

OUTLANDER CHRONICLES
BOOK ONE

PHOENIX

C.H. COBB

DOORWAY



PRESS

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Soli Deo Gloria!

CHAPTER 1

The rusting sign twisted back and forth in the cold February wind, its post corroded paper-thin. A good storm would finish it off. Faded letters announced *SPEED LIMIT 45*, but it was a message no longer necessary. Hadn't been, not for eighty years.

Beyond the sign, just cresting the hill, ten men trudged north on the crumbling road. The bluish spider tattoo covering the left side of their faces identified them as *Anarchs*, and specifically as members of the clan inhabiting the rusting ruins once known as Exton, Pennsylvania. Predators without a conscience, they were equipped with assault weapons and a hatred of social order. Their target was a dying community of *Townies*, just up the way, which had been struck with some illness or other. Their intent was to help the poor pilgrims to their natural end, perhaps just a bit ahead of schedule.

Hidden in a dense thicket of laurel, a tall, bearded man crept forward on the frozen ground. He surveilled the approaching group with dark, intelligent eyes, missing nothing. Arabic in features, he was clothed in an eclectic collection consisting of stained deerskin leggings, military-grade boots, and a heavy but worn coat retrieved from the

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ruins of some forgotten mercantile. His movements and the way he handled his weapon betrayed careful training and long experience.

His one-man ambush had been prepared for the men who now approached from the south. He knew that the moral calculus of what the ten were about to do mattered not at all to them. Unfortunately for the Anarchs, it did matter to the tall Arab. They had planned murder and plunder, but Hakim Abdul al Malik had laid his own plans, and the collision was but seconds away.

“Why couldn’t you guys just *leave the kid alone?*” he muttered to himself. “He’s suffered *enough* without your help.” Hakim grimaced. He hated killing. *Isa, forgive me!*

He could hear their feet crunching on the old highway. The familiar adrenaline rush kicked in, controlled by the terrible calm that always came over him as he prepared for battle. He selected full-automatic on his M14, and forced himself to regard the Anarchs as targets, not men. He shifted slightly on the cold, hard ground, pulling the butt plate tightly into his shoulder. His measured breath created momentary puffs of fog.

A little closer . . . a little closer . . . and, fire!

The staccato bark of his rifle shattered the morning stillness as the spray of bullets etched a lethal pattern across the group. Three men dropped, screaming, the foliage behind them spattered bloody red. The remainder scattered off the road into cover.

Shoot and move, he reminded himself as he slid backwards then moved laterally to a new firing position.

The tall Arab rammed a fresh magazine into his gun, then peered through the heavy undergrowth. The far side of the road erupted in the flame and sound of automatic weapons fire, as the Anarchs raked the spot where he had just been.

Stupid amateurs!

Picking a target, he rapped out a three-shot burst, killing a fourth Anarch. Hakim wormed his way to a new position. Another brief burst, another kill. Again he relocated.

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“Hal, how many of them are there?” a voice wailed.

“Hal’s dead. I’d guess there are three or four of them,” someone responded.

“I thought Hal said that there was just the kid left, and that this would be an easy raid!” the first voice protested.

“Yeah, well, Hal was wrong. Any more questions, moron?”

Cloaked in thick brush and silence, Hakim waited for the Anarchs to make another mistake. He peered through the undergrowth, looking for a target. Five minutes lengthened to ten, and he began to get cold.

“I’m pulling out!” a voice declared, thick with disgust. Several others muttered agreement.

Hakim listened to the diminishing sounds of the withdrawal, and then gathered his pack and walking stick, and disappeared into the wilderness.

About a mile away, a young man was digging a grave. An inch shy of a solidly-built six feet, he had a wide mouth accustomed to easy smiles, sandy-colored hair, and brown eyes. He was wearing a worn pair of blue jeans, a ratty denim shirt covered by an equally ratty coat, and old leather work boots that showed signs of too much use. His normally friendly face was contorted with grief at the moment; he was preparing a grave for his mother.

The rattling percussion of the distant firefight startled him and he threw down his shovel, grabbed his rifle, and jumped into the fresh hole. He waited a bit after the sounds of the gunfire ceased, then climbed out of the hole and wearily resumed his digging.

As he lowered the sheet-wrapped body into the grave, he began to weep. “Gonna miss you, Mom. I love you. I wish I could say that to you just one more time. Sorry dad can’t be here, Mom, but he’s just too sick to leave his bed.”

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A week later, Jacen Chester threw the last shovelful of dirt on his father's grave, and then leaned on the shovel, surveying the end of his sad task. Seventeen fresh mounds encircled the top of this low, green Pennsylvania knoll. Those graves represented all he had loved and lived for, family and friends. Laid low by some sickness, one by one they had died, and one by one he had buried them on this accursed hill. In the end, only he himself was spared.

Staring at the mounds, he figured he was all cried-out. Tears had been replaced by a bleak, throbbing anger at the injustice, the sheer unfairness, of it all. If there was a god, he hated him and was sure that he was hated by him in return. He and all his loved ones were in the grip of Fate, and the dice had been rolled and they had all lost. All except him.

Well, he'd lost too, the twenty-three year old figured, because he was still alive, and now very much alone. He leaned over and picked up his rifle.

"I'm very sorry."

Startled, Jacen whirled around and brought up his rifle, jacking a shell into the chamber in one smooth movement. In the edge of the trees stood a tall bearded man. The stranger appeared to be about forty, like Jacen's own dad had been. His face was tanned and wind-burnt, with high cheekbones and an aquiline nose. It was a rough face, but the deep, black eyes were filled with pity and sincerity. The man wore a large pack and held an ornately carved walking stick. He also wore a shoulder-holster with a pistol, and had an assault rifle slung over his back.

The man's simple compassion penetrated Jacen's guard, and he did not trust his voice to respond. Jacen held the rifle steady, but said nothing.

"I'd be mighty thankful, son, if you did not pull that trigger."

Surprised, Jacen relaxed slightly. He'd not been aware that his finger was curled around the trigger. It was only then that he understood just how numb he'd become. He didn't

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even know what day it was. The last week had been a nightmare of death and mourning.

Angry that his grief had again risen to the surface, Jacen demanded, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I've been watching you for eight days now. I've seen you caring for these people, and digging the graves."

"I haven't seen you!"

"Didn't want to be seen," the stranger responded. "I've been keeping the Anarchs off your back."

"Heard some shots late last week. That you?"

"That was me. They were planning to raid your settlement; I spoiled their plans. Figured you had enough to worry about."

Jacen lowered his rifle and fought a losing battle with his emotions. His shoulders began to shake, he leaned against the tree, then sank to the ground, weeping uncontrollably. He was furious at himself for losing it, but was unable to control his grief any longer. The kindness of this total stranger undermined his defenses, and he was undone.

The man retreated into the trees twenty yards, pulled off his pack, and began to build a fire. Soon he had coffee boiling and venison roasting. He clattered about with such noise that Jacen realized the man had not moved on, but was extending an invitation.

Jacen struggled for a few moments with the whirling vortex of emotions that his grief and anger had generated. He needed to be alone and he needed someone to talk to and all at the same time. It was overwhelming. Finally he followed the sounds and approached the stranger's campfire.

"Who are you?" Jacen stepped close to the fire, and sat down on the ground.

"I am Hakim," the man said, and then tossed Jacen two cups. "Pour the coffee, would you?"

"You look like an Arab. You belong to the People of the Prophet?"

"It depends," Hakim responded.

"On what?"

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“It depends,” Hakim repeated. “Of which prophet do you speak?”

Jacen’s anger flashed. “Give me a straight answer!” he demanded. “Are you a Muslim?” His parents had taught him that the Great Disaster had been triggered by religion, particularly Islam and Christianity.

“I was; I once was a Muslim. I am no longer. I am of the people of the prophet Isa, not Muhammad.”

“I’ve never heard of Isa!”

“That’s because you don’t speak Arabic,” Hakim chuckled.

“Who is Isa?” Jacen demanded bitterly.

Hakim’s face darkened with anger. He looked at the young man and asked hotly, “Look, do you want to interrogate me, or do you want to enjoy *my* coffee and *my* venison with me?”

What’s the matter with me? I am so angry I could kill right now, thought Jacen. He looked down, and put his head in his hands. “I’m sorry; I’m not myself. I’m just having trouble with my emotions. I’ve lost everyone, I’m furious, and I don’t even know who I’m mad at.”

“You gotta knife on you?” Hakim asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“Because I’m really hungry. Cut off half of that venison for yourself, and then pass the rest to me.”

They ate in silence. Jacen had not realized he was famished. For two days he hadn’t paused to eat, and it was all he could do to avoid wolfing the meat down.

“What’s your name, son?” Hakim asked as he sipped his coffee.

Jacen stared thoughtfully at the man sitting across the fire. *Why should I trust this guy? I don’t even know who he really is. On the other hand, he’d have no point in scamming me. All he’s got to do to take everything I own is kill me. If he was going to kill me, he’d have done it while I was burying dad. Get a grip, Jacen! Why shouldn’t I trust him? Why does it even matter anymore, anyway?* Jacen made

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a silent decision, and took a leap of faith. It was a leap that he would later realize changed the course of his life.

“Jacen. Jacen Chester. These were my folks, my community. Some sort of sickness wiped us out. I buried my mom a week ago; I buried my dad today. Folks I love have been dying for the last three weeks. Seems like all I’ve been doing is diggin—“ His voice left him as his throat constricted with emotion. Tears began to roll down his cheeks again. Hakim sat nodding, saying nothing.

After a moment, Hakim asked, “Why’d you burn down your cabins this morning?”

“Didn’t know if maybe the whole place was somehow contaminated. Didn’t want anyone else to catch the sickness if they should happen along here. So I burned the whole settlement down. My house was the last to go. Everything I’m keeping is in that pack over there.”

“What are you going to do, Jacen?”

“Gonna go west. Get away from the east, all these ruins, and all the Anarchs.”

“And all the memories?”

Jacen nodded. “My dad said the folks in the middle of the country were relocated to the coasts when the dying started, some eighty years ago. I figure there’s no one left there now. So that’s where I’m headed.”

“Okay, so you’re headed west. What then?”

Jacen’s face brightened as he said, “That’s the good part; that’s where my dream is. I’m going to build a town that will replant a whole new civilization.”

A flicker of a smile ghosted across Hakim’s face. “A new civilization? Right. Have you always dreamed such small dreams?” Hakim asked dryly.

Jacen stood and began to pace as he elaborated on his vision of the future. He was obviously excited. “Look at us! I don’t mean just you and me—all of us. Here we are, surrounded by the remains of a once-great civilization, and all *we* can do is scavenge in the ruins for rotting clothes and the few leftovers of a former time!”

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“And so you intend to, what? Stop scavenging?”

“Yes! Well, no! Not at first, anyway; eventually. But that’s not really the big idea. I want to build a town, Hakim, that somehow gets *beyond* mere survival. There’s *got* to be more to life than just avoiding death. I want to start a community committed to creating, producing, and learning, instead of just . . . scavenging in the ruins.” Jacen scowled and sat down. He’d never shared his vision with anyone. Somehow this stranger had loosened his tongue, and he wasn’t sure if it had been wise to share everything.

Hakim sat, sipping his coffee, pondering the young man’s words. “How will you populate your town?”

“As I travel west, when I run across good folks, I’ll invite them to join me.”

“Hm. You married, Jacen?” Hakim queried.

“No, why?”

“If you want a growing population, everyone needs to do their part, including you,” the older man chuckled as he refilled his cup.

The fact that he was still unmarried was a sore spot for Jacen, and he retaliated, “Well, look at you, Hakim! Are YOU married?”

“Nope, can’t say that I am. But I’m not bragging about starting a new civilization, either.”

“You’re old enough to be my father!” Jacen needled. “How come you aren’t married, Hakim? What have you got to show for your forty some-odd years, huh?”

“That’s personal, kid, and it’s none of your business!” Hakim snapped, suddenly irritated.

For a few moments the two men drank their coffee without speaking, staring into the slowly dying fire. Dusk fell, and the west glowed with a pastel pink. Clouds trailing on the lower rim of the sky were momentarily gilded, and then the sun sank below the horizon and the clouds resumed a foreboding gray.

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“Why don’t you get some sleep, son,” Hakim suggested gruffly, still irritated. “I’ll take the first watch.” He doused the fire with the remnants of the coffee pot.

“Watch?? Do you really think it’s necessary? I thought you eliminated the Anarchs last week!” asked Jacen, surprised.

“Yes, I got some of them, but not all of them. At least five got away. And you can bet that they know what’s happened out here. They might wait until tomorrow morning to ransack the remains of your community, but they may decide to come tonight. If they do, we’d better see them first unless you fancy getting your throat cut while you sleep. So keep that gun right by your bedroll, and keep it loaded! I’ll wake you up a little after midnight and you can keep the morning watch.”

Two weeks earlier, Hakim had been walking up from the south on deserted byways. He had no destination in mind. He was wandering alone, as he had for years. He was a man of insatiable curiosity, which meant he read everything he could get his hands on, and always had to see what was around the next bend.

Nearly out of ammo for his M14, he had been scavenging in the ruins of Philadelphia. He was searching in the remains of an old hardware store when he heard someone approaching. He found a hiding place just before three men, each toting a shotgun, sauntered into the store.

“The Townies at Ludwig’s Corner have been hit by a bug. I was scouting their settlement the other night, and counted six new graves on the hill above it,” said the first.

“This is a good time to roll ‘em! Let’s go get their stuff,” urged the second man, as he foraged through piles of rotting merchandise.

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“No, pinhead,” scolded the third man, “d’ya want to catch what they’ve got? I say wait for them all to die, then we’ll move in.”

“Huh-uh,” disagreed the first, who seemed to be dominant. He was pawing through a near-empty rack of rusted tools. “We’re not going to wait for ‘em to die. Can’t wait that long. We’ve got to have food, and they have it. We’ll kill any Townies left alive, and then we’ll take their stuff.”

“What about their sickness, Hal? We might catch it from them!” whined the third fellow.

“Naah. We’re immune! We’ve been hanging out in the ruins for years without catching a bug. We *must* be immune. Besides, we’ve got to have food before we starve. We’ll hit ‘em soon,” directed Hal.

At that moment, Hal turned and Hakim had a clear view of his face. It was covered by the tattoo of a spider, the body of the spider occupying the front of the left cheek. *Oh, great*, Hakim thought to himself, *Anarchs. And I’ve only got seven rounds left. I’d never survive a shoot-out, not when they have shotguns.*

As the men rummaged through the store for anything useful, Hakim observed the same tattoo on each man, in the same location. Tattoos were the identifying marks of the Anarchs; the facial tattoo indicated their specific clan. Townies rarely wore tattoos, and never on the face, considering it a barbaric custom.

Luckily for Hakim the three left several minutes later, unaware that their plans had been overheard. After finding ammunition in the ruins of an old police station, Hakim next located the Townies’ settlement. It was then, during his covert surveillance, that he had noted the young man serving as the lone caregiver of the dying group. Some intangible quality of the young man had impressed him, and Hakim had made a decision. Whatever the dying fortunes of the little community, it was not going to be interfered with by the Anarchs. Not if he could prevent it.

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“Jacen! Jacen! Wake up! It’s your turn for watch.” Hakim waited until the young man began to dress, then asked, “Have you ever stood watch before?”

“Sure, many times,” Jacen replied, digging the sleep out of his eyes.

“How were you trained?” Hakim asked doubtfully, eyeing the sleepy young man in the cold moonlight.

“Trained? What’s to train? You just walk circles around the settlement,” Jacen yawned. “At least, that’s how we did it.”

“Actually, it’s a little more involved than that, if you do it right. Listen! When you are standing watch, the lives of those who are sleeping are in your hands. It’s serious business. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. In the old days, in the military, people who fell asleep on watch were sometimes executed. It’s that serious, so stay awake. I don’t care to have my throat slit by the Anarchs while I’m sleeping.”

“Got it. I’ll stay awake.”

“Good. Every thirty or forty minutes, patrol the perimeter of our camp, but never take the same route twice. Don’t establish a pattern, unless you want to get jumped while you are patrolling. Understand?”

“Sure. Got it. Don’t set up a pattern. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Always carry your rifle, and if you use it, shoot to kill. No mercy, do you understand? If they come at us, they are coming to kill us; that’s just the way the Anarchs operate. If you don’t kill them first, they will certainly kill you. This is serious business, boy; if you’re gonna survive, you need to defend yourself without a second thought. You follow?”

Jacen was now fully awake, and nodded soberly in the moonlight. He pulled on his boots and his coat and then jacked a shell into the chamber of his rifle. He noticed that when Hakim spread out his bedroll it was not near the dying

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embers of the fire but well away in the shadows. A shiver ran up his spine, and as he circled the camp he remembered all the nasty things he'd ever heard about Anarchs. He had no trouble staying awake.

CHAPTER 2

It was a cold, clear night, and the sky was brilliant with stars. Puffs of a gentle breeze scattered the frost and brought sound and motion to the treetops. Jacen was tired, but he welcomed watch duty and the silence of the night. It was the first time in weeks in which he was not serving, or burying, someone.

He forced himself to think of his parents, see their faces, and remember their voices. He recalled images of his neighbors, all of whom were now dead, buried, and lying cold in their graves. Jacen did not want to avoid the pain of bereavement; he wanted to sear it into his memory. He wanted the anger of the loss to energize him so that he might deny Fate the last victim of his community. He would go west and build a new community, a community with many families, the rule of law, and the protection of civilization. And no Anarchs!

With a start he realized that he'd been buried in his thoughts for a long time. A look at the stars told him it had been over two hours since his last patrol around the camp. After listening intently for several minutes, Jacen stood,

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walked out about one hundred yards, and began to patrol the perimeter of his camp.

It was a little after 5:00 AM when he heard them approaching on the trail. What had once been Route 100 running from Exton to Pottstown was now little more than an overgrown path between the two ruins. Eighty years without maintenance had had its effect. Small trees and weeds were growing from the cracks in the crumbling asphalt.

The soft, crunching sound of feet tramping in the old roadway and the murmur of hushed voices was transmitted through the cold night air with amazing clarity. Jacen silently drifted back into camp, and moved toward the shadow where Hakim had spread his bedroll. It was empty!

Jacen struggled to control the rising fear in his chest. *Hakim must have heard the intruders and gotten up. What do I do now?* Something touched his shoulder and he stifled a gasp of surprise. It was Hakim.

Using hand signals, the older man directed Jacen to take a position on the ground behind some thick, fallen logs, and he made it clear that Jacen was not to shoot until Hakim did. Then Hakim disappeared into the shadows again.

The young man got into position amongst the logs. He noted with approval that it was a good site with lots of cover. Selecting the burst mode of his M4, he hunkered down and waited.

The M4 was carried almost universally; there was a large number of them available, as it had remained the personal weapon of choice for the military into the twenty-first century. The arms had been stored in crates packed in grease before the Great Disaster, so they had not corroded with age. While ammunition had been plentiful for scavengers the first fifty years or so, it was getting harder to find. There was no manufacturing to replenish the supply.

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Jacen listened as the Anarchs drew close. One stumbled and fell, with much cursing and hissing and shushing from his companions. The group stopped as their companion clambered to his feet. Jacen peered through his barricade and counted five men in the moonlight. He could overhear their conversation.

“I can’t believe someone burned down the cabins. We could have used them.”

“Somebody must have survived the sickness, and torched ‘em.”

“Well, where’s the survivor?”

“How should I know, idiot? I don’t care anyway. If he’s not there it just saves us a bullet. Or five, rather,” the speaker snickered, looking around the group.

Jacen trained his rifle on the one on the left. He figured that Hakim would probably aim at the dominant speaker, who was standing on the right. As the small group continued to talk and argue, Jacen maintained his aim, waiting for Hakim to open up.

It was clear from their talk that they intended to kill him. A shiver ran up Jacen’s back; if not for Hakim’s insistence that they keep watch, they would have been murdered.

The group of Anarchs was beginning to head away, when one held up his hand and whispered, “Wait!” His companions turned and stared at him.

“I smell a camp fire.”

“No you don’t,” one disagreed. “You smell the burnt cabins.”

“Nope. Wind’s coming from the wrong direction for us to smell the cabins here. It’s a camp fire, and it’s nearby.”

Jacen was grateful that the fire had burnt itself out several hours ago. Though the man could smell it, at least he could not see the remaining embers. The Anarchs fell silent and began to creep in Jacen’s direction. He knew that they could not see him but he felt the chill of fear nonetheless. Closer and closer they came, and still Hakim did not open fire. Jacen was about to fire when the loud rattling bark of an