

Foreword

“In the fifth century of the Fifth Age in the realm of Alorin, the [Adept](#) Malachai ap’Kalien wielded the itinerant power widely referred to as elae to create—nay, not a mere dimension as is so widely professed—but an entirely new world, whole cloth, out of Alorin’s own aether.

News of his accomplishment resounded throughout the thousand realms of Light, for it was a feat both unheard-of and unimaginable. Many were horrified by the working, naming it the penultimate blasphemy.

Seeking understanding, Malachai appealed to the great Adept leaders who gathered in the revered Hall of a Thousand Thrones on the cityworld of Illume Belliel. He beseeched their mercy—if not for him, then for his fledgling world—but he met strong opposition. Aldaeon H’rathigian, Seat of Markhengar, was most outspoken in his outrage, and succeeded in a brief campaign to sway other Seats to his views. Thus was Malachai’s infant realm ruled an abomination, and its maker condemned an outcast. Even the Alorin Seat, Malachai’s own representative, turned his head in shame.

*Destitute, Malachai appealed to the darker gods.
And they did not refuse him.”*

The Adept Race: Its Tragedies & Triumphs, Chapter 19, The Legend of T’khendar – as compiled by Agasi Imperial Historian, Neralo DiRomini, in the year 607aV

Prologue

The dark-haired man leaned back in his armchair and rubbed one finger along his jaw. His blue eyes narrowed as his mind raced through the possibilities still available, each branching with hundredfold new and varied paths. Impossible to try to predict the future when so many paths were in motion.

Much better to mold the future to one's own desires.

Shifting his gaze back to that which troubled him, he reached long fingers to retrieve an invitation from his desk. The missive scribed in a bold hand and embossed with the royal standard of a mortal king concerned him not at all; what troubled him so deeply was the personal seal of signature pressed into the wax at its end.

A rising breeze fluttered the heavy draperies of his bronze-hued tent, and he glanced over at a four-poster bed and the exquisite woman lying naked behind its veils of gossamer silk. He knew she wasn't sleeping, though she pretended it so to give him time with his thoughts.

He looked back to the seal on the parchment in his hand. It was a strange sort of signet for a prince. He wondered if the man had any idea of the pattern's significance.

Surely not. None of them ever remember, in the beginning.

Yet if the seal was true—and how could it be otherwise, when none but the pattern's true owner could fashion it?—then he had very little time to act. Twice before, he'd come upon a man who could fashion this particular pattern, and each time his enemies had reached the man first. This time must be different.

The drapes fluttered across the room, and a shadow entered between the parting. No, not a shadow. *Something*. The air rippled into waves as heat rising from the flames, and a cloaked figure materialized, already in a reverent bow.

"First Lord," the Shade murmured.

"Ah, Dämen." The dark-haired man waved the invitation gently. "This is quite a find."

Dämen straightened and pushed back the hood of his pale blue cloak, revealing a face like a mask of polished steel; metal yet living flesh. "I knew you would be pleased."

The First Lord returned his gaze to the pattern. As he studied the twisting, sculpted lines forming a complicated endless knot, he glanced up again. "These invitations were sent broadly?"

"To nigh on four corners of the globe, *ma dieul*," replied the Shade. "Four-hundred invitations, maybe more."

The First Lord frowned. "Unfortunate, that. This pattern cannot help but garner notice. The others will certainly recognize its substance. It will draw our enemies' eyes to him."

"That could be fortuitous for us if it lures them into the open."

"No, they're too intelligent. They'll send others to do their bidding." He lapsed into thoughtful silence.

After a moment, the Shade prodded gently, "What is your will, *ma dieul*? Shall I retrieve the prince to safety?"

“No—*assuredly* no,” and he enforced this order with a steady gaze from eyes so deeply blue as to be ground from the purest cobalt. “Balance plays heavily in the life of any man who claims this pattern, and we cannot take the chance of losing him again.”

The Shade shifted with discontent. “The others will not hold to such restrictions, *ma dieul*.”

“More to their error.” The First Lord sat back in his chair. “If I’ve learned anything from past losses, Dämen, it’s what not to do.” He tapped a long finger thoughtfully against his lips. “We must bring him in carefully...slowly, for the revelation will not be an easy one.”

The Shade frowned—his chrome-polished features perfectly mimicked living flesh. “Your pardon, First Lord, but if he did not Awaken to his Adept talents with the onset of adolescence, what chance remains?”

“A slim one.” Indeed, the chance was so minute that it would take a great tragedy to draw out his Awakening—a tragedy he must somehow fashion, for the man of their interest held too much importance to lose him again into the ever-shifting veils of time.

The First Lord regretted the future in the making. Often of late, he regretted the future more than he did his tragic past.

He pursed his lips and shook his head, his eyes determined...yet still he hesitated. He didn’t question the need, but life was a precious, tenuous thing. He regretted every one he’d been forced to end over the countless years. Still, he’d waited too long, planned too carefully...sacrificed too much. Mercy was a virtue he could ill afford.

He looked back to the Shade. “I fear steps will have to be taken.”

“Well and so, *ma dieul*.” Much went unsaid in the Shade’s tone, but his gaze conveyed his unease.

The First Lord needed no reminding; he would have to be so precise in this planning—every detail, every possible ramification must be considered—for the moment the man crossed that ephemeral threshold they called the Awakening, he would become a beacon for their enemies’ vehemence. And that was something no mortal could survive.

His thoughts spun as he conceived of his plan. Then he settled his cobalt-blue eyes upon his Lord of Shades and gave him his instructions.

The Shade bowed when his master was finished. “Your will be done, *ma dieul*,” he murmured. Then, straightening, he faded...his form shifted, dissolving like dawn shadows until nothing remained where something had been only moments before.

His most pressing matter thus decided, the First Lord tossed the invitation aside and returned his gaze to the glorious creature awaiting his pleasure on the bed.

The woman stretched like a cat and settled her vibrant green eyes upon him. “Come back to bed, *ma dieul*,” she murmured in a silken voice akin to a purr but echoic of a growl, “for I have need of you.”

He returned a lustful look. “And I have need of you,” he replied in a rough whisper. Lifting his own naked body from his chair, he went to her.

Leilah n’abin Hadorin, youngest daughter of Radov abin Hadorin, Ruling Prince of M’Nador, stood trembling on the balcony that overlooked the vast gardens of her father’s palace in Tal’Shira by the Sea. She lifted a shaking hand and touched her cheek where an

angry red handprint flamed. *He's never hit me before*, she thought as tears leaked from her dark brown eyes.

But he's never caught you eavesdropping while he plotted with the enemy, either.

Considering the circumstances and her father's ill humor of late, a single slap in the face was a mercy.

'Fool girl!' she heard her father's acid hiss, his dark eyes flaming with fury. *'You're lucky I caught you spying instead of one of Bethamin's [Ascendants](#) or his [Marquiin](#)! Get you gone from my sight while I consider how to deal with you!'*

Leilah wiped her cheeks, wet with tears, and choked back a sob. She hadn't been spying—though Raine's truth, she'd overheard far too much of the conversation to deny the accusation with any conviction. Nor could she tell her father why she'd actually been hiding in his study. Radov had never been fond of compassion, but since the Ascendants of the Prophet Bethamin had arrived in Tal'Shira, he seemed to have lost all taste for it.

What does it mean that he allies with the Prophet Bethamin?

Nothing good, she was certain.

M'Nador's neighboring kingdom of Dannym had banned the Prophet's teachings, and Queen Indora of Veneisea had issued an official censure, which was practically the same thing. Leilah's father, Prince Radov, depended on an alliance with Dannym and Veneisea to continue his military campaign against the Akkad; that her father spoke of a new alliance with the Prophet Bethamin could only mean he intended to betray his other allies.

The thought chilled her. Even now, both Dannym and Veneisea supported M'Nador's war, sending troops and supplies, even precious Adept Healers, who were few enough in number that releasing even one from the service of their own kingdom was a noble sacrifice.

And now my father allies with Bethamin.

Leilah didn't like the Prophet. Every time she listened to his teachings, she came away feeling cold inside. Since Bethamin's Ascendants and their gauze-shrouded Marquiin had come to Tal'Shira, the sun hadn't once appeared from behind the overcast that had arrived as if part of the Prophet's entourage. The palace staff had grown edgy and fretful and talked in whispers now, and her father's Guard had become increasingly sharp-tempered, just like their monarch. Leilah saw how everyone was falling prey to the mantle of gloom that surrounded Bethamin's endlessly proselytizing priests, yet apparently she was the only one who did.

She thought of the Marquiin again and shuddered.

They were Adept truthreaders—or had been, once. They weren't like any of the other truthreaders she'd met. The Marquiin had a darkness about them, a sense of cold malice. Everyone said that truthreaders—*real* truthreaders—couldn't lie, but Leilah wouldn't trust a Marquiin for the whole Kandori fortune. She couldn't bear to even approach them, for they all exuded a sour stench that made her wonder what foulness was hidden beneath the grey silk that covered them from head to toe.

Even before she learned of her father's planned alliance, she'd tried to speak to her older sisters about her fears—that is, the two sisters not as yet married off to sheiks or Avataren lords—but they'd complained she was hurting their heads with talk of politics and had sent her from their solar.

Her brothers were all long gone, seeking their fortunes in foreign lands or leading her father's armies into battle against the Akkad, but she doubted they'd believe her anyway; they all thought of her as 'little Lily,' as if she was still running around half-naked splashing in the palace fountains and not a girl of sixteen, of birthing age.

That was the other problem—the reason she'd been in her father's study without his knowledge: to use his personal seal. Her father's spies read her own letters with meticulous attention, but no one ever disturbed missives sent beneath Radov's personal seal. It was imperative that her letters left the palace under this guise, else...

Even as a shuddering sigh escaped her, Leilah smiled through her tears at the memory of her true love Korin's handsome face, of his sultry dark eyes and his amazing lips, of the feel of his hands on her bare skin...

It had been almost a year since she'd seen Korin. As soon as her father learned of her interest in him, he'd banished the 'impudent' boy from the kingdom. The moment still felt as devastating in memory as it had upon its experience.

Then had come Fhionna and her dangerous plan, the secret letters ferried back and forth, the promise of rescue...

Soon none of this will matter, she tried to reassure herself. Soon he will come and whisk me away, and we'll sail as far east as the seas will take us. There, we'll raise children and goats and live happily in solitude, needing nothing but each other.

Smiling, sighing at the thought, Leilah dropped her hand to the little purse at her side where she kept his secret letters and—

Oh, no!

She spun around looking for the handbag. It was gone! She remembered falling as her father had struck her. She'd felt something catch and tug, but the moment had been too shocking to notice much else. The little chain must've caught on the edge of the table.

With a sick feeling of dread, Leilah realized her purse must still be in her father's study. It wasn't only her and Korin who would face her father's wrath if he discovered those letters; Radov would stop at nothing to unearth her accomplices. Fhionna and Aishlinn would eventually be hunted down and given fifty lashings just for ferrying the letters back and forth. That is, if they survived their own capture.

Shaking for a different reason now, Leilah pushed a hand to her throat. She would be doomed if her father found those letters. Coupled with her recent act of 'spying,' those letters would brand her a sure traitor in his eyes.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth, beset by a horrible moment of indecision. She'd been sent away in no uncertain terms so her father could receive Bethamin's Ascendant and his Marquii in his chambers, but perhaps if she was very quiet...if they'd moved to speak in the adjacent gallery instead of her father's study, as was Radov's wont...if she didn't so much as make a peep... Perhaps they wouldn't even notice her returning for her purse.

Leilah rushed back inside the palace and headed down the long, wide passage towards her father's chambers. In truth, she would rather face the lash for disobedience than feel the force of her father's wrath should he learn of her illicit love affair. If Radov discovered her in that act of defiance, being sold to Avataren slavers would be a mercy.

The two guards on duty outside her father's chambers eyed her dubiously as she entered, but they didn't stop her. *They'd probably enjoy watching the lashing, she*

thought resentfully, though what she would've done if they'd prevented her from entering, she didn't know.

She slipped on tiptoes close to the wall of the large anteroom toward one of two doors that opened into her father's study. Pressing an ear to the door, she heard nothing, so she slowly turned the handle. Hope welled in pulse with her anxiety. She might just be able to slip in unnoticed...

Even as she made it inside, she saw her little purse across the way, half-concealed beneath the armchair, exactly as she'd imagined. The room was empty, but the doors to the gallery were open. She would have to pass them to reach her purse. Heart pounding loudly in her ears, Leilah rushed across the room, but just as she neared the open doors, something made her pause.

She stood transfixed an inch from the portal's edge with her heart beating so loudly it was deafening. Waves of chill air seeped from the gallery, heavy and dense, laden with malevolence. Leilah shrank from its touch.

That was when she heard the moaning. It seemed a wail not of mortal death but of a dying soul; even more frightening was the sure certainty that the horrible moan came from her father.

As if caught in a dream, Leilah felt herself drawn inexorably forward. She felt powerless to stop herself. Slowly, she inched her head around the edge and saw...she saw...

She saw.

And then she ran.

Part 1

Ean & Trel

One

'To know love is to know fear.'

– Attributed to the [angiel](#) Epiphany

The skiff bobbed on icy waves as two sailors rowed in tandem. A crescent moon looked down upon the little boat and limned a silvery trail back to the hulking shadow that was the royal schooner *Sea Eagle*. The damp air smelled pungent with the scent of brine, but the sky shone uncommonly clear, and the wind carried an exhilarating sense of promise.

Or at least Ean thought so as he stood with boots braced in the prow of the skiff watching the dark expanse of the Calgaryn cliffs growing taller, broader...vaster, until they towered over the little boat. No lights glimmered in the great crags to tell the rowing sailors where beach ended and deadly rocks began; neither lighthouse nor lantern served as a beacon to guide them across the blanket of ebony ocean. They'd only Ean to guide them, his ears keen to the roar of the waves upon a familiar shore.

"There." Ean pointed with arm outstretched. "Two degrees to port." The blustery wind whipped his hair, lifting and tossing it in wild designs while his cloak flapped behind him, so that he seemed a figurehead as he stood in the prow, a sculpture of some undersea godling.

"Aye, Your Highness," said one of the sailors, and he and his partner adjusted their rowing to shift course.

"'Tis strange," noted the skiff's fourth occupant, who was seated on a bench behind Ean wrapped in an ermine cloak. Ean's blood-brother since childhood, Creighton Khelspath had sealed his destiny to Ean's. They'd both passed their eighteenth name day, that age of manhood that brought new titles and new responsibilities; yet neither felt quite ready to face the world beneath the mantle that accompanied their new status.

"What's strange?" Ean shifted his head slightly to maintain his focus on the minute sounds of the surf.

"Strange to be coming back here after so long." Creighton's tone shouted his anxiety. He added under his breath, "Strange to think of ourselves as the King's men again, instead of just the Queen's."

"Would there was no need for such distinction," Ean muttered. He'd spent five long years arguing with his queen mother about her estranged relationship with his king father—the entire time he'd been living on his mother's island of Edenmar, in fact—and the enduring disagreement had created a flood of bitterness on the matter. His mother had sequestered him in Edenmar to protect him after both of his older brothers were lost to treachery, but this truth provided ill consolation for being ripped from all that he'd known and loved.

Yet...now all that had changed—at least, Ean hoped it had. Two moons ago, Queen Errodan and her entourage had returned to Calgaryn to make peace with King Gydryn in the name of their only surviving son. Ean hoped his name would be enough to bridge the

canyon between his mutually embittered parents; a great part of him feared nothing could span so immense a distance.

Abruptly the skiff surged upwards amid a rising roar of crashing waves.

“We’re here!” Ean grabbed the side of the boat for balance and shot Creighton a knowing look, while the waves dragged them towards the muted gleam of beach, and excitement churned in his chest like the crashing surf.

Then he could stand the anticipation no longer and leapt from the boat. He slogged through hip-deep waves to stand, dripping, upon the shore. Jutting cliffs sliced into the bay on either side of the wide swath of sand, which sparkled faintly in the moonlight. Ean opened his arms and turned around to embrace the air of his homeland, breathing deeply of its familiar scent.

The sailors rode the waves all the way in, until the flat-bottomed boat scraped the shore. Creighton swept up his ermine cloak and stepped from bow to beach. He joined Ean’s side and turned to face the crashing surf and the broad blanket of night.

Far above the dark waters spread another sea, this one a starry splay of diamonds surrounding a smiling moon. Just above this gleaming crescent, high within the arch of sky, a seven-pointed constellation flamed.

Creighton blanched. “Ean.” He pointed with his free arm. “Look.”

Ean lifted his gaze to follow along Cray’s line of sight, but his ebullient expression faded when he saw the grouping of stars. “[Cephrael’s Hand](#).”

At this utterance, both sailors lifted their faces to the heavens.

“’Tis an inauspicious omen for your return,” Creighton said uneasily.

One of the sailors grunted at this, and the other spat into the sand and ground his boot over the mark.

Ean cast him a withering look. “Ward for luck if you wish, helmsman, but *we* make our destiny, not superstition.”

“[Epiphany’s](#) Grace you’re right, Highness,” replied the sailor, “but you won’t begrudge me if I keep my knife close tonight, I hope?”

Ean caught sight of Creighton loosening his own blade and stared at his blood-brother. “You and I both have studied the science of the stars. How can you believe that constellation has any power over our fates—”

Creighton spun him a heated look and hissed under his breath, “How can you not?”

Ean pushed a chin-length strand of cinnamon hair behind one ear and folded arms across his chest. He couldn’t discount the terrible events that had happened beneath the taint of Cephrael’s Hand—both of his brothers had died while that constellation shone in the heavens—but neither could he believe in the superstition surrounding the fateful stars.

Ean looked away, his jaw suddenly tight. The memory of his lost brothers evoked a sigh that felt painful as it left his chest. “We blame the gods too often for things no one controls.”

“That’s your father talking.”

Ean shot Cray an aggravated look. “Sometimes he’s right.”

A gusting breeze brought the stench of seaweed and wet rocks, and something else, some proprietary scent seemingly owned by that beach alone. Ean remembered it well—it and all of the memories it carried like autumn leaves spinning in funnels across the sand. “I said goodbye to both of my brothers upon this very spot,” the prince observed quietly, recalling a much younger self who’d watched as first one brother and then the

next was carried away toward an awaiting royal ship at anchor, much as the *Sea Eagle* was now.

Neither brother had returned from their journey south. One had been lost to treachery, the other claimed by the Fire Sea. Now Ean stood upon this shore not as a boy but as a man, and he'd never felt more aware of how different his life had become, how much the fingers of tragedy had molded and changed him.

"The Maker willing, we shall meet them again someday in the [Returning](#)," Creighton said respectfully, repeating a litany they'd both recited too many times already in their young lives, "and know them by Epiphany's Grace."

"Aye," Ean agreed, feeling unexpectedly hollow.

"Aye," intoned the sailors, who couldn't help overhearing.

Ean grimaced. He turned his gaze towards the *Sea Eagle* and the tiny flame of a lantern topping its mainmast. Once, a royal schooner could always be seen at anchor just off these cliffs, awaiting the King's command for his pleasure, but after the loss of the *Dawn Chaser* and Ean's middle brother five years ago, King Gydryn sailed no more.

Memories of his lost brothers had stolen what joy Ean had summoned for his homecoming, leaving naught but unwelcome emptiness in its place. The prince tried to summon a happier tone to help shake off the clinging cobwebs of loss. "Come on." He clapped Creighton on the shoulder and started off through the sand. "Let's see how far we can get before my mother's men spot us."

Creighton followed Ean across the beach. "I only hope they're not inclined to shoot first and ask questions later. A bolt in the shoulder is no fair homecoming gift."

Ean shot him a sideways grin. "No one could mistake you for a brigand in that outfit."

Creighton adjusted his ermine cloak indignantly. "You never get a second opportunity to make a first impression, Ean." He smoothed his velvet jacket and pressed out the long line of ornate silver buttons that gleamed down the front—indeed, Ean had watched him spend many an hour polishing said buttons in preparation for their return. "And Katerine's favor is worth any effort."

The prince chuckled. "A *first* impression? Wasn't it Katerine val Mallonwey who looked raptly on as you tried to escape that sea skunk on this very beach?"

Creighton grunted. "How was I to know it was mating season?" He shook his head and scowled at Ean's back. "I had to burn that cloak. The smell never would come out of it." Ean laughed again at this, whereupon Creighton glared sootily at him. "I do believe you take perverse pleasure in my misfortunes."

"If only your misfortunes were not so entertaining."

As they navigated between two hulking rocks that muffled somewhat the crash of the sea, the prince reached for his blood-brother's arm. "Now then." Ean leveled Creighton an arch look. "You swore you would explain once we were ashore. Why all the pomp? The cloak? The endless polishing of buttons?"

A foolish grin split his friend's face. "Tonight I'm to see Katerine."

Ean's smile vanished. "You told her of our landing?"

"No—of course not, Ean."

The prince frowned. "You know the threat upon our lives, Creighton—never mind the precarious situation of my father's throne. If you told Katerine or *anyone*—"

"Ean, I swear I did not."

Ean gave him an odd look. “Surely you don’t expect to wake her in the wee of the night. So how...?”

A faraway look beset his best friend, and a moment passed before Creighton confessed, “It’s like I can sense her.” He dropped his gaze sheepishly. “I know it sounds foolish, but after so many letters back and forth, secrets shared across Mieryn Bay...years of imagining her eyes and smile as she read my words and wrote to me in return...” Creighton looked back to Ean and shrugged. “I can’t explain it. I just feel in my heart that when next I set foot within Calgaryn Palace, Katerine will be there to meet me. So...” he glanced down at his finery, “I’ve come prepared.”

“I see,” Ean said, even though he didn’t. He frowned and then started them walking again. After a moment, he shot Cray a sidelong glance. “I take it that you mean to propose.”

As if with grand ceremony, Creighton reached inside his coat and withdrew a velvet pouch. He emptied its contents onto his palm and extended it towards Ean. “I was going to give her this.”

Ean paused to take the ring and look it over. A large ruby glinted within petals of delicate silver filigree fashioned in the shape of a rose. “It’s beautiful.” He handed the ring back to Cray. “It must be very old.”

“It belonged to an Avataren Fire Princess,” Creighton said significantly as he returned the ring to its pouch and the pouch to his coat.

“Ah.” Understanding suffused the prince while a smile overcame his tense expression. “So...my mother and her Companion Ysolde are complicit in this farce. I’m hurt I wasn’t entrusted with the secret, too.”

“Only for your own protection, Ean. We wouldn’t want any rumors going around that *you* were planning to propose.”

Ean snorted caustically. “Everyone knows better than to whisper unsanctioned rumors about me.” Ironically, there were so many rumors circulating about himself, Ean couldn’t keep them all straight, but he felt certain not a one existed that hadn’t been invented by his father’s Spymaster, Morin d’Hain.

The trail steepened as they reached the cliffs, and the boys turned their attention to the climb. In the night’s deepening quiet, Ean’s thoughts wandered back to Creighton’s earlier observation.

It *was* strange to be returning as men to these places where they’d played as children, to the very beach where he and Cray had so often sought refuge from Ean’s eldest brother Sebastian, who’d had ingenious methods of torturing them when he was in a temper; where all the boys had come to devise new ways to torment their tutors, secretly and momentarily united against a common foe. Strange to find comfort on a chill and treacherous shore, yet it was there he’d fled when first one brother and then the next had been taken, snatched away by the pitiless snares of Fate.

And stranger still to find comfort lingering there, like an old friend waiting by the wayside.

He had mixed feelings about his return. Seeing his father, coming *home* again, these things filled him with a warm excitement; but the reason he’d returned...

Ean didn’t want a formal acknowledgement as the crown prince—*Raine’s truth*, how could he desire a crown when it only fell to him though treachery and tragedy? Never had he felt the loss of his brothers more than in the sure understanding that he’d taken their

place in line for the throne. Yet the cold fact remained: Ean represented the family's last hope of retaining the Eagle Throne. He shouldered that responsibility as any good son should, though he wept in the knowledge of what had passed to lay the promise at his feet.

"My prince, is that you?"

The boys drew up short at the voice from above.

Footsteps approached, and a soldier's mailed form soon solidified higher along the path. Queen Errodan's silver coat of arms glimmered on the man's breast, a barely discernible trident on his dark green surcoat. "Why it is you, Your Highness. And you also, Lord Khelspath. Fortune bless you're both safe. Her Majesty is most aggrieved about requiring you to come ashore under these circumstances, but Your Highness's safety necessitated it."

Ean sighed. *Never was understatement uttered so blithely.* "It's good to see you, Eammon."

The soldier nodded. "Aye, and you also, Your Highness. This way then, if you will."

They took the rest of the steep climb in silence, which was fine with Ean. His frame felt twice as heavy carrying the weight of his thoughts. As they neared the crest, noises disturbed the night, and suddenly the unexpected yet unmistakable sounds of battle came floating down.

Eammon held up his fist to halt them and hissed, "Stay here!" He sprinted up the trail.

Ean and Creighton exchanged a wide-eyed look. "Ean...we can't just *wait*—"

"I know."

They darted after Eammon.

At the crest, the moonlight revealed a writhing frenzy of soldiers. Green-coated Queen's Guard fought red-coated palace soldiers—could the Queen's men really be fighting the King's? Ean stared open-mouthed as he tried to make sense of the scene. Not even his parents' enmity explained why their respective men would've come to blows.

Creighton grabbed his arm. "Is...is it your parents fighting again?"

Ean worked the muscles of his jaw, feeling dismayed. "I think something else is going on." He motioned for Creighton to follow, and they ducked through the tall sea grass skirting the edge of the fray. The prince's eyes sought an opening, an opportunity to intervene—

Suddenly cold steel pressed sharply against his neck. Ean caught his breath and stilled beneath the blade.

"I have him!" shouted a voice, close and painful in his ear.

In the clearing, the fighting slowed. Among the men Ean recognized, Eammon looked down the wrong side of a blade.

A burly man dressed in the king's livery pushed forward to where Ean stood pinned between an armored man and the razor edge of a dagger. "Good work." Dark eyes in a bearded face looked Ean over. "Let's see his weapon." He reached for Ean's sword, sheathed at the prince's hip, and examined the hilt and its sapphire pommel stone.

Ean's captor pressed his face close to the prince's ear. He could almost feel the man's leering grin as he remarked, "That's a Kingdom Blade all right."

The man's breath smelled as foul as the rest of him. Ean couldn't believe the king's men would've sunken to such low standards—he didn't believe these were the king's men at all.

“Aye,” said another man standing nearby, “but the other lad has a Kingdom Blade also.”

The burly leader straightened to frown over at Creighton, who stood at sword-point just behind Ean. The prince could barely see him out of the corner of his eye. Looking back to Ean then, the leader grabbed the prince’s chin and roughly turned his face from side to side. “Can’t tell. He *could* be the right one.”

“You’d think the other’d be him,” grumbled another of the men, also in the uniform of the king’s men. “Look how he’s all gussied up.”

“Just so.” The leader narrowed his gaze at Ean. “Well then, which are you? The prince or his dog?”

“I am Prince Ean!” Creighton declared immediately.

“I am Ean val Lorian.” The prince held the man’s gaze with angry eyes. “And you’re a corpse when my father learns of this.”

The leader laughed and extended an arm towards the others. “Aren’t we all soiling ourselves now?”

The men’s remarks in reply brought an angry color to Ean’s cheeks.

“You may have fooled us,” Eammon’s voice interrupted the laughter, “but the King’s Own Guard is coming even as we speak. Be certain they’ll know you for the knaves you are.”

The leader continued his inspection of Ean’s face. Returning his gaze, Ean wondered if being gone from the kingdom so long that no one recognized him would prove a blessing or a curse. “I just can’t be certain which one you are,” the leader remarked. “Best to kill them both.”

“Prob’ly so,” said the voice with the sour breath at Ean’s ear. The prince felt the blade cutting into his flesh, and instinct extended a desperate hand. He slammed his heel onto the bridge of his captor’s foot and spun *into* his embrace. The dagger sliced along the side of his neck with an instant of icy fire, but then Ean had his hands on the weapon and was forcing the blade away and his captor backwards, deep into the uneven grass. Fighting and broke out behind him.

Ean and his captor wrestled nose to nose for control over a slender slice of steel. The cliff drew precariously close as they struggled for dominion, teeth clenched and muscles locked. Suddenly the soldier stumbled. Ean felt his weight shift and pushed harder into this momentum. The cliff’s edge reared up—

Ean wrenched free. The man shouted a furious curse as he fell.

Breathing fast, Ean braced a hand on one knee and another over his bleeding neck. His heart was racing, while his stomach felt sick. He knew he had to go back and help the others, but death suddenly felt far too real and close.

He wiped a slick and bloody palm on his cloak, claimed his sword and returned to help his mother’s guard. A stranger dressed in his father’s livery reared up out of the melee to challenge him. Ean ducked his swing and thrust his blade through the man’s gut. The traitor slid off the blade as he fell to his knees, and Ean backed away covered in his blood, both repulsed and stunned in the same terrible moment.

Suddenly strong arms wrapped around him and squeezed with a pressure so great that Ean couldn’t keep hold of his weapon. He struggled, but the man’s arms felt an iron vice. He the prince into the long grass once more and threw him down. Ean rolled, but the man

pounced on top of him. In seconds he'd pinned the prince's shoulders beneath his knees and the rest of his body into the sand. It felt like a bear was sitting atop him.

The man stuffed a foul rag into Ean's mouth and then drew a dagger from inside his coat. "Now then. We'll do this the right way." He showed the blade to Ean, though it seemed barely more reflective in the clouded night than the man's dark eyes. Moonlight or no, however, there was no denying the hungry anticipation in his gaze.

He licked his tongue along the blade and grinned wickedly at Ean. "This is Jeshuelle. She's named after my favorite slut—a fighter, she was. Nearly bit my ear off while I was claimin' her. I dug out her heart and filled the dead hole with my seed." He scraped the point of his blade across Ean's chest, making an X over his heart. He gave the prince a grim smile. "That's the only way to be sure, you know—take out their hearts. [Healers](#) can't raise the dead." He chuckled at his own joke and raised his dagger—

A sudden keening stopped him—froze him, actually, while a wild look of recognition slid like a film across his dark gaze.

Ean cringed, ears protesting that terrible cry. It grew in volume, a horrid, uncanny wail that resembled nothing in nature.

What in [Tiern'aval](#) is that sound?

"*Shite,*" hissed the assassin. Abruptly he rolled off the prince and scuttled away on hands and knees, low through the long grass.

Puzzled and dismayed, Ean spat out the rancid cloth and pushed shakily to his feet. His chest ached from bearing the assassin's weight, and his neck was bleeding a fiery wetness into his collar. He pushed one hand over the gash again, unsteadily retrieved his sword from the grass, and stumbled back towards the clearing—

To meet an inexplicable scene. Soldiers from both sides stood immobile as if actors frozen in some grotesque mimicry of battle. None moved, no one spoke.

Had Ean been wiser, had he not just been nearly garroted, suffocated and stabbed, he might've thought to follow the assassin, who seemed to be the only one with any understanding of the threat that approached. Instead, Ean stood rooted, grimly enthralled by that dreadful, ear-splitting cry.

A cloud moved off the moon...and they came.

In the silver light, a cloaked man was approaching through the meadow. Even as Ean watched—and had he not been watching from the very start, he never would've believed his eyes—deep shadows began rising up from the low blanket of night; solidifying, congealing darkness unto themselves until they coalesced into creatures of legend and myth.

It cannot be!

Ean denied the vision his eyes were so clearly witnessing. Half as tall as horses, entirely black with eyes like silver fire, they lifted their paws out of the night-shadows that birthed them and gathered around their cloaked master, red tongues lolling.

Darkhounds.

Had it been daylight, still they would've cast no shadow, for darkhounds *were* shadows—made real.

And then the hooded stranger reached the clearing, and Ean became intimate with a new kind of fear.

He'd wondered why no one yelled in challenge—that is, until he tried to speak out himself and found he couldn't.

The cloaked stranger waved a finger at Eammon and the other of the Queen's soldiers. "You men. Bind each other."

Several hounds trotted forward on soundless paws carrying ropes in their mouths.

The stranger turned his hidden gaze directly to Ean as if he knew him on sight. Pushing back the cowl of his hood, he locked gazes across the distance with the prince, and Ean knew he was dreaming.

"Look at me but once, Prince of Dannym," said the man with the face like mirrored silver, "and I have the power to bind you to my will."

Shade and darkness! The curse took on a sickening new meaning.

While Ean strained to find some desperate understanding, Eammon and the others took the ropes from the darkhounds' mouths and began binding each other. They moved stiffly, and their eyes were wild.

Ean tried to shout, but his voice merely pushed against the confines of his throat. He tried to lift his hand; the effort left his heart pounding and the sound of blood throbbing in his ears. Only his eyes remained free, so he searched the moonlit night for Creighton. But either his blood-brother had fallen, or he stood out of Ean's periphery.

The thunder of running horses disturbed the binding darkness, and Ean's hopes soared—could it be the foretold King's Own Guard who approached? Moments later, two-dozen rough-looking men reined to a halt in a scramble of hooves and steaming mounts.

The Shade spun his head to fix them with a stare. "You're late."

"We had to elude the King's Guard." The man in the lead shifted agitatedly in his saddle and aimed a narrow-eyed look over his shoulder. "They'll be here soon."

"Get the prince on his horse and be off then." The Shade looked once more to Ean. "Go with them, Prince of Dannym."

Ean found his sword back in its sheath and his legs suddenly moving quite against his volition. More frightening still, he couldn't even pretend to fight the Shade's command; his legs simply no longer belonged to him.

As Ean neared the horses, a man came forward with a moon-pale stallion in tow—*his* stallion, Caltar. The prince's fine destrier had made the crossing with the Queen two moons ago, but Caltar seemed so out of place among this strange night that Ean almost didn't recognize him. Yet before he knew it, he had one foot in his stirrup and the other slung across Caltar's back.

Only as he settled into the saddle did he realize that he could now move his upper body freely. Ean looked up, to the constellation of Cephrael's Hand gleaming above him. He held onto some desperate hope that this must be an elaborate deception, that a court [wielder](#) had been solicited to create the illusion of these creatures of myth...or that they were all victims of some magical hypnosis to believe the same appalling vision.

The Queen's men had just finished binding each other when the hounds began their unnatural keening again. This time an unmistakable hunger resonated in the whine.

The Shade's dark gaze flitted across the men who'd been posing as the king's guards—statues now, made of flesh and bone. Their faces were frozen in varied rictuses of disbelief, fury or fear.

The Shade looked back to his hounds. "Spare none."

The darkhounds attacked, and men gave their lives to sate the predatory hunger of insubstantial shadows. Ean couldn't decide which was worse—that the men were being

eaten alive, or that this gory death was given them amid a silence broken only by the snarling of feeding hounds. Even seeing his mother's men safely ignored did nothing to lessen the horror.

The prince swallowed and looked away.

“Creighton Khelspath!” The Shade's clear voice rose above the hounds' ravening din. “Attend me!”

A pang of fear gripped Ean, and he searched for his blood-brother, for he still hadn't seen him. Finally, a form rose up from the long grass bordering the scene. *Creighton*. Ean's blood-brother wore a horrified expression, as if death had already claimed him, and he walked with a staggering gait, clearly in pain.

Ean wanted desperately to call out, but the Shade's working denied him his voice. So he watched helplessly as his blood-brother crossed the distance, miraculously passing safely through the feasting darkhounds.

Fury clenched in Ean's chest. He reached for his sword with sudden desperation—could he not do *anything* to stop this?—but his fingers couldn't close upon the leathered hilt. The sword hung encouragingly at his side, yet it might've been aboard the *Sea Eagle* for all it would aid him.

Creighton halted in front of the Shade. His expression looked void of emotion, as if he knew already he'd been defeated.

The Shade stared at him for a long time. Then he shook his head and slowly drew a sword from beneath his dark cloak. “Kneel,” he commanded, motioning with it.

Creighton dropped to his knees.

The Shade walked behind Creighton and lifted his sword, the steel of which gleamed with a silver-violet sheen. He placed the tip against the back of Creighton's neck, and Ean thought he might lose his mind.

No! No! Noooooooooo!

The Shade seemed to clench his jaw. “It was not meant to be this way with you.” Then he spoke a long chain of words in a language Ean couldn't understand. Throughout, Creighton never looked up, never turned to look at Ean, yet Ean imagined he heard his voice as clear as day in his mind.

Tell Kat that I love her, Ean. Tell her I will always love her. Tell her I'm sor—

The voice ended with the Shade's two-handed thrust.

And Ean found he could scream after all.

“*Reyd.*” The leader of the riders called the Shade's attention toward the road. A distant thunder of running horses warned that the king's soldiers were coming at last. And too late.

The Shade still held Creighton impaled horribly upon his sword, his body slumped like a broken marionette. Ean couldn't bear to look. “Yes, *go*. Go!”

The horsemen peeled away, and Caldar followed without Ean's prodding—which was just as well, for the prince was tumbling amid crushing waves of despair.

Three brothers!

It was all Ean could think of as the world spun and his gut twisted and his chest heaved with desperate grief. *Three brothers lost.*

Two

'The eyes do not see what the mind does not want.'

– A Kandori proverb

To Ean in retrospect, that night's wild ride seemed no more real than had the assassin sitting atop his chest, or the arrival of the Shade, or the keening of the darkhounds; all that felt real was an immense, crushing sense of loss.

He stared through burning grey eyes and murmured the Rite for the Departed as his horse cantered, the wind stung his face and his heart bled. *"There is no afterlife. There is only the Returning..."* The rumble of running horses stole his words, but he suspected the gods heard just the same—if they were listening at all. Certainly he felt Cephrael's eye upon him more keenly than ever; superstitions claimed the [angiel](#) gazed down from those fateful stars called the hand of fate—a misnomer, for if anything, the constellation was Cephrael's oculus into the realm of Man.

Ean forced a tight swallow and continued the rite over the pounding of Caldar's hooves. *"Of gods in the known, there remain only Cephrael and Epiphany, themselves immortal, the only true immortals, who were made in the genesis to watch over this world. All who pass, pass into Annwn, the Now, for the Now is eternal. Cephrael willing, we shall meet them again in the Returning and know them by Epiphany's grace."*

He felt no better for having said the rites for Creighton. Too many times he'd repeated the familiar words...too many brothers lost to treachery and tragedy.

They stopped at dawn to eat and rest the horses. With his broiling anger proof against the chill autumn air, Ean watched the Shade as he moved among his band of renegades, a tall figure dressed all in black, with dark hair smoothed back from a widow's peak and a shining chrome countenance. So reflective was the Shade's mask of silver skin that at times he seemed unnervingly faceless, for his features perfectly reflected of the flora around him.

The renegade leader allowed the prince some few moments off his horse to rest and relieve himself. Afterwards, he slouched against a tree, casting hateful glares at the Shade. Ean admitted a perverse fascination with the creature. He told himself he needed to know his enemy if he hoped to overcome him, but in truth, the Shade drew his curiosity like lightning to the craggy heights.

Dear Epiphany...what has happened that Shades return to our [realm](#)?

Everything the prince knew of Shades came from stories of the [Adept](#) Wars, three centuries ago, during which time the mad [wielder](#) Malachai ap'Kalien had nearly exterminated the Adept race. While those tales spoke enough of Shades to present them as fearful enemies, the same tales claimed that Shades and their new master, Björn van Gelderan, had been banished from the realm at the end of the wars. If that was true, then how was this one standing before him?

More puzzling still: what interest could a Shade have with him?

When first facing the puzzling scene of soldier fighting soldier, Ean had assumed that one of Dannym's powerful families stood behind the treachery, but a Shade could have no interest in gaining a mortal throne.

Ean grunted and shook his head.

The more he thought through the facts, the more disjointed the picture became. First the fighting soldiers: clearly someone had infiltrated the palace guard. This much made sense, for it fit with his first hypothesis of a powerful noble family making a play for the Eagle Throne by eliminating the last heir of the val Lorian line, namely, him.

Second, his capture by the madman with the dagger named Jeshuelle. The assassin had been dressed as a soldier, but he'd seemed quite too enthusiastic about killing Ean and had asked no one's leave to do it. Ean suspected the assassin had come with his own agenda, sent by a different master. That made two factions out for his life.

Third, the Shade who'd spared Queen Errodan's men but commanded his hounds to devour the traitors...

There was just no explaining that.

Ean shuddered. He tried to push the images from his mind, but the more he tried not to think about it, the more vividly he saw Creighton with the Shade's sword impaling his neck.

Fighting a sudden sense of protest and fury so fervent they threatened to choke him, Ean closed his eyes, leaned his head back against the tree and breathed deeply to calm his anger.

It seemed only moments later that someone kicked at his boot. The prince opened his eyes to find the Shade staring down at him.

"Time to ride."

An immediate and visceral hatred pulsed outward from Ean's chest through his entire form. Had the Shade not had him pinned to the tree with his power, he would surely have attacked him. He spat at the creature's face instead.

The phlegm froze in midair. It hung there yellowly, mocking him. Then it evaporated into a puff of mist.

The Shade's polished silver features reflected the clouds and the grass, but his obsidian gaze revealed only unearthly indifference. "It's a foolish man who makes a liege lord of pride." He took Ean by the arm and pulled him to his feet, so they stood nose to nose. Clouds shifted, and Ean saw his own face in the Shade's mirroring features.

The man pressed black-gloved fingers to Ean's chest, which was rising and falling in rapid time with his fury. "I give you this caution once, as a courtesy: do not think to challenge me. You live or die by my grace now, Prince of Dannym." Then he turned on his heel and moved among the ranks of his men with his cloak billowing out behind him. "Move out!"

They traveled all day in the blustery wind, moving rapidly southeast. They were well into the foothills, and the sun had fallen behind a mountainous skyline, when they finally broke ranks to set up camp.

The Shade gave Ean full use of his body for the first time, whereupon one of the men thrust a shovel into the prince's hands. Ean spent the last of the daylight digging a pit deeper than he was tall. He handed up the shovel, expecting them to pull him out, only to learn that he'd been digging his own bed for the night.

Ean shouted after the retreating guards, "You can't keep me like this!"

Their laughter burned like salt in his wounded pride. He kicked the earthen wall and spun angrily around, wishing he'd done a lesser job of the task, or that he'd even half

wondered *why* they'd wanted the damnable hole, so that he might've made provisions for his own escape. He shouted obscenities until his throat was raw, even knowing they only laughed at him.

Eventually the night air cooled the greater part of his anger, and Ean threw himself down to brood. This mistake showed him a truth his grandfather, the Queen's Admiral, had been saying to him for years: anger, fear, grief—these emotions dulled the senses. They could turn a thinking man into a frenzied man, and ultimately, into a dead man. Fear was the worst of all, for with it came hesitation and with that, inaction, failure and death. Too clearly, Ean saw that Creighton's vile murder had immobilized him as effectively as the Shade's mysterious power.

I've been so stupid!

Ean sank elbows on bent knees and pushed his head into his hands. Had he been thinking clearly—had he been *thinking* at all, instead of merely trading vengeful thoughts with the host of lesser emotions that had been keeping him company—he might've thought to try to leave some mark of his passing.

The prince leaned his back against the earthen wall and looked to the heavens...and there, as if mocking him through a break in the overcast, glowed the seven stars of a hateful constellation.

Cephræ's Hand.

"Are you *following* me?" Ean shouted. *Have you some plan for me?*

But if the [angiel](#) Cephræ was listening, he deigned no reply.

It happened several hours before daybreak. Ean was dozing beneath a cold drizzle when something startled him aware—

The form landed atop him with a rough expulsion of breath. Before Ean knew what was happening, the assassin was pressing his knees into Ean's shoulders and had pinned the prince immobile with his muscular legs.

Not again!

Ean kicked and bucked, but he was no more successful at dislodging the man's heavy form this time than he had been at the cliff.

Darkness shadowed the assassin's face, but Ean recognized his voice as he pulled out a blade and murmured, "This is Jeshuelle..."

Thirteen bloody hells!

Ean opened his mouth to yell just in time for the assassin to stuff another foul-smelling cloth into his mouth and cover it with his free hand. "Now, now, princey..." He clicked his tongue and leaned closer. All Ean could see of him was that same hungry look in his dark eyes. "No one's nearby to hear you scream. I took care of that."

Ean fought with whatever parts of his body he could. This lunatic meant to kill him, but he'd be damned if he'd give him an easy go of it.

Smiling sublimely, the assassin raised Jeshuelle and brought the blade forcefully down. Fire exploded in Ean's shoulder. He screamed into the gag and bucked and strained beneath the assassin's clenching legs.

The man pulled Jeshuelle free—yet another agony—and frowned at the dripping blade. "Shite. Must've hit a rib." He raised the dagger again.

Ean thought desperately, *NO!*

The assassin struck—
His knife...*stuck*...

Ean stared. The assassin stared. They both seemed equally startled.

Jeshuelle hovered in the air three inches above Ean's bleeding wound.

The assassin cursed in a foreign tongue and took two hands to the hilt. He bared his teeth and tried to force the blade downward while Ean struggled beneath him, weakening with every painful breath. But no matter how hard the assassin pushed, no matter how he hacked and sawed at the air and cursed, he couldn't make Jeshuelle move any closer to Ean's chest.

"You there!" The wavering glow of torchlight grew in strength from above. Ean went weak with relief. "What's going on?"

"*Shite*." The assassin scrambled off Ean.

The prince turned his head and spat out the foul gag. "*Help me!* I'm—" but faintness stole his breath, and the world spun. He heard the sounds of others climbing down into the pit, of male voices raised in anger and a brief clash of blades, but the best he could do was lie there trying to hold the earth still.

A form appeared over him. "Bloody hells." The guard looked to someone standing above. "Fetch Reyd!"

"No," a second voice answered with authority. "The other one, who arrived tonight."

Strong hands lifted Ean then, and soon he felt a breeze and mist on his face, but these were bare awarenesses. A maelstrom was trying to suck him down, down...past the flames of a torch sensed through closed eyes.

Dizziness kept him company while events spun around him; the throbbing ache in his upper chest somehow mingled with the beating of his heart; the fiery threads of pain and the warm flow of life seemed somehow intertwined. Ean opened his eyes once to a sea of swimming faces, and then he knew only darkness.

Sometime later, the prince swam back toward wakefulness, ascending through twilight waves of disorientation until he hovered just below the surface of consciousness. He tread water there, unable to quite open his eyes to the light; but listening, hearing the conversation taking place over his sleeping form.

"...then it's done," said a man. It might've been the Shade.

"So it would seem," replied another voice, this one deeply male, if melodious and fluid, with a timber that seemed akin to a purr but echoic of a growl. "He is now present on the currents of *elae*, as any Adept would be."

"And so the danger to him grows," said the first, almost regretfully.

"An inevitable consequence. But tell me of the assassin."

"Caught and beheaded."

"Unfortunate. I would've questioned him."

"Had there been any hope of learning who sent him, I would've done so, but he was a [Geishaiwyn Wildling](#)."

"Geishaiwyn," repeated that deep voice, sounding somewhat mollified in the stating.

"That would explain how he knew to flee you the first time."

"Yes, but another will come. They always contract in pairs."

“And so die by the dozens. Geishaiwyn bleed like any other.” Motion followed, as a man’s steps across the carpet of earth. Then: “What of your crew? The Wildling compromised your security. I hope—”

“None were spared,” the Shade answered. “The time for mercy has long passed.”

“Death is a mercy if your master fails,” replied the second man in a voice like the deep night.

Silence followed, lingered. Ean began to wonder if the conversation was over and thought of sinking back into the beckoning depths. The dark waters were inviting of oblivion, and he was beginning to feel the pain again while hovering this close to wakefulness. Then he heard them speaking once more and told the deep waters, *Not yet...*

“Who will teach him now?” asked the first.

“He must teach himself. There is no one left to do it.”

The Shade grunted. “There is *you*. There is Markal—”

“Markal’s time is not yet come.”

A stubborn silence fell, as if in protest. Finally: “Then you are right. There is no one.”

The sounds of motion followed, and what might’ve been the sweeping aside of a flap of heavy canvas, as if a man now stood in the portal.

“When will—?” began the first.

“In three days.” The tent flap fell closed with a rustle of canvas.

This time the silence was enduring. Ean willingly sank back down into oblivion’s embrace.

“Wakey, wakey.”

Someone shook Ean roughly by the shoulder. The prince blinked open his eyes to meet a stranger’s peering down at him. Ean recognized neither the man nor the unfamiliar tent, and he looked around feeling disoriented.

“Shade says you’re well and healed, princey. Time to up an’ at it. Help break camp.”

Ean shook off the fog of his recovering sleep and slowly pushed up on his pallet. Stiffness in his shoulder reminded him of the events that had brought him there. When he pulled off the wrappings to see the wound, he caught his breath.

It can’t be!

Hardly a scar remained where the blade had speared him, only a circle of new pink flesh. He knew Adept Healers had the talent to speed a man’s body in its efforts to repair itself, but either he’d been asleep for a number of days, or a very powerful Healer had worked her craft upon him.

“Hurry yerself, now.” The man tossed Ean a tunic and ducked out of the tent.

Ean donned the shirt slowly, his mind awhirl. Knowing the Shade had taken steps to heal him meant the man wanted him alive. It appeared they were letting him move freely about now, and if they really didn’t mean to kill him, perhaps he still stood a chance of escape.

Throughout the morning as he helped break camp, Ean looked for any opportunity that might afford a chance of escape. They let him ready his own horse for travel, and he noticed his sword strapped among his saddlebags. The beginnings of a plan came into easy focus.

When no one was watching, Ean slid the weapon from his saddle and hid it instead behind a fallen tree demarking the edge of the campsite. Not much later, he saw the opening he'd been hoping for. Most of the men were busy on the far side of the camp. Only two remained nearby, and they were just beginning to disassemble the Shade's tent. The man himself came out and headed towards where Ean was sitting on the fallen tree.

The prince let his arm stray behind him and took hold of his sword. Feeling the leather-wrapped hilt and its familiar heft gave Ean a renewed sense of purpose. This creature had murdered his best friend. He *deserved* to die.

Perhaps Ean would've lived with regret over his dishonorable intent—indeed, later he would only wonder if the Shade hadn't done him a service—but in that moment, retribution narrowed his gaze to a single focus.

Ean let the Shade pass by, and then with his eyes fastened on the man's back, he rose and followed. Closing the distance silently, Ean brought up his sword before him, aiming for the man's spine—

Suddenly the Shade stood facing him only inches away.

Ean reared back in alarm.

The Shade grabbed Ean's sword by the blade and yanked Ean's body close to his own. "*Foolish,*" he hissed, nose to nose with the startled prince.

Ean felt a chill spreading through his fingers, and he looked to his sword to find a silver-violet flame licking its surface. He dropped the blade with a violent oath, instinctively recoiling from the ill-conceived power.

The Shade flipped the weapon and snatched the hilt out of the air. In the same instant, he lunged at the prince.

Ean shouted and leapt back. In a terrifying moment where time seemed to slow, the blade came spearing toward his chest—

And exploded in a cloud of ash.

Choking dust flooded into Ean's nostrils and burned his throat. He coughed and gagged and doubled over to push hands on his knees, sucking in painful, chalky breaths—all to the sound of the Shade's cold laughter.

Straightening slowly, the prince palmed soot from his eyes and spat ash from his mouth. "May Belloth claim you thirteen hells," he rasped. He finally understood how desperate his situation was—and he hated the creature all the more for it.

But his words oddly brought the Shade to ire. He snatched an unresisting Ean by his tunic and pulled him close again. "What know you of hell, Prince of Dannym?" His breath was cold and strangely odorless, like a dry arctic wind. Obsidian eyes bored into val Lorian grey, and Ean felt fear—the *Shade's* fear—seeping into him through their contact. The hair started rising on the back of his neck.

"I know Hell, for I have died there. *Hell* is a blessing compared to what awaits us all if he fails. Remember you that, Prince of Dannym."

He shoved Ean away to emphasize this last, and then, inexplicably, punched him.

The prince spun with the impact and hit the earth in a hard expulsion of breath. Silver stars marked his blackening vision, while the warm taste of blood filled his mouth—a fitting complement to the bitter ash that still clung there.

As if in answer to the angry query in Ean's glare, the Shade said coldly, "For respecting so little, those who saved you." He pitched Ean's useless sword hilt at his feet, turned his back on the prince, and left him there.

Three

‘Failure is the province of the craven and the dead.’

— The Vestal Björn van Gelderan to one of his generals
during the Sunset Battle of Gimlalai, circa 597aV

Trell’s horse snorted and shifted beneath him as a gust of hot wind surged up from the desert valley, flattening the sparse grass that grew like wisps of hair between jagged, sun-scorched rocks. The wind brought with it the smell of heat, baked earth and sand, and a gnawing apprehension as unwelcome as it was strange.

Trell turned in the saddle and focused grey eyes on the ridge at his back. The view reminded him of another ridge, this one lording over the rushing, charcoal waters of the River Cry; a lonesome ridge in the Kutsamak Range, where he and Graeme, his second-in-command, had held off the entire Veneisean army with little more than fifty men. That had been two moons ago. Now Graeme was dead, the Akkadian forces occupied Raku Oasis, and Trell was a celebrated hero.

Gentling his stallion with a stroke on the neck, Trell looked back to the view of the desert valley and the creatures flying above its vast sea of dunes—sleek, golden creatures with hides like molten bronze. He squinted at them beneath the duck-billed brim of a dun cap, which was making a valiant attempt to shade his eyes from the sun. But this was the M’Nador desert; the sands were as bright as the day, the blue sky was as parched as the land, and an ever-present glare made a man’s eyes tired before their time.

If only you were here to see this, Graeme...

Trell squinted at the gilded beasts soaring high above the sand. They flew with sublime grace; their enormous shadows floated across the dunes in unworldly silence. He stood in awe at the breadth of their wingspan, at the golden-fire hue of their hides and the way their scales glinted in the long rays of the afternoon, sparkling so brightly as to leave spots before his eyes.

And are Nadori soldiers standing upon the walls of Taj al’Jahanna, on the far side of the Sand Sea, watching you also? Surely my enemies could be no less entranced than I.

Knowing the Nadoriin, however, they would be working feverishly to find a means of destroying the creatures, rather than appreciating them for their mystique and purity.

Sundragons.

They’d been summoned back from the icy corners of the realm by the Emir’s Mage, summoned to do his bidding and eager to please—if the stories were true—in exchange for their reprieve.

“Ghastly things aren’t they?” a familiar voice commented from behind.

Trell glanced over his shoulder to find his friend Ware reining in his stallion. A tall Agasi, Ware lost no height sitting the saddle of his lean desert horse. He was darkly bearded and generally hairy, but his blue eyes displayed an intelligence Trell had found common in men of the Empire; the Agasi were an educated people, be them prince, blacksmith or sell sword.

Looking past Ware, Trell noted that the rest of his men, a dozen Converted in all, had descended the ridge and were dismounting now. Soon it would be time.

“They’re beautiful.” Trell turned back to the distant dragons wearing a look of appreciation on his sharp-featured face. “I wish Graeme could’ve seen them.”

Ware grunted skeptically. “I don’t know.” He flicked at a horsefly with his reins. “They’re fierce creatures. Sheik Am’aal was nearly bitten by one of the things when he got too close to its tail. The creature snapped its head around with the speed of a striking viper, and if it weren’t for the Sheik’s agility at ducking—no doubt from all those arrows he’s made a habit of avoiding—he’d have made the beast a tasty snack.”

“Reasons not to get too curious, I suppose.” Trell had never cared for Sheik Am’aal. The man was a consummate philanderer; all those arrows he’d avoided tended to be from well and rightly-offended husbands. “A fierce beauty then,” he conceded, “but beauty nonetheless.”

Ware broke into a crooked grin, curiosity mixed with amusement. “What are you doing among us lowbreeds, Trell of the Tides? You ought to be composing poetry in a white tower somewhere, you and your ‘beauty’ this and ‘glorious’ that and general high-minded musings—oh, don’t think I’m criticizing you.” He grinned at Trell’s faintly indignant look. “Not a one of us would challenge your tactical brains, but you seem to me a learned man, a man of philosophy, not one of blunt violence and greed like so many of these Converted,” and he jerked his head toward the company of expatriate mercenaries behind him.

Hearing this, said men offered a host of scatological culinary recommendations, to which Ware returned his ideas of what they could do with their suggestions. It was a friendly exchange.

Trell allowed himself a slight smile. *I do, do I?*

All of his men knew that he remembered nothing of his past prior to awaking in the Emir’s palace five years ago, and friends and acquaintances alike were often sharing their opinions of his origins, sometimes in jest, sometimes in sincerity. Trell didn’t mind, either way. On a rare occasion, someone made a comment that almost triggered a memory, and he lived for those almost moments—yearned for them, in fact.

Ware was watching him with a keen look in his blue eyes, as if Trell was far more intriguing than Sundragons. “You could’ve been a nobleman’s son sent from Tregarion or Calgaryn to study abroad, but tragedy struck and you wound up in the Akkad.”

Trell smiled ruefully. “Northern cities, those two. But am I from one of those kingdoms?” He turned to Ware with a shadow of the torment he often felt hinting in his grey eyes. “The Emir likes to say I floated in from the Fire Sea, a gift from the Wind God.” He gave Ware a dubious look. “Even if it’s true, the Fire Sea borders many kingdoms. I’ve the same dark hair and coloring as that Barian Stormborn of the Forsaken Lands, and the height and features of those merchants you and I dealt with in Kroth. Some say I even have the look of your own blood: Agasi—descended of the elvenkind.”

“Just so,” Ware admitted with his eyes pinned on his younger friend. “You could be any of these, Trell of the Tides.”

The Emir’s men had called him Man of the Tides when he’d first arrived in Duan’ Bai, insensible with fever and at death’s door. When he woke from the fever that had nearly claimed his life, he remembered only his given name. They’d added Trell to the moniker then to humor him.

“But I think you’re right—about the northern kingdoms, that is.” Trell let out a slow exhale. “I do as the Emir asks of me, but while I’ve never lost sleep over battling Nadori infidels, some part of me cringes at fighting the men of Dannym or Veneisea...as if I know I’m slaughtering my own blood.”

As he spoke, Trell’s hand found its way to the sword at his hip, a sleek blade with a silver hilt and sapphire pommel stone—a brilliant gem whose clarity and vibrant color made even the Bemothi traders envious. The sword was his only possession, his only connection to the life he’d once led, and though it served as merely another mystery, Trell considered himself blessed to have it.

High above the Sand Sea, the six dragons had completed their midair rendezvous—or whatever the purpose of their gathering—and were breaking away into pairs again. They flew north, west, south, but not east, for there the Nadori army waited on the far side of the vast sea of dunes.

The war had gotten bloodier in the past fortnight, though the enemy dared not try to retake Raku again—not after the slaughter on the Khalim Plains. Trell had ridden through that wasteland of death, and he shuddered at the memory. Now the Emir’s forces were deployed along the Sand Sea escarpment, and so long as the Veneisean army remained trapped across the River Cry—which duty had been assigned to Trell’s company of Converted until their unexpected reprieve two days past—then the Emir’s troops had only to concern themselves with their eastern flank.

“Do you think we’ll win?” he asked Ware without removing his eyes from the dispersing dragons.

The Agasi shrugged and wiped an arm across his sweaty brow. “Who can say? I’m not even certain what you’d call a victory. The Akkad and M’Nador share more than a coveted border. Half the natives are fighting their cousins or nephews or uncles. How do the Basi put it? ‘As long as the land has been blistered, the Kutsamak has played host to war.’ Tis more apt to call these the haunted mountains—Raine’s truth, we’re like to be standing on the dust of the dead even now.”

A whistle of alert from one of the men called Trell’s attention back to the ridge, where a turbaned Basi was scampering down the steep incline. Trell recognized the holy man Istalar, who would be their guide through the shrine. “The time comes,” someone commented, referencing Istalar’s return from watching the position of the sun.

Trell and Ware exchanged a look. Then as one, they dismounted. Trell grabbed his satchel with his few possessions, slung the strap diagonally across his chest, and turned towards the jutting cliffs in front of them. He frowned, feeling unsettled.

More disturbing than the scent of magic that permeated the air those days—raising the hackles of any self-respecting soldier—was the feel of the place they were about to go. Trell had sworn no oaths to the Emir’s desert gods—he wasn’t Converted—but he was the first to admit that something sentient resided in the shrines of the Kutsamak.

The holy man came to a dusty halt in front of them. An elder member of the Emir’s own tribe, he wore a silver and black-striped turban, one fold of which was pulled across his nose and mouth. This he removed to speak, revealing a heavy grey beard. “It is time, *A’dal*,” he reported to Trell, using the desert word for leader. “We are allowed to enter now to receive a blessing on your quest.”

Trell nodded wordlessly.

The holy man led away, skirting the ridge toward the sheer cliff at its end. Trell glanced to left and right and then followed, but he couldn't help feeling exposed on the open mountainside, even dressed in his earth-hued tunic and britches that blended so well with the sand...even with the Mage's dragons patrolling the sky.

A shadow befell them as they walked, and Trell looked up as a pair of Sundragons flew between them and the sun.

"Never thought I'd be grateful for those beasts," Ware muttered.

Trell matched his gaze, peering in his intense way. "I still wish Graeme could've seen them."

"Graeme was a good lad, true enough, and I know the two of you were close, but he wouldn't have appreciated these creatures as you do, Trell." The dragons moved on and the sun returned, and Ware settled Trell a discerning look. "Graeme was not your equal, my friend. Few men are."

Trell barked a laugh. "Save your honeyed words for the ladies."

Ware made to respond but seemed to change his mind and peered at him curiously instead. "What's going on in that head of yours today? You're even more aloof than usual."

Trell shot him a sideways look. "I am never aloof."

Ware held his gaze. "You know what I mean."

Trell turned profile again and frowned, because he did know what the other man meant. Ware wasn't the only one who often criticized Trell for spending more time in his head than was prudent; even in battle he maintained a sort of pensive composure, an attribute all of his men had commented upon.

Dare I tell him? Raine's truth, I'm desperate to talk to someone.

But could a man like Ware understand the constant torment of not knowing one's own memory? Could he understand the fear Trell harbored over his unknown past, or the feelings of frustration and duty that drove him to embark on his current course? To his own shame, Trell didn't trust that Ware could. Instead of answering, he said, "I heard you might be going on mission for the Emir's Mage."

"Aye, that's so." Ware's gaze spoke plainly of his curiosity—it would take a dimwit indeed not to wonder what sort of fell assignment Trell had been given that it required a god's blessing before starting upon it. "I think everyone's grateful to be away from the Cry." Ware turned in profile to frown at Istalar's back. "Some of these younger fools can't believe anyone could tire of battle and glory, but since the Khalim Plains..." He glanced out across the Sand Sea and his gaze darkened, perhaps with the memory of what had transpired that night on the plains, among the maze of dunes.

"Well...I've seen enough of death for a while, and the Mage is rumored to have many errands he needs run—chancy quests, they say, ripe with danger." He brightened and winked at Trell. "Sounds just like my kind of entertainment."

"No doubt." Yet Trell's eyes didn't quite match his smile.

"I dunno..." Ware was acting as if he felt compelled to explain himself. "After what the Emir's Mage did for our forces on the Khalim Plains, well...men are lining up to serve him. I guess I'm one of them."

Trell arched brows. But just as quickly his gaze narrowed again. "Lining up? I hadn't heard that."

Ware scratched at his beard and regarded Trell shrewdly. “They say when the Mage speaks, even the Emir listens.”

Trell pulled off his cap and pushed a hand through his dark hair, dislodging wavy locks that seemed perpetually tousled despite having been beneath a hat all day.

The Emir’s Mage...

The man had arrived at the front six moons ago, seeming little more than the Emir’s shadow at the time; a quiet stranger with a genteel manner and a compelling gaze. Six moons... and now the Emir fell silent at the Mage’s command?

The man’s position upon the Emir’s trusted council unsettled Trell. Since the Mage’s arrival, Trell had found the Emir too often cloistered behind locked doors—and himself excluded from his usual confidence.

Clenching his cap in his fist, Trell turned to look full at Ware. “Have you ever met the Mage?”

“Not yet. You?”

Trell frowned. “Briefly, once.”

“And you’re suspicious,” Ware declared. Then he goaded, “You’re sure he means to take over the world and is using the Emir to achieve his own nefarious ends.”

Trell opened his mouth to protest, but when he caught the teasing glint in Ware’s eyes, he assumed a resigned look instead. “You know I’m suspicious of everyone.”

“That’s just about the only thing you have in common with the rest of these degenerates, Trell of the Tides.” Ware clapped him on the shoulder. “No one has to teach a soldier to be suspicious of magic, or of those that work it.”

They were coming to the end of the trail where bare rock face edged a deep ravine. Even as Trell was assessing the high mountain cliff, a raucous cry split the air, and then a second followed in answer. A searing wind buffeted the line of men as the same pair of Sundragons that had passed earlier swooped down from the sky. They flew low and then alighted atop the cliff. The beasts folded their massive wings, wrapped serpentine tails possessively around the rocks, and peered down at the men with predatory stares.

“Look, Trell” Ware’s tone held dry humor as he squinted at the creatures. “Even the Sundragons have come to honor you. You truly are the hero.”

Trell gave him a withering look.

But it did appear as though the dragons had come to say their farewells.

Farewell. It seemed a wondrous word. Trell was still trying to absorb the truth himself: that he was leaving the Emir’s service after so many years; leaving at the Emir’s own insistence and with his blessing; leaving to live a future that might help him uncover his past. And leaving in the *middle* of a war... that was the most unbelievable part of all.

Trell hadn’t been able to bring himself to tell his men, though he knew they would support him, even congratulate him; yet he felt a traitor for abandoning them. That he did so at the Emir’s command lessened none of his guilt—war was war, and the Akkad needed every capable hand.

But the Emir has the Mage to help him now... Trell thought more bitterly than he would’ve liked, his own memory of that night on the Khalim Plains springing to mind. *What need has the Emir of a nameless man with a few good tactics when the Mage can turn entire armies to dust?*

Yet for all his resentment at being excluded of late, Trell wanted to believe what the Emir had explained to him—he wanted to trust that the war was nearing an end.

They were walking beneath the dragons' shadows, with the beasts veritably towering over them, golden eyes staring down with fierce intensity, when the holy man Istalar passed a rocky outcropping, turned, and abruptly disappeared into the mountainside.

Only when one stood directly before the cave could the entrance be seen—a jagged grey-black parting just wide enough for a man to pass between. Trell followed next, then Ware and the rest, save two who held the watch outside.

Violet glass globes set in carved niches illuminated the cave with reddish-plum light. How the candles stayed perpetually lit quite eluded Trell's understanding, but this was a truth in all the sacred shrines. As he stood for a moment letting his eyes adjust to the dim light, it occurred to him that this might be the last time he entered one of the sacred places, and the idea held both relief and unexpected sadness for him.

Globe after globe marked the way deep into the mountainside, and Istalar led with quiet resolve. Already Trell noticed a difference in the air. The feeling was akin to walking into a den where a beast lay in wait. Something *dwelled* there, some...*entity*.

Trell didn't know what gods he believed in, but he didn't doubt the existence of a force larger than himself, and it was just such a force that inhabited those hallowed hills. Indeed, it was this very force to which the Emir had sent Trell in order to gain divine favor on his journey.

Trell's eyes were well adjusted by the time the narrow, descending passage opened onto a cavern. Trell stopped short.

A roaring waterfall fell from the shadowed ceiling, casting a spray in a shimmering veil of color and light. An iridescent spirit seemed to dance within the watery shaft, shifting its hues with every movement. The effect was beautiful and yet so obviously arcane that Trell shook off the ghost of a shudder.

Already down the set of stone steps carved into the curving wall, Istalar walked to the pool's edge and knelt down. Trell waited apart from the rest of his men while Istalar made an offering prayer. Mist collected on Trell's clothes, his hat, his cheeks. He pulled out a kerchief and wiped his eyes and scanned the faces of the others. They weren't so bothered as he—mostly they looked bored—but they wouldn't be making an offering to the god of this place, as he would, and they weren't hoping to receive a divine blessing.

As he watched Istalar kneeling at the water's edge, Trell felt a surge of apprehension and wondered what sort of response he was likely to get from the god of the shrine—him, who wasn't even Converted. He would've been all too happy to go on his way without visiting the shrine at all, but the Emir Zafir bin Safwan al'Abdul-Basir was a religious man, and while he might have a foreign Mage working for him, he certainly didn't want his kingdom's gods working against him. Ritual offerings were necessary any time one wanted a blessing, and the Emir wanted a blessing for Trell, his near-adopted son.

Istalar finished his prayer and beckoned to Trell.

Feeling as nervous as he had that day five years ago when he'd first been presented to the Emir, Trell walked to the water's edge and knelt on the wet stone beside Istalar.

"Now," whispered the holy man, "you must make your offering and your prayer." Trell must've looked miserable, for Istalar gave him an encouraging smile. "Fear thee not, Trell of the Tides; the god of this shrine is benevolent towards you."

Trell turned to him wanting more than anything to know how he could be so certain. "Istalar...I don't know the right words to say."

The holy man's steady gaze seemed the embodiment of faith. "The gods know our hearts, Trel of the Tides. Words mean nothing to them. It is our souls they speak with. Open your heart in prayer. They will answer you." With that, he rose and took seventeen backwards steps away from the water—one in honor of each of the desert Gods—before straightening.

Trell pressed his lips together and looked back to the luminous pool of liquid light. He reached into his satchel and retrieved a dagger. It had once belonged to Graeme and was thereby special to him. His only other possession of value was his sword, and it was too precious to part with, even for a god's blessing. He hoped the dagger would suffice.

Catching his bottom lip between his teeth and feeling ridiculous, Trel let the dagger slide from his fingers into the water. The light swallowed it.

Now what? He had no idea how to pray.

'Open your heart' Istalar had said.

Trell drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes.

His heart held painful things: feelings of loss and the frustration of years of not even knowing his own heritage. His heart held mixed emotions: it seemed a lifetime's dream to finally have hope of learning the truth of his past, and yet that same dream stirred such fear in him. What if he discovered that he wasn't the man he thought he was? What if in his prior life he'd been a bastard, a thief...a coward?

His heart held grief...and guilt.

Trell was trying to think of what else his heart held when he heard someone whisper. He wiped the accumulated mist from his eyes and turned a glance over his shoulder, but his men stood far away, involved in their own affairs.

Feeling faintly unsettled, Trel turned back to the water and closed his eyes. At once he heard again that whisper. He strained to understand its words, yet the harder he tried to listen, the more the words eluded him.

Frustrated, he dutifully returned to pondering the torments of his heart instead, though it pained him to dwell on them. Only then, as he surrendered to the powerful pain of his deepest feelings, did the ethereal voice speak and his heart receive its message. Thusly do the gods impart their blessings: spirit to spirit, like the faintest breath of wind...

Follow the water, Trel of the Tides.

Trell sprouted gooseflesh from head to toe.

An acute ache sprouted in his chest, and his throat constricted—it felt as if his whole body was suddenly trying to keep his soul from escaping—and he *knew* with certainty that not only had a goddess spoken to him, but that his soul had resonated with Her blessing.

Follow the water, Trel of the Tides.

For the space of that moment, Trel heard no sound except Her voice, which was no sound at all, yet it encapsulated the resonance of spirit speaking to spirit.

Then the roaring waterfall was accosting his ears again; likewise the low hum of male voices engaged in their usual vulgar commentary.

Overcome by the experience, Trel rose and backed away from the water in the same manner as Istalar.

The holy man was waiting for him seventeen steps away. Trel straightened and turned to face him. He felt both fulfilled and strangely hollow, as if his soul still yearned after a touch—a presence—that had vanished beyond reach.

Istalar smiled crookedly through broken teeth, yet his was a genuine smile. Trell had always liked him. “What did Naiadithine tell you?”

Trell hadn’t known this was her shrine, but he should’ve guessed from the outset. Naiadithine, Lady of the Rivers, had claimed Graeme for her own when he fell into the River Cry, never to resurface. It only followed that the Emir would send Trell to the water goddess for a blessing on his quest.

“I think...I think she told me...” he pulled off his cap again and pushed a wet hand through his hair. “She told me to...follow the water.”

Istalar nodded sagely. “Follow the water, Trell of the Tides,” the holy man echoed.

Trell gave him an uneasy look. Another chill scurried down his spine. “Yes,” he whispered, feeling far too close to arcane dealings for any sort of comfort. “*That* exactly.”

Istalar took Trell by the arm and pulled him further away from the water and the men. “The Emir looks upon you as a son,” he said in a low voice, “and he would be bereaved should harm befall you. Before you journey into the West, there is something he wants you to understand.”

Trell didn’t like the sound of that. “Which is?”

“You leave a place of safety for one of danger.”

Trell arched a brow. “A war is a place of safety?”

“No, Trell of the Tides, the Mage’s shadow is a place of safety, and you’re soon to leave it. You must learn to use your three eyes.”

“Three eyes?” Trell repeated.

“The eye of your mind—your intelligence; the eye of your heart—your conscience; and the eye of your soul—your instinct. These are your three eyes. You must use them all, and *trust* them all. This *above* all.”

Trell nodded. “Very well. My three eyes. Is that all I must know?”

“No.” Istalar pulled on his greying beard, smearing the mist that had accumulated in glittering droplets. His brown eyes looked troubled. “You must know that the realm is not at rest. Far beyond this war that plagues our people, darkness lurks where light once resided, and there are unexplained—”

A terrible rumbling erupted, drowning out his following words.

Trell exchanged an uneasy look with the holy man, and then the earth shook with a jarring force that sent water careening out of the pool. Trell and Istalar both reached for each other.

“*Daw*, what was that?” Trell cast a fast glance around.

Shouts echoed from the higher cave just as another spasm shuddered through the cavern. Trell stumbled into the wall and exhaled a curse.

“We’re under attack!” A man shouted from the top of the staircase—Trell couldn’t see who it was, though it sounded like one of the men he’d left guarding the cave entrance. The sentry’s voice was still echoing a thousand-fold *ack-ack-ack*’s when a grinding thunder assaulted their ears, and a veritable wall of stones tumbled down, forcing those on the cavern floor to dodge and roll.

“Radov’s wielders are attacking the Sundragons!” the sentry shouted. “The cavern is *collapsi*—”

Just then, the floor seemed to tip up and crash down into place again with an angry, jarring shudder. Trell’s feet were simply no longer beneath him. The next thing he knew,

his skull met the unyielding rock and searing pain blinded him. He heard it inside when he hit, a hard clap that was a combination of blunt thud and fiery pain, but he was only vaguely aware of the cry that left his lips, or of the chill water that soaked his garments in bursts as waves careened out of the pool.

Some small part of his mind recognized moans and shouted prayers amid the crashing of stone. Then he felt himself being roughly shaken, and he strained to focus.

Istalar was crouched beside him. The holy man's face was smeared with blood streaming from a nasty gash above one eye. He was speaking, but Trell couldn't hear him.

"What?" Trell tried to listen through the ringing in his ears. "*What?*"

The rumble in the cavern was deafening, but somehow Istalar pitched his voice above its din. "You must hurry!"

Trell tried to sit up, but no sooner had he done so than vertigo overcame him and his head started pounding with a vengeance. He couldn't tell if it was blood or water that soaked his hair—probably both.

Istalar helped him to stand, but Trell had hardly gained his feet before his knees buckled. The holy man caught him around his chest and pushed him up against the wall. "Go!" he urged. "Run *now*. Before it's too late for you!"

What was the man saying? Trell couldn't tell who was talking, couldn't remember talking...was anyone talking? *Gods and devils* his head was a pulsating agony! Red fog clouded his vision...

Men were scrambling to escape. Water poured from the pool, sloshed around Trell's ankles, and then rushed along into the darkness to find its own way out. There were bodies unmoving on the cavern floor, dark forms half-covered in luminous water. Did the god live in the water? Was the water the god? What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he think clearly? And what was the holy man doing?

Istalar had undone his turban and was wrapping the cloth around Trell's head. Trell pushed feebly at the holy man's hand. "No...not...Converted."

This can't be right.

Somehow that single thought pierced through the fog of pain. Clarity returned in a lucid moment. *Please, goddess, I cannot die before I know who I am. Where do the nameless souls go?*

Istalar tied off Trell's makeshift bandage and ripped away the remaining cloth. Then he took Trell by both shoulders and captured his dizzied eyes with his own. "Follow the water, Trell of the Tides!"

Trell wiped his eyes again. "Follow the water..."

The holy man pointed toward the deeper cavern. "Follow the water!"

Trell blinked and gazed in the direction Istalar was pointing. Then he lifted a hand the other way. "No, *there*—"

"There is no escape that way!" Istalar half-pushed, half-dragged Trell towards the deeper caves. "The entrance is gone!"

Trell looked over his shoulder and saw that indeed, the steps had collapsed. They were trapped.

This can't be right!

Istalar maneuvered him out of the main cavern into one of the caves, which glowed with the sacred water running through it, its low, uneven ceiling just barely out of Trell's reach.

The mountain growled again, petulant and fierce. Tiny stones pelted Trell's head and shoulders. Istalar looked up with a sharp intake of breath, and then he pushed Trell forcefully and yelled something Trell couldn't make out because of the roaring in the cavern—or perhaps it was the roaring in his ears; it was hard to separate the two.

Trell splashed face-down in the water, just barely escaping the tumble of rock that sealed off any retreat.

He got slowly to his feet, dripping and shaking. He stood for a moment staring at the fall of rock while battling a surge of fury. Had the jumble of stones claimed Istalar? He felt a choking pressure in his chest at the thought.

Trell said a soldier's prayer for Istalar—the only one he knew—and then stood frozen by a terrible thought: *is this happening because of me? Did I anger Naiadithine with that pathetic excuse of an offering?*

Perhaps as a result of his narrow escape from the rock fall that had surely claimed Istalar, Trell felt a surge of clarity and realized he was wasting precious time. The rock had sealed off his escape, but not the water's. It poured through the cracks between the stones as if running one last race.

Follow the water, Trell of the Tides.

The words seemed suddenly prophetic. Trell looked down at the water swirling around his ankles, luminous and pale. There *was* something about it...something that tugged at his memory even as the icy current tugged at his heels.

Come...follow...it seemed to say.

Trell went.

He chased the current, though his head pounded painfully with every splash. The water's luminous light cast reflective shadows on the near walls but was never bright enough to reveal the cavern's ceiling. Trell let the water guide him, and though its fingers were icy and swift, and darkness pressed as heavily upon his shoulders as it did upon his consciousness, Trell was determined not to be afraid. Fear was the worst evil ever to plague a man, for with it came hesitation and with that, inaction, failure, death.

Follow the water, Trell of the Tides.

Perhaps it was the clap to his head that had conjured such blind trust, or perhaps it was the recognition that he had little to lose save his life, and what had that been to him until now? Existence, perhaps, but a parched one.

He remembered neither parents nor siblings, if he had any. He could share no childhood memories, nor boast of that one doe-eyed girl who'd stolen his heart even as he'd stolen her virginity. He couldn't remember his mother's smile, or his father's wisdom—assuming he was even a legitimate son.

And yet his was a life Istalar had sacrificed his own to save.

So as he raced along, wet and shivering in the strange cavern of water-light, Trell knew he owed Istalar—and Graeme, and the Emir above all—at least a brave attempt to live, to escape if he possibly could. All the while, the divine water communed with his spirit.

...Follow the water, Trell of the Tides...

He wandered in the chill caverns for two long hours. Time enough for his feet to grow numb, to trade sweat for shivering. All thought was soon reduced to sheer determination. His teeth were a chattering echo by the time he found himself wading deeper and deeper into a stream that eventually pooled to his waist. The current grew strong as it tugged him toward the dark, wet rock that was the cave's—and his own, he suspected—end. The water-light revealed the ceiling hovering close enough to know there was no escape above and none behind.

He tried not to despair, but he couldn't help wondering if all was lost.

Yet as he stared at the swirling water, reason prevailed. *All this water, but it doesn't rise to claim me. And the current is getting stronger...*

There had to be an opening somewhere.

Trell ripped off Istalar's bandage and labored out of his boots. He checked to ensure his sword was secure in its scabbard and the scabbard firmly around his waist—for life without his precious sword would be worse than nothing. Then he took three quick, deep breaths and dove beneath the pool of liquid light.

Icy fingers stabbed him, vindictive in their insistence that he gasp from the cold, but he held his breath with steadfast defiance, opened his eyes, and let the current carry him, only trusting that Naiadithine wouldn't betray him in his leap of faith.

The current pulled him quickly into a narrow opening, a funnel for the water, barely wide enough to swim through.

Daw! It was agony to hold his breath for so long. He forced his arms to stroke and his legs to kick, despite the icy needles stabbing his flesh. If the passage thinned any more, he'd be caught there, trapped deep inside the mountain's guts, left to drown.

Breathe! his body shouted.

Breathe! his lungs protested, burning in his chest.

Trell felt the fingers of panic gripping him.

Then, in a moment of surprising clarity, he realized he'd experienced this before, this dreadful desperation that threatened to overpower all mental control. Somewhere, at some point in time...he'd almost drowned.

A sudden peace flooded him. It felt like a divine gift, for this was his *own* memory. Trell found a renewed determination to keep swimming, and seconds later, he surged into the open with a choking gasp that echoed off a low ceiling.

The current carried him swiftly along. Slowly, the blackness cleared from his vision and the fire left his lungs, and he realized he was in an underground river. There was water-light enough to see the wide stream and the smooth, wet stone of the low ceiling, but it was a faint light, moon-pale, as though Naiadithine had done her part and was leaving him to find his own way now.

His muscles were cramping, his teeth chattering, his head throbbing, and his body felt numb and heavy; yet for the first time in nearly half a decade, Trell was grateful to be alive. He grinned stupidly as the river carried him, oblivious for the moment of any pain or danger—for *he had remembered!* Not a dreamed memory, but his own true recollection of life before the Emir's palace.

A roaring began that quickly grew in volume, and suddenly Trell was plummeting downward in darkness, falling...falling...

He felt himself rushing through air and sucked in a deep breath. Then followed a harsh plunge into depths unknown, being caught by the current again and pulled along, only to strike against something—caught painfully on his arm, what was it?

He held on.

The greedy current tried to pull him further downstream, but he hooked his arm around the line—was it a line? He felt along it with numb fingers. *No. A chain.* Trell wrapped both arms around the chain and swam up along its length. He fought the blackness piercing his thoughts and kicked as hard as he could.

Finally the current died, and he recognized still water that gradually grew warmer. He let go of the chain and swam with hands of ice and lungs of fire until he burst free into darkness. He drew in his breath with a shuddering gasp that echoed back at him from close wall. Above, he caught the barest glimpse of starry sky.

I'm in a well.

There was the chain attached to its post. No doubt he'd unwound it all trying to pull himself up. He reached for it again, hoping to use it for a rope, but his body was trembling so violently that he couldn't even make his fingers close around the metal. The well's rim was too high above, and the walls were too slick to climb.

With the fall of adrenaline, fatigue and hours in the cold set in to claim their due. Trell yelled for help, but he heard only the echo of a stranger's voice, meek and trembling like an ewe's pitiful bleat. He called out several more times nonetheless, and then splashed his arms in the water until they were too heavy to lift.

But no one came.

Because he couldn't hold the chain, Trell looped one forearm within it as best he could, and then he rested his wet head against the cold metal while his teeth chattered and his body trembled. He knew it was important to stay awake, but it was only heartbeats before his eyelids won their battle to close.

As he sank into darkness, he heard again Naiadithine's whisper...

Follow the water, Trell of the Tides.

Four

‘The mysteries of a woman’s heart cannot be measured. They are as the expanse of time and space: endless and unknowable.’

– The Espial Franco Rohre, while serving as a minstrel in the Veneisean court

“**What do** you mean their trail just vanished?” His Royal Majesty Gydryn val Lorian, King of Dannym, stared uncomprehendingly at the soldier before him. “Oh, get up—*get up*.” The king waved irritably at the man, who’d fallen to his knees with remorse.

Standing across the room, Queen Errodan val Lorian pressed her back stiffly against the velvet-paneled wall and thrummed her fingers on her crossed arms in an effort to disperse the storm of emotion threatening her logical thought. The long wall of glass-paned doors behind her husband’s desk revealed a paling of the leaden sky. She’d expected to have her son with her when dawn came. Instead, she stood alone.

Alone in a roomful of strangers.

The queen drew in a slow breath to still her nerves. Once she would’ve known each man assembled there by more than mere name and rank, so trusted she’d been with her husband’s confidence. Now Errodan stood as an outsider, welcomed in this room on this evening by the king’s grace alone.

They’d called her after midnight with the news of Ean’s disappearance, and she’d arrived in Gydryn’s private chambers just as the first man in what was to become a long succession of soldiers was making his report.

Hearing all was the king’s [truthreader](#), Vitriam o’Reith, who so far had pronounced each man’s report the honest truth. Besides the truthreader and herself, only three others attended the king: Rhys val Kincaide, Captain of the King’s Own Guard, and his lieutenant, Bastian val Renly; and Morin d’Hain, head of Dannym’s intelligence network.

“We’ve been waiting all night for your report, man,” Gydryn grumbled to the soldier in front of him. The man had gotten back to his feet and was just standing there looking contrite. He was one of two who’d traveled furthest from the battle scene where Ean had been taken and had therefore been the last to arrive back at the palace and present his findings to the king.

“Just explain yourself, man.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The soldier shifted on his feet and then shot a nervous look at the Lord Captain, who glared at him. “As—as I was saying, Kalyn and myself,” and he glanced over his shoulder to the closed double doors, beyond which, ostensibly, the other soldier waited, “. . . we were among the first on the scene, assigned to Lieutenant Posten’s company. We’d been riding to the rendezvous at the cliffs where His Highness put ashore—”

“His Majesty knows all of this, soldier,” Morin d’Hain cut in. “He was asking you about the trail left by His Highness’s kidnappers.”

The soldier looked uneasily at Morin. Errodan herself knew the Spymaster mainly by reputation. The youngest man ever appointed to Gydryn’s Privy Council—by far the youngest Master of Spies—he’d been named to his position in Errodan’s absence, and until this accursed night, they’d had little reason to interact.

The soldier shuffled his feet and returned his gaze fleetingly to the king. “The uh, lieutenant, Sire, he assigned us—”

“Soldier, we’ve already heard from the lieutenant,” Morin interrupted again. “Please tell His Majesty about the prince’s *trail*.”

“Oh...yes, milord. Well, Kalyn and myself headed east following a trail of horses that ran for about three clicks, and then it just...ended.”

“Ended? How?” Morin asked.

The soldier gave him an apprehensive look. “I mean, milord, the uh...hoof prints just ended...you know, like they all up and rode into the air.”

“A clean line of dirt, as if brushed away?” The Lord Captain Rhys asked.

The soldier turned to him and almost imperceptibly straightened again, as if his body knew better than to slouch in front of his captain. “No, my Lord Captain. These was grasslands, and until that point the meadow had been rightly trampled. Wasn’t no way to take two dozen horses across it with the rains we had recently and not leave a goodly path of mud. No...this was grass all stamped on and then grass that wasn’t touched, like they just up and road into the clouds—”

“Yes, so you told us once already,” Morin pointed out.

“Sorry, milord.”

Gydryn shifted in his chair and regarded the soldier in silence. Errodan reflected that her husband struck a formidable presence, even after five decades of life. His frame remained just as hale and broad, while the barest hint of silver etched his raven hair and beard.

“What is your explanation for the vanished trail?” the king asked while Errodan was ruminating on how much Ean looked like him.

The soldier’s eyes widened. “Your Majesty? I don’t...I mean, I thought—”

“Yes, you thought?”

The soldier visibly swallowed. He looked around at the silent faces in the room. “But... don’t we all think the same thing? I mean...if it wasn’t magic as obscured their trail, Sire, I don’t know what could’ve done it.” The statement thus made, he cringed as if expecting a rebuke but met only silence.

Indeed, what could any of them say? Every soldier who’d been there had reported of arcane events—*darkhounds* feasting on traitors dressed in the livery of the palace guard, a man with a silver face they imagined to be a Shade, magic that bound them to another’s will...

All the stories matched, yet the soldiers had so little evidence to corroborate the tale that it was difficult to believe, even with Vitriam’s assurances that they spoke the truth. For all Errodan knew, the soldiers mightn’t even have met Ean and Creighton at all, but simply made up the entire encounter and tied each other up for show—the latter of which, in point of fact, had actually occurred.

After a tense silence, Morin shifted in his chair and leaned forward to level dark eyes on the soldier. “When you were at the scene of the battle, did you see any bodies?”

He scratched his head and frowned. “Bodies, milord?”

“As in dead people,” the Lord Captain Rhys muttered.

“Well, no, milord. But there was a lot of blood.”

“Blood,” repeated Morin. “You’re certain it was blood?”

The man wrinkled up his face as if thought itself required painful determination. “I can’t swear to it, but we found Her Majesty’s men in a big clearing that was pretty well torn up from battle. The men were all tied up with nobody near.” He cast Errodan an apologetic and slightly embarrassed look. “Right bloody strange, finding them there like that.”

“And the blood?” prodded Morin.

“Raine’s truth, I can’t swear to it. It was dark and the field was muddy and wet. If it wasn’t blood that soaked the field, it was right sticky, and the air sure smelled like it does after a battle.” He looked uncertainly at the others. “Was there no blood?”

“We’re less interested in the presence of blood than we are in the astonishing lack of bodies to account for it,” Morin said.

“I didn’t see no bodies, milord, and that’s Raine’s truth, but I vow something had happened there. The whole place felt...well, it felt *wrong*. *All wrong*. And those men—Her Majesty’s men—they were rightly spooked. They talked a lot about dogs, but I never saw no dogs, but I’m sure they were scared to Shadow of something.”

“One more question.” Morin called the soldier’s attention back to meet his gaze. “Did you see Creighton Khelspath?”

The soldier looked baffled. “No, milord. Wasn’t he taken with the prince?”

“Thank you, soldier,” the king murmured. “You may return to your post.”

“Actually, I’m off duty now, Sire—”

“Get out, man!” Rhys barked.

The soldier fled.

When the King’s Guard had closed the doors again, Morin leaned back in his armchair, closed his eyes and pressed steepled fingers against his lips.

Errodan considered him. He wasn’t a bad looking man, perhaps twenty and eight, with blond hair, brown eyes and a cleft chin kept cleanly shaven. He appeared hardly older than her eldest son would be now—may Epiphany bless and keep him—had he not been murdered in cold blood by Basi assassins. Morin had proven himself sharp-witted, and so far she hadn’t seen him cringe once from the truth, no matter its unpleasant taste.

“Too strange,” the Lord Captain Rhys grumbled while Morin deliberated in silence. “Her Majesty’s men are certain the traitors were ravaged by dogs and that Creighton was slain by the Shade, but none of them can tell us what happened to the bodies of the men who supposedly died just inches away from them.”

“Or what became of Creighton after this Shade supposedly ran him through,” Morin muttered.

Bastian val Renly cleared his throat. “Your Majesties, milords...” He looked around the room. “Isn’t it possible that the darkhounds *ate* the men, bones and all?”

“We haven’t ascertained it was darkhounds did the deed,” Rhys growled.

“I think we can be sure it wasn’t Her Majesty’s terriers, Captain,” Morin remarked with closed eyes.

“And what of poor Creighton?” Bastian went on. “Epiphany preserve us—we’re honor-bound to send word to the boy’s father if he is truly dead, but we’d be fools to tell one of the most powerful nobles in Agasan that his son was slain by a *Shade*—of all unholy creatures—and then have no body to account for it!”

King Gydryn knuckled his forehead, looking pained. “Where is Creighton’s body?” He lifted his grey-eyed gaze to the assembled group. “I won’t believe the boy dead without seeing his body lying before me.”

Errodan felt relieved to hear those words. Teams of soldiers were already scouring the kingdom for Ean—*my dear, dear boy!*—and Gydryn’s determination meant more would leave in search of Creighton as well.

“We must proceed very carefully.” Morin lifted his gaze to include everyone in the room, and his tone spoke volumes. “There is the slimmest of chances—found in the inexplicable involvement of a stranger thought to be a Shade—that this night did not proceed as our enemies had planned. Your Majesty’s man, Eammon,” Morin said, looking to Errodan, “he spoke adamantly that the traitors had planned to kill the prince, but then this Shade appeared. If that’s true, then there might still be a way to turn this catastrophe into a coup in our favor.”

Errodan prayed it might be so. Few among the nobility knew just how precarious Gydryn’s hold was on the Eagle Throne. Beyond the people in that room, in fact, only one other might have some real inkling of the truth...

Morwyk.

Errodan thought the name with scathing contempt at the same time that Morin said, “This has the Duke of Morwyk written all over it.”

“*Morwyk.*” Rhys spat on the floor and ground his boot over the mark.

“I would be thrilled to lay this at the Duke of Morwyk’s feet, Morin,” Gydryn observed while casting Rhys a flat look, “but I don’t see Stefan val Tryst orchestrating such an appalling scene—really, a Shade, Morin?”

“Not the Shade, Sire—by Epiphany’s Grace, if he’s to be found, we’ll uncover the actor who performed that stunt.” Morin tapped a finger on the arm of his chair. “No, I reference the earlier half of this plot, before the inexplicable arrival of a man pretending to be a Shade. That’s when Morwyk’s theretofore well-orchestrated plan fell to pieces.”

The Duke of Morwyk. He had his talons set on the Eagle Throne—that was a certain text. He made no secret of his criticisms of the war in M’Nador and Dannym’s support of Prince Radov, and he preyed on Gydryn’s patience with seditious talk behind the thick walls of his castle in the south. The man was rumored to be raising an army “for defense of his own eastern holdings,” but every day Morin caught another of the duke’s spies in court. It would’ve taken someone with Morwyk’s connections—and riches—to pry information about Ean’s landing from otherwise loyal men.

“So, in your estimation, Morin, there were *two* plots to harm my son?” Errodan asked. “Morwyk’s, which failed, and this stranger’s?”

Lieutenant Bastian val Renly cleared his throat again. “Is no one willing to believe that the Shade and his darkhounds were real?”

The men in the room exchanged looks. Even Errodan found the idea implausible.

“It’s just that it wouldn’t be the first herald of magic to confront us today, Sire.”

“You speak of the dead man found in the tunnels near the weld chamber,” said the king.

“Yes, Sire. We’ve yet to find anyone who can identify him, or explain to us how he died.”

The king frowned. Finally he looked to Vitriam. “What say you of these events surrounding my son, Truthreader?”

After a long silence in which it seemed as if the truthreader was inhaling one spoonful of air at a time, the elderly Adept straightened in his chair and looked to the king. “I can only say, Sire,” he announced in a voice like the strained exhale of an aging bellows, “that those of Her Majesty’s men to whom we spoke believed wholeheartedly that the man they saw was a Shade, that his power to bind them was real, and that the dogs were darkhounds raised from the shadows of the night.”

“So he was convincing,” Morin said. “That only makes him a gifted illusionist.”

“Indeed, Spymaster. Indeed.”

The room fell silent, and Errodan had begun to think the matter had been abandoned, when Vitriam chimed in again. “But would it not also be imprudent, Spymaster, to dismiss the possibility out of hand? Shades did once walk the realm, and darkhounds seem mythical now only because few men still living have ever faced them. One may go many years without seeing a redbird, or live all his life without meeting the olyphaunt. These are not reasons to believe a thing does not exist.”

Morin still looked skeptical. “Björn van Gelderan and his Shades were banished three centuries ago to [T’kendar](#).”

“Yes, so we’ve all been emphatically assured. Yet it’s been occasioned that the banished return, sometimes having never known—or even cared—that they were banished to begin with.”

Errodan frowned at him. She was convinced that the man often talked utter nonsense.

Morin still seemed dubious, but he let the matter rest. “His Highness’s situation notwithstanding,” he said, nodding an acknowledgement to Vitriam, “the problem we face most immediately is one of perception. Until the prince is found, or until we receive further word of his condition, no one can know of the true events of this night. Things must proceed as planned.”

Errodan shook her head in frustration. They’d invited dignitaries from seven kingdoms to attend a fete for a prince—Ean had personally pressed his own seal into four-hundred invitations—but now they’d no prince to present. “We cannot have a parade without a guest of honor, Morin.”

“Indeed, Your Majesty. We shall explain the circumstance as the tardy arrival of the *Sea Eagle* and not call off His Highness’s parade until it’s obvious the ship isn’t going to reach port. The *Sea Eagle*’s captain should’ve received our bird by now with new orders to return to the islands. With any luck, no one will have seen the *Sea Eagle* in last night’s waters at all.”

“The Autumn Festival and Fair should begin as usual then,” Errodan decided. “It will distract our noble guests from Ean’s absence and give them other matters to gossip about.”

“My men are accompanying the palace guard in their search.” Morin stood and walked towards the windows with hands in his pockets. He seemed a thinner outline of himself, haloed by the rising sun. “We’ll spread a number of false rumors about last night to keep the Duke of Morwyk’s spies guessing.” He looked at the king under his brow. “I’ve already dispatched a team to investigate the battleground more closely and follow up on these many disparate and confusing leads.”

“We will speak of this to no one.” Errodan included everyone in her gaze. “As far as any of us know, the Prince’s ship is merely delayed.”

Thus agreed, all eyes looked to the king.

“One week.” Gydryn fixed his gaze on Morin d’Hain. “You have one week to find my son...” He didn’t need to finish the sentence, for they all knew the inevitable words. Or the val Lorian reign may soon see its end.

Five

'All things are formed of patterns.'

– The *Sobra I'ternin*

'I know Hell, for I have died there. Hell is a blessing compared to what awaits us all if he fails.'

Ean spent the better part of the next day pondering the Shade's words, but no matter how he tried to formulate some explanation, he couldn't make sense of them. He finally concluded that the man had just been speaking with his own anger, not foretelling some cataclysmic eventuality. But as Ean settled into his tent that night, he couldn't stop wondering who the Shade's *he* actually was.

The moon had just fallen past its midnight arc when Ean woke to a powerful hand shaking his shoulder. He jerked in alarm, and his lids flew open to find a pair of vibrant green eyes staring down at him. A hand clamped over his mouth. "Speak not," the man warned.

Something about his voice struck a chord of recognition. Heart pounding, Ean nodded.

The man released him and straightened. Ean sat up in the shadow of a looming form. "We must go. There's little time."

A thousand thoughts raced through Ean's mind, but he hurried into his boots all the same. Surely this stranger's presence meant he was being rescued, yet he struggled to believe it possible. Who could've found him? And what about the Shade and his slew of guards?

The latter question became moot when Ean followed the man from the tent. Eight shadowed forms were lying scattered in the moonlit grass. "What in Tiern'aval...?" He spun to the stranger, who more than matched him for height. He knew they'd never met, for he would've remembered such a man: raven hair falling in loose waves to his shoulders, sculpted features both statuesque and stern, and most of all, those emerald eyes.

"I see you are well enough." He looked Ean over with a critical gaze. "That's a blessing."

"Whole, at least," Ean managed, thinking of his two near escapes from death. "But who—?"

"Keep your voice down!" The stranger glanced around and then pulled Ean back into the shadow of his tent. Ean followed his gaze across the campsite. He saw no sign of the Shade, but other men walked a distant patrol, and a large group huddled by a far fire. A shout erupted from the group, and Ean realized they were gaming.

The stranger tugged on Ean's arm and started off without waiting for him. "We must hurry."

Ean followed, somehow never thinking to suspect the man or his motives. Other questions found their way across his lips, however. "Who are you?" He caught the man's

cloak in his grip and worked hard to match the other's long, fast stride. "Why are you risking your life for me?"

"I risk nothing." The man jerked his cloak free and upped his speed towards the forest.

They moved silently into the trees. Far above, a waxing moon stripped the color from the world. Ean felt stripped himself, naked with credulity and barren of understanding.

He fell into step behind the stranger and watched his heels as they brushed and lifted his heavy dark cloak. Ean instinctively, inexplicably trusted him; but trust alone couldn't resolve the incomprehensible events that plagued his thoughts.

"Please." The prince tried yet again to gain some answers. He ducked to avoid a low branch and aimed his questions like arrows at the stranger's back. "You must tell me: how did you know I was here? Who are these men, and what—what *business* brings a Shade to task with me? *Please*—" he grabbed the man's arm, but released it again just as quickly, startled by the feeling of the stranger's flesh beneath his fingers. It might've been marble for all it yielded to his touch.

"Do I look a Shade to you, Prince of Dannym?" The man kept moving, forcing Ean to hasten after him. "My business is not his business, and his is not mine. Where our paths intersect, we cross without touching." He turned a penetrating look over his shoulder. "And there is nothing I *must* do."

Ean felt the man's gaze spear forcefully through him. It took all of his will to draw breath beneath that stare. "The safety of my father's kingdom may depend on what information I can gather."

The stranger grunted and turned forward again.

Ean chased after him. The fir limbs pulling and tugging at his shoulders felt like hands, frustratingly holding him back from the answers he sought. "If you'll tell me nothing, then you force me to return and attempt to question the Shade—"

Abruptly the stranger stopped and spun, forcing Ean to draw up short. "*Don't be a fool.*" His words reverberated in the darkness, ominously, like a warning bell ringing in the night. "Your life is more important than you know."

Ean stood rooted to astonishment.

The man grabbed his arm and pushed him roughly into the lead. Ean stumbled into motion, feeling oddly chastised, unexpectedly childish, and keenly aware of his rescuer's forceful presence just behind him.

A pale shape grew substance in the moonlight, and as Ean neared it, his expression brightened. *Caldar!* Motion behind the horse of a darker sort, and Ean saw yet another great stallion, this one as shadowed as its master. They soon gained the horses, and Ean felt his hopes surge.

"We're not out of this yet," the man warned as if reading the prince's thoughts. Almost as if in answer, the grating bellow of a horn erupted in the night, sending a nearby flock of slumbering birds scattering out of the trees. Ean spun with a sharp intake of breath.

But the stranger bounded in silence onto his saddleless horse—barely the creak of leather britches could be heard with the tightening of his thighs. He swept his immense cloak behind him and turned Ean a frightening and humorless grin. Tiny fang teeth glinted in the far corners of his mouth...teeth the prince never would've noticed had the man not smiled just like that.

Ean froze.

A zanthyr.

He managed a swallow—in the same moment realizing that the truth seemed somehow appropriate. A mortal man stealing into the Shade’s camp to whisk him away seemed impossible, but a *zanthyr*...

They were one of Alorin’s most ancient races, harboring two distinctly separate forms: one human, one animal. Both as elusive as the wind.

Ean reminded himself to breathe.

“Hurry.” The zanthyr took up his reins. “They know you’ve escaped now.” He swung his stallion in a rearing circle and charged off through the trees.

Ean mounted and spurred Caldar after the zanthyr. The creature’s black cloak billowed behind him as he rode through the trees, making him look very much the part of the famous specter of All Hollow’s Eve. The horses surged down into a ravine and splashed across a dark-running stream. Back up the other side, the zanthyr turned them hard to the north.

They rode for hours, sometimes furiously, sometimes carefully, but always pressing unflinchingly northward. By the first twinge of dawn, they’d gained a trail where the horses fell into an easier, loping canter.

Ean took advantage of the silent riding and decided a few things in those quiet hours, not the least of them that the zanthyr had to be working some kind of magic to replenish their horses’ strength.

To think that zanthyr could wield *elae*! That was something no one knew, surely. The creatures were already relics by the turn of the current Fifth Age, and they’d only grown more elusive as the centuries passed. Humankind knew little enough about them, but the one thing everyone seemed to agree upon was that zanthyr were notoriously disloyal. Stories of their capricious acts abounded; tales of a zanthyr pledging his fidelity to each of two warring kings, only to sell each monarch’s secrets to the other and make fortunes off the both. Since the dawn of their creation, the creatures had apparently been betraying someone.

And while this zanthyr may have been saving Ean’s life, that very fact troubled him. He would have to be daft indeed not to realize that any matters concerning Shades, zanthyr, and assassins went deeper than a ploy for a throne.

But now that they’d all involved him in their mysterious affair, he intended to get to the bottom of it.

The horses were walking beneath the grey dawn light when the prince brought Caldar alongside the zanthyr. “Tell me, why are you helping me?”

The zanthyr turned him a withering look. “Be grateful that I am and leave it at that.” Perhaps because the prince looked so injured by his brusque dismissal, the zanthyr’s expression softened minutely and he held a hand towards Ean’s saddle bags. “I don’t know if you noticed that I repaired your sword for you.”

“My—my *sword*?” Ean did a double-take at this packs. In the dawn light, a well-known jewel glinted dully. He grabbed for the weapon and looked it over. His eyes widened.

It can’t be!

He'd watched the Shade disintegrate his sword with his foul power, yet now the steel gleamed as true as the day of its forging. Ean swung the weapon, cutting the air with precision, and then placed two fingers under the tang. The sword felt better balanced than it had before.

He lifted astonished eyes to the zanthyr. "How could—how did you *do* this?"

The zanthyr turned forward again. A breeze blew his dark hair into his eyes as he murmured, "You will have need of that sword yet. Much need."

Ean fell into a wondrous silence. *A zanthyr, by Cephrael's Great Book!* And a particularly dangerous one, from everything Ean had seen. Killing eight men was no easy task, but this creature had done it without gaining so much as a scratch, without a spec of mud upon the trim of his immaculate cloak... without making a sound.

Staring at his mysterious rescuer, Ean couldn't help but wonder how the zanthyr might fare against the Shade and his terrible power, and then he cursed himself for such a thought.

The sky was turning a chill purple and mist was rising from the earth when the zanthyr turned his horse off the path they'd been following. He led towards a thicket of oak saplings and dark hawthorn bushes which were growing in such close proximity that night seemed to remain there, trapped within.

The zanthyr dismounted in front of a small gap in the hedge and nodded to Ean to do the same. "We'll camp here and rest today." He looped his reins over a fledgling branch and moved to attend to his horse.

Ean slid exhaustedly off his horse, leaned elbows on his saddle and looked around, trying to gauge their whereabouts. "Do you know where we are?"

"Near the duchy of Stratford."

"Stratford?" Ean all but laughed at him. "You jest, surely! We were just in the Eidenglass."

"What's your point?"

Ean hunched down in order to view the man from beneath Caldar's girth. He rubbed down Caldar's forelegs absently while he considered his assertion. "It's impossible. We couldn't have traveled all that way—"

"Nothing is impossible." The zanthyr sounded annoyed.

Ean didn't want to argue with him. "Stratford then. But surely you don't expect trouble any longer?"

"They're looking for you, make no mistake of it." The zanthyr rose, and Ean followed him to standing. He pinned the prince with a disquieting sort of look, emerald eyes aglow. "You have a significant price on your head, Prince of Dannym. Be glad I'm not in need of coin."

Ean pressed palms to tired eyes and tried to comprehend such madness. That one night's desperate escape felt less exhausting in retrospect than the continuing mystery of his capture. *Who? Who is behind this?* "Tell me what you know of my kidnappers," he said thickly, dropping his hands again, "and I'll see you rewarded for it. My father will be most interested to know the identity of those plotting against the throne."

The zanthyr looked Ean up and down with a cynical eye. "This is no mere plot against a throne. Be forewarned: Cephrael's Hand glows in the heavens. The cosmic Balance is once again shifting, and only the condemned can defeat the forbidden."

“What does that even *mean*?”

The zanthyr knelt down and drew something in the dirt. Then he stood staring down at his drawing wearing an unreadable expression. After a moment of this, he turned to Ean. “Let’s go in. Morning nears.” He disappeared into the thicket.

Ean felt a groan escaping him as he dragged Caldar’s saddle off and followed the zanthyr. He was beginning to feel truly ragged. He bore the burden of avenging Creighton’s death, but to do so properly, he had to understand the forces in play. Instinct told him the zanthyr could offer the explanations he so desperately needed, but every word out of the man’s mouth only left him more confused.

Ean pinned his saddle between arm and hip and ducked to enter the thicket, but the zanthyr’s drawing stopped him in his tracks. The bare earth bore an intricate, looping pattern. Something about it caught and held his attention...

A rough hand grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him through the bushes. Ean barely noticed falling to his hands and knees. After a moment, clarity returned. He shook his head to clear his gaze and looked over at the zanthyr, who was sitting with one arm draped over a bent knee. “What...” He blinked several times and pushed back on his knees. “What happened?”

“It’s a mindtrap. Don’t look at it.”

How fast his thoughts had gone astray! “A mindtrap.” Ean frowned. He’d never heard of such a thing, but he understood now better of its power. He thought about how easily and how long he might’ve been stuck staring at that pattern and cast the zanthyr a sour look. “Nice of you to warn me.”

“I just did.”

Frowning at the creature, Ean scrubbed at his growth of beard and looked around the tiny grove. In the time he’d been caught on the mindtrap, the zanthyr had apparently cleared a space for them to sleep, dug a fire pit, and lined it with stones so that the glow of the flames might not be seen. Ean didn’t find these facts to be the least bit heartening.

The zanthyr tossed another branch onto the fire. “There are deadly forces about. The mindtrap will keep them at bay while we sleep.”

“The Shade, you mean.”

The zanthyr cast him a narrow look. “Shades are not a threat to you. They serve the Fifth [Vestal](#) and thrive in his shadow.”

Ean blinked at this statement. He had to have heard him wrong, for it made no sense. *No sense!*

“Shades are not—” He wanted to pull out his hair at the blatant absurdity. “How can you say such a thing to me? And the *Fifth Vestal*, did you say?”

Ean pushed a hand through his hair and stared at the fire’s growing flames. The title was out of legend, though to be sure Alorin’s Fifth Vestal had lived among them once. The Vestals of Alorin, five in all, were revered by the races of men. Indeed, the Vestals held an almost divine authority over Adepts and kings alike, for they served and protected the entire realm and were bound to this duty with an incorruptible oath.

Or so everyone had believed before Björn van Gelderan, the Fifth Vestal, had betrayed his oath at the height of the Adept Wars. Now his name was spoken only in stories, and only as the duplicitous traitor he’d proven to be.

Had anyone else referenced the Fifth Vestal in relation to his kidnapping, Ean would've laughed off the comment, but this was a zanthyr, one of Alorin's oldest and most mysterious races; his very nature gave credence to his words.

And then there was the fact that Ean just felt he was telling the truth, even though that truth felt utterly, completely *wrong*.

"You speak of Björn van Gelderan?" Ean wondered why he felt so ridiculous just speaking the man's name. "You're saying that... what? That Björn van Gelderan has returned to Alorin from... well, from wherever he's been for three hundred years?"

The zanthyr turned to him looking decidedly unimpressed with his deductive skills. "Yes, my prince."

"And?"

The zanthyr frowned disapprovingly at him.

Ean frowned back in return—Raine's truth, the creature was more infuriating than all of his tutors put together—but he tried to form some picture in his head all the same. "So the Fifth Vestal is behind the Shade's appearance, but..." and here he hesitated, quickly thinking through what he'd been told. "But someone else is searching for us," and here his tone grew sardonic, "and they're somehow *more* dangerous than the worst traitor Alorin has ever known, or his army of inhuman Shades that work the blackest magic and command man-eating hounds conjured out of thin air?"

"No, my prince." The zanthyr pinned his unnerving emerald gaze upon Ean. "They're not searching for us. They're searching for *you*."

Ean barked a laugh, but he quickly sobered again when he saw the zanthyr's expression unchanged. "You're serious."

"As the sun sets west."

Ean held the zanthyr's gaze, waiting for more. After a moment, he concluded, "You're not going to tell me anything else, are you." It wasn't really a question, so he didn't really expect an answer. In that, he wasn't disappointed.

Ean moved closer to the fire and pulled his knees to his chest. "So the mindtrap will protect me today..." He felt suddenly ill-prepared to face whatever lurked in wait, especially when he'd fared so poorly against the Shade. "What of tomorrow then?" *What of when I'm home in Calgaryn? What of the rest of my life?*

"Tomorrow is a new day, my prince." The zanthyr lay back upon his cloak and draped a leather-clad arm over his eyes. "Rest now. At twilight, we ride."

Ean exhaled a ragged sigh and fell onto his back. He pushed his arm over his eyes, mirroring the zanthyr's position, while a nest of tangled thoughts spun themselves into cryptic designs. He expected to lie there for hours feeling tormented by all the things he didn't understand, but instead he fell fast asleep.

That evening, as Ean was saddling Caldar in preparation for resuming their travels, his eyes kept straying towards the mysterious pattern called a mindtrap. He'd always wanted to better understand the wielder's art of Patterning, and he suspected the zanthyr knew much of the craft.

'All things are formed of patterns,' Ean's mother had explained to him once. Though she was but a novice historian of the Adept Art, she knew more than most. *'Like the*

intricate lacework of a snowflake, or the complex veins that form a single leaf. One can learn to see these patterns and recreate them using the lifeforce called elae. Only when a student has mastered the pattern of a thing can he then control or compel that thing. Only then does he embark upon a wielder's path.'

Frowning as he tightened Caldar's girth, Ean asked the zanthyr, "Is that a wielder's pattern or an Adept's pattern?"

The zanthyr was holding his midnight stallion's head in both hands and staring into the horse's eyes as if somehow communing with it. "It's simply a pattern."

Ean trailed a hand down Caldar's nose as he wandered over to the mindtrap. "But don't Adepts and wielders work patterns—work *elaē*—in different ways?"

"Yes."

Ean braved a direct glance at the looping design, but finding no mental pull in the doing that time, he allowed himself to look at it more closely. The zanthyr must have done something to it, for it seemed nothing more now than a design of loops scrawled in the dirt.

While studying the pattern, Ean tried to puzzle out the hidden meaning that he suspected lay behind the zanthyr's laconic *yes*. "So Adepts and wielders work *elaē* differently, yet they use the same patterns?"

"It is not so simple as that, my prince."

Ean frowned at him. Then he turned back and frowned at the pattern. If all it took to be a wielder was a mastery of Patterning, then he imagined he could be a wielder too. He had a knack for patterns—had he not chosen an equally intricate design for his own personal seal? The zanthyr's pattern looked easy enough to remember; Ean expected he could draw it as well as any man.

Suddenly the zanthyr was right beside him, speaking low into his ear, "Thinking of trying your hand at the Art?"

Feeling slightly unnerved, Ean turned the man a peevish look over his shoulder. "It can't be that hard."

"You think not?" The zanthyr cast him a shadowy smile. "Study it as long as you like then. Memorize it."

Keen to the challenge, Ean studied the looping design while the zanthyr finished readying for their departure. *It's not too different from a number of scripted L's strung together in a circle*, the prince decided. He sent his mind whirling through the loops as if to memorize the steps of a court dance. Right loop, right loop, left loop, down loop, right loop...

"Ready?"

Ean blinked and looked around. The horses were saddled, and all evidence of their stay had been erased. How long had he been staring at the damned thing again?

"Yes," he answered, but he felt a little unsettled.

The zanthyr gave him a fiendish grin and swept his boot across the dirt.

Ean knelt to redraw it, and—

"Gone!" He fell back on his heels, dumbfounded. "It's *gone!*"

The zanthyr was still grinning at him. "So you noticed."

"No, I mean in my head. I can't—"

"No." The zanthyr turned and walked back to his horse. "You can't. You're no wielder, Ean val Lorian."

“But...” Ean jumped to his feet and followed after him. He couldn’t tell if his aggravation was with himself or the other man. “So, what...? A wielder could’ve remembered?”

The zanthyr mounted his horse with the same graceful ease with which he seemed to do everything else. “A wielder first learns to accurately recall the pattern. Then he learns to draw it. Finally, he must learn to create it substantively with his mind while filling it with his intent.”

Ean swung into his saddle and took up his reins. “So what is an Adept?” He knew that Adepts were born with the talent to work one of the five strands of *elae*, whereas a wielder had to learn Patterning to accomplish such workings of magic.

The zanthyr regarded Ean levelly. “An Adept forms the pattern with his mind—*innately*—as he wills the strand of *elae* to do his bidding. He doesn’t envision the pattern, nor does he mentally conceive it, yet the pattern is enacted when he works *elae*, for the pattern is inherent in the way he *thinks*. The patterns that enable an Adept’s talent are so ingrained in the fiber of his being that he works them with as little thought as breathing.”

“An Adept *thinks* in patterns.” Ean admitted it was impressive. He sent a sudden curious look towards the zanthyr. “So which are you?”

The zanthyr flashed a grin and spun his horse to the north.

A drizzly morning greeted them as they reached the southernmost boundaries of Gandrel Forest and began looking for a place of shelter. Ean finally had to admit that they were where the zanthyr claimed they were, though he still couldn’t fathom how they were covering so much ground each day.

Yet the Gandrel was familiar to him, as was the line of distant mountains demarking Dannym’s northwestern coastline. He could no longer doubt that they neared his home city of Calgaryn.

The Gandrel looked forbidding as they approached the massive line of trees, which clung to mounding fog beneath angry grey skies, and as they moved within the sheltering branches, night seemed to fall again. If Ean turned and looked beyond the tree line, he could see the gradual brightening of the grey morning, but within the woods, it remained dark and silent, as if the forest was sleeping late.

After walking the horses for the better part of an hour, the zanthyr finally set up camp beneath the low-bowing branches of an ancient balsam fir. Soon they laid down to rest, and as before, Ean was falling asleep the moment his head touched his arm.

He woke at twilight to the smell of rabbit roasting. Pushing up with a stretch of sore muscles and eyes that felt full of sand, he saw the zanthyr sitting cross-legged beside a low fire. A skinned rabbit hung from three crossed hickory limbs—green, so they wouldn’t catch the flame—while wispy tendrils of smoke from the fire funneled up the tree trunk to dissipate among the higher branches. Ean heard rain falling beyond their tent of fir limbs, but either the broad tree or some magical pattern of the zanthyr’s kept them dry.

The zanthyr took the rabbit from the spit and sliced into the breast with one of his dark knives. Then he placed the meat on a cleaned strip of bark and handed it to the prince, who thanked him.

While Ean ate, the zanthyr settled back on one elbow and rubbed his thumb along the dagger he held. It was a cold looking weapon, with both blade and hilt fashioned of a singular black stone that Ean had never seen but had heard plenty enough about.

One of their famous enchanted blades—[Merdanti](#) weapons. At least that legend is true.

The dagger's polished stone cast no shine; rather, it seemed to absorb the firelight into its core. Seeing it reminded Ean of his sword and the mystery surrounding its repair. He lifted his gaze to the zanthyr. "Might I ask a question of you?"

The man glanced up between the spill of his raven hair. "You may," he granted with a shadowy smile, "though I may not answer it."

Ean eyed him, wondering at his infuriating style of conversing. "It's my sword." He took a bite of the rabbit and said through a mouthful, "you must've wielded *elae* to mend it, but everything I've learned about the lifeforce denies such workings. My understanding is that *elae* can be compelled to alter the forces of life, but none can command it to alter the state of inanimate objects." Ean held the zanthyr's gaze. "But you did."

Though the zanthyr's expression revealed no change, yet Ean sensed that he was amused. He cleaned his dagger on a corner of his cloak. "Indeed I did."

"How is that possible?"

The zanthyr considered him carefully before replying. "In my day, there were a great many wielders who commanded the fifth strand of *elae*. The fifth is the most powerful of the five strands, for it compels the elements themselves."

Ean nodded; it was as he'd suspected. He pinned the zanthyr with his own level gaze. "I knew this. I just didn't think anyone lived who could work the infamous fifth strand anymore."

The zanthyr cast him an elusive sort of smile. He tossed his deadly dagger into the air and caught it by the point. "There are a few. The Agasi wielder Markal Morrelaine's skill with the fifth is well known. Likewise that of the High Lord Marius di L'Arlesé of Agasan. Malachai ap'Kalien was a fifth strand Adept—he had to be, to do what he did. And of course, there is the Fifth Vestal."

"Björn van Gelderan." Ean felt strangely uneasy speaking the man's name, though for no reason he could put his finger on. History taught that Björn van Gelderan had betrayed his revered position.

He looked to the zanthyr again. "How can Björn van Gelderan remain a Vestal after all he's done?"

"All he's done..." The zanthyr narrowed his gaze ever so slightly beneath his wavy dark hair. "What do you mean by 'all he's done'?"

Ean missed the dangerous shift in the zanthyr's tone for he was too caught up by his own misunderstandings. "It was the Vestal's duty to protect our realm from the misuse of *elae*, was it not?"

"It was and is."

"So what do you call the Adept Wars, and the treasonous role Björn played? He took up Malachai ap'Kalien's banner and waged war on his own race. His betrayal was the worst of all, they say."

"*They say...*" The zanthyr repeated the words slowly, his dagger suddenly still in his hand. "And tell me, Prince of Dannym, what do *they* know of the Adept Wars?"

That time his tone fell sharply, like a cold knife drawn along Ean's spine. The prince's eyes flew to the zanthyr's in startled response.

"What do any of you know about them?" The zanthyr flipped the hair from his eyes and pinned Ean with a quiet stare. "Mankind bears the scar of these wars like a banner proclaiming their victimization, but *mankind* was barely—" Abruptly he stopped, fell silent, and then waved his dagger to dismiss the subject—and his ire—completely. "You asked how the Fifth Vestal can still be the Fifth Vestal. The answer is simple: because the new Alorin Seat, who is also the realm's First Vestal, Alshiba Torinin, has no one to replace him. It will take none other than a fifth-strand Adept of Björn's caliber to assume his position, and as you correctly stated, my prince..." here he paused, and his tone took on a terrible and unexpected sorrow, "Alorin has few fifth strand Adepts anymore." He arched a raven brow and added more quietly, "None have Awakened for generations."

Ean could tell from the gravity of the zanthyr's tone that this circumstance was far more serious than he understood.

He brushed a hand to push his chin-length hair from his eyes and stared down at the rabbit in his lap. "Here in Dannym, my homeland, we follow the old ways," he confessed quietly. "We honor the sacred festivals and speak the rites, though I cannot say how many truly believe and how many do these things merely out of tradition. But my family at least believes in the Returning, and we say the Litany for our lost ones, and we...hope."

He looked up and managed a smile that didn't quite touch his eyes. "We hope we might someday meet them again in the Returning...we pray we might somehow know them though they look different to us." Ean paused, and a frown furrowed his brow. "But you...you speak of the Returning with *meaning*."

The zanthyr looked him over. "There is Balance in all things, my prince—life and death, day and night, and myriad other dichotomies not so easily defined. All fall within the scope of this cosmic law." He ran his thumb along the sharp edge of his dagger. "The Adept races are the children of this realm, and their lives are tied to the realm's life—for all living patterns are inextricably intertwined, including those patterns that give Adepts their gifts."

Frowning slightly, he looked up at Ean beneath the spill of his dark hair. "Since the beginning of time, those Adepts who died yet Returned and Awakened. Always they maintained their same Adept gifts in their next life. Upon adolescence if not sooner, they always woke to their gifts. Thus the race thrived. But now...now the realm is dying."

"And so dies the Adept race." Ean didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry."

The zanthyr gave him a tolerant sort of look. "Eat your dinner." He pointed his dagger at the rabbit.

Out of respect more than lingering hunger, Ean complied. But as he chewed another bite, he asked, "The uh, Shade...did he use the fifth strand to destroy my blade?"

The zanthyr arched a brow beneath the dark spill of his hair. "No."

Ean shook his head and chewed. *So many mysteries...*

Yet the zanthyr seemed unusually in a conversational mood, for he exhaled a thoughtful sigh and remarked, "Your humankind was a different people before the Adept Wars. Once, magic formed an integral part of life in many kingdoms. Wielders, Adepts, Warlocks from the Shadow realms, shapeshifters and Sundragons...in my day, all the races lived in tandem with the civilizations of men."

“Terrorizing civilization, you mean,” Ean countered. Then he grimaced at his own obvious ignorance and added by way of a shrugged apology, “Or so history has taught us.”

The zanthyr opened palms skyward. “A subjective conclusion.” He fixed Ean with a quiet stare. “What is it you hope to hear from me?”

“Only the truth.”

The zanthyr laughed softly, sounding a deep rumble against the pattering rain. “Ah...*truth* is it, my prince? And whose truth would that be? *My* truth? Malachai’s truth? Perhaps the truth of the Sundragons, who were banished to the nether-reaches of the realm by the First Vestal Alshiba Torinin, simply because they’d served her ex-lover, Björn van Gelderan. Do you expect those dragons, who thrived in the warmth of the desert kingdoms, to think their banishment to the icy edge of the realm justified?” He shook his head. “There is only one truth in this universe, my prince.”

“And what is that?”

“There is Balance in all things.”

Ean frowned. “Balance again.” The zanthyr had already proven he’d no intention of explaining that subject. “Then what of the histories—”

“Since when did historians concern themselves with facts?” The zanthyr leaned back on one elbow and waved his dagger idly. “Once in a while some historian will stumble over the truth, but most of the time he’ll pick himself up again and continue on as if nothing has happened. And yet, some things...” He straightened and settled Ean a telling look. “Some *truths* are better left to myth and legend, Prince of Dannym.”

Ean found this an unsettling thought.

He set aside what was left of his meal and exhaled a sigh that felt strange as it left his chest. “What of our plans then? Do we sti—” but the question went unfinished, for the zanthyr raised his hand sharply with a glare that demanded silence. Then he leapt to his feet and slipped soundlessly off, drawing his blade as he vanished between the branches.

The prince scrambled to follow.

But as he pushed after him through the veil of fir limbs, he drew up short before two men. They stood frozen with swords upraised, their blades dripping rainwater, their eyes downcast at a looping pattern scrawled in the dirt—one which seemed oddly impervious to rain.

Ean returned his half-drawn sword to its scabbard and exhaled a measured breath. He carefully avoided looking at the mindtrap, but he couldn’t help noticing the way the rainwater ran in rivulets around the pattern without touching or damaging its integrity, as if it had been scrawled in stone and not simple earth.

A grimaced marred his brow as he squeezed around the frozen men, and then he hastened to join the zanthyr. The man was standing next to a large oak, scanning the dim, rain-swept forest with his gaze.

Ean saw naught but long sheets of grey rain. He wiped water from his eyes and tried to focus through the gloom. Mostly his attention kept straying to the living statues standing immobile behind them. “Um...how long will they stay...like that?”

The zanthyr aimed his piercing gaze into the mist. “Until someone pulls them off.”

Ean cast a grimace back at the men. “What if no one does?”

“Then we’ll have two less swords to worry about.” The zanthyr turned to him brusquely. “Stay close.” He started off into the night.

Silence hung within the forest like moss draping the branches. No ravens called from their evening roost, no crickets sang; only the rain continued its quiet patter against dying autumn leaves. A fog was rising, dampening the earth as much as the evensong, so that Ean heard all too clearly his breath coming faster.

The dagger struck without warning.

A sharp and powerful jolt spun him partly around, and he staggered to keep his footing as a searing pain radiated outward from his chest and shoulder. Instantly his right arm became useless at his side. In the next heartbeat he collapsed to his knees and sucked in air, yet his lungs seemingly refused to fill.

Ean fell to his side in the mud, wheezing with every breath. He watched in the detached way of the drugged as the zanthyr deflected two more daggers with his dark sword, and then advanced on a far tree. When the next blade flew, the zanthyr snatched the dagger out of the air and spun a tight circle, slinging it back whence it had come with whiplash speed.

Ean heard the dagger rip through the leaves. Then a muted cry. Seconds later, a man tumbled from high limbs, struck the earth and bounced once before lying still.

The zanthyr bounded atop him in a swirl of dark cloak and slammed one hand down around the man's throat. "*Geishaiwyn.*" He looked the man over narrowly. "You, at least, will travel the pattern no more."

The assassin made a choking sound. Ean thought he heard him wheeze, "*A halál csak az'eleje.*" Then he died.

The prince feared the assassin hadn't died in vain—indeed, he feared he'd done his work too well. He could barely think for the pain in his shoulder—his flesh *burned*—and his muscles were twitching so violently that he couldn't even grasp the hilt of the dagger to pull it out.

Poison. Some part of him realized this as he watched the growing circle of blood soaking through his drenched tunic. *Poison on the blade.*

A sudden wrenching pain in his stomach assaulted him, and he rolled onto his side as his body fell into convulsions. He sensed a shadow approaching, but coherent speech eluded his tongue. Even when the zanthyr yanked the dagger from his flesh, the scream Ean emitted sounded far away to his own ears. Only the pressing of hands upon his wound brought a moment of clarity.

Ean looked up to find emerald eyes staring into his own. Then another wave of nausea overcame him, and he rolled onto his side and vomited until he blacked out.

A while later the prince found himself aware, only partly knowing he'd been unaware moments before. The zanthyr's eyes remained pinned on his, and holding the man's gaze helped him focus.

"You were lucky." The zanthyr pulled the prince to his feet.

Ean reeled; his world spun, and he passed out again.

When he came to, he was sitting atop a black horse. They were deep in the Gandrel, cantering among sky-scraping hemlocks whose trunks were broader than a horse was long. Caldar paced along beside them. He looked uncharacteristically at ease playing second to the zanthyr's stallion.

Ean tilted his head back to view the zanthyr, who held him securely against his own body with one strong arm wrapped around his chest. “He got me...again.” Ean’s tongue felt heavy and thick. Forming his thoughts into words took effort. “How...?” He couldn’t understand how he lived at all.

The zanthyr silenced him with a grunt. “You’ll die yet if you don’t get that shoulder tended to. I’m no Healer. See to it that you don’t die before we can get to one, or I’ll be decidedly vexed with you.”

Ean blinked at him.

“And mind you keep your mouth shut along the way, Ean val Lorian,” the zanthyr warned. “This is just the beginning of your Return, and I cannot forever follow in your wake silencing your presence to those who search.”

Ean stared at him, barely registering the man’s words, only knowing such awe and gratitude as he’d never before experienced. “I...owe you my life.”

The zanthyr grunted. “You owe me a great deal more than that.”

The prince leaned his head weakly against the zanthyr’s broad chest. “Somehow I will return this. I pledge you my service, my trust—”

“No!” The zanthyr’s ferocious response shocked Ean into sudden lucidity. “Do not trust me!” He locked eyes with Ean to reinforce his command. “I will not have it upon my conscience.”

The odd warning seemed a sort of farewell.

Ean felt darkness calling like an old friend. He managed a weak nod, already forgetting what he was supposed to be agreeing to, and tumbled down to greet it.

Six

*‘Trust, but do not be deceived. Be prudent, but do not delay.
Azerjaiman waits for no man.’*

– An old desert proverb

Trell regained consciousness like the slow pouring of honey. He swam up through a mind-fog of darkness and the near memory of chill water to the unexpected sensation of comfort. He opened his eyes and found himself lying in a massive ebony bed, three sides of which were draped in diaphanous silk, the fourth layer drawn back with a black satin cord. And beyond the bed? The dim walls of a tent, but it could have been the tent of a sultan or the Emir himself, so opulent were its trappings.

Sunlight brightened the canvas walls to a pale copper and cast a luminous glow across the ornate chests and tables placed around the room. His eyes brushed across beaded lamps with glittering gemstone tassels, a deluge of books covering every available surface, and several odd-looking statues. Plush Akkadian carpets shielded bare feet from the raw earth, while the ebony bed itself could only be described as a work of art. Where had he come to find such luxuries in a desert camp?

Voices floated in from nearby, their words muffled. Anxious to understand where he was and how he got there, Trell pushed up quickly—and regretted it. An onset of dizziness and a dull throbbing in his skull reminded him of the very real nature of his recent ordeal.

He laid slowly back again to wait for the world to stop spinning and reviewed what he remembered:

Someone must’ve found him and pulled him from the well.

Someone had brought him here—wherever *here* was.

Someone had healed him.

Then he recalled that memory of drowning, a brief image intense with desperation and panic, and even the choked recollection of gulping water—*saltwater; yes, sea water*—into his mouth and lungs.

Trell analyzed this memory with great care. It was the first recollection he had from a time before waking in the Emir’s palace. Though the mere flash of a picture, it contained all the things a memory should have: emotion, associated perceptions, and even his own thoughts at the time.

Fantastic!

My very own memory.

Trell broke into a smile as he lay staring at the sheers draping the bed. Having just that small bit of memory gave him great hope that he could remember more of his former life. Maybe the Emir had been right to send him away. The idea still pained him more than he cared to admit.

Trell remembered that day the Emir had told him he must leave as if it had just occurred...

When the Converted Commander Raegus n'Harnalt had arrived with a hundred men to relieve Trell and his company at the Cry, Trell's men had cheered.

"Ho, Trell of the Tides!" the other commander greeted Trell as he'd dismounted in the middle of Trell's camp with his men filing in around and behind him as best they could in the confined space. One found little enough flat ground along the Cry. Accordingly, the steep walls of the surrounding canyon were mushroomed with brownish tents. The rock ledges became hot enough to cook on by midday—fortuitous really, for wood was scarce—and canvas tarps, secured haphazardly between rocks, provided the only shade.

The sun was just coming up when Raegus arrived, but Trell's company had been active for hours—only those who'd held the night's watch were sleeping beneath the shade of their desert tarps.

"The Emir is most pleased with your service!" Raegus approached Trell with open arms of greeting. "You are to be given a hero's welcome in Raku."

Trell clasped shoulders with the other commander and then pressed a fist to his heart in the desert fashion. The traditional greeting thus concluded, Trell pulled off his cap and ran a hand through his unruly dark hair. It was barely dawn, but already the heat was rising, sweeping in on the tide of sunlight as if surfing its outermost reaches, a broad band of sweltering air that withered everything it touched.

Trell squinted at the other commander as he tugged his cap back on. "Then you're here to relieve me?"

Raegus broke into a broad grin. He opened his arms and raised his voice to include all within earshot, "Nay, Trell of the Tides, we are here to relieve everyone!"

His declaration met with a cheer that soon echoed from ridge to ridge, the good news spreading fast among the men. No doubt the Veneiseans heard the outburst on the other side of the Cry. Trell privately hoped they wondered if yet another victory had been gained while they baked in the sweltering heat, stalemated and outsmarted by a nameless commander of a band of renegade expatriates.

His company had set off that afternoon, with the men in an enduring cheerful humor. All the way to Raku Oasis, they boasted and bragged, reminisced and jested; whatever painful memories they'd carried from the Cry were quickly fading, transitioning from a place of close discomfort to one of distant nostalgia. Such was the mind's capacity for change, for adaptation and reconciliation, and even for forgiveness; to alter a man's memories such that overwhelming experiences became subject later to rejection, to laughter.

Trell thought it an amazing thing to witness, though he couldn't help but wonder if this same mechanism—this altering factor of the mind—kept him from remembering his own past? Yet when the mind was capable of such rapid healing, what could've so wounded him that he could remember nothing of his former life, even now, five years later?

Catching himself at these thoughts, Trell gave a soft smile. This was his philosophical side; the one his men jested about, the one Ware so often commented upon, the one Graeme had always held up as proof he was noble-born.

This was the side that asked endlessly, *Who are you?*

Trell sought shelter in his thoughts when no shelter could be had elsewhere. He could vanish into his head so completely that the outside world seemed insubstantial in comparison, and hours might pass before he returned to it. Indeed, his company was riding beneath the thick walls of the oasis before he woke from his thoughts to the cheering of a thronging crowd.

From the battlements on high, ranks of Converted threw raucous kisses and olive twigs in good-natured mockery of the traditional rose, while the soldiers inside the city spread sand before their path, bowing and taunting as much as they applauded or cheered. Men that Trell had never met shouted his name as he rode.

The Converted were a motley band of renegades. They hailed from places as dissimilar as Dheanainn and Kjvngherad; yet a common element bound them, one that transcended background or heritage, crime or treason. This same element in turn bound them to the Emir, for the Emir had given them back their honor. That and more—he'd placed them on equal footing with each other, to advance not according to birthright but to ability, to gain riches in reward of strength and agility proven on the field of battle.

Trell wasn't Converted. He'd sworn no oaths to Emir's pantheon of desert gods, yet the Converted considered him a brother in war. His past was lost, even as theirs was lost—if one circumstance came by design and the other through tragedy, it mattered little to these men, and Trell had proven himself time and again, gaining the loyalty and admiration even of those who'd heard only his name.

Knowing all of this, Trell gazed around and tried to smile—to at least acknowledge the gratitude and fellowship the men offered him.

The heroes' celebration lasted all the way to the palace of the former Sultan of Raku, who'd found his death at the hand of the Emir's personal guard. The Emir's chief minister stood waiting upon the steps of the palace to greet them—an unusual honor, for Prime Minister Rajiid bin Yemen al Basreh rarely showed his face in public. Trell knew him to be a mysterious sort of man who spent most of his time in the Akkadian capital of Duan'Bai, where he headed up not only the Emir's governing cabinet, but also a deadly network of spies and assassins.

Unsurprisingly, al Basreh remained beneath the light of torches and a waning moon only long enough to greet Trell and his men and deliver an astonishing message.

"The Emir is most approving of your service." His words, spoken in the desert tongue, seemed both resonant and oddly soft. They floated down to embrace Trell and his company as they collected before the massive steps leading to the outer palace gates. Trell looked up at al Basreh and sensed an unusual silence descending among his men. "You have been relieved of your duty on the Cry. What is next for you, you are no doubt wondering?"

Indeed, they all were.

Al Basreh nodded sagaciously, his dark eyes peering out from the shadow of a gray and black-striped silk turban, which undulated with wavering shadows cast by torches to either side of him. "We are at war, my fellows, and much is expected from the Converted; toil and sacrifice, obedience and valor, even unto your very lives, but for you..." and here he flashed the shadow of a smile, "for you, heroes all, the choice of where to fight is yours. You may serve our Su'a'dal on whatever front you desire, for such is a hero's right: to decide where next he shall shed the blood of his lord's enemies."

They were astonished, and then they cheered.

“Go then!” Al Basreh raised his voice to be heard. “Be the master of your fates and write the next chapter of your lives with fidelity and honor.” He pressed a fist to his heart, and the men, sobered only slightly by his poignant words, did the same.

As the band dispersed, still humming with surprise, al Basreh descended the steps to greet Trell as he approached. They met in the middle.

If they were not exactly friends—and Trell wondered if the older man trusted anyone enough to name them a friend—yet they shared a familiarity and respect between them. Al Basreh bowed a low greeting and said upon straightening, “The Emir wants to see you, Trell of the Tides. He could not be more proud of a son of his own blood.”

Trell thanked him for relaying the Emir’s appreciation, and asked as they headed up the stairs and through the gates, “What news from the front?”

“A missive from Taj al’Jahanna.” Al Basreh’s tone revealed no small measure of amazement. “Most unanticipated.”

They entered the palace to the clamor of vigorous cleaning and mending in an effort to repair the ravages of the initial invasion: carpenters and artisans aplenty were hard at work despite the late night hour. They walked beneath scaffolding and ladders and around clay pots of plaster and paint, while turbaned men moved to and fro and spoke in hushed tones so as not to disturb their betters.

Once they were away from the industrious workers, al Basreh confided, “Radov requests parley.”

Trell nearly missed a step. He spun a wide-eyed look at the older man and hissed, “If I didn’t know you better, I’d think you jesting!” No wonder al Basreh had sounded surprised when he’d spoken of a missive from Taj al’Jahanna.

Prince Radov abin Hadorin of M’Nador was an obstinate ox of a man, with a mulish demeanor and generally disagreeable nature. To think he would consider surrender after eight years of war—*this time*, and of which Trell had known only five—was to imagine the Emir suddenly denouncing all his gods and taking up the Blood Art alongside Myacene Fhorgs.

Trell frowned. “Does the Emir think Radov seeks peace? Surrender?”

Al Basreh cast him a sidelong look, his dark eyes unreadable. “We have beaten Radov, and he knows it in his bones.”

Trell couldn’t have been more startled to see cows flying across the Sand Sea—which reminded him, appropriately enough, of the Mage and his dragons. Surely they’d played no small role in bringing Radov to his knees.

“I suppose the Emir’s Mage will attend the negotiations?” He frowned off down the distant passage. “Does the Emir mean for me to attend as well?” *Is that why the Emir pulled us from the Cry?*

Trell didn’t believe they’d been reprieved simply to reward them. Awards were given after the war was won, not during its fiercest fighting.

“The Mage is attending to other matters, and as for you...” Al Basreh almost smiled again. Twice in one night—it was a record-breaking evening. “For you, Trell of the Tides, the Emir has special plans.”

His Eminence Emir Zafir bin Safwan al Abdul-Basir, Prince of Princes, Unifier of the Seventeen Tribes, rose from behind an ornate desk laden with maps as Trell entered his

study. Zafir's bald head was shining from the heat, which lingered like a disease within the room, making the air heavy and thick though the sun had long fallen to slumber.

He opened arms to Trell and embraced him as his guards were closing the massive mahogany doors, but he pulled away again just as quickly and gave Trell a frown of consternation. "You are no longer whole. I sense a cavern of loss within you."

Standing there before the only father figure he could remember, Trell felt a new fissure of pain slice through his heart. "Holding the Cry has taken its toll," he admitted. His every exhalation carried the taint of guilt and the ache of loss.

"Naiadithine's waters are greedy," the Emir agreed, naming the mother-spirit of the rivers, "and I know that you and Graeme Caufeld were close friends."

Trell turned his head away to hide the surge of grief and fury that threatened his composure—damn the injustice of fate! "It should have been me." He clenched his jaw and stared angrily off. "That arrow was Cephrael's hand reaching for me, Su'a'dal."

Zafir placed a strong hand upon Trell's shoulder. "But Jai'Gar knew it was not your time," he consoled softly, naming the Prime God, Father of All Fathers. He captured Trell's gaze with his own dark one. "We will honor Graeme. You have my word."

Trell simply held his gaze and nodded, for to say anything more would have been too painful.

"Now..." The Emir banished the subject as he turned to walk back to his desk. "If I know you, you are wondering why I pulled you from the Cry. I suppose al Basreh told you of the parley."

Trell forced away numbing thoughts of Graeme and gave the Emir his full attention. "A letter from Radov? It's unbelievable."

Zafir grunted as he sat down in his red leather chair—the Sultan of Raku's once, now restyled with gold filigree. He spun a piece of parchment toward Trell that he might see the red wax seal upon the bottom. "There it is, imprinted with the infidel's own signet." He waved Trell be seated also. "Otherwise I would've named it a foul hoax."

Trell took the proffered seat across the desk while frowning at the letter. He couldn't say if the seal was genuine, having never seen Radov's personal signet, but he knew who could. "I suppose al Basreh—"

"Oh, indeed." Zafir gave an offhanded flick of bejeweled fingers. "Al Basreh assigned spies to investigate, but they uncovered no deception, and the seal is genuine. It seems this parley is legitimate."

"Then the war could truly end." Trell said the words like an exhalation, but his tone was rife with disbelief. His gaze strayed out the open patio doors, across the city of Raku and beyond, toward the endless expanse of the Sand Sea. He wondered what a world without this war would be like.

"Which brings us to you, Trell."

The Emir's words drew Trell's attention back to him.

Zafir was watching him steadily, and Trell got the impression in that moment that something of grave import was transpiring, something beyond a mere assignment of duty. The idea made him uncomfortable.

Zafir nodded as if to confirm Trell's suspicions. "The time has come, Trell of the Tides."

Trell felt a sudden hollowness open in his chest. It took a moment to summon words through his apprehension. "...Time for what, Su'a'dal?"

Zafir's round face grew at once solemn. "It is time for you to leave us, my son-of-the-seas."

"I...don't understand."

"Trell," the Emir smiled upon him, but sadness shadowed his gaze, "I know the mystery of your past plagues you. I cannot think of a better means of rewarding you than to set you on your way. Your heritage is your birthright. Seek it now with my blessing."

Every part of Trell railed against the Emir's pronouncement. "But Su'a'dal, we're at war." Surely this was a cruel jest—to send him away when he was most needed?

"You've served me with the fidelity of my own blood-sons." The Emir dropped his gaze and pressed fingertips against the desk, his voice choked with emotion. "You have made gains for our cause of which even the gods have taken notice. Though it pains me greatly to see you go, Azerjaiman has spoken to me in this, Trell. The Wind God brought you to me, and He takes you back to his breast now upon the mandate of our Prime God, Jai'Gar. I dare not defy His will."

Trell had kept a sleepless vigil that night upon the walls of Raku, gazing distantly into the starry heavens, trying to make sense of events, trying to find any sort of justification for Graeme's death and his own oddly good fortune.

Yet was it truly fortune to be sent away upon the eve of what could be their final victory? To be denied the moment of looking upon the enemy generals and knowing that he'd beaten them, outmaneuvered them, bested them on the tactical field—*him*, a nameless man without title, with no heritage at all to speak of. Was it fortune to be denied the triumph of seeing Radov on his knees?

Trell harbored no real hatred for the Nadori prince, but neither could he respect a man who'd denounced his gods in favor of greed.

Trell had made the Emir's cause his own, and he wanted to see the conflict through to the end. He would've stood his ground and argued his case with the Emir, but...

Azerjaiman had spoken...

To his utter chagrin, he couldn't argue with a god.

Thus did the dawn find Trell setting off with supplies and silver and a small contingent of Converted, leaving with the Emir's blessing under the guidance of Istalar, who would take him to the shrine to gain Naiadithine's divine favor on his journey.

And where has that journey brought me now?

Trell exhaled a sigh that touched the silk drapes of the ebony bed. He tried once more to sit up—slower that time—and the dizziness came as only a minor discomfort. As soon as he felt stable, he slipped from the bed, walked to a carved obsidian basin and washed his face. Raising his head to the ornate mirror above, he regarded himself as if studying a stranger.

His hair looked no different after cave-in and river and hours of sleep than it did any other time: a tousled jumble of raven waves with the occasional curl thrown in for good measure. The unruly mass had always seemed a strange contrast to his angular face, and the hard months of battle had only increased this disparity.

Staring at his grey eyes, at the shadowed lines connecting cheek to jaw, Trell didn't see the scholar that his friends Ware and Graeme had claimed to see. He just saw a face, a face that answered to a name but had no history; a face that might resemble someone else's or might not; a face that had two makers somewhere that had contributed eyes and nose and chin...but which features had come from his father and which from his mother?

Letting out a slow breath, Trell frowned at himself and pushed wet hands through his hair. "Who *are* you?"

Silence followed, the mystery declaring its continuing rule over his life. He sighed and turned to find something to wear.

His clothes had been washed and new boots laid out for him at the foot of the bed. All of his things were lying there—his sword, even his satchel. Trell stared blankly down at his belongings. How had he made it through a river and swum up a well with all of that weighing him down? It was a fair miracle. Perhaps it had indeed been Naiadithine's blessing that bade him to follow the water.

Trell dressed slowly. All the while, he strained his ears towards the muted conversation that continued beyond the heavy drapes of his room, but no words ever floated through clearly.

When he thought himself ready enough, Trell inhaled a deep breath to the fullness of his lungs, exhaled with measured calm, and walked to the heavy drapes. He found the parting and pushed determinedly through.

The quiet conversation stopped abruptly as he stepped from bedroom into parlor and found himself facing three others.

The young man seated in the wingback armchair appeared lean and boyish, with glossy black hair smoothed back from a widow's peak, flawless caramel skin, and pale amber eyes. He wore a long tunic over loose britches in the desert fashion, the fine linen dyed a cerulean blue that seemed especially vibrant against his skin, and he greeted Trell with a smile of pleasant surprise.

The woman sitting sideways on the divan with long legs crossed at the ankles could have been a statue for her perfection. To call her lovely would've been an insult to her beauty, though her features were far from soft. Her cheekbones seemed a sculpted perfection, her full lips formed a graceful line, and her nose flowed smoothly upwards into arched ebony brows that framed intense green eyes—which were studying Trell with obvious candor. She wore a fitted gown of heavy emerald silk split up the sides, and slim suede knee-boots dyed to match. Her sleek raven hair draped around her shoulders like a shawl.

The third man, who stood behind the woman with arms crossed, was not a mortal man at all; this Trell knew at once, for he had met his like before. His skin was leathery and as black as pitch, while his long, hooked nose and furious scowl seemed the caricature of a mummer's mask. His golden eyes were fixed on Trell with undisguised malice—though Trell rather suspected this effect was more a result of the man's ill-disposed features than from any personal disregard. Utterly hairless, and dressed in loose black garments bound at the joints by leather straps, he was called a Wildling at best, a Whisper Lord by race, and though he wasn't wearing any daggered gloves at the moment, Trell suspected he was still just as deadly.

"Be welcome," the youth greeted in the desert tongue, drawing Trell's eye back to him. "Please..." he motioned Trell approach their circle.

Trell noticed other things about the room then: the plush carpets, the tall lamps fringed with strands of gemstones that gleamed alluringly in the room's muted light, and a mysterious breeze that stirred his hair and cooled his neck yet had no obvious source.

"Where am I?" he replied in the same language, for he spoke the desert tongue fluently—not that this was any measure of his past, sadly, for he'd learned through the years that he could also speak with equal ease, Agasi, Veneisean, and the Middle Kingdoms' Common Tongue.

The young man leaned sideways in his armchair, propped an ankle over his knee, and twined fingers in his lap. He wore loose leather-strapped sandals, and his toenails shone black. So did his fingernails, Trell then noted.

"Why you're..." the youth began, but then he seemed to reconsider his answer.

"You're in the mountains west of Jar'imán Point. Three days by horse from Raku."

Trell lifted brows. Amazing to think he'd traveled that far on an underground river, but then the river set its own course, while a horse did not. "I'm grateful to be here." He glanced from the glaring Whisper Lord, to the unreadable woman, to the youth. He felt unusually awkward among them. "You—did *you*...?" *Devil's wind...where do I begin?* "I was in a well..."

The youth smiled and nodded, yet there was something about the gesture that made it seem more than a simple response. It was a generous smile, bright and...sharp, if such a word could be used to describe the way the youth's wide mouth ended in crisp corners. "You were in a well," the young man confirmed, seeming amused by this statement. Then he spread his arms. "And now you are here. Feel welcome. We are all guests in this marvelous place."

Trell approached tentatively. "Did you find me? Do I have you to thank?" He glanced at the room's other two occupants, but instinct told him they'd had nothing to do with his rescue.

The youth broke into another of his wide smiles, and this time Trell felt sure there was something secretive about it. "No doubt you are quite curious how you came to be here," the youth observed agreeably, and he glanced at his two companions.

The woman stood with slow grace, all the while focusing her catlike green eyes on Trell. Then, saying nothing, she turned and departed.

The Whisper Lord cast Trell another malignant glare—or it could have just been a noncommittal look; it was hard to say with Whisper Lords—and followed the woman through the parting of drapes. He pulled them closed behind him, shutting Trell in the room alone with the youth.

"Please join me," said the latter. He indicated an armchair near his own. "I am called Balaji."

Trell nodded as he sat. "I am Trell."

"A strong name." Balaji nodded with approval. "Trell of the Wash was one of the great swordsmen of old. You likely know him as Trell of the Longshore. Trell d'Bouvalais was the famed sorcerer who established the first Ring of Mages in the Citadel on Tiern'aval, and then there was Nach Trell dan'Eliar, called Trell the Terrible by the Fire Kings, who conquered all of far eastern Avatar in the time known as The Before, in the uncharted years preceding the Fourth Age of Fable." He paused and eyed Trell with his head tilted slightly to the side as if assessing him. "But you are likely named for Trell Tavenstorm," he decided, "the wielder who helped forge the pact known

as the Triad, which formed the three allied kingdoms of Dannym, Veneisea and M’Nador. A great man—all of them great, in their own right.”

Trell had never heard of any of these people—at least not that he could remember. His name was fairly common; he hadn’t realized it had noble roots. “And who are you named for?”

Balaji broke into that same secretive smile. “Me?” He looked amused again. “My full name is Dhábu’balaji’sridanaí, which means ‘He Who Walks the Edge of the World.’ ”

Trell arched brows. “That’s a bold naming.”

Balaji barked a laugh. “So it is!” He smiled as if the notion had only just occurred to him. “So it is!”

Balaji’s gaze moved to the drapes then, and Trell leaned around in his chair to see the Whisper Lord returning. He carried a silver tray set with two crystal goblets and a full decanter of clear fluid. He set the tray on a table nearest to Balaji.

“How kind of you, Loghain,” Balaji said.

The Whisper Lord handed a goblet to each of them, replying, “I thought you might be thirsty.” With that, he withdrew, all the while wearing that furious scowl.

Trell followed the man with his eyes until the Wildling had disappeared through the curtains. Then he leaned back in his chair and frowned.

Balaji just looked amused. “Often things are not as they seem, my new friend Trell,” he observed, “and especially in this place.” He held up his goblet. “To Freedom, however she grace thee.”

Trell joined him in the toast, though he found the tribute unusual—in keeping with the rest of his experience thus far. He recognized the drink the moment his lips touched the cool goblet. It was known locally as *siri*, and was made from the fermented juice of white grapes. The liquid was cold enough to make the goblet sweat. Trell thought it had never tasted better.

“Now,” said Balaji as he lowered his goblet with a satisfied smack of wet lips, “to your questions.”

“I was in a well,” Trell repeated. “It’s the last thing I remember.”

Balaji nodded. “Yes, yes. You were near death when you arrived here. Had the Mage not worked his power, you’d be having conversation with your gods right now.”

“The Mage?” Trell started at the revelation. “You—do you mean the Emir’s Mage?”

“Indeed.”

Trell furrowed his brow in wonder. “Why would he have gone to such lengths for *me*?”

Balaji shrugged. “Who knows the inner working of a Mage’s mind?”

Trell cast him a sharp look. “How did the Mage find me in a well?”

Balaji took another sip of his *siri*, eyeing Trell over the rim with his strange eyes that seemed to reflect the fields of wheat whose color they’d claimed. “He has eyes and ears in these mountains, my new friend Trell. Surely you did not think your Emir would hire the Mage simply to strut around like a preening peacock, as if to strike fear into the hearts of your enemies by his presence alone?”

A smile flickered across Trell’s lips. “No, I suppose not.”

“Ah, there’s hope for you yet.” Balaji cast him a teasing look and raised his goblet once more in tribute. “As to how you arrived here...the Mage brought you in on the back of his horse three nights ago. Those who pulled you from the well knew the Mage had the

power to resurrect you, should he so desire. Near death you were when you arrived with him—practically blue and stiff with shock. I'd never seen a man turn such a color. After the Mage worked his Healing upon you, he sat by your side all the night and through the next day, until you were out of harm's reach."

It seemed an unlikely fortune, this chance rescue. There were some who claimed it was never lucky to gain a magician's eye. Trell wondered what interest the Mage could've had in saving his life, for he didn't believe for a second that the boon came without a price.

He shifted his gaze back to Balaji. "Is the Mage here now?"

"Alas, his duties have called him elsewhere."

"Am I..." Trell wasn't sure how to phrase the question. "Am I being...held here?"

"Assuredly not." Balaji chuckled at the grim shadow that had graced Trell's expression on this question. "Though the Mage has recommended that you enjoy our hospitality until the moon is full."

"Why?" Trell tried not to sound suspicious, but his first instinct had roused his distrust. Did the Mage want something from him in return for his life? One of Ware's mentioned quests, perhaps?

"Having healed you, I suppose," Balaji meanwhile offered, "the Mage has some insight into your true condition. He knows how deeply your injury was felt, and how long before your stamina is truly restored."

Trell admitted this could be true; he knew that Healers had to create a deep rapport with those they were Healing.

"Then again," Balaji added with a grin and a shrug, "who knows the inner workings of a Mage's mind?"

"Yes, you said that once already."

Balaji regarded him with good humor, but his wheat-pale eyes were dancing as if beneath the wind of his unspoken thoughts. "Enjoy your time of relaxation, my new friend Trell," he offered in his agreeable way. "We are all of us guests here, and you have the best of the rooms—the Mage's own. He invites you to read his books, explore our lovely valley, join us for dinner—tonight will be a banquet in honor of Loghain's departure—and introduce yourself to the others who come and go; you never know when friends made here will come in handy," and a distinct twinkle came into his gaze as he said this last. "Then be on your way in a few days when the moon is full. That is always the best time to begin a journey."

"How do—" Trell began, but Balaji stood and smiled down at him. The youth seemed amiable enough, yet there was something about that sharp smile that set Trell's teeth on edge.

"Perhaps we can converse more at a later time." There didn't seem to be much in Balaji's tone inviting question on the matter. "Alas, the day grows on, and I have duties. If you will permit me..." he motioned to be away, and Trell could do little beyond nod. Balaji had treated him with the utmost politeness, and Trell had never found it in himself to respond with outright rudeness.

He did scowl after the youth as he left, however. Then he downed the rest of his *siri*, pushed out of his chair rather heatedly, and returned to his rooms.

Trell spent some time looking over the furnishings of the Mage's quarters, examining the many books lying around, peering through the glass lamp shades, plucking at the dangling gemstones...and wondering why the Mage had left so many priceless and personal things lying about.

He puts a lot of faith in a man he doesn't even know.

By midday, restlessness had overcome him. He belted on his sword, slung his satchel diagonally across his chest, and headed off.

The tent complex claimed an immense number of connected rooms, and Trell got confused several times trying to find the way out, but at last he emerged into daylight and pushed a hand over his eyes to shade them from the brilliant day.

He stood midway up the hill of a valley. Long green grass softened a gentle slope, which descended toward a river studded with large, bleached rocks, while evergreens and hardwoods adorned the higher surrounding hills. The air held a fragrance that Trell distantly remembered. It took him a moment to place it: it was the sweet smell of grass, an entire *valley* of it.

He couldn't possibly be in Akkad-held lands.

The Kutsamak Mountains were arid and bleak from Raku westward to the Haden Gorge, and south of the Kutsamak lay only empty desert for a hundred miles. The lands didn't become fertile until one neared the mountain city of Sakkalaah. All this greenery placed him far from the Kutsamak.

And more than a three-day ride back to Raku, that's for certain.

So. Had Balaji lied to him? Or could the youth have erred in estimating how long the ride would take?

All Trell could decide was that either he'd come a lot further in that underground river than seemed possible, or the Mage's horse could fly.

Trell turned his attention back to the valley. *So where have I seen a view such as this?* He believed he'd known such grassy hills before, for the scene felt too familiar. He'd spent the past five years in the Akkad, with only an occasional jaunt through the jungles of Bemoth or eastward to the Fire Sea, but he recalled all of those landscapes with perfect clarity. No, this one resonated against a much deeper memory, one of rolling hills ending in blue-tinged mountains.

Perhaps it really is time for me to get out into the world, he reasoned, still trying to justify away his pangs of guilt. *The Emir was right to send me away. Nothing about the Akkad stirs memories for me, but here, beyond the desert...these trees, these mountains...something awakens.*

He was quite absorbed with these musings when a distant clicking and clattering pulled him from his thoughts.

Trell looked to the west, where a quiet stream disappeared into a copse of hardwoods growing in the bosom of two hills. The sound was coming from that direction, so he set off across the open field and into the wood.

He hadn't long to walk among the trees before he came upon the source of the sound: two of his fellow guests were practicing swordplay in an open grove—that is, if you could call such a battle *practice*.

The Whisper Lord Loghain had stripped to his waist and was wearing only his baggy pants, which were secured with black leather straps at thigh, calf, and ankle. His leathery pate gleamed with the sheen of sweat, while the skin of his pitch-black, muscled chest

was streaked with tiny cuts that bled as true as any human's. He now wore a Whisper Lords' characteristic daggered gloves, and the long knives extending from each fingertip flashed with deadly precision as he fought his opponent.

She was perhaps even more impressive, wearing only a bodice of sheer green silk that covered her torso but left her long legs bare, at least as far down as the slim green suede boots, which hugged her calves at the knee. She'd secured her long raven hair in a heavy bun, but many strands had come loose. She was also perspiring—and in places that revealed aspects of her femininity which other ladies would have deemed mortifying.

Trell, of course, was quite appreciative.

He settled onto a fallen tree to watch them—though mainly he watched her. She had legs like a fine-bred mare, long and lean-muscled and spectacular. Her form was slender yet curvaceous, but more astonishing than her physique was how she fought as fast and as furiously as the Wildling. Instead of deadly gloves, she sparred with two short swords, each of them with hilt and blade as black as her opponent's skin.

Merdanti. Trell knew such weapons on sight, yet rarely had he seen them wielded by mortal hands. Which meant...

The Whisper Lord dodged, darted, lunged and spun. She snaked between knives, blocked his advances, made a few of her own, and escaped like the wind. Their blades moved too quickly to follow with the eye, and the sound of their meeting was the rapid scraping of a master chef sharpening his knives.

Their dance continued a little longer, and then the woman darted between the Wildling's crisscrossing blades and scored a long, thin gash across his chest before dodging away in a backward flip to land with her booted feet at an angle of attack. Trell blinked, trying to remember what she'd done—trying to reason out *how* she'd done it.

The action stilled.

The Whisper Lord backed away, still wearing that furious scowl. And yet, now that Trell had a moment to study him, he noticed a subtle difference in the Wildling's eyes as he looked upon the woman. Trell thought he saw approval in Loghain's gaze, and certainly appreciation.

"*Caalaen'callai, Vaile,*" Loghain said in a voice that was the whisper of sand across glass. He bowed to her.

She smiled and bowed in return. Then they both turned their heads and looked at Trell.

Who felt immediately the intruder, though surely they'd known he was sitting there for quite some time. He got to his feet. "Your pardons." He bowed a quick apology and added in the desert tongue, "I hope I'm not—"

"We were finished," interrupted the Whisper Lord quietly, speaking the Common Tongue. "She has beaten me again."

The woman chuckled, the sound coming low, sultry. Exotic. "You have let me win again is more the truth," she corrected with a gentle smile. "Come, Loghain." She tossed both her dark blades into the grass and motioned him over. He went like an obedient child.

She laid her hands upon his chest in an intimate manner, long fingers splayed, and closed her eyes. Trell drew in his breath, guessing at once that the woman was an Adept—that much at least, if not more. *A Healer? And a warrior too?* Trell decided he would have to be very careful in this woman's company.

A good rule all around, actually.

The pair separated. “*Dama, Vaile,*” Loghain thanked her. Trell saw no immediate difference in the cuts on his chest, but an Adept’s Healing worked on a deeper level, encouraging the body to heal itself. No doubt by tomorrow the welts would be gone.

Vaile touched Loghain’s cheek endearingly. “*Quor ito a ’dama,* Loghain,” she replied in a purring sort of way.

The Wildling turned, nodded to Trell, and walked back towards camp, vanishing within the forest.

The woman came over to Trell. She stood taller than him. “I am Vaile.” She extended her hand in a northern, and curiously masculine, fashion.

Trell clasped wrists with her. “Trell,” he replied, trying very hard not to look directly at her breasts, or more specifically at the protrusion of her hearty nipples as they pressed against the sheer silk of her bodice. *She fights like a warrior, speaks like a Northman, and dresses like a sultan’s mistress...*

Vaile gave him a sly half-smile full of quiet amusement. Her eyes were unbelievably green, greener than the grass of the hillside, or the fir trees, or any green he’d ever encountered. She walked over to a boulder half covered in moss and picked up a bundle of cloth. As she let it unfold, Trell saw it was the bottom half of her dress. Re-affixing the skirt around her waist, she then retrieved her blades from the grass and offered as she straightened with both in hand, “Walk with me?”

Trell was happy to oblige.

What strange company I’m keeping, he mused as they headed off together through the trees. *Strange company the Mage keeps, too.*

There was something about these new acquaintances that made Trell very aware of his humanity—or at least of his mortality, which was an odd sort of thing to think about.

So, he decided, trusting his instincts more than he trusted his eyes, *neither Balaji nor Vaile are human. What are they then? More Wildlings like the Whisper Lord?* He began a running list of possibilities in his mind.

One race seemed to fit Vaile’s description right away, and Trell turned to Vaile—only to find her watching him with an almost predatory look in her emerald eyes. Trell instinctively drew back a little.

“My lady? Have I offended you?”

The look vanished as Vaile laughed. Her tone was haunting in mirth, almost like a purr. “You take me for a *lady,*” she murmured. “How delightful!” She shifted her swords into one hand, then reached behind her head with the other and began unworking the knot at the nape of her neck. Soon her mass of raven hair tumbled down her back. “It seems the Mage has taken a liking to you, Trell,” she observed then. “You have the gods’ own luck.”

Or at least the blessing of a god, Trell thought. He adjusted the strap of his pack across his shoulder. “Why do you say that?”

“Surviving cave-in and river and cold,” she answered, giving him a strange look. “Isn’t that enough?”

Trell managed a crooked grin. “Oh...yes, of course. I just thought for a moment you meant because—”

“And now the Mage has taken a liking to you,” she repeated, grinning as she finished his sentence for him, “and that is lucky too.”

They reached a running brook, whose water seemed the color of the wet river stones that lined its basin. Vaile knelt at the creek's edge and splashed some water on her face and neck. Then she cupped her hands and drank.

Trell asked as he waited, "You are a Healer?"

Between sips, she replied into her hands, "You saw me heal, Trell." Lifting her eyes to him, she inquired with a knowing smile, "Why do you ask a question that has already been answered?"

Trell regarded her with a pensive frown. "Perhaps I am not so quick-witted when I find myself in such...unusual company."

She stood and pinned him with a challenging gaze. "Do you mean to say *I* am unusual?" Her bodice was now fully soaked down the front, rendering it nearly translucent.

Trell didn't attempt to hide his eyes as they admired her, nor his approving smile. "I think you are most unusual, my lady."

She laughed. "And you are charming—for a Northman."

Her unexpected statement pinned him fast. "A Northman," he repeated, surprise making his voice waver. "What makes you say that?"

She settled him an assessing look through half-lidded eyes, a very feline sort of gaze. Then she offered her hand...and a smile. "Come."

Trell took her hand despite himself. Her very touch tingled on his skin. Images of the two of them entwined in the Mage's massive ebony bed flashed to mind.

Fast reining in his desires, Trell reminded himself of the things he'd already seen this Vaile do; if she was a wielder, she might be working some sort of spell-pattern upon him. The idea made him twice as wary as he held her hand.

They were soon walking again, following the cool stream back towards the camp. Vaile pulled his hand in front of her and turned it up to study his palm.

Trell considered her carefully. "And what future do you read there, my lady?"

She glanced over at him beneath a fall of her silken hair, a pair of intense green eyes staring among the strands. The moment reminded Trell so strongly of a panther whose path he'd crossed in the jungles of Bemoth that he snatched his hand from her grip and reached for his sword all in the same reflexive instant.

Vaile stopped, blinked, and cast him a quizzical look. "What do you fear?" Her voice was low, echoic of a purr. "Not me, surely."

Trell stared at her. This was no mere woman to treat like a lady of the court. This woman was *dangerous*. She exuded threat with every effortless motion. "I think you are much to be feared, my lady."

"You are a guest here, Trell," Vaile posed, "just as I am, just as are Balaji and Loghain and the others you have yet to meet. Why would you think I intend you harm?"

Trell kept his distance, his fingers still wrapped firmly around the hilt of his sword. "Do you?"

At first her eyes widened, but then she fell into quiet laughter. The sound was honey to his ears, making him want to taste the mouth that made such a sound, to press his mouth against the throat that produced it. Oh, she was bewitching all right.

Vaile settled him a shadowy smile and tossed a silken strand of hair from her cheek. "Not at the moment."

Perhaps it was her candor that relaxed him, but Trell managed a slight smile and released his sword. “For some reason,” he observed as he fell back into step beside her, “that doesn’t reassure me.”

“It would mean my life if I harmed you,” she told him quite seriously then. They emerged from the forest to a glorious view of the expansive green valley and its crowning, white-capped mountains. “Every guest is safe under the Mage’s roof, Trell. His rules are sacrosanct. None would dare cross them.”

“Rules? What do you mean?”

She held her hand towards the camp that crowned the nearest hill, an amalgam of conjoined coppery tents. “This place is a *sa’reyth*. A sanctuary. Three hundred years ago, before Malachai’s terrible war, there were many such places where...” and here she paused, considered her words, “where those who were not welcome among human society could dwell in peace and safety. The *sa’reyths* were safe havens where enemies could meet on neutral ground, where the feuding races of Alorin could shelter together. The sanctuary rules were inviolate. This is the first of the *sa’reyths* to be restored, and we...we outcasts are grateful for its return.”

They reached a stream, and Vaile jumped its banks on light feet. Trell followed, asking as he regained her side, “How long has this sanctuary been here?”

She glanced over at him. “Since the Mage’s return.”

“Since his return from where?”

She arched a raven brow and replied with amusement, “I have not followed him in all of his travels.”

Trell frowned slightly. “I didn’t mean to pry. It’s just...”

She gave him a tolerant sort of look. “It is understandable for you to be curious about the Mage. But what of *your* history? Where do you hail from—besides, most recently, a well?”

Trell shook his head. “That is a loaded question, my lady. And one I can’t answer to even my own satisfaction. Five years ago I awoke in the Emir’s palace in Duan’ Bai with no memory of my former life or even my name. They called me Ama-Kai’alil or ‘man of the tides’ for many weeks.”

“Man of the tides,” she mused as if tasting of the words. “Why this name?”

“There is a city named ‘The Tides’ on the Akkad’s southeast coast—called Kai’alil in the desert tongue...” and here he shrugged.

She gazed at him with unexpected compassion. “And how did you come by your name today?”

Trell exhaled a measured breath. “I dreamed of it. It was an...odd dream. Now they call me ‘Trell of the Tides.’ I guess once a name has stuck...”

She nodded, looking sympathetic. Vaile took her blades into two hands again and began twirling them absently as they walked. Trell watched with appreciation for her skill. “It’s funny, but I don’t even know how old I am.”

She looked him up and down with one raised eyebrow. “Twenty and one, I would say, or twenty and two. I have an eye for the passing of mortal years.”

“You cannot have passed much more than that yourself, milady,” Trell noted, somewhat unconvinced by her pronouncement.

She laughed uproariously over this. “You do not have an eye, Trell of the Tides!” She gave him a friendly clap on the shoulder so he would know she was not offended. Then she shook her head and repeated through another bout of laughter, “No eye at all!”

Trell stared at her—at her unlined face, her smooth complexion, the line of her hip, the lift of her breasts. *Impossible. She cannot be more than a few years older than me!*

At the same time, he decided she could be correct about his own age, give or take a year. He’d been a youth like Balaji when he awoke in Duan’ Bai—ten and five, or perhaps ten and six?

Trell was pondering those days when he felt her eyes upon him and turned to find Vaile watching him again. “Do you regard everyone with such candor?” he asked by way of mild complaint.

“You are a handsome man, Trell of the Tides.” Vaile shifted her blades into one left hand and ran the other along his cheek. “You have the brooding gaze of a poet.” She took his hand and held it up for him to view. “You have the hands of a priest but the shoulders of a soldier and you speak with the wisdom of a scholar—when you are not acting the fool in front of beauty.” She dropped his hand and shrugged. “But this is hardly a fault, I think. A man who can appreciate beauty has a soft heart, unjaded as yet by life and loss.”

“You flatter me, my lady.”

“I speak things as I see them.” She flashed a devious look. “Were I not already paired, I might take you for a pet—a paramour to please my desires.”

“I doubt I’d enjoy being your pet,” Trell returned, and he added suggestively—because he couldn’t help himself, “but *pleasing* you wouldn’t be too terrible at all.”

She reached and cupped his cheek with a soft hand. “Take care what words you speak to a woman who never forgets, Trell of the Tides. Men come and go, but I...” and here she dropped her hand and turned her gaze away. “I endure.”

It was the first hint Trell had of the woman beneath; her intimations of heartache weren’t lost on him.

“But come.” She glanced his way with that elusive smile back in her eyes. The wall around her true emotions had returned, as impenetrable as ever. “Tonight is Loghain’s last evening with us, and Balaji has prepared a feast in celebration of his departure. We must see what the little one with the bold name has conjured up for dinner.” Catching Trell’s curious look, Vaile was quick to add, “Figuratively speaking, of course.”