

FATHER OF DRAGONS

A golden dragon with large, translucent wings stands on a rocky mountain peak. The dragon's body is covered in intricate scales, and its wings are spread wide, showing a golden-brown hue. The background features a range of mountains with snow-capped peaks and green valleys, under a blue sky with soft clouds. The overall scene is dramatic and majestic.

By E.MORE
L. B. GRAHAM

FATHER OF
DRAGONS

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



FATHER OF DRAGONS

L. B. GRAHAM



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This book contains two chronicles. A “prologue” precedes the first chronicle which is entitled, “Awake.” The second chronicle entitled, “Arise,” is followed by an “epilogue” and a “glossary.” Each chronicle has its own table of contents.

Summary: As the forces on both sides are being drawn together toward a great battle, Aljeron and Valzaan journey to awaken the Father of Dragons, to enlist his aid against Malek’s armies.

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For Tom and Ella

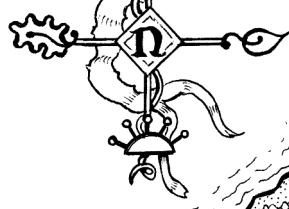
Who brighten my world and give pleasure to my days

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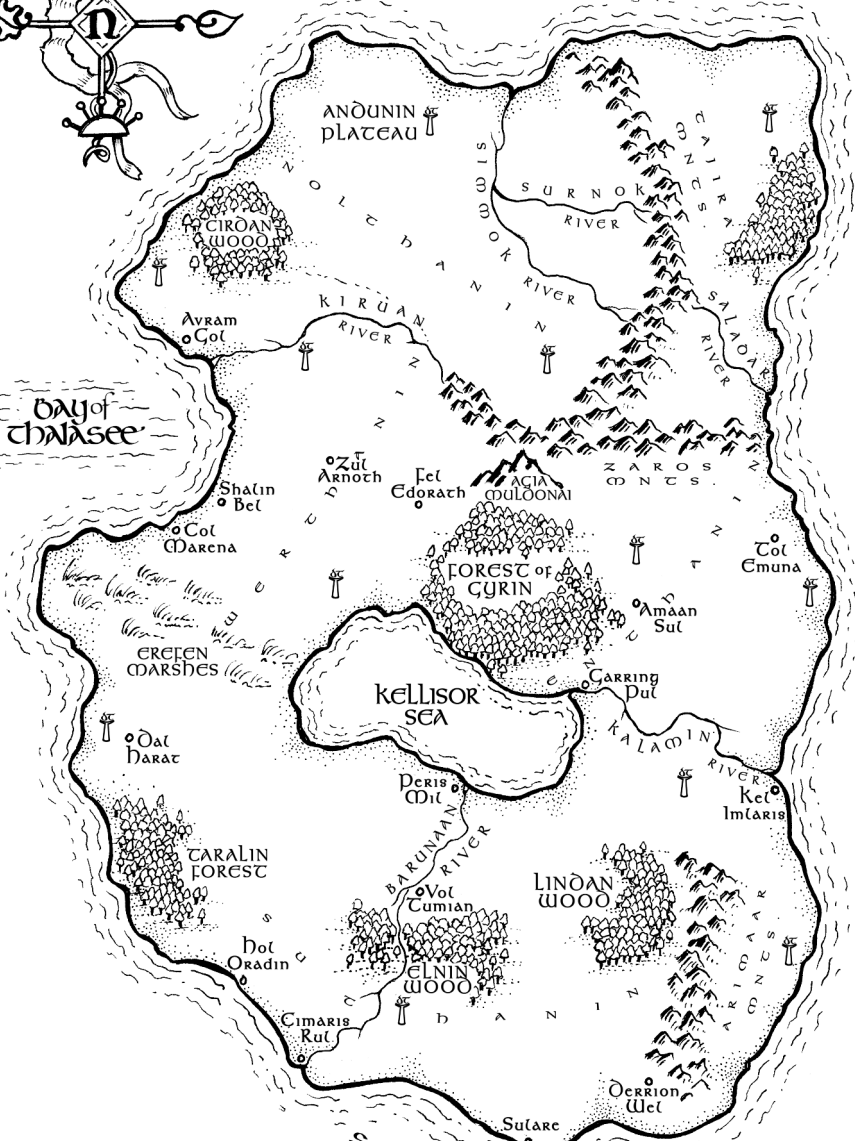
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KIRCHANIN

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



BAY of
CHALASÉE



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

the FORBIDDEN
ISLE

PROLOGUE: VULSUTYR

THE DECK CREAKED under Vulsutyr's feet. He gazed out over the water as he walked toward the starboard side of the bow. He passed the empty front bench, looking down at the great oar, unused and still. The wind had been steady and strong all the way, a fact that Vulsutyr took to be a good omen. He'd doubted off and on since long before their departure from Nal Gildoroth, doubted that aligning himself with Malek had been a wise choice, but the time for such reservations was past. He was committed, as were his children, and their fate was now tied to Malek's, for better or for worse.

Summer was fading. A cool breeze was stirring above his head as the massive sail billowed in the darkness. Others designed and built these great ships, and he had wondered about the vessels' ability to make headway through the water carrying so much weight. His concerns proved unfounded. Even without his children filling the long rows of benches and operating the oars, they made rapid progress across the wide waters. Not since the dawn of the First Age when he woke to life at the foot of Agia Muldonai and was brought to his island

had he seen the shores of Kirthanin. He would see them again now, and soon, and if all went well, he would return again to the place of his beginnings and stand once more upon the foot of the Holy Mountain.

The merest sliver of faint morning light slipped across the waves, and he looked back over his shoulder toward the east. The darkness was definitely beginning to roll back as morning broke across the horizon. He turned back north and peered through the still dim sky, looking for a glimpse of land. He saw it. Amid the various dark shapes that made up the horizon was the unmistakably darker and immobile faint outline of shore. The southern shores of Suthanin lay ahead, though still a fair distance away. It might not be before evening, but today he would set foot again upon solid ground.

As the outline of the land grew clearer, he thought again of the beautiful coastline of his island slipping away in the bright sunshine behind him. He missed the stark beauty of home and the solitary existence he had led there with his children, at least before Malek and the Nolthanim came, and before Malek filled the island with his creations. He wondered again, as he had so many times over the years, what Malek would have done if Vulsutyr had not allowed him to stay. If Vulsutyr and all his children had fought Malek, could they have defeated him and his men? He remembered from the beginning of all things the power and majesty of the Twelve, but he had come to see over the long years that Malek, though still powerful, was not all that he had been.

In the end, none of his questions had answers. He had grown in his own power even as Malek had declined in his, perhaps to the point where he was almost Malek's equal, but he had realized this too late. He had made the pact and kept it, and now that pact had brought him to this time and place. More than that, he had helped Malek create *them*, and they would not have been easily destroyed had Vulsutyr rebelled.

He had been happy on his island, and when this was finished, he would go back there. Malek had talked of Vulsutyr staying in Kirthanin to rule at his right hand, but Vulsutyr knew that Malek would be as happy to see him return to the island as Vulsutyr would be to go. The hunger to destroy and to rule emanated from Malek, and Vulsutyr would be happier as the sole ruler of his own little world than as Malek's lieutenant in the larger domain of Kirthanin. Yes, he would go back, but before he could, he needed to deliver Kirthanin and the Mountain to Malek, which he meant to do as quickly as possible. Seeing Agia Muldonai again was the only part of this whole journey he was looking forward to.

As the sky lightened, Vulsutyr spotted a sail in the distance. He raised his hand to shelter his eyes from the slight morning glare. It was a ship all right, and it had seen them. There was no mistaking that. Vulsutyr realized from the moment he saw the sail that if he could see this much smaller, single ship, then surely they could see the enormous fleet gliding across the waters toward them.

The ship was turning back toward land. He could see it cutting a wide swath as it tried to reverse its course. It would make a run for land to warn what remained of the forces stationed along the southern shore. The dragons and most of the men had been pulled away by the civil war up north, but a small garrison manned Sulare and the surrounding area. There was little these forces would be able to do against Vulsutyr's fleet, but he preferred they had no warning. The ship would need to be overtaken and destroyed.

Vulsutyr moved to the bow and climbed the tall, arcing prow that extended up and outward. He cupped his hand to his mouth as he held to the solid wood with the other. He called with a great shout to the sky, and echoing from the other great ships came more calls and cries. These calls echoed across the

water, rolling in like thunder on a cloudless day. Several of his children came quickly from down below, taking up the great oars as they took their seats on the benches. The beater of drums began to beat out the rhythm, and Vulsutyr felt the mighty vessel surge forward under his feet. He smiled. The ship ahead had a sizeable lead, but it would not outrun his children.

Morning turned into afternoon, and they drew closer to the ship as it drew closer to the shore. They were so close now that he could see men scurrying back and forth on its deck. He could see fear in their movements. Their ship was lighter and more agile, but it was losing its advantage with every passing moment.

Now men with bows and arrows were coming to the port side, which was the only side that afforded any angle at all with which to attack. Vulsutyr called to his children who weren't manning the oars to be ready. A small volley of arrows was released, but most fell short into the water while a couple struck the side of the ship. The men on the other ship, realizing they were not yet in range, waited.

It was a strange waiting game. The parties stared at each other across the intervening waves. Vulsutyr in all his might and grandeur stood proudly at the side of the ship, gazing with a fiery intensity at the men who looked back in despair. When the distance between them had been cut in half, another volley was loosed. This time, Vulsutyr's children lifted great wooden shields above their heads to shelter both themselves and their brothers on the oars. The arrows sailed long or struck these harmlessly. Vulsutyr strode across the deck and picked up one of the colossal but empty barrels that had carried fresh water across the Southern Ocean, and walking to the rail, threw the barrel with great force so that it struck and snapped the forward mast of the other ship.

Cries of terror echoed across the water along with the great cracking of the mast as it split and fell, rending the air.

The ship seemed suddenly to turn back toward the pursuing vessels, and almost before anyone was aware of it, Vulsutyr's ship was within striking distance. Instantly, half a dozen of his children leapt across the small gap, their feet crashing through the deck of the other ship. Men leapt from the vessel into the water on either side as Vulsutyr's children smashed the vessel to pieces beneath them. Great chunks of wood fell in every direction as the vessel collapsed. Vulsutyr's children in churning water quickly grabbed hold of the massive ropes lowered for their return. They snatched up the ends and pulled themselves back up on deck.

Vulsutyr gazed down at the flotsam and jetsam as it passed under the prow of their ship. Flesh and wood both succumbed to the mighty pull and were dragged under the keel to be raked beneath the vessel. He looked up to the shore. In much the same way, they would roll over everything and everyone between here and the Mountain.

The sun had fallen beneath the horizon and twilight was fading as Vulsutyr walked along the sand. All around him the hosts of Malek were assembling as far as the eye could see. The children of Rucaran the Great had already moved north from their landing place to scout out the vicinity and bring back word of its defenses. Likewise the Nolthanim and Malekim had assembled in two extensive but coherent masses, preparing for a nighttime march. His own children surrounded him on the beach, waiting for the last of the ships, watching uneasily as it sailed in under cover of dark.

The great dark vessel glided in and ran aground in the soft, warm sand. From up on deck, half a dozen great chains dropped, and two of his children took hold of each chain as the rest gathered round and drew their weapons. The tension in the air was thick, and Vulsutyr felt sweat beading on his brow as he waited with the rest of them.

The creaking of great locks coming undone and massive iron bars being pulled open broke through the still night air. Every other activity came to a halt. Vulsutyr swung his head around and saw the eyes of a myriad of men and Voiceless trained on the dark and unadorned prow.

A handful of his children appeared up above, leaning over the prow's side and motioning to him. He nodded and motioned to his children holding the great chains to commence.

Swiftly they responded, pulling with great power as the chains tightened above their heads. For a moment they appeared like a dozen leaning statues trying to pull the ship further aground, when suddenly the top of the ship's prow began to come away from the deck, and the whole front of the vessel fell crashing down into the knee-high water, burying itself in the soft, loose sand.

Those who had been pulling the great chains scrambled wildly to get away from the cavernous opening that they had created, not stopping until they were well behind their armed and waiting brethren. A wide path opened up through the encircling masses, with Vulsutyr alone standing in front of the ship's gaping jaws. He felt his solitude keenly, and stepping in toward the great hole, he also stepped aside, leaving a clear path up the beach.

For a long moment nothing happened, and the gathered crowd stood in silence, waiting. Then there emerged from the vacuous hold a creature almost a span shorter than Vulsutyr but with shoulders much wider and long powerful arms that hung almost to its knees. Eyes as black as the empty night sky stared straight ahead as the lead creature passed by Vulsutyr, less than a span away but with no hint or sign of recognition. A second passed after, just like the first, and so on until all twelve had moved silently by.

Everyone watched them go, and as the first one reached the grass beyond the sand it began to run at a smooth, even

pace. The others likewise broke into a run, and before long both their dim and dusky forms and their near-silent footfalls passed beyond Vulsutyr's capacity to track them. They were gone now, unleashed upon Kirthanin like shadowy nightmares sprung from the depths of the world's most troubled dreams. Vulsutyr watched them go and wished them all speed, knowing that whether they were ultimately successful or not, they would not be going back across the Southern Ocean with him, and for that he was glad. Though he had shared in their making, they had never respected him as their maker or harkened to his voice, and he did not claim them as his own. They were no children of his, and if he never saw them again in his lifetime, he would not be grieved.

More than a week later, Vulsutyr and the hosts of Malek were moving north across the open grasslands of Suthanin. They had met with little resistance in that first week, but word of their arrival had gone ahead of them, and men and Great Bear were coming south to meet them, or so the wolves had said. He believed it was true, because the shiny marauders had been flying increasingly overhead. Let them come, Vulsutyr thought. He was not afraid of the dragons. He would reach up and pull one from the sky and rip it open, despite the protection of its scales, and then all of them would know he was not afraid of the fire in their hearts.

The sound of horns up ahead spurred Vulsutyr to start running. It was a battle cry, and his children ran behind him toward the front lines. There they saw men fighting men, and Great Bear battling with Malekim as the children of Rucaran ran among the combatants.

They made their way through the confusion, but as they neared the front, several golden forms dropped from the sky and flew low overhead. Vulsutyr stood tall as his children stooped and ducked all around him. As the wave of dragons

passed on, Vulsutyr looked past them to another dragon soaring higher. This dragon was different, larger and purer of color, the gold untainted with any lesser hue. His great golden head stared down, his deep bright eyes searching Vulsutyr's face. It was Sulmandir, Father of Dragons. Vulsutyr had seen him once before flying high above the Mountain. Vulsutyr did not shrink back, but met the gaze of this highborn foe without trembling.

Again the dragons circled and returned, coming this time even lower. Blasts of fire and heat erupted from their mouths, and Vulsutyr's children dove out of the way while Vulsutyr himself stood firm even as fire enveloped him. When the fire and smoke cleared, however, Vulsutyr remained, standing as strong and tall as ever. Now, though, he drew his long bright sword and held it high over his head, the blade running almost parallel to the ground as he clenched the hilt. Vulsutyr's body glowed in the heat from the fire, and as those around him stared, traces of flame ran along his bare arm and rippled along the edge of the sword until the whole blade glowed with fire.

Vulsutyr threw his head back and laughed a deep, majestic laugh. Straightening up, he roared, and the sound of his voice split the sky, echoing across the battlefield. He felt the heat and glow of the fire warm his body and strength surged through him. Fire ran through his veins like blood, and if this was the best the dragons could do, they would fall one by one at his feet as he tore them to pieces.

The small cluster of dragons passed overhead a third time. Again fire and smoke billowed, but Vulsutyr remained focused. The last of them swept above, and Vulsutyr leapt into the sky, striking the tail of the dragon with a sharp, swift blow. The flaming sword sliced the tail clean off, and it fell to the ground with a thump, severed dragon scales sprinkling the ground. The dragon's wings beat harder, trying to maintain

his altitude, but he faltered. Vulsutyr sprinted forward underneath him and, leaping again, took hold of the tip of his wing. Vulsutyr pulled, dragging the dragon down from the sky and slamming it into the sun-baked earth.

The dragon did not surrender, raising itself as best as it was able with its massive jaws open to attack Vulsutyr. The fire giant was ready, though, and he easily dodged the dragon's strike, letting the great wide jaws snap harmlessly. Then, with remarkably swift reflexes, Vulsutyr grabbed the dragon's neck as it recoiled. Holding him still, Vulsutyr slid his hands up to the dragon's jaws, and with a sudden jerk ripped the dragon's bottom jaw from his head. The creature bellowed as it fell sideways to the ground, and Vulsutyr drove his flaming sword up to the hilt through his exposed underbelly.

Blood poured through the gaping hole and seeped down the golden scales into the brown grass and thirsty soil. Ripping his sword out in a swift motion, Vulsutyr stepped up onto the now motionless golden form of the fallen dragon and searched the sky. There, high above, Sulmandir still flew, watching Vulsutyr's every move. Vulsutyr's eyes followed him across the sky, unmoved. Sulmandir swept around in a great arc and headed back north across the battlefield. As he did so, Vulsutyr raised his empty hand and clenched his fist in a gesture of defiance. He was Vulsutyr, Father of the Giants and master of fire, and whether the Grendolai succeeded in their appointed mission or not, the dragons would not deter or slow him.

The Mountain loomed large. They had come to it at last, but it was not as Vulsutyr imagined it would be.

The tide of battle turned against them despite all he had done on Malek's behalf. Though the Nolthanim held their own against what remained of the Suthanim, Werthanim, and Enthanim, the Great Bear had dealt serious blows to the Malekim.

What's more, his own children, as strong and brave as they were, had proved less able to withstand the furious attacks of the dragons than he. They moved now toward Agia Muldonai, more in retreat than anything else, visions of conquest and dominion slipping away.

He cursed the creations of Malek for their weakness. Rucaran's children, for all their prowess and stealth, had been beaten back again and again by the steady strength of the Great Bear, as had the Malekim, bred specifically to be their counterpart. Though the Malekim succeeded in the early engagements in inflicting heavy casualties against the forces of Kirthanin, the movements of the Silent Ones had been shadowed doggedly by the Great Bear ever since. Their single-minded dedication freed the dragons to focus on Vulsutyr's children, and increasingly the dragons were able piece by piece to pick off the stragglers, whoever was unfortunate enough to be caught away from the protection of the whole. He watched over and over as the patient and determined dragons kept well away from him and singled out one of his children across the battlefield to be overwhelmed and struck down.

Without a change of fortune, this war would be lost, and along with it his hope of delivering the Mountain to Malek and going home. He had to strike a counterblow. He had to even the odds and take the next battle into his own hands. He would break the lines of the Great Bear and give the Malekim a chance to take control again. He would sweep away the weak and weary men of Kirthanin, who hung onto their swords and their courage with the same weak grip. He would pull from the sky any dragon that dared to come near him, and he would turn the tide once more, single-handedly.

From their left flank, the side farthest from the Mountain, he heard the alarm. He looked up into the sky and saw the now familiar sight of dozens of dragons approaching from

the west. The men and Malekim ahead of him broke into a run, as did his own children. They were running toward the Mountain, no doubt hoping to take some high ground and fight this next battle from a position of their own choosing. Vulsutyr ran with them, eager to set foot upon the base of the Mountain once more. He would draw strength from the place of his creation and the object of his mission.

A deep rumble like thunder rolled across the heavens above him, and he turned to see the form of Sulmandir leading the dragon formation closer. He had not seen the dragons' great father in their last few battles, but now he was back. Good, Vulsutyr thought, there could be no better way to turn the tide quickly than to strike Sulmandir down. He pressed onward. This was his day.

The battle raged on. All around him, the lines of Malek's forces were broken or breaking. He had done what he could, but for every time and every place where he broke through and turned back their adversaries, fresh holes in their defenses sprang up across the field. Multitudes of Great Bear kept pouring out of Gyrim. Surely all the draals had emptied themselves entirely, and the full might of the clans of Kirthanin were here to wage this battle, for everywhere he looked the fury of the Great Bear dominated the battlefield. Men and Malekim alike fell back, and only his own children could hold back their line here and there.

The full measure of Kirthanin's human armies must have been similarly mustered, for men kept flowing in toward the Mountain from both the east and the west. They were not as powerful as the Great Bear, but they were not giving ground or falling back. They fought, Vulsutyr thought, as he himself would fight were he cornered before the gates of Nal Gildoroth with nowhere else to go.

Afternoon became evening and the sun hung low in the west. He was weary, very weary. Despite the renewed vigor he

had gained with his feet upon these rocks and the Mountain at his back, his strength was fading. He felt hope slipping away with the evening light.

He scrambled higher up the mountainside, just for a few minutes, to regain his composure and to figure out where best to assault next. It was an impossible choice. Everywhere things were falling to pieces. How could he pick one place in desperate need of his presence over another? How could he pick one hole in the dam to plug when the flood was being loosed even as he stood and watched? He had sworn to himself that this day he would turn the tide, but he knew even as he stepped higher up the Mountain that he had failed.

A golden form shot swiftly over his head. He looked up to see Sulmandir bearing down at him with great speed. He threw himself down to avoid the outstretched claws of the Father of Dragons. Dust and dirt covered Vulsutyr as he sprang to his feet, his body bleeding from a dozen small cuts from the small sharp rocks that littered the lower reaches of the Mountain. He looked around him and realized that while he had been moving backward, his children had been pressing forward. He was set apart from his own.

But he was not afraid of the dragons. They could come upon him all they wished. Their fires would not hurt him and their smoke would not slow him. He would find strength in the heat and turn their fire against them. He rose to his full height and watched Sulmandir circle to come in a second time.

This time the dragon did lead with an explosion of flame many times hotter than any with which the others had torched him. It blazed all around him. As the smoke cleared, he looked down at his arms and saw the glow, back again, this time even brighter than before. He drew his flaming sword and held it high. "Come to me, Father of Dragons!" he yelled. "I will cut your heart out and rip your head from your body!"

His voice resonated across the battlefield. Engagements both heavy and light, both fierce and fading, began to break up as all eyes turned to see the duel just getting underway at the foot of Agia Muldonai. Other dragons were circling high in the air, sometimes swooping when it looked like one of Vulsutyr's children might be moving toward the Mountain, using flame and smoke to hold them back, but none of the other dragons approached the Mountain. Only Sulmandir flew close to the giant of fire. Only Sulmandir soared above him, his wings almost touching the Mountain.

A third time Sulmandir dove, flying faster and faster toward Vulsutyr. His wings sent powerful gusts of wind across the battlefield, and Vulsutyr tensed as his golden form drew close. A swift lunge took Sulmandir by surprise, and a mighty thrust of the flaming sword straight up into the sky just missed one of Sulmandir's great wings. The dragon altered his course and sank awkwardly lower in the air before regaining his graceful rhythm and pulling upward.

Vulsutyr raised his empty hand and with a clenched fist shook it at the sky. He screamed, his face contorted with rage and malice. But he was quickly aware that he had misjudged Sulmandir's trajectory. The dragon was not rising above him as he had done the last couple of times. Instead, he cut back swiftly and was accelerating rapidly, directly at Vulsutyr.

Even as Vulsutyr's step forward had caught the dragon by surprise, so Sulmandir's change of pace, coming back immediately rather than circling above and gathering speed, now caught Vulsutyr by surprise. Vulsutyr felt suddenly exposed there upon the Mountain, and with a great swoop downward Sulmandir was upon him. Vulsutyr dodged late, and the sharp talons of one of Sulmandir's claws ripped strips off of his bare shoulder and upper arm. He winced as his blood ran down his back and side. He turned, following his adversary without gestures or cries this time, only concentration. Sulmandir had drawn first blood.

Again Sulmandir circled back around. He seemed, if possible, to be coming this time even faster than he had come before. Vulsutyr stooped, feinting another dodge, but as Sulmandir passed overhead he stood quickly, driving his fiery sword up into Sulmandir's underbelly. Sulmandir's momentum caused the jab through the tough golden scales to become a long, jagged gash as the blade ripped him open. At the same time, Sulmandir's back legs struck Vulsutyr firmly in the chest, knocking him down.

Vulsutyr rolled over immediately and staggered to his feet. He felt a rush of adrenaline. He turned to see Sulmandir just avoid crashing into the side of the Mountain, setting down heavily and awkwardly not far away. Instantly Vulsutyr pursued, scrambling across the loose rocks to finish what he had started. He would salvage victory from defeat this day after all. The death of Sulmandir would change everything.

Sulmandir spun quickly, despite the blood gushing out from underneath him and the golden scales lying loose among the shale and stone. He reared as Vulsutyr approached, roaring with a cry so loud and so fearful that Vulsutyr stepped back. But as the last sound of its echo died away from the Mountain, Vulsutyr felt his courage return. He smiled at his foe and laughed. He too had howled like a beast when he felt cornered and defeated. He was cornered no longer. He was in charge now.

He circled Sulmandir warily, watching to see how mobile the dragon was. Sulmandir moved slowly, perhaps with difficulty. A golden streak passed overhead, and he looked up to see a dragon almost upon him. Quick reflexes and a swift stroke of his flaming sword kept the dragon far enough away that his talons couldn't do him harm.

They're coming now, Vulsutyr thought, trying to save their father. He knew he needed to strike first and strike fast. He didn't want to fight all the dragons gathered there at the battlefield in

order to finish the job, and they would be able to get to him a lot quicker than his own children would. He turned back to Sulmandir and accelerated straight toward him, sword raised. Just a couple steps and a powerful stroke and Sulmandir's head would tumble down the Mountain.

A flash of gold flew into view from the side. It was unexpected and lashed his arm, sending his sword clattering to the stones. Sulmandir's tail, razor sharp and incredibly fast had lacerated his wrist and forearm, slicing them open and nearly severing them completely. The pain was sudden and sharp, but he had no time to think about it. Sulmandir himself was now striking forward. If the dragon had moved slowly and with difficulty before, he did not do so now. He struck with lightning speed and precision, one massive claw sinking straight into the base of Vulsutyr's neck, another pinioning his healthy arm to his side. The burning pain in Vulsutyr's wounded arm was immediately eclipsed by the cold bite of torn flesh and exposed veins. Vulsutyr felt the claw penetrate his soft neck and all hope was gone, washed away by a flood of despair. He knew with utter clarity that this was death. His eyes blinked once as the dragon's great golden head drew closer, Sulmandir's wide eyes fixed on his own, peering dispassionately at his prey. Both claws tightened and pushed deeper inside him, and then there was only darkness.

AWAKE



DREAMS AND VISIONS



RULALIN STOOD BEFORE the cavernous opening in the side of the Mountain. The loose rock beneath his feet began to slide and he stepped forward, closer, to avoid slipping downhill. He rubbed his sweaty fingers on his cloak, claspings the thick rough fabric until his fingers hurt. A cool wind blew out of the darkness, air that was foul and stale. It was strong enough to toss the hair on his forehead to and fro, and Rulalin raised his hand to sweep some of it out of his eyes. Sighing, he relaxed his grip on his cloak and walked into the cave.

For a while, he was aware only of darkness before him and light behind him, but as the light from the outside faded, he was increasingly aware of dim but constant light from pale blue stones evenly spaced along the base of the wide tunnel's walls. Their light seemed to grow stronger as the light disappeared. He looked back over his shoulder, and

the gaping hole in the side of the Mountain was but a pin-hole of light in the distance. He turned and kept going.

The wind kept blowing in his face, and though the foulness remained, he grew almost accustomed to it. He was glad of the coolness in the air as it struck his face, for the tunnel seemed very warm. Sweat was beading on his brow, and he could feel it spreading out in damp circles on his cloak. He thought he'd been here before, but he didn't remember this heat.

He turned out of the large tunnel into a smaller corridor and kept moving forward. He had been walking for some time, it seemed to him, and yet he had seen nothing and no one. It was eerily quiet and empty, and the only sounds he heard were the sound of his feet echoing on the rock and the sound of his exhalation, abnormally loud in his own ears.

He passed by turns through larger tunnels, smaller corridors and spacious halls where the ceiling and sides were beyond his sight. All of it was dimly lit. All of it was vacant. All of it seemed both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

Looking down, he watched his feet move, one after the other. He was strangely conscious of the fact that they seemed to be self-propelled, moving without direction from him. He had felt this way before, as though he were sleepwalking in a dream, moving without willing to move, but never as strongly as he felt it now. His feet had entered the cave, and he followed. His feet turned a corner, and he followed. His feet felt their way along the smooth stone floor, and he came after, always, ceaselessly after.

Suddenly, his feet came to a stop before a wide, solid wood door. His hand, as completely beyond his control as his feet, reached out and pushed the door open. It swung back with a loud creak on rusty iron hinges, revealing a large room, though by no means a cavern like some of those he had just passed through. No, this room had walls and a ceiling that Rulalin could see, though it was large. It was like the large halls

through which he had passed in at least one respect: It was essentially empty. It was essentially empty but not completely empty. In the middle of the room was a staircase ascending through a hole in the ceiling into darkness.

He walked to the foot of the staircase and paused. It seemed at last as though the will directing his feet had disappeared. He did not move. He stood and stared upward into the darkness. The room in which he stood was semi-illuminated by a pair of faintly burning torches to the right and the left of the door he had entered. As he peered upward, he could see no such light shining above. There were only the stone stairs going upward, ending, and then nothing.

A chill swept down Rulalin's spine, and he felt instantly cold. The heat of the exterior corridors was gone here. The sweat that had poured from him clung uncomfortably to his shuddering skin. He had been to this place before. There could be no doubt of that. He had been up these stairs before, and though he did not wish to ascend them again, he felt his right foot lift off the ground and come down on the first step.

His foot felt as heavy as if it were made of lead, and its echo on the stone bounced around the chamber. His left foot, likewise heavy and awkward, left the ground below him and came back down, equally heavily and with an echo just as deafening. Step by step he ascended, until first his head and then his torso and then his whole self was swallowed in the darkness of the room above. He stepped from the stairs onto the solid floor rimming the large hole through which he had just passed. He saw a chair beside the wall and stepped over to it. As soon as he placed his hand upon it, the light below was extinguished, and he was left in utter darkness.

He froze at first, but when nothing else happened, either good or bad, he sat down in the wooden chair and waited. He sat for a long while, hands folded together in his lap, his head erect, looking straight ahead though he could see nothing in

this place. He unfolded his hands and rubbed them on his arms, trying to erase the chill that had driven away all memory of warmth. It remained.

He sat until his eyelids grew heavy. They drooped dangerously close to shutting, and his head started to fall forward before he jerked it upright again. His eyes opened wide, and his body tensed. He was very awake, very alert. Something was different. A voice echoed in the room, but it wasn't his, *You are sworn, and you are mine.*

Rulalin looked up at the roof of his tent. He could tell by the amount of light above him that it was midmorning. The Mountain again. For a long time he had not dreamed at all, at least not that he could remember. He was merely restless, tossing and turning, and according to Soran, sometimes talking as well. Now he was dreaming again, but when he dreamed, it was always the same. There was always the gaping opening that led into the Mountain, always the long lonely walk, always the same dark chamber, and always the inescapable voice.

He rolled over and faced the tent wall. To turn the other way would mean to look at the wooden cage in the far corner, but he didn't want to do that. Of course, it wasn't so much the cage as the figure hunched inside it, but fresh out of his dream, or nightmare, or whatever one would call it, he didn't really want to see Benjiah peering through the slats of his cage at him, not that Benjiah had done much other than sit motionless in the back corner since being brought into Rulalin's quarters.

Outside of their initial brief exchange, Rulalin had neither approached the cage nor addressed Benjiah. It had been his plan to unnerve the young boy with his silence. He had learned the power of silence to throw a man off his guard. Fearing silence, the nervous always said things they ought not

to say and later wished they had not said, and Rulalin wanted any and all information he could pry from the boy about the enemy, and about Wylla.

He heard the rustle of the tent flaps opening, and morning light streamed in. Along with the light came a gust of cold air. It might be Spring Rise, but the air still had the chill of winter. He sat up on one elbow, failed to hold back a yawn, and looked over at the silhouette of Soran, framed against the bright outer world.

Rulalin motioned Soran to the small wooden table that sat a span or so from his bed and stretched as he got up himself. Despite his new rank and the benefit of the tent, his muscles were stiff and sore, and he longed for the distant pleasure of a bed and fireplace.

He took a seat across from Soran, who seemed distracted by the cage. His young friend was eyeing it while trying to appear like he wasn't, and Rulalin fought his own desire to look. If young Benjiah was inside, watching them, he might notice Soran's curiosity, but the boy would see none from Rulalin.

"So," Rulalin said.

"So."

"A cold morning."

"Yes," Soran nodded, "very."

"Good thing spring is here," Rulalin said tersely.

"Yes," Soran answered, nodding knowingly to acknowledge the sarcasm, "though it isn't the cold that you notice when you first go out."

"No?"

"No."

"Really," Rulalin said, peering at his friend's face. "What do you notice first?"

"Come out and see," Soran said, standing.

Rulalin rose from the table and followed Soran. He pulled his cloak tightly around him and tied it firmly, stepping through

the flaps. The cold of the morning stung his face, but Soran was right. Immediately, all thought of cold or anything else was replaced by the overwhelming realization that it wasn't raining, not even drizzling. Even if the soggy and saturated ground beneath his feet still sloshed with water, the air was dry and nothing fell on his head or face.

He looked up and held out his hands, opened wide. Nothing. The sky was dark and the clouds as thick and sinister as they had been all the way along their long and unending march, league after league, but there was no rain. Rulalin looked from the dark sky to Soran.

“Amazing.”

“Yes.”

“I'd given up hoping we'd wake up and find the rain gone,” Rulalin added, remembering how many mornings he'd risen, bitterly disappointed to find yet another long, soaking day ahead.

“Me too.”

“I'll take it though.”

“As will I.” Soran almost laughed. “As far as I'm concerned, I don't care if it never rains again. I can do without it for a while.”

“Agreed,” Rulalin said, but his thoughts were drifting away from the conversation even as he said it. “I suppose if I'd really thought about it, I should have seen this coming.”

“How so?”

“The Kumatin,” Rulalin answered. “If the rain was meant to bring flooding, to turn the rivers into roads for the Kumatin, that mission has been accomplished. Now that the enemy has crossed the Kalamín into Enthanin, the river is a barrier to our pursuit. Cheimontyr is holding back the rain even as he summoned it, all to aid his own purposes.”

“Do you think the rain will return once we get across?” Soran asked, the disappointment evident in his face and tone.

“Maybe not,” Rulalin said, trying to be hopeful. “After all, we realized long ago the rain couldn’t go on forever unless Malek meant to drown the world entirely, which wouldn’t make sense. He’s a destroyer all right, but he means to rule something. Maybe the rain was always destined to end once the Kumatin made it all the way inland. Maybe this was always the plan, and the setback facing us now at the river is just a coincidence, a momentary delay of little note.”

“Well,” Soran said, pointing at the mobilized camp, scurrying with activity in the direction of the river, “if it is of little note, there are certainly a lot of hands and heads at work down there trying to figure what our next step is.”

“Yes,” Rulalin conceded, “I can’t see how we are going to get across quickly either, but I’m sure Malek and Cheimontyr and Farimaal will think of something. I’m just glad it’s their problem, not mine.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“I don’t know. I think the Vulsutyrim will cross the river and bring the abandoned boats back. That would be the logical first step, but most of the vessels are small and will only carry men and wolves. The giants can swim across, though the waters are deep and rough. It’s the Malekim that are the problem, the Malekim and our supplies. Even if we could start right away, it would probably take a couple of days to get everything across. So, I think we can relax a little bit. We’re probably going to be right here for the foreseeable future.”

“I’m not complaining. We could use the rest.”

“We could.”

“Besides, it isn’t like the head start will do the enemy much good anyway. They are still outnumbered and overmatched.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps? Do you doubt it?”

“Did you see the wall of earth that shut us off from them?”

“Yes,” Soran started, seeming a little frustrated by Rulalin’s point, “but I fail to see the relevance.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because, as you said yourself, the wall of earth, as far as we know, was the work of that boy in your tent with the help of Valzaan’s staff.”

“I think it was Valzaan’s staff. I don’t know for sure.”

“Perhaps not, but it makes sense that it would have been. How else could the boy have done it?”

“I don’t know. I’m just saying it might not have been Valzaan’s staff.”

“Even so, the boy is our captive now. If he could wield great power at will, why is he stuck in a wooden cage? Surely you’re not afraid of him?”

“Soran, I don’t know what to make of him or of any of it, and that is what scares me. When the wall of earth collapsed, revealing only the boy and the shards of the staff, it made no sense. How could that boy, a child really, hold back Cheimontyr? How could the Bringer of Storms be thwarted by a boy not yet of age? Even if he was holding Valzaan’s staff, how is it possible? Valzaan himself could not do this. At least, he didn’t. When we overran Zul Arnoth, he could not hold us back. Even on the beach above Col Marena, the power he wielded couldn’t save his own life.”

“No, and Benjiah has yet to save his. He is here after all and as likely as not his life is already forfeit, even if he keeps it yet a little while.”

Rulalin didn’t answer. He had thought already of the possibility that he might not be able to save Benjiah, and it worried him. How would Wylla react if Benjiah was dead or beyond Rulalin’s power to save when they reached Amaan Sul? He had not planned for this, and while he saw that Benjiah’s capture could ultimately be the very thing he needed to

help his plan succeed, it could also be the very thing that brought his dream tumbling down.

“Look,” Rulalin eventually said, “all I’m saying is that what the boy did was remarkable, staff or no staff. If power equal to Cheimontyr’s remains, either in him or in a staff or in anything, who knows what else can happen? If it can happen once, perhaps it can happen again.”

“I just can’t see it,” Soran said softly, almost whispering.

“As we couldn’t have seen what he just did a few days ago.”

Rulalin thought back upon his first glimpse of Benjiah after the chaos and confusion of that day had begun to settle down. He had looked so small and pale, a limp body being carried by a couple of men like a fallen soldier being moved from the battlefield. His fair hair was soaked with sweat and matted to his head, and his dangling hands were being dragged across the slick, wet grass. Who could have believed, even then, right after the fearful display of power, that its like could have come from him?

Rulalin suspected that the whole discussion of whether the power had been Benjiah’s or the staff’s was wrong-headed. Such power was almost certainly too much to attribute to either or even both working together. Such power pointed beyond its user to its maker, beyond Benjiah to Allfather.

It was a chilling thought, disrupting any notion Rulalin had, whether conscious or not, of Allfather as a distant figure unconcerned with the unfolding events in Kirthanin. If He had bequeathed such great power to Valzaan and then to Benjiah to oppose Malek and his forces, then why could He not do so again? Even as Malek had given Cheimontyr power to control the weather, maybe Allfather also could grant to others the power to defeat His enemies.

Rulalin, however, quickly countered this in his own thinking. If Allfather had the power to defeat Malek and end his quest to rule Kirthanin, why hadn’t he done it years ago? Indeed, why

had Malek been allowed to live at all once his rebellion had begun and his intent had been made known? Perhaps Allfather was not stronger than Malek, as had been commonly taught and believed, and perhaps even if Allfather was more concerned with the affairs of Kirthanin than Rulalin had previously thought, maybe it didn't really matter. Surely Allfather must lack either the power to stop Malek or interest in what he was doing, or else He would have squelched this uprising long ago.

Rulalin was largely comforted by all this, but not entirely. Valzaan had talked to them of this all those years ago in Sulare, saying that Allfather had both the power and the desire to see Malek defeated but had reasons of His own to let the foretold ages of the world come to pass. Valzaan said that the end was not in doubt, even if the events between now and the end might be. Valzaan's belief and conviction, as confident as it was, didn't necessarily make these things so. After all, the old man had been blown helplessly into the sea. Still, Rulalin found it impossible to dismiss his words entirely, because for him, given what he had done and was doing, it would be especially painful if Valzaan turned out to be right in the end.

"I wonder," Rulalin said, realizing as he did so that Soran almost certainly would have no context to understand the question he wanted to ask. "I wonder if our betrayal of Kirthanin is forgivable. I mean, in an ultimate sense, not just if the men and women we've betrayed can forgive us."

Soran looked sharply at Rulalin. "What do you mean, 'in an ultimate sense'? I don't follow you."

"I mean," Rulalin answered, trying to be patient even though his natural tendency would be to react to the challenge in Soran's tone, "if it really is true that one day we'll have to give a reckoning, an accounting for what we've done, you know, to Allfather or something, could we be forgiven?"

"I don't need to be forgiven," Soran said.

“You don’t?” Rulalin asked, surprised at the coldness in Soran’s voice.

“No, I don’t. I did what I had to do to save my city. If Allfather even cares about any of this, what right would He have to condemn me? He had His chance to save Fel Edorath. He had His chance to stop Malek if He really cared to. It would be a bit hypocritical for Him to leave Malek alive and well in the heart of the Mountain and then to get bent out of shape when we joined Malek to keep Him from destroying our city, wouldn’t it?”

“Maybe we were supposed to value Allfather’s commands and our faithfulness more than our lives,” Rulalin answered, his quiet, sober tone increasingly at odds with Soran’s growing vehemence.

“That’s just stupid.”

“Is it?” Rulalin answered, not entirely concealing his anger at the insubordinate speech. “I mean, you talk as though we actually saved Fel Edorath. Fel Edorath isn’t saved. Fel Edorath is divided and by now, probably empty and abandoned. Some follow Malek, and some follow Aljeron. Some died with us, and some died against us. The city is empty, and its unity broken. What kind of city have we saved, exactly? We’ve saved nothing so much as our own hides.”

“You’re just in one of your moods again,” Soran said.

“Maybe I am,” Rulalin answered. “Then again, maybe I’m not. Maybe what we’ve done, what I’ve done, maybe it is so reprehensible as to be beyond forgiveness. Maybe when I walked into the Mountain I walked beyond the reach of mercy. Maybe when I swore that oath, I gave Malek more than my allegiance.”

Soran didn’t answer. He didn’t even look at Rulalin. He stood with his arms folded, staring in a different direction, as though he hadn’t even heard what Rulalin had said. Rulalin sighed.

“I won’t bother you with my thoughts on the matter anymore,” Rulalin said at last, letting the anger that had briefly seized him go. He put his hand on Soran’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. Most likely, I’m asking questions without an answer anyway. What we have done, we have done.”

It was a strange day for Rulalin. He wanted, almost above all, to keep well away from the hustle and bustle of the parts of their encampment closest to the river. He didn’t want any part in the brainstorming, planning, or work that their new predicament would mean for them. As long as he was successful in having no role in any of these things, he could bear no responsibility for any failures along the way.

The easiest way to stay out of that mess would have been simply to stay in his tent. Ordinarily, he would have taken a seat at his small wooden table with his back to the tent flaps so as to appear busy and unavailable, just in case anyone would come by with anything but a direct message for him. He could have justified this seclusion all the more easily since the cage with their recently taken captive of war was also in his tent. Who could have questioned his loyalty to duty if he had shut himself up all day to keep an eye on the boy?

The boy, though, was just the problem. Rulalin had no idea if his own silence was succeeding in unnerving Benjiah, but Benjiah’s silence was unnerving him. He couldn’t help but imagine that Benjiah was keeping careful watch on him. He didn’t plead for his life or beg for water or food. He didn’t lash out at the cage or his captor. He just sat, quietly and as far back in the shadows as he could.

Consequently, Rulalin found it impossible to remain inside the tent. The day, then, was an endless succession of movements out into the camp and then back into the tent when he thought he had been spotted and might be called

upon by Tashmiren, Farimaal, or one of the other captains. While outside, he moved briskly from one place to another, trying to look busy and preoccupied. While inside, he sat at his small table, ill at ease and dying to go to the cage to see what its occupant was doing.

By late afternoon, he finally realized that the situation was untenable. Benjiah needed to stay under his care, which meant he needed to stay nearby, but he could not stay in the tent. That much was certain. He would have the cage removed after dinner, but first he would speak to Benjiah.

As darkness fell upon the camp, Rulalin approached his tent with dinner in his arms. He had procured two loaves of bread and some salted meat that wasn't too far gone. Once cooked, the smell of being slightly off had gone away, and compared with what many in the camp would be eating that night, Rulalin knew he couldn't complain.

He paused at the entrance to his tent and waited for the man behind him to step inside first and place the pitcher of cold water and cups on the table. He followed, setting the food down carefully.

"Thanks," he said to the man, who bowed and exited.

Not waiting for nerves to set in, he picked up one of the loaves and a hunk of the meat and carried them to the cage. He stooped and peered in. The pair of torches now burning on stands sent flickering rays of light through the slats. Benjiah sat in the back corner, watching Rulalin.

"Dinner," Rulalin said calmly, placing the food between the bars and setting it down on the floor of the cage.

Benjiah didn't answer and didn't move.

Rulalin walked back to the table, picking it up and moving it over to the cage. He set it down and returned for his chair. When he had settled in, he started to eat his food, pouring a cup of water and setting it likewise between the slats.

“See,” he said a few moments later as he swallowed a mouthful of bread, “the food is quite all right. If I wished to kill you, I would have done so already.”

Benjiah didn’t move at first, but as Rulalin continued to eat, saying nothing further, Benjiah crept over and took the things Rulalin had set down. He took them and returned to the corner, where he set about tearing into the food hungrily.

Rulalin finished his dinner and sat back, watching the boy eat. Benjiah remained as he had been, sitting quietly, eating, staring out of the cage at Rulalin. Rulalin felt the uneasiness coming over him. He was irked. It was the boy who was supposed to be feeling unnerved, not him.

Rulalin leaned forward, across the table. “The wall of earth, did you raise it?”

Benjiah chewed on his supper and didn’t answer. Rulalin returned his stare. He had known he might not get answers or cooperation this time. He would still ask the questions, though. Who could know which question might be *the* question, the question that would open the flood gates and get the boy talking?

“Was the staff Valzaan’s? I thought I recognized the shattered fragments as they were being burned.”

He emphasized the last few words clearly, and yet, if the boy was at all disconcerted by the fiery fate of the staff’s remains, he didn’t show it. He lifted his cup and drank.

“How’d you come by it, anyway? No one else want it?”

Silence.

“I don’t suppose it matters anymore, though, does it? The prophet’s staff is gone, just like the prophet. What power it might have contained is now lost forever, like its former owner.”

Benjiah put the last piece of bread in his mouth and chewed. When he had finished eating, he drank what was left of the water and set the cup down.

“Would you like some more?” Rulalin asked, raising the pitcher and filling his own cup. He lifted the cup then and drank.

Benjiah neither answered nor moved.

“Aren’t you afraid for Amaan Sul and for your mother?”

Benjiah shifted his position somewhat, but Rulalin couldn’t tell if it was his question that had gotten to the boy. He thought that perhaps he had seen a bit of Benjiah’s interior wall come down, but if he had, Benjiah’s quick recovery had kept him from being certain of it. To be sure, the boy regained the same look of calm he had worn all the way through the brief dinner and interview.

“If you are afraid,” Rulalin said, slipping out of the chair and stooping by the slats of the cage, “Don’t be. As far as it lies with me, I will see that no harm comes to her, or to you—if you help me.”

Benjiah had followed Rulalin’s move from the chair to the ground beside the cage, but still he did not reply. He sat, and he watched.

“Think on it,” Rulalin finished, standing again and moving the table off to the side. He walked over to the flaps and called to the soldiers waiting outside. He then turned back to the cage. “Don’t worry, you aren’t going far away, but I thought some fresh cold air might help you to think clearly so you can be more helpful the next time I ask you my questions. Enjoy.”

The soldiers entered the tent, and securing the cage carefully on all sides, they lifted it from the ground and carried it out into the night.

Benjiah felt the cold keenly as the men carried the cage outside. He had heard Rulalin talking about it with the man he called Soran that morning and felt it sweep in as the flaps opened, but the tent had been a relative refuge. Now he was outside, and he felt for himself the chill as it penetrated his

thin tunic and pants. He had lost his cloak somewhere in the process of being moved into the enemy's camp, and he doubted that his captors would be very sympathetic to his current predicament.

The cage bounced up and down as the soldiers carried it, and he worried that too much of this might make him sick. He needn't have been worried though, as his ride was fairly brief. Not thirty spans away from the front of Rulalin's tent, a couple of supply wagons sat empty. The soldiers set the cage down beside these, and all but a pair of them moved off through the camp. The two that appeared to have been given the task of guarding him took seats on the edge of one of the wagons nearby, turning their backs on him.

Sitting, he drew his knees to his chin to try to stay warm. At least he wasn't wet, he thought. Then he realized what was different. There was no rain. Under the cover of the cage's solid roof, he hadn't noticed it at first. He held his hand out of the slat and felt the beautiful absence. No raindrops spattering on his skin or drumming the wood. The night was cold but dry, and he hoped that the rain had ceased to fall on the other side of the river also.

Benjah's heart rejoiced. He realized of course that it was entirely likely that the cessation of the rain was Cheimontyr's doing, but he still took the end of the storm as a blessing. That plus the coming of Spring Rise, even if it didn't yet feel like spring, were signs of hope no matter how small, and he needed them now more than ever.

He peered up out of the bars at the nighttime sky. He could see no stars. The rain had stopped but the clouds remained. He sighed. He would have liked to see the stars, and even more so the sun the following day, but perhaps he'd have to wait for that. It would be worth it when it came, of that he was sure.

As he thought about the sun, shining brightly in the sky, he found it hard to see the return of the sun as anything but

defeat for the enemy. Perhaps the rain coming and going was at Cheimontyr's command and part of his plan, but there seemed to be something antithetical about the sun to the giant's being that made Benjiah doubt the Vulsutyrim would let it show itself if he could help it.

He shook his head, leaning back against the slats. That was silly. Whatever Cheimontyr desired, surely the Nolthanim at least, if not the Malekim and Black Wolves, would desire the return of the sun some day. Of course, Benjiah realized that if Malek's hosts prevailed in this war, the future of Kirthanin would be charted according to Malek's own personal desire, not that of any of his servants. To that Benjiah could not speak or even hazard a guess. What Malek might want or not want with regard to the sun, Benjiah did not know.

Benjiah looked up at the solid roof of the cage. He thought of all the days and nights he had walked, ridden and slept without covering above his head. League after league, he would have paid almost any price to have shelter, and now that he was a captive in this cage, there was no rain.

Reflecting on being inside the cage brought to mind Rulalin's offer: protection for Benjiah and for his mother, though at a price. As he thought about what Rulalin had said, he honestly didn't know if the condition "if you help me" applied to the entire offer or just to himself. Rulalin might have been saying he was going to help Benjiah's mother, regardless. There was no way of knowing now what the man meant, and even if Rulalin's intentions were clear, how could Benjiah trust him? The man had killed his father in Sulare in cold blood; why should Benjiah think his own life would be spared?

He thought of his mother and Amaan Sul. What remained of the men under Caan and the others would arrive safely, he hoped, but he would not be among them. That would be hard for her, but she would have to be strong and clear her mind for the decisions before them. Amaan Sul was not a city built

for sieges, especially not of the kind Malek's hosts would bring. Benjiah couldn't imagine how the city would escape, especially if he was here, rendered useless, seemingly without any of the power and strength he had so recently wielded.

He tried again to summon some form of it to push apart the slats of his cage, but he felt nothing. The light and heat that had flowed through his body beside the river and in the dragon tower did not come. Perhaps the power had come from the staff, or at least through it. Whatever had happened, he could not summon any miraculous deliverance. He hadn't even been as yet successful in connecting with a windhover to see what was going on in the world. Perhaps he had served his purpose. Perhaps Allfather was finished with him.

He lay down. Still cold, he curled up on his side. He didn't really believe, deep down, that Allfather would just abandon him. He had known that staying on the southern shore of the Kalamín might mean capture or worse, and he had stayed willingly. He would face what came next with courage and without fear, knowing that Allfather could deliver him if He chose but that He was not obligated to do so.

His mind drifted again to his mother. Rulalín had spoken about her with a strange earnestness. Benjiah had felt the man playing with him, testing him as he asked his questions. He had known that Rulalín would like answers, but that he hadn't really expected any. Benjiah had known this before the men came strutting in to carry him out, but his relocation had certainly confirmed it. His punishment for failing to respond had been determined before the interrogation began. And yet, when Rulalín had slipped from his seat and stooped by the cage, staring in, Benjiah had seen in his eyes something else. If he had not known better than to trust Rulalín, he would have called it sincerity. The more he thought about it, the more he thought he was right. Rulalín had probably believed that he was offering Benjiah comfort, but his comfort was not

comforting. The last person in the world to whom Benjiah would entrust his mother's safety and well being was Rulalin Tarasir. Surely the man knew that. Maybe that was why he had added that Benjiah's own well-being and possibly his mother's might depend on Benjiah's help. That part, at least, had likely been intended as a threat. Rulalin must know that he need not remind Benjiah of all people what he was capable of. If he could aid Rulalin in order to save his mother and yet maintain his honor, he would, but Benjiah couldn't imagine such a scenario. He would need to be careful with this man, who seemed to want to show Benjiah in successive moments that he was a friend, and then remind him that he was the family's greatest enemy. He would need to be careful indeed.

The rain was pouring. Benjiah stood upon a plain, and all around him the rain fell heavily. It wasn't night, but the sky was dark. Lightning flashed horizontally through the clouds and thunder rolled across the sky.

The plain disappeared, as did the rain. Instead, Benjiah found himself in darkness, total darkness. He was dry and hot, his clothes soaked with sweat. A surge of unbelievably bright light illuminated everything. His own eyes were almost burned by the intensity of it. Then, as quickly as the light had come it was gone, and Benjiah was no longer in darkness.

He was squatting in a cage. He knew the cage now. Every line on every slat seemed familiar. He reached over with his fingers and felt the rough sides of the slats nearest to him. He ran them down along it, and a sharp jab of pain erupted in his fingertip as a long slender splinter sunk under his skin.

The cage also disappeared. The great white city emerged all around him. It was always this way. Always the rain. Always the light. Always the cage. Always the city. This time, though, when he closed his eyes the city did not disappear. He waited.

He was always given a glimpse and only a glimpse. Every time he had tried to move or turn around, the city vanished. He stood still now, his eyes closed, enjoying the incomparable feel of warm sunlight on his face, wondering how long it and the city would remain.

After a long time, he decided that he might as well try. He turned slowly, looking at the buildings that rimmed the great open square. They didn't go away. He kept turning. Soon he had turned so far that he could no longer see the portion of the city revealed at first. He had his back to the square entirely, and off in the distance, rising above the other buildings, he could see a great hall-like structure towering. He was curious to go see it, but he didn't dare move. He was afraid that he might lose this.

He couldn't turn much more without moving his feet, so he decided to risk just the smallest of pivots. He shifted his weight and slid his feet ever so slightly. Nothing changed. He kept turning so that he was now facing back onto the square. A long, low wall ran in a gigantic circle in the center of the square. It had probably housed a reflecting pool or something like that once, or perhaps it would again one day.

Having turned all the way around, the vision of the city did not disappear. He had moved his feet a little bit; dare he move them more? He took a step into the square. His feet echoed on the smooth, white pavement. The sound died away, but the pavement remained, as did the city erected upon it. He relaxed and began to walk, slowly but surely, moving across the open square to the low circular wall.

He bent down and felt the smooth stone. The splinter and the pain were gone from his finger. When he looked more carefully, he could see no trace of either, or of the blood that must surely be flowing from the wound. The rock was warm but not hot, and his fingers lingered upon it.

He started to walk beside the wall. The pavement inside the circle seemed just like the pavement on the outside. He felt the urge to cross over the wall.

Do not cross over, a voice said inside of him.

“Why not?” he asked out loud.

Because you are only meant now to see this place. You are only here in seeming. When you are really here, you will know what to do.

“But how can I come here? I’ve never seen this place before and don’t know for sure where I am.”

You will come here the same way you have gone everywhere your path has taken you.

“How is that?”

I will bring you.

“What am I to do?”

Here the sacrifice is to be made. Here the blade will be laid down. Here the binding will be broken. Here will be both the end and the beginning, and all things will be made new.

A rumbling shook the ground and Benjiah was thrown to his knees beside the wall. The ground and the city quaked, but neither was destroyed. Water exploded out of the earth beyond the wall and flowed like a great waterfall in reverse up into the sky. Benjiah looked up as a wall of water fell cascading upon his face.