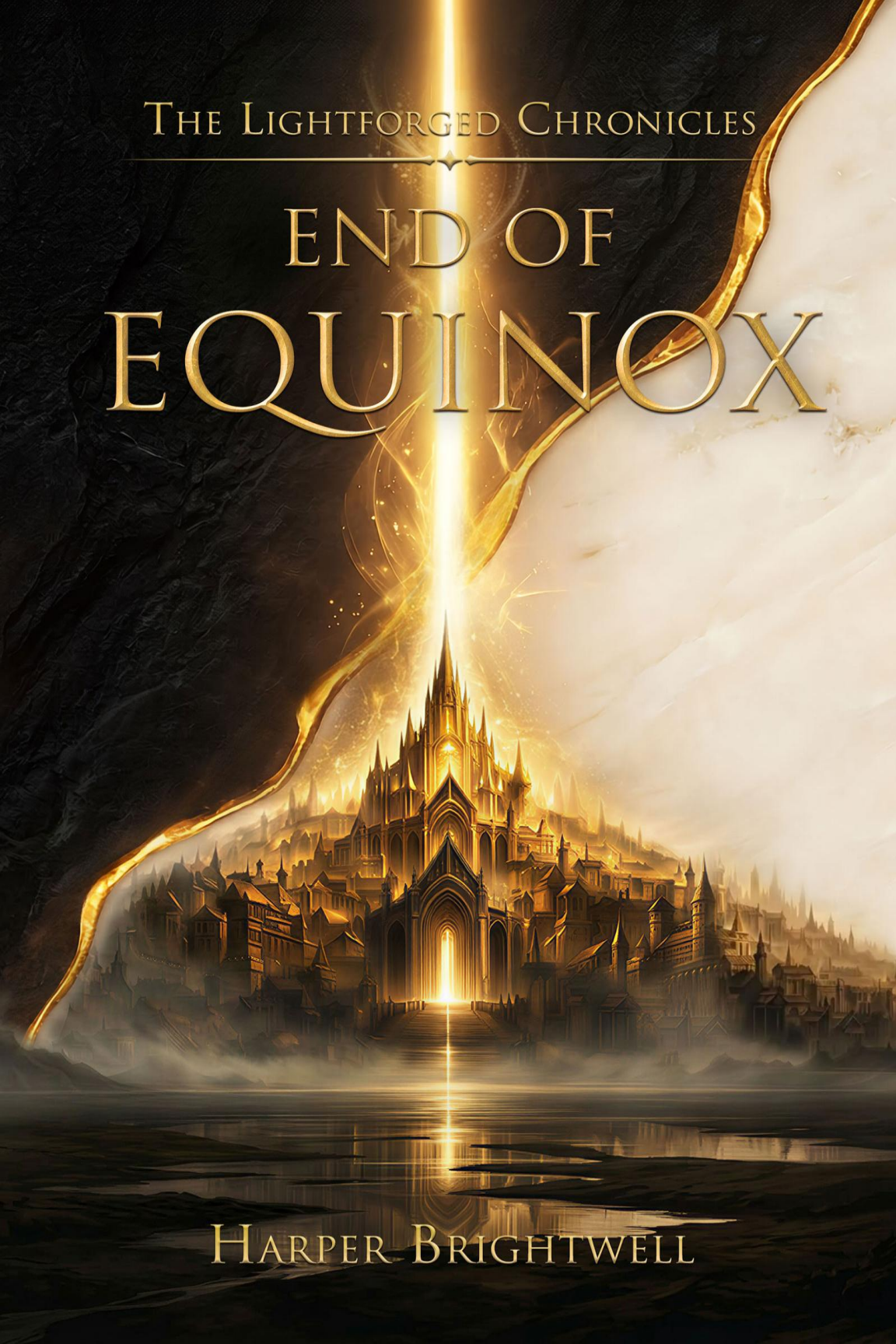

The Lightforged Chronicles
End of Equinox
Harper Brightwell



PROLOGUE

The Fading Light

Despite the size of the Sentinel garrison in Light's Reach, and the usual clamor of marching boots, sparring steel, and shouted drills, the halls were silent during the Hours of Invocation. Within his private quarters, General Vigil knelt before the sigil of the Light, entreating the Luminaries for guidance in these unsettled days. The omens of late had been, in a word, disturbing.

His personal library offered little comfort. Every volume he owned was a copy of a copy—some centuries old, a few so ancient that their origins were half myth. Yet one entry among them, preserved in a book thought lost by most Orders, had gripped his thoughts for months. Vigil was not a Paragon prone to rigid dogma, but one did not take lightly the recorded words of the Founder, especially those carrying prophecy, warning of a coming tribulation and an age of deepening darkness.

There was a strange mingling of dread and solace in that passage, and he could not say why he returned to it again and again.

As great as the gifts are that my Maker has entrusted to me, even a Luminary cannot see all ends, for the futures of mortals are ever mutable. As the Light refracts and reflects, so too does a mortal's path. Some places that seem shrouded may yet blaze with radiance, revealing possibilities for those bold enough to act. Yet yesterday, as I meditated in the heart of Glorion's brilliance at the summit of Mount Altum, a vision came to me, one that darkened my spirit, and from which I take little comfort. Even now, I hesitate to set these words to paper, for parts of what I saw were so grievous that I dare not record them.

I beheld the realm of Ephraim as it stands: a land where shadows are faint and Torment is but a fading scar. The world lay bathed in the Light, all peoples enjoying the stillness that followed the Dawn's War. Far from mortal dwellings, I saw the prison wrought by the Luminaries, drawing in every remnant of darkness. Yet even then, the bonds weakened as men drifted from the Light.

The vision leapt forward. I saw Beacons rising across Ephraim, raised by our faithful to safeguard the land. For long ages, they blazed, fending off the dark. But while Ephraim's history is long, mortal memory is short. Our ancient adversary crept once more into the hearts of men, and corruption bled into the soil beneath their feet. Beacon after Beacon dimmed, plunging whole regions into turmoil as Torment crawled again into the realms of the living. The Claritors, our steadfast children, rose to break its power and cast it back, but my heart grieved for the lands marred and lost.

Still, many remained faithful, and an age of Equinox settled over Ephraim. A final Beacon was raised, yet its foundation was laid in secret treachery. Darkness touched its core, and through that corruption, it fell. Its ruin severed many of the faithful from the Light and ushered in a Nightfall, ending the era of Equinox.

The rise and fall of the realm weighed upon me, invoking deep anguish. But then the Light granted me a gift of hope. Amidst the gathering night, I saw lesser lights, champions descended from our Claritors, guardians of the steadfast. Among them rose one like a star with a double portion of spirit, called forth from a dominion of unbelievers. The deeper the darkness grew, the more fiercely his light blazed. Yet Torment swelled, and Ephraim darkened further still, until it seemed that this star guttered out.

But from that extinguished place, a constellation returned, burning with renewed radiance. These lesser lights brought the Light's vindication, and the darkness recoiled before them until Torment was scoured from the realm forever.

Yet even in that vision of triumph, I perceived the cost, burdens no mortal should be asked to bear, sacrifices that would carve scars into the very soul of Ephraim. For the path of the righteous is not spared the fire; it is proven by it. My heart ached for them, and I wondered whether they would have the faith to endure what lay ahead.

Perhaps this vision is but a deception sent by the enemy to sow despair, but I think not, for what power would foretell its own undoing? I do not know the name of the warrior of Light I saw, though his armor bore kinship to the Lightforged designs that shall soon be entrusted to Ephraim's guardians. But I know this: his courage shone purer than any of the age to come, and the hope he carries is not his alone. It is the promise that our labor is not in vain, and that the faithful will one day deliver Ephraim from the shadow. For it is the faithful who bear the Light into dark places.

In the Light, there is no darkness. And where the Light stands, Torment flees.

* * *

A sharp, rapid knock jarred General Vigil from the passage, shattering the stillness of his quarters. Interruptions were becoming more frequent, more than at any point in his long years of service, and each one frayed his patience further.

He rose and turned toward the door, but before he could call out, another flurry of knocks struck the wood, cut short as the door swung open. A young woman stood at the threshold, her fist still mid-motion. Her knuckles halted inches from his barrel chest, and a blush rushed across her face. The newly sewn insignia on her shoulder marked her as a recently promoted captain.

Vigil allowed himself the smallest inward chuckle. Clearly, the lowest-ranking soul on the watch had drawn the short straw tonight.

The petite officer straightened to rigid attention, made the Sign of the Light with practiced reverence, and delivered her report.

"Forgive me, sir—General. I know the hour is late, but the watch commander sent me. He said you wished to be informed of…disturbances."

Under different circumstances, the contrast between her youthful, nervous energy and his towering presence might have been almost comical. But Vigil's countenance remained hard as stone.

"I see… Captain Bexley," he said, reading her name from the badge as he stepped past her.

General Vigil was a mountain of a man, his Paragon-wrought frame radiating the unmistakable authority of high command. His face looked as though it had been carved from granite, all hard planes and weathered lines that matched the breadth of his shoulders. Closely shorn grey hair and old battle scars framed dark eyes that gleamed with keen intelligence. Whatever image one held of a general, Vigil surpassed it. Captain Bexley seemed to realize this anew as she stared up at him, wide-eyed.

"Lead the way, Captain," Vigil said. "Let's see what matter could not wait."

She executed an about-face crisp enough for a parade ground and set off down the corridor toward the command center. The halls of Light's Reach were adorned in the distinct style of the Lucent Dawn—half martial heraldry, half reverent devotion. The two officers had passed these frescoes and tapestries countless times and paid them little mind now, but their walls carried the great battle honors of the Orders. A new visitor could lose days tracing the stories captured in the artistry.

Some claimed that every major military and sacred event of the Lucent Dawn was woven into these halls. Legend held that their foundations were laid back when the Founder himself still walked Ephraim. Those ages were so ancient that most considered them the stuff of myth, preserved only in ancient tomes and believed in earnest by the particularly devout.

Captain Bexley pushed open the doors to the command center and called the room to attention. Vigil's jaw tightened as the officers snapped upright. He would never grow accustomed to the pomp that accompanied his station. These soldiers were good, diligent people, and the last thing they needed was to halt their duties just to stare at him. Yet he was seasoned

enough to know that such disciplined rigidity forged precision, and in darkening times, precision was no small virtue.

"As you were," Vigil said, already scanning the room as he strode inside. His gaze settled on the watch commander while Captain Bexley hurried to her station beside him.

The watch commander stepped forward, meeting Vigil's eyes. "My apologies for the interruption, sir. But I knew you would want to be apprised of this immediately." Though older than Captain Bexley, the man still looked impossibly young to Vigil, another reminder of the years that had weighed on him more than he cared to admit.

"All right, Commander. Let's have it," Vigil said. His tone made it clear that expediency was expected.

The watch commander tugged at his collar and swallowed, suddenly unsure whether he'd overreacted. "Reports just came in from the Temple in Sardis. Cultist activity. They attempted to strike the Beacon there."

Vigil's brow furrowed. He crossed his arms. "I'm still wondering why I'm here. We've dealt with this for months. Likely more Dominion scum."

The commander flinched at the rebuke. He knew the old war veteran had little patience for preamble.

"Yes, sir. The issue is..." He forced himself forward. "We've lost contact with the Sentinel squad dispatched to eliminate the threat."

Vigil's expression changed. Irritation vanished, replaced by concern. "What do you mean, 'lost contact'? How long since their last report to their commanding officer?"

"They left in pursuit of the assailants at seventeen hundred."

"And you're just *now* telling me this?" Vigil cut him off sharply. "That was five hours ago! They've been outside the Beacon's protection—and the walls of Sardis—well into the night." His voice struck like stone on steel, harsher than he intended.

The watch commander's expression softened into a quiet apology. "We dispatched a second unit to link up with the first. We believed the delay was simply interference due to the proximity to Mezrak. As you know, there've been more communication disturbances lately."

Vigil considered that. The timing aligned too neatly with the surge in cultist activity to be mere coincidence.

"Where is the second group now?" he asked. "And I assume you sent an Artisan with the Sentinels to maintain comms."

"Yes, sir," the watch commander replied. "Standard squad composition. But they came under fire several hours south of Sardis, and then the line went dead. We can't read their transponder at all."

The words hung heavy. A Sentinel transponder was Aurelite-attuned by the Artisans through their esoteric methods, resonating at a frequency detectable by the watch arrays. The system was famously stable, reliable even in storms, distance, or skirmish. Everyone in the room knew what it meant when such a link failed. Only the strongest darkness could silence Aurelite.

Vigil rubbed his neatly groomed beard as he stepped toward the central display. With a swipe across the projection array, he narrowed its focus to the region around Sardis. "Show me where the teams were headed."

The technology responded instantly. It was Aurelite-driven, like all devices of the Lucent Dawn. That singular gemstone, able to hold and channel the Light, was unlike any natural substance in Ephraim. The Orators taught that Aurelite was a gift from the Luminaries themselves, a relic of their presence in ages past. Yet only the Artisans truly understood the intricate, almost paradoxical science behind it. Simple in appearance, but infinitely complex in function, Aurelite absorbed resonance, stored power, and reshaped it for countless uses: communication, defense, energy, weaponry, and metallurgy. Even the smallest chips held value; glimmers—small fragments of Aurelite too small for practical use—served as the common currency throughout the Lucent Dawn.

The watch commander adjusted the Aurelite crystals at his station, then stepped beside Vigil at the display. "As you know, the first cultist activity originated here, when they began gathering near this Beacon." A red pulse shimmered on the map, marking the location. "They call themselves 'the Darkening.'"

Vigil barely reacted. Cults had risen and fallen for centuries—some dangerous, most merely deluded. This group seemed no different.

"When we dispatched the first team," the commander continued, "they pursued the cultists into the canyons to the south." A silver pulse traced the Narrow Path southward. "The last transmission we received came from Artisan Dalton."

At the name, Vigil's eyes sharpened, a flicker of recognition breaking through the hard lines of his face.

"You know him, sir?" the commander asked carefully.

Vigil gave a slight nod. "Yes. He was assigned to equipment upkeep in my quarters before his field assignment, long enough to form an opinion." Vigil reflected on the young man. He'd always liked Dalton. Enthusiastic. Brilliant. Diligent. But not the usual sort of Artisan. A little too curious. A little too willing to wander beyond the lines drawn for him. That tendency got him into trouble with his superiors. Vigil knew another senior Lorekeeper like that once. He was now in Midhaven. "No wonder he got assigned to Sardis," Vigil said with something almost like regret.

He circled the display, studying the three-dimensional projection as though a different angle might reveal what had gone wrong, if only he could find the right perspective.

He was about to speak when a sharp alert chime cut through the room. The watch commander hurried back to his station, fingers dancing across the Aurelite controls. "General, it's an emergency transmission."

Static flooded the speakers. For several seconds, nothing coherent emerged, but beneath the distortion, they could hear the faintest impression of a voice, struggling, fighting against a storm of interference to be heard.

"Blast this thing to Mezrak! Hello, can you hear me? This is Artisan Technician First Class Dalton!"

The voice on the other end was ragged, breathless, and steeped in panic.

The watch commander reached to open the channel, but Vigil lifted a hand, stopping him.

"This is General Vigil at watch command," he said, his voice calm and steady, tempered by long years of guiding soldiers through fear and battlefield shock. "Report your status!"

"Is that you, Vigil?" Dalton's voice cracked with desperation.

Despite the tension thickening in the room, several soldiers bristled at the technician's familiarity with their commanding general.

"Yes, Dalton," Vigil replied, unbothered. "It's me. How are you holding up?"

A thread of reassurance crept into Dalton's voice at hearing Vigil, but it trembled on the edge of breaking. *"I'm at the end of my rope, General."*

Several Sentinels exchanged glances, startled at the technician's familiarity and the curse he'd let slip while addressing a Paragon.

"Where are you, Dalton? What's your status? We don't have your location."

The Sentinels winced again as Dalton muttered another frustrated oath, the sound of him fumbling frantically with his transmission gear crackling through the static.

The watch commander motioned toward the display. Vigil stepped back to the projection just as the Aurelite arrays began triangulating Dalton's signal.

"They're all dead."

The words came in a strangled rush, followed by several clipped, wrenching sobs before Dalton managed to steady himself. *"I don't know where I am, General. They're after me."*

Those last words were whispered like prey huddled in the dark, waiting for the predator's jaws to close.

"Who is after you, Dalton?" Vigil asked, giving the young Artisan a moment to catch his breath. Years of combat had taught him to recognize when panic and exhaustion were overtaking a man.

"The better question..." Dalton stopped, gasping, and Vigil could hear the hesitation, the fear of naming what stalked him. "The better question might be *what* is after me."

He forced himself onward. *"The same cultists the Sentinels drove out of Sardis doubled back with reinforcements. They ambushed us. They keep..."*

Dalton's voice broke into a harsh whisper. *"They keep screaming about the coming Nightfall."*

Vigil's jaw tightened. He bristled inwardly at the word, but kept his bearing perfectly steady. Any crack in his composure now would only unravel Dalton further.

Sensing the man's panic beginning to surge again, Vigil spoke gently but firmly. "All right, Dalton. I need you to look around and find Sardis's Beacon. Scan the horizon. If you can see the Light, move toward it."

A few seconds of static-laced silence passed before Dalton replied, steadier than before. *"Yes... I see it. It's to the north."*

Vigil nodded, even though Dalton couldn't see him. "Good." A faint chuckle slipped into his voice. "Hard to miss that bright beam stabbing up into the sky, isn't it? Start heading that way and keep your comms device with you. We'll use it to track your position."

Another pause. Then a quieter, humbled response: *"Yes, sir. Thank you, General. I... I lost my head there. I should have looked for the Light."*

The calm returning to his voice spoke of training and discipline reasserting themselves over fear.

Vigil traced the projected canyon paths toward the Temple of Sardis. "Are you in danger right now, Dalton?"

Dalton's reply came with the sound of crunching stone under steady footfalls. *"No, sir. I mean, they were after me, but I lost them in the slot canyons."*

A faint warmth touched Vigil's eyes at the return of confidence. "Good. The path you're on should bring you back to Sardis in a few hours."

There were still far too many questions unanswered, but they would have to wait. For now, his only source of information seemed relatively safe.

"Dalton," Vigil continued carefully, "who attacked the Sentinels?"

A small manipulation, but a deliberate one. Vigil hoped shifting the focus to the squad might ease Dalton's fear and let him speak more clearly.

"I... I don't really know, sir." The tremor in his voice returned, thin and unsteady.

Concern pricked at Vigil. If Dalton was still in danger, he needed better intelligence—and fast. He pushed a little harder.

"What do you mean, Dalton? Were they under cover? Attacking from a distance?"

This time, when Dalton answered, the steady rhythm of his footsteps had stopped. *"No, sir. I saw them. I'm not..."*

He choked on the words. Vigil could hear the young Artisan wrestling with a surge of fear and revulsion.

"I just don't know what they were. I've never seen anything like them. They weren't human. At least, not like any people I've ever seen."

Vigil felt a coldness settle into his bones. Dalton and the slain Sentinel squad had still been several days' march from Mezrak's Gate, the forbidding chasm south of Sardis. A place steeped in shadowed lore, much of it proscribed by the Lucent Dawn and known only to the most learned Lorekeepers. To the people of Ephraim, it was the threshold to the Obscurous Realm, more commonly called the Dark Beyond.

Vigil had sensed from the start that something was wrong. They had stamped out cultist cells across the Dunmar region for centuries, and none had ever possessed the strength—or audacity—to overwhelm a Sentinel scout team, let alone two working in concert. If they were working with something darker, something *real*, then this was far worse than a cultist uprising.

Dalton's voice wavered back through the static. *"I've only ever read descriptions in the ancient texts, but..."*

Vigil straightened. Around him, the entire command staff leaned forward as if pulled by a single thread, straining to catch the next words from the terrified young Artisan.

Vigil leaned toward the receiver. "But what, Dalton? What did you see?"

Silence answered him, a long, heavy pause.

Vigil whispered, more to himself than to the room, "Did we lose him?"

The watch commander shook his head sharply. "No, sir." But his eyes were wide, and the color had drained from his face.

Vigil wondered if his own rising anxiety was as visible as theirs. Then, a single word crackled through the comms, one word that froze every person in the command center.

Captain Bexley breathed, barely above a whisper, "Light preserve us..."

"Everyone out," Vigil barked, his parade-ground command cutting through the room like a blade.

They cleared out with the speed of soldiers who'd just heard incoming artillery.

Once the last officer had filed out, Vigil steadied his breathing and spoke into the receiver. His voice was low and reassuring. "It's going to be all right, Dalton. We're sending a Paragon to meet you and escort you in."

They heard Dalton's footsteps resume, firmer now, more confident, as he headed north toward Sardis. *"Thank the Light... and thank you, sir."*

Vigil turned to the watch commander. "Who do we have near Sardis?"

The commander scanned his roster, fingers moving swiftly over the Aurelite controls. After a tense moment, he looked up. "It appears Paragon Zenith is already in Sardis, investigating that region."

Vigil exhaled slowly. Of course. *He* had sent Zenith to look into the reports of heretical teachings weeks ago. How could he have forgotten? The prophecy... The sudden interruption... It had rattled him more than he cared to admit.

For the first time since the evening's disturbance began, a faint smile touched Vigil's face. "Good. That is good. Get Zenith moving with a recovery team to retrieve Dalton immediately."

The watch commander's hands flew across the Aurelite controls, dispatching orders as Vigil turned back to the display. The silver pulse marking Dalton crept slowly northward. Vigil felt himself shaking his head in disbelief at what Dalton had described, and at what it might mean for the entire region of Dunmar.

He faced the commander again. "I want all personnel in this center sequestered and censored. No personal communications in or out until we know more. Not a word about this event—or what Dalton claims—until Paragon Zenith sends his debrief. Is that understood?"

The watch commander nodded with an intensity that suggested there was no possible misunderstanding.

Vigil returned his gaze to the slow-moving silver dot and offered a silent prayer to the Light that Zenith would reach Dalton in time.