

THIS IS HOW A HERO IS FORGED

Cold Iron



MILES CAMERON

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Masters & Mages

Book One

MILES CAMERON

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

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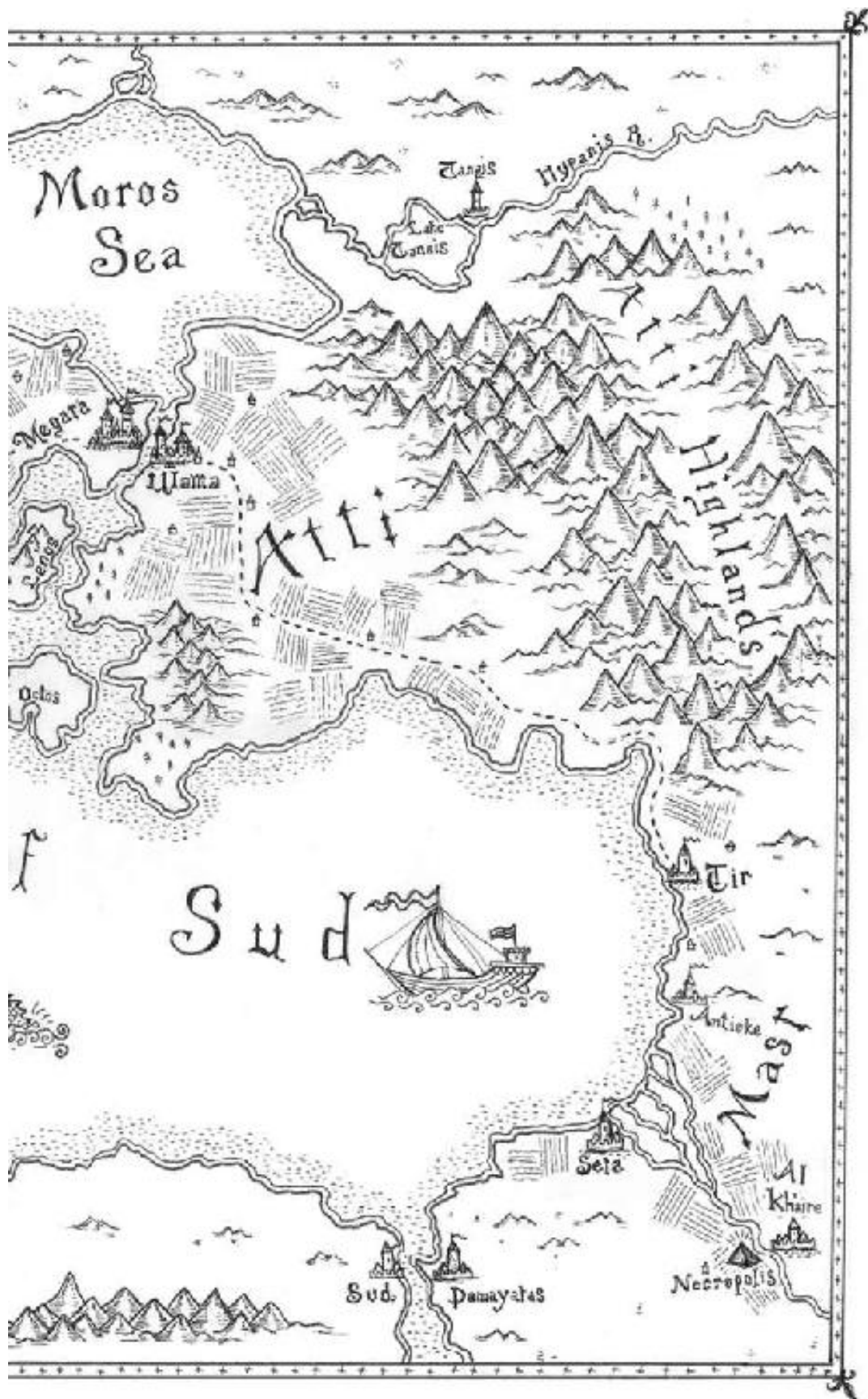
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The
WORLD



Epigraph

Again, regarding principles, it is argued that they can be known through experiences, but this is both deceptive and fallacious, for experiences only have the force of establishing a universal principle by way of induction from many cases; and a universal principle never follows from an induction unless the induction includes every singular for the universal, which is impossible ... Let us assume that whenever you have sensed iron, you have sensed it to be hot. It is sure that by this reasoning you would judge the iron that you can see and all iron that exists, to be hot. And that would be a false judgement. Iron is often cold.

Tirase, Questions on Metaphysiks

Prologue

It was late in the day when Syr Xenias di Brusias was ready to leave Volta. Almost everything that could go wrong had done so, and he was rushed and was prone, even after the life he'd led, to forget things, so he made himself stand by his fine riding horse in his two-stall city stable and review everything.

He still had not decided what to do by the time he mounted. He set himself in motion, mostly to avoid thinking too much.

His mare was delighted to be ridden; she'd been cooped up for as long as he had himself, and as soon as she was out in the street behind his house she was ready to trot, or more.

He kept her gait down because it was very important that he not be stopped. He was a little overdressed for a common wayfarer, in tall black boots all the way to his thighs and a black half-cloak and matching black hat full of black plumes, but he liked fine things and he lacked the time to change.

He was riding out of a maelstrom, and he needed to stay on the leading edge.

He could hear screams from the north, where the Ducal Palace was. He patted the sword at his hip with his bridle hand then he turned his horse at the first cross street – away from the palace of towering brick on the hillside, and down towards the river, the bridges, and the street of steelworkers where he had a commission to collect.

It struck him that if he collected the commission then he had made his choice; he would never be able to come back to Volta.

It also struck him that a violent political revolution could cover a great many dark deeds. There were already looters on the streets; two men passed him carrying a coffer, and neither looked up or caught his eye. The sound of breaking glass was almost as prevalent as the sound of screaming from the north.

He heard *gonnes* firing, and the snap of crossbows, and a sulphur reek floated past him and made his mare shy. There was the acrid reek of magik, too.

He let the mare trot, and her hooves struck sparks from the paving stones. Volta was one of the richest cities in the west, and it had fully paved

streets and running water from the two great aqueducts, which was still nothing compared to the wonders of his home. The City.

Megara. Which he was about to help destroy.

Or not. He still couldn't decide.

The mare stopped abruptly. There was a corpse in the street, and the sound of steel crossing steel. He tugged at her reins, turned along an alley that ran across the back of the shops and emerged on the next broad, empty street, with tall houses tiled in red rising high enough to block the sun.

He looked right and left, but the street was empty. From long practice, his eyes rose, looking at rooflines and balconies above him, but nothing moved, and he gave the horse her head. They flew along the street, past the corner of violence, and down to the riverside, where he reined in and turned the mare into Steel Street, where the armourers were. He knew the shop well; Arnson and Egg, the two families on the gold-lettered sign, had made fine *gonnes* since the principle had first been developed far to the east.

He had a moment of doubt; the street seemed deserted.

But he saw a light burning, and smoke from the chimney, so he dismounted, tethered his horse to a hitching post and moved his dagger back along his belt from habit. Then he pounded at the door despite the darkening eve and the sounds of violence in the high town.

He heard footsteps.

'You came!' said young Arnson.

He pushed in beside the young man.

'I came for my *fusil*.'

The lad smiled. 'It is done.' He pointed at a leather case on the front bar. 'Pater is gone; he says it will be bad here. I'm to keep the doors locked and only eat food in the house.'

'Very wise.' The man paused to admire the case; the fine steel buckles made by hand and blued, and expert leather-work.

Then he took out the weapon.

'You made this?' he asked.

The young man grinned. 'I did, too. Pater helped with the lock; I'm not that dab with springs, yet. And I hired the leather-work.'

The boy was so pleased with himself that the man almost laughed.

He permitted himself a smile instead. 'And the compartment?'