

ALL THINGS ARE FORMED OF PATTERNS...

MELISSA MCPHAIL



CEPHRAEL'S  
HAND

A PATTERN OF SHADOW  
AND LIGHT

— BOOK 1 —

CEPHRAEL'S

HAND

SAMPLE CHAPTERS 1-3

A Pattern Of Shadow And Light  
Book One

MELISSA MCPHAIL

Books by Melissa McPhail

Cephrael's Hand

The Dagger of Adendigaeth

Paths of Alir

Kingdom Blades

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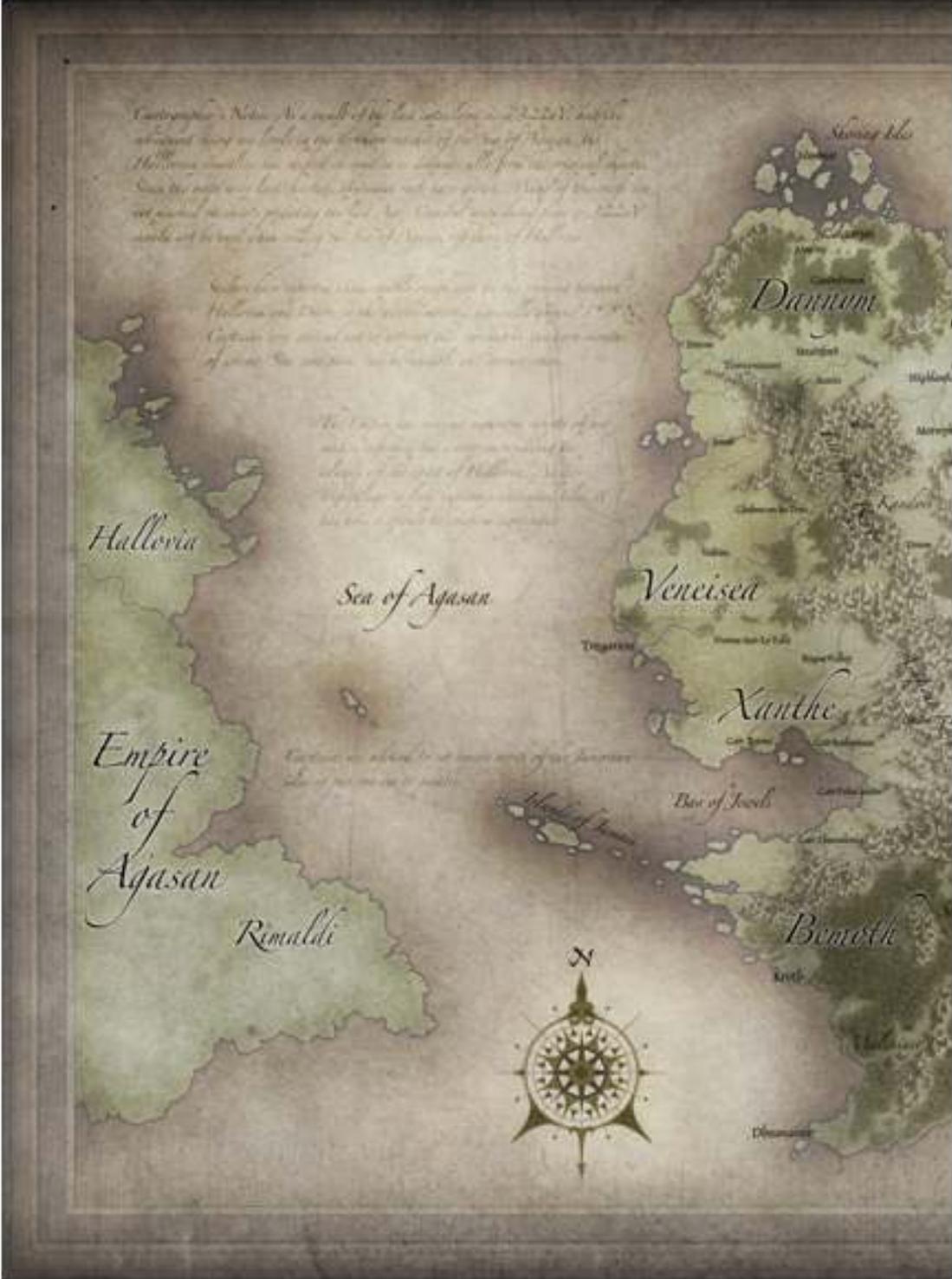
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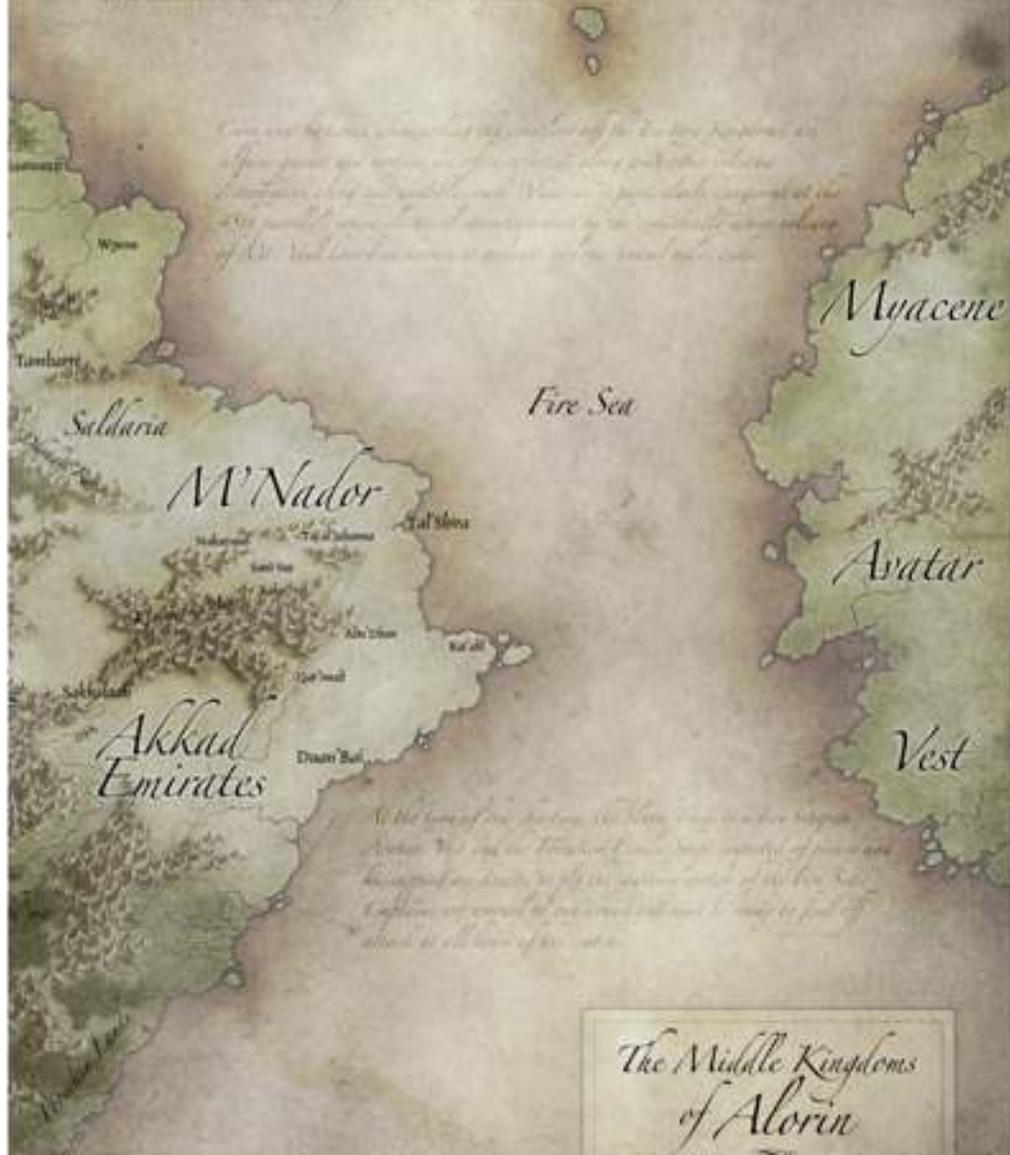
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# MAP OF ALORIN



*On the borders of Myacene, Vest and Vest and found between the White Kingdom and the  
East. The waters of the Sea are not unlike those of the White Kingdom, being  
shallow, but in color and nature. Some vessels are built along the deep water coast, about 180  
1800. Salween coast and all of Dorian and Myacene.*

*Can and be used, according to the account of the White Kingdom, as  
offering good and service in other respects, along with other islands  
of the coast, and in general, and West in general, which is not at all  
of the world, and is not at all, and is not at all, and is not at all,  
of the world, and is not at all, and is not at all, and is not at all.*



*In the time of the Empire, the Sea was a wide region  
between Vest and the Kingdom, and was a part of the sea and  
the Kingdom, and was a part of the sea and the Kingdom,  
and was a part of the sea and the Kingdom, and was a part of  
the sea and the Kingdom, and was a part of the sea and the Kingdom.*

*The Middle Kingdoms  
of Alorin*  
Charted on behalf of the Emperor by the Imperial Cartographers in  
the year of 1110, to reflect the existing islands of the East, and  
which is published from the Bureau of the Emperor, 1110.

## 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’kendar – 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, each branching with a 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.

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, saw 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 sensuous 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 towards 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.

# 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 was 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 estranged 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 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, his ebullient expression fading 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 spot.

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 towards 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 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 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 Ean's joy in his homecoming, leaving an 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 middle 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 materialized 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 made 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 furious 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 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 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 dragged 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, 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 desperately to find some 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, Caldar. The prince's fine destrier had made the crossing with the queen two moons ago, but Caldar seemed so out of place in 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 Caldar'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 employed to create the illusion of these creatures of myth...or that they were all victims of some magical hypnosis, made 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 was devoid 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 towards 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 known as 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, 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 the flora around him.

The renegade leader allowed the prince some few moments off his horse to rest and relieve himself. Afterwards, Ean slouched against a tree, casting hateful glares at the Shade. He admitted a perverse fascination with the creature and 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, himself.

Second, his capture by the madman with the dagger named Jeshuelle. The assassin had been dressed as a soldier, but he'd seemed far 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, impaled by the Shade's sword. 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 from Ean's chest through his entire form. Had the Shade not had him pinned to the tree with his power, Ean 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 own 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 alternating 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.

*Cephrael's Hand.*

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

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

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

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 chest. 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 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 towards wakefulness, ascending through twilit 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 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 see a stranger's peering down at him. Ean recognized neither the man nor the 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 line of new pink flesh. He knew Adept Healers had the talent to speed a body's ability 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 awl. 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 wherein time seemed to slow, the blade came spearing towards 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."

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 otherworldly 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 beauty.

*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 mount. A tall Agasi, Ware lost no height sitting the saddle of his lean desert horse. He was darkly bearded and shaggy-haired, but his blue eyes displayed an intelligence Trell had found common in men of the Empire; the Agasi were an educated people, be they 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 towards 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 with his gaze still fastened on 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 these 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 towards 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 a 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 smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"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 who work it.”

They were coming to the end of the trail, where a 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 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; 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 through. 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*, Trell 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. He reached into his satchel and retrieved a dagger. It had once belonged to Graeme and was therefore 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, Trell 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, Trell 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, Trell 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, Trell of the Tides.*

For the space of that moment, Trell 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, Trell rose and backed away from the water in the same manner as Istalar.

The holy man was waiting for him seventeen steps away. Trell 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 next 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 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 that streamed 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.

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 from the pool sloshed around Trell’s ankles and then rushed along into the darkness. 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? 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.”

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 towards 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 he couldn’t make out because of the roaring in the cavern—or perhaps it was the roaring in his ears.

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 choking pressure in his chest. He said a soldier's prayer for Istalar—the only one he knew—and then felt a surge of clarity and realized he was wasting precious time. The rock had sealed off his escape, but not the water's.

*Follow the water, Trel of the Tides.*

Trell looked down at the water swirling around his ankles, luminous and pale. The icy current tugged at his heels.

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

Trell went.

He chased the current, his head pounding painfully with every splash, while the water's light cast reflective shadows on the near walls. As he raced along, wet and shivering, 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. And all the while, the divine water communed with his spirit.

*Follow the water, Trel of the Tides...*

He lost track of time as he paced the water's flow through the chill caverns. His feet grew numb, and his sweat turned to shivering. By the time he found himself wading into a stream that eventually pooled around his waist, his teeth were a chattering echo. The current grew strong, and the water-light revealed the ceiling hovering close; there was no escape above and none behind.

*All this water, but it doesn't rise to claim me. And the current is getting stronger...*

There had to be an outlet.

Trell labored out of his boots. He checked to ensure his sword was secure, took three quick, deep breaths, and dove beneath the pool.

Icy fingers stabbed him, but he held his breath 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 barely wide enough to swim through.

*Daw!* It was agony to hold his breath for so long. He forced his arms and legs to drag him forward, but if the passage narrowed any more, he'd be trapped there, deep inside the mountain's guts.

*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.

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.

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, flailing helplessly until he struck against something and 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 the water 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 walls. 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.*