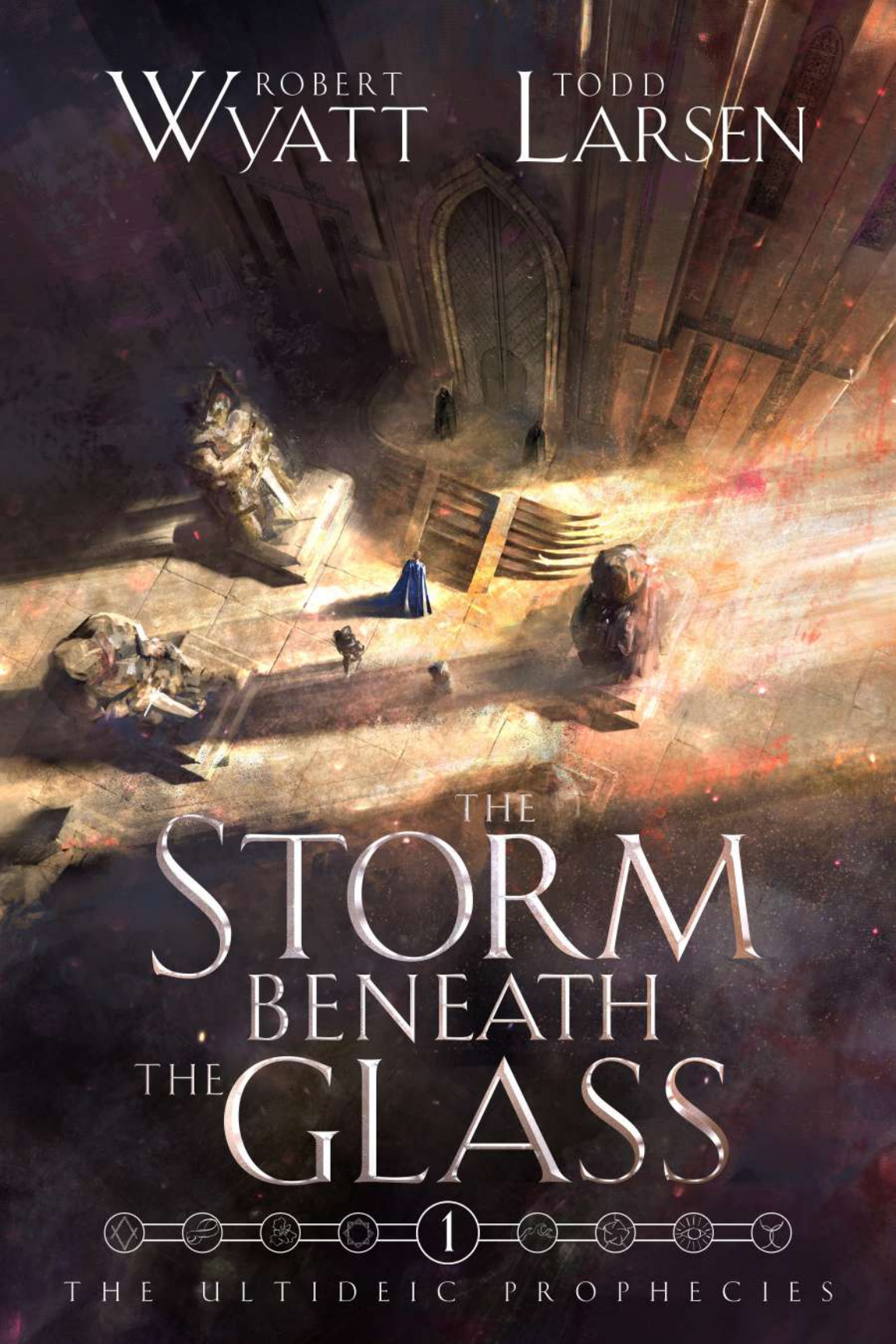
ROBERT WYATT
TODD LARSEN
THE STORM BENEATH THE GLASS
1
THE ULTIDEIC PROPHECIES

The Storm Beneath The Glass

GATESTONE
PUBLISHING

ROBERT WYATT
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Book 1 of The Ultideic Prophecies

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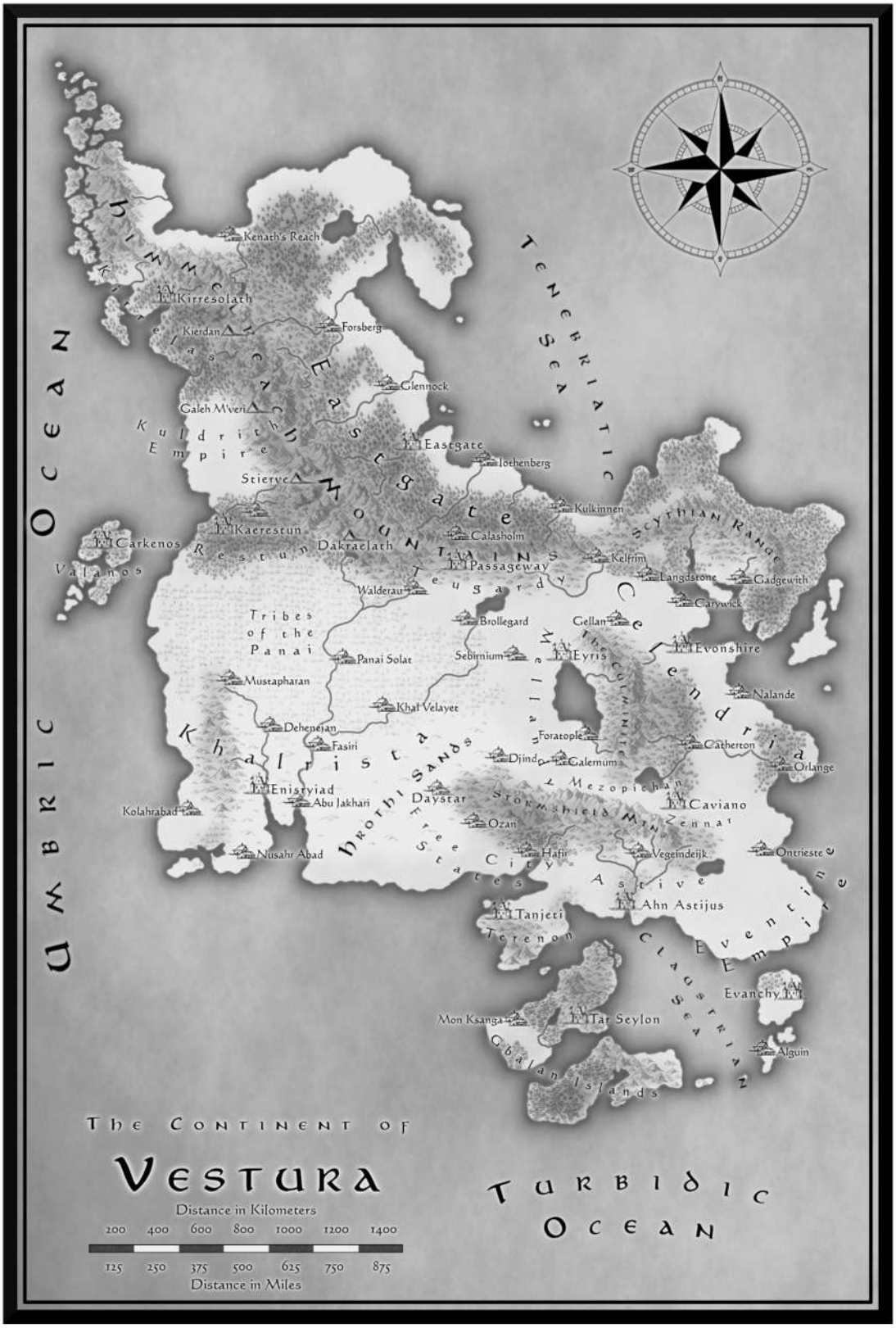
Dedicated to our beloved wives, Cindy and Angela, without whose patience and support through the many years this book might never have been possible.



The Continent of Vestura

Distance in Kilometers

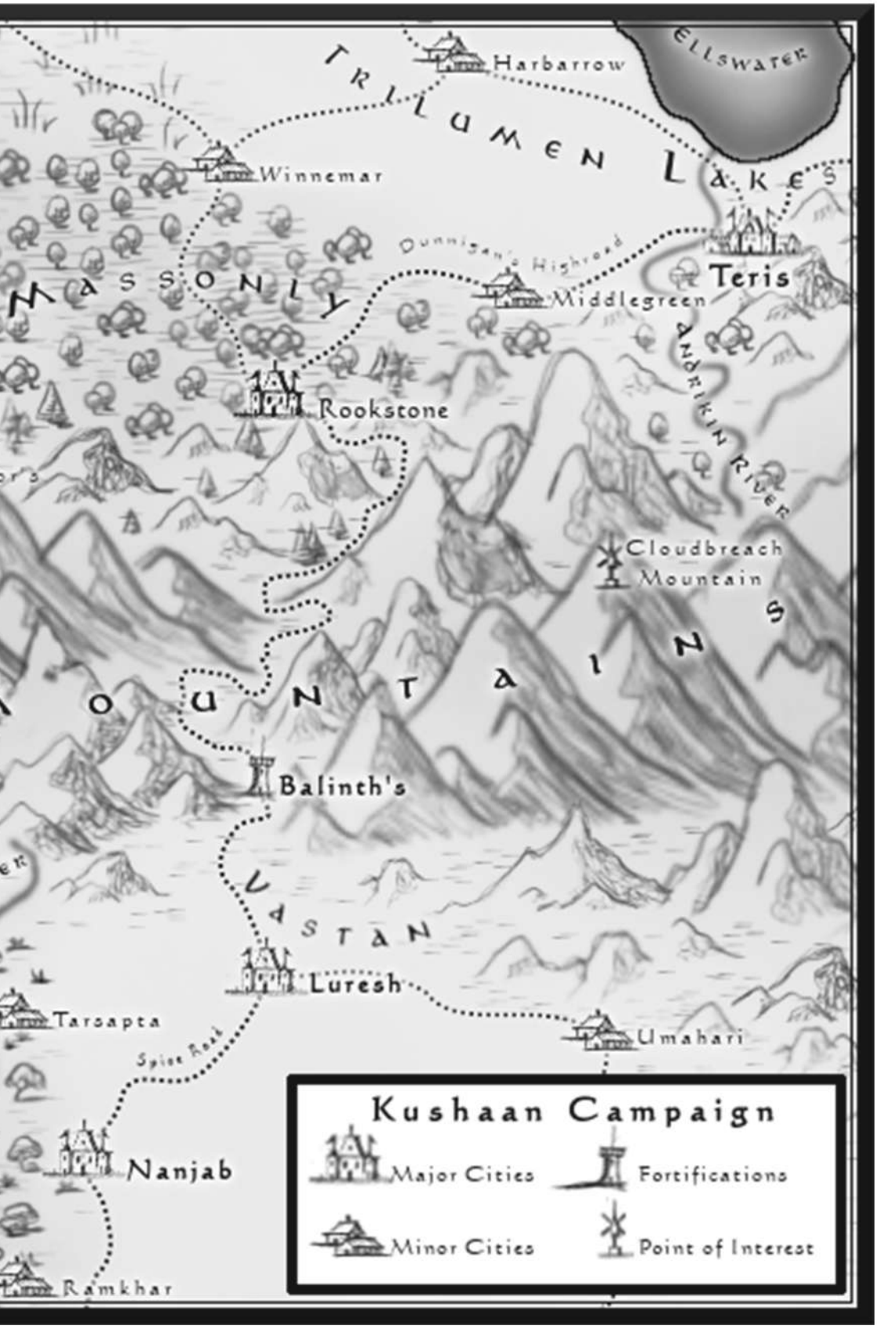
200 400 600 800 1000 1200 1400

125 250 375 500 625 750 875

Distance in Miles

Aurorlic Ocean
Umbric Ocean
Nordgard
Jorvik
Limgon Shu
Djuzhen
Tungaji Mts.
Sarrsfjord
Tseganuur
Campertia
Nowsli Hordes
Sierrandora Peaks
Khar
Washi Dawa
Thalassa
Calavia
Maltagena
Habenstock
Candin
Wakaru
Vartosa
Calavia
Renstadt
Ibaru
Shunikawa
Gilterrada
Lithowen Range
Gulf of Inchari
Tennury
Steadleigh
Banbridge
Remalia
Deock
Bright
Teris
Velspar Mountains
Kiruvesi
Jhari
Kolrathi Wilds
Sumapra
Luresh
Kushaan
Wararíki
Bangarh
Sarakesh
Kochwari
Dipoor
Rajpura
Kashpur
Rishakesh
Emerald Sea
Traders
Sanupalava
Nassasa
Ruarda Mts.
The Continent of
Iuventia
Distance in Kilometers
200 400 600 800 1000 1200 1400
125 250 375 500 625 750 875
Distance in Miles

REMALIA
Malwen River
Main River
Holbrooke
Steading Stones
Snowdun Crag
The Te-go Nest
Ruins at Elginfir
VELSPAR
Sunapra
Meer River
Sheerbahar
Monuments at Hiroi
Parahati River
Bajna
KUSHAAN
Sengali


Ellswater
Harbarrow
Trilumen Lakes
Winnemar
Dunnigan's Highroad
Middlegreen
Teris
Andrikin River
Rookstone
Cloudbreach Mountain
Balinth's
Lastan
Luresh
Tarsapta
Umahari
Spice Road
Nanjab
Ramkhar
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Point of Interest

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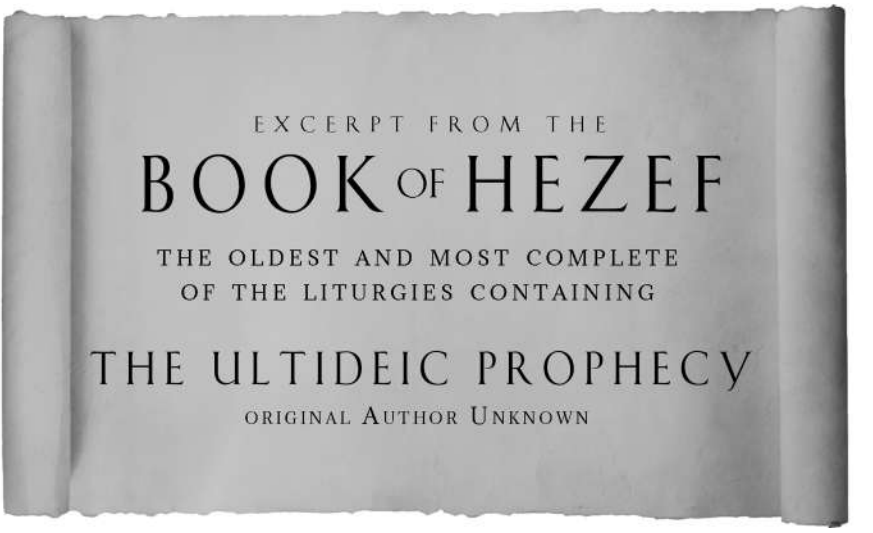

1. I heard a voice calling me by name. And I looked heavenward, and behold, a window into the heavens was opened unto me, and a voice as of a chorus of eight trumpets—for the ninth remained silent—spake unto me, and I was sore afraid.
2. I beheld a being clothed in robes that surpassed the brightness of the noonday sun. The countenance of the being was of such glory that I could scarce look upon it, and my hands were for naught to shield my eyes from the radiance thereof. And the being had eight faces—for the ninth was apart from the others, whose face was without form, and void—and the brightness thereof was so great that I could scarce make out one from another.
3. And the voice was as of thunder, and spake unto me, saying, "Come hither, Prophet, and I shall shew unto thee the Will which shall henceforth come to pass."
4. And immediately I was brought as it were by my spirit through the window of heaven, even unto a sea of glass, spread out before me both to the right and to the left and before me, beyond sight.
5. Behind me was a throne room set in heaven, with eight thrones—for the ninth was apart from the others—of purest gold which shone above the brightness of the sun.

6. One was of the finest workmanship, inlaid with bdellium and lapis and jasper, and all manner of fine carving. Another was of the straightest of lines, perfect in its exactness. And each throne was of a peculiar workmanship in its own right so as to denote which was the work of each.
7. The voice said unto me, "Look." And I looked and beheld the sea of glass. And beneath the glass stretched the tapestry of Creation, upon which all nations and peoples, all mountains and deserts and waters known to men were sewn.
8. And I beheld that the tapestry was of wondrous workmanship, so fine that I could not see the end of it. So great was it that its threads numbered more than the sands of the deserts and the stars in the heavens.
9. I looked at the nations thereupon, and lo, the skies gathered a storm to unleash upon the nations of the earth. And the Eight rode upon the storm—for the Ninth stood apart from the others—crowned in the glory of lightning, armed with great bows and arrows.
10. And the thunder and the howling thereof began as a distant whisper and grew in might until it filled the measure of its coming.
11. The storm was born in the East, but it was the Center before it was the East. And such was the force of the storm that it covered all the tapestry. Mighty were the works of the storm.
12. And I beheld the storm beneath the glass as it billowed forth across the tapestry. And the winds thereof held exceeding fury.
13. Fierce thunderings shook the land. And the people upon the tapestry quaked in fear and ran before the noise thereof, some here and some there. But the nations recognized it not.
14. And behold, the Nine were the storm, and the storm was the Nine.
15. And the nations were consumed thereby, and bewailed the storm-shattered peace, and there was nowhere to hide from the storm.

16. Lightnings flashed, and voices sounded, even to shake the people.
17. A rain fell upon the tapestry in a great torrent, and where the rain covered the people, contention was sown, and a great clamor grew. Wars and rumors of wars spread throughout the land upon the winds of the storm and everywhere the rain fell.
18. And the seeds of the tempest were sown, and great was the contention thereof. Neighbor turned against neighbor, friend against friend, fathers turned against their sons, and mothers against their daughters.
19. And I saw a great serpent was born of the tempest.
20. And the serpent began to writhe about on the winds of the storm. Great was the destruction that came thereof. And the shadow of the serpent spanned the tapestry, covering all the threads thereof in a brume of darkness.
21. The serpent was held aloft by the winds of the storm, and the storm was sustained by the fury of the serpent. And the serpent had legs in number of nine. His head was wreathed in fire and lightning.
22. And the serpent roared with the thunder of a thousand thousand trumpets. And the golden thrones shook where they stood above the glass.
23. The mouth of the serpent was lined with teeth like spears, countless as the stars, and poison fell from its teeth like rain. And a hail of blood fell across all the face of the tapestry, and upon all the inhabitants thereof.
24. And the serpent hungered and gorged itself upon the peoples of Creation, but its hunger could not be satisfied.
25. And the fangs of the serpent fell upon the people, and there was death. And great were the lamentations of the people. The cries of those who mourned exceeded even the mighty trumpets of the storm. And I tried to stop my ears, but my hands were of naught, and I could scarce bear the sound of it.
26. I cried for the being with the eight faces to end my suffering, but my voice was lost in the tumult and lamentations beneath the glass.
27. The Eight began to see—for the Ninth remained apart—

that the serpent and the storm would not carry them all. And great were the trumpets they carried. Mighty were the thunderings that blasted forth as they blew upon the trumpets. Fearsome were their bows and their arrows.

28. And the people of the tapestry heard the voices of the Nine, and their lamentations became the songs of praise and the prayers of the faithful. And a lull in the storm fell upon Creation for a season.
29. After a season, the songs of praise became the horns of war. And the tumult across the tapestry was great. And the nations were shaken and began to fall.
30. And I beheld a great commotion issued forth from among the people, some crying here, and others crying there. And the nations began to assemble with the Nine, some here, and some there—though the Ninth stood apart and scorned them.
31. And a door like unto a tomb was opened in the tapestry, among the threads of the mountains, and a great multitude was called to join the nations.
32. And the voice from the stones issued forth across the tapestry, calling anew. And the people began to hear and give heed. The voice spake as one of old, though it were new. And it came forth out of the stones to lead the people.
33. The voice from the stones was not a voice of thunder, neither a voice of trumpets, but a voice that did pierce to the quick.
34. And I looked, and behold the Eight on the storm contended one with another—for the Ninth stood apart. And as it was in heaven, so it was across the face of the tapestry.
35. Nevertheless, the voice came forth as a stone rolling forth from the mountains, gathering power and might as it fell. And none there were who could stop it.
36. And lo, there was a banner to the nations erected, and on the banner a sword of flame and a crown of light. And lo, the banner rent in twain, and all the people were divided to one side or another.
37. And a third part of the hosts of the tapestry aligned them-

selves with the banner of the crown. And a third of the nations did likewise.

38. Yet a third part of the hosts of the tapestry followed after the banner of the flaming sword, with their spears and their javelins and their swords and their arrows. And a third of the nations did likewise.
39. And a third part fell by the wayside, joining themselves not to one part or another, and having no power to act, but only to be acted upon. And they fell beneath the banners and were trampled.
40. And behold, the land divided in two. And the Eight contended among the nations. And some there were that sought after the Ninth, and contended against the Eight.
41. And the armies of crown and sword filled the tapestry. So great was the contention thereof that the heavens shook.
42. And I heard a multitude of voices in the heavens, crying out as it were from beyond the stars to the armies upon the tapestry beneath the glass, some shouting for triumph, others pleading for peace. But the armies heard them not.
43. And the nations gathered for a mighty battle. The dust from their feet rose up, even till it blotted out the sun. And the sun became as dark as soot. And the moons became as ash. And the gloaming of the gods commenced.
44. And one by one the golden thrones began to fall from their place, even as the pillars before Vayen-elan in her fury, burning as it were a lamp whose oil is spent until only two thrones remained.
45. And the Eight that were Two rode forth at the head of their armies, one against the other.
46. And the great serpent went before them. Behind them followed a hail of brimstone and fire. And a third part of the nations were consumed. And a third part of the trees were burned and a third of the ships were lost to the waves of the sea.
47. And the Two strove against one another as their armies did battle. And great was the destruction thereof.
48. And the threads of the oceans became as blood. And the

threads of mountains, also. Yea, the threads of the whole tapestry ran crimson.

50. And so great were the strivings and the contentions and the warfare of the nations and the Two that the tapestry should be torn asunder.
51. But behold, and lo, the armies of One bowed the knee. And the Nine became One. And the Will was made manifest.
52. And the winds of the tempest did cease, and the serpent fell from the sky, and great was the fall thereof.
53. And the One returned to the heavens to rest for a season. And there was a silence across the land.
54. And the people of the tapestry knew peace.
55. And I was left alone in darkness till the sea of glass faded from sight.
56. And I remembered no more.
57. Thus it finished.

CHAPTER I
ANDRIC

"Duke Garamond is the one I'm worried about." King Jevorak leaned back in his armchair, concern written in his steel-blue eyes. The hint of a frown tugged at the corners of his mouth that was framed by a carefully groomed, graying beard. A fire blazed in a large fireplace, warming the king's private study. Spring had come late to Teris, and mornings still felt the chill of winter's grasp. "I need his troops in the field, as much for the extra lances when we march against Kushaan as to keep him from causing mischief at home while we're away. If we don't find some way to bring him around, we will have to leave a much larger contingent behind to secure the region."

Prince Andric reached for a stray lock of his sandy-brown hair as he tried to think of something useful to say, but stopped himself, not wanting to draw a rebuke from his father. He had no idea what the king could do to convince the stubborn Duke of Massonly to commit more than the token force he had already offered, and the prince found it difficult to muster more than a passing concern for the matter at all. Today was the beginning of the annual Charge Days celebrations, and all Andric wanted was to be out of the palace. The festivities didn't begin until tomorrow, but anything had to be better than sitting in these interminable discussions with his father and the king's advisers.

The holiday was officially called the Days of Hamoth's Charge. It was a celebration and commemoration of the famed battle centuries past when King Hamoth had rallied his people and led a great charge of thousands of

cavalry to face the overwhelming barbarian hordes, to stave off certain destruction and carve out a united Kingdom of Remalia. The festivities covered three days that included a day of fasting and religious devotions, a day of contests, tournaments, and martial displays—including a retelling of Hamoth's victory—ending with a day of grand celebrations and feasting.

Today was Preparations Day, the first of the three-day celebration. Breakfast was the only meal of the day, followed by a day-long fast until breakfast the next morning. Evening devotions would be held at the temples. The day commemorated the deprivations and sacrifices made by their forefathers in the days of great strife and the blessings of the gods in saving the people from destruction and granting them victory over their enemies.

"My lord," Crown Prince Stephir said cautiously, his green eyes fixed on the king. "Perhaps it would be wise to wait one more year. Even without Garamond's additional troops, the losses to our food stores in the Vastan Province this winter make it difficult to see how we can sustain a campaign of more than a few months."

Andric knew his older brother had more fundamental objections to the proposed war than just logistics, but he hadn't voiced them to their father in several weeks. This was no doubt Stephir's last attempt to speak his mind before they held the war council this evening and their path forward became set in stone.

Before the king replied, High General Kuymon shook his balding head in disagreement. "The Curritan and Kesh Provinces will have plenty of food to augment our supplies once we take them. You've done an admirable job of establishing our supply lines, Your Highness, and I'm sure we will have what we need to sustain—" Kuymon stopped as the door to the King's study opened and a guard stepped into the room.

Light glinted off the guard's polished armor and the steel head of his halberd. It was unusual for the Divinarim, the holy knights that guarded the royal family and the palace, to interrupt these sessions. "Forgive the intrusion, Your Majesty. Minister Turtan says he has an urgent matter to report."

"Very well, send him in," the king said heavily, clearly not happy to have any more to worry about.

Andric guessed his father was relieved to not address Stephir's concerns again. The prince gazed through the large windows that faced the soaring, snowcapped peaks of the Velspar Mountains to the south. If all went according to the king's plans, they would be on the other side of those mountains, fighting the Kushaani within a month's time. The prospect of finally seeing his first battle thrilled him. He would fight in the Charge Days tourna-

ment tomorrow as he had the previous two years, but no tourney bout could compare to real battle.

"Your Majesty, my lords and lady," Minister Turtan said, bowing with the formality and flourish characteristic of the clerics of the goddess Sharin Dara. "I apologize for interrupting, but I just received word of another incident at a temple in the city. I thought you should be informed immediately."

Andric recognized the sudden anger written in the hard set of his father's face. "Go on," the king instructed.

"Of course, my lord. It was the Temple of Venerate Alscome, the Teraithian temple in the Oettan District. Several clergy and temple guards were killed or injured, and the building was badly damaged. They're claiming..." Minister Turtan paused, pursing his lips, and took a deep breath before continuing, "...claiming that they were attacked by a celestial creature."

"Someone summoned a daemon to attack a Teraithian temple?" Stephir asked in disbelief. "It seems more likely it was one of their own that got out of control."

Temples were permitted to summon creatures from the realms of their respective deities for use inside the temples, but otherwise summoning was forbidden in the Kingdom of Remalia. Temples of the goddess Teraithia were known to sometimes summon ferocious daemons to guard their brimming treasure vaults.

"The Teraithians are claiming it was a creature from the realm of the Holy Couple."

"Of course they would say that," Stephir said dismissively. "We all know the Teraithians have been getting more aggressive in their efforts to undermine the other faiths. I wouldn't put it past them to orchestrate this attack so they can blame a rival church."

Remalia had no official state religion, but it was generally known that the royal family favored Yonvaar and Kerail, the Holy Couple, largely due to the late queen's influence. Although she had died when the princes were young, King Jevorak had allowed them to follow in their mother's footsteps. Perhaps because Stephir remembered more of their mother than Andric did, his brother remained singularly devout to the Holy Couple, though he eschewed the title Servari, the name given to those who worshipped the god and goddess who espoused love and service to others as the highest virtue. Andric instead chose to see the best in the worship of each of the nine deities.

"I wouldn't be too quick to rule this out as a retaliatory move by one of the other churches," Andric said, tactfully disagreeing with his older brother.

High Consul Penrossart, the presiding high priestess of the Sharinist faith

in Remalia and one of King Jevorak's closest advisors, finally spoke. "Unfortunately, I believe you may be right, Your Highness. There is certainly plenty of blame to be leveled on all sides. I fear the religious strife is getting worse, and if not abated soon, it may reach a tipping point. With so many pilgrims in the city for Charge Days, we could be facing riots if we don't respond swiftly."

"Then let me go as a representative of the crown and assess the situation," Andric urged his father. "I can ensure there is security in the area and ensure that further violence will not be tolerated from any quarter."

"If I didn't know better, I might suspect you were trying to escape this session," the high consul said with a slight smirk, a rare moment of her mild playfulness coming through. Turning to the king, she continued. "Prince Andric's suggestion does have merit, Your Majesty. A personal response from a member of the royal family would likely help mollify the Teraithians and reinforce that ending the violence is a priority for the crown."

"Very well," the king said. "But I insist you take a double contingent of Divinarim. And tell the city guard I want increased patrols in the Oettan District. And I want daily reports about their investigation into the attack until the perpetrators are arrested."

"Of course, Father." Andric shot Stephir a subtle, gloating glance as he quickly rose from his seat before anyone could change their mind.

"And make sure you're back in time for the evening devotions. We need all the divine support we can get before the war council," the king added.

Andric gave a perfunctory bow. "Will you be needing anything else from Minister Turtan? If not, I could use his assistance."

"You may go," Jevorak said to the priest, who bowed much more elegantly than Andric had then followed the prince out of the room.

Andric stopped to speak to the knights that stood guard outside the king's study. "I am going into the city. Please arrange to have guards join me at the White Gate."

"A double contingent of guards," Minister Turtan clarified as Andric moved on with the priest at his side and two Divinarim trailing them.

"Yes, thank you," Andric replied flatly. Six knights to escort him through the city seemed completely unnecessary, but he let it go. It was a small price to pay to get out of the palace. He needed to dress the part if he was going to be on official business, so he headed for his room to change, questioning Turtan as they walked along the sunlit corridor.

"What do you think is really going on with the attack?" Andric asked.

The minister had a network of eyes and ears throughout the kingdom,

especially here in the capital city of Teris. The man seemed to always know more about what was happening than he let on. Andric knew of a handful of plots Turtan had quashed before they were carried out and was sure there were many more he never heard about. He was tempted to take the minister into the city with him, but he already knew the priest would politely decline.

"I hear many rumors of these kinds of actions being contemplated, Your Highness, but this one, I am troubled to say, came as a complete surprise."

"So you have no idea what happened?" Andric asked dubiously.

"Well, I wouldn't quite say that. The Teraithians appear to be behind many of the misfortunes suffered by other churches in recent months, but it has proved difficult to find sufficient evidence to charge them with. Frustration is mounting among certain factions over the perceived lack of justice, so I am inclined to agree with your assessment that this is probably a retaliatory strike. The Dorothi would normally be my first guess, but this business with the summoning does not fit their usual patterns. This may simply be what it appears to be—an attack by the Servari."

They arrived at Andric's quarters, and he didn't bother to wait for a servant to come assist with changing. He quickly worked on the ties and buttons of the quilted wool doublet as Minister Turtan continued.

"This probably has nothing to do with the attacks, but it could prove useful in your questioning of the temple's seraph. My sources indicate that the man frequents the Sykorian temples and has been using his temple's funds to pay for his indecorous habits."

The Sykorians were known to offer patrons indulgences in keeping with their goddess's hedonistic doctrines.

"You want me to blackmail the seraph?" Andric asked, curling his lip in disgust.

"No, nothing so uncouth as that. It's just a piece of information to keep tucked away until it might prove useful to clear an obstacle or loosen his tongue."

Andric only half-listened as Turtan continued offering advice on how to conduct the royal inquiry. He enjoyed being warmed by the bright morning sunlight streaming through the large windows. His room commanded a breathtaking view that extended from the Trilumen Lakes northward to the snowcapped peaks of the Lithowen Range in the east, providing a majestic backdrop to the awe-inspiring temples and other structures that shared prominence with the royal palace atop the Mount of the Gods, the broad hill that rose up in the midst of Teris against the imposing backdrop of the Velspar Mountains.

The vast city proper stretched out below the Mount in a sweeping arc. Unlike the grand buildings crowning the Mount, which were made of the most exotic and rare materials from around the world, much of the city was constructed of ordinary stone and wood with slate or gray tiled roofs, slanted to keep the occasional snowfall from building up during harsher winters. The occasional copper roofs dotting the cityscape, green with age, stood out from the rest of the charcoal-colored rooftops.

The pristine blocks of the rare white granite brought from the Tybalan Hills far to the north were visible at the edges of the huge Celendrian rug covering the floor. The sunlight sparkled brilliantly off the reflective flecks in the stone, giving them an unexpected splash of color and setting a dazzling background for the vibrant curtains and tapestries that adorned the walls.

He opened a pair of large armoires and selected a pair of dark blue trousers, high black leather boots, a long-sleeved white blouse, and a black vest with gold embroidery. The vest and loose blouse were more in the fashion of Calavia, but they happened to be in vogue within the higher social circles in Remalia, which suited Andric nicely. From a polished brass stand, he lifted his royal sash made of elegant blue and heavy white velvet, embroidered with the thread-of-gold rearing stallion of his family crest. He fastened it about his waist and over his shoulder in a practiced manner.

It was becoming increasingly popular for noblemen to wear swords outside, but Andric usually chafed at the discomfort. Only the royal family and the Divinarim were permitted to carry weapons in the palace, so going without one was not at all conspicuous. However, during the Charge Days, he was expected to wear one. He buckled his gilded longsword as he faced the armoires. He considered a heavy cloak to protect against any chill, but instead chose a light gray riding cloak and quickly fastened it on his shoulders. The cloak hung awkwardly, being hampered by the sword, but there wasn't much to do about it.

"Thank you for your assistance, Minister Turtan," Andric said, checking the mirror to ensure his wavy, sandy-brown hair and clothes were presentable before hurrying out of his chambers. "I will have a report sent to you later."

The priest bowed as Andric strode out of the room, followed by his two Divinarim protectors. Andric nodded politely to those he passed as he made his way through the palace's sunlit corridors.

Once outside, he crossed the sprawling palace grounds toward the royal stables. The night's frost quickly turned into morning dew wherever the sun found it, the shadows the last fading refuge of the lingering cold. Andric did

his best to stay in the warm sunlight and wished he had chosen his winter cloak when he passed through the cold shadows.

He had sensed for weeks, with unsuppressable anticipation, the life force finally seeping out of the depths of the world to the surface as the overdue sun burned away the blanket of frost and snow under which the world slept. Andric had been fooled in past years when a week or two of warm weather seemed to hail the arrival of spring, only to have his hopes dashed when winter roared back in with a mocking vengeance. This year, with the slush and mud accompanying the thawing season finally behind them, Andric felt life finally flowing back into him as well.

Teris was not a place known for harsh winters (at least according to others), but neither could they be called mild. It was not uncommon for the snow to arrive and stay for several months, especially in the eastern foothills of the Velspar Mountains where the city of Teris stood. Teris was one of the mightiest cities on Baon and the capital city of the Kingdom of Remalia.

Andric spent all winter dreaming of the warmer days of summer. That was still a few months away, but today he was in high spirits and grateful to have escaped the confines of the palace. Although the clear skies the night before had meant a cold morning, it boded well for a beautiful day ahead.

Arriving at last at one of the stable gates with his Divinarim in tow, Andric entered the central stableyard and scanned the grounds for the stable-master. The stables, while magnificently constructed, only housed the score of horses that belonged to the royal family. Most visitors to the palace were required to leave their horses at one of the larger stables outside the wall that ringed the Mount of the Gods. The king had a much larger stable in the countryside where his horses were bred, trained, and housed when not residing in the palace stables. Andric rarely visited those anymore, though he had enjoyed spending time there as a boy.

The palace stables were built over a hundred years ago by Andric's third great-grandfather. According to the histories that Andric had been required to study growing up, Hovac Laconeus was an eccentric but visionary man who wanted to bring pieces of the wide world to Teris. Remalians didn't take easily to change, and many of Hovac's projects had not endured down through the years to Andric's day. The palace stables were the most notable exception.

Built in the style of Byanthine, a powerful empire that existed halfway around the world in the days of Hovac, Andric felt they were a spectacular contrast to traditional Terisian architecture. Forged from centuries of war, the Kingdom of Remalia was built first and foremost with utility and endurance

in mind, and the palace was no exception. Although beautifully adorned with masterpiece paintings, tapestries, and sculptures, the massive and austere structure was built with the finest materials, constructed to endure to the end of time.

In contrast, the royal stables were a breathtaking masterpiece of impossibly delicate and ornately sculpted stone and wood meshed into lifelike scenes of the military exploits of Hovac and his forefathers, wild herds of horses on the plains of Remalia, and forests, mountains, and seas. Hovac had enlisted master craftsmen from Byanthine who used *met'elan* to imbue their otherwise fragile work with the strength to withstand the ravages of nature and time. While not every king since Hovac appreciated his contribution to the palace complex, none of them could bring themselves to destroy or even alter the magnificent structure. Andric often found it amusingly ironic that their horses, admittedly some of the finest in the world, lived in more opulence than the king.

Andric continued into the courtyard toward the smallest of the three corrals and called to a lean woman with steel-colored hair who was giving attention to a young filly and a stable hand. The woman wore a simple white sash over a red vest, the sign of her station as stablemaster. Upon seeing the prince, she quickly finished her instructions to the young man, then briefly whispered to the filly, gently stroking her neck as she handed the horse's tether to the stable hand. After a moment she turned and made her way toward the prince.

"Milord, how can I be of service?" she asked, bowing with her hand over her heart. Her voice bespoke respect. The woman's weather-worn and tanned skin was edged with a few age lines, and her manner was infused with kindness and patience.

"Good morning to you, Mistress Teer. And good Charge Days. Will you ready Wind and six more for me?" Andric asked warmly. He liked the stablemaster. She had held her position for many years before Andric was even born. It was Mistress Teer who had taught Andric to ride. Her exceptional affinity for training and caring for animals was unparalleled in the kingdom. Andric grew up hearing rumors that although she was no elantir, Mistress Teer used the arcane powers of met'elan to bewitch the animals. Andric had outgrown such superstition, but he did not doubt the stablemaster connected with her animals in a way that bordered on the mystical.

"Certainly, Your Highness." Mistress Teer shouted the order toward the stables, and three nearby stable hands immediately leaped into action. "Milord is in unusually high spirits today," she observed.

The prince had always been impressed by Mistress Teer's sense of empathy, not only with animals but with all those around her. Andric had asked her about it once. She had smiled patiently and explained that it wasn't a thing she had learned, like training animals, but rather a gift from the gods she had been blessed with since her youth. She then imparted a bit of wisdom.

'We all have special gifts, milord Andric, but we must guard how we use them. With them, we may improve life or degrade it.'

With youthful fervor, Andric had asked how to know the difference, and Mistress Teer's eyes had seemed to sparkle as she chuckled.

'If you ever figure it out, you must share the secret with me. See that you always do your best to improve life for yourself and especially for those around you.'

Though the words could have been easily dismissed by the young prince, they had made an impact and kept him often turning to the stablemaster for advice on more than just horses. Whether it had been a touch of prophecy or just a profound insight on Mistress Teer's part, the stablemaster had touched on Andric's deepest longing—to truly make a difference in the world. He had not yet discovered any gifts that seemed particularly beneficial to anyone.

Stephir, on the other hand, had been abundantly endowed with gifts. He was the ideal charismatic, decisive, and astute prince that any kingdom could hope for. He had become their father's right hand. Andric was not jealous of his brother's skills or even of his position. On the contrary, Stephir had ensured they developed a close relationship despite the ten-year difference between them. Together with their middle sister Hellen, his siblings had practically helped raise Andric. But Stephir had married when Andric was just six, and Hellen had married a few years later and left to live in Tennury with her husband's family.

Even though Stephir now had two children of his own, he still connected with his younger brother and helped him feel they were on even footing. At times, Andric was grateful for having a lighter load of responsibility; it freed him to pursue more entertaining activities. Besides, Andric was not sure if he could ever live up to the expectations placed on Stephir. However, the older Andric got, the more he found it frustrating and disappointing that his father never entrusted him with any real responsibility. Perhaps one day that would change.

None of that was allowed to stay on the prince's mind today. Andric inhaled deeply and smiled at the stablemaster. "High spirits indeed. Not even the morning cold can keep me shackled today," he boasted, stretching his arms wide in a gesture of freedom. Unfortunately, his cloak flew open, and a

sudden chill ran down his spine and he shivered violently, his skin turning to goose flesh.

"It seems it would rather shake Milord to death," Mistress Teer chuckled.

They spoke casually for a few minutes until the stable hands approached, leading a beautiful dappled white mare and six heavy destriers Remalia was so well known for. Andric walked around his horse, nodding in approval at the obvious care she had received from the skilled stablemaster and her staff. He patted the mare gently on her neck. The coat's glossy sheen and softness belied the hard muscles that tensed under his touch. She seemed as eager as he was to enjoy the sun that the day promised. Taking the reins, Andric mounted Wind and bid Mistress Teer a good day.

Two additional Divinarim joined the prince's party, one on each side and two behind. Only the royal family was permitted to ride while on the Mount of the Gods, so the Divinarim escorted the prince on foot. Andric usually didn't mind the slow pace, but today it bothered him. He trotted slowly out of the stable yard gate and wound his way through the broad, tree-lined paths of the palace gardens, recently reawakened from their winter slumber. Within minutes, he made his way onto the Grand Avenue.

The Grand Avenue was eight times as broad as any other road in the city and cut a straight course from the front steps of the palace, north across the Mount of the Gods, down through the city to Hightowers' Gate, and into the countryside. The palace, which stood at the southern end of the Mount facing north, shared its vantage with seven other edifices: six temples, one to each of the gods with the exceptions of Sykoria and Akraharr, (and the Holy Couple, Yonvaar and Kerail, who required only one place of worship), and the House of Falan, headquarters of Remalia's military. The eight buildings faced the Grand Avenue running down the center of the Mount, all bound together and separated from the rest of the city by the inner wall set like a gleaming white granite crown upon the head of the Kingdom of Remalia.

Wind's iron-shod hooves clicked loudly on the cold, close-fitting cobblestones. As Andric approached the White Gate leading from the Mount out to the city proper, he heard a busy workday well underway. There had been an unusually high level of activity in Teris leading to the Charge Days' celebrations. What most people didn't know was that the heightened activity was not a coincidence. The king was using this year's Charge Days to mask preparations for a possible war with Kushaan.

Two more Divinarim awaited the prince at the White Gate, halberds gleaming in the morning sun. In addition to guarding the royal family, the Teraithian holy knights in the Order of the Divine Flame were also given the

sacred duty of guarding the Mount of the Gods, the most sacred site in all of Remalia, perhaps even the whole of Baon. Today there was a larger-than-normal contingent of the Divinarim guarding the White Gate. Outside, the city guard and several soldiers from the army worked together to manage the crowd that was already gathering.

Each year, on Preparations Day, all Remalians were invited to the Mount of the Gods to attend the temple of their choice for the evening devotion. Many already lined the Grand Avenue outside the White Gates, waiting for their chance to enter. For many who lived in the city, this was an annual tradition. For most in the kingdom, it was a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to the grand temple of their chosen god. By sundown, the crowd would stretch down the Grand Avenue and along many of the side streets.

"Good morning, Your Highness," a knight greeted the prince as both men saluted sharply, right arms across their chests and fingertips touching the pole of their halberds. Andric nodded his acceptance of the courtesy. "I understand we are headed to the Temple of Venerate Alscome in the Oettan District."

"We'll be stopping by the Library of Selmarine first," Andric answered.

"Of course, my lord."

All six Divinarim stepped on the mounting blocks, attended by squires in white and blue livery to help the armored knights onto their mounts. The guards knew well where the obscure Viancian temple was located. It was one of the few places Andric regularly visited in the city. Today was not just a casual social call to see his friend though. He wanted Barak's help investigating the attack on the Teraithian temple. Not that Barak had any particular expertise in the matter, but the young scholar was one of the most brilliant minds Andric had ever known, and often saw connections that others missed.

Andric nudged Wind forward, and the guards moved into place, forming a protective ring. They sauntered through the White Gate and into the city amidst myriad voices in the waiting crowd who pointed to the prince as he passed. Ropes had been set up to keep the crowd cordoned off, allowing Andric to casually make his way down toward the largest of the open-market districts, no doubt already teeming with activity.

Everywhere Andric went people recognized him, bowing respectfully or offering wishes for good Charge Days. He smiled back warmly, nodding now and then in acknowledgment. Everything looked bright and cheerful. Poverty was not readily seen in these prosperous times. Andric knew it existed, but it was tucked away in the far corners of the city, far from the places where decent people congregated.

As the prince approached the edges of the market, the heavier traffic prompted Andric to tuck his small leather purse into the inner pocket of his vest, though he doubted it was all that necessary. Thievery was usually kept to a minimum by the city guards, at least in the inner city, especially around the market. Stealing from a member of the royal family on horseback and surrounded by six Divinarim was almost laughable.

People crowded around the small food stands and carts that lined the street entrances to the market. Shoppers and merchants mingled, enjoying a taste of the morning meals. A familiar din filled the air as hawkers shouted their wares to all within earshot. A chaotic blend of smells wafted through the air; the smell of freshly baked bread merged with a potpourri of exotic spices, both sweet and acrid. One moment he wished he had not already begun the Preparations Day fast, the next he was glad he had a settled stomach and hoped it would stay that way.

A tall woman in a costly dress and fur cloak stood on a bench beneath a few trees, the first leaf buds of spring forming on the branches, shouting at passers-by.

"Kerail loves you! Come to her arms and accept her divine embrace! She will protect you in these troubled times! She will give succor to your wounded soul. How long will you wander as children, straying from the path of peace?"

Religious street criers had become increasingly common of late. Andric tried not to pay them much heed.

"Shut up and go back to your tea parties!" another woman, attire and olive complexion indicating Calavian origin, yelled back.

The woman on the bench opened her mouth to reply but paused as Andric drew near. She curtsied gracefully to the prince, even while standing on the bench. Gesturing toward Andric, she raised her voice for the crowd.

"There is a true son of the Holy Couple! House Laconeus has ever been recorded among the names of the faithful."

Andric felt uncomfortable with the unwanted attention as some in the crowd, most of whom seemed to have been largely ignoring the woman, looked up to notice the prince. He gave a curt nod and turned to look at something else—anything else.

A little further up the road, the atmosphere was lightened by an old folk tune performed by a small group of musicians. A couple of city guards saluted Andric as he passed—the younger one smartly, his senior a little less so. A group of young women, none of them particularly attractive he thought, pointed and giggled together as he approached. It wouldn't be proper to more than casually acknowledge them, he told himself. He casually

directed Wind to the right, but he could not help glancing back to see if the maidens were still looking at him. Only one was, to whom Andric threw a charming smile and a wink. The others would never believe her.

He chuckled to himself as he continued to ride through the now-packed streets of the marketplace. Colors danced as people waved a variety of fabrics and clothing. Aided by his guards, Andric pushed Wind slowly through the river of bodies.

Once free of the crowd, he felt a slight tug at his boot. He glanced down at a filthy Cannessi girl. He could not tell how much of her dark skin was dirt or her natural coloring, and her ratty hair probably hadn't been washed since the last rainfall. Her tattered, and in some past age vermilion, dress hung loosely on her frail frame. Andric guessed she was probably only five or six. He looked around to see if he could spot the child's mother or older sibling but saw no one. Her size had probably allowed her to slip past his guards. Suddenly, a Divinar cut his horse in close to the prince and reached out with his heavy booted foot to shoo her away, but Andric stopped him.

"It's all right," Andric said, waving the man off. "What's your name, little one?" He kept his tone friendly, though he noticed, with some distaste, that the fingerprints on his boots matched the grime on her hands. He was often less patient than he should be with subjects such as this girl—certainly less than Stephir usually seemed—but he knew what was expected of him as a prince and a Laconeus.

The little girl simply looked back at him with huge, round eyes. The sun shone down upon her face, penetrating the long lashes that arced over the deep pools of green that were her eyes. With a quick move she held up a dried wildflower she must have gathered from the summer before.

"How much?" Andric's smile was glued on his face in what he hoped was a reassuring and empathetic manner. He knew there would be many in the crowd watching him. The sprite lifted her other hand, all five fingers splayed wide. The prince offered a silver coin in exchange for the flower. She probably had no concept of its worth, which gave him some genuine satisfaction. A beaming smile split her dirt-stained face and her eyes widened in delight at the sight of the shining coin in her hand. He waved to her as she turned and darted into the crowd.

He knew as soon as word got out that he had given the little girl the coin, he would be surrounded by other children wanting to sell him their goods. Deciding Barak had probably finished his morning routine by now, he headed out of the market in the direction of the temple where his friend resided.

Andric's invigorated mind took note of some of the sights that, on most

days, he passed without noticing. There was one sight he was unfortunately already familiar with. Scaffolding ran like latticework up the blackened face of the burned-out husk of a vaisoht, a place of worship for followers of the god Vai Doroth. Workers moved on the scaffolding with cleaning equipment and tools restoring the building. It had only been two weeks since that fire had been set to the vaisoht in the middle of the night. From the accounts Andric had heard, the attackers had been dressed in the black robes worn by the clerics of Vai Doroth, but they had also donned black hoods to hide their identity.

There was conflicting speculation about the identity of the vandals. Some named them as a rival faction of Dorothi clerics who were outraged by a proclamation from vaisoht's chief cleric that Vai Doroth would soon abandon this world because of the pervasive unbelief and chaos so abhorrent to the god who espoused order, justice, and above all, self-discipline. Others said the arsonists were radical Teraithians or Sykorians. Whoever they were, it was the third such attack this year before the attack last night, and none of the criminals had been caught.

These hostilities had been going on for years in Kushaan, Jankar, Celendria, and other parts of the world. Even some of the less civilized regions in Remalia suffered the same turmoil. But to have it here in the capital city, his home, was beyond troubling. And it was not just the violence. People had abandoned their homes to move to the wilderness and establish religious settlements, while others had become no better than bandits, attacking people in the name of one god or another.

Andric could almost appreciate Vai Doroth wanting to abandon the world.

CHAPTER II
ANDRIC

The Library of Selmarine was a small temple of the goddess Viance located in the shadow of the towering city walls. Today, Andric didn't wish, as he had a hundred times before, that Barak would move to the Great Library of Viance on the Mount of the Gods.

Andric had tried to convince Barak that if he moved to the mount, he could have unfettered access to vastly more research material, including some of the greatest scholars in Baon, a prince of Remalia, and by association, all of the most important people in the kingdom. While these may have been good reasons, Andric knew his friend could see through them. The real reason Andric wanted Barak to move was for the prince's own convenience.

Selmarine had an in-depth library devoted to the theories of the arcane power of elan. The elantir guilds may have had other works not found in the library, but the guilds forbade everyone but their members from having access to their knowledge. There was no such concept to the Viancians as forbidden knowledge. The central tenet of the goddess's teachings was that all knowledge was of worth, and striving for knowledge was the greatest good to which a person could dedicate their life. Of course, knowledge could be used for good or ill, but Viance's doctrine did not concern itself with those matters—that was left to the province of the other gods to work out with their followers.

Viance's doctrine fit Barak perfectly. His friend was happy to live at the small temple, nestled in the eastern quarters of the city, away from the bustle of the political center and the distractions that usually went with it. The trea-

sured books were enough to keep him occupied for now. Besides, Barak reasoned, he still had access to any of the works in the larger collection at the Great Library whenever he desired.

Andric dismounted and handed Wind's reins to a Divinar, ordering the guard to wait at the outer temple gate. He knew they didn't like leaving the prince alone, but they didn't argue. With religious tensions high throughout Teris, having the distinctly Teraithian knights in the Viancian temple might not be helpful despite their charge to protect him.

He passed through a low arched passageway into the inner courtyard. No one was there to greet him, but this was typical of his visits to his friend. The priests of Viance were far more concerned with their studies than they were with proper formality and courtesy for their visitors, even if that visitor was someone from the ruling family. It used to bother him, but he had learned long ago not to take offense at it.

The sounds of the city outside were impotent to penetrate the divinely produced peace found within the temple walls. Andric walked casually along the stone walkway. Some of the faces he passed were familiar, although he knew few of them by name. Barak, of course, knew all their names. Not by any particular effort, Barak simply remembered things easily. It was usually not something that played in Andric's favor, and he had learned not to argue with his friend about details from the past. Indeed, he did not argue with Barak about much of anything if he wished to keep his pride intact. He would only engage the Cannessi's sharp mind for practice in keeping his own wits honed.

The two friends had met under unusual circumstances. Andric had many tutors growing up, each an expert in their field. Master Scholar Encavath, High Priestess of Viance at the Great Library on the Mount, was tasked with selecting his courses of study and his teachers. When Andric was thirteen, the master scholar determined he should have a deeper understanding of met'e-lan, the ability to manipulate elan, the life force throughout all creation.

Andric later learned his father had initially refused, not wanting his son to waste his time delving into impractical subjects. But Encavath had persisted. Was met'elan not simply another form of power, used for good or ill as directed by those who wielded it? Would it not be better for Jevorak's son to understand such power's proper place in the world? Should he not be prepared to take informed action if he ever was forced to deal with the abuse of that power? Their father relented, and Master Bellubont became his tutor. Much to Andric's delight, Stephir decided he could benefit from the same education and often joined the tutoring sessions.

Master Bellubont was a priest of Viance who served at the Great Library, and he was also an elantir. Andric believed the man harbored some undisclosed resentment toward the princes (or perhaps all the nobility), and he took every opportunity to include his "assistant", a brilliant young Cannessi refugee a couple of years older than Andric, in the princes' tutoring sessions. Andric was convinced Bellubont just wanted to show how dim they were by comparison. It had irked Andric at first, but Stephir told him to appreciate the fact that there would probably always be someone better in some given skill, and his job was to harness those abilities in the service of Remalia. The young prince just wanted to be the best at something—anything.

He decided to take Stephir's advice and tried to see what he could do to use Barak's talents "for the good of Remalia," which in his mind translated to "for the good of Andric." Despite Master Bellubont's intentions (and perhaps in no small measure due to Andric's changed mindset), Barak's unassuming manner and unabashed honesty were endearing and left Andric in awe of the quirky Cannessi who seemed to know something about everything and a lot about many things.

One day, Andric mentioned Barak's uncanny abilities to Stephir, who laughed. "You realize he's just making educated guesses about most of it, don't you? Do you think he has any actual knowledge about military strategy, economics, foreign policy, swordsmanship, horseback riding, or Calavian cuisine?" Andric tried to catch Barak at his guessing, but it never paid off. Barak readily admitted when he was just making a guess, and he was more than happy to explain the logic behind his guesses, which made him seem all the more brilliant.

Andric pushed himself harder when Barak was around, in part trying to avoid giving Master Bellubont the satisfaction of so much of a gap between the young men. But his progress came in fits and starts. Some days he was able to focus his mind and soul to channel elan with an ease that left the priest begrudgingly impressed. On other days, he could barely get his thoughts to slow down enough to measure his breathing, let alone feel the currents of the life force within himself and the world around him.

Stephir did well enough, managing to light a candle within only a few months of study. Andric had melted the whole candle in a burst of flame that splashed hot wax everywhere, which no one found nearly as funny as he did.

Barak, for all his brilliance, simply could not perform even the simplest elant. When Andric had pressed him about it, Barak claimed it was an inherited trait; not for all Cannessi, just those that came from the western Velspars. Barak claimed he was one of the rare Cannessi who could even sense elan, but

still could not touch it or use it—as if it were always just out of reach. He tried to feign indifference, but Andric could tell the young scholar was frustrated and at times seemed depressed about it. At first, Andric held his successes with met'elan with great pride over Barak, but he grew uncomfortable with his own pettiness and learned to keep his pride to himself.

The high priestess finally called an end to that course of study, but had noticed the change in Andric and asked if he would like to have Barak join in some of his other subjects. Andric had considered the pros and cons. On the one hand, Barak would always outshine Andric (at least in scholastic subjects), and he imagined what the other nobles might say about a refugee being a study companion to the prince. Of course, Andric took some pleasure in turning the situation into a case for his magnanimity, showing his great charity for the poor Cannessi refugee boy. If it started going wrong, Andric could always change his mind.

It had actually taken some convincing to get Barak to accept! He only wanted to focus on learning all he could about met'elan. Eventually Andric prevailed, but Barak insisted he would only attend the lessons on the condition that he could continue to live at the Great Library. Andric just assumed that was a foregone conclusion and didn't consider or mind that Barak had no qualms about putting conditions on a royal's request to join in their tutoring. It would have been beyond impertinent from anyone else, but it never came across that way from Barak.

Andric learned to accept his friend's astute mind for what it was, and he used it for his own benefit. Occasionally he would argue something he had heard from nobles and courtiers to see how Barak would respond. More than once, Andric took Barak's words back to court, engaging in a vicarious debate between his scholarly friend and those at the palace. He was proud of his friend when he heard those same words later plagiarized by others. It was too bad Barak had neither the pedigree nor the desire to run in the same circles as the nobles. Andric knew Barak would surely keep them in their place better than anyone, or would so offend the lot of them that they would seek to take his life.

Being friends with Barak had proved beneficial in another unanticipated aspect. Andric continued developing his skill with met'elan even after Master Bellubont's tutoring had ceased. However, without formal instruction, it had proved difficult. Andric turned to Barak for help. Even without the ability to perform met'elan himself, Barak was an apt teacher, guiding Andric through the theories and exploring unorthodox ideas Andric otherwise would never have encountered.

It had been nearly a year since Barak left the Great Library to live at the Library of Selmarine. Although his friend still focused heavily on his study of met'elan, his hunger for obtaining knowledge in many disciplines made him a natural fit for the Viancian faith, and the priests allowed Barak to live as one of them even though he quietly declined to take the oaths of the priesthood. As much as Andric wished Barak would move back to the Mount, ever since his father had made it clear he didn't consider met'elan a worthy pursuit for a prince of Remalia, it had proved useful to have a place away from the immediate orbit of the palace to study and practice without feeling the weight of the king's scrutiny. Fortunately, Jevorak was too preoccupied with preparations for war to focus his attention on Andric's visits to Selmarine.

Andric walked along the halls of the dimly lit temple, knowing where he would find his friend. The priests and priestesses of Viance usually kept to a strict routine of disciplined study interspersed with necessary practical tasks. While he had no desire to emulate their spartan existence, Andric could not help but have a degree of admiration for their simple and focused lifestyle.

He arrived at the library wing of the temple, sure to find the Cannessi lost in some tome or another. Two priestesses sat on a bench near the doors, lost in a discussion he vaguely recognized as elantic theory, neither paying him any attention.

"Similarly, as one can control the amount of refraction by altering the angle or the medium, couldn't one change the harmonic resonance of a met'elantic conversion by transmission through various intermediate corpuses?" the younger one asked.

"In certain circumstances, yes, but that won't always balance with the sub-integer frequency synthesis in the Hygrerian theorem. You could lose too much..."

He walked past them and pulled on one of the heavy double wooden doors but was surprised to find it locked. He tried the other one and found it locked as well. In fact, they were more than locked. They didn't even rattle when he pulled on them. It was as if they were a solid part of the wall rather than the dark, iron-bound doors he had opened many times before. After giving them a few firm yanks, he was convinced it was a useless exercise.

"May we help you, my lord?" the senior priestess asked, pausing her conversation with the other priestess.

Andric turned to face her, attempting to keep the confusion from his face. "The doors to the library appear to be locked. I don't suppose you have a key?"

"May I inquire as to the nature of your visit to the Library of Selmarine?"

Andric was again surprised. The library had never been closed before, let alone had anyone questioned him about why he was there. "I am here to see Barak Ve'Aurben." Whether they knew who Andric was or not, he could not be certain, but the woman inclined her head, apparently satisfied with his answer.

"Now, as I showed you..." the woman said to the young priestess seated next to her.

The cleric bowed her head and Andric guessed she was preparing to perform some elant. He was curious to see if he could sense what she was doing, so he opened his center, the place in his chest where his perception of elan was principally located. After a moment, Andric felt a shift in the elantic field as a thin stream of elan modulated to volkh, one of the seven elantic modalities (or nine, if one counted the two forbidden ones), flowed from the cleric toward the doors. The volkh modality was commonly employed when hardening or softening material, so that made some sense, but it didn't fully explain why the doors did not move at all.

He was surprised when he also sensed the subtle pull on his consciousness that told him someone nearby was attuning to one of the deities' divinessence. He couldn't discern which divinessence it was unless he was also attuned to the same divinessence, but in most cases, it was easy enough to deduce. The ability to attune to a deity's divinessence did not come from his elantic center but from being sufficiently aligned with the deity's mind and will.

Andric was not singly devoted to Viance, but he had a deep respect and love of her doctrine and will. Especially in this moment, desiring to learn what the priestess was doing, it wasn't difficult for the prince to deepen his alignment with the goddess. His craving for knowledge intensified as he oriented himself with Viance's will that all should seek deeper understanding of the world and the mysteries of life. His sense of her divinessence coalesced until it felt like a gossamer aura surrounding him. He extended his consciousness to meld with the divine.

The wonder and awe already swirling through him surged, imposing on his mind a second orientation, as if he was simultaneously existing in two different worlds. It had been overwhelming the first time he had attuned, but his recent practice with Barak helped him maintain his balance. In the fabric of Viance's divinessence permeating the area, he could sense the attuned priestesses, attracting him like a moth to a flame.

The older priestess shot a glance at Andric, no doubt sensing his attunement, before admonishing the younger one. "Don't let yourself be distracted.

You must maintain a tighter link with the divinessence. It shouldn't waiver so much."

It was good advice for Andric too, as he strained to hold on to both the elan and his attunement to the divinessence. He had some vague guesses of what the priestess was about to do. There were certain applications where elan and divinessence could be combined, but it was dangerous and great care had to be taken. To do so for the mundane purpose of locking doors seemed reckless. The familiar discomfort of the elantic vibrations resonating through his center suddenly amplified as the woman's elantic flow was infused with divinessence. He braced himself against the painful intensity, channeling his own elan and modulating it in counterpoint to volkh to dampen the effects.

By the time Andric refocused on the priestess's elant, it was already done. The senior priestess nodded in satisfaction and gestured for him to proceed into the library. He felt inclined to admonish the clerics about the dangers of what they were doing, but he knew it was pointless. They were just following the orders of their superiors. Besides, if anyone understood the dangers of what they were doing it was the Viancian scholars themselves. Andric bowed and went through the doors that now opened without a hint of resistance. The two companions immediately resumed their discussion without another word to the prince.

The doors silently closed behind him, unnaturally cutting off the words from the priestesses' conversation. Andric was a bit disconcerted that he could no longer hear any hint of sound from outside the doors. He nodded in polite greeting to the elderly priest sitting next to the entrance, presumably there to unlock the doors for those wishing to leave. The prince was tempted to continue puzzling through the unlocking elant, but he thought his experimentations might not be appreciated and headed off to find Barak.

He passed row after row of tightly packed shelves that left barely enough space for a person to fit between. The aisles were as dimly lit as the rest of the building, something Andric always found odd, but here and there, pools of light from alchemical lamps fell on desks where members of the order studied or transcribed various books or scrolls. Glancing down the far end of the wide center aisle filled with tables, Andric discovered Barak was not at his favorite spot.

After a quick check along the far wall of the library, Andric found him in another of his usual spots on the east wall. His diminutive friend looked like a child as he sat perched on a stool in front of a greatly oversized book that rested on a highly polished oak bookstand. Andric smiled to himself. Barak was a creature of habit if ever he had known one. He wondered if that was a

result of living among the clerics of Viance, or if Barak had chosen this life because it was a natural fit to his own nature.

Andric tiptoed up behind his friend, who likely would not have heard a legion of mail-clad warriors running at him in a passionate battle cry. The prince felt like a great fellcat, ready to pounce on an unsuspecting deer. With a sudden swoop, Andric grabbed Barak's hunched shoulders and gave a simultaneous roar. It had the desired effect. The small scholar nearly jumped out of his skin, producing more of a yelp than a roar himself. Andric made sure to keep a steady grip on his friend to keep him from falling off his seat but leaped backward at the first sign Barak had his balance, narrowly avoiding the quick jab of a sharp elbow that was unwittingly aimed at his manhood.

"Careful Barak. Many a maiden would be most displeased should your elbow ever find its mark," he joked.

"Or rather they might thank me," Barak retorted coolly, having regained his composure. His friend had always appeared young, due in no small measure to his short stature and slight build characteristic of the Cannessi. His ashen-gray skin was like aged and weathered wood, though lighter than some of his nationality, no doubt due to a lack of time spent out of doors. In keeping with the tradition of his adopted home in Teris, Barak usually kept his coal-black hair trimmed short. During the winter he had let it grow longer than usual, and the slightly wavy locks brushed the low collar of the loose-hanging brown robes worn by priests.

Barak did not wear the sash reserved for ordained members of the order, which was draped from one shoulder to the opposite hip. The robes were remarkably simple compared to the vestments worn by priests and priestesses of most of the other gods. That was typical of Viance though. The goddess's disciples had no use for pomp or material beauty, although most of the art Andric had seen depicting the goddess represented her as indeed beautiful with some ineffable quality of sublime refinement and fairness.

"What brings you to assault me so early in the day, Andric?"

The prince put on an injured face and started to protest but was cut off as a priestess marched around the corner of a nearby bookcase.

"Young man," she began sternly, but seeing it was the prince, quickly stiffened her posture and appeared to reconsider her words. "This is a place of study and worship, Your Highness. If you would please keep quiet and allow the others their thoughts, it would be greatly appreciated."

Andric was surprised at being addressed so, but glancing around at the other tables he saw other priests bathed in the light of their lamps casting disapproving looks in his direction. Slightly embarrassed at the commotion he

had caused, he chose to overlook the slight to his station. "My apologies, Scholar..." he hesitated before conjuring her name, "Mella. I will keep that in mind and help preserve the honored reverence here." Andric was proud of the formality of his words but surprised that the priestess stiffened further. She opened her mouth slightly but quickly closed it with a frown and a curt nod before turning on her heels to stonily return the way she had come. Andric waited until she was out of earshot before looking at his friend and shrugging with a sheepish expression.

Barak shook his head and smiled ruefully. "It probably would have gone better for you if her name was actually *Mella*."

Andric winced at his mistake.

"What time is it?" Barak asked, straightening his back with a stretch.

"A few hours past sunrise," Andric answered.

His friend shook his head as he glanced at the ceiling. "You know something? As somewhat of a historian, I must make a special note of this singular occasion. Let us mark it with a celebration." Barak's voice took on a deeper, if hushed, tone and, with one hand raised above his head as if holding a goblet in a toast, slipped into an archaic speech as Andric looked on, a bit bewildered.

"Henceforth shall this day be had in remembrance from generation to generation, down through the endless corridors of time, as the Day of the Awakening. The day when the good Prince Andric of Remalia, son of Jevorak Laconeus, was raised as if from the dead by some miraculous power at an hour not looked nor hoped for by any who knew the sad curse that ever held the young lord in unnatural slumber long after the rest of the kingdom had risen to greet the day."

Andric rolled his eyes and groaned but could not completely suppress a smile.

"Henceforth shall it ever be a day to be celebrated by all good citizens of Creation rising at daybreak, to behold and pay homage to the majesty of the rising Morning Star—"

Andric jumped in. "A celebration indeed." Playing along was usually less injurious to his pride than trying to come up with some witty retort. And who knew how long Barak would go on if given the chance? "For 'tis the strength of the sun's warmth which raises the dead earlier than due course." Andric was not as adept as Barak at the old style of speech but knew his childhood tutors would be pleased with his attempt. "Thus, if thou shalt accompany—"

"Wilt," Barak corrected offhandedly.

"If thou *wilt*," Andric repeated in a tone of insincere annoyance, "accompany me on a ride of Mother Baon," he was pleased with himself for using a more unusual name for their world, "we shall revel in the day!" he finished triumphantly.

Barak smiled and clapped quietly. "Well spoken, Your Highness."

Andric bowed at the applause but gave a sour look at the honorific. He expected it from most people and even enjoyed hearing it from the pompous courtiers. But he never liked hearing it from Barak, who considered the whole affair of titles a bit childish. Andric let it pass, refusing to have his spirits dampened.

"I'm glad you're here," Barak continued. "I thought of some things we could try to make the heat conservation more efficient in your auxonic elants. You see, I—" Barak's words quickened, as they often did when he was excited about an idea and was about to launch into a lengthy explanation.

Andric cut him off before he could get too far. "Actually, I need your help with something else today."

Barak looked a bit disappointed but nodded. "All right, if I can."

"There has been an attack on a Teraithian temple in the Oettan District. I am making an official inquiry for the crown, and I would like you to go with me."

"Another one? Maybe she was right," Barak mumbled to himself.

Andric waited a moment to see if Barak was going to clarify what he meant, but his eyes were fixed on the floor, a sure sign he was getting lost in his own thoughts. "Who was right about what?" Andric prodded.

"What? Oh, Scholar Idduak. She was giving a discourse on the Ultideic Prophecies. Her thesis was that we are in the time of their fulfillment. It was a well-reasoned lecture, but I haven't had the time to delve into the matter. With all of these religious attacks though... neighbor turning against neighbor, strife, and animosity growing everywhere, the contest of the gods does seem like a storm roiling across the world."

"And I suppose she argued that Viance was going to be the victor."

"Actually, no. She said there is no way of knowing how it will end, just that the signs point to the end being near."

"I hope she's wrong. I like the balance between the gods. I can't imagine the world with only one god remaining. Except maybe Sykoria," Andric joked, putting a look on his face as if he was considering the hedonistic possibilities.

Barak's expression turned disapproving. "That's a world I would prefer

not to see." Barak had such a sense of moral purity that if Andric didn't know any better, he might suspect Barak was a Servari instead.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," Andric said dismissively.

"The prophecies or her thesis?"

"Either of them. I suppose the prophecies have some truth to them, but like all prophecies, they're too vague to be of any use. People see what they want to see, and there are those in every generation who believe the prophecies will be fulfilled in their lifetime."

"Well, eventually someone will be correct. What if it's Scholar Idduak?"

"Sounds like a good reason to come with me to visit the Teraithian temple that was attacked."

"How did you make that grand leap in logic?" Barak asked, his voice laced with heavy skepticism.

"You'll get to examine a piece of the evidence firsthand," Andric offered.

"No, thank you. Perhaps Scholar Idduak would like to go. I would be happy to make an introduction."

"I could really use your help, Barak. It isn't clear who's responsible, but they're claiming it was servants of the Holy Couple. It certainly seems plausible that it could be a retaliatory strike by one of the other churches. I will be occupied with the politics of the situation, and I want you to be another set of eyes and ears that can pick up what I might miss."

Barak slowly shook his head, but Andric could tell he was considering it.

"Reportedly, the attack was carried out by summoning a daemon," Andric added almost as an afterthought.

Barak's eyes snapped to Andric's face. "Really? What did it look like? Are there any traces left?"

"I don't have many details, but apparently it caused quite a bit of damage and killed several people. Come with me and see for yourself."

Barak heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Oh, very well. I'm too distracted now to concentrate on my studies anyway." Andric knew that was not true; Barak could always fall into his studies, but the prince was not about to argue.

Barak glanced at the scholars at other tables and smiled, leaning closer to Andric and lowering his voice. "Besides, I think they'd all like to see me leave for a while after our disturbance."

Andric followed his friend as he returned the large book to its place on a shelf, and the two of them made their way out of the library.

"I'll go get Steed and meet you at the front gate," Barak offered. It still amused Andric that Barak had named his horse Steed. Barak had brushed aside any suggestion that he needed to pick a better name.

"By the way, what's the story with the library doors?" Andric asked, following the Cannessi scholar.

"I consider myself a decent historian, Andric, but I'm afraid I don't have any idea about the origins of the doors. I would be happy to research the matter if it's important to you."

"Yes, please do." Andric was kidding, but there was a decent chance Barak would do it. "But I was more interested in current events. Why couldn't I open the doors?"

"In order to keep you out, I imagine."

"Stop being obtuse. They're more like solid stone than doors," Andric retorted.

"They wouldn't be very effective at keeping people out if they weren't."

Andric had been more curious about *how* the doors were secured, but now his interest was piqued by a different question. "Why are you trying to keep people out? The library has always been open to anyone."

"Not anymore."

"Why do you need to keep people out of the library?"

Barak stopped and looked directly into Andric's eyes in that unnervingly sincere way he sometimes did. "After the attack on the vaisoht near the Gazana Market, and now this attack on the Teraithian temple, do you really need to ask?"

Andric understood. "Has anyone attacked Selmarine?"

"Some books on met'elan were destroyed and the shreds were left in the library. We suspect it was members of one of the guilds. They've become increasingly..." Barak paused, probably searching for a particular word "... *intolerant* of anyone having elantic knowledge that they don't control or condone."

"I could have guards posted outside the temple."

Barak shook his head. "That would simply call us out for more unwanted attention. The library is safe for now."

As they approached the sealed library doors, Andric asked, "Would it offend anyone if I tried opening the doors myself?"

"You don't intend to blast your way out of here, do you?" Andric was fairly sure Barak was joking, though there was no hint of it in his voice.

"I got a sense for how they did it when I came in. I just want to see if I can replicate it."

Barak shrugged and approached the elderly priest sitting near the doors. "Scribe Yponnil, Prince Andric would like to try his hand at opening the doors. Would that be all right with you?"

"As His Majesty wishes," the man replied indifferently. *Majesty* was an honorific reserved for the king, but it was such a frequent mistake made by the common subjects that Andric hardly gave it a second thought as he carefully considered what he needed to do.

He had only recently begun training with Barak on how to infuse divinessence into an elant. Barak helped Andric learn the theory, but after some painful first attempts, they resorted to asking for assistance from Master Tuuthard, one of the master scholars at the temple who specialized in the subject. She had resisted at first, but a handsome donation to the library helped convince her otherwise. She was a harsh teacher, but Andric had come to appreciate that about her as he learned the dangers this exercise posed. He was lucky he hadn't been killed in his first unguided attempts.

The safest approach was to begin the elant and then infuse it with the divinessence, but it was challenging for Andric to bring himself into sufficient alignment to attune to the divinessence if he was already focused on channeling elan. Andric primed himself by reciting in his mind the practiced words of a sacred Viancian devotional.

Flame of knowledge, illuminate my path. Guide my feet, that I may find the light. Open my eyes, that I may see the light. Quicken my mind, that I may comprehend the light. Loosen my tongue, that I may share the light.

Andric's heart resonated with sincere desire for the spirit and promise of those words to be true in his life. He would never be the scholar Barak was, but he had always found joy and exhilaration in discovery and finding new treasures of knowledge. Like laying beneath the warm sun with his eyes closed but still perceiving its golden light, Andric sensed Viance's divine power around him, flowing into and through him. He attuned his mind to the divinessence and felt the disorienting surge of divine connection.

With a sliver of his consciousness, he opened his center. He needed only a small amount of elan, so he could afford to draw it from his body instead of siphoning it from the world around him. He willed a small void to open in his center and felt the elan flow into it, sharp and alive. He modulated it to volkh and sent it out like a thin tendril snaking toward the doors, seeking to connect with the trace amounts of elan in the wood, iron, and stone.

Nothing.

He probed with the thread of his elan, looking for an anchor point or node of some kind, like a blind man sliding a key across a lock searching for the keyhole. *Perhaps that's what the divinessence is for*, Andric thought.

The most difficult part of learning to combine divinessence and elan was training himself not to think of it as difficult. The two energies did not natu-

rally interact with each other, at least not in any way mortals understood, but a conscious mind could coax the elan to connect with divinessence and take on a part of its quality.

Andric relaxed his senses, letting them float in the font of divinessence within him. He pictured the divinessence forming itself to the shape of his body, filling every part of him. Then he imagined his physical body fading away, leaving behind his consciousness to occupy the divinessence-self.

He was still aware of the elan flowing through his center, but it was separate from the new divinessence-self. He dampened the vibrations of the elan in his center to protect himself from the intensity that was about to come through. Slowly he merged his elantic center into the imagined ethereal body. The elan jumped ecstatically, threatening to break out of its modulation to volkh. Andric avoided his novice mistakes of trying to control the divinessence-infused elan. Instead, he allowed it to race along the flow of his elan that was already connected to the doors. He single-mindedly focused on volkh, felt its rhythm throughout his divinessence-self, and the elan followed suit, almost as if it now had a volition of its own.

This time, his elan connected to the divinessence-imbued elan in the doors, but something was different. The doors were not hardened, as he had expected. He didn't fully understand how it was done, but it was as if some of the nature of the stone in the floor and doorframe was infused into the doors, blending and binding them together. In some way he could not quite define, they were one.

"I don't see..." Andric had learned a long time ago not to say *can't* around the Viancians, "...what to do with the thread. I have searched for an anchor point or node of some kind, but there doesn't appear to be any."

He was hoping for some suggestion from Barak, but the priest spoke first. "You're trying to connect your elant to the physical. But that's not what holds the door fixed."

Andric tried to puzzle out what the old man meant. *What* is *holding the doors shut?* There was not enough elan present to.... He lost concentration on dampening the elantic thread in his center and the frenzied energy sent a painful jolt through his core. He winced but carefully coaxed the vibrations back into a tight rein.

"Try introducing a seam between the door and the stone," Barak offered.

Andric was grateful he didn't have to try to solve the problem himself. His mind was already tiring from keeping so many pieces in his thoughts at the same time and would have to give up soon. He slid his elan into the space between the doors and the stone doorframe. *A seam*? He pictured the elan

already there as if it were a single piece of cloth running through the wood and stone. *How do I make a seam?* He had been thinking of volkh as hardening the doors, but maybe if he inverted the modulation and applied it to the elan he could weaken it enough to fold it.

Inverting a modality was fairly easy once one developed a sense for it, like singing the octave of a note. Andric hadn't worked much with volkh, but he had always had a talent for modulating the modalities. The elantic flow shifted, and it felt like a key finally slipping into place. He rolled his elan to fold the doors' elan on itself and sent that fold running around the perimeter of the doors. When the fold completed its loop around the doors, the connection with the stone evaporated. They were just doors again.

"Impressive for your first try, Your Majesty," the priest said, nodding approvingly. Andric released his elant, then the divinessence. A headache pounded behind his eyes, but he was pleased with himself.

Barak shook his head slightly. Andric smiled. Barak only did that when he was impressed, which was no easy feat.

"Thank you for your help, Scribe," Andric bowed slightly to the old cleric. Turning to Barak, he added, "We really should be going." Andric tried to sound casual, but some amused gloating crept into his voice as he pulled one of the doors open and held it for his friend.

"You really have no idea how blessed you are," Barak said, shaking his head again as they walked along the colonnaded path toward the dormitories.

"I know. You *are* a pretty good friend, but don't go getting a big head about it," Andric joked. "I'll meet you out front."

Their paths diverged and Andric made his way out of the temple. He mounted Wind and waited with his guards in front of the temple for his friend, who soon appeared on a beautiful and slender chestnut horse perfectly suited for his small stature. It was much to Andric's credit that Barak would mount a horse at all. He had a phobia of them when they first met, but Andric had insisted. Now Barak could hold his own and proved it as they trotted toward the Oettan District.

CHAPTER III
Barak

Barak rarely found a need to leave the library, particularly during the winter when Andric had little interest in taking rides outside the city. He tried to remember the last time he had been outside Selmarine's walls; sometime around last Harvestcrest if he remembered correctly. *Has it really been almost three months?* Perhaps he was overdue for a change of scenery after all.

He had never liked spending time out in the streets of the city. Being Cannessi had always made him a target for suspicion and mistreatment, and the growing tensions made everything worse. It certainly was never safe to go out alone, especially dressed as a priest. Today though, the streets were unusually crowded for Charge Days, which was even more reason to stay within the safety of his temple.

It was reassuring to be protected by several of the most well-trained knights in the kingdom, even if they were Teraithian. Barak enjoyed watching the churning stream of bodies part to open a clear path before them, hardly hindering their progress at all. He reflected on what a fitting metaphor that was for Andric's life in general, and how little his friend truly appreciated how much he benefited from the ready assistance and constant deference.

"Why is it called the Oettan District?" Barak asked Andric as they skirted one of the open street markets. He was uncomfortable confronting an unfamiliar situation, and he managed his anxiety the way he usually did, by gathering information.

"If I remember correctly, Oettan was the name of the architect or chief

builder of some of the estate houses and other buildings in the district. His designs were distinctive, so the area picked up his name."

"And the temple that was attacked, is there anything noteworthy about it?"

Andric squinted slightly in the way they did when he was trying to work things out in his mind. "Not that I'm aware of," he finally said.

Barak suspected there was something, but decided it was best not to push.

"By the way, you're coming out to Hamoth's Field tomorrow, right?"

Barak sighed. "We'll see," he said noncommittally.

"I would hate to be forced to have a word with Headmaster Gowend about how disappointed I would be if my good friend Master Ve'Aurben couldn't attend the tourney."

Barak was not entirely certain it was an empty threat. He didn't give much credence to positions of authority, but the headmaster was one of the few that could make Barak uncomfortable. He sometimes suspected the woman used the divine benefaction of dispositioning on him whenever they spoke, though if she did, she was very subtle about it. Thinking of benefactions brought him back to the task at hand.

"Who will be investigating the summoning? I would assume attacks of this kind would normally be investigated by the city guard, but are they capable of dealing with something like this?"

"The city guard will technically be responsible for investigating, but I suspect the Teraithians will make their job difficult, preferring to handle things themselves. Unfortunately, they have far greater resources than the guard does, so they can probably do a better job of it. But that won't likely lead to any justice. Not legal justice at any rate."

"And how are you going to keep the Teraithians from retaliating again? Because you know they will do everything they can to come out on top." Barak felt a little awkward speaking disparagingly about the Teraithians in front of the Divinarim, but not enough to curb his tongue.

"By making it clear that we will bring the harshest penalties against whoever is involved in these religious attacks on either side."

"But if this attack was just a retaliation for a previous attack by the Teraithians, shouldn't that mitigate their punishment?"

"No. It just means more necks for the headsman's axe."

Barak grimaced to show his distaste for the brutality of the suggestion. "You know, there are much cleaner ways to punish high criminals. In Celendria, for example, they have a priest disposition them into a quieted state,

then elantir simply stop the heart. It takes longer, but it's supposedly painless."

"We'll have to save the discussion of the merits of execution techniques for another time," Andric retorted.

In the street ahead, a large crowd had gathered in front of imposing wrought iron gates that closed off the grounds of a large structure that resembled a small castle more than a temple. Whisps of smoke drifted into the morning air from open windows in the central tower; not enough to make Barak think the building was currently burning, but still a clear indication of a recent fire where none should have been. His stomach knotted at the thought of a fire burning through the Library of Selmarine.

A row of heavily armored Teraithian knights barred the path to the gates, long polearms at the ready to keep anyone unwelcome from getting too close. Barak noticed additional guards patrolling the immaculate grounds of the temple behind the wrought iron fence. Golden images of Teraithia's holy symbol, two overlapping angles, one pointed to heaven and the other pointed to the earth, capped the larger iron posts spaced along the black fence, providing a touch of ostentatious beauty.

"Those are the archseraph's guards," Andric said, squinting again.

Now that Andric had named them, Barak noticed the torso-length wing made of black leather feathers hanging from the back of each knight's left pauldron, marking them as members of the elite Seraphic Guard.

"What's he doing here?" Andric wondered aloud.

One of the Divinarim addressed the prince firmly. "Your Highness, might I suggest we take you around to a side entrance."

"No, it's important that I am seen here."

"Very well, m'lord. Master Ve'Aurben, please move behind the prince."

Barak had been with Andric and his guards enough to know these kinds of instructions were always for their safety, so he did as he was told. All six guards drew in tighter as he maneuvered Steed behind Andric. They adjusted their grips on their halberds and lowered their polished heads to just above the people standing in the street, which proved an unnecessary precaution.

The crowd quickly parted, opening a path to the gate. Most people bowed their heads and placed their hands over their hearts. Barak wondered if it bothered Andric, or if he even noticed, when some did not offer obeisance. Voices whispered recognition of the prince, and though they generally sounded pleased, there was something else he could not quite identify. Frustration perhaps?

City guardsmen stood in the street keeping the crowd at bay. The temple

guards drew up to attention and saluted, left arms across their chests, fingertips at the hafts of the tall weapons they held in their right hands, as the Divinarim opened ranks to let the prince move to the front. Barak noticed the heads of the temple guards' polearms were a different design than the halberds carried by the Divinarim, and wondered if the differences were practical or purely aesthetic. He detested being ignorant of so many things.

"Prince Andric," one of the knights greeted them loudly enough to be heard by the crowd. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit to the Temple of Venerate Alscome?"

"I am here at the direction of His Majesty the King to ensure the tranquility and safety of his people." Andric's voice was likewise raised to be heard by the crowd. Murmuring ran through the onlookers, and Barak scanned their faces to gauge their mood. Some nodded, others slowly shook their heads, and many spoke under their breath, too quiet for Barak to hear.

Then someone shouted, "Akraharr take your tranquility. We want justice!" More than a few voices shouted their agreement.

An angry voice from elsewhere in the crowd retorted, "They got justice last night for once!" Approbation for those words was more subdued but seemed to register on more faces. Even surrounded by heavily armed knights, Barak felt exposed and vulnerable.

"Justice belongs to the crown alone," Andric said firmly, trying to sound as if his words were definitive on the matter.

Barak sensed that many of those gathered didn't see things quite the same way.

"I am certain Archseraph Charin will be most pleased to have your assistance, Your Highness." The knight gave a firm wave of his gauntleted hand and the others moved quickly to open the black gates. They saluted sharply again as Andric rode onto the immaculate temple grounds.

Barak glanced back as the gate clanged shut behind them. He felt safer, but also trapped. *Why did I agree to come? I have no business being here.*

There were more temple guards posted along the wide cobblestone path that ran from the gates to the marble steps of the temple where a handful of priests and priestesses in black velvet vestments of the Teraithian priesthood watched Andric approach. A glossy black and gilt coach, flanked by a pair of Seraphic Guard knights, waited in the courtyard. It was as grand as a royal carriage, and it was not difficult to guess it was the archseraph's. The knights and other guards all saluted and the clerics bowed as the prince's group dismounted.

"Your Highness," the senior priestess soberly greeted him, "you honor us

with your visit." Her warm-brown skin indicated Kushaani descent, though her voice carried no hint of an accent.

"I am sorry it is under such unfortunate circumstances. And it appears I'm not the only visitor you have today," Andric said, glancing at the carriage.

"Yes, the archseraph has also graced us with his presence, and Captain Drandin of the city guard is here as well. They're inside with Seraph Prozint. May I show you to where they are?" With a gesture from Andric, the clerics turned and led them through the ornate, cast bronze doors of the temple.

Barak had only been inside one other Teraithian temple before; the one on the Mount of the Gods. He had asked Andric during their studies if he would show him each of the temples on the Mount, figuring he would get to see much more of them if accompanied by the prince. He had not been disappointed. They were each magnificent in their own way, reflecting in their design and decoration the values of their respective deities.

That had been an interesting educational experience. This was entirely different. Even as a guest of the prince, Barak felt out of place walking into the temple. He was not particularly astute at reading emotions, but even he sensed the tension running thick through the place.

They passed through a foyer into a large inner courtyard encircled with more guards. The gurgling of water from a beautiful marble fountain in the center of the courtyard felt irreverent in the heavy atmosphere. The acrid smell of smoke infused the area, though there was no visible sign of damage. Several wayward wooden buckets were haphazardly stacked near the fountain in the otherwise immaculate courtyard.

Another set of imposing double doors led into the temple's grand assembly hall. Beams of light streamed through the smoky air from large windows high overhead at the top of the octagonal central tower. Whisps of white smoke rose from piles of charred benches and tapestries. Barak's eyes were drawn to a number of red sheets covering body-shaped forms on the floor.

"The smell is awful," Barak muttered.

"It smells like sulfur," Andric replied, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

"Yes, some of the fires were started with brimstone, and others by the demon that was summoned," the priestess replied as she led them toward the group gathered near an enormous alabaster statue of Teraithia dominating the center of the hall. It was partially blackened from the smoke and fire, and one of its outstretched arms was broken off above the elbow. Although it held no religious significance for Barak, he was saddened to see a beautiful piece of artwork damaged that way.

The metallic salutes from the archseraph's guards as Andric approached drew the attention of the group standing by the statue.

The priestess leading the way stopped and bowed. "Your Eminence, the—"

"Prince Andric," the man at the center of the group interrupted. He inclined his head in a polite nod to the prince, while the others offered a more traditional greeting, placing their hands over their hearts and bowing. The high priest's distinguished sophistication was accented by the age lines at the edges of his face and the gray highlights in his otherwise dark, trimmed beard and immaculate hair.

"Your Eminence, it has been a while," Andric returned the greeting with a more formal tone than usual. Barak wondered if it was out of respect or caution.

"Too long, Your Highness. Your visit is a welcome surprise. We were just discussing how best to track down the criminals responsible for this vile act of desecration."

"Do you have any thought as to who might have done this?" Andric asked.

"I'm certain the Servari are behind it. They summoned an unholy creature from their gods' realm, which is what caused the fires."

"How do you know it was from the Holy Couple's realm?" Barak asked.

All eyes dropped to look at him.

"You must be the Acolyte Ve'Aurben I have heard about."

"Oh, I am not a priest, just someone who likes books. Otherwise you have it right though. But I believe you were about to tell us about the daemon." Barak knew manners dictated he should use one of the many honorifics for the archseraph, but he already didn't care for the man. Besides, a little disrespect might put him off just enough to get something useful out of him.

The high priest addressed his answer to Andric. "We have records with descriptions of flora and fauna of each of the deities' realms."

"Well, all except Akraharr of course," Barak interrupted.

The archseraph slid a thinly veiled annoyed glance in his direction before continuing. "The summoned creature shared certain features that are common to those in the realm of the Couple."

"Such as...?" Barak asked. He was genuinely curious but made his tone doubtful to needle the man a bit. He had to be careful though. Too much and he might embarrass Andric, or worse, be asked to wait outside.

"I believe Seraph Prozint," Charin gestured to the priest at his side, "is in the best position to provide those details."

Prozint drew in a breath, his brow furrowing dramatically, but Barak spoke first. "So you saw the daemon yourself?"

"No, but I have the descriptions from those who did see it, at least the ones who survived, and they were all very clear."

"Perhaps we could hear from them directly," Barak suggested casually, "if it wouldn't be too much of an inconvenience," he added as if suddenly remembering his manners. Barak caught a slight grin touch the corners of the city guard captain's mouth.

"I'm sure that can be arranged," the seraph said flatly.

Barak began to feel remorseful about his behavior. He glanced at Andric to see if he could gauge his friend's reaction. A couple of the Divinarim shifted uncomfortably. He must have been much more offensive than he had realized.

I really should apologize.

One of Divinarim spoke firmly, her raised voice echoing in the large hall. "It's my duty to inform you all that it is against the king's command to use benefactions or met'elan against a member of the royal family or their advisors."

Barak's guilt abruptly subsided and his thinking cleared. *Someone was dispositioning me*, he realized as anger replaced the guilt he had felt moments earlier.

"Yes, thank you for that reminder," Andric said, his words filling the awkward silence that followed the Divinar's pronouncement. "But as to the question at hand, maybe I can be of some assistance on this matter."

"Your Highness is gracious to offer. By all means..." the archseraph said with an accepting nod.

"Celestial creatures are imbued with the divinessence of the deities of the realm they are summoned from. I may be able to sense which realm this one was from."

"Your Highness can sense the Couple's divinessence?" Seraph Prozint asked, his brow furrowing again.

"At times, yes." Then Andric shifted his gaze to the archseraph. "And sometimes I can sense when someone is attuned to Teraithia's divinessence."

"Forgive me, but I don't consider this an appropriate time to jest, Your Highness," Prozint said, trying to strike a tone of polite disapproval.

Barak wanted to defend Andric's integrity, but this was a delicate matter and he might do more harm than good.

"Everyone other than Prince Andric and his companions will wait outside." the archseraph ordered abruptly. The clerics who had escorted

Andric in immediately retreated out of the grand chamber, followed by Captain Drandin and the archseraph's guards. It took a moment longer for Seraph Prozint to accept that the order included him as well. He gave a slight bow and followed the others out, the doors echoing softly as they closed behind him. Only the Divinarim and Barak remained with the prince and the archseraph.

"Your Highness should be more discrete in claiming to have such... an unusual talent, to sense the divinessence of a deity to whom you have not yet committed your full devotion. Most won't believe you, and some might even consider it heresy to make such a claim."

"I don't really care what they think."

"Of course you do. As well you should. 'Perception is the power that shapeth the world.'"

"I'll keep that in mind. Shall we see if I can put my perception to use?"

"I welcome any assistance you may render, Your Highness."

Andric looked around the assembly hall, walking first in one direction, then closer to a wall, then moving off in another direction. Barak followed, as much to stay close to his friend as to have some distance from the archseraph, always shying away from the cloth-covered bodies on the floor. He was not sure if it was the acrid smoke wafting through the air or being this close to death that was making him nauseous.

"What are we looking for?" Barak asked in a hushed voice, hoping to help speed things along so they could leave.

"Somewhere the daemon may have touched, especially long enough to start a fire or leave a mark."

"If we brought in the actual witnesses, they could probably narrow it down for us," Barak suggested.

"If we have to, but I'd like—"

"I would be happy to have the witnesses brought in if it would help," Charin offered. Barak looked back at the archseraph, still standing by the towering statue of Teraithia. He was surprised that he could have heard what they said at that distance. The acoustics must carry even a whisper to that spot. He noticed again the burned and broken arm.

"Look," Barak said, pointing at the pieces on the floor.

"You might be right." They walked back to the center of the assembly hall and approached the statue.

"No luck?" the archseraph asked, sounding almost pleased.

Barak wanted Andric to succeed if for no other reason than to put a dent in the man's smugness. It was a petty instinct, but one he could not immedi-

ately push aside. Andric bent to examine the stone arm lying on the ground. It was partially blackened, and three of the fingers had broken off, but otherwise it appeared intact. Barak guessed it had been elanticly hardened to have remained mostly whole after such a fall.

Andric ran his hand along the polished alabaster, then stopped at a particular spot in the blackened area. He closed his eyes in concentration. Barak was familiar with the process Andric went through to put himself in alignment with a particular divinessence. He usually recited some memorized sacred text that crystalized for Andric the aspect of that god the prince's heart and mind most responded to. Barak had made many attempts to do the same, but try as he might, the only divinessence he ever felt was Viance's.

"Archseraph, may I ask you to please move back some distance."

"Have I offended Your Highness in some way?" The high priest's voice was stiff, sounding more slighted than apologetic.

"You're too strong a source of Teraithia's divinessence. It's making it difficult to sense the traces left by the daemon."

"I see," he said smiling, apparently pleased by the prince's words, and somehow managed to look regal and relaxed at the same time as he strode several paces away. Barak knew that he would never have that kind of bearing, but was glad not to suffer from the arrogance that usually seemed to go with it.

Andric finally nodded. "It is indeed the Holy Couple's divinessence," he said, rising.

"Remarkable," the archseraph said as he returned to the statue. "So you really can sense more than one deity's divinessence. How many can you sense?"

"Is this really what we should be discussing at the moment?" Andric asked.

"If Your Highness would indulge my curiosity for just a moment."

Andric sighed. "All of them, though Akraharr and Sykoria are a bit more challenging."

"I should hope so. Still, I don't think I have ever known anyone who could sense more than one without first converting. How long have you been aware of this gift?"

"All my life, I suppose, though I didn't really understand it until this last year. Master Ve'Aurben has been instrumental in assisting me. Now, about the attack on the temple—"

"Forgive me, Your Highness. One last question if I may. Are you able to

attune to the divinessences, to perform benefactions with them, or just sense them?"

Something in the way the archseraph asked the question stirred caution within Barak. He seemed... hungry for the answer.

"I don't generally practice benefactions, but yes, I can attune to the divinessences. At least, to those I've tried. As I said, I haven't put much effort toward Akraharr or Sykoria."

The archseraph stared intently at Andric for just a moment, then looked down at the statue's arm lying on the ground, changing the subject. "So, what are we to do about the Servari attack?"

"Do you have any idea who may have done this? Were any threats made against the temple?" Andric asked.

"Oh, there are always gnats buzzing about, but I don't pay them any mind. At least not until they infest my house. Then they must be dealt with."

"Archseraph, tensions in Teris are already high. I do not believe it would be prudent for the Church to involve itself in this matter. Please ensure your people cooperate fully with the city guard, and I will ensure that our best resources are directed to bringing the culprits to justice."

"You expect us to sit by and do nothing? That would be an affront to Teraithia's teachings. That is the path of the weak and helpless."

"Taking actions that weaken Teraithia's influence in the world is also an affront to her teachings, isn't that right?" Barak asked.

"So you fancy yourself a theologian as well, I see," the archseraph said condescendingly. "It's true that every action taken by her disciples should be designed to bring Our Lady greater glory."

"Which is why you issued a Writ of Divinity calling for all Teraithians to bring souls into the faith or let them 'burn in a hail of brimstone and fire' I believe were the words." Barak knew from Scholar Idduak's lecture that the Writ was laced with phrases from the Ultideic Prophecies.

"I fail to see what that has to do with this situation."

"If your grace would indulge my curiosity for just a moment."

The archseraph's eyes tightened, betraying his irritation at having his words parroted back to him. He looked at Andric, perhaps hoping the prince would put Barak in his place. Barak was grateful when Andric held his gaze steady, waiting for an answer.

"The Writ was intended to inspire greater fidelity and action in spreading Teraithia's truth in the world."

"And do you think it's possible that some of your followers took the words of the Writ to let those who reject such efforts 'burn in a hail of brim-

stone and fire' literally, and were involved in setting the fires at the Dorothi and Servari temples in the past few months?"

"You dare accuse me of instigating the attacks on the other churches!" The archseraph's voice echoed loudly in the smoky air. Barak felt an oppressive weight fall on him like a hand threatening to extinguish his life. Two Divinarim stepped forward, halberds lowered. The others seemed hesitant to threaten their spiritual leader.

"Your Eminence, it is forbidden," the same Divinar admonished, her words measured but hard as stone. The pressure evaporated, leaving Barak shaken but more determined to forge ahead.

"Perhaps it—" Andric began, but Barak cut in.

"I am not accusing you of anything. But someone is."

"What do you mean?" the archseraph asked.

"You think it's a coincidence that the attackers used brimstone and a daemon to set fire to the temple?"

The archseraph looked around the assembly hall, though what he was looking for Barak could only guess. Perhaps he was buying time to consider the idea. "An interesting theory," he finally said. "One I'm sure you will share with Captain Drandin. Now, unless Your Highness needs anything else from me, I'm afraid I have pressing matters to attend to back at the Mount."

Barak could not help himself. "Forgive me, Your Grace. One last question if I may. Do you believe we are in the time of the gloaming of the gods?"

"If we are, Teraithia help us all." With that, the archseraph strode from the assembly hall. The sound of his hard-heeled footsteps echoed loudly in the grand chamber.

"I don't think he'll be inviting you to dinner anytime soon," Andric said.

"I thought that went rather well, all things considered."

"You certainly know how to get under some people's skin," Andric replied with an amused tone that told Barak his friend was not bothered by how things had transpired. "Anyone else you'd like to perturb before we go?"

"I had hoped to hear the description of the daemon from the firsthand witnesses, but honestly, I'm just eager to leave."

"You don't want to have a look at the bodies or something?"

Barak shook his head and started for the door, hoping Andric was joking about the bodies. He was relieved when the prince followed.

"If you really want to talk to the witnesses, I can arrange for it later," Andric offered.

"If the city guard will be making a report of the statements, could I just get a copy?"

"I'll see what I can do."

Andric stopped briefly to inform Seraph Prozint and Captain Drandin of what he had found and assure them they had the full support of the crown. By the time they made it out to the steps of the temple, the sun was high overhead and glinted brilliantly off the archseraph's carriage as it headed toward the front gates. Andric quickly mounted and kicked his horse into a canter. The iron-shod hooves clacked loudly on the cobblestones as they hurried to exit through the gates held open by the temple armsmen. The city guards in the street cleared a path through the crowd for the archseraph, and the Divinarim led Andric the same way. Once they had moved past the crowd, Andric directed them down a different street.

"I want to get out of the city. Let's go see the fairgrounds," Andric said.

Barak wanted to get back to the comfort of the library, but he knew his mind wouldn't soon let go of the events at the Temple of Venerate Alscome. Perhaps it was better to accept the distraction of a ride. Besides, he didn't want to have to endure Andric's attempts to pressure him.

"All right."

"Really? Just like that?"

"I want a preview of where you're going to have your royal hide thrashed tomorrow."

Andric barked a laugh. "I don't know about that. You'll have to be there to see for yourself which way it goes."

Andric chatted about his sword training and the competitors he hoped to face this year. Barak only half-listened, distracted by thoughts of the attack on the temple. He could not relate to people who chose violence to express their grievances. What good did it do—had it ever done? Did they really think it would change the way the Teraithians believed or acted?

Soon they were on the Grand Avenue, passing beneath the colossal Hightowers' Gate, the main way in and out of the inner city. The fortification consisted of a series of massive portcullises with six towers that rose high over the tunnel running through the massive city wall. The stone appeared seamless and impossibly smooth but did not look entirely natural, having been constructed before elantir perfected their craft. That men could accomplish such a feat of engineering left Barak in awe.

Beyond Hightowers' Gate, the Grand Avenue was called Dunnigan's Highroad. A sprawling outer city had spilled beyond the bounds of the massive city walls. No one had attacked Teris in over two centuries, and security had given way to growth. The outer city was an odd mix of poverty and wealth, with filthy slums and extravagant estates. Originally, the shanties of

beggars and other undesirables had surrounded the city's mighty walls. Slowly at first, then like an avalanche, shops and homes appeared that were too poor or too large to be built within the inner city. They had started close to Dunnigan's Highroad, but now they surrounded the entire city. Without strict confines to work within, the streets and districts of the outer city followed no rhyme or reason. Most of the crime in Teris occurred in the outer city. Two years ago, King Laconeus had ordered it cleaned up and reconstructed with a sense of order. Most of the ongoing work could not be seen from the Highroad anymore.

Behind the prince's party, the mid-day peal of bells from the Grand Temple of the Holy Couple tolled out from the Mount of the Gods, their perfectly tuned notes carried to every ear for miles around. Barak had been fascinated to learn the elantic principles that enabled the sound to propagate over such distances without having to be louder at the source. Elantir at the temple surrounded the bells with a field of elan attuned to the yldrath modality, which slowed the dissipation of the vibrations. Knowing how things worked helped him appreciate them so much more. He enjoyed the sound and wished they rang more often, but they only sounded on holy days. At dusk, all the bells in Teris would peal in a glorious cacophony.

"I can't believe it's the second tolling already," Andric said. "We don't have much time. I have to be back by the third."

They picked up the pace toward the fairgrounds just beyond the outer city. Hamoth's Field and the surrounding lands were kept clear of any settlement by law dating back to the time of King Hamoth himself. Barak was grateful to have an area of untouched nature to enjoy on occasion. The manicured parks and gardens of Teris were beautiful, but there was something about being in an untamed forest Barak found particularly rejuvenating. He sighed, wishing that was their destination instead.

The fairgrounds were teaming with people making the final preparations to set up booths, pavilions, contest areas, stands, stages, and a multitude of other areas for activities Barak could only guess at. Noticeably absent were the delicious smells of cooking food Barak always enjoyed. His empty stomach growled in anticipation of tomorrow's festivities. He knew that not everyone observed the privations of Preparations Day fasting, but today it was prohibited to sell food at the fairgrounds.

"It might be difficult to come see you for a while," Andric said casually.

The Divinarim had formed a wide circle around Andric and Barak, giving them some semblance of privacy. Barak sensed something was on Andric's

mind, and guessed that he was about to hear what it was. He remained quiet, giving Andric time to get the whole matter out at his own pace.

"The Kushaani slave raids into Remalia have been increasing, especially in the Vastan Province. My father intends to put a stop to it."

Barak nodded his head, realizing that Andric was revisiting a previously discussed topic.

"It will be interesting to see what resistance my father receives over the next few days from the nobles. I think he's expecting a fair amount of maneuvering, if not outright opposition."

"He must be planning a fairly extensive campaign," Barak observed.

"What makes you say that?" Andric asked, cautiously looking around for eavesdroppers.

"Well, if he intended to just stop the raids, he could simply increase border security. The Kushaani lands along the border are relatively poor, and therefore not particularly attractive from an economic perspective. Taking them has some small strategic advantage to stop the border raids, but that can only be a strong motive for your cousin and the crown, not nobles from most places in Remalia, and therefore not a source of much contention. On the other hand, if he intends to go after the slavers, that means invasion." Barak's mind raced ahead to the implications of his own words. He saw in his mind's eye the maps he had studied in tutoring sessions with Andric.

Barak continued explaining his reasoning that had led to his conclusion. "The central and southern tribes are the primary markets for slaves, so to the extent your father intends to shut down the slave trade, he has to shut down those markets. They're also the richest lands in Kushaan, making them far more attractive targets. However, that will require Remalia to push far into Kushaani territory, which is terrain that will significantly slow your troop movement and require a much larger force and a greater proportion of foot troops than Remalia's traditional unit composition. Also, if taking spoils was Remalia's intention, again your father wouldn't anticipate much difficulty, so he must intend to conquer and hold those lands, which would of course give rise to contention over who gets to control them. But doing so will significantly increase the complexity and scope of the campaign."

Andric shook his head in amused wonder. "Maybe I should suggest to my father that he appoint you as an advisor."

Barak grimaced. "No thank you. I fear I would lose my mind if I had to be occupied by the inanity of politics. My studies are enough for me."

"Gee, thanks," Andric replied with a touch of feigned injury.

"If my guess *is* correct, you would have either had to already be amassing

troops in the borderlands, or you would have to deploy a vast number of troops very soon if you're going to have enough time to secure a foothold down in the Strappatka territory before the next storm season sets in."

"Are you a spy? Or maybe you've secretly changed your studies to military strategy?" Andric joked.

"Hardly, on either count. Curritan is sparsely populated, and Kesh is dense jungle. The Strappatka lands are the most productive agricultural region anywhere near your targeted territories. The food will be critical if you're going to be that far from Remalia. And the Strappatka are the nearest of the large tribes, putting you on one side of the other large tribes' lands so you limit the number of fronts you can be attacked from and position yourself to conduct a more systematic and measured campaign. It seems the logical choice."

Andric accepted the futility of keeping anything from his friend. "Stephir has been developing foodstuffs in the Vastan Province, and he has slowly been building our forces at key strategic locations. Unless there's some major problem with the nobles, my father will start moving the bulk of our army within a week, with additional forces from the other nobles to follow."

"Maybe Scholar Idduak was right."

"She said we were going to war against Kushaan?" Andric asked.

"No, she said a major war was imminent, and it would involve all quarters of the world."

"Taking over the world may be a bit heavy-handed just to stop the slave raids," Andric joked. "I think my father misses leading a big army. It's a chance to relive his glory days. Alas, I have not heard of plans for worldwide conquest. Not a bad try for a dusty bookworm, though."

"Are you certain?"

"About you being a dusty bookworm? Absolutely!" Andric laughed.

The wheels in Barak's head churned. "So when do you leave?" Barak continued as if it was nothing out of the ordinary, though the implications of Andric's departure for their friendship were significant.

"If all goes according to plan, this coming Restday."

Only four days? A mix of emotions surged through Barak. He was going to miss his friend. At least there was little chance of Andric dying in the war. But he would certainly be different when he returned. Would they still be friends?

"We should probably head back. My father will kill me if I'm late." They left the fairgrounds and returned to the road. Many more people were moving in both directions, and Andric had difficulty keeping the quick pace. By the

time they reached Hightowers' Gate, the sky was tinged with orange and pink as the sun dipped below the Lithowen peaks in the east. Andric instructed two of the Divinarim to accompany Barak to the temple. Barak's instinct was to decline the offer, but he thought better of it. After what he had seen today, he was glad to have the protection.

"I'll see you tomorrow at the tournament grounds. Wager against me at your own risk," Andric said boastfully.

"I'll see if I can fit it into my schedule," Barak joked back. Andric smiled, then hurried up the Grand Avenue toward the Mount of the Gods. Barak turned toward Selmarine, his thoughts churning over everything that had transpired. His mood slowly darkened, matching the deepening shadows of late afternoon in the narrow city streets. Try as he might to focus his attention elsewhere, one thought kept returning to the surface and he knew he would have no rest until he had followed it to its conclusion. He needed to delve into the Ultideic Prophecies.

At the temple's gates, he bid the guards farewell, then hurried to stable Steed. He wanted to find Scholar Idduak before the evening devotions started and ask to read her discourse. It seemed the best place to start.

The third tolling of the bells began before he left the stables, their chimes filling the air with ringing. He usually paused to savor these occasions, but tonight the chaotic chorus seemed to underscore the trouble in the world. He chuckled sardonically. There was no way Andric was going to make it to the devotions. The prince was surely feeling dread at this moment, though for a completely different reason than Barak.

He remembered tomorrow might be the last chance to see his friend for a long time, and an aching loneliness suddenly gripped his heart.

Not right now. I'll have time to feel lonely later.

Now it was time to see if he could peer above the glass and glimpse the plans of the gods.

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GATESTONE
PUBLISHING

Victory was all but guaranteed,
but the threads of fate twist in unseen hands.

The Kingdom of Remalia has basked in years of peace, but now, a storm foretold in prophecy brews on the horizon. Religious unrest and brutal slave raids from Kushaan give the king the perfect excuse for a long-desired war. Crown Prince Stephir senses doom in the coming conflict, while his brother, Prince Andric, is eager to carve his name into history with blood and steel.

But wars are waged by more than mortals, and the prophecy whispers of unseen players pulling the strings.

With their connection to home severed, a mysterious disease dragging the king toward death, religious persecution erupting into chaos, and an unknown enemy invading, the brothers must race against time—and destiny itself—to save a kingdom slipping from their grasp.

As the Storm Beneath the Glass surges
the Gods may have other plans.