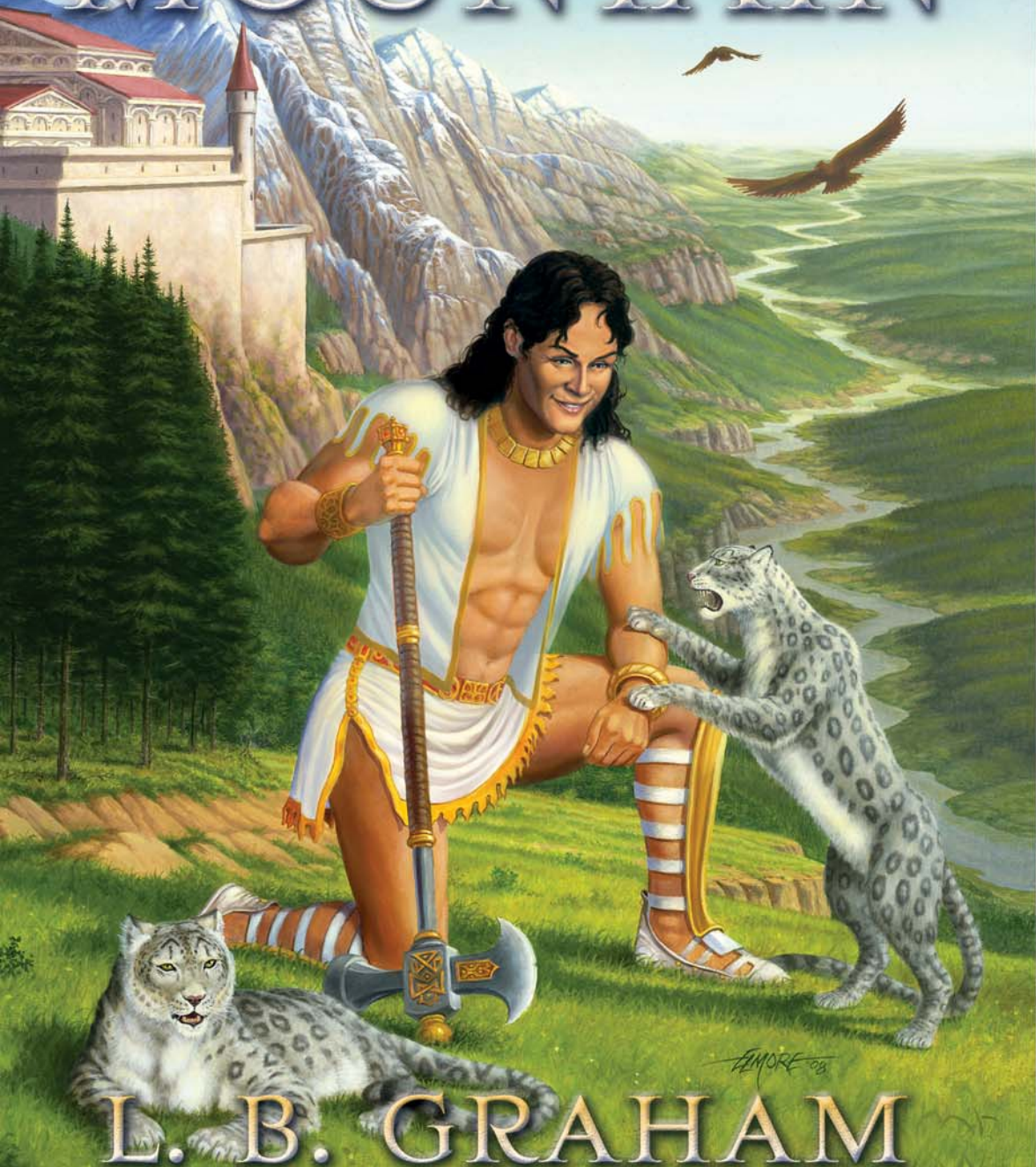


# ALL MY HOLY MOUNTAIN



L. B. GRAHAM

ALL MY HOLY  
MOUNTAIN

# 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*



# ALL MY HOLY MOUNTAIN

L. B. GRAHAM

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*For my father, Thomas Edward Graham,  
who has entered already into the joy of his reward  
and tasted of the restoration for which we long.*

---

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# CONTENTS

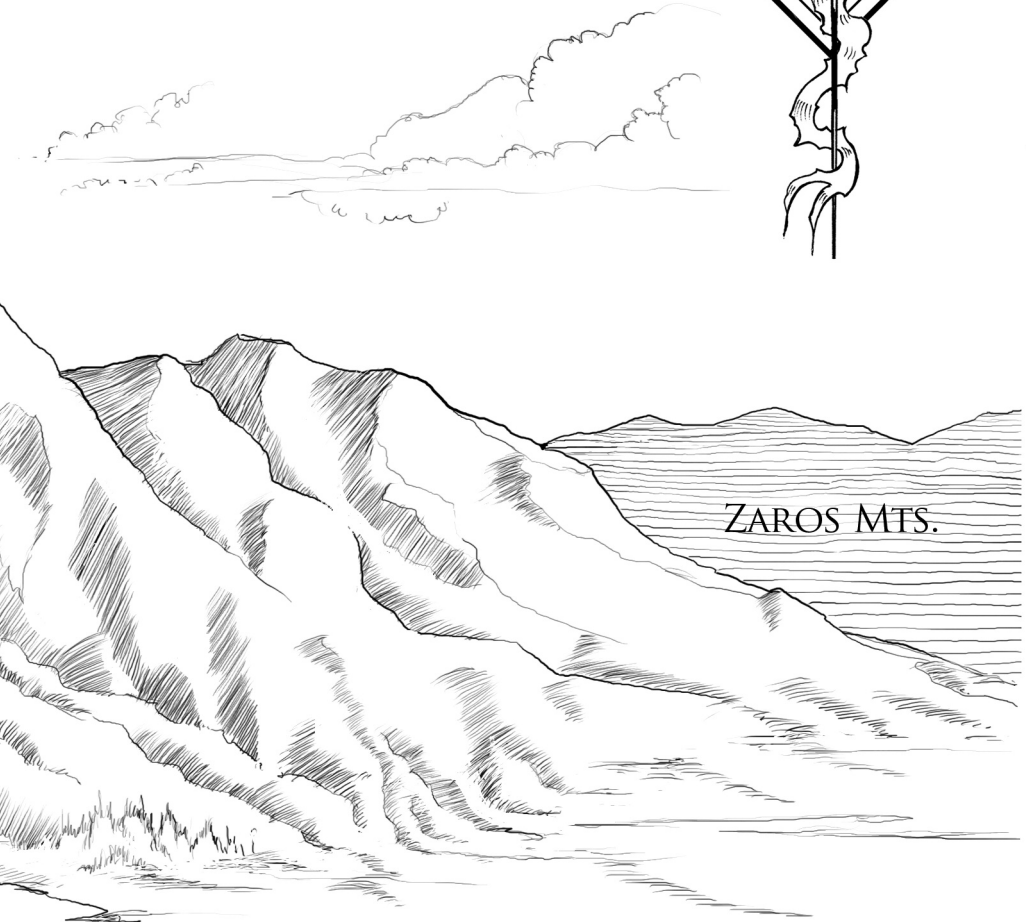
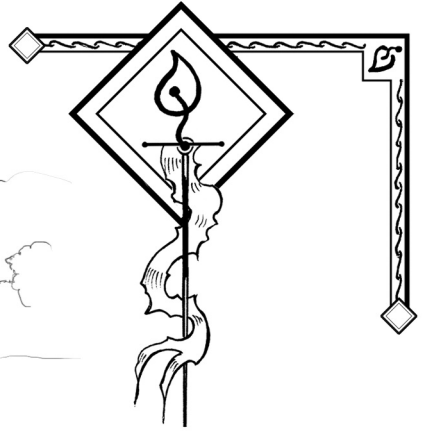
Prologue: The Prophecy	9
<b>BLADE</b>	
1. No More	27
2. Back from the Brink	44
3. The Hammer Falls	63
4. Dread Captain of the Nolthanim	85
5. The Devoured	104
6. Reunion	126
7. Night of the Wolf	145
8. Last Rites	162
9. Facing the Future and Unveiling the Past	181
10. A Time for Love	202
11. The Last Campaign	222
<b>BROKEN</b>	
1. A Prophecy Fulfilled	243
2. The Once and Always King	263
3. Their Separate Ways	282
4. The Kumatín	302
5. Saegan	323
6. All Roads Lead to the Mountain	342
7. Under the Hammer	360
8. Strength That Stoops to Conquer	375
9. The Last Titan	398
10. The Crystal Fountain	413
11. The Unmaking	431
Epilogue: All Things New	459
Glossary	467

Agia Muldonai

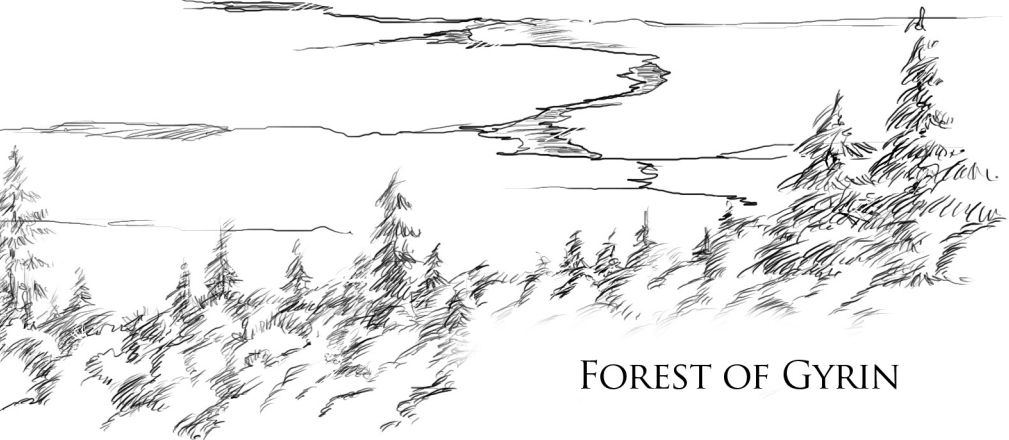
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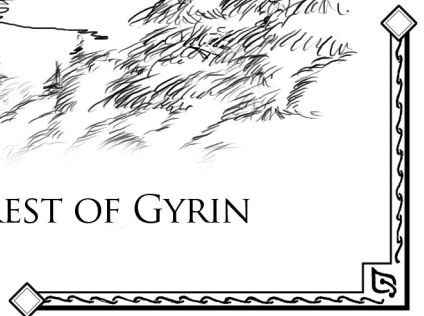




ZAROS MTS.



FOREST OF GYRIN







# PROLOGUE: THE PROPHECY

CORIAN WALKED TO THE EDGE of the great pavilion and looked out over the tents fluttering in the stiff winter breeze. Midwinter and the New Year had come and gone two days ago, and still the Assembly bickered and debated. Malek had shut himself inside the Mountain after the fall of Vulsutyr some seven years before, but without Allfather's permission to go up after him, there was nothing the Kirthanim could do but wait.

He turned from the tents and looked to the Mountain itself. It rose, tall and imposing in the twilight. Not since the end of the First Age had any man dared set foot upon it, that is, until Malek and his hosts fled into its labyrinth of tunnels and caverns. Now the long-deserted Mountain teemed with dark and vile life. Some were made by Malek. All were obedient to him, living in subterranean darkness.

Corian sighed. If Allfather would not grant their petition to go up the Mountain after Malek, then the future defense of Kirthanin must be looked to. First and foremost on the list of essential matters, Corian believed, was the still-gaping wound

held open by the interrupted and unresolved Civil War. While Kel Imlaris had not been in the center of the conflict that tore Kirthanin apart (indeed, Kel Imlaris was never in the center of anything), the division touched even his beloved home city. Corian could sense the deeper divide among his brothers on the Assembly, and it grieved him.

Stepping from the pavilion, he moved out into the gathering night. He had walked this ground each year for seven years, just like the others, and still Allfather was silent. No prophet came bearing word of Allfather's direction. In fact, Erevir had not even been seen since Malek's retreat into the Mountain, and no one knew where the prophet had gone. What's more, the Assembly's attempts to solve their problems had failed over and over again.

He needed to propose his plan. He knew it would sound crazy to the others. They were men of action with little on their minds beyond building defenses or finding ways to hem Malek in if Allfather disallowed direct engagement. The subtlety and long-term value of his idea would be missed by many, but nevertheless, he needed to try. When he listened to the debates and heard the bitterness in both what was said and, more poignantly, in what was left unsaid, he understood that hope for a real and lasting peace lay not with them but with their children.

Corian stopped between two large tents bearing the red and grey of Tol Emuna, the colors mirroring the rough terrain of that formidable city. Beyond them his own tent, brilliantly decorated in the vibrant blue and yellow of Kel Imlaris, reflected the brighter world of his sunny home. He looked up at the stars beginning to shine. He'd never been much use in things military, and even in the discussions and negotiations of recent years, where he should have excelled, he had failed. He couldn't afford to fail this time. He could feel the frustration mounting on every side. No, none of them was foolish

enough to resort to blows again, not after all it had cost them, but they might well accept, even embrace, the cold disharmony that had settled upon the land. The once-vicious foes, though no longer at war, each looked only to their own cities and houses. Kirthanin could not afford that state of affairs to persist, not if they hoped to stand strong and stand together against the looming threat of Malek in the Mountain.

He would try to mediate an agreement that all would honor, but to do that, he would have to get Dalamere of Shalin Bel and King Sandrel of Amaan Sul to agree first. They were influential and respected men, and if they could shake hands over the agreement, then Corian could present it to the Assembly with support. The fact that such bitter rivals could agree would force the others to take notice. Yes, it had to be done, and soon.

Every year since Malek's retreat, the Assembly gathered at the foot of the Mountain a week before the New Year. Every year, they stayed for ten days. Every year, on the evening of the third day of the New Year, someone suggested that the Assembly should be concluded, that they'd accomplished all they could, that no word from Allfather had come and did not appear likely to come. Every year, the fourth day dawned to find the great tents coming down and each delegation preparing to ride. Every year, the fourth day of the New Year ended with the pavilion and the broad clearing empty once more.

Tomorrow was the third day, and no word from Allfather had come. He could wait no longer.

The sun rose over Gyrim, its expanse stretching to the eastern horizon. Though the delegates were gathered right at Malek's doorstep with only a token force of men from each city, Corian knew they were as safe here with the might of the Gyrimdraal protecting them as they would be in far off Kel Im-laris by the shining sea. The absence of dragons in the sky was

indeed alarming, but the Great Bear remained a stalwart buffer against attack from the Mountain.

Corian called for a runner, and four young men came quickly to his tent. Two of them he sent away. The first he sent with a written request to King Sandrel, and the second he sent to Dalamere. The Assembly was not scheduled to meet until after the midday meal, and while the leaders might have meetings that morning, Corian doubted it. None of the delegations had arrived at the Mountain without a clear agenda, and most attempts to form alliances had transpired in the dusk and twilight of the first few days of meetings.

Corian knew that both men would likely see his request as a nuisance. He was not an important man, and he came from a politically unimportant city. However, he had passed his seventieth birthday two years before, and age still commanded some respect among the Novaana. They would grumble to their stewards and to their subordinates and perhaps even to the runners, but they would come.

King Sandrel arrived first. Tall and robust, his sandy locks curled upon his brow, he appeared every inch the warrior he was reputed to be. Though only in his late twenties during Malek's Invasion, he had led the forces of Enthanin as the crown prince of Amaan Sul, and when his father fell in battle, Sandrel refused to take the crown until the war was over. He was valiant in war and wise in most matters domestic, but as stubborn and hard-headed as any in relations with the Werthanin or western Suthanim. He had inherited bitterness and hatred from his father and his father's father as surely as he'd inherited the valor and nobility with which he ruled Enthanin. Alliances against Malek did nothing to quell the animosity. What's more, with each passing year the common hatred of Malek that had eclipsed all other hatreds faded, leaving more room for the old rivalries to grow to their former intensity.

“Corian,” King Sandrel said as Corian went out to greet him. “What requires my attention at this early hour? I had hoped to spend a morning in quiet reflection, since all hope of peace and tranquility will pass with the approach of today’s meeting.”

“And is that not a matter of grave concern, Your Majesty?”

“A nuisance, yes, since I dislike the constant bickering as much as the next man, but a grave concern? No.”

“With Malek hidden in the Mountain and Kirthanin still deeply divided over disputes that are older than I am, disputes that should have been long since forgotten, that is not a grave concern?”

King Sandrel looked at Corian with barely masked annoyance. “Enough of the lecture, Corian. It is easy enough for the men of Kel Imlaris to forgive wrongs that were not primarily directed against them.”

Corian held out his hands and motioned with them to King Sandrel to relax. “I do not wish to lecture you, and I am aware of my city’s lesser role in the divisions I spoke of. I am also aware that if Kirthanin falls to Malek in the future, my people will suffer as much as yours, and avoiding that common fate should be the common cause that trumps all other matters, for *all* of us.”

“I agree, which is why I continue to come to these meetings year after year, though they have produced precious little of value.”

“You are correct that little of value has come from most of these gatherings.” Corian nodded. “Hoping to change that, I have summoned you, you and another.”

“Who?” King Sandrel tensed.

Corian indicated the figure approaching through the nearby tents. King Sandrel’s response was predictable. “Dalamere! You have wasted my time, Corian. I have had all I need of Dalamere

and the Werthanin in the Assembly meetings. I will not suffer them when I do not have to.”

“That’s a pleasant greeting,” Dalamere said. He stopped and stood with arms crossed, glaring at both King Sandrel and Corian. “Perhaps when you have finished your business with the *king*, Corian, you can come to my tent and tell me whatever it is that is so important.”

“Our business is already concluded,” King Sandrel replied, turning to go.

“Peace, both of you,” Corian scolded. “Treat each other like children all you want in the Assembly. Yes, perpetuate there the foolishness of your fathers that almost ruined us all, but don’t waste my time with it. I am as old as the two of you put together, and you will hear what I have to say.”

Neither man replied, but neither moved away either. In fact, both followed Corian into his tent, carefully positioning themselves in places equidistant from Corian and each other, taking wooden chairs to sit in awkward silence. Corian took a deep breath. *Allfather, grant me success and grant us peace.*

“All right,” Corian began. “Despite the way in which I just spoke to the two of you, you are here because I think you are wiser men than many of your peers. I have a proposal that I want you to consider. It is simple and will take only a moment of your time, but I believe it could have far-reaching benefits for Kirthanin. Perhaps it might even mend the divide that has separated us too long.”

King Sandrel snorted, and Dalamere ignored him, looking blankly at Corian. He said at last, “You must be a very optimistic man.”

“Hopeful,” Corian answered. “I am hopeful that enough common sense remains in the Assembly to pursue the common good.”

Neither responded, and Corian continued. “My proposal is simply this: The Assembly should establish a haven some-



where in Kirthanin. To my mind the distant southlands would be preferable, as far from the shadow of the Mountain and the divisions of the past as possible. I thought perhaps Sulare, now that it is no longer needed to keep watch on the waters of the Southern Ocean, but it isn't pressing that we resolve that issue now. I propose that every seven years, for half a year, the Assembly should send all Novaana between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five to that haven."

"What?" King Sandrel blurted. "What for? Who would run this 'haven'?"

"I envision men from Werthanin, Suthanin, and Enthanin working together to run it," Corian replied.

Dalamere laughed. "You really are an optimist."

"I am hopeful."

After a brief silence, King Sandrel said, "Corian, I'm not following you. Aside from the obvious impossibility that the Novaana of Enthanin would trust their sons and daughters to a place run even in part by Novaana of Werthanin, what would it accomplish if they did? How does this solve our problems?"

"The purpose of the sojourn would be to forge relationships with the Novaana who will lead the Assembly in years to come. They would be old enough to understand what is at stake and yet young enough, I hope, to lay aside regional rivalries and learn to see each other as friends."

King Sandrel frowned at Corian, and Dalamere sat silently, merely watching him. Corian took their silence as a chance to press his point. "Don't you see? By the time most of us start coming to the Assembly, and by the time we're old enough to have a voice anyone will listen to, we're so steeped in our region's squabbles we can't see past them. But what if each new generation could get to know one another as people, as men and women, outside of the realm of politics? What if they learn their shared humanity firsthand from one another and from wise and compassionate men of other realms? The men

we send could teach them about the world before the Civil War, when Kirthanin was united and strong. They could train the young Novaana for a better tomorrow. Could we not unlearn the bitterness and contempt that the Civil War and Malek's lies have taught us? Could we not, through our children, undo the folly of our fathers?"

"I hear what you are saying," Dalamere said at last, leaning forward with a look that seemed to Corian to be almost mournful, "but it is impossible. There is too much distrust. My daughter is twelve, and I would be as reluctant to send her into the care of an Enthanin as King Sandrel would be to entrust Prince Arindel to the care of a Werthanin."

"On that," King Sandrel added vehemently, "Dalamere and I agree. What you suggest is not only impossible, it is unnecessary."

"Unnecessary?" Corian replied in disbelief. "Can you not see the danger we are in so long as our divisions remain un-mended?"

"No, I cannot," King Sandrel replied. "Two men need not be friends to guard the gate to my city together. They need only do their job. The men of Enthanin will do their part in the east, and if the Werthanin will do their part in the west, we will protect Kirthanin from Malek. How we feel about one another has nothing to do with it."

"But Your Majesty . . ."

"No more talk, Corian," King Sandrel replied, standing and holding out his hands to prevent Corian from speaking further. "I have heard your proposal and have no interest in it. It is impractical foolishness, and I will not distract the Assembly from important matters of Kirthanin's defense with it. Arindel will be taught and trained by no one but me."

"Then he will learn your hatred, and another generation will be lost."

"He will learn what is necessary."

With that, King Sandrel stepped from the tent and started away. Corian looked to Dalamere, who also stood. “Don’t waste your breath, Corian. I can see the sense in what you are proposing, but it can’t be done. There are far too many who feel as King Sandrel does to ever approve it. Even seeing the sense of it, I don’t know if I would approve it until I knew who would be running the place, and I can imagine that choosing those men could be as divisive as the idea itself. I just don’t see how it could be implemented. Not in our lifetimes. Maybe the idea will be more palatable to our children’s generation.”

“Yes? And how will that be if they learn their view of the world from us?”

“I don’t know.”

Dalamere left the tent. Corian sighed and placed his head in his hands.

Corian looked at the stone memorial around which they were gathering. It had been established at the beginning of the Second Age, over a thousand years ago. It had been erected to remind future generations of the words Erevir had spoken to the Assembly in this place on that occasion:

*So says Allfather:*

*There is blood on the Mountain.*

*It stains the City*

*And soaks the ground.*

*The Fountain is defiled.*

*It no longer flows*

*And cannot cleanse.*

*The deep waters will flow again.*

*And then the stains*

*Will be washed clean.*

*But until that day shall come,  
The Holy Mountain is  
Forbidden to us all.*

The warning and the hope that message contained had once been sufficient to bind all Kirthanim together. No longer, it would seem.

The Assembly meetings that afternoon had been as useless as Corian expected. He supposed that he should take some consolation in the fact that King Sandrel and Dalamere were two of the least inflammatory voices in the disputes, but it was small consolation. Thinking back over their meeting that morning, though, had brought a little more comfort. He was still disappointed, but as the day passed and he gained some distance, his hope returned. The failure had not been total. He had expected the real antagonist in the conversation to be Dalamere, and to his surprise, Dalamere had almost been supportive. King Sandrel's bad mood and vehement rejection could be partially attributed, no doubt, to Dalamere's mock reverence of Sandrel's royalty. When and where ridicule of Enthanin's political structure had entered the more complex issues dividing east and west, Corian had no idea, but he did know that insults of the monarchy remained one of the biggest obstacles to productive dialogue. He was far too old to enjoy traveling very much, but he resolved to travel constantly between Amaan Sul and Shalin Bel to keep at each man separately. Perhaps the following year he would have more luck.

Now, though, he waited with the rest of the Assembly for the formal blessing upon Kirthanin. These men gathered around him would echo the words, wishing peace to men they had barely been civil to for the last ten days, and then they would return to their tents, eat supper, sleep, and go

home as convinced as ever that they were wise and beneficent and their enemies malicious fools. He could barely stand to be in their midst.

As the gathering fell quiet for the words of blessing, a rider came out of the forest, thundering toward them along the foot of the Mountain. As he grew closer, Corian thought that the man was the most wild and striking figure that he had ever seen. His flowing green robe flapped in the wind along the side of the black horse. The man's white hair stood out in all directions, a thick shock of unkempt tangles, and the man's eyes, they were as blank as a page without words, as white as his hair, devoid of color. Even so, despite the man's evident blindness, the eyes were wide open and seemed to be gazing at the Assembly. He drew his horse up not far beyond the elder about to begin the blessing.

"Who are you?" the startled elder cried.

"I am Valzaan, prophet of Allfather, and I come bringing an answer to your petition, rebuke for your folly, direction for your future, and hope for the dark days that must come."

Though his arrival had triggered murmurs, there was complete silence now. Corian, like the rest of them, stood transfixed by this wild stranger and his wilder words.

"Allfather has heard your request to be allowed onto the Mountain in order to pursue Malek, but He forbids it. The Mountain is closed. As He told your fathers through Erevir, so He tells you. Until the Fountain flows again, washing Avalione clean, you will not go up. Ask no more for this, for He will not change His mind and you will receive no answer but this one. So says Allfather."

The prophet on the horse paused to let his words resonate among them, and then he continued. "What's more, Allfather has held back this answer for seven years, giving you all a chance to recognize your greatest need, to seek His forgiveness for the Civil War that ravaged this land and to repair the

breaches that caused it. You have not done so, so I bring this rebuke. For seven years Allfather will hold back the rain, and you will learn that none of you rises up in the morning or lies down at night except by Allfather's hand, which sustains you. You will learn that these men beside you whom you despise are your brothers. If you do not learn to stand together, you will perish together. So says Allfather.

"And yet," Valzaan continued in a gentler voice, though it still carried to the farthest edge of the Assembly. "Even in His judgment, there is mercy. Allfather will grant you a spring harvest like none you have ever seen. Your grain fields will produce beyond your imagining, and your fruit trees will sag under the weight of their yield. All this will come to pass to prepare you for the drought and famine that is coming, so long as you obey Allfather's command and enact the wise proposal of Corian of Kel Imlaris."

Corian was stunned to hear his name, and all nearby turned to look at him as the prophet continued. "You will not leave this place until you have agreed to the plan, settled on a place, and selected a date this spring for the training to begin. Corian will show you what you are to do, and those among you who already know the plan are charged to support it wholeheartedly. This will be done, or the harvest that I have spoken of will not come, and the seven-year drought will be disastrous beyond measure. So says Allfather."

At this point, a voice other than Valzaan's broke the silent reverie that had fallen upon them all. It was the bellowing voice of Trevarian, one of the most difficult and fractious Novaana in the Assembly. "This is absurd, brothers. Who is this man who comes before us without credentials to testify to the authority he claims, ordering us about as though we were children? Without such proof, why should we heed him?"

The man on the horse raised his hand, silencing any who would have replied. "The drought I have prophesied will ul-

timately confirm my authority, but that you all might know I am who I say I am, and that I speak for Allfather as I claim, I will give you more immediate proof. This man who calls you to question my authority, to doubt my claims, has long been in the service of Malek, and he remains among you like a serpent in the grass to poison those voices of wisdom and moderation who have tried to speak for peace these last seven years.”

“That is a lie!” Trevarian cried.

“Silence!” Valzaan commanded, and Trevarian obeyed as Valzaan dropped from his horse and moved through the Assembly. All parted to let him pass until he stood a few spans from Trevarian, where a small clearing formed around the two men.

“Most of you already realize that what I have said is true. Now that I have said it, you can sense it, but that you may know it beyond doubt, I will give you proof.” The prophet faced the man with his blank and fantastic stare, addressing him directly. “Even now, Trevarian, it is not too late for you. Acknowledge your wrong, beseech Allfather for His mercy, and you will be forgiven. Deny it, and you will perish.”

Trevarian trembled, looking not at the prophet but at the men staring at the spectacle unfolding in their midst. He began to shake his head slowly. “No, it isn’t true.”

“So be it,” Valzaan replied quietly. He turned and headed back through the crowd toward his horse. Without warning, a ball of fire fell from the clear sky, striking the place where Trevarian stood. It struck and disappeared, leaving nothing but scorched earth and ashes, blowing low along the ground in the cold evening breeze.

Corian gazed at the space, amazed. As soon as the prophet had spoken the accusation, Corian saw the logic of it. Wherever the deepest divisions lay, the most virulent dissension and most



bitter arguments of the Assembly, Trevarian was never far away. Corian felt, if anything, embarrassed not to have considered that something more than folly motivated the man. Now Trevarian had been punished and the legitimacy of the prophet established in a single moment. In that same moment, Corian's great hope for Kirthanin's future had become not only likely, but almost certain.

"So far I have given you the answer, the rebuke, and the direction. Now it is time for the hope, for indeed, dark days lie ahead. I cannot say when, for Allfather has not revealed it to me, but though you may not go up after Malek, he will come down after you. Be sure of that. A third great war is coming, and it will be terrible. Even so, fear not, for Allfather has not abandoned you. Hear now the words he has spoken:

*'With a strength that stoops to conquer  
And a hope that dies to live,  
With a light that fades to be kindled  
And a love that yields to give,*

*'Comes a child who was born to lead,  
A prophet who was born to see,  
A warrior who was born to surrender,  
And through his sacrifice set us free.'*

"So says Allfather." Valzaan added. His blank but staring eyes swept over them. "In the dark days that shall come, remember these words of hope and cling to them, even as you cling to the words of the mound rite that Allfather spoke from of old concerning the days of restoration: *'I shall cleanse Agia Muldonai. It shall be cleansed forevermore, as indeed all Kirthanin shall be cleansed. Never again will sword and spear be raised in war, for even they will be made anew, and*

*all implements of war shall be made implements of peace, and no one will dare to harm or destroy on all My Holy Mountain.'*

"You have work to do."

With that, he wheeled his horse around and was off, galloping back the way he had come.



BLADE





# NO MORE



WYLLA LOOKED UP through her tears at Benjiah, strung between the two poles. Watching him rolled through the crowd in his wooden cage had pained her, but when he'd emerged looking defiant and unbroken, she thought that perhaps she could endure this after all.

He had looked so noble, noble and beautiful. She saw Joraiem in Benjiah's quiet strength. They pushed him toward the scaffold, and he walked up the stairs without comment, pride and strength in his calm demeanor. Surely he was on his way to death, for short of Allfather reaching down from the heavens and plucking him out of their midst, she could see no way out for him now. And yet, though his death seemed inescapable, she hoped she would be able to watch with the same unbroken pride and defiance.

She had hoped this until she saw him chained to the poles. The way they jerked the chains tight, pulling his arms up so

hard into their unnatural position, smashed any defiant courage, any vision of standing before her people in this dark hour as the strong queen unmoved in the face of defeat. She was reduced to the role of tearful mother, weeping for her only son.

“Why do they need to be so tight?” she whispered through her tears to Yorek.

He placed his hand upon her shoulder. She felt his fingers squeeze her slightly as a sign of reassurance, and then he left them there to remind her that she did not stand alone.

Tashmiren, in his ornate coat of dark blue with a scrolling red pattern embroidered upon it, moved to the front of the scaffold. He turned his back to the crowd and whispered quietly to Benjiah. She couldn’t hear what he was saying, but she’d seen the man around Malek’s camp and knew him to be a smug, smirking fool. She could imagine the cruel taunts rolling from his lips, and for a moment, anger overcame her sorrow and she clenched her fists by her side.

Benjiah raised his head slightly, and Wylla could see from where she stood that he was saying something in reply. Whatever it was, it seemed to bring the short conversation to a close, for after just a moment, Tashmiren turned back to the crowd.

The next few moments were almost unbearable. Tashmiren walked slowly back and forth across the front of the scaffold, saying the most ridiculous things. He spoke of their rebellion against Malek and their surrender as though they had been naughty children who refused to come to supper when called. He mocked their celebration of the Mound rites and their worship of Allfather. He went so far as to suggest that Allfather was a fabrication, that Malek was their true god.

A cold shudder passed through Wylla. What if what Tashmiren was saying was true? It was a terrible thought, but even as Tashmiren rambled, Wylla couldn’t quite dismiss it. After



all, there was a certain logic to his argument: If Benjiah truly was Allfather's prophet, why was he chained to these poles, about to die? If Allfather could not save his prophet from this ignoble death, then perhaps Malek really was the one great power of Kirthanin. Not a god perhaps, but a malevolent demigod toying with lesser beings.

Wylla composed herself and pushed the thought away. There was evidence, counterevidence, that a power in this world was arrayed against Malek, at times an apparently stronger power. She couldn't think clearly at the moment about exactly what it was, but she knew it was there. Still, as Tashmiren turned to face her son once more, having enumerated the charges against him, she couldn't help but feel unsettled by this scene and Allfather's abandonment of her son. At times she had felt anger at Allfather for allowing her husband to die as he had, and now Benjiah's life neared its end. She couldn't help but wonder if she'd been naïve to believe all her life in a God who'd not seen fit to protect either her husband or her son, though apparently both had been His chosen instruments.

Benjiah's head jerked up from where it had been hanging as he stared at the platform. She was once more caught up in the scene.

"So," Tashmiren was saying, "having heard the charges that Malek brings before you, have you anything to say?"

Wylla looked past Tashmiren at her son, who met Tashmiren's gaze with little expression. *What could he possibly say?* She thought. *Don't bait him, Benjiah. He only wants an excuse to make your death more painful.*

Benjiah said nothing for a moment, and then his eyes moved past Tashmiren to the crowd. Wylla realized that he was looking at her. Involuntarily she lifted her hand and stretched it out toward him, as though by doing so she could touch his face and comfort him.

Benjiah looked into her eyes, and she treasured the love she saw there. She gazed back, trying to make an imprint of that moment upon her heart for however long she should have left to live. His eyes flickered back from her face to Tashmiren's, and she could see his lips move, though she heard no sound. She sighed. She wanted his death to be as painless as possible, but if Benjiah needed to speak, so be it. If by looking to her he had found the strength, even to lift his voice in a whisper, she was glad she could be here.

Wylla lost sight of Benjiah's face. Tashmiren had all but turned his back to the crowd and moved closer to Benjiah, and it seemed from where Wylla stood that a series of hostile whispers passed between the two men. Then Tashmiren stepped back, and she could see Benjiah's face once more.

She gasped at what she saw. Gone was the impassive face of calm defiance. It had been replaced now with a kind of ecstatic exuberance. He lifted his head as high as he could hold it. His blond hair fell away from his eyes, and she could see them clearly, no longer cold and resigned but bright and shining. At that very moment, he opened his mouth again, and this time his voice boomed, every bit as loud as Tashmiren's had been. His voice resounded above them, and to Wylla's surprise, she realized he was singing.

*Peace, my son, and lay you down,  
The sun has gone away.  
Wake and find the dawn at hand,  
Tomorrow is today—  
Tomorrow is today.*

What song was that? What words were those? What did they mean? Wylla looked to Yorek as though to ask, but before she could, Benjiah started the song over again, this time even louder, more clearly.

*Peace, my son, and lay you down,  
The sun has gone away.  
Wake and find the dawn at hand,  
Tomorrow is today—  
Tomorrow is today.*

Tashmiren seemed incapacitated by the bizarre turn of events. He stared dumbfounded at Benjiah. Once more Wylla turned to Yorek as the song ended, but the sky seemed to crack and brilliant sunlight burst through the grey clouds. She looked up at the tiny crack, which quickly widened, magnifying the intensity of the light and blue sky many times over. She raised her hands instinctively, for her eyes weren't ready for the brilliance of a sun they had not seen in more than half a year. Her eyes flickered shut despite her desire to gaze at the blue.

The piercing bright light shone through her closed eyelids, making it only just bearable. Gasps and groans rose around her, and she felt jostled by the crowd as people shifted and squirmed, trying to shield themselves from the light. Both friend and foe alike, having lived and moved in semidarkness for so long, had been similarly stunned by the sudden burst of the full light of day.

Then, over the mumblings and murmurings she heard Benjiah call out, clear and strong. "Behold, he comes!"

The words rang out across the plain, and still Wylla could not open her eyes to look at her son or to try to see what he meant. Despite her inability to look for herself, Benjiah spoke again and her question was answered.

"The Father of Dragons! He comes!"

Benjiah stared at the golden forms approaching. An image of dozens of dragons winging their way through the air had flashed rapidly through his mind, their powerful wings beating as they flew eastward toward Tol Emuna. As the image

passed and he looked west at their barely visible approach, he thought to himself that he'd never seen anything so beautiful.

The crowd started to move as though waking up from a daze. Benjiah looked down at men and women, Malekim and Great Bear, and even Vulsutyrim opening their eyes as they began to get used to the bright sunshine. The break in the clouds had continued to expand, and now as Benjiah looked heavenward, blue sky stretched across the horizon. It was almost as beautiful to Benjiah as the dragons.

Despite the confusion in the crowd, three facts became apparent to Benjiah. The first was that the Vulsutyrim had heard his cry and were moving to prepare. The towering forms of the giants were in motion, and all around the moving giants was a growing commotion of men, Malekim, and Great Bear scrambling to get out of their way. Some Vulsutyrim were gathering in the middle of the crowd, generally away from the scaffold and piles of weapons where they had been stationed, while others were moving away from the crowd, back in the direction of Malek's camp where Benjiah had started his day.

At first Benjiah wondered why, but then he thought of the great shields that he had seen the Vulsutyrim use in the skirmishes and battles against dragons along the Barunaan. Whenever dragons appeared, the Vulsutyrim came together under those shields, which did a remarkable job of protecting them from the dragon's fire. They had seemed from a distance to be wood with some kind of inflammable cured hide stretched over it. Surely the giants were headed to the camp to defend themselves.

The second fact that became clear to Benjiah was that the Great Bear were taking advantage of the Vulsutyrim's distraction to reclaim their weapons. A brief struggle took place around both mounds of weapons. The Nolthanim left behind by the giants were quickly overpowered by Great Bear, who armed themselves, established a perimeter around the

weapons, and began distributing swords, bows, and axes as quickly as they were able. The sight of the furious Great Bear wielding their staffs excited Benjiah almost beyond reason. He strained against his chains, but they held him tight. He felt discouraged by his inability to break free, but he did not despair. The dragons were coming, the enemy was in disarray, and the Kirthanim were beginning to rearm. Hope rose in him, even though he was still held fast.

The third fact that came to him was that the crowd nearest the scaffold was in utter turmoil. He couldn't see exactly why. He imagined that there had been far less room for the crowd to maneuver as the Vulsutyrim started moving away. The waves of displaced bodies had nowhere to go as they came crashing up against the great structure. Also, the captains of the Kirthanim had been near the scaffold, off to Benjiah's right. Likely they had the same idea the Great Bear did—get to the weapons. That the general confusion was an opportunity for them to break free of their guards and rally to the weapon deposits, he didn't doubt.

*Mother.* He surveyed the crazed scene swiftly to try to see her. He scanned the place where she had been, but he saw few distinguishable faces in the seething mass.

A movement on the scaffold drew his attention to something happening even closer to home. Tashmiren had summoned the large Nolthanim soldier, the man Benjiah assumed was his executioner. They stood close by, not two spans away, heads bent together so they could hear each other above the gradually increasing din. Tashmiren was looking sideways at Benjiah and pointing to the man's sword.

The wave of bodies that had pushed Wylla sideways past the scaffold had been irresistible. Had she not gone with it, she would surely have been trampled. As it was, it was all she could do to keep her footing. Yorek had almost gone down as well,

and both of them probably owed their lives to Rulalin, who first steadied Wylla and then grabbed Yorek, who had started to fall. When the sideward movement ceased, more or less, Wylla looked back up at the scaffold. She was too close to the side to see Benjiah, though the near pole rose high enough that she could still see the top of it.

Wylla turned from the scaffold to Rulalin. She knew what she must ask of him, and she knew that he'd have good reason to resist. She must persuade him, and quickly.

"Rulalin!" she called above the groans and chatter as she grabbed the man's arm.

He turned to look at her, then leaned in close to hear her.

"Benjiah," she said loudly into his ear as she pointed toward the scaffold.

Rulalin pulled back slightly and searched her eyes.

She reached up with both hands and took hold of his face, firmly but tenderly. "I need you. You were willing to help last night, and you are the only one who can help me now."

Rulalin looked up at the scaffold, then back at her. "I will do what I can."

Rulalin pushed through the crowd, his face still tingling from the touch of Wylla's hands. It was that touch, even more than the break in the clouds, that brought light to his darkness. The night before, he'd had some hope that he might be able to free Benjiah and get away from the camp. Maybe, he'd thought, they'd be able to evade capture for as much as a day, and for that day, he would be Wylla's hero and protector. Here, now, there was little hope of that. Whatever was going on, whether the dragons really were coming or not, he wasn't going anywhere with Benjiah even if he did manage to free Wylla's son. It was, quite literally, broad daylight, and that scaffold was surrounded by servants of Malek. Rulalin was under no illusions about getting Benjiah free and getting away.

Even so, when Wylla touched his face and looked into his eyes, he knew that he would do everything in his power to save the boy. Rulalin had lived much of his life in disgrace for what he had done in service to his obsession for her, and he was willing to die doing what he could in service to her, to Wylla herself. He owed her more than that, but he would give her what he could.

It was only a span or less to the stairs that led up to the platform, and yet getting there was like wading upriver through rapids. The tide of humanity pushing against him was almost impenetrable. Almost miraculously, he was able to find cracks here and there, tiny gaps between people, and the next thing he knew he had reached the bottom of the stair.

It was there that he met his first deliberate rather than incidental obstacle. A clear-headed Nolthanim soldier had escaped the drift of people a moment earlier by gaining the second or third step. He'd also managed to keep anyone else from using the stairs as a haven from the mad pushing and shoving. Rulalin had no doubt that he was looking out for more than his own welfare. He was there to make sure no one gained access to the prisoner.

The man had not yet noticed Rulalin's interest in his location, for there were many people before him, and Rulalin had approached from beyond the edges of the Nolthanim's peripheral vision. Even so, Rulalin had no illusions about being able to draw his sword. Even if the quarters hadn't been so close that it was all but impossible, that movement would betray his intent long before he could attack. He needed another way.

There was no time to waste, and Rulalin had but one idea. He let himself drift behind the stairs with the natural movement of the crowd until he stood a half step behind the stair where the soldier stood, then he raised his right hand slowly and cocked it. Striking quickly, he grabbed the man's knee and pushed it forward. As he'd hoped, the



man's leg buckled and he teetered. Holding tight, Rulalin seized his opportunity and pulled.

It worked. The soldier pitched off the stairs into the crowd of people, and Rulalin immediately pulled himself up onto the stair. Another Nolthanim close by saw the first man's fall, which cleared a space for him, and he leapt onto the bottom stair to come after Rulalin.

Rulalin did draw his sword now, and only just in time. The Nolthanim drew his and Rulalin was able to deflect the first stroke, though the force of it pushed Rulalin down against the stairs. He was desperate, lying on his back and in a vulnerable position. With his left hand he grabbed the hair hanging loose on the Nolthanim's head. He pulled it sideways at an awkward angle and heard the man grunt with the sudden jerk of his head. With the man's neck exposed, Rulalin swung his head forward and hammered it with his forehead as hard as he could, twice. The first time he hit mostly chin, but he pulled the man's head back harder and the second time he struck the exposed, fleshy part of the neck.

The soldier sputtered and Rulalin jerked up violently as he continued to pull the man with his left hand, and he managed to roll the Nolthanim off the stairs. The soldier fell into the jostling crowd, and Rulalin wasted no time in turning and scrambling the rest of the way up.

The executioner drew his sword and handed it to Tashmiren. The long, shiny blade gleamed in the bright sunshine, and Benjiah strained again against his chains, pulling with all his might. Allfather had spoken to him and assured him that this day was not his last. Benjiah knew what he'd heard hadn't been a dream or an illusion. Even so, he could not break the chains, and Tashmiren was drawing nearer with the sword, an even crueler, more insolent grin on his face than before. Benjiah kept pulling.

Tashmiren walked slowly, savoring Benjiah's helplessness. Though not entirely rational, the thought occurred to Benjiah that if he was to be cut open while chained between these poles, he'd rather the executioner do it than Tashmiren. The executioner drifted closer to Benjiah as well, but he had stepped to the side in deference to Tashmiren, who had obviously pulled rank and laid claim to this kill. Benjiah felt his anger and frustration returning. He wouldn't die by this man's hand. He just wouldn't.

Tashmiren stopped and held the sword up to Benjiah's neck. He could feel the sharp point against his vulnerable flesh, where Tashmiren pressed none too gently, and he stopped pulling against the chains for fear his motion, though slight, would get his throat cut. Tashmiren laughed softly. "Boy, dragons or no dragons, nothing can save you now."

Benjiah didn't reply, but he met Tashmiren's gaze evenly. Despite what he thought Allfather had promised him, he found it difficult to be hopeful in his current situation. Even so, though he might die, he wasn't about to plead, beg, or grovel, or lose his composure in any way that might suggest Tashmiren had gotten to him.

Benjiah was vaguely aware of the sounds of a scuffle not far away. Tashmiren must have heard it too, because he turned his head for a second and then turned back. He must not have seen anything of note, because his face betrayed no concern. "For whatever reason, your death is important to my master. Had things gone as planned, though, I would have been only a spectator to it. Now, I get to do it myself, and when this little commotion is over, I'll stand before him and take the credit and glory for making sure his will was done despite what has transpired. All in all, this day is working out well for me."

"The storm is broken and the dragons are coming," Benjiah said quietly. "I would be cautious about dreaming of your reward too soon."

Tashmiren lowered the sword so he could move in even closer. He stepped up until his coarse hair brushed Benjiah's cheek. "Your dragon friends couldn't deliver your army before, and that was before we'd decimated your ranks of men and Great Bear. They certainly won't deliver you now."

Tashmiren motioned with his free hand to the crowd. "The Bringer of Storms is here, as are his brothers and the rest of Malek's host. The coming of the dragons is only a momentary delay at best. In fact, it is fortuitous. They're saving us the trouble of climbing the mountains to find their gyres and hunt them down. It would have been a time-consuming and tiresome process."

Again, Benjiah held his tongue. The man made him so angry, and he knew that was exactly the point. He wanted to see Benjiah's frustration and anger so he could laugh as he struck the killing blow. Benjiah clenched his teeth and said nothing.

Tashmiren stepped back and raised the sword to chest level this time. "All right, boy prophet of Allfather, no more talk. Now you die."

As the last phrase slipped from Tashmiren's mouth, Benjiah felt the pull of *torrim redara*, and suddenly Benjiah found himself in slow time. He was struck, as always, by the instant silence, and he closed his eyes for a moment and breathed a sigh of relief. He opened his eyes again and looked at the man holding the sword. This was but a temporary stay of execution. When he entered the normal stream of time, Tashmiren would move quickly and swiftly to kill him.

*Benjiah.* It was the voice he had heard clearly for the first time in the storm while sailing south from Col Marena and most recently just moments ago. It was the voice of Allfather; he was sure.

*Benjiah.*

"Yes, Allfather, I am listening."

*Can you break the chains?*

Benjiah strained against them again, but even in slow time, they held him fast. “No, I cannot.”

*Nevertheless, they will be broken. Can you deliver yourself from the man before you?*

Benjiah looked at the raised sword. “No, I cannot.”

*Nevertheless, you will be delivered. You will be delivered, and when you are delivered, you will know that the fate of men is in my hand and no other. You will know that all I have promised, I will do. Look to your left.*

Benjiah turned left as far as his chains would allow. At first, he saw only the executioner’s big body, for he had taken up his position there and stood frozen, watching Tashmiren threaten Benjiah. Beside the executioner was the pole, and more than that, Benjiah couldn’t see.

“I don’t see anything.”

*Look more closely.*

Benjiah refocused, noticing for the first time something that was mostly obscured from his vantage point. Between the pole and the executioner he saw a glimpse of what appeared to be a crouching man moving from the side of the scaffold where the stairs were toward the pole and the Nolthanim guard.

He craned his neck even farther back, despite the pain that shot through his arms as he stretched them awkwardly in an attempt to get a better glimpse, and he was stunned by what he saw.

*I have raised up a deliverer, and he will save you from the hand of your enemy.*

“But that’s Rulalin Tarasir, my father’s murderer.”

*It is. He murdered your father, but today he will deliver you.*

“I don’t understand.”

*You will. For now, just see and understand that my arm has not grown short so that it cannot save.*

“I see and understand.”

*Good, now return to real time and see what I will do.*

Benjah felt the pull and knew by the noise and commotion emanating from the crowd that he had left *torrim redara*. He looked up at Tashmiren, whose mouth was just closing behind a final taunt. Benjah looked at the man's mocking eyes and said, "You fool, you're already dead and you don't even know it."

Before Tashmiren could react, a cry of pain drew his attention to the side, and both he and Benjah turned to see the body of the Nolthanim executioner sliding off Rulalin's blade onto the platform. Benjah turned quickly toward Tashmiren to drink in the sudden appearance of surprise and fear on his face as realization of his predicament set in.

"What are you doing?" Tashmiren said, turning defensively toward Rulalin, Benjah now forgotten amid the more pressing matter of self-preservation.

"What I've wanted to do for a very, very long time."

Tashmiren stepped back slowly. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh I would," Rulalin answered, stepping forward.

"You swore your allegiance."

"I did."

"You're breaking your oath."

"I am."

"Malek will kill you."

"Not before I kill you."

Tashmiren, holding before him the sword he'd had to borrow, nervously glanced sideways at Benjah. "If you want the boy, just take him."

"I will, after I kill you."

Tashmiren lunged and tried to land a desperate stroke, but Rulalin easily deflected it, and with Tashmiren off balance, he slashed the back of the man's leg. Tashmiren howled as he dropped to his knees, blood seeping through the back of his cloak.

Grimacing, the wounded man looked up and directed seething hatred at Rulalin. Through clenched teeth he said, "You fool, you treacherous fool."

"Yes." Rulalin nodded. "That is exactly what I have been, but I am a traitor no more. I serve Malek no more."

With that, Rulalin drove his sword through Tashmiren's gut, just below his rib cage, until the tip of the blade came out of the man's back. Benjiah watched him drive the killing blow home, swiftly, deftly, almost effortlessly. He held Tashmiren upright, and then, after a moment, when he was sure Tashmiren was dead, Rulalin withdrew his sword and let the body fall.

Rulalin looked down at the dead man and turned with a grin to Benjiah. "I've been waiting to do that a long time."

Benjiah looked at Rulalin, a mixture of wariness and gratitude within. Allfather might have raised up Rulalin to deliver him from Tashmiren, but the traitor was still his father's murderer. How exactly Benjiah was supposed to respond to this turn of events was something Allfather had neglected to mention.

Rulalin did not wait for Benjiah's response. Glancing quickly left and right at the stairs on either side of the scaffold, Rulalin stepped closer to Benjiah. "I don't know how much time we have up here before we get company, so I'd better see about getting you down."

As Rulalin moved aside to examine the chain that held Benjiah's right hand tight, Benjiah saw that at the front of the scaffold, directly behind the place where Rulalin had killed Tashmiren, a man had been lifted up onto the stage and was now crouching, moving stealthily forward. It was the man Benjiah had noticed moving through the crowd, fury in his face as Benjiah sang.

As soon as the man realized that he'd been seen, he leapt toward Rulalin. Sunlight glinted off the dagger he was holding in his hand. Benjiah called to Rulalin, "Look out!"

It was too late. Rulalin had just begun to turn when the man buried the dagger up to its hilt in the small of his back. Benjiah saw the look of pain and surprise on Rulalin's face as he heard the blade go in, be withdrawn, and then be thrust in again.

Rulalin's sword clattered to the platform floor, and Rulalin fell past Benjiah with a crash and lay still.

"You have served your purpose," the man murmured as Rulalin fell. "I have no more need of you."

The turn of events caught Benjiah completely by surprise. Allfather had said Rulalin would deliver him but nothing about any of this. Now Benjiah seemed to be right back where he had been. Where was his deliverance going to come from now? This man intended his death as surely as Tashmiren had.

He looked into the man's eyes. They were dark and cruel, and the hate that burned in them was far deeper than Tashmiren's. He bent over and grabbed Tashmiren's body, which was lying right in front of Benjiah, and roughly pulled and tossed it aside. The man seemed strong, but Benjiah noticed he limped a little. He faced Benjiah again, this time with nothing separating them.

"I have big plans, and you can't be allowed to ruin them, child of prophecy or no," he said, stepping forward with the dagger, ready to strike Benjiah's exposed chest.

As the blade rushed in, the light and warmth that Benjiah had felt beside the Kalamín flowed through his body. The dagger kept coming toward him, but it seemed to be moving slowly now. Benjiah felt a rush of strength as he pulled with his right hand, ripping the chain from the iron ring on the pole and slashing the chain across the face of his lunging attacker.

The blow was sudden, fierce, and startling. The man's head snapped back as the chain struck him, lacerated the side of his face, and drove his stab attempt wide of the mark. In fact, the dagger flew out of his hand and dropped over the edge of the scaffold. Benjiah pulled with his left hand and again ripped from the iron ring the chain that had only moments ago withstood all his struggles. He dealt the man a second blow, this one across his chest, sending him staggering back a few steps.

Benjiah felt the relief in his arms, free of their painful positions at last. Half a span of chain dangled from each wrist, but his arms were loose and he was free. The man who had stabbed Rulalin was dazed and off balance. Benjiah lowered his shoulder and struck the man hard enough to send him tumbling backward. He rolled over completely and fell off the front edge of the scaffold and into the crowd. Benjiah quickly looked around him for any other surprises, but he was alone on the scaffold.

He was alone on the scaffold, but he knew he had to get off it. An almost inexhaustible supply of men could be sent to kill him up here. He had to get away. The question was how.

He looked up at the horizon, which had been lost to him in the dramatic events of the last few moments. Swooping down out of the sky was the golden form of a dragon, dropping lower and lower and flying faster and faster. The dragon was flying right toward the scaffold, right toward him. As the dragon's intent dawned upon him, Benjiah braced himself. In a matter of seconds, he was firmly gripped in the talon of the dragon and soaring up above the scaffold, the crowd, and the battle beginning down below.