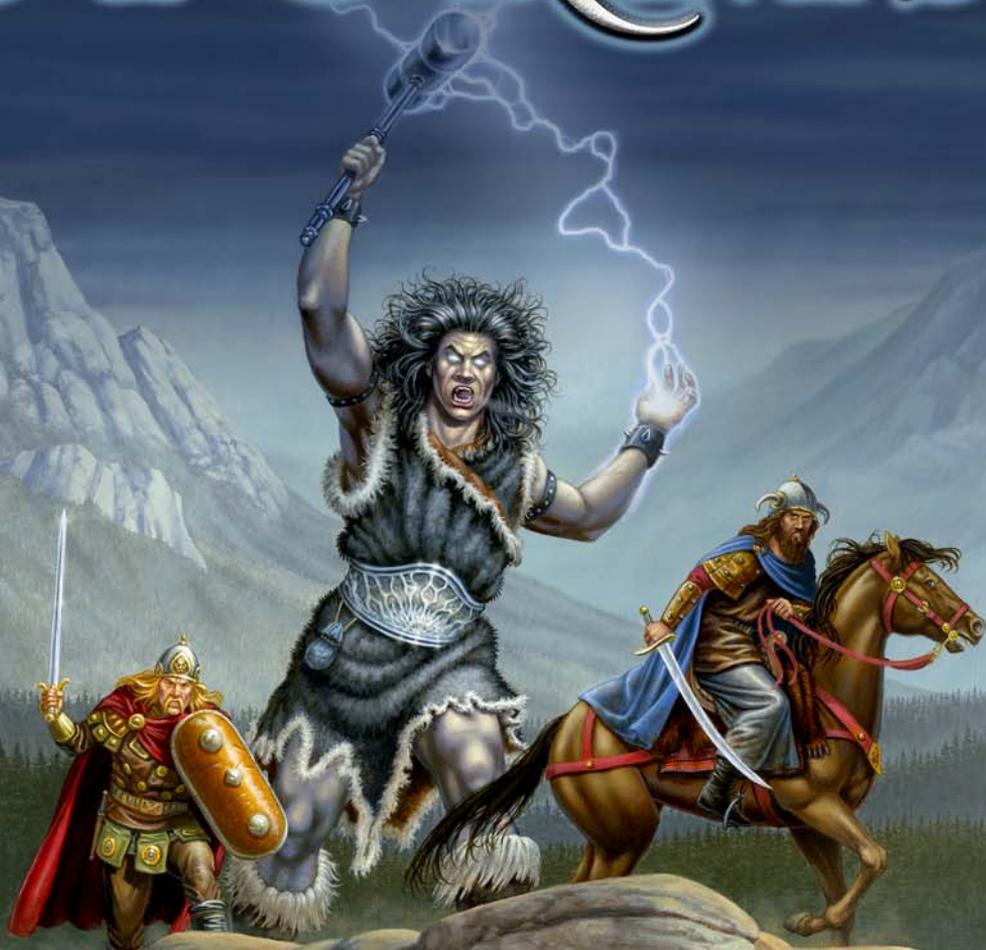


# BRINGER OF STORMS



L. B. GRAHAM

BRINGER OF  
STORMS

THE BINDING OF THE BLADE

BY L. B. GRAHAM

*Beyond the Summerland*  
*Bringer of Storms*  
*Shadow in the Deep*  
*Father of Dragons*  
*All My Holy Mountain*



# BRINGER OF STORMS

L. B. GRAHAM

**R&R**  
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*For Anna, my mother,  
who read to me.*

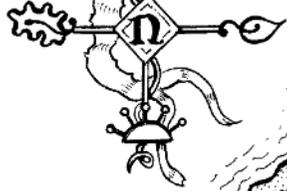


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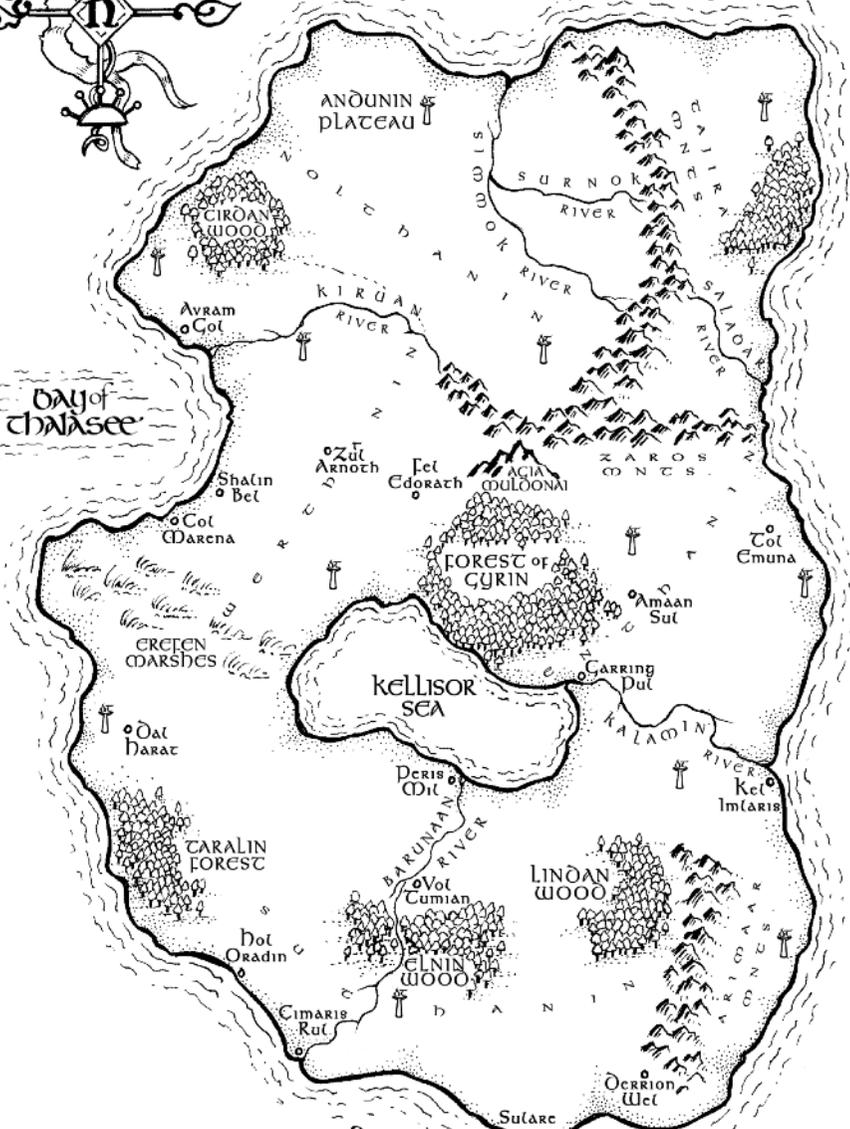
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# KIRCHANIN

G R E A T N O R T H E R N  
S E A



Bay of  
Chalasee



S O U T H E R N  
O C E A N

the FORBIDDEN  
ISLE

# PROLOGUE: WHAT WAS AND WHAT WILL BE

ALAZARE SAT ON THE rocky precipice, his feet dangling from the ledge. His eyes were squeezed shut because the constant spinning of the world around him had begun to make him feel sick. He had tried to get a good look over the side of the Mountain, to see where Malek had fallen, but looking down had been a bad idea.

He opened his eyes. The spinning wasn't nearly as bad now. He blinked a few times and found he was even able to focus, but his relief was tempered by the return of the ringing in his ears. The ringing had accompanied him as he had chased Malek through the streets of Avalione and up the long stair that ascended the northern slope behind the city. When he had thrown Malek from the Mountain, the ringing had stopped, only to be replaced by the spinning.

Gingerly, Alazare reached up and touched the side of his head above his right ear, where Malek had struck him with the

hammer. When he thought of the fury of that blow, Alazare knew he was fortunate to be alive. Ringing ears and blurry eyes were the least he should have expected. In the end, he knew that he was alive only because Allfather had seen fit to spare him. What else could account for his survival? Alazare had watched Malek slay Volrain with that same hammer just moments before it had shattered when used against him. It wasn't the solidity of the blow that had destroyed it, for he had dodged it just enough that it struck him and glanced off his head, and he was spared the full force of the impact. For a moment, they had both been immobilized by that curious turn of events. Alazare had seen shock, anger, and even fear as Malek looked at the broken pieces of the hammer. Alazare knew then, as Allfather's spirit filled him, that Malek had been delivered into his hand.

Alazare looked up. The sky above the Mountain was a glorious blue. The brightness hurt his eyes, even though they were focusing better than they had been. He shifted his position on the rock and gazed out over the rough landscape of Nolthanin, out beyond Agia Muldonai. With a sigh, he managed to muster the will to try looking down once more.

This time, the spinning did not return, and he did not get dizzy as he gazed down the side of the Mountain. The precipitous drop fell for hundreds of spans. The rocks on the side of the Mountain were jagged and rough. It was an impassable surface, much like the upper reaches of the eastern and western sides. The bottom of the Mountain was difficult to see, but even without complete clarity, it was obvious to Alazare that the impact of Malek's fall had changed the terrain. The rough and uneven ground that sloped slightly downward from the foot of the Mountain had been broken open. Now, a large crater interrupted the consistency of the landscape. Alazare could not see the bottom of that crater, which frustrated him, but he couldn't imagine how Malek could have survived that

fall. For all his might, surely even Malek must have been broken by that impact.

Alazare started to rise but quickly thought better of it. The ringing in his ears became a deafening buzz, and the spinning returned to his eyes. He sat back down with a thump and cradled his own head in his hands. The wound above his ear pounded with pain, and he thought his head might explode. With his legs still dangling over the edge of the rocky ledge, Alazare gingerly lay back on the ground. Maybe it was premature to think he was going to survive the hammer blow after all.

When next he sat up and opened his eyes, the sun had dropped below the western peak of the Mountain. The light it cast was a bright red, and while it couldn't really be said to be the color of blood, that was what it brought to Alazare's mind. Blood. The Holy Mountain was stained with blood. Malek had destroyed the peace that had reigned in this place for a thousand years. Malek had lifted his hands in violence against his own brothers, and he had incited others to do the same. Alazare touched the dried blood that clung to his matted hair. Somewhere, behind and below him in Avalione, the blood of his brothers was drying where it had seeped out of their lifeless bodies.

As he sat, thinking of what had become of Avalione and the Twelve, he noticed a windhover alight nearby. The bird hopped across the warm rock to the place where he was sitting, cocking its head sideways as it peered at him.

"So you've come to keep me company, little fellow," he said. "I'm sorry, but I think I will prove to be a poor companion. I have nothing to say, and it is probably better that way. Darkness is coming, and it may never pass."

The bird hopped nearer. It stopped just shy of his enormous legs, which still dangled over the edge. For several minutes, the windhover perched there quietly, looking out over

the wide land still visible for leagues in the light of the setting sun. It turned its head to look at Alazare. Then, suddenly, the bird leapt into the air, wheeled around, and flew south over the city behind them. Alazare turned to look over his shoulder, but the bird quickly dropped out of view.

Immediately, Alazare wished he hadn't turned around. Just the sight of the tops of the city buildings, Allfather's Temple, the Council Hall, and the rest made him sick to his stomach. For the first time, as the sun set over the Blessed City, it set upon a graveyard, not a living place. Only he remained, and likely not for long.

He turned and gazed back out over Nolthanin. He could not yet face what lay behind. He could not yet descend the long, winding stair back into Avalione. Thinking of what was there, he started to wish that he had not survived at all. If it had been necessary for Allfather to grant survival to one of them, even if only for a while, why him? Why had he been left alone to face what could not be faced? Surely nothing could be worse than this.

Behind him rose a sound—the flutter of many wings and the cry of many birds, and when he turned, half a dozen wind-hovers came into view. Each King Falcon carried something in its talons and brought it to Alazare. The first four carried pieces of fruit from the vineyard and groves that grew on the eastern slope of the Mountain beyond the edge of the city. The last two carried strips of cloth that had been dipped in water. As Alazare placed the pieces of fruit on the ground beside him and took the two wet cloths, he realized they had been soaked in the water of the Crystal Fountain. They were cool and refreshing, and with one he wiped the grime and sweat and blood from his face. He held the cloth to his skin and pressed the moist surface against his sore eyelids. The other he held against the side of his aching head. It was immensely soothing and provided a welcome measure of relief.

The birds stood by silently, almost still, as though waiting his command so that they could provide for his need. He took up the fruit they had brought and ate. It tasted sweet and good, and he repented of his haste in despairing of this life. "I am rebuked by your goodness," he said to the windhovers. "There is still joy in the sweetness of a grape and the coolness of water. May I have some more?"

Instantly the King Falcons rose, wings flapping, and sped back down into the city. They returned momentarily, each bearing the same gifts they had brought before. This time, Alazare took the two cloths and squeezed the water into his mouth, then sucked what remained from each. Though both contained little more than a mouthful, that mouthful was exactly what his parched throat needed. He swished the cool water around in his mouth and closed his eyes as the liquid slid down the back of his throat.

When he had finished the second round of fruit, he turned to the gathered windhovers and said, "Blessed are you, little ones, for you have ministered to me when I thought myself forsaken by all living things. Whatever is to come, and wherever Kirthanin is to go from here, you will be blessed as long as this world shall last."

As he spoke, each of the birds settled down upon the rock. There they stayed, and whenever Alazare turned to look at them, he found them waiting, watching. As the last rays of daylight faded and darkness fell even upon the northern face of Agia Muldonai, the odd group remained: Alazare, his eyes more closed than open, immobile on the edge of the cliff facing north; and the windhovers, their piercing dark eyes steady on the great Titan, keeping his lonely vigil.

In the grey morning light just before dawn, a great golden form came gliding over Avalione. Sulmandir swept up and over the top of the precipice on which Alazare still sat, look-

ing with wonder at the curious scene, for the Titan was almost statue-like in his lack of motion, and a cluster of six wind-hovers sat almost as still just a short distance away. Sulmandir circled overhead for a few minutes, but even when he passed almost directly in front of Alazare, he could detect no sign of life in the Titan. He had seen the bodies of the others, and now he feared that he was looking down upon the final victim of Malek's crazed mutiny.

Sulmandir landed on the rocky ledge not far behind Alazare, and the heads of the King Falcons turned almost in unison. They, at least, were still living. Alazare in Titan form was a good seven spans tall, so that even when Sulmandir raised himself to his full height, he was shorter than his friend. Now, because Alazare was seated, Sulmandir stood a bit higher than he, and as he approached him from behind, he lowered his mouth to whisper in his ear.

"Alazare, if your heart beats still, come back from wherever you have gone. I have need of you. Kirthanin has need of you."

Alazare did not reply, and Sulmandir straightened as he considered what to do next. He was reticent to touch Alazare, perched as he was in a precarious position. He had finally decided simply to repeat himself when Alazare suddenly moved. It wasn't a dramatic movement, just a barely perceptible sinking of his head. Sulmandir paused, wondering what it meant. For all he knew, Alazare's dead body was just slipping forward. Perhaps he would eventually tumble off the heights into the depths below. It was a grim thought, for Sulmandir knew that if Alazare was in fact dead, then both he and Kirthanin would have to face its doubtful future alone, for the first time without the guidance of even one of the Titans.

But then Alazare spoke, just as softly as he had been addressed. "What Kirthanin needs, Sulmandir, I cannot give. It is beyond me. What was broken and destroyed here is impossible for anyone but Allfather to put back together."

“That may be true, but I do not speak of fixing or finding. I speak of fighting and defending.”

At these words, Alazare turned, though from the grimace of pain that crossed his face and the way he lifted his hand to hold his head, Sulmandir could tell that the sudden movement had cost him. “What do you mean? Malek and his followers are dead. Anakor, Charnosh, and Daegon lay fallen where they were slain, and I threw Malek from the Mountain myself.”

“I know. I have viewed the crater at the foot of the Mountain, but I am not sure that Malek died in the fall. The crater is empty.”

“What?”

“There is no body in the hole. I made a preliminary sweep of the area to see if I could find him, but I could not. I fear he has shifted into human form and hidden in one of the many caves or crags below.”

Alazare stared at Sulmandir, his heart sinking. If Sulmandir spoke the truth, the battle was indeed far from over.

“Alazare, some among the humans are preparing for war. I flew north, into Nolthanin, and I saw that Andunin has given his people weapons with blades of metal, carefully crafted and well-made. Even from the height at which I flew I could detect Malek’s handiwork. His rebellion appears to run deeper than it first appeared, for the farther I flew, the clearer it became that almost all of Nolthanin has made ready for war.”

“Andunin,” Alazare whispered. “What did Malek promise him, I wonder? Long life? Power? Or perhaps he did not make a promise, but a threat. Perhaps it was not what Malek could give so much as what he could take.”

“Perhaps both,” Sulmandir added. “Fear of Malek and a promise of glory would be hard for a man like Andunin to resist. He loves his family and his people, and fear for their lives might have caused him to succumb, especially if the possibility of greatness was rolled into the offer.”

“If Malek is dead, then we could stop whatever is happening below before it even starts. But, if Malek is still alive, then we may well be looking out over a world about to go to war. But surely Malek, even if he survived, surely he is broken in some way? We must find out, Sulmandir, for if he has been injured, even in some small measure, then we may yet stop the war. If Andunin sees that Malek cannot secure victory, then maybe he will put down his weapons before more ruin falls upon Kirthanin. Perhaps the world below can avoid the complete destruction that has befallen Avalione.”

“You may be right, Alazare. I will summon some of my children to help me look for news of Malek and to watch the developments in Nolthanin. I will return by nightfall with word of what we find.”

Sulmandir paused, looking at Alazare, whose gaze had strayed from the dragon to the city. Reading the sadness in his eyes, Sulmandir looked away. “Before I go, Alazare, is there anything I can do here, to help you?”

Alazare shook his head gently. “No, great Father of the Dragons. What I need to do, I need to do alone. Go, find as many of your sons as you can, and do all that you have proposed. I must rise at last and go back into the city. I must attend to the fallen faithful, and dispose of those who betrayed our house.”

Sulmandir nodded as Alazare swung his body around, away from the rock ledge, and slowly stood to his full height. Though Alazare was clearly in great pain, the power and magnificence of his Titan form was still evident. “You were victorious here, Alazare. Though all may feel like ruin and despair, you triumphed. Though all may feel like death and destruction, you live today because Allfather has chosen you to live.”

Alazare held his head. “For now, Sulmandir. I live for now, but my ears ring so that I can hardly hear, and my eyes blur so that I can hardly see, and my head aches and throbs con-

stantly. I fear I will never be well. Even so, I thank you, for you speak the truth, and I have only Allfather to thank.”

“You would tell me that continued service is the only thanks he requires.”

“You’re right, but what that service will be, that is a mystery.”

“Yes. Who can know what lies ahead?”

“Allfather alone.”

“Indeed,” Sulmandir nodded and, after leaping from the rock, circled above Alazare once before flying north.

For a moment, Alazare watched the Golden Dragon, both beautiful and powerful in flight. It was comforting to think that Sulmandir had not been claimed by Malek’s rebellion, at least not yet. As Sulmandir disappeared from view, Alazare shook his head slightly in disbelief. He stole another quick glance down the side of the Mountain at the crater created by Malek’s fall. How could he have walked away? He didn’t know, and at the moment, Alazare guessed it didn’t really matter. The only important fact was that Malek, it seemed, was somehow still alive.

Alazare turned from the edge, and the windhovers leapt into the air and circled overhead. With a glance from them to the city below, he began to make his way down the long winding stair. It was time to bury his brothers.

The stairs descended for more than a hundred spans back and forth from the northern ridge of Agia Muldonai. Even when Alazare reached the bottom of the stairs, he was still about seventy-five spans above Avalione. Gently sloping terrain led the rest of the way down, so that stairs were unnecessary. Moving as carefully and slowly as he could, Alazare made his way to the bottom. At last he was on ground that was more or less level, and he walked across the intervening space into Avalione, which he entered from the back. Most of the build-

ings faced south, and he wound through them until he reached the rear of Allfather's Temple, just before the courtyard of the Crystal Fountain.

He stopped and rested his head against the smooth, solid stone of the Temple walls. On the other side of the Temple, in the courtyard, he would find some of the slain. He knew already what he would do with the bodies of the three traitors; he would drag them one by one through the city and out the southern gate, where he would leave them exposed on the ground beyond the city walls. He would leave them for the birds to pick their flesh and gnaw their bones. They deserved no burial and would have none.

Rejuvenated by anger, Alazare moved forward again. He would feel better when these three were no longer in the city, defiling it.

As Alazare entered the courtyard, he saw the scene was just as he had left it. The water of the fountain sprayed high into the air, just as it had done for a thousand years, but floating in the pool at its base was Daegon, who had fallen into the water when Alazare struck him down. Sitting slumped with his back against the fountain was Volrain, the last of the faithful Titans to fall. He had fallen by Malek's own hand, struck and killed by the same hammer that had shattered moments later against Alazare's temple.

He walked to the fountain and stepped up into the pool. He waded through the cold clear water, but despite his thirst, he refused to drink. Vowing even as he crossed the pool that he would not drink until the three were expelled from the city, he plunged on until he reached Daegon.

Daegon was facedown, and Alazare left him that way. He had no wish to see this Titan's face again. Taking hold of the body under both armpits, he pulled it across the pool to the southern side. With a great heave, he lifted the torso onto the side of the fountain pool, and giving the feet a great push, he

managed to shove the whole body out. It fell with a wet thud on the paved courtyard, and Alazare climbed out onto the stone. Once out, he renewed his hold on the body and started down the central street that led through Avalione to the gate.

It was a difficult job. The body was stiff and heavy with water, and Alazare's eyes were acting up again. He had to stop frequently, release his grip with one hand and feel around in front of his face to make sure he was still on course. Eventually, though, he reached the gate, which was still partially open from when he and the others had entered silently the previous morning. Shoving that side of the gate with his shoulder, it swung open, and he hauled Daegon's body out of the city. He didn't stop in the wide, lovely meadow of soft green grass that surrounded the city walls. Instead, he kept on dragging Daegon until the grass gave way to a sloping surface of large rocks and loose gravel. Then, with a great heave, Alazare sent Daegon's body sliding down the side of the Mountain. It slid, still prone, and head downward, for about fifteen spans before coming to rest against a large boulder. Alazare tried to focus so he could see the place where Daegon was lodged, but he couldn't get a clear look. After a moment, he headed back to the city.

Just inside the gate, to the western side, were three more bodies. Here lay both Stratarus and Haalsun, not far from one another, with Stratarus's killer, Anakor, lying almost on top of them. Alazare grabbed Anakor by the leg and began to pull him out the gate. He was greatly relieved that he didn't have to take Anakor as far as Daegon, and that he was not soaked with water. He brought him to the same place where he had thrown down Daegon, and he gave Anakor a similar solid shove over the side. Anakor slid across the loose stones but missed the boulder and slid a good bit farther down. Eventually, he too came to rest.

Alazare found the last of Malek's allies, Charnosh, in one

of the groves east of Avalione, lying in the cool, soft grass. He had been struck down by Rolandes, who had avenged Haalsun's murder by the gate, but Rolandes had been unable to escape Daegon, who had come on him from behind just after the faithful Titan had killed Charnosh. Stooping over, Alazare gently rolled Rolandes off Charnosh, again doing his best not to look at the traitor. Securing Charnosh by the feet, he began to drag him back through the city toward the gate, finding grim satisfaction in the rough treatment Charnosh's body received along the way.

As he passed through the gate a third time, his muscles aching, his body sweating, and his eyes and ears malfunctioning, he closed his eyes and pictured the cold, clean water of the Crystal Fountain shooting high above the pool. By now, the blood from Daegon's body might have even been washed away, out of the pool itself, but even if it wasn't, Alazare knew he could stand in the pool and drink right from the source, right from the Fountain without fear of any contamination. How he looked forward to that drink.

Stumbling, he opened his eyes again and continued to pull Charnosh through the field. He had drifted off course but soon righted himself and headed for the place where he had deposited Daegon and Anakor. He brought Charnosh to the slope and without hesitating for a moment hurled the body down it. This time, the body followed Daegon's path precisely and soon lay nestled against his treacherous brother. Alazare paused long enough to pray that the birds come quickly or the bodies rot completely, that even this barren place on the Holy Mountain would not be long defiled by these wretches.

As he passed through the gate yet again, he paused again over the bodies of Stratarus and Haalsun. He could put off no longer what to do with them. They needed to be buried, but where? He looked out through the gate at the beautiful green meadow. It was big and broad and in some ways would have

been perfect for a final resting place. But Alazare wanted to lay his brothers down within the blessed city itself. He needed to find a place in Avalione for them all.

He started back up the center road, toward the Crystal Fountain, for he was eager for that too long delayed drink. As he walked, he realized that the grove on the eastern edge of Avalione was the only place large enough and peaceful enough to hold them all. Rolandes lay there already, and neither the two at the gate nor Volrain by the fountain would be hard to move there. The three in the Great Hall, though, would have to be carried all the way across the city, for Alazare would not drag the bodies of the faithful.

He reentered the courtyard and then the pool of the fountain. He waded through it until he stood under the spray. As it fell over him, he leaned his head back, feeling the wonderful refreshment of the water that ran down his face and arms and body. With his eyes closed, he opened his mouth and drank. Each time his mouth was full, he would take long, delicious gulps. He didn't want to open his eyes or move from that spot, for he knew the hardest part of his task was still ahead.

But when he had finally satiated his thirst, he left the fountain and climbed out of the pool. Stooping by the fallen body of Volrain, he gently cupped his brother's chin in his great hand. Dried blood covered the paving stones, the side of the fountain pool, and Volrain's face, clothes, and hair. Placing his shoulder against Volrain's chest, Alazare lifted him until he was resting more or less upon the side of the pool. Carefully, with his arm beneath his brother's shoulders, he leaned Volrain back into the water. With his free hand, Alazare began to wash the blood off of Volrain's face. When it was clean, he moved to Volrain's hair, which was floating in the water, and started to untangle it, pulling out the dried clumps of blood with his wet fingers. It was unpleasant work, and he knew he

couldn't get Volrain completely clean. Still, he would do whatever he could to prepare him for burial.

Eventually, he hoisted Volrain up over his shoulder to carry him out to the grove. He walked slowly through the city, grateful that his eyes had stopped bothering him for the moment. The buzzing in his ears was low and steady, and he realized that the sound of his own feet on the pavement sounded faint and far away. Alazare sighed. If he lost both his sight and his hearing, he wouldn't be much use against Malek. He could only hope that Malek had fared worse than he.

In the groves, Alazare laid Volrain with care beneath one of the trees. He then retrieved Rolandes and lay him beneath a neighboring tree north of Volrain. For several moments, Alazare gazed at them, but he pulled himself away and headed down to the gate.

There he took Stratarus first upon his shoulders, and he carried him back to the grove. He put him down beside Rolandes, under the next tree over, and then did the same for Haalsun. He massaged his sore arms and shoulders. The sun stood almost directly overhead. It would soon be midday, and he still needed to dig the graves and retrieve Balimere, Therin, and Eralon from the Council Hall. He would need to move quickly now.

He decided to dig the graves next. The three in the Hall were out of the sun, and he didn't want to disturb them until the heat of the day had passed. Besides, he hadn't been into the Hall since his return to the city, and he wasn't sure how he would handle the scene when he went.

Seven graves he dug, as the sun rose higher, passed midday, and began to descend again. He laid out the graves under seven trees, parallel to one another but a little staggered, for the tree line was not completely straight. He would have liked to make the graves deeper, but time was against him. When all seven were complete, he headed back into the city, pausing

only for another drink from the Fountain before making his way to the Council Hall.

He found the doors wide open. Entering, he scanned the Hall apprehensively. The great square council table was where it had been, chairs pushed in, three to a side. Had Alazare not known what to look for and where, he wouldn't have noticed anything amiss, but on the far side of the Hall, beyond the table and below the great western window, a pair of feet rested on the stone floor. The attached legs were not in view, blocked by the table.

As he walked slowly across the large room, the rest of the carnage gradually came into view, and for a moment he had to stop and lean upon the corner of the table to steady himself. The sunlight flooding in through the western window highlighted the dark stains on the light grey stones, and the cold, mangled bodies of his brothers. As he approached them, he looked down on Therin and Eralon, who had tried to resist after Malek struck down Balimere, but against the four traitors, they had stood no chance. Moving past them to the body under the window, Alazare knelt down beside Balimere and rolled him over.

In death as in life, Balimere was beautiful. Of all the Twelve, he was the most beloved, both among the other Titans and among the people of Kirthanin. Perhaps that was why Malek had killed him first. Alazare sat down and cradled Balimere's lifeless head in his lap. Despair and grief welled up in him, and he began to weep. He wept for Balimere, wept for the others, wept for all of Kirthanin. All was misery and ruin. Rage welled up in him too, and he felt bitterly angry that Malek had not been killed when he threw him from the Mountain.

Alazare lay Balimere back down and stood. He would take him out last. Lifting Therin in his arms, he carried him out of the Hall, through the city, and to the grove. After returning

for both Eralon and Balimere, he stood once more in the grove, now with all seven of his Titan brothers lying still in the grass. He walked their length, taking one last look at each of them, from Volrain on the southern end to Balimere on the northern. Then, retrieving the shovel once more, he returned to Volrain's body.

Laying him gently in the grave, he paused before shoveling the dirt back in. He felt the spirit of Allfather come upon him. "Farewell, Volrain. Faithful and true you lived, and faithful and true you died. Rest well until the end of time. Rest well until the Holy Mountain is cleansed. Rest well until all things are made new, and the way is prepared for your return. Go to Allfather's side and rest!"

Alazare covered Volrain and moved to Rolandes. Again the words came, and again he wept as he spoke them. And so he spoke and wept over Stratarus, Haalsun, Therin, Eralon, and finally Balimere. But before he covered Balimere's body, he dropped to his knees beside the grave and reached down into it to touch Balimere one more time. He was struck by the peace on Balimere's face. It contrasted dramatically with the turmoil in his own heart. Had Balimere died in peace? Had he stood, looking Malek in the face, at peace? Had rejecting Malek's mutiny stood before him so clearly as the right thing to do that there had been absolutely no concern over what would happen if he refused?

"Allfather," Alazare whispered, "I don't know why you have spared me, or for what purpose I still live, but I pray that you would grant me just a small portion of the peace you have granted Balimere. Can I not have some of this rest you promise now, if not for my body, for my soul?"

His answer came immediately. Alazare's sobbing stopped, and the trembling in his fingers and hands disappeared. Calmly, slowly, he laid Balimere in the earth. Gently, he kissed his forehead and then whispered in his ear, a single word. He

spoke so quietly that no living soul, however nearby, could have heard it. Even so, it resonated in Alazare's mind, and as he stood to cover Balimere, it was all he could think of. Louder and louder it echoed within until the ringing of his ears was drowned out completely and his blurred vision was pushed from all conscious thought. And when at last he had smoothed out the ground that covered Balimere, and he had turned from the seven fresh graves to return to the city, he whispered it one more time as he gazed upon the devastation brought to the beauty that was Avalione.

“Resurrection.”



# GATHERING





# THE STREETS OF SHALIN BEL



THE BEAUTY OF SHALIN BEL was evident even in the autumn twilight. Though a sprawling city, with many buildings of carved stone rising along seemingly endless streets in every direction, it was also a vibrant and living city, with trees lining the streets as far as the eye could see. Autumn was an especially beautiful time in Shalin Bel, and anyone who visited in that season treasured the colorful memories they took with them when they left.

Oblivious to the beauty around him, a solitary man hurried along one of the smaller side streets. The sun was well below the western horizon, and if the man had been able to see past the buildings and beyond the edge of town and into the many leagues of farmland, villages, and farmhouses, he would have been able to see the sunset reflected on the peaceful Bay of Thalasee. But the man did not even take in the resplendent

beauty around him. The trees, tall and stately, with leaves turned brilliant hues of orange, red, and yellow, and illuminated by the last light of the day, went unnoticed. He was late, and he did not like to be late. It wasn't so much that the friend he was meeting would be annoyed, though he might be. No, it was more his own conscientious nature that drove him onward. He didn't like to keep anyone waiting, especially when the news was good.

Turning the corner, he almost ran into the lamplighter, who was coming the other direction and had already lit the many lampposts along the street, though it wasn't even yet the beginning of First Watch. The days were growing ever shorter. As the man apologized and moved on, he was reminded of how much remained to be done before winter. It was hard not to be excited about the prospect that soon, the war could be over. Victory was within their grasp, and barring some unforeseen catastrophe, all that remained for them was to reach out and seize it.

A strong, cold wind whisked down the next street, and the man pulled his heavy cloak even tighter around his body. He was not a native of Werthanin, but he had been here the better part of seven years now, long enough to know that this was unseasonable cold. If this was Full Autumn, he shuddered to think how cold Full Winter would be. With any luck, though, everything would be over by then and he could be on his way back to Suthanin with his family.

He tried to envision a warm summer day at home, but it didn't do him much good. His wife seemed able to visualize home easily and be comforted, but he lacked some crucial ability that made this possible, for he was rarely able to conjure up anything more than weariness and homesickness. Almost as quickly as the thought of home had come, he was busy pushing it away again. It was a distraction he didn't need right now. The less he thought about going home, the more he

could focus on doing his job, and the better he did his job, the sooner he could think about going home.

Turning onto one last street, he finally reached his destination. Two young men had just emerged from a large wooden door to a popular inn, The Flute and Fiddle, and when they had passed him with a nod, he entered.

The accumulated warmth of several large fires and many bodies hit him, and he gladly removed his heavy cloak and draped it over his arm. The sword dangling at his side made him feel self-conscious. Even in days like these, he felt awkward bearing arms in a friendly inn, but as he had often reminded his friend, they couldn't afford to be unprepared or caught off guard, not when they were so close.

He stood in a narrow hall, which had three large common rooms branching off it. On a busy night like tonight, he had no idea where his friend would be. He poked his head into the largest common room, the one immediately on the right. True to its name, The Flute and Fiddle was providing music. A trio of young women were playing, rather beautifully, a sad, old song that he felt sure he had once known, even though its name eluded him now. One of the women played a flute, another a fiddle, and the third sang with her eyes closed and hands clasped. Though most of the men and women in the room were busy conversing with one another, they showed their obvious approval for the song and for the musicians when they finished. Then, after a brief pause, the trio began again, playing a much livelier song to which the singer also danced.

Scanning the room quickly, the man saw that his friend was not there, which was a pity, for he would have enjoyed the music. He continued down the hall, the music and song drifting along behind him. The second room was about half the size of the first, though equally packed and dense with smoke. Though he saw a few familiar faces, including a few officers who had been injured earlier in the war, he didn't see the man

he was looking for, so he stepped across the hall to the common room on the left.

The last of the common rooms was almost as big as the first, and two large fireplaces lit and heated it. His friend sat near the fireplace farthest from the door. He was always easy to spot, not only because of the large scars that ran down the right side of his face, but because Aljeron was the only man around who always had a tiger with him, even when he was taking a late supper in a public inn where tigers were generally discouraged.

“Sorry I’m late,” Evrim said as he approached Aljeron at the table.

“Never mind that now,” Aljeron said, looking up with an expressionless face. “Did the messenger come?”

“He did.”

“And?”

“Gilion says that things are right on schedule. Brenim is back and they’ll be ready as soon as we can get there.”

“Good.” Aljeron leaned back in his chair. He sipped from a large mug and looked thoughtfully into the fire. Reaching down with his free hand, he stroked Koshti’s head. The tiger closed his eyes and signaled his approval with a contented growl that Evrim had come to recognize as the tiger’s version of a purr. While Aljeron was lost in his thoughts, Evrim caught the attention of one of the stewards and ordered a cider.

He had received and finished half of it before Aljeron’s attention returned to the table. “Sorry, but I’ve already ordered. Are you eating?”

“No, I grabbed a bite while I was waiting.”

Aljeron nodded. “You dispatched my message to Gilion in return?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He reached over and patted Evrim on the shoulder. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate having you with

me. It makes all the difference in the world to have competent people around. I don't even know why I bothered asking. You've never failed to do what you've been asked."

"Not if I could help it."

Aljeron sighed. "As glad as I'll be to see this finished, I'll be sorry to see you go home. I've gotten used to having you around. You're not just a good officer; you're a good friend. Any chance you'd consider staying in Shalin Bel?"

Evrin took a drink. "I don't think so. Kyril wants to go home and so do the girls, though they've adapted to life here pretty well. I want to go too. Shalin Bel is truly amazing, but we'd like to finish raising the girls in Dal Harat. It's home, after all, even if it is just a little place."

Aljeron nodded. "I understand. Though I'll likely never marry now, if I were to, it would be hard for me to settle down somewhere else when I could be here. It isn't so easy to leave home in the end, is it?"

"No, it isn't."

"That was the only thing about marrying Wylla that was bittersweet for Joraïem, you know, having to leave Dal Harat. He knew he'd be happy in Amaan Sul with her, but leaving the family, leaving you, well, it pained him. "

"I know," Evrin answered, finishing his cider and signaling to the steward for another. "And it wouldn't have been easy to see him go. It wasn't the same when he left for Sulare, and it hasn't ever been the same since. But things are what they are, right?"

"Right."

Evrin looked at Aljeron as he stared across the room at nothing in particular. For a moment, Aljeron's face had softened, and he had seen a glimpse of what others called "the old Aljeron." But the cold, hard look had returned upon mention of Joraïem's name, and Evrin had a pretty good idea what he was thinking about.

“Fel Eдорath is going to fall, Aljeron, and we’ll get him. He won’t escape justice this time.”

“I hope so, but he isn’t mine yet.”

The steward reappeared with Evrim’s second cider and Aljeron’s meal, a large bowl of steaming hot stew with half a loaf of bread and cheese. Aljeron thanked him and ordered another cider. When the man had gone, Aljeron leaned over the meal and looked intently at Evrim. “I’ve waited seventeen years for this, Evrim. Seventeen years. It infuriates me to think he has been alive and well all this time. He’d better hope that he dies defending his city, because if I take him alive, he will be sorry that I did.”

Evrим leaned over the table too. “I’ve waited just as long, and I despise him just as much. I know how much you want to be the one to kill him, but I’m not making any promises that you’ll have that chance if I get my hands on him first. He was my best friend and my wife’s brother.”

Aljeron stared at Evrim, and Evrim knew his own eyes mirrored the intensity in Aljeron’s. Evrim rarely betrayed his feelings, but on a few rare occasions, he had shown Aljeron a glimpse of the fire that burned within. Evrim knew this shared passion was why Aljeron trusted him absolutely, even though they had barely known each other when Aljeron had first made Evrim an officer in his army. Both men had loved Joraiem Andira as though he had been their brother, and they both smoldered with the desire to make Rulalin Tarasir pay for taking his life.

Aljeron smiled, and the fierce fire in Evrim’s heart dissipated. He leaned back in his chair. “Don’t worry, Evrim. I wouldn’t begrudge you the right to do what you had to do. If there is any hand in Kirthanin other than my own that I could accept his end from, it would be yours, and maybe Brenim’s. Of course, that would go for Monias too, but his support for what we are trying to do here has always been reluctant.”

“He wants to see justice done, Aljeron, believe me. But even before Joraiem died, he was never very keen on the use of weapons. He accepted their necessity with Malek and Malek’s creatures living right in the middle of Kirthanin, but I’m not surprised that he finds it difficult to support a war like this between men.”

“I know.” Aljeron swallowed some of his stew. “It would just be easier to make our case to the Assembly with his full support. For that matter, it would be easier to make our case to the Assembly with Wylla’s full support. Their voices clearly and unashamedly supporting us would go a long way.”

“We have Wylla’s support, Aljeron, but you know why she isn’t going to go before the Assembly and give a fiery speech about the necessity of this war. She was Joraiem’s wife, but she is also the Queen of Enthanin. The war will end, and we will need to knit Kirthanin back together. It is going to be hard enough to reunite Werthanin and restore peace between Shalin Bel and Fel Eodorath without bringing Enthanin into it all. Besides, she’s trying to raise Benjiah without bitterness. She doesn’t want him to be consumed by the hate that burns in you and me, and I don’t blame her.”

Aljeron sighed. “No, I don’t blame her either.” He paused from his supper and reached down to stroke Koshti some more. “Do you think we will be free of it when this is done and he is dead?”

Evrin shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know, but I hope so.”

Aljeron continued eating, but Evrim remained silent, gazing into the fireplace. The room wasn’t quite as full now, as several of those who had been eating when Evrim had come in had finished and gone. Five men still wearing their heavy outer cloaks entered and took a table across the room. Evrim glanced up, but he didn’t recognize their faces.

“Have you heard from Kyril and the girls recently?” Aljeron asked.

“Not since their arrival in Amaan Sul in the spring. I’m sure they are enjoying themselves, though. They always do. Kyril and Wylla get along well. From the moment they met, even with circumstances being what they were, they were close. Kyril looks to Wylla as an older sister for guidance and for help, and from what I can tell, Wylla loves to have Kyril around. Maybe she’s the little sister Wylla never had. Goodness knows Pedraal and Pedraan wouldn’t have given her many opportunities to fulfill her natural big sisterly inclinations.”

“No, I imagine not.”

“And the girls, well, they adore Benjiah. He can do no wrong in their eyes. Halina and Roslin could barely wait to go and see him again.”

“What is he like, Benjiah?” Aljeron asked, looking up from his supper thoughtfully.

“He’s a handsome boy. His hair is blond like his father’s was, but it is hard to tell who he resembles most in the end. He has his father’s eyes, but I think his face resembles most clearly Wylla. The last I saw him, three years ago, he was only thirteen, but I could tell already he was going to be a tall, strong boy. I am sure that he has changed a lot since then.”

“What’s he like as a person?”

“Strong, quiet . . . angry.”

“I can imagine.”

“You know,” Evrim said, setting his cider down and leaning in over the table toward Aljeron, “you really should go and see them when this is done. I know it would be hard, but I think it would be comforting too, and I don’t just mean for them. Wylla would love to have you visit, and meeting Benjiah might help you to be more at peace with Joraiem’s death.”

Aljeron seemed to consider this. “Perhaps you’re right. Maybe after Rulalin is dead, maybe then I can go and see him. I have often felt like I have failed the boy by not avenging his

father sooner. Maybe afterward I'll be able to look him in the eye and know that I have done what justice required."

"You haven't failed him, and no one sees it that way but you. If you don't visit, you will do both Benjiah and Joraieim a disservice. You were his father's friend, and he should sit beside the fire with you and hear your stories of his father. I have told him mine, and of course Wylla has told him hers, but I'm sure that he would love to hear of his father in the Summerland and Nal Gildoroth and the rest from you. I know that he admires you."

"Benjiah admires me?"

"He does."

"How do you know?"

"The last time we were together, Benjiah was playing a game with Halina and Roslin, where he was running around with a stick, slaying imaginary enemies while they were sitting together under a bush. They were supposed to be prisoners in a cave or something. I asked him what he was doing, and he said that he was killing the Malekim so that he could set the girls free. He was re-enacting your pursuit of the women after they were abducted on the Forbidden Isle. I told him that his father had used Suruna, not a sword. Do you know what he said to me? He said, 'I know, but today I'm pretending to be Aljeron.'"

Aljeron finished eating quietly and looked up at his friend. "Thanks. I hadn't considered what it might mean to him to meet me. I will go when this is through, Evrim, and I will tell him how much I loved his father."

They sat in silence, the warmth of the fire heating their faces as they gazed into it. Koshti's eyes were closed, and from his even, rhythmic breathing, it appeared that he was asleep. The room was now almost completely empty, and the music, which had been steadily drifting down the hallway the entire evening, had stopped now. The crackling and popping of the warm fire filled the silent void in the room, and though it wasn't

especially late, Evrim and Aljeron knew that most of Shalin Bel would have already retired for the night. The shops were closed, and while most of the inns would be open for several more hours, even they would have few people eating and drinking within. It was cold outside and most people in the city would be home by their own bright fires and in their own warm beds.

“Well,” Aljeron began at last. “We should probably get back. Tomorrow I have to convince the council that seeing this through to the end is the only reasonable path before us, and after that we still have many things to do before we head back to Fel Edorath. Let’s get some rest.”

“Sounds good,” Evrim said, standing and stretching. “Whenever I know the time is approaching to return to the front, I always savor those last few nights in a real bed. You know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

“When do you think we will be ready to go?”

“If we are ready to go by Midautumn, my thought would be that we could celebrate the rites here, then head out the following morning. That should give Gilion and Brenim plenty of time, and as soon as we get there, we will bring Fel Edorath to its knees and end this war.”

After listening to the innkeeper remind him how much he had loved Aljeron’s parents, Aljeron stepped outside, followed closely by Koshti and Evrim. Aljeron was certainly glad he had wrapped his cloak tightly before going out. The wind was blowing twice as hard as he remembered, and the evening air was twice as cold. It was very dark now, though the moon was almost three-quarters full and shone brightly over the city. The lamps along both sides of the street gave off a soft glow that illuminated most of the roadway, though patchy spots here and there remained in darkness.

Aljeron tried to say something over his shoulder to Evrim, but the whistling wind obscured his words so much that he doubted Evrim understood. Even Koshti looked up intently at Aljeron as though to say he had heard his voice but didn't know if the words had been meant for him. Evrim shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Aljeron tried again, a little louder, but Evrim still didn't hear. This time, Aljeron waved it off as unimportant with a look of frustration and kept walking.

They made their way down several streets. They passed the occasional pedestrian, invariably walking quickly and clinging tightly to a cloak. The usual social niceties were replaced by simple nods as everyone seemed anxious to get where they were going. In addition to the cold, small droplets of rain were beginning to fall. Aljeron felt the first drop hit his hand. Looking up, he took the next one in his eye. He rubbed it to get the water out. The drops started to fall faster, and Aljeron stepped up his pace as he glanced over his shoulder with a look at Evrim that he intended as, "It figures."

They weren't far now from the Council Hall of Shalin Bel. The Council Hall was an enormous stone building that was really more of a complex than a single structure. At the center was the Hall proper, where the Novaana who lived in and around Shalin Bel met with the prominent merchants and city elders to discuss the city's affairs. Since many of these people owned extensive lands outside the city itself and traveled into town for meetings of the city council, one large building off of the Council Hall was dedicated to two large kitchens and five separate dining areas, and two more large buildings were full of chambers in which visitors stayed when they came into town for the council. Most of those chambers were allocated more or less permanently to their users. Evrim and his family were a case in point, and Aljeron had seen to it that they received some of the best quarters to be found. So a spacious four-chamber suite had been dedicated to them ever since.

Aljeron's use of the facility was more typical. The Balinor estate lay an hour's ride beyond the western gate, just south of the road to Colarena, so his parents had kept a suite of chambers at the Council Hall when staying in the city. In fact, their quarters were undoubtedly the best, for the Balinors were generally acknowledged to be the most prominent of all the Shalin Bel families, though they had never asserted any such position and happily functioned as one family among many in the city council and in the Werthanin delegation to the Assembly.

That was exactly how Aljeron's father had seen it and how Aljeron had been raised to see it, but at times like this, it was a decided inconvenience. Reining in the Shalin Bel council and getting it to support the war had never really been easy, even in the early days, but especially as the conflict had dragged out longer than anyone had expected, the number of dissidents had steadily grown. Aljeron might not have minded so much if the objections had been principled, as Monias's were, but he was sick and tired of economics and pragmatics dominating the debate when justice was the more important consideration. He cared of course about the well-being of those merchants and farmers who depended on commerce and trade between Shalin Bel and Fel Edorath, and he found no joy in their sustained hardship, but he couldn't just abandon justice so that business would pick up again. Many men had sacrificed more than profits or fortunes in the last seven years on the plains between Werthanin's two great cities. He wasn't about to let their efforts die in vain when the end was within sight.

The Council Hall was still some distance away, and the rain became heavier. Aljeron's soaked hair lay in clumps on his shoulders, and his hands were trembling with the cold. He rubbed them again on his wet clothes to try to dry and warm them, even if just a little bit. He looked over his shoulder at

Evrin and noticed that he was having much the same problem. He was holding his hands up to his mouth, blowing on them fiercely. Aljeron tried it too, but it didn't really help and the bottom of his cloak kept blowing open.

At the next corner, he crossed the street, and a faint sparkle of light caught his eye. He turned his head in time to see a flash of steel pass less than a hand in front of his face and hit the side of the building beyond him. The resulting ring was just barely audible above the wind. Ducking quickly around the corner and drawing his sword, Daaltaran, at the same time, he turned to see Evrin and Koshti close behind, though he could tell Koshti was likely to go dashing back out into the street if he heard any sign of further danger.

"What was that?" Evrin shouted as he leaned over Aljeron's shoulder.

"A knife meant for my head, I imagine." Aljeron pointed out through the rain at a cloaked figure darting from a dark doorway across the street. "Come on," Aljeron added.

He ran out into the rain with Koshti at his side and Evrin just behind, and he focused as well as he could on the elusive figure that ran ahead of him. For a moment he thought he had lost sight of him altogether, but suddenly he saw the man turn into a dark, narrow alley. The alley ran a long way between two rows of buildings and emptied out onto a lit street. Aljeron paused just long enough to pick up the silhouette before plunging into the alley after him.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Evrin shouted as blackness swallowed them. "He may not be alone."

Aljeron didn't reply but kept on running through the alley, which was so narrow that they were forced to proceed single-file. Koshti had taken the lead. One second Aljeron could see nothing before him, and the next Koshti had broken back out into the light and so had he. They paused again, but this time Aljeron could see no hint of his attacker. Koshti, though, took

off to the left up the street. The men followed, trusting that Koshti's senses were doing what theirs could not.

Not far ahead Koshti led them into another alleyway. This one was dark like the first, but seemed to have no outlet and threatened to dead-end in darkness. There was no way without light of some kind to know just how far back the alley went. Immediately they halted, sensing that unless the man had made a mistake, they could be in a very precarious place.

A knife whistled through the darkness, slicing through Aljeron's sleeve and making a clean if passing cut in his arm. Immediately they backed out of the alley and around the corner into the lighted street. As they did, several men in dark cloaks with swords drawn pursued them, and soon they found themselves trying to gain firm holds on their swords' slippery hilts.

As Aljeron gradually processed what was happening, he realized that about half a dozen men were pressing them back, each wielding their swords as if they knew what they were doing. Clearly these men had seen combat, probably recently and against his own army. He gripped Daaltaran tightly and soon had shifted from defensive strokes to offensive attacks against two of the assailants.

One of them slipped on the wet paving stone and Aljeron found the opening he needed. With a quick, furious attack at the other man, Aljeron forced him back half a span. Wheeling rapidly toward the man who had slipped, he caught him still off guard and drove Daaltaran completely through him. As quickly as he had buried Daaltaran, he withdrew it, now dripping with blood and shimmering red in the rain, and turned to meet the counterattack of the other man. The attack was quick but predictable, and Aljeron had soon driven him back to the corner of the street and alley, where he made quick work of him.

Turning, he saw a third man dead at Evrim's feet, and a fourth lay before Koshti with one of the tiger's massive claws resting on his chest. Koshti's teeth were bared and bloody, and

Aljeron recognized in his eyes the glint of battle fury that came over him in the middle of combat.

Running to Evrim, he called, "Where are the others?"

Evrin still held his sword warily before him. "I saw only five, and the other one ran back into the alley when he saw Koshti tear his friend open like a feather pillow."

The sound of something metallic falling on stone rang out from the alleyway, and before Evrim could even think of protesting, Aljeron was running back into it. As it turned out, the alley didn't go very far back, and it took only a moment to realize that the man wasn't there. Something loose under his foot told Aljeron that he was standing on the cause of the metallic ring. He bent over and picked up a sword. Groping in the dark, he found a tall, slender ladder tied up against the side of one of the buildings that faced the large street. It was common in the city for homeowners and even some of the shop owners to use their rooftops, which were generally flat, for a number of different purposes. Holding up the sword before Evrim's face, which he could now make out in the alley's darkness, he said, "I bet he didn't want to drop this. Let's go up and get him."

Koshti remained in the alley, pacing at the foot of the ladder, as Aljeron and Evrim went up. Soon both stood on the roof, swords ready. The building was attached to a line of shops, and Aljeron and Evrim began to make their way carefully from rooftop to rooftop.

The lights from the street illuminated at least a portion of their passage. Still, it was fairly dark and puddles of water met their feet at every step. After they had crossed perhaps a dozen buildings, Aljeron grabbed Evrim's arm. With Daaltaran he pointed to a dark figure, perhaps three buildings ahead, paused at what must have been another street, for lamplight framed his dark form nicely. Quickly and quietly they turned slightly and took a more direct path toward him.

They were about to step onto the roof where the man was standing, peering over the edge of the building, when he turned and looked at them. They both froze instinctively, and the man took a step that put him right at the edge of the roof.

“If you surrender we will take you as a prisoner of war,” Evrim shouted through the storm, though Aljeron wondered if the man could hear.

The man made no reply but began move slowly along the edge of the roof toward the corner, where the light wasn’t so bright. Evrim called out again, “Stop moving and kneel! We will take you prisoner and spare your life.”

The man stopped, but didn’t kneel as they came closer. He turned and looked quickly over the edge again, then looked back at them. They had crossed half of the roof and in a few moments would be in a position to take him prisoner. The man seemed at that moment to realize this fact as well, for he suddenly leapt out over the street and disappeared.

As both Aljeron and Evrim raced to the edge, they heard the crack of his body hitting the street. The man lay almost directly under the light of a street lamp and did not move. Aljeron looked up from the street after several moments. “Fool,” he said to Evrim as he turned away from the edge. “Come, let’s see if the bodies tell us anything about these men.”

Koshti was waiting impatiently at the bottom of the ladder, and he seemed to discern almost immediately from Aljeron that the fighting was over. His body relaxed and he fell in behind them as they went to examine the dead men.

The bodies didn’t tell them a thing. All five were dressed in nondescript clothes and cloaks, and none of them carried anything except for a sword and a small pouch of silver and gold coins. Two carried knives. When it was clear they weren’t going to learn anything from the attackers’ possessions, Aljeron and Evrim headed off to inform the city guard so that the bodies could be removed before morning. There was

enough tension in the city and concern over the war without people thinking that they were no longer safe in their own houses and in their own shops. Something like this the night before he met with the council could be quite a nuisance.

When everything had been taken care off, they arrived at last at the Council Hall. And after doing their best to converse nonchalantly with the guard at the gate, they passed through.

Evrin followed Aljeron through the long maze of hallways to his chambers, and they stepped inside with Koshti. Aljeron quickly kindled a fire, and the two men gladly removed their soggy cloaks and huddled by the fireplace. After the fire was burning strong, they sat back in two wooden chairs beside it and warmed their hands until they were positively glowing with the heat.

During all of this neither of them spoke; in fact, they barely looked at one another. But when they were just about completely dry, Evrin broke the silence. "They were the men from The Flute and the Fiddle."

"I know."

Evrin shook his head. "Can you believe the temerity? To think that they showed themselves to us, sitting right across the room for the better part of an hour. They might as well have waved and said hello."

"They were having a drink before going to work."

"Well, at least it was their last."

"I should have known they were trouble."

"How?"

"They never took their cloaks off. It was warm in there, and they sat cloaked the whole time to conceal their weapons. I saw it, but it didn't register."

"That's twice now," he said turning to Aljeron again. "I don't think you should go out alone or at night again until after we return from the Fel Eдорath victorious. Even then you might want to think twice about it."

“I’m not going to live like a prisoner in my own city,” Aljeron growled. “Besides, the last attempt was over a year ago, and that was just one man. He could have been anybody with a grudge or grievance.”

“But he wasn’t. You know that.”

“Even so, Fel Edorath barely has enough men left to slow down my entrance into the city. They won’t waste any more men on what even Rulalin must realize is a suicide mission.”

Aljeron reached down to stroke Koshti’s head, which was still drying. The tiger, for all his heavy fur, seemed to tolerate the heat more than Aljeron could. In fact, neither heat nor cold seemed to wear on Koshti, as long as he was dry. He didn’t enjoy being wet in either.

“I think you underestimate Rulalin’s desperation and determination,” Evrim continued, undeterred. “We can’t be the only ones who see his end is near. Do you really think he’s just going to accept defeat and bow out gracefully? Let you walk into his city and take him captive? He means to get you if he can.”

“I don’t doubt either his desperation or his determination. I’m just not going to allow him to take anything from me, my freedom or my life.”

“Aljeron, why—”

“Look,” Aljeron said, turning toward his friend and speaking firmly. “I understand what you’re saying, but I’m not going to cower in my room. Besides, we’ve only got a few days left here before we head back to Fel Edorath, and unless he sent more than the five we encountered tonight, there is no way anyone else is going to arrive in time to find us, much less attack us. Don’t worry about it.”

Evrим apparently recognized the finality in Aljeron’s voice. “All right, but at least let me stay here tonight and take me with you wherever you go the next few days. I can sleep here in the parlor.”

“Don’t be silly. Who was talking tonight about savoring his last few opportunities to sleep in a real bed before going back to the front? You’re going to trade that in for the floor of my parlor? And for what? You think a band of assassins is going to try to overpower the guard and make their way into the Council Hall?”

“Why risk it?”

“Look,” Aljeron said, sitting back in his chair and gazing into the fire. “I appreciate your concern, even if you are obsessive, but I don’t want you sleeping on my floor. Koshti will already be sleeping there, and he’s as intimidating and effective a bodyguard as I could ask for. I want you to go back to your own chamber and get a good night’s rest, not only tonight but every night you get the chance.”

Evrin gazed at Koshti and sighed. “All right, Aljeron. I give up. You’re going to do whatever you want to, but at least think about taking me with you outside the Council Hall, especially if you are going out at night.”

“I promise to think about it.”

“That’s a start. Think of it as being kind to a lonely man. With Kyril and the girls in Amaan Sul, my chambers feel big and empty. An invitation out and about could be your gift to me, your mercy offered to a friend.”

Aljeron laughed. “You don’t give up. Poor Evrin, all alone, eh?” He stopped laughing and turned back to the fire. “Sure, I’ll try to include you whenever I can, that way you can make sure I’m not killed by assassins, and I can make sure you aren’t wasting away from loneliness.”

“Deal,” Evrin said quickly.

“Well, now that that’s settled, would you like a drink?”

“No thanks,” Evrin replied, standing. “It’s late.”

“Do you want me to come with you? You know, I could check under the rugs and tables and even in your bed for possible threats.”

“Funny. Do you want me to meet you here tomorrow, or in the Hall?”

“Here is fine. Meet me at the beginning of Second Hour, then we’ll have some time to review things before the Council begins.”

“All right,” Evrim replied as he walked over to the door to the hall. “I will be here at Second Hour.”

“See you then.”

Evrim slipped out into the hall and down the corridor. Aljeron closed the door behind him and then returned to the fire. He sat beside Koshti and stroked the fur along his back, which was not only dry now but warm and bristly. “You were great tonight, old friend,” he whispered softly as he rubbed him gently. “You are always there when I need you. So many years now, and you never fail me.”

Koshti rolled on his side so Aljeron could stroke his stomach and looked up at Aljeron. Not for the first time, Aljeron wondered what the tiger was thinking. Despite their close bond, the intuitive communication they shared, and their many years together, he didn’t know. It was a question that not even Valzaan had been able to answer.

Valzaan. The name brought back so many memories. Aljeron slipped out of the chair and lay next to Koshti. It had been many years since he had last seen the prophet, and many more since they had first met in that great field of grain near the dragon tower on the road to Sulare. How much those days came to him now like a wondrous, golden era of youth. He saw it now as one of the best years of his life. The friends he had made there, especially Joraïem, had filled the one void he hadn’t even realized he had, close companionship outside his family with a real person. That was what he had found with Joraïem. Though it had been difficult and even terrifying at certain points, he looked back at their adventures together as one of the highlights of his existence.

But then Rulalin had murdered Joraiem and robbed Aljeron of that friendship. How clearly that morning remained in Aljeron's memory. Wylla had come into the Great Hall for breakfast without Joraiem, and Aljeron had asked her where he was. Her answer had made Aljeron shudder. He had sensed something was wrong, but there had been no opportunity to do anything about it. Word had come immediately after that Joraiem was hurt down on the beach, and they had all raced to him. He had often wondered if Joraiem was alive when he'd asked Wylla where he was, or if the cold shiver that rippled through him had been some kind of supernatural awareness that his friend was dead.

That moment had changed everything. Life ever since had been misery and toil. He had taken Joraiem's body back to Dal Harat and grieved his loss anew as Joraiem's family grieved it for the first time. He had returned to Shalin Bel and grown ever more frustrated by the inability of the Assembly to bring Rulalin to justice. And as his anger and bitterness had grown, he had been forced to deal with the loss of his mother, and then several years after, the loss of his father. He had buried them both, and now he was more alone than ever.

He rose and walked into his bedroom. It was dark, and he was glad. He opened the window. The rain was still falling steadily, and the cold air that rushed in made him shiver. He inhaled deeply, shut the window, and got into bed.

Loneliness. Evrim had spoken of it, and Aljeron didn't doubt Evrim was lonely. He was afflicted with the loneliness of a man used to being surrounded by family. He had a loving wife and beautiful children.

Aljeron's loneliness, though, was of another sort. It was bone-deep. The emptiness threatened at times to consume him. His parents. His best friend. All he had ever had. All lost. He had nothing now, except this war, and the council would decide tomorrow if he still had even that.