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WAY *of*
KINGS
P R I M E

THE 2002 ALTERNATE VERSION

FICTION BY BRANDON SANDERSON®

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SANDERSON CURIOSITIES

The Way of Kings Prime

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THE 2002 ALTERNATE VERSION

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A DRAGONSTEEL ENTERTAINMENT® BOOK

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS BOTH ONE of my greatest accomplishments and one of my greatest failures.

I started it during a difficult time in my life. I'd graduated with my undergraduate degree in English in 2000, but had been summarily rejected from every graduate program to which I'd applied. (The book *Elantris* was my writing sample for those submissions.) The publishing industry didn't want my books either; I'd been racking up a nice stack of rejections saying my books were too long.

On top of it all, I'd just finished writing what I consider two of the weakest books of my career. (Though later on the ideas from these unpublished books evolved into *Mistborn*.)

And this was when I decided to begin the most ambitious story I'd ever attempted.

I've talked a lot about that time in my life; you might have heard the story before. I started *The Way of Kings* because I needed something for *me*. Something to prove to myself that I still loved writing. After spending several years chasing the market by trying to write like popular writers who were selling at the time, I asked myself, "What would I most want to read? What would I be writing if I didn't care what the publishing industry thought?"

The book you are now reading is the result. I was told my books were too

long; this is even longer than any book I'd heretofore created. Publishers told me to focus less on magic and more on creating gritty Earth-like settings, like what was selling at the time. I went off in a completely different direction, into a land of knights in magical power armor, ancient magics, and an ecology that was far, far removed from anything you'd find on Earth.

To an extent this was me giving up, but in the most glorious way possible. I had realized, during those dark moments, that I loved writing so much that I wasn't going to give up, even if I was never published. *The Way of Kings* was for me. It was my exploration of my own goals for the fantasy genre—my feelings of where it could go, what it could do—and what I'd like to see fantasy become.

I've talked about something my friends jokingly called "worldbuilder's disease." That's the affliction a writer can get where they spend all their time worldbuilding, and never actually tell their story. For *The Way of Kings*, I decided to GIVE myself worldbuilder's disease. I let myself just think and plan about the world for months and months before writing—far more than I normally did.

At the time, I was working the graveyard shift at a hotel and would write during downtime. I bought a three-ring binder, and I started printing off pages of Roshar's worldbuilding each day after I finished. I filled that thing up with some three or four hundred thousand words of ideas for the setting—more words than the book itself eventually had. In part, this was to give myself time to deal with all the rejections I'd been getting.

Things eventually got better. I finally got accepted to a graduate school. (BYU let me in; I hadn't wanted to apply there initially because that's where I'd done my undergraduate studies. However, out of twelve applications the first year and another eight the next year, it's the only school that accepted me.) I started to see some small successes in publishing. And right around the time I finished *The Way of Kings Prime*, I finally sold a book.

The Way of Kings saw me through it all. It shepherded me through my transition from an amateur to a professional writer—and the text, as you'll soon find out, shows that. This book is a failure, but a spectacular one.

I'd never attempted something on this scope before, and so I tried to write too many different viewpoints, with too many different plotlines for me to juggle. The end result, as you'll read, is a book that lacks focus—it's trying to do too much. What it envisions is awesome, but because of my limited skill at the time, I ended up with a large number of fragments of different stories told together in one book—rather than something that tells a single narrative.

Everything is going to feel just a little off to you in this novel. Indeed, themes like mental health, which I later learned better ways of addressing, are . . . handled less delicately in this book. Also, in reading history, I found that many arranged marriages happened between people of extremely disparate ages, and I wanted to explore that kind of strange relationship. (I did it in a way that didn't involve anything uncomfortable happening—but it still came off poorly in the book. Fair warning.)

Almost all the characters are here, though most of them have different names. (Jasnah and Dalinar are the only names I remember keeping. And I don't believe Navani exists yet.) Kaladin, called Merin in this, has a completely different arc—as I hadn't put Bridge Four into the book yet, and hadn't yet figured out how to make spren part of the world as I wanted.

Taln, the Herald, is a main character—I envisioned him as the main character of the series back then, though his arc was supposed to be uncertain, as I didn't want you to know if he's actually what he claims, or if he's delusional.

The events of this book are far, far different from the published version. So please don't assume anything in here is still canon, or an indication of the future for the real Stormlight Archive—even the name of the series was different; I was calling it the Dawnshards. All that said, I'm very proud of this novel. It's the book I wrote right before *Mistborn*, and is of a similar quality—just less controlled.

It taught me a great deal, however, and I still think it's worth reading—so long as you understand that the book is an embryonic version of the story I truly dreamed of telling. I would eventually gain the skill and confidence, after years of thinking about what went wrong, to write the book a better way. If for some reason you haven't read the published version, please read that one first.

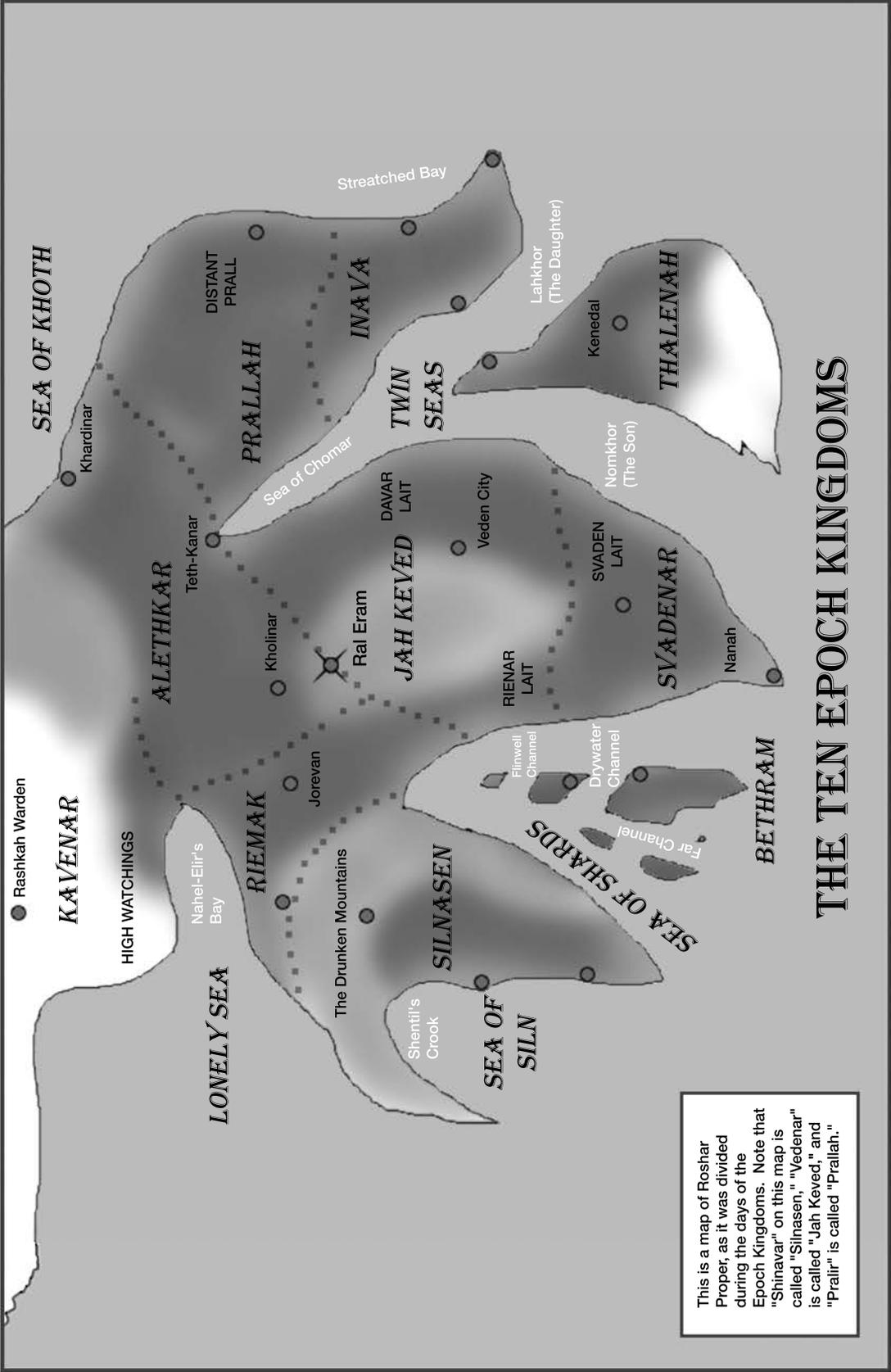
Despite all its flaws, it's exactly what I needed when I wrote it. And it is the seed that eventually grew into something great. I hope you find something in it to love.

Brandon Sanderson
April 2020

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

EVEN THOUGH *THE WAY OF KINGS PRIME* was never published in the traditional way, it still had a large group of people—friends, family, members of writing groups—who read it and gave feedback. Even by the time *Elantris* was published, the binders with the printed pages of the book you now hold in your hands were still being shared around. (In fact, one of those binders full of comment-filled pages was literally used as a doorstop when helping a friend move apartments.) So, thank you to everyone who read, commented upon, and enjoyed this book throughout the years.

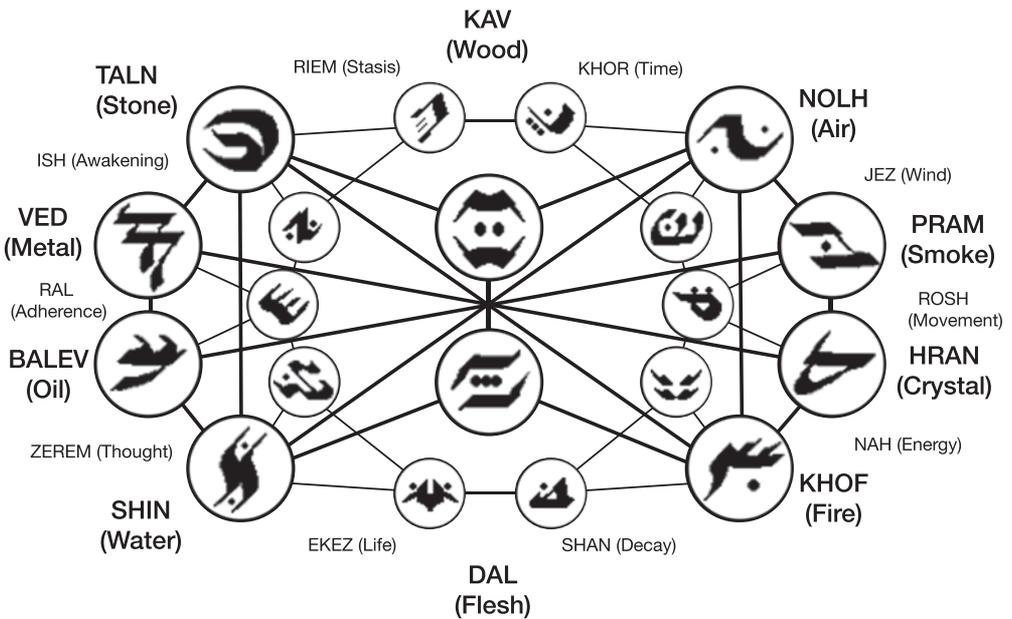
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THE TEN EPOCH KINGDOMS

This is a map of Roshar Proper, as it was divided during the days of the Epoch Kingdoms. Note that "Shinavar" on this map is called "Silnassen," "Vedenar" is called "Jah Keved," and "Pralir" is called "Prallah."

THE DOUBLE EYE



THIS IS A REPRESENTATION of the Double Eye as it appears in Rosharan art. Sometimes it appears stylized or without glyphs, as seen on the next page. Other times the Ten Forces are left out in favor of portraying the Ten Essences more prominently.



chapter 1

DALENAR 1

DALENAR COULD SEE a highstorm approaching. Its clouds crested the horizon like a rising wave, dark, silent. It was still distant, but it would come. Furious and exact, highstorms were as inevitable as the rising sun.

The wood lurched beneath his feet, and Dalenar reached reflexively for the tower's rail. The battlefield stretched below him, a world of screaming men, metallic rings, and hissing bowstrings.

"When we return," Elhokar muttered from a short distance away, "remind me to find a towermaster who doesn't see fit to run over every boulder on the battlefield."

Dalenar snorted quietly, scanning the battlefield. Spearmen in Alethkar blue held in a tight formation around the advancing tower, protecting the wooden structure and using its momentum to help push them forward as they pressed against the enemy line. Two massive chulls pulled the tower, a fifty-foot high construction of wood and steel. The chulls lumbered forward on trunk-like feet, encased in stone—the great northern beasts used massive, hollowed-out boulders like shells to hide their tender bodies. They didn't even seem to notice their harnesses at their necks or the men scurrying at their feet.

The tower did its job well. Its two tiers of archers launched volley after volley of missiles at the enemy. Dalenar looked down at the soldiers, wondering what it would be like to be a simple footman facing the enormous

structure. The unfortunate men were forced to choose between holding their shields up high to block the death from above, or holding them low to block the spears in front of them. The discarded bodies, left in heaps behind the advancing line, proved that both choices were equally fatal.

“Where is he?” Elhokar said, frowning. The king shone in his golden armor, one of the finest suits of Shardplate in Alethkar. Gold-trimmed with sunbursts on the shoulders and breastplate, the armor was topped by a helm mounted with four intricate spikes. Yet, majestic though it was, the armor looked wrong on the young king. Dalenar still expected a different face to look out from that helm—a face aged with wisdom, not young and untested.

“He’ll come, your majesty,” Meridas promised with a smooth voice.

Dalenar frowned, but said nothing. The king had a right to choose his counselors, and while Meridas was lowly of rank, he was still a lord—and a wealthy one. Without Meridas’s merchant fleets, the king could never have moved across the Sea of Chomar in such a short time.

Elhokar didn’t respond. His eyes watched the battlefield, yet Dalenar knew he wasn’t planning strategy. Elhokar only desired one thing from this battle.

And that, unfortunately, left Dalenar to shoulder the bulk of the command. Dalenar turned, waving toward the back of the tower and its small crowd of aides, messengers, and lesser lords—Dalenar’s two living sons among them. A messenger approached, and Dalenar ordered a squad of heavy infantry to the eastern flank, to break a particularly resilient group of Prallan spearmen. The messenger nodded, moving to climb down and deliver the message.

“Where is he?” the king repeated quietly.

Dalenar moved up to stand beside the young king, his armored feet thumping against the wood. Dalenar’s own Shardplate wasn’t as intricate as that of his nephew—he hadn’t sewn it with silks, and it bore few adornments. It suited him, and he had worn it with pride since the day his brother had given it to him, so many years ago.

“The Traitor will commit himself soon,” Dalenar said with a slow nod, speaking over the sounds of fighting a short distance below. “Your sister’s strategy is a good one. The Prallan forces are buckling in the east, and their men fight with the frantic motions of a group demoralized. If the Traitor doesn’t join the battle soon, he will lose the day for certain.”

Elhokar waved a golden hand. “This day was won hours ago.”

“Don’t express the fall, your majesty,” Dalenar warned. “Our force is

larger, but the Prallans fight on the land of their fathers. Arrogance will serve us nothing but misery.”

Again, Elhokar did not respond. He had a regal face, with a perfect Aleth countenance—dark black hair, oval face, and a distinct chin. In fact, he had more of a traditional noble look than his father had—Nolhonarin’s face had been flatter, his nose wide and blunt. Yet Nolhonarin had been a commander like Alethkar had rarely known.

Dalenaar sighed to himself, turning back to the battlefield. What had happened to him? What had happened to the days when he could mourn a man’s falling one day, then drink to his victories the next? Why did he keep looking for the features of the father in the face of the son, and since when did he wonder what it felt like to be a footman in the enemy’s army?

His body felt old, lethargic despite the mystical strength and speed of his Shardplate. There had been a day when he’d sworn by the Tenth Name of the Almighty that he would die with Shardblade in hand, but that had been a day before he’d lost both brother and son on the bleak Prallan highrock.

“There!” Elhokar snapped suddenly, standing upright.

Dalenaar followed the king’s gesture. In the distance he could barely make out a large tower rolling onto the battlefield. Lady Jasnah, Elhokar’s sister, had been right—the Aleth offensive had forced the Prallans to commit their towers despite the approaching highstorm.

“He’ll be on that tower,” Elhokar said. With that, the young king hopped up—Shardplate granting him spryness despite its bulk—and threw himself over the side of the tower.

“By the—” Dalenaar cursed, leaning over the rail and watching the king drop to the first archer tier below, then leap over its ledge as well.

Dalenaar spun, pointing at his sons. “Aredor, come with me. Renarin, hold the tower.”

Renarin, the younger of the two at seventeen, paled visibly at the command. “Father, I—”

“Renarin, we don’t have time for your worries,” Dalenaar snapped as Aredor obediently leapt over the tower’s ledge. “You’re the king’s cousin. Hold the west and press the east. I need to try and keep our fool of a king from getting himself killed.”

“Yes, father,” Renarin said.

Dalenaar ignored Meridas’s hostile glare—the clever merchant might be wealthy, and he might have the king’s ear, but he was too low a rank to be given command. Dalenaar took a breath, then hoisted his legs over the tower’s rail and leapt off the side.

He plummeted some fifteen feet before landing with a grunt on the archer's tier, the reinforced wood thumping loudly beneath his feet. His Shardplate softened the brunt of the blow, but his legs still protested the fall. Shardplate notwithstanding, falling from the top of a tower while wearing thirty brickweights of steel was not a casual hop. Gritting his teeth, Dalenar jumped off the archer's ledge and fell to the second tier, then finally dropped one last time to the ground ten feet below.

Stone cracked beneath his armored feet, and he reached up, steadying himself against the tower as a page approached with Stormwind, his horse. Ahead, he could see Elhokar galloping toward the distant tower, riding directly through the Prallan lines, his honor guard—unmounted, of course—frantically trying to cut their way toward their king. Aredor rode a short distance behind, moving with the swiftness of youth.

Dalenar heaved himself into his saddle, keeping his mutterings about the king to himself, and kicked the beast into motion. The Prallan high-rock hills were slick and barren during the summer, their uniform tans and browns broken only by the blood of men. They called the heights Stormlands for good reason—the highstorms had swept the land clean of everything but bleached stone and boulders.

Stormwind—a massive Shinavar beast—snorted as it approached the enemy line. Dalenar reached out his arm to the side and summoned his Shardblade.

It took ten heartbeats. Dalenar counted them as the smoke gathered around his palm, forming into the shape of a sword nearly six feet in length. Smoke became steel at the tenth beat, and the weapon fell into his waiting grasp. It was light and familiar in his hand—it knew him as he knew himself. It had become part of him the day he'd bonded it, and had grown to fit his exact needs. Dalenar's Blade was a simple and utilitarian weapon, straight and double-edged with little ornamentation—only a single glyph patterned in the center of the metal. *Morn*, the glyph of loyalty.

Dalenar quickly overtook the king's honor guard and galloped into the enemy ranks, his only companion Gelnin, his shieldbearer, who rode on Dalenar's second horse. The tattered Prallan spearmen were loosely organized, and most of them made way before his charging beast. Those who had the courage to attack a Shardbearer—attempting to win the Blade, armor, and title for themselves—already lay in pieces on the ground, slain by quick strikes from either Elhokar or Aredor.

Dalenar charged through the brown-uniformed ranks, using his mount's momentum to barrel past the spearmen. A few moments later he broke

through the back of their line, then pushed Stormwind in a gallop parallel to the fighting. Elhokar rode ahead, but Aredor had been slowed by an ambitious squad of soldiers. Aredor had been forced to stop and fight them, lest they cut his mount out from beneath him.

Dalengar kept moving, cursing the king as he avoided a group of heavy infantry. Shardblades could cut through steel as easily as lightning cut through the sky, and Shardplate couldn't be pierced by regular weapons. A determined group of spearmen, however, could eventually wear down even the finest duelist. Youth, rank, and equipment made Elhokar brazen.

The Prallan tower loomed ahead. It was pulled by several teams of men—the Prallans hadn't the resources to afford chulls. Hissing sounds announced arrows falling from above, and Gelnin moved out in front, deftly blocking what arrows he could. Dalengar was barely gaining on the king—Elhokar rode at an insane gallop toward the tower, without even a shieldbearer to protect him.

Dalengar moved in quickly, galloping his mount toward the tower while the archers were mostly focused on the king. Even still, several of them noticed him, and the arrows continued to fall. As Dalengar approached, he made out a brown banner on the front of the tower—it bore the glyph *Jie*, the symbol of a man forsaken, the Traitor's adopted crest.

Suddenly, a galloping horse moved in beside Dalengar. Aredor's face was urgent as he gestured to the side. "Father, there!"

Dalengar turned, then cursed quietly as he noticed three mounted figures rounding the back of the tower. All three bore glistening armor, and all three rode directly for the king. Dalengar hadn't seen many Prallan Shardbearers during Elhokar's three-year campaign—Pralir had been a poorer country even before sheltering the Traitor and inviting Alethkar's invasion. Apparently, they had been saving some surprises.

"The tower is a ruse," Aredor said. "The men atop it bear the armor of footmen."

Dalengar nodded. Elhokar's hatred for the Traitor was well-known. This wasn't the first time Elhokar had left the safety of his lines to try and kill his enemy. The king had sworn an oath that no hand would take the head of the Traitor but his own.

"I'll help the king," Dalengar said, turning Stormwind. "You move around to the side and try and take down that tower."

Aredor nodded, breaking off to the right to dodge another swarm of arrows. Dalengar galloped toward Elhokar, hoofbeats beating against the slick rock.

A sudden, inhuman scream sounded ahead of him, and his shieldbearer's mount toppled to the ground with an arrow in its chest, throwing Gelnin from his saddle. Dalenar barely ducked his own mount to the side to avoid the wreckage, continuing on without a backward glance.

The king stood defiantly on the rocky ground, arrows hailing around him. His horse had fallen, and he was raising his weapon toward the approaching Shardbearers.

An arrow snapped against Dalenar's shoulder, marring the silver gilding but not even scratching the Shardplate beneath. Dalenar ground his teeth—they had already lost two horses, an incalculable price for Elhokar's foolishness. If he lost Stormwind to an arrow as well . . .

Fortunately, it didn't appear as if that would happen. A last hail of arrows fell, several striking the ground around Dalenar, as Aredor reached the tower. The boy had summoned his Shardblade, and the weapon twinkled brightly as he swung it to the side. The Blade sheared through the side of the tower, cutting free an enormous chunk of wood—including the axle of the front side wheel. The tower lurched, the pullmen at the front scattering. Aredor's weapon flashed again, and the tower tipped to the side, throwing free archers and spearmen alike as it crashed to the stones below.

The cessation of the arrows felt like a weight lifting from Dalenar's shoulders, and he took a deep breath. Ahead, the three Shardbearers had reached the king. Elhokar's Shardblade was thinner than Dalenar's, but far more intricate. In fact, it looked more like a piece of art than a weapon, inscribed with a tenset glyphs and a massive sunburst at its center.

The lead Prallan Shardbearer—a man in dark charcoal Shardplate bearing a crest that Dalenar did not recognize—dismounted and leapt toward the king, a Shardblade glistening in his hands. The other two men pulled backward to wait for the results of the fight, as proscribed by Protocol.

Dalenar charged the nearest of the two, a younger man with no crest on his armor—though he wore one on his cloak. The boy's Shardplate, in fact, looked beaten and was scarred in several areas—he had probably inherited it recently, his brother or father dead in a duel, and it hadn't had time to repair itself. The young man's Blade was simple and nondescript, probably unbonded.

Dalenar tried to ignore the boy's apparent inexperience—hesitance, even in the name of mercy, brought death. He swung as he charged past the boy, his Shardblade slicing the air. The boy parried deftly, but the move still threw him off-balance; he obviously wasn't accustomed to mounted dueling. Before Elhokar's invasion, the lad probably hadn't seen swordplay outside

of courtside duels. A better man than Dalenar would have dismounted and allowed the boy to fight as he was accustomed.

Dalenar spun Stormwind, using the momentum to smash Oathbringer into the boy's weapon, knocking it aside. His backhand slice took the young man in the neck. There was a clang of metal, Blade biting Plate, cutting and bending the magical steel as only a Shardblade could. The boy's Plate held, but it was badly scarred. His neckguard was twisted to the side, and the metal of the helm could no longer turn, forcing the boy to watch Dalenar sideways.

Dalenar raised his blade. The boy raised his own, refusing to yield. With an inward sigh, Dalenar nudged Stormwind forward and finished the job. A second blow, placed at the exact angle of the first, broke the already-strained armor. Body and head slid from the horse separately, and the boy's Shardblade dropped from limp fingers. The weapon hit the ground point-first and sank several feet into the hard stone.

Dalenar lowered his weapon, and a second later Stormwind screamed in pain, throwing Dalenar free as a Prallan spearman rammed his weapon through the beast's neck.

Dalenar crashed to the ground. He lay dazed for a moment, the sounds of battle distant. Even before his hearing returned, he locked on the sight of a spear descending toward his face.

He raised a desperate hand to block the blow. His hand was empty—he had dropped his Blade. So, instead, he kicked the spearman's knee with the full power of Shardplate's Awakened strength. There was a crack and a scream, and Dalenar rolled, sighting Oathbringer beside him, grabbing the weapon as he climbed to his feet.

He came up facing a nervous group of five spearmen. They wore mismatched armor of wood and leather, bearing steel only in their caps and their spearheads. Their faces were desperate—they had been pushed across the Prallan Highlands for the better part of nine months, Elhokar's armies defeating them at every conflict. They knew that this would be their last battle.

Dalenar stepped backward, eyeing his opponents. The men should have attacked more quickly, while he had been prone. If not then, they should have rushed him at once, while he was still dazed, grabbing for his sword arm or striking at his face. They might have taken him. Their fear, however, held them back, and by the time they rushed forward—a mass of hysterical faces and quivering spears—Dalenar was ready.

He spun, holding Oathbringer in two hands. The first pass sliced the

ends off their spears. The second cut down all five in one sweep. Steel, flesh, or wood, it mattered not to the Shardblade.

Dalnar shook the blood from his Blade, pausing to throw a glance at the king. Elhokar still fought—his opponent was far more skilled than Dalnar's had been. Dalnar turned, searching for the final Shardbearer, and found him battling against Aredor a short distance away. Both men were still mounted, and they fought unmolested by outside combatants. The spearmen knew better than to break Protocol by attacking Aredor while he was engaged in a duel.

Dalnar stood for a moment, watching his son. Then he tore his eyes away. Aredor would be all right—the lad was nearly as fine a swordsman as his brother had been, and this wouldn't be his first battlefield duel. Instead, Dalnar kept a wary eye on the Prallan soldiers. Their line was fracturing in several broad sections, and he was pleased to see a group of blue-uniformed soldiers peek through a short distance away.

Within a few moments, the Prallan spearmen had retreated toward the thick of the battle. Above them, in the distance, the approaching highstorm dominated the sky, its darkness rolling forward like approaching night. It would hit soon. Dalnar turned, his section of the battlefield suddenly quiet as men moved to fight in other directions, leaving the dueling Shardbearers beside the corpse of the fallen tower.

Dalnar caught motion out of the edge of his vision, and glanced toward Aredor's battle. His son swung, striking his opponent in the chest with a powerful blow, sending the man backward off his horse to crash to the ground, Shardblade dropping from his fingers. Aredor lowered his Blade, and the Prallan raised his hands in a sign of yielding. He would lose his armor and Blade, but would keep his life.

Elhokar, however, wasn't faring as well. He fought with the smooth sweeping blows of Airform—a dueling stance that had never quite suited him. Elhokar was a man of quick temper and firm strikes, but he had always resisted Dalnar's suggestions that he study Fireform or Quartzform. Airform was the form of kings, Elhokar had always claimed.

His opponent fought with the careful, misdirecting attacks of Smokeform. The man in brown armor was an obvious master of the style. He struck carefully—never with much force, but each blow weakening Elhokar's Shardplate. The king's own blows missed far more often than not.

Dalnar stepped forward quietly, joining his son and the defeated enemy Shardbearer in watching the royal duel. After everything that had happened—the years of accusations, the squabbles on the borders, and the

final daring invasion across the thin-necked sea of Chomar—it could all end with a simple stroke of the sword. Elhokar should have known to stay on his tower, to remain where he could not be challenged.

Yet, Dalenar felt it difficult to stoke his frustration. Elhokar's father had known better, but that was because he had learned better. Nolphonarin had nearly lost his life in a half-tenset foolish duels before learning temperance.

It happened in a flash. Elhokar, off-guard. The man in brown striking. The blow took Elhokar in the head, bending his helm, twisting it to block his vision and throwing him to the ground with its force. Dalenar inhaled quickly, thinking of his own duel just moments before.

And then Elhokar attacked. His blade guided by instinct, his eyes blocked by steel, Elhokar drove his blade upward as he knelt on the stone. It slid smoothly through the small space beneath his opponent's breastplate, driving up to the heart. The enemy Shardbearer jerked, then dropped his Blade and toppled backward. The weapon clanged to the ground before Elhokar.

"Your majesty," Dalenar said with relief, stepping forward as Elhokar stood and pulled off his helmet. "That was too close a duel."

The king tossed the mangled helm to the side with an off-handed gesture. "I was always in control, Uncle."

"Even when you couldn't see what you were doing?" Dalenar said with a snort.

Elhokar turned toward him, eyes unyielding. "You're the one who taught me that a true duelist strikes with his soul, not with his eyes. My opponent was a fool." He turned, obviously considering the topic to be at an end, and regarded the fallen tower. "The Traitor was not here."

"No, your majesty," Dalenar said, nodding for his son to go and gather the Shardblades of the fallen men. As the spoils of battlefield duels won by men who already had Blades themselves, the weapons would become the property of the king, to be distributed as he wished.

Elhokar frowned, turning toward the battlefield and studying the movements of troops. It was difficult to make much sense from the mass of brown and blue without the tower's vantage. Thousands of men, hundreds of squads, fought on the field. They had to get the king back to the safety of their lines before the Traitor's generals decided to try for his life again.

"What is that?" Elhokar said, pointing with a gauntleted fist. At first, Dalenar worried he had seen another tower. The king, however, was pointing toward a stony hillside at the back of the battlefield, behind the Aleth line.

Dalনার squinted, trying to make out what had drawn the King’s attention. The darkening sky was making it difficult to see.

“The western flank,” Aredor said, stepping up beside his father, the three Shardblades held carefully before him. “Our line is withdrawing.”

Elhokar cursed. “That move exposes our entire central line! Who is in charge back there?”

“My son,” Dalনার said.

“Renarin? The boy couldn’t duel a blind woman.”

“He’s well-practiced at tactics,” Dalনার said stiffly. “If you’d wanted to appoint someone else, you should have done it before you went dashing off to try and get yourself killed.”

Elhokar turned, his eyes dark at the lack of respect.

Be careful, Dalনার warned himself. This is not your brother. Elhokar is a different man. “We should return, your majesty,” Dalনার said, wrestling down his anger. “It is not safe.”

Elhokar waved his hand dismissively at the word ‘safe.’ His honor guard had finally managed to catch up, pushing through a widening gap that was dividing the Prallan army into two separate forces. In the distance, several more Prallan towers were rolling forward into the fray—a final, desperate attempt to turn the battle. However, with the Aleth central line threatened, they could actually make a difference.

Dalনার felt a sudden stab of worry. The battle had nearly been theirs. However, if the Prallans pressed the west, and if those towers held . . .

Renarin, what in the name of the Thoughtgiver are you doing?

The honor guard approached, accompanied by a large group of spearmen and one mounted man. Meridas regarded the corpses and fallen tower with his usual indifference. Dalনার, however, was impressed to see the man approach. Meridas was no Shardbearer—his armor was a simple breastplate of normal steel, and he wore a regular sword at his side. Venturing away from the relative safety of the tower was a brave feat, even if he was accompanied by several hundred soldiers.

“Meridas,” the king said as the councilor bowed deferentially. “Good. I need your horse.”

“Your majesty?” the merchant asked with concern as Elhokar dismissed his Blade—the weapon disappearing back into smoke—and clinked forward, waving for the tall merchant to dismount.

“Elhokar . . .” Dalনার said warningly.

The king, however, simply raise a forestalling hand. “I’m just going back

to the tower, Uncle. I need to find out how much of a mess your son has made of our battle.”

“The scouts discovered an army of Prallans far to the west,” Meridas explained as he dismounted. “I told him to send a messenger for you, but he withdrew the line instead, fearing that we would be flanked.”

Dalener frowned, finally understanding Meridas’s willingness to enter the field. This wasn’t the loyal vassal braving the battle to seek his king, it was the petulant underling seeking an ear to tell his tale.

“Your majesty,” Dalener said, stepping forward. “Wait for Aredor to—”

The king mounted Meridas’s horse, then kicked it into a gallop without a word. Dalener tried to dampen his frustration, but it was growing increasingly difficult. He had sworn on his life to defend the son of the brother he had loved. Spears he could block, Shardbearers he could duel, but the boy’s own stubbornness made for an impossible battle.

Behind him, several attendants stripped the Shardplate off of the young man Dalener had killed. He had been no older than Renarin, a boy forced into the role of a man by circumstances and title. Once, hatred and fury had lent Dalener their power. Now, pity was sapping his strength as steadily as age.

He was so distracted by his unpleasant emotions that it took him a moment to register Aredor’s yell. Dalener’s head snapped up, turning toward his son, who was leaping atop his horse and summoning his Shardblade.

Dalener followed his son’s gaze, looking past the frantic honor guard, past the confused Meridas. The king had been unhorsed somehow, and stood, looking dazed, his Shardblade still unsummoned. Above him a mounted figure raised its weapon to strike again. A fourth enemy Shardbearer. Where had he come from?

They were too far away. Aredor couldn’t get to him, and the honor guard had been left behind. Blue-uniformed corpses lay scattered around the two figures—men cut down while Dalener hadn’t been looking. Other spearmen were running away, or standing stunned. The king . . .

One solitary spearman in blue suddenly dashed across the rocks and jumped at the unnamed Shardbearer. Only one man.

But it was enough. The spearman jumped up with a heroic bound, tossing aside his spear and grabbing ahold of the enemy Shardbearer’s waist. The weight threw off the surprised Prallan’s strike, and he missed the king. Unbalanced, the Shardbearer reached desperately for his reins, but missed. He tumbled backward, the brave Aleth spearman hanging stubbornly to the man’s waist.

The king recovered his wits, summoning his Shardblade and backing away. Tensets of footmen, realizing their opportunity, jumped for the fallen Shadbearer, spears raised.

“WHERE DID HE COME FROM?” Dalenar demanded, regarding the fallen Shadbearer. The man’s armor was unnaturally nondescript. It bore no scars from battle, but it also bore no crests, silks, or ornamentations. Even the paint had been removed, leaving it a dull-grey color. The man’s face was a mess—the Aleth spearmen had made absolutely certain that he would not rise to get revenge.

Most strange, however, was his Shardblade. It was not a Blank—it bore the intricacies of a weapon long-bonded. This man had been no recent-inheritor. Dalenar had only seen the man alive briefly, but brief assessments were the soul of dueling. This had been a warrior comfortable with fighting on horseback, a man who knew precisely how to strike a standing foe. A man who had managed to unhorse, and nearly kill, Elhokar.

“He came from behind our ranks, father,” Aredor said quietly. The young man stood beside Dalenar, looking down at the corpse. “I saw him too late—he came riding up the conduit our own forces made when they divided the Prallans. He moved quickly, masking his approach by staying to lower ground. He took down the king’s horse in one blow, then waited until his majesty rose to make his second strike.”

“He was Prallan slime,” Elhokar spat with a loud voice. He stood a short distance away, still without a helm, waving away healers and attendants. “He ignored Protocol. He attacked me with my Shardblade unsummoned, and then tried to strike me down while I was unhorsed. Strip his armor from him and leave the body to rot with the common men—he wore no crest, so he will receive no lord’s burial.”

Dalenar stood for a moment longer, regarding the dead lord’s gruesome visage, before shaking his head. Whoever he had been, it was probably better for his family—and his legacy—that his disgraceful attack on the king remained unlinked to his name.

In the distance, the royal tower and its hulking chulls rolled toward them, though for the moment the barren hillside—the same place where the king had nearly been killed—had become an impromptu center of command. Elhokar’s order, supplemented by suggestions from Lady Jasnah back at the command tent, reorganized the Aleth lines and minimized the damage Renarin’s move had caused. As for the five thousand men Renarin

had ordered out to attack the second army, they could do nothing—at least, not until the highstorm had passed.

“My lord?” a hopeful man said. Dalenar turned, regarding a scruffy-bearded spearman with a broad smile and the rank glyph of a fifth footman.

“What is it?” Dalenar asked.

“Well, my lord, I’m captain of the squad who killed the Shardbearer, you see,” the man said eagerly.

Dalenar regarded the fallen Shardbearer again. Traditionally, the armor and weapon would go to the fortunate spearman who had made the kill—instantly propelling them to lordship and Shardbearer status. However, practical experience had long since proven that group efforts were common in defeating a Shardbearer. When it could not be determined who had actually struck the killing blow, the Blade was usually bestowed on the commander of the squad who had performed the deed.

Dalenar shot a look at the king, who was speaking with messengers from the royal tower in a quiet voice, his face growing increasingly angry. At least a tenseset footmen stood a short distance away—each one bearing a bloody spear, their eyes eager. No doubt their captain had promised to reward them for their support, once he had the Shardblade.

These were the men who, just moments ago, couldn’t get out of the way quickly enough. They scattered and left the king to his fate. Now they want to claim the reward for themselves.

“Your majesty,” Dalenar said loudly, drawing the king’s attention from his attendants.

“What?” the king snapped.

“What should we do with this man’s Plate and Blade?”

Elhokar waved a hand uncaringly. “Give them to the captain of the spearmen.”

The captain puffed up at the comment, smiling broadly.

Dalenar frowned. “Your majesty, might I suggest we give the spoils to the man who saved you, the one who pulled the nameless lord from his saddle?”

Elhokar’s face darkened slightly at the words ‘saved you.’ However, he waved his consent, turning back to his messengers, sending several of them off in various directions.

“Well?” Dalenar demanded, turning to the shocked spear captain. “Where is he?”

“Merin took a blow to the head when he fell from the saddle,” a soldier called. Dalenar pushed his way forward, joining a group of spearman

who knelt around an unconscious form. The king's savior was surprisingly young—sixteen, perhaps seventeen.

“See that he's taken to the healer's tents,” Dalenar said. “Tell them he's a nobleman now.”

Several soldiers nodded and Dalenar turned, looking upward. The sky seemed to boil with darkness, clouds spawning from one another, creeping forward. A moment later, the highstorm hit.

DALENAR PULLED HIS CLOAK TIGHT, leaning against the inside of the royal tower. The wood groaned behind him, buffeted by the highstorm winds outside. Fortunately, it was only a spring storm. Back at the camp, raincatchers would be gathering the precious water, without which the army would have difficulty surviving on the stormlands. On the battlefield, however, the rain was only an annoyance—one that Dalenar, sitting inside the wooden tower, did not have to deal with. Nobility did have its privileges.

The Prallans should not have committed their towers. The winds, while not as powerful as those of a summer storm, were strong nonetheless. More importantly, the Prallan towers were not well-constructed. The royal Aleth towers had been designed by the finest architects of Roshar; their tops could be collapsed to make them more squat, and their sides bore ropes to be tied down or held by unlucky footmen. They could survive all but the most furious of storms.

The Prallans were not so fortunate. Their towers had been thrown together hastily to defend against the Aleth advance. They were weak and flimsy. Messengers periodically arrived at the tower door, dripping wet from the storm, telling them of events outside. Over half of the Traitor's towers—no longer protected behind hills as they should have been—had been toppled before the storm's might. Lady Jasnah's planning had proven itself once again. Though the battle had looked uncertain for a moment, the time of worry was over—without their towers, the Prallans had little hope of winning the day, despite Renarin's maneuver.

The fighting had stopped for the moment. Spring highstorms were generally about an hour in length, and they were windy enough—and dark enough—to make fighting inefficient. Those men important enough to stay dry sought refuge inside of towers. The rest were forced to seek what shelter they could in the curves of the land.

Dalenar shivered. It was hard to believe that only a half hour before he had been sweating in his armor. He had been forced to stand in the storm for several minutes while the tower was prepared, and he had grown

sodden in the first waves of rain. His armor seemed to draw in the chill of the storm, and was cold against his body. Fortunately, he didn't have to worry about it rusting—Shardplate was as resistant to the elements as it was to weapons. Dalenar's own suit had been in the Kholin family for four centuries, and before that it had belonged to a different royal family. In fact, there wasn't a set that didn't date back to the Ninth Epoch or before. Even the youngest suits of Plate were nearly a thousand years old—others had lasted for close to two millennia.

They had been crafted by Awakeners to increase a man's strength, stamina, and agility. Unfortunately, when the Epoch Kingdom craftsmen had made the armor, they hadn't thought to add some kind of mystical heating power. Dalenar shivered again, grumbling to himself about Awakeners and their general lack of practical understanding.

He leaned forward, trying to warm his hands against the lantern. Around him, generals and lords sat in quiet conference. Elhokar waited impatiently at the far end of the gloomy structure, resting against the side of the tower. He probably would have ridden out into the storm if he'd thought he could get away with it.

Renarin sat with his brother, looking even more miserable than Dalenar felt. The boy had borne the brunt of a royal tirade for his problematic decision.

Dalenar shook his head. Somehow, the Traitor had uncovered more troops. By all intelligence reports, the man had been forced to commit every soldier he had to the battlefield. Yet he had found more. By the time his secret flanking army had been discovered, most of the Aleth reserves had already been committed to the battlefield—basic strategy said that when you were defeating your opponents, you wanted to defeat them as soundly as possible. Once Elhokar's forces had gained the upper hand, most of the reserves had been applied to increase pressure on the Prallans, forcing them to use their towers.

Without reserves, Renarin had decided to withdraw the western line and send it out to face the advancing force. Unfortunately, he hadn't waited for a complete scouting report before making his move. They didn't know how many Prallans were out there—the highstorm had hit before the messengers could get an accurate count—yet Renarin had already played their hand. He should have sent more scouts, and sent warning to the king of the approaching force.

Renarin's maneuver hadn't been a terrible one, but it had been hasty. It was not a choice Dalenar would have made, but he could see another

commander giving those same orders. The king wasn't as lenient as Dalenar—he was furious about not being informed. Unfortunately, Renarin's lack of self-confidence only lent fire to Elhokar's censure.

On the other side of the tower, the king continued to fidget. Dalenar knew the young king well—he wasn't really mad that Renarin had committed the reserves. Much would have been forgiven if it hadn't been for a single fact—the scouts claimed that the Traitor himself rode with the flanking force. Dalenar could see Elhokar's hands twitching, yearning to summon his Blade and attack the man who had killed his father.

Dalenar shook his head. Elhokar needn't have worried. The entire army knew that the king had sworn to severely punish any man who robbed him of the pleasure of killing the Traitor himself. Renarin's force wouldn't attack the traitor's banner until the king arrived. Besides, they would have stopped for the highstorm like the rest of the army. Elhokar would have his chance soon enough. Once the storm passed, the king could regain command and ride out to see if the scout's reports were true.

The tower creaked one last wooden groan, quivering beneath a final gust of wind, and then all was still. The highstorm had passed.

“Gather my honor guard and find me another horse,” Elhokar said to an attendant, striding toward the door. He paused, looking back. “Move quickly, Uncle, unless you want to be left behind again.”

WATER COULD BRING LIFE even to the seemingly-barren stormlands. Rockbuds appeared to be simple stones until they sensed water on their shells; with the fall of the highstorm rains, the false rocks split, revealing the delicate petals and thirsty vines that hid inside. The plants opened only after storms, their petals uncurling to lap up a few moments of sun, their vines creeping down to soak in the puddles of rainwater. Tiny, crab-like crustaceans scurried from fissures and cracks, digging in the temporary muck and feeding on the exposed plants.

Traipsing across the slick stone, seeing the rockbuds in bloom, made Dalenar think of his home—a land where the plants didn't need to cower within rocky shells between highstorms. Kholinar, a land where stone walls were covered with blooming polyps, where the boulders were draped in vines and the air was cool with humidity. The highstorms were weak back in the Kholinar Lait—the lowland valley was surrounded with hills just steep enough to protect it from the fury of the winds, yet not sheer enough to bring danger of flash floods.

Once, battle had made Dalenar thirsty for more of the same, but now

it only seemed to make him long for the warmth of his hearth. If all went well, he could be back at Kholinar within the month.

Elhokar rode defiantly ahead, crossing the rock on someone's roan stallion. Around him strode seven thousand troops and a tenseset Shardbearers, Dalenar and his two sons included. If the Traitor truly marched with this flanking force, then he would not escape a duel with Elhokar.

Dalenar hustled, his armor clanking as he jogged up beside the king's horse. His body protested the motion—he had taxed it much these last few weeks, and the remainder of the trip would be even worse. Elhokar rode on one of the last horses in the entire army—the beasts were extremely expensive to import from Shinavar, and even harder to care for in the harsh stormland climate. Even many noblemen had difficulty affording a mount—of the ten Dalenar had brought with him to Prallah, only two remained, and he didn't plan to risk any more in battle.

"Elhokar," Dalenar said as he approached the king's horse, "I don't like this. We've had no word from the force my son sent, and we still don't know the size of the enemy. We could be marching into an ambush."

Elhokar didn't reply. He did, however, have his Blade in hand already. "I sent scouts, Uncle," he replied. "We will not make your son's same mistake."

Dalenar sighed. The stormlands expanded into the distance, endless hills of naked stone, broken only by the occasional formation of rock. Directly ahead of them, the stone rose into a moderate-sized butte, steep-sided and formed of dark brown stone. Their last report from the reserve forces placed them a short distance ahead, on the other side of the butte.

Something seemed wrong to Dalenar. They were too far away to see anything, but his conclusions came from instinct rather than sight. His feeling of dread was confirmed by the sight of an approaching scout, running across the hills with an urgent step.

"Halt the column," Dalenar ordered.

Elhokar eyed him, but did not contradict the order. The seven tensquads pulled to a halt, waiting for the solitary scout to approach.

"What is up there?" Elhokar demanded as soon as the man arrived. "Is there fighting?"

The scout shook his head, puffing for breath. "No, your majesty . . . or, at least, it isn't going on any more . . ."

"What?" Elhokar demanded. "What did you see?"

The scout shook his head again, looking confused. "They're . . . dead, your majesty. All of them."

THE SCOUT HAD NOT EXAGGERATED. Dalenar stepped solemnly through the field of corpses, blue and brown uniforms intermixed, weapons clutched in dead fingers. The small valley was a scene of absolute carnage. Nothing stirred. Even the wind seemed silent, as if the Almighty Himself were hesitant to speak.

The soldiers of their seven tensquads stood at the edge of the battlefield, looking in at the fallen, remaining where the king had ordered them. Only Shardbearers and a few important commanders picked their way across the field, examining the dead.

Dalenar frowned, kneeling beside the body of a fallen soldier—a young spearman in blue. The boy wore the leather skirt and wooden plate armor of the standard Aleth footman. Yet he had not been killed by another spearman—the side of his head had been crushed in. Heavy infantry, then? Most heavy infantry carried hammers, maces, or axes instead of spears. Yet, heavy infantry made up a very small percentage of most armies, and that was especially true of the Prallans, who hadn't the resources of the Aleth military.

He stood, wandering across the field, examining the fallen—trying to see beyond the faces of the dead, trying to sense the flow of the battle that had claimed their lives. It was immediately obvious that the Prallan force had been larger—far larger. There were at least three brown-clothed corpses on the ground for every blue one.

Over fifteen thousand . . . Dalenar thought with amazement. *How in the name of the Lawbringer did our men stand against such odds?*

The valley was hedged on one side by the plateau, and bore a large crack in the ground directly opposite. It would have been possible for the Aleth soldiers to use the column-like valley to hold a strong line, keeping themselves from being surrounded. But that was a defensive maneuver—even if the Aleths had managed to successfully hold such a formation, they couldn't have killed so many of the enemy.

Besides, the corpses told Dalenar a different story. They spoke of no defensive formation, but a haphazard offense—a scattered mixing of sides. Very few men on the entire field had been killed by spears—yet nearly all of them wielded them. Their wounds were washed of blood—as if they had fought and died during the rains of the highstorm.

It didn't make sense. Even assuming that there had been Prallan survivors, it seemed impossible that so many had been killed by the Aleth force—especially if the Prallan army had contained as much heavy infantry as the damage seemed to imply. It was wrong, all wrong.

There is no way our force did this, Dalenar thought, scanning the battlefield. Even with three Shardbearers, they could not have done this much damage.

Something very strange had happened on this battlefield. The dead whispered to him clues of their struggle, and only one thing made sense. A third force had attacked both of them. But how would such a force have gathered without Elhokar's scouts locating them, and how had they escaped so cleanly?

They would still be close. "Your majesty!" Dalenar said. "I want you out of here. Now."

The king ignored him, stepping over a body, accompanied by Meridas and—by Dalenar's command—Renarin and Aredor for protection. Elhokar walked through the bodies with an indifference—or, rather, a preoccupation. He was not callous, just determined. His eyes sought one thing.

Dalenar studied the landscape urgently, sensing danger. He saw none, however. The plateau was low, and he could see nothing at its top. He waved over a few scouts and sent them searching anyway. Then he made his way over to the chasm. It was not an irregular feature—the highstorm rains carved out many a gully and fissure in the stone. The sides were sheer, and the bottom contained only rubble. No men had attacked from within its reaches.

"There!" the king cried suddenly. Dalenar looked up to see Elhokar jump over a body and break into a run. Dalenar cursed, forcing himself to follow after, jogging in his Shardplate and trying to be as respectful toward the dead as possible. He kept his eyes up, the sense of danger still keen. Yet no army appeared to attack—if, indeed, a third force had come upon these men in the rains, it had fled quickly to forestall retribution.

Dalenar caught up to the king as Elhokar knelt down to tug at a bloodied banner. It bore the glyph *Jie*. Beneath it lay a haunting face. He had once been known as Oshlen Reil, though his lord's name had been stripped from him after his murder of King Nolphonarin. Since that day, Oshlen had simply been known as the Traitor.

And he was very, very dead.

"No . . ." Elhokar said, falling to his knees on the bloodied ground, bowing his head.

Aredor nudged Dalenar, pointing to the side. "That one's Talhmeshas," he said, pointing at another corpse. Talhmeshas Pralir—king of the Prallan state of Pralir, the nation that had harbored the Traitor and invited Aleth invasion. Dalenar frowned, studying the bodies. Both had been stripped of their Plate and Blades.

Elhokar knelt stunned beside the body of the man who had killed his father. Eventually, he picked up his Blade and rammed it into the stone beside the dead man's face. "All these years," Elhokar whispered, "fighting. Looking for him. Longing to feel his blood on my Blade . . ."

Dalনার shook his head. At least the king had no one to blame for stealing his vengeance—the man who had killed the traitor undoubtedly lay dead on this field somewhere.

The king looked up with a sudden motion, then stood, sliding his Blade free from its stone sheath. There was . . . danger in his eyes.

Dalনার felt a chill. There was no one to blame, unless—

Elhokar pointed at Renarin. "You took this from me," he hissed.

Dalনার gritted his teeth, placing his hand on Elhokar's iron shoulder. "Your majesty—"

Elhokar shook the hand free with a sharp movement. "Stay out of this, Uncle." The king raised his blade, falling into Airform's dueling stance, one foot placed forward, Blade held in two hands.

Renarin took an uncertain step backward—his Blade wasn't even summoned. Elhokar had been right about one thing; the boy was a terrible duelist. And, despite his shortcomings, Elhokar was one of the finest in Alethkar.

"Elhokar!" Dalনার snapped, stepping between the two. "This is my *son!*"

Elhokar stood, weapon outstretched. Dalনার had only seen such a seething hatred in the young king's eyes one other time—the day he had found his father's body. Finally, he hissed in anger, but dismissed his blade.

"He forfeits his Shardblade," Elhokar snapped, standing upright. "He drops from Fifth to Thirteenth Lord, and he shall not inherit, even if Aredor should die."

"What?" Aredor asked incredulously, stepping up to his younger brother's side. Aredor's Blade was still out, Dalনার noticed—and, unlike his brother, Aredor was quite competent.

"Elhokar," Dalনার said quietly, stepping up to the king. "This is excessive. The boy only did what—"

"The boy's leadership made me an oathbreaker," Elhokar said. "I swore to take the Traitor's life myself—every man in the army knew that. The soldiers who disobeyed my order are dead, but the responsibility for their act lies with the one who commanded them."

Dalনার held his tongue, afraid that his response would be unbecoming of a nobleman. His hand, however, quivered as he gripped Oathbringer's familiar hilt.

“It’s not just the traitor’s death, Uncle. The boy nearly cost us this day’s battle. I will *not* have him in a position where he can take command again. Either he gives up the Blade now, or he duels me for the opportunity to keep it.”

The wind finally started blowing again, a light breeze, sending a ripple across the tattered cloaks of the fallen men. The Voice of the Almighty, it was called. Dalenar felt it whisper to him—whisper temperance as he gritted his teeth, facing down the son of the brother he had loved so much. Finally, he turned away.

“Do as he says, Renarin,” he said.

“Father, no!” Aredor cried.

Renarin, however, was his normal quiet self as he summoned his Blade. Ten heartbeats passed as a season, and the boy knelt, proffering the Blade. Nolhonarin had presented the weapon to Dalenar on the eve of the boy’s birth, as he had done the day Aredor was born. Renarin had carried it since the day of his *Charan*.

Elhokar took the weapon, then pulled out a steel-handled dagger. He slammed the butt of the dagger against the pommel of Renarin’s Shardblade, knocking free the black opal that formed the pommelstone—the opal was the “Shard” of a Shardblade, the object that made it possible to bond weapon and man.

The opal dropped to the stones, clicking softly. Then, Elhokar spun, marching from the battlefield. The collected Shardbearers and commanders, who had gathered around the scene, slowly trickled away, their faces uncomfortable.

Renarin stared down at the opal. Aredor knelt by his brother, his face dark. He would have fought to keep his Blade—he was like his older brother, Sheneres. Determined, unyielding. Sheneres had died at the hands of the Traitor that same night, the night Nolhonarin had died. The boy had died in defense of his king, but there had been no time for Dalenar to seek his own vengeance. Only the king’s revenge mattered. Dalenar was Elhokar’s *Parshen*. His will was swallowed in that of his king. Such was his duty.

Dalenar turned away from the boys, looking up toward the horizon. He could still see the darkness of the highstorm retreating in the distance.

“Come, Renarin, Aredor,” he mumbled. “We must return to the camp.”

chapter 2

JASNAH 1

“**T**HE TRAITOR IS DEAD, my lady.”

Jasnah closed her eyes, exhaling softly and sitting back in her chair. *It is over.* Three years of war had come to an end. She sat for a moment, enjoying the peace of finality, before finally sitting upright and opening her eyes.

The messenger still knelt before her. He had obviously come directly from the battlefield; the bottoms of his boots were slick with brownish crom—the muck that fell with highstorms—and his cloak was still wet from the rains. He wore no armor—just a leather vest and a simple pair of loose trousers tied with a string. Runners had to remain unencumbered and mobile.

The tent pavilion’s main audience room was large and spacious, though the metal supports gave it a more cluttered look than Jasnah would have preferred. The ground was covered with a large reed-woven mat—which, Jasnah noticed with displeasure, was dappled with crom from the messenger’s boots. Now that the highstorm had passed, the flaps on the side of the tent had been pulled aside to let in the sunlight.

Jasnah could smell the humid coolness lingering from the storm, but the tent itself was warm and dry. The highstorm had been unusually powerful for late spring, but the pavilion had held to its stakes. The structure was of

Veden make—well-designed for extended campaigns, though Jasnah would be loath to test it against summer highstorms here on the Prallan highlands. Fortunately, it didn't look like the war would come to that.

"My brother?" Jasnah asked.

"King Elhokar is unharmed, my lady," the messenger replied.

No thanks to his earlier stunt, Jasnah added, though she kept her face calm. No matter how many precautions she took, no matter how flawless her battle strategies, Elhokar always managed to get himself into some kind of trouble. Like most young Shardbearers, Elhokar thought himself immortal. He could no longer afford such brashness—he was king now.

"Tell me of the battle," she commanded. "It is over quickly. Did my brother finally find and duel the Traitor?"

The messenger gave his report, and as he did so, Jasnah allowed a frown to creep onto her face. It was possible that five thousand could defeat such a larger force, but hardly likely. She wasn't the only one surprised by the report—she sat in the command tent, along with a group of older generals who were too aged to take part in the actual battle. Several of these muttered to themselves at the oddity. As the messenger finished his report, one of the generals walked over to the logistics map—which was set on a low table in the center of the room—and began arguing over how the battle might have proceeded.

The messenger waited patiently, still kneeling. Jasnah dismissed him with a wave of her hand, and he retreated from the large tent pavilion. The thick tent flap dripped a trickle of water as he brushed past it on his way out.

Jasnah glanced to the side as the generals continued to argue. "Well?" she asked of her companion, the only other woman in the room.

Shinri Davar, Jasnah's ward, pursed her lips. Of medium build with a blazing head of red Veden hair, Shinri was only seventeen years old, yet she was already twice as clever as most of the women at court. Her braids were simple, for a noblewoman, and she held herself with the slight uncertainty of a girl who hadn't yet realized just how beautiful she was.

"It's . . . wrong," Shinri finally said, speaking with a smooth Veden accent. "Lord Renarin's troop arrangement was careless—he sent his men into what appeared to be an obvious trap. Yet they won anyway."

Jasnah nodded.

"What do you make of it, my lady?" Shinri asked.

"I'm not certain," Jasnah admitted, watching the generals. One had arranged some pieces representing troop squadrons on the map, and the others were generally coming to an agreement about how five thousand

could have defeated such a large force. Their explanation, however, was contrived.

Twenty on one side dead, five on the other. No survivors. Too many irregularities. I must speak with Dalenar about this when he returns.

“It’s actually over,” Shinri whispered, as if stunned by the realization. She turned to Jasnah. “The war is over. This means we can return home, doesn’t it?”

Is it over? Jasnah thought. *I certainly hope so.*

Shinri was waiting for an answer. “My brother entered this war to get revenge for the death of our father,” Jasnah replied, keeping her concerns to herself. “That goal is now fulfilled.”

Shinri frowned, eyeing her. She was a clever girl, and growing more and more competent as she learned to control herself and her emotions. She recognized a dodged question. The old Shinri—the impudent thirteen-year-old girl who had come to Jasnah as a ward four years before—would have demanded an explanation. Now, however, Shinri only frowned to herself, studying Jasnah, before finally turning back to her embroidery. She was working on a new glyphward for the tent doors—superstition held they had to be replaced after every highstorm.

Jasnah turned her own attention to the map-table. It had been constructed low, so that Jasnah could look over it while seated, as was proper for a lady of her stature. Of course, propriety had to be bent slightly to even let her into the tent—the command of troops was a Masculine Art, and Jasnah’s participation in the battle was irregular at best. Occasionally, the room’s generals would shoot presumably-covert glances her direction. Even after three years at war, they weren’t accustomed to having a woman in their midst.

They kept any objections to themselves, however. Even the most stubborn of them could see that Jasnah’s battle-plans were superior. Her strategies had led the Aleth armies to unquestioned victory in Prallah. In addition, Jasnah never presumed to actually command troops—she simply outlined strategies. The implementation of those strategies, and the actual command of troops during the battle, lay with the tower-top commanders.

Jasnah studied the map-table as a messenger arrived to relate the newest battle information. Elhokar had left the mop-up of the main Prallan force to one of his sub-commanders, and Jasnah was pleased to see that the man was doing a tolerable job. Most of the Prallan forces had surrendered—either they had heard the news of their king’s death, or they had simply realized the futility of further combat.

This force had been the last major concentration of Prallan troops. Orinjah, the capital of Pralir, was now exposed to attack—and, with both the Traitor and the king dead, it was unlikely the city would offer any resistance. After that, it would be easy to travel back to Alethkar through the Oathgate. Assuming her brother intended to return to Alethkar.

“You’re worried that the king won’t want to return home,” Shinri whispered, catching Jasnah’s eye. “You think he might become a conqueror, and continue on into Distant Prall.”

Jasnah eyed the younger girl, but gave no confirmation to the words. *Clever indeed*, she thought. *Perhaps too clever.*

“It is not wise to voice such idle speculations, Shinri,” Jasnah said. “Watch the battle.”

Shinri smiled slightly, knowing Jasnah’s lack of denial was as good as a confirmation. However, she obediently did as commanded. There was really no reason for the girl to study tactics—her place as a noblewoman would require her to watch over her husband’s political needs, but she would never be called upon to plan battles. However, Jasnah found strong correlations between warfare and politics—both required a keen understanding of your enemies, and an even better knowledge of your own capabilities. Both required foresight and planning, and both demanded a certain amount of cunning.

She heard hoofbeats from outside the tent, and looked up, expecting another messenger from her brother’s force. She was surprised, therefore, when a familiar form entered. The aged man was beardless, after Aleth fashion, though he still had a full head of elegant silver hair.

“Balemar?” Jasnah asked. “What are you doing here?”

The Royal Stormkeeper smiled when he saw Jasnah. Balemar had changed little since she’d last seen him, six months before, during her visit back to the Aleth capital of Ral Eram. Of course, Balemar never seemed to change—he still looked much as he had during her youth, when he had served as Royal Stormkeeper and primary advisor to her father, King Nolhonarin.

“Ah, young Lady Kholin,” Balemar said, stepping into the tent and putting down the hood of his cloak. The garment was damp from high-storm rains—his news must be urgent indeed if he had come all the way from Alethkar, not stopping for storms, to bring it personally.

Not that one would know such from his demeanor. He smiled as he spoke, as affable and nonplussed as ever. “I had hoped to find your brother here.”

“He hasn’t returned from the battlefield yet,” Jasnah said.

“Ah,” Balenmar said, walking slowly over to an open seat beside her. “May I sit?”

“Of course, Balenmar,” Jasnah said, “you needn’t ask.”

“Nonsense,” the aged man huffed, settling himself into the chair. “If the old people don’t hold to the traditions, then who’s going to?” He paused, looking up at her. “And don’t tell me I’m not old. I get very tired of that.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

Balenmar snorted, resting one hand on his cane as he sat. He was getting old—feeble, even. She was surprised he had attempted such a long trip. But then, Balenmar had always been a stubborn one.

“You say the king is still on the battlefield?” he asked. “Then I have missed the conflict. Tell me, Lady Kholin. Did anything . . . irregular happen on the battlefield today?”

Jasnah eyed the old man carefully. Balenmar hadn’t been much of a player in recent Aleth politics, but he had always been clever. *What do you know, old man?*

“What do you mean by ‘irregular?’” Jasnah asked carefully.

“Was the king in any particular danger?” Balenmar asked.

“This is war. He’s always in danger.”

“Of course,” Balenmar said. “If you can think of nothing specific, then I shall have to wait to ask the king himself.”

Jasnah frowned. The implication was obvious—he’d find out anyway, so she might as well be the one to tell him. “There *was* one oddity,” Jasnah said. “The king nearly fell to an enemy Shardbearer’s Blade.”

Balenmar raised a bushy eyebrow. “A duel went against him?”

“No,” Jasnah said. “There was no duel. A Shardbearer without glyph or other identification attacked my brother, breaking Protocol. He rode up through our ranks, unhorsing Elhokar and striking against him suddenly. Fortunately, my brother’s men protected him.”

Balenmar’s eyes thinned. “A glyphless warrior, you say? No identification at all? No one recognized his face?”

“When the soldiers finished with him, there wasn’t much of a face to see,” Jasnah said.

Balenmar rubbed his chin, nodding to himself.

“If you have information pertaining to my brother’s safety, Keeper Balenmar,” Jasnah said, “it would be wise to share it with me.”

Balenmar chuckled. “No, Jasnah, I think not. I’m too late to stop the event itself, but my information is still precious. I shall be the one who shares it with the king—it wouldn’t do to have it reach his ears before I can

get an audience with him. He's been far too fond of his foppish merchant advisors lately; perhaps once he hears this, he will realize the value of keeping counsel with men of wit, not just men of wealth."

Jasnah frowned deeper, but Balenmar only shook his head. "You're not going to get it out of me, child. You'll know soon enough, I suspect. Besides, I have other news for you."

Jasnah suppressed a sigh. She was quickly approaching her thirty-fifth birthday, but Balenmar had yet to stop calling her 'child.' Ironically, she couldn't think of any way to complain without sounding childish. So she simply let it pass.

"And what news would that be?" she asked.

"News about the queen," Balenmar said quietly. To the side, Shinri edged closer with an almost imperceptible move, straining to eavesdrop on the conversation—just as Jasnah had taught her.

"What about her?" Jasnah asked. "Has she done something foolish? Squandered the royal funds? Invited her Veden countrymen in for a riotous feast?"

"Ah, but it is quite the opposite, child," Balenmar explained. "I fear our dear Queen Nanavah has finally begun to develop a mind for politics."

"Impossible," Jasnah said dismissively.

"Undeniable," Balenmar countered. "She's taken over complete control of the Royal Ledgers, and has actually been administering them with skill. I wouldn't have been able to leave Ral Eram in person to come here—despite the import of my news—if she hadn't taken over most of my duties. I'm afraid I've become rather vestigial back at the palace—an amusing situation, I must add, when one realizes that I was only left behind as Steward of Ral Eram because the king found my counsel useless."

"You're hardly useless, Balenmar."

"I didn't say I was," Balenmar said. "But the king sees me that way—and don't you try and deny it. You may be a talented liar, Jasnah, but you can't fool a man who already knows the truth. Elhokar considers me a symbol of the past, and that's why he replaced me with that sycophant Meridas."

Jasnah didn't bother arguing. She wished Balenmar's words were exaggerations, but, unfortunately, Elhokar had not proven particularly wise in his choice of counselors.

Before Jasnah could say anything further, a disturbance from outside the tent drew her attention. Through the tent flaps, she could see a group of men approaching, and they bore her brother's flag—a vibrant blue *khol* glyph, the symbol of their house.

"It appears he has returned," Balenmar said.

"I'm going to go speak with him," Jasnah decided, rising. "Are you certain you don't want me to deliver a message to him . . . ?"

Balenmar chuckled. "No, child. I'll wait until he decides to give me an audience. Knowing Elhokar, I may have to wait a few days, but I'd still rather speak to him myself."

Jasnah nodded, skirting the brown crom as she walked on sandaled feet toward the front of the tent. Her seasilk *talla* was a deep Aleth blue, embroidered with silver thread. The dress was form-fitting, and reached from neck to ankles, with buttons up the side. As was customary, the right cuff was tight around the wrist, and the other was open and enveloping, hiding the left hand from view. Her dark hair was carefully pinned up and braided in her headdress, but—as was her personal custom—she wore no gemstones. It was traditional clothing—this was a day to show patriotism.

Despite the messenger's assurances regarding her brother's safety, Jasnah felt a tremble of relief at seeing Elhokar striding safely at the head of the line. His armor was scarred with a long gouge across the breast, and he wore no helm, but he looked unharmed. Her relief turned to concern, however, as he approached and she made out his expression.

Elhokar marched alone—even the ever-present Meridas was keeping his distance. Jasnah sought out Dalenar with her eyes. Her stately uncle also bore a dark expression, and he strode a good distance behind the king. Dalenar was a *Parshen*—one of Elhokar's two Second Lords. On a day such as this, after such a great victory, his place was at his king's side.

Something was wrong. Jasnah kicked off her sandals and stepped out onto the stone. The rock was still wet and cool beneath her feet—the stormlands weren't just barren, they were also unusually cold. She suppressed a shiver, holding up her *talla* slightly and striding toward the column of men as quickly as the restrictive dress would allow.

"My lady?" Shinri asked with concern, stepping to stand beside Balenmar at the edge of the tent's mat.

Jasnah hustled forward toward Elhokar. The king, however, did not wait. He brushed past her with a quick pace, walking toward his tent.

"Elhokar!" Jasnah demanded.

He ignored her. Jasnah ground her teeth in annoyance, turning toward a more promising target. She moved to the right, cutting off Dalenar.

"Uncle, what is going on here?" she asked.

Dalenar, tall and ponderous in his silver Shardplate, paused and looked

down at her. His armor was also scarred, his gauntlets stained with dark blood, and he smelled of sweat. Yet the gloom of his armor was no match for his face.

“Ask your king,” he said sharply, and continued past her.

Jasnah turned with amazement, watching him go. Armored men clanked around her, calling for healers, armorers, or servants. They were all noblemen, of course—the citizens would have stayed in the lower camp. Jasnah watched Dalenar for a moment, then turned to stare after Elhokar. She stood amidst the churning aftermath of the battle, the soldiers splitting deferentially around her—a blue blot against a background of metal and stone.

“It’s all right, Jasnah,” a calm voice said.

Jasnah turned. Renarin, with his relaxed posture and soothing eyes, stood nearby with his customary smile. Short—even a few inches shorter than Jasnah—he seemed out of place amongst the towers of Shard and steel that were the army’s noblemen.

“What, Renarin?” she demanded. “*What* is all right?”

The young man shrugged. “I didn’t need a Blade anyway. Why waste it on me? I never even duel.”

Jasnah stood, stunned. Renarin smiled wistfully, then trailed after his father. Jasnah watched him go, then spun and stalked toward her brother’s tent.

She threw back the flap, heedless of the rainwater it splattered across her dress. Elhokar stood inside, several aides removing his Shardplate with careful hands.

“You took away Renarin’s Shardblade?” she snapped, wiping her feet on the cleaning mat at the front of the tent.

Elhokar did not answer, simply raising his arms as the aides removed his cuirass.

“Elhokar, how could you?” Jasnah asked. “You took away his Blade in front of the men, in front of his father? Lord Dalenar is your *Parshen!* If you humiliate him, you undercut your own authority!”

Elhokar accepted a water flask from a servant, then waved the aides away, clearing the tent. Only one of the window flaps was open, and the rest of the tent was lit by a dim lantern in the corner.

“Our uncle should never have brought that boy to the battlefield,” Elhokar finally said as he took a swig of the newly-gathered rainwater. “Renarin has no place commanding an army. We both know that. He doesn’t trust himself, and the men don’t trust him.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to demote him,” Jasnah replied, folding her arms.

“He disobeyed my orders,” Elhokar said, cupping a bit of the water and splashing it on his face. “The Traitor was to die at my hands. Renarin commanded the force that killed the man—the fault is his. Besides, the boy is a liability—I need to think about my kingdom, Jasnah—all of it. That Shardblade should be carried by a man who can use it in defense of Alethkar.”

“The ‘boy’ is only five years your younger, Elhokar,” Jasnah said. “And he has served you well these last three years. Not everyone is meant to be a duelist. You should not have—”

Elhokar slammed the flask down on his small wooden table. “I should not have done what, Jasnah?” he snapped. “Would you command my men as well as lead my armies? Am I not king?”

Jasnah closed her mouth, grinding her teeth as Elhokar sighed and took another drink. She had to be calm. The harder she pushed, the more difficult Elhokar would become.

“Who did you give the Blade to?” she asked in a more reserved voice.

“No one, yet,” Elhokar said, moving toward the far side of the tent and pulling open one of the window flaps. “I might give it to Meridas.”

Jasnah exhaled softly in annoyance.

“What?” Elhokar asked.

“I don’t trust him. Meridas is too . . . calculating.” *Too clever. I can’t watch everyone for you, Elhokar.*

Her brother snorted. “You don’t trust anyone, my dear sister. Sometimes I wonder if you even trust me.” He looked at her. After a moment, he simply chuckled and turned to stare out the window flap toward the south. He held up a hand—cutting Jasnah off even as she opened her mouth.

“Very well,” he said. “Perhaps I was too hard on Renarin. I will try and think of a way to make it up to Dalenar. Is that sufficient?”

She didn’t reply, but he knew her silence—signifying the end of the argument—was word enough.

“This should be a day of joy, not anger,” Elhokar said, still staring out the window. “Regardless of the methods, our father is avenged.”

“And the war is over,” Jasnah said, stepping around the water he’d dripped on the floor and moving toward him.

Elhokar did not answer. He continued to stare out the window. Toward the south. Toward the free kingdoms of Distant Prall—a collection of loosely-organized states, young and tempestuous, with weak militaries and weaker alliances.

“Elhokar?” Jasnah asked, stepping up behind him. “The war is over. The Traitor is dead.”

“And if we were to . . . continue?” Elhokar asked without turning.

“You would become a tyrant?” Jasnah asked.

“The difference between a tyrant and a liberator depends on who writes the history,” Elhokar said.

“The difference between a tyrant and a liberator, Elhokar, is one of intention. Would you conquer those people for their benefit, or for your own?”

Elhokar stood for a moment, then snorted quietly, turning from the window and walking away from her, toward his chair on the other side of the tent. “You sound like Dalenar, always spouting morality at me from *The Way of Kings*.”

The king eased into his chair. As he settled back, she could see the fatigue behind the ambition. And beneath that . . . a young boy, desperate for validation.

“Elhokar,” she said softly, “your men are tired, your lands are overburdened, and you are exhausted. The kingdoms of Distant Prall have had enough suffering and conflict—do not bring them a war no one needs.”

Elhokar didn’t respond.

“You have a wife waiting for you, Elhokar,” Jasnah continued. “And a son you barely know. You’ve proven that the Kholin line is strong—you brought justice to the man who killed our father, and you destroyed the kingdom that harbored him. Our scouts say Orinjah is defenseless—we could take the city within five days, and the Prallan Oathgate would be ours. We could be home before the month is over.”

Elhokar glanced toward the south one last time, then met her eyes. “Very well,” he said. “We will return.”

Jasnah sighed quietly in relief. “There is one other thing,” she said.

“Speak quickly,” Elhokar said. “I’m tired from the battle.”

“It’s about the second battlefield, the one where you found the Traitor dead.”

“What about it?” Elhokar asked, his face darkening at her mention of the Traitor.

“Well, don’t you find it a bit odd?” Jasnah asked. “Twenty thousand men, killed by five? And in such a short time—barely two hours?”

“It could be done,” Elhokar said. “Four-to-one isn’t really that bad of odds.”

It’s far worse than I’d ever want to face, Jasnah thought. “Something’s wrong, Elhokar. The death of the Traitor . . . the faceless Shardbearer who attacked you . . .”

“You’re being paranoid again, sister,” Elhokar said with a wave of his hand. “Go speak to Dalenar about these things, if you must. He was muttering about something similar on the battlefield. In fact, go speak to him now—leave me in peace. It has been a difficult day.”

Jasnah frowned, but bit off a response, instead turning to leave the king to his ‘peace.’ She had gotten what she wanted from him.

The war was finally over.

chapter 3

MERIN 1

THE MONKS TAUGHT that wind was the voice of the Almighty. The storms were His fury—a tempest to remind of His omnipotent will. The gentle breezes were His love—a calm reminder that He was watching, and that He cared for those below.

From his haze of near-wakefulness, Merin could feel the wind blowing across his face. Despite the slight pounding in his head, he lay peacefully, letting the wind soothe him. Wherever he had gone in life, the wind had been his companion. It had blown over his back as he worked the fields back in Alethkar. It had ruffled his cloak as he marched across lonely stormlands in Prallah. It had been behind his spear as he fought in the King's Army. At times, Merin thought he could feel the presence of the Almighty, that he could hear the wind before it arrived. Then he knew that he was not alone. Someone was watching over him.

He took a deep breath, then opened his eyes. The tent ceiling overhead was unexpected. He groaned slightly, propping himself up. He lay on a comfortable mat in a large, open-sided tent. He recognized it—he had helped put it up on several occasions. It was the healer's tent—but he was on the wrong side. He wasn't lying with the regular soldiers, but was instead on a special pallet, over in the . . .

“Merin!” a voice exclaimed.

Merin turned as a couple of figures approached, smiling. Ren, Sanas,

and Vezin were spearmen from his squad—spearmen, like himself, who had come from small Tenth Villages in rural Alethkar. As they approached, Merin sensed a hesitance in their faces.

“Uh, are you feeling better, my lord?” Sanas asked as the men paused beside Merin’s pallet, just inside the tent.

Merin frowned. “Lord? Who are you . . . ?” then he saw it. Sitting at the end of his cot, lying across the top of a cloth-wrapped package.

A Shardblade.

It came back to him. He had been on the battlefield, in his formation. Orders had come from the generals to divide the enemy troops, splitting them along the fissure created by the king’s honor guard. Merin’s squad had fought on the eastern internal flank, pushing the enemy back, making way for their towers to roll forward.

Then *he* had come. The martial force that every spearman feared, yet every spearman dreamed of defeating. A Shardbearer.

Riding a massive war stallion, his armor unadorned, the man had cut through the Aleth ranks with ease, slaughtering footmen, batting away spears. That blade had cut the tip from Merin’s own weapon as it passed, leaving him with a useless stub. The soldier standing beside him had died with an almost casual swipe of the Shardbearer’s weapon.

Merin had watched the king’s horse die from a single blow. He had seen his squad scattering in fear before the deadly blade. And . . . he had run. Dropping his broken spear, he had dashed forward, and . . .

“By the winds,” Merin mumbled. “That has to be the *stupidest* thing I’ve ever done!”

“It worked, though,” Ren said quietly, looking toward the end of the mat.

Merin paused. *He can’t be saying what I think he’s saying. It can’t be . . .*

Merin slowly pulled the blanket off his legs and knelt before the sword, ignoring the pain in his head. He reached forward tentatively, running his fingers along the blade. It was enormous, almost as long as a footman’s spear. The weapon glistened silvery, but the design of the metal made it seem as if it were crafted from thousands of small quartz gemstones. Four intricate glyphs were etched into the blade, subtly created by the orientation of the quartz pattern.

“It’s . . .” Merin trailed off. It was his. He grabbed the handle with suddenly eager fingers, hefting the Blade.

“Wow,” he mumbled. “It’s a lot heavier than I thought it would be. The stories always say Shardblades are light!”

Of course, it was a lot lighter than a weapon its size would normally have been. Even with two years of spearman's training, Merin probably wouldn't have been strong enough to lift such a massive weapon if it had been constructed of normal steel. The Shardblade was heavy, but no heavier than a regular sword.

"Here," he said, turning to the others. "Try it."

The three spearmen didn't move.

"What?" Merin asked.

"You're not supposed to let anyone else hold your Blade, um, my lord," Sanas said. "They told us to wait here until you awakened, to make sure nothing happened to the Blade. Now that you're up, we're supposed to go back to the squad camp . . ."

Merin moved to stand. "I'll go with you. It would be good to see everyone."

The three exchanged awkward glances. "Um, if you want to, my lord . . ." Sanas said.

Merin paused. Even the normally enthusiastic Ren seemed reserved. They were obviously happy to see him awake, but they were still . . . uncomfortable.

"Maybe I'll just wait here," Merin said.

The three smiled. "You're a lord now, Merin," Sanas explained. "A *Fifth* Lord. You don't belong with spearmen. But, well . . . you give us hope. It's good to know someone made it, after all the talk and stories."

"Everyone in the army heard about you," Ren said eagerly. "You saved the king's life! Old captain Tunac wasn't very happy when you got the Blade instead, but what's he going to do about it? Eh, uh, my lord?" The short man chuckled.

The three stood awkwardly for a moment. Then they bowed and left. Merin watched them go, fingers still resting on the hilt of the Shardblade. *You're a lord now.* It was unfathomable.

Outside, he could see signs of the camp breaking down. No wonder his friends needed to return—deconstructing camp was an enormous task, and every hand was needed. Merin turned, motioning toward a healer. The aging man looked up, then quickly rushed over to Merin's mat.

"Yes, my lord?" he asked. His sleeves and clothing were speckled with blood, and his posture was tired.

"Um, yes," Merin said. How exactly did one speak like a lord, anyway? "Why are we breaking down camp?"

"The Traitor is dead, my lord," the healer explained, eager to help despite

his obvious weariness. “As is the Prallan king. The war is ours—Lord Elhokar plans to march on Orinjah before the day is out.”

Over. They had known it would end this day, one way or another. Captain Tunac had said this would probably be Pralir’s last stand.

“Are you feeling better, my lord?” the healer asked. “You took a strong blow to the head, and slept all through the night. You woke a few times, but you were dazed and incoherent.”

“I don’t remember that,” Merin confessed. “My head hurts a little bit, but I think I’m all right.”

“Might I recommend a little more rest, my lord?” the man asked.

Merin glanced toward the camp. Everyone had something to do. It felt wrong to sleep when everyone was so busy. “Am I allowed to leave?” Merin asked.

“Of course, my lord. Just don’t do anything too strenuous, and check back with the healers at the end of the day.”

Merin nodded, and the healer withdrew. As the man left, however, Merin realized something. “Healer,” he called.

The elderly healer turned, eyebrow raised. “Yes, my lord?”

“What is it I’m supposed to do? As a lord, I mean?”

“I’m not sure, my lord,” the man said with amusement. “Perhaps that would be a question best asked of another lord.”

“Good idea,” Merin said, climbing out of his bed. He was a bit dizzy as he stood, but the wave passed quickly. He reached over and picked up the Shardblade, then regarded the package underneath.

“Your Shardplate, my lord,” the healer explained helpfully. “I can send some packmen for it, if you wish.”

“Yes, that would be wonderful,” Merin said. He stepped outside the tent, standing in the morning light, and stopped.

Now what?

He thought for a moment, then glanced down at his Shardblade. There was one thing he’d always wondered. He walked over to a large boulder, then raised the Blade and thrust it into the stone.

The ballads had exaggerated a bit. The Shardblade didn’t ‘cut through stone like the breezes cut the air.’ There was a resistance to his pushing, but with a small amount of effort, he was able to slide the blade into the boulder up to its hilt.

Merin pulled the blade free, looking down at it with wonder. He backed up, hefting the Blade up over his shoulder, and swung with a mighty

two-handed blow. The Blade sheared through the middle of the boulder—as if the momentum somehow increased the weapon’s sharpness—and whipped out the other side to slice clean through one of the healing tent’s support poles.

The tent lurched slightly, one side drooping. Healers and patients alike looked out at a sheepish Merin, who lowered his Shardblade. “Uh, sorry!” he called before blushing and hurrying away.

Still, the exhilaration of the moment did not pass. He finally let himself believe what had happened. He was a Shardbearer—he outranked a good three quarters of the noble population. Only the lords of independent cities and their heirs were of a higher stature than Shardbearers. To capture a Blade on the field of battle . . . it was the dream of every lowly footman. It was the possibility that spawned stories, the hope that gave normal men the courage to face a Shardbearer, despite their bleak chances of success. But it had happened to Merin.

His enthusiasm dulled slightly, however, as he reached the camp’s main thoroughfare. To his right, in the distance, he could see the white-and-blue banner marking Zircon Tensquad, his home of the last three years. A home to which he could not return.

He looked down at the Blade. It was awkward to carry with its incredible length and super-sharp edge. It glistened in the sunlight, its quartz-like patterns shimmering. Apparently, they would fade over time. The markings were a manifestation of the bond the sword had had with its master—a man who was now dead.

He couldn’t return to Zircon Tensquad, but that was only a manifestation of a larger issue. What of home? What of Stonemount, with its fields and simple farmers? No Shardbearers lived in small tribute villages—the ballads said they were needed at the sides of their lords, to go to war or to duel for honor. He would never be able to return to Stonemount. But he had no lordly family to honor and protect. He no longer had a place—not really a citizen, but not really a lord either.

Not really a lord at all. Merin knew all the songs, from “The Chronicle of the First Return” to “The Storms of Summer.” He wasn’t a man like those in the stories. He was a boy who had acted without thought. His rescuing of the king had been done out of reflex and luck, not out of heroism. He hadn’t even really killed the enemy Shardbearer, only distracted him.

This shouldn’t be mine, Merin thought. Surely someone will realize that.

He looked up, turning from Zircon Tensquad's tents and looking to the northern side of the camp—toward the tents of the noblemen. He would find his answers there.

He began walking through the camp. Men bustled around him, collapsing tents, carrying supplies, packing equipment. Once, he would have been befuddled by the enormous number of people. Stonemount was a Tenth City, a village of less than five hundred people. The tens of thousands that comprised the King's Army had amazed him. Over time, however, the amazing had become mundane.

He passed massive chulls rested within their pens, the sound of crunching rockbuds echoing from within their boulder-like shells. Dark-eyed Kaven tribesmen watched him as he passed, speaking to each other in their rumbling language. Soldiers yelled and barked, giving and receiving orders, preparing for the movement of a beast larger even than the chulls—the army itself. It was a mass of swarming men, every one of whom seemed to have a purpose.

Every one but Merin.

The nobleman's section wound around several hills which provided seclusion from both regular soldiers and highstorms. The lords each camped with their own entourage, depending on their rank and power. Here, the tents became more colorful, and the banners bore stylized—sometimes unrecognizable—glyphs instead of just simple colored stripes.

Merin paused. The glyphs represented houses, like the *Shelh* glyph that the one noble family in Stonemount had used, but these were unfamiliar to Merin. Who should he ask for help?

The tents were being collapsed, falling flat like squashed winter mushrooms. The workers were mostly soldiers. Nearby, he could see a small group of noblemen—distinguished by their dyed cloaks and seasilk clothing—watching the proceedings. Merin approached them uncertainly. He was a nobleman now, so he probably shouldn't bow. What, then? Call out a greeting?

The lords noticed him before he made up his mind, their conversation falling silent. Beneath their disapproving stares, Merin was suddenly aware of his own clothing—simple tan trousers and shirt, stained from several years of use beneath his armor.

"Is that a . . . Shardblade you hold, boy?" one of the lords asked. He was a tall man, with long dark hair and a haughty, peaked face.

"It is . . ." Merin said.

“Who did you take it from, boy?” the lord asked, stepping forward with a curious eye.

Merin took a step backward, grip tightening on the hilt of his sword. “I was given it by order of the king,” he informed him. “On the battlefield, yesterday.”

The nobleman frowned, pausing. He studied Merin more closely. “Ah, yes. I recognize you now.” Then, he simply snorted, and turned back to his companions. The four men continued their discussion as if Merin wasn’t even there.

“Excuse me?” Merin asked, breaking into their conversation.

The lead nobleman turned again, eyebrow raised. “What do you want, boy?”

Merin flushed. “I’m just not certain what I should do,” he said. “Everybody’s preparing to leave. What’s my place?”

“You can go help pack my tent, if you wish,” the nobleman said, waving indifferently toward a group of soldiers working a short distance away.

Merin flushed again. Conditioning told him he should simply take the insult, but it seemed wrong to say nothing. “I don’t think you should speak to me like that,” Merin said slowly. “Doesn’t this Blade make me a lord, like you?”

The nobleman raised an eyebrow. “A lord? Well, technically, I suppose. Like me? I think not. There are lords, boy, and there are *lords*.”

“I’d be careful, Meridas,” a new voice said, coming from behind Merin. “That young man is a Shardbearer. Another insult or two, and I’d say he had legal grounds to challenge you to a lethal duel.”

Merin froze. Meridas? He had heard that name before. Meridas was the king’s counselor—a very important man.

Merin turned to glance behind. The newcomer was a much younger nobleman, perhaps five or six years Merin’s senior. The man stood leaning against a pile of packing crates a short distance away. His hair was light, his body lean and tall, and his seasilk shirt light blue against a darker blue cloak.

“Why, if it isn’t Lord Aredor,” the nobleman, Meridas, said with an indifferent raise of the eyebrows.

Lord Aredor—heir to Kholinar, son of *Parshen* Dalenar and cousin to the king. Merin realized with discomfort that this was the closest he’d ever stood to such noble blood.

And he was about to get much closer. Aredor strolled over, placing a familial hand on Merin’s shoulder. “Really, Meridas. Show some respect. We owe a great debt to Lord Merin. He saved the king’s life, after all.

Where were *you* when his majesty was in danger, Meridas? Oh, wait, that's right. You aren't a Shardbearer. You were hiding back on the tower."

Lord Meridas did not rise to the insult. His face remained calm, his head nodded slightly, as if to concede Aredor the point. His three companions—all younger men—were far more excited. Oddly, they didn't seem angered by the newcomer's insults, but instead seemed eager to speak with him.

"Oh, we've heard of Lord Merin," one of them said quickly. "We didn't recognize the lad, that is all. Lord Merin! Why, they're telling stories about him already."

"Indeed!" another said. "And, if I might say, my Lord Aredor, they're also speaking of your own bravery. Is it true you bested yet another Shardbearer on the battlefield?"

Meridas glanced at his companions with dissatisfaction. The three, however, seemed too excited by the prospect of earning Aredor's favor to notice the disappointment.

Aredor just smiled. "Afraid I don't have time to talk about my 'bravery' at the moment, Lord Valnah. Lord Merin is desperately needed at the royal complex. Good day, Meridas."

Aredor turned, steering Merin by the shoulder and walking away from the group of noblemen, chuckling to himself.

"Lord Aredor—" Merin said, glancing over his shoulder.

"Please," Aredor cut in, "no 'lords.' We're both practically the same rank—which, by the way, is a far step above dear Meridas back there, despite the king's fondness for him. With all his wealth, he's only a Seventeenth Lord, which puts you twelve ranks above him."

"He didn't seem to see it that way," Merin noted.

Aredor rolled his eyes. "Meridas is about as snobbish a lord as you'll ever find, but don't be bothered by him. In court, you'll have to get used to people looking across the breeze at you. Eventually, you'll realize that they're the only truly harmless ones. I'm more interested in hearing how you managed to get all the way up here. Last we heard, you were resting in the healer's tent."

"I was," Merin explained, still a little uncomfortable. Aredor was cousin to the king—even amongst noblemen, he was a very important person. "They told me I could leave, as long as I checked back with them tonight."

"Well, that's good, then," Aredor said. "Because I really am supposed to take you to the royal tents."

Merin paled. "The king wants to see me?"

Aredor snorted. "I doubt Elhokar knows your name or even remembers you were given a Shardblade. No, you're going to meet with someone far more impressive."

More impressive than the king? "Who?" Merin asked.

"My father."

LORD DALENAR KHOLIN had once been described to Merin as 'the noblest man in all of Alethkar.' Standing before the *Parshen*, Merin could finally understand what those words had meant. Dalenar was large and muscular despite his age, with arms like stone and a chest broad as a boulder. Yet, there was nothing oafish in his air. He stood with an innate majesty, his eyes wise, his voice calm and stately. He wore his armor, even though there was no danger of battle, and over the glistening silver he wore a regal cloak of the deepest blue with the symbol of his house on the back. It was a large *Kolh* glyph—the symbol that meant power—but it had been designed with flowing lines and broad wings, as if blown upon the winds themselves. It was subtly different from the King's own house glyph, though the two were similar enough to indicate the familial relationship.

Dalenar spoke with a small group of older men in militaristic cloaks. They were greying and reflective; Merin thought he recognized several of them by description—generals in Lord Elhokar's army. Lord Dalenar's tent had already been disassembled, and his possessions sat in neat piles ready for the packmen.

The *Parshen* noticed Merin almost immediately. "Excuse me, my lords," he said. "There is a matter to which I must attend."

The generals nodded, walking off to their separate duties as Dalenar approached Merin. Aredor patted him on the shoulder, then withdrew, leaving him to speak with the *Parshen* alone.

"I see you have recovered from the knock to your head, Lord Merin," Dalenar noted.

"Yes, my lord," Merin said uncomfortably. "Thank you."

"I believe I have reason to give you thanks, lad," Dalenar said. "You did your kingdom a true service on the battlefield yesterday."

Merin flushed. "My lord, you show me too much honor. I don't deserve this. I . . . I wanted to ask someone about that. I think there's been a mistake. Someone else should have this Shardblade, not me."

Dalenar shook his head, a bit of the formality leaving his face. "No, I think it well placed. During this war I have seen a number of Shardbearers fall. Most were killed in duels with other Shardbearers. Several were

killed by archers, and a couple of others were slain by teams of Shardless noblemen. Only one was killed by a spearman.”

Dalener paused, leaning forward, laying a hand on Merin’s shoulder. “I stood helpless as my king was about to die,” Dalener said quietly. “You saved him. Citizen or lord, Shardbearer or common duelist, I have rarely seen such bravery in all my years.”

“I . . .” Merin trailed off, uncertain how to respond. “Thank you, my lord.”

Dalener clapped him on the shoulder. “Traditionally, a citizen made into a lord is assigned a house by the king. This is his majesty’s decision, but he has given it over to me. I would be proud if you would join my house and serve me in Kholinar.”

“Your house, my lord?” Merin asked, stunned.

“Yes,” Dalener explained. “House Kholin is a proud and majestic line, Merin—the royal line. You would become Merin Kholin, a ward in my house, expected to follow my leadership and rise to my call when war is unavoidable. As compensation, you will receive the standard stipend of an attendant Shardbearer, and will become a member of my court.”

Merin looked up—for the first time since waking, he felt like he knew exactly what to do. “I would be honored, my lord.”

Dalener smiled. “I take that as an oath, Merin Kholin. You must honor it as you would honor your own life. More so, even, for your oath as a Shardbearer is your oath to the kingdom itself.” He paused. “Sometimes, it may force you to do things that are . . . difficult.”

“I understand, my lord,” Merin said.

“Good,” Dalener said, standing up straight. He reached up and undid the clasp to his cloak, then pulled off the luxurious, deep-blue garment and held it out to Merin. “It is traditional to present a newly-sworn Shardbearer with a gift. This cloak bears the glyph of my house, which is now your house. Wear it with pride, and let it remind you of your duty.”

Merin balked at first, but he looked into Dalener’s sincere eyes, and knew this was not a gift to be rejected. He reached out, taking the garment in his hand. It was soft and smooth, yet heavy in its thickness, and had the slight reflective sheen of seasilk. Perhaps it was the moment, but Merin thought that he had never seen a color quite so beautiful or brilliant as its warm sapphire.

Merin looked up from the cloak. “My lord. I . . . I’m not sure that the others will accept me as a nobleman. The men of my squad seemed uncertain how to treat me, and the noblemen I spoke with don’t seem to consider me worthy of my title.”

Dalener nodded. "And they probably won't ever consider you worthy of it. You've entered a harsh world, lad. It shouldn't be so, but there are many who will dislike you. Some will even hate you."

Merin frowned.

"Don't let it bother you too much, lad," Dalener said. "That is just the way it is. You won't be able to make everyone like you. But, if you keep your oaths, you might be able to make them respect you."

"Do what is right. Be honorable, even to your enemies. Study *The Way of Kings*. Have the monks read it to you often, until you have it memorized. Remember what Lord Bajerden wrote: 'Nobility is service. Rank is a privilege, not a right.' Do these things, Merin, and even the jealous ones will admire you."

"Yes, my lord."

Dalener smiled, clapping him on the shoulder. "Don't be so nervous, lad. My sons will watch out for you. Go report back to Aredor. He will see you cared for and trained in the ways of your new station."

chapter 4

TALN 1

HE FELT PAIN. That was wrong. He shouldn't have been able to feel the pain, *feel* was too weak a word. For so long, the pain had been everything—world, dream, thought, and breath. *Feeling* allowed too much separation. Had he been sane enough to think, he would have yearned for a day when the pain was simply something *felt*.

He felt pain.

He gasped, a croak escaping his lips. That was wrong too. There should have been no gasping, no croaking. Only screams.

He couldn't understand. Comfort was an alien sensation. He writhed before the unfamiliar lack of pain, weeping. He didn't know how long he lay with closed eyes, unable to think or speak beyond a whimper. Then, slowly, like a plant creeping from its shell, the *self* tentatively emerged from the place within his soul. The place of hiding, the place where a piece of him could survive.

It brought knowledge, and memory. He pushed them away at first, then broke down and clutched them to him, a dying man drinking furiously to slake his thirst.

The pain was there too. It had been part of him so long that, even though his body felt no torture, it would always be felt within his mind. Together with his *self*, he grabbed hold of the painself and forced it deep within, into

the shell, pushing it away. The two pieces of him were light and dark—they could not coexist. When one emerged, the other had to retreat.

Taln gasped in pleasure, opening his eyes. A cool sky hung above him—a blue sky, of breezes and clouds. Not a sky of fire. He had Returned.

He lay for a long while, staring up, feeling the wind. Finally, he sat, pushing aside the wave of dizziness. He was naked, sitting on a shelf of rocks. His sword lay next to him. The Mount of Ancestors stood in the distance, giving a clue of his location. His mind was still fuzzy, his *self* not fully in control. It would take time.

Time would have to wait. He stood, lurching to his feet, stumbling a few times and steadying himself against a boulder. Ral Eram, the First Capital. It would be near; he had to travel there.

He needed to warn the people.

chapter 5

MERIN 2

THREE DAYS AFTER THE BATTLE, clinging to his horse's saddle as the ground blurred by below, Merin had cause to regret his oath to Lord Dalenar. Every hoofbeat jostled, threatening to hurl him to the deadly stones below. White-knuckled, he gripped the saddle, and whispered lines from the *Arguments*—inside, however, he doubted it would help. The Almighty allowed fools to bring their own fates, and Merin had certainly been a fool for climbing on the back of such a dreadful beast.

Finally—blessedly—the horse lurched to a stop. Merin carefully raised his head, hands still gripping the saddle. Lords Aredor and Renarin had stopped their horses, and his own animal had followed their lead. Merin had been half-afraid that the creature would just keep on going into eternity, bearing a long-decayed Merin in its saddle.

Lord Aredor swung off his horse, dropping to the stones below. “See,” he said, looking back with a broad grin. “That wasn’t so bad.”

Merin shivered. “Aredor, that was the most horrible experience of my life.” The first few hours, traveling at a moderate speed, had been bad enough. Aredor hadn’t suggested a gallop until they neared their destination. Merin should have known better than to ask what, exactly, a ‘gallop’ was.

Aredor laughed, handing his reins to an approaching soldier as his brother dismounted as well. “You’ll get used to it.”

Merin looked woozily down at the ground, not trusting his legs to move

just yet. “I think not. Man wasn’t meant to travel that fast, Aredor. It was terrifying.”

“Ha,” Aredor said, walking over to offer Merin a hand. “This from the man who fearlessly attacked a Shardbearer with no weapon but his own hands?”

“Yes,” Merin said, carefully sliding out of the saddle. “But I did *that* with my own feet.”

Aredor chuckled again, moving over to speak with the nearby squad captain. Merin stood unsteadily for a moment. There was a dull ache through the lower part of his body, reminiscent of that first horrible day when he had joined the army and begun his training with the spear. Soreness would set in before too long.

He sighed, turning back to his horse and untying his Shardblade from the back of the saddle. The roan beast looked back at him, watching with an almost amused expression—as if it received no end of pleasure from torturing those who saw fit to climb on its back.

Though several days had passed, Merin still felt a strange numbness regarding his new position. It just didn’t seem possible that he was a lord. Who was he, Merin of Stonemount, to carry a Shardblade and ride with Lord Dalenar’s heir? Yet, whenever Merin slipped and called Aredor ‘my lord,’ the older man was quick to correct him. In fact, Aredor treated Merin like an equal. Like a friend. True, Aredor had been ordered to help Merin adapt, but the man hardly needed to be as accommodating as he was.

Merin tried to maintain his perspective—as Meridas had said, he wasn’t really a lord, not like the others. However, Aredor’s affable personality was disarming; Merin couldn’t help treating the man like one of the spearmen from his squad. Or, at least, a very well-dressed and mannered spearman.

Merin sighed, hefting his Shardblade and resting it on his shoulder. That seemed to be the best way to carry the weapons until they were bonded. He turned, studying the landscape. The scenery was familiar—the barren stones and distant cliffs proved that he was still in Prallah. The main bulk of the army had moved on toward Orinjah, the once-capital of Pralir, creeping at the pace of the unwieldy creature it was.

Merin had been looking forward to leaving the third peninsula, traveling through the Oathgate back to Alethkar. He’d never seen an Oathgate before, but apparently one could use one to transport instantly back to Ral Eram, the capital of Alethkar. Ground that had taken years of fighting to cross could instead be covered in a few heartbeats. However, Orinjah would

have to wait, for the moment. Dalenar had ordered his sons and Merin to return to the scene of the battlefield several days before; Aredor had yet to explain their errand to Merin.

“It’s so cold here,” Renarin said in a quiet voice.

Merin paused as a young soldier led his horse away. Renarin stood a short distance away, beside a small hill.

“Cold?” Merin asked. While the stormlands were generally a bit cooler than Alethkar, it was still mid-summer. It was rarely ‘cold,’ except maybe following a highstorm.

Then, however, Merin noticed the smoke. Ahead of them, just over a slick-topped hill, several dark trails crept toward the sky. Burning stations—the places where those soldiers unfortunate enough to draw corpse-duty were gathering and burning the bodies of their fallen comrades. Thousands of men had died on this battlefield—many more Prallans than Aleths, but in death all were treated the same. Their corpses were transformed through fire, their souls sent to the Almighty, continuing the cycle of Remaking.

Renarin stared quietly up at the columns of smoke. He was so different from his brother. Short with dark, curly hair, Renarin was as unpretentious as Aredor was outgoing. Yet both had a strange way of drawing one’s attention. Aredor did it with sheer force of personality, Renarin with his unnerving, somber eyes. Apparently, Merin and Renarin were the same age, but Merin always felt like a child before those eyes.

Merin shivered slightly, reaching for his glyphward—then realized he didn’t have it on. Aredor had given him some nobleman’s clothing to wear beneath Dalenar’s cloak. The seasilk was unusually soft on his skin, not to mention amazingly tough. It wasn’t as lavish as his cloak, but it was noble, and he had decided not to wear the crom-stained glyphward his mother had given him the day he left for the war. Now he wished he hadn’t been so prideful. He stood uncomfortably beside Renarin, glad when Aredor finished his conversation and approached.

Aredor paused beside the two of them, growing subdued as he regarded the trails of smoke. “Come on,” he said, nodding to the horses.

Merin groaned. “You’re kidding.”

“Just a short distance this time,” Aredor promised. “The second battlefield isn’t far away.”

So THIS IS IT, MERIN thought, looking across the simple field of rock. *This is the place where Renarin lost his Shardblade.* Like everyone else in the army, Merin had heard the stories of the strange mid-highstorm battle.

Five thousand Aleth troops and three Shardbearers had faced down and defeated a troop of twenty thousand, killing the Traitor and the Pralir king in the process.

Merin looked down at his Shardblade. It seemed unfair to him that Renarin should bear the king's anger, losing his Blade on the same day Merin had gained one. Merin's weapon still showed the markings of its previous owner, though they were hidden by the impromptu 'sheath' Aredor had given him. The sheath was little more than a folded piece of metal, shaped so that it could be placed over the sharp edge of the Blade and tied tight at the back. The sheath was another remnant from Epoch Kingdom days—it had been fashioned from the same metal as Shardplate, to be used by men during their hundred-days bonding period.

Set in the pommel, held by four clasps, was a medium-sized opal. Merin eyed the stone carefully, looking for some sort of change in its color. He could find none—it still glistened with the same multicolored sheen as before.

Aredor chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder. "It's only been a couple of days, Merin," he said. "You won't be able to notice anything yet."

"How long?" Merin asked.

Aredor shrugged. "You should begin to see a change in ten days or so. Don't worry, it's working. When the stone has turned completely black, one hundred days will have passed, and you'll have bonded the Blade."

Merin nodded. Ahead, Renarin was already walking down the trail to the battlefield. Merin grimaced slightly as the wind changed, bringing with it the stink of death. While the main battlefield was mostly clean of bodies, this one had barely been touched. A small squad of men worked at a burning station a short distance away, but most of the corpses still lay where they had fallen.

"Aredor," he asked, frowning. "What winds brought us here?"

"You were a spearman, right?" Aredor asked, handing Merin a seasilk handkerchief that smelled strongly of perfume.

"Yes," Merin replied, thankfully holding the cloth to his face as they followed Renarin toward the battlefield.

"Father wants you to look at the uniforms and armor of the dead men," Aredor explained, voice slightly muffled by his cloth. "Look for anything . . . odd."

"Odd how?"

"I'm not sure," Aredor confessed. "Anything irregular or out of place—discrepancies that make you think the men might not actually be from our army."

“What?” Merin asked, frowning.

Aredor paused, eyeing the battlefield distrustfully, then turning toward Merin. “Something very strange happened here, Merin. You were a footman. How would you feel, facing a force four times your size? How likely would you have been to win?”

Merin shivered. Four to one? Two to one was practically an assured loss. “The king says that the Almighty gave them victory,” Merin replied.

“The king says a lot of things,” Aredor replied. “He doesn’t believe my father’s suspicions—he claims that one Aleth soldier is easily worth four Prallans. In a way, he’s right. Our men have far better training, superior equipment, and strong morale . . . but even still, four to one?”

“But what other explanation is there? The Prallans wouldn’t have killed themselves.”

“No, but someone else might have done it,” Aredor explained. “Father thinks there was a third force in this battle. One of the arguments against a third army is the fact that they left no bodies behind. Or, at least, that’s what it seemed like originally.”

“Lord Dalenar thinks they were disguised?” Merin asked.

“It would answer a lot of questions,” Aredor said. “The third force could have approached the battlefield wearing Prallan uniforms. Once they attacked, their dead would have been indistinguishable from those they killed.”

Merin nodded, turning toward the battlefield again. Several Aleth soldiers approached, bowing and giving them rods to use for examining the bodies. Even still, it was grisly work. Merin, however, had been assigned to corpse detail before. After a while, he was able to ignore the faces and focus on the uniforms.

He picked across the field, Aredor doing likewise. Merin tried to look for anything unusual or suspicious. It was difficult work. Footmen were given weapons and armor at the beginning of their training, and cared for their own equipment—oiling and polishing after highstorms, fitting and padding to improve flexibility and reduce discomfort. It was difficult to distinguish what might be odd, and what was simply personalized.

The Aleth soldiers wore leather skirts and vests covered by wooden plates running down the chest. It was relatively cheap, but still effective—the leather and wood could be created easily through Awakening, and required no further smithing. The Prallans wore similar materials, though it was more piecemeal and of a far lesser quality. Merin didn’t know the enemy uniforms well enough to determine if they were odd or not. All of them seemed similar enough.

Merin picked his way across the field. Most of the men appeared to have died from crushing blows. He recognized spear wounds, and most of these weren't caused by spears. The corpses were bloodied and mangled, but they weren't cut. Other than that, he had difficulty discerning anything strange.

Eventually, Aredor approached him, waving his hand. They retreated to the peripheral of the battlefield. "Anything?" he asked.

Merin shook his head. "I don't know, Aredor. I keep seeing things that might be odd, but then again they might just be individual peculiarities."

"I agree," Aredor said. "I did a quick count, and there appear to be about five thousand Aleths—which is the number Renarin sent. If the third force imitated our men, they didn't leave enough dead behind to make it noticeable."

"And if they imitated the Prallans?"

Aredor sighed. "I looked. I can't see anything—I don't think even the Prallans could. They were forced to stretch for resources during the last part of the war. A lot of their soldiers had makeshift armor, or none at all. You can't find inconsistencies where there's no regularity."

Merin nodded.

"We could count the enemy numbers," Aredor continued, musing to himself, "but we never did have a very accurate count in the first place. Of course, it would make sense for a third force to imitate the Prallans, since they're less uniform."

Merin nodded, looking across the field again. He and Aredor stood near the western edge, beside a rift in the ground. At first, Merin thought it might have hid some secret, but the chasm was obviously empty. Its empty bottom was smooth and well-lit in the afternoon sun—no caves or other secrets hid in its sides.

"There is one thing," Merin said.

Aredor raised an eyebrow.

"These men weren't killed by spearmen."

Aredor nodded. "Father noticed that too. The third force must have been very well-equipped with heavy infantry."

"Yes," Merin said. "But I think it's more than that. There should have been fields of sliced-up bodies where the Shardbearers fought."

Aredor paused. "By the Truthmaker!" he said. "You're right. I didn't see *any* bodies killed by Shardbearers—yet, we know there were at least five on the battlefield. Our three, the Traitor, and the Pralir king. The Prallans probably had a couple more, too."

Aredor stood with a dissatisfied posture, regarding the battlefield again. As he thought, Renarin approached. Dalenar's second son paused a short distance from Merin and Aredor, however, choosing to turn and stand apart from them as he began his own contemplations.

Dalenar's second son had looked through the battlefield as well, but his movements had been more erratic. He hadn't examined bodies like Merin, or made counts like Aredor. Eventually, Renarin whispered something to himself.

Aredor turned. "What was that, Renarin?"

"I said that this is my fault," the younger son repeated. "I sent these men to their doom. The king was right to take my Blade away."

Aredor walked over, placing a comforting hand on his brother's shoulder. "You didn't do anything wrong, Renarin. The king would probably have done exactly what you did."

Renarin shook his head, falling silent.

Merin joined them, studying the battlefield with a careful eye. He was no military expert, but he had spent several years fighting, and had seen large battles before. "I don't know much, Aredor," he said, "but I think your father might be right about the third army."

"Yes, but the king will want evidence," Aredor said, stepping up beside Merin. Behind them, Renarin sighed and sat down on the ground, staring down at the rocks in front of him. "Elhokar can be winds-cursed stubborn, and he doesn't want to bother with the possibility of a third army."

"Then we have to find a way to prove that some of these corpses in Prallan uniforms weren't part of the Traitor's army," Merin said. "That has to be the answer."

"No," Renarin whispered from behind.

Merin turned, then shivered. Renarin was doing *it* again, looking at him with those eyes of his. Staring, yet unfocused.

"These corpses were all either men from our army, or men from the Traitor's force," Renarin said.

Aredor frowned. "You're saying there wasn't a third army?"

Renarin shook his head. "There was. It just didn't leave any bodies behind. They must have taken their corpses with them."

Merin frowned, looking back at the battlefield. That seemed like an awful lot of trouble to go through—not to mention the time factor. The highstorm had been only a couple of hours long. It would have been near impossible to kill twenty-five thousand men in that time, let alone pick out the corpses of the fallen and transport them somewhere.

Merin turned skeptical eyes toward Aredor. The elder brother, however, was regarding Renarin with interested eyes.

“You’re sure, Renarin?” Aredor asked.

Renarin nodded, looking a bit sick. “I can see it in the patterns of their bodies. There were dead here that are gone now.” He waved distractedly toward a section of the battlefield. “The two sides had begun to disengage, in preparation for the highstorm. Then someone else came—over there, on the southern side. After that, our men and the Traitor’s army fought together. They’re all dead now, though. Every one.”

Aredor stood for a moment, contemplative. Renarin volunteered no more.

“Let’s go back,” Aredor finally said.

AS LITTLE AS MERIN WANTED to admit it, the trip back to the army was nowhere near as arduous as the previous ride had been. Perhaps the growing soreness and fatigue in Merin’s body distracted him from the unnatural motions, or perhaps the ‘gallop’ before had shown him that regular horse speeds were comparably sane.

As the hours passed, his grip relaxed, his mind too tired to bother being terrified. Evening was approaching by the time they reached the location of the army’s morning campsite. It was, of course, now empty—the army had moved on, leaving behind remnants of cloth, trash, fire-scars, and cesspits.

The three continued riding. Aredor was confident that they could reach the army by nightfall—Orinjah was supposed to be less than a day’s march from the campsite. Indeed, as they moved on, Merin began to notice a gradual shift in the landscape. They had already begun to leave the stormlands behind, and as they moved farther to the southeast, the scenery became eerily familiar.

The barren rock of the highlands changed to the more sheltered hillsides of common farmlands. The rocky hills lay in belts of land sheltered by the higher grounds nearby, which weakened highstorms. The lower the elevation, the more prevalent rockbuds became, until the stone-like polyps could be seen growing here and there on nearly every surface. Roshtrees hung from overhangs—they appeared as wide tubes of stone at the moment, but after highstorms they would let down vines covered with foliage, and sometimes fruit. A few of the more-sheltered ones even had their vines down in the evening coolness.

The most telling sign of the farmland, however, were the hills that had been cleared of rockbuds and other plant life. Though barren at the moment,

they bore ring-like scars made by inavah polyps, which had clung to the hillsides before the summer harvest. They were so similar to the fields of Stonemount that they could have been in Alethkar, if it hadn't been for the ragged highlands behind them and the absence of the Mount of Ancestors in the distance.

The road itself was clean of polyps, and beyond that it was easy to see where the army had traveled. Rockbuds were resilient, but their shells were far more brittle than regular stone. A large swath of them lay shattered—shells broken, delicate stalks inside smashed flat—by tromping soldiers bearing metal-heeled boots. The remnants had already dried in the arid summer air.

Aredor's promise that they would reach the army by nightfall proved a bit premature. About an hour after sunset, they finally crested a hill to find hundreds of lights burning across the landscape before them, marking the rise and fall of the land.

"There," Aredor said, pointing to the side. In the waning light, Merin could barely make out a steep drop-off in the land. The Prenan Lait, the valley that sheltered the city of Orinjah.

Aredor nodded in satisfaction, reining in his horse. "I told you it was within a day's travel. The king should have already negotiated the city's surrender. We won't be able to make it home this evening—the soldiers back home only open the Oathgate to check for us at dawn. Tomorrow, however, we'll sleep in our own beds."

"The Oathgate," Merin said with wonder. "What does it feel like? Traveling through one?"

"You've never done it before?" Aredor asked with surprise.

Merin shook his head. "I've never even seen the capital. I come from a Tenth City?"

Aredor smirked. "Right. Don't worry—there's nothing frightening about the Oathgates."

"That's what you said about horses," Merin noted.

"The Oathgates are even more harmless than horses," Aredor promised. "They're really nothing more than doorways—you can barely tell that there's anything unusual about them, except the fact that they open up on the other side of Roshar."

Merin nodded as their horses began to move again. He wasn't convinced, but if the other option was riding a horse for several weeks back around the sea of Chomar and down the second peninsula to Ral Eram, he was willing to give the Oathgate a try. Besides, he couldn't suppress his curiosity. He

would finally have an image to place with the gateways he had heard of in stories and ballads. The Oathgates were said to have been given to man by the Heralds themselves. The ten portals connected the ten capitals of the legendary Epoch Kingdoms back to Ral Eram, the First City, a grand neutral city open to all. The Epoch Kingdoms were long since fallen, and Alethkar controlled Ral Eram now, but it would still be exciting to travel through the gate.

They rode into camp, Aredor nodding friendly acknowledgments to many of those they passed. Dalenar's heir was greeted well by all, even those who knew him only by reputation. Merin smiled at the warmth of the reception. Somehow, Aredor managed to remain friendly with even those who should have been his political enemies.

Renarin followed behind them, looking distracted as he rode. Merin eyed him for a moment, then turned to Aredor. "Are we going to report to your father right now?"

Aredor shrugged. "I don't see why not."

"Are we going to report . . . everything? Even the things your brother thinks?"

Aredor glanced at Merin, then followed his look back toward Renarin. Finally, he turned forward again. "I know my brother seems odd, Merin, but he's really not. He's just . . . not comfortable with those he doesn't know. Once you get to know him, you'll realize he's not strange at all, just a bit of a daydreamer."

Aredor paused. "Besides," he continued. "Live with him for a decade or two, and you'll find that he has an uncanny ability to . . . well, know things. I've rarely known him to be wrong. He notices things, Merin. Things regular people just don't see."

Merin frowned, reaching reflexively for his glyphward, then again cursing his decision not to wear it. The three of them dismounted at the perimeter of the noble tents, and then made their way toward Dalenar's pavilion. Outside, Merin saw several unfamiliar guards. One, a shorter man, bald and lithe, with a short beard, eyed them with a careful look as they entered the tent.

Inside, Lord Dalenar sat in discussion with a woman Merin had seen only at a distance. Lady Jasnah Kholin was striking with her immaculate hair, fine features, and poised attitude. She sat in one of Dalenar's chairs, wearing a green noblewoman's dress, well-illuminated by the room's four lanterns. Behind her stood a young woman with red hair and a roundish face.

“No, he didn’t tell me either,” Dalenar was saying. He waved Merin and his sons forward, not pausing in his dialogue. “But whatever it is, Elhokar believed it. Part of me is eager to see Balenmar in favor at court again—the man served Nolphonarin right up to the day of his death, even taking a wound in defense of his king despite his age.”

“I don’t like secrets, Uncle,” Lady Jasnah said. “Even if they are kept by allies.” She paused, eyeing Merin with a critical look.

“The boy is trustworthy, Jasnah,” Dalenar said. “He’s a ward in my house, now.”

Jasnah didn’t seem as convinced as Dalenar, and Merin glanced down, feeling self-conscious before her eyes.

“Regardless,” Dalenar said. “We can’t keep our suspicions secret from them—we did, after all, send them to spy for us.”

“I should hardly call it spying, Father,” Aredor said lightly, stepping forward and pouring himself something to drink from the winetable at the side of the tent. “After all, the dead can hardly offer complaint.”

“What did you discover?” Jasnah asked, her tone cool and businesslike.

“Very little,” Aredor said. Renarin stayed near the front of the tent, and Merin—uncertain of his place, did likewise. “There was definitely a third army,” Aredor continued.

“You have proof?” Lady Jasnah asked.

“Not a bit,” Aredor said, sighing and taking a seat beside his father. “But the third army is the only reasonable explanation. The way the soldiers were standing when they died . . . the strange manner of the wounds . . . it all points toward a third force.”

Lord Dalenar frowned deeply. “The idea of a vanishing army that can destroy twenty thousand troops makes me very uncomfortable, Jasnah.”

“Agreed,” Lady Jasnah said in her calm, almost emotionless voice. “However, I’m having enough trouble keeping my brother from riding off to try and conquer the rest of the world—it won’t be easy to persuade him to listen to our worries.”

“I don’t know that I care whether or not he listens,” Dalenar replied. “I’m just worried that this attack will lead to something else. Another strike of some sort.”

Jasnah nodded and the tent fell silent, the only sound that of Aredor sipping his wine. Eventually, Jasnah spoke. “We have another problem as well, Uncle. Balenmar’s words regarding Queen Nanavah appear to be true—I’ve been interviewing the messengers who have visited Ral Eram recently. I may have a battle on my hands when I return.”

Dalener shook his head. "Now is not the time for the queen to begin growing into her station. I thought perhaps, once the war was over, things would get easier."

"They never do," Jasnah said. "No good can come from leaving the court to itself for several years."

"I wish Elhokar would . . ." Dalener tapered off, sighing. "I don't know, Jasnah. I don't have the patience to deal with your brother any more. It takes all of my effort to remain civil when I talk to the boy."

Lady Jasnah sat for a moment, looking thoughtful. Her eyes were composed, her demeanor withdrawn. Looking into that face, Merin could believe the stories he'd often heard told about her. She seemed to lack anything in the way of emotion—save, perhaps, for displeasure.

"Shall we divide our efforts, then, Uncle?" Lady Jasnah asked. "I will see to my brother and the queen, and will try and find out just what Balenmar said to gain himself the king's good graces again. See what you can discover about our vanishing army, and send word to me if you discover anything."

"Very well," Dalener said.

"Good evening, then. I have preparations to make for the morrow's return."

Lady Jasnah rose, and Dalener stood courteously as she turned to go. She paused briefly beside Renarin as she reached the tent's exit. "Renarin," she said, "how are you managing?" The words were sincere, even if her tone remained neutral—perhaps there was more warmth beneath that face than was first apparent.

Renarin smiled. "I'm fine, my lady. Please, don't worry about me."

"I will get you another Shardblade," she said.

"Don't," Renarin said. "I never really needed one anyway."

Lady Jasnah paused, then nodded to him and swept from the room, her female attendant following behind.

Lord Dalener waved the boys forward, seating himself and nodding for them to do likewise. "Now," he said. "Tell me exactly what you saw and thought when you searched the battlefield."

chapter 6

JASNAH 2

JASNAH HAD SEEN THE PRALLAN Oathgate before, but always from the other side. Both were identical, of course—a large archway of black onyx with a rim of cut obsidian. The archway’s opening, like those of the other Oathgates, was filled with a light veil of smoke. She could make out vague shapes on the other side, patterns of light and dark, forms with edges blurred by the mist. The smoke hung unnaturally, like a draped sheet, stirring and rippling occasionally as if it were a laketop touched by wind.

There were ten sets of Oathgates in all—during the Epoch Kingdom days, the ten gates had provided the kings with constant access to Ral Eram. Each of the ten Epoch capitals held a domed building like the one in which Jasnah now stood, and all ten linked back to a central chamber in the palace of Ral Eram. They were a marvel, and gave a powerful strategic edge to the one who controlled Ral Eram.

But to Jasnah, they also meant something else—especially this one. Even standing where she was, a short distance away from the gate, she could hear the obsidian in her mind, calling to her. It was like a sound, a pure note, alive and vibrant. She couldn’t hear other gemstones unless she touched them, but obsidian . . . it whispered from even a distance.

She blocked it out, forcing herself to ignore its longing summons, focusing on the room around her instead.

Back in the First Palace, the Prallan Oathgate had always looked out of

place with its foreboding Cimmerian cast. Yet, here in a room dedicated to it, the gate seemed fitting. The Prallan Oathgate Vault was circular, rimmed with glyphs representing all Ten Essences and Ten Forces. The Prallans had always been fond of obsidian, the Polestone of knowledge and mystery, and their palace was crafted of dark iron, marble, and stained woods. With its intricate glyphs, expensive stones, and ancient architecture, the room was a vision of a time long lost.

The room's majesty had long since fallen to the wear and tear of time. Pralir, the newest kingdom to take root in the ancient land of Prallah, had stood for only thirty years before Elhokar's invasion. The kingdom's poverty and struggles were reflected in the unkempt feel of the Vault room. Wood scarred and battered, stone scratched and chipped, iron rusting. The hints of beauty were there, but they were only shadows—as if the entire country were covered with a thin veil of Oathgate smoke.

Jasnah could only hope Elhokar's rule would bring the battered land some measure of relief.

"Lady Jasnah?" Kemnar, second in command of her personal guard, asked from behind. "What are you waiting for?" Short with a completely bald head and a thin dark beard, Kemnar was more soldier than he was nobleman—he was a twentieth lord, four times removed, and he received no hereditary stipend from his home city.

"Nothing, Kemnar," she said, not bothering to explain. She had long awaited this day, awaited it since her father's death, and Elhokar's subsequent declaration of war.

She stepped through the smoke, and was home.

Wisps of smoke trailed her body, as if trying to pull her back with incorporeal fingers. She stepped into a white marble room—the Central Oathgate Vault of Ral Eram.

Sun shone through numerous windows, and bright white columns ringed the ovoid room, one between each pair of windows. The Ten Oathgates stood around her, each one distinct in craft and material, each leading to a capital city that had once been home to a powerful kingdom, many centuries before. The smoke held to her for a moment before settling back toward the Prallan gate, only to be disturbed again as Kemnar stepped through. He would be followed by many others during the days to come; an army returning to its homeland.

The Central Vault was busy this day, bustling with Elhokar's aides and returning noblemen. It was also clogged with the regular guards—a redundant safety measure, since it was impossible to pass through an

Oathgate unless both sides were open. Still, during times of war, one could never be too careful.

The king had passed through a few moments before, and Jasnah moved forward in search of him. The Oathgates lay in an hourglass formation following the pattern of the Double Eye, and they were far enough apart from one another that she could see a crowd gathered at one end of the room.

The smoke broke again, and Shinri stepped through. The girl's face was composed, but Jasnah knew her far too well not to notice the excitement in her posture as she glanced toward the other side of the room, and the open Veden Oathgate. *She's seventeen, and she has a fiancé waiting in Vedenar,* Jasnah chided herself. *Let the girl go.*

"You may visit," Jasnah said to Shinri. "Be back for the feasts this evening."

"Thank you, my lady," Shinri said, and darted off toward the Veden Oathgate—a massive structure of smooth glass and diamonds.

She found Elhokar at the front of the room. He smiled as he held up a small child, one Jasnah wished didn't look so unfamiliar. Ahrden Kholin, the king's son and Jasnah's only nephew, was barely into his second year. The boy looked confused at the sudden fuss and frightened at the strange man before him—he had been born while Elhokar had been at war, and there had been little opportunity to visit during the last two years. It would take time for him to get used to the father he had rarely seen.

Elhokar didn't seem to share Jasnah's concern. His face showed only joy as he held the young child, a crowd of deferential nobility standing around him with quiet stances. For a moment, Jasnah was able to feel her habitual worry soothed away as she looked at her brother's face.

Practicality reasserted itself as she noticed a discrepancy in the crowd. "Kemnar," she said, "find out what happened to Lord Dalenar."

The short warrior nodded curtly, stepping away from her. Behind, other important lords were making their appearance through the Oathgate—most were Landed nobility or Shardbearers who had participated in the war. Jasnah, however, was only concerned with locating a specific stern form. During the week since that final battle, Dalenar had remained cold toward Elhokar despite Jasnah's numerous attempts at soothing the wound.

Dalenar still acted as required of him, of course—the highstorms would stop blowing before her uncle ignored his duty. Yet, she could see a hesitance that had not been there before. A hesitance that could lead to distrust. Elhokar couldn't afford to lose Dalenar; their uncle was the most

respected man in all of Alethkar. He was vital both politically and martially, especially since Jezenrosh—Elhokar's other *Parshen*—had withdrawn to his palace, complaining of sickness.

It wasn't good for both *Parshen* to be absent for Elhokar's return. The king's *Parshen* were supposed to be his two most loyal supporters, and Elhokar had managed to alienate them both.

"*Parshen* Dalenar and his sons returned to Kholinar soon after passing through the Oathgates," Kemnar informed in a quiet voice, returning to her side. "They spoke to no one."

Jasnah ground her teeth, shooting a frustrated look at the Aleth Oathgate—an archway with a stiff triangular top, crafted completely of jade and studded with sapphires. It led to Kholinar, the former capital of Alethkar, the estate where her father had lived before he conquered the First City. Now Dalenar ruled there, and he had apparently decided to return instead of remaining for the victory celebrations.

"Jasnah, come and greet your nephew," Elhokar said, turning with a smile, Ahrden squirming in his grasp.

Jasnah put on a calm feminine face, stepping forward with a smooth gait—she would have to deal with Dalenar at another time. For the moment, she had other worries—in the form of a red-haired woman at the king's side. More plump than Shinri, Queen Nanavah Vedelen betrayed the same distinctly Veden features: round features and reddish hair, though Nanavah's was far more blonde than Shinri's. Nanavah was also more sturdily built than Shinri, a Veden trait that had apparently bypassed Jasnah's young ward.

Nanavah was not only Elhokar's wife, but sister to the king of Vedenar, the kingdom directly to the south. Though the Idiot King Ahven was generally regarded with little seriousness, Nanavah's line made her a very important woman.

"Lady Jasnah," Nanavah said with a comely smile as Jasnah approached.

Jasnah nodded back, but inside she frowned. The last time she had seen Nanavah—nearly a year before—the young queen had still been visibly furious with Jasnah. Either Nanavah had overcome her hatred, or she had learned to mask it. Jasnah seriously doubted the former was possible.

"Where is Dalenar?" Elhokar said, pausing as he handed his son back to an attendant.

"He returned to Kholinar," Jasnah replied.

Elhokar's expression darkened.

"My lord," Jasnah said before he could respond, "Lord Dalenar has a

family and a city to care for as well. I am certain he will return in time for the feast. Let him go to greet his betrothed.”

It was a thin excuse, considering Dalenar’s opinion of being betrothed to a woman so young, but Elhokar seemed to accept it. As soon as he turned back to his crowd, Jasnah motioned Kemnar to the side.

“You want me to make certain the *Parshen* does as you said,” Kemnar assumed.

Jasnah nodded. “Impress upon my uncle the . . . importance of his solidarity. Make certain you mention the word ‘duty.’”

Kemnar nodded, heading for the Kholinar Oathgate. Jasnah masked her worries again, and turned a composed face toward the crowd of nobility.

“Come,” Elhokar said, his voice firm—as if the result of built-up determination. “Let us visit my mother.”

NOTHING MADE JASNAH FEEL her age more than looking down at her mother, and knowing the woman was dying. True, Jasnah was still in her fourth decade, but her mother was only in her sixth. Lady Ezavah Sheledar looked far older than her fifty-six years. Airy, almost skeletal, in form, the woman seemed to be aging with every heartbeat. When Jasnah had last visited, the former queen had seemed near-death. Yet, somehow, Ezavah had grown worse since then. It seemed impossible that the wan figure in the bed was even alive.

“She has not awoken, I assume?” Elhokar asked, his voice solemn as he knelt beside the bed. Jasnah stood at his side, Nanavah behind her husband. The room’s only other two occupants were a single nobleman guard and the stormkeeper who acted as Ezavah’s healer.

“No, my lord,” the stormkeeper replied. “In a few months, it will be two years since she last opened her eyes.”

“Was anything ever discovered about the . . . incident?”

“No, my lord,” the stormkeeper replied.

Elhokar sighed, bowing his head. Finally he stood, looking down at the sickly figure. “I have tripled my offerings at the monastery. The monks offer up daily prayers on her behalf, yet the Almighty ignores their cries.” He looked up, meeting Jasnah’s eyes. “I am king—should the Almighty not heed my will? He mocks me.”

Jasnah stared back, uncertain how to reply. A part of her was glad that Elhokar was so devoted to the traditions of the past—it was good for his rule, for the people were more inclined to support a king they thought was

pious. Yet, the piece of her that scoffed at superstition—institutionalized or not—wanted to offer what comfort it could. She remained quiet.

Elhokar looked toward the stormkeeper. “How long?”

The old man shook his head. “Two years ago, I would have said weeks, maybe months. She has lasted years. I cannot say how long the sleepsickness will continue.”

Elhokar nodded, turning toward the door.

“My lord,” Nanavah interrupted, drawing his attention. “I apologize if this is not the time, but there are matters that should be discussed.”

Jasnah eyed the red-haired queen.

“Which matters?” Elhokar asked.

“It has been two years, my lord,” Nanavah explained. “And it may be longer. Surely your distinguished mother would have chosen a husband for Lady Jasnah by now.”

So that was to be the game. Jasnah eyed the queen. The woman had made progress indeed.

Elhokar, ignorant as always to what was left unsaid, turned to regard his mother, nodding to himself. “She has a point, Jasnah. Your youth is waning. We both know Mother’s patience with you was nearly at an end—if she hadn’t fallen sick, she would have chosen a husband for you long ago, whether you approved of him or not.”

“I don’t see what we can do about it,” Jasnah said carefully.

“I am king,” Elhokar said with a wave of his hand. “We both know very well that if you ask, I can declare Mother unfit to choose your spouse.”

Which would pass the duty of choosing my husband on to my nearest female relative, Jasnah thought, keeping her face calm. And, without any living paternal aunts, that duty would fall on her brother’s wife. Nanavah.

Despite Balenmar’s warning, Jasnah was surprised at the queen’s subtle move. *When did this happen?* Jasnah wondered. *When I left her, Nanavah had little interest in politics beyond the pretty baubles her station provided her.*

“My lord,” Jasnah said, adding a slight edge of emotion to her voice. “I would . . . but I think I should wait, just in case. I am not that old yet, and Mother still might awaken. I think patience is best—in the name of tradition.”

Tradition. That was a word that always worked for Elhokar—it made him think of their father. Elhokar liked to think that he was a traditional man.

“Very well,” the king said. “But not much longer. Come, Nanavah, we must prepare for the feast.”

The queen shot Jasnah a displeased look as she followed her husband from the room. *Yes, Jasnah thought, maintaining her calm face, you've grown as a politician, my queen, but you've only had a short time to learn your husband's mannerisms. I've had a lifetime.*

"You coming, Jasnah?" Elhokar asked.

"In a short time," Jasnah said. "I want to spend a little more time with her."

"Very well," Elhokar said, leaving.

Jasnah looked over at the stormkeeper. "Leave us," she told the scholar. The old man looked a bit surprised, but followed the king, closing the door behind him.

Jasnah stood, grinding her teeth in dissatisfaction as the soldier joined her. Nelshenden was head of her personal guard. Tall, proud, and Zirconic, he was everything an Aleth nobleman was supposed to be. If he'd been born to a better family, or had the luck of inheriting a Shardblade, he probably would have been quite a force in Aleth politics. Even as it was, half of the court's women swooned every time he walked by—even if he was too low a match for most of them to consider.

"Anything?" Jasnah asked.

Nelshenden shook his head. "The six months passed without another attempt on her life."

Jasnah regarded her mother with dissatisfaction. Six months previously, word had reached the army of an apparent attempt on the sick woman's life. Many had dismissed the event, but Jasnah had sent Nelshenden just in case.

"I looked into the servant who claimed to have interrupted the attempt," the young nobleman said. "He isn't the most reliable of sources—he fled the city only a few days after the event—but he was known to be a bit smoke-tongued long before he even began working in the palace."

Jasnah nodded distractedly.

"My lady," Nelshenden said with a patient voice. "Why would anyone try to kill your mother?"

"I can think of one person," Jasnah said, eyeing the door.

Nelshenden paused. "The queen?" he asked with shock.

"She obviously wants to be rid of me," Jasnah said. "If Mother died, then Nanavah would gain my Right of Decision. It shouldn't be hard for her to find an unattached, unimportant nobleman somewhere with whom to imprison me. Once she's free of me, the winds only know what she'll do with Elhokar."

Nelshenden didn't respond, and she turned toward him. "You think I'm being paranoid, don't you?"

"It wouldn't be the first time my lady has . . . overreacted," he noted.

Jasnah shook her head, turning back toward her mother. Ezavah had been strong once—a fighter. Jasnah knew by first-hand experience; their frequent clashes had been the talk of the feminine political circuits. Yet she missed the woman. Different as they had been, their arguments had provided more of a bond than others would understand. The fights had made Jasnah strong—made her the woman she had needed to become.

"Do you hate it that much, then?" Nelshenden asked.

"Hate what?" Jasnah replied.

"The idea of marriage."

Jasnah paused. He loved her. She had always known that. That was part of what made him such a valuable bodyguard. Did she hate marriage? No, she did not—but she definitely didn't want to end up with the man Nanavah chose for her.

"I just want to find out what that woman is up to," Jasnah said.

Nelshenden sighed. "Very well. What do you want me to do?"

She turned toward him—he had sacrificed much. "Nelshenden, I am sorry to keep you out of the end of the war."

"Honor is not in fighting, my lady," he said. "Honor is in doing one's duty—and my duty is to you. If my watching your mother brought comfort to your mind, then I consider my duty well fulfilled."

Jasnah allowed herself a slight smile. She kept Kemnar because of his raw effectiveness, but she kept Nelshenden for his honor. He was so earnest—yet so young. He would make some woman a fine husband some day, and Jasnah intended to make certain he ended up with a woman who deserved him. For now, however, she needed him with her. Things were happening in the palace, things she was not prepared for. She had left one battle to join another.

"Take your pick of my guard," Jasnah said. "Order them to keep very careful watch on my mother. You, Kemnar, and I have other work to do."

Nelshenden nodded, but he frowned as well.

"What?" Jasnah asked.

"She *is* our queen, my lady. I don't see that she has done anything worthy of such distrust."

Good, trusting Nelshenden—he wouldn't understand. "It isn't just the queen," Jasnah said. "There's something greater going on, something I'm

afraid my dissociation from the court has kept me from hearing about. Four days ago, someone tried to assassinate the king.”

Nelshenden paled. “When? How?”

“On the battlefield,” Jasnah said. “A Shardbearer with no crest or glyph—but with a fully bonded blade—came from behind our lines and attacked Elhokar with complete disregard for Protocol.”

“A curious event, my lady,” Nelshenden said, “but I’m uncertain that counts as an assassination attempt.”

“I’d probably agree,” Jasnah said. “But Balenmar arrived just after the attack. I think he knew about it—no, not that he planned it. You noted his departure from Ral Eram, I assume?”

Nelshenden nodded. “He left about a month ago. He said he had urgent news for the king.”

“He knows something, Nelshenden,” Jasnah said. “And if he discovered it from within these walls, then we can find it as well. Until I know what kind of danger my brother is in, I can’t afford to let Nanavah ship me away to some far corner of the kingdom. Does that make sense?”

Nelshenden nodded.

“Good,” Jasnah said. “Gather your men and set the guard. These next few weeks will be pivotal.”

chapter 7

TALN 2

He arrived with the highstorm.

The summer storm was furious in its passing, a tempest of wind and rain enveloped by a mantle of black clouds. The guards of Ral Eram's massive iron wall huddled in their cloaks, seeking shelter in towers or crouched beside wet battlements.

And when the storm had passed, raging toward the western horizon, the guards stood to find a solitary figure standing before the city gates. Muscular with dark, tanned skin, he wore only a makeshift loincloth. His long, matted hair dripped from the stormwater, and his head was bowed, his face hidden, his posture slumped. He seemed almost ready to collapse.

To his side, he held a bright silvery weapon, point down with the tip stuck into the stone, his hand resting on the pommel. The size, sheen, and beauty of the sword made its nature apparent even from the top of the wall. A Shardblade.

The guards regarded their captain questioningly, a couple fingering forearms wrapped and tied with cloth glyphwards, sewn by their wives. Men did not travel during highstorms—especially in the summer, when stormwights and other creatures were said to roam.

The guard captain peeked over the side of the wall. The stranger had not moved. He stood in a puddle of water, not shivering despite the cool mountain breeze. The city gates had been closed for the storm, as per

tradition. Tradition also held, however, that no one should be forbidden entrance into the city—especially not a nobleman with a Shardblade.

The captain nodded to the others, who moved to crank the gate open. As they did, he ran over to his office and dug out his own glyphward—sewn with a glyph he did not recognize, but his wife said stood for ‘holiness.’ He held up the square of white cloth. He usually avoided appearing superstitious before his men.

He tied it on anyway.

THE WALLS OF RAL ERAM no longer shone. Taln frowned, resting his hand on Glyphting as the city gates crept open, careful not to push on the sword too hard lest it sink into the stone. His mind was still muddled—his memory was like a lake thick with crom, and many images were still difficult to distinguish. The walls . . . they were steel, crafted from gigantic blocks of stone that had been Remade by Awakeners during the Sixth Epoch. The Oathpact Kings kept them polished, a glistening symbol of their bond.

Yet they shone no more—not like he remembered. They were dull and dark. Was it his memory that was wrong? No. No, while many things were fuzzy, this was clear. He could picture the walls of the city, picture them shining in the sunlight, just before . . . when? When he had left during the Eighth Return, the last time he had seen them. After that, he had died at the Keep of Veletal.

Perhaps he had failed. Perhaps the city had fallen. How long had it been? How long since his death? One century? Two? What would have happened to mankind if he had failed?

What happens to them if I fail . . . ?

He smelled smoke. The massive wall before him burst into flames, fire shining high into the sky like a beacon. He wavered, slumping to his knees. He could hear the screaming. Horrible, bestial yells.

If I fail . . . if I fail . . .

The flames spread to the stone around him, burning everything, their heat oppressive. The smoke twisted and curled, and he could sense something dark within those fires. Something moving closer. Coming . . . coming . . .

No! Taln told himself, forcing himself to his feet. *No! I did not fail. I held Veletal long enough before they killed me. I must have. If I'd failed, mankind would be dead. There would be no Return. I would no longer exist. There are men on the top of that wall. You did not fail.*

The fires withdrew, the wall was doused and returned to a dull grey, and the screams withdrew, growing soft, then silent.

He stumbled forward, toward the open gates. A couple of guards stood just inside, watching with apprehensive eyes.

"S . . . state your name and rank for the city registers, my lord," the lead guard sputtered. He wore a dark leather vest, and carried a spear.

Taln paused. A spear. *What foolishness is this? That will be useless against Khothen limbs. Where is his hammer?* He had much work to do—but this was a matter to discuss with kings, not guards.

"My . . . lord?" the man asked uncertainly, several other guards moving to back him up. The guard's accent was very difficult to understand—that in itself was a clue as to how long Taln had been gone. Fortunately, despite the strange accent, there was something in Taln's mind that immediately began adjusting for the language difference, at it had done so often before.

"Kings," Taln croaked, his voice sore. "Gather the Oathpact."

The guards regarded each other uncertainly. Had they misunderstood him?

"The Oathpact Kings," Taln repeated. "Leaders of the Epoch Kingdoms. The Return has begun. I must speak with them."

"The . . . Oathpact?" the lead guard asked. "My lord, you must be mistaken. This city belongs to Alethkar."

Alethkar. The name was familiar. Taln raised a hand to his head, rubbing his temple. Alethkar . . . Bajerden's kingdom. *This city belongs to Alethkar. That was not right.* He had trouble remembering why, but he knew it was not right. There should have been ten kings, not one.

"Take me to the king," Taln said, stepping forward.

The guard moved forward to block him, and Taln reacted instantly. Glyphting flashed, shearing the tip from the man's spear, then stopping beside his neck.

Taln paused. This man only did his duty. Taln withdrew the sword, stumbling slightly. "I . . . am sorry," Taln said, lowering Glyphting.

The guard exhaled slowly, his eyes wide as he regarded the end of his broken spear. The walls . . . the spears . . . something was very wrong. The world had changed while Taln had been gone.

There was a way. He could almost picture it—a scene, with him and the others, addressing the Oathpact Kings. It had been Jezrien's idea.

"The Sign," Taln whispered. "Please, tell me you remember the Ballad of the Return."

"The . . . Ballad of the Return?" the guard asked, reaching down to finger a cloth-written glyph tied around his arm with two black strings. "Which one?"

“Any of them,” Taln said. “They mention a law. A duty all kings must perform. They must allow me to give them the Sign. Your religion. Vorinism . . . it teaches of this, yes? Vorinism still exists, I hope? It teaches of me as well.”

“My lord? I am a good Vorin, but . . .” the guard trailed off. “You can’t mean to say that . . .”

“I am Talenel Elin,” Taln said. “Herald of the Almighty, one of ten who saw the dawn of this world. The time of Return has come again.”

chapter 8

JEK 1

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, stood at the edge of the lush Veden chamber, watching the heathens enjoy their party. They paid him little heed—while his people were uncommon in the desolate lands of the east, there were often a few in most large cities. He held his cup, but did not drink from it. Even after nearly ten years exiled in the uncivilized lands of Jah Keved and Alethkar, he had not grown accustomed to the Kanaran people’s overly-sweet wines.

The room, like most of its kind, was formed of stone blocks. The people tried to hide their desecration of the rock—using rugs and woven mats for the floor, and hangings for the walls. Jek was careful not to rest his back against the stones as he watched; he might have been Truthless, but he was not a blasphemer.

He still wasn’t certain at the reason for the festivities. However, he had traveled to Veden City several times, and it seemed that the nobility of the country needed little excuse to throw a celebration. Apparently, this time they regarded the Aleth victory in Prallah as one of their own, even though they had sent very few men to the endeavor. That was another trait of the easterner mentality—they often took credit for achievements that were not their own.

Jek’s attention was focused on the far side of the room, where the Veden king sat on his throne. Jek had been watching the man all evening,

comparing rumors with facts. What he saw gave him little hope. King Ahven Vedenel was a man with the mind of a child. He watched over the feasting nobility with wide, innocent eyes, drinking wine from his goblet and smiling foolishly. When he spoke, his words were slurred with the dullness of one touched in the head.

The true king, then, was the man who stood beside Ahven. As self-important as he was bald, Karathach was often dubbed ‘The Lord Puppeteer’ in whispered rumors. Jek’s observations, however, left him with little respect for the man’s manipulative abilities. It wasn’t difficult to play puppeteer over such a witless king.

Jek had seen enough. He nodded to his companions—a group of merchants who had, for a price, allowed Jek to join their company—and slipped from the room. He needed to retire early if he was going to be awake in time to assassinate King Ahven in the early morning.

chapter 9

JASNAH 3

THE FIRST PALACE, DESIGNED to accommodate the entourages of each Epoch Kingdom at the same time, had eleven different feast halls. Only the one in which Jasnah now sat—the one that had originally been dedicated to Alethkar—had seen any use during the last several decades.

The room was one of the largest in the palace, majestic and grand. The acoustics were wonderful—a balladess stood in the corner of the room, singing a slow, passionate song. “The Fourth Ballad of the Return,” Jasnah thought it was—though she could never keep them separate. A line of women sat behind the current singer—lesser noblewomen, waiting their turn to provide music for the feast.

The hall’s grey marble floor was inlaid with a massive silver *palen*-burst that depicted the glyph *nolh*, the symbol of air and of power. Air—the first of the Ten Essences, often used as a representation of the omnipotence of the Almighty. It was no coincidence that Alethkar’s ancestors had chosen *nolh* to represent their kingdom, a fact of which Elhokar seemed quite aware as he sat proudly at the king’s table.

Jasnah studied her brother from her place at the women’s tables. He seemed to be growing into the kingship more and more every day—the insecurity he’d displayed upon first assuming the throne was nearly gone now. He seemed comfortable among his noble supporters, more in control. How could it be that there were so many things he did not see?

Dalengar sat to the king's right, in his proper place as *Parshen*, yet her uncle's mood was withdrawn, and he did not smile at the king's comments. To Elhokar's left sat Meridas—a place that should have been reserved for Jezenrosh Kholin, Elhokar's cousin and second *Parshen*. Meridas was obviously not a man to be trusted. He had enormous power despite his lowly title, and he had no dogma beyond his own thirsty ambition. Yet Elhokar saw fit to give the man his ear.

Jasnah turned from Elhokar's table to seek out another threat. The women's tables were clustered together in a circular pattern, with the men's tables forming a half-ring around their right side. The queen's table was near that of her husband, a short distance from Jasnah's own. Nanavah sat speaking quietly with her ladies-in-waiting, her posture controlled. Powerful. Jasnah had spent the last few hours sending messages to her old contacts in the city, and did not like the replies she had received.

It didn't help her mood any that Shinri had disappeared. The girl had yet to return from her trip to Vedengar, and while it had once been common for Shinri to lose track of time, Jasnah had thought the girl beyond such things. Shinri's absence made Jasnah's table look conspicuously empty. Though Jasnah had sent out a tenset invitations, only two had replied affirmative—Tama Jothken and her cousin, Remlah. As Sixteenth Ladies, they were the two lowest-ranked women Jasnah had invited—she had added them to her list almost as an afterthought because of their fathers' honorable support of Elhokar in the war. The two sat somewhat sheepishly at the end of Jasnah's rectangular table, eyeing the other tables, which were mostly full of occupants.

Jasnah frowned in dissatisfaction as the cooks began to enter, bearing steaming platters of food. There had been a time when her table would have been the most prestigious one at the feast. It appeared that her extended absence had dulled both memories and allegiances.

"My Lady Jasnah?" a hesitant voice asked.

Jasnah turned with a frown, though her mood quickly lightened as she saw who had spoken. A girl, barely fourteen years old, stood beside the table. Despite her youthful features, she wore an intricate woman's *talla*, with her hair in braids and her face painted. She held herself well, only slightly uncomfortable despite how obviously out-of-place she was.

Kinae Khardinar. Dalengar's betrothed.

"Kinae," Jasnah said, smiling. "You've . . ." *You've grown so much.* It wasn't exactly the sort of thing one told a second lady, betrothed of a *Parshen*. "You look lovely."

“Thank you, Lady Jasnah,” Kinae said. She had always been a somber girl—perhaps it was the speed at which she had been forced to grow up. “My lady,” Kinae said. “It looks like some of the people at your table decided not to come to the feast. Can my table come join you? If you have room, I mean.”

Jasnah felt a sudden wash of gratitude. *Oh, child.* . . . It was an amazing compliment—despite Jasnah’s relationship to Elhokar, she was unmarried, and therefore was of a lower rank than someone like Kinae, even if her marriage wouldn’t take place for another four years. For Kinae to abandon her own table and to sit beneath Jasnah’s . . .

Kinae probably didn’t understand what she was offering. Then again, she just might. She was very clever—moreover, she was dedicated to understanding and fulfilling what was expected to her. Though duty loomed far larger than her youthful experience could handle, she tried so hard to live up to her station.

Kinae waited expectantly.

“I would like it very much if you joined me, Kinae,” Jasnah said honestly. Not only would it fill her conspicuously-empty table, it would cause a stir in the attending women. In Jasnah’s current state of power, anything that shook up the status quo was likely to favor her position.

Kinae turned and walked back to her table, maintaining an attempted regal bearing despite her diminutive size. There were subtle understandings that Kinae hadn’t figured out yet—an experienced lady would never have come in person, but would instead have sent a lesser lady in her place—but she did a remarkable job, considering her age.

As Kinae reached her table, Jasnah caught sight of Dalenar at the king’s table. The man was watching Kinae with a look of controlled dissatisfaction. The rest of the court accepted the betrothal for what it was—a political union, meant to seal Alethkar’s relationship with the state of Khardinar. They were willing to overlook Kinae’s age; sometimes, conventions had to be bent in the name of political expediency.

Dalenar, however, was not a man who approved of bent morality and false motives. To him, it was wrong for a man to accept even a betrothal to a girl Kinae’s age. However, at the same time, he was a firm believer in doing what was best for the kingdom—and a strong union with Khardinar was vital to Alethkar’s health. When Elhokar had given him the order to become betrothed, he had submitted to the good of Alethkar. However, the conflict between duty and morality left him in a very strange position.

Jasnah smiled. If only all of their problems were as simple as Dalenar’s

relationship with his betrothed. The pending union might make him uncomfortable, but he would deal with it—besides, he already had two heirs. When he and Kinae wed in four years, Dalenar could leave the marriage unconsummated—as a union in name only—for the rest of his life, and it wouldn't really matter. In fact, Jasnah suspected that she wouldn't be the only one who respected Dalenar even more for the decision.

She just wished he would show just a little more warmth to Kinae. She tried so hard, and Jasnah suspected the young lady didn't really understand why her betrothed always seemed displeased with her.

Kinae had a rather large entourage—mostly the wives of Shardbearers in Dalenar's court. The women masked their displeasure at being forced to move tables. Technically, they were members of Dalenar's court and not Elhokar's, but the Oathgate made Kholinar practically an extension of the royal court. These women wouldn't like the fact that Kinae had associated them with Jasnah, who was obviously out of the queen's favor.

The ladies, however, let none of this show. They seated themselves at Jasnah's table with pleasant smiles, as if overjoyed at the prospect of dining with the king's sister. Soon the table was full, and Jasnah felt a lot less out of place.

As the meal began, a late arrival finally appeared at the doorway. Shinri wore the same red *talla* as earlier, and her face was marked with confusion. She sought out Jasnah's table, then made her way through the feast hall as quickly as propriety would allow.

Shinri sat herself on the empty stool just beside Jasnah, and Jasnah gave her a dissatisfied look.

Shinri flushed. "I apologize, my lady," she said quickly. "I should not have been late."

Jasnah nodded. "Compose yourself."

"Yes, my lady," Shinri said, taking a few deep breaths and settling herself. "I'm sorry." She glanced across the table, identifying the ladies who were sitting with them. "Not many answered your invitations."

Jasnah shook her head. "Fortunately, Kinae offered to bring her entourage to my table."

Shinri smiled. "She's a good child."

Jasnah nodded. Kinae was only three years younger than Shinri—but what a difference those three years made. Shinri had the maturity and the mind of a woman—and Jasnah fully intended to exploit both. She would need to use every resource she had if she were going to recover her position at court.

“What kept you?” Jasnah asked.

Shinri frowned. “Tethren refused to see me,” she said, absently picking at threads on the cuff of her left sleeve.

“Stop that,” Jasnah said, frowning at the girl’s nervous habit. “What do you mean he ‘refused to see you?’ What kind of man won’t meet with the fiancée he hasn’t seen for six months?”

“The servants were very kind,” Shinri said, “but they stalled me in the sitting room. Eventually, they returned and told me that I’d just missed him—that he’d left just shortly before my arrival on a trading trip to Thalenah.”

Shinri didn’t seem like she accepted the explanation—as well she shouldn’t. Jasnah had instilled in the girl a healthy amount of skepticism regarding noble motivations. Everything the servants said *could* have been true—Tethren was a Prince of House Rienar in Jah Keved, but he was a younger son, and such often oversaw their family’s business negotiations. Perhaps Shinri had arrived just as he was leaving, and the servants had stalled her while they tried to get word to him in time. But Tethren must have received word that the Aleth nobility were returning from Prallah—why would he have left without seeking out Shinri?

“If you wouldn’t mind, my lady,” Shinri said. “Could you include some questions about Veden politics in your evening’s communications? I would like very much to discover what has been happening.” *Specifically*, she implied, *whether or not my fiancé has been cheating on me*.

“It’s unlikely that Tethren is . . . looking elsewhere, Shinri,” Jasnah said consolingly. “He is known to be a very honorable man—and he seems truly devoted to you. There must be another explanation.”

“I know, my lady,” Shinri said. “But . . . could you ask anyway?”

Jasnah paused for a moment. It was early in the feast to begin correspondences, but she could see several other women already beginning to scribe notes. “Very well,” Jasnah said. “I have things I need to discover as well. Bring me some paper, then go change for the feast.”

Shinri nodded, rising from the bench and hurriedly fetching Jasnah some paper and a small brushpen from the side of the room. Afterward, she withdrew from the room.

Jasnah idly picked up an eating spear as she composed her thoughts—the metal skewer was tipped with a ruby, and she was very careful not to let it touch her skin as she stabbed a chunk of pork and slipped it in her mouth. The pork’s sharp flavor gave her pause—she hadn’t realized how much she missed the conveniences of a full chef’s staff. During the war, she had often

been forced to subsist off Awakened grain. While nutritious, such rations were relatively mundane.

The pork, like all of the other items on the table, had been prepared specially for the female tables. Each dish had either been fried or seared after cooking so that it wouldn't drip and ruin expensive seasilk *tallahs*. Like the other women, Jasnah ate with her right hand, her left hand held demurely in her lap, cloaked in the folds of the long left sleeve. The eating spears were long and thin, and the dishes had all been arranged in small chunks to allow for meticulous eating.

The men, of course, would have none of that. They ate with stocky eating spears in one hand, thick knives in the other. Their food would have been prepared after more masculine tastes, with sharp spices and extra seasonings. Jasnah had once tasted a man's dish out of curiosity, and the spiciness of it had left her mouth burning for what seemed like days.

Eventually, she turned her attention to writing. She set aside her spear, and picked up the brushpen, carefully scribing on the thick white paper. She first wrote notes to those women she trusted—or, at least, had trusted—the most, then moved on to those she didn't trust at all, but who often had valuable information.

"It's early in the dinner for such furious writing," a familiar voice interrupted after a short time of scribing.

She looked up to a smiling Balenmar. He stood beside her table, stooped against his cane, looking as old as the winds themselves.

"You don't mind if I sit, do you?" he asked, moving over to a stool.

"Of course not," Jasnah replied. Few men would even consider joining one of the female tables, but Balenmar was . . . somewhat outside of normal conventions. Stormkeepers, the scholars trained in Thalenah, weren't completely free from social conventions like Vorin monks were, but they were generally given more leeway.

The old man sighed, settling down on the stool and laying his cane across his lap. He smiled. "It seems this body of mine moves more and more slowly with each passing storm. Someday, I fear it shall simply freeze, and I'll be stuck standing in the middle of the hallway like a statue."

Jasnah raised an eyebrow. "Well, if that happens, we'll be certain to have a maid stop by to dust you off every once in a while." She glanced toward the king's table, where an empty chair marked the place Balenmar had been sitting just moments ago. It was at the very far end of the table, a ways away from the king and his *Parshen*—but it was still at the king's table, a far more distinguished position than Balenmar had ever held in Elhokar's court.

"It appears that the king appreciated your news," Jasnah said.

"Indeed," Balenmar said.

"And what is it going to take for me to find out what, exactly, you two discussed?"

Balenmar eyed her in his unconcerned way, then reached over and selected an eating skewer and tasted an inavah cake. "*Parshen* Jezenrosh isn't here."

"He's been sick," Jasnah replied carefully. "He never recovered from the illness he gained in Prallah."

Balenmar raised his eyebrows. "Ten months. That's a long time to be sick."

"My mother has been sick for longer," Jasnah pointed out.

"Your mother is not sick, child," Balenmar said. "She is dying. Jezenrosh, I assure you, is not. There is something going on in Crossguard. When Elhokar left for the war, he brought his most ardent supporters with him. What does that say for the noblemen he left behind? Noblemen left alone for the better part of two years . . . six months of that spent with access to a discontent cousin to the throne . . ."

"You speak of dangerous things," Jasnah said.

"Someone sent that man to kill Elhokar on the battlefield, Jasnah," Balenmar said. "Someone who wanted, very much, for it to appear that Elhokar was killed by a Prallan who broke Protocol. And, with the king dead, Alethkar would need a new leader to seek a double vengeance upon Pralir. Elhokar's son is far too young—and that would present a very convenient opportunity for an aspiring nobleman."

"Proof?" Jasnah asked.

"Nothing substantial yet," Balenmar said. "But the king appreciated my conclusions. I'm looking."

Jasnah digested the information. Jezenrosh's absence was conspicuous, though he and Elhokar had been at odds since their childhood. Elhokar had chosen Jezenrosh as his second *Parshen* for tradition's sake, and had done so at Jasnah's strong suggestion. She had hoped that by working together, they would overcome their differences—unfortunately, their relationship had only grown worse by the forced association.

But would Jezenrosh try and have the king killed? It was far-fetched. The *Parshen* had never displayed that kind of ambition before.

"How sure of this are you?" she asked.

Balenmar shook his head. "My specific information was regarding the attack itself, not who performed it. But the rest seems obvious."

Jasnah nodded. “All right,” she said. “I’ll remember this, Balenmar. I’m in your debt.”

Balenmar raised an eyebrow. “Jasnah dear, just because I play the game doesn’t mean I don’t care about Alethkar. I served Nolphonarin all his days; I would do the same for Elhokar. I came to you not to extort favors, but because I fear for the king’s safety. Despite the danger, he won’t let me help him as he should. Do you remember the night before Jezenrosh’s departure?”

Jasnah nodded.

“Something happened between Jezenrosh and your brother that night. There was an argument between the two of them, but Elhokar refuses to tell me what it was about. I don’t trust the boy to take care of himself, and I certainly don’t trust the queen to look after him.”

Jasnah eyed the queen’s table. “Agreed.”

Balenmar sighed. “Perhaps the king was right to leave me behind from the war. Old men don’t travel well—we complain more than we advise, and we find it hard to see the regality of the son when all we remember is his father. However, Elhokar needs us now, even if he doesn’t realize it.”

Jasnah was still watching the queen’s table. “You were right about her.

Balenmar nodded, chewing on the edges of his cake with a thoughtful face. “Things haven’t quite been the same here this last year, child. The records say I was in charge, but sometimes it really didn’t feel that way.”

“When did it happen?” Jasnah asked. “When I left her, Nanavah was about as savvy as a chunk of granite.”

Balenmar shrugged. “She’s her father’s daughter, Jasnah. At first it seemed she’d only inherited his temper, but apparently there was more hiding underneath than we assumed. There have been rumblings in Jah Keved—people are less and less pleased with having the Idiot King on the throne. Perhaps she fears her brother’s throne will fall, and has realized that she needs to be a stronger force in politics if she wants to keep her power. Either way, watch yourself with her. She’s been quite efficient in her conquest—you’ll find few allies left.”

Jasnah nodded. “I noticed,” she mumbled.

Balenmar set down the eating spear, half of the cake uneaten, as he moved to rise. “I don’t see how you stand this food—it’s so terribly bland.”

“It suits us,” Jasnah replied.

“As you will. Anyway, we should not speak of these things here. I will contact you if my sniffings turn up anything more concrete. Just . . . be

wary, Lady Kholin. Your brother's life is far more at danger in his own bed than it ever was on that battlefield."

Jasnah felt a chill, but nodded.

Balenmar stood on wearied legs. "I should go, my lady. Your brother plans to make some sort of announcement in a few moments."

"Announcement?" Jasnah asked.

Balenmar shrugged. "I guess we'll see, won't we?"

Jasnah frowned as the old man hobbled away. What was Elhokar planning? Why hadn't he mentioned it to her? It was probably nothing, but . . .

She sighed, turning back to her letters. There was nothing to do for the moment but find out just how limited her resources were. Shinri returned a few moments later, looking far more formal than before. She had redone her braids and her facepaint, and had exchanged her *talla* for a gorgeous yellow one with dark blue embroidery. She wore a necklace of ruby to match her hair, and her favorite jade bracelet.

"Do you intend to sing tonight?" Jasnah asked the girl.

Shinri glanced toward the balladess stand. "I'm not sure, my lady," she confessed. "With everything that's happening . . ."

"You should," Jasnah told her. "We need to re-establish ourselves in Ral Eram. It would be good to remind the court what it's missed in your absence."

"Yes, my lady," Shinri said as Jasnah handed her a pile of letters. The girl moved off to do as commanded.

Shinri wasn't the only one running letters. The women of the court saw feasts as a perfect opportunity for correspondence, since replies could be received so quickly. The men paid little heed to the bustling messengers, laughing and feasting, inavah wine flowing freely. Intrigue was the game of their women; if there was anything important to be learned, their wives and daughters would inform them the next day—preferably late in the day, once they'd slept off the payment for their night's celebrations.

Jasnah waited patiently for replies to her notes. Eventually, she heard a familiar voice sounding in the hall. Conversations quieted and people glanced toward the balladess pedestal despite the fact that there had been singing, in one form or another, during the entire feast.

Shinri's voice was beautiful. She had chosen to sing "Windborn Fate," a melancholy ballad about a lost love, and its haunting melody drew the attention even of the king, who stopped talking to Meridas long enough to listen.

Jasnah smiled. Shinri didn't use her voice to her advantage as much as she should—like politics, singing was one of the prime Feminine Noble Arts. A noblewoman with talent such as Shinri's could use the renown she earned for great political leverage—people would be more likely to attend a nobleman's party if they knew that there was a chance that a renowned balladess would be performing.

Eventually, people returning to their feasting. Shinri sang several more ballads, during which Jasnah received several correspondences, all unrelated to her inquiries. Most of them were welcomes regarding Jasnah's return, though a few were apologies from women she had invited to sit at her table. She prepared careful replies as she waited—it had been a long time since she'd had to pander to the court women, but it appeared that she was going to have to reacquaint herself with the process.

Elhokar's announcement came before any of the women replied to Jasnah's questions. He raised himself up from the king's table, pushing his chair out behind him, only a little bit tipsy. The room grew quiet as he cleared his throat, holding forth a hand sparkling with rings. Shinri stopped singing, and took the opportunity to pick her way back toward Jasnah's table, abandoning the balladess pedestal to another woman.

"It is certainly good to be among friends in our home country again," the king said in a firm voice. There were murmurs of approval among the men at this. "We have fought well, and revenged ourselves upon the man who took the life of my father, the king. It has been a difficult war—difficult to leave our families, difficult to see the deaths of our friends. But that is the price of justice.

"Now, however, is a time for celebration. The land of Pralir—nearly half of the ancient kingdom of Prallah—is ours. There have been spoils won. Many of these have been awarded to those who fought most loyally, others must be retained by the crown for its own reasons. There are some rewards, however, that have not yet been placed."

Elhokar gestured toward the back of the room, where several noblemen entered, pulling a small cloth-draped cart between them. One threw off the cloth, exposing five gleaming weapons. Shardblades.

There was a hiss from the king's table, and Jasnah glanced back toward it. Dalenar's visage had turned notably hostile, though he contained himself. Renarin's Shardblade was among the five.

"These weapons have no claimant," Elhokar explained. "Several were won by the eyes of keen archers, who felled enemy Shardbearers from a distance. Others came from our own men, who died with no heir. Others . . ."

Elhokar paused, not looking at Dalenar. “Came from other sources. While all Blades that were not won in single combat and are without heir are traditionally mine to bestow, I have set aside these five to be special rewards.

“Lords and ladies, we shall have a dueling competition—a competition such as they had in the days of my grandfather, before the wars and pain of my time. The winners shall not only carry away honor, but shall earn themselves Shardblades and the title that goes with them.”

This caused an excited stir. Normally, there were only three ways to get a Blade: inherit it, earn it from the king, or defeat a Shardbearer in combat. The three methods were increasingly unlikely, and even the first was a hopeless dream for most men. The opportunity Elhokar proposed was rare indeed.

Jasnah sat thoughtfully as the hall burst with discussions. It was an interesting move, but a potentially brilliant one. Years of warfare had depressed the kingdom and strained allegiances—a chance for such festivities would enhance Elhokar’s popularity. There were few things the people of Roshar—noble and citizen alike—liked more than an exciting duel.

“Any man of noble rank or of First Citizen status may participate,” Elhokar continued. “Traveling duelists or duelists from the countries of our allies—Jah Keved and Thalenah—may participate in the festivities and the lesser events, though they may not win a Blade. The competition will occur in sixty days, and I wish it to be well-attended—in fact, I demand it. Every nobleman of Fifth rank or above is hereby commanded to come to Ral Eram for the festival, though he need not participate himself. Most especially, every Shardbearer in my realm must attend. Let the news be spread.”

Jasnah frowned. A nobleman would be a fool to miss a social opportunity such as this one; Elhokar didn’t need to command them to attend. Jasnah eyed Meridas, who seemed far less tipsy than the other men, then shot a glance at Nanavah, who sat speaking with the women of her table. Finally she looked back up at Elhokar, who had seated himself once again.

What are you planning, Brother? What is it you aren’t telling me?

Several moments later, replies to Jasnah’s questions began to arrive. Shinri watched the deliveries eagerly, and Jasnah reluctantly turned her attention from her brother to the communiqués.

At least they had the courtesy to respond, Jasnah thought, opening the messages and scanning their contents. She had feared that the letters would be terse and uninformative, but apparently she retained enough political might to ensure her requests were taken seriously. The women she had

contacted were expert politicians—the wives of Third and Fourth Lords. They knew better than to alienate the king’s sister—at least, they knew better than to do it while that sister was still a potential force in the court.

The news was not explicit—the women had only shared enough to make it appear that they were helping her. Still, she was able to glean some information from the pile of letters. Nanavah had taken special care to befriend and reward Jasnah’s former allies. The queen had set up her own special dining clubs, and to be invited had become the grandest of courtly honors. What’s more, Nanavah had somehow gained access to the royal treasury.

The queen wasn’t giving away Elhokar’s money—she was apparently too savvy for that. However, when a woman allied with Nanavah, the roads to her husband’s city somehow got repaired more frequently, or patrolled more extensively. Both encouraged merchants to travel to the city and, more importantly, citizens to move into the city. Everyone knew that the ten-year census was approaching, and with it city ranks would be revised. Those who ruled well, and whose cities grew, would be rewarded with increased ranks—and the taxation benefits, political power, and military support that came with them.

While the tactics were as old as female politics, Jasnah was still impressed. Most women played the game, but few—even those with Nanavah’s access—did it successfully. Hers would be a difficult hold to break.

One thing, however, confused Jasnah. Emeralds. Several sources mentioned Nanavah’s involvement in the emerald trade—they suspected she was stockpiling them. But why? To drive the price up, then sell? The merchants would never fall for such a ploy. Perhaps she had been trying to gather more resources in case her husband’s war continued. In the economy of Awakening, emeralds meant food. Assuming one had talented Awakeners, the Polestone could be used to create grain.

“My lady?” Shinri asked hesitantly.

Jasnah paused, looking up from the letters.

“Did they say anything about Tethren?”

Jasnah glanced at the letters. She had indeed asked about the man, but none of the sources had anything to say. “No,” she admitted. “But that means nothing, Shinri. This court has little heed for the workings of the Three Houses. You need to ask in Jah Keved.”

Shinri nodded. “Of course. You’re right. Thank you for asking, my lady. I think that—”

The oak doors at the back of the room burst open, slamming back against

the walls with a sudden snapping sound. The room fell sharply silent as a figure strode into the hall.

Jasnah had rarely seen such a wild, unkempt man. His hair was savage and disheveled, dripping wet from a recent highstorm. His beard was matted and stained dark with crom. He wore only a tangled loincloth, apparently crafted with haste from the bark of a shennah plant. He was tall, towering nearly a head over the guards who stood apprehensively behind him, and his exposed body was lean and muscular.

And he carried a Shardblade.

The people of the room cried out in surprise, several of the men standing, their hands held to the side as they began summoning their Blades. Elhokar slammed his palms on his table, rising with a dark look.

“Who—”

“King of Alethkar!” the wild man barked, speaking in a clipped, rural accent, similar to that of a man from Riemak to the west. The stranger strode forward, stopping in the middle of the room, amidst the women’s tables.

“I am he,” Elhokar replied.

“I was under the impression that Ral Eram was a city of Ten Kingdoms!” the wild man announced. “Why is it that I find only one king here, ruling over the entire city as if its emperor?”

Elhokar flushed. “What is your business here, stranger?”

“I am no stranger,” the wild man said. “I am Talenel Elin, Herald of the Almighty. I have come to bring warning of the Return, and of the danger you face—though, from appearances, it seems you are enough of a danger to yourselves. Is it true that you are recently returned from an invasion of Prallah, your once ally against the tide of the Khothen?”

“Bah!” Elhokar said, looking at the guards. “Why in the blessed name of the Almighty would you let this fool interrupt my feasting?”

“Your men did as your own ancestors required,” the wild man said, holding forth his Shardblade, causing several of the women to shy away in fear. “They acted by laws preserved in your ballads, laws I helped establish so that the proper proof could be provided. Behold!” the man said, thrusting forth his hand in a dramatic gesture. “Witness the Sign of the Return!”

Nothing happened.

The room sat in silence, regarding the strange man. The would-be-Elin looked down at his hand with concern, then thrust it forward again. Again, nothing happened. Suddenly, the man wavered, looking disoriented, his eyes unfocused, his hand going to his head. At that exact moment, eight guards tackled him from behind.

Women cried out and men ducked as the soldiers brought the strange man to the ground. Two of them focused only on the madman's arm, mindful of the Shardblade and its supernaturally-sharp edge. The guards and he fell in a heap, pinning the madman to the ground.

Lords jumped from their seats, joining the group of guards who struggled to control the man. Whoever he was, he must have been incredibly strong, for he nearly rose to his feet with six men holding him down. Finally, he seemed to lose his resolve, and he slumped to the floor, allowing himself to be held motionless.

Assured they were in control, the soldiers carefully pulled the madman to his feet, six of them holding him tightly, another four standing with drawn swords. One grabbed the madman's Shardblade and ran it forward to Elhokar's table.

"Captain," Elhokar said, face bright with anger, "your incompetence has embarrassed me at my own homecoming feast!"

"I'm sorry, my lord," the lead guard said. "But, he had a Blade, and . . . well, the ballads do say we have to allow anyone to perform the Sign . . ."

"Not in the middle of a feast, you fool!" Elhokar snapped. "Take him from here and have him executed."

"Executed?" the captain asked.

"He's so fond of the Law of the Sign," Elhokar said, waving toward the man, "let him suffer the punishment for it. I know the ballads too, and I saw no sign of his divinity."

"My lord . . ." the captain said. "He obviously has no wit to—"

"Do not question your king!" Elhokar screamed.

The captain bowed, flushing at the command. Jasnah eyed the poor wildman, pity stirring within her. He stood slumped in the guards' grasp, his head down, and he seemed to be whispering something to himself. This was not Shinavar—the people of Alethkar expected civility and honor from their rulers. Executing madmen simply for being insane was an act of barbarity.

Perhaps this man's cause could serve her as well. It was a risk, but . . .

Jasnah stood, drawing the room's attention. "My lord, I ask mercy."

"On what grounds?" Elhokar spat, sitting.

"He carried a Shardblade," Jasnah pointed out. "That makes him a nobleman."

"Or the murderer of a nobleman," Elhokar replied.

"We don't know that, my lord," Jasnah said.

"I am not in a mood for argument, Jasnah," Elhokar said. "Do not rouse

my anger further. This man has interrupted my feast and threatened me before my court.”

Jasnah dropped to the ground and bowed her head to the marble floor. “Please, my lord,” she pled. “Take his Blade, add it to the pile of those to be won at the competition, and spare this man his life. You have shown the world your honor already. Now show them your mercy.”

Elhokar paused, regarding his sister. “Very well,” he said with a sigh. “If you wish to take responsibility for him, Sister, then he is yours. Just take him from my sight.”

Jasnah rose, waving Kemnar over from the side of the room, where he stood with the other personal guards. “Take him to Mercyhome monastery and put him under the care of the monks there,” she said quietly. “Make certain he’s clothed and bathed, and give them a few gems as payment.”

“And if he gives me trouble?” Kemnar asked, eyeing the stranger. The man had yet to look up from his mumblings.

“He seems to have lost his spirit,” she said, “and he no longer has a Blade. He shouldn’t be any trouble for you.”

“I didn’t imply that he would,” Kemnar replied.

“The monks will know what to do with him,” she said. “You can leave a few guards with them if it looks like he might act up again.”

Kemnar nodded, waving for a few of the palace guardsmen to join him in leading the madman away. Jasnah moved back to her seat, brushing off her *talla* and seating herself again. The men of the court turned back to their meals, their laughter forced as they intentionally tried to forget the incident. The women, however, watched Jasnah. She had shown them something, something that they would not quickly forget. She still had power over her brother, power to save a man’s life even when the king’s infamous temper had been stoked.

Jasnah met the queen’s eyes through the crowd. The woman’s mouth was a line of displeasure—calling for mercy should have been her place, but she had not acted. Jasnah had, and the king had listened to her. It set an uncomfortable precedent.

Jasnah turned away from the woman, lightly picking up her brushpen and scribing thankful replies to those women who had answered her questions.

chapter 10

JEK 2

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, knelt in the darkness and laid a quiet hand on the granite, mouthing the fourteen curses against a people who forced him to desecrate holy stone.

Yet there was no other way. It shamed him, but he barely even noticed any more. When he had first come to the lands of the east, he had tried to find ways to keep from walking on the stone. He would stand on rugs and ride in hand-drawn carriages. Eventually, he had been forced to admit his hypocrisy. Beneath the rug was stone. Beneath that stone, more stone. Wherever he walked, whether it be inside or outdoors, his feet desecrated the rock. There was no regular soil in this blighted land.

Jek stood. The night was cool, yet still arid. He longed for the enfolding humidity of his homeland. That was not to be, however. He was Truthless—his lot was to walk the stones, knowing every step brought him damnation. And so it would be.

He scuttled along the palace wall in the darkness. Though heathens, the eastern people did have some impressive attributes. Their skill with textiles and dyes far outmatched that of his own people. The seasilk bodycloth he wore was stronger, yet lighter and more flexible, than any wool outfit from Shinavar. It was colored the deepest of blacks, its natural sheen roughed to prevent it from glistening in the starlight. Were he still a member of the Halantentan, the clothing would have been the envy of the entire clan.

He paused beside a stone post on the wall, crouching down, eyeing palace guards and their lanterns. The heathens liked to build outward, rather than upward. In Shinavar, the palace of one so wealthy would have been a tenses stories in height, constructed to show the power of the clan leader. However, stone was not meant to be used for building homes—it resisted cutting and smoothing, wishing to remain in its natural form. It was too heavy for much stacking. The difficulty didn't permit the construction of tall buildings—massive support pillars were needed to achieve even a single story.

The Veden palace was of typical design. It spread out across a shallow stone plateau at the center of Veden City. Built of five wings, it was a labyrinth of hallways and chambers. During the party he had attended earlier, Jek had spent as much time as possible scouting his pathways. Complex though the palace was, it betrayed one major flaw—consistent with most of its kind in the east.

Important men liked windows.

Jek climbed over the side of the wall, slinking down its side, using the two sides of a corner to keep himself from falling too fast. He crouched at its base, then scuttled across the courtyard. A quick grapple with handholds, and he was up once again—this time on the roof of the palace. The stone was unnaturally flat beneath his unshod feet, worked and scarred by the hands of men. He stole across the top of the building, aiming toward the back wall.

The heathens were fools. Their nobles always slept in the same room, and didn't even try to disguise which room that was. Look for the largest, best-protected room in the building, and one would find the lord of the household. It was fortunate that the heathen eastern assassins were as incompetent as their lords; otherwise, the land would have been depopulated of noblemen long before.

Two guards stood on the outside balcony, their lanternlight blinding them to the darkness. Even if they had been without light, they probably wouldn't have thought to look upward—even though that was the most obvious path to the king's chambers.

Jek shook his head. Sixteen years, and he had yet to find a true challenge in these lands. He wondered if the heathens even realized how fortunate they were—if they'd been more civilized, the clans would have attacked them long ago. As it was, however, Truth forbade the attacking of children, women, and non-warriors. By common Shin consent, all easterners fell into the first category.

That prohibition, unfortunately, no longer applied to Jek. He was Truthless.

The first guard died with Jek's stiletto in his back. The second guard turned with a look of shock, opening his mouth to scream as his companion slumped to the ground. Jek leaped forward, grabbing the soldier by the neck, cutting off his cry of surprise. Jek whipped out his chokecloth, spinning behind the man and wrapping the cloth around his neck. The guard got in a single claw at Jek's arm before a twist of the chokecloth sent him to join his companion.

Jek rested the body quietly against the stone landing. He felt slightly less guilty about killing them than he did others. The soldiers carried swords—they were noblemen of the Vedenel house, self-professed warriors. According to Truth, any man who wished to be a warrior could die like one, should he make that choice.

The door was wooden—created, undoubtedly, through heathen misuse of sacred arts, for there were no trees in the east to provide wood. The keys were on one of the guard's belt. Jek used them in the lock, opened the door, and crept inside.

It was darker within than without. Jek moved through the room, quickly making out the black blot of the bed against the far wall. There, only for a moment, did he give himself pause. During his years in exile, he had been forced to kill non-warriors of all types—women, children, craftsmen, and servants. Yet, he had never performed this one heresy: the murder of one whose mind had been taken by the Shanalakada. The Idiot King was more than just a child, he was a child with no opportunity. An invalid.

The bitter taste in Jek's mouth was nothing new. *This is your punishment*, he thought, forcing himself forward. *This is your shame. You have no Truth remaining.*

He stopped before the bed to perform the deed—only to find it empty.

Immediately, his senses became alert. Instincts trained through hours of practice beneath his father's tutelage took control of Jek. He spun, rolling across the ground to avoid attack, and scrambled for the door. As he reached it, a voice whispered in the darkness.

"If you leave, you will just have to return to try again."

Jek froze, crouching beside the wall, seeking the concealment of darkness and searching for the one who had spoken. The voice had been familiar—the words misformed and dull.

On the other side of the room, a light flashed—the hood being removed from a lantern. The soft glow revealed the Idiot King seated at a table.

He wore a loose sencoat of dark materials and a pair of easterner pants—very wide at the cuff and baggy through the legs.

“You have come to kill me,” King Ahven said. “It is curious that you would run so easily. What of the precise efficiency I have heard regarding Shin assassins?”

A trap? It was a strange one, then. No guards, no bows. Just a simpleton and a table. Jek rose, still on guard, regarding the king carefully. Witless he may appear, and slow of speech he may sound, but his words were not those of an idiot.

“What manner of man are you?” Jek asked.

“You will have to move closer to the light,” the king said. “Otherwise I won’t be able to see your words.”

Jek frowned, suspicious. Ahven sat patiently. *See my words . . .*

Jek stepped forward into the light—like a warrior of his people, he wore no covering on his face. “You’re deaf,” he said, “not an idiot.”

The king’s smile was subtle—thin lipped, barely expressive. “To most, you’ll find that the two are the same.”

Jek reached down, sliding his stiletto from its sheath. He would play the king’s game no longer. Idiot or genius, deaf or mute, he had been ordered to kill this man. He was Truthless—a tool, like his knife. He would do as commanded.

“Ah, the infamous Shin sense of honor,” Ahven said. “What do you call it? Salahkep?”

“That is not a word you may use,” Jek hissed. Dashing forward, his weapon reflected the lanternlight.

Ahven seemed amused as he reached over and pushed the lantern to the side, revealing an object sitting hidden behind it. A decapitated head.

Jek stumbled to a halt, eyes wide. The head was that of the Veden nobleman Randach, House Davar—the very man who had held Jek’s Bondstone. The man who had sent Jek to kill the king . . .

Ahven rested his hand nonchalantly on the table, unfazed by the grisly object at his side.

Randach was dead. Jek’s Bondstone . . . if no one had it, then he was . . .

Ahven reached out and dropped a small object onto the table. A simple chunk of rock—not smoothed, worked, or etched. Blue turquoise, one of the most sacred of stones. This chunk was natural, as it had fallen. Its cracks and faces were deeply familiar to Jek.

“Master,” he said, falling to a regretful knee.

“Indeed,” Ahven replied.

“Master . . .” Jek said, looking up. “I ask you. Return my Bondstone to me. Declare my penance finished, and allow me to return to my clan.”

“I think not,” the Idiot King said. “At the very least, I believe you owe me two guards.”

Jek bowed his head again. “What are your orders?”

“Head up, assassin,” Ahven reminded him. “I must see your lips.”

Jek raised his head.

“You will travel to the south, to Windhollow. Seek out the palace of Talshekh Davar, and kill his wife and children.”

Talshekh Davar—head of House Davar, one of the three High Families that ruled Jah Keved. “He knew nothing of the attempt on your life,” Jek said.

“This is not about revenge, assassin,” Ahven said, dark eyes reflecting the lanternlight. “I have . . . another purpose. Kill the Davar family, but leave Talshekh himself alive. Then return to me here.”

Jek closed his eyes. Another slaughter. He had been so close . . . four masters, now, and the Shanalakada had not seen fit to release him from his penance. Perhaps they never would.

He rose, bowing to the Idiot King, then left the room on silent feet.

chapter 11

SHINRI 1

SHINRI DAVAR SLOWLY DIPPED her index finger into her tea. It was warm to the touch—not hot, like men’s tea, but mild and feminine. She removed the finger, a glistening reddish-brown drop pooling at its tip. She did nothing as it gathered, then dripped free, falling the short distance to her leg below. The fine seasilk repelled the liquid at first, and the tea formed into a refractive blister on the perfect yellow surface.

Everything was perfect again. The war had passed. In fact, to the women sitting in the Lady’s Garden around her, the fighting had been a bare nuisance.

The seasilk finally succumbed, and the tea bubble deflated like an exhaled breath, seeping into the cloth and forming a slight brown stain.

“Shinri?” Lady Tenet asked. “Child, are you paying attention to me?”

Shinri looked up, smiling with the false warmth Jasnah had taught her to convey. During four years as Lady Kholin’s ward, Shinri had learned many things. She had been trained in feminine etiquette. She had been given lessons in poetry, writing, reading, and painting. She had been taught how to control her surroundings, and how to play the games of politics. Through all of this, however, Shinri had learned one thing more potent than all the rest: how to hold her tongue.

Shinri sipped her tea.

“I really don’t see how you manage, Shinri,” Lady Tenet continued.

“Living with that woman is more than one should be forced to bear.” Tenet was a square-faced woman with overdrawn eyebrows and lavish clothing. She had once been one of Jasnah’s greatest supporters in the court.

“You should listen to Lady Tenet, Shinri,” urged the girl beside Shinri. Tenet’s ward, Varnah, was a small-framed girl with a friendly voice but abysmal fashion sense. The girl’s light-colored yellow *talla* made her darker complexion appear far too tan, but her friendly eyes were innocently sincere—as if she didn’t realize the terrible betrayal she was suggesting.

Shinri sipped her tea. Most of the ten women in the sitting circle whispered amongst themselves, pretending not to pay attention to Shinri’s conversation. Lady Jasnah’s training, however, taught her to notice their cocked heads and skittish eyes, along with their deliberate postures.

The green leaves of the garden provided an unsettling contrast to the bleak Prallan highlands to which Shinri had nearly become accustomed. The Lady’s Garden was a mass of vines, rockbuds, and blooms that was one of the great wonders of the First Capital. Massive stone walls surrounded the garden, nestling the plants against a fold in the mountain to protect against highstorm winds. The garden columns were arranged in a careful pattern, their stone overgrown with cultivated rockbud polyps that bore blooms so large and leaves so wide that there was little doubt they had been transplanted from a lait.

“Yes, Shinri,” Lady Tenet continued, laying a hand on Shinri’s shoulder. “You must consider your own future. I realize you are warded to Jasnah, but such things can be changed . . . with the proper influence. Jasnah has lost touch with the ways of the court. She always was an eccentric woman, suffered by the rest of society because of her closeness to the king.”

Eccentric? Shinri thought. *Weren’t you the one who once praised Jasnah’s mastery of the Feminine Arts? My dear lady Tenet, you speak as if one year’s time is enough to transform a woman from a model of courtly perfection into a daft spinstress. Of course, you yourself are something of an expert on that second category.*

Shinri sipped her tea.

Tenet frowned at Shinri’s silence, brow furling, her stark eyebrows pointing down at her nose like threatening spearheads. “You would do well not to ignore my advice, child,” the woman warned. “You’ll find that my position is not unfavorable in the new court. You still have a year of wardship left—I could see you transferred to a woman of some great import. If you stay with Jasnah, you risk being tainted by her fall. Thank about this: your pretty Tethren is a prince of House Rienar, and is a very important person.

His mother could call off your engagement at any time, should she find you—or your associations—unsuitable.”

Jasnah’s training kept Shinri from showing a response, and for that she was infinitely grateful, since this barb stung sharply. She still hadn’t heard from Tethren—not even a note from his voyage. They had seen little of each other during the war—of course, that was supposed to matter little in a political arrangement. True, Shinri liked to think there was more than simple political convenience between herself and her betrothed, but Tethren’s mother had the Right of Refusal in the union.

Don’t pay attention to Tenet, Shinri told herself. She’s just a bitter old woman. What she says has no true relevance.

“Well?” Tenet asked. “Have you nothing to say?”

“I appear to be out of tea,” Shinri noted, looking at the bottom of her cup with a frown.

Tenet huffed. “You’ve changed, child,” she snapped. “And not for the better, I say. Perhaps it’s too late for you after all.” She rose, moving over to another bench and butting into the conversation there, her back turned toward Shinri.

Tethren. His recent lack of communication was more disturbing than she wished to admit, and so she avoided thinking of him. Perhaps once his mercantile trip to Thalenah was over, they could meet face-to-face and she could find out why his letters had stopped.

A servant brought more tea. Lady Varnah squirmed beside Shinri, glancing down uncomfortably. “You shouldn’t act so, Shinri,” Varnah said. “Lady Tenet is just looking after your interests.”

“I’m sure she is,” Shinri replied.

“I know it’s difficult to contemplate,” Varnah said with her vapid, yet sincere, voice. “But . . . I mean, it can’t be very pleasant, living with Lady Jasnah. The way she looks at people . . . the way she talks. . . . She’s so cold, Shinri. Like her body isn’t made of flesh, but stone.”

Pleasant? No, Varnah was correct. Being Jasnah’s ward was rarely what Shinri would term ‘pleasant.’ “The lessons we must learn to be ladies are rarely pleasant, Varnah,” Shinri said.

“They don’t have to be unpleasant either,” Varnah replied. “Jasnah doesn’t treat people like people. She treats them like tools. The woman has no heart.”

Shinri shook her head. “She’s not that bad.” *Well, maybe that’s an exaggeration.* “She is very skilled at what she does, Varnah. I’ve learned a lot from her.”

Varnah sighed. “Just . . . think about Lady Tenet’s suggestion. Promise you’ll consider it, Shinri?”

Tenet’s presumptuous demands could be brushed off, but Varnah’s guileless plea was far more difficult to dismiss. That was probably the point. “All right,” Shinri said with a sigh. “I’ll consider it.”

Varnah smiled as if she actually believed Shinri’s promise.

As the afternoon progressed, Shinri went through two more cups of tea holding her tongue as the group began to converse more collectively. The topics, led by Tenet, generally focused on Jasnah’s many faults. Shinri was amazed at how openly they voiced their mockery of the king’s sister.

They must truly think her powerless, Shinri thought.

The realization was a discomfoting one, for Shinri had largely dismissed Jasnah’s fears about Nanavah. Not that Shinri didn’t trust her mistress’s political instincts; Jasnah simply had a tenancy to . . . overreact. There had been several occasions during the last few years when Jasnah had been quick to suppress a political rival that Shinri had seen as somewhat less than threatening.

Most people, even women, just didn’t think like Jasnah did. As if to prove that point, the tea circle’s conversation soon wearied of the Lady Jasnah, and the women moved on to more exciting topics. They discussed unmarried Shardbearers and young landowners, the fashionable colors and cuts for the oncoming summer months, and gossiped about several known couples. There was discussion of poetry and ballads, along with some rather unkind backbiting, but it was all generally fluff.

This was the real court. The women cared about political position, true, but they didn’t spend their every moment plotting. Perhaps that’s why they weren’t as successful as Jasnah. But perhaps that’s also why they often seemed so much happier than she was.

Shinri lowered her tea, content for the moment to listen to the women discuss Dalenar’s new Shardbearer, the former-peasant. Surprisingly, Shinri had missed the fluff. The balls and the concerts, the tea circles and the gossip. Who would have thought it possible? Yet when she had been taken from it, she had found that she longed for those simple days of pleasure with a fierce homesickness.

During the war, Shinri hadn’t been able to see the thrill in Jasnah’s maps and calculations. To Shinri, life in Prallah had seemed a continuous exercise in discomfort. Barely protected from storms, sleeping practically in the open, without proper amenities or enough water even for regular bathing. It has been miserable. Even worse, it had been boring. She had

prayed to the Almighty for an end to it all, so that she could return to the proper life of a courtly lady.

Why then, now that she was back, did it all seem so hollow?

She tried to take part in the tea circle's conversation, but she found herself lacking motivation. *It's just Lady Tenet*, she told herself. *Her suggestion that you end your wardship to Jasnah has unsettled you.* But it wasn't just this day's conversations. Shinri had found trouble integrating herself ever since their return.

Nothing the women discussed seemed important. Perhaps Shinri had been away too long, and the people involved were too removed. Or maybe it was her weakened position in court—now that Jasnah was universally dismissed, Shinri was treated lightly by association. Yet she found herself unconcerned by her change in popularity. What did it matter to her if Eleventh Lord Senden was no longer courting Lady Rienan? Why should she care about the list of women who hadn't been invited to the private ball at Lord Kavenden's mansion?

Jasnah would chide her. These minor workings of the court were clues to much greater events. Lord Senden was heir to an independent title, and the woman who found his hand would gain much power from the union. Lord Kavenden was a Fourth Lord, controller of most of Alethkar's non-imported Jasinite trade. The lords he snubbed gave good indication to his business plans. Jasnah often said that no courtly event—from marriages to friendly games of chips—could be safely ignored.

It just all suddenly seemed so frivolous to Shinri. She had hated Prallah, with its crom-overgrown villages and its empty landscape. The cities had been filled with the half-starved and the frightened, their men slaughtered in one of a tenseset wars during the last half-century. She'd hated the fighting—the men groaning in pain, the wounded and the lame. Jasnah could step over a corpse with the same indifference she gave a pebble, but Shinri had frozen in terror the first time she'd seen one. She had never been to war before—and never wished to see its devastation again.

Compared to those memories, the idle chatter of women in a garden sipping tea seemed pointless. *And what of Tethren. Is he frivolous?* He had been so kind to her—loving, even, which was far more than she had been led to expect from a political marriage. But she hadn't seen him much during the last year. Her impressions of the man, five years her senior, had come from the idealistic viewpoint of a young girl, more a child than a woman. Yet those memories were sweet. The promise of his hand had been a driving force behind her desire to change and become the courtly woman she had spurned during her youth.

And now you've started to change back, she realized. Just like Lady Tenet said. You've changed, Shinri, and perhaps not for the better. I thought you were over this. I thought you had decided to finally become a proper lady, just as your father always wished. And, for a time, she had done it. Unfortunately, the war had revived some old inclinations. Even still she felt its hand on her mind, its terrors weighing her down.

Shinri sighed, resisting the impulse to dump her tea dregs onto the clean white marble of her bench. As she sat, her mind reflexively half-focused on the conversation around her, Jasnah's training teaching her to sift information even when she didn't really care to.

"Lord Jezenrosh still hasn't come to welcome the king home from his campaign," one of the ladies noted. *Parshen* Jezenrosh was a favorite topic of conversation in court—if only because his early withdrawal from the war smelled of scandal.

"Indeed," Lady Tenet said knowingly. "Though, of course, his illness is said to preclude travel—perhaps even the short distance it would take to travel from Crossguard to the First Capital."

Lord Jezenrosh. Jasnah was suspicious of him as well—and this time, Shinri agreed with her. Jezenrosh had never seemed like a trustworthy man. Though he spoke rarely, the words that did leave his tongue were reprobative more often than not. His eyes were merely tolerant when they weren't outright disapproving, and his attitude toward the war had been less than accommodating. When he'd left Prallah six months before, Shinri had been glad, though the rumors of his actions during the king's absence implied it would have been much better for the throne had Jezenrosh remained where Elhokar—and more importantly Jasnah—could have kept better watch over him.

Shinri excused herself as the conversation turned toward less interesting topics. Jasnah had asked that Shinri attend any functions to which she was invited—apparently, Jasnah herself was invited to so few that she needed Shinri's ears to go on her behalf. There was only so much, however, that one could endure. Shinri set her cup on the bench and left the sitting circle, walking through the monolithic, overgrown pillars toward the garden's exit. Outside, her litter-bearers waited to return her to the palace, but she waved them away. Accustomed to their lady's eccentricities, the men simply lifted their litter obediently, returning to the palace alone.

Shinri regarded the streets of Ral Eram. During the war, 'streets' had been made between tents and had been filled with soldiers; it was almost overwhelming to be in a place with proper buildings, markets, and

streetgoers. She looked over her options, picked a direction, and began to walk.

The whim to walk the streets often took her. Once, as a child, she had scampered wildly, ignoring the propriety of her birth. Though she had long since overcome such silliness, she had learned that remaining in her rooms when she felt like walking would only make her nervous and irritable. Much better to be moving, strolling through the streets with new pathways opening around her, her slippered feet taking her where they willed.

Ral Eram was a beautiful city. Aged like a wise grandfather, the ancient streets and stone buildings were kept free from cromstone and refuse. Structures stood with broad columns and firm lines, following the architecture of Epoch Kingdom times. The city was busy as well; King Elhokar's army was slowly traveling through the Oathgates and making its way down the ramps to the foot of the mountains, where it would gather for final accounting before dismissing the volunteer portions.

Merchants had gathered eagerly, knowing that the men would receive bonus pay now that the war was finished. Along with the merchants came families seeking to visit loved ones, and the regular stormleavings that aggregated around any large group of soldiers. Shinri strolled through streets both crowded and ignored, paying little attention to the people but enjoying the pathways they created.

Did the changes in herself bother her? Innocence, in its own way, was contentment. A life of balls and gossip did not bring images of death and injury. But she couldn't ignore what she had seen. Like an Awakener's crystal, the light of dissatisfaction had been roused within her, and she found herself dissatisfied with her new life. Could she really be satisfied with an existence whose purpose stretched no farther than looking pretty for the next feast, even if she were married to a man such as Tethren?

Jasnah had purpose. Conniving though the woman might be, Jasnah always found something to occupy her talents. She was ever working. What others saw as social occasions, Jasnah viewed as an avenue toward potential alliances. Jasnah's was not the life Shinri would choose for herself, but at least it had meaning. Jasnah's battle plans had driven Alethkar's armies to victory, and her political abilities had solidified Elhokar's place on the throne during the tempestuous years following their father's death. Shinri had little doubt that if Jezenrosh was planning to overthrow the king, Jasnah would discover and foil his schemes.

What could Shinri find for herself that was similarly fulfilling? She paused, realizing that she had found her way to the front of the city. The

city gates were open, and the massive walls of Ral Eram—Awakened from stone to dark steel during the Epoch Kingdom days—stood as if pouting at their ineffectiveness as hundreds of people streamed in and out of the city. Through the gates, Shinri could see the landscape beyond. Ral Eram huddled on a short plateau abutting the mountainside itself, and the view beyond the walls was expansive.

Empty plains and foothills expanded before her. The wilderness below was a place without roads. *Or, Shinri thought, a place with nothing but roads. Each way you travel is a new path, each direction a new choice.* She was struck by a sudden desire to flee the city, to leave its women to their gossips both clever and frivolous. She wanted to pull the hairsticks free from her braids, cast off the binding cloth of her *talla*, and see a place far away. What would the noblemen merchants below think, to see Shinri run wildly past, bursting free of those city walls? It would breach their perfection, having one of their own abandon decorum in such a way. The thought was enough to make her smile.

It was, of course, insane. She couldn't survive alone—the hills outside Ral Eram were stormlands, and Shinri wouldn't even have the beginnings of an inkling how to gather food or care for herself. She was a product of noble society; she knew how to consume resources and spit out intrigue as a byproduct. The impulse to leave was lunacy.

Perhaps this is how that poor madman felt, Shinri thought, on that day—whenever it was—when he finally gave himself up to insanity.

Shinri shook her head, stooping down to gather some pebbles from a crack near a stone wall. Stuffing the chips of stone in her sleeve pocket, she turned her feet toward another path, wandering in the general direction of the palace. As she walked, she began to hum to herself. It had been a time since she sang the songs of her childhood, but—as always—the tunes came back without effort. However, as always, the words themselves were lost to her. She contented herself to the humming as she walked.

Her emotions would recenter. She hadn't really been back for very long—she just had to give herself more time. The old inclinations would fade, and she would find pleasure in courtly life again. She could tell herself this with confidence, for the great stabilizing factor was returning. Tethren. When she saw his proud, noble face again—when he smiled at her as he had before, this time seeing her as a woman and not a child—then things would return to the way they had been before.

She eventually approached the ramp up to the palace. Here, her pathway options narrowed drastically. The palace was built on a smaller plateau a

short distance above the city, and the only way up to it was via a pair of stone ramps—one on each side of the palace. Shinri trailed up the eastern one. The stones were slick and clean, the blood that had been spilled on both ramps long ago had since been washed away by the raging of countless highstorms. Though the Aleth claimed prevention as their reason for conquering the First Capital some fifteen years before, the rest of Roshar had a less-idyllic view of the ‘liberation’ of Ral Eram. Alethkar made a hefty profit off of traffic through the Oathgates. Though the nation now spoke of honor and defending against tyranny, pointing out its resistance of the Tyrant Jarnah, there were scars in its past that did not bear up beneath heavy scrutiny.

The palace complex was enormous, built to hold the courts of ten Epoch Kings, not just one. As a child barely past her *Charan*, the youthful Shinri had gotten lost in its plush corridors on tensets of occasions. Even still, she only wandered the far wings when she knew she had a great deal of time to find her way back. Time she did not have this day. As tempting as those untraveled pathways were, she turned her attention toward locating Lady Jasnah. Her mistress would wish to know of the day’s events, especially Lady Tenent’s suggestion that Shinri transfer her wardship to another noblewoman.

Lines of striped carpet pointed her down the center of the corridors, so Shinri stayed to the peripheries, making her way through the Aleth wing of the palace. Lady Jasnah’s rooms did not reflect her recent loss in prestige; they were among the most lavish and well-placed in all of the palace. Of course, the king’s sister could hardly be located anywhere else. Lady Jasnah was in her study, her guards standing by the walls, minor female attendants chatting quietly at a table a short distance away. The Lady Kholin herself sat at a round table set near the center of the room, sorting through stacks of papers. She glanced up when Shinri entered, then immediately turned her attention back to her research.

Shinri walked forward and seated herself on a stool at Jasnah’s table. The room was stuffily well-appointed, like most in the palace. The floor rug was monochrome blue, and was so clean that Shinri didn’t doubt that the palace staff had crawled across it picking each and every bit of dirt from its follicles, just so it would be perfect for Lady Jasnah’s return. The walls were well lit, and Shinri found it strange that she should wish them to be tent canvas instead of stone.

“What is that you’re humming?” Jasnah asked, not looking up from her notes.

Shinri paused, realizing that she had still been quietly singing. She flushed. “Nothing, my lady,” she said. “Just another song from my childhood.”

“Your singing made quite a stir at the feast,” Jasnah noted. “Now that we’ve returned to civilization, perhaps it is time to resume your lessons. Talents unused quickly become detriments when everyone realizes that your current skill fails to agree with your reputation.”

So like Jasnah, Shinri thought. Concerned for the utilitarian use of the talent; completely unmindful of its beauty.

“Well?” Jasnah asked, not looking up from her notes. “How was tea?”

“It went mostly as expected,” Shinri said, idly removing the handful of pebbles from her left sleeve pocket. “Though Lady Tenet did something odd. She cornered me and suggested that I switch my wardship to another lady.”

Jasnah nodded, taking the news in with her customary calmness. “I expected that would come today,” she noted. “It was only a matter of time.”

Shinri started. “You knew what they would do?” she asked. “Why didn’t you warn me?”

“You had to be free to make your own decision when the offer came,” Jasnah said. “I presume, since you are telling me what happened, that you have decided to reject the proposal.”

Shinri felt a chill. *You taught me too well, Jasnah. I see what you are doing. You were testing me. That’s why you didn’t tell me—you wanted to see what I would do. By the Bondkeeper! Can’t you let yourself trust anyone?*

Jasnah picked through her papers as if ignorant, or uncaring, of Shinri’s realization.

I defended you today, Shinri thought. She forced herself to remain calm, and waved for an attendant to bring her some tea. Nice, mild, feminine tea. Shinri took a sip, then idly rolled the pebbles in her hand, occasionally letting one drop to the carpet below.

Jasnah shook her head. “I need something more than this,” she mumbled, waving her hand over the sheets of paper. “I need to see the royal ledgers themselves. I won’t know what that woman’s up to until I can read first-hand what she has been spending my brother’s money on. And would you stop that?” she said, referring to Shinri’s pebbles. “I can’t believe you’ve started dropping rocks on the floor again. I thought you had gotten over that years ago.”

“I’m sorry, my lady,” Shinri said, putting the pebbles back in her sleeve pocket.

“I need you alert, Shinri,” Jasnah said. “Something is happening here in the palace, more than Nanavah would wish us to know. They went after

you because you are the last ally I have. Stealing my ward from me would be a master stroke, a final proof that I have been defeated. Lady Tenet is little more than the queen's errandwoman now—Nanavah was behind the suggestion that you reassign your wardship, I promise you that. And, since the queen saw fit to try turning you, it means she still feels threatened by me. That means she's hiding something." Jasnah clenched her jaw in thought. "I need to see those ledgers."

"Nanavah is technically the First Scribe," Shinri said. "And it appears that the king has begun enforcing her position. You'd need her permission to access the royal ledgers."

Jasnah's mouth thinned. "Perhaps," she said, thinking for a moment. Then she turned back to her papers. "Here," she said, selecting a sealed letter from the stack. "This came for you a short time ago."

Shinri recognized the glyph on the front immediately—a stylized *nen* in the form of a flower, the symbol used by Tethren's sister. She was the one he usually used as a scribe. Shinri sighed in relief, accepting the letter from Jasnah with an eager hand—the blatant emotion earning her a small frown of displeasure. For the moment, Shinri didn't care. Tethren had finally written her. Everything would be all right. Within his smile, she could rejoin the perfection of the court, perhaps banish the worries of her childhood.

She broke the seal, and read the letter. Then she read it again. She was too stunned to try for a third.

"Everything well with Prince Tethren?" Jasnah asked distractedly. "I told you it would be."

"Everything is . . . pleasant, my lady," Shinri said quietly. "Very pleasant."

A few seconds later the letter floated lazily to the floor, then a handful of brown pebbles dropped on top of it, scattering brown cromdust across its surface. Neither pebbles nor dust did much to obscure the words, however; words which proclaimed Prince Tethren Rienar's ship sunk during a summer highstorm, all hands lost.

chapter 12

MERIN 3

MERIN STOOD UNCOMFORTABLY, trying not to blush in embarrassment as the tailor pulled out yet another seasilk cloth—this one red—and draped it over Merin’s shoulders. The thick-mustached man turned, eyebrows upraised questioningly.

Aredor tapped his cheek musingly. The room was well-lit and crafted of typical Kholinar granite, with woven mats on the floor and decorative pillars along the walls. Aredor leaned against one of the room’s pillars, watching the tailor work.

“Well, ladies?” Aredor asked, turning to the six young women who sat, arrayed in bright-colored *tallahs* and jewel-riddled hairbuns, to his side.

“Better,” one of the women said. Merin still struggled to remember all of their names—he thought her name was Irinah. A creature with dark hair and a plump face, she was the daughter of one of Lord Dalenar’s trusted Shardbearers.

“I agree,” said the one with light hair and a greenish dress. Rahnel, he thought. “But he doesn’t look good in colors that bright. Try something darker, master tailor.”

The other women agreed, nodding and chatting among themselves. Merin flushed at the attention as the tailor removed the cloth and waved at his aides to bring him some other choices. It seemed ridiculous to Merin that people could spend so much time worrying about clothing. Before the

colors, Merin had spent the better part of an hour trying on different cuts of shirts and trousers behind the changing screen, then presenting each new combination for Aredor and the women to judge.

Yet Aredor and the ladies didn't seem to find the experience boring. As a matter of fact, they appeared to be enjoying themselves immeasurably. Of course, they weren't the ones standing on tired legs while the entire room gawked—if it hadn't been for his military training, Merin was certain his legs would have given out long before.

"Hang in there, Merin," Aredor said, reading Merin's expression with a chuckle. "You'll be glad for the effort—these ladies are the finest judges of apparel in the court. When they're finished with you, your wardrobe will be the envy of the city."

The women laughed demurely at the compliment. It seemed to Merin that they were paying more attention to Aredor than the clothing selections. That, however, was not a problem—better Aredor than Merin.

"It certainly is good to have you back in the court, Lord Aredor," Irinah said as the tailor draped another cloth across Merin's shoulders, letting it fall around his body like a cloak. Irinah seemed the leader of the women, though from what Merin understood, she was one of the lesser ranked of them. That was another thing he couldn't quite figure out, though—noble ranks.

"Oh?" Aredor said with a raised eyebrow. "I wasn't certain the court would even notice my absence."

"Lord Aredor!" one of the other ladies said with indignance. "Why, the court wasn't the same without you!"

Aredor chuckled, nodding toward Merin. "Don't get distracted, ladies."

They turned their attention to Merin again, studying the new colors—a deep charcoal draped with grey.

"Far too dreary," Rahnel pronounced. "Lord Merin is somber enough without covering him in greys."

"Besides," Irinah said, "black reminds people of Awakeners. No court-conscious man should wear anything too similar to it."

The tailor nodded, riffling through his cloths again as his assistants pulled off the charcoal and grey. *Somber?* Merin thought.

"Have you heard the story of Lord Merin's bravery on the battlefield, ladies?" Aredor asked. "You know he saved the king's life?"

Merin flushed at the comment, but the women only grew more excited. "Oh, yes," said one of the quieter women—Merin had forgotten her name, though she had a thin frame and wide eyes. "We've heard of it." She sighed wistfully.

Merin's flush deepened. Of course she'd heard of it—everyone had. In fact, most of the people he met couldn't stop talking about his heroic rise to nobility. To them, his exploit was as something out of the ballads. They didn't know how hasty and uncoordinated it had been. Of course, most of them seemed more fond of moaning over its dramatic power than actually congratulating Merin on his success. It was as if there were two Merins—one the romanticized lord, the other the awkward peasant-made-nobleman.

"Did you really defeat a Shardbearer without even a dagger?" one of the girls asked.

"Not exactly," Merin said with a sigh, his voice muffled as the tailor pulled a cloth over his head—this one had a hole in its center so it fell evenly around his body. "I just pulled him off of his horse. Someone else actually killed him."

"Lord Merin is too modest," Aredor informed. "The Prallan Shardbearer had broken Protocol, and was about to strike the king down. Everyone else scattered, and we were sure his majesty was doomed. Only one man was brave enough to come to his king's rescue."

The women turned properly amazed expressions toward Merin, mouths forming 'o's of wonder. The tailor stepped back, regarding Merin critically.

"No brown or tans, master tailor," Irinah said, frowning. "Lord Merin has only recently become a Shardbearer. Brown is too mundane a color—there is no reason to give a reminder of what he once was, now, is there?"

The tailor nodded, moving to remove the cloth. Merin sighed to himself. "Aredor," he said as the tailor worked. "Isn't there something more important I should be doing?"

"A man has to look good," Aredor replied. "Half of being a lord is looking the part."

"That's the thing," Merin said. "I'm still not sure what it means to be a lord. What is it I'm supposed to do? Surely there's more to it than dressing well."

Aredor chuckled. "You're always so concerned about what you should be doing. People aren't going to tell you what to do all the time any more. Being a lord isn't so much about what you're supposed to do as it is about what you feel you need to do. Besides, having a Shardblade doesn't mean you can't relax once in a while."

Standing and being draped with cloth didn't seem much like 'relaxing' to Merin. However, he simply sighed and decided to bear it—Aredor probably knew what he was doing. The tailor finished again and stepped back.

“That’s perfect!” Lady Irinah proclaimed, a sentiment that the others agreed with after a moment of discussion.

Merin looked down. The chosen color was a dark maroon, crossed with a sash of deep navy. It was only one of four color combinations the women had decided they liked. All of them were darker colors—maroon, dark green, and several shades of blue.

“Yes,” Rahnel said with satisfaction. “Well done, master tailor.” The man bowed at the compliment, motioning for his assistants to gather up the cloths and repack them.

Merin looked questioningly toward Aredor, eyebrows raised hopefully. Aredor nodded, waving him down off the raised platform. Just then, the door opened, and Renarin stepped in, a customarily dazed expression on his face. Immediately, the room fell silent as the women stopped their chatting.

Renarin stood for a moment, looking across the room. His hair was disheveled, as it often was, and he somehow managed to stand halfway in shadow despite the room’s brightness. The women sat in silence, shooting glances at each other. They tried to maintain their smiles, but even Merin could see that they were uncomfortable.

“I’m . . . sorry to interrupt,” Renarin said, turning to go.

“Nonsense, brother,” Aredor said, waving him forward. “We were finished here anyway, weren’t we, ladies?”

The women rose, smiling and offering belated welcomes to Renarin. They bid Aredor farewell, each getting promises from him that he would call upon them soon.

Renarin watched them go, then turned to Aredor as the door closed behind them. “It didn’t take them long to start fighting for your affection,” he noted.

“Ah, you’re too cynical, brother,” Aredor said, still watching the door, shaking his head wistfully. “We’ve been gone too long. There haven’t been any men here to give them attention. Poor things.”

“They could have come with us to Prallah,” Renarin replied. “The winds know, we could have used a few more scribes.”

Aredor chuckled. “That lot would never have survived the stormlands. This is their element—and now that we’re back, our dear Merin had better watch out.”

Merin frowned as he joined the two brothers, picking up his Shardblade as the tailor and his assistants left out the back door.

“What was that?” Merin asked. “Why do I have to watch out?”

“Unmarried Shardbearer?” Aredor asked. “Savior of the king? Newly

adopted into house Kholin? You're a prime catch, my friend. If you don't watch yourself, one of those ladies' mothers will have you wedded before you realize what happened."

"And, knowing my brother," Renarin added, "he's doing everything he can to help them out. You realize half the reason he held this little tailoring session was to introduce you to the local eligible women."

"A little socializing never hurt a man," Aredor said. "You should try it some time, Renarin."

Merin fastened on Dalenar's cloak, testing the new length—Aredor had ordered one of the tailor's assistants to hem it, and they had returned it when they arrived. "I appreciate the help, Aredor," Merin said. "But the truth is I don't know if I'll be able to afford much clothing this month. I planned to send the stipend your father gave me to my parents in Stonemount."

"Oh, don't worry," Aredor said with a wave of his hand. "If you need more, I'll loan it to you. Now, are you ready for today's other activity?"

Merin frowned. "There's more?" he asked, stretching his tired limbs.

"You're the one who's always asking what his duties are," Aredor reminded him. "Well, it's time to start them. If you're going to compete in Elhokar's dueling competition, you'll need to learn how to use that Blade and Plate of yours."

"Dueling competition?" Merin asked, feeling a twinge of excitement. "Me?"

"Of course," Aredor explained. "The king ordered all Shardbearers to attend, and you're a Shardbearer. Unless you want to be made a fool of, you'll want to learn how to duel a bit before you get thrown into a ring."

Merin smiled. Finally, something that made sense. The ballads made one thing clear: Shardbearers dueled. "Where do we start?"

Aredor nodded. "To your room," he said. "We'll start with the Plate, then we'll go find you a dueling instructor."

"FATHER THINKS IT was a group known as the *Rantah*," Renarin explained.

"*Rantah*?" Aredor asked as he unpacked Merin's Shardplate, arranging the various pieces on the floor.

"It means 'Distant Mountain,'" Renarin said. "When he founded Pralir, King Talhmeshas had to conquer a number of smaller nations—he had to hold both the Prenan Lait and the western coast of Prallah if he wanted to found a kingdom with any measure of stability. *Rantah* is an underground rebellion populated by the noble lines of those conquered kingdoms. They've been a stone in Pralir's shoe for the last two decades, burning villages, attacking caravans, and destroying soldiered garrisons."

“An underground rebel group?” Aredor asked skeptically. “That doesn’t sound like the kind of organization who could destroy an army of twenty thousand. If they could do something like that, why stay underground? In fact, if they had those kinds of numbers, I doubt they *could* have stayed underground.”

Renarin shrugged. “The old nobility of Pralir—the ones who have made peace with Elhokar, hoping that he’ll let them retain a margin of power—are convinced it was the *Rantah*. They say the group has been hiding in Distant Prall for a few years, gaining strength. If they attacked at the right time, as an ambush, it’s conceivable they could have destroyed the Traitor’s secret force. At least they had motive—if there was a group out there who hated Talhmeshas Pralir more than Elhokar, it was the *Rantah*.”

Aredor shook his head, not convinced as he regarded the Shardplate. Merin’s room was relatively small, but it was blessedly big compared to the simple floor mat and crowded troop tent he had used during his time in the military. There was a bed, a table, and a stool—and while the floor was empty of rugs or mats, Aredor said Merin could purchase either whenever he wished. Right now, the stones were covered with the array of metal Shardplate sections. There were over a tenseset pieces, and all had leather straps, but strangely no buckles. Merin looked down, bewildered—he didn’t even know where to begin.

“Shardplate is kind of a misnomer,” Aredor began, selecting a piece of armor—the largest piece, a breastplate-shaped cuirass. “It doesn’t really bond to a person the way Shardblades do. It probably got the name because Shardbearers were the ones who tended to wear it.” He motioned for Merin to hold his arms out, then fitted the breastplate across Merin’s chest.

The leather straps constricted quickly, and Merin cried out in surprise. The piece of armor felt like something living, clamping onto his chest like the jaws of an animal. It halted a moment later, however.

Merin wiggled slightly, amazed at how freely he could breathe. The metal was heavy, but weighed far less than the metal breastplates he had occasionally trained with as a spearman. In fact, despite being a single sheet of metal, it felt less constrictive than even his layered wooden spearman’s armor.

“Shardplate fits to its owner,” Aredor explained, reaching for the shoulder guards. “However, it doesn’t bond to you—if you take it off, it will fit to the next person just as quickly as it did you.” Aredor placed the shoulder guards, and they too immediately locked into place, their straps clamping on and fitting to Merin’s body.

“You can put the armor on by yourself, but it’s a bit awkward,” Aredor explained, moving on to the left arm. “If you want to take it off, you can touch the clasp underneath each piece, and it will unlock. The armor will stop pretty much any weapon, as long as it doesn’t manage to slide into a chink between two pieces. Shardblades are the exception—Plate will only stop a Shardblade on the first blow. If you get hit squarely in the same place twice, the Plate will probably give way.”

“Then what?” Merin asked as Aredor affixed pieces of Plate to both arms. “Is my armor ruined?”

Aredor shook his head, picking up some pieces of armor that fit around the bottom of the chestplate, protecting his sides and waist. “It will repair itself, molding back into its original shape. That takes time, though, so you’ll want to avoid getting hit.”

Merin nodded as Aredor handed him the codpiece, then moved onto helping him attach the leg pieces and metal boots. When he was done, Merin was covered completely in steel except for his head and hands. It was a strange feeling, like he had been dipped in a pool of molten metal.

Merin wobbled slightly. It was awkward—that was for certain. However, not because of the weight. Strangely, he felt no more burdened than when Aredor had affixed the first piece. Instead, it was just . . . different. There were tugs on his body in irregular places, and his balance felt slightly irregular.

He raised an arm, and it swung up with ease. Carefully, he tested his motion, squatting down and standing up again. Then he tried a small jump. He cried out in surprise as he went higher than expected—almost as high as he would have gone if he weren’t wearing several tenset brickweights of metal. Aredor steadied him as he teetered maladroitly.

“It takes some getting used to,” Dalenar’s heir said with a chuckle. “The Shardplate was made by Awakeners, like your Blade. It compensates for itself, making you stronger and quicker. If you know how to balance the combination of awkwardness and enhancement, you can actually be more fluid in the Plate than you would be normally. You’ll definitely be stronger. The Plate also cushions you from blows—wearing this, you could probably take a catapult boulder in the chest and come out alive.”

Aredor bent over, picking up the last three pieces of armor. “These are the most important pieces of equipment,” he explained. “The gauntlets and the helmet. Most people who attack you will go for your head—it’s the most exposed part of the body. We don’t know why, but no suits of Shardplate were made with faceplates. Some people try affixing regular

steel faceplates to them, but many prefer visibility instead. No Shardbearer following Protocol will swing for your face, though they may attack the side of your head. Spearmen and other citizens, however, will always go for the face—that’s practically the only place they can hurt you.”

Merin nodded, accepting the helmet and placing it on his head. Like the other pieces, it immediately sized to fit him, and rested more snugly than his spearman’s cap ever had.

“The gauntlets are designed to give you flexibility,” Aredor explained, holding out the left gauntlet for Merin to slide his hand into.

The gauntlet was crafted from what appeared to be a heavy leather glove fitted with intricate plates of steel running along the back. However, flexing his hand, he realized he could feel through the leather as if it were extraordinarily thin. “It’s amazing,” Merin whispered.

Aredor smiled, holding out the other gauntlet, and Merin slid his hand into it as well.

Immediately, the room pitched around him. Merin stumbled, disoriented, at the strange sensation. The air seemed . . . thick, somehow. Liquid. It rippled and shifted, like—

It stopped. Merin shook his head uncertainly, lifting a gauntleted hand. “Is that supposed to happen?” he asked.

“What?” Aredor asked with concern.

“I . . . I’m not sure,” Merin said. “The room suddenly felt different. I can’t explain it.”

Aredor looked toward Renarin. The younger brother shrugged. “It’s probably just the initial surge,” Aredor explained. “Every time I put the last piece of Plate on, I just feel a slight burst of strength as the Plate completes itself.”

“Maybe that was it. . . .” Merin said slowly. “Well,” Aredor said, standing. “That’s your armor. Now that you know how to put it on, take it off. We’ve got to get to the monastery while there’s still some light left for training.”

KHOLINAR WAS BEAUTIFUL. Merin couldn’t remember a day when it had been the capitol of Alethkar, but it had an Oathgate, which meant it dated back to the days of the Epoch Kingdoms.

Before his ascension to nobility, Merin had never visited a *lait*. He had known that there were valleys where rivers ran down the center. The idea of a constantly-running river itself was amazing enough—back in Stonemount, water had only flowed right after a highstorm. Rain had to be collected carefully, so that there would be water to drink between storms.

Merin had imagined the river to be like the waterways back home—small and swift-running, flowing through cracks with the quick energy of a storm. He had never imagined such a broad, rushing mass of water. It passed by a short distance from Kholinar—far enough away that floods following highstorms wouldn't be a problem. There was so much water that when he had first seen it the week before, Merin had stood stunned for at least ten heartbeats before Aredor was able to get his attention.

The lait itself was a valley, one with relatively stiff sides. They were smooth, worn by countless highstorms, but the incline was steep enough for Merin to finally understand just why laits were so perfect for cities. In Prallah, his squad had been taught to avoid narrow canyons for fear of being in one when a highstorm caused a flash flood. The lait valley, however, was wide enough not to be dangerous, but still steep enough that it weakened storms greatly. Indeed, the highstorms that had come since Merin's arrival in Kholinar had been almost laughably docile.

The result was fertility. Rockbuds lined the sides of the valley—so many of them, in fact, that he could barely see the rock underneath. All of them were in bloom, despite the fact that the last highstorm had been several days before. The landscape was green instead of stoneish tan—it had been unsettling at first, all of that color, but he was quickly growing to appreciate it. Aredor said that the rockbuds only withdrew into their shells during the very height of summer—when the air grew too dry even for the humid valley—or the dead of winter, when the rains fell so steadily that many plants had to withdraw lest the moisture rot them.

The roads of the city were kept free of rockbuds, and the ground was so smooth that Merin had begun copying Aredor, wearing only a pair of comfortable slippers. Back in his village, most buildings had been allowed to give in to the elements. Rockbuds were not removed, and continual buildup of cromstone from winter storms formed stalactites on overhangs, making the buildings look almost like natural formations of stone. In Kholinar, however, everything was sculpted with neat lines. Triangular shapes predominated, with peaked arches and doorways, and many buildings were constructed on grand scales, with massive columns and large open foyers—something only possible in a place where the highstorms lacked fury.

Aredor led Merin toward the edge of town, where they would find Shieldhome monastery. As they traveled the smooth streets, Merin shook his head in wonder. Two years earlier, he had traveled to a monastery to learn to wield a spear. What would he have thought, had he known he

would be returning several years later to take up dueling as a nobleman and a Shardbearer?

Such thoughts were banished, however, as Merin idly caught sight of a passing building. He froze immediately, staring with awe—and more than a little apprehension. The large black structure was crafted in a bulbous shape that seemed to defy regular architectural conventions. It almost looked like an enormous pyre—a massive burst of flame that had somehow been captured and transformed into rock.

Aredor and Renarin paused beside him. “It’s the Kholinar *Kablan*,” Aredor said. “Hall of the Awakeners. A little eerie, isn’t it?”

Merin nodded. He’d heard of *Kablans* before, of course, but they didn’t have one in Stonemount—or in any of the nearby villages. In the rare instance an Awakener was discovered in a rural area, they were always sent to a larger city, and the village was paid a percentage of the profits that came through the Awakenings the creature performed.

A group of servants was driving a line of carts toward the *Kablan*, each one bearing a large block of stone. A couple of figures stood at the base of the marble building—and they wore black. Merin shivered as one of the figures turned toward him. Merin couldn’t see what it looked like because of the distance, but he knew the stories. Awakeners weren’t quite human, not any more. Their arts . . . changed them.

“I’ve always wondered what the inside looked like,” Renarin noted, looking at the *Kablan*.

Aredor shivered visibly. “I have absolutely no idea, and no desire to find out. In fact, if I never had to see an Awakener except on the day of the *Charan*, it would be fine with me.”

“They are the fuel of our economy,” Renarin said in his unassuming voice. “Without them, gemstones would be useless, and we would be paupers, my brother.”

“Well, that’s fine,” Aredor said. “Let them fuel the economy—as long as they do it from *within* their building.”

Merin nodded. “I agree,” he mumbled. The figure was still looking at him. He had only seen an Awakener once, during his *Charan*. It had been a young man, one who hadn’t been an Awakener very long—only the unlearned were wasted on the *Charan*. That Awakener hadn’t looked any different from a regular person, but he would change. Apparently they all did, eventually.

Merin could still remember the glowing bit of quartz, hovering above the Awakener’s hand. He could remember his fear as the quartz floated forward,

still glowing, to touch Merin's skin. It had shattered, sending a strange sensation through his body—a sudden vibration, a feeling like each of his bones had been scraped against rough stone at once. Supposedly, that one experience made Merin immune to Awakening for the rest of his life. There was no reason to fear the creatures, for they no longer had power over him. Even still, when the day of the *Charan* came each year thereafter, he had found a way to be out in the fields when the Awakener arrived to perform the ritual on the children of age that year.

“Be thankful, brother,” Renarin noted, “that the Almighty didn't decide to make *you* an Awakener.”

Aredor snorted. “Come on, lets get to the monastery while there's still light.”

Merin nodded eagerly, joining Aredor as they walked away. Renarin lingered for a moment, then followed. Soon, they had left the *Kablan* behind, and a structure with a familiar architecture rose up before them.

Aredor said that Shieldhome monastery was one of Kholinar's most famous landmarks. Founded during the Ninth Epoch, the monastery contained the most skilled masters of dueling in all of Alethkar. As they walked through the broad, glyph-covered gates, Merin immediately felt a familiarity. Two years earlier, when he had first joined the military, he had been taken to a Strikehome Monastery in Norkedav for initial training. While the city had been much less grand than Kholinar, the monasteries had been nearly the same. The ground was covered with sand for training, and the monastery was made up of four walled courtyards with quarters for the monks lining the outer perimeter.

Aredor kicked off his slippers, motioning for Merin to do the same. “I need to go speak with the monks,” Aredor explained. “And have them gather their masters to see if any are willing to train you. Go over and watch the men spar, if you like. It will give you a feel for the training.”

Merin nodded as Aredor wandered off. There were several groups practicing in the courtyard, including one to his left which was composed of men in colorful clothing—obviously lords. Merin wandered their direction, curious.

Several pairs dueled with Shardblades—an action that Merin would have considered dangerous, had Aredor not explained that once a Shardblade was Bonded, it could be dulled for sparring. The majority of the men, however, dueled with regular swords. As Merin approached, he realized with a sinking feeling that he recognized several of these men.

“Well,” Meridas said, holding up a hand to stop his duel. “Greetings to you, peasant Shardbearer.”

Merin frowned, wishing he’d recognized the man earlier. What was he doing in Kholinar? Meridas was attendant to the king; he should have remained in Ral Eram.

“Come to learn how to duel, little citizen?” Meridas asked, sword held casually at his side as a few other noblemen gathered around him with interested expressions. “You’ll have to be careful. Wouldn’t want to get . . . hurt by accident. Then someone else would have to be given that pretty Blade of yours.”

Merin sighed, turning away from Meridas and the others. He felt their laughter on his neck as he walked away. Every time that he felt like he was growing to be accepted in Dalenar’s court, someone reminded him that he didn’t really belong. Aredor and Renarin could only do so much—they had their own lives, and their own duties. They couldn’t watch out for Merin forever—eventually he would have to find his own way.

You won’t be able to make everyone like you—but you might be able to make them respect you. Dalenar’s words from before returned to him. Merin looked down at his Blade. Perhaps dueling was the way to earn that respect.

He wandered across the courtyard, looking for other duels to watch. Most of the noblemen were near Meridas, so Merin instead found himself watching a group of older monks. Like many monks who followed the Order of Khonra, they wore long tan skirts and loose shirts instead of traditional robes. They fought with swords, though they weren’t necessarily noblemen—monks were considered to have neither class nor gender, and they could practice any art they wished, whether it be painting or dueling.

The monks were very good. They fought with wooden practice swords, and their motions were fluid. Rhythmic. Watching their smooth, controlled motions seemed to calm a bit of the chaos in Merin’s recent life.

After a few moments, one of the monks noticed him watching. The man paused, regarding Merin with the eyes of a warrior. “Shouldn’t you be practicing with the other lords, traveler?”

Merin shrugged. “I don’t really fit in with them, holy one.”

“Your clothing says that you should,” the monk said, nodding to Merin’s fine seasilk outfit.

Merin grimaced.

The monk raised an eyebrow questioningly. He was an older man, perhaps the same age as Merin’s father, and had a strong build beneath his

monk's clothing. He was almost completely bald, save for a bit of hair on the sides of his head, and even that was beginning to grey.

"It's nothing, holy one," Merin said. "I'm just a little bit tired of hearing about clothing."

"Maybe this will take your mind off of it," the monk said, tossing him a practice sword. "And don't call me 'holy one.'"

Merin caught the sword, looking down at it blankly. Then he yelped in surprise, dropping his Shardblade and raising the practice sword awkwardly as the monk stepped forward in a dueling stance. Merin wasn't certain how to respond—all of his training in the army had focused on working within his squad, using his shield to protect his companions and his spear to harry the opponent. He'd rarely been forced to fight solitarily.

The monk came in with a few testing swings, and Merin tried his best to mimic the man's stance. He knew enough not to engage the first few blows—they were meant to throw Merin off-balance and leave him open for a strike. He retreated across the cool sand, shuffling backward and trying not to fall for the monk's feints. Even still, the man's first serious strike took Merin completely by surprise. The blow took Merin on the shoulder—it was delivered lightly, but it stung anyway.

"Your instincts are good," the monk said, returning to his stance. "But your swordsmanship is atrocious."

"That's kind of why I'm here," Merin said, trying another stance. This time he managed to dodge the first blow, though the backhand caught him on the thigh. He grunted in pain.

"Your Blade is unbonded," the monk said. "And you resist moving to the sides, as if you expect there to be someone standing beside you. You were a spearman?"

"Yes," Merin said.

The monk stepped back, lowering his blade and resting the tip in the sand. "You must have done something incredibly brave to earn yourself a Blade, little spearman."

"Either that, or I was just lucky," Merin replied.

The monk smiled, then nodded toward the center of the courtyard. "Your friend is looking for you."

Merin turned to see Aredor waving for him. Merin nodded thankfully to the monk and returned the practice sword, then picked up his Shardblade and jogged across the sands toward Aredor. Standing with Dalenar's son was a group of elderly, important-looking monks.

"Merin," Aredor began, "these are the monastery masters. Each of them

is an expert at several dueling forms, and they'll be able to train you in the one that fits you best. Masters Bendahkha and Lhanan are currently accepting new students. You can train with either one of them, though you'll need to pay the standard hundred-ishmark tribute to the monastery out of your monthly stipend."

Merin regarded the two monks Aredor had indicated. Both looked very distinguished, almost uncomfortably so. They regarded Merin with the lofty expressions of men who had spent their entire lives practicing their art, and who had risen to the highest of their talents. They stood like kings in their monasteries—not condescending, but daunting nonetheless.

Merin glanced to the side, a sudden impression taking him. "Holy ones, I am honored by your offer, but I feel a little overwhelmed. Could you tell me, is the monk I just sparred with accepting students at the moment?"

The masters frowned. "You mean Vasher?" one of them asked. "Why do you wish to train with him?"

"I . . . I'm not certain," Merin confessed.

One of the masters waved for a younger monk and sent him running off toward Vasher's group. As he did so, Aredor pulled Merin aside with a concerned face.

"What are you doing?" Aredor asked quietly.

"Those masters make me uncomfortable, Aredor," Merin said.

Aredor rolled his eyes. "You're going to have to get over that, Merin. You're a lord now."

"I'm trying," Merin replied. "But . . ."

"The man you sent for isn't even a proper monk," Aredor said. "He's Oathgiven, not Birthgiven. He joined the monastery by choice, rather than being given by his parents before the age of his *Charan*. He won't be a dueling master—he probably just came here by happenstance."

"Aredor," Merin said frankly, "I came here by happenstance."

Aredor just sighed as the young monk approached, the man Merin had sparred with—Vasher—following behind. "What is this about, masters?" Vasher asked in a calm voice.

"This child wishes you to be his master," the senior master said, waving toward Merin. "He wishes to know if you are taking any students."

Vasher snorted. "You really don't know what you're doing, do you, little spearman?"

Merin just shrugged.

"Very well," Vasher said. "If he is willing to do what I say, I'll train him."

Aredor groaned quietly, but the masters just nodded and began walking

away. Vasher turned back toward the corner of the monastery, where the monks he had been sparring with still practiced. Uncertain what else to do, Merin tagged along behind. Once they reached the place he had dueled before, Merin set aside his Shardblade and reached for a practice sword.

Vasher reached out a foot and placed it on the sword just as Merin began to lift it. “No,” he said.

Merin rose uncertainly, watching as Vasher walked over to the weapons pile and selected an object. He returned with a large, thick-hafted horsekiller arrow, and handed it to Merin.

“An arrow?” Merin asked slowly.

“A little spear,” Vasher said. “For a little spearman. I don’t want you thinking you are a duelist—you haven’t earned a practice sword yet.”

“You let me fight with one before, master,” Merin protested.

“That was before you were my student,” Vasher informed. “And don’t call me ‘master.’ My name is Vasher. From this moment on and until I declare your training complete, you are not to duel with anyone unless I give you permission. You may not swing a sword—even that Shardblade of yours—unless it is under my direction. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir!” Merin snapped, spearman training returning.

“And don’t call me ‘sir’ either,” Vasher said with a bitter scowl. “You’re a lord, not a footman. Follow my rules if you wish, learn from me as you wish, and leave as you wish. I care not.”

“Okay . . .” Merin said, eyeing the arrow with skepticism.

“Good. Now watch.” Vasher turned, falling into a stance and raising his sword. He stood there for a moment, then turned expectant eyes on Merin.

Merin quickly mimicked Vasher’s stance. The monk walked over to him, nudging Merin’s foot forward a few inches, correcting his posture, and showing him how to grip the arrow.

“Good,” Vasher said. “How high can you count?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” Merin confessed, holding still in the stance. “As high as I want, I suppose.”

“Good,” Vasher said, turning and walking back toward his dueling partner. “Hold that stance for a thousand heartbeats. When you’re done, let me know, and we’ll do another.”

Merin frowned, but the monk said nothing further. A bead of sweat rolled down Merin’s cheek in the sunlight. *What have I gotten myself into?* he wondered, sighing internally.

chapter 13

TALN 3

TALN AWOKE FROM a dream of agony and screams. Two things occurred to him immediately—first, as an Elin, he should not need to sleep. Second, as an Elin, he definitely shouldn't dream.

He frowned, sitting up. The last few days were a blur in his mind. He had come to Ral Eram. He remembered his arrival, and his . . . bursting in on some sort of feast or party. Beyond that . . .

The Sign hadn't worked. Taln hissed in surprise, thrusting forward his hand, trying to manifest the *nahel* bond within him. Nothing happened. What of his other powers?

He analyzed his surroundings with a quick glance. He was in a long, rectangular chamber set with beds along both walls. The room was set with stone pillars, and the windows were shaped with triangular peaks. In fact, the architecture held a great number of angles and lines—he was probably in the Aleth section of the city?

Many of the beds were occupied with the lame and the sick, and the men tending them wore undyed tan robes, sewn with the glyph *ila*—the mark of the priesthood. There were two doors leading out of the room, and the windows provided an alternative exit—they looked wide enough to be broken with relative ease. A table would probably do it.

There was a small chest beside his bed—a chest with amber knobs. He

reached out, blessing his fortune. He had the Sourcestone of Stonewarding. He touched the amber, seeking to draw upon its power.

Again, nothing happened. Taln withdrew his fingers, frowning. Something was very, very wrong.

Why won't my Stonewarding work? he thought with frustration. *And the Sign. I need information.*

He looked up, scanning the room again. His mind was far less fuzzy than it had been—images, places, and thoughts were all becoming more clear. There were only two monasteries in the Aleth section of Ral Eram—unless new ones had been constructed—Lighthome and Mercyhome, of which Lighthome was a female monastery.

One of the attendants noticed that Taln was awake, and the man waved over an older monk. The elderly man regarded Taln with a displeased expression, whispering to his companion in a voice most men probably wouldn't have been able to hear. Taln was not most men.

"Where is Brother Lhan?" the elder monk hissed. "He should be here!"

"I'll fetch him, *Telilah*," the younger monk promised, bowing his head in deference, then rushing off.

The older man cleared his face of displeasure, smiling reassuringly toward Taln. He had a large nose and grizzled features, and his hands were callused. "I see you finally awoke from your slumber, traveler."

"Yes, holy one," Taln replied, still bothered by the fact that he had fallen asleep in the first place. "Thank you for caring for me." Taln flexed his arm, testing his muscles against their extended immobility. "It seems I've been a bit out of sorts these last few days. How long was I . . . asleep?"

"Four days, off and on," the senior monk explained. "You were awake for much of the time, but you seemed unable to focus."

Four days. . . . Taln shook his head. Yet, he could feel the weakness of his mind, the whispers at the edge of his sanity. It was getting worse each Return. Perhaps that was the reason for his apparent slumber.

"I must say, traveler," the kindly monk said. "You seem far more . . . lucid now than when they first brought you."

"I feel far more lucid, holy one," Taln said with a smile. He raised his sheet slightly, noticing that he was still naked. Hopefully, the monks would loan him some clothing—though he doubted anyone was going to give him a weapon any time soon.

"Tell me, traveler," the senior monk said uncertainly. "What do you . . . remember of yourself?"

Taln raised an eyebrow. "Are you asking if I still think that I'm a Herald?"

“In not so many words,” the monk replied.

“My problems of the last few days were not related to my identity, holy one,” Taln said. “I *am* an Elin. I will not lie to you; that would do us both a disservice.”

“I see,” the monk said, his disappointment apparent.

“However,” Taln continued. “I don’t expect you to believe me. The Sign did, after all, fail—I’ll have to solve that problem before I can move onto other items. For now, let it suffice to say that I was a traveler in need of your assistance, and you provided it. The Almighty bless you for that.”

The monk smiled, glancing to the side as another brown-robed form, looking a bit disheveled, entered from the north hallway.

“You are welcome to stay with us as long as you need, friend,” the elderly monk said, gesturing toward the newcomer. “Brother Lhan has been assigned to care for you. He will travel with you, and make certain you are acquainted with the city.”

In other words, he’ll make certain I don’t get into trouble, Taln thought, smiling and nodding his head as the elder monk backed away to care for other patients.

Taln was pleased to note that Brother Lhan was carrying a folded pile of clothing with him. Lhan was a younger man—probably in his early twenties—a bit on the pudgy side, with an unconcerned oval of a face. Lhan blinked tiredly as he approached, and his left cheek was still imprinted with the lines of whatever he had been lying on when they woke him.

Lhan yawned as he pulled a stool up beside Taln’s bed, resting the clothing on the floor beside him. “Greetings, traveler. Welcome to the glorious Mercyhome monastery.”

“Thank you,” Taln said, reaching immediately for the clothing. “I assume these are for me?”

Lhan nodded, yawning again.

“I’m sorry they woke you,” Taln noted, picking through the clothing.

Lhan shrugged. “It’s my own fault—I’ve really got to find a better place to hide.”

Taln raised an eyebrow at the comment as he examined the clothing. The cut was unfamiliar to him, though fashion changes between Returns were normal. The trousers were very loose through the legs, and ended in wide triangular cuffs about halfway down the calf. The shirt was equally loose, probably intended to be worn tucked into the pants, then tied with the sash. There were undergarments as well.

The most important article, however, was the thick brown cloak—a piece

of Rosharan fashion that would never change. Cloaks were necessary even in the summer to ward off highstorm rains. All of the clothing had been crafted from *shennah*, a plant whose bark was stringy and fluffy enough to be spun. It made for rough fabric; fortunately, all but the cloak had been treated in such a way to make them softer to the touch. Taln nodded in satisfaction—he would have preferred seasilk, of course. The material was lighter, stronger, and more comfortable. These, however, were a citizen's clothing. He could have hoped for nothing more.

"Brother Lhan," Taln said. "Please run and fetch me some thread and a needle."

"Excuse me?" the monk asked.

"You and I are in a forced relationship," Taln said. "Your superiors obviously expect you to keep me from causing any serious trouble. If you want my cooperation in this, you are going to need to make yourself useful."

Lhan raised an eyebrow. "How very . . . economical of you."

Taln sighed, regarding the man. "I'm not trying to be difficult, Lhan; I'm just trying to save the world. A needle and some thread would be very helpful."

Lhan rolled his eyes, rising from his stool. "All right."

"Oh, and bring me four medium-sized rocks," Taln added, rising and beginning to dress. "About half the size of your fist."

"Rocks?" Lhan asked skeptically.

"Yes, rocks," Taln replied. "This is Roshar. The last time I checked—which, admittedly, was several centuries ago—they were fairly prevalent here."

"Rocks," Lhan mumbled again as he walked off.

Taln was dressed by the time Lhan returned. Taln accepted the thread, needle, and rocks from the monk, then proceeded to begin sewing a flap into the hem of his cloak. The monk sat down, regarding Taln with curiosity.

"The second thing I'm going to need from you, Brother Lhan, is information," Taln said, pulling the thread tight.

"Ask away."

"What year is it?"

"10e980," Lhan replied.

Taln paused, needle held halfway through a stitch. "980?" he asked.

"Indeed," the monk replied. "Not that I've seen daylight for the last ten years or so, but at least they tell me that's what the year is."

980. Nearly a thousand years since the Ninth Epoch, since the last

Return. Such a long time—something must have happened to the Khothen. They had never waited that long between Returns before. “What happened to the Epoch Kingdoms?” Taln asked, turning back to his sewing.

Lhan didn’t respond immediately. “You’re kidding, right?” he eventually asked.

“Pretend I’m not,” Taln said without looking up.

“They fell,” the monk explained. “Right after the beginning of the Tenth Epoch.”

Taln closed his eyes, sighing to himself. He’d hoped it wasn’t true, but . . . “What about Alethkar?” he said, opening his eyes. “It obviously still exists.”

“Well, a lot of the Epoch Kingdoms exist in name,” Lhan explained. “It’s always a good idea to use one of the old names when you found a kingdom—it makes you seem more legitimate.”

“Which ones still stand, then?” Taln asked. “Even if only in name.”

“Alethkar, of course,” the monk said. “Though, as the king told you, we’ve expanded a bit over the last few years. Thalenah still stands—it’s by itself on that island over there, so its borders stay pretty stable. Vedenar is now called Jah Keved, though it’s ruled by three Veden Houses with a figurehead as their leader.”

Taln frowned. “That’s it?”

“Well, Shinavar is still there,” Lhan said. “No one ever really pays much attention to the clansmen. The land that used to be Lakhenran is ruled by Jah Keved, as it has been off and on for the last few centuries. Prallah’s a mixture of a tenseset different kingdoms—our king just captured the largest one, as you’ve probably heard.”

“Riemak, Bethram, Inava?”

“Gone,” the monk said. “Kingdoms sometimes try to claim them, but mostly they’re uninhabited—except Riemak. There are enough bandits over there to form their own kingdom.”

Taln nodded. It wasn’t as bad as it could have been—Bethram was the smallest of the kingdoms, and would be missed only briefly. Riemak’s disappearance would be a strong blow—the Holy City at its center had been a powerful center of morale during times of battle. However, Alethkar, Vedenar, and Thalenah had always been the most populous—and powerful—of the ten.

“Vorinism is still strong, I assume,” Taln noted, reaching for the rocks Lhan had brought him.

“And always will be, Almighty willing,” Lhan said in a dutiful monotone,

his piousness weakened slightly by the extended yawn in the middle of the sentence.

“If the Vorin religion is still in power,” Taln said with a frown, “how is it that no one takes my claim to be a Herald seriously? Have you forgotten about the cycle of Returns, the coming of the Khothen? The religion was founded to prepare for such things.”

“Well,” Lhan said, “we’ve kind of had to change our focus during the last epoch. You did, after all, promise that you weren’t going to come back any more.”

Taln froze, glancing up. “What?”

“At the end of the Last Return,” Lhan explained. “The Elin disappeared and said they wouldn’t be coming back, that the cycle of Returns was through, and the Khothen had been defeated.”

“That’s not possible,” Taln said.

Lhan raised an eyebrow.

“I wouldn’t be here if the cycle of Returns were over,” Taln explained. “Trust me. Which of the Elin proclaimed this?”

“Well, I’m not really sure,” Lhan said. “It didn’t become official Vorin doctrine until around the fifth century, I think.”

“Why so long?”

Lhan shrugged. “You’re kind of asking the wrong monk—actually, the wrong monastery. The Order of Ishar contains all the history experts. This all happened a thousand years ago, after all.”

“But it’s your theological heritage,” Taln said, finishing his stitching.

“So the senior monks are fond of telling me.”

Taln stood, putting on the cloak.

“You sewed rocks into your hem,” Lhan noted. “How very . . . odd of you.”

Taln spun, turning a few times to judge the motion of the cloak. Then he turned to the side in a quick motion, pulling the garment off with a smooth gesture. He nodded to himself, putting it back on.

“For weight,” Taln explained. “A weighted cloak is easier to position in a battle, and easier to remove quickly.” He could also use it as a surprise weapon, though he didn’t offer that bit of explanation.

“Oh,” Lhan said.

“What did you think I was doing?” Taln asked with amusement, sitting down on the bed and removing the cloak.

“I wasn’t sure,” Lhan replied. “I just figured you were confused. You are, after all, crazy.”

Taln raised an eyebrow. "You're not a very subtle one, are you, Brother Lhan?"

"I make up for it in sheer laziness," Lhan replied. "What are you doing now?"

"Pockets," Taln said, setting out the cloak again. "Do you mind if I cut up this blanket?"

Lhan shrugged. "That's the kind of thing we expect crazy people to do anyway. You'll have to tear it, though. *I'm* certainly not going to give you a knife."

Taln frowned, but did as requested. "You seem surprisingly flippant with regard to my supposed lunacy. Aren't you afraid I'll become violent?"

"You're not a violent one," Lhan said. "I've seen a lot of your type come through the monastery. I also know you can't be talked out of who you think you are. My job is simply to make certain you don't accidentally hurt yourself or anyone else—especially not myself."

"You have experience with 'my type,' then?" Taln asked, sewing a large pocket into the cloak's inner right side.

"I tend to get all of the more . . . undesirable assignments."

"I wonder why," Taln mumbled. He fell silent as he worked, turning his thoughts to a topic he had been avoiding. What was he going to do? Normally, he would let the other Elin decide the plan, but he appeared to be the only one to have reached Ral Eram. He needed to find the others, and that required one thing: his sword.

It had been taken from him . . . he remembered that night at the feast only vaguely. "My sword . . ." he said.

"It was confiscated," Lhan said. "You didn't exactly make a good impression on the king. Enduring, perhaps, but definitely not good."

"There was . . . a woman," Taln said thoughtfully. "She saved my life."

"Lady Jasnah," Lhan agreed. "The king's sister. Don't assume she protected you out of fondness. Lady Jasnah is about as compassionate as a sleeping chull. Even her breathing is politically motivated. No one's certain why she pled for you, but most think it was some kind of stunt."

"Either way, I owe her my life," Taln said. The loss of his weapon was troubling. With Glyphting, he could sense the locations of the other Elin. It would be the easiest and fastest way to find them.

Assuming, of course, he thought, that the Blade's powers still work.

Taln paused. A feeling of dread struck him. Stonewarding didn't work, and he couldn't manifest the *Nahel*. If he lost the sword as well . . .

The windowlight turned red. Taln gasped, feeling dizzy, and an expression of concern actually crossed the monk's face. "Are you all right?" Lhan asked.

The monk burst into flames. The windows melted. Blood-red fire ripped up the sides of the building, pooling at the top and bearing down on Taln with its heat. Smoke rose from suddenly-ignited beds, curling ominously, bringing with it screams. Sudden, formless screams that came from the far edge of the room. Taln looked up. Fire roared, and something moved within it. Something dark. The screams mounted, pulsing in his ears, searing him, flaying him.

"What's wrong?" Lhan asked, still in flames, his flesh melting from his face.

Taln closed his eyes, grabbing the sides of his head, pushing the screams away. He shivered, exhaling in a long, demanding sigh.

When Taln opened his eyes, the room had returned to normal. He sat for a few moments, breathing deeply.

"I'm fine," Taln finally said, forcing himself to stand and look at his new cloak. It had one large pocket, two smaller ones, and a small ribbon at the back to hold a hidden dagger—if he ever managed to get his hands on one. "I assume I'm allowed to leave the monastery?"

"As long as you take me with you," Lhan replied. "But . . ."

Taln raised an eyebrow.

"You're kind of expected to go work in the royal mines," Lhan explained. "To help pay for your keep."

"But no one is going to force me," Taln clarified.

"Well, no . . ."

"Good," Taln said, throwing on his cloak. "We're leaving, then."

"Um, where are we going?"

"To get some information," Taln replied.

"Oh?" Lhan asked. "You mean my wealth of accumulated wisdom isn't good enough for you?"

Taln turned, eyeing the monk with a suffering eye, then waved for him to follow.

chapter 14

JASNAH 4

JASNAH CAREFULLY COMPOSED HERSELF, settling into the high-backed chair. It was refreshing to have an audience chamber again; three years at war had accustomed her to tents and temporary camps.

The First Palace's plushness felt almost surreal. Many of the rooms were covered with intricate, mural-like carpets, and the walls of both hallways and rooms were crafted from seamless marble—made from smoothed clay that had been transformed through the power of ancient Awakeners.

Her personal audience chamber was as she had left it a year before. It lay in the Aleth section of the ten-winged palace, and was decorated with a deep blue marble. The men of her personal guard—eight in number, now that two stood guard at her mother's door—stood beside the pillars on either side of the room. The carpet was a dark maroon, depicting a scene from *The Fall of Kanar*, brave Tanath standing before the gates of his doomed city. There wasn't a single gemstone in the entire room—an oddity in Roshar, especially for a noblewoman.

The storm shutters were open, filling the room with sunlight. One of the maids, she noticed, had pasted paper glyphwards to each of them in preparation for the next highstorm. Jasnah was going to have to spend some time re-explaining to the servants her opinion on superstition. They couldn't even see how irrational their actions were—most, if not all, of them were Vorin, and the religion taught that the storms and winds were

the voice of the Almighty. Yet they still held to traditions centuries old, traditions that attributed ill fortune and mystical danger to the storms.

Despite the annoying glyphwards, the room was relaxing. Sitting in her audience chair again, the world finally seemed as if it were regaining some of the order that had been scattered and confused these last three years.

“Show her in,” Jasnah requested.

Nelshenden nodded, pulling open the doors and revealing the person who waited outside. Jasnah did not recognize the middle-aged woman, though her cloak bore the familiar glyph *pren*, the mark of a scribe. Her *talla* was white with little ornamentation, and she only wore one gemstone—a clear diamond ring. Behind her stood a younger woman, wearing a simple white robe and caring two thick tomes.

“My lady,” the scribe said, bowing.

“Lady Analesh,” Jasnah said, nodding. “I was sorry to hear of the death of your predecessor.” Her words were very truthful—Jasnah had worked very hard to gain the allegiance of Lady Shemlakh, the previous Royal Treasurer.

“It was an unfortunate illness,” Analesh agreed. Her voice was careful, her face controlled. This was a woman who had worked hard for her station; the position of Royal Treasurer brought immense power. “I brought the ledgers you requested. I assume you have the king’s permission to view them?”

“Of course,” Jasnah replied. “He is my brother.”

The scribe didn’t move. The implication was obvious—she wanted proof, in the form of written documentation. Unfortunately, Elhokar was being stubborn—he claimed that now they were back in Ral Eram, it was time he began following tradition by using his wife as scribe instead of his sister. Jasnah may or may not have been able to get Nanavah to give her permission to see the records. Regardless, bowing to the woman’s authority was not a precedent she wanted to make.

“Come now,” Jasnah said smoothly. “Everyone knows the trust my brother bears me. Before the war, I ran all of his affairs.”

“With respect, my lady,” the scribe replied, “that was before he was married. Lady Nanavah is now the First Scribe.”

“I am the one he trusted to take with him into Prallah,” Jasnah pointed out.

“That was the king’s prerogative to decide,” the scribe replied. “However, I cannot release these records without proof of his consent.”

This time, Jasnah frowned openly, allowing the full brunt of her displeasure to shine on the woman. Analesh looked unfazed.

“Very well,” Jasnah said. “Kemnar, kindly go and fetch my brother.”

This finally got a reaction—if only a slight one. Even if Elhokar hadn’t been away at war the last few years, Analesh would have had little personal experience with the king. Her job was to keep the records—Nanavah would be the one who actually interpreted them for Elhokar.

“My lady,” Kemnar objected—just as he had been instructed. “The king is busy in conference with his generals . . . he won’t take kindly to interruption.”

“I see little other alternative,” Jasnah said.

“Very well, my lady,” Kemnar said, bowing then leaving.

Analesh’s eyes flickered toward the door as it closed. Jasnah let the silence hang for a moment before speaking. “Lady Analesh, might I borrow your pen and some paper for a moment?”

Analesh paused, then waved her aide forward. The younger woman deposited a brushpen and some paper on the writing board beside Jasnah’s chair. Jasnah began writing with a nonchalant air, paying no attention to the woman waiting before her. However, out of the corner of her eye she could see Analesh inching forward, straining to catch a glimpse of what Jasnah was scribing.

Analesh breathed in sharply as she saw what the paper contained—a formal order for Analesh to be discharged from her position. All Jasnah would have to do was read it out loud in front of Elhokar and get his agreement before three trustworthy witnesses.

Lady Analesh stood quietly, watching Jasnah’s brushstrokes with increasing nervousness. *That’s right*, Jasnah thought as she wrote. *Think carefully. You’re relatively new to this position—you might know Nanavah well, but you barely know the king. He’s been gone too long—he’s an enigma to you. You’ve heard stories of how important I used to be, and how powerful Elhokar’s temper can become. You remember what I did the other week, with the madman.*

Nanavah might have appointed you while I was gone, but can she protect you now that I’ve returned?

“My lady,” Analesh said. “I hardly think we need bother the king.”

Jasnah nodded toward Nelshenden, who immediately left in search of Kemnar. Of course, Kemnar would never have bothered Elhokar—but Analesh needn’t know that.

The aide stepped forward at Analesh’s order, depositing her tomes on Jasnah’s writing board. “A wise decision,” Jasnah said, picking up the order of discharge and folding it carefully, then setting it aside. “I will remember that you are a woman who can be trusted for her . . . prudence.”

Analesh bowed her head deferentially as Jasnah reached over to open the first of the books. Jasnah paused, looking up at the treasurer. "You may wait outside until I am finished."

Analesh opened her mouth, as if to object—then her eyes fell on the order of discharge. Not destroyed, just tucked away. Finally, she bowed her head slightly and retreated from the room, her aide following.

The books contained the records of acquisitions and expenditures during the last three years. Jasnah could decipher them easily—she had been in charge of finances during the first few years of Elhokar's reign, before the escalation of the Prallan war.

Jasnah scanned the lists. For a time, Balenmar had been the only one who requisitioned funds—as he had been authorized to do before Elhokar left for the extended campaign. Balenmar's withdrawals were all carefully documented, explaining exactly what the payment was used for. He was efficient in his expenditures—as could be expected from the aged stormkeeper.

After a short time, however, Nanavah's name began to replace Balenmar's. Jasnah frowned, studying the woman's entries. She was only a few minutes into her analysis when Nelshenden and Kemnar returned.

When they entered, Nelshenden nodded to the other six guards, waving for them to leave the room. As the door closed, he frowned in Jasnah's direction. "I don't like this deception, my lady."

"You didn't have to lie, Nelshenden," Jasnah said, not looking up from the ledger. "You just went looking for Kemnar. There's nothing wrong with that."

She glanced up when he didn't reply. His eyes were still troubled.

"You think like a man, Nelshenden," Jasnah said, looking back at the ledger. "This is woman's business—trust me, it's perfectly accepted. Some day your wife will do it too."

Kemnar obviously didn't have any trouble with his part in the deception. He walked forward, regarding the ledger with curiosity. He would be able to read the numbers—they were based on the twenty-five *palen* glyphs, which everyone could read. He might even recognize some of the glyphs in the requisition descriptions. The intricacies of the *palh* language, however—with its confusing syntax, its non-verbal markers, and its mixture of the ancient tongue with the Aleth language—would be completely beyond him.

"You can make sense of this?" he asked.

"Of course," Jasnah said, scanning down a column of entries. Nanavah had started carefully, taking over Balenmar's duties one at a time, making

payments to the city guard, royal scribes, and street maintainers. Nothing irregular—at first, she had followed Balenmar’s schedules with exactness. It was not surprising that she had been able to make the switch—by legal right and tradition, the king’s wife was the First Scribe, and had charge of all bureaucratic affairs.

“It seems reading would be a useful skill to have,” Kemnar said musingly.

“Kemnar!” Nelshenden snapped. “Scribing is a Feminine Art! Would you have women picking up Shardblades and dueling?”

“Of course not,” Kemnar said, still regarding the page with interest. “What does it say, my lady?”

“It says that our queen is a very clever woman,” Jasnah said. “It looks like she had Balenmar teach her what to do. Then, about six months ago, she took over the royal finances completely. That’s when the oddities begin to appear.”

“Oddities?” Kemnar asked.

“Moneys withdrawn without explanation,” Jasnah explained. “Never very much. Probably bribe money, used to expand her influence in the court. A lot of the projects she commissioned also appear to favor one noble house or another.”

“My lady!” Nelshenden said. “We must inform the king of this.”

Jasnah snorted. “Nothing she did is illegal, Nelshenden. She is First Scribe—she may disperse the funds as she sees fit. Besides, I did the same thing when I was in charge.”

Nelshenden paled visibly.

“I may have to shatter a few more pedestals today, Nelshenden,” Jasnah said. “If you wish, you may wait outside.”

“No, my lady,” he replied. “I will be fine.”

Jasnah nodded, turning back to the ledger, picking up her brushpen and taking notes on which cities had received aid, which projects had been advanced, and which requests for funds had been denied. The information was vital. Over the last week, Jasnah had begun reestablishing connections with the court’s women, making allegiances where she could, taking charge of those women—such as Analesh—that she thought she could influence.

However, the women receiving the most aid from Nanavah would be the most difficult to persuade—Jasnah’s time would be far more effective if she spent it on women who had been denied or ignored. Of those, there were plenty. One could not divert funds to the maintenance of certain roads, the building of certain ports, or the establishment of certain political

treaties without offending ones who might have otherwise received favor. These would have to become Jasnah's core of support.

"What of your search, Kemnar?" she said as she began copying down the names of those women who had received the most support from the queen.

"Lord Balenmar was right about one thing," Kemnar replied. "Jezenrosh's 'sickness' certainly wasn't debilitating enough to stop him from forming a strong political union against the king."

"Only political?" Jasnah asked.

"It's unclear," Kemnar said. "This isn't exactly my area of expertise. My contacts can tell you exactly how to find an underground Awakener, but they don't pay much attention to high-level allegiances. From what I can tell, Jezenrosh is planning dissent, not coups."

Jasnah frowned, shuffling through the ledger and locating lists of women who had made petitions in court, and been refused. Balenmar had spoken to her several times since the feast, but he still had nothing to offer by way of evidence beyond his own suspicions. However, these were grave—rumors did indeed indicate that Jezenrosh was heavily displeased with the king, and several ladies at court had heard that the faceless Shardbearer had not come upon Elhokar by happenstance.

She needed control, and she needed it quickly. There was real danger in Alethkar; she could sense it. However, she wouldn't be able to gather the information her brother needed until her power in Alethkar was re-established. She had to deal with Nanavah quickly.

As Jasnah moved through the ledger, something odd caught her eye. "Emeralds again," she mumbled.

"What?" Kemnar asked.

"Emeralds," Jasnah repeated. "The ladies at the feast were right—Nanavah keeps buying emeralds. Over the last year, she's steadily purchased them at higher and higher prices."

"Perhaps she simply wants to increase the stockpile," Kemnar said. "In case of famine."

"That's what the ledger claims," Jasnah said. "But I don't believe it. The palace already has an enormous stockpile." Jasnah paused, studying the ledger. "She's trying to drive the price up for some reason."

But why? Jasnah scanned the records, trying to dig out secrets that just weren't there. The ledgers explained the overt purpose of the requisition, but only in very simple terms. There were lines to show goods received in exchange for the money taken, and they showed that the emeralds had actually been purchased and delivered—even the First Scribe couldn't

have gotten away with putting that much money into her own pocket. In addition, someone else usually did the purchasing—Nanavah only gave the orders and arranged the deals. She had purchased from a number of different places, though one company did stand out. *Channal*, a merchant organization out of Palinar, a Fourth City in the middle of the kingdom.

The door to her room opened, and a white-robed form stepped in. “Lady Jasnah?” she asked.

Jasnah held up a hand. “Tell Anaesh I am nearly finished,” she said.

“My lady?” the attendant asked, confused. “I was sent to bring you to the royal libraries.”

Jasnah paused, looking up from her ledger, realizing that this scribe wasn’t the same one who had accompanied Anaesh.

“What?” Jasnah asked with a frown.

“The libraries, my lady,” the scribe explained. “There’s been . . . a disturbance.”

THE MADMAN LOOKED quite different with a haircut, a shave, and clean clothing. In fact, much of his wild eccentricity was gone—Jasnah now saw a man of mundane, if muscular, appearance. He could have been an average citizen—a military man, or perhaps a smith of some sort. He had a strong jaw and a handsome profile without being overpoweringly attractive.

The monks had given him a shirt of woven shennah and a pair of loose trousers, along with a sturdy thick cloak to protect against highstorms. His light hair and rectangular face made it unlikely that he was an Aleth—if his accent was to be believed, he was probably from somewhere to the west. The area where the Epoch Kingdom of Riemak had once stood was now a refuge for bandits, tyrants, and mercenaries.

Except for his great height, the man wouldn’t have earned a second look had she passed him on the street. Unfortunately, he was rather hard to ignore, sitting as he was in the middle of the royal library, a stack of books on the table in front of him. Female scribes and historians stood nervously at the edges of the room, peeking in at him from other chambers and half-hiding behind bookshelves. By coming here, the madman had broken one of the strongest traditions in modern society.

Men were not allowed in libraries.

“Why did you send for me?” Jasnah asked, turning toward the palace guards who stood just inside the library entrance. Even they were a bit unnerved by the taboo. Most of the scribes would be unmarried women—those who had never managed to find a husband, or those who had

disagreed with the matches their mothers had made for them and asked for permission to become scribes instead. They now served as writers, historians, or royal glyphwriters, and the library was their sanctuary.

The guards regarded one another. "We went to the captain," one of them explained in a hushed voice, "and he said you'd know what to do with the madman."

"You did take responsibility for him, my lady," Nelshenden reminded her.

Jasnah frowned, glancing at the sheepish, brown-robed monk who stood beside the guards. He was from Mercyhome—she recognized the glyph. "The monks of Mercyhome appear to have grown more lax in their duties since I left for the war."

"Let me assure you, my lady," the monk replied. "The monastery is anything but lax. Most of the monks are quite diligent—I just happen to be a particularly bad one."

Jasnah snorted, turning back toward the room. It was dim, each table lit by a small reading lantern. The white-cloaked women at the edges of the room were like ghosts—frightened, yet fascinated, by this man who pretended to be able to read. Apparently, cleaning up his body had not helped his mind.

"Do you want us to drag him out?" the guard asked.

"Let me speak to him first," Jasnah decided, walking into the library. Kemnar and Nelshenden followed closely, their eyes focused carefully on the madman. No taboo would keep them from protecting her.

Jasnah rounded the madman's table, studying his face. He seemed intent on the book in front of him—the *Ezorpan of Balen: Shardbearer of Vedenar*. An interesting book, less famous for the man's life it chronicled but far more so for the Justification—the commentary Balen's wife had added at the bottom of each page.

The madman's face seemed far more . . . stable than it had before. There was no fervor in his eyes, no imbalance to his movements. He flipped a page as he noticed her, then looked back at his book.

Cautious, she seated herself across from him, laying her long-sleeved left arm across her lap and her right arm on the tabletop.

"The Ten Epoch Kingdoms have fallen," the madman said in his thick Riemak accent.

"Yes," Jasnah replied. "About a thousand years ago."

The madman shook his head. "A thousand years," he whispered. "There have been long periods between Returns . . . but a thousand years? Even

the first one was only eight hundred. Most have only been two or three centuries, four at the most.”

Jasnah wasn't certain how to respond. The Epoch Kingdoms had been gone so long, they were practically myths. Names of what had once been kingdoms were now used as general references to geography.

The madman looked up at her, closing the book, his face pleasant. “You are Jasnah Kholin,” he said. “The king's sister—and you saved my life.”

“Yes,” Jasnah said carefully.

“You think I'm insane,” the madman noted. “I don't blame you. That is, after all, why we came up with the Sign—so that we could dispel any doubts.”

“The Sign didn't work,” Jasnah said.

The madman nodded. “So I noticed. I'm still trying to figure that out.” Despite his Riemak accent, or maybe because of it, he had a peaceful, quiet voice—very incongruous with the tempestuous way he had burst into the feast the week before.

The madman glanced down at the book. “I still can't believe they're gone. The book says the Oathpact was broken almost before the Khothen were defeated. The kings must have been waiting, saving strength to spring on each other. We should have guessed—I never trusted Vadren, and Ronad wasn't very far behind. I never found out what happened, of course—I died early last time.”

“For a man who's been gone for a thousand years,” Jasnah said tentatively, “your accent sounds remarkably like that of a man from Riemak.”

The madman raised an eyebrow. “Is that why everyone keeps saying I'm from there? I'd wondered.” He turned back from the book. “What I really want to know, however, is why all of these books are written by women? And why do they all claim to be biographies of their husbands, when half of them spend most of their time offering commentary on something completely different?”

Jasnah froze. “*What did you say?*” she asked.

The madman looked up, his eyes innocent. “Take this book, for instance. It claims to be a history of a man named Balen. There's only a tiny bit about him at the top of each page, however. The rest is a rather interesting discussion on what happened at the dawn of the Tenth Epoch.”

Jasnah leaned forward, shooting a glance back at Kemnar and Nelshenden. The madman was speaking things that weren't for masculine ears. “Who told you that?” she demanded in a hushed tone. “Who read to you from the Justification?”

“No one needed to read to me,” the man said with amusement. “I knew

how to read before this world was founded—though, I’ll admit that I didn’t learn your version of it until the Sixth Epoch.”

“Really?” Jasnah asked skeptically, leaning over and pushing his book down against the table. “Read that,” she said, pointing at a paragraph.

“No one knows what caused The Silence,” the man said. “Or even if it occurred at all. Some scholars claim that the event never occurred, that Awakening didn’t suddenly disappear—they argue that the Oathshard was brought on an era of distrust in mankind, and Awakening fell out of favor for its mystery. Others attribute the loss of Awakening abilities to a mystical connection to the Oathpact; when one was shattered, the other broke as well. Regardless of the truth, it is obvious that some powers attributed to the legendary Knights Epellion of the Epoch Kingdom—Windrunning, Stonewarding, and the others—are no longer available to mankind, even if Awakening itself eventually returned.”

Jasnah sat back in her chair, stunned. “Who are you?” she whispered.

“Talenel Elin,” the man said frankly. “Some have called me Stonesinew the Steadfast, others simply call me The Soldier. Personally, I’ve always preferred to simply be called Taln.”

“Taln?” Jasnah asked. The word was *Palh* for rock.

Taln shrugged. “It suits me. Usually, during Returns, I spend my time hitting things. Ishar and Jezrien are far better at planning than I am—which is why I was hoping they would be here already.”

Jasnah took a deep breath. He certainly wasn’t the first man who had learned to read—many stormkeepers were thought to have taught themselves. However, he was the only one she’d seen admit it openly. “Look . . . Taln,” she said, leaning forward. “You have to understand. No matter what you think, no matter what your mind says, you aren’t a Herald. You’re a man, from Riemak. Were you in a battle? Was your head wounded?”

“The Sign’s failure is a problem, isn’t it?” He shook his head. “I don’t know, maybe it has something to do with this ‘Silence’ the text mentions. You really don’t have Knights Epellion any more? This is Alethkar—you should have Windrunners. The power was tied to the royal family.”

“Windrunners are a myth, Taln,” Jasnah explained. “Please, go back to Mercyhome. The monks there can help you; they know how to treat people with your illness.”

Taln smiled. “They want me to go work in the mines.”

“That’s a good job,” Jasnah said. “The King’s Mines offer steady pay, good for a Tenth Citizen. You may be low of rank now, but if you work hard,

your grandchildren will have Eighth Citizen status. They'll be full Aleths, just like everyone else."

"I appreciate the offer," he said, voice growing solemn. "But I can't accept it. The Khothen are coming, Lady Jasnah. The creatures known as the Shadein, or Stormshades. They will come in one year. In the centuries before the Epoch Kingdoms were founded to unite against them—before Vorinism was founded to encourage men and teach them to prepare—the Khothen nearly destroyed mankind on three separate occasions. They won't stop until they succeed. This time, they won't find a united Roshar to fight against them, and they've grown craftier over the centuries—come to know us better. I have to find my brethren. Failing that, I have to find a way to stop the Khothen on my own."

He leaned forward, looking her in the eye. "I don't remember much from the last few days. The first few weeks after a Return begins are . . . difficult. However, I do know you were responsible for saving my life, and I thank you—dying now would have been terribly inconvenient. However, I must ask something else of you."

Jasnah frowned. "What?"

"I need my sword," Taln explained. "My Shardblade. It is connected to those of the other nine Elin—through it, I can feel where my brethren are. I need you to get it back for me."

Jasnah shook her head. "That's not going to happen, Taln."

"If it doesn't," he said, standing, "then I'll have to find a way to get it back myself. That won't be pleasant for anyone involved." He paused, looking around the room. "I have a feeling I'm not wanted here—it has something to do with only women being authors these days, I assume?"

"You could say that," Jasnah replied.

Taln held up Balen's Ezorpan. "Can I take this? I promise I'll return it."

He probably had no idea how much the book was worth. For some reason, however, Jasnah said yes anyway. "Very well. Just promise not to return to the library again."

Taln nodded. "That's a deal, sister of the king. Think about what I said—time is short."

With that, he strode from the room. Jasnah sat back in her chair, sighing to herself.

chapter 15

JEK 3

J EKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, did not sneak when he entered Ahven's palace. If the Idiot King wanted to hide the fact that he had a Shin slave, he should have given an order to that effect.

It was as if Jek could feel the blood dripping from his fingers. During ten years as a Truthless, Jek had rarely been ordered to commit such a massacre. Talshekh Davar might have been young for a house leader, but he was extremely fertile. Thirteen children had born his name—six sons, seven daughters, eight of them beneath the age of the *Charan*.

Talshekh was a father no more, nor a husband. Jek had done his work well. He always did. Though he had no will of his own, he bore the shame and the sin of the murders—that was the conundrum of his punishment.

Surprisingly, Ahven's guards let him pass without resistance. He wondered how the Idiot King had found a way to give them orders without revealing his true nature. The rooms beyond looked different in the daylight—one would never have been able to tell from the lavish furnishings what little regard the people had for their supposedly imbecilic king. The Veden were fond of symbols that portrayed their martial accomplishment—tapestries bearing glyphs of heraldry were favored over paintings, and colorful shields hung from many of the doors. Suits of armor—not Shardplate, but crafted to imitate it—stood as sentries at corners and in alcoves. Ahven's audience

chamber was a grand room with massive, squareish columns, decorated with shields, spears, and imitation Shardblades. Red and white—the hereditary symbols of old Vedenar—were the favored colors.

Interestingly, it appeared as if Ahven held court in his chamber, though the room was very poorly attended. From his previous scoutings, Jek knew that the king's whims held very little authority—early in his career, Ahven had signed a document requiring all royal edicts be authorized by the Puppeteer before becoming law. The Puppeteer, however, needed no signature from the king to make most proclamations. Considering such, it was rather amusing that there was anyone in the room besides the guards.

The Idiot King sat on his throne, which was crafted completely from black steel. In Shinavar, the seat of such an important man would have been lined with gold or silver—a sign of wealth and favor from the Shanalakada. To the heathens of the east, however, gold had no more value than steel—all metals were the same when one used the sacred arts with such impunity.

The minstrel speaking with Ahven was far more interesting than the king himself. The minstrel was female of course—eastern noblemen considered singing a feminine art. Men could sing if they wished, but only women could do it for an audience. She was of middle age, probably married to a lesser nobleman who relied on her earnings to support him—a woman beautiful of voice was often as much in demand among the Kanaran nobility as one skilled at politics.

“He asked for the Ballad of the Eastern Seas, my lord,” the minstrel said. She was draped in a very long sencoat, with an enveloping pink shirt underneath—clothing that might have been considered scandalous up north, in the more prudish kingdoms of Alethkar and Pralir. “Followed by the Song of *Nahket*.”

“The Song of *Nahket*,” Ahven said with a smile. “I like that one.”

“Yes, my lord,” the minstrel said. “Lord Rienat is fond of it as well.”

Jek frowned, standing in the shadows of a column, trying not to touch any more stone than he had to. What was Ahven's game? He was deaf—what knowledge did he have of ballads or songs? Indeed, what need had he of minstrels? Perhaps it was simply part of his act as a fool. Jek had not discovered the Idiot King's lack of hearing before attempting the assassination, and Jek liked to think that his information-gathering abilities were respectable, even though easterners were generally distrustful of his people.

Whatever the reason, the minstrel's report continued for a time longer.

Once completed, Ahven nodded for one of his servants to give her a couple of gemstones and usher her out. Jek watched with interest, trying to catch hints of Ahven's true intelligence behind the mask. Though Jek had little respect for eastern heathens in general, this king's mastery of his own image was impressive. Everything from his expressions to his slumped, not-quite-right posture gave an air of mental deficiency. Coupled with the slurred voice, even Jek was unable to sense the competence hidden behind those dull eyes.

"What is next?" Ahven asked his steward.

"Your audiences are finished, my lord," the stumpy man replied.

"They are?" Ahven asked, looking sorrowful.

"Yes, your majesty. Perhaps you should return to your rooms and rest. You have had a full day. Look, see. Your Shin minstrel has arrived."

"Yes," Ahven said, nodding. "I am tired. I will return to my rooms."

Jek raised an eyebrow, impressed again. Ahven's reactions were simple without sounding inane. He played his part well.

This man is Truthless, Jek reminded himself, rubbing his fingers together. *Truthless, and heartless. Ahven might be a fine actor, but beneath his mask he is a murderer like the rest—and a lazy one.* How easy it was to order the slaughter of a family when one could sit comfortably in one's palace, listening to minstrels while children died.

"YOU DID AS I ASKED?" The Idiot King stood at the far side of his sitting room, beside a large wooden cabinet.

"You did not ask," Jek said simply.

Ahven smiled, watching the movement of Jek's lips. "No, I did not. Davar's family is dead, then."

"Yes," Jek said, his voice reserved, though tone would be lost on this man.

Ahven nodded, turning toward the cabinet. He pulled it open, revealing . . . birds. Jek paused in amazement, regarding the three metal cages. Two were empty, but one contained a small flock of bright yellow Shin songbirds. They were . . . beautiful, though their cheeps haunted him. They were reminders of a place that seemed more distant with each fresh assassination.

Ahven opened the rightmost cage, reached in, and allowed one of the birds to hop onto his finger. Then he brought it out and shut the cage. The Idiot King turned, the songbird resting on his finger and warbling with a light voice.

“What was the reaction in Windhollow?” Ahven asked, glancing toward Jek’s face.

Jek shook his head. “Talshekh will come for you,” he said. “The rumors say he believes that the Puppeteer was behind the assassination. He is already gathering his forces.”

“Indeed,” Ahven said, glancing down at the bird.

Ahven frowned. There had been a time when house Vedenel had been the most powerful of the three, a time when it had ruled the entire kingdom, its House Leader more an emperor than a king. That time had passed long ago. Now, House Vedenel was suffered more than obeyed. It was the weakest of the three, and that weakness had grown even worse since the death of Ahven’s father.

“House Vedenel has no army,” Jek said, Ahven’s eyes flickering up at the movement of his lips. “You barely have what could be called a militia. House Davar is the most powerful of the three—Talshekh will gather a considerable force.”

“Indeed,” Ahven repeated. He looked back down at his songbird, reaching out and scratching its head. The small creature proffered its head eagerly, rubbing against his scratching finger. “Talshekh Davar has wanted to take the throne for some time. Only fears for his family kept him back—his wife worried that war would open the children to assassination.”

“So you remove the source of his hesitance?”

Ahven nodded. “Even if he hadn’t suspected my dear Chancellor of State, Talshekh would have gathered his army. He wants my head nearly as much as your former master did—though for different reasons. He considers my . . . deficiencies an embarrassment to the proud Veden heritage.”

Jek’s frown deepened. *Not an idiot . . .* but perhaps a madman.

Ahven continued to scratch the bird’s head. “I cannot hear them, you know,” he eventually said. “I’ve often wished to. My hearing went when I was a small child. I sometimes think that I can remember what it was like . . . the songs. The pure voice of my sister. Perhaps it is simply a fabrication, but the memory is there.”

Jek opened his mouth to reply, but Ahven was too fascinated by the songbird to look up.

“It trusts me so implicitly,” the king said as the bird ruffled its feathers, then rubbed its head against his finger for more scratching. “I raised them all, you know. My keepers considered it a good waste of time for their dear child of a king.”

Ahven continued to scratch, then reached over with his other hand, and lightly snapped the bird's neck. Jek blinked in surprise as Ahven set the corpse aside, resting it on a nearby table. "Come," the Idiot King said. "I have other tasks for you to perform."

Jek remained where he was as the king walked away, looking down at the dead creature. *So that is it*, he thought to himself. *Ahven is not a man who kills for revenge, or even to advance himself. He kills because he wishes to prove how powerful he is. Not a madman or an idiot . . . just a simple thug.*

Jek shook his head, turning to do as he had been ordered.

chapter 16

SHINRI 2

SHINRI WISHED, NOT FOR the first time, that the Aleth royal court had never moved to Ral Eram. She was much fonder of Kholinar. It felt . . . real, and not just because of the lait plants. A city reflected the soul of its lord, and few men were as *real* as Dalenar Kholin.

Lord Dalenar suffered no sycophants in his court, and panderers soon withered beneath his stern, capable eyes. Everyone was expected to do as they should, and many did just that—for they knew that their lord was a man who took his duty seriously. Shinri also liked the city for its honest political climate. Many of the more ambitious women avoided the Kholinar court, for it was known to be somewhat bland. Young Kinæ—betrothed to Dalenar as part of the treaty that bound the pseudo-rebellious city of Khardinar to Alethkar proper—was still too young for political games. In addition, Lord Dalenar was known to use unpopular attributes—such as honesty and trustworthiness—as criteria for granting rewards to his men.

A good example was the young boy who rode between Lord Dalenar's sons, obviously still uncomfortable with the idea that he would be invited to go riding with his lord and the king's sister. Merin, now Merin Kholin, was a strong-limbed boy with a firmness of body—a trait not mimicked by the uncertainty in his eyes. She had seen hundreds like him, spearmen brought

from the plentiful villages that dotted Alethkar's midlands. Of course, none of those men had achieved this boy's feat—slaying a Shardbearer.

It was something spoken of in ballads, but not something the nobility actually expected to happen. A common citizen? Killing such a high-ranked nobleman? Without the histories to remind them that such things were to be considered acts of heroism, most of the aristocracy probably would have found the boy's act offensive. As it was, they spoke of him in mixed terms. The tale of his bravery was like a thing out of a poem or ballad, yet the boy himself many whispered of as awkward and unimpressive. Separating the deed from the man; it was a very aristocratic mindset.

There was no such confusion for Lord Dalenar. Though Dalenar sat upon his horse attired as any other nobleman—dressed in seasilks, his hair finely-kept, his saddle rich—his noble eyes and honorable actions proved him something far above the average. He was a handsome man, too. Square-faced with peppered hair, his body firm like that of a man far younger. It was hard for her to imagine a more perfect lord.

Perhaps Tethren would have turned out like Dalenar, her mind thought unbidden, always eager to ruin a perfect moment. As the days passed, her hopes for her fiancé's return had slowly given way before brutal reality. Independent reports confirmed both Tethren's trip to Thalenah and his ship's misfortune. Some scattered wreckage had been turned up by other ships in the convoy, but the highstorm had been fierce, and no survivors had been discovered.

Tethren is gone, she told herself. *You have to move on to more pressing matters. Like Jasnah said—you need to be alert. There is danger in court.*

Though their ride was ostensibly a leisurely one, Shinri doubted Jasnah was capable of simple 'leisure.' The lady had come to discuss her concerns about the Aleth court with one of the few people she actually trusted. Shinri, however, tried not to let her mistress's agenda spoil the ride. The lait hillside was gorgeous. The horses could barely move without stepping on leaves or vines of some sort. The lait rockbuds, with their underdeveloped shells and overdeveloped blossoms, grew so thickly that it was often hard to see through their leaves to the ground below. Massive flowers hung from the center of the thick rockbud stalks, their weight causing them to dangle and bob in the slight breeze. Unlike a garden, there was no coordination of colors—blue blossoms grew right next to yellow ones in no discernable pattern—and Shinri found the lack of obvious organization refreshing.

Lord Dalenar reined in his horse. "This looks like a good spot," he noted, nodding toward a more level bump on the lait hillside.

“It is suitable,” Jasnah said. Though her voice was controlled, Shinri knew her mistress well enough to tell that Jasnah would have been just as pleased with stark stone walls as she was with the beautiful hillside. To Jasnah, the ride itself was a waste of valuable time that could have been spent plotting.

They waited quietly as a group of attendants rushed forward and constructed a sitting platform amidst the rockbuds. Shinri patted her horse's neck fondly, then allowed an attendant to help her down. The petite white mare had given her a pleasant ride, even if a piece of her did wish that she'd been allowed to ride Lord Dalenar's massive war charger instead. The men waited respectfully as Jasnah and Shinri seated themselves before dismounting.

The mat was stiffly plush, seated on wooden supports to be just above the general height of the leaves and flowers. It was far too comfortable, but Shinri was accustomed to such things. Lord Dalenar whipped back his deep blue cloak and seated himself across from Jasnah, then the three younger men joined them.

“We spend two years wishing for the comforts of home,” the young Lord Aredor quipped as he sat, “and as soon as we get here, we can't wait to leave those comforts behind so we can take our meals out on the hillsides.”

Lord Dalenar grunted softly, smiling at the irony.

“The scenery is a bit more agreeable here than it was in Prallah, Lord Aredor,” Shinri noted as the servants began bringing them pre-meal tea. “There are a few more flowers in the lait than there were on the highlands.”

“Oh, I don't know,” Aredor said with a quick smile. “It seems we carried the two fairest flowers of all in our company the entire time.”

Shinri did him the honor of blushing, but Jasnah just snorted quietly. They both knew Aredor meant nothing by the comment. Dalenar's heir was nothing if not an incorrigible flirt, and it was well-known in court that he was far from interested in seeking a permanent match. There had been a time, when she was very young, that Shinri had felt something of a girlish crush on his older brother, the now-dead Sheneres, but she had never given Aredor much more than passing thoughts. Still, he would make a wonderful political match—and one could do far worse than marrying into Lord Dalenar's family.

The thought immediately made her feel guilty. *Tethren isn't a few weeks dead and already you're thinking of your next match?*

Shinri accepted her tea from a servant, the motion causing her to turn and catch Dalenar's final son, Renarin, watching her with those eerie eyes of his. He immediately turned away, but Shinri couldn't help shivering. The

boy was just so . . . odd. Unlike most men, his expressions were completely unreadable, and his eyes often seemed distant—as if he were considering things far beyond the capabilities of normal people.

Dalener accepted his own tea—the liquid steaming and in a mug after the masculine fashion. He took a drink, then turned his eyes over the softly wafting sea of leaves and flowers around them. “It feels strange, doesn’t it?” he wondered. “Sitting here mildly, not wondering about the next battle or about supply lines and gemstone reserves?”

“Our battles are hardly finished, uncle,” Jasnah said. “Sometimes I wonder if the worst isn’t yet to come.”

Lord Dalener raised an eyebrow, but Aredor just smirked. “My dear cousin,” the boy noted, “don’t you *always* think the worst is yet to come?”

Jasnah ignored him. “The queen’s recent activity in court is a cause for apprehension,” she said.

“I’m not sure, Jasnah,” Dalener said. “I was wary of her before, when we were in Prallah, but I have been pleased by the devotion she now shows the king. We always worried that she would never grow to fulfil her role as Elhokar’s wife. Perhaps we should be heartened by her newfound interest in politics.”

“Not if she is going about things the wrong way,” Jasnah said. “Mock my sensitivities if you must, Aredor, but it must be said that the woman is not trustworthy.”

“She is our queen,” Dalener said, hinting that the conversation bordered on disrespect.

Jasnah waved her hand dismissively. “I care nothing for pleasantries of courtly language right now, Uncle,” she said. “I care about keeping my brother’s throne secure. If this woman cannot do that, then someone else needs to look after him.”

Dalener sat quietly for a moment, holding his bronze mug. “You need to let him go sometime, Jasnah,” he said quietly. “Eventually you’ll have to move on, marry, and let the boy’s wife care for him. As I said, she does seem to have genuine affection for Elhokar, and she seems to take her duties seriously now. She might see you as a threat to her power—but then, she probably has good reason to do so.”

Jasnah bristled slightly, but then she relaxed. “I know, Uncle,” she finally agreed. “But I can’t let him go yet. Things are too dangerous. Prallah was long and tiring, but there was never any real worry that we would lose the campaign. What looms over us now could destroy Alethkar.”

The conversation fell still, the only sounds those of servants preparing their meal in the background.

“You mean civil war,” the young boy Merin offered. “You’re worried about the other *Parshen*, Jezenrosh.”

Shinri eyed the boy. She had assumed he would be too intimidated to offer anything during the conversation, but apparently he was a bit more brazen than she thought. *He pulled a Shardbearer off of his horse*, she reminded herself. *He rescued the king when all of the other soldiers were running. Those are not the actions of a coward.*

Still, he probably shouldn’t have spoken. Despite his Shardblade, Merin was still a youth. This conversation was between Dalenar and Jasnah, with Aredor’s council being suffered because he was a full adult. Merin might be brave, but he obviously still had little understanding of courtly etiquette.

“I doubt it will be anything that dramatic,” Jasnah said. “But it doesn’t take a war to destroy the soul of a kingdom. Jezenrosh is poisoning the nobility against my brother, and without my connections in court I cannot determine his level of success. I worry he will divide the people against their king.”

“You can’t think that he wants the throne for himself,” Aredor said.

“I don’t know,” Jasnah said. For a moment, Shinri thought she might reveal what Balenmar had said about the faceless Shardbearer, but Jasnah kept these speculations to herself. “The man is far too solitary—no one knows what he wants.”

“I got to know him a little bit during the war,” Aredor said. “I don’t know, Jasnah. He likes to complain, but I don’t think he’d try and overthrow the king.”

“Do you know what happened?” Jasnah asked. “That night before Jezenrosh left the war? Do you know what he and my brother argued about?”

Aredor paused, then shook his head. “No.”

Dalenar shook his head as well. “I asked Elhokar, but he didn’t wish to speak of it . . . and you know that boy’s temper.” He sighed, shaking his head. “You’re right, Jasnah. The queen could have picked a better time to begin asserting herself, eh?”

“Definitely,” Jasnah replied. “She’s locked me out of nearly every source of courtly information. To be honest, Uncle, I don’t share your confidence that she has my brother’s interests in her heart. I’ve been studying the kingdom’s expense ledgers recently.”

Dalener raised an eyebrow. “How did you talk her into letting you see them?”

Jasnah just smiled. “Anyway, the queen has made some very strange expenditures during our absence. She’s unduly interested in the emerald trade, for one thing. In addition, I’m convinced she’s been intentionally aggravating Jezenrosh and his allies. She’s learned to manipulate the royal funds, tariffs, and work projects far too well. She’s brought several houses to near-ruin, and, given time, she could probably do the same to Jezenrosh himself.”

Dalener accepted this information with the solemnity it demanded. He had a clever mind for politics, despite being a man, and could see the shadowed implications of Jasnah’s statement. Unfortunately, shadows were all they had. If the queen really were provoking Jezenrosh, what did it mean? Was she foolishly snapping at the man she saw as her husband’s enemy? That would be the act of an inexperienced woman who thought herself doing what her station demanded, and it seemed to fit. Yet, the queen’s recent political insight made one wonder if she had more subtle motivations.

Shinri picked at the intricate sitting cloth as she sat, pulling a string free and marring its pattern, destroying its arrogant perfection. What was the queen’s pattern? This one question had monopolized Jasnah’s worries over the last few weeks, and therefore had done the same to Shinri. She and her mistress had discussed the question at length—it wasn’t Shinri’s place to speak now, while Jasnah conferred with Dalener, but she had given her opinions before. The queen was not to be trusted, perhaps, but Shinri saw her as Dalener did—not vengeful or evil, but simply as a woman trying to secure her power against the domineering threat of the great Lady Jasnah. It was inconvenient that her flexing should come now, when Jezenrosh threatened, but she was hardly worth the concern Jasnah gave her.

Eyes were on Shinri. She didn’t look up, but she knew that Renarin was watching her again. *What is wrong with that boy?* she thought uncomfortably.

“But,” Jasnah suddenly declared, “I bore you with female politics. Tell me of your progress, Lord Dalener. What have you discovered about the attack in Prallah?”

“Blessed little,” Dalener replied. “That kingdom would have collapsed soon with or without our help. The southern and eastern borders are still chaos—not helped by the king’s instance on withdrawing the greater portion of our troops. I agree that the men need rest—many of them are

rural volunteers who need to get back to their crops—but he should leave a larger portion of the regulars in Prallah to secure the border. I . . .”

Dalena trailed off as a messenger bearing Elhokar’s sunburst *khól* glyph approached. The *Parshen* waved him forward, but the messenger didn’t approach Dalena, instead giving Jasnah a whispered message. Shinri was close enough to catch a few words—one of which sounded a lot like ‘madman.’

“What is it?” Dalena asked as Jasnah waved the messenger away.

“A very large annoyance,” Jasnah said with a displeased frown. “One my brother is amused to let me keep oath regarding.”

Dalena raised an eyebrow.

“The madman who interrupted our return feast,” Jasnah explained. “He has an undeniable talent for creating disturbances, and for pulling me away from important conferences. There is still much to discuss.” She paused, turning an eye toward Shinri.

The look was obvious. Kemnar was out searching his ‘sources’ for information about Jezenrosh, and Nelshenden was guarding Jasnah’s mother. Assuming that Jasnah wished to remain in Kholinar, that only left one person to go in her place.

“You want me to take care of it, my lady?” Shinri asked.

“Apparently he’s taken to preaching in the market square,” Jasnah said. “Take some of my guards and see if you can’t make him go back to his monastery peacefully. If you have any problems, send me a messenger.”

Shinri nodded, rising and waving a servant to bring her horse.

“Aredor, Merin, accompany her,” Dalena ordered. “See that the Lady Shinri comes to no harm.”

Shinri flushed. “That’s hardly necessary, my lord.”

“I insist,” Dalena asserted, and there was nothing left to say. One did not argue with Dalena Kholin.

“SO, IT’S JUST ONE MAN?” the boy, Merin, asked. “The king sent a messenger all the way to Kholinar expecting Lady Jasnah to return to the capital and deal with a single crazy man? Isn’t that a little frivolous?”

Shinri glanced through the curtains to where Merin and Aredor walked beside her litter. The young Shardbearer spoke bluntly, displaying his obvious lack of understanding. While Dalena and Jasnah might be able to question the king’s motives, it was not for a simple boy like Merin to do likewise.

Aredor, unfortunately, was little better. He didn't chastise Merin, or even pull the boy aside to explain his error. Dalenar's second son had never needed to pay much attention to what should and shouldn't be said—indeed, the affable man probably wouldn't have cared anyway. Regardless, his station as Dalenar's heir made him put him above most courtgoers.

"The king is a busy man," Shinri said simply.

"Yes, but surely he could have sent some soldiers to deal with the disturbance," Merin said with a frown. "I mean, sending for Jasnah took just as much effort, right? And now the problem continues while we travel through the Oathgate and down into the city."

Shinri sighed quietly. She couldn't, of course, explain that the move had been done to intentionally annoy Jasnah. Though the king probably didn't understand most of the implications of Jasnah's move during the feast, he was smart enough to understand that he had been manipulated. He had wanted to execute the madman, and Jasnah had diverted him. Though Elhokar could always pass off his forbearance by claiming he was simply suffering his sister, King Elhokar could be a spiteful man. He had said that the madman was Jasnah's responsibility. He would make certain to remind her of the foolishness of her decision.

When Shinri didn't respond, Merin looked to Aredor for an explanation, but Dalenar's heir simply shrugged. Merin frowned. He was a brooding, serious-eyed boy—not at all what she would have expected from a rural citizen. He carried his Shardblade with a reverence that bespoke an awareness of his high calling, even if he didn't yet understand all of its implications. He held the Blade up, resting it on his shoulder as he walked, the blade itself—and any budding designs it held—masked by his metal practice sheath.

"That cloak doesn't fit you," Shinri noted curiously.

Merin looked up, then flushed slightly. He wore blue and white nobleman's seasilks, modest in coloring and embroidery. The only striking article in the ensemble was the rich blue cloak, deep in color and emblazoned with Dalenar's glyph—a sharp-lined *khol* set in the shape of a shield. The cloak, however, was too broad for Merin. The length had been hemmed, and while it didn't fit poorly, it obviously hadn't been originally tailored for him.

Aredor laughed at her comment. "I told you it was noticeable," the older boy said. "I kept telling him he should have another one tailored."

"Lord Dalenar gave this one to me," Merin said simply.

"In a symbolic gesture, Merin," Aredor explained. "You don't actually have to wear the cloak, especially not everywhere you go. Besides, it's a

cold-weather cloak, meant to be worn in the highlands. It's far too thick to be comfortable here in the lair."

Merin shrugged. "It feels fine to me."

Shinri smiled. Men's emotions were so obvious. There was a resolve in Merin's eyes, one that hinted that he would wear the cloak no matter how hot it became. The garment was important to Merin, probably because Dalenar had given it to him. There was a simple honesty to the action—a firmness. *No wonder Dalenar likes the boy*, Shinri thought. *The two are remarkably similar, considering their backgrounds.*

The scenery outside slowly changed from rich houses into more mundane shops. Though the streets in Ral Eram were never empty, they were even busier here, and her litter-bearers had to slow to make their way through the traffic. People gave both litter and Shardbearers moderate space, however, so the movement wasn't difficult. Shinri picked idly at the threads in her litter curtains—she had quite nearly removed the golden embroidery from one entire section before they arrived at the specified location.

And there he was. He stood on one of the sculpted square boulders that marked the corner of the intersection. Shinri's litter bearers stopped, but she didn't knock for them to put her down, instead enjoying her vantage as she looked over the crowd toward the madman. Not that she really needed the view—his voice was audible even over the mumblings of the market-goers.

He shouted brazenly, standing with a self-assurance few sane men could boast. He wore the same simple clothing as before, in the library, but he displayed none of his earlier tranquillity. He bellowed warnings relating to the coming of the Return and the danger of the Stormshades. He didn't break or pause in his announcements, regardless of hecklers. He spoke with passion and . . . a sense of authenticity.

Shinri smiled despite herself. Here was the ultimate pebble thrown on a polished floor, the epitome of pulled threads and spilled tea. Though the people tried to ignore him—citizens in their browns, merchants in their colors, ladies in their litters, and lords with their retinues—Shinri could see that their efforts were only for show. Here was a man who could not be ignored. He marred their perfection. He was the reflection of a man broken, his mind and decorum lost. And yet, within that fallen state, he was somehow more genuine than they.

"You know," Aredor noted with a smile, "if I were to go insane, I hope I'd end up preaching the apocalypse on some street corner like this fellow. If you're going to go mad, you might as well have some fun with it, eh?"

Merin snorted. "If you're going to run off and go mad, kindly do it soon so we can be rid of you." The young Shardbearer squinted, studying the madman. "Shouldn't someone be taking care of him? I mean, besides Lady Jasnah?"

"He's in the care of the Mercyhome monks," Shinri explained. "There's one with him now, sitting by the rock. I . . . think he's dozing."

Merin's frown deepened.

"I don't think they assigned him the most honorable of monks," Shinri added.

"The madman really thinks he's a Herald?" Merin asked, listening to the man's rantings.

"Apparently," Shinri said. "You were at the feast, weren't you? You heard what he said there."

Merin nodded. "It's just that . . . what he says is blasphemy. We should quiet him before the priests hear. They wouldn't be pleased."

"Priests?" Shinri asked. "You mean the Elinrah?" She snorted. "They'd probably be happy for the publicity."

Merin's expression darkened.

Careful, Shinri, she reminded herself. This isn't a normal nobleman. He grew up in a small village. He probably believes Elinrah—he probably doesn't even know the difference between it and regular Vorinism.

She knocked for her bearers to set down the litter, then climbed out into the crowd. Despite her shorter height, she could still see the madman's form standing upon his rock.

"Come on," Shinri said, stepping forward. Jasnah's four guards moved in around her, making a path through the crowd. She approached the madman's rock apprehensively, and she had to admit that having two Shardbearers with her was a nice comfort. The madman noticed her approach, but did not stop his yelling.

Shinri paused a short distance from his rock. Merin and Aredor were tense—they likely remembered how this man had acted at the feast, when his eyes and actions had been so wild. Yet he had seemed so peaceful when she had seen him in the library.

But, that's what madness is, isn't it? Unpredictability.

Aredor nodded to the soldiers. Despite his leisurely attitude, he was well known for his dueling ability, and Jasnah had spoken of his effectiveness on the battlefield. He turned toward Shinri, speaking in a low voice. "I can take care of this if you wish, Shinri."

"No," Shinri said. "I want to speak to him first. Please, stay here." She

took a few hesitant steps forward, stopping just before the rock. Merin moved to accompany her, but Aredor laid a hand on his shoulder, allowing Shinri the space she wished to accomplish her task.

Assuming I can get his attention. It turned out that she didn't need to. Once the madman finished his latest round of apocalyptic warnings, he turned toward her, smiled, and seated himself.

Shocked at the sudden change in his demeanor, Shinri stood quietly for a moment.

"I recognize you," the madman said, reaching for a water pouch and wiping the sweat from his brow. "You were with the Lady Jasnah Kholin the other day, in the library."

"I'm her ward," Shinri explained.

"Ah," the madman said with a nod. "Who are the swords behind you?"

Shinri glanced backward, to where Aredor and Merin watched uncertainly. "Lords Aredor and Merin Kholin," Shinri explained.

"Kholin?" he noted. "Brothers to the king?"

"No," Shinri said. "Cousins—or, at least, Aredor is. Merin was granted his surname by title."

The madman nodded. He was so . . . well-exercised for a lunatic. His body was muscled and brawny enough to make both Dalenar and Merin look inferior by comparison; had he been a soldier before madness took him, perhaps?

"They look as if they're certain I'll attack you at any moment," the madman said with amusement. "Though, I suppose after my display the other day, they have a right to be hesitant."

Shinri nodded, feeling foolish. How did one speak to a man who now acted so normally, yet who had been ranting insanely just moments ago? "It seems that . . ." *It seems that what? That you're still insane?* "It seems that you have decided to try a different tactic."

The madman snorted quietly, taking another swig from the waterbag. "I thought I'd give it a try. I haven't ever really had to do it this way before—most of the time, people just believe me when I tell them who I am. Of course, most of those times came during the days of the Epoch Kingdoms, when our Returns were expected." He looked over the crowd, eyes solemn. "This method isn't working very well, I'm afraid. I seem to recall that streetside preaching is what the prophets always do in the ballads. I've never been much of an orator, though. I think I'm enhancing my reputation for madness more than I am my reputation as a Herald."

Shinri smiled. "Lady Jasnah sent me to ask you to stop."

"She didn't come herself," he noted. "Next time perhaps I'll have to find something that makes a bit more of a disturbance."

Shinri paused, studying the madman's eyes. *So lucid*, she thought again. "You wanted her to come. You did this on purpose."

"Of course I did it on purpose," the madman said with a smile. "You think a man stands himself on a rock and screams at passersby by accident? These people need to be warned of what is coming. The probability of your Lady Jasnah visiting sometime during my speech was a side-benefit."

"But why?"

"Because I am led to understand that I am under her care," the madman explained. "And that means she is my strongest connection to the nobility. Unfortunately, the palace guards are watching for me now, since I slipped by and got into your library, and won't let me in to seek her out. That means I need to coax her out to see me. You don't know if she's managed to get my sword back for me, do you?"

I doubt she's given it a passing thought. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

The madman nodded. "Why don't you give her a message for me? I'll promise to stop my preaching here in the market if she'll tell the guards to let me pass."

"I doubt she'll do that," Shinri said immediately. "But if you wish to visit her, we might be able to arrange an escort to bring you to her audience chamber. Stop making a disturbance—you said it wasn't very effective anyway—and I'll send a messenger to you once I get specifics from Lady Jasnah."

The madman smiled. "She's trained you well," he noted. "You're very young to understand how to make a promise without giving anything up."

Jasnah would have been disappointed to see Shinri blush so openly.

"You have an accent," the madman noted. "Not from Alethkar, I assume?"

"I come from Jah Keved," she said.

"The same as the king's wife," the madman said. "A relative of yours?"

"No," Shinri said. "We're of different houses, but we came here as part of the same treaty."

The madman nodded. "You're what . . . fifteen?"

"Seventeen," Shinri snapped.

"Forgive me. It's been a very, *very* long time. What do you think of your mistress? I've heard much said of her, but nothing from one that actually knows her."

"She is a brilliant politician and a skillful teacher," Shinri said simply,

withdrawing slightly. She had already answered far too many of his questions.

“Ah, and now you look more like her,” he said cryptically. “She is a strange woman, this Lady Jasnah. Everyone agrees on that fact. As you’ve noted, my understanding of people’s ages has been thrown off a bit by the millennia; however, isn’t it thought odd that she remains unmarried at her age?”

Unmarried. The word brought back unconscious thoughts of Tethren. She dismissed them immediately, but not quickly enough, for she found the madman regarding her with discerning eyes.

“What?” he asked. “You have someone of your own, young Veden ward of the Lady Jasnah? Someone who brings you pain?”

“It is unimportant,” Shinri said coldly.

“I see,” the madman responded. “He left you? Or is it something worse?”

“Why should I discuss such things with you?” she said.

“You probably shouldn’t,” he admitted. “Madmen are terrible at keeping secrets.” He winked at her, drinking the rest of his water with a deep swig.

Shinri paused. “You’re not what I expected,” she finally admitted.

The madman smiled. “You know, people tend to tell me that a lot—no matter what Epoch it happens to be. But discussing my history would have little point, since you will probably take it all to be the ramblings of a madman. What of you? Who is Shinri of the House Davar?”

Instantly suspicious, Shinri studied his honest eyes, trying to delve his intent. “Shinri Davar is a woman of little consequence,” she said. “A simple messenger.”

“The ward to the king’s sister can hardly be a person of little consequence,” the madman replied. “And a simple messenger would not be granted the protection of two Shardbearers.”

You may be insane, madman, Shinri thought, *but you’re still clever.* Suddenly the conversation’s direction made sense. He had said that his only connection to the court was Lady Jasnah, but he was trying to expand his options.

“All right,” she admitted. “I’m of more consequence than some. However, important connections or not, I’m far too irrelevant to get your sword back for you.”

Taln snorted. “Did your mistress teach you to be so suspicious, or does it just come naturally to modern Rosharan women?”

“Deny that your entire point in speaking to me is to get your sword back,” Shinri said.

The madman shrugged affably. "One can never have too many friends in any noble court, Lady Shinri Davar," he said. "Even mildly irrelevant ones."

Shinri stared him a challenge. His eyes, however, were just so honest—and strangely innocent. *That proves your insanity, madman. No man who claims to be thousands of years old could possibly seem so innocent.*

"I promise not to ask you to get my sword for me," the madman offered. "I'm still curious about you, however. There is so much I do not know, Lady Shinri. What treaty is it that brought you to be Lady Jasnah's ward? Why do people speak of your mistress with such awe and such derision at the same time? Who is this woman you serve, and why does her soul seem so tired?"

Why, it's not me at all, Shinri realized, and almost laughed to herself in startlement. *It's Jasnah you are interested in.* Were demigods allowed to get that look in their eyes when they spoke of a woman? Shinri suspected not.

She covered her smile—he probably didn't even realize it himself. But, self-aware or not, she could only bid him one bit of mental advice. *Good luck, madman. Men of sounder mind than you have been crushed by that particular stone.*

"It is not my place to speak of my mistress, citizen," she said. "Etiquette forbids."

"Then what of the treaty you mentioned?" he prodded.

"It was designed by Lady Jasnah," Shinri explained. "Three years ago, just after the old king's death. In order to stabilize her brother's throne, she negotiated a treaty with Jah Keved—the kingdom directly to the south."

"Formerly Vedenar," the madman said. "During the last Epoch, there was a . . . friendly rivalry between Vedenar and Alethkar."

"Hmm," Shinri noted. "What a pleasantly descriptive understatement. Anyway, Lady Jasnah's treaty standardized the southern border, gave favored trading status to Jah Keved, and brought Lady Nanavah Veden north to be the king's wife. She's sister to King Ahven of Jah Keved, you know. I was delivered to Alethkar. In one move, two of the Great Houses were tied to the Aleth royal line."

"And the third?" the madman asked.

"Rienar?" Shinri asked. "It was secured by arranging a marriage treaty between myself and . . ." She paused, realizing what she was saying. *Between myself and a prince of the Reinan line. Tethren Reinan.*

The madman must have noted the sadness in her eyes. "You don't approve of the union?" he guessed.

Give him nothing, Lady Jasnah's training whispered in her mind. "Of

course I approved,” Shinri said calmly. “Tethren Rienar was an honorable and kindly man, and a very powerful man.”

“Was?” the madman asked.

Shinri gritted her teeth in annoyance at the mistake. *It wasn't like you could keep it from him*, she told herself. *Tethren's death is now commonly announced. The madman could ask anyone with half an eye for politics and get the truth.*

“Prince Tethren’s ship sank in a highstorm on its way to Thalenah several weeks before,” she explained in her political voice.

The madman cocked his head. “Does that happen often?” he asked. “Don’t you have charts to predict the coming of the storms?”

“We have stormkeepers,” Shinri said. “They keep track of such things.”

“Then wouldn’t the ship have gotten to shelter before the storm hit?” he asked. “During previous Epochs men were wise enough to seek port when a strong highstorm was near.”

You think I haven't considered that? she thought. But . . . she hadn’t. It was something Jasnah would have been suspicious of immediately, but Shinri hadn’t given the oddity a second thought. It was definitely strange for a common mercantile convoy to let itself be trapped out during a highstorm. Usually, summer sailing was arranged so that one could be in port when the more furious highstorms hit. Only a trip to Thalenah or Shinavar would require leaving the coast, and both destinations could easily be reached between storms. For a ship to risk an open-ocean storm, rather than waiting a few days for an open window . . . its leader would have to be foolish.

Or in a very great hurry.

“I’m sorry,” the madman said. “The topic must bring you pain. It’s just that there is so much to learn—this time even more than the others, since the Epoch Kingdoms have fallen. What are these stormkeepers you mention? Mystics?”

“Hardly,” Shinri said with a snort, glad to leave the topic of Tethren’s death. “They are scientists, trained in Thalenah at the New House.”

“The New House?”

“The House of Truths, in Prallah, was . . . lost during the Oathshard wars,” Shinri explained. “The stormkeepers, however, trace their lines back to scholars who were serving in royal courts when their homeland was razed. They formed the New House to replace their old institution, moving it to Thalenah—which was the most stable kingdom during the Oathshard days. You should ask Lady Jasnah if you want to know more—she studied in Thalenah when she was younger.”

Of course, she added, so did I. I just didn't bring much back from the experience . . . except maybe the enmity of a couple tensets of stormkeepers.

"I see," the madman said. He stood, bowing slightly to her. "I'll take your offer then, Lady Shinri. I promise to stop preaching here, and you will get me in to see your mistress. I really need to speak with the Lady Jasnah again; she struck me as an impressive woman when we spoke."

Shinri smiled. *Impressive?* she thought. *What a pleasantly descriptive understatement.*

chapter 17

MERIN 4

MERIN STOOD PERCHED on the side of the stone wall, looking down. Kholinar's walls were lofty and thick. Their sides smoothed by the drippings of winter storms, the wall's blocks seemed to have melded together—almost as if the structure were formed of a single, massive stone. The rock was dark, the color of corm buildup and winter lichens—similar to the buildings of Merin's home village. Unlike many of Kholinar's buildings, the walls could not be scrubbed clean or whitewashed. However, the unrefined look felt right—it made the walls seem more like a natural force than a man-made barrier.

Merin took a breath, then jumped off the side.

He had chosen a lower section of the wall—one of the shorter side bastions that ran parallel to the main structure. Even still, it was a daunting distance to the ground, thirty or more feet. Merin plummeted like a boulder. He tried to keep his eyes open as he fell, watching the ground approach. His feet slammed against it, the weight of his Shardplate throwing up chips of broken stone. He stumbled slightly, falling back against the wall and steadying himself.

He took a couple of deep breaths. Even after several tenset repetitions, jumping off the wall still unnerved him. Experience had proven that the fall would not hurt—though the impact shook a little, it was manageable. Still, there was something unsettling about falling from such a height.

Merin sighed, heaving himself away from the wall's support to begin jogging back up the wall's steps. *Only sixty more to go . . .*

When he reached the top again, he was surprised to see Aredor waiting for him. Dalenar's heir wore his customary well-tailored outfit, and stood leisurely with his back resting against the battlement. "My older brother once visited Shinavar," he noted. "He said that there were animals there that could fly—strange, colorful creatures, some as large as a pig. I do not think, however, that they gained the ability through sheer force of repetition."

Merin snorted, walking over to his jump-point, looking over the edge. A cool breeze was blowing, though the day was hot. Summer had almost reached The Searing, the forty-day stretch at its center when rain was scarce. The Searing was broken by only a single highstorm at its center—The Almighty's Bellow, the most furious storm of the year.

Merin turned back to Aredor, removing his helmet and wiping his brow. "Vasher told me to jump off the wall a hundred times," he explained.

Aredor raised an amused eyebrow. "Ordering you to eat in your armor for a week wasn't enough for him, eh?"

"Apparently not," Merin replied, shivering slightly at the memory of wearing his Shardplate to evening meals at Dalenar's palace. Visiting lords had given him some very odd looks, but had received no end of mirth from the experience once Aredor filled them in.

"A hundred times, eh?" Aredor said. "What number are you on?"

"Forty-one," Merin said.

Aredor grimaced. "You've been at it for several hours already!"

"It takes time to get up those steps," Merin said.

Aredor just shook his head. Merin could see the amusement in his eyes, however.

"I know," Merin grumbled. "I should have chosen one of the masters you picked for me."

"Oh, I would never gloat over a friend's misfortune," Aredor said.

"I'm sure."

"I'm certain Brother Vasher knows what he's doing," Aredor said. "Why, if you keep at it, he might actually let you fight with a sword."

Merin snorted, and threw himself off the top of the wall again. The uncoordinated jump, however, flung him off-balance, and he dropped on his side, crashing to the ground in an unceremonious clang.

With the hard landing, it happened again—just like the first time he had put on the armor, and several times after. The air around Merin changed, becoming viscous to his sight, patterns forming and flowing. The air was

still transparent, yet keenly discernible to him—like the waves of heat rising above flames.

Merin sat, stunned for a moment. The Shardplate had cushioned his fall, leaving him a little dazed—but that was not why he remained motionless. He still had no explanation for why the armor changed his sight—Aredor seemed befuddled, and Renarin said he'd rarely worn Shardplate. However, every time it happened, it lasted briefly. Any motion disturbed the experience, ending the surreal moment.

He did not want it to end. There was something . . . transfixing about the motions in the air. The patterns were not random—they moved with the air. In fact, it was almost as if he could see the wind itself, flowing around him, pushed by people who passed, falling in currents beside the wall's shadow, only to rise again when it reached sunlight. The air seemed to whisper to him, drawing him to it, embracing him . . .

Almost reflexively, he reached upward with a gauntleted hand. The experience ended as suddenly as it had come, plunging him back into normality. He lay, dazed, on the stones below the wall. Above, he could barely make out Aredor's concerned face, looking down at him.

Merin sighed, heaving himself to his feet to show that he was unharmed. Several minutes later, he puffed his way to the top of the wall again. The armor might increase his strength, but it was still difficult to make the climb over and over again.

"That was quite a jump," Aredor noted.

"Are you here for a reason?" Merin asked. "Or did you just come to mock me?"

"Oh, mocking, mostly," Aredor said with a yawn. "You know, you look like you could use a break. Why don't you leave the rest of your . . . training for tomorrow?"

Merin glanced over the side of the wall. He had a dueling session with Vasher in another hour or so. It probably wouldn't be a good idea to arrive fatigued from the jumping—the monk's training was hard enough as it was.

"All right," Merin said. "Let's go get something to eat."

"THEY SAID THEY WERE too busy with the harvest," Merin said as he, Aredor, and Renarin made their way toward Shieldhome for evening sparring. "Or, at least, that's what their letter said. The scribe says she copied down their words exactly, though."

Aredor frowned. "Why wouldn't your parents want to come to Kholinar? With a Shardbearer's stipend you could surely give them a better life here."

Merin shook his head. "It's . . . difficult to explain." His parents' words, while disappointing, had not been surprising. "My parents are . . . happy as farmers, Aredor. Stonemount is a tiny village. Its people have no concept of the difference between tributing lords, ranking lords, landed nobility, and unlanded nobility. They've heard of Shardbearers, but none of them really know what that means. To them, what I've become is . . . something strange, something that shouldn't affect one of their children. They do know that they have to get the harvest in, however, before the Searing arrives."

"Still seems strange," Aredor said. "You're their son. Don't they want to see you?"

Merin had visited once. Once their training as spearmen was completed, they had been allowed two months to visit their families before going off to Prallah. Even then, Merin's visit had been awkward. None of his brothers had traveled farther than the next two villages over. They had been fascinated by the stories he told, but reserved toward him. He had been . . . foreign. Merin remembered the awed hesitance he had seen in the eyes of his three friends that morning when he awoke to find himself a Shardbearer. He had no desire to see the same in the eyes of his parents.

"I'll visit them once summer is over," Merin said. "There's no hurry—I've been away for three years now."

They entered the monastery, where Aredor and Renarin split to walk toward the noblemen's side of the courtyard. Merin was still a little surprised that Renarin came to the monastery—he would have thought the duels would be too strong a reminder of the lost Shardblade. Renarin, however, didn't seem to mind—he and his brother spent many of their evening spars practicing with each other, using regular swords.

Something Merin still hadn't been allowed to do. He sighed, setting his Shardblade against the far wall where he could keep an eye on it, then removing his slippers. He wore training clothing—a sencoat and loose trousers, much like the outfits the monks wore, though his was noticeably finer in make.

Vasher stood with his monk companions, drinking from a water barrel. Several of the monks nodded to Merin as he joined them. During his time training with Vasher, Merin had begun to understand a little bit of the politics of the monastery. At first it seemed like the only stratification in the courtyard lay in the division between lords and citizens. However, there was a more subtle distinction—one among the monks themselves.

While most of the monks ate together, shared responsibilities of cleaning, and interacted with each other civilly, they always trained with the same group of men. The groups did not intermix on the sparring yard; they maintained strictly stratified cliques.

Vasher's group seemed to be near the bottom. All its men were about the same grizzled age. They were different from the calm-minded weapons masters that trained in other parts of the courtyard. Vasher's companions spoke less, and seemed to hide more within their troubled eyes. Most of them bore scars or other hints of battle. They were Oathgiven monks—men who had joined the monastery of their own will, after becoming adults. Merin wondered what it was these men wanted to escape, and whether the monastery provided the shelter they sought.

"How did the jumping go?" Vasher asked, lowering his ladle and wiping his mouth with a towel, then picking up his practice sword.

"I got about halfway done," Merin said.

Vasher nodded, waving for Merin to follow him toward an open patch of sand. "Show me your stance," he said once they arrived.

Merin fell into the dueling stance as he had been trained, hands held forward as if gripping a sword's hilt. Vasher walked around him, eyeing the stance with a critical eye. Eventually, he nodded. "Good," he said, tossing Merin the practice sword.

Merin smiled broadly, catching the wooden weapon. *Finally!* During the weeks of training, he had begun to desire the simple wooden blade with nearly the same zeal some men chased Shardblades. However, instead of power or title, the acceptance of this blade brought something else: validation.

Vasher walked over to the pile, picking through the practice weapons, acting as if nothing important had transpired. "Back into your stance!" he snapped, shooting a glance at Merin.

Merin did as ordered, falling into the stance, feeling the weight of the wooden sword in his hands. Regardless of its material, it was a fine weapon, well-weighted and sturdy, bearing the nicks and bruises of countless matches. It felt good.

Vasher approached—bearing, Merin noticed with interest, a long, hook-ended pole-arm instead of a sword. Rather than falling into a stance when he arrived, Vasher simply reached out with the weapon, hooked the back of Merin's leg, and flipped him off of his feet. Merin toppled to the sand with a surprised grunt.

"Up!" Vasher said. "Quickly. Into the stance!"

Merin scrambled up, sand trickling from his sencoat as he reassumed the stance.

“Not quickly enough,” Vasher said. “Again.” He hooked Merin’s leg with a quick gesture, throwing him to the sand again.

Merin did as commanded, this time making better time, jumping up and raising his sword as quickly as he could manage.

“Far too slow,” Vasher informed him. “I want you to fall down and get up a hundred times.”

Merin groaned, lowering the practice sword. “I thought that since I had a sword now, you’d actually let me spar,” he complained.

Vasher snorted. “I just didn’t want you to get too accustomed to the stance with the wrong weight in your hands,” he said. “Now go.”

Merin sighed, falling to the ground, then scrambling back up. Vasher stood back, nonchalantly leaning against the pole-arm and watching as Merin worked. Sweat-stained sand was plastered to Merin’s forehead by the time he finished. However, he could already see improvement. Now, instead of rising and then assuming the stance, he could nearly step right into it from the moment he began to rise.

As he finished his hundredth rise, Vasher suddenly attacked, jumping forward with his hooked weapon. He swung the polearm like a staff, coming at Merin with both ends swinging in a flurry of attacks.

Merin yelped, bringing up the practice sword to block what blows he could. Vasher’s fury pushed him back across the sand, forcing him to retreat.

“Maintain the stance!” Vasher snapped between blows. “It will think for you. All of your strikes flow from the stance, all of your motions are fluid within it. In the stance, you are *nolb*, free as air, flowing into the next attack. If you break the stance, you become *taln*, and stone cannot change shape. Even a rock can be broken with enough force or persistence. The wind, however, can never be defeated.”

Merin tried to do as commanded, tried to keep his feet positioned as he had been taught, tried to step in the motions he had repeated hundreds of times. Even with the confusion of Vasher’s attacks, however, he could immediately see the truth of the monk’s words. When he didn’t misstep, when he managed to keep his sword placed in one of the five defensive positions, his body seemed to move without thought. The parries and retreats he had been taught came naturally, and Vasher’s blinding strikes were somehow blocked. However, when Merin misstepped, stumbled, or lost his focus for just a moment, a tenset blows seemed to strike his skin.

Vasher stopped eventually, and Merin tumbled backward, stumbling and

dropping to the sand, the practice sword falling from nearly-numb fingers. He sat in the sand for a moment, gasping for breath.

Vasher planted the staff's end in the sand and extended a hand, pulling Merin to his feet. "Go get something to drink," he said.

Merin nodded thankfully, jogging over to the water barrel and grabbing a ladle. He drank thankfully, but sparingly. He probably didn't need to be so frugal with water—not here, in Kholinar, with its river and its lushness. However, his instincts still told him it was summer—back in Stonemount, water would be scarce until the fall highstorms began to pick up.

As he drank, Merin glanced across the courtyard, toward the sparring noblemen. Aredor and Renarin were there, as was Meridas and several of the other men Merin knew from the court. Apparently, many noblemen from Ral Eram came to Kholinar to train with Shieldhome's respected master monks.

"I can't help wondering if I should join those noblemen, Vasher," Merin noted as his teacher approached. "When I was a spearman, the captains always emphasized how important it was to know the men you were fighting with, so you could trust them. How can I be expected to defend Alethkar in war if I don't have the camaraderie of the other lords?"

Vasher shook his head. "When you were a spearman, your life depended on your neighbor's ability to protect your flank. You're a Shardbearer now; you can depend on no one. Even on a battlefield of a hundred thousand men, you will fight alone."

"Yes, but shouldn't I at least spend a little time sparring with them?" Merin asked. "Seems like it would help me learn how to duel."

"I'm not teaching you how to duel," Vasher said.

"What?" Merin asked, turning with surprise.

"I'm teaching you how to fight," Vasher said.

"And the difference is?"

"One is contained in the other," the aging monk said, turning to walk back across the sand. "Go and get your arrow."

Merin sighed, putting away the ladle and walking over to the weapon pile to do as commanded. When he joined Vasher, the monk had retrieved a dark-colored sheath from the wall inside one of the rooms along the wall. The monk slid a bright steel sword from the sheath, its sheen reflecting the setting sun.

Vasher fell into his stance. "You wanted to spar?" he said. "Very well."

Merin stood hesitantly, looking down at his arrow, then back up at Vasher's sword. Its edge did not look dulled. "You have a very strange teaching style, old man," Merin informed him.

Vasher snorted. "Come on. Find the stance."

Merin sighed, doing as instructed, holding out the long arrow as if it were a sword. He had pulled off the fletchings long ago, and held it in one hand, as instructed by Vasher, but ready to use the second hand for power if necessary.

"This is the difference between dueling and fighting," Vasher explained, stepping forward to strike. Merin jumped backward reflexively, resisting the urge to use his arrow to parry.

"Your noble friends," Vasher continued, "can only fight one way, with one weapon. If they lose their Shardblades on the battlefield, they become useless. Disarm them, and you've won. A real warrior, however, depends on himself, not on his weapon." He struck again. Merin dodged backward, beginning to sweat. The sword stroke had passed far too close—did Vasher realize how dangerous his 'training' was becoming?

"You will study with the sword," Vasher said. "And you will use a Shardblade. It will become part of you, like a limb of your own flesh. Sometimes, however, limbs must be lost to save the life. If you get too accustomed to the Blade's lightness and power, it will become a crutch." He swung again; Merin dodged.

"Come on," Vasher chastised. "Fight me."

"If I try to parry, you'll just cut my weapon in half," Merin complained.

"Then find another way," Vasher challenged.

Merin continued to dodge, gritting his teeth. Each swipe was more frustrating, and Vasher's comments began to sound like taunts. How did the man expect him to fight? This wasn't a spar—it was a ridiculous farce.

Finally, Merin could stand it no longer. Vasher swung, and Merin struck, desperately lunging forward, driving the point of his arrow toward the man's chest. The monk easily flipped his sword around, shearing the front off the arrow. Then he kicked, sweeping Merin's feet out from under him and throwing him to the sand yet again. When his vision cleared, Vasher stood above him, sword placed against Merin's neck.

"I want you to remember this," Vasher said. "This is how every Shardless opponent will feel when he must face you. After a time, you will begin to think you're invincible. But remember this feeling—the feeling that drove you to attack an expert swordsman with nothing but an arrow. That frustration, that hopelessness, drives men to recklessness and heroism. Perhaps, if the man you killed had remembered that, you would be dead and Alethkar would be part of Pralir, rather than the other way around."

Vasher extended a hand, helping Merin to his feet. He nodded toward

Aredor and the other noblemen. “They like to pretend that their duels are fair—they contrive ways to make them balanced. But no fight is ever balanced, Merin. One man is always better trained or better equipped. Some day, you will have to defend your life with a sick stomach, or with a dire thirst, or even after some woman has spurned you. It will never be fair. Honor and Protocol are fine ideals, but at the end of the fight, the one is still alive usually gets to decide who was the more honorable. When you fight, you need to use every advantage you have. Understand?”

Merin nodded, reaching down to pick the arrowhead up off the ground so that no one would step on it.

“Good,” Vasher said. “Now go jump off the wall some more.”

chapter 18

TALN 4

“**Y**OU’RE GOING TO GET me into trouble again, aren’t you?” Lhan said flatly.

Taln ignored the monk, instead studying the approaching monastery. At first, he’d been shocked at the changes he’d found in Roshar since the last Return, but he was slowly beginning to realize that the similarities were even more striking. Over the centuries his sense of the passage of time had dulled somewhat, but even for him a thousand years was a weighty period. Yet Spearhome monastery—and most of Ral Eram’s other structures—stood as they had during the times of the Epoch kingdoms. True, they were a little worn—the constant battering of highstorms, even within the protection of the city walls, had weathered stone and forced some replacements to be made. Cromstone, formed through the drippings of uncountable winter drizzles, had formed crusts and stalactites down the sides of less-cared-for walls, giving the city a more organic look. Still, it was amazing in its consistency with his memory.

“I’ve never gotten you into trouble,” Taln finally told Lhan said as the two walked down the street toward the monastery.

“Oh?” Lhan asked. “Sneaking into the palace libraries? Getting Lady Jasnah angry with me? That doesn’t count as getting me into trouble?”

"If I wasn't supposed to go in there," Taln said, "then you should have stopped me."

"You didn't tell me you were intent on the royal libraries," Lhan said. "Do you have any idea how much trouble you made? And that stunt on the street corner. Honestly, did you really think that would accomplish anything?"

Taln smiled lightly. "I can't be expected to understand the ways of your culture—I've been gone for a thousand years. Besides, I'm crazy."

Lhan raised an eyebrow. He did not, however, make any move to stop Taln from approaching the monastery. During the past few weeks, Taln had grown increasingly curious about his strange babysitter. The monks appeared to have selected the most apathetic member in their ranks to guard Taln. Lhan certainly enjoyed complaining, but he didn't really seem to mind getting into trouble. In fact, Taln got the sense that Lhan enjoyed it. Each time Taln did something that walked against the wind—such as his visit to the library, or his continuing refusal to go work in the mines—Lhan got a subtle revenge on the monastery leaders.

Revenge for what, Taln had yet to determine. He was still somewhat confused at how a servant of the Almighty could grow so bitter.

Spearhome monastery was run by the order of Khonra, the "Path of War." Taln could remember a time before the rise of the four monastic orders—however, even then, some monasteries had specialized more than others, and many of those had turned their attention toward the arts of warfare. Vorinism had been devised by Ishar, the spiritual leader of the Heralds, not just as a way for men to worship the Almighty. Its most solemn duty had been to prepare men for the coming of the Khothen. As such, a system for the training of common men in warfare had been vital.

Taln was pleased to find the monastery system still in effect, even if Vorinism had abandoned its hereditary duty of preparing for the Returns. Khonra monasteries felt very different from their cousins, and Spearhome was a prime example. Instead of the customary cluster of instruction buildings constructed around one grand hall, Spearhome was little more than a connection of four large courtyards. There were storage rooms and quarters for the monks ringing the walls, but the open training yards were obviously the focus of the complex.

"Now what?" Lhan asked as Taln paused just inside the monastery gates—a pair of massive wooden structures carved with tensets of intricate glyphs, most of them incarnations of *taln* or *khof*.

Taln scanned the courtyard. It was lined with sand to cushion falls, and

one side seemed dedicated to training swordsmen, while the other half focused on the spear. Taln's mouth downturned again as he noticed the spears. Even worse, he could see through one of the entry gates to another courtyard, where a group of men were practicing with the bow—another useless weapon against the Khothen.

"Do you have a plan, or are you simply going to stand there and look menacing?" Lhan asked.

"The Stormshades will be here in under a year," Taln explained. "I need to judge the martial capability of your people so I know what resources are at my brethren's command. You say that Alethkar is the most powerful of the existing kingdoms?"

Lhan shrugged. "Probably about equal with Jah Keved."

Taln nodded. "I remember seeing Shardblades at the feast. I presume, then, that Shaping is somehow still available to mankind, even if Epellion Sourcing has for some reason diminished?"

"Shaping?"

"The power by which Shardblades are crafted," Taln explained.

"Oh, we can't make them any more," Lhan said. "What we have now are all leftovers from the Epoch Kingdoms."

"How many Blades would you say the kingdoms have?"

Lhan shrugged. "Most important landowners—Sixth Lords or better—have one, and there are a fair number of unlanded Shardbearers as well. Maybe a hundred here in Alethkar—though we stole a good number of those from Pralir."

"That's a fair number, all things considered."

"Well, when you happen to have an indestructible magical sword that can cut through almost anything," Lhan noted, "you tend to keep track of where you put it."

"Didn't help me keep ahold of mine," Taln mumbled. "All right. I need to go spar with your warriors, see how good their training is, coax them into telling me what percentage of the civilian population is trained, find out how big the local military force is, discover what martial advancements in tactics and technology have been discovered during the last thousand years, and befriend both monks and soldiers to gain their trust so they accept my leadership when the time comes." He paused. "You might want to sit down—this could take a while."

"I'd avoid hurting any noblemen if I were you," Lhan said, sitting and leaning back in the shade to rest against the wall. "You are, by their

standards, just a citizen. Getting executed by a petulant lord with a broken arm would be a quick way to end your quest to save the world.”

“I’ll take that into advisement,” Taln said as he strolled toward the sparring swordsmen. Their dueling forms were unfamiliar to him—the stances and styles had apparently changed during his absence. However, he could still see the soul of the old Epoch Kingdom methods in their combat. He and the other Elin had encouraged the rise of dueling as a formalized art—through the tradition, the kingdoms had been able to relieve tension in a relatively harmless way, while at the same time honing their skills in preparation for the next Return.

Several of the groups stopped practicing as he approached, holding their weapons uncertainly as he kicked a wooden practice sword up off the pile and caught it with a deft motion. He fell into a stance, feeling the weight of the weapon in his palm and smiling at the familiar sensation.

“Who’s first?” he asked.

A few of the noblemen raised their weapons. Another, however, frowned. “Don’t I recognize you?” he asked, eyeing Taln. “What rank are you?”

“Unimportant,” Taln replied. “Let’s spar.”

“He’s the man from the feast!” one of the others cried. “See! He’s shaven, but I recognize that face!”

Taln cursed quietly as one of the younger men backed away, then dashed off to fetch the attention of the monastery masters. Taln had to move quickly. He selected a younger man in a fine seasilk training outfit who looked like he knew how to hold his sword. “You,” Taln said, facing the man. “Let’s see how you do.”

The man didn’t respond.

Taln stood for a second, then attacked. His feet kicked up sand as he spun forward, swinging his weapon. The man flinched, raising his arm and backing away, but did not raise his weapon. Taln stopped just short of hitting him.

“I think you are in the wrong place,” one of the older men said, his face dark.

Taln glanced to the side, noting the group of armed monks running his direction.

“I came to spar,” Taln said. “Is this not the place?”

The man snorted. “You hold that sword like you think you’re a Lord.”

Taln glanced down at the wooden sword. Dueling had always been dominated by the aristocracy—they could afford the finest blades, and

spend the time it took to practice. However, the sport was open to all classes—or, at least, it had been.

“I see,” Taln said, tossing aside the sword. “All right, then.” He walked over to the weapon pile, selecting a spear. It was blunted, the end was severely battered, and the weighting was poor—it was probably just used to train the swordsman how to attack a spearman. He picked the weapon up anyway.

“All right,” Taln said, falling into a fighting stance, the spear thrust forward. It had been a while since he’d used a polearm—he should probably take it easy at first. “I’ll take five of you at once.”

None of the men moved to challenge him—in fact, to a man they walked away, leaving him in his stance. Taln’s frown deepened, and he stood upright as the monks finally reached him. He held up a hand to forestall any comments.

“Let me guess,” he said. “It’s against their sense of ‘honor’ to duel with a common citizen.”

One of the monks nodded, and Taln sighed. They were all fighting men—the Order of Khonra obviously still took its duty of training both citizen and lord very seriously, and its members would all be expert warriors.

“Very well,” Taln said. “I’ll spar with one of you, then. I assume that will be allowed?”

“Certainly, traveler,” the lead monk said. His sword was still sheathed, but his hand rested carefully on its hilt. “Just register with the monastery and give proof of Eighth Citizen status, and we will be pleased to train you.”

Eighth Citizen status. Taln raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me for a moment, holy brothers,” Taln said, turning and stalking across the sand toward the entrance to the monastery. Lhan looked up with an innocuous smile as he approached.

“What are these citizenship levels they keep mentioning?” Taln asked.

“I was wondering if you were ever going to get around to asking that,” Lhan replied.

“And?” Taln prompted, planting the butt of the spear in the sand and standing expectantly.

“And you should know what they are,” Lhan said. “Didn’t you tell me you knew King Bajerden personally? Don’t tell me you never read *The Way of Kings*.”

“*The Way of Kings* was written after the Return was over,” Taln informed.

“However, I did read it during the next Return, long after Bajerden’s death. It speaks of levels for lords and cities, but says nothing of citizens.”

Lhan paused. “It doesn’t?” he asked.

Taln shook his head. “I’m quite certain.”

“Oh. Actually, I’ve never read it myself . . . I just always assumed . . . Well, anyway, citizenship ranks are the same as noble ranks. They don’t matter much, except that most people are Sixth Citizens, and you have to be at least a First Citizen if you want to marry into a noble house.”

Taln frowned. “And, I assume, you have to be an Eighth Citizen to train at the monastery?”

“You have to be one to train, or to join the military—or even hold a weapon, technically.” Lhan smiled, nodding toward Taln’s spear, then toward the group of increasingly hostile monks that stood a short distance behind him.

“You also aren’t supposed to leave the city,” Lhan added. “And you don’t count in the census—that’s to keep a lord from hiring a batch of mercenaries and moving them into town just before the census to inflate his numbers.”

“I see,” Taln said, turning slowly. There were seven monks, all armed—most with spears, but two with swords. None were practice weapons.

Taln dug his toes in the sand, getting a proper footing. Seven men, well-trained, and him with a poorly-weighted practice weapon . . . Perhaps they’d listen to him if he proved himself. Jezrien or Chanaral probably would have told him not to make a stir, but they didn’t understand soldiers like he did. Social mores aside, the best warrior always commanded respect. He lowered the weapon, preparing to attack.

“What is going on here?” a sharp feminine voice demanded from a short distance away.

Taln glanced quickly to the side, immediately suspicious of a diversionary tactic. That glance was enough to tell him the battle was over.

“Lady Kholin,” Taln said, standing upright and setting the spear aside. “That was quick.”

Jasnah Kholin sat in a luxurious litter suspended from the shoulders of four approaching bearers. The litter was draped with colorful seasilks, embroidered blue and red, the side toward him open and held back by two tiesstrings.

The inside of the litter was piled with plush cushions, but none of the softness seemed to have affected the lady’s eyes. She sat in one of the intricate restrictive dresses Taln had seen only among the nobility, green in color this

time, and her hair was pulled up in a complex half-braid half-bun, with two tails of black hair jetting fountain-like from the back of her head.

"You are becoming a very taxing problem, madman," Lady Jasnah informed as the bearers halted beside Taln.

"I apologize," Taln replied, regarding her musingly. "Is that outfit as uncomfortable as it appears?"

Jasnah raised an eyebrow, then nodded coolly for her bearers to set down the litter. She stepped out into the sand, her feet covered in seasilk slippers that matched her dress. "Walk a little ways with me, madman," she commanded, gliding out into the now-empty courtyard.

Taln did as requested, and the lady's guards followed them, standing just out of earshot. Jasnah stopped once they were a short distance from the monks and her bearers.

"What do you want?" she asked in a straightforward voice. "Shinri told me that you were making a stir just to get my attention. What can I do to make you stop being a nuisance?"

"She promised me an audience," Taln said.

"You're getting it now. What do you want?"

"Get my sword for me," Taln said.

"I can't do that," Jasnah said.

Taln shrugged. "You asked what I wanted, and I replied."

The lady's eyes narrowed. "Do you have any idea the chaos you are causing?" She asked. "People in the capital are growing restless. Most know you are mad, but there is an element that can be swayed by even the most foolish of claims. They are whispering that the Return has come, that apocalypse will follow."

"With all due respect, my lady," Taln said. "That's exactly the reaction I've been trying to generate."

"You foster chaos."

"I prepare for what must come."

Jasnah hissed slightly, her face controlled but frustration lurking just beneath.

"Lady Jasnah," Taln said gravely. "Have you wondered what would happen if I were right? All of Roshar could be in very serious danger."

"The cycle of Returns is over," Jasnah replied.

"So your records say, and so the kings at the turn of the last Return claimed," Taln said. "But who are they to be trusted? Ronad the Ambitious? Vadren the Covetous? Ten rulers your own history dubbed the Oathshard kings. These are the men whose word you rely upon?"

“They aren’t the only ones,” Jasnah countered. “The monasteries teach that the Returns have finished.”

“That only started four hundred years ago,” Taln said. “I’ve done my research.”

Jasnah frowned. “Well, who are we to trust if we can’t listen to our religious leaders? Would you have us instead follow after the mysticisms of the Elinrah?”

Taln paused. “The Elinrah?”

“A religion,” Jasnah explained. “You should look into them—they do, after all, claim to worship you.”

Taln frowned. “That is heresy. Only the Almighty should be worshipped.”

“Well, people get confused,” Jasnah said lightly. “Not all of us have the convenience of being able to speak with the Almighty whenever we wish.”

“I haven’t spoken with Him in a very long time,” Taln mumbled. *They claim to worship you. The heresy of Kanar has returned?* Things were worse than he had assumed.

“You don’t live with the Almighty?” Jasnah asked. “What kind of Herald are you?”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Taln explained.

Jasnah raised an eyebrow.

“You speak rather flippantly of the Almighty for a Vorin,” Taln said slowly.

“I’m not exactly a model Vorin,” Jasnah replied.

“I see,” Taln said. “What happened?”

Jasnah opened her mouth to reply, then paused, shooting a frustrated look at him and folding her arms. One sleeve of her dress, he noticed with interest, was far longer than the other.

Jasnah frowned. “I’m trying to figure out how exactly this conversation abandoned its primary topic and moved into a discussion of my theological shortcomings.”

“I was just curious—I tend to be interested in the state of men’s souls.” He paused, smiling. “You could call it an occupational hazard.”

Jasnah snorted quietly. “My soul is just fine,” she assured. “Look . . . Taln . . . I need you to stay out of trouble. If you promise me to do so, I can get you an audience with the king. You can deliver your important messages to him.”

“He won’t believe me,” Taln said. “The Sign isn’t working.”

“Perhaps you just need to try it again,” Jasnah said. “Promise not to make

a stir for a few weeks. No more going where you aren't supposed to, no more yelling condemnations on the streetcorners—”

“I only did that once,” Taln interjected.

“Regardless,” Jasnah said, her voice becoming smooth and reassuring. “That’s not the way. You need to speak with King Elhokar. Promise to do as I say, and I will get you in to see him.”

Taln smiled lightly, but on the inside he was heavily skeptical. *Playing off of my supposed delusions, sister of the king? Lhan was right—you are a calculating one.* She was trying too hard . . . there was something he was missing.

“You make a persuasive argument, Lady Jasnah,” Taln said with a bow of the head. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Very good,” Jasnah said with a curt nod. “Visit my chancellor of appointments in, say, half a month. If you’ve stayed quiet and made no disturbances, then I will try to get you an audience with my brother.”

Taln nodded, and Jasnah turned, walking toward her litter. He watched her go, frowning to himself. She was playing with him—somehow he doubted his ‘audience’ would be as promising as she implied. It was like the young girl’s promise just a short time before, one Jasnah still hadn’t really ever made good on.

Yet Jasnah seemed desperate to get him to stay quiet. Something was going on.

As her litter left, Taln walked over to Lhan—noting, with dissatisfaction, that the monks had absconded with his spear. Lhan had settled himself on the sand, eyes closed as he lay back on the shaded sand.

“Did you have an enjoyable conference?” the monk asked as he heard Taln approach.

“Thrilling,” Taln replied. “I’m still trying to figure out how she knew I was here. She arrived far too quickly to have been informed by one of the monks.”

“Oh,” Lhan said, yawning as he opened his eyes. “I sent for her, just before we left Mercyhome.”

“You sent for her?” Taln asked.

Lhan nodded. “I couldn’t have you getting yourself killed, my dear madman. If you got into a fight with a nobleman and got yourself executed, I would have to go back to weaving floor mats. For a supposedly docile and reverent bunch, the Kavel monks certainly are hard on floors.”

Taln snorted, shaking his head and watching jealously as the monks, noblemen, and citizens resumed their training.

“So are we finished here?” Lhan asked.

“Yes,” Taln said with a sigh.

“You seem uncharacteristically upset,” Lhan noted.

Taln leaned back against the wall, standing beside the reclining monk. “This isn’t supposed to be me, Lhan,” he said quietly. “This isn’t what I do. I’m a soldier, not a politician or a preacher. I have no idea how to make people believe that the Return has come—that is something for Nale or Ishar to do. My duty has always been to prepare the people for war.”

“I see,” Lhan said.

Taln sighed. “Something’s very wrong. It’s been over a month since I arrived, and they haven’t come to the city. This is the meeting place—they should be here. Jezrien would have the Aleth king begging him to take over command of the royal armies by now. I can’t even persuade a group of monks to fight me.”

“Where do you think the others could be?”

Taln shook his head. “Perhaps they’ve given up on Kanar—perhaps they realized the Epoch Kingdoms had fallen, and so they moved on to more promising ground. They could be in Shinavar, rallying the clans, or maybe one of the other kingdoms accepted them, like Marnah did during the Second Return.”

Taln stared off across the sandy courtyard, watching the duelists. “I don’t know, Lhan. Nothing has worked. The citizenry thinks I’m insane; the nobility fears to speak with me lest they incur royal disfavor. I get kicked out of both library and monastery . . . to be honest, I’m not even certain what to try next.”

Lhan smiled. “Oh, there are plenty of places we haven’t been kicked out of yet.”

Taln chuckled. “Lady Jasnah wanted me to promise to stay out of trouble for a couple of weeks.”

“Maybe she’s got a point,” Lhan said. “You yourself said that you’re not sure what to do next. Maybe you just need to relax for a little while, and let it come to you.”

“What?” Taln asked, amused. “Relax by going and working in the mines like the monks keep telling me?”

“Oh, I’m sure we could find something better for you than that. Maybe work in the monastery, or even this one. If you spend enough time working on their floor mats, maybe they’ll let you pick up a spear and spar every now and then.”

Taln eyed the lackadaisical monk. Lhan continued to speak, talking in

his lazy way about the virtues of floor mat repair—paying no mind to the fact that he'd complained about that very thing shortly before.

He sent for Jasnah, Taln thought, finally understanding. "I've misjudged you," he said out loud.

"Excuse me?" the monk said, pausing.

"I thought you were lazy," Taln said.

"Oh, let me assure you, I'm quite apt at it."

"This whole time," Taln said, "you've just been waiting for me to get frustrated. You've been following me around, letting me get myself thrown out of nearly every place we visit, waiting for me to fail so many times that I got bored with it."

Lhan sat quietly for a moment. Then he shrugged. "I always want to do things the easiest way possible. I've found that men rarely like to be told what they can't do. So, I just let them try it. You'd be surprised at how many 'crazy' men simply wanted to try things their own way for a little while before settling into what the rest of the city had planned out for them."

"And if they don't settle down?" Taln asked.

"They do," Lhan said. "Eventually."

"That could take time," Taln challenged.

Lhan shrugged. "Sometimes months, sometimes years. It doesn't really matter to me, as long as they don't get themselves hurt and they keep me from washing dishes."

Taln cocked his head, regarding the brown-robed monk in a new light. "How many crazy people has the monastery assigned you?"

"Oh, a couple," Lhan said. "Sometimes, people just need a friend, Taln. I'm not good at very many things—as my divinely annoying brethren can attest to—but being a friend . . . that I can do. It doesn't cure anyone; I don't think most of them can be, or want to be, 'cured.' But I can often find a way to make life a little less difficult for them."

"That's very noble of you."

Lhan snorted.

"Admit it," Taln challenged. "You're a good monk."

"Say that again, and you'll see how 'good' I am," Lhan said, standing up and brushing off his robe. "Come on—I'm hungry, not to mention tired of lying around in the sand."

Taln nodded, joining the monk as they walked out of the gates. One thing still bothered him, however—Lady Jasnah's insistence that he 'stay out of trouble.' She had seemed so . . . anxious, despite her calm air. Almost like something was coming . . . an event she didn't want him to disturb?

“Lhan,” he said idly as they strolled away from Spearhome, “is anything special happening in the next two weeks?”

“What?” Lhan asked. “You mean besides the dueling competition?”

“Dueling competition?” Taln asked.

“You haven’t noticed that the city is abnormally packed with travelers?”

“Lhan,” Taln said with a raised eyebrow. “The last time I saw Ral Eram, the Oathshard Wars hadn’t even started yet. I have no idea what a normal population is.”

Lhan rolled his eyes. “Duelists from all over Kanar are coming to the city,” he explained. “The king is holding a royal dueling competition, with Blades and titles as prizes—he has to do something with all those cities he stole from Pralir.”

Royal dueling competition. Taln remembered something . . . something vaguely from his first day in Ral Eram, when he had burst in upon the king’s feast. *Take his Blade . . . Add it to the pile of those to be won at the competition . . .*

His sword, Glyphing—it would be given away at the dueling competition. It would be there, unclaimed, waiting for a new master . . . or an old one.

Taln smiled broadly. “Lhan, I think you might be right,” he said. “I need some time to think. Let’s spend a few weeks weaving mats and staying out of trouble. I want the Lady Jasnah to forget I’m even here . . .”

chapter 19

SHINRI 3

LADY SHINRI:

You ask nothing we ourselves haven't wondered a tenseset times over. Why would the Almighty take my brother now, when times are so difficult in the Three Houses? Why did he have to be lost in such a way, without even the honor of a battlefield death or failed duel? These are questions of theology—things for monks and stormkeepers to ponder, not women such as ourselves. Our duty is that of consolation and preparation. Now that Prince Tethren has been taken, we must give strength to those who still live and protect them as best we are able.

However, in answer to your specific inquiries, you will soon see that there was little of mysterious note about my brother's death. His convoy did not leave Lakhenran precipitously at all—rather, care was taken to depart directly following the tenth Mar-Kav highstorm, a well-acknowledged day of fortune for sea travels. The trip to Thalenah was planned so that each of the more violent highstorms could be spent within the shelter of cove or port.

The events, therefore, of my brother's death are a matter of ill fortune, but not ill planning. During the third day of the open-sea voyage to Thalenah, one of the ships was struck by a problem with its rudder. I know little of such things, but have included a technical explanation

of the problem, as recorded by one of my scribes who questioned the captain.

It was soon obvious that this ship could not reach Thalenah in a timely manner. My brother, however, was a man of honor—as you well know—and refused to leave the straggler behind. He determined that the best course was for the entire convoy to wait out the storm, and made orders to that effect. Unfortunately, seaborne highstorms are a fierce and unpredictable force. It turned out that my brother’s flagship, not the ship with the structural problems, was the one that succumbed to the Almighty’s winds.

The other sailors in the convoy did not, as you implied, simply sail away and leave Prince Tethren to his maritime grave. They spent days scouring the waves for survivors, picking apart wreckage and praying to find their prince yet alive. The Almighty, however, granted them no miracle. The sailors were forced to leave the area and sail for port, lest they be caught in yet another storm.

I have included copies of testimonies taken from various crewmembers, as well as copies of the dock registers and docking schedules both from the port of departure and that of expected arrival. I am confident that studying this evidence will set your heart at ease regarding the tragic events of my brother’s demise.

I understand your hesitance—you are Veden at heart, and it is the nature of our people to hope and wish. In this matter, however, you must learn as I have. Hopes for Tethren’s survival will only prolong the pain of mourning.

Lady Shendaran Rienar.

Shinri set the letter aside, looking over the accompanying documents. They were, of course, in order. Though the captain’s explanation of the ship’s difficulties made little sense to her, she had little doubt that it was unimpeachable. The other testimonies were both clear and consistent.

It was, of course, all fabricated.

Shinri sat for a quiet moment, ‘evidence’ spread before her on one of Lady Jasnah’s sitting-room tables. The letter was exaggeratedly defensive. The evidence was too abundant, and too freely offered. Shendaran was far too quick to assure that the death lacked mysterious elements, especially considering all the questions she chose not to answer. Why would Tethren endanger an entire convoy for one ship? Why didn’t he move the crew from the beleaguered vessel to another ship, then sail safely to port?

Did Shendaran really have so low an opinion of Shinri's political skills that she would use such obvious tactics? Did she not realize that her quick assurances that nothing was wrong would only provoke Shinri toward unwanted conclusions?

Shinri reread the letter. And, as she did so, an awareness grew within her. Shendaran wasn't trying to be obvious. To most women in Vedenar, such a letter would be considered an adequate response. Shinri, however, had been trained by a far better master.

Even as she read, Jasnah's lessons poked at her mind. This word was misplaced, that assurance offered too hastily. The text was like a puzzle with irregular pieces—any one of the clues, by itself, was unremarkable. However, the whole—when arranged correctly—displayed a picture. Shendaran was hiding things. She herself didn't know the details of her brother's death, and she was trying very hard to cover up that ignorance.

Jasnah really is good at this, Shinri realized. *Her training has become so innate to me that I can easily deconstruct the intentions of one of Vedenar's most prestigious politicians.*

Shinri knew about Jasnah's skill, of course. One did not live with the Lady Jasnah Kholin for three years and not learn to admire her genius. However, Shinri had always been involved in plots that did not directly concern her—Lady Jasnah's goals, Lady Jasnah's will. It was a different thing entirely for Shinri to see Jasnah's hand manifest in Shinri's own goals.

But, what does it mean? Shinri thought. *You never did like me much, Shendaran—never did forgive the little girl who jealously ruined your sitting party by running through in a mud-drenched dress. Is that why you lie to me now, out of simple spite?*

Shinri idly pulled at the edges of the fine, scented paper, ripping off circular pieces as she thought. Shendaran didn't like her, true, but the elements contained in the letter were too extensive to have been fabricated for one woman. This was a response that had been given before—probably to both political rivals and allies. House Rienar wanted it known that Tethren's death had been an unfortunate accident, and nothing more. That meant they didn't want people poking too closely at the events of the convoy's loss.

But why? Ignorance was not so grievous a sin that it would inspire such a cover-up. True, all houses had things they wished to hide from their rivals, but it would require something of direct relevance to force such extremes.

The convoy's cargo? The transportation of delicate materials would explain the quick cover-up. It would also explain why the cargo had been transported by ship, rather than through the Oathgates—though the

official explanation was the avoidance of Aleth tariffs. However, if the cargo were the secret, what of Tethren? Was his death a simple accident, as stated, unrelated to the cover up?

Perhaps there had been a mutiny. Rumors of a prince of the Three Houses being killed by common citizens could be dangerous to morale. Jah Keved was organized far more martially than Alethkar, and such a loss of command would be a grave embarrassment to House Rienar. What if one ship's crew had taken the prince captive, then been sunk by the rest of the convoy?

Shinri shook her head at the extravagant speculation. She didn't have enough information to begin imagining complex mutinies or deep cover-ups. She had only a small set of lies, perhaps just cosmetic in nature. Though Lady Jasnah was capable of making wild logical connections with very little information, Shinri didn't have her experience or intuition. Shinri would have to dig further, as she had been taught. Write to Rienar's political rivals, sniff for rumors regarding the convoy, see if Tethren had made any odd alliances or enemies during the last six months.

It would take time, but it felt . . . strangely invigorating. Shinri rolled up her scraps of torn paper, idly flicking them across the room. She had worried about purpose. Well, she might not have the passion for intrigue that Lady Jasnah boasted, but at least she was beginning to discover her own political goals. She no longer felt the powerful loss of Tethren's death—it had become more the latent ache of a promise unfulfilled, a pathway unexplored—however, searching out the truth of his death felt right to her. She would never serve as his scribe and wife, seeing to his political interests, but she could give him this one last offering.

I should have been more suspicious, Shinri realized with amusement. *I would have thought that living this long with Jasnah would have made me paranoid too.* It had taken the questions of a madman to spur her curiosity. Yet, for that questioning, she found herself strangely indebted to the man who called himself Talenel the Herald.

The door opened, and Jasnah swept into the room—perfect in bearing, beauty, and poise. Shinri flicked a wad of paper, then hurriedly replaced her left sleeve and put her hands in her lap. If Jasnah noticed, she said nothing. Kemnar and Nelshenden entered the room after their mistress; the two guards were often with her now, kept close and involved in protecting the crown.

“What is that?” Jasnah asked, waving toward Shinri's stack of papers.

“Nothing, my lady,” Shinri said, folding the letters. “Simply another list of condolences sent regarding the prince's death.”

Jasnah nodded. "See that you answer them all respectfully, Shinri. Your wardship will end soon, and you will need allies in order to make another union for yourself."

Shinri nodded. *I'm sorry, Jasnah, she thought. But if you knew the truth, my investigation would become yours instead. You do not become involved unless you can control. Tethren was my fiancé. I will find out what happened to him.*

Letters of condolence made a good excuse. They were something Jasnah would understand and encourage, for they saw the prince's death in the same way that Jasnah did: as a political inconvenience to be smoothed like any other bump in one's plans. Jasnah herself had offered little in the way of sympathy. In this, despite their years together, Shinri knew that she and Jasnah would never understand one another. Love—romantic love—was something Shinri doubted that Jasnah would ever be able to comprehend. Jasnah would encourage discovering House Rienar's secrets for political gain, or even to sate curiosity, but she wouldn't understand doing so out of duty to a man one had loved. And, Shinri *had* loved Tethren, even if the emotion had been that of a foolish young girl.

Shinri glanced up, unconsciously seeking Nelshenden. There he stood, eyes plain with the sincerity of an honest and honorable man. He stood in his place, waiting beside Jasnah's chair, a position he bore not just out of duty, but out of love as well. Sometimes, seeing the pain in his eyes was too much for Shinri to endure, and she had to flee.

Jasnah ignored the man, as usual. She conferred quietly with Kemnar, whom she had always found more useful. Though there was nothing between them, of course. Kemnar was far more like Jasnah—devious, capable of compromise, and efficient. However, he was fond of common women—the citizens he met in bars or on the street.

The two schemed while Nelshenden stood slightly apart, wishing he could find a way to earn Jasnah's respect and love, but knowing somehow that no matter what he did, he would only find her disapproval. Shinri knew that feeling well.

"Shinri," Jasnah suddenly said. "I need you."

"Yes, my lady," Shinri said, tucking her letters into her left sleeve pocket and rising to join her mistress.

"What do you know of recent events in your homeland?" Jasnah asked.

"Very little, I'm afraid, my lady," Shinri said. "I have been busy with events here in Alethkar."

Jasnah frowned. "Kemnar informs me that times are tempestuous in the Three Houses."

“Times are always tempestuous in the Three Houses, my lady,” Shinri replied. “But Kemnar is correct. From what I’ve heard, recent events are even more troubling than usual. My far cousin has raised an army against his kinsmen. While it wouldn’t be the first time one House took arms up against another, it does appear that this might be more than the typical border dispute or retribution for a caravan raid.”

Jasnah glanced at Kemnar, then sighed. “I can’t watch everyone in every kingdom,” she said in an almost grumbling voice. “But a war on our southern border is hardly something that can be ignored. Shinri, perhaps you should deliver your responses to those letters in person.”

The implication was clear—Shinri was to visit her contacts in Veden City and gather what intelligence she could. The command was not unwelcome—the Rienar cover-up was likely linked to the constant struggles between the Three Houses. Perhaps she could serve multiple purposes with a single visit.

“Yes, my lady,” Shinri said. “It has been too long since I last paid my respects to King Ahven, anyway. I should have visited long before.”

Jasnah nodded, waving her away and immediately moving on to other plots.

THE IDIOT KING SAT PLEASANTLY upon his throne. He nodded happily at those who approached him and bowed to pay their respects. His clothing matched his smile—rich, yet somehow lacking regality. Matched with the man’s vapid eyes and innocent smile, the bright clothing seemed childishly gaudy. A waste of coin and silk.

Ahven obviously knew nothing of his looming death. It hadn’t taken Shinri much time to assess the situation—though her contact with her homeland had been sparse during the last few years, the Vedens were a far more open people than their Aleth cousins. In addition, news of Talshekh’s approach was hardly a secret topic. Her distant cousin had finally gathered the forces, and the courage, to march on Veden City. He came to conquer—soon a new House would sit on the throne.

It had only been a matter of time. House Vedenel had allowed itself to grow too weak, a disease manifest by its figurehead of a king. Poor decisions, a lax military, and fallen trade contracts had left the once-virile House with barely enough power to maintain the city, let alone its armies. Though forces were being gathered, allies being called upon, it was highly unlikely that House Vedenel would be able to raise an army large enough to resist the conqueror.

Well, Shinri thought, at least it will be a relatively quick coup. Vedenel has to stand here—the city is by far its most secure refuge. Those who wish to fight will die quickly, and those with less honor will bow to the new king.

The nobility were not ignorant of this choice. The Veden noblemen stood stiffly, speaking in the quiet tones of nervous men. Those with enough influence, or who were not too closely related to the royal line, had already fled the capital to ‘seek respite’ on their own lands. Those who remained would either have to risk standing with the king—fighting a battle that they were unlikely to win—or they would have to side with Talshekh and hope that the new king didn’t decide they had been too closely connected to the king to be left alive.

Most probably wouldn’t make that final decision for several days yet. They were waiting to see if the Lord Puppeteer managed to gather a suitable resistance or not. The Vedens were a martial people, but they didn’t hold strictly to Aleth ideals of honor. Few battlefield warriors saw any good in fighting a far superior foe, and the Veden men would react similarly when the time came. The only ones whose doom was absolutely certain were those whose power was directly related to that of the king.

The Lord Puppeteer, notably, was absent from the ball.

Shinri smiled, waving a servant to refill her wine. The Puppeteer was undoubtedly very busy seeking allies and planning for the battle. He had no wife or daughter, and was even reported to distrust women politicians—a sentiment that would hurt him severely. But his misfortune was hardly a reason for grief. Shinri had never much cared for Karathach or the king he controlled. Of course, her impressions had been formed during her childhood, when she had not been known for her rational assessment of personalities. Still, it struck her as poetic that the Puppeteer should fall with barely a whimper after flaunting his power so blatantly. She did feel a measure of sympathy for her poor, mindless king. Inside Shinri’s mind, however, Jasnah’s imposed rationality whispered that the kingdom would prosper far more under Talshekh’s reign.

She strolled across the feast chamber. She was surprised at how refreshing she found it to return to Veden courtly ideals—or perhaps the refreshment simply came from escaping Aleth austerity. Either way, the Vedens were far more lax than their northern cousins. Instead of sitting primly at tables, the women stood near grand serving tables, mingling and holding small bowls of food. They discussed politics openly, rather than sending clandestine missives to dart between tables, and did so unabashedly within the hearing of men. Some of the groups even intermixed as they ate, speaking openly

together. Even with the extreme tension of an approaching army, their interactions were far more relaxed than what Shinri had grown accustomed to.

She chose a group of women sprinkled with ladies of power, yet not too closely kinned to the royal line, and approached with a slow gait, selecting small pieces of sliced fruit from the dining table and placing them in her bowl. She wasn't really very hungry, but the fruit plates had been arranged so precisely and carefully that it was difficult to resist plucking slices from their patterns, if only to break them up a bit.

The small group of women noticed her approach, and immediately made room for her. Shinri held in her smile of pleasure. Her surname did not go unnoticed in Vedenar these days. Though her relationship to Talshekh Davar was relatively distant, she was still of his line. Too far removed to make a good hostage, but not so far removed that she wouldn't make a decent ally in the impending months. The power gave her an unexpected edge, one she hadn't enjoyed since the height of Jasnah's courtly influence back in Alethkar. Yet this power was far superior, for it was actually Shinri's, and not just another facet of Jasnah's competence.

"Lady Shinri Davar," said one of the women, bowing her head. She was Lady Khalsah Iahven, a Fourth Lady and far too important to normally have bothered with a simple ward such as Shinri.

Yes, Shinri thought, bowing back, but not showing as much deference as she should have. *I could grow accustomed to influence like this. Perhaps that is what draws Jasnah to politics.*

"We are graced by your unexpected visit, Lady Davar," Khalsah continued.

Yes, Khalsah, we all heard my surname the first time. Thank you. "It is I who am graced, Lady Khalsah," Shinri replied. "I have been away from the Veden court for such a long time that I feared a cold reception."

"Never for you, Lady Shinri," said another lady—Temanan Iaven, Khalsah's distant cousin.

Shinri smiled with closed lips. "Thank you for the welcome. Though, I must admit surprise at finding the city so fortified with soldiers."

"Oh, it is not so defensible as one might think," Temanan said quickly, obviously hoping Shinri would somehow relay the information—and its source—back to Talshekh. "Loyal allies to the king are strangely difficult to find. A most unpleasant state, I must say."

"Loyalty is always most strongly tested during times of strife," Shinri said. "I'm sure the king's supporters will prove sufficient from their strength of heart, if nothing else."

"Indeed," Khalsah said. She was obviously the craftier of the two. Perhaps

fifty years in age, her feminine braids were subdued and streaked with grey. Though the men preferred costumes far more simply cut than their Aleth counterparts, the women's dresses were virtually indistinguishable from northern designs.

"Of course," Shinri noted idly, "the king's obvious success does not preclude us from discussing other outcomes for reasons of entertainment."

"Purely for logical enjoyment," Khalsah agreed.

It was a flimsy excuse. However, Shinri suspected that it would compare rather soundly to the tensets of similar excuses being given by other ball-goers. Few of the king's more vital supporters had chosen to attend this particular function, and the Puppeteer was in no position to begin alienating the numerous fence-sitters by striking against those who discussed his fall. Ironically, treason was about as easy to discuss as the next highstorm.

"I wonder," Shinri said, popping a roshfruit slice in her mouth, "what do you think of my cousin's ridiculous aspirations. If he is temeritous enough to march against the king, might he be foolish enough to move on to . . . other interests as well?"

Khalsah's eyes narrowed. Shinri placed her in a difficult position—the woman had to decide if she were speaking to Jasnah's ward or Talshekh's cousin.

"I doubt he will look northward," Khalsah finally said. "Your cousin is an ambitious man—not an undesirable trait in a leader. However, the Aleth border is too strong to penetrate, and King Elhokar's armies are still gathered from his campaign in Prallah, are they not?"

"Indeed," Shinri agreed.

"The treaty with Alethkar has been very favorable," said the final woman, Vedmaken Jentil. Short, with blondish southern hair, the woman was the least powerful in the group. She would hold her tongue for most of the conversation.

Khalsah nodded. "I doubt Talshekh would risk endangering trade with the north to start a war that he would be unlikely to win. I have this information from . . . reliable sources. You may relate it with confidence."

Ah, so you choose Shinri the Ward after all, Shinri noted. *Well played.* Not that Khalsah didn't hope to gain influence from the conversation—she had given Shinri a potential gem of information, and would expect a well-spoken word or two in return.

Most of the evening's conversation had been along similar lines. Kemnar's worry about Vedenar was unfounded—there was unrest, true, but the Idiot King would fall quickly. Talshekh's ambition would stop there—he

couldn't begin a march northward, not with the Searing coming and the Aleth borders so well-patrolled. Once he took the throne, he would have to expend effort to secure his reign, not to mention be wary of yet another Lakhenran revolt. Alethkar was safe for at least a few years.

And that meant that Shinri had time to probe a few other questions.

"I appreciate your candor, Lady Khalsah," Shinri said. "You appear to have enviable contacts."

Khalsah smiled. "Some prepare better than others."

"Indeed. My contacts in Vedenar are unenviable these days, especially considering recent losses."

"Prince Tethren's death was a tragedy for the entire kingdom," Khalsah said smoothly. The smile in her eye was almost gleeful. She knew something, but she wasn't about to share it.

So, Shinri thought with dissatisfaction, *the coin of my surname is that easily expended?* There was something else in Khalsah's face. Vengefulness? Shinri frowned, trying to remember if, as a child, she'd ever thrown anything at the woman. Unfortunately, by pure odds of probably, the chances were not in Shinri's favor. . . .

Lady Temanan frowned slightly. "Prince Tethren?" she asked. "Indeed. To lose him, and in such a way. . ."

Khalsah paled almost imperceptibly as Temanan spoke, and Shinri sprang before the senior woman could deflect the conversation.

"In which way is that?" Shinri asked.

"Why," Temanan said, flushing slightly. "You know . . . *that way*. To one of *them*. I would never travel with one myself, and all the way to Thalenah. . ."

"Ah yes," Shinri said quickly. There was only one *them* in Veden society. "I warned him not to take an Awakener with him on the ship."

Khalsah frowned in dissatisfaction, studying Shinri's face, obviously trying to determine the extent of Shinri's bluff. In this area, however, she was outmatched—one of them had been trained by Lady Jasnah Kholin, and the other had not.

"Terrible indeed," Shinri said to prompt Temanan. Her mind, however, buzzed. An Awakener? On the ship? It was unlikely. Tethren had been a pious Vorin, but—like most Vedens—he had been deeply superstitious. He would never have traveled on the same ship as an Awakener.

Temanan leaned closer. "I heard the creature went completely mad," she whispered. "As they often do, you know. It made the waters around its own ship burn, and the vessel was immolated completely. That's why all hands were lost. They say the things can't hurt a person directly, but if

they turn the boat around you into stone, your own immunity won't do much good, eh?"

"Cousin," Khalsah said. "This is her former betrothed you speak of. Mind your tongue."

Temanan flushed, but the damage had been done. *Perhaps it is you who should mind your tongue, Khalsah*, Shinri noted. *If you want to keep a secret, you probably shouldn't tell it to your weak-minded cousin.*

"I . . . think I will withdraw, ladies," Shinri said, bowing slightly and adopting a slightly ill look. Let them think that talk of Tethren had left her morose—perhaps they would be afraid enough of losing favor with her that they would volunteer more information at another date.

She bid her other farewells as quickly as propriety allowed. She made a few subtle inquiries as she did so—now that she had some information she could tease, getting others to volunteer what they knew in the hopes that she would be able to add something more was easier. She spent little time at it, but that little was enough. Those who had decent connections knew the same story. Tethren had been transporting an Awakener to Thalenah—the Thalen king's fascination with Awakeners and their arts was well known. The sale of a kingdom's Awakener was strictly forbidden by *The Way of Kings*, as was the treatment of any person like a commodity, but it often happened anyway.

King Amelin of Thalenah would have paid richly indeed for an Awakener. He probably would have even given Tethren a sizable amount of the creature's Awakening profits—Shinri knew Amelin, and the stories were true. He kept Awakeners because of the novelty of their power as much as for the wealth they could bring. Trading him one would have been a masterful deal.

However, Shinri knew it never could have happened. Tethren believed too strongly in *Sheneres* to do such a thing. Beyond that, he loathed Awakeners—he had always cringed when someone told him a material had been Awakened, and never even wanted to discuss the topic of Awakeners. He would not have brought one on his ship—he wouldn't have even brought one in the same convoy. No matter what his father or brothers demanded, Tethren would have had nothing to do with such a deal.

Suddenly, Shinri felt a sharp blush of embarrassment. She was not so clever as she had thought. She had assumed that lady Shendaran, Tethren's sister, was simply her political inferior. Shinri had seen through the letter so easily, noticing its flaws and hidden content, all the while congratulating herself on her superior political savvy—and all the while being manipulated to do just that.

Shendaran had expected her to dig. She had prepared for Shinri's suspicion, and had known that Shinri was unlikely to accept any explanation from House Rienar. This, the story about the Awakener—this was the true feint. This was the story spread unofficially, the patch used to underlay an obviously suspicious event. It was a very Veden scandal—Shinri's people loved stories of poetic destruction via Awakening or Stormshade. They would quickly accept the second lie for its shameful and supernatural implications, especially if House Rienar was smart enough to deny it as much as possible.

But it was a lie. Shendaran didn't know two things. Shinri had known Tethren a relatively short time, but she had studied him with the obsessive eyes of a lovestruck girl. She knew far more of him than she was expected to.

Secondly, Shinri was no longer really a Veden. She had spent too much time in Alethkar—and with the supremely Aleth Jasnah—to retain many of her superstitions. She didn't accept the Awakener story because of its illogic.

And that, unfortunately, left her where she had begun—save for one bit of information. She now understood that she wouldn't find her answers in Jah Keved. The Veden people couldn't be honest with her even if they wished to—the lies had grown too convoluted.

But what else is there? She thought. *If I can't get the truth from them, then how do I discover it?*

What would Jasnah do? The answer came to her immediately. Since Shinri couldn't find the answer at the source of Tethren's voyage, she would have to go to his destination. King Amelin probably didn't remember Shinri—and she doubted she wanted him to, for she hadn't exactly treated him with the dignity deserving of his station. However, Thalenah had dock registers and cargomasters. Perhaps she could borrow Kemnar for a short time and have him seek out the truth behind that convoy's cargo.

Determined, Shinri left the mansion and ordered her litter bearers to carry her to Veden City's Oathgate Dome. Like the others, it was structured like a reverse fortress, designed to protect against the unlikely event of unwanted travelers coming through.

There was no line—it was late in the day, and the Oathgates were closed to all but the most important of travelers. Her bearers put down the litter, and she swept into the building, intent on returning to Jasnah with her news of Veden politics. The guards waved her inside, into the circular room lined with glistening quartz and bright diamonds. The Oathgate itself was a twisting structure of pure quartz, designed like a natural arch of stone blown into formation by the winds.

And it was already open. Shinri paused—she had expected that she would need to demand the services of the young Awakener kept on premises to open their side and send a message through the opal requesting that the other side be opened as well. However, it appeared as if another traveler had already demanded its opening. As she watched, the white-smoke veil in the arch's center broke, and a man stepped through.

Round-faced, with the large, almost child-like eyes of his kind, the Shin man moved with more grace than the smoke itself. He crept more than walked, his step almost a glide. Shinri stepped back, staring despite herself as the man strode by. He glanced at Shinri with eyes that read her as easily as they read a common glyph, and understood her with an ease that would have shamed even Jasnah's skill.

He was out the door seconds later, passing her without acknowledgement or respect for her station, leaving her to wonder how a foreign man could demand such free use of the Oathgates.

chapter 20

JEK 4

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, occasionally found some things challenging about living among the eastern heathens. Their warriors were incompetent, true, but the Kanaran people had advantages that were not related to their skill. Jek was undeniably Shin—his skin was lighter and smoother than that of a Kanaran, his features more rounded, his nose far less predominant. Many Kanarans claimed that the Shin looked like children to their eyes—an irony, since the easterners themselves were considered children by the Truth.

Regardless, Jek could not easily hide among them. Even with skin darkened by makeup, his features would mark him as a outsider—a Riemak mixedbreed, if not a full Shin. Moving among the Kanarans unnoticed required skill and care. Fortunately, such was included in his training—his clan might not have been one of the most overtly powerful, but no Shin would dare question their effectiveness.

Karathach the Lord Puppeteer did not ‘hold court,’ for technically he was not king. Gaining private audiences with him was surprisingly difficult. He considered himself careful, but in truth he was simply pompous. He did not wish to be bothered by those he considered his inferiors.

Fortunately, he was growing desperate.

Jek stood quietly at the back of the small stone room, trying to ignore the sense of the stone pressing in on him. The Puppeteer’s audience chamber

was lavish with the goods of his plunder—seasilk, woven rugs, and woods of all variety crowded the room's occupants. Of men, there were about ten, including the Puppeteer himself.

The Puppeteer's eye sockets seemed to droop in his head, his entire face gaunt and worried as he paced. "Naden!" he snapped. "What of your contacts to the south? Surely Lord Reinar realizes the danger of one House rising against another?"

One of the Puppeteer's rich-clothed attendants shrugged helplessly. "He cannot fight Talshekh, not with the might of his armies gathered like they are. House Davar is too powerful."

"Bah!" the Puppeteer said, waving his hand. "I need answers, not excuses! How many of them are there?"

"The scouts count over twenty thousand, your excellency," one of the men offered. "Though his numbers swell daily."

"Perhaps we can bribe him," a third man suggested. "Make peace? A treaty?"

"He thinks I assassinated his family, you idiot!" the Puppeteer snapped.

The men in the room glanced at each other nervously. It was commonly held in the city that the Puppeteer had indeed been behind the slaughter of the Davar family, though the thoroughness of that belief could only have been created by Ahven's rumor-spreaders.

During his weeks in Ahven's company, Jek had come to realize that Jek himself was not the only efficient man who quietly served the Idiot King. There was a very soft, very exclusive underground in Veden City—an underground that understood that the Puppeteer's power was fleeting. A group that served Ahven, as Jek did.

"I didn't kill them!" the Puppeteer insisted to his supporters, who looked unconvinced. Apparently, the Puppeteer had often expressed his dissatisfaction with House Davar.

Jek shook his head. Among a land of heathens, there were many who were nonetheless competent. The Lord Puppeteer was not one of them. The men in this room should have been his most avid supporters. If he had such little ability to persuade them, then . . .

It didn't really matter. Veden City was doomed. Twenty thousand men camped just outside its walls. The Puppeteer had barely eight thousand at his disposal. That was enough to give the invader pause before attacking the city, but it wouldn't stop him for long. Talshekh's numbers were growing every day.

In addition, it appeared that the Lord Puppeteer would receive no aid. Whether by his own incompetence or by Ahven's secret maneuverings, he

had been left without allies. Once news of the Davar invasion had arrived, assumedly firm allegiances had suddenly withdrawn. Troops had failed to rally to the capital, and support had evaporated. While House Vedenel supposedly controlled a third of the country of Jah Keved, news of Talshekh's invasion had isolated the House to a single city. Landlocked, with mountains at its back, there would be no escaping the trap. The Puppeteer had sat, firm in his belief that support would arrive, until it had been too late.

This man was doomed. That was not a question. The true puzzle was, why had Ahven instigated it? The second thing the invading Talshekh would do—right after killing the Puppeteer—would be to execute Ahven. Vedens were not like the Aleths to the north—there would be no subtlety in this seizure. Talshekh was marching on the capital. He would see himself named king. Ahven would die with the man he had trapped.

“You!” the Puppeteer said, pointing at Jek. “Shin! What of those men you promised me?”

“They come,” Jek lied, speaking a broken dialect of Veden. “My entire clan.”

The Puppeteer closed his eyes, exhaling in relief. Even those who had never seen a Shin fight knew that their abilities could not be matched by anything in Kanar.

“When will they arrive?” the Puppeteer asked.

“Soon,” Jek said.

“You promised five thousand,” the Puppeteer said eagerly. “Five thousand Shin swords.”

“Yes,” Jek said. “My people, fine craftsmen.”

The Puppeteer froze. “Fine . . . craftsmen?”

“Yes,” Jek said. “They make swords. Bring swords to his Excellency. His Excellency’s soldiers, well weaponed.”

The Puppeteer’s eyes bulged. “Craftsmen!” he yelled. “You bring me five thousand craftsmen!”

“No,” Jek said, cocking his head. “Five thousand swords. His Excellency asked for swords. We bring, and sell swords.”

“Sell . . .” the Puppeteer looked dazed. Then, his rage returned. “Out!” he screamed, pointing.

Jek adopted a look of confusion and scurried from the room in compliance.

AHVEN WAS NOT IN HIS ROOMS. Jek did not have to search long to find him, however. The guards directed him to the Veden City walls, where the Idiot King stood looking out over the Davar army. The troops were scattered

across the bare stones, the colors of their tents marking the presence of tensets of lesser houses. Davar had gained allies quickly. In this heathen land, loyalty often meant only as much as the strength of one's armies.

The invaders had brought with them a tenset of the large towers the Kanarans used in battle, but they would probably not be needed. City walls were almost a formality in this land—instead of providing fortifications, they often simply hampered one's Shardbearers. With a well-executed strike against the city gate, Talshekh's own Shardbearers would quickly slice their way through the wood. Even without Blades, the heathens' profane use of the sacred arts could change the gate—or even the walls—into water or air to allow passage. In Kanar, sieges did not last very long.

"You have returned early," Ahven noted as Jek approached. The king was alone; his guards stood a short distance away, well out of earshot. Jek had determined that some of them knew of their king's charade, but others obviously did not. For a man whose manipulations were so varied, Ahven did an amazing job of keeping his secrets.

"I was forced to reveal that I was bringing no troops," Jek said. "And the Puppeteer threw me out."

Ahven frowned. "You played your hand early."

Jek shrugged. "There is no further reason to watch the man. He is a fool, and his fate is inevitable."

Ahven smiled. "You acted impetuously," he said. "Perhaps my steward is doomed, perhaps he is not. After all, you think that I am doomed as well."

Jek froze. How had he . . .

Ahven's smile deepened. "Tell me of the meeting," he said, watching Jek's face carefully.

"The Puppeteer was looking for options," he said. "He kept asking members of the group if they could help, even though they had already said they could not. One of the members often pointed out how many troops Talshekh had."

"Fourth Lord Dinvah Shenchal," Ahven said quietly. "He favors 'The Fifth Refrain of the Returns' and 'The Song of Souls,' among others. Simple melodies, with trite rhymes."

"Lord Zalachan was there," Jek continued—he was accustomed to Ahven's strange interruptions. "He didn't speak much. He looked more troubled than the others, but not as nervous."

"The Onyxseer's Child," Ahven whispered. "And 'The Ballad of the Sixth Return.' Straightforward songs that tell stories and always explain their morals."

“Lord Naden was unwilling to be firm about his contacts in Reinar,” Jek explained. “He said that they were frightened to move against Talshekh.”

“‘The Whisper of Spring,’ ‘The Words of Nale Elin,’ and ‘Kantar’s Last Dream,’” Ahven said. “Careful songs, that sound sweet to the ear, hiding their complexity. Naden lies. Lord Reinar will not sit and hide—he gathers his own forces. He will not come to our aid. Every day Talshekh sits in siege of this city is another day Lord Reinar has to prepare.”

Jek frowned. Weeks spent with Ahven had not given Jek the insight he wished. He had made many assumptions about the Idiot King, but they had slowly betrayed themselves. He had thought that the man was a simple thug. Now, Jek was no longer certain. In truth, he was beginning to wonder at Ahven’s sanity. When Jek had returned from the meeting with the Puppeteer, he had found Ahven’s room empty. There had been two more yellow songbirds on the floor, their necks crushed.

“Tell me, Jeksonsonvallano,” Ahven asked with a soft voice. “What songs do you prefer? If there were a minstrel here now, what would you have her sing?”

For some reason, Jek felt a chill. “I don’t feel like listening to music at the moment,” he said.

“Assume you did,” Ahven said. “What songs have you requested in the past? What songs do you hear that give you pause?”

His bondage would not let him lie. “You will not know them. My favorite is called ‘The Kalanatanan.’”

“Ah,” Ahven said. “A ballad that tells a story indeed. A song of loyalty, and of a warrior who dies for his clan.”

Jek shivered. “Yes,” he replied.

Ahven nodded, then turned back toward the army. They had arrayed themselves carefully against the slight shelter of the sloping land. Veden City was unusual in that it wasn’t on a Lait—it was exposed to the full fury of the storms, when they came. The day was hot, the air dry in Jek’s throat. He had been in Kantar long enough to know that the storms would be very infrequent this time of year. When they did come, their fury would be such that it could be dangerous to be outdoors.

“There,” Ahven said, nodding toward the city gates. “It has happened.”

Jek peered down, looking out over the camp. No force was approaching, however, and he looked back with confusion. Then he saw it. The disturbance was not on the outside, but on the inside. A man on horseback ordered the gate opened—he carried a white flag and a spear.

“The Puppeteer would have given no order for parlay,” Jek said.

“He didn’t give the order.”

Looking closer, Jek saw something he hadn’t noticed before. There was an object sticking from the end of the messenger’s spear. A head.

“Come,” Ahven ordered. “We must work quickly.”

SITTING ON HIS THRONE in the glory of the Veden palace, Ahven looked like a king. Even as an impotent king, Ahven had more wealth than any Shin clanleader. Here, in this heathen land, lords claimed to serve their people, but their expenditures and wastefulness proved otherwise.

Ahven was resplendent with jewelry and gemstones, most notably diamonds, the symbol of Vedenar. Jewels had been sewn into his cloak and clothing, and his fingers glittered with rings. Watching him, it would have been impossible to know the way in which the rest of the nation regarded their king.

Until he opened his mouth. “We welcome you to Veden City.” The king’s voice betrayed its characteristic muddled drawl, the result of a childhood spent with waning hearing, then an adulthood spent completely deaf. On top of it, Ahven added a slight hesitance . . . a stumbling of words. Not too overt—even an idiot could be trained in what to say—but it was enough. Even to one who knew the king’s secret, this man sounded like a half-wit.

Third Lord Talshekh was a burly man. He wore little jewelry—the massive Shardblade in his hand was ornamentation enough. It was a thick, curved weapon, and matched his heavyset legs and build. He seemed less like a man and more like a chull in Shardplate.

“You have freed us,” Ahven said. He spoke the words that were passing like a wave through the city—words encouraged by the group of lords Jek had left behind with the Puppeteer, the men who had killed their supposed leader and delivered his head to the invader. They hailed Talshekh not as a conqueror, but as a liberator—a man who had come to cleanse the corruption from the capital. It was claimed that the entire city had been beneath the thumb of the Lord Puppeteer, and that he had practically kept the other nobility in bondage.

Talshekh stood for a moment, his eyes unreadable. His trusted Shardbearers stood behind him, arrayed as they had been as they marched through the broad doors.

“You have pleased the crown,” Ahven said.

Talshekh stood for a moment longer, then turned and strode from the throne room—leaving Ahven alive.

Jek closed his eyes, pulling back into the pillared shadows of the throne

room's far corner. If Talshekh had killed the Idiot King, then Jek would have had an opportunity to plea for his Bondstone. Another chance—perhaps—to be set free.

That was not going to happen. Jek still had a master. He opened his eyes, leaving the shadows and following Ahven into the dressing chamber at the side of the throne room. Ahven sat patiently, waiting as attendants removed his royal jewelry. It was several minutes until they were alone and could speak freely, and Jek spent the entire time wondering.

"You think I should be dead," Ahven said with amusement as the final attendant left.

"You should be," Jek said.

Ahven shook his head. "You don't understand Lord Talshekh Davar," he said. "He didn't just want revenge. He wants much more. Do you realize that no one man has ever conquered all of Kanar?"

"Yes," Jek said.

"They tell stories of those who have tried. Nev Windvoice, Sadees the Sunmaker . . . even Jarnah, who is only twenty years dead. Talshekh likes those stories. He likes them very much."

"If he wants to conquer the eastern peninsulas," Jek said, "he'll first need to be king of his own nation. He should have taken your head, and your title."

Ahven shook his head. "Lord Reinart is rising to arms in the south," he said.

"Talshekh has more troops," Jek responded. "And more Shardblades. He will defeat Reinart."

"Ah, but which would he rather be?" Ahven said. "The conquering tyrant, or the dutiful subject, putting down a rebellion? Vedenel gave itself to him, and its king welcomed him. He knows he can take the throne any time he wishes. If he leaves me, he can march south with the legitimacy of royal support. He will gain the allegiance of the more traditional lords—those who would have resisted him as a conqueror, but will welcome him as the liberator of Veden City. He can put down Reinart, then have me quietly executed. He becomes king not by the sword, but by consent of a loyal—and loving—people."

Jek paused in thought.

"If you want to conquer the world," Ahven said, "you need more than armies. You need loyalty. You need both love and fear. You need to be seen as more than a man—you need to be a force, like the winds themselves. Men do not resist divinity. If every land you leave behind rises against your

rule, then you will need to spend all your time squashing rebellions rather than conquering new land.”

“He will still come for you,” Jek challenged. “Even if what you say is true, Talshekh will need to be king. You will have to die.”

Ahven smiled. “I have another list for you,” he said. “These men need to be dead before Talshekh returns. You won’t have much time—he will gain momentum as he marches south, especially when word of what happened here arrives. Vedens do not like to fight their kinsmen. Reinard will be forced to surrender, or to fight in a single battle—the longer he draws it out, the more of his supporters will join with Talshekh. The war could be over within a month’s time, especially if you do your job quickly.”

Jek nodded, and memorized the names as Ahven spoke them.

chapter 21

JASNAH 5

“**L**ADY DENRAH WILL SUPPORT you,” Shinri said as she pulled the brush through Jasnah’s hair. “She knows you are the reason Dalenar gave her husband leave to recruit in Pebble’s Perch.”

Jasnah nodded—that particular negotiation had required a great deal of persuasion on her part. Though Dalenar was a very noble man, he was still a lord—and was loath to lose citizens to another city, even one within the same kingdom.

“I think you have allies in the Nivesh family as well,” Shinri continued.

“They’ll need more convincing,” Jasnah said. “Lady Evash is intimidated by Nanavah’s posturing. She’ll need more assurances before she’ll move on her dislike of the queen. Perhaps if I persuade Elhokar to promote her cousin . . . the boy did very well in the Prallah war. His heavy infantry squad certainly did its share of damage.”

Shinri nodded, continuing to brush. “It’s working, my lady. The women thought your return would be as a spring storm—come and gone almost without notice. Everyone assumed you would be married and gone without ever re-entering court life.”

“That is probably what Nanavah promised them,” Jasnah said, looking into the mirror as Shinri brushed.

“Anyway,” Shinri continued, “now they’re worried that you’ll regain your old influence, and that Lady Nanavah isn’t as invincible as they assumed. I think you’ll find some of your allies will begin returning.”

Jasnah nodded to herself. It had taken continued effort during the last month, but she was determined not to let the royal court ignore her. She used what resources she had—the money from Elhokar’s stipend, her influence with both king and *Parshen*, reminders of her former power—to forge a new place for herself at court. It was going slowly, but it was working.

As she brushed, Shinri idly pulled the hair away from Jasnah’s neck. It was at that moment that the girl’s gem-studded bracelet touched Jasnah’s skin.

Jasnah gasped as the room detonated with sound. Two separate gemstones on the bracelet, jezinite and sapphire, touched at the same time, and the power of their notes assaulted her mind like screams. Each one pulled at her, a demanding set of vibrations that shook her soul, fighting with one another for her attention.

Shinri’s arm passed, the gemstones breaking contact, and all was silent again.

“My lady?” Shinri asked with concern. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Jasnah said, shivering slightly, struggling to banish the echoes within. “Please, take off your bracelet when you brush, Shinri. It caught a piece of my hair and yanked it.”

“Oh!” Shinri gasped. “I’m sorry, my lady.”

“It’s all right,” Jasnah said, composing herself as the gemstones’ cries faded in her mind.

There was a knock at the door, and Shinri went to answer it. It was probably Kemnar—Jasnah had sent him to Peacehome Monastery to deliver a message for her.

Shinri returned a moment later, her face troubled. “My lady,” she said, “you have a visitor.”

Jasnah frowned. It wasn’t that late—the sun had barely set, and many people would still be awake—but she had retired early to compose letters to the budding nobility in the new Aleth state of Pralir. She had instructed Kemnar to set up her audience with Ralmakha for the next day. Knowing the monk, he had probably come immediately just to inconvenience her.

“Tell Brother Ralmakha to wait,” Jasnah said, rising.

“Ralmakha?” Shinri asked. “My lady, it’s Lord Balenmar.”

Jasnah paused, frowning. Balenmar? She turned, regarding herself in the

mirror. She was dressed only in a sencoat—a cloak-like robe that wrapped around the chest and tied at the waist with a sash. Her hair was down, her face washed. She was in no condition to receive a male visitor. But, Balenmar . . . the old man wouldn't visit a lady's chambers so late unless it were important.

"Bring me my cloak," Jasnah said.

Shinri rushed to fetch the fine seasilk cloak and place it around Jasnah's shoulders. It was feminine in cut, designed to hang loosely around the body and to close completely at the front. Jasnah did the clasps inside, enveloping her entire body in the garment, then moved into her sitting room, seating herself in one of its stiff-backed chairs. It was no audience chamber, but at least it was better than the bedroom.

She nodded to Shinri, who disappeared around the corner into the entry hallway. A moment later, she returned with the aging stormkeeper. The man leaned wizenedly on his cane, and his eyes were wrinkled with worry. Shinri hurriedly brought the man a chair, and he seated himself.

"What's wrong?" Jasnah asked.

The old man sat with his cane planted before him, both hands resting on top of it. He wore a fine blue shirt beneath the cloak, and a pair of loose trousers. Finally, he reached into his cloak pocket and retrieved a rolled piece of paper. He proffered it to Jasnah. "You keep asking for proof," he said.

Jasnah paused, then reached out from beneath her cloak and accepted the paper. It was a letter, scrawled in a hasty hand. *The Stormkin move on your word, my lord. He who hinders you will be subdued within the month.*

Jasnah raised an eyebrow.

"It's the firmest proof I've been able to discover," Balenmar said. "You have heard of the *Jenchal*?"

Jasnah shook her head.

"The *Jenchal*—The Stormkin—are a group of assassins based out of Pali-nar," Balenmar explained. "It is whispered that they have a new patron—a very important, and very rich, patron. These are a very elite group, Jasnah—they're only hired to do important jobs."

"Where did you get this?" Jasnah asked, holding up the sheet.

"It's a copy," Balenmar admitted. "The original is held by one of my contacts in Crossguard—I could not afford to purchase it. My lady, this message was delivered to Jezenrosh himself."

Jasnah grew cold.

“Jezenrosh hates your brother, Jasnah,” Balenmar said with a solemn voice. “I don’t know why that is, but my sources are firm. Elhokar may consider my usefulness suspect, but I have been alive for a long, long time. Even you would be surprised at the places I have informants—men who may not like your brother, but who would do anything to see stability maintained in Alethkar. The fact that Jezenrosh has hired the *Jenchal* was confirmed just this afternoon by four separate sources. Jasnah, we can only assume the worst.”

Jasnah sat back, thoughtful within the warmth of her cloak. “Jezenrosh and my brother may have had disagreements,” she said, “but this . . . ? Balenmar, are you certain?”

“My lady,” Balenmar said. “My facts are based on hearsay, and my worries based on conjecture. These assassins may not even exist, or if they do, its possible Jezenrosh is using them for another purpose. But if one were going to make a ploy for the throne, now would be a good time—the kingdom is tired and weak from war, and some of the king’s best supporters died on the battlefield. Even if there were suspicion of foul play at the king’s death, most would be hesitant to launch into a civil war.”

Jasnah shook her head. “We don’t know enough.”

“That is why I brought this to you instead of the king,” Balenmar said. “You know how to be . . . delicate.”

“Very well,” Jasnah said. “I will look into it. I’ve an . . . acquaintance who is somewhat close to *Parshen* Jezenrosh.”

Balenmar nodded, rising. “Thank you, Jasnah. Your brother is not the easiest man to like, but he is the son of Nolhonorin. For that, he deserves my loyalty.”

“Shinri,” Jasnah requested. “See Lord Balenmar to the door, and find out if Kemnar has returned from the monastery yet.”

“Yes, my lady,” she said, escorting the aging man as he rose to leave.

Jasnah sat back in consternation, pondering on what the stormkeeper had said. Jezenrosh wouldn’t be the first *Parshen* to try and take the throne for himself. He had withdrawn from the Prallah war following a serious disagreement with the king, and now he had hired a team of assassins. It did not look good.

She was pleased to see Kemnar enter a few moments later, Shinri trailing behind. The short guardsman gave a quick bow. “I had to wait until the break between evening services before he would see me, my lady,” the man explained.

“But I have an audience with him tomorrow?”

“Um, no, my lady,” Kemnar said. “The monk refused your invitation.”

“What?” Jasnah demanded.

“He . . . said he was too busy at the monastery to visit the palace,” Kemnar explained. “He mentioned that if you wanted to see him, he does readings from the *Arguments* five times daily.”

Jasnah closed her eyes, composing herself. *That man* . . . Monks were outside of traditional societal structure—Ralmakha could ignore a command from any nobleman but the king. However, after speaking with Balenmar, it was even more important that she see him.

“Kemnar,” she said, standing. “Go and tell my bearers to prepare my litter. Shinri, fetch my violet *talla*.”

“My lady?” Shinri asked. “You’re actually going to visit the monastery?”

“Of course,” Jasnah replied. “Evening service should just be ending. The monk will have no excuse but to make time for an old friend.”

OF THE FOUR VORIN monastic sects, the Order of Kavel was the most unassuming. Its members tended to focus on the Common Arts, teaching functional crafts and providing care for those unable to do so for themselves. Peacehome monastery personified this philosophy.

Once one passed through the glyph-covered double gates and entered the inner courtyard, it was easy to see that this was a place of practicality and order. The stone buildings were kept clean, free of cromstone stalactites. The stone ground of the courtyard had been carefully leveled and smoothed, and was kept free of chips and gouges. Lanterns had been lit to stave off the evening darkness, and a small number of people trickled from the buildings, the last remnants of those who had attended the evening service.

Jasnah’s litter caused only a moderate stir. Other litters marked the presence of a few noblemen—while the Kavel philosophy tended to attract citizens more than lords, there were still some of her colleagues who preferred its simplicity. The core theology of the four sects was the same; the difference lay in the artistic lessons they offered and the charge—or lack thereof—for such lessons.

Jasnah tapped for her bearers to lower the litter. She had chosen her more lavish vehicle—the one with seasilk curtains as opposed to wooden sides. Summer was near, and highstorms were growing increasingly infrequent. The palace stormkeepers said the next one wouldn’t come until the middle of the next day.

Jasnah climbed from the litter, composed herself, then climbed the steps to the devotion hall, the largest building in the complex. The hall displayed

a bit of richness, with delicate spiral columns and numerous mosaics lining the inner hallway—despite Kavel’s humble nature, Peacehome Monastery was one of the largest buildings in Ral Eram. In the First City, even the slums were a bit ostentatious.

The looks of surprise began the moment she was recognized. Monks paused in their labors, turning with amazed expressions as she swept down the tiled hallway, Kemnar and Nelshenden following behind. Citizens whispered to one another with excitement as she passed, and several lords stopped dead in their tracks, regarding her with stupefaction. Jasnah kept her eyes forward, her pace unrushed, ignoring the air of curiosity. It was natural, of course—the entire city knew that it had been over a decade since Jasnah was last seen inside a Vorin monastery.

Before her lay a pair of open doors, emblazoned with a mysticized representation of the Double Eye—the twenty *palen* glyphs connected by lines in the shape of a sideways hourglass. She remembered the doors from her childhood, in the days just after her father had captured Ral Eram for himself. The mysterious collection of glyphs, rendered in the shape of a magnificent eye with two pupils, had always drawn her attention away from readings of the *Arguments*. She had wondered if the eye truly was that of the Almighty, watching her, looking into her soul.

It had been many years since she had last passed those doors, and even more since she had bothered to wonder about the Almighty.

“Lady Jasnah?” a surprised voice asked as she entered the central devotion room, a large, functional chamber with numerous mats for patrons to sit upon while the *Arguments* were preached. Brother Lhardon, First Monk of Peacehome Monastery, was young for his station—barely into his fifth decade—and had a wide ovoid face.

Jasnah paused as the monk approached. “Lady Jasnah!” the man repeated. “You’ve missed evening service, I’m afraid.”

“I’m not here for the service, Lhardon,” she informed. “Where is Ral-makha?”

Lhardon’s face fell slightly. “Oh. He’s in the fourth devotion room.”

Jasnah nodded curtly, turning toward one of the side passages.

“Morning service is tomorrow at dawn,” Lhardon said hopefully behind her, his voice echoing in the large stone chamber.

Jasnah ignored him, continuing on her way.

“My lady,” Nelshenden said. “That was an abrupt way to treat a brother of the monastery.”

“Lhardon should never have become First Monk,” Jasnah said. “He’s far too smoketongued to be a Kavel—he was only excited because he thought I might start coming to Peacehome, and bring offerings with me.”

Nelshenden’s look of disapproval did not retreat, but he kept his tongue. *Perhaps he’s right*, Jasnah acknowledged. Lhardon did not deserve her annoyance. It was somewhat frustrating that Ralmakha could still have such an effect on her, even from a distance.

That distance, however, was closing. She paused outside the fourth door in the hallway—a portal crafted of iron, bearing ten different incarnations of the *ish* glyph: glory, peace, holiness, consecration, remaking, monkhood, blessedness, piousness, dedication, and change.

She pushed open the door, which swung easily on counterbalances, and walked into the small room. There was only one man inside, wearing the light brown sencoat of a monk. He stood before a group of small statues, mumbling in a low voice. He paused as the door opened, turning.

Ralmakha had changed little over the last few years. His hair was beginning to thin, but he kept the curls short after monkly fashion, and so it made little difference. He had a firm Aleth face, more triangular than square, that had a studious, scholarly cast to it.

“Lady Jasnah,” he said, bowing his head.

Jasnah folded her arms, regarding the man. “Surprised, Ralmakha?”

“By you?” he asked. “It hasn’t been *that* long, Jasnah.”

Jasnah snorted quietly. “Well, if your refusal to see me was a ploy to get me to visit the monastery, then it succeeded.”

“Lady Jasnah,” Ralmakha said chidingly, “you think I would be that transparent? I told your man why I could not meet with you at the palace. I simply have too many important duties.”

Jasnah raised an eyebrow. “Yes,” she noted. “You’re so important to the monks that they have you saying the *Arguments* to the prayer statues.”

Once, he would have risen to the gibe. Now, however, Ralmakha just smiled. “It is good to see you again,” he said. “I assume you haven’t come to hear from the *Arguments*?”

“I need to ask you some questions, Ralmakha,” Jasnah said. “About Jezenrosh.”

Ralmakha frowned slightly in confusion. “He’s *your* cousin.”

“Yes, but he married *your* sister,” Jasnah replied. “I barely even know the man, but you were a ward beneath his father.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“And you never get messages from your sister?” Jasnah asked. “You never visit her? Come now, Ralmakha, you probably know Jezenrosh better than anyone outside of Crossguard.”

Ralmakha turned, looking past the group of prayer statues toward a mural at the back of the room. It depicted Ishar Elin, giving the gift of the Oathgates to the ten kings who would eventually form a unified Roshar.

“All right, Jasnah,” Ralmakha said. “I’ll answer your questions—assuming you answer one for me.”

“What?”

Ralmakha turned back toward her, meeting her eyes. “Why did you stop believing?”

Jasnah raised an eyebrow. “You probably don’t want me to answer that.”

“And why not?”

“Because you won’t like the answer,” Jasnah replied. “Besides, isn’t it supposed to be dangerous to blaspheme inside a monastery?”

“It isn’t really blasphemy if you don’t believe in the deity you’re insulting.”

“Let’s just say that I found . . . inconsistencies in the doctrine,” Jasnah said.

Ralmakha raised an eyebrow.

Jasnah sighed, shaking her head. “What are you doing here, Ralmakha?” she asked. “Why waste your days giving sermons to statues? You know the monastery looks down on a man who joins once past the day of his *Charan*. They’ll never let you rise in their ranks—you’ll always be stuck in a corner somewhere, out of sight.”

Ralmakha’s eyes flashed slightly at the comment, showing a bit of the fiery temper that hid behind the smiles. “I was meant to be here.”

“Meant to be here?” she asked. “You’re a nobleman, Ralmakha, heir to a Fifth City! You renounced your family, your duties, and your Blade . . . for what?”

“Not all of us can deny who we are, Jasnah,” Ralmakha snapped. “Who are you to speak of duty? You, whose every day is a lie? Do not forget to whom you are speaking. Do not forget the secrets you once told me.”

Jasnah froze, chilled as if by a sudden highstorm wind. She shot a glance at Nelshenden and Kemnar, who still stood beside the door. The two took the hint, backing from the room and closing the metal door.

“How dare you speak of that!” she hissed.

“What?” Ralmakha said. “You haven’t told your men? What of your brother? Does the king know that his beloved sister, genius of the court, shouldn’t be there at all? Will you tell your husband—if that heart of yours ever allows you to marry? Will you tell him he wedded an Awakener?”

"You don't know what you are talking about, Ralmakha."

"You have a duty given by the Almighty," Ralmakha informed her angrily. "A duty you blatantly ignore. Yet you still presume to tell everyone else how they should live! You . . ." Ralmakha trailed off, closing his eyes, breathing deeply.

"This is why I refused to come see you," he finally said, his voice growing soft once again. "Do you realize I haven't lost my temper in two years? No yelling, no worrying what my rage will do to me, and those around me . . . Yet five minutes with you, and it comes out again. You always did have that talent, Jasnah."

He looked up at her. "I should not have spoken of the events of your *Charan*. The Almighty has given each of us many paths, and we choose our own travels. Ask your questions of me—I will answer."

Jasnah calmed herself, wondering at her own guilt. She'd fought with Ralmakha many times before—their debates were some of her fondest memories. But that, however, had been in Thalenah—a different time, when they had both been different people.

"What does your brother-in-law think of the king?" Jasnah asked.

Ralmakha eyed her. "Surely you don't believe the rumors?"

"Which rumors?"

Ralmakha shook his head. "Jezenrosh wishes Elhokar no harm, despite what you may have heard. The *Parshen* is a man of passion, and he often says things he does not intend. He and I are similar in that way."

"There are some who think he might try and take the throne for himself," Jasnah said carefully.

"Those who say so are either misguided or they are fools. Jasnah, I grew up with Jezenrosh—I know him like a brother. He has never liked Elhokar, but there is one problem with assuming he'd seize the throne. Jezenrosh has no ambition. He hates leadership. He is a scholar—he would have joined the stormkeepers if he weren't heir. For a time, I thought he might renounce his throne and follow me into the monastery. Unlike me, however, he had no brothers who could inherit. No, ruling Crossguard is bad enough, in his mind. He has no desire to be king."

"You're certain?" Jasnah asked.

Jezenrosh nodded. "I'm certain, Jasnah. Jezenrosh is no murderer, and he hates courtly politics. He married my sister because he knew she was terrible at intrigue—he loved her simplicity. Together they live, trying to ignore the rest of the kingdom as best they can. There is no danger to Elhokar from Crossguard."

Jasnah folded her arms again, tapping her foot in frustration. Two men whose judgment she trusted had given her two polarized opinions—if she believed the wrong one, her brother could end up dead.

Ralmakha knelt, regarding the collection of knee-high statues—representations of noblemen or women who, for one reason or another, couldn't come to regular services. They commissioned statues to stand in their place and listen to the *Arguments* on their behalf.

Ralmakha reached out, selecting one and bringing it to the front. It was crafted completely of jade—though it had probably been made of clay, then Remade through Awakening. It depicted a young woman with long hair, sitting demurely on a small pillar.

“This one is for you, you know,” he said.

Jasnah blinked in surprise. “What?”

“Your mother commissioned it,” he explained. “Right after you left for Prallah that first time. She always worried about you—she claimed the philosophies you learned in Thalenah ruined you, made you an unbeliever.”

“My mother always looked for someone to blame,” Jasnah said with a wave of her hand. “Anyone other than her own daughter. I wonder if she ever paused to note that the same philosophies turned you into a monk.”

“I wonder,” Ralmakha agreed.

“Destroy it,” Jasnah said. “I don't want it here representing me.”

Ralmakha looked up, surprised. “Are you sure you want to do that, Jasnah? Even if you don't believe, what can it hurt?”

Jasnah shook her head. “You can't even see the hypocrisy, can you? The monasteries teach that everyone needs to hear from the *Arguments* and learn to Remake their souls, yet it lets the wealthy simply buy their way into devotion. They get all the benefits of being a pious Vorin, without any of the annoyance. Very convenient.”

“The prayer statues are a symbol, Jasnah,” Ralmakha said quietly. “No one regards them as being equal to actual attendance—it is a metaphor, a deferential tribute given when one is away.” He stood. “I'll have the statue removed, but not destroyed. Perhaps some day you'll want it.”

Jasnah raised a skeptical eyebrow. However, her response was cut off by a quick knock at the door, followed by Nelshenden pushing it open. “My lady?” he said, his voice urgent.

“What?”

Nelshenden stepped back, revealing an exhausted messenger. “My lady,” the man said, falling to one knee. “You must come to the palace immediately!”

Jasnah stepped forward. "What? What is this about?"

The messenger looked up. "Your mother, my lady. The queen is dead."

LADY EZAVAH DID NOT look peaceful in death. The woman looked decayed. Shriveled. The same as she had looked the day before—the only difference being the lack of breath.

Jasnah had assumed that the death would have little effect on her mood. She had known her mother's passing was near. Yet the loss she felt was a sickly pit within her. Lady Ezavah had always been a buffer for her daughter, even when Jasnah tried to escape from the woman's shadow. The queen had been a storm of passion when alive, hardly the ideal courtly woman, but she had commanded respect nonetheless. Much of what Jasnah had achieved, especially near the beginning, she had accomplished because of her mother's reputation.

This woman had made Jasnah strong. Without her, Jasnah felt hollowly alone. In addition, the death brought other difficulties. Though she felt callous for thinking of it, the wall protecting Jasnah's independence had just collapsed.

Just when I was beginning to regain my feet. The thought made her even more sick. *Just when I was beginning to gain acceptance into court again . . .*

Elhokar sat in a chair beside their mother's bed, hands clasped before him, looking down at the body with an almost child-like expression of sorrow. Nanavah stood at his side. Meridas and Balenmar stood a respectful distance behind, along with several other court officials. Dalenar and his sons stood beside Jasnah, their heads bowed in respect.

Elhokar stood. "My mother has finally found peace," he said in a respectful voice. "The Almighty has taken her to the Dwelling. We will hold services at Kingshome monastery tomorrow." He paused, glancing at his wife.

"With a death, so must new life be symbolized," Elhokar continued. "Lady Jasnah's betrothal shall be announced at the beginning of the dueling festivities."

chapter 22

MERIN 5

MERIN CLANKED THROUGH the hallways of the Kholinar palace, looking for Aredor. He found Renarin instead. The younger son was in Aredor's sitting room, seated beside a table—a brushpen held in his hand.

"You're writing!" Merin accused, aghast.

Renarin looked up with surprise, then relaxed when he saw it was only Merin. He held up his sheet of paper, which was scribbled with very simple glyphs—ones that even Merin recognized. "They're just numbers," Renarin defended. "Men are allowed to write numbers."

"They are?" Merin asked uncertainly.

"Well . . ." Renarin hedged. "Merchants do it, though they usually use tallies. A lot have just started using the glyphs for convenience, though."

"Yes, but why do you need to write them?" Merin asked, regarding the sheet of paper. He knew very little of mathematics, but some of the numbers appeared to be sequences of one sort or another. If there were any connections between the other sets of numbers, however, they were beyond him.

"I just like playing with numbers," Renarin said in his sheepish way, accepting the paper back.

Merin shrugged. "Where is Aredor?"

"He's meeting with someone," Renarin said, nodding toward the heir's audience chamber. "It's a little early to be off to sparring practice."

"We're not going there yet," Merin explained, setting aside his helmet,

then reaching over to undo the clasp on his right gauntlet. "Your brother promised to arrange for someone read to me from *The Way of Kings* today. I was going to go over to Faithhome to get a reading, but he said he'd arrange for a monk to come here and do it, so he could listen too." Merin frowned as he spoke, pulling off the other gauntlet, then peering inside.

"What's wrong?" Renarin asked.

"The gauntlet," Merin complained, shaking it up and down for a moment, then peering inside. "There's a rock or something stuck inside—it's been bothering me all day." He set the gauntlet aside with a sigh. "Here, will you help me with the breastplate?"

Renarin rose, helping him pull off the chest piece. Then the younger son picked up Merin's gauntlet, putting it on and letting it size itself to him.

"You're right," Renarin said as Merin took off the rest of the armor. "There is something in here." Renarin pulled off the gauntlet, picking at the inside.

Merin pulled off the last boot, then sat down with a sigh. He was so tired of the awkward metal that he was almost beginning to regret the day he had saved King Elhokar's life. Vasher had him training in the Plate so often he felt like he wore the suit more often than he didn't—he was surprised the monk hadn't commanded him to sleep in it yet.

"There!" Renarin said, pulling something out of the gauntlet. "It was wedged underneath a layer of leather. Look." He held up something very different from the rock Merin had been expecting—a small pendant, tipped with a disc-like piece of carved stone.

"What is it?" Merin asked, reaching for the stone.

"Looks like jade," Renarin said. "A glyphward."

As soon as Merin touched the glyphward, the air in the room drew breath and came to life. Merin stood, frozen for a moment, the source of the strange visions suddenly manifest. Just as before, he could see the air flowing through the room, sense its motions blowing in beneath the door, seeping out through the shuttered window, and even being drawn in and out by Renarin's lungs.

Tentatively, he released the glyphward. The room returned to normal.

"I wonder how it got in there," Renarin was saying with a musing voice. "Must have belonged to the man who tried to kill the king. A glyphward brought with him, tucked safely in the gauntlet, for protection in battle. Didn't work very well, did it?"

Merin touched the glyphward again, tapping it as it hung from the string below Renarin's fingers. As soon as his fingers brushed the glyph, the air became visible again.

“Merin?” Renarin asked, frowning. “What’s wrong?”

“Touch the glyphward,” Merin said. “Try it.”

Renarin shrugged, placing the glyph in his hand. “All right. What now?”

“You don’t . . . sense anything different?”

“No,” Renarin said. “Should I? It’s just a glyphward, Merin.”

It doesn’t work for him, Merin thought. But why? “What glyph is it?”

Merin regarded the carved character. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “Looks like it’s a derivative of *Nah*.”

Nah—power. Merin withdrew his hand uncertainly. What kind of strange magic was this? Glyphwards were supposed to protect against the supernatural, not foster it. And why would it work only for Merin?

“Do you want it?” Renarin asked.

Merin paused. Did he? He reached into his sencoat’s side pocket, pulling out one of his mother’s sewn glyphwards—one he had carried with him through battles. It was stained and dirtied, and would look silly next to his fine clothing, but his experiences earlier had taught him to at least carry it with him. He opened it up. “Here,” he said, “drop it in this.”

Renarin frowned, but did as requested. Merin folded the cloth, locking the strange pendant within it, and tucked both in his pocket.

“And people say *I’m* strange,” Renarin mumbled, sitting down. “I—” He was cut off as the door to Aredor’s audience chamber opened, and a man stepped out, followed by Aredor. Merin didn’t recognize the stranger, though he wore riding clothing—not lavish, but rich enough. Probably a minor nobleman, Nineteenth or Twentieth Lord. The breast of his cloak bore the glyph of House Kholin, but the glyph was twisted into an unfamiliar design.

Aredor stood for a moment, speaking to the newcomer.

“Who is he?” Merin whispered, leaning closer to Renarin.

“A very distant cousin,” Renarin whispered back. “From Crossguard—one of *Parshen* Jezenrosh’s couriers.”

“Jezenrosh?” Merin asked. “Isn’t he supposed to be dying or something?”

Renarin shook his head. “He left the war because of sickness, but he’s since recovered.”

Aredor gave the stranger a familial clasp on the shoulder, and the courier bowed his head, then turned and walked quickly from the room.

“What was that all about?” Merin asked as Aredor walked over to join them.

“Family business,” Aredor said off-handily. He eyed Merin’s Shardplate, sitting in a heap on the floor. “More wall-jumping?”

Merin shook his head. “Vasher wants me to lean how to jump up to my feet from a prone position without using my hands.”

“Wearing Shardplate?” Aredor asked with amusement. “That’s not possible.”

“Oh, it is,” Merin said. “I managed to do it a couple of times.”

“Out of how many tries?” Aredor asked skeptically.

“Five hundred or so,” Merin admitted.

Aredor chuckled, and Merin blushed. “It’s better than last week,” Merin said. “He had me jumping off the wall, landing on my feet, rolling to the ground, coming up, swinging twenty times, then jogging back up the stairs—all without stopping. Five repetitions nearly killed me.”

This time, Aredor laughed out loud. “Well,” he said, “if I ever get attacked by a wall, I’ll know who to send for. I assume you’re here for the *Kings* reading?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” Aredor replied. “She should arrive any moment.”

Merin paused. “*She*? You said you were going to bring in a monk!”

“Oh, did I?” Aredor said innocently. “Completely forgot.”

Merin flushed, looking down at his outfit. He was dressed in a padded shennah undershirt and trousers, meant for use beneath armor. Both were stained with sweat from his day’s exertions.

“By the winds!” he swore. “Loan me something else to wear!”

Aredor laughed, nodding toward his bedroom chambers. Merin rushed inside, selecting an outfit as he heard the outer door open and a feminine voice speak. He hurriedly changed—Aredor was a tad taller than he, but the clothing fit without looking too bad. He quickly splashed some water on his face from the bin, sprinkled on a bit of scented oil on his neck, then composed himself and rejoined the others.

Merin had to admit, this one was rather attractive. Thin-faced with dark, Aleth hair, she was a model of noble femininity—reserved without being cold, immaculately dressed and composed. She rose when Merin entered, bowing respectfully.

Aredor winked his direction, and Merin resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “Merin,” Aredor announced, “let me introduce the Lady Sankal, first daughter of Lord Chanaran Miendavnah. We are fortunate for this opportunity—Lady Sankal is known for her poetic voice.”

“It is an honor, my lady,” Merin said with a nod.

“For I, as well,” the lady replied. “Please, be seated. You wished to hear from *The Way of Kings*? Which section?”

“The First,” Merin requested, seating himself beside Aredor on the couch. Lady Sankal waved to her companion—a younger girl, probably Sankal’s ward, who bore a very thick tome. Sankal seated herself as well, opening the book in her lap.

“Part One,” she read, “The Ideal Monarch. The Sovereign is not a tyrant, but a father. As the Almighty cares for his creations, so the Sovereign should love and care for his people. His is a holy position, granted to him by birth from the Almighty. In the eternal eye of the Almighty, a Sovereign’s worth will be judged not by his acts of heroism, his great conquests, or his wealth. It will be determined by the love he earned from his people.”

Despite his annoyance with Aredor, Merin smiled. The reading was far better than the ones he had received from the monks. Lady Senkal spoke with a melodic cadence, converting Bajerden’s simple passages into a rhythmic near-ballad. Her voice was sweet and relaxing, and she never stumbled over words like the monks often did.

“She’s something, eh?” Aredor said quietly, nudging him. “You should trust me more.”

Merin raised an eyebrow. “I haven’t forgiven you yet,” he informed.

“Oh?” Aredor asked. “What are you going to do? Make me jump off the wall a couple of times?”

“No,” Merin replied. “But next time I’m up there, I’ll do my best to make certain I fall on you.”

Aredor chuckled to himself, leaning back and relaxing as he listened. Merin did likewise. Actually, he was rather pleased with the outcome, even if he were getting a little tired of *The Way of Kings*. He felt guilty admitting it, even to himself, but it was true. He knew the words were important—Kanaran society was founded on Bajerden’s philosophies. However, the writing was just so dry. Bajerden outlined his beliefs in a straightforward, but dull, manner. Merin had been excited the first couple of times he had received a reading, but Dalenar had recommended that Merin hear from the book at least once a week—more often when he could manage it. Even with six sections to choose from, the readings were beginning to seem very repetitive.

“The great and magnificent duty of the Sovereign is the safety of his people. Without them, he is nothing. As they provide for his sustenance, he must provide for their livelihoods. The second duty of the Sovereign is the wealth of his people. He is a waged servant, and if his people do not prosper more because of his presence, then he has failed them.”

The book made more sense to him now that he understood that

Bajerden's word 'Sovereign' didn't just refer to the king, but to anyone of noble blood. The first and fourth sections were the ones Merin found most interesting—the first because it reminded him of the heroes of the past, and the fourth because it mentioned Protocol and swordplay. However, even the best sections were a little dry.

Merin forced himself to continue listening to readings, however. Dalenar was right—how could he perform his duty if he didn't understand what that duty was? There was no better place to hear about the obligations of his station than through *The Way of Kings*.

The truth was, however, he would much rather have been hearing from one of the great ballads. He had accidentally made the discovery—after a *The Way of Kings* reading, Merin had heard a monk reading from *The Fall of Kanar* in a nearby room. He had gone to investigate, and had listened ravenously. It wasn't until that moment that he had realized the treasure at his disposal—there were hundreds of great epics to be heard, everything from *The Betrayal of Inavah* to *The Chronicles of the Returns*. Back in Stone-mountain, he had only been able to hear the songs known by townsfolk or passing minstrels, but now—as a Lord—he could demand any of them on a whim. It had become his habit to request a reading from one of them after hearing a section out of *The Way of Kings*.

Unfortunately, he wouldn't be able to sneak in any ballad-reading this day. Lady Senkal marched onward through her recitation, reading about the rules by which a sovereign should decide whether or not to go to war.

"She's not married, you know," Aredor whispered about three-quarters of the way through the reading.

Merin rolled his eyes. "Why is it you insist on trying to marry me off?" he hissed. "You're five years older than me, and you haven't seen fit to woo a bride yet—in fact, everything I hear claims you enjoy keeping the women guessing."

"I'm horribly misrepresented," Aredor said. "It's a conspiracy among the mothers. None of them want me as a son-in-law."

Merin shot his friend a suffering look. Aredor was one of the most sought-after matches in Alethkar. It was commonly expected that he would be chosen as *Parshen* after his father died—either way, he would inherit Kholinar, one of the most powerful cities in the kingdom. Any mother would be eager to choose him for her daughter if she thought he would agree to the match.

Aredor nodded toward Senkal. "Her father is lord of Basinrock," he noted. "A sixth city."

“And?” Merin asked. That made her a Sixteenth Lady.

“And,” Aredor said meaningfully, “she has no brothers.”

No brothers? Merin thought with surprise, turning to regard the woman again. She continued her reading despite the whispers—apparently, it was expected that the men would get distracted every once in a while. She looked up as she spoke, shooting him a glance and a smile, then looked down at the book.

“That means her husband will inherit the city,” Aredor explained quietly.

“I’m not dense, Aredor,” Merin replied.

“Basinrock is only a sixth city,” Aredor continued. “But that’s very respectable, all things considered. It’s a tribute city to Kholinar right now, but its emerald mines are productive enough that my father has considered granting it full independence. If its lord were a relative, Father could easily be persuaded to make the change. Her father is very eager to see that happen.”

“Eager enough to marry his daughter to a former peasant?” Merin asked with a frown.

“Don’t be so quick to judge them, Merin,” Aredor said. “Not every nobleman is like Meridas or the king. Some of us see a lorded citizen as the most honorable kind of nobleman. Listen to what Bajerden says—his entire social system is based around the idea of rewarding those who serve well. The best leaders are to be elevated, and those who deserve nobility will find it. In a way, *your* existence legitimizes all of us.”

Merin sat back thoughtfully, remaining quiet until the end of the recitation. Once it was finished, Lady Senkal modestly withdrew—it would be unseemly for her to tarry too long with men she had barely met. As she left, however, she mentioned that she would be visiting Kholinar for a period of two weeks, and that she would be pleased to return and read to them from the other sections.

“I think she likes you,” Aredor said after the door closed.

“That’s because she couldn’t smell me,” Merin said with a frown. “Next time, warn me when you’re going to do something like that.”

Aredor snorted. “Last time I did, you found an excuse to run away and hide. Pick up your sword—it’s time for training.”

THE OPAL IN MERIN’S SHARDBLADE had darkened steadily over the weeks. Merin examined the gemstone closely as he walked, peering into its greying depths. It had been about two months since the final Pralir battle—nearly eighty days. He was getting so close . . . just a few more weeks, and the

Blade would be his completely. He would be able to dismiss it and recall it, and all shadows of its former owner would be gone.

As it was, the only remnant of the dead man was a faint outline of the glyphs running up the length of the blade. Over the weeks, the weapon had lengthened by half a foot, growing to Merin's needs. The gemstone-like indentations on the blade had melted away, instead being replaced by shifting waves that looked something like water. Merin wasn't certain why the design was appearing—he'd only seen the ocean once, when they had passed near its tip while marching to Prallah. Yet he was told that the Blade would know his soul better than he did, and that its ornamentations would reflect him.

The blade had begun to curve slightly, losing its straightness. That, at least, he understood. The fighting style Vasher was teaching him relied heavily on broad swings and slashes, and had very little focus on thrusts. The weapon was growing to fit his training. The hilt had grown as well, perfect for the two-handed blows he often delivered, and the crossguard was curving delicately, the ends growing into points.

"You know," Aredor noted, "staring at it won't make it bond any faster."

Merin lowered the weapon. "I'm just worried—the dueling competition is only a few days away. I guess I won't have the weapon bonded in time."

"You can still participate," Aredor said. "You'll just have to fight with the sheath on so you don't accidentally hurt anyone."

"That will make it awkward to fight," Merin said. "Assuming I even get to participate."

"You haven't asked him yet?" Aredor asked.

Merin shook his head. "I'm going to do it today."

"He's got to let you," Aredor said confidently. "I mean, why is he training you, if not to teach you how to duel? This is a perfect opportunity to test your skills."

Merin wasn't so certain. Vasher still forbade Merin from dueling with anyone besides himself and a couple of his fellow monks. Merin bid Aredor farewell as they entered the monastery, making his way toward Vasher's customary corner of the courtyard.

Vasher nodded to him as he approached. "Today we spar again," he said simply, tossing Merin a practice sword.

Merin caught the sword and fell into his stance. A few moments later, they were trading blows on the sandy ground. Merin liked to think he was getting better. After all, Vasher had finally consented to begin

teaching him how to spar, rather than just making him practice swings and stances.

Of course, Merin had yet to even score a hit on the older man. He tried hard as they practiced—waiting for that one chance, that one opening, when he would finally show his teacher his improvement. It had yet to come.

Merin held up a hand forstallingly as the latest exchange ended. Vasher waited patiently as Merin stretched his arms, then fell back into a dueling stance. The stance was the sign, and the elder monk advanced again, kicking up sand as he approached. Merin held his weapon forward, watching carefully for the first strike, parrying it as it came. According to Vasher, most fights were won on the turn of one or two blows. However, before those blows came, there was often testing—a few tentative exchanges, meant to distract one's opponent, or perhaps judge his strength.

The end came in a flash. Merin parried as trained, on the defensive, trying to block or dodge all of the strikes. As usual, he wasn't left with any opportunities to attack—Vasher struck so quickly, his attacks came so rapidly, that it was all Merin could do to keep himself from being hit.

This time, he blocked most of them. One blow, however, slipped through, striking him on the side of the leg. Merin grunted in pain, losing his rhythm as Vasher pressed forward, bowling over him and knocking him to the ground.

Merin sighed, resting back in the sand, staring up into the darkening sky. It was completely free of clouds—during spring and fall, the sky was often cloudy, even when no highstorm was approaching. During the summer, however, even a hint of rainfall was too much to expect.

"You keep leaving your left side open," Vasher said. "You're not a spearman any more—you don't have a shield to protect you."

"I trained with a spear and shield for two years," Merin replied. "I can't expect to overcome my reflexes in two months."

"Excuses are fine until they kill you," Vasher said. "Come on—we haven't been at it that long."

Merin sighed, sitting up. As he did so, he felt an unfamiliar lump in his pocket. He frowned, reaching down reflexively before remembering the glyphward he and Renarin had discovered. He glanced up at Vasher, then hesitated.

It can't be evil, Merin told himself. It's a glyphward. However, he was still uncertain.

Use any advantage you have . . . Vasher's words from before returned to him.

Merin reached in his pocket as he stood, quickly unwrapping the glyphward. He brought out the ward with a hasty motion, slipping it around his neck and tucking it beneath his shirt. The air became perceptible around him, driven by a cool breeze coursing through the valley. He could see it, stronger up above, blowing over the wall and dropping in upon them.

"Stance," Vasher ordered.

Merin did as commanded. What kind of advantage did he expect to receive from the glyphward? Being able to see the wind wasn't exactly a strong martial benefit.

Vasher approached, sword held before him in a familiar, careful grip. He was cautious, discerning, perfect. He gave no clue as to his thoughts. Except . . .

Vasher took a sharp breath. Merin saw it—saw the air get sucked through Vasher's nose, then suddenly stop. The monk was holding his breath.

Merin struck even as Vasher raised his blade to attack. Merin moved in quickly, beneath the man's guard. Vasher's eyes flashed with surprise, but it was too late. Merin's weapon struck Vasher on the side of the chest, causing a grunt of pain and throwing dust from the monk's clothing.

The monk stumbled back, lowering his weapon.

"Ha!" Merin said. "Finally!"

Vasher rubbed his side, eyes thinning. "You're getting too accustomed to my style," he informed. "Fight the same man too long, and even a novice will learn to anticipate his moves. Let's get a drink."

Merin continued to smile, tempted to mention Vasher's own lecture on 'excuses.' However, now was not the time to agitate the aging monk. As they approached the water barrel, Merin carefully broached a new subject.

"The dueling competition is in four days," he said.

"So?" Vasher asked.

Merin shrugged. "I thought I might participate."

"Not if you want to keep learning from me, you won't," Vasher said.

Merin groaned, dropping his ladle into the water. "Why, Vasher? Don't you understand the opportunity I'll be passing up?"

"You already have a Blade," Vasher said. "The competition means nothing to you."

"It means everything," Merin said. How could he explain? "You're a monk, Vasher—you don't understand these things. I need to participate,

show the others that I can be one of them. They still think of me as Lord Dalenar's 'pet peasant.' I need to prove myself."

"You're young," Vasher said, taking a drink. "There will be plenty of time for you to 'prove yourself.' Afterward, there will be plenty of time to regret doing so."

Merin sighed, leaning against the barrel with a frustrated glare.

"I understand more than you think, Merin," Vasher said. "I haven't always been a monk."

Merin nodded disconsolately. Eventually, he looked up, studying the grizzled monk. "Vasher, I've spoken to the others. You've never taken a student—not even a peasant. None of the monks you spar with have taken students either. What made you decide to train me?"

Vasher replaced the ladle, then fished out the one Merin had dropped. "I know something of what it is like to be a reject," he said. "I understand what it is to leave one life and begin another."

Merin frowned at the cryptic answer. Vasher just turned back toward their practice swords. "No duels, Merin," he repeated. "Come on. You've training to do."

chapter 23

SHINRI 4

PAINTED FACES STARED AT SHINRI. She had forgotten how disturbing that could be—she really had grown accustomed to life in Alethkar’s court. Once she had joyed in the discomfort those faces had given visiting noblemen; her younger self would have been horrified to see the woman she had become.

The city of Kenedal, capital of the island kingdom of Thalenah, had become foreign to her once again. Yet it still held a fascination for her. Shinri strolled through the city streets, her feet given a roaming freedom that was growing depressingly rare lately. For the moment, however, there was nowhere specific she had to be—no plot of Jasnah’s to further, no ceremony she needed attend, no function that demanded her peripheral attention. She could simply stroll, looking at the pictures.

The Thalens were fascinated with eyes and faces, and often exaggerated them in their murals and paintings—art forms of which they were extremely fond. Shinri barely passed a building—whether it be shop, government structure, or simple dwelling—that didn’t bear at least an amateur painting on one side. Most were far from amateur—just like Aleths liked to decorate their doors with portalglyphs and carvings, the Thalens used murals and paintings as a representation of wealth and status. The more powerful a man was, or the more rich a shop’s goods, the better his painting.

They were especially fond of faces. Eyes peeked from overhangs and

ledges, faces were emblazoned on building sides, and massive crowd scenes ran across the larger structures. Lady Jasnah's history lessons had taught Shinri things that once—as a child and young adolescent—she had stubbornly ignored. Even though Thalenah seemed more normal than Shinavar, it wasn't truly a Kanaran kingdom. Its people were of Inavan stock—the only ones left, now that Inavah itself had been destroyed. They weren't pagans, though they had once been. Thalenah had joined with the Kanaran kingdoms in their worship of the Almighty when Josen, dubbed "The Vorin King," had converted in the Fifth Epoch.

Shinri reached up, brushing her fingers along a mural. Aleths preferred indistinct artistic representations, favoring form over detail even in most sculptures. Heralds were represented as faceless warriors of divinity, and human representations rarely included more than perfunctory faces. To the Vorins, stylized *palh* glyphs were the only regal form of visual art, and even those were often considered secondary to poetic or musical pieces.

It seemed so strange to see detail in the faces again. But, it was a good sense of strangeness. The paintings, mixed with the unfamiliar Thalen architecture, made the street seem slightly off. Imperfect. Real. It was an alien realness, true, but it left her refreshingly calm. She felt no impulse to gather pebbles or pull at the threads of her dress, no need to mar the images she saw around her by prying free mural tiles. It was a freedom she hadn't felt since her return from Prallah. Thalenah was already flawed, and that was good. It was honest.

So, for the moment, Shinri simply walked and enjoyed the peace. Or, at least, she tried to. As she strolled, she was amused to find a slight sense of urgency within her—a desire to return to Alethkar. Things were moving so quickly. Jasnah's betrothal would be announced this very evening, and the queen still hadn't revealed which of the many potential suitors she intended to choose. Events in Shinri's homeland of Jah Keved were coming to a head, the dramatic death of the Puppeteer—followed by her cousin's subjugation of House Rienar—providing unexpected twists in the dynastic upheaval. There was a thrill in all of this. She had tasted power during her visit to Veden City, and it had awakened an understanding within her. Even as Jasnah's underling, she was at the center of movements that shaped nations much as the highstorms shaped the land.

And this was the duality within her. At times, Shinri was reminded of how much she disliked noble society for its falseness. The convolutions of etiquette and courtly intrigue sickened her. Yet at the same time she felt an attraction to their puzzles and struggle for power. She moved among

them with skill, enjoying the application of things Jasnah had taught. She was a child of the very society her sensibilities denounced.

Maybe that's why I'm so twisted, she thought wryly, holding up the sleeve of her *talla* and glancing at a place where she had pulled free the silvery embroidery. The red dress was pocked by tiny sewing holes, scarred patterns showing where the embroidery had once trailed. She knew that the chambermaids were talking of her again—they constantly had to take her dresses to the tailors for restitching, wash hidden brushpen scrawlings off the stone walls, and take her furniture in for re-finishing to obscure the marks Shinri cut into the wood. Maybe it wasn't simply a reaction to the court's lying perfection—maybe it was a manifestation of her indecision. She was the one who lied, trying to pretend she belonged to the court yet trying to remain above it at the same time.

And now you go further, she thought. It had taken weeks for her to find time to come to Thalenah to search for Tethren's convoy in the dock registers. She should have come sooner, for discovering the truth about the death of the man she had loved was not a thing to be delayed. Yet, the maneuverings in Alethkar were so demanding. Jasnah needed Shinri's help and support—in a way, the entire kingdom did, for Jasnah's task was the preservation of its monarch.

Tethren was . . . distant. It had been so long since Shinri had seen him last, eight months now—and that had only been a quick visit between stages of the Prallan war. It had been two years since they had really spent any time together—two years during which she had grown from fifteen to seventeen. It seemed like so little in the measure of epochs, but when she thought of the barely-civil child she had been and compared her to the woman she had become . . .

You must do this, she thought. *You must know what happened to him, if only to resolve that section of your life. Everyone has forgotten Tethren amidst the groanings of kingdoms and armies. But not you. This is something you must do—no matter how uncertain you are of your abilities.*

And, unfortunately, 'uncertain' was an understatement of the problem. Gathering information from dock-keepers was not like doing the same with Kanaran noblewomen. The men she had asked so far had been unhelpful at best. She'd wanted to bring Kemnar—that had been a large part of her procrastination about coming to Thalenah. In the end, she had failed. Jasnah simply needed the man too much; he appeared to report his findings, but he always disappeared back into the Ral Eram underground, searching for clues about the group of assassins that sought King Elhokar's life.

That left Shinri on her own. Without Kemnar's skill, it quickly became obvious that the information she sought wouldn't be given to her by common workers—a Kanaran noblewoman dressed in fine silks was never going to gain their trust. Such was the reason, conscious or unconscious, that her feet led her to the Thalen palace.

It was an ancient building, lined with statues on its step-like sides. The Heralds were represented, of course, as were Thalen kings and heroes. Notably included, however, were the Seven Conquerors—there was even a statue dedicated to Jarnah, the very man Dalenar Kholin had killed just two decades before.

The addition of the Seven Conquerors amongst the heroes and kings was odd. Jarnah, for instance, had conquered Thalenah itself before moving northward to Vedenar, and finally stopping at Alethkar. Yet as she studied the statues, Shinri thought she understood why they were there. The seven men were figures of lore. They were the seven leaders who had tried, and failed, to unite all of Roshar under one throne. Even in Alethkar, there were numerous ballads and stories about them.

Shinri turned from contemplating the statues to instead study the steps that lay before her. They were cut for a masculine stride, not for a Kanaran noblewoman in a *talla*. Of course, most Aleth women wouldn't have left their bearers and attendants back in Alethkar so they could wander the streets aimlessly like a deranged madwoman. Shinri sighed, and began climbing—a slow, annoying process in the form-fitting dress. She eventually reached the top, and paused by a pillar to consider her next course of action.

King Amelin had been kind to her as a child, though she couldn't understand why he had suffered such an unruly girl. She had avoided Thalenah during the last few years, as she had come to be ashamed of just how rude she had been to its noblemen and teachers. Now, however, she needed the king's aid. She would simply have to count on Amelin's patience—perhaps he would look upon her long-overdue apology with enough favor to grant her access to official dock ledgers.

Shinri glanced up from her reflections. A guard at the front gate had turned and was regarding her with a curious look. He ducked into the building, then returned a brief second later with a robed stormkeeper. The scholar paused for a moment, then rushed forward hurriedly. "Lady Shinri Davar?" he asked, speaking the Veden tongue with the staccato accent of a Thalen.

"Yes?" Shinri asked hesitantly.

The man laughed. “By the Heralds themselves,” he said with amusement. “Well, I suppose Sen Crenchan did say ‘When looking for a lost gem, search your pockets first.’ We have half the palace guard wandering the city looking for you, child, and now you show up on the palace steps.”

Shinri paused. “The king . . . is looking for me?”

“Of course,” the stormkeeper said, waving her forward. “When visiting a foreign kingdom, child, a lady of your rank might consider paying respects to the local king. It makes for good courtesy, you know. When his majesty heard you had come through the Oathgate, then simply disappeared into the city without attendants and without leaving a message for him, he was most disturbed.”

Great, Shinri thought sickly. She put on her Jasnah face, however, smiling. “You must take me to his majesty immediately, then, so I can apologize for my grievous oversight.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do, child,” the man said, gesturing toward an approaching litter. “His majesty had hoped to meet with you before his appointment at the New House. When it became obvious that locating you would prove difficult, however, he departed and left instructions for you to be brought to him at the earliest possible convenience.”

Shinri nodded, allowing herself to be led to the litter, then carried through the richer section of the city toward the New House. The structure looked something like a palace itself. Built after Thalen architectural ideals, it was more rounded than angular, with broad domes and plenty of wallspace for murals. Once they arrived, Shinri asked her bearers to put her down, a command they followed with obvious reluctance.

Yes, I know, she thought, climbing out of the litter. *Women are far too precious to be allowed to walk about on their own. The winds help us—what if I should trip and fall?*

She followed her guide into the building, and was confronted by memories. The hallways of the New House contained even more pictures than the city streets. Not a flat surface was wasted—the floors bore tile murals, the walls grand reliefs or paintings. Here, where highstorms and crom were not a worry, the detail could be even more fantastic than it was on the outside. However, it wasn’t the beauty itself that caused Shinri to pause, but that beauty’s familiarity. She wouldn’t have thought that the New House would have had such an effect on her. The building had been her home for barely a year, just before her wardship began.

Yet, she remembered the busy hallways, cluttered with robed stormkeepers. She remembered the quiet study rooms, their meditations broken only

by her occasional spoiled remark. She remembered tutors both kindly and distracted, scholars whose studies were their passion and who had varying patience for the temperamental child who had been placed in their care.

“Lady Shinri?” her guide asked. “Shall I call for the litter?”

“No,” Shinri said, hurrying forward with a blush. “Lead on.”

She composed her demeanor as her guide conferred quietly with a younger man waiting by the inner doors, asking after the king’s location. He then led her from the main hallway. The New House was arranged in the form of expanding rectangular hallways, with rooms in between. It didn’t take long for her guide to lead her to one of the outer hallways, where Shinri found a familiar figure standing in conference with a couple of robed scholars.

King Amelin was a tall man, young enough to be handsome, old enough to be distinguished. Despite the Thalen noble line’s millennia-long tradition of mixing with the Kanaran houses, Amelin still betrayed classical Inavan features—a round face with a short, subdued nose and chin, but predominant ears and brows. The king said something to his companions, and several left, leaving only one behind—a middle-aged stormkeeper in rich, high-ranking robes.

Shinri’s guide bid her wait, then scurried forward to announce her. Shinri stood quietly as Amelin looked over with surprise. The hallway fell silent, and Shinri steeled herself for royal displeasure.

“Your majesty,” Shinri finally said, speaking in Thalen as she bowed. “Lord Keeper,” she added, nodding respectfully to the king’s companion.

The king smiled. “Little Shinri!” he exclaimed, waving her forward. “About time they found you!”

Shinri wrestled down a blush. “I apologize for inconveniencing you so by my thoughtless lack of respect, your majesty,” she said, walking forward with her eyes respectfully lowered. “I should have announced myself to your staff immediately upon my arrival so that I could present myself as befitting etiquette.”

The king paused, cocking his head. Then he laughed loudly. “By the Winds! Such propriety. It appears that Lady Jasnah has ruined you, as I worried she might.”

“She has made a lady of me, your majesty,” Shinri replied.

Amelin raised an eyebrow. “A lady?” he laughed. “Well, there are worse things to be, I suppose. Still, I can’t help but remember the fiery little girl who stalked my hallways and threw books at my stormkeepers. She had such . . . passion.”

“There are other ways to channel passion, your majesty,” Shinri said. “Ones that don’t involve giving the royal tutors a concussion.”

Amelin smiled. “Oh, I didn’t worry about that too much. Reports said your aim was terrible.”

“I was twelve,” Shinri said. “And those tomes were *heavy*. I still can’t believe that . . .” She trailed off, flushing slightly. “I do apologize for those days, your majesty. I was a foolish child who hadn’t yet learned the service others were striving to do her.”

Amelin waved away her apology with a gesture. “Here, Shinri. You remember Keeper Devai, don’t you?”

Shinri paused, studying the hefty scholar. “Should I, your majesty?”

“You should, Shinri,” the stormkeeper replied. “I dodged a fair number of the aforementioned heavy tomes.”

Shinri cocked her head, trying to place the voice. *Arrowneck Rechal?* she thought with sudden surprise, finally deciphering his features. *By the winds . . . last time I saw you, you were almost thin enough to be knocked down by a winter highstorm!* “Lord Keeper . . . you’ve, uh, filled out.”

“Young ladies ‘fill out,’ Shinri,” the stormkeeper replied with a chuckle. “I’ve just become fat. His majesty is to blame. I was never meant for administration.”

Amelin didn’t respond to the jibe. He just smiled, nodding to an attendant. “Send for Zezrik, if you would,” he requested. “Tell him we’ve located the Lady Shinri.”

The attendant nodded, dashing off. Shinri stood uncomfortably, wondering at events. Amelin still seemed to retain a fondness for her—perhaps her petition would not go unheeded. However, this was not Vedenar, and it was not polite to discuss politics so early in a conversation. So, she turned to lighter topics. “How is the New House doing, your majesty?” she asked respectfully.

“Oh, it gets along—perhaps too well,” Amelin said, waving for her to walk beside him as he began to stroll down the hallway. “The local First Monks would have me believe my soul is in question for competing with the monasteries for noble students.”

Shinri nodded as they passed classrooms and libraries. The hallways of the New House scuttled with stormkeepers, all of whom bowed to the king when they passed. Shinri remembered his periodic inspections from her training days. Amelin believed strongly in the school his ancestors had created, patterned after the legendary House of Truths, and took personal interest in its development.

The building was open to all, a place of deep learning and scholarship, like a monastery without the Vorinism. Here, where Kanaran ideals mixed with Inavan tradition, theistic values were weaker . . . many even thought them perverted. However, there were some—such as Lady Jasnah—who preferred the more secular learning the New House provided.

“Tell me, Shinri,” the king said. “Has your father forgiven me yet?”

Shinri blushed again. “He . . . has not changed his mind, your majesty.”

“He must be rather impressed with your development lately,” Amelin noted. “He finally has an ideal courtly daughter.”

“Hardly ideal,” Shinri mumbled. “Not like . . .”

“Jasnah Kholin?” Amelin asked. “She studied here, you know. Do you remember her, Devai?”

The portly stormkeeper nodded. “Of course, your majesty. She was . . .”

“Perfect?” Shinri asked.

“Competent,” Devai corrected. “Too competent. Jasnah Kholin couldn’t just attend a class, she had to dominate it. Most of the other students hated her; a few loved her. But hateful or loving, she controlled them all.”

Interesting, Shinri thought. Of course, she could imagine Jasnah in such a situation. “A lady is always in control,” Shinri said out loud, quoting one of Jasnah’s favorite teaching phrases.

Amelin snorted quietly. “I think you’ll find, child, that Lady Jasnah’s ‘control’ will serve her little over the years. In the end, when she finds herself alone, perhaps she will realize that some things were never meant to be manipulated. If you’ll excuse me.”

Shinri nodded, surprised at the bitterness in the king’s words. It was not uncommon to find someone who spoke of Jasnah in such a manner, but she hadn’t expected to hear the tone in King Amelin’s voice. Senses trained by the very woman he had just disparaged tingled at the oddity.

“Why does he say such things about Lady Kholin?” Shinri asked the no-longer-arrownecked man at her side.

Devai sighed, watching his king. “Amelin is younger than he looks, child. His father was still alive when Lady Kholin attended the New House nearly twenty years before. He had . . . plenty of opportunity to interact with your lady.”

“I see,” Shinri said. *Another one? How many hearts have you broken, Jasnah?*

“Do not let the king’s history with Lady Kholin weaken the import of his words, young Shinri,” the scholar suggested. “King Amelin is a wise man. It is difficult to love or be loved when your thoughts are focused only

on manipulation—even if you sincerely seek to help through your efforts. Remember that as you join the court.”

Little worry there, Shinri thought. I think if you knew the truth, you'd find me not so corrupted by Jasnah as your king implied. At least, Jasnah seems to think I've still a ways to go.

Inside the room, the stormkeepers had set down tomes and approached their king. Newly-inducted acolytes and grizzled sages both looked excited as they explained their research to their liege. Amelin smiled, as if interested. Several monks stood obligingly in the corner, probably to be used as readers. Shinri frowned at the sight of the monks—they hadn't been there when she attended the New House. Most stormkeepers ignored even the pretense of tradition, giving little thought to the customs that said men should not read. Thalenah might have become Vorin in religion, but it was still separated from the mainland by a great distance. The island kingdom maintained its own . . . perspective on rules and traditions.

“The monks are new,” Shinri said.

Devai smiled. “His majesty invited them—even pays them—as a means of smoothing tempers. Do not let his humility fool you—the New House is doing well, very well. It is Thalenah's primary source of income, now that the opal mines have failed. Our stormkeepers are respected across the three peninsulas—you won't find a major nobleman anywhere in Kanar who doesn't employ one. Students come from every civilized nation to learn from us. We may not be the House of Truths, but we are the closest thing the world has in these times.”

Shinri nodded, smiling slightly as familiar memories returned again. She could almost pretend that she was here to learn from the stormkeepers again. Perhaps it had been the opportunity to get away from her father, or perhaps—deep within—she really had enjoyed learning. Either way, as she thought back, she remembered her days in the New House with great fondness. She had actually cried when her father arrived to take her away, explaining that there was a new treaty with Alethkar—a treaty that gave a princess of one house to be the future queen, and a daughter of another to be a ward of the king's sister.

“The king appears to be enjoying himself,” a new voice said.

Shinri turned curiously at the voice. She hadn't realized that someone had approached. The form standing behind wore a black robe.

An Awakener.

Shinri yelped slightly despite herself, backing away. The Awakener

looked at her with an amused expression, regarding her with his inhuman eyes. They were unnatural eyes, without iris, pupil, or whites—only red. A deep, glistening red. His skin was deeply flushed as well, and the air around him rippled in a slight halo. Yet there was no heat coming off his body

“Who is this nervous child?” the Awakener asked, turning toward Devai.

“Lady Shinri, of the Davar House,” the stormkeeper explained. “The king mentioned her to you, I believe.”

The Awakener turned back toward her, and Shinri shivered. “I see.” He held up his hand, and Shinri could see for the first time that he held a large ruby in his hand—a hand with blood-red nails.

The ruby began to glow. Shinri shied back as the crystal burst to light, floating out of the Awakener’s hand, spinning in the air and throwing shards of bright red light across the hallway.

“Tell me, child,” the Awakener said, taking a step forward, ruby floating before him. “What do you feel? What do you hear when you touch one of the Polestones? The music? Does it come to you? Do they . . . call to you?”

Shinri paled, glancing at Devai. The rotund stormkeeper did nothing to stop the creature. The hair on her arms rose, and she began to shake. The Awakener couldn’t do anything to her. She’d undergone the *Charan*. She was safe. But . . .

She looked at the thing that was no longer human. Awakeners lived for hundreds of years, and their art changed them, each one in a different way. They didn’t think like men, for they were no longer men. And as something other than men, perhaps the rules of men did not apply to them.

The ruby glistened. The creature stepped forward. Shinri’s heart jumped, terror rising. *I have to go. Go somewhere. Run away!* The air around her seemed to darken slightly, as if the creature were sucking away the light, and Shinri felt a . . . longing.

Longing. It was a strange and confusing emotion to fight with her fear. She wanted . . . something. She was missing something. But what she needed, or why she should think that she needed it, was a complete mystery.

“Zezrik, that is enough,” the king said. He stood in the doorway, having finished his conference with the scholars inside.

The Awakener bowed slightly, his gemstone growing dark and falling back into his hand. He stroked it idly with his thumb, unnatural eyes watching Shinri as the king approached, laying a hand on Shinri’s shoulder and turning her away.

“Don’t mind Zezrik,” the king said affably. “He’s harmless. A little

strange, but Awakeners all get that way, eventually. He's served my family faithfully for three centuries."

Shinri glanced behind. The Awakener had turned from her, and was speaking to Devai. The two followed behind as the king started walking down the hallway again.

"Why . . . ?" Shinri began. "Why do you let them . . . ?"

"You think we should set the Awakeners apart, like you do on the mainland?" Amelin asked. "Sequester them? My father didn't think that was fair, considering what they do for us, and I tend to agree with him."

"They don't seem to mind being separated," Shinri said.

"They don't seem to mind being free either," Amelin replied. "Anyway, it is of little matter. I'm more interested in why, after three years away, you finally decided to return to Thalenah—and why you didn't see fit to even send word to the palace."

Shinri blushed. "I apologize again, your majesty," she said. *How much to tell him? What will I give away if he finds out I'm suspicious of Tethren's death?* The answer was simple—she couldn't give away anything, since she didn't really know anything. "I didn't think to contact you because I was distracted by other events. You may have heard that I was engaged to Tethren Rienar?"

The king nodded. "Part of the same treaty that stole you away from us, I recall. I do mourn your loss at his death, child. I don't know if you were close to the prince or not, but I knew something of the lad. He was a good and honest man."

"It is a shame that he should die so tragically while traveling here, to Thalenah itself," Shinri noted.

The king paused slightly, eyeing her. *So, it begins,* Shinri thought. *You play the game after all, Amelin. You may be fond of the child your school once trained, but fondness and politics are completely separate things.*

"Indeed," Amelin finally said. "I didn't even know that he was coming until word of his death arrived at the palace."

"Really?" Shinri asked, studying his face covertly, looking for signs that the king was lying. He was good at hiding his emotions, for a man. "Some people I've spoken to were under the impression that Prince Tethren was coming specifically to engage in a deal with you, your majesty."

Amelin snorted. "You speak of the rumor that he was going to 'sell' me an Awakener? Tell me, Shinri. You've just seen that I value the freedom even of those who don't value it themselves. How likely do you think I would be to break *sheneres* by paying money to own another man?"

Shinri shrugged. "If you thought you were bringing him to freedom, perhaps."

"No," Amelin replied. "A man's reputation is his life, Shinri, especially when dealing with you Kanarans. Even freeing an Awakener wouldn't be worth the chance of the Aleth and Veden noblemen thinking me an oathbreaker. If they were to stop employing our stormkeepers . . ."

He was probably telling the truth. Amelin could bend religious traditions or gender roles, but no man could deny *The Way of Kings* and survive. It would be political suicide, especially considering Alethkar's rising political strength.

"I must admit, then," Shinri said carefully. "I am confused. Tethren was a careful planner, your majesty. I find it difficult to believe that he would let his entire convoy be caught in a powerful highstorm, no matter what the circumstances. You wouldn't know what tradegoods he was transporting, would you? What would be so important to him that he would press on instead of returning for shelter?"

"The dock register said he was bringing a simple shipment of ceramics from the Lakhenran mudshores," Amelin replied.

Ah, so you have researched this, Shinri thought with satisfaction. *But, what is it you aren't telling me, my dear King Amelin?* The cover-up was obvious in his eyes and his posture. He was nervous about something, though he kept it in check.

Time to bargain. "It seems that these are difficult times, no matter where one travels," she said.

"Indeed," Amelin replied. "At least the highstorms are somewhat predictable—far more so than the hearts of men. One never can tell when one's trusted ally might become a foe. He might even come to wish your death."

Ah, so you've heard of the assassination plot. And he obviously wanted to hear more. Unfortunately, there was little she could offer him in good conscience—the danger to Jasnah's brother was far too pressing.

"I'm afraid I know little of such things," Shinri said. "I've been watching Jah Keved lately. My family is, of course, my foremost concern."

Amelin eyed her. "I doubt you can have maintained much familiarity with them, though, seeing as how you've lived in Alethkar for the last three years."

True, she thought. *So, he doesn't want to hear about the Veden dynasty change—or, at least, he's correctly guessed that I don't have much to offer beyond speculation*.

"You are correct," Shinri admitted. "I have been away from the Three

Houses for too long. However, the truth is that I spent as much of it in Prallah as in Alethkar. The war itself proved very interesting, especially in its final days.”

Amelin paused. “I am a bit curious about that,” he admitted. “I heard some . . . interesting rumors. Something about the death of the Traitor and the Pralir King?”

Shinri smiled. Bait taken—now she just had to hope what she offered was worth whatever it was he hid. “It happened during a highstorm,” she explained. “The king was on the battlefield, fighting toward a decoy tower. The Traitor led a surprise force in a flanking maneuver, sneaking toward the back of our army, probably to attack our command towers—or even our camp itself.”

“A cowardly move,” Amelin noted.

“True,” Shinri said, “but so was murdering his own king, then fleeing to Prallah to hide. One of our scouts noticed the approaching force, and we sent an intercepting army. However, the man who sent the intercepting force did not wait for proper estimates of troop strength or location. He ended up sending five thousand men to face a force twenty thousand strong.

“When the highstorm passed, King Elhokar led a larger force to intercept. However, he found both armies—the Traitor’s force and the smaller Aleth contingent—dead.”

“Curious,” Amelin said with a troubled look. “They fought during the highstorm?”

“Apparently,” Shinri said. “But later analysis led Lord Dalenar to believe that there was a third force involved. One that killed both groups of men, under the cover of the storm, then left the bodies as if they had killed each other.”

This caused Amelin to frown openly. “That is . . . very strange,” he said.

“Lord Dalenar thinks the third force came up from Distant Prall,” Shinri explained. “The wild lands there are just a short distance away, and there are numerous malcontents there who were unhappy with Pralir and its king.”

“But why kill the Aleth force too?” Amelin asked. “It seems very unusual.”

“It has given Lord Dalenar a great deal of worry,” Shinri agreed. “He is seeking information about who could have raised an army large enough to defeat over twenty thousand soldiers in the space of a highstorm’s passing. He thinks it might be a group known as the *Rantah*, a collection of former Pralir noblemen who were ousted during the conflicts a decade back. I’m afraid I know little more than that.”

Amelin nodded thoughtfully. Then he studied Shinri again, his eyes

betraying a measure of respect. Even considering her changes in behavior, he obviously hadn't expected to find a political adept in the place of the outrageous child he had known.

"You're very observant," he noted. "Lady Jasnah trained you well."

"Thank you, your majesty," Shinri said. "Of course, she also trained me to expect those treated with kindness to respond in turn . . ."

"You're already better than she is," Amelin said with a chuckle. "That's always been her problem, Shinri. She can't laugh about these things, even slightly. Everything is so serious to her. The mighty, stoic, unyielding Lady Jasnah Kholin. Sometimes a man doesn't want strength—he just wants a smile."

"I saw her smile once," Shinri noted. "At least, I think I did—it might have been a nervous twitch. Or perhaps she was just stifling a sneeze."

Amelin laughed deeply, shaking his head. "That woman . . . I certainly hope that her future husband is a man of sturdy patience. The betrothal is to be announced this evening, is it not?"

"Yes," Shinri said. "At the dueling competition."

Amelin nodded. He took a breath, sobering slightly. "All right, on with the 'response in turn' then. You're right to suspect Tethren's death, child. However, I think you're seeking answers to the wrong questions. The cargo of that convoy is irrelevant. Rather than asking what the ships were carrying, you should be asking what they *weren't*."

"What they weren't carrying?" Shinri repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Your Prince Tethren wasn't aboard any of those ships," Amelin said quietly.

Shinri paused in the hallway, stunned. *Stupid! You didn't even consider that. What of Jasnah's training now? How could you miss something so obvious?*

"The Rienars threw that convoy together with such speed that it was obvious they were trying to hide something," Amelin explained. "I was fortunate to have a very clever spy in the port they chose to depart from, and he got himself on board one of the convoy vessels. Shinri, they sunk that ship themselves. They sailed out, knowing ahead of time that they would get caught in the storm. They tried to make it look as realistic as possible, so the sailors would spread the rumor they wanted, but my spy went out during the storm itself. The Rienars scuttled their own ship, leaving it to sink in the storm."

Scuttled their own ship. "They wanted it to look like Tethren was dead," she said. "But why? So they could use him as a spy somehow?"

Amelin shook his head. "House Rienar is convinced he is dead," he said.

“The sinking of the ship was to cover something else—something about the way he died, though I can’t figure out what. They needed a convenient excuse for a prince of one of the Three Houses to just suddenly disappear.”

“A sickness would have been far less suspicious,” Shinri said. “Why use such a contrived method?”

“They would have been expected to display a body if he’d died of a sickness,” Amelin pointed out.

“True,” Shinri said. “But even still . . . I came seeking answers, your majesty. But what you’ve given me only makes me more curious.”

Amelin paused, shooting a look behind to where his attendants stood with the Awakener and head stormkeeper. He turned back to her. “This is a . . . difficult subject, Shinri. I don’t know what happened to Tethren, but the Rienar are determined to keep it secret. You might not want to push too hard on this one—I doubt the reward is going to be worth the cost.”

“Perhaps,” Shinri said skeptically.

Amelin shook his head. “The Rienar sinking their own ships, the Davar rising up to take the Veden throne, Aleth *Parshen* hiring assassins to kill their own king . . . Times have grown uncertain, Shinri. I don’t trust the world any more, not beyond my own shores. I am going to try to keep Thalenah secure during the days to follow. You are welcome here, if you wish to remain.”

Shinri paused. “I don’t understand, your majesty.”

“Refuge, Shinri,” Amelin said quietly. “It will be a difficult thing to find in the near future, I think. Why don’t you stay in Thalenah for a while? I’ll send a message to Lady Kholin; your period of wardship has to be nearing an end, and she is going to be wedded in a few days. She will be too busy to see to your training—perhaps she’ll let you stay here, receive some of the teachings at the New House that you once avoided.”

Refuge. But, what he offered was more politics. Did he ask out of concern for her, or out of desire to have leverage against both Lady Jasnah and Lord Talshekh Davar?

No, she told herself. You can trust this man.

But she couldn’t stay anyway. “Not now, your majesty,” she said, shaking her head. “Lady Jasnah needs me too much right now.” *Besides, I need to know what happened to Tethren. He wasn’t on the ship. Your spies say that the Rienars think him dead, but what if . . .* It was a frightening thought. She had loved him, once, as a child. What would she think of him now?

“Besides,” she said out loud. “I think you may be overreacting. The issue with Jezenrosh is dangerous, perhaps, but it will soon be resolved. There

may be conflict ahead, but it will be nothing compared to what we already endured in Prallah. Alethkar won that war with ease—it can overcome a few internal squabbles.”

“Ah, child,” the king replied. “The Prallah war was but a breeze to the highstorm that is coming. And most houses aren’t ready for it—their glyphwards aren’t out, and their windows are open. Destruction will come with the winds.”

Shinri frowned, looking up at the kindly man who had welcomed her as a child, and would now do the same for her again. How could she explain? If there was a storm coming, then Shinri needed to spend it at Jasnah’s side.

Jasnah frustrated her. Others saw the woman as heartless, and at times Shinri agreed. Jasnah was never complimentary, ever critical, and always manipulative. But Jasnah was the only one who had been able to take the child Shinri and give her the gifts of propriety and education. Only a will that powerful, a temperament that unprovokable, had been strong enough to make Shinri change. After the death of Shinri’s mother so long before . . .

The truth was, Jasnah was really all she had. All she had ever had.

“I must go back,” she said.

The King sighed, standing. “Very well,” he said. “Just watch yourself, once-little Shinri. Dangerous times are approaching. Our Oathgate may not be open in the coming months, but if you can find your way here, I will provide what safety I can.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

AMELIN STOOD, WATCHING the young girl leave down the hallway, heading for the Oathgate. He shook his head. It was already beginning—first Vedenar, with the war of the houses, and soon Alethkar. The world was changing.

He turned to his companions. “Well?”

Red-eyed Zezrik shook his head. “She is no Awakener. She sensed nothing of the Melody, and she wears her jewelry without regard. Without love.”

Amelin nodded. That had been his last guess, though it had been a farfetched one. Still . . . “Perhaps not an Awakener, but she’s of the right age, and of one of the right lines.”

“So are a lot of people,” Devai said. “We tested her when she was here four years ago, your majesty. There is nothing unusual about the child.”

“Yes,” Amelin said. But, so much had been lost with the fall of the House of Truths, and there were things for which they knew no tests. “Very well.

What of her purpose here in Thalenah? Do you think she was spying for Jasnah or for her cousin Talshekh Davar?"

"Hard to say, your majesty," Devai said. "Did she give any hints to you?"

Amelin shook his head. "She covered herself well. She implied she was here to investigate the death of Prince Tethren, of House Rienar. It is a good story—perhaps even the truth. She was engaged to the man, after all."

"A political betrothal," Devai said. "Made when she was just fourteen. She came through the Oathgate furtively, without announcement or notice to you, then entered the city without attendants or litter bearers. That is very suspicious behavior. Do you think the Aleth might suspect what we do?"

Amelin shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted. "There might be a few onyxseers in Jah Keved . . . but Alethkar? We have heard nothing."

"Which could mean that their security is even greater than our own."

A frightening thought. "Come," Amelin said. "We have preparations to make."

chapter 24

TALN 5

“THIS ONE’S DIFFERENT, Lhan,” Sapphire Jan said, leaning against his staff as he watched the muscular madman work. Jan had been foreman of the First City’s cromcleaners for going on twenty years, and he had seen many types of men. So many, in fact, he’d assumed he knew just about every type of worker the Almighty could provide. It appeared that he had been wrong.

Brother Lhan turned with an unconcerned eye, rising from his work on a building’s wall to regard Taln. The supposed madman worked with fastidious care, chipping cromstone off of a stone waymarker. Even from the first day, the man’s work had been perfect—every corner and crack cleaned, no hint of sloppiness.

Sapphire Jan had seen that before. Men that fastidious, however, also tended to be shy. Quiet types, who never spent time talking with the other workers. Even if they were more outgoing, their quick, efficient work quickly ostracized them from the others, who didn’t like being made to seem lazy.

This man was different. Jan’s eyes narrowed as he watched Taln smile at a passing worker, exchanging pleasantries and a joke, then go back to his work.

“What do you mean, Jan?” Lhan said.

“Look at him,” Jan said. “Look at the way he works. He’s not like the other ones you’ve brought me—he actually does the job.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the workers I provide,” the husky monk informed.

“Now, don’t get huffy,” Jan said with a snort. “I don’t mind helping out a man of the Almighty—I could use few good deeds under my cloak. I’m never displeased when you bring by one of your projects—I just expect them to need some . . . extra supervision. This one, he almost doesn’t seem crazy.”

“Almost,” Lhan said, dusting off his gloves, which were covered with rock chips. Whenever the monk brought a new worker, he always spent the first few months working the streets as well. Lhan claimed he wanted to get away from the monastery, but Sapphire Jan saw the gentle patience in the monk’s attentiveness. His wards were rarely the best workers—though not through fault of laziness. They just tended to get distracted or be a bit slow. With Lhan’s guidance, however, they usually found a place among the cromcleaners.

“Are you sure he’s . . . ?” Jan asked. “I mean, he just doesn’t talk like the others—or even look like them. He seems like a regular man, and a good one at that. He does four times the work of my best worker, never seems to need to rest, never makes a mistake in his cleaning, and is easily the best-liked man on the team.”

Lhan shook his head. “I wasn’t certain at first either,” he admitted. “But . . . you’ve heard him talk.”

Sapphire Jan nodded. He had indeed. In fact, that was the problem—the only problem. A lot of the men on his teams weren’t the brightest gems in the pile. They were foreigners who hadn’t come from civilized lands, or men who couldn’t get jobs as craftsmen or servants. When Taln had first started talking, the men had laughed. Now, however . . . well, Sapphire Jan could see the looks in their eyes. Before long, the madman would have the entire team believing he was some kind of heavenly servant.

“I don’t like it, Lhan,” Jan admitted. “I’m sorry to the Almighty, but I just don’t like it. You’ve brought me men who wander off in the middle of their shift, men who sit and clean the same patch of stonework for hours and hours without looking up, and men who never say a word, just stare into space. I never worried about any of them. This one . . . he could be trouble. I even find myself half-believing him. If he ever wanted to cause trouble, I worry that these poor lads would listen to him.”

Jan clinched his jaw in thought. He’d earned the nickname ‘Sapphire’

early in his career. The stories gave all the Polestones personalities, and Jan was most certainly a sapphire—stubborn, demanding, and in charge.

“He has to go, Bother Lhan,” he decided, fingering his glyphward and hoping the Almighty would forgive him. “If he could learn to be quiet, it’d be different. But we both know he won’t ever stop this nonsense about the Return. I can’t have the man on my team. I’m sorry.”

Lhan nodded. “That’s all right, Jan. I’ll just have to find another place for him.”

Sapphire Jan shook his head, turning away as the monk removed his gloves and wandered over toward the working Taln.

IN THREE THOUSAND YEARS of life, there were relatively few things that Taln had not tried. Cromcleaning, interestingly, was one of them.

He knelt on the stone, using a small metal tool to clean the crusty cromstone out of the carved cracks of a waystone—a street marker that gave directions to various parts of the city. Cromcleaning was a curious sign of the three peninsulas. The Elin had been surprised by the lack of crom on buildings when they had come for the First Return. They had assumed that people would just let it build up.

That, however, had been long, long ago. Taln shook his head, using the edge of his tool to scrape the softer cromstone from the granite etchings. He barely even remembered what it was like to live in a land where the rains didn’t drop muck that eventually hardened to stone. Crom could be cleaned off with ease. His own problems were not so easy to repair.

It was not easy for him to remain ‘quiet.’ The Khothen were coming, and something was very wrong. Epellion Sourcing didn’t work, not even his own. This time there would be no Windrunners or Stonewards to respond to the demonic assault. Mankind stood on the brink of its own destruction, and no one even realized it.

Except Taln. And, presumably, the other Heralds. But they had yet to arrive. Taln had not spent the last few weeks in idleness, despite his attempts to remain out of trouble. He had befriended the keepers of bars, listening to stories of travelers, searching desperately for some hint of his Brethren. Though he no longer had access to the library, he had his one book, and he had studied its every page a tenset times over.

He had interrogated every old gaffer who would speak with him, absorbing as much of the recent history as he could. He had heard of the coming of Jarnah, who had nearly conquered the world before being slain by Dalenar the Tyrantbane. Taln had heard of the wars in Prallah,

and had gathered everything he could on the various kings of the various nations.

He could do no more in Alethkar. Here, he was considered a madman. He needed to move on, to use his newfound information to make a better—hopefully more sane—impression on another kingdom's monarch. There was still hope for Roshar, even if his brethren failed to arrive.

However, there was one thing he wanted to do first.

Lhan approached with his customary unhurried gait. Taln wasn't certain if the monk didn't trust him, or if he was just concerned for Taln's mental health, but Lhan hadn't left him alone a single day out of the last two weeks. Despite numerous complaints about how much he loathed cromcleaning, the monk had gotten down and scrubbed walls like a man who'd been doing the work all his life.

Taln rose, dusting off his gloves as the monk approached. "You requested that we be allowed to leave early?"

"You could say that," Lhan replied.

"Good," Taln said with a nod, setting aside his tool and gloves. It was growing late in the day, and the sun was just a few hours away from setting behind the monstrous peak of the Mount of Ancestors.

"We need to get cleaned up," Taln said. "The duels will begin soon."

"Lead on then, Herald of the Almighty," Lhan said, waving toward the monastery. "Though, why you want to go watch is beyond me. I know a couple good games of chips we could get in on . . ."

Taln smiled. Every day, the monk—like everyone else—got wages from the cromcleaning. Lhan probably should have turned his earnings in to his superiors, since monks couldn't own wealth. Lhan, however, promptly took the gems and lost them in nightly gambling games with the other cromcleaners. He'd once told Taln that he figured the money would get to the poor of the city one way or another, and he might as well have fun giving it to them. He never seemed to wonder what would happen if he won—fortunately, Lhan was absolutely terrible at chips.

"No chips tonight, Lhan," Taln replied. "You have a promise to keep."

Lhan rolled his eyes. "I can tell you what's going to happen," the monk informed. "Some men are going to pretend to try and hurt each other with swords. They'll hop around a bit, and one of them will strike a lucky blow. They'll stop, congratulate each other for being so magnificent, then they'll go get drunk. There will be a lot of lords there, and they'll all do their best to make the rest of us feel like we don't belong. It will be crowded, smelly, and melodramatic. A good game of chips, however . . ."

Taln shook his head. “You said if I worked on the streets, you would get me into the duels.”

Lhan sighed. “All right. Since we’re citizens, we’ll only be able to watch the lesser duels, of course.”

“Of course.”

Lhan paused. “After the duels, we need to have a talk about . . . issues of employment.”

“If you wish,” Taln said.

Sapphire Jan had been a good foreman, and Lhan had worked hard to provide Taln with a stable life. Taln was grateful to both of them. However, neither of them knew that Taln had no intention whatsoever of cleaning walls the next day—even if he did survive the night’s festivities.

chapter 25

JASNAH 6

THE FEAST HALL FELL SILENT as Jasnah entered. The quiet was eerie. The competition should have been a time of mirth and celebration, not one of solemnity. Titles would be presented, honor and prestige would be earned, old acquaintances could be rekindled and old rivalries enflamed. Yet, at Jasnah's entrance, the women suddenly fell silent. The men, sensing the mood, trailed off as well.

Jasnah tried to ignore the onlookers as she walked forward with a smooth gait. The variety in kingdoms represented at the feast was surprising. Thalen and Veden visitors were to be expected—both kingdoms were powerful in their own right, and were allies of Alethkar. However, there were also would-be noblemen from the struggling kingdoms of Distant Prall, conquered aristocrats from the occupied kingdom of Lakhenran, and even a few Shin clansmen.

For the festivities, Elhokar had chosen the *Jez* hall—the Eleventh Hall, as it was called, built not for a single kingdom but to accommodate a larger mixed group. It was wide and open, its support columns relegated to the outer rim with four massive pillars running down the center of the chamber. A dueling ring had been drawn between each set of pillars, with tables forming layered circles around them. There would be other dueling rings, of course, in lesser feast halls—attended by citizens and

less-important nobility. The preliminary duels had already been performed. Only the very best of contestants would perform before the king.

Jasnah walked through the room, maintaining an elegant stride, *talla* blue, hair up, looking as regal as she ever had. While Elhokar had thought to keep the betrothal announcement a relative secret, Nanavah had seen to it that every woman in the court knew exactly what was going to happen. And, what a man's wife knew, he knew.

The men watched respectfully as Jasnah passed, pleasantly oblivious to the truth. To them, the betrothal announcement marked the joyous—and long overdue—marriage of the king's aging sister. Their wives, however, knew better. The women of the court smiled with false eyes. Those with enough sense to pay attention realized that no wedding would be announced this day, but a funeral—the death of Jasnah's political career. Jasnah's struggle with the queen had been unseen, even unmentioned, but it had been as fervent as any battlefield war.

Nanavah sat at the queen's table, almost demure in her red *talla*, resplendent with sapphires. She had won. As Jasnah's closest married female kin and surrogate mother, Nanavah had the right to choose Jasnah's husband. She could choose practically anyone—provided the match wasn't *too* unequal. However, there were plenty of lords of modest rank who lived far, far from Oathgates or courts. It would not be difficult to find Jasnah a man with little interest in politics, one who lived in a city so secluded from important events that Jasnah would have difficulty discovering what was happening in Ral Eram, let alone influence court politics. Jasnah was not completely defeated, but it would take her years to recover.

Dalener sat at the king's table, his hostility toward Elhokar far less evident than it had been a few weeks before. Once again, Meridas sat in the place normally reserved for the king's second *Parshen*. Jasnah frowned slightly as she saw the smooth-mannered nobleman. He was far too conniving for a male, and far too successful in his politics for one from such a relatively unknown house.

Elhokar stood, waving for Jasnah to approach his table. She moved forward, bowing before him.

"I wish you would consent to wearing jewelry, sister," he said quietly. "It is unseemly of the king's sister to appear so plain, especially on her betrothal day."

Jasnah gave no response. Traditional or not, this was one matter on which she would offer no concession.

Elhokar sighed, turning to the crowd. "I have some business that needs

to be attended to before his competition begins,” he said unnecessarily to the quiet room. His next words were a surprise, however. “You,” he said, pointing at a young nobleman in a green seasilk shirt and loose brown trousers. “Stand before your king.”

The young man flushed slightly, embarrassed. Jasnah turned, resting her uncuffed hand lightly on the king’s table. She didn’t recognize the man, but his cloak bore Jezenrosh’s glyph. The young nobleman rose, then walked forward and fell to one knee before the king’s table.

“Introduce yourself to the court,” Elhokar ordered, leaning forward, hands on the table as he looked down at the younger man.

“I am Fifth Lord Islin Naninarin of Crossguard, your majesty.”

Fifth Lord of Crossguard. A Shardbearer. Indeed, his yet-unbonded blade could be seen leaning against his table. Jasnah recognized his family name, but only vaguely.

“When were you given your Blade?” Elhokar demanded.

“Several months ago, your majesty,” the young man said. “From Lord Jezenrosh. It belonged to one of his men who had died in the war.”

“And where is your Lord Jezenrosh now?” Elhokar asked.

“In Crossguard, your majesty,” the man said, eyes still lowered. “He regrets his inability to attend, but his illness forbids it.”

Elhokar stood upright, waving the young Shardbearer away. Jasnah felt a chill. She recognized the dangerous anger in her brother’s eyes.

“Hear that, court of Alethkar!” the king announced. “I ordered every Shardbearer in my realm to attend this feast, yet my cousin sees fit to ignore his king. In his place, he sends two unknown Shardbearers—men granted Blades less than a hundred days ago; men none of us have even met.”

Don’t do this, Elhokar . . . Jasnah thought, taking a step toward him. He stopped her with a glare.

“Perhaps Lord Jezenrosh truly is ill,” Elhokar said. “Perhaps, for some reason, he needs to keep his other Shardbearers at his side, sending only these pups to answer his king’s command. Either way, he is no longer able to fulfill his duties as *Parshen*. Therefore, I relieve him of the title, lest it burden him further.”

Jasnah sighed. The title of *Parshen*, once given, was normally only withdrawn in response to treason. Jezenrosh had many relatives, allies, and friends. Taking his title was a slap that would be felt across many faces.

The crowd seemed less surprised than it should have been. *Of course they knew*, Jasnah thought. *This is too conniving a move for Elhokar to have managed on his own. It has been planned ever since the king announced the dueling*

competition. Jasnah eyed Nanavah, who was smiling contentedly at her table, Ladies Desolh and Senis at her side, the wives of the two most powerful Third Lords in Alethkar. *She was behind Elhokar's order that all Shardbearers attend the competition. But . . . what reason could she possibly have to oust Jezenrosh?*

"Lord Meridas Isvenda," Elhokar said, turning.

The tall merchant fell to one knee.

"For service to your king and country, I grant you Lordship of the city of Orinjah, formerly of Pralir. Orinjah shall bear the rank of Fourth City until the time of the next census. I also name you *Parshen* to the king, warden of Prallah. Select for yourself a Shardblade from those to be awarded this evening."

Jasnah's displeasure seethed. Following Jezenrosh's release, Meridas's appointment was hardly surprising. The merchant finally had the power he had sought so hard to obtain. Now, he would be an even more potent force in Aleth politics—with its Oathgate, Orinjah would quickly become one of the most powerful cities in the kingdom. Jasnah was so displeased that she almost missed Elhokar's nod for his wife to stand.

It was time.

"My lord," the queen said loudly, "I have decided to exercise my Right of Decision. Lady Jasnah Kholin has served her house well, but it is time that she be wedded."

Nanavah paused, then smiled slightly. "Oddly, I see another problem in the court that needs to be rectified. Lord Meridas has a new duty and a new Blade, but he too is unwedded—an unfitting state for a king's *Parshen*. Therefore, I give Lady Jasnah to him, assuming his mother approves. Let Lady Jasnah Kholin be married to Lord Meridas Isvenda."

Jasnah stood dumbly. She turned from Nanavah, to the king, and finally to the smiling Meridas. *What?*

Meridas stood. "I am very pleased by this opportunity to become brothers with the king I love so much," he announced. "And even more pleased to receive a woman as beautiful and capable as Lady Jasnah. I shall send word to my mother immediately—the wedding can occur as soon as she blesses the union, my lady queen."

Elhokar smiled broadly. "Then the betrothal is official. Let the duels begin!"

chapter 26

JEK 5

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, moved quickly in the night. Around him, tents glowed from within like massive, luminescent fungi. Where there was light, there were shadows—and where there were shadows, he was unseen.

He paused, crouching in the darkness, peering through the Davar camp. He couldn't believe that they had returned so quickly—and with such force. Even in the darkness, he could see the banners waving with the symbol of House Reinar. The southern nobles, seeing the movements of the wind, had proposed allegiance with Talshekh. There was no longer any pretense—no reason for Davar to accept the rule of an Idiot King. Talshekh had arrived back at Veden City earlier in the day.

Ahven wouldn't survive the night.

Jek scuttled away, slipping over smoothed rock, moving silently through the camp. He had finally finished with Ahven's list—the last few names had, surprisingly, been men in Talshekh Davar's army. Their deaths would soon be discovered. Yet, strangely, Talshekh's own name had not been on the list.

Why not have him assassinate Lord Talshekh? In Shinavar, killing the leader of an army would be immaterial—clan leadership was soundly structured, and no army would falter from the loss of one man, no matter how important. In the east, however, things were different. Leaders often provided sole inspiration for their men.

Perhaps Ahven realized that this situation was different. Jah Keved had been shattered and unified simultaneously—the Houses had risen against one another, then had solidified behind a single leader. Even if that man died, an army would still sit outside of Veden City. Yes, killing Talshekh would end one threat, but even if another civil war ensued, one thing would be universally understood. Ahven could not remain on the throne.

Jek could see it now—Talshekh's pavilion. Getting in would be difficult. Here, the walls were cloth, and not stone. Sounds traveled easily, and signs of struggle could be seen by flickering light. Killing Talshekh would not solve Ahven's basic problem, but it probably wouldn't hurt. The more squabbling, the more confusion, the longer the Idiot King would have to plan.

Jek leaned down, staying close to the ground, his cheek almost touching the stone beneath. He felt the rock with his fingertips, whispering an apology for the blood he must spill upon it. Ahven had given no order to attack Talshekh, but Jek's Bond was more than simple slavery of body—it required more. It required honor and duty, without the rewards of either. If killing Talshekh helped his master, then Truth demanded he act.

And then he saw them. Four men, bearing staves of wood, slowly patrolling the perimeter of Talshekh's tent. Men with light skin and familiar clothing. Shin warriors.

Jek shrank back into the darkness, surprised. Where had Talshekh found Shin willing to serve him? Were they Truthless? No, that couldn't be possible—it would be too much of a coincidence. The men held identical staves and walked with familiarity. They were of the same clan. Falnakandan? Trudunashas? Both were Clans of the Staff. But, why would they . . . ?

Jek felt his palms grow slick against the stone. It had been long since he had faced a true warrior, too long. There could be only one reason they would consent to guarding Talshekh—he must have convinced them that he was in danger from a Shin assassin. They would be watching for one such as Jek. How many more were there? Four alert Shin warriors were enough of a risk on their own, but if there were others . . .

Jek slipped back into the darkness. He would serve his Bond foolishly if he got himself killed without orders. He would let Ahven decide.

JEK FROWNED AS HE searched the city. It was busy despite the late hour. The people knew that Talshekh's army had returned, and many probably understood what that meant. Already, merchants had rushed from the city,

offering goods and comforts to the wearied troops. The gates were wide open, a sign from the nobility of Vedenar—they would give up their fool of a king willingly, if it would bring their own safety.

Except that king was not to be found. The nobility was visibly disturbed. Their messengers and servants scuttled through the city as bobs of lantern-light, searching frantically for their sacrificial monarch. Without proof of his blood, they would not be able to ensure the invader's good will.

Jek crouched on a rooftop, watching a particular lantern-lit figure on the streets below. He recognized the man despite his lack of uniform—he was one of Ahven's guards, one of those who had appeared to know his king's secret. He had been waiting in the shadows outside Ahven's palace, hiding as best an easterner could manage, when the assembled troops of the Veden nobility had come for the king.

The soldier was probably loyal, but he was terrible at sneaking. He constantly looked over his shoulder, and he crept when he should have strolled. Even the other easterners should have noticed something suspicious about his movements—Jek was surprised that none of the many street-goers gave the soldier a second look. They were too busy with their problems to realize that the answer they sought was lurking his way past them on the street.

The low stone buildings of Veden City were perfect for roof-top following, and Jek had no trouble tailing his prey. The man's destination, however, gave him pause. Jek settled down against the firm stone of a roof, crouching and studying the building the soldier entered.

The structure was taller than most, though still only one story. Its sloping rock walls glistened with flakes of quartz, and even in the darkness Jek could make out the lavish metal ornamentations on the pillars and doors. In front, a tall bronze statue stood with an outstretched hand, pointing toward the city. In his other hand, the statue held a triangular shield—the Kanaran symbol of justice.

Jek pulled back into the shadows, thinking. The statue could only represent one figure—Nale Elin, Herald of Justice. He was the one Jek's people called Halanatan, Stoneborn of Blood Opal. Jek had always avoided the Elinrah temples. The heathens' common-day perversions were bad enough; he hadn't any desire to know what the clandestine New Religions did with the sacred stories of the Ten Stoneborn.

Yet, if Ahven was associated with the Church of Nale, it would explain much. Of all the Elinrah cults, the Church of Nale was one of the most secretive yet most powerful. Jek could finally stop wondering how Ahven could act so innocently impotent, yet have such good information.

Jek dropped from the rooftop into the alley beside. He could not wait. If Ahven was truly inside the Elinrah temple, then the king would probably not remain there for long. Ahven's smartest course of action was probably flight—and if the king escaped, it could take Jek months to track him down. Jek stepped into the light, and adopted the air of urgency he had seen in the postures of so many this night. Hopefully, if someone saw him, they would think him simply another attendant, rushing to warn his master's allies of the king's disappearance.

He quickly approached the Elinrah temple. He kept his head bowed, partially not to draw attention, and partially so he wouldn't have to look up at the paganized image of Nale Elin. How little the heathens understood. Could they not see that the Stoneborn were holy? That their images should not be crafted into any substance that was not stone? Even worse, Jek knew of the Kanarans preference for using the Sacred Arts. The statue probably hadn't been of bronze when it was first sculpted. For some reason, the use of sacred powers in combination with the creation of a desecrated icon was even worse than most paganisms.

The temple's broad gates were not open, but the soldier had entered through a secondary, smaller door. Jek approached this, trying to decide how far he would go to discover the king's location. These men might be Ahven's allies—killing them would be unwise. However, there was also the possibility that they had the Idiot King held captive, and that the soldier Jek had trailed was a traitor.

The small door opened as Jek approached, revealing a darkened hallway beyond. Two men stood in deep blue cloaks—not black, for that was reserved for Awakeners. The men had their hoods drawn after the manner of those trying to appear secretive and mysterious.

"We were told that you might come," one of them said in a quiet voice. "You may enter, man of Shinavar. Realize, however, the privilege given you. Many wait years before being allowed admittance to the home of the sacred brotherhood."

Jek kept his tongue, wondering if these men understood just how foolish they appeared. If they wished to be secretive, they should have studied the Shin Clans of the Blade—clans such as the one Jek had once belonged to. A Shin clan would never have built a massive building in the middle of the city to proclaim how enigmatic it was. Clans of the Blade were unseen, unheard, but deadly.

The hallway inside was crafted completely of bronze. Jek stepped onto

the metal floor with relief—it was only a short removal from the stone, but it was a welcome one. One of the cloaked figures led him through cramped bronze corridors that twisted around in a spiral, eventually leading him to a doorway encrusted with various gemstones. The only illumination came from a candle held by Jek's guide.

The man pushed open the door, and Jek was pleased to see the Idiot King inside. Ahven wore no robe. In fact, he wore clothing far less extravagant than normal—seasilks after the noble cut, but unladen by gemstones or jewelry. He wore a deep red cloak with the hood pulled back. The room felt large compared to the tiny hallways, though it was probably only about fifteen feet square. It was illuminated by ten glowing braziers, which cast a rubicon glow across the metallic walls.

Cloaked brotherhood members knelt along the walls. Ahven, however, stood, looking toward four bundles of cloth that lay on a raised dais at the back of the room. They were children, Jek realized, cloaked almost completely in dark swathes of seasilk. The youngest was perhaps ten years old, the eldest a girl that might have been in her late teens.

The children sat with their hands forward, trails of sand streaming from clenched fists onto the ground in front of them. Their eyes watched the falling sand. The entire dais, Jek realized, was crafted from a black stone.

Onyx.

No! Jek thought with shock. *That isn't possible.* He hissed quietly in surprise, stepping into the room, studying the children's faces and skin. No, they were not Shin. They were Kanaran. But . . . it was impossible.

"You must find the girl," one of the children whispered, not looking up from his streaming sand—not even moving, save to eventually reach over to the pot of sand beside him to grab another handful.

"I know where she is," Ahven said, confident.

"You will lose her," the child said. "You will have to find her again."

"Beware of the Windrunner," the eldest of them said. "I see him. He will not know you, but he could destroy you."

"Who is he?" Ahven demanded.

The girl shook her head. "I see . . . patterns. Too many patterns. All of them point toward danger. You must move quickly, Idiot King. Something has gone wrong in the world. It must have a leader. Conqueror, savior, or tyrant—it matters not. There must be unity."

"Now is a time for boldness," the boy who had spoken before agreed. "I

see . . . chaos in the patterns. Our protectors have fallen. Someone must make ten kingdoms into one.”

The last handful of sand dropped, and the children did not reach for more. Ahven nodded his head slightly—almost a bow—then turned toward Jek. “Come,” he said, striding from the room.

Jek wasn’t quick to follow. He stared at the children, and at the sand, and at the onyx. *A fabrication*, he told himself. *They speak nonsense and imitate the patterns of the past*. Somehow, he couldn’t quite convince himself.

“Assassin,” Ahven snapped. “Come.”

Jek turned and followed. “Those were Holetatinal!” he said.

Ahven raised an eyebrow. “They didn’t seem Shin to me, assassin,” he said.

“Onyxseers,” Jek said, his voice—though quiet—echoing in the metal hallway. “You realize they must be fake. There haven’t been Onyxseers in Kanar since the Ninth Epoch.”

“Perhaps,” Ahven said.

“They tell you what you want to hear,” Jek insisted. “They’re obviously mimicking the actions of Shin Stone Shamans.”

Ahven didn’t respond, so Jek tried another tactic. “You should escape,” he said. “Talshekh is guarded by Shin clansmen. I could try to assassinate him, but I would probably fail. Even if I kill him, another will try to take your throne.”

Ahven shook his head. “You’re not going to kill Talshekh,” he said. “Come.”

“What are you going to do?” Jek demanded as two robed forms opened the doors before them, letting Ahven out onto the night street.

“You heard the seers,” Ahven said. “It is time for boldness.”

LORD TALSHEKH LOOKED SLIGHTLY LESS impressive without his Shardplate. He was still massive, but much of that mass was contained in an ample gut and stocky legs. Despite the girth, he was well-muscled—but his were the muscles of an aging man whose battles had mostly passed.

He looked a little disheveled—he had probably taken Ahven’s disappearance as a sign that the king had fled. He certainly hadn’t expected his enemy to stride into the middle of his camp, accompanied by nothing more than a couple of guards and a solitary Shin assassin.

News of the arrival, however, brought crowds. Jek noted a large group of Vedenel noblemen gathering on one side of the camp, their eyes wide

with pleased surprise. Perhaps they had come pleading for their lives or to assure Talshekh that their political enemies had been the ones who aided in Ahven's disappearance.

Ahven stood quietly in the night, torches whispering before gusts of wind. What did he expect? That Talshekh would accept his surrender? Ahven held the throne. Talshekh could not let such a threat to his leadership live.

Indeed, as soon as Talshekh stepped from his tent and saw Ahven, the Davar lord smiled deeply and summoned his Shardblade. Those in attendance would witness the murder, but they would not contradict Talshekh's inevitable declaration that they had released the country from incompetent rule—that he had performed his act in the name of justice, rather than ambition.

Talshekh stepped forward and swung his Blade at the Idiot King's head. Ahven ducked, nearly falling to the ground as he whipped back his cloak and pulled a sword from beneath its depths. Ahven spun behind the surprised Talshekh.

The idiot king was trained as a warrior.

He wasn't masterful—Jek could see that much. Neither was he incompetent. However, no great amount of skill was required to dodge Talshekh's arrogant strike. Nor was mastery necessary to spin behind the large man as Ahven did, his own Shardblade raised high over his head.

Ahven sheared Talshekh's head in half with a single stroke. Ahven had probably meant to aim for the neck, but he hit somewhere right below the ear instead. It didn't matter—the Blade cut through the large Davar nobleman's head with ease.

Talshekh's corpse slumped to the ground. The crowd's eyes lingered on it, stunned.

Of course Ahven has a Shardblade, Jek realized. He's king. They couldn't have kept one from him, idiot or not. The Blade is a sign of nobility.

Ahven stood before the crowd, bloodied sword held in firmly in a post-swing posture. "Last night, the Almighty appeared to me in a dream," he said loudly. It took Jek a moment to realize what was wrong—Ahven's accent was gone. He sounded normal. "He said He would heal me of my infirm mind, for the Three Houses needed a leader. Talshekh, obviously, was not that leader."

Then Ahven stood up straight and dismissed his Blade. The Idiot King strode forward, stepping over Talshekh's body, and walked toward the open city gates. Jek thought that someone might challenge him, but no one did.

Jek hurried after Ahven, glancing back with apprehension. The collected noblemen were still staring at the corpse.

“Now what?” Jek asked, turning back to Ahven.

“Now,” Ahven said with a smile, “we wait for them to figure it out. I have another task for you.”

“Someone you need dead?”

“No,” Ahven replied. “Someone I need . . . retrieved.”

chapter 27

MERIN 6

“LET THE DUELS BEGIN!”

Merin forced his cheers to sound as enthusiastic as those of the other men. Indeed, he couldn't help but absorb the feast hall's general feeling of levity. Servants burst from the side doors, bringing forth steaming dishes. Men around him rested their fine-clothed arms on the tables and began to chat with enthusiasm, speculating on the evening's matches.

Merin, sitting amidst it all, found the experience almost surreal. Part of him was still the son of a Sixth Citizen farmer. That part didn't belong in a position of respect, between Dalenar's two sons at a table with an enviable view of the second dueling ring. Yet, that had somehow become his place. Another part of Merin, a part growing ever stronger, found the men around him increasingly familiar, the spicy food increasingly delicious, and the seasilk clothing increasingly natural. The excitement was almost enough to make him forget about his own inability to participate in the competition.

There will be other duels. Other competitions. Don't worry yourself, lad. You shall see enough of fighting in your life. They were Dalenar's words, spoken to him when Aredor had complained about Vasher's restriction.

Aredor was still noticeably upset. Though he joked with the young men at the table, every time he saw Merin's yet-unbonded Shardblade sitting beside his chair, his lips downturned slightly. He had obviously been

looking forward to this event as an opportunity to reveal his young protégé to the court at large. Despite his relative open-mindedness, Aredor was still a nobleman, and did not like having his plans diverted by the whims of a lowborn monk.

Merin glanced toward the king's table, looking past scurrying servants, boisterous noblemen, and nervous duel participants. The king's table sat before the primary dueling ring, the one where the main competition for Shardblades would take place. Aredor and Renarin had chosen a table near the right-hand ring instead, claiming that duels between Shardbearers were more interesting. The victors in these duels would earn not only honor, but a fair opportunity of gaining lordship of a city in the newly-conquered lands of Aleth-Prallah.

At the king's table, Lord Dalenar's austere face looked worried, even more so than usual. The King's demotion of Lord Jezenrosh had obviously unsettled Dalenar—apparently, removing the title of *Parshen* from a man was an irregular move. Yet, the rest of the crowd seemed to have accepted the decision—Jezenrosh hadn't been seen in court for a long time, and it was obvious he wasn't fulfilling his duties as *Parshen*. Even Aredor seemed to have gotten over the announcement, though he had hissed in anger when Elhokar first made it.

Dalenar obviously hadn't moved on so easily. Merin tried to imagine Lord Dalenar as people had described him in his youth—outgoing, even rowdy, with a loud voice and a love of fighting. Merin shook his head—he couldn't picture such a thing. Merin had known only one Dalenar. Stern, but kind. Dutiful and reserved. He sat with a quiet sense of decorum as the men around him—including the king—made rancor. *This is the type of nobleman I would be.*

Merin turned his attention back to the ring before his table, where the first contestants were preparing to duel. Merin heard cheers from behind as the other matches began, but he was glad for Aredor's choice of tables. He had never seen Shardbearers duel up close, and Vasher had instructed him to be observant of the forms and styles used.

Their ring was by far the largest of the three, and the tables were set back from its perimeter. Both contestants wore Shardplate—either their own or borrowed. The armors were more colorful than Merin's; he had been forced to spend most of his monthly stipend on clothing and other requirements of class. It would be some time before he could afford to have the armorers accent his Plate with designs, paints, or silks.

The contestants raised Shardblades—the sign that both had summoned

their weapons—and the match began. The first one to score two hits in the same general location would be declared the winner.

The two men clinked forward, obviously well-accustomed to moving in Shardplate. One man wore plate that had been painted a ruddy brown, and his Blade was a wide-bladed weapon, thicker at the top than at the base, almost like a large, intricate cleaver. The other man's weapon was thinner than most, his armor a light—almost imperceptible—green. Merin watched with interest as they made their first tentative strikes, judging one another.

“When are you up?” Renarin asked, leaning forward to look past Merin at his brother.

“Eighteenth,” Aredor replied. “I’m dueling Tiren of Fardust.”

The crowd cheered as the man with the thin sword scored a direct thrust against his opponent's chest. “I’ve never seen a Shardblade meant for stabbing before,” Merin noted.

“There aren’t many of them,” Aredor replied. “Most of the dueling forms discourage thrusting, and it’s against Protocol to attack the face.”

“Why?” Merin asked as the two Shardbearers moved back to the edges of the ring to begin the second point.

Aredor shrugged. “It’s always been that way, ever since the forms were developed, back during the days of the Epoch Kingdoms. There was probably a reason—people didn’t use spears or arrows very often back then either.”

The second point ended quickly, as the red-armored Shardbearer used his greater size to push his opponent nearly to the edge of the ring, eventually striking a loud blow against the side of the man's head. Even with dulled Blades, the blow sounded painful, but the green-armored man raised a hand, indicating he could continue.

As they prepared for the third point, Merin turned his attention to the food. Back in Stonemount, he had been accustomed to simple inavah cakes and soup, with the occasional splurge of pork—good, robust food, as his mother had always called it. The lords, however, could never do anything with simplicity. Even after two months in Kholinar, Merin was barely accustomed to the spices. He always forced himself to eat them, however—even when he wasn’t dining at evening meal with Lord Dalenar and his sons. He needed to learn how to be like the others.

So, he dished himself several large slices of glazed pork, and then carved off a chunk and downed it. The taste was amazing, but the heat of the spices followed immediately, and Merin reached for his flagon of wine, gulping it down.

Aredor chuckled at Merin's red face. "Go easy on that," he said, nodding to the gold flagon. "Remember, you only get three cups."

Merin nodded. It was Lord Dalenar's restriction—*The Way of Kings* forbid drunkenness of the nobility, a prohibition most of the other lords seemed to ignore. Dalenar had ordered all members of his house to drink no more than three flagons. For Dalenar, that was almost gluttonous—at Kholinar dinners, they were allowed only one.

Merin sat the flagon down, barely able to taste the wine's sweet flavor over the spices. He had never had alcohol before leaving Stonemount, but the other spearmen had made certain to rectify that oversight as soon as they discovered it. Those were not nights he would miss with any great sense of loss—he had trouble remembering them, anyway.

The bout ended with the green-armored knight making good on his first strike, sweeping his opponent's feet out from beneath him and scoring another hit to the man's chest. The onlooking men cheered enthusiastically; the women smiled in their controlled way. The next bout began almost immediately.

As the evening progressed, Merin watched the duels with fascination. Though he was growing more and more accustomed to Shardplate and its quirks, it still amazed him that men could move so fluidly within its confines. Those who were well-trained were able to perform some extraordinary feats for the crowd, jumping nearly half the length of the thirty-foot ring, swinging their Blades with such power that they hummed in the air, and smashing each other's armor with such force that even the Shardplate showed some dents from the blows.

As he watched, Merin thought he saw the things that Vasher wanted him to notice. Those who were trained in their Plate—not just in dueling—had an enormous advantage. In addition, the differences between fighting styles was amazing. Each man seemed to have his own personal form, and the various Shardblades reflected this. Even among similar styles, the Blades each bore slight differences in length or shape, matching their master's needs.

As the eighteenth bout approached, Aredor rose, moving to the dressing square, where servants helped Shardbearers don or remove their armor. He returned a few moments later, wearing his Plate, a frown on his face.

"What?" Merin asked.

"Tiren forfeited," Aredor explained, sitting with a clink. The chair held his weight—the fine hardwood was reinforced with steel to accommodate Shardbearers.

Merin frowned. "Why?"

“Something he ate yesterday has apparently made him ill,” Aredor replied. “He thought he could fight, but he’s had a relapse.”

“Well, that’s good for you,” Renarin noted. “You advance automatically.”

Aredor shrugged. “There’s not really much for me to gain by winning this—I’m already heir to a Third City. Given the choice, I’d rather duel than just advance.”

Merin nodded in understanding—he would rather have dueled and lost, as opposed to just watching. As Aredor tapped his gauntleted fingers on the table, obviously frustrated, a page wiggled between the room’s tables and approached.

“Lord Aredor,” the young man said. “We may have found a substitute for Lord Tiren, if you still wish to compete in the first round.”

Aredor perked up. “Who?”

“Lord Aredor,” a smooth voice said from behind.

Merin turned with surprise, recognizing a narrow-faced man. Meridas—now *Parshen* Meridas—stood outfitted in bright gold-and-silver Shardplate with a blood-red cape. His new Shardblade sat clasped before him, point down, wearing a protective metal sheath over its edge.

“Lord Meridas,” Aredor said slowly. “You are the replacement?”

“Indeed,” Meridas said, eyeing Merin and Renarin. “Your companions do not participate? Lord Renarin . . . well, we can understand his predicament—he has embarrassed House Kholin enough. But the peasant Shardbearer? Why is he sitting out? Are you worried that he too will make a fool of himself before the court?”

“Watch yourself, Meridas,” Aredor warned.

“No,” Meridas said pleasantly, “you be certain to watch *your* tongue, Lord Aredor. It appears that I now outrank you. You may be cousin to the king, but I will soon be his brother. Besides, what was it you once told me about not crossing *Parshens*?”

Aredor flushed, standing. “Bring your Blade, merchant,” he spat, waving the page away. “Let us begin.”

“Aredor . . .” Renarin said uncertainly. Aredor, however, held up a forestalling hand, then gestured for Meridas to enter the ring. Meridas nodded agreeably and took his place.

“I don’t understand,” Merin said to Renarin as Aredor entered the ring, holding out his hand and summoning his Shardblade. “I’ve seen Meridas at the monastery, but he only became a Shardbearer a few minutes ago. How can he hope to fight Aredor with Blades?”

“Look at his weapon,” Renarin said. “The opal.”

Merin squinted, catching a glimpse of Meridas's pommel stone. The opal was nearly black. "It's nearly as dark as mine is!" Merin objected. "But how?"

"He must have had a Shardblade sometime before," Renarin explained. "One that he lost somehow—like I did. If he took the opal off of it before he lost it, he could use that opal on the new Blade."

"You can do that?" Merin asked with surprise.

Renarin nodded, fishing in his cloak pocket for a moment, then bringing out a dark black stone. "If I ever get another blade, I can attach this and bond it quickly. Of course, I don't really care. I never wanted one in the first place. It just gave people an excuse to try and duel me."

Merin frowned at the new information, turning back to the dueling ring. "How long until he bonds it completely?"

"That depends on how long it's been since he lost his Blade," Renarin said. "A few days, at most. Most re-bonds take only a few moments. He must have lost the Blade many years ago."

The duel began, and suddenly Merin was very worried. Everyone said that Aredor was one of the finest duelists in the kingdom—in fact, he was highly favored to win the Shardbearers' competition. Merin could see confidence in his friend's eyes—Aredor expected to beat Meridas with ease. He hadn't noticed the opal.

The first exchange made that mistake obvious. Every duelist's style was different, but they all followed similar lines of development. As the previous duels had progressed, Aredor had named off the various dueling styles for Merin—each named after the gemstone that fit the personality of the style. Sapphire Form, with its wide swings and flowing movements, Ruby Form, with its blazing offense, and others.

Meridas's style was unlike any Merin had seen that evening. He stood with a relaxed, almost indifferent posture, Shardblade held point-down beside his right leg. When Aredor approached for the first testing swing, however, Meridas changed. Merin didn't even see Meridas's hand move—the arm was a blur as he raised his weapon for a sudden flurry of one-handed attacks.

The blade snapped four times against Aredor's armor, the blows ringing in the air. The final blow took Aredor in the back, smashing with such power that Meridas split the sheath from his Shardblade, throwing the two pieces of metal to the sides and leaving a large scar across the back of Aredor's silver armor.

Aredor groaned, raising a hand to the side of his helmet, where Meridas had struck him twice. Meridas stepped back, once again nonchalant,

weapon held beside him in the same strange unconcerned dueling stance. The officiator awarded him a point—only one could be gained per exchange—but Meridas raised a hand.

“I forfeit,” he said idly, strolling from the ring.

Aredor stumbled back toward their table, the crowd watching with stunned eyes. His eyes were dazed as he dismissed his Blade, then pulled off his helm.

“By the winds!” he hissed, regarding the helm with stupefaction. “How did he hit me so hard . . . and so quickly? Where did he learn to duel like that?”

Renarin was watching the retreating Meridas, his eyes troubled. “That one is not what we assumed,” he whispered.

“No need to tell me!” Aredor mumbled, reaching back and trying to feel the scar on the back of his Plate. Finally he just sighed, pounding the table with an armored fist. “He took me by surprise!” he complained. “I was a fool—I thought . . .”

Merin shrugged helplessly. “At least you weren’t eliminated.”

“He retreated so that I wouldn’t have a chance to prove I could beat him,” Aredor said with a curse. “He attacked when he knew I wouldn’t be ready for him, then left before I could redeem myself. He didn’t want to defeat me; he wanted to humiliate me!”

The crowd’s shock wore away as the next two duelists entered the ring. Eventually, Aredor tromped off to remove his armor, and Merin returned to his overly flavorful meal. Renarin, however, continued to watch the king’s table, regarding Meridas with one of his indecipherable looks.

chapter 28

SHINRI 5

SHINRI COULD TELL IMMEDIATELY that something was wrong. Not from Lady Jasnah's face—it was stone, like always. Nelshenden, however, looked sick with worry. He didn't stand near the wall, like the other nobleman soldier attendants, but squatted beside lady Jasnah's table, speaking quietly with her.

Shinri hastened her step as she entered the feast hall, pushing through the scents of feasting and the sounds of dueling. Shame burned within her. She had spent too long in Thalenah, talking with King Amelin. When she'd hurried to return, she'd been caught in the traffic at the Oathgate—noblemen of far higher rank than her travelling to Alethkar to view or participate in the duels. Despite protests, she'd been forced to wait for hours before returning. She'd hoped to make it in time for the betrothal announcement, but apparently she'd just missed it. What had happened? Why did Lady Jasnah sit at the queen's table, rather than her own?

"My lady!" Shinri said, hurrying to the stool beside Jasnah, etiquette forgotten for the moment.

Jasnah looked up at her with disapproving eyes—eyes that could make Shinri feel shame even when she did something right. Though at the queen's table, Lady Kholin sat alone, several seats separating her from any of the queen's normal attendants.

"Shinri," Jasnah said flatly. "I expected you to arrive on time for this

event. Be thankful that my brother pays little attention to women—if you had been a Shardbearer, he would likely have reprimanded you.”

Shinri flushed. “My lady . . .” she trailed off, looking at Nelshenden. The handsome soldier’s face was dark. She couldn’t ever remember seeing such anger in the honest man’s eyes. Menacing, dangerous anger. “Who?” Shinri demanded.

Nelshenden nodded toward the king’s table and the man sitting at Elhokar’s right hand. The merchant lord, Meridas.

“*Him!*” Shinri sputtered.

“His majesty made that pig a *Parshen*,” Nelshenden said with a dark tone. “And gave him a Shardblade. I—”

“Enough, Nelshenden,” Jasnah snapped. “That man is to be my husband.”

Nelshenden fell silent.

“But, my lady,” Shinri said . . . Meridas. Thinking about him made her feel as if her mind had been dipped in grease. She glanced toward the king’s table, and found the man’s calm—yet somehow scandalous—eyes watching her. Stripping her to the bones—or maybe just to the flesh that coated them. Shinri turned away.

“Meridas will be an important lord in my brother’s kingdom,” Jasnah explained. “He will need a woman acquainted with politics. Through being his wife, I can be of great service to my brother. It is a far better union than I had feared. Perhaps I was wrong in assuming the queen would exile me to an unimportant city.”

There was . . . something in her tone. Another person wouldn’t have been able to recognize it, but Shinri had spent years learning beneath Jasnah’s tutelage. She could see hints of the emotion Jasnah hid.

Pain. Hurt, carefully tucked away. Unacknowledged. Suppressed. But still potent. No, Jasnah did not want to marry this man. Not at all.

Shinri lay a hand on Jasnah’s, and Jasnah looked into her eyes. Right then, finally, Shinri understood. Jasnah wasn’t heartless. The woman couldn’t make her emotions go away. She was just very, very good at hiding them. Suddenly, Shinri felt closer to Jasnah than she ever had in the past three years.

“That man is not honorable,” Nelshenden whispered.

“There is nothing you can do, Nelshenden,” Jasnah said, her eyes becoming cold again, emotions checked with a skill that Shinri could only envy.

“There is something I can do,” Nelshenden said. “I could challenge him. A High Duel.”

Shinri started slightly. *A High Duel. Duel to the death.* He would do it,

too. Nelshenden was so cursed honorable and idealistic that he would get himself slaughtered to protect Jasnah's honor.

"No," Jasnah said. "You will not die dueling that man, Nelshenden."

"I could win his Shardblade," the guard replied. "I could be . . ." *Worthy of you*. He left off the last part, but Shinri could read his eyes.

"You would die," Jasnah said. "Lord Meridas has a Shardblade, and you saw him fight young Aredor. The new *Parshen* has great skill in dueling. He would slaughter you."

"I would almost prefer that," Nelshenden whispered.

"This is no time for vendettas," Jasnah informed sharply. "Or have you forgotten that the king's life is in danger?"

Mention of duty brought Nelshenden slightly out of his darkened state. "I remember, my lady."

"Has Kemnar returned yet?" Jasnah asked.

Nelshenden shook his head. "I have not seen him since last night, when he visited the palace in beggar's clothing. Even then, his reports were not encouraging. If the Stormkin assassins have people inside of the city, then we have not been able to discover them."

"What would you have me do, Jasnah?" Shinri asked, feeling ashamed. She had let her fixation with Tethren take her away from where she was needed. For once—perhaps the only time in her recent life—Jasnah had suffered a shock she could barely handle, and Shinri had been off tracking down a dead man.

Perhaps not dead . . . a piece of her whispered.

But irrelevant at the moment anyway, she argued back. Her duty was to Jasnah.

"There is much to do," Jasnah said. "I'll need you to visit the tables of the other women and listen for anything suspicious. There are ladies here from across all of Alethkar—perhaps one of them will give us the clue we need. I cannot leave the queen's table—we'll have to rely on you for information tonight."

"I understand, my lady," Shinri said.

"Here," Jasnah said, handing Shinri a letter. "Deliver this first." The other ladies were already exchanging secrets and proposing alliances, but Jasnah appeared to have only this one letter. The betrothal announcement had shocked her indeed.

"Who is it for?" Shinri asked.

"Lord Aredor Kholin," Jasnah explained.

Shinri frowned. A man?

“Tell him to have someone he trusts read it to him,” Jasnah said. “Someone he trusts very much.”

“Yes, my lady,” Shinri said, rising to weave her way through the tables to the edge of the room. The men cheered as a Shardbearer was defeated, their mirth somewhat distracting. Sometimes she envied them, and the freedom their innocence brought. Most were simple tribute lords or Shardbearers. They didn’t have to worry about plots and betrayals—they could come to a feast simply to enjoy the duels and eat a good meal.

Shinri glanced at the king’s table as she passed, and Meridas paused in his conversation just long enough to give her another of his filthy stares. *Oh, Jasnah*, she thought as she scuttled past. *I know you’re strong, but this?*

And yet, Jasnah would survive. She was demanding of those around her, but nowhere near as demanding as she was with herself. She would take her betrothal and use it to her best advantage. A woman couldn’t simply take up a Shardblade and duel away her problems. She had to be clever, patient, and persistent.

The Prallah war was but a breeze to the highstorm that is coming . . . Dangerous times approach. King Amelin’s words returned to her. He had been so apprehensive. What did he know? What was he planning for?

Stop it, Shinri told herself. *You’re back serving Jasnah now. You let yourself get distracted by Tethren and Thalenah, and weren’t here when you were needed. You need to focus, like Lady Jasnah told you to.*

Unfortunately, she couldn’t banish her worries so easily. The contrived fiasco of Tethren’s death was far too suspicious, and King Amelin’s words were far too ominous. Jasnah had trained Shinri too well—she couldn’t help considering the things she had discovered.

I’ll discuss them with Jasnah this evening, Shinri decided. *She’ll know how to interpret what has happened.* She would be annoyed at Shinri for keeping the investigation of Tethren’s death secret, but that couldn’t be helped any longer. Events were growing too large for Shinri to manage alone.

Decision made, Shinri sought out Dalenar’s heir. Aredor sat with his brother and the solemn young Shardbearer Merin Kholin. They had a very good table, of course—Lord Aredor was one of the most popular young men of the court—and sat watching the duels in the southern ring. Aredor had his Shardblade summoned, as did Merin, and they were obviously comparing the Blades.

Shinri bowed slightly as she approached. “Lord Aredor,” she said, drawing his attention. All three young men looked up. “I—”

Shinri froze. There, sitting on the table, was Tethren’s Shardblade.

She knew it, of course. Hopelight, it was called, a majestic Blade that bore a crystalline pattern etched into its metal. The pattern was dull, now, like a stature that had been weathered by countless winds. And in its place an unfamiliar design was beginning to emerge, something akin to flowing rivulets of water. Yet, despite the wearing, despite the new bond, the hints of Tethren's touch was unmistakable. The glyphs that had run along the Blade were still visible, and Shinri had known that Blade as she had known the man himself.

She couldn't move. She could only stare at the table.

"Lady Shinri!" Aredor said with a grin, obviously not noticing her incapacitation. "Doesn't our Lord Merin look handsome this evening? Almost like the grand hero the court has made him out to be, eh?" Aredor looked at his young companion, smiling and winking.

"Where . . ." Shinri whispered. "Where did you get that Shardblade?"

"Oh, surely you've heard the story, Shinri," Aredor said dramatically. "Lord Merin saved the king's life, you know. An unknown Shardbearer tried to kill his majesty on the battlefield—ignored Protocol, even. But Lord Merin intervened. Jumped up and pulled the faceless man right off his horse. It's quite a story—you should have Merin tell it to you some time."

"You just told it to her, Aredor," Merin said, blushing.

Shinri ignored them both. *Unknown Shardbearer . . . tried to kill his majesty . . .* She knew of the event, of course. She had been with Jasnah, near the battlefield, when it happened. She had paid little attention to it, however, despite gossip about the strange, faceless Shardbearer that had tried to kill King Elhokar. An unknown man, without glyph to identify him.

The sinking of the ship was to cover something else, Amelin had said. Something about the way Tethren died, though I can't figure out what.

House Rienar had tried to assassinate King Elhokar on the battlefield. It was inconceivable. And yet, her proof was unmistakable. The Shardblade lay on the table, Tethren's touch upon it seeming to fade by the moment.

Though her mind was stunned, Shinri's body knew what it had been sent to do. She dropped the letter to the table. "Have someone you trust read it to you, Lord Aredor," she heard herself mumble. Then she turned, walking from the room and its jovial occupants, with their masculine cheering and feminine manipulations.

She walked out into the hallway, seeking a bit of quiet to think. Why would the Rienar try to kill Elhokar? Why would they do it on the battlefield? And—the most confusing question of all—how would they have

persuaded Tethren to take part in such a dishonorable act? The man she had known would never have broken Protocol.

And yet, how well had she really known him? She had still been mostly a child then. Even if her impression had been truthful, they had seen each other little during the last year. Men changed.

Shinri sighed, letting her fingers trail along the cool stone wall as she walked, the sounds of feasting growing dim behind her. The truth was, she knew very little. She was not Jasnah, able to anticipate logical discoveries with an inhuman sense of inference. Tethren's Shardblade had been right before Shinri on several occasions, carried by the young lord Merin, and she had never even noticed it. She might never have noticed it, had Merin not taken off the practice sheath to display the Blade to his friends.

Shinri paused her wanderings, leaning back against the stone wall with her eyes closed. Even knowing of his death, even having been separated from him for so long, seeing Tethren's Blade was a shock. It was the first tangible evidence that he was gone, a piece of her life cut away. While she couldn't really mourn a love lost, she could at least feel depressed at what might have been.

I need to get back to Jasnah, Shinri thought. She needs to know about this. It no longer affects just me. They tried to kill Elhokar. Perhaps House Rienar is allied with Jezenrosh.

"Lady Shinri Davar?" a voice asked.

Shinri jumped, opening her eyes. A man stood in the hallway before her. Dressed in the clothing of a merchant courtier, he had pale skin and large, Shin eyes. She opened her mouth to reply, then paused, realizing that she recognized his foreign features. She had seen him before, in the Veden City Oathgate chamber.

When he moved, his body displayed the same fluid control she had sensed in him on that day weeks before. Before she could so much as speak, he had his hand wrapped around her neck, something sharp pressed against her back.

"I apologize, child," he whispered to her in lightly-accented Veden. "But you must come with me."

chapter 29

TALN 6

TALN GAVE LHAN the slip after about two hours of watching duels. *Goodbye, my friend*, Taln thought as he slumped down to hide his height, then ducked away amidst the massive crowd.

He was outside, in one of the palace's outer courtyards, where several dueling rings lay well-illuminated in the night by torches and lanterns. The duelists who participated were of insignificant rank—Nineteenth and Twentieth lords who had been eliminated from the prime competition, or lesser duelists from other countries.

However, these duels were still exciting—a man's rank had little to do with his fighting ability. There were still prizes to be had, for the king had sponsored several prestigious events outside of the prime competition, as had some of the more wealthy merchant companies. Even if these men didn't win a Shardblade, a victory in a lesser event could mean wealth and notoriety.

Taln forced himself away from the dueling rings. He pushed through the crowd, shuffling beneath his cloak in a hunched posture. Lhan had been right—the courtyard was extremely busy, dense with the scent of bodies. However, the monk had been wrong about the duels being boring. How could he not be intoxicated by the thrill of a well-fought contest? How could he not itch to participate, hands longing for the unity of mind and weapon? Taln could have watched the duels in a joyful daze if his purpose hadn't been so urgent.

As he approached the palace gates, he sought out a secluded overhang beside a vending tent, then stood and turned his cloak inside-out. The inside—or, actually, the outside, since he had been wearing his cloak the wrong way around since leaving the monastery—was lined with brilliant blue seasilk. He'd purchased the cloth in secret, then sewn it to the outside of his cloak in the early hours of the morning, when even the monks were asleep. He still felt guilty for gambling with the other cromcleaners, winning enough money to buy the seasilk, but he had been unable to think of another way.

Taln stepped out from behind the tent and assumed a commanding posture. His plan would require more than a skin of silk—his cloak wasn't tailored like that of a nobleman. While it was bulky and masculine, it hung naturally on his body, and didn't have the broad extended shoulders to give it the cape-like, rectangular look that Rosharan lords favored.

Nobility, however, was not in wealth or tailoring, but in attitude. Taln strode toward the palace doors, his cloak clasped shut in front of him, lest it open and reveal his common clothing beneath. His step was firm, his air important, and his lips formed a slight half-scowl. As he stepped up to the gates, one of the guards frowned slightly, regarding him. The man made as if to step forward, and Taln halted immediately, turning an intolerant look toward the man.

"Where would I find the primary competition?" he demanded, mimicking the noble accent as best he could. He would still have a bit of the backwater Riemak accent in his voice, he knew, but hopefully that would enhance the persona he was attempting to mimic.

The guard paused. He was a younger man, with dark curly hair and a boyish face. "My . . . lord?" he asked.

"The primary competition," Taln repeated. Then, in a lower voice, he continued. "Tell me. How is the king's . . . mood today?"

"I'm not sure, my lord," the guard confessed.

Taln turned, looking toward the palace with a somewhat distracted expression, as if he were considering something unpleasant. "Have any other lords arrived late?" he asked.

"Not that I know of, my lord," the guard said.

Taln's expression darkened. "My father warned me of the king's temper. Do you think, perhaps, the joy of the festivities might make him more accepting of my tardiness?"

"I'm not certain, my lord," the guard replied.

Taln nodded curtly. "Very well. Where can I find him?"

The guard pointed down the central hallway. “To the east, my lord, in the grand feast hall.” The guard paused for a moment. “Good luck, my lord.”

Taln sighed, nodding his thanks, and strode into the palace. The truth was that he needed no directions—he probably knew the palace better than half of its occupants. Indeed, he knew things about its construction that had been kept secret even from kings. He quickly made his way through the pillared hallways and grand, open foyers of the Aleth section. The grand feast hall was near the center of the ten-winged structure, with the other communal rooms.

Even if he hadn’t known his way, the location would have been obvious. Servants scuttled to and from the room, bringing food and drink, and lords in bright clothing stood in the hallway outside, speaking in quiet conference or boisterous discussion. Few paid Taln any heed—hopefully, his affectation would mark him as a lord, but his relatively poor cloak would mark him as an unimportant one.

The grand hall was nearly as crowded as the courtyards, though many of the people here were sitting, and the room smelled of perfumes and luxurious food rather than sweat. The women and men sat apart in three rings of tables, each one surrounding a dueling circle. Many of the male onlookers had risen from their tables to instead stand at the peripheral of the room to watch a particular duel. The most popular ring was the one at the center.

Taln took his time, carefully scouting the room. He had intentionally waited until later in the day, when reactions would be dulled by wine. The room had three exits—the main doors and two servant’s entrances. If his memory served him, the exit on the east wall led through the kitchens, and had an outlet to the main hallway. From there, it was only two turns to the Oathgates.

There were several tenseset guards in the feast hall, but the congestion would make it difficult for them to react, especially if too many intoxicated noblemen decided to take arms against him. The Oathgates would probably be guarded—but, hopefully, some of them would be open to allow for foreign noblemen to return to their homes.

Taln circled the room several times, getting a feel for the layout and soldier placements. Eventually he stopped, joining a group of noblemen standing to the right of the king’s table. From the conversations he overheard, the primary competition was nearing its end. The clang of swords rang over the voices of men, nearly drowning out the single balladess who sang in the far corner. The two noblemen who fought now would both be

awarded Shardblades for progressing so far. Their contest was a matter of prestige—and of rumors that the king had cities in Prallah that still had not been assigned lords.

Taln's target sat beside the king. His name was Lord Meridas, and he had apparently already been awarded a Shardblade. Taln could see Glyphting sitting on the table in front of the man; its markings had been dulled considerably—almost completely—but he still knew the Blade for what it was.

Taln glanced to the side, eyes falling on a random nobleman standing a short distance away. The pommel of a sword jutted out from beneath the man's cloak, the hilt within reach. Taln stretched his fingers, then let his muscles relax, carefully falling into a combat stance.

And then he saw a form moving through the crowd, a figure in tan robes and a nonchalant expression. Lhan. How had he . . . ?

Taln eyed the sword hilt again. He just had to reach out and . . . As he tensed his muscles, however, the nobleman turned to a friend, hand falling on his pommel.

"I should have known I'd find you here," Lhan said, strolling up beside Taln. "And you were doing so well at staying out of trouble, too." The monk paused, regarding Taln's cloak. "Who'd you steal that from?"

"I made it," Taln said. "Last night."

Lhan nodded, turning toward the central ring. "So it was all an act. The king's not going to listen to you, Taln. I don't care what you say to him, his majesty will not be pleased if you interrupt his revelry a second time. If you'd wanted to see him, you should have just waited for Lady Jasnah's promised audience."

Taln didn't respond. He watched as the sword-bearing nobleman turned back to watch the duel, hand still resting on his weapon's pommel. Taln glanced to the side; Lhan was regarding him with a confused expression. The monk's eyes seemed to be searching for something.

"You're not going to make another announcement to the king, are you," Lhan finally said. It was not a question.

Taln shook his head. He nodded toward his target. "I'm going to grab that man's sword," he said in a quiet voice. "In the following confusion, I'm going to take down the two guards by the king's table. Then, I'm going to take my Shardblade back from the man sitting next to his majesty. I'll jump onto the table, run down its length, toward the east wall, where I'll shove through the crowd and escape into the kitchens. From there, I'll fight my way to the Oathgates, take the best open portal—hopefully, one

to Lakhenran, if it's open. From there, I'll escape into the wilderness and use my Blade to locate my brethren."

Lhan's eyes widened slightly, and he glanced toward the king. "Taln, this room is full of Shardbearers and guards!" he hissed. "Are you crazy?"

Taln met the monk's eyes. A realization seemed to spark in Lhan's face. "By the winds . . ." Lhan whispered quietly. "You really are. I'd almost thought that . . ."

Taln turned away. "Go, Lhan. I told you what I plan for a reason. If you're still standing here when I move, they might connect you to me and cut you down before you can explain otherwise. Go."

Lhan didn't move. "If you reach for that sword, I swear I'll scream."

Taln snorted. "I'll have the weapon before the sound leaves your throat," he said. "Go."

"Taln, this is ludicrous!" the monk said with a pleading voice, grabbing Taln's arm. "You're not thinking clearly—you may not *be able* to think clearly. Trust me. No matter what your delusions claim, you aren't a soldier."

Taln frowned. Where had he gotten that idea?

"You were defeated easily last time you confronted the king, and you had a Shardblade then," Lhan said. "You're too familiar with common work to have been a soldier all your life. Please, trust me. Come back to the monastery. Don't do this—even if you do get the sword away from that man, every lord in this room is an expert duelist. You won't make it ten paces before they kill you."

"Watch, then," Taln said, shrugging off Lhan's hands. Taln's target still held his pommel, but his grip was loose. It would simply be a matter of knocking his arm to the side before taking the weapon.

"You'll kill them, then?" Lhan said quietly as the crowd cheered. "If the soldiers resist? Will you kill them?"

"I may have to," Taln said. "I need my Shardblade back."

"What kind of Herald would you be then?" Lhan said quickly, as if he had discovered something incriminating. "What servant of the Almighty would kill innocent men? You would perform an act of evil in order to get your sword back? You're all right with that?"

"Moral quandaries won't work on me, Lhan," Taln said softly. "You have no idea how long I've wrestled with them."

Lhan stepped in front of him. "Just wait, Taln. Wait a few minutes. Talk this through."

Don't listen to him, Taln thought. *He's just stalling you.* But, stalling for

what? Something specific? Lhan seemed anxious. Suddenly, the monk's face grew relieved.

"I do not call this 'staying out of trouble,'" a firm voice said from behind, confirming Taln's suspicions.

Taln turned to confront the Lady Jasnah. She stood with folded arms, left sleeve drooping, her two guards nowhere to be seen. "I don't have time for this, madman," she snapped. "What is this about?"

"I told you earlier," Taln explained. "I need to get my sword back, one way or another."

"I see," the lady replied. Behind Taln, a point was declared, and the crowd yelled in approval. He glanced to the side—the nobleman's sword was free again.

Lhan moved over to Jasnah's side. "Taln, listen to reason. Please."

"To him, this *is* reasonable," Jasnah said as Taln turned his back on the two. The nobleman's hilt lay exposed, inviting.

"I wonder how the world will survive after he gets himself killed," Jasnah said.

Taln froze.

"That's right," the woman said. "Think about that. What happens when you die, Talenel Elin? You said you needed to locate your brother Heralds. You haven't found them yet, have you? What if something happened to them? What if you're the only one left?"

What if something happened to them.

The room grew dark. Dark and red.

"What if you fail?" Jasnah asked. "A room full of warriors? An entire castle's worth of soldiers? Even for the mythic soldier of the Heralds, those are daunting odds. You told me that you could die. What happens to us if you do?"

What if you fail.

Before him, two dueling warriors burst into flame. They danced, two candle-tips sparring on the floor. There was no crowd, just a rolling inferno.

And the screams. Horrible screams, sounding from the fires. Sounding in his ears—screams of terror and pain. The sound of some poor creature being tortured beyond sanity.

What if you fail? What if you fail? What if you fail . . . ?

Taln spun in the fiery tempest. Lhan was a blazing torch that shied back from Taln in fear. The noblemen around Taln were nothing more than living pyres.

But her. She was unchanged. She stared at him with those eyes. Eyes dense, like stone.

“Can you risk it?” she asked. So unyielding, yet so right.

Behind her, the smoke of a thousand flames gathered and pooled together. Taln could see a form moving within the vortex. A dark, shifting thing. An evil thing. It moved forward, coming for him.

“Curse you woman!” Taln said, groaning, stumbling.

He had to attack. He had to do something, anything. Uncertainty was the fire’s gateway, and inaction its sustenance. The sword . . . he just had to reach for the sword . . . so close . . .

If he fought, he would fail.

He moaned, closing his eyes, holding his head. He clawed at his mind, casting out memories, seizing optimism and dragging it forth. He was not alone. He would find the others.

However, he had to live until he was absolutely sure that they were alive.

Taln opened his eyes, sweat dripping from his brow, and gasped quietly. He was on his knees, the crowd around him having backed away in alarm. Taln reached up, allowing Lhan to help him to his feet. Lady Jasnah watched with cool eyes. She nodded once, turning to leave.

“I have done what you asked,” Taln said as Lhan calmed the onlookers, explaining that Taln was having stomach pains. “I stayed out of trouble.”

Jasnah turned, eyebrow raised inquisitively. “You still want a meeting with my brother?”

“No,” Taln said. “Something else. Tomorrow, I will be leaving Ral Eram. If you wish to avoid an incident, see that the guards allow me access to the Oathgates.”

“Very well,” Jasnah said though a thin line of a mouth. “But not tomorrow—there will be too many people returning home from the dueling competition. I will send you word.”

“Soon, Jasnah,” Taln said firmly. “You will not leave me waiting as you did with our previously promised ‘meeting.’”

“You have my word,” Jasnah said.

Taln nodded, then rested a weak hand on Lhan’s shoulder, not caring that doing so revealed his poor clothing. “Let’s go,” he said.

chapter 30

JASNAH 7

WITH THE DUELS FINISHED and the awards bestowed, there was little for the men to do but drink. As the hour grew late, the feast hall slowly drained of participants, the feasters trickling off to the sitting rooms. Those who remained in the main hall were subdued, their drunkenness leading to stupor and lethargy.

Jasnah's table—or, rather, the queen's table—was mostly empty. The women sat in clandestine conferences, their seating rearranged now that formality had broken down. Many of the less-important women had retired, and many of the more-important had moved to more suitable locations for evening conferences. On the next day, there would be further feasting and dueling, but the main events had already occurred. Those men who had important duties could be on their way—though, from the looks of many, it would be well into mid-afternoon before they considered leaving.

Seven hours of duels—interspersed by the near-catastrophe with the madman Taln and her frustration at Shinri's disappearance—had provided Jasnah with little insight into her problems. There were only three ways to break the forced betrothal. The first required Elhokar's permission, which was unlikely. The second was to join the monastery—the Order of Chonra accepted women. The third was to have Meridas's mother forbid the union.

Neither prospect looked very appealing. Joining the monastery would require Jasnah to forsake all political aspirations and worldly possessions,

not to mention require her to join the service of a religion she did not endorse. The second was highly unlikely—through the marriage, Meridas’s family would secure ties to the royal Kholin line. Even if Jasnah were to engage in some extreme scandal—such as taking an illicit lover—she doubted Meridas’s kin would renounce the union. Besides, even if Jasnah were to persuade them to break the engagement, Nanavah would still have her Right of Decision. There would be many an aspiring lord willing to marry the king’s sister, no matter how unappealing Jasnah made the union.

Even if Jasnah put her displeasure with Meridas aside for the moment, she found herself frustrated. The queen’s maneuvers made very little political sense. Why would Nanavah marry Jasnah to such a powerful man? Why manipulate Elhokar into renouncing Jezenrosh? It made no sense.

Perhaps Nanavah had heard about the assassins. That could be a valid reason for removing Jezenrosh from his position, thereby weakening the man’s claim to the throne. It was a move Jasnah herself might have considered, had she been in Nanavah’s place. Could the moves be nothing more than spousal duty? Why, then, did Jasnah feel so strongly that she was missing something?

Jasnah shook her head, rising to retreat from the Eleventh Hall. Nelshenden stood by the wall, waiting dutifully as always. His loyalty to *Sheneres* was unwavering—*The Way of Kings* spoke disapprovingly of any excess, including drunkenness, and it would take a royal edict to get Nelshenden to have more than a single glass of wine at an evening feast.

As she stepped out of the room, a familiar figure appeared in the hallway, making his way toward the Eleventh Hall. Kemnar was not dressed like a nobleman—his cloak was of rough shennah with no dies, his clothing a simple vest-smock tied over a pair of ragged trousers. His eyes glistened with urgency.

“You found something?” Jasnah said eagerly, pulling the man aside as he joined them in the outside hallway.

“The assassins are here,” Kemnar replied, pulling out a purse, “in the city. I had to use nearly every gem you gave me to figure out where.” He gave the purse to Nelshenden, who handled all of Jasnah’s finances—the two soldiers knew better than to try and hand her gemstones, even currency.

That was it, then. Balenmar was right; Ralmakha was wrong. “Where are they?” Jasnah demanded.

“They’re posing as a merchant company,” Kemnar explained.

“You know when they plan to strike?” Jasnah asked hopefully.

Kemnar shook his head. “This is a clever group, my lady. Very professional,

very well-established. They don't make mistakes, and even the most important crime lords know not to ask too many questions."

Jasnah folded her arms, tapping her foot in frustration. "What's the name of their merchant front?"

"The *Channal* group, out of Palinar," Kemnar replied.

Jasnah froze. She'd heard that name before. She thought back, trying to clear the muddled events of two months of intrigue. *Channal . . .*

Her eyes widened in surprise. That was the name of the company in the treasury logs, the one Nanavah had been purchasing emeralds from. An irregularly large number of emeralds, at an irregularly high price.

"By the winds . . ." Jasnah whispered. "Nelshenden, gather my guards! And as many of the Royal Guard as you can persuade to come with you."

Nelshenden frowned. "Now, my lady?"

Jasnah paused. *You're betrothed now*, she thought to herself. *The next few days will be filled with marriage preparations. Elhokar will never believe your allegations, not without proof, and you won't be in a position to go out on your own. Move now, or not at all.*

"Yes," she said. "Immediately."

"THE QUEEN WANTS MY BROTHER DEAD," Jasnah said in a hushed tone.

Kemnar and Nelshenden sat across from her in the hand-drawn carriage. The streets were empty enough this late at night to allow for such a bulky vehicle. They had gathered about thirty soldiers, including her own, and the group marched alongside the vehicle. Hopefully, it would be enough.

"That's a dangerous claim, my lady," Nelshenden said solemnly, his face shadowed in the dark carriage.

"The emerald purchases weren't meant to drive up the market," Jasnah explained. "They were a pay-off—a way for Nanavah to transfer a large amount of money to the assassins without drawing attention to herself, and without having to delve into her own pockets. Ironically, my brother funded his own assassination."

"But why, my lady?" Nelshenden said, shaking his head. "She has power, she has rank, and she has the king's ear. Killing him accomplishes nothing."

"Unless she wishes another to take his place," Jasnah said. "A lover no one—not even women of court—has discovered."

"Who?" Nelshenden asked with a frown.

"Meridas," Jasnah said.

Kemnar frowned. "That's a stretch, my lady."

“Is it?” Jasnah asked. “He’s now a *Parshen*, and betrothed to the king’s sister. That’s not a large step away from the throne.”

Kemnar sat thoughtfully for a moment. “Not a stretch to believe,” he finally admitted, “but a stretch to prove. We have had no hint of an affair.”

“We’ll find one tonight,” Jasnah said.

Kemnar looked appreciative. “Assuming you’re right, they’d have to get rid of you after they kill the king. They’ll probably wait a short time—a year or so. With you out of the way, Nanavah and Meridas could make their union official.”

“My lady,” Nelshenden said. “We should not be acting on this alone. I repeat my objection from before—we should bring your concerns to the king. It is the proper way.”

“That’s very honorable of you, Nelshenden,” Jasnah replied. “But you just pointed out that Nanavah has the king’s ear. What proof do I have? Some figures in a ledger? Speculation? We need more.”

Nelshenden did not look satisfied. “You should not have come, my lady.”

“You know me better than that, Nelshenden,” she replied. “Don’t worry—I’ll remain in the carriage until the assault is finished.”

“Yes,” Nelshenden said as the carriage pulled to a stop, “but we’ll have to leave men behind to protect you.”

He and Kemnar hopped out of the vehicle, landing quietly on the street. Jasnah had given orders to stop a block from the *Channal* guildhouse.

As her men made their preparations, a stern face approached her carriage window. Lord Zenach, second captain of her brother’s personal guard, was an aging man she couldn’t remember ever having seen smile. His reputation for sobriety was legendary—only Nelshenden could have convinced him to agree to such a clandestine operation. His eyes, however, warned that he would go no farther without good cause.

“We’re here, my lady,” he said in an even, but unyielding, voice. “Now you will tell me what this is about.”

“There is a group of assassins posing as merchants in that building, captain,” Jasnah explained. “They have a contract on the king.”

“This is about Lord Jezenrosh?” the captain asked, eyeing the dark building.

“You’ve heard about that?” Jasnah asked.

Zenach looked back at her. “Yes.”

“You take the threat seriously.”

“It is my duty to take all threats seriously,” the man replied. He strode

away to confer with Nelshenden and Kemnar. A few moments later, Kemnar and four men retreated to the carriage, surrounding it, Jasnah, and the four pullers in a loose circle. The other twenty-five men drew their weapons and approached the building, splitting into three groups.

Overhead, the stars sat in stoic regard, most of them concentrated in an enormous cluster the monks called the Dwelling. They gave little light this day—the Dwelling was low on the horizon—and Jasnah quickly lost sight of her men in the darkness. Then, all was still. Seconds passed as heartbeats, then gathered into minutes which pulled on her nerves like weights on a string.

Finally, a group of three men returned from the building; one was Nelshenden. Jasnah didn't wait—she climbed from the carriage and approached him with a rushed step.

"The guildhouse was empty," the guard said. "They cleaned out, taking all of their gear. Only one watchman stayed behind."

"You captured him?" Jasnah asked hopefully.

"Barely," Nelshenden said. "He had a trapdoor out the back. Zenach caught him."

"Take me to him," Jasnah ordered.

"I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING!" the man exclaimed. "I'm just a scratch!"

"What's a scratch?" Jasnah asked, turning toward Kemnar.

"A local man," Kemnar explained. "Hired from outside the organization to provide experience in the region."

Jasnah nodded. Two lanterns showed that Nelshenden had been right—the building was empty. The rooms had been stripped of all ornamentation and personal effects, leaving behind only a few tables and chairs, one of which held the prisoner. He was a wiry, nondescript man, and his nervousness seemed a little too exaggerated.

Kemnar approached the assassin, leaning down with a threatening look. Jasnah watched with folded arms, Nelshenden and Zenach standing beside her. The room's only other occupants were the two lantern-bearing soldiers.

"You *do* know something," Kemnar said, drawing his knife. The well-made steel—created from an Awakened alloy to be stronger than regular metals—glistened in the lanternlight. It was a stabbing weapon, designed to get through the faceplate of a Shardbearer.

"I swear by the Tenth Name of the Almighty," the assassin whispered, cowering. "They didn't tell me anything."

Kemnar leaned down closer, putting the tip of the weapon against the man's neck. "I realize this isn't a group one betrays lightly," Kemnar whispered. "But they're not here. I am."

The point of the weapon drew blood.

"Kemnar!" Nelshenden said. "You are not to hurt him!"

Kemnar sighed, standing and shooting a dry look at Nelshenden. He stepped back to Jasnah, speaking in a quiet voice. "He is going to make this very difficult, my lady."

"We must follow *Sheneres*," Nelshenden said. "We have nothing if we have not honor."

"Nelshenden," Jasnah said. "This assassin has knowledge that might save our king's life."

"Better we risk the king than betray our souls, my lady," Nelshenden said. The words were not spoken lightly—his eyes bore a weight of decision. "If we follow what is right, the Almighty will see us to victory."

The Almighty, Jasnah thought. *Wonderful*.

Kemnar turned, eyeing the prisoner. "He's no simple scratch," Kemnar said. "He puts on a good show, but a group like this wouldn't hire someone they didn't think was trustworthy—and able to withstand a little torture. I can probably break him, but it will take time. Maybe days."

Kemnar paused, eyeing the captive, then turned back. "The thing is, my lady, we might not have days. There are only two reasons the assassins would have abandoned this building. Either they thought they'd been discovered, or the assassination is planned for tonight."

"You think they would attack the king in the middle of a dueling competition?" Nelshenden asked skeptically. "Do you have any idea how many Shardbearers there are in the palace right now?"

"Blades and Plate don't protect against a knife in bed, Nelshenden," Kemnar said. "Besides, half the palace has drunk themselves silly. I doubt most of those Shardbearers even remember their own names right now."

Zenach swore quietly, breaking his silence. "He's right, my lady," he said. "Those palace guards who weren't on duty participated in the duels, and with all the Shardbearers around, we let a good number of them off. We're as understaffed as you'll ever find us."

"Then we have to assume that the king is in danger," Jasnah said. "Captain, take your men and mine and return to the palace as quickly as possible. I want you to gather every guard and Shardbearer you can to protect the king. My captains and I will stay here and see what we can gather from the captive. We'll join you if we discover anything."

Zenach's only response was a curt nod. His two men put down the lanterns, and all three were out the door in a matter of seconds. Jasnah remained, Kemnar and Nelshenden beside her, regarding the captive. Kemnar was right—they didn't have days to wait. They may not even have minutes.

There was a way. The thought entered Jasnah's head idly, then refused to leave. She could place a stress upon this man's soul that no simple physical torture could equal.

No! Jasnah thought, I will find another way.

But what? Even if she persuaded Nelshenden to let the torture progress, it was unlikely they would discover any information in time.

She could make him break. There was one thing every Rosharan feared more than threats, more than pain. She resisted the option, but it would not depart her mind. She kept thinking of Elhokar—a man who was, to her, little more than a boy trying so hard to be king. What was more important? His life? Her soul?

"Nelshenden," Jasnah said quietly, holding out her hand, "give me a gemstone."

"My lady?" Nelshenden asked with surprise.

"Do it!" she said.

The soldier quietly pulled open his money pouch, selecting a gem and placing it in her hand. The ruby was covered with a light glass glaze and stamped with the seal of Alethkar, declaring it to be worth fifty Ishmarks. As soon as the stone touched her hand, Jasnah could hear its Tone. The note sounded powerfully in her ears, even through the glass.

Could she do it? What would Kemnar and Nelshenden think if they knew? Like monks, Awakeners were required to forsake wealth and privilege—but unlike monks, Awakeners were also ostracized. Removed from their families, feared, shut away. They were strange, inhuman creatures. Their arts changed them. People whispered that Awakening didn't just change them—it stole their souls. It took from them their humanity.

Jasnah closed her eyes, and held up the ruby. If she concentrated, she could hear another sound coming from within her—her Soul Tone. Unlike the ruby, her Soul Tone didn't give off a simple note—it produced a brilliant, vibrating cord. It was her own unique harmonic, usually so quiet she couldn't hear it.

She reached out with her Soul Tone, the familiar chord growing *louder* somehow, though she knew she didn't hear it with her physical ears. She took the Soul Tone, and touched it against the ruby, stroking its Tone like

a finger upon the strings of an instrument. Her Soul Tone gave strength to the ruby's music, amplifying it, making its pure, solitary note grow in force and strength.

The ruby shivered in her hand. It began to vibrate with a soft hum that would be audible even to non-Awakener ears.

She heard Nelshenden gasp. She opened her eyes as the vibrating gemstone shattered its glass glazing. The gem began to glow with a pure red light, rising into the air above her hand, illuminating the room with a faceted rubicon glow.

The prisoner watched mutely, eyes widening. Then he screamed, struggled against his bonds, pulling ineffectually against the ropes tying his arms and legs to the chair. Gone was his false anxiety and overdone cowering.

"Speak," Jasnah ordered, holding her hand forward, the gemstone vibrating and spinning above it.

"I know nothing!" the man screamed.

Jasnah turned her hand to the side, palm facing toward the far wall, the ruby spinning and glowing before it. She nudged the ruby with a stroke of her mind, flipping it through the air toward the room's lone table. The gemstone struck the wooden table, shattering into a shower of red dust, transferring its vibration to the wood itself.

The strike sounded loudly, like a sharp pop, within Jasnah's mind. She grabbed ahold of the table's Tone—a chord far less complex than that of a living creature. Normally, non-gems had Tones far too weak to notice, but the ruby's explosion brought the table's Tone to life like a bell suddenly struck by an iron rod.

Jasnah held tightly to the table's Tone, which vibrated irregularly, its own Tone struggling against that of the ruby. If she did nothing, the table would cast off the ruby's Tone, returning to its natural state. However, Jasnah refused to let that happen—she pushed, hearing and remembering the ruby's Tone in her mind, forcing the table's Tone to change, to become a uniform note instead of a chord.

It had been years since she had Awakened, and her abilities were weak. She strained against the table's Tone, the departed ruby's note hanging and vibrating in her mind. For a moment, she could see beyond the table's form. She glimpsed past sight, feeling the table's pure substance—the *lhel*, from which all things were created.

The *lhel* of the table pushed against her; she pushed back, forcing its Tone to change and match that of the ruby.

The wood became fire. It didn't burn, like a blaze started from logs,

but was immediately Remade into flame. The table exploded with a large roaring sound, a blossom of fire illuminating the room, throwing heat against Jasnah's face, scarring the stone walls with black soot.

Then the flame was gone. She could hear Nelshenden whispering a prayer to the Almighty. The prisoner was crying. Jasnah's soul chord vibrated erratically, sending a shiver of pain through her body. The force with which she had pushed against the table returned upon her, and for a brief moment, her own Tone threatened to change and become like that of the ruby. Jasnah had to seize her Tone quickly, holding it stable, forcing it back toward regularity.

She took a few deep breaths. "Nelshenden," she finally said. "Another gemstone. A ruby, if you have one."

Nelshenden was lethargic, but he eventually complied, pulling out another fifty-Ishmark gem. Jasnah gritted her teeth, still fighting to keep her Tone stable.

I'd forgotten how hard this was, Jasnah thought. Her very bones seemed to vibrate, sending pain through her body. If she released control, her *lhel* would adopt the note she had just Awakened—and she herself would disappear in a burst of flame.

"I undertook the *Charan*," the prisoner sobbed. "You can't affect me with Awakening."

"That's what we tell you," Jasnah said, holding forth the ruby again.

"I'm just a scratch," the man said. "They didn't even tell me who the hit was until this afternoon! They left an hour ago, told me to watch the building and report if anyone came looking for them. Honestly, I don't know anything."

Clenching her jaw against the pain and the danger, Jasnah stroked the second ruby. It began to glow.

"That's all I know!" the man promised. "They hired me about a month ago. All they did was look around the city, get to know the layout of the castle. The first time we did anything was last night."

"What did you do?" Jasnah demanded.

"We hit a group of men traveling to the city," the man said. "I just stood watch—they did the killing. I didn't know they were Shardbearers! Honestly!"

"Shardbearers?" Jasnah asked, surprised, lowering the gemstone. It popped ineffectually, spraying her hand with red dust.

The man nodded in his bonds, eyes closed, shivering slightly as he wept. "Took them in their sleep. Two of them, with their guards. We buried the

guards, but they took the bodies of the noblemen. I don't know what they wanted with them."

Two Shardbearers. "Where was the group you attacked traveling from?"

"Crossguard," the man whispered.

"By the winds . . ." Jasnah said, spinning toward her two stunned guard captains. "You two, wake up! Worry about my Awakening later."

Nelshenden shook his head, coming out of his stupor, regarding her with eyes that were alarmingly distrustful.

"Two Shardbearers, Nelshenden!" Jasnah said. "From Crossguard. The assassins killed Jezenrosh's delegation and took its place! They replaced his Shardbearers with two young men who could claim to have been elevated so recently that no one in court would recognize them."

"By the Almighty!" Kemnar exclaimed.

"That's where the rumors of Jezenrosh's plotting came from!" Jasnah said. "Nanavah doesn't just want to kill my brother, she wants to blame it on Jezenrosh."

"And the assassins have rooms in the Aleth section of the palace," Nelshenden whispered, "a few doors down from those of the king himself."

chapter 31

MERIN 7

MERIN RELAXED IN ONE of the sitting rooms across the hallway from the feast hall. The room was warm and pleasant, lightly decorated in dark woods with a thick rug on the floor. He held a cup of rainwater sweetened with roshtree juice, his Dalenar-proscribed allotment of wine long since imbibed.

Renarin sat next to him. The young man had been acting strange, even for Renarin, ever since Aredor's fight with Meridas. Renarin still held his first cup of wine—but, instead of drinking it, he sat staring into the flagon's depths.

Aredor seemed far less disturbed by the confrontation. He stood by the room's hearth, speaking quietly with several men from Teth Kanar, a Third City set at the Point of the Sea of Chomar. Winning the Shardbearer's competition had lightened Aredor's mood, not to mention redeemed him in the eyes of the other court members.

Merin sighed, enjoying the peace. Merin had watched some thirty Shardbearer duels, and the quick motions, the cheering onlookers, and the clang of metal against metal had brought on a slight headache. Fortunately, as the evening had progressed, the court's men had lost much of their rowdiness. Those who wanted to get drunk did so, and the rest of them had trickled off to one of the sitting rooms.

The competition's eventual winner was a young man who stood speaking with King Elhokar on the far side of the room. Merin thought he

recognized the man from the Pralir battlefield, but had never spoken with him. Aredor had identified him as the fourth son of an Eighth Lord, which made his victory all the more triumphant—it was unlikely he would have ever managed to get a Blade elsewhere. The young man stood with a look of disbelief on his face, one that Merin could heartily understand.

Eventually, Elhokar disengaged himself from the lucky Shardbearer. He strode from the room, bidding goodnight to several lords as he passed. The king probably had the right idea—Merin had no idea what hour of night it was, but it was probably well time they returned to Kholinar. Unfortunately, his chair was far too comfortable to abandon at the moment. He leaned back, closing his eyes and sighing in contentment.

Merin felt it, even with his eyes closed. He couldn't see the air change when the pendant somehow touched his skin, getting past his undershirt, but he could still feel it. He could sense the wind outside the building, the winds far away, calling to him. He felt . . . a burst of strength, a sudden awakening of soul and being. Nothing was ever dull within the embrace of the glyphward. Nothing was ever lethargic, depressed, or listless when he could feel the wind.

And yet, he forced himself to reach up and pull the pendant away from his neck, tucking it back into position between shirt and underclothing. He hadn't been able to make himself take it off, not with the power and vivaciousness it seemed to lend. However, he still didn't trust it. His mother told stories of the whispering highstorms, and of the curses they could bring. Someday, he would get rid of the pendant. Just not today.

Merin settled back into his chair, but the relaxation was tainted now that he had been reminded of the greater strength he was missing.

"I don't like this," Renarin mumbled from beside him.

Merin raised an eyebrow. "What is wrong with you tonight, anyway?"

Renarin looked up from his wine. "What do you mean?"

"Meridas tricked your brother and made a fool of him," Merin said. "That's not going to change, but Aredor did redeem himself. You don't have to focus on it so much."

"I haven't been thinking about Meridas," Renarin said, looking back down at his wine. "I'm worried about Aredor."

"He seems to be fine," Merin said. From the pieces of conversation Merin had heard, Aredor was deeply engaged in an attempt to get a particular seasilk caravan to pass through Kholinar. Lord Dalenar and Lady Kinæ had retired back through the Oathgates a few hours before, leaving Aredor to handle the evening's financial discussions.

“He’s been shooting glances toward those two men all night,” Renarin said. Merin frowned. “Which two men?”

Renarin nodded at two noblemen who stood by the far wall, drinks held in their hands but not touching their lips. Merin recognized them—they were the two Shardbearers from Crossguard, the men Jezenrosh had sent. The younger one wore a dark expression—he was the one who had been embarrassed so soundly earlier in the evening, when Elhokar had demanded to know why Jezenrosh had not come to the dueling competition.

“Why would Aredor care about those two?” Merin asked.

“I don’t know,” Renarin replied. “But he does. I can see it. Aredor followed them here, to this room. He keeps standing alone, as if waiting for someone to approach him—however, it’s never those two. Not yet.”

Merin shook his head, leaning back and closing his eyes. “The palace guards are right, Renarin. You’re a strange, strange man.”

“Am I?” Renarin asked. “Look.”

Merin forced his eyes open. Aredor stood distracted from his conversation, obviously paying little attention to his two companions, who were now speaking to one another. His eyes watched Jezenrosh’s two Shardbearers—who were leaving the room with a quick gait.

Merin raised an eyebrow as Aredor bid farewell to the men from Teth Kanar, then strolled nonchalantly over toward Merin and Renarin. “I’m going to go stretch my legs for a moment,” he said. “Wait for me here—I’ll be back shortly.” He didn’t even wait for a reply before following the two Shardbearers from the room.

Merin glanced toward Renarin.

“Follow him?” Renarin asked.

“Definitely,” Merin replied, picking up his Shardblade and jumping from the chair.

The two of them ducked out into the hallway. A doorway just opposite them led to the feast hall, with its food-littered tables and occasional drunken slumberer. The hallway lamps were lit, and it was easy to see Aredor to the right, moving quickly down the passageway as he caught up to the two Shardbearers and walked in step beside them.

“What are those three planning?” Merin asked with a frown, sneaking out behind them.

Aredor’s trio stopped, and Merin pulled Renarin aside into a pillar alcove. He peeked around the corner to see Aredor speaking quietly with the two others, his face frustrated. A few moments later, the two Shardbearers stalked away, leaving Aredor alone in the corridor.

“Come on,” Renarin said, slipping out of Merin’s grasp and scurrying toward his brother.

Merin flushed as Aredor turned and saw them, then waved for them to stay where they were. He approached, a deep frown on his face, his eyes still turned toward the men disappearing in the distance.

“Aredor, what’s going on?” Merin asked.

“Those men were supposed to bring me a message from Jezenrosh,” Aredor said.

“About what?” Merin asked.

“It’s not important,” Aredor said with a distracted wave of his hand. “They said they didn’t know what I was talking about, even though Jezenrosh promised to give me a reply. I find it hard to believe that he would forget . . .”

“Aredor,” Renarin said urgently. “The king left the room right before those men.”

“You think he might be meeting with them?” Aredor asked.

“No,” Renarin said. “Those two didn’t drink all night, and they didn’t mingle. They took part in the Shardbearers’ competition, but they were both eliminated early. They fought very carefully in the first few rounds, and appeared very skilled, but then were defeated through simple mistakes—as if they wanted to progress far enough not to stand out, but also didn’t want to draw attention by doing too well.”

Aredor mulled over his brother’s words. “Come on,” he finally said.

Aredor led them forward, through the maze of interconnecting hallways that crossed the ten wings of the First Palace. Aredor took a different route than the Shardbearers had, but he moved quickly, leading Merin and Renarin in a quick half-jog that looped them back toward the royal quarters.

The hallways here were dark. Lanterns burned on their wall brackets, but there were no chandeliers, and only every other lantern was lit to save oil. Merin stopped beside Aredor, puffing slightly from their dash and the excitement of the moment. The hallway was silent. Aredor paused for a moment, then moved as if to start again.

Renarin, however, held up a hand, head cocked to the side. A few moments later, Merin heard it too. Footsteps—loud, clinking footsteps, as if . . .

The two Shardbearers rounded an intersection just ahead, now clad in Shardplate. They had been joined by about ten men in simple, dark clothing, all of whom were armed with maces or clubs. The two Shardbearers stopped with a clink when they saw Aredor. One of them wore dark grey and gold; the second was the green warrior with the thin blade Merin had watched duel.

“Did Jezenrosh put you up to this?” Aredor asked, his voice ringing in the empty stone hallway. “Or did you decide to do it on your own?”

The Shardbearers did not respond. Their group of common warriors stood hesitantly behind them.

“Killing the king will do you no good,” Aredor said. “My father will never stand for it. I warned Jezenrosh not to be absent from the night’s festivities—I warned him that he might lose his title. Elhokar might be a fool, but greater is the fool who heedlessly provokes him.”

The older of the two Shardbearers motioned to his soldiers with a quick gesture, and they split, each group heading down a different hallway behind him. They could easily reach the king’s quarters by a more roundabout method. The Shardbearers said not a word, stepping forward, long lines of smoke forming from their hands.

“Merin, Renarin, go and warn the king’s guard,” Aredor said, eyes fixed on the two Shardbearers as he summoned his own Blade.

Merin paused. Jezenrosh’s Shardbearers walked forward with foreboding steps. These men would not follow Protocol—not when assassinating the king was their night’s task. Merin felt an itch of fear regarding their gleaming Shardplate, remembering how much of a difference it had made in the night’s duels.

With scrambling fingers, Merin pulled out his belt knife and cut the strings holding the metal sheath over his blade. The sheath clanged to the stone floor, releasing the Blade from its grip. Suddenly, the weapon felt balanced, even alive, in Merin’s hands. Its hilt wasn’t completely straight, but formed so that his grip locked perfectly into place, as if it were another set of hands clasping with his own.

Merin stepped forward, standing in a dueling stance beside his friend. Aredor smiled, though his eyes were reserved.

“Renarin, go,” Aredor said. “To the king’s chambers first, then to the royal guard houses if you have time.”

“But—” Renarin said, voice worried.

“Go!” Aredor snapped.

Ten heartbeats passed, three Shardblades formed. Renarin paused only a moment longer, then took off at a dash.

“I saw their duels,” Aredor said in a low voice, releasing the clasp on his cloak and nodding for Merin to do likewise. “The older one is the better of the two. I’ll take him, you take the younger one. Fight defensively—if we can hold them long enough, others will come.”

Merin nodded, sweat tickling the side of his face, hands clammy as they gripped his Blade.

The two Shardbearers attacked in tandem. Breaking Protocol instantly, they both pressed toward Merin, obviously trying to defeat the weaker of their two opponents first. Aredor wouldn't let them. He charged the older man—the one in green—swinging his Blade and forcing the man to engage him.

The second assassin swung at Merin. The man's Blade was long and straight, its length bearing designs that made it appear to be a series of stacked triangles. Merin ducked with a quick motion, Vasher's training prompting him to action without thought. His opponent's weapon sheared through the corridor wall behind him, leaving a long scar in the stone.

Merin came out of his duck and fell immediately into Vasher's stance. He struck while his opponent was still off-balance, but the man deflected the strike with the base of his sword, pushing Merin backward with a heave of Plate-enhanced muscles.

Merin stumbled with a grunt, barely staying upright. The Shardbearer struck with three sweeping blows, stepping forward with each one, forcing Merin to hop repeatedly backward. The final maladroit jump was too much, and Merin lost his footing, tripping and tumbling to the ground.

The Shardbearer dove for the kill, but a sudden blow from behind struck the man's back, drawing his attention. Merin's opponent turned in surprise as Aredor skidded past, then stopped in front of Merin.

Both opponents pressed their advantage, but Aredor faced them both, deflecting blow after blow. Merin shook his head, dispelling his dizziness as Aredor fought and somehow stood against two Shardbearers at the same time. Merin could see Aredor sweating from the exertion, however, and could see the man's arms quiver after parrying each of the Plate-enhanced strikes. He was barely staying ahead of their attacks, deflecting Blades at the last moment, teetering on the edge of being overwhelmed.

Merin jumped to his feet, throwing himself back into the contest. Aredor stepped to the side, allowing Merin to face the younger Shardbearer again, and the two duels separated—this time, Merin's opponent was careful to place his back to the open hallway. As he turned, Merin could see a long scar in the man's Shardplate where Aredor had struck him.

Merin tried to remain calm, focused on his stance, letting training dictate his swings. Yet, it was impossible not to notice his own deficiency. Vasher had been right—he wasn't ready for dueling. He fought as best he

could, but his opponent seemed to anticipate his moves. Merin knew only a couple of basic strikes, and the lack of variety made him predictable. He could not win this fight.

Not fairly, at least. *Use every advantage you have*, Vasher had said.

Merin clenched his jaw as his opponent swung again, using the same sweeping three-strike attack he had used before. This time, Merin jumped backward, not trying to parry, only trying to give himself a second of free time. He reached into his shirt pocket, pulling out the glyphward and dropping it around his skin.

The air's movements manifest to him, and the wind's voice whispered to his mind. Unfortunately, he wasn't certain what good that would do. He had used the glyphward in combat several times, but it had never been as effective as it had been that first day. He could see the air, and could see men breathe, but that gave him little aid other than hinting at when an attack would come.

Still, slight though it was, it gave him an advantage. He watched his opponent's breath, using it to judge the man's strikes. Each time the man inhaled, Merin jumped backward, getting out of sword-range. The assassin attacked with increasing frustration, trying to catch Merin. The man's Shardblade cut slice after slice in the hallway's walls, shearing lanterns from their perches, but never landing a blow.

"Coward," the man hissed, swinging again. Merin ducked away, glancing behind him, checking on Aredor. His friend appeared to have adopted a similar tactic, staying out of range, trying to tempt his opponent into over-extending himself. They couldn't afford a quick battle—Jezenrosh's Shardbearers would overpower them.

Unfortunately, the assassin's Plate also lent them greater endurance. The battle had only lasted a few minutes, but Merin could already feel his reactions slowing. He was puffing from the exertion and the constant dodging, his arms pained from the occasional blow he had to block.

The final attack came as a wave. Merin's enemy plunged suddenly forward, giving little hint of the offense, even through breath. He closed on Merin, swinging repeatedly, forcing Merin to fight rather than dodge. The assassin didn't pause, keeping Merin off-balance. The offense pushed Merin backward, toward Aredor. Merin managed to block each of the blows until the man lashed out with an unexpected punch. Merin struck instinctually at the opening, hitting the man in the chest, but Shardplate stopped the blow.

The fist took Merin on the shoulder. The force of the strike tossed him

backward, and his Blade tumbled from numbed fingers. The air in the room snapped back to translucence as the glyphward ripped free, its leather string caught on an edge of the assassin's gauntlet.

Merin fell to the floor again, his Shardblade clanging to the marble a short distance away. Aredor looked up at the motion, distracted, and the green Shardbearer thrust with his thin weapon, striking Aredor in the side of the chest. The Blade sliced easily through flesh, sinking into Aredor's chest up to the hilt and pinning him to the wall behind him.

The green Shardbearer whipped his sword free, and Aredor slumped to the ground, screaming in pain, a trickle of blood smearing against the wall.

Merin cried out, rolling to the side and reaching for Aredor. Instead of his friend, however, his eyes focused on something else. The glyphward lay on the marble, a speck of green against the white.

Merin scrambled for the bit of stone, but he did so with despair—evil or holy, it had done him little good so far. Hopefully, Renarin had warned the king's guards. Hopefully, they would be able to raise a defense to stop these Shardbearers from killing the king. But it was too late for him.

Merin grasped the glyphward even as his opponent raised his Blade for the final blow. Merin could see the air around the Blade as it hung, ready to fall. He would watch the air part as the weapon killed him. He heard the wind in his mind, calling him.

Merin called back. *Come to me.*

The glyphward flared in his hand, bursting to light with a bright green flame, searing Merin's flesh. He cried out in pain, but could not let go.

The palace shook. The hallway shuddered, as if in pain. And then, Merin heard it—a low moan . . . like the call of an enormous beast. Jezenrosh's assassins both paused, turning confused eyes toward the far end of the hallway, which was the source of the sound.

A few scraps of cloth blew into the hallway, followed by a swirl of dust. The moan approached, the stones trembling faster, and faster, and faster. The glyphward continued to burn in Merin's hand, the agony searing him to the bone, the unnatural green light growing brighter.

And then it hit. A tempest of air—like an entire highstorm channeled into a single gust—crashed through the confines of the small hallway. It smashed against the four combatants, dark with dust and debris, entire tapestries and rugs carried by its fury. It roared in Merin's ears, no longer just speaking to his mind, but screaming with the howl of a chained creature finally let free.

It blew stronger than the fierce summer storms Merin had occasionally

been caught in during harvest. It drove grit and sand into his skin, forcing him to curl up against the marble. Above him, his opponent was thrown backward by the force of the wind. Another body crashed to the floor a short distance from Merin—the green Shardbearer, also knocked to the ground. Through the wind, Merin could see the air curling strangely away from the man's Shardplate—as if the supernatural metal were struggling to protect him, but failing.

The pain in Merin's palm flashed, then died. The storm slackened, then calmed, then vanished, leaving bits of string and fluff floating lazily to the ground. Merin groaned, holding his injured hand to his chest and sitting up, dust streaming from his clothing, his shoulder still pulsing with agony from the Plate-enhanced punch. Green dust—all that remained of the glyphward—trickled from his still-closed fist.

There was a clink from beside him, and Merin turned dazed eyes toward the sound. The green Shardbearer rolled over, shaking his head as he reached for his Blade. The motion ended in a jerk as Ardor thrust a sword through the man's faceplate.

Aredor stumbled, holding his side and slumping to his knees beside the man he had killed. "The other one . . ."

Merin lurched to his feet, forcing himself to ignore the pain of his injured hand and shoulder. The second Shardbearer had been thrown a good distance down the hallway. The man stood with a daze, then looked toward his Blade, which lay on the ground a short ways in front of him, half the distance between himself and Merin.

Both dashed forward at the same time. Merin reached out as he ran, snatching Aredor's Blade, which stood upright, sticking from the green Shardbearer's face. The weapon slipped free easily, though it sat unfamiliarly in Merin's hand. The grey Shardbearer moved more quickly, Plate enhancing his motions. The man scooped up his Blade, then swung toward Merin with a powerful blow.

Merin ducked the attack, feeling it slice the air above him, and came up with his own swing—smashing his Blade into the man's back, directly in the scarred line where Aredor had struck earlier.

The man jerked in mid-step, pulling Aredor's Blade from Merin's grasp. The weapon remained lodged in place, seeping blood at its edges, as the Shardbearer collapsed with a crash of metal against stone.

Merin slumped to the ground as he heard voices approaching. He could only hope they were on the right side, for he knew he wouldn't have the strength to face another foe.

chapter 32

JASNAH 8

JASNAH STEPPED AROUND the corpse of an assassin, waving away the soldier who tried to shield her from the scene of death. She held up her dress, stepping over the pool of blood, and pushed her way into the king's quarters. A royal captain approached, but Nelshenden cut him off, whispering quietly to the man and sending him away.

Elhokar sat on his audience throne, leaning forward in thought, his expression dark. He was unwounded—the assassins had reached his outer hallway, but a disturbance raised by Renarin had alerted his guards to the danger in time.

Nanavah had failed. Jasnah's eyes thinned as she focused on the queen, sitting on a stool at the king's side, a hand resting on his arm in mock-sympathy. Jasnah had been too slow, but Dalenar's sons had proven themselves true to the honor their father had taught them.

Meridas stood at the side of the room, speaking with Balenmar and several Shardbearers, displaying a proper look of outrage at the night's events. She even heard him give a moan of disappointment that he hadn't arrived in time to help Aredor fight. Balenmar met Jasnah's eyes with a relieved gaze—he thought that the threat was over. He had been fooled as she nearly had been.

Elhokar looked up as he noticed Jasnah. "He shall pay for this," the king

said. "I knew Jezenrosh was insubordinate, but I had hoped he would see reason. I should have listened more carefully to Balenmar's warnings."

Jasnah shot a look at Nelshenden, who was still trying to convince the guard captain to leave them alone with the king. He appeared to be having little success.

"Elhokar," Jasnah said, "we need to talk."

The king frowned. "Surely you don't expect me to ignore an attempt on my life. Jezenrosh's own Shardbearers tried to kill me tonight."

"There is more to this attempt on your life than you know, my king," Jasnah said. "Dismiss the others—we must speak in private."

Elhokar paused, sitting upright in his throne. Eventually, he waved the guard captain toward him and gave the man instructions in a low voice. The captain obviously didn't like what he heard, but bowed and waved the guards and other nobility to follow him out. The people trailed out, a questioning Balenmar included. Jasnah shot him a reassuring glance.

"Meridas, you stay," Elhokar commanded. Meridas nodded, and remained where he was. Nanavah also made no move to leave, and the king made no move to dismiss her.

Jasnah waited expectantly, her mouth a thin line, but the king met her gaze defiantly. Finally, she walked forward, grabbing Elhokar by the arm. He resisted at first, then sighed and let her pull him over to the side of the room, out of Nanavah's earshot. The queen watched them with curious eyes, but remained by the throne.

"Where are Aredor and Renarin?" Jasnah asked quietly, folding her arms as Nelshenden closed the doors, then walked over to keep a wary eye on Meridas.

"Aredor was wounded," Elhokar said. "He is in the care of the palace healers. I sent Renarin to Kholinar to speak with his father. Our uncle has grown tired of war—surely you've seen it. If Dalenar is going to be persuaded to support me against Jezenrosh, he will need the word of his sons on what happened this night."

"My lord . . ." Jasnah said, uncertain where to begin. She eyed Meridas, who lounged against a pillar on the side of the room. What would be the best way to explain . . .

"Brother," she said, "I think Meridas might have had something to do with the attack tonight."

"What?" Elhokar asked with amusement. "What possible reason could he have for such an act?"

Jasnah flushed. "I think he and your wife might be . . . seeing each other, Elhokar," she said. "We need to discuss this in—"

Elhokar laughed, cutting her off. He glanced toward Nanavah, who was still watching them with a curious expression. "She thinks you and Meridas are lovers," Elhokar told her in a loud voice.

The queen chuckled in amusement, and Elhokar turned back to Jasnah. "Really, Jasnah. I don't have time for your paranoia, especially after Jezenrosh's assassins."

"I don't think Jezenrosh sent those men tonight," Jasnah said, too loudly. Nanavah looked back toward them at the sound, then rose to wander toward the two.

"What?" Elhokar asked with a snort. "You think his Shardbearers acted on their own volition?"

Jasnah had no choice but to continue. "Those weren't Jezenrosh's Shardbearers," she said. "The men he sent were killed last night, on their way to the First City. Their Blades were stolen, and their entourage was replaced with assassins."

Elhokar moved to open his mouth, but Jasnah cut him off.

"I have proof," she said sharply. "As we speak, my other guard captain is delivering a captive to the royal dungeon. The man can authenticate my words. Once you hear what he has to say, you'll realize that Jezenrosh was not behind the attempt on your life. The true assassins are your wife and Meridas."

Elhokar glanced toward his wife, who had paused a short distance away, her expression dark.

"Nanavah has been delivering large sums of money to the false company run by the assassins," Jasnah explained, gaining momentum as she saw guilt in Nanavah's eyes. "She hired them to have you killed and implicate Jezenrosh."

Elhokar's mood became troubled, and he stood for a moment, thoughtful. Finally, he looked up at Nanavah, his face angered. "I thought you were more cautious than this."

"You have no idea how cautious I was!" Nanavah said. "Your sister is just . . . inhumanly nosy. I warned you she would be trouble."

Jasnah felt a sharp sense of shock creep up her spine. She looked from Elhokar, to his wife, then back again. "By the winds . . . you knew?"

Elhokar's look was confirmation enough.

"But, Nanavah and Meridas . . ." Jasnah said. "What about them?"

Elhokar chuckled—the sound, cold rather than mirthful, made Jasnah shiver. “*That* part, dear sister, you contrived on your own.”

“You knew,” Jasnah mumbled, stunned. “The assassins were never meant to succeed. They were to fight their way here, where you could pretend to defeat them on your own. That’s why the assassins took the bodies of the two Shardbearers with them—so that you would have corpses to show for the apparent attempt on your life.”

Elhokar nodded.

“The rumors . . .” Jasnah said. “You made them. You used Balenmar somehow—you led him along, knowing the man would be eager to prove his use to you.”

“Balenmar is a link to my father,” Elhokar said. “If I can claim to be acting on information the old fool helped provide, I can gain the support of the more traditional elements of the kingdom.”

Everything crumbled around her. “Elhokar, why?” she whispered.

The king regarded her sufferingly. “You yourself told me that the noblemen have grown tired of war, Jasnah. Jezenrosh needs to be dealt with, but I’ve known for some time that gathering support against him would be difficult. The nobility needed to be given a little . . . nudge to help them along.”

Jasnah felt like collapsing. She stumbled weakly, leaning back against the stone wall.

“You’ve always underestimated me,” Elhokar said quietly. “You always assumed that I couldn’t rule alone. You claimed to love me, but with that love you presumed to control my court on my behalf. You never stopped to think that maybe your help wasn’t needed, nor was it appreciated.” Elhokar turned and nodded toward the other end of the room.

Jasnah spun just in time to see Meridas jump forward. Nelshenden reacted belatedly—he had been watching the king with amazed eyes. Nelshenden turned just in time for Meridas to ram a small dagger into his chest. The soldier gasped once, then Meridas placed a hand over the man’s mouth, keeping him from yelling.

That didn’t stop Jasnah. “No!” she screamed, rushing forward. Meridas released Nelshenden’s mouth and snapped his hand forward, grabbing Jasnah by the shoulder. He held her carefully, not hurting her, but keeping her at bay as he pulled the dagger free. Nelshenden slumped to the ground.

No guards came at her call—Elhokar must have ordered them to remain outside, despite what they might hear. Meridas released Jasnah, and she fell

to her knees beside Nelshenden, watching even as the light fled from his eyes, his mouth open, his body twisted in pain.

“Nelshenden . . .” she whispered.

“He knew far too much,” Elhokar said, approaching his chair and seating himself again. “Besides, his affection for you was unseemly. I will send you a new guard as a wedding gift—a man with a little more rank and experience.”

Jasnah reached forward, resting her hand on the side of Nelshenden’s dead face. She would not cry. She survived as she had taught herself, long ago, during her days in Thalena. She took all of the grief, guilt, and pain, and crammed it into the piece of ice within her. She did not shake or weep, she simply looked up through cool eyes at the man who was her brother. “I will not forget this, Elhokar.”

“Bah,” the king said with a wave of his hand. “Spare me your preaching, Jasnah. You do not know what I know about Jezenrosh—the man needs to be stopped. Our kingdom depends on my ability to act before he is ready. Meridas, take your betrothed to her rooms and see that men you trust are posted at her door. Then seek out her second captain and his captive. Make certain their knowledge dies with them.”

Jasnah did not turn her gaze from Elhokar as she rose. She watched him, eyes locked on his face, forcing herself to see the mistake she had made. Gone was the boy she had given love and protection. In his place was a man who deserved neither. Elhokar turned away, a twinkle of shame in his eyes as Meridas forcibly led Jasnah out into the hallway.

chapter 33

JEK 6

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, delivered his captive as instructed. Ahven had set aside a room for the girl—one without windows, guarded by five soldiers. Jek gave her to their care, watching as they closed and locked the door behind the red-haired youth.

Why is this girl of such importance? he wondered, lingering. She was of good birth, but not that good. Perhaps it was her tie to the Lady Jasnah Kholin. A tool for bargaining, perhaps?

He left the palace behind, seeking out his master for the second time in one night. Idiot King no longer, Ahven now moved openly, wishing to be witnessed by as much of the Veden nobility as possible. Jek found the man near the gates to Veden City, standing in a ring of torches, looking out at the army which was still camped beyond.

Jek approached, and the guards let him pass without comment.

“You found the girl?” Ahven asked, turning toward Jek, watching his lips. Still deaf? But he sounded so natural.

“Yes,” Jek replied. “She was at the competition.”

Ahven nodded. “And there was an attempt on the king’s life?”

“Two Shardbearers, sent by Elhokar’s own *Parshen*,” Jek said. “They were not successful.”

“They were never intended to be,” Ahven said cryptically. “Alethkar will rise in civil war. It seems to be common, these days.”

Jek did not respond. There was much activity in the army camp, a strange parallel of the fervor that had struck Veden City only hours before. Torches and lanterns scurried between the different sections of the army, and men stood alert, weapons drawn. Jek could hear the ringing of weapons in the background, and flame-lit smoke curled in the air from several groups of tents.

This was still an enemy army, despite Ahven's stunt in killing Talshekh. Veden City would still be captured, Ahven killed. Slaying Talshekh had done little but delay—what was Ahven's plan?

"It's almost over," Ahven said. There was something . . . odd to his tone. Jek realized that he had been wrong. Ahven's accent wasn't gone; he still retained a noticeable flatness to his tone, but his words sounded mostly natural now, compared to what they had been like before. Someone who didn't know Ahven was deaf might judge the slight oddity to be a personality quirk.

"How?" Jek asked.

Ahven didn't notice the comment. Jek stepped up, drawing Ahven's attention. "How?" he repeated. "Your voice. How did you do it?"

"Speech coaches," Ahven said absently. "They taught me to exaggerate the dullness of my words, then to sharpen their clarity. I wasn't completely deaf as a child—I remember some of what it is like to speak and hear. I'm told I don't sound perfect and likely never will, but it suits my purposes."

"How did you know you could kill Talshekh?" Jek asked. "You knew from the ballads he chose? You knew he would be impetuous, and that you could defeat him in swordplay?"

Ahven smiled, looking back toward the tents. "No," he said. "On that, I gambled. The Veden Lords are tyrants and warriors. We play prettily by the words of Bajerden, but at our hearts we are despots. They would never accept a leader who could not defeat an opponent in battle."

"There will be other duels," Jek warned. "Ones you cannot win. Your surprise is expended."

"I will appoint champions," Ahven said. "One win is enough, for now. By the time this all is through, no one will even remember I won that duel by chance."

By chance. Jek shook his head, uncertain how to judge this man once called idiot. "You only have nine birds left," Jek said carefully.

Ahven inhaled softly, his eyes flashing with . . . rage? Intolerance? It was gone so quickly that Jek missed it. The king turned from Jek, waving for the royal soldiers to move forward. They did as commanded, carrying a collection of cloth and poles to the area just outside the city gates. A few

minutes later, they had erected an open-sided pavilion, one inscribed with a massive glyph—the Kanaran symbol for peace.

“Who will you parlay with?” Jek asked. “They still fight amongst themselves.”

“It has been decided already,” Ahven said. “Those who resist do so out of frustration, not out of hope. You decided their new leader for them.”

Jek paused. “Me?”

Ahven nodded. “Everyone with a more suitable claim is now dead. Come.”

Jek followed, unconvinced. However, in accordance with Ahven’s implication, a contingent of soldiers left the gathering of tents, marching forward to the parlay tent. At their head was a middle-aged man Jek did not recognize.

Ahven seated himself in a chair provided by one of his attendants, then nodded for the newcomer to take the opposite chair. The man did not sit. He was shorter, and did not have the traditional look of a Veden warrior. His features weren’t hard enough, his eyes too keen with cleverness. His Shardblade was not summoned, but two of his soldiers carried theirs openly.

“I do not see what we have to discuss,” the man said.

“But you came to my tent anyway, Lord Ilhadal Davar,” Ahven said. “That implies, at least, curiosity.”

“I wished only to see you, and to hear your words with my own ears,” Lord Ilhadal said. “I see the stories are true. It appears that our idiot made fools of us all. Some men do not take well to such mockery.”

“Are you saying that you’re completely surprised?” Ahven asked with amusement. “That you’ve never heard reports from your spies that the king might not be the fool he implied?”

Ilhadal did not reply.

“Come now, Ilhadal,” Ahven said. “I know you. You are ambitious, like Talshekh, but you are not the impetuous buffoon your cousin was. You are patient, and you are careful. You prefer a building subtlety to a sudden and obnoxious crescendo. You make plans for your future, and make allegiances with skill.”

Ilhadal snorted. “What do you know of me, King?” he snapped. “We have never met, nor spoken.”

“You would be surprised,” Ahven said. “But that is irrelevant. You can’t afford to attack me now. Your army is grand, but it is barely under your control. Ours is a superstitious people, my lord. They may have given

you their hesitant support, but they will break if you try to take the throne from one the Almighty obviously chose Himself.”

Ilhadal snorted again, but Jek could see concern in his eyes. Part of what Ahven had said, at least, was true.

“What do you propose, then?” Ilhadal said. “I have an army but no throne. You have a throne, but no army. Instability aside, I think one of us is in a far better position.”

“You have a daughter, do you not?” Ahven said offhandedly.

Ilhadal froze. “What of Shinri?” he growled. “She is safe, in Alethkar.”

Ahven smiled, leaning forward. “You misunderstand me, my lord. Consider this. You will never sit on the throne of the Three Houses.”

Ilhadal’s face darkened.

Ahven raised a finger, speaking quietly. “But your grandson might.”

Ilhadal stood in silence. Then, slowly, he seated himself in the offered chair. “Speak on.”

“I will need something in return for my good faith,” Ahven said.

Ilhadal’s mood darkened even further in the torchlight. “I would think that your continued reign would be gift enough.”

Ahven shook his head. “I did not gather this army to let it disperse unfulfilled. The Aleth king will soon go to war with his countrymen. Alethkar is already weakened from years of battle and from the need to keep a controlling force in Prallah. The civil war will be quick, but it will be destructive. If a strong force were to move in and crush the last of their armies . . .”

This gave Ilhadal pause. “They *are* our allies, Ahven,” he noted.

“Then let us be civil and remove from them the burden of rule,” Ahven replied. “They obviously cannot maintain it themselves, though it was kind of them to capture Prallah for us. Tell, me, Ilhadal. Why would you want to deliver your grandson one throne, when you could give him three?”

“It will not be as easy as you imply,” Ilhadal said. “My holdings are to the north. The borders of Alethkar are always well-patrolled. They will hear of our coming, and they will unite against us. Instead of preying on their squabbles, we will restore their monarchy.”

“Not if we don’t go through the border,” Ahven said.

“The sea?” Ilhadal asked. “It would take too long to gather the Lakhenran navy. Besides, Teth Kanar would make the only suitable port, and it will be well-defended, even in times of civil war.”

“We won’t use the sea either,” Ahven said.

“What, then?” Ilhadal demanded.

“The Oathgates.”

Ilhadal snorted. “Ridiculous. Even Elhokar Kholin wouldn’t be foolish enough to let an army through the Oathgates. They need to be opened from both sides.”

“Getting through the Oathgate is my concern,” Ahven said. “Your duty is to return to your men and secure hold of your forces. I will proclaim our allegiance—that should give you help. Once you are finished there, fetch your wife. She has a Right of Decision to exercise.”



chapter 34

DALENAR 2

EVEN AFTER TWO AND A HALF months back from the war, the sweet breezes of Kholinar felt foreign to Dalenar. The fertile cliffs of the lait, green with hanging vines and blooming rockbuds, were unnatural to eyes accustomed to stormland browns. The winds, gentle even during summer highstorms, seemed to taunt him with their weakness.

Dalenar stood on his palace balcony, his posture stiff though he was alone. He had thought to find peace in returning to Kholinar, but peace was something that had been lost to him for far too long. When he closed his eyes, swords clanged and arrows hissed. When he walked the hallways of the palace, he saw memories of the dead. Images of Nolhonarin, his elder brother and king. Images of his first wife, Kalkanah, whose name had meant ‘The Almighty’s Gift of Peace.’ Worst were the memories of Sheneres. Dalenar’s heir would have been almost thirty years old, had the lad still lived.

Peace was a lie. For Dalenar, there would always be a war. If not a war he lived, then one he remembered. And, if he began to think he might learn to avoid both, a messenger would visit his palace.

This time, there were two.

“My . . . lord?” The voice was so sweet, so uncertain. “The messengers wait for you to answer them. They are unhappy.”

Dalenar turned his head toward Kinac, and the girl immediately lowered

her eyes, blushing. He could see her self-consciousness. She tried so hard to please him. He knew of her efforts, and he forced himself to be civil. Yet she was clever, and could sense his dissatisfaction—even if she couldn't understand that there was nothing she could ever do to remove it. No power in Roshar, not even the Almighty's hand itself, could force Dalenar to ever be this girl's husband in anything other than name.

"Tell them to wait," Dalenar ordered, turning away again.

Kinae retreated, leaving Dalenar to his unrest. He turned his eyes to the south. Over the ridge of the lait, he could see the Mount of Ancestors rising in the distance. On its eastern slope crouched Ral Eram, the First Capital—the city founded by the Heralds themselves. During the two months following the end of the Pralir war, Elhokar had moved his armies through the Oathgate and organized them in the foothills below Ral Eram, ostensibly to see to their dismantlement. However, it took nearly as long to disband an army—collecting its gear, paying its wages, and organizing its registration—as it took to gather one, especially considering the travel time from Prallah. Now that he had decided to attack Jezenrosh, Elhokar would need barely a few days to reorient and reorganize his men. He could probably march on Crossguard with at least half his original numbers.

Jezenrosh would never be able to match such a force. Still, he did hold the defensive advantage. Unlike the Prallans, the Aleth nobleman was well-equipped, and had a good number of both Awakeners and Shardbearers. Even with superior numbers, Elhokar would not find Crossguard an easy stone to break.

Dalenar shook his head. There was more to the coming war than tactics. There were two boys, young to Dalenar despite their titles. Elhokar, Jezenrosh, and Sheneres had played together as children. Even then, Elhokar had known that he would one day be king, and Jezenrosh had chafed at the arrogance he saw. Sheneres had always been the peacemaker.

Dalenar could not take his son's place. There would be no peace now, not with assassins dead in Ral Eram. And so the separate messengers came running. Who would Dalenar, the grand Tyrantbane himself, support?

Dalenar turned from the balcony, walking past the oak stormshutters and through his chambers. The messengers stood respectfully as he entered the audience hall. It was a small room, without grand columns or ostentation. Dalenar waved the men to sit, then took his own seat before them. Aredor and Renarin waited in the back, along with several of Dalenar's tribute lords and the young Shardbearer, Merin.

Dalenar rested an elbow on the chair's armrest, rubbing his chin as he

regarded the messengers. Both wore Aleth blue, their cloaks emblazoned with a stylized *khol* glyph—Elhokar’s sunburst for the man on the left, Jezenrosh’s stormwinds for the man on the right. Neither messenger had been pleased to discover the other’s presence.

This is wrong, Dalenar thought. *So very wrong.*

“Well?” Elhokar’s messenger finally asked. “What is your decision, Lord Dalenar. Will you stand with your king, or will you join the traitor?”

“My lord is no traitor!” Jezenrosh’s messenger snapped.

“His men tried to kill the king,” Elhokar’s messenger said.

“After Elhokar shamed them publicly before the entire court!” the second man said, standing. “What those men did for their own honor has nothing to do with Lord Jezenrosh!”

“Enough!” Dalenar said, bringing silence to the room. The messengers turned toward him expectantly. Dalenar sighed. “I cannot choose between the sons of my brothers, and I will not take part in their squabbling. My house, and those of my tribute lords, will remain neutral. Any Shardbearer or lord beneath my rule who chooses to join either side will be stripped of rank and Blade. Let them find another lord to follow if they think so flippantly of my commands.”

“This is a dangerous move, *Parshen*,” Elhokar’s messenger informed, his expression darkening.

“Begone,” Dalenar said, rising. “Both of you.”

Jezenrosh’s messenger bowed stiffly, then turned and left. Elhokar’s messenger trailed behind. “Know that the Kholinar Oathgate will be sealed with the others,” he said. “The king’s orders, should you refuse to aid him. He cannot have a man he does not trust at his back.”

Dalenar turned from the messenger, not watching as the man left. A few seconds later, footsteps approached from behind.

“Is this wise, father?” Aredor’s voice asked quietly.

“I will *not* choose between them,” Dalenar replied.

Aredor stepped to the side, moving so that he could see into Dalenar’s eyes. The boy’s arm was still in a sling, his face pale from exertion. After the last week’s ordeal, Aredor had spent much time in bed, recovering from blood-loss and injury.

“This war is not just, father,” the boy said.

“Jezenrosh’s men tried to kill the king,” Dalenar replied. “Regardless of whether they acted on his orders, he is responsible for the sins of his men.”

“That is the same argument Elhokar used to take Renarin’s Blade,” Aredor said. “I didn’t believe it then either.”

“And if Jezenrosh did give them orders?” Dalenar asked.

Aredor paused. Then he looked back, his jaw determined. “Something smells wrong here, father. Something about the assassin’s attack, the letter Lady Jasnah gave me . . . I spent these last few months in communication with Jezenrosh, father. I don’t think he would have done this.”

Dalenar regarded the boy. “Communication? What kind of communication?”

Aredor glanced away. “It’s unimportant now.”

Dalenar sighed. Aredor’s instincts were good—something did, indeed, smell wrong. A king should not take up arms against his kinsmen, and an uncle should not be forced to watch his nephews kill one another.

“We will remain neutral, Aredor,” Dalenar said firmly. “Those are your orders.”

Dalenar could sense the displeasure in his son’s posture. Aredor was young; inaction felt worse to the boy than treason. Aredor turned without responding, stalking from the room. The other occupants dribbled away after him, all except Kinæ, who waited by the back wall, ever-dutiful with her diminutive *talla* and wide eyes.

Almighty forgive me for abandoning the one who dies, Dalenar thought.

chapter 35

SHINRI 6

THEY CHOSE FOR SHINRI a very pretty cell. In fact, confronted by the lush carpets, fine wardrobe, and lavish meals, Shinri found she could almost ignore the armed guards outside her door.

She had little success in guessing the identity of her captors. Though the options were limited, so was her information. The most obvious choice was her own cousin, Talshekh Davar. He supposedly had an army camped just outside Veden City, and simple logic concluded that he probably held the throne as well.

However, there was one great flaw in that supposition—as far as she knew, Talshekh had no reason for wishing her captured. The other Houses made far more likely culprits, for any of them might think to use her for her lineage—imprisoning her in some desperate attempt to gain leverage over Talshekh. If that were the case, however, her captors had made a grave mistake. Shinri had only met Talshekh twice, and both times he had given her little notice. She was a distant cousin; he would not be warded off by her imprisonment, especially since his goal was the throne itself.

Yet the days of her captivity passed without either threat or release. If House Vedenel held her, it did not try and use her in a bargain. And if Talshekh did have an army outside the city, it did not attack. She cursed her tiny, slit-like windows—though the palace was on a hill, it was only a single story, and the city walls blocked most of her view. Peer as she might, she

couldn't make out the glyphs on the cloaks of the wall-top guardsmen. She only knew that they were white—which meant that one of the Three Houses, at least, held the city.

There was, of course, a third option. Tethren had tried to kill King Elhokar. House Rienar obviously had plots of its own. She couldn't imagine what sequence of events could have given them control of Veden City, let alone allowed them to stave off Talshekh's armies, but she couldn't discount the possibility that she was in their hands.

In fact, she couldn't discount much of anything. She spent her three days of imprisonment in apprehensive self-debate. As the hours trickled past, she grew increasingly anxious. The pain of ignorance was even more potent than her anger at being held captive. Just when she thought she would burst from frustration, she finally received a visit from her captor.

It was not someone she had even bothered consider. "Father?" she asked with surprise as the man walked in.

Ilhadal Davar was a stern, well-groomed man of short stature. He had been past his prime in Shinri's youth, and the years had only made his aging more evident. Like most Veden noblemen, he thought himself a soldier, but he bore none of the pragmatism that usually came with the profession. Ever worried about what others thought of him, Ilhadal was a man with too little imagination to support his potent ambition. Still, Shinri hadn't thought he would keep his own daughter captive.

Perhaps he's somehow earned passage, Shinri thought optimistically, and he's come simply because he was worried about me. Not that he ever has worried about me before . . .

Ilhadal gave her one of his characteristically unsympathetic glances. If there was any measure of concern in his eyes, she couldn't find it.

"Sit," he said, pointing to a stool.

Shinri did as commanded, waiting to play her hand until she had more information.

Ilhadal raised an eyebrow, as if surprised to see her following orders. He strode forward, broad white cloak set with the thick, mane-like collar that her people preferred. He walked a full circle around the stool, studying her and rubbing his bearded chin.

"The Kholin woman does good work," he finally said. "I half-expected you to throw a tantrum when I walked in, no matter what my informants told me about your progress."

Shinri raised her chin, staring her father in the face. "Lady Jasnah is a woman of impeccable composure, father. I have learned much under her guidance."

Ilhadal grunted. He did not sit, but remained standing, arms folded, regarding her with the eye of a tradesman at market. *Why would he keep me in here?* Shinri thought, furiously trying to put her aforementioned learning to use. *He obviously has some measure of authority in the palace. The guards treated him respectfully as they let him in. His blood ties to Talshekh are as weak as mine, but perhaps he has managed to make himself an advisor to the man. That doesn't explain why either would give orders for me to be kept under guard.*

Why would he lock her up? Two conclusions came to mind—either he expected her to try and escape the city, or he expected others to try and get to her. The first was possible—he obviously still regarded her somewhat as the impetuous child of her youth. The second didn't seem very likely at all. Even considering her wardship, she was no one of any great import.

“You know,” he said, “I blessed the Almighty when the House leaders asked me if I would give you to Alethkar as part of the treaty. Until that moment, I had been convinced that you would never be of any good to me. Yet, because of the treaty, I could be rid of you and serve the House at the same time.” He paused, eyeing her. “Never in all my imaginations did I think that I might get yet another chance to use you.”

Shinri frowned.

“Your wardship is over,” Ilhadal said, turning toward the door. “Your stepmother has exercised her Right of Decision. Attendants will be sent to prepare you for the ceremony.”

Only years of training beneath Jasnah let Shinri shake off her shock quickly enough to speak before he left. *Who, Shinri. You have to find out who!*

“Talshekh?” she guessed. He was unmarried now—the death of his wife had been part of what set off his determination to take the throne.

Ilhadal paused, then smiled, shaking his head. “No, Shinri,” he said, as if slightly confused himself. “Talshekh is dead. I lead House Davar now.”

“You?” Shinri asked. “But, you were *fourteenth* in line for the House title!”

“I know,” he said. “There have been . . . many casualties recently.”

Shinri studied him, quelling her horror. Her father had always been an ambitious man, but not *that* kind of ambitious. He was the pandering courtier, the lesser nobleman who thrived on the barest bit of recognition from his superiors. He was mildly clever, true, but he was not a plotter or an . . . assassin. Or, at least, he hadn't been.

“I see it in your eyes, Shinri,” he said from near the doorway. “I see it in everyone's eyes. Facts have made the truth irrelevant, it appears. Regardless of the means, I was placed in the difficult position of thinking I must kill my king in order to serve my country. Fortunately, another option presented

itself. I can only hope that history will judge me for what I have done, and not for what others assume was my hand.”

Another option presented itself. It took Shinri only a few moments to work out the answer. “Him?” she asked with shock. “I’m to be married to the Idiot King?”

Ihhadal nodded. “Not so much an idiot any longer, it seems—perhaps never one at all. The king has undergone something of a transformation; the common people are already convinced it was the Almighty’s work. The nobility are more skeptical, but I suppose we always are.”

The Idiot King. For so long she had assumed herself for no one but Tethren; she hadn’t really considered what his death meant for her future. Of course she would have to be married to another—a woman’s power came from her husband’s rank. Even if her father hadn’t become First Prince of House Davar, her fostering to Lady Jasnah would have made her a prized marriage.

But, Ahven Vedenel? Her father’s words about a ‘transformation’ made no sense. Had someone trained Ahven to act less foolish? But, even if that were so, he would still have the mind of child. What kind of marriage was that?

Jasnah’s training whispered that it was a very good one. Shinri would be one of the most powerful women in Jah Keved. Her father the Prince of one house, her husband the Prince of another and king of all three. Ahven’s mental weakness would be a small problem, one she could use to her advantage. She would have a great deal of freedom—and even power, assuming she could gain some measure of control over him.

The Shinri side of her, however—the piece that Jasnah hadn’t ever been able to train away—wanted to scream in horror at the idea. She glanced around covertly for something to break or unravel, eventually choosing a nearby plant from which she could pluck a few leaves.

“When?” Shinri asked, crumpling a crisp leaf in her hand, feeling the sap wet her palm.

“Soon,” her father promised, knocking for the guards to open her door.

“Wait!” she said, standing. “Can I at least leave? Why must you keep me here like a prisoner? What do you fear, father?”

He glanced back at her, then stepped out and waved for the guards to shut the door.

chapter 36

MERIN 8

MERIN SPLASHED A CUPFUL of water on his face, sighing in pleasure as the cool liquid washed away the sweat and fatigue of a day spent sparring.

Around him, the Shieldhome monastery grounds bustled with unusual activity. Kholinar wasn't at war, not yet, but Lord Dalenar's pronounced neutrality—and the subsequent sealing of the Oathgate—felt like a bad sign. Citizens and lords alike came to Shieldhome to work out frustrations, and perhaps to prepare. Just in case.

Merin was beginning to learn that the world of a nobleman was far more morally ambiguous than he had presumed. The ballads spoke of right and wrong, and they always warned their audience which side to believe in. Even when a figure was portrayed as both evil and heroic—such as Jarnah the Tyrant—there was always a separation of actions from character. To become a Conqueror was bad. However, fighting with honor and bravery—as Jarnah always had—was good.

Those ideals seemed frail when compared with Alethkar's current situation. Assassination was an evil act—not to mention unheroic. But what if those assassins had been sent to stop a man who was planning tyranny himself? Many whispered that King Elhokar, who had turned back from Prallah reluctantly, had been planning now to invade Jah Keved. The rumors said this was why the king hadn't dismissed his armies, and why he was so

quick to react against Jezenrosh's offense. Surely planning an invasion of the south—a land held to be one of Alethkar's truest allies—was a dishonorable act. If Jezenrosh knew of this and tried to stop it, was he justified in using assassins against his own king?

Merin could tell he wasn't the only one worried about this dichotomy. The people wanted an answer. The biggest problem in Kholinar wasn't the fact that their countrymen were at war. The real problem was that Lord Dalenar—the most revered man in all of Alethkar—refused to tell his people which side was right.

It left men wondering and whispering. Perhaps Lord Dalenar didn't know what was right either. That possibility scared them more than anything else.

"Don't think so hard, kid," Chadrin said. "You're giving me a headache."

Merin smiled at the aging monk. After Merin's battle during the assassination attempt, something had changed between Merin and Vasher's little band of monks. Instead of just regarding Merin as Vasher's apprentice, the eight men had begun to accept him as one of their own. Though Vasher was still Merin's trainer, the others had begun to joke and spar with Merin, and they generally seemed to regard him with the fondness one gave a little brother or junior teammate.

"Chadrin," Merin asked, "who do you think's right? Jezenrosh or the king?"

The elder warrior shrugged. "Haven't met either one."

"You don't have to meet them to know if they're right or not," Merin prodded.

"Oh, I don't know," Chadrin replied with a wide, gap-toothed smile. "Whether or not a fellow's right often depends on how much I like 'im."

Tadr, a leaner man whose only remaining hairs were completely grey, snorted. "I guess the wenches are always right then, eh, Chadrin? You seem to like them more than you like anyone."

"Wouldn't know any more," Chadrin said, raising a cup to his lips and obscuring his face. "Monks don't do things like visit the wenches. Wouldn't be proper of 'em."

Tadr snorted his response to that comment.

"No," Merin complained. "What do you really think? About the king's war, I mean."

"Such things aren't meant for discussing by you, little spearman," Vasher said from a short distance away. "And even less meant for us. Lord Dalenar is a wise man. If he says that it isn't for us to choose sides, then we won't choose sides. Personally, I doubt either one of them are right."

“So, was what I did in the palace wrong?” Merin asked, turning toward his trainer. “Should I have let the assassins pass?”

“No, boy,” Vasher said. “What you did was right—even if you did go against my command that you refrain from sparring.”

“But, I didn’t spar. I—”

“Oh, he knows,” Chadrin said with a laugh. “He’s just gettin’ on ya, kid.”

Merin caught a hint of a smile in Vasher’s eyes. “What you did was right,” Vasher repeated. “You saved your king’s life. It isn’t your place to decide if that life was worthy of saving or not—though it is Lord Dalenar’s place to decide whether or not his armies will act against Jezenrosh.”

Merin nodded.

“Now, how is that shoulder?” Vasher asked.

Merin rolled his arm. “The bruise is almost gone now,” he said.

“You’re lucky,” Vasher said. “He must not have hit you square on—a punch like that from a man in Plate should have broken a few bones.”

Merin nodded, rubbing his arm. The motion only reminded him of his other wound, however—the one that he hadn’t told anyone about. Though he had felt the glyphward burn in his palm as if it were molten, it had left no mark. His hand had been numb for three days following the assassination attempt, but feeling had slowly returned. Now, he could feel no remnant of either pain or numbness.

No one knew what to make of the torn tapestries and rugs. Aredor had been dazed following the battle, and didn’t seem to remember the storm that had blown through the hallway. Jezenrosh’s Shardbearers were dead, and no one else had seen the winds.

And so, Merin had remained quiet about the event, pleading confusion as to what had brought so much dust into the hallway. He tried to ignore the hollow sensation he felt now that the glyphward was gone. Its power had been expended, the magic locked within its stone gone. It was best to move on.

“Hey, Vasher,” Chadrin said. “The kid’s getting pretty good, eh? Bet you didn’t expect him to be able to take down a Shardbearer in Plate like that.”

Merin blushed. “That was mostly Aredor,” he said. “I was so useless in the fight it’s a wonder I didn’t cut off my own leg.”

Several of the men laughed at this, but Chadrin wasn’t finished. “You should teach ’im how to skep, Vasher,” the burly warrior said. “He’s probably ready.”

“Hey, that’s a good idea,” one of the other men—Daniv—said. Several of the others nodded their approval.

Vasher glared at the group of monks. “He’s not ready,” he said. “The boy hasn’t even bonded his Blade yet. He can’t skep until then anyway.”

“We might not have much more time to train him, Vasher,” Tadr said, shaking his head. “Great things are happening outside our little monastic island. How long will it be before some lord decides to drag the boy away to war? The Shardbearers he duels on the battlefield won’t care if he’s ready or not. You should at least train him to defend himself.”

Vasher continued his glare.

“He really is ready, Vasher,” Daniv put in. “You’ve heard Lord Aredor praise the boy’s dueling skill. He’s twice as good as any of us were at his age—and he hasn’t even had that Blade a hundred days yet.”

Vasher grunted, studying Merin. Merin was uncertain what they were talking about—but he was equally certain that whatever it was, he wanted to learn it. “Yeah, Vasher,” he joined in. “At least teach the boy how to defend himself.”

Vasher snorted with a slight smile, then nodded toward the other side of the courtyard where a large group of noblemen were sparring in the sand.

“See the Shardbearer in blue?” Vasher asked, pointing out a younger man in bright blue Shardplate. “Put on your Plate and go challenge him to a duel.”

Merin paused. “But you told me not to duel.”

“Last week you couldn’t wait to embarrass yourself, now you’re arguing with me? Get!”

Merin jumped, rushing over to ask one of the younger monks to invite the other Shardbearer to duel. Then Merin quickly went to the dressing square, where several other young monks helped him don the Shardplate. Merin knew the man he was about to spar. His name was Khalvan, a distant cousin to the Kholin. The man had done moderately well in the dueling competition, finishing near the middle of the pack of contestants.

Several groups of onlookers gestured and nudged one another as Merin approached the dueling ring. Some smirked in amusement; others were simply curious. Though the rumors rightly claimed that Aredor had really been the one to save the king, Merin had taken part in the battle. If people had been curious about him before, they were doubly so now.

So, what will it meant to them if I lose this duel? Merin thought with sudden apprehension, realizing that most of the courtyard had stopped its sparring to gather around his ring.

What will it mean if I win?

Merin raised his Blade to indicate that he was ready, and Khalvan stepped forward. The man's stance was different from Merin's—he kept the Blade closer to his body, its tip raised higher in the air.

Merin struck first. Propelled by the speed of Shardplate, he danced across the sand, swinging his Blade in the sweeps Vasher had taught him. His opponent parried each blow with ease, then delivered a strike directly against Merin's helm.

Merin pulled to a stop in the sand, gritting his teeth as the scorekeeper awarded a point to Khalvan. *Focus*, Merin told himself, repeating Vasher's oft-voiced counsel. *Feel the form, and let it do the work.*

Merin approached the second bout more carefully, letting his opponent make the first move. When the man struck, Merin was able to block the first blow and try a counterstrike. His opponent easily turned Merin's Blade away, but Merin let the form pull him back, just out of reach. Merin was actually surprised when his follow-up attack connected with Khalvan's shoulder.

Several members of the crowd nodded appreciatively at this, but the third point made them more skeptical, as Merin didn't last to a count of three before taking a blow to the side.

Merin grunted slightly at the impact. Even a dulled Blade had a powerful force behind it. Khalvan had three points—though he couldn't win until he struck Merin twice in the same place. Merin still had a chance. He advanced, wary and careful, just as he had been trained. He did everything right—he followed the form properly, he let reflex direct his movements, and he swung his Blade with precision. Yet the exchange still ended with a second blow to Merin's helm, officially ending the contest.

There was a general air of snickering as Merin pulled off his helm, nodding in respect to his opponent. On the battlefield, Merin would have been dead. Here, in the monastery courtyard, he was just shamed. He'd barely put up a fight. The crowd disbursed as the monks helped Merin out of his armor, then he slunk back toward Vasher and the others—no matter how crowded the courtyard got, Vasher's corner somehow remained comfortably free of interlopers.

Merin took a drink with bowed head and flexed his lightly-aching shoulder. Whatever it was the others had been encouraging Vasher to teach him, Merin would not learn it this day.

“Well?” Vasher asked.

“You saw,” Merin said. “I didn't do so well.”

“Why?” Vasher asked.

Merin shrugged. “I can’t tell,” he said honestly. “I thought I was doing everything right. The form . . . it just wasn’t enough. My attacks were too easy to block, and my swings were too wide—they left too many openings. Not enough practice, I guess.”

Vasher grunted, eyeing him. “Oh, stop sulking. There was no way you were going to win that bout. Khalvan Nadadin is an accomplished and experienced duelist, and you’ve never fought a bout in Plate before.”

“Then why did you make me fight him?” Merin protested.

“The fight wasn’t the test, kid,” Chadrin said, seated in the wall’s shade a short distance away. “The question afterward was.”

Merin paused. *The question afterward . . . ?*

“The form I’m teaching you isn’t really one of the twenty dueling styles, Merin,” Vasher explained. “It’s something . . . else. Something we came up with ourselves.”

“By ‘we,’” Chadrin added, “he means ‘I, Vasher, developed this all by myself.’”

Vasher shot the man a glare, then turned back to Merin. “The style has its weaknesses,” he said. “It depends on knowing where your opponent is going to strike before he moves—something you can only do by fighting many men and understanding instinctively how your opponents think. It is a form that allows flexibility and ease of motion, letting you anticipate and adapt. It’s a difficult style of fighting, little spearman. You probably won’t win many duels until you master it. Once you do, you’ll win them all.”

Merin frowned. “Then, what is this ‘skeepin’ that the others mentioned?”

“Something you don’t need to know at the moment,” Vasher said. Then, however, he raised a hand to cut off Merin’s objection. “However, it might be a good idea to start training you, just in case. Here, sit down.”

Merin did so eagerly, settling himself on the sand. Vasher seated himself directly in front of Merin, adopting an almost meditative pose. “Hold out your hand in front of yourself, pointing at me, then hold up one finger and point it at the sky.”

Merin did as commanded.

“What do you see?” Vasher asked.

“Um, my finger?” Merin replied.

“Now focus on me,” Vasher commanded. “Leave your hand where it is. What do you see?”

Merin frowned in confusion. “The same thing.”

“The same?” Vasher asked. “Or two copies of the same?”

“Well, yes,” Merin said. “If I focus on you, I see two versions of my finger. One from each eye.”

“Exactly,” Vasher said. “Now, I want you to focus your attention away from the two fingers. Keep looking at me, but try and see *through* your fingers. First one, then the other. If you concentrate hard enough, you should be able to see what is beyond, even though your finger is in the way.”

“All right . . .” Merin said.

Vasher stood. “When you can make both fingers disappear at once, you’ll be ready to learn skepping.”

“That’s it?” Merin protested, lowering his finger.

Chadrin laughed. “Be glad, kid. At least he didn’t make you do anything completely pointless. I remember him once forcing a student to try and snatch raindrops from the sky during a highstorm!”

Vasher grunted. “This isn’t a ‘pointless’ exercise, Chadrin,” he snapped. “It will teach the boy to focus and to control his perceptions. It will train his mind for what is to come—if you can come up with a better meditative exercise, then you can go find your own student.”

Merin smiled at the repartee, holding his finger up again and trying to make the separate images disappear, as Vasher had taught. Unfortunately, now that his master had moved, the view in front of Merin was that of the other noblemen. They continued their sparring, their laughter, and their camaraderie—all without even passing a glance by Vasher’s corner of the courtyard.

“They still don’t accept me,” Merin said. “I thought, maybe, helping Aredor save the king would change things. But it didn’t. They’re polite, some are even respectful, but they don’t like me. I don’t think I’ll ever be one of them.”

“Good,” Vasher said.

“Oh, leave the boy alone, Vasher,” Chadrin said. “Just because we left that world behind doesn’t mean it’s bad for everyone.”

“The boy needs to know the truth,” Vasher said firmly. “They’ll never accept you, Merin. Never. You remind them too much of what they are not, and that makes them uncomfortable. They’re jealous of you because of what you’ve done in saving the king.”

“But everyone knows that was Aredor,” Merin said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Vasher said. “They’re jealous. And, more importantly, they’re angry that you aren’t beneath them any more—you’re even above most of them in rank. They’re angry that Lord Dalenar gave you a place in his house, and they’re never, never going to accept you as one of their own. Get used to it.”

Merin lowered his eyes, staring down at the uncountable grains of sand before him. “Lord Dalenar said something similar. Back when I first got my Blade. He said I wouldn’t be able to make them like me, but I might be able to make them respect me.”

“Lord Dalenar is a wise man,” Vasher repeated.

“A wise man,” Chadrin said quietly. “A liar, but still wise.”

Vasher shot Chadrin a laconic glare, and for the first time Chadrin looked as if he regretted one of his quips. Chadrin glanced away, blushing slightly. Before Merin could voice a question, Vasher turned the stare toward him, forcing him to choke down the inquiry. The topic of Lord Dalenar’s supposed ‘lies’ was not to be discussed.

AS SOON AS MERIN RETURNED from the monastery, he went looking for Aredor. His friend had been notably absent from sparring recently. Part of this was due, of course, to Aredor’s wound—the cut on his side had been deep, and had nearly cost him the use of his arm. He would not soon swing a sword with that hand again.

There was more to it, though. Of all the members of Lord Dalenar’s house, inactivity seemed to aggravate Aredor the most. Merin saw the look in his friend’s eyes the last few times Aredor had visited the monastery—the young nobleman didn’t seem to find solace or relief in exercise, but rather saw the sparring as a reminder of the war he thought he should be fighting.

Indeed, Aredor had been uncharacteristically pensive these last few weeks. Merin never knew where to locate his friend anymore—Aredor could no longer be found sparring at the monastery, lounging near the ladies’ gardens, or drinking with friends in the local taverns. Instead, Dalenar’s heir tended to sulk in the quiet palace sitting rooms—where he would sit with dissatisfied eyes and a snappish attitude—or sometimes he would wander the palace, pacing and brooding like a vengeful stormshade.

The worst sign of all was Aredor’s refusal to accompany his father when visiting local noblemen. Lord Dalenar was gone at the moment, in fact, on a three-day trip. Merin would have thought that Aredor would welcome the chance to leave Kholinar, but the heir had complained fatigue from his injury and remained behind. Merin shook his head—not like Aredor at all.

Merin strode into the palace. He made a point of visiting his friend every day to try and lift the man’s spirits, and so he made his way to Aredor’s rooms. The steward there, however, informed Merin that Lord Aredor was

absent—and, like usual, Aredor had left no word of his destination. Merin sighed, knocking on the door across the hallway instead. A familiar voice called for him to enter—Renarin employed no steward.

Merin opened the door and stepped inside. There was something oddly sanitary about Renarin's quarters—they didn't quite look like someone lived in them. The boy was tidy almost to a fault, and he shunned ornamentation. Merin, by Aredor's recommendation, had commissioned several works of glyph art from local artists and hung them in his room. Renarin's walls were empty, and though his quarters were far larger than Merin's, they held about half as much furniture, and no rugs.

The room's only sign of personalization was the desk near the corner of the room, a piece of furniture that held several stacks of glyph-covered papers. Merin walked across the empty room, picking up the topmost paper. The glyphs were pressed on its page in haphazard, almost frustrated, sequences. Merin recognized most of them—simple numbers, nothing like the complex characters used in paintings or books of literature.

"I'm on the balcony," Renarin's voice called from a short distance away.

Merin replaced the paper and made his way out onto the balcony. Though the Kholinar palace was only one story tall, it had been built on a slight cleft in the land, allowing all of the rooms on the backmost wall to overlook the city. Lord Dalenar's balcony monopolized most of the space, but Renarin's rooms had a small section to the side of his father's.

Renarin stood in simple whitish-grey clothing, not even wearing a cloak. He leaned against the balcony's stone railing, staring out—not at the city, but instead up into the sky toward a pattern of clouds that drifted toward the lair. Not dark highstorm clouds, but regular white ones, the kind that Aredor claimed were far more common near the coast.

"Have you seen your brother around today?" Merin asked, walking up to stand beside Renarin.

Renarin's shake of the head was almost imperceptibly slight. Merin squinted up into the sky, trying unsuccessfully to delve just what it was about the clouds that fascinated Renarin so.

"He didn't come to sparring again today," Merin said. "The healers said he should try and work his good arm, so that he doesn't get too weak. But he hasn't shown up all week."

Renarin nodded.

Merin sighed, leaning against the railing. "It's just a cloud, Renarin. What's so fascinating about it?"

"I don't know," Renarin answered after a pause. "I wish I did."

Merin shook his head. Sometimes talking with Renarin was about as informative as a conversation with a rock.

Renarin frowned, still watching the cloud. "Do you ever think that you might be . . . missing something?"

"Missing something?" Merin asked. "Like what? An appointment?"

"No," Renarin said. "Something bigger. Like a piece of you that isn't there, and never has been. But you can feel the space where it should go, and you wonder if everyone feels that space and doesn't recognize it, or if they all have the piece and you don't."

Merin frowned. "I don't know, Renarin," he said, trying his best to answer the question. "I always dreamed about the ballads and the wars. I wanted to be part of something like the stories I had heard. Then, suddenly, I was—and it turned out to be very different from what I had expected. There isn't much glory in watching your friends get cut down by arrows and spears."

"But you became a Shardbearer," Renarin noted.

Merin grunted. "And sometimes I wonder if that was a blessing from the Almighty, or just some kind of divine prank."

Renarin smiled. "At least you got what you wanted, even if you later realized it wasn't what you had thought. Me . . . I don't even know what it is I want. I'll probably never be a Shardbearer again, and the king certainly isn't going to appoint me to any important positions."

"You'll always have a place in Kholinar," Merin said. "Aredor will see to that."

"Coddled by my elder brother," Renarin said, shaking his head. "There should be more . . ." he glanced back toward the room. Merin followed his gaze toward the desk, with its papers. "Things have been confusing recently, Merin. I write at my equations and my numbers, like I did even as a child, but something's wrong. I can't find the answers anymore. It's like . . . like I don't have all the numbers. It's like the universe can count to ten, but I can only reach five."

"Renarin," Merin said flatly, "I have absolutely no idea what that's supposed to mean."

Renarin smiled. "Neither do I, I suppose. I guess that's the problem."

Merin shook his head, sighing. How could someone be so depressing if you didn't even understand what they were talking about? As Merin turned, he noticed something from the palace grounds below. There was motion at the stables. "Has your father returned early?" he asked.

"Not that I know of," Renarin said, watching the cloud again.

Merin frowned. There was certainly something going on down there. "Come on," he said, tugging at Renarin's shoulder. It would do the boy some good to get out of his rooms.

"LORD AREDOR HAS DECIDED to ride out and meet his father," the stablemaster explained. "We're preparing his mounts."

"To meet his father?" Merin asked. "But Lord Dalenar is expected back in just a couple of days. Aredor will have to turn around and come back almost as soon as he arrives!"

"I don't question the command of my betters, my lord," the stablemaster huffed. *And neither should you*, his tone implied.

Merin sighed. The stablehands were preparing at least two tensets of horses—Aredor obviously intended to travel well-attended. What was he thinking, and why hadn't he mentioned the decision to Merin?

Merin glanced at Renarin, who was studying the horses intently. Eventually, Renarin just shrugged. "I guess we can just ask him."

Merin followed Renarin's nod, toward where a group of figures was crossing the palace courtyard. Aredor, dressed for riding, strode at their head, his deep blue Kholin cloak billowing behind him. Fifteen men accompanied him. Merin did a quick face count, and came up with a surprising list.

"Five Shardbearers, including Aredor," he mumbled to Renarin. "And the rest are fairly high-ranking as well. What is his purpose?"

Renarin didn't reply. Aredor noticed the two of them and paused, then walked forward to meet them. He adopted a friendly smile, reminiscent of the old Aredor, but it seemed a bit forced. Still, it was good to see him walking so firmly, his head held high, the brooding gone from his eyes.

"Ah, Merin," Aredor said. "I've been looking for you. I didn't want to leave without letting you know where I'd gone."

Merin frowned, glancing toward the horses. The other men were packing the last of their gear and mounting up. "What is the meaning of this, Aredor?" Merin asked. "It doesn't make any sense. Lord Dalenar will be back within a couple of days anyway."

"I've had a change of heart," Aredor explained. "I can't sit around anymore—I have to go to him. Father needs me right now; he said so himself."

"Well, I guess I'll have to go pack," Merin said slowly. "Or did you already take care of that?"

"You aren't coming," Aredor said.

The words were like a slap across the face. Aredor had always included him. “But . . .”

“I’m sorry, Merin,” Aredor said with a shake of his head. “I can’t take you this time. Don’t worry, it won’t be for long. You wouldn’t want to come anyway—it will be a boring trip.”

“I don’t understand,” Merin complained. “If it’s such a minor trip, then why does it matter if I come? Why—”

“He’s not going to meet Father,” Renarin interrupted in a quiet, yet piercing, voice.

Merin paused, noting the flash of shame in Aredor’s eyes. *The pack horses, Merin realized. There are too many of them. They wouldn’t need so many supplies for a two-day trip.*

“The war,” Merin said. “You’re going to fight!”

Aredor shot a furtive glance at the working stablehands, then turned back to Merin and Renarin, speaking in a low voice. “You can’t tell anyone,” he said. “Father will try to find a way to stop us.”

Merin paled. “You’re *disobeying* Lord Dalenar’s direct command!”

Aredor paused, then nodded once. “I can’t remain here in Kholinar, Merin. I need to find out for myself if my cousin is a traitor, and I don’t trust the king. I received a letter from Lady Jasnah the night of the dueling competition. She seemed to think that her life was in danger, that the queen herself was involved in the assassination attempt on the king. There’s more to this entire mess than people are telling us.”

“If Lord Dalenar knew something, he’d tell us,” Merin asserted.

“Probably,” Aredor agreed. “But Jasnah sent the letter to me, not Father. She knows what I know—that Father is too conservative. He’s too worried about propriety sometimes, and this waiting proves it. He doesn’t know which side is right, so he won’t help either one, lest he choose incorrectly and find himself in the wrong. Well, I’m more of a gambler—and so are those who’ve decided to join me.

“There are things on the winds that just don’t smell right, Merin. Everyone knows the king has been dissatisfied with Jezenrosh for some time—and he’s been suspiciously slow in disbanding his armies. There’s something very convenient about the way those assassins struck, giving the king a perfect opportunity to move against Crossguard. Well, my companions and I don’t intend to let Elhokar raise his hand against one of our own until we’re certain the move is just.”

Merin opened his mouth, then closed it. *How do I make a decision like this? Choose between Lord Dalenar and Aredor?*

“This could cost you your title, Aredor,” Renarin whispered.

Aredor smiled wryly. “Father taught me too well. He always told me it was best to do what I knew was right in my heart. Well, this is right, and I’m going. We can work out the consequences later. Besides, what is the worth of a title when you don’t use it to seek what is just? He taught me that too.”

“Father will chase you down,” Renarin warned. “He’ll have to send men after you to protect the integrity of his command.”

Aredor nodded. “Oh, he’ll send men. But he won’t catch us—no matter how fast his horses ride.”

Merin stood, trapped by his own indecisiveness. How could he let Aredor ride without him? The man who had befriended him, and who had taught him what it was like to live as a nobleman?

Merin’s cloak blew in the wind. Lord Dalenar’s cloak, given to him as a symbol of Merin’s oath of service. Aredor regarded Merin for a long, uncomfortable moment.

“I won’t take you even if you offer, Merin,” Aredor finally said. “I can see the indecision in your eyes, and this isn’t a task for the uncommitted. Take care of Renarin until I return.”

With that, Aredor turned and climbed into his saddle. Within a few moments, all fifteen men were gone, riding from the city and trailing the dust of their broken oaths behind them.

chapter 37

SHINRI 7

SHINRI WAS SOON TO DISCOVER what her father had meant by King Ahven's 'transformation.' While the security at her room was not relaxed, she was given a couple of ladies-in-waiting to provide service and companionship. Their greatest contribution by far, however, was in the area of information.

Shinri learned about the king's sudden and miraculous Remaking from idiot to leader. Both of her ladies—young and low-born—found the king a dramatic figure. They spoke of his speeches before the citizens and lords, telling Shinri of his powerful voice and his commanding sense of honor. In just a few short days, King Ahven had managed to unite two opposing armies, making friends of all three Houses.

Of course, her father had something to do with that. His sudden rise to First Prince was absolutely remarkable. That was the word one of the girls used—'remarkable.' She had to think for a moment before saying it, however, and Shinri could see the hushed rumors in her eyes. The girl wouldn't, of course, speak the rumors to Ilhadal's own daughter. Shinri could guess what was being said, however. People assumed that her father had subtly killed his way to the top, a fact that would greatly weaken his reputation. The men of Jah Keved believed strongly in the duel as an ultimate decider of disputes, and they found assassination a cowardly substitute.

Still, Ilhadal was House Leader. He was reportedly not accepting any

personal duels, but instead sending challengers to his champions. He could survive, for a time, in such a manner. He would need to do something eventually to prove his legitimacy, but for the moment his loyalty to King Ahven lent a stabilizing factor to the Three Houses. Rienar had pledged itself in alliance to Davar, and Davar had pledged itself to Vedenel. It appeared that the squabbles amongst the Three Houses would instead become unification—a transformation no less amazing than the king's supposed Remaking.

This new image of King Ahven was somehow more discomfiting than the old one. The idiot Ahven, at least, had been a stable component. Despite her unfamiliarity with him personally, Shinri had been certain she knew what she could expect. While the prospect of marrying a man with the mind of a child was unsettling, at least it was something she could make plans around and understand.

The new Ahven, the reborn and Remade Ahven, was unassessable. What did one make of a man who was a mental invalid one day, then became a powerful leader and accomplished duelist the next? He provided just the kind of unpredictable element that Shinri had been carefully taught to avoid in her machinations. Unpredictability, by its very nature, cannot be trusted—or so Jasnah had always said. Far better to choose the stable yet less-efficient than to gamble on the excellent yet random.

And yet, dared she hope? The ladies spoke of this man in such awed voices that it was impossible for Shinri not to share in at least a bit of their adulation. True, they were young, and true, Vedens were a superstitious lot. But perhaps this man would live up to his budding reputation. Perhaps he would be a man like Lord Dalenar. Strong, true . . . even loving?

SHINRI DIDN'T MEET THE MAN she was to marry until the day of the wedding itself. After being stuck in her rooms for several weeks waiting, the joy of being released was almost enough to wash away her nervousness.

Her father had purchased for her an extravagant gown—apparently, his new position was providing him with the wealth he had coveted when she was a child. The garment was mostly white, embroidered with gold—Lord Ahven's colors. She stood quietly, waiting as her ladies dressed her—a strange experience, since she was accustomed to being in their place.

In a short while I will be Queen of the Three Houses. The thought was almost as dumbfounding as the concept of getting married.

Her father soon arrived to inspect her. He looked out of place in his lavish costume, complete with a masterful cloak pinned back slightly at the

side to reveal the lack of a sword at his waist—an ostentatious reference to his being a Shardbearer.

Ilhadal regarded his daughter with a characteristically mercantile air. “You’ll do,” he finally decided.

You’d hate to think you spawned an inferior product, right, Father? Shinri thought angrily as the women finished her braids. That’s what it always was. You hated me because I came from you, because my imperfection was your own. Well, I’m glad you finally found your place. You’re at the top now. I hope you go mad from the frustration of not having anyone left to pander to.

“It’s a good thing this is a political union,” Ilhadal noted. “Because I doubt anyone would choose you otherwise. At least the dress is beautiful.”

Shinri was already working at the threads on the inside of her oversized left sleeve, and she yanked one free just for him. She probably shouldn’t have snapped back at him—Jasnah would have waited—but her frustration needed an outlet, and she spoke. “How long do you think he’ll let you live once we’re married?” she asked.

The ladies paused, and Shinri could feel their embarrassed exchange of glances. Let them speak—anything that undercut her father’s authority served Shinri’s purposes.

Ilhadal glared at her. “Leave us,” he commanded the ladies. They did, leaving her alone in the cell of a room with her father.

“You will not speak of such things again,” he commanded.

“Oh?” Shinri asked. “Should I not seek to warn my own father? Really, do you think that King Ahven can afford to let you survive the wedding? The chance that you’ll kill him quietly, like you did the others, is far too dangerous.”

“Do not speak so to your father!” he said, stepping forward as if to hit her.

Shinri remained firm. “You would strike your queen on the day of her wedding?”

Ilhadal froze.

“That’s right, Father,” she said. “Queen. This is the place you’ve given me—and it is one over and above you. Of course, soon there will be few whose place isn’t greater than your own.”

“I was wrong again,” he said with a snort. “That Kholin woman fooled me. You haven’t lost any of your impudence—you just put a fair cover over it.”

“Tell me, Father,” Shinri said. “Have your noblemen been giving you gifts? Large sums, presented in quiet, as pledges of loyalty? Do they give you promises to follow and accept your leadership? Do they seem a little . . . too eager to please?”

He paused. Shinri studied him carefully. *You only have this one chip to play*, she told herself. *Get as much from it as you can.*

“King Ahven gives speeches often now,” she guessed. “And, oddly, he makes most of them before the troops. Your troops. Their loyalty was never really yours—it belonged to Talshekh. You are a poor substitute, a last-moment replacement for the man they admired. Your faction may have gained dominance, but only because of the Veden sense of martial decorum. You were next in line, and that is the only reason they let you become First Prince. Of course, there’s one easy way to remove that problem—take you out of the line, and someone else can step up.”

Ilhadal looked . . . dumbfounded. “How do you know these things?” he demanded. “Your maids have been speaking! I told them to remain quiet about outside events.”

“Ahven and your own noblemen are already plotting your death, Father,” Shinri said, ignoring his comment. “They’re waiting for the formality of a marriage, for they see the advantage of uniting two of the great houses. You had better tell your assassins to be quick. Once this marriage happens, you’ll need to kill the king immediately.”

“I would never!” Ilhadal snapped. “I’d take up my own sword and strike him down first!”

Ah, Shinri thought, reading his face. There was honesty in his anger. *So you didn’t do it, then.* Ilhadal Davar had not killed his kinsmen. It was an oddly relieving revelation—there had been children among the thirteen men ahead of him for the House throne. It was a comforting thought to know that one’s father did not murder children.

But, who then? Could it really be a coincidence? Fourteen men, dead in a few months? All of the precise lines required to put my father on the throne?

“Then you’re doomed,” she said out loud. “Even if the king doesn’t kill you, you won’t keep your place long. Your so-called supporters are only placating you while they gather strength. Everyone assumes you took the throne through deception. They’ll give you money and private promises, true. But, think about this, Father—when you were a sycophant in the very court you now rule, did you give the largest gifts to the men you trusted and respected, or did you give them to the men you wanted to lull? They’ll begin presenting real challengers as soon as the wedding is finished, and eventually you won’t be able to hide behind champions. No man can fight off an entire House. They’ll bring you down eventually, one way or another.”

He was very nervous now. Her words had obviously shaken his confidence, and he tugged at his lavish clothing, as if seeing it anew. “How . . . ?”

Shinri raised an eyebrow. “Really, Father,” she noted dryly. “You shouldn’t have sent me to tutor under the greatest political mind of our time if you didn’t want me to learn a few things. I can try and help you, once I am queen, but so far you have given me little encouragement to do so.”

Ilhadal snorted, eyeing her with a look that, she was satisfied to note, now contained a great deal more respect than it had before. *Of course, he probably gives you more respect than he usually gives me.*

“We’ll see,” he finally said with a wave of his hand. “The thing is, child, you don’t know half of what you think you do. There’s something greater than this all, something that will hold the noblemen together, and something that will make certain people respect me rather than whisper snidely behind me. Yes, if only you understood . . .”

He smiled then, not realizing that in nibbling at her bait, he had given away far more than he expected. Shinri was missing a piece of it all. A bit more prodding, and she would know what it was.

That prodding, however, would have to come after the wedding. The doors opened at her father’s command, and her ladies rushed back in to put the final touches on her hair, then pick up her train. Soldiers waited at attention on either side of the hallway. They held their swords out, point down, tips touching the stone and making a column of steel that led her way to the wedding chamber.

Blessed Almighty, Shinri thought, her nervousness returning full-force. *I’m not ready for this!*

The ceremony, however, obviously didn’t intend to wait until she was ready. Her father nodded for her guards to begin the escort, then hurried off to place himself at the front of the audience.

Shinri walked slowly down the hallway, swords lining her on either side, feeling a numbness overtake the passion she had felt during the debate with her father. The last few weeks had been a different life, a dream. She didn’t even know what had become of Alethkar. Had Jasnah found the assassins? What of the tension between Jezenrosh and King Elhokar? Jasnah’s own marriage to Meridas could very well have happened already—and if it hadn’t, it would come very soon.

I won’t be able to return to that life, Shinri realized for the last time. *My father was right. One way or another, my wardship is over now. I’m not the student any more. I’m on my own.*

The doors to the wedding chamber opened, and she felt her first real hint of terror at what was about to come. She was too young—most women were at least given until they were eighteen, even in political marriages.

She didn't know enough, hadn't learned long enough. She couldn't even decide if she enjoyed noble society or was disgusted by it. She looked for something to break, scatter, or twist—but there was nothing. Her ladies continued to prod her forward, and the waiting crowd watched expectantly.

She barely saw King Ahven—standing in a sharp white uniform, showing none of the idiocy she had seen in him before. She wasn't certain how she kept walking, moving forward, until she stood before him. She knelt, taking her place on the cushion facing him. Only one line of thought kept her strong.

He looks like a good man. If he really has spent all this time pretending, then he's clever too—and strong enough to keep his throne when everyone thought he would lose it for certain. He is handsome, now that his eyes are firm and intelligent. He's calm too. He could be the man I've hoped for.

His face was rigid. He gave her no smile, no look of encouragement as she knelt, but she shouldn't have expected one. This was a serious occasion, and all reports made him out to be a sober man. He didn't know her. But she would be his most powerful supporter. She would keep his throne for him, protect his interests as Jasnah had so deftly taught her. He didn't realize it yet, but he was getting more than just a simple political union. Far more.

The ceremony passed in a blur. A Vorin monk spoke some words, the crowd waited politely, and Shinri knelt demurely. At the end, King Ahven Vedenel reached down, palm forward.

And she took his hand. The ceremony was over.

The next few hours were a dazed mix of congratulations and feasting. Shinri wanted to speak with the man she had just married, but as the wedding feast began, she was almost immediately pulled away to the queen's table. Her table. Women who had barely been civil to Shinri during her visits to Vedenar searching for Tethren now jostled and vied for a chance to sit next to her.

Shinri glanced toward the king's table, letting the women work their seating out amongst themselves. Ahven Vedenel reigned at his table with a commanding presence—he had the kind of charismatic aura that took skill and experience to produce.

It was only then, sitting at the table, being served a meal she was too nervous to eat, that Jasnah's training finally kicked in. *Why would he pretend to be an idiot for so long?* Shinri thought suspiciously. *What would it accomplish?* She could think of several advantages. In recent centuries, House Vedenel had been the weakest of the three Houses, despite its possession of the throne. A strong king would have been subject to duels from the other

House leaders. But, by feigning idiocy, Ahven would have been able to maneuver himself into a position of power before revealing himself.

But what a gamble! Shinri thought, not certain whether to be impressed by his resourcefulness or skeptical of his fortune. How had he learned leadership skills when he had spent his days acting the imbecile? How could he be certain that, even now, he would have the necessary core group of loyal attendants to secure his rule? A popularity gained through sensationalism could be lost in a flash of poor luck.

Shinri spent most of the meal pondering these issues. She was still more than a little stunned by the day's events—she was no longer Shinri, the child ward of Jasnah, but Lady Shinri, the woman queen of Vedenar. Her logical ponderings about Ahven were more a retreat to the familiar than they were an exercise of true rationality.

By the meal's end, she had come to only one conclusion: Ahven Vedenel was a man of superior luck and skill. Great events would mark his reign—and she had to know what kind of man he was.

The feasting ended, and within moments Shinri found herself alone with him, a man she still didn't know, in his chambers. The wedding night was a thing she had barely let herself consider. This moment was to have belonged to Tethren—that she should have to spend it with another seemed wrong, a violation of the love she had once held.

Tethren is dead, Shinri told herself firmly. *You have to make a new life now.* She stood quietly as Ahven closed the door to his bed chamber.

"My lord," she said humbly, his back still to her. "Though we are now husband and wife, I find that I barely know of you—let alone know you personally. What kind of man is it that I have married?"

He didn't answer—in fact, he acted as if he hadn't heard her. He turned, and began to disrobe with careful, almost emotionless, functionality. He paused only once, looking up, his expression explaining that it was time for her to do what was expected of a wife.

He took her quickly, without speaking. Resigned to her place as his wife, Shinri accepted it.

Until she saw those eyes.

Focused in the wan light above her, more powerful than the passion, pain, and confusion, were those eyes. She saw a depth of rage and anger within them, a hatred that made her want to curl up in horror. They were not the eyes of a lover. They were not the eyes of a noble lord. They were the eyes of a monster, released from their mask during those moments when all emotions became bare.

Then she understood. He climbed off of her, stepping away from the bed, his face and motions returning to their previous level of control. Shinri sat back, shivering as she pulled the blankets up around her naked body. A sudden and sickening terror drove her. She wanted to hide from those eyes.

"It was you," she whispered—silently enough that she was certain he wouldn't be able to hear her.

"What was me?" he asked firmly, his voice oddly accented, his eyes focused on her face.

"You," she repeated. "You killed them, or had them killed. The people in the succession line before my father. You assassinated them."

And he smiled. A cold, terrible smile. "Yes."

"Why?" she whispered.

King Ahven shrugged. "Your father was the only one ambitious enough to take the House throne, yet weak enough to hesitate when the time came to kill me and take my place." He paused, looking at her and smiling again. "And he was the only one with an unmarried daughter of age—or, at least, near enough."

The chill in Shinri's breast became ice, and it begged her not to ask the next question. Yet, like an onlooker drawn to a scene of carnage, she could not stop herself. "But," she whispered, "I was engaged to another."

Ahven's smile deepened.

"How?" she whispered.

"I'm amazed that you never noticed," Ahven said, continuing to dress. "The man Tethren never loved you, not really. He wanted my sister Nanavah with the deep, foolish love men reserve for something unattainable. You should have paid more attention to the ballads he listened to. 'The Song of a Hundred Lovers,' 'The Blessing of Minalah,' 'Windborn Fate' . . . These are the songs of a hopeless romantic. All I had to do was promise him Nanavah's hand, and he was willing to risk his honor . . . his life . . . everything. You see, Prince Tethren could never have loved you. You were given to him freely."

Numbness. Just let yourself be numb. No feeling. Don't think about what just happened. Don't think of that . . . thing touching you.

Ahven tossed her dress onto the bed, its fine seasilk now wrinkled. "Put that back on."

Shinri didn't move. She couldn't.

Ahven regarded her. He displayed no hints of anger as he walked to the door and threw it open. He pointed to the guards outside. "You four," he said. "Go and dress my wife."

Shinri felt her eyes widen in reflexive horror. *He wouldn't dare . . .*

Ahven stepped over and ripped the blanket free from the bed, leaving her exposed.

"Now!" he snapped to the guards.

He would.

Despite the direct command, the guards stood uncertainly. Shinri reacted first, the air cold on her skin as she scrambled off the bed and picked up the dress. The guards eventually stepped forward, making perfunctory efforts at helping as she hastily, embarrassedly, struggled to don the dress. She tried to ignore the faces poking in through the door, though she couldn't help blushing as they saw her nudity. The dress's tassels and exaggerated train made the dressing difficult, especially since the soldiers did their best to look anywhere but at her as they helped.

As she finally got the dress to cover the more embarrassing sections of skin, Ahven stepped forward, grabbing her chin and lifting her eyes from the floor to meet his. "Your father is a fool," he whispered. "We both realize that. Now we both also realize that I won't indulge spoiled women, as he once did."

That was a mistake. It gave her a focus for her shame and anger. It let her see into those eyes again, and gather what strength she had. When he released her chin, it remained held up.

"Good enough," he told the guards. Her dress was disheveled and improperly tied, but she was at least decent.

"Come," Ahven said—both to her and the guards—as he strode from the room. Shinri followed, not because she was beaten, but because she knew there was no use to fighting at the moment. He had just proven his control. She couldn't fight him, not yet.

Her father joined the group as it strode down the palace hallways. He gave Shinri barely a look, though he did flush slightly at the sight of her with her hair unraveled and hanging freely, her dress rumpled.

"What is this?" Ilhadal asked. "Why are the troops gathering outside?"

"It's time for you to have your proof, Ilhadal," Ahven replied. "As promised. We begin our plans this afternoon."

"Now?" Ilhadal said. "But the gate . . ."

"Come," Ahven said simply.

The shame of being forced to leave the palace and walk without a litter in her current state would have mortified the Shinri of a few hours before. Now the gawking citizens seemed like nothing.

He killed Tethren, she thought. Somehow, Ahven convinced Tethren to ride

to certain death, just so that I would be unengaged at the proper time. He found a way to slaughter the Davar line of succession so that my father would take the House throne.

She had to keep a tight hold on her terror as they approached the Oathgate dome, lest she begin to worry about what he would do next. Unpredictable indeed. Unpredictable and terrible.

Soldiers were gathered inside the city. This was odd enough to give Shinri pause—she had expected there to be an army outside the city, for she had heard some minor explanations of how Talshekh's force was now commanded by the Idiot King. But these men were inside the city itself—thousands of them, spearmen, swordsmen, and archers standing in neat ranks, waiting for something.

Ahven led her past the rows of men toward the Oathgate dome. Inside the red-painted structure waited another squadron of soldiers.

These men wore blue uniforms. Aleth uniforms.

Shinri couldn't contain a laugh. "That's why you kept me imprisoned," she realized. "You think to take Ral Eram! You feared my loyalties to house Kholin!"

Her father started, but Ahven acted as if he hadn't even heard the comment. The king walked forward, inspecting the blue-uniformed troops.

"You won't get through the gate," Shinri said, catching the king's eye. "King Elhokar isn't that great a fool. The gates are locked from the Aleth side except when there are plenty of troops present."

Ahven didn't respond, but instead turned back to his inspection.

"*This?*" Shinri asked of her father. "This is what you were preparing for? This is your great plan? You think the Aleths aren't aware of the danger the Oathgates provide? You won't be able to go through until *they* decide to open their end, and they're always wary of an attack when they do so. You'll never take the city this way."

Her father shifted uncomfortably. "He says he has a way to open the gates even if one side is locked," Ilhadal mumbled weakly.

Shinri laughed. "Then he is the Idiot King after all!"

A hand grabbed her neck. "You can do this with or without the dress on, my queen," Ahven whispered in her ear. "You may choose. If you say another word this day without first being told to do so, I will take it as a sign that you've decided to give the men a show."

Shinri flushed, and Ahven pulled her by the neck over to the Oathgate. He paused for a moment, eyes deep with concentration, and she thought she saw him take a breath—as if in preparation for some great task.

Or some great gamble.

“Touch it,” he said, nodding to the large opal set in the side of the Oathgate.

“What?” Shinri asked.

He nodded to the opal again. “Touch it,” he commanded.

Shinri sighed, and reached out to the shimmering, palm-sized stone.

Everything stopped.

It was as if a hundred different pathways suddenly opened to her. An offering, made before her fatigued conscience—sudden and amazing refreshment. Pure and beautiful fulfillment of problems she hadn’t known she had. Distant locations appeared—not actual images, but tantalizing offerings, things formless yet encouraging. *Just walk. Go. Find us. Leave.*

Through the images and longing, she somehow saw a haze of white mist stream down from the top of the Oathgate, obscuring its center and indicating that it had been opened.

Ahven pushed her away from the gate, and her link was broken. Suddenly, she couldn’t remember what she had sensed or seen, and was left only with a hurtful desire.

What . . . what was that?

Ahven spun, smiling broadly and waving his hand toward the Oathgate. “Well?” he demanded of the stunned guards and collected noblemen. “Get moving!”

Shinri stood quietly as the soldiers in blue rushed forward, piling through the now-open Oathgate.

“Secure the palace!” Ahven ordered. “You *must not* let anyone out to raise warning. Kill any you see; I don’t care who they are. The future of the Three Houses depends on your courage! A living servant is one who can escape and warn King Elhokar—an event that would result in the deaths of yourselves and your brother soldiers!”

Shinri stumbled away, but a guard caught her, holding her by the shoulders as Ahven continued to encourage the men to their grisly task. He would massacre the entire palace staff just to keep his invasion secret. He was worse than a monster. He was a thing for which Shinri had no words.

And I’m married to him.

Jasnah would probably tell her to stay with him. The position of power as Ahven’s wife would, in Jasnah’s eyes, provide the greater opportunity to protect lives and keep Alethkar safe. Though Ahven seemed harsh, he

had . . . enjoyed bedding her. She could use that against him, forcing him to spare lives and be merciful.

But I am not Jasnah. The revelation came as if a stark and sudden break in the clouds. *And I never will be. She would be right—staying with him would serve the most good. It is the logical, and perhaps moral, choice. But I cannot do it.*

The first time he had come to her, she had accepted him—but she hadn't known. Never again. If he took her again, she would fight.

She looked up, studying the grim satisfaction in Ahven's eyes. It had been a long time since she had felt hatred, and it had never been this strong.

There was only one thing to do. The roads called to her, the outside, the freedom.

She would escape.

chapter 38

TALN 7

THE STATUE LOOKED NOTHING LIKE HIM, of course. It stood about twelve feet tall, bold and powerful. Its face was indistinct, following Kanaran artistic traditions, but the body and clothing were magnificently detailed. An enormous, muscular chest sat atop squat, trunk-like legs. The arms bulged with inhuman strength as they held their massive Shardblade point-down in front of the body.

Taln shook his head. No human could bear such ridiculous proportions and oversized muscles—such a man would have trouble walking, let alone fighting. Of course, that mattered little to the people. They would have their Heralds, and would design them as they saw fit. Truth rarely measured up to imagination.

He had never grown accustomed to seeing his image—realistic or not—used as an icon of faith. It was bad enough when the Vorins used it. These new ‘Elinrah’ temples were even more troubling. Taln had heard the cromcleaners speak of the so-called ‘new’ Elinrah religions, which had developed in rural areas during the last few centuries. However, the Elinrah ideas—focusing on mysticized worship of the Heralds—were not really all that new at all. They were just a continuation of mankind’s millennia-old heresy. Nearly every Epoch, the Heralds had been forced to reiterate their primary teaching: the Almighty was to be worshipped; the Elin were not.

Taln sighed, turning away from the temple. Perhaps there would be time to correct the Heresy of Kanar later. He bowed his head and walked away from the city of Ral Eram, moving toward the steep, stone rampway that led to the upper plateau and the palace.

And so I retreat, Taln thought. And leave them to their doom. It was a bitter realization. Ral Eram, the First Capital, had always been a place of strength. The city had never fallen to the Khothen. Even during the last two Returns, when the creatures had nearly overwhelmed mankind, Ral Eram had remained strong. Since its founding five Epochs before, the city had been a symbol of unity and hope for the people of Roshar.

Unity no longer. Taln shouldered his pack—a simple construction sewn from the sheet of his bed—and climbed the palace incline. Below him, the city proper sat on its cliffside ledge, unaware that its Herald had failed. Over two months had passed since his coming; less than eight remained until the Khothen returned. Taln had no more time to spend on the once-great fortress city. He would find allies elsewhere, and with them stand.

If only the others were here, Taln thought with frustration. Jezrien would have persuaded the foolish king and his sister, Sign or no Sign. Nale would have drawn supporters from the warriors of the city with his sheer aura of noble efficiency. Chanaral—dear, patient Chanaral—would have gained the love of the people, and with that love forged an alliance against the darkness to come.

Unfortunately, Ral Eram had been left with Taln instead. A warrior, true, but one of steel and blood; a conflict of politics and persuasion was far beyond his capabilities. Perhaps, once he located the others, he would be able to bring them back. Perhaps there was time yet for Ral Eram.

If you find the others . . . a voice in his mind whispered.

I will! Taln told himself, swiftly capping his worries, lest the fires come again. *I will . . .*

A figure met him at the top of the stone ramp. Taln paused, frowning as he regarded Lhan. Would the monk never give up? Over the last few days, Lhan had tried incessantly to convince Taln to stay. Taln had been glad when Jasnah's messenger had finally come—telling him a time had been arranged for him to use the Oathgates—if only because it would finally let him be rid of Lhan's pestering. Apparently, he had been premature in that assumption.

"Well?" Taln asked of Lhan.

The monk smiled, stepping aside and revealing a small pack—crafted, Taln noticed, very similarly to his own. "I've decided to go with you."

Taln raised an eyebrow. "I don't think so."

"You don't get to choose," Lhan said happily, picking up his pack. "If you leave me behind, I'll just follow you and made a nuisance of myself."

"You're needed here," Taln said, walking past him.

"Oh, I know," Lhan said, rushing to catch up. "Without me, the monastery floors will have no one to clean them. A tragedy, let me assure you." He paused, cocking his head to the side. "Of course, if I leave, the monastery seniors will have to replace me. Maybe the cleaning will actually get done once in a while. I guess I'm doing them a favor."

"You're not coming with me," Taln said, walking up the palace steps. He proffered Lady Jasnah's admittance note to one of the guards, then waited as the man carried the note over to the guardhouse so their scribe could read it.

"You know, Talenel," Lhan said. "For a man who claims to be horribly unsettled by the fact that no one believes his message, you seem rather quick to reject the one follower you've managed to recruit."

Taln eyed the monk. "You don't believe that I am a Herald."

Lhan shrugged. "Haven't made up my mind yet. Perhaps I just need a little more time."

Taln snorted. Lhan hid the truth well, but it was very difficult to lie to a man who had lived for three thousand years. Lhan still thought Taln insane—in fact, Lhan thought him even more insane than he once had. The monk had that glint in his eye. It was the glint the nobility had shown on that night months ago, when Taln had failed to show the Sign. It was the glint the warrior monks had shown when Taln infiltrated their training courtyard. It was a glint born of the discomfort, uncertainty, and even fright that came from speaking with a complete madman.

Oddly, it disappointed Taln to see the discomfort in Lhan's eyes. The monk had never shown it before. Lhan's worry was a recent manifestation—something that had appeared after that night at the duels, when the monk had finally realized the extent to which Taln was willing to go. Now Lhan understood. He would never quite be comfortable around Taln again.

But there was truth in Lhan's words. Taln was in no position to reject anyone willing to help him. The Khothen were coming, the Knights Epellion were no more, and his Blade had been stolen. Taln would have to make use of the tools he had.

"Very well," Taln said as the guard returned, waving Taln into the palace and handing back his writ. "You may come, assuming you're willing to agree to one condition. You will not sabotage my attempts to persuade the

other kings of Roshar. You might be convinced of my insanity; let others make their own decision. Agreed?"

"Sounds fair," Lhan said, joining him as they moved through the massive entry hall, walking toward the Oathgate chamber. The monk wore a simple grey traveling robe and cloak, his feet shod with leather sandals.

"We'll have to see about getting you some boots," Taln said. "We may need to cut across some stormlands between cities."

"Boots," Lhan said with amusement. "I've never owned a pair."

Taln paused. "Never?" he asked.

Lhan shook his head.

Taln frowned. "When was the last time you left the First Capital?"

"Fifteen years ago," Lhan replied.

Great. "I don't suppose you ever did any weapons training with the Order of Khonra?"

"Nope," Lhan said cheerfully. "Never found much use for it."

Even better, Taln thought with a sigh. "Come on," he said, walking the final distance to the Oathgate chamber. Two blue-liveried soldiers stood at the entrance, and they quickly moved to block Taln and Lhan. Taln reached into his cloak pocket, unfolding Jasnah's writ and proffering it again.

The guard did not take the paper. "The Oathgates are sealed," the man said simply.

"I have a—" Taln began.

"No exceptions," the guard informed.

Taln frowned. "I was told I would be allowed through before King Elhokar's sealing took effect."

The guard did not respond.

Taln sighed, glancing to the side, where Lhan betrayed a hint of nervousness. Mentally, Taln rolled his eyes. The monk obviously worried that Taln would just attack the soldier out of frustration. Not that Lhan would be worried about the guard; he still assumed Taln to be some deranged farmer who had stood out during one too many highstorms.

"Go and find Lady Jasnah," Taln told the guard calmly, much to Lhan's obvious relief. "She'll explain."

Again, the soldier didn't reply.

"Well, that's that," Lhan said, tugging on Taln's sleeve. "Guess we'll have to go back. We can return as soon as Lady Jasnah sorts things out. You know, this is actually fortunate—I know a couple of men who offered to let us into a game of chips tonight, if we happened to . . ."

Taln ignored the monk, frowning slightly to himself. His instincts

twitched nervously. Something was wrong. He glanced to the side, analyzing his surroundings, his body growing taut with anticipation. What had his subconscious noticed . . . ?

The Oathgate room, Taln thought, looking past the guards. An inordinate number of soldiers were gathered in the room, all in Alethkar blue. Except . . .

It was faint. Very faint. The scent of blood.

“Yes, Lhan,” Taln said slowly, backing away from the two soldiers. “I think we will go.”

Lhan actually looked surprised. Taln studied the soldiers as he walked away. Their uniforms were too perfect. Their hair was Aleth black, but their temples and fingers were darkened slightly with dye. Behind the two guards, several squads of soldiers formed up, weapons drawn. One of them noticed Taln’s study and raised a hand, barking a command to one of his companions.

“*Out of the palace, now!*” Taln said, shoving the monk down the hallway and taking off at a dash.

chapter 39

MERIN 9

“THE SOVEREIGN MUST HOLD HIMSELF to a higher standard than the citizen. His path is one of poise, of control, and of sobriety. When his people feast, he must remain watchful for enemies. When his people sleep, he must remain alert for danger. He must never allow his honor to be compromised, because his actions are the actions of a country. His honor is their honor. This is *Sheneres*—to act as normal men wish they could.”

Merin paced in the monastery reading room, its smaller confines well fitting his agitated mood. The monk, in his simple grey sencoat and tan trousers, read calmly from *The Way of Kings*. Though the man undoubtedly noticed Merin’s state, he refrained from making any commentary. He simply read according to his duty, acting as an unbiased conduit for the ancient text.

Merin would have welcomed a little advice at the moment. Unfortunately, he was becoming accustomed enough to noble propriety to realize this was not an issue to discuss with a random monastery brother. And so he paced, hoping Bajerden’s wisdom would stretch through the epochs to tell Merin what he should do.

“Read that part again,” Merin said, pausing.

“The Sovereign must hold himself accountable to laws that normal men may ignore,” the monk said dutifully. “It is only by living a higher path himself that he can ask his people to obey his dictates.”

Merin nodded, beginning his pacing again as the brother continued on. As Merin moved, his eye caught sight of the room's corner, where his Shardblade sat leaning against the wall, Dalenar's cloak draped over its hilt.

The Sovereign must hold himself accountable to laws that normal men may ignore. Merin was no sovereign, no king or *Parshen*. And yet, he was a nobleman. Bajerden's words were addressed to him.

Merin had assumed he understood. He'd wanted to be a hero, wanted it so badly. His dreams had been of Shardblades and great acts of courage, his mind stuffed with evening stories told when the day's harvest was in.

He had been prepared for hardship. The stories always spoke of the soreness of marching, or that of sleeping on rock. Things were never easy for the great warriors—their horses died, their friends betrayed them, and they always got caught outside during highstorms.

He had been prepared to be hurt, perhaps to die. The heroes didn't always win. Some, like poor Tanath of Kanar, died bravely—but died nonetheless.

Merin continued his pacing. Why hadn't any of the stories prepared him for this? What of the guilt that came from doing what you thought was right, then realizing afterward that you might have been wrong?

What was the right answer?

He had let Aredor go. A braver man would have gone with his friend, joining him in a just—but unpopular—cause. A more honorable man would have sent word to Lord Dalenar, warning of the heir's flight. Perhaps if Merin had done that, the riders sent to chase Aredor down would have been successful. Yet, faced with these two options, Merin had done nothing. He hadn't gone with Aredor, and he hadn't informed Lord Dalenar.

His inaction made him feel . . . nonexistent. The world continued as if Merin weren't involved. But, wasn't that a good thing? Who was he to interfere with the workings of great men?

The Sovereign must hold himself accountable to laws that normal men may ignore.

That was the problem. Faced with two choices—both honorable in their own light—Merin had done nothing. *But*, he thought with frustration, *what could I have done? Sent messengers to Lord Dalenar, thereby betraying Aredor? Left to try and protect Aredor, thereby breaking my oaths to Lord Dalenar?*

Honor was supposed to be absolute. Of this single fact, the stories were firm. There was good and there was evil. Was Merin flawed because he couldn't tell the two apart? He wasn't really a nobleman, after all. He was just a peasant with a Shardblade. He couldn't help thinking that a better man in his same position would have instinctively known what to do.

They did. Dalenar and Aredor. They both knew their courses—and they chose opposite paths. But they're both good men!

Could a good man choose a dishonorable action?

The monk had stopped reading. Merin paused, looking up. They must have reached the end of the fourth section of *The Way of Kings* already.

“You may go,” Merin said. He’d kept the man far too long already, and Bajerden’s words didn’t seem like they were helping all that much. Merin had gone through the entire book nearly a tenseset times during the last week, and he was no closer to a solution.

Merin sighed, gathering up his Blade and throwing on his cloak. Outside, the hallways of Gloryhome monastery were broad, almost daunting. Great archways covered massive and intricate glyphrenderings, constructed with silvers, golds, and gemstones so that they glistened in the sunlight. Merin passed near one, his form blocking the window’s light and throwing a shadow over the majestic wall inlay. It was designed vaguely in the shape of the Double Eye, but it was crafted from what looked to be hundreds—maybe even thousands—of glyphs. He ran his eyes along the patterns, looking for forms he recognized. There were a few familiar glyphs, but not the one he sought.

He suspected he would never again see his phantom glyph, the strange carving that had granted him such power. The stories and old gaffers often spoke of mystical glyphwards, imbued with power. They were always ancient and rare things, like in the tale of the Tenth Dawn, with its pig-herding hero.

Merin had found such a glyph of power, but had wasted its energies in one furious moment. He could still feel the winds charging down the palace hallway, screaming in his ears, obeying his desperate plea. *Such strength . . .*

If only he could remember the exact construction of the glyph. Perhaps he could recreate its power, if only in some small way. But his attempts so far had been laughable—and he dare not show them to anyone else, for they smacked too closely of writing.

Merin shook his head. Such powers were for Awakeners and mystics—it had been marvelous fortune that one had found its way to him, even for a short time. In fact, it was probably better that it was gone. Such things were not meant for simple boys like Merin. It had belonged to the faceless Shardbearer, a charm intended for the workings of some great deed.

A deed I foiled, Merin thought. The assassination of King Elhokar. That glyphward was meant for foul deeds, Merin. Yes, it is much better lost. In the end, instead of killing the king, the glyphward had served to save the man’s life.

“I stare at them too, sometimes,” Renarin’s voice said from behind.

Merin turned as Renarin walked up beside him. The younger Kholin son stood with his eyes focused on the massive glyphrendering. “Even when I was a boy, I was more interested in the patterns on monastery walls and floors than I was in the sermons of the monks.” Renarin reached up, brushing a line of silver inlay with his fingers, as if searching through touch for some meaning that his eyes could not detect. Finally, he turned to Merin. “How was your recitation from *The Way of Kings*?”

“Frustrating,” Merin replied. “What about you? How was your recitation of . . . uh . . .”

“*Beyond the Wall of Essence*,” Renarin explained. “And yes, it was interesting—though it’s a Seventh Epoch work, and some of the language is difficult to understand. You should have it read to you sometime—especially if you’re interested in Lhonomic theory.”

Merin nodded, though he had little interest in the esoteric works Renarin studied. The basic texts were confusing enough. Merin turned to go, moving down the hallway toward the monastery exit. Renarin’s eyes lingered on the massive glyphrendering, but he did follow.

Merin stepped out into the sunlight. Gloryhome was very different from the other two monasteries in Kholinar. It was constructed on the side of the lait valley, a moderate hike from the city proper. Renarin explained that Ishar monks, the order named after the Herald who had written the *Arguments*, tended to prefer seclusion. Gloryhome’s hallways were always quiet, and there were no courtyards for dueling practice—just seemingly endless rooms filled with books, scrolls, and reading pedestals.

They began to walk the switchbacks leading down to Kholinar, Merin’s mind brooding over the same old problems. The morning chill had burned away as the sun crested the valley walls, and the summer heat was powerful. That only served to increase his taxed feeling of fatigue. “Do you wonder if we did the right thing, Renarin?” he asked as they walked.

“It is a man’s way to wonder,” Renarin replied.

Merin sighed, rolling his eyes slightly. Unfortunately, Renarin was the only one he could talk to about the topic. “Well, do you find any answers when you wonder?”

“I assume you’re talking about my brother,” Renarin said.

Merin nodded.

Renarin walked for a moment before speaking again. “I don’t know, Merin,” he finally said. “I don’t think it would have been right to try and stop him. You saw how he was that week before he left. This is something he needed to do.”

“And if he dies out there?” Merin asked. “If he is killed in the war, won’t his death be partially upon us, since we didn’t do our duty by stopping him?”

Renarin shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“How can you be so ambivalent?” Merin demanded with frustration. “This is your brother we’re talking about! If we had been the ones leaving for war, Aredor would have gone with us—you know he would have. Aredor would have insisted on accompanying us, if only to protect us from harm. But we let him go alone.”

Renarin fell silent. Eventually he just sighed. “You think I haven’t considered these things, Merin? You think I haven’t stood in the night, staring east, wondering what Aredor is doing? If he’s all right? I’ve seen you brooding these last few days. Well, you’re not the first one to worry. People always whisper about me in court, about how I’m always thinking about things no one else cares about. Well, I think about things I care about—and let me promise you, if it involves Aredor’s flight, I’ve considered it. Far harder, and far longer, than you probably have.”

Merin recoiled slightly at the outburst, spoken in Renarin’s usual near-monotone, yet snappish nonetheless. A moment later, Renarin turned toward him, a bit of the hostility draining from his posture.

“I’m sorry, Merin,” he said. “I wish I could answer you. It seems I’m having enough trouble answering my own questions lately. I’ve always been able to see things—answer problems that no one else can. But now, when it finally matters, I can’t find anything but more questions. I don’t know where to find the answers to any of them.”

Merin looked down, feeling a bit ashamed. If Renarin had tried that hard and was still confused, what chance did Merin have of finding the answers. If only . . .

Merin looked up. The city was approaching, and from their vantage he could make out much of its sprawl—including several distinctive buildings.

Renarin doesn’t know where to find the answers . . .

“I think I do,” Merin said. “Come on.”

THE ELINRAH TEMPLES CONFUSED MERIN. For the most part, the nobility ignored the Elinrah—and, what little they did say about the religious sects was always scornful. That felt odd to Merin, since in other areas of faith, the nobility were quick to prove how righteous they were.

During his months in Kholinar, Merin had been able to discover a bit of what made the Elinrah unpopular. The ten Heraldic sects were connected in the noble mind to the common man—but not in the same way as the Order

of Khonra monks, who spend their time serving the poor and the feeble. No, the Elinrah were considered something that only citizens participated in, something beneath noble attention. There also seemed to be some sense that the Elinrah were unorthodox, even profane, though Merin couldn't understand how that would be. The Elinrah worshiped the Heralds and the Almighty, just like Vorinism. They were parts of the same religion.

Renarin balked at the temple entrance. "I don't think we should be doing this, Merin."

"Why not?" Merin asked. "Elinrah soothsayers came through my village all the time, and everyone agreed that they were useful. They predicted the floods during my twelfth year, and one told my mother she was pregnant before she even knew. My father always got their advice to decide which day to begin the planting or harvest."

"That's superstition, Merin," Renarin said. "The Almighty doesn't work like that, giving his truths to whispering soothsayers and mystics."

"Why not?" Merin asked. "Doesn't He want us to know what to do? The *Arguments* say He loves us, right? So, He'd want us to ask Him what to do."

"We ask for blessings through the monasteries," Renarin said.

Merin rolled his eyes. "This is the same thing. Come on, I'll show you. If the Elinrah were evil, would your father let them into his city?"

"I don't think he has much choice," Renarin said. "They're too popular to keep out." He looked up, staring at the statue of Prael Smokewish, Herald of Secrets. The statue depicted a dynamic figure—a tall, lean man who was bare-chested beneath his sencoat. The Herald's right arm was upraised, fingers curled as if grasping an unseen object. The head pointed east, toward the dawn, and the left hand held a stone Shardblade.

"I've never liked that statue," Renarin said. "I don't imagine Prael'Elin like that. He's too . . . imposing to be a scholar."

"Are you coming in or not?" Merin prodded.

Renarin finally sighed, climbing the steps and joining Merin. Merin nodded, trying to look more confident than he was. In truth, he didn't have much of an idea how to proceed. Where he came from, the Elinrah didn't have grand temples or beautiful statues. Elinrah priests were humble-clothed men who traveled the villages making auguries or giving blessings, and while most towns had Elinrah fraternities, Merin had been too young to join their clandestine meetings.

Yet he had come this far. Surely the Elinrah here gave auguries, like the priests did in the villages. The entry-chamber was dark, lit only by strange lanterns that were covered in dark blue glass encasings. The flames flickered

as things distant, their light frail. Several figures in dark grey, or perhaps dark blue, robes stood in conference at one side of the room. As soon as they noticed Merin and Renarin, however, one of the men scuttled forward with a quick step.

"My lords!" he said eagerly, his excited voice echoing strangely in the gloomy room. "Welcome, welcome. I am called Kamp. Have you come for blessing, wisdom, or augury?"

"Augury," Merin said.

"Ah, excellent, my lords," the man said with a friendly bow. He took special note of Merin's Blade, then squinted at Renarin's face and paled slightly. "Why, Lord Kholin!" he exclaimed. "This is . . . a rare honor."

"It is a rare time," Renarin replied with a frown.

"What kind of augury do you require, my lords?" the man asked. "Of the sands, of the wines, or of the wards?"

Merin only recognized one. "Wards," he replied.

"Very good. Please, if you will—there is an augury room to your right. I shall fetch you a seer." Kamp nodded toward a small chamber at the side of the entryway, then scuttled away and disappeared into a darkened corridor.

"Bit cheery for an evil cultist," Renarin noted, frown still in place.

Merin snorted, leading the way toward the augury chamber. "Elinrah is no cult," he snapped. "It's just another part of Vorinism. Honestly, there's even a Herald outside!"

Renarin didn't respond, instead allowing himself to be led into the side-room. It was oblong, with a carved double eye on the floor. In the center of the eye, sitting on top of the glyphs *Kav* and *Dal*, was a stone table with a bench along one side and a stool on the other. Three of the blue lanterns hung along the sides of the room, and silver glyphs were carved almost ostentatiously along the walls. They were neither as beautiful nor as intricate as the glyphs in the temple—more like background decorations than actual pieces of art.

A few minutes later Kamp returned, leading an elderly man by the arm. The old man looked fairly unhappy to need the assistance, and held his head high—an attempt at dignity slightly undermined by his faltering step. As soon as the two reached the stool, the old man swiped at the younger priest's arm. "I am quite fine on my own," he snapped in a grumbling voice, seating himself. Kamp didn't let go of the old man's arm until he was completely situated, however—an action that earned him another swipe.

The old priest composed himself, gnarled hands resting on the table as he eyed Merin and Renarin in the soft light. "I don't recognize them," he said.

“They’re here for an augury, Grandfather,” Kamp said, voice light-hearted despite the treatment he had received. “*Noblemen*. The distinguished man on the left is Lord Renarin Kholin, son of our great Lord Dalenar. And, unless I guess incorrectly, our other guest is Lord Merin Kholin—he who saved the king’s life on two different occasions. They are very important men.”

The old man snorted. “What do they want?”

“An augury,” Kamp reminded gently.

The old man closed one eye, leaning forward to examine Merin a little closer. Then he grunted and bent down—teetering precariously for a moment—and hefted a small bag up from underneath the table and placed it on the table. He began working at its knots with two sets of gnarled fingers, a task that took him no small amount of effort—however, he swatted Kamp’s hands away every time the younger man reached to help.

“Grandfather is one of our finest seers,” Kamp said as the old man finally pulled free the knot and began removing a set of worn wooden disks the width of a man’s fist. “They say that wisdom and age brings great power in seership, and that a man who—”

“Shut up,” the old man snapped. He eyed Merin and Renarin again. “Who’s paying?”

Merin paused. “I will, holy one. Uh, how much is the usual donation?”

“It’s not a donation; it’s a payment,” the old man said. “And it’s fifty ishmarks.”

Renarin snorted at the extravagant price, but Merin removed a sapphire of the appropriate value and set it on the table. Sight of the large gem finally made the old man perk up, and he shook himself slightly, adopting a more formal air. His fingers moved with a bit more dexterity, bespeaking a familiarity as Kamp handed him a large sheet of paper, which the old man proceeded to put down over the table’s top.

Merin frowned, sitting back as the man flattened the large sheet, then set five candles at the table corners. This part was unfamiliar to Merin—the other seers had only drawn the disks from a bag, using the symbols on them to make predictions.

Once the paper was flat, the old man arranged the wooden disks into several piles, all face down, their glyphs hidden. “Your name?” the old man asked.

“Merin,” Merin said. “Merin Kholin.”

The man reached into his bag again, riffling through a group of stones inscribed with glyphs. He selected one—the one inscribed with *Riem*, the

basis for Merin's name—then set it at the very center of the table. “Day of birth?” the old man demanded, distractedly pulling out a piece of black charcoal and scribbling a few numbers beside the stone at the center.

“Tenth day of Mar-Nolh,” Merin said.

The old man paused. “A portentous day indeed,” he said. He looked back at the paper, holding his charcoal and frowning slightly. “Merin . . .” he mumbled. “Riem, Ezer, Rosh, Ish . . .”

“Seventy-seven,” Kamp said helpfully.

The old man hissed, swatting at the younger priest with a twisted hand. Then he proceeded to scribble the number beside the others. “All Forces, no Essences . . . another portent. You are a strange child indeed.”

Merin blushed slightly, beginning to feel embarrassed. This wasn't what he had expected at all. He glanced at Renarin, expecting to be confronted with skeptical eyes. The younger Kholin, however, sat with an interested posture, watching the old man's markings with unblinking eyes.

Numbers, Merin realized. *Should have known those would interest him.*

“And so,” the old man said, studying Merin. “Why do you seek an augury, Merin Kholin—he who was birthed on a tenthday and named after the forces?”

“We seek news of a friend,” Merin answered. “A friend we fear lost.”

“This friend's name?”

“Aredor,” Merin said. “Aredor Kholin.”

“Ah,” the old man said, exhaling slowly. “Should have guessed that one, eh? Very well.” He reached into his sack again, pulling free a stone inscribed with the glyph *shal*, and set it on the table. “Would you know his date of birth?”

“The thirty-ninth of Mar-Shin,” Renarin said.

The old man nodded, scribbling numbers around Aredor's stone as well. Once finished, he reached into his bag one last time and picked out a larger, perfectly-round stone with no markings on it. The others had been of some kind of granite, but this was a pure black—probably onyx.

“It is in order,” the old man finally said, holding the onyx sphere in his left hand. “You may begin turning over the chips, one from each of the five piles.”

Merin nodded, reaching forward and turning over the first wooden disk. This was more what he had expected.

“Ah,” the old man said. “*Khor*, time and age. What is the next disk? *Shal*? I see. Pause for a moment.”

Merin frowned, waiting as the man scribbled more on the tabletop,

forming a cascading sequence of numbers from one stone to the other. “Not good, not good,” he mumbled. “I see danger. Danger indeed for the heir Kholin. Yes, danger and fighting. The next chip.”

It was *Riem*, the symbol of unchangingness. This set the old man into a flurry of scribbling and mumbling.

“Danger?” Merin asked with a frown. “That’s it? Of course there’s danger—he rides to war!”

“Patience,” the old man snapped, idly rolling the onyx sphere in his left hand. “You have to give the numbers time!”

Merin sat back with a huff. Renarin, however, continued to lean forward. He stood slightly, bending over the table and watching the old seer’s work.

The old man eyed Renarin with annoyance. “Next disk,” he said testily.

“Jez,” Merin said, after turning it over.

“Hmm,” the old man said, scribbling. “I see . . . a difficult passage of time for House Kholin. I see divisions and storms, and . . . *and would you sit back down!*”

Renarin didn’t respond. He stood with his face pressed nearly to the table, eyes scrambling across the old man’s numeric equations. “This is wrong,” Renarin whispered. “You leave holes . . . such big holes, and you wander like a man lost, or one who cannot see.”

“Cannot see?” the old man demanded, swatting ineffectually at Renarin. “I’ve been a seer for six decades! Numerology takes time, practice, and *age*. What do you know of it!”

Renarin ignored him. “But . . . I can’t see either,” he said. “You write the questions even more crudely than I, and you have no answers. You . . .” He trailed off, glancing upward—toward the old man’s left hand, and the sphere clutched therein.

Both hands moved at once. Renarin, however, was far more spry. Moving with a dexterity Merin would have envied in the dueling ring, Renarin snatched the onyx sphere from the old man’s hand.

“This is insufferable!” the old man said, swatting Renarin repeatedly with the empty sack. Renarin took the opportunity to grab the man’s discarded charcoal stick. The old seer hissed indignantly and stood. “My pride is offended. You tempt both winds and even the Almighty’s Heralds themselves! May the Answerer himself bring you ruin!” He ignored his grandson’s pleas, waving the young man away and beginning to hobble away from the table. He paused, however, then turned back and grabbed Merin’s sapphire. Then he huffed one last time and lurched his way from the

room. Kamp followed with a worried look, shooting a bow back at Merin and Renarin before disappearing after the old man.

"Well, that was brilliant," Merin snapped. "It would help sometimes, Renarin, if you would try to be a little less strange. You even scared away an Elinrah priest!"

"Hush," Renarin said, eyes still on the table. He began to scribble on the paper, sweeping the wooden chips out of his way with a dismissive gesture. The disks flew from the table, knocking a candle to the floor and spraying wax across the dark blue stone.

"Renarin?" Merin asked, standing and frowning slightly at the intensity in his friend's eyes.

Renarin ignored him, scribbling a few more numbers. He paused, looking down at the onyx in his hand, eyes awed. Then he turned back to the numbers.

"By the winds . . ." Renarin whispered, almost as if in a trance. "He's going to die, Merin. Aredor. He's . . . going to die."

"What?" Merin asked. "Renarin, you can't know that."

"I *see* it, Merin," said the younger Kholin. "It's here. Finally, I can see. Aredor is going to die fighting the king. Jezenrosh will lose. If only father had stopped him . . . but Aredor went the other way. North, not east. By river, not by land." Renarin paused, then looked up at Merin, eyes mournful. "He's doomed. My brother is doomed."

Merin shivered. "Renarin, I . . ." He trailed off as a group of priests in blue robes appeared at the door, their expressions agitated.

"My lords," one of them asserted. "Perhaps it would be best if you left now."

Renarin's head snapped up. Sweat streamed down his brow, and he stared at the men with a disturbing frenzy. He began to shake slightly, like a man about to have a fit.

"Yes, we should leave," Merin said quickly. *So much for the augury*, he thought, regarding Renarin with worry. "Come on, Renarin."

Renarin held up the onyx sphere. "How much for the stone?" he demanded.

"My lord?" the stocky priest asked.

"What do you want for it?" Renarin asked. "What does it cost?"

"My lord, the stone of a seer is—"

The man stopped as Renarin pulled out his cloak pouch and spread its contents across the table. Three tenset coins glistened beneath the four remaining candles, an array of colors rubicon, hyacinthine, and azure.

“That will be enough,” the priest said, eyes wide.

“Enough, also, to forgive the incident this day?” Merin said, pushing Renarin from the room. “Lord Renarin has been of a strange temperament recently. The stress of his brother’s disappearance has been great.”

“Of course, my lord,” the priest said, still staring at the table’s riches.

Merin led Renarin from the temple, and the bright light seemed to restore a bit of his friend’s sanity. Renarin blinked, shading his eyes from the sun, the onyx sphere still clutched in his hand. He stood for a moment, then sighed, looking down.

“I’m all right,” he said, noticing Merin’s concerned look.

“Let’s get back to the palace and have something to eat,” Merin said. Renarin still looked a bit pale, his skin clammy.

Renarin nodded. “I feel so strange.”

“That means a lot, coming from you,” Merin said, trying a wan levity.

Renarin, however, didn’t smile. He shook his head. “I feel it still, Merin. Aredor is going to die.”

“I worry about him too,” Merin said.

“No, Merin. *I know* he is going to die.”

Merin eyed his friend, looking for signs of another . . . whatever had happened before. Renarin looked to be his old self, however—though he was even more gloomy than normal. He remained that way through the entire walk back to the palace, though Merin tried to get him to talk about other topics—anything but Aredor.

It didn’t work. And, as they walked, Merin found Renarin’s thoughts contagious. His uncertainty from before returned, his worries released from their brief captivity. He was no closer to knowing what he should do. He had still abandoned Aredor, and he had still broken with duty by not telling Lord Dalenar what he knew.

At their rooms again, Merin ordered them a simple meal, hoping the sustenance would do Renarin some good. The boy quickly found his balcony, however, and stood upon it brooding.

Merin felt little better. *I need to make a decision, one way or the other*, he realized. *It’s the indecision that is destroying me*. He felt like Aredor had looked that week before making the decision to leave.

But what decision to make?

What if there’s another answer?

“Renarin,” he said, standing. “What was that you said about Aredor before? Going north, not east?”

“When he left,” Renarin said idly, “Aredor said no horse would catch

him—even though he knew that Father had taken all of the fastest horses with him for the messengers to use. Aredor shouldn't have been able to stay ahead, not when Father had all the best stock. Yet he did. Father never found him. That's because Aredor didn't take a path anyone expected. He went north, then took the river east."

"But the river doesn't flow strongly enough to carry traffic in the summer," Merin said.

Renarin shook his head. "I saw it, Merin. That's what he did. I don't know how, but he did it."

Merin opened his mouth to object, but paused. Long ago, just after Merin had been given his Shardblade, Aredor had told him something about Renarin. *He notices things, Merin. Things regular people just don't see.*

I've rarely known him to be wrong.

"We need to go after him, Renarin," Merin announced.

Renarin looked up. "We can't," he said. "My father . . ."

"We have no choice!" Merin said. "Look at us. We can't stay here, worrying like this. He's your brother and my friend. We can't let him die alone."

Renarin stood quietly.

"We won't fight, though," Merin explained, stepping closer and speaking quietly. "We'll leave in secret, like Aredor, and follow him. Then, when we get there, we'll convince him to come back. We won't disobey Lord Dalenar's command, but we also won't break Aredor's trust."

"We won't be able to convince him," Renarin said. "And besides, my father commanded that no one go to the war at all—we'll be breaking his command if we leave without his permission."

"We'll break the command, but not the honor of it," Merin said. "Renarin, I can't stay here any more. I have to go—this worrying is driving us both mad! It will work out. The Almighty will see to that."

Renarin didn't look convinced.

"Would you rather stay behind?" Merin asked.

Renarin looked up, then shook his head. "Let's go, then. Quickly, before I think about it too much."

chapter 40

TALN 8

TALN AND LHAN CROUCHED in a side chamber, the room lit only by a window on the far wall. Footsteps, yells, and the sounds of battle echoed through the palace's stone hallways.

Lhan's breathing was quick. "What . . . what's happening?" the monk demanded.

"Someone has taken the Oathgates," Taln said quietly from his position at the doorway. The outside hallway was empty. Taln turned from the hallway door and slunk across the room to the window, peeking outside. "They sent soldiers through to secure the palace."

He could see a large assemblage of soldiers gathering outside the window, right at the top of the ramp leading down into the city proper. The men appeared to be lounging idly, as if waiting for orders, but their postures were slightly forced. They were members of the invading army, sent to make certain no one escaped the palace and warned the people below. Whoever the invaders were, they worked efficiently. The ramp had been secured within minutes, and the attack was well-placed. The palace was probably understaffed with soldiers, most having gone with their various lords to join King Elhokar in his warmaking.

Well, that way is cut off. There were at least fifty soldiers atop the ramp—far more than he would like to try fighting on his own without a Shardblade. He probably could have reached the ramp ahead of them, but he'd chosen

to hide instead—fearing that Lhan wouldn't be able to keep up. Apparently, that had been a poor decision.

Lhan listened at the doorway a little longer, obviously trying to determine the validity of Taln's words. Eventually, the monk joined Taln at the window. "Who could it be?" he asked nervously.

Taln shook his head. "They're Kanaran," he said. "Either Veden or Prallan. Perhaps Jah Keved has attacked, or maybe some remnants from the conquered Prallan nations are trying to get revenge on your king. Their identity doesn't matter to us—our job is to get past those soldiers and escape before the city is captured."

Lhan frowned. "We can't go. We have to do something!"

"Like what?" Taln said, leaving the window. The western ramp had been taken, but perhaps he could beat the invaders to the eastern ramp.

"I don't know," Lhan admitted. "Don't you care if the city falls?"

"This city fell centuries ago," Taln said frankly, glancing out the doorway and making certain the hallway was still clear. He paused, looking back and noting Lhan's concern. "Look, if you want to help your countrymen, you have to escape the palace first. Get to the lower city with me, and you can raise the alarm if you wish. It matters not to me."

Lhan nodded, joining Taln as he crept from the room and began moving through the palace. He tried to stay to the periphery of the labyrinthine structure, away from the Oathgates. The invaders would have to bring in many soldiers quickly, secure the palace, then try and take the city gates by subterfuge. Ral Eram's people would be accustomed to seeing large groups of soldiers moving through the streets—King Elhokar's war preparations had been steady during the last few weeks.

It was a daring attack, but a clever one. The First Capital was isolated in its cliffside location. An occupying force could hold the city with ease, assuming it gained control of both city walls and Oathgates.

But how? Taln thought. *How did they get through the Oathgate? Elhokar would have been a fool to leave his side open to invasion.*

It didn't matter. True, the bickerings of men were harmful—divisiveness would lead to destruction when the Khothen came. But, for the moment, it didn't matter to Taln who held Ral Eram. One unbelieving kingdom or another, it was the same.

A sudden gasp from Lhan drew his attention. Taln paused, one hand against a stone wall as he listened for the sounds of battle. The monk's face had grown pale, and he was looking down a side passage, toward something Taln couldn't see.

“What?” Taln hissed, joining the monk.

He needn't have asked. Bodies lay scattered through the hallway, blood pooling on the white marble. They wore the simple clothing of servants, their bodies hacked and mangled, obviously cut down as they tried to run.

Lhan turned, retching. Taln stood silently, observing the carnage.

“Why?” Lhan finally whispered.

“They need to secure the palace,” Taln said quietly. “Killing the occupants is faster, and safer, than trying to capture them. This way no one escapes to raise warning.”

Lhan turned away from the slaughter, slumping with his back against a wall, shuddering sickly. Taln stared on. The dead stared back.

Oh, Almighty . . . He thought, bowing his head. *Sometimes I wonder if they're worth protecting.*

A scream sounded from behind. Lhan glanced up. The scream was close, just down the hallway.

Taln didn't turn toward the sound. He looked through the hallway of corpses, past the death toward a window at the far end. Through it, he could just barely make out the slope of the eastern ramp. It was empty.

I need to go. This fight is not mine. I need to escape, so that I can—

The scream sounded again. Lhan scrambled to his feet, apparently trying to judge the sound's location. His hands shook as he scrambled over and picked up a discarded length of wood one of the dead peasants had tried to use as a weapon.

Lhan paused, looking down at his weapon. The scream sounded again, and he looked up. His posture was nervous, his hands quivering. Then he struck off down the hallway toward the sound.

Lhan would fight. Even though the monk had never held a weapon, he would fight and die to protect the one who screamed in fear. Lhan might be an idler, as he always claimed, but he was a good man.

Some of them were definitely worth saving.

Taln looked down at the bodies as the screams called to him, feeling an anger begin to burn in his chest. Three thousand years had men been on Roshar. Three thousand years of being killed by the Khothen, buffeted by highstorms, and surviving upon the harsh rocks of an inhospitable world. Three thousand years, and they still had not learned. They still had to kill.

Quietly cursing himself for a fool, Taln turned his back on both corpses and windows. He stalked down the hallway, passing Lhan, following the sounds, and slammed open a door at the end.

A group of the fake Aleth soldiers stood with corpses at their feet. A small cluster of terrified servants cringed near the far wall, women clutching children, men huddled and frightened. Those with the will to fight back already lay in their own blood.

The door shook as it slammed against the far wall, and the soldiers looked up. Most held spears, though a sword-wielding nobleman directed their work. The officer waved toward Taln, barking a command in a language Taln almost understood.

A spearman approached Taln with a grim expression. The soldier's eyes bespoke a guilty resolve. He had convinced himself that, as a simple footsoldier, he was not responsible for the immoral decisions of his betters.

"You should know better," Taln whispered angrily.

The spearman thrust with his weapon, and Taln was finally free. No angry monks stopped him this time, no noblemen turned their backs, and no Lady Jasnah appeared to stay his hand.

It had been centuries since he had last been able to fight back.

Taln ducked to the side, snatching the spear's haft and yanking it forward. The soldier yelped, falling off-balance, and Taln grabbed him by the arm, twisting with a firm yank. The arm popped in its joint, and the man screamed in pain as Taln jerked him around, grabbed him by the back of the neck, and slammed his forehead against the stone doorway.

The soldier slumped to the ground, and Taln kicked the spear up into his hand. He spun it and fell into a fighting stance.

The other soldiers stared down at their unconscious comrade. The frightened servants fell silent, looking up with hopeful faces.

"Kill him!" the officer yelled, his foreign words becoming distinct as Taln's mind decrypted the changes in the Veden language since his departure.

Taln did not wait for the soldiers to obey. He leapt forward, spinning his spear in a staff-form. The four spearman fell into a line, like battlefield warriors, holding their spears as if to thrust. Taln knocked their weapons aside, slamming the butt of his spear into a head as he spun past. He ducked beneath a spear swipe, turning to ram his weapon through a second man's side, just below the breastplate. The soldier stumbled to his knees, his death throes twisting the still-impaling spear in Taln's fingers. Taln dropped the weapon, ducked to the side, and kicked another fallen spear up into his hands. Then he raised it to deflect a third soldier's thrust.

Taln jumped backward, spinning his weapon around so the tip faced behind him, then rammed it through the surprised nobleman's neck. Taln

turned, sidestepping a spear thrust, then spun his weapon around and stabbed his attacker in the thigh. The man dropped to one knee, and Taln took him down with a second thrust to the face.

The final spearman tried a wild thrust, but Taln rapped the haft of his own weapon against the man's spear three times in blinding succession, stepping forward with each hit, then dropped his spear as he got too close for effectiveness and punched his opponent square in the face. The spearman fell unconscious. Taln spun one final time, cloak billowing as he kicked a third spear into his hand. He raised it carefully, eyeing the fallen men for further danger. The impaled spearman finally jerked to a painful stop, and none of the others moved.

The room was still. "By the winds . . ." a voice finally whispered. Lhan stood at the doorway, eyes wide with shock.

Taln lowered his spear, the metal tip clicking against the stone floor. Then he dropped the weapon, waving toward the frightened servants. "See to them," he ordered Lhan as he moved to check on the servants who had been struck down before he arrived. There were five. A couple of the dead lay clutching makeshift weapons—lengths of wood or kitchen knives. Only one had a pulse, an aging man in the uniform of a citizen courier.

Taln rolled the injured man onto his side, pressing his hand against the still-bleeding spear wound. He reflexively reached out to the *Nahel* bond within him, preparing to draw upon the life energy of the thousands who were linked to his Soul Tone.

And found nothing. He cursed quietly. There would be no healings this Return until he discovered what had happened to his powers. He would have to do things the old-fashioned way. He reached over, sliding a dagger from a dead soldier's belt, then cut away the wounded man's shirt. The spear wound was relatively shallow.

"Father!" a younger woman said, rushing to the man's side. Lhan gently pulled her away as Taln cleaned the wound with his water flask, then bound it with a strip of cloth from the man's own cloak. He nodded to Lhan, motioning for him to let the girl attend the fallen man.

Taln stood, assessing the situation. There were nine servants remaining, minus the wounded man, but four were women and three were children. The two men were an unimpressive pair; obviously brothers, they were spindly, nervous, and dressed in the simple garb of kitchen assistants.

"You two," Taln said, kicking a pair of spears into his hands. "Take these." The two kitchenmen caught the spears in uncertain hands.

"I . . . my lord—" one began.

"I know," Taln interrupted. "You don't know how to use them. Try and look like you do." He tossed a third spear to Lhan. "Same for you." He nodded to the four women. "Two of you, fashion a litter from that nobleman's cloak and the two remaining spears so we can pull the wounded man behind us. One of you, watch after the children. And you . . ." The final woman was a stout, middle-aged scullery maid with a wrinkled, unfrightened expression. Taln tossed her the nobleman's sword. She caught it with surprise. "They won't expect you to be armed," Taln said. "Find a way to exploit their ignorance. Let's move."

As the women crafted their litter, Taln gathered daggers from the fallen soldiers. He kept two and gave the other three to the unarmed women. Then he told the servants to remain still for a moment as he ducked back into the hallway and checked the eastern ramp.

It was now guarded by another squadron of soldiers.

Taln gritted his teeth, then made his way back to the room. The women were still working on the litter when Taln re-entered. As Taln tried to decide what to do, Lhan approached him. "It appears I was wrong about you again," the monk said. "Where did you learn to . . ."

Lhan trailed off as Taln regarded him with a suffering expression.

"Oh, right," Lhan mumbled. "Three-thousand-year-old pseudo-divinity. Well, got any holy powers that will get us out of the palace?"

Taln snorted, tucking one of his daggers into the knife-fold on the inside of his cloak. "You're the one who wanted to stay and help."

Lhan looked helplessly at the spear in his hand, then down at the dead servants and soldiers. He gritted his teeth. "Right. Where next, then?"

Taln shook his head. "Your first instinct was right. We need to leave. I can't fight an entire army."

"Do you think they intend to . . .?"

"Kill everyone in the palace?" Taln asked. "Probably. That would be the easiest way to insure that no one gets out to warn the city guard. They'll likely take a few hostages from among the upper nobility to use as leverage against Elhokar, but it's doubtful that even those will survive the invasion."

"The upper nobility . . ." Lhan said. "You mean, like Lady Jasnah?"

Taln paused. *Yes. Exactly like Lady Jasnah.* Why did the thought bother him? He owed the woman nothing. Or did he? She had saved his life, perhaps twice. Though she thought him a madman, she had seen to his care, even his comfort, during his stay in Ral Eram.

He had seen the way that hostage women, even nobility, were often treated by their captors.

The ramps were blocked, the palace sealed. In better circumstances, perhaps he could have taken the Oathgates and stopped the flow of soldiers, but he didn't have the manpower to attempt such a dangerous move. There were, however, other ways out of the building—ways known only to those who had been present when the foundations were lain.

It was on the way. If he took them to the cellars, he would pass through the Aleth royal quarters. It would probably be only a short stop to check and see if Lady Jasnah were still alive, assuming he knew specifically which rooms belonged to her.

Taln turned, regarding the steady-backed maid, who had taken command of the small group of maids and was directing the construction of the litter. The woman worked efficiently—her presence was obviously a comfort to the younger girls, and they had almost completed their task.

“Woman,” Taln said.

She turned. “Denia, my lord.”

“Denia,” Taln said. “Do you know which quarters belong to . . .”

“Lady Jasnah, my lord?” She asked. “The lady was to be married today. Do you want her quarters, or her husband's quarters?”

Married? Taln thought with shock. “Her quarters,” he finally decided. It was as good a choice as any.

“I can show you then, my lord,” the chambermaid said. “Once we reach the proper section.”

Taln nodded to himself, stepping out the eastern door and listening in the hallway beyond. He heard faint sounds of battle coming from the rightmost corridor. “This way,” he said, waving his nervous group forward.

“That way?” Lhan asked. “But that's the direction of the fighting!”

“Where there is fighting, there is resistance,” Taln said. “And that is where we want to be. Come.”

chapter 41

JASNAH 9

THE VORIN WEDDING CEREMONY was an archaic tradition, a remnant of epochs when the religion had held far more sway than it did in modern Roshar. Vorinism hadn't had any real power since the turn of the epoch, when the Oathshard Kings had proclaimed the cycle of Returns broke. The religion's eventual decision to stop warning about Stormshades and Returns—accepting as canonical the reports that the Heralds themselves had declared the Khothen defeated—had only weakened its stance further.

In modern Roshar it was fashionable to profess Vorin allegiance, but few noblemen gave much thought to the Almighty's supposed whims beyond paying their tributes and attending the occasional reading from the *Arguments*. The monasteries were no longer the political power they once had been.

Still, tradition was the foremost law of Aleth noble culture, and even a professed heretic such as Jasnah could not escape a Vorin wedding. Of course, as much as she was displeased by her forced submission to the Almighty's 'approval' of her union, the emotion could not compete with her distaste of the man she was to marry.

Meridas stood with the air of smug satisfaction of a man who thought himself responsible for far more than he could legitimately take credit. He wore a fashionable pair of long leather boots, a pair of loose trousers bulging out over the top, and a militarily-cut overshirt with wide cuffs. His

cloak was blue, of course, to signify his union with the Kholin house, and it matched Jasnah's *talla*, which Meridas himself had purchased and sent to her. It was a fabulously extravagant gown, dressed with frills and colored with the deepest of blue dyes. The left sleeve, traditionally long, was tiered with overlapping swaths of light blue silk down to the cuff, which ended just short of her ankles.

The location for the ceremony was the Eleventh Hall. The wedding was attended mostly by women, for their men were at war beside their king. Her brother himself was noticeably absent. Elhokar's official reason was the pressing need to respond to Jezenrosh's attempted assassination. The truth, Jasnah suspected, was more private. She had seen Elhokar several times before he left the palace to join his troops, and each time he had been unable to meet her eyes. It did not surprise her that he had chosen not to attend the wedding.

The ceremony began, and Jasnah noted with distaste that Lhardon, the obsequious First Monk of Peacehome, had been chosen to officiate. Lhardon stood at the front of the room beside Meridas, beaming at the importance of his position—and probably thinking of the generous tribute her brother would have given Peacehome in exchange for performing the ceremony. The First Monk began with an overdone speech, then waved for a hundred candle-bearing monks to enter the hall, lighting the way for Jasnah to approach.

She did so, trying to keep her head high and her face expressionless, despite her sickened stomach. Shinri had disappeared the night of the dueling competition—undoubtedly Elhokar had assumed the girl knew too much, and had ordered her silenced. The thought made Jasnah despair; Shinri had done nothing wrong other than to associate with Jasnah. Her death, like those of Nelshenden and Kemnar, could be attributed directly to Jasnah's foolish devotion to her brother.

Jasnah had spent the last few weeks locked within her rooms, only allowed freedom when escorted by a tenseset soldiers sworn to Meridas. Every letter she scribed was confiscated by the guards, presumably to be translated by monks and likely destroyed. Those responses which did come had been opened and perused, and were always of little use. She had hoped that some of her more subtle pleas for aid might go unnoticed by her captors, but she suspected that Meridas himself was the one looking through her letters. For an unmarried man such as himself to excel so wonderfully at politics, he had likely been forced to learn some traditionally feminine skills.

When she reached the front of the room, Jasnah knelt on the cushion,

bowing her head before the standing form of the man who would soon be her husband. She knelt with resignation, not without hope. Though her skin squirmed at the thought of Meridas touching her, she had never expected anything but a marriage of necessity. For now, there was little she could do against the men who had betrayed her. However, the wife of a *Parshen* was a powerful woman, and men were creatures of short memory, quick to laxness and presumed victory. She had seen that her brother kept his throne during the chaotic years following their father's death. She could see it lost to him during the uncertain years of conquest.

The ceremony proceeded, Jasnah kneeling in the uncomfortable position as Lhardon droned on, quoting from the *Arguments* and *The Way of Kings*. He drew upon the formal Vorin ceremonial texts as well, quoting passages that implied nobility was granted and suffered by the monks—passages that would never have been tolerated outside a wedding speech.

Soon the time came for the final piece of the ceremony. Lhardon proffered his blessing, and Meridas extended his hand to accept Jasnah as his own.

Jasnah looked up at Meridas, regarding the oily merchant in his finery, his hand proffered. When she took that hand, she would legally be his, bound by promise to protect his interests and his power.

The room was silent as she stared at the open palm. Lhardon coughed uncomfortably, and women in the crowd shot each other nervous glances.

Can I do it? Jasnah wondered. Political necessity or not, can I marry the man who killed Nelshenden?

The door burst open, a sudden breeze causing candles to flicker. Heads turned to regard a bloodied soldier. "My lord!" the man cried, stumbling forward, monks and noblewomen shuffling away like scattering rodents. "The palace is under assault!"

"What foolishness is this?" Meridas demanded, lowering his hand.

The soldier held his side, blood dripping between fingers. "The Oathgates, my lord. They have been breached!"

Meridas paused, then white smoke formed around his hand. "Take my wife to my chambers!" he commanded four men of his honor guard as his Blade appeared in his hand. "The rest of you, come with me."

The soldiers pulled her to her feet, several ladies in waiting scrambling forward to help Jasnah gather up her extensive blue seasilk train. The soldiers nervously led her from the room, the monks and other nobility staying behind, muttering amongst themselves in uncertain voices.

The Oathgates, breached? It was unlikely. The Gates had been designed so that no such thing could happen—no king, even one of the infamously

noble kings of the original Oathpact, would allow an uncontrollable portal into the center of his capital city. Both sides of a gate had to be opened by Awakeners before passage was possible.

Unlikely, true, but not impossible. An Awakener spy could have been sent—a young one, new to his power. One who had not lost his sensitivity to the outside world, but instead retained his ambition and interest in politics. If such an Awakener could have found his way to the Oathgate chamber, opening their side . . .

But who would invade? Dalenar? Had he joined with Jezenrosh? Somehow Jasnah couldn't see her stately uncle working in such a devious manner. Thalenah, then? King Amelin was said to be very lax with his Awakeners, allowing them free rein of the city. Ral Eram was even more depleted of troops and Shardbearers than it had been during the extended Prallah campaign—Elhokar wanted to make quick work of Jezenrosh, attacking with flare before his allies remembered how wearied they were of war. What if the First Capital had proven too tempting a gem for an outside invader?

Such were her thoughts as the guards rushed her toward the Aleth section of the palace. She was so wrapped up in her machinations that she didn't notice the attack until the first guard fell dead.

Jasnah stumbled back in shock as the man died, her ladies screaming in horror. Meridas's soldiers leapt into action, defending themselves against a group of armed attackers who burst from a doorway at the side. The attackers had superior numbers, however, and they quickly overwhelmed the three men. In a matter of seconds, all three of Meridas's soldiers had fallen. Jasnah looked for escape, but knew that her dress would keep her from moving with any speed. She would easily—

Jasnah froze, realizing with shock that she recognized one of the attackers. "Kemnar?" she asked incredulously.

Kemnar bowed slightly, motioning for his men to secure the hallway. "My lady," he said.

Jasnah exhaled in relief, holding up her dress and stepping over a guard's body. Her lady attendants cowered behind her, confused. She had thought Kemnar dead for certain—she should have known better. "It took you long enough," she said.

Kemnar smiled toothily. He bore a fresh scar on his face, one that came dangerously close to his right eye. "Sorry about that," he said. "Elhokar knew I escaped. Had half the soldiers in the city looking for me. Fortunately, I know a number of people who've made quite a profession out of not being found."

“Kemnar!” one of the men shouted. She recognized several of them from her personal guard. The others were new to her. “There is fighting coming from this direction.”

“Gather up the fallen swords,” Kemnar ordered, stepping forward and picking up Jasnah’s train. “We’ll probably be tight for funds, and we should be able to pawn them. Watch that corridor—I don’t want any surprises.” He looked at her. “Sorry about this, my lady,” he said, taking his sword and beginning to slice off the back of her dress.

“Then . . .” Jasnah said, “the palace is really under attack?”

“Yes,” Kemnar replied in a low voice. “We were planning to wait for this evening to rescue you, but when the ruckus started, we decided to move.” He pulled the bulk of the train free and tossed it aside. Then he waved to his men. “Let’s go,” he said. “Our primary concern is Lady Kholin. Let that fool Meridas worry about the invaders.”

The ten men nodded, escorting Jasnah and the three frightened ladies-in-waiting away from the sounds of fighting, toward the eastern section of the palace. As they walked, Jasnah caught sight of a doorway into one of the servants’ quarters. She froze, gasping slightly despite herself as she saw the bodies littered within.

Kemnar paused beside her, face grim. Then he nodded for them to continue.

“Kemnar . . .” Jasnah said.

“My lady, we have no choice,” he said. “What would you have us do? Fight to defend the palace and risk losing you to the invaders? Do you have any idea how valuable a captive the king’s own sister would make?”

Jasnah nodded, steeling herself against the carnage. She had seen death before. She had spent years with Elhokar on the battlefields of Prallah. But common people were somehow different than soldiers.

“At least the massacre tells us it’s not Dalenar who is invading,” she said, moving forward again.

Kemnar nodded. “They must be trying to secure the palace, taking control of the Oathgates quickly before news can reach Elhokar. Some remnants of the Prallan rebels, perhaps? This *Rantah* group that Lord Dalenar thinks is behind the death of the Traitor? If they got an army to the Traitor without us seeing, they might have been able to get one into the city.”

“Perhaps,” Jasnah said.

Their trail ended at a large, unoccupied set of chambers in the eastern wing. It had a wide terrace with large open doors that overlooked the city below. Kemnar peered through the balcony doors, then cursed quietly.

“What?” Jasnah whispered, joining him and peeking out into the sunlight.

“The ramp,” Kemnar said, pointing. A squad of at least five tenset soldiers lounged near the top of the stone ramp leading down into the city proper.

“But they wear Aleth blue!” Jasnah said eagerly. “We can bring them back to the palace and—”

“Those are no soldiers of ours, my lady,” Kemnar informed her. “There are hardly that many left in the entire city, and they would never gather here. They’re too busy guarding the walls. The invaders want to box us in.”

Kemnar ducked back. He didn’t speak, but Jasnah could see the troubled look in his eyes. If the eastern ramp, the one farthest from the Oathgate chamber, was guarded . . .

“We should check the western ramp, just in case,” Kemnar decided. “Other than the ramps, the only way out is through the Oathgates themselves, and I doubt—”

“Kemnar!” the lookout shouted. “We’ve been spotted!”

Kemnar cursed, grabbing his sword and waving his men to fan out. At the end of their hallway, a large squad of soldiers strode their direction. Kemnar was right; despite their blue uniforms, they were collectively too tall and broad to be Aleths.

Vedens Jasnah thought. It would explain the slaughter—Vedenar was far more militaristic than Alethkar, its soldiers known for their harshness.

Kemnar slammed the hallway door shut, but there was no bar, only a small latch. He jumped back as the door smashed open, and the battle began.

The fight went poorly from the very beginning. Jasnah backed up to stay out of the way, but there was nowhere to run. They dared not escape through the terrace, for just beyond—mercifully out of earshot—waited the ramp-guarding soldiers. Kemnar’s men were outnumbered nearly two to one, and they had to worry about protecting Jasnah and keeping any of the enemy from escaping through the terrace and bringing enemies up from behind. Jasnah watched her defenders die—they fell with heroism, but they died all the same. Soon, only Kemnar and two other men remained, backed up in a tight circle around Jasnah and the three ladies. Her protectors’ breathing was heavy, limbs wet with blood. Nine enemy remained, seven spearmen and two sword-bearing noblemen.

There was a lull as the two sides regarded one another, their companions dying on the floor around them. Kemnar glanced up suddenly, his eyes flickering toward something behind the invaders. One of the soldiers noticed the motion, turning. He mumbled something, alerting his companions. A

man stood at the end of the hallway. Alone, dark, almost like a shadow. He was unarmed.

Taln, the madman.

Jasnah groaned quietly. She had forgotten that this was the day she had arranged for his departure through the Oathgates. She had unwittingly brought him to his death.

Taln stepped forward.

“No, Taln!” Jasnah yelled. “Run!”

He did run—toward the soldiers. He stooped down, cloak fluttering as he dashed forward with a speed that belayed his size. The nobleman at the back raised his sword to cut the madman down.

Steel glittered in Taln’s fingers as twin daggers appeared from beneath his cloak. Surprisingly, he dodged the nobleman’s attack, then rammed his daggers into the man’s upper arms. The nobleman screamed in pain. Taln snatched the falling sword, then rammed its hilt into the nobleman’s face, the force of the blow tossing the man backward.

The nobleman fell against the back ranks of his own men, and the battle pulsed to life again—but with a change. The new participant drastically altered the flow of the conflict. Taln was a boulder rolled through a patch of insects. He was a spinning god of death—quick, precise, almost inhuman. He sliced the end off a spear as it thrust for him, then easily beheaded its bearer. As Kemnar stumbled near Jasnah, falling beneath the assault of several soldiers, Taln hurled his sword. The fine steel shortsword whipped through the fray, slamming into the head of one of Kemnar’s assailants, causing the man to stumble long enough for Kemnar to regain his footing.

Taln kicked up the two-foot end of the spear he had sheared from its haft—catching the pseudo-weapon without even glancing toward it—then plunged it dagger-like into the chest of an attacking spearman. Even as the attacker fell, Taln bent to the side, dodging another spear. He grabbed the offending spear, yanking it in its bearer’s hands so the haft came up and took its owner in the chin. A kick sent the man reeling back into the second nobleman, stunning both long enough for Taln to duck and rip the broken spearhead out of the dying soldier, only to plunge it into the chest of the off-balanced spearman. The soldier fell, dropping his spear as if into Taln’s waiting hand, and this came up to block the nobleman’s attack. The nobleman’s sword bit deeply into the wood, and Taln spun the spear, sliding both weapons from their owner’s hands and dropping them to the ground.

The nobleman glanced toward his sword as Taln reached to the side, where the second spearman was trying to pull the broken spearhead from

his chest. Taln wrenched the spearhead free—letting the man collapse with a sigh—then slammed it into the nobleman’s back as the man ducked to retrieve his sword.

Kemnar and his two companions held their ground, finishing off the last two soldiers. As the final Veden fell, Kemnar jerked to a surprised halt, regarding the swath of dead men at Taln’s feet. The madman was completely unwounded.

Kemnar whispered the tenth name of the Almighty, lowering his sword. The other guards did likewise. Then, from behind Taln, a group of people poured into the hallway. Kemnar fell into a fighting stance before realizing that these were not more soldiers—far from it. Though most bore weapons of some sort, they held them uncertainly. There had to have been at least fifty of them—palace servants and other citizens, a group of children, and several litters carrying the wounded.

Taln stepped forward as Kemnar checked his fallen comrades for life. The madman stood before Jasnah for a moment, quiet, but breathing deeply from the battle. “Lady Kholin,” he finally said.

“Madman,” she replied, tipping her head.

“It seems your family isn’t the only one who dreams of holding all ten Oathgates for itself.”

Jasnah flushed with anger despite herself. “Do not compare me with these,” she said, nodding to the slaughterers.

Taln eyed them, then nodded. “You are right. I apologize.”

“You fight well,” she noted. “Unexpectedly well. Perhaps I shouldn’t have kept you from taking back your sword at the feast.”

Taln smiled slightly. “If you hadn’t stopped me, I wouldn’t be here now, and you would be dead at these soldiers’ hands. The Almighty’s ways.” Then he turned, eyes losing their smile as he regarded the dead. Kemnar had found two men alive, and was helping one to his feet while his companions bound the other’s wounds. He would have to be carried.

Jasnah’s stomach turned at the sight of the massive group of peasants. How were they to escape with such a great number? In fact, how would anyone escape? Taln had rescued them, but if the Oathgates had fallen as Kemnar claimed, an army was likely on its way through at the moment. Though Taln fought amazingly well, he still fought as a man, with steel and wood. She had seen no signs of supposed divinity, and one man—no matter how good—would not be able to stand against such odds.

Taln obviously saw the look in her eyes. He moved over, peeking carefully out at the ramp beyond.

“We can’t escape,” she whispered.

Taln shook his head. “There is another way. Isel, Jeniz, help Lady Jasnah’s men with their wounded. The rest of you, let’s go. We don’t have much time.”

Two of the palace servants hopped forward, moving to assist Kemnar. The rest of the citizens stood nervously, gripping their weapons. Kemnar glanced at Jasnah questioningly. She held up a hand, bidding him not to join the fleeing peasants. The madman spoke with presumed authority, obviously giving no thought to the fact that Jasnah, or even Kemnar, grossly outranked him. In another man, the assumptions would have been insultingly arrogant. To Taln they simply seemed . . . natural. He had led men before. Whoever he really was, that much was obvious.

“Where do you seek to take us?” Jasnah demanded as Taln picked through the fallen weapons, distributing them as he saw fit.

The madman looked up. “The palace cellars,” he informed. “There’s a passage there into the caverns beneath the mountain.”

Jasnah raised an eyebrow skeptically.

Taln sighed, then approached her, holding the fallen nobleman’s sword. “Look,” he said quietly. “You think I’m insane, but I obviously learned how to fight somewhere. Is it inconceivable that I might know something about this building that you do not? Your family has, after all, lived here for less than a generation.”

Jasnah narrowed her eyes, but said nothing. Taln obviously took the silence as assent. He handed her the sheathed sword. “Here,” he said. “Hold this. I may need it later.”

With that, he waved his rag-tag group forward, taking the point position, followed closely by several younger men and his Peacehome monk friend.

Kemnar stepped over next to her, watching the strange group leave the room. “The cellars will leave us trapped,” he noted.

“We’re trapped anyway,” Jasnah decided. “Besides, it might earn us a little bit of time. You said the invaders are trying to secure the palace—they’ll check the cellars last, since they have no exits.”

No exits. Her own words fell harshly on her ears. Kemnar seemed to accept them, however, and he waved his three able-bodied companions to close around Jasnah to escort her after Taln’s troop.

The going was brutally nerve-wracking, but mercifully uneventful. The palace felt oddly silent now, an atmosphere enhanced when they passed corpses in hallways or rooms. Some were palace guards, but more often they were regular citizens, cut down as they ran or hid, slaughtered regardless of gender or age.

The hallways, once familiar to her, now felt alien. Jasnah shivered. After a short time of travel, Taln held up a hand, stopping the procession. Jasnah pushed her way forward, past wounded servants and young men with untested weapons. Taln had given some of them swords, she noted, despite their citizen status.

“What?” she asked as he stood quietly.

“Listening,” he said. “There is battle up ahead. I had assumed the palace secured, but someone obviously fights on.”

Jasnah frowned. She heard nothing. The direction Taln had indicated led to the Oathgates—their group had been forced to skirt uncomfortably close to the center of the palace in order to reach the cellar stairwells.

Taln waved her to remain where she was, then crept forward to a hallway intersection. He returned a few moments later. “We’ll have to sneak past the next intersection,” he explained to Jasnah and the few men who stood near the front.

“Shouldn’t we go and help whoever’s fighting?” the monk asked.

Taln shook his head. “We shouldn’t have delayed this long as it is. It isn’t your life and mine we risk now, Lhan, but the lives of all those we’ve saved. We cannot afford further recklessness.”

Taln organized the peasants into a line, then approached the intersection and waved them forward in small groups. Not waiting for her turn, Jasnah joined him at the intersection, the weight of the sword he had given her unfamiliar in her hands. She ignored his suffering glare, turning to peer past him down the leftmost hallway of the intersection. She was mildly surprised to realize that he was right—there were sounds coming from that direction. The hallway broadened near its end into a small entryway, and she could make out forms moving in this section, though she could see nothing distinct. Occasionally, a yell of pain would carry through the stone passages. There were, however, no sounds of metal on metal. Just the screams.

“More executions,” she said grimly.

“No,” Taln corrected as the servants continued to pass. “It’s . . . something else. Those screams are all Veden.”

“You claim to be able to tell accents from screams?” Jasnah scoffed.

Taln nodded distractedly, looking down the hallway with confused eyes. Then his eyes opened wide. He turned with a sudden motion. “Lhan! The cellar stairwells are two intersections up on the right. Lead the people down and wait for me there.”

Lhan opened his mouth to object, but Taln ignored him, taking off down the side hallway in a fast creep.

Jasnah cursed quietly, watching him go. What was so important that he would abandon the people so quickly after giving his speech on not being ‘reckless’? *He’s insane*, she reminded herself. *He may seem stable, but he’s not.* However, insane or not, they needed him—if the secret passage in the cellars did exist, Taln would have to live long enough to show it to them.

“Kemnar, go with the people and protect them,” she ordered. “I’m going to bring the idiot back.”

“I’ll send my men,” Kemnar replied, “but I’m not leaving you.”

“Fine,” Jasnah said, rising and moving down the hallway with as much stealth as she could in the frilled blue dress. She could see Taln up ahead, standing in a pillar alcove just before the hallway widened. She needn’t have worried about sneaking—the soldiers ahead weren’t watching their backs, instead focused on something Jasnah couldn’t see. She joined Taln in his alcove, receiving another suffering glare.

“What is it?” she hissed, ignoring him.

Taln nodded past the pillar, as something walked into view ahead of them—a man. Meridas.

“My Blade,” Taln whispered.

The nobleman stood indifferently before a group of nervous invaders, their spears held at the ready. The remains of those foolish enough to attack lay on the ground already, dismembered in various ways. Meridas held Taln’s Shardblade casually by his side, point down, in his odd relaxed dueling stance.

Meridas dashed forward without warning. The seven spearmen didn’t stand a chance—not against a Shardblade. Meridas took them down in three swings.

“He’s good,” Taln noted with a frown. “I didn’t expect that.”

“Meridas!” Jasnah called, showing herself as the nobleman wiped his sword.

Meridas raised an eyebrow as he saw her, then frowned as he saw Taln. “You should escape the palace, woman,” he said, turning away from her and stepping over a body. He walked away impassively.

“Where are you going?”

“The Oathgates,” he said. “I’ll cut my way through and escape to warn your foolish brother. I told him not to leave the city so undermanned.”

“The Oathgates are sealed,” Taln said. “King Elhokar ordered them closed. How will you escape through them without an Awakener?”

Meridas paused.

Just then, a door at the side of the hallway flew open, revealing two men

in Shardplate—probably summoned to deal with Meridas. They assessed the situation and the dead soldiers, then one stepped forward and held out his Blade in a dueling posture.

Meridas smiled, as if their arrival were a pleasant gift, and nodded his head to the first man.

Beside Jasnah, Taln tensed.

“No!” she hissed. “Theses are Shadbearers! They’ll cut you down without—”

Taln reached up, ignoring her as he grabbed the hilt of the sword she still carried. In front of them, Meridas and the first man began their duel.

“Shadbearers are like other men,” Taln whispered, hand on hilt. “Swing something at them, and they can’t help reacting. Watch.”

With that, Taln whipped the sword out—leaving the sheath in Jasnah’s hand—and jumped toward the second Shadbearer. The man turned in surprise, raising his weapon. Taln swung his sword, and the Shadbearer parried reflexively, slicing Taln’s weapon in half.

The Shadbearer didn’t notice the dagger in Taln’s other hand until it was too late. The Veden cried out, dying with a length of steel in his eye, and Taln grabbed his Shadbade as it fell—then jumped directly at the back of the man dueling Meridas. Taln cut down the second Shadbearer before the man even knew he was there, dropping him with a thrust directly between two sections of Shardplate.

Meridas scowled as his opponent died. “You . . . *peasant!*” he hissed angrily. “That was against Protocol! You attacked a man already engaged in a duel!”

Taln snorted, picking up the second Shadbade. He gestured toward the open door from whence the Shadbearers had come. Beyond, Jasnah could make out a small pile of corpses, all of them in servants’ clothing. “Men who would condone *that* receive no quarter from me,” Taln said, stepping toward Jasnah. He held out the second Shadbade to Kemnar. “I watched you fight to protect the lady. You are a man of skill and honor. Consider yourself promoted.”

Kemnar’s eyes widened slightly. Even he, with his sarcasm and seeming indifference to noble politicings, would have dreamed of someday owning a Shadbade. It was an honor a nobleman as lowborn as he would probably never receive.

He glanced at Jasnah, and she nodded slightly. Kemnar took the blade with reverent hands. Behind, Meridas’s expression darkened even further.

Taln turned and held out the second Shardblade. “Now,” he said, “you will give me that Blade you hold in exchange for this one.”

Meridas frowned in confusion, then glanced down and smiled, hefting his Blade. “I think not. This one suits me just fine.”

“It was not a request,” Taln said. “That Blade was taken from me by force. I will have it back.”

Meridas smiled, lowering the Blade to his side in his dueling stance. “You and I, then?” he said. “Shall we see how you do when you aren’t stabbing your opponent from behind?”

“Very well,” Taln said, putting one foot back, raising his Blade.

“Enough!” Jasnah snapped. “You would squabble with one another while the palace is being overrun around us, our people being slaughtered? Save your bickering for another time.”

Meridas didn’t break form. Taln, however, had the decency to glance back with a small measure of guilt. He lowered his weapon.

“Meridas,” Jasnah continued. “This man claims to know a secret way out of the palace. I suggest you come with us, unless you plan to fight Vedenar’s army on your own. Kemnar, gather the Shardplate.”

Shocked from his stupor, Kemnar nodded and moved forward. Shooting a wary glance at Meridas, Taln joined Kemnar, quickly unfastening the magical straps and gathering the pieces of metal in the dead men’s cloaks.

“You believe the madman’s claim?” Meridas said with a snort, strolling over to her.

“Do we have any other options?” Jasnah asked pointedly.

Meridas frowned, his—Taln’s—Shardblade disappearing from his hand in a curling breath of white smoke. Taln and Kemnar rose a moment later, dual cloaks full of Shardplate thrown over their shoulders, Blades in hand.

“Let’s go,” Jasnah said, stalking back down the way they had come. Taln and Kemnar followed quickly; Meridas trailed with less enthusiasm. A few moments later, they reached the stairwell, and Jasnah pulled a lantern off the wall and led the way down a twisting, cramped stairwell. The truth was, she had never actually gone down them before. There was little reason for a high-ranking noblewoman to visit the cellars. As they reached the bottom, her lantern revealed a group of nervous, spear-wielding servants. Their faces flashed with relief as they recognized her.

Jasnah scanned the group, and was surprised to realize that the numbers had swelled—other servants must have sought refuge in the cellars as well. There had to be close to a hundred people crowded between the wine-racks

and bags of grain. Entire families huddled uncertainly, watching her with hopeful eyes.

“All right,” Jasnah said, turning back to the stairwell as Taln and Kemnar reached the bottom. “Let’s see this passage, madman.”

Taln pushed past her, dropping his pack of Shardplate. “Lhan, please find someone to carry that,” he requested. The monk’s eyes widened as he saw the gold-gilded metal beneath, and he glanced at Taln’s Blade with wonder. The crowd huddled away, whispering to one another as Taln walked toward the back of the room.

Jasnah followed, surprised at the size of the cellars. They extended into the distance, a connection of catacomb-like stone rooms with great, unadorned pillars to hold them up. Taln wove his way certainly, moving past barrels of water, sacks piled to the ceiling, and boxes of spices. The crowd trailed behind, a ghostlike group of men and women, their eyes haunted. Many were probably familiar with the cellars—they knew, as Jasnah did, that there was no exit through them. What had Jasnah led them to, trusting the whims of a madman?

Most of them would be dead without that madman, Jasnah reminded herself. As would you. He deserves to be heard, if only for that reason.

Eventually, Taln paused inside a small, unused room. He waved Jasnah forward with the light. The rest of the group paused uncertainly behind, standing just outside the room.

Jasnah stepped inside, the tattered remnants of her dress train leaving a trail in the dust. The room was perhaps ten feet by ten feet, too small to be of much use. Dark mold covered one wall, and a couple of broken crates rested in the corner.

Taln pushed aside a couple of crate pieces, then wiped the dust from the back wall. It was crafted of worked stone bricks, like the rest of the cellar, their color a dull grey. He pressed against one of the stones.

And, of course, nothing happened.

Taln frowned. He pressed again, harder. “Something’s wrong,” he mumbled.

Jasnah closed her eyes, exhaling softly.

“This should open,” Taln complained quietly. “Chanaral himself designed the mechanism. It was crafted by the finest of Epoch Shapers—time should not have weakened it. The Blades still work, why wouldn’t this?”

They were trapped. Dead. Perhaps . . . perhaps they could hide long enough, until night, and then sneak away into the city. It was a slim hope—the invaders had to know that people would be in the cellars.

Footsteps approached, and a figure pushed its way through the crowd to Jasnah's side. "Someone's coming down the stairs," Kemnar said urgently. "We barred the door at the bottom, but . . ." He said the words quietly, but the crowd was too close not to hear. Some of the people cried out, women clutching their husbands. Others looked down with despair.

Jasnah glanced back at the madman. He stood on the left side of the small room, wiping at the mold covering the far wall. Beside her, Kemnar rushed over and grabbed the cloaks full of Shardplate, then disappeared back in the direction of the stairwell.

"Taln," she said. "We have to fight. Leave it—there is no passage."

The madman ignored her. "There!" he said, almost to himself, breaking away what appeared to be a piece of aged mortar. "But, what is the purpose of this?"

"Taln!" Jasnah snapped. Then she paused. Something glittered beside Taln's hand. She frowned, stepping closer, holding up the light.

A shining black gemstone was set into the stones. Even as Jasnah approached, she could hear its Tone begin to hum in her mind. Obsidian. Her Polestone.

"What . . . ?" she asked. "Why is that there?"

"It's a lock," Taln said with a frown. "Like the ones on the Oathgates. I don't know where it could have come from—it wasn't here last Return."

From behind, a series of rhythmic thumps echoed through the cellars—the sound of axes striking the stairwell door. "Time is short, my lady!" Kemnar's voice called in the distance.

"We'll have to cut through the wall," Taln said, turning from the obsidian and raising his Shardblade. "Without an Awakener to Stroke the gemstone, we can't open the door. This will leave an opening for our enemies to follow, but perhaps the other Shardbearers and I can hold the gap long enough to . . ."

He trailed off as Jasnah closed her eyes, listening to the call of the obsidian. It was a cool, clear Tone in her mind. So familiar . . . enticing. She took the Tone of her own soul, rubbing it against that of the gemstone, calling forth its music. Even without opening her eyes, she knew the obsidian had begun to glow.

A rumbling shook the room. Jasnah opened her eyes, then stepped back as a portion of the wall in front of Taln fell away, throwing chips of mortar and dust into the air. It slid back into the wall, revealing a dark passage beyond. Taln stood, Blade lowered, regarding her through unreadable eyes.

Jasnah glanced behind self-consciously. She hadn't touched the Obsidian,

however. To anyone else, it would have appeared that Taln had opened the door. Hopefully.

“Get the wounded into the passage!” Taln commanded, waving at the gawking servants. “The rest of you, gather whatever supplies you can. We’ll need lamp oil, grains, and water. Hurry!”

Jasnah stepped aside, letting the servants begin to scramble through the opening. Kemnar returned a moment later, wearing the golden suit of Shardplate. He paused, staring at the opening, then ran back to get Meridas and the other soldiers. The axes continued to fall in the background.

Taln still watched her. Jasnah glanced down, not wanting to meet his eyes. A few minutes later, supplies gathered, the last of the peasants rushed into the hidden passage. Kemnar clinked past, as did Meridas, who had obviously claimed the other suit of Plate. Eventually Taln waved her through. She strode through the doorway, followed by the madman.

The passage was of worked stone, much like the cellars. Yet, the stones here seemed . . . different. More aged, if that was possible. Taln pressed a stone on the wall, and the hidden door rumbled closed behind them, sealing off the cellars even as the sounds of men yelling echoed closer and closer.

The servants held their lanterns nervously in the dark. Taln waved them to move forward, straight ahead, into the darkness. The stone sloped downward, and Jasnah realized that she had no idea where they were going.

“Where does this lead?” She hissed at him.

“Down,” Taln said simply, walking forward.

Jasnah sighed, following him, last in line. She paused a second later, however, as she noticed a side passage. It appeared to be the only one in the corridor. She held her lantern high, revealing a door in the distance.

It was beautiful. Worked of metal and gemstones, it sparkled in her lanternlight. She could make out the pattern of the Double Eye set in its face, marked by ten massive gemstones at the Pole positions. Even from the distance, she could hear them humming slightly in her mind.

“Come on,” Taln said, appearing again at her side.

“What is that?” she asked.

Taln paused, his eyes quiet as he regarded the door. “It is nothing,” he finally said. “Come.”

Hesitantly, Jasnah allowed herself to be led away, into the dark passage-way and the bowels of the mountain.

chapter 42

DALENAR 3

THE TWENTY DUELING FORMS were ancient—older even than most Shardblades. Formalized lore, taught to students just after they began training with the sword, explained that Kanaran dueling had been developed by the Heralds themselves. Nale'Elin, the finest duelist of the ten, was said to have set up the system as a way for men to prepare for the coming of the Stormshades by fighting and training without fracturing the Epoch Kingdoms through war.

Dueling was the first and primary Masculine Noble Art; all lords were expected to learn its secrets. And so, Dalenar trained. Sparring was familiar—the one great constant in his life. Brothers, wives, and children might die. Monasteries and their morals might have to be left behind for war. But there was always the duel. Peace or strife, ill-temper or good, Dalenar always took the opportunity to spar—even if it refused to calm him as it once had.

Brother Mazinchal fought with Blade and Plate, one of three prized sets owned by Shieldhome. Mazinchal was good. He fought with a subtle variation of Garnet Form—third century Deniz line, if Dalenar remembered correctly. Garnet was a solid, straightforward Form that focused on single-hit wins. Mazinchal was more defensive than most Garnets, however, mixing a bit of Obsidian in for misdirection. It made for a fine combination, one that Dalenar had always respected.

The sparring did not last long—bouts against Garnets never did. Dalenar won, scoring a second blunted strike against Mazinchal's shoulder. At the end, Mazinchal removed his helm, waving for a young monk to bring them water.

"That's three out of four, my lord," the monk noted as he sipped from the ladle. He was a husky man with powerful legs and a surprising quickness about him. Like most Birthgiven monks, he bore no scars from true battle, but that was no reason to presume him inexperienced.

"The winds favor me today," Dalenar said simply.

Mazinchal shook his head. "One wonders if you even benefit from sparring here anymore, my lord. I can beat nine out of ten Topazes—Garnet is strong against it, you know. But you . . ."

Dalenar accepted the ladle, not responding. Garnet was strong against Topaz, true—the first focused on quick, explosive kills, the later on endurance and precision. Garnet was a Form for duels; Topaz was a Form for the warrior who expected to fight a half-tenset different duels on the battlefield, bouts waged beneath a hot sun with spearmen waiting to attack the victor.

"If I may be so forward, my lord," the monk noted, waving the young water-carrier away. "You are as fine a master as this monastery has ever known. Perhaps you should consider taking students."

"Perhaps when better days come, brother Mazinchal," Dalenar said.

"Ah," the monk said, bowing his head. "Forgive me, my lord. I momentarily forgot your . . . distractions."

Dalenar waved dismissively, indicating that Mazinchal forget the supposed offense. The monk bowed and retreated, allowing two younger monks to remove his Plate so it could be used by another. Dalenar stood in the sun, sweat from the sparring rolling down his cheek. Mazinchal's comment was the closest anyone had come to mentioning Aredor's disappearance since the discovery five days before. Monks and lords alike stepped softly around Dalenar, none wishing to acknowledge his shame.

Dalenar wished such a luxury upon himself. Aredor's betrayal—and that's how Dalenar had to regard it, as a betrayal—had undermined whatever authority Dalenar had hoped to maintain through neutrality. How did it look for a lord to make a command, only to have his own heir flagrantly disobey?

Even worse than the political embarrassment, however, were the other repercussions—punishments that must fall as soon as Aredor returned. Did the boy realize the position in which he had placed his own father?

For Dalenar to keep his oath—an oath made before an official emissary of the king—he would have to disinherit his own son.

Dalenar closed his eyes, sighing quietly to himself. And who did that leave? Renarin, openly stripped of his Blade by the king? Dalenar had no illusions about Renarin's reputation. Dalenar's tribute lords and Shardbearers would undoubtedly follow the boy out of loyalty to Dalenar's memory, but such loyalty dulled over time. It was not a good foundation for rule. Perhaps, once the shame of his act was forgotten, Aredor could be reinstated. It was unlikely, however, that the lords would forget recent events. In their minds, Aredor would be forever the boy who had ignored his father's command. How could Aredor command their oaths when he himself had so flagrantly broken his own?

Not for the first time, Dalenar wished for Sheneres's calm, understanding counsel. The boy would have made a wonderful lord, far better than his father. Sheneres had been able to make peace without creating enemies, and could give commands that men followed out of desire, not just duty.

Another monk was stepping forward to spar—they knew that Dalenar liked to vary his opponents. Dalenar stretched his hand to the side to begin summoning his Blade, but paused. A litter was approaching the monastery; it was constructed of fine darkwood and laced with light pink seasilk, and the bearers wore Dalenar's own insignia. He made a motion to his sparring partner, and the man stepped back, nodding deferentially as Dalenar strode across the sands to meet Kinæ.

She rarely visited him during his sparring time. Though he had never forbidden her, Kinæ somehow sensed that Dalenar saw the monastery as a place of . . . refuge. Escape. And, despite her innocence, she obviously knew that he found her one of the things from which he needed that escape.

The litter-bearers stopped near the entrance to the monastery, where several of Dalenar's attendants stood, waiting for commands or messages. The bearers lowered the litter, and Kinæ stepped out, swathed in regal seasilks suited to a more mature woman. She glanced uncomfortably around the grounds, where monks had stopped their sparring to regard their future lady.

"My lord," Kinæ said in her formal voice, "we just got a messenger who says that my father is coming to Kholinar."

"Your father?" Dalenar asked with surprise. "How many days away is he?"

"Not days, my lord," Kinæ said. "The messenger said he'd be here within the hour."

Dalenar gritted his teeth so the men wouldn't hear him curse. Lord

Echathen of Khardinar was a fine man and an excellent battlefield commander, but he despised being fussed over. He often complained that he'd rather eat with his men than dine at a regal feast, and absolutely loathed protracted ceremonies. He was, Dalenar reflected, much as Dalenar himself would be, had he not been forced to grow up as a brother and uncle to kings.

"Gather my Shardbearers," Dalenar commanded one of his attendants. "Pull them from baths and dining if necessary. I want at least a tenset of them there to greet Lord Echathen." He pointed at another man. "Order the cooks to prepare for a feast—simple food, without much garnish." A third man. "Warn Lord Valan of Echathen's arrival, he'll know what other arrangements to make." Dalenar had learned early in his career that he needed a good palace steward to care for the details of pageantry that most nobility expected of a *Parshen*.

"My lord," Kinæ said under her breath. "I need to talk to you where others can't hear. Fast!"

Dalenar paused. Kinæ was getting better at femininely masking her emotions—though how she was learning such things without being someone's ward was beyond him. However, now that she had spoken, he could see the barely-contained urgency in her eyes. She could have sent a messenger to bring him word of her father's impending arrival, yet she had found it necessary to come herself. Whatever she wished to tell him, it was important to her.

Dalenar made a few more commands, then stepped back a few paces, waving Kinæ forward so that they could speak in private.

"Is this about your father, Kinæ?" Dalenar asked quietly.

"No, my lord," she said, glancing nervously back at the attendants and monks. "It's about your son."

"Aredor?" Dalenar asked with surprise.

"No, my lord. Renarin. I . . . I think he's going to sneak off to the war too."

"*What!*" Dalenar asked incredulously.

Kinæ shied back at the outburst, looking down and flushing.

Dalenar controlled himself. *Don't overreact*, he thought. *This is Renarin she is speaking of. The boy wouldn't do such a thing—his winds-cursed unassertiveness might be annoying, but it usually keeps him out of trouble.*

"Kinæ," he said calmly. "What made you think such a thing?"

"I heard him talking, my lord," she replied in a small voice. "With Lord Merin. They were in the lord Renarin's room. I was passing in the hallway, so I listened to them. Lord Merin said 'We have to go after him.' Lord

Renarin said 'We can't. My father will be angry.' Then Lord Merin said 'We have no choice! We can't let your brother die alone!'"

Dalena stewed, grinding his teeth. They couldn't possibly . . . But they could. Merin still didn't know the ways of nobility, and Dalena knew that he and Aredor had become good friends. Renarin had always idolized his older brother. If Merin put it into his head that they should go . . .

"I'll check on it," Dalena said stiffly. "You did well by bringing this to me, Kinae."

The girl looked up, smiling at the encouragement as Dalena waved her back to her litter.

HE SENT NO MESSENGER. As the Kholinar palace shuffled and spun with servants preparing for a distinguished visitor, Dalena himself went to check on Renarin. The boy was not in his rooms. When Dalena found Merin absent as well, he began to worry. He didn't admit the truth, however, until he visited the stables and found that Renarin had requisitioned two of Dalena's swifter horses not an hour before. Apparently, Renarin had told the stablehands that Dalena wanted him to ride out and meet Lord Echathen and escort him to the palace.

Dalena forced himself to remain quiet about the disappearance. Even when Lord Echathen's party arrived with no Renarin as an escort, Dalena hoped that perhaps the boys would see their foolishness and return on their own. If they did so, he would be spared punishing them. Surely Renarin would realize the stupidity of joining the war effort. He was no fighter.

But Merin was. Dalena had known so many young men like him—most noble, but boys were the same regardless of parentage. Merin was eager to prove himself. Twice he had saved the king's life—both times by fighting when no one expected him to. He would assume himself immune to reprimand—would think that this time, like before, he would somehow find a way to do what everyone assumed he could not.

Dalena kept his anger in check even as he stepped forward to greet Kinae's father. Third Lord Echathen was a man who could have been a king, both in bearing and in lineage. His city, Khardinar, had been mostly independent of Alethkar since the turn of the century. Made wealthy by grand sapphire mines and trade through its calm bays set at the very end of the Kholinar Lait, the city had been close to declaring itself a separate kingdom until Nolphonarin's firm defense against the invader Jarnah. Dalena still remembered a young Echathen, riding with his father to join against the invasion, defending a common border despite internal disputes.

When Echathen himself had inherited a short time later, Nolhonarin had been quick to gain the young lord's loyalty, folding Khardinar back into Alethkar without sword or spear.

Echathen bowed deeply before Dalenar. "Greetings, my *Parshen*," he said. He had changed little since those days. He had lost most of his hair—and now shaved off the rest—and time had added some creases to the face, but he was still the stark and eager warrior who had ridden at Dalenar's side during the Jarnah war.

Dalenar forced a smile to his face. "You needn't prostrate yourself so, old friend. Come, I've ordered a feast to refresh you from your journey."

Echathen stood, smiling, then turned to regard Dalenar's fourteen Shardbearers—all in Plate—who stood at the head of a quarter tensquad of soldiers, all saluting. Dalenar had avoided anything too dramatic—no thrown flower petals, no trumpeters or heralds. Just the soldiers, greeting one of their own. This, however, still proved too much ceremony for the aging Echathen.

"I see I gave you too much warning again," Echathen said with a wry grumble. "I'll have to try and find slower horses for my messengers."

Dalenar chuckled despite himself, turning and letting Echathen greet Kinae. Again, the man bowed. Through betrothal, his own daughter's rank had been elevated beyond his own. She held herself well, all things considered.

"We have prepared rooms for yourself and your men, my lord," she said. "Please make use of them. We shall begin the feast whenever you feel prepared."

A slight discomfort flashed in Echathen's eyes. "Thank you . . . my lady," he said. He turned, waving his group—mostly nobility, from the looks of them—to follow Dalenar's attendants to their rooms.

DALENAR FLED TO HIS BALCONY AGAIN. He stared out over the darkening lait, listening to the lingering sounds of feasting below. He had retired at a distinguished time, leaving the younger men to their revelries—though he doubted many of them would enjoy themselves as they would at another lord's palace. Dalenar's thoughts on drinking and gluttony were well-known.

Below, a group of dark-cloaked men galloped from the stables, torches held high in the night as they rode on their lord's business. Dalenar could no longer wait for Merin and Renarin to return. Rumors were already spreading—the stablehands had spoken of the missing horses and the lordlings who had not returned in Echathen's party. By dawn most of

Kholinar would know that Dalenar's second and final son had betrayed him as well. This time, at least, Dalenar could deny the rumors—Renarin had told no one of his leaving, and had given no explanation. Assuming Dalenar's men caught them before they arrived at the war, there might be something he could do for the boys.

The lait cliffs were strange dark mountains in the waning light. Dalenar sighed, suddenly feeling so very old.

A sound came from behind. Dalenar turned to find lord Echathen, tall and broad-chested, standing at the doorway to his balcony. Dalenar waved him forward.

Echathen stepped up to the stone railing, resting arms on its top, a glass of wine held loosely in one hand. "You look northeast," he noted. "Toward Crossguard."

"I look northeast," Dalenar agreed, "and consider the idiocy of youth."

Echathen smiled. "We were idiots too, once."

"I sometimes wonder if we still aren't," Dalenar said quietly.

Echathen snorted. "You'll notice the men I brought with me," he said.

Dalenar nodded—he had noticed. No ladies, only lords. Very strange for a supposed social visit. They were Echathen's most powerful tribute lords and neighbors. All of them, like a surprisingly large percentage of the Aleth nobility, had declared themselves neutral in Elhokar's bickering with Jezenrosh. Dalenar's refusal to take sides had made them bold.

"Many men think Elhokar acts presumptuously," Echathen said simply.

"Those are treasonous words, old friend," Dalenar said.

"It seems our country breeds treasonous words lately," Echathen replied. "Some wonder when the fighting will stop. They wonder if we were justified in invading Prallah. They wonder if their king has become the same kind of tyrant we fought so hard to defeat two decades ago."

"Pralir harbored the Traitor," Dalenar said simply.

"And so we invaded," Echathen replied. "Without diplomacy, without asking for a trial of our king's murderer. We attacked within months of his flight."

Dalenar frowned. "If there are those who say such things," he noted, "one wonders why they didn't join with Jezenrosh."

"Because Jezenrosh is no better," Echathen said, sipping his wine. "The king is wrong to attack his countryman, but he was right to be wary. Surely you've heard of the way Jezenrosh courted the nobility in Elhokar's absence. Besides, Jezenrosh is no leader. Even those who follow him don't give him much respect. The boy's too eccentric, and he has little skill in

battle command. Men like him just fine, but they don't want him as their king."

"I don't see where this is going," Dalenar said wearily.

"Don't you?" Echathen asked. "Dalenar, there are many who whisper that a new leader is needed—and that leader is not Jezenrosh. They need a king they trust. A king respected like no man in Alethkar."

Dalenar leaned against the stone rail, feeling a cool wind call through the lait, ruffling his clothing. "Echathen, I am his *Parshen*. I will not betray my king."

Echathen didn't answer immediately. "No," he finally said. "I guess I didn't really think you would. Just know this. When Elhokar came to us three years ago—paranoid that Khardinar would rebel at the old king's death—and offered us his silly treaty, we did not accept it for him. He suggested Kinæ for one of his fops, it was *I* who insisted it be you. I know you've never liked the betrothal, Dalenar, but it was necessary." He paused, then lay a hand on Dalenar's shoulder. "Khardinar is loyal to the Tyrantbane. If he rides to arms, then so shall we. There are others who would follow as well."

With that, Echathen left him, and Dalenar bowed his head before the wind, hoping that the Almighty was in its whispers—for he could certainly use some direction.

chapter 43

JER 7

MINREL STRUGGLED TO KEEP her hand steady as she poured the tea. She kept her eyes lowered, but couldn't help glancing up at the man seated at the low table before her. He was so strong of jaw, so determined and aristocratic. How could this man have ever been called the 'Idiot King?' It was difficult for Minrel to comprehend.

Granted, she had never seen the man up close before this day. She had heard the stories, though. She knew of his transformation—the man before her was less a mortal and more a holy being. Like a Herald. The finger of the Almighty had touched him, taking away his mind sickness and giving the Three Houses a strong leader in their day of need. He was the Idiot King no longer; already people were whispering of a new title.

The Awakened King.

There was only one other man in the room, and he sat across the low table from the Awakened King. Minrel moved over, busying her nervous hands to make the shaking less obvious. This man was himself a symbol of King Ahven's calling. Everyone knew that the Shin almost never fought beneath the command of a Kanaran leader. The arrogant foreigners considered all people of the east to be beneath them—it took a very special individual to earn their loyalty, a man like Jarnah the Conqueror. Or like Ahven Vedenel.

The Shin man watched her with his unnerving eyes. He lifted his cup, his motions fluid and purposeful—even the way he held his cup seemed

graceful. Her hand suddenly slipped as she poured, jerking slightly and disrupting the stream of tea, but the Shin man somehow anticipated the motion and smoothly moved his cup in tandem with her slip. The flow of tea continued uninterrupted, not a drop spilled.

The cup full, Minrel gratefully raised her pouring vase. The Shin man caught her eye, and Minrel paused. Instead of the cold arrogance she had expected to find therein, the man's eyes were . . . understanding. Even comforting, in their own way.

Standing, Minrel backed away to leave the room.

"Stay," King Ahven commanded.

Minrel froze, then walked back to the table and knelt beside it, her chest level with its top as she waited upon her king's call.

"So what do you think of our new accommodations, assassin?" the king asked his companion. "The First Capital is a fine prize—and not just for the Oathgates. There is a fairness and beauty to the buildings that one will not find in any city of Veden design."

The Shin man did not reply, but sipped his tea quietly. The king's words were correct—Ral Eram was a wondrous city. With their graceful columns and cromless angles, its buildings were far more beautiful than those in any Veden City.

"Speak," King Ahven commanded. "I can see the answer in your eyes anyway. Deafness teaches a man to read more than lips, assassin."

Deafness? The comment made no sense, but these were important men. There was little doubt they would speak of things far above the understanding of a simple Eighth Citizen serving girl barely past the age of her *Charan*.

"If this city is a place of beauty," the Shin man said, his accent making even his words sound graceful, "then I have trouble seeing it through the blood that drips from its stones."

Minrel couldn't suppress a shiver. She had heard the stories, of course. The stories of . . . the city's capture and the slaughter that had occurred. Her father had explained the necessity very sternly—just like in the stories and ballads, sacrifices had to be made. Enemies were not just those who held spears, but any who might resist in their hearts. This was why the king had commanded Veden servants be gathered and brought through the Oathgate to serve in Ral Eram's palace, and this was why he had ordered the deaths of their Aleth counterparts. And his will was that of the Almighty. Did the Awakened King not have power over the Oathgates? Did he not command the loyalty of men who should have rightly tried to kill him? Had he not been healed by the Almighty himself?

The king chuckled quietly at the Shin man's comment. "Do not idealize those who died, assassin. How many people do you think old Nolhonarin killed when he captured this city in the name of Alethkar? It is only just that the same destruction should return against them."

"*You* speak of justice?" The Shin man's words were calm, but there was an insulting tone to them nonetheless. Minrel caught her breath, glancing up toward the Dwelling, but no retributive strike fell to destroy the man for his blasphemy against the Awakened King.

King Ahven just laughed again. "I *am* justice, assassin. Has not your blade proven that? After everything that has happened, still you doubt."

"Ilhadal will not let you live," the Shin man said in a simple, direct voice. "The moment his daughter produces an heir of your line, you will be killed. One Shin assassin will not be enough to protect you on that day, Idiot King."

"Perhaps," King Ahven replied, holding out his cup for Minrel to fill again.

"And," the Shin man continued, "if he assumes that you are delaying the production of an heir, he will grow impatient."

"He has his proof for the moment," King Ahven replied.

"Ah yes," the Shin man said. "Your stunt with the guards, executed within full sight of the wedding bed so that rumors of consummation would spread. One wonders how any man could be unresponsive to such treatment of his daughter."

"One wonders," King Ahven said, "how someone could be so ignorant of men's temperaments. Ilhadal Davar is no Talshekh, doting on the whims of wife and children. Ilhadal favors 'The Spell of Might' and 'The Unseen Ballad of Return'—he is a man of ambition, a man who likes his music to contain simple beats, performed loudly. To such a man, children are things to be dominated—and a failure of a daughter is a thing to be given only contempt. If I treat her likewise, I will be seen as a man of strength."

"If that is the truth, then Ilhadal Davar is a fool," the Shin man said.

"A fool he is," King Ahven replied. "But not for the reasons you assume."

Minrel sat very still, trying to look unnoticed. *I shouldn't be hearing these things*, she thought uncomfortably.

"But enough banter," the king said. "What of the group who escaped?"

"Your scouts are having trouble tracking their movement through the caverns," the Shin man replied. "It could take weeks to find them."

The king rubbed his chin, which sported a growing beard—something he'd apparently begun to grow only after his Awakening. It was already

becoming full, however, and was cut after Veden fashion, giving the face the desired squareish look.

“Do they have a map of the caverns? One that leads them to daylight?” the king mused. “Or was their flight to the caverns simply an act of desperation? My spies know nothing of this escape method, and they claimed to know a great deal about the palace.”

“Perhaps some of the palace servants could have told you more,” the Shin man said, his eyes hard.

King Ahven ignored the jibe. “We will have to move quicker,” he said. “Lady Jasnah Kholin is a woman who needs to be dead—if my soldiers had let half the palace escape and killed her as ordered, then I would not be nearly as worried. We cannot risk her alerting her brother.”

“You can’t hide a marching army,” the Shin man said. “What does it matter if she alerts them? We’ve taken the city quietly, but Elhokar’s scouts will warn him of your coming.”

“As long as he discovers my armies *after* he has weakened his forces by fighting his cousin, I will mind little. The joining of their forces is what worries me. And the Kholin woman . . . I have been warned to deal with her. You will take a small force of soldiers and ride around the base of the mountain, watching for refugees and openings in the rock. Make certain those caves don’t let out somewhere nearby, where she could quickly make for Crossguard. The woman supposedly took a large number of people with her—she shouldn’t be difficult to find.”

The Shin man nodded, rising to his feet. He didn’t bow as he walked toward the door.

“Wait,” King Ahven said. “You have forgotten something.”

The Shin man paused, turning back.

“The girl needs to be dealt with. We have discussed things that need not be passed onto the other servants.”

Minrel froze. The Shin man did likewise, his face flashing with the first vivid emotion he had displayed.

Hatred.

The girl . . . me? ‘Dealt with’ how?

King Ahven reached out, dropping something onto the table. A small blue stone.

Minrel scrambled to her feet, suddenly frightened, though she wasn’t even sure why. “My lord . . . your majesty . . . I won’t say—”

The Shin man was fast—so amazingly fast. Minrel tried to stumble backward, but he caught her, hand going to her throat and holding it just

tight enough to choke off her words. He stood that way for a moment, eyes turned toward the king.

Ahven said nothing. Minrel looked toward him, pleading, tears forming at the pain in her throat. This was the Almighty's chosen, the Awakened king, he wouldn't . . .

"Please?" Minrel whispered in voiceless terror as the darkness closed.

"I HATE YOU," JEK WHISPERED, carefully lowering the servant's corpse to the ground. She was just a girl, a child really. A child in a land of children. Did that make the sin twice as bad?

He looked down at her horrified, dead eyes, and doubted such a sin could get any worse.

He looked up. Ahven Vedenar sat calmly.

"You didn't need to make her stay," Jek accused.

"Then I would have had to wait for her to return when I wanted more tea," Ahven replied.

So young . . . Oh Shanalakada, must you treat them so? And must I be your hand? Again the words of his banishment returned to him, words spoken by the sacred Holetatinal on the day of his shaming. This is your curse, to be the tool of those who know not Truth, to share in their blasphemy but have no will to do otherwise. You are Truthless. He represented not only his own desecrated honor, but that of his people as well.

"I have no Truth," Jek whispered. "And yet it binds me."

"There is no truth, assassin," Ahven said.

Jek stood, looking over at Ahven. There was a . . . hunger in the man's eyes. It was almost as if he wanted Jek to break down and abandon his vows, to admit that Ahven was right—that there was no honor, or truth, and that people were as the birds of Ahven's cages. Things to be snapped and discarded.

Yet what perversity would make the man wish for such a thing? If Jek broke his Truthless bindings of honor, then Ahven would lose his most efficient servant.

Ahven met his eyes, then waved him out of the room.

chapter 44

MERIN 10

MERIN SQUINTED, SHADING his face from the afternoon sun. His anxious eyes devised enemies where there were probably none. Were those dark spots in the distance riders, or simply another shadow thrown up by a formation in the rock? There were specks on a closer hillside—simple rockbuds, or scouts searching for runaway noblelings?

The lait valley cut a great gouge across the land, its green sides twisting into the near distance until it vanished, the slope of the land hiding the depression from view. Merin and Renarin hadn't dared travel within its soft beauty—too many people lived along the lait's riverbanks. Even wearing dull shennah cloaks and simple trousers—Merin's Blade and Plate carefully wrapped and stowed on the pack horse—he and Renarin were still distinctive. Riders themselves were rare even along the lait, and Renarin warned that anyone with an eye for horseflesh would recognize their mounts' fine breeding.

So, they cut a path parallel to the lait, trying to stay out of sight. Two riders were not enough to leave much of a trackable trail on the hard Rosharan stone, and so their greatest danger came from the eyes of the peasants and travelers they passed.

"We shouldn't have done this," Renarin said morosely. The boy had a penchant for repetition.

"Well, we did," Merin said. "Our only hope now is to return with a living

Aredor to prove we didn't break our oaths by fighting for either side. Do you see anything?"

Renarin shook his head. "But I'm not exactly experienced at this."

Merin grimaced. *It's a wonder we haven't been caught already.* "It would help if we knew where we were going," he noted.

Renarin shook his head, looking down at the black sphere in his hand. He carried it with him everywhere, its smooth surface never far from his caressing fingertips. "I know," he mumbled. "I just . . . we haven't had enough time to stop and think. But he has to have come this way, Merin. Father's riders didn't catch him."

"And if he went south?" Merin asked.

"Toward Ral Eram?" Renarin said. "Seat of the king? No, he would run afoul of Elhokar's messengers and reinforcement lines. Aredor's party was too large—it would have been spotted by enemy scouts. He came north."

Merin sighed. But as he had said to Renarin, their time of decision had already passed. They had come north. They had to either press on or turn back and beg forgiveness—and Merin had no intention of returning to Kholinar without Aredor. Unfortunately, none of the towns they had visited bore rumors of Lord Aredor's passing. That could mean that Renarin was wrong, or it could simply mean that Aredor had stayed to the lait rim as well.

Merin felt blind. He was riding in darkness, trying to feel his way—only, he didn't even really know where he wanted to go. Meanwhile, while Merin stumbled about, Aredor was in danger.

You don't really know that, Merin told himself. Yes, he's probably in danger, but Renarin's premonition is . . . well, unsubstantial. You don't know Aredor is going to die.

Still, the youngest Kholin's attitude made an eerily convincing argument. Merin turned, glancing at Renarin as the two walked down the short hill that had been their vantage point. Renarin's normally unsettling air had adopted a slightly frantic cast—a remnant from his episode in the Elinrah temple. The boy fidgeted now, always glancing about with a nervousness that bespoke more than a simple fear of pursuit. When they stopped for the night, Renarin would take up charcoal and scrawl on the stones around them, mumbling to himself.

And this is the man I'm trusting to guide me to Aredor, Merin thought. Blessed winds—I must be even more disturbed than he.

"That's Pebble's Perch up ahead," Renarin said as they remounted, nodding toward the lait ahead of them. "It's a sixth city, not tributing but

independent. It's the largest town for another two days—we should stop there and look for information.”

Merin nodded. Visiting the village would mean exposing themselves to whoever might follow, but what else could they do? Renarin seemed certain that Aredor had taken the river somehow, though that seemed incredibly unlikely. As they crested the valley wall and began their way down a switchbacking path, Merin was able to see the river in its entirety. The banks on either side bespoke a water flow that was normally twice as wide, and what did trickle past was hardly navigable. It was several tenset feet wide, but its flow was slow, and the many protruding rocks and sandbanks proved how shallow it must be.

“He sailed on that?” Merin asked pointedly.

Renarin looked up. Then he just shrugged. “It would have been a little higher when Aredor passed this way, and the river melds with mountain streams to the north. I don't know, Merin. I can only tell you what I saw.”

“Saw how?” Merin pressed. “In a vision?”

“No,” Renarin said. “In the patterns of numbers.”

“What does that even mean?” Merin protested.

Renarin just shook his head.

Merin sighed again, letting the matter drop. Pebble's Perch was indeed a large city, though it looked to be in something of a lull. Intricate docks housed a variety of barges and riverboats that were mostly grounded. Those that did lie in the water didn't float so much as sit in the mud, sand, and crom, waiting for the return of the fall rains. Large embankments stood on either side of the docks to protect the vessels from sudden highstorm floods, and most of the ships looked to be under some manner of summer repair.

The city obviously drew its living from the river. Large dockhouses made up the bulk of the structures, and they gave the city a far less refined look than Kholinar. The streets were arranged in a haphazard, unplanned way, and the buildings lacked general ornamentation.

“The city must suffer during the summers,” Merin said.

Renarin shrugged. “The spring harvest is in, and the villages have to be given time to bring their grain to the city. By the time the storms come regularly again, those barges will be well-stocked and ready to ship their goods downriver for distribution. I would think that they find the cycle refreshing—it gives them a few months every year to stop and think.” *Something I haven't been able to do lately*, his tone implied.

As they approached the city, they dismounted and led their horses, hoping that walking instead of riding would make them look less intimidating—or

memorable. Renarin was right; despite the lack of river traffic, the city markets were busy. Packmen loaded with reed baskets hiked in careful lines toward the docks—apparently, the massive storehouses were used to keep the grain during the Searing. Merchants and lesser noblemen haggled beside stalls and tents, and young boys cried out their masters' prices and deals for all to hear.

"I've never seen this side of it," Merin said. "The *inavah*. I always kind of wondered what happened to it after we grew it."

"The world has to eat," Renarin said. "And with Prallah in ruin, Alethkar has grown rich by its plenty."

Merin shuffled uncomfortably. "Prallah was that important a food producer?"

Renarin nodded. "The part of the country you saw, the highlands, was where the Traitor chose to fight—but that was only to keep us away from the farmland below. Prallah has always been the most productive grower in Roshar. Over the last decade its various kingdoms have been Alethkar's greatest competition for lucrative sales to Thalenah and Vedenar, who mine more but grow less."

Very convenient that Prallah should come under Aleth control, Merin thought. The more he discovered about the war on the Third Peninsula, the less persuaded he became of Alethkar's moral edge.

They stood for a few moments, looking around at the marketgoers. "Well, now what?" Merin finally asked.

Renarin shrugged. "I don't know. We could always try a tavern, I suppose."

"That hasn't worked too well so far," Merin said with a grimace. So far, tavern occupants hadn't been very comfortable around the two. Merin wasn't certain what they were doing wrong—shopkeepers distrusted them immediately, and streetgoers were polite, but rarely gave them much heed. Merin could probably demand more attention if he revealed his Shardblade, but that would ruin any chance of anonymity.

"There are some beggars over there," Merin said with a nod. "The stories always say beggars are great sources of information. When Sadees Sunmaker was alone, separated from his armies after the Battle of Surerock, he hid among the city beggars and they contacted his men for him."

Renarin frowned, eyeing the bundles of cloth and bone. "I don't know. I doubt they're concerned about more than their next meal."

"They probably just look that way," Merin said. "Beggars are always part of the organized criminal underground in big cities. They're the eyes of the local Thief Lord, and keep watch over his interests."

Renarin turned his skeptical look from the beggars to Merin. "You know," he said, "you have some very strange ideas, Merin."

Being called 'strange' by Renarin was a discomfoting experience. "You'll see," Merin insisted, leaving Renarin with their horses and approaching the three beggars. All were older men, though their weathered faces and unkempt beards might have exaggerated their age somewhat. One appeared to be missing his left leg at the knee, but Merin knew from the stories that it was probably just contorted to look that way.

"Greetings, friends," Merin said in a low voice, squatting down before them. "I have need of your . . . specialized services."

All three men perked up, their gnarled hands shooting out in hope of alms. Merin reached into his pouch, picking out a sparkling sliver of ruby set in a drop of glass. The hands reached for it, but he pulled it back out of their reach.

"Not yet," he said. "First I need information."

"What information, master?" one of the old men said in an eager, lispng voice.

"Have you seen riders come through this market recently?" Merin asked.

"Yes, many," another beggar said, trying to reach past his companion's hand.

"This would be a special group," Merin explained. "Thirty in number, with an air of nobility. One of . . . particular nobility." He gave the last words special emphasis, eyeing the beggars knowingly.

"Old Juke saw them," the third man said. "Yes, I saw them. Riders."

"When?" Merin asked eagerly.

The old man paused. "Today?" he said hesitantly.

"Today?" Merin asked. Surely Merin and Renarin couldn't have gained that much time on Aredor. He regarded the beggars through narrowed eyes as the other two began to assert that they too had seen the riders come through 'today.' All three clutched eagerly for the ruby chip.

"You are playing with me," Merin said with dissatisfaction.

"No, not playing," the third man promised. "Please, my lord. The chip. A chip for Old Juke?"

Ah, I see, Merin thought. *Not enough, eh?* He reached into his pouch pulling out a ten ishmark chip. The three men's eyes widened, and one even started drooling.

"Now," Merin said. "I want specifics. Did Lord Aredor come through here or not? What do you know of his travels?"

The three men were too focused on the chip to say much. Merin moved as if to put it away, and they wailed as one. "Yes, we saw him. Lord Aredor. He came. With riders. Yes. Can we have the coin now?"

"I don't believe you," Merin said. "I want to speak with . . . Him."

The three men paused. "Him?" one asked.

"You know," Merin said conspiringly. "*Him*. The one who commands you. Your lord of this city."

"Our Lord . . . um, my lord?" one asked.

"You?" another said, cocking his head in confusion. "Yes, you're a good lord. A chip? A chip, please, for Old Juke?"

Merin sighed, dropping the chip before them. "Just tell him what I asked," Merin said as the three men lurched forward, fighting for the money. Merin retreated back to Renarin, who stood with his onyx sphere held before his eyes, staring at it with absorption.

"Put that thing down," Merin said with annoyance. "You look daft."

"I'm not the one trying to reason with beggars," Renarin said, lowering the sphere.

Merin glanced back at the three men, whose struggles were drawing attention from the marketgoers. "They're staying quiet for some reason," he said. "Crafty ones, they are."

Renarin looked skeptical.

"Fine," Merin said. "What do you want to do?"

"Ask the shopkeepers," Renarin said. "Perhaps my brother stopped for supplies."

Merin nodded, and Renarin led the way. The sky soon began darkening in the west, the approaching highstorm a foreboding sign of their failed progress. None of the shopkeepers seemed to know anything—though, again, they were hesitant to discuss anything but business. As soon as they determined that Merin and Renarin weren't likely to purchase anything or negotiate for the sale of grain, the shopkeepers turned their attentions to more promising prospects.

The two left another futile conference, walking back onto the street. Renarin looked west, frowning. "Highstorm coming soon," he noted. "Last one before the Searing. We'll have to remember to buy some more water before we leave."

Merin nodded with resignation. Pebble's Perch was another failure. "The lait turns east here," Merin said, nodding toward the valley bend ahead. "Do we continue to follow it, or keep going north?"

“We stay with the lait,” Renarin said. “He went by river.”

Merin was too tired to begin another argument. “Let’s find an inn,” he said. “We can—”

“Lord Renarin?” a man called from behind them.

Renarin jumped visibly, and Merin felt a dread certainty that they had been located. When they turned, however, they didn’t find Lord Dalenar’s soldiers bearing down on them, but instead a short, portly man with a red face and an excited expression.

“Lord Renarin!” the man exclaimed. “It is you! Why, I’d all but decided you weren’t coming. Hurry, hurry. The highstorm is nearly here! We haven’t much time.”

Merin and Renarin stared at the newcomer for a moment. He was sweating freely, but didn’t seem to mind. His movements matched his words, however, as he motioned eagerly for them to follow him.

“Wait,” Merin said. “How do you know who we . . . ?” he trailed off, then looked up with a broad smile. “The beggars!” he said. “You must be their lord!”

The short man frowned. “No, I’m no lord—First Citizen, though my father hardly thinks I’m worth the title, I’ll say that. Come, lords. We really haven’t much time. Lord Aredor said that you’d—”

“Lord Aredor?” Renarin said, stepping forward. “You know my brother?”

“Yes, yes. He said you might follow him. He told me that if you did arrive, I was to bring you down the river, but really—*we haven’t any time!*”

Renarin looked to Merin, then started after the excitable man. Merin followed more suspiciously. “You say Aredor told you we were coming?” he asked.

“He said you might come, my lord,” the man said. “He didn’t know. He thought you might follow—especially you, Lord Merin. He told us to watch for either of you, indeed he did. I am Selsen, a man well-trusted by Lord Aredor, if I might say. Now, to the docks!”

Merin and Renarin followed curiously, leaving behind the market for the equally-busy—yet far less cacophonous—dockside. Their round-bellied guide moved with surprising speed as he wove through the crowd toward a particularly run-down riverhouse.

“What do you make of this?” Merin said, catching up to Renarin.

The younger Kholin simply shrugged. “It sounds like Aredor to try and take care of us, even when he’s not around. He was right to suspect that we might follow him.”

“But, that man,” Merin said, pointing as their guide ducked into the building, his voice echoing inside. “You trust him?”

"I'm not sure," Renarin said. "You might want to . . ." he nodded toward the horses.

"Right," Merin said, reaching back and pulling his Shardblade free from their packs. It created an immediate disturbance as dockworkers paused in their loading, staring at the massive blade. "So much for anonymity," Merin whispered, resting the Blade on his shoulder and walking toward the dockhouse.

Selsen popped back out before they could step inside. "Hurry!" he said. "Follow!" And he was off again.

Merin turned back to Renarin with a resigned look, and both followed after the man. The dockhouse sides opened behind them as a group of workers pulled back the wooden gates. This particular building was fortunate enough to be built close enough to the river that even the receded waterline abutted its sides. However, Merin's suspicions about the river's depth were proven true as Selsen leaped into the river. He was a short man, and the water only came up to his knees.

"Hurry, lads!" Selsen yelled at the dockhouse. A group of ten young men were pulling a small vessel out of the housing. It looked something like a sleek barge. It was wide and flat, tapering to a point at the front. It slid slowly into the water, where the young men continued to tug on ropes, drawing the vessel farther out into the river.

"What is that?" Merin demanded of the little man.

"A ship!" Selsen said. "Jern, Reklan, get their things and stow them on the *Calmness*. You two, my lords, should hurry up."

"Into the river?" Merin asked. "You mean for us to walk out there with you?"

"Never mind getting your feet wet," the little man said with a chuckle. "The rest of you will join them soon. Come on!"

The little man turned and jumped forward, following his pullers deeper into the river. Eventually the ship began to float—barely. The waters came up to the pullers' chests as they neared the center of the river, out beyond the dock's protective embankments.

"By the winds . . ." Merin whispered. "He's a Stormrider! That's what the ship is!" As if to mark Merin's words, the ship suddenly unfurled a pair of thick, rectangular sails set in stout, stumpy masts. "I've heard stories of them," Merin said. "Men who try to ride the waves of a highstorm's flood. Some in ships, others on barges, some even in barrels."

"Indeed," Renarin said, then promptly stepped off the dock to begin wading toward the ship.

“Renarin!” Merin said, reaching out. Behind him the packmen had unloaded their horses and were moving into the river as well.

“Hey!” Merin snapped as he saw one carrying his bundled set of Shardplate. The men ignored him, however, in their hurry to join their companions.

“Quickly, young lords!” the stumpy man yelled from the river’s center. “Very little time now!”

Merin turned toward the ominous western sky. Then he turned east, looking down the lait valley with its weak river. That river would soon be filled with a crashing wave of water. The lait was too wide for it to be of much damage to the city or docked ships, but a vessel left out when the floodwaters came . . .

All of the Stormrider tales ended the same way: with a destroyed ship and a set of dead occupants. Told around the hearth they had been funny tales to a young boy who had never seen river or lait, and the storytellers had always exaggerated the folly of those foolish enough to try and survive sailing during a highstorm.

Merin closed his eyes as Selsen called for him again. *I’ll probably make one boulder of a tale*, he thought. *The young soldier who saved the king, then got himself killed trying to Stormride!*

He stepped into the water anyway, following after Renarin. “This is stupid!” he called at his friend. “Renarin, I’ve seen the floodwaters in Kholinar! No ship could survive that! Renarin!”

Renarin had reached the vessel, and Selsen stood on one side helping him up. The air was already cooling, the winds picking up slightly, and the riverwater seemed to be moving more swiftly.

“It’ll be all right, young lord!” Selsen said. “I’ve done this twice already!”

“It’s madness!” Merin insisted.

“No, you see,” Selsen said as Merin approached, “I know the secret. Everyone else tries to ride the wave of water that comes with the storm. But us, we’re not going to do that. *The Winds!* They’re the key. They’ll push this ship forward even in three feet of water! The sails are angled; they lift us up, and we skim just on the top of the water. Have you ever skipped rocks on the river, young lord?”

“No,” Merin said flatly.

“Oh. Well, you’ll see what I mean soon enough. Come on up.”

Merin stood in the cool water, staring at the vessel. It was so thin, so frail. Though its well-built sails gave an illusion of strength, Merin had felt summer highstorms.

Renarin was letting two of the servants lash him to a seat near the side of the vessel. “Come on, Merin,” he said, eyes alight. “I told you he went by river, and I was right! I saw it! I was right!”

“This is madness,” Merin muttered again, but didn’t complain as two dockhands hoisted him onto the deck. He stood dripping as one motioned for him to lash down his Shardblade.

Selsen stood, a broad—almost maniac—smile splitting his face. “The highstorms are like giant waves, you see,” he whispered with an eager voice. “Massive waves of wind and water that sweep across the land. First east to west, then back west to east again, reversing direction with each storm. They’re like . . . like a broom being pulled across the stones. We’re just going to let ourselves be a speck of dust caught in that broom’s tines.” He winked. “Trust me. It’s terribly fun!”

“Terrible,” Merin said sickly. Somehow he suspected this was going to be far worse than the time Aredor had made him gallop on horseback.

Two men lashed him into place, then they began adjusting ballast, the captain yelling at them to be quick as he watched the oncoming storm with a mixed nervous excitement.

“Here she comes!” Selsen finally yelled. “Back, lads! Out of the floodway!”

The dockhands scattered, leaving the insane vessel bobbing slightly in the shallow waters. Merin turned with apprehension as a rushing sound approached. He could see the rainwall streaking toward them. Behind it roared a massive, crushing wave of rumbling liquid. It frothed and beat upon itself like a pulsating beast of brown and white, its howl that of screaming winds.

“The only trick to this all is steering!” Selsen called. “If I take us the wrong direction, we’ll be caught in the winds and ripped to pieces!”

Merin gulped. “What do we do if that happens!” he screamed over the water’s roar.

Selsen smiled, catching Merin’s eye. “If that happens, lad,” he bellowed, “hold your breath!”

The winds hit a second later.

VORINISM DIDN’T SPEAK MUCH of the afterlife. The monks said that it was not man’s place to worry about the next life, but that his focus should be on this one. The mortal life was where man faced his challenges—and to the Vorins, those challenges were manifest in the danger of the Stormshades.

The Returns were finished, Vorinism now taught, but there was much that could be learned from the past. The Khothen themselves were a

metaphor. When the Stormshades threatened, men had been forced to live within the precepts of society, not creating chaos or fighting against other men—for all of humankind had a far greater enemy to face. Men needed that same unity in everything they did. If one pressed the monks to speak about the afterlife, they simply explained that living well—remaking oneself by transforming the Ten Carnal Attributes into the Ten Divine Attributes—would assure a man rewards.

The Elinrah priests were more forthcoming. They whispered of the Almighty's Dwelling, the radiant gathering of stars that shone in the night sky. The Dwelling was said to be at the very center of that collection of stars, where the points of light were so thick that one couldn't distinguish space between them. That place of light and peace was where the souls of good men would find rest.

There were other places too. One, Khothar, was a place of fire and smoke. Khothar was the land of the Stormshades—and the Elinrah taught that this was a land where the souls of men who did not follow the Almighty were punished. There was a place even worse, however. The Deep. A place reserved for men who professed allegiance to the Almighty, but who were evil in their hearts. This was a place of special suffering, a land of dark coldness. A land of madness.

Merin hadn't expected to find himself there.

But where else could he be than the Deep? What had he done that he would lie bound, his screams lapped up by the highstorm's roar, his face beaten by both rains and the crashing waves from the river below? The wind of the tempest pushed from behind, but it was doubled by passing air to the sides, a wind created as their boat moved at a ridiculous speed over the waters.

Cities, dark from the clouds overhead, blipped past like drops of forgotten rain. If men in them watched the river, they might have seen fools caught in a perpetual roar of destruction. They might have heard screams of terror over the wind. But they probably didn't.

Fortunately, unconsciousness took Merin before madness could.

THE FEELING OF WET SORENESS that awakened him was worse, even, than the pain he had felt on his second day in the army. Merin felt as if a tenseset of spearmen had taken their practice weapons and beaten him repeatedly. He groaned, water dripping from his mouth. He would have vomited, but he had freed his stomach of its contents before the first few minutes of travel had passed.

"Ah, first time's the worst, you know!" Selsen's voice quipped from a short distance away.

Merin opened sodden eyes, lifting his face from the wooden plank. His bonds had been loosed, but he could barely move anyway.

"Hand me your sword," he mumbled. "I'm going to kill you."

Selsen laughed. Merin groggily located the man standing on the deck a short distance away, fiddling with some ropes near the sails. "Thought we'd overshoot there for a moment! Almost couldn't get these knots undone. That's the *really* tricky part. Anyone can start, but stopping . . . well, that takes a smooth hand. Have to find an open place, where the stormflood weakens, then cut the sails and ride it out. But we made it. My men should have seen us pass—they'll be here soon."

Merin managed to sit. His head hurt worst of all, and he blinked in the waning light. It was dusk, and they seemed to be floating on a random section of the river, no buildings in sight. "Where are we?" he asked.

"Near Jeznarn," the man said. "About fifty miles north of Crossguard."

Merin froze, pain forgotten for a moment. "Fifty miles north of . . . but, that trip could take weeks on foot! How long were we . . .?"

"Usually takes about five hours," Selsen said happily.

Halfway across the kingdom in five hours. Merin had marched that same distance in the army, and had taken more than three weeks.

Selsen noticed his wonder. He waddled over, then stooped down, grinning. "This is it, you see, young lord? The future! No more waiting for messengers on horses, no! We have a new way of traveling. New, bright, and wondrous!"

"New, bright, and insane," Merin mumbled, rubbing his bruised right arm. "Besides, what if you want to send a message south instead of east or west? Or, what if you want it delivered during the summer, when days pass without storms? In fact, what if you don't happen to live near a lait at all!"

Selsen rubbed his chin. "I'm working on a way to do it without the river," he said. "Though I haven't quite decided how to do it without the storm. That part's kind of central to the strategy, eh?"

Merin lurched to his feet, stumbling over to where Renarin still lay, wet and unconscious. "You're crazier than a rock with no name," Merin said, patting Renarin's cheek and trying to wake him up.

"Ha! You don't know how lucky you are! Why, poor Aredor, he had to come on the big ship!"

"The big ship?" Merin asked, turning.

"Sure," Selsen said. "This gal, the *Calmness*, is the design ship. I built it

first as a kind of model, then built the larger version that Aredor rode. He had so many men with him that we couldn't fit them all on the little ship! Safer, true, but not half as exciting!"

Merin closed his eyes. *Ignore him. Ignore him. You're alive, and you're near Crossguard.* He turned back to Renarin, who was beginning to stir.

Renarin opened his eyes, groaning. "So this is what they do to boys who disobey their fathers," he mumbled as Merin helped him up. He paused, freezing, then reached for his pocket with an urgent motion. He pulled free the onyx sphere with a sigh of relief.

"Ah, there they are!" Selsen said, pointing toward a group of riders descending the lait slope. "They're good men. Much obliged, like I am, to Lord Aredor's generosity. We'll give you a pair of horses to replace the ones you left at the Perch, and you can be on your way. You could be to Crossguard in a few days, if you ride hard."

Merin sighed at the thought of more traveling. He looked at Renarin, who didn't look much better.

But Renarin was right. Aredor did come by river. A clever guess, given what Aredor had said back in Kholinar, or . . . something else?

"Let's go," Renarin said. "We need to find him as quickly as possible."

chapter 45

JASNAH 10

AT FIRST, JASNAH THOUGHT that the spark of sunlight was a trick of the caves. During their week-long passage through darkness she had occasionally seen promising glints of light up ahead, only to discover a shard of quartz jutting from the cavern wall, its crystalline surface deceptively reflecting their lanternlight. She had almost begun to think the caverns eternal, that she had led the frightened palace servants from a quick slaughter to a slow, creeping death by starvation. The mountain was an oppressive tyrant around them, its endless passages misleading, almost maddening. Surely men were not meant to delve its secrets. This place with its dripping waters, its twisted rock formations, and its darkened corners should be death to those who arrogantly thought to navigate its paths.

One thing, however, kept the servants from bending beneath the weight of uncertainty and gloom. Taln always seemed to know where he was going. When they reached a merging of caverns or tunnels, he instantly picked a direction, prodding them on with his sheer force of decisiveness. Men did not grumble when Taln led, and women did not question. Jasnah was amazed at how easily they followed, how quick they were to smile and forget their pains when the daily march was through. Theirs should have been a desolate company—their kin slaughtered, their home ransacked, their lives in question. Instead of despair, however, she saw in them a

stalwart determination. And, with resignation, she could only determine one source for their resilience. They believed him.

Taln guided them firmly. He cared for their wounded, showing a surprising level of medical proficiency. He spoke to them with confidence, ignoring Meridas's frequent suggestions that the troop was headed to its doom. Taln spoke of Heralds and Stormshades, of the Return and the need to defend mankind. Jasnah cringed at every such profession, his mental problems forcing her to acknowledge that despite his competence, he was not a man who could be trusted with extended leadership. Many of the servants, however, didn't share her apprehension. She could blame them little—considering their sufferings, any hint of hope was of value. She became certain, however, that when . . . if . . . they escaped the caves, she would need to adopt a firmer stand with Taln, lest he infect the others with his delusions.

Meridas presented his own problem. Her refusal to recognize their wedding had angered him, and though he was civil, she could see his frustration. Though he was by far the ranking nobleman in the group, he had been wrong about the passages, and couldn't very well demand leadership when he didn't know the way. His barbs against Taln were plentiful and snide, but he didn't attempt to give flagrant commands—he was clever enough to understand that the madman was their only chance to escape. Indeed, Meridas found himself isolated by necessity. There were few nobles in the group, and besides Jasnah and Kemnar, none were very high in rank. Kemnar's guards were all nineteenth or twentieth Lords—professional guards, well beneath Meridas's consideration. Jasnah's ladies-in-waiting were little better. That only left two sixteenth lords, palace couriers who had been absorbed into the group during the escape. Meridas quickly appropriated these two to be his adjuncts, but they were hardly fitting confidants.

Despite Meridas's cool demeanor, Jasnah could see that the situation grated upon him. He didn't like feeling subordinate, and he shot occasional hateful looks at Taln. Once the group reached safety, Meridas would also have to be controlled, lest he act on his frustration and try to kill Taln.

So, when the sunlight ahead was finally confirmed, Jasnah knew she had to act quickly. She pulled herself up, trying not to think about her bruised feet and aching muscles. Even as the citizens piled from the cave opening, exulting in the open sky and waning evening light, Jasnah approached Meridas and Taln, who stood at the back of the crowd. The two men were eyeing each other with hostility—their reasons for truce had just expired.

“No,” Jasnah commanded.

The men glanced at her, but kept wary watch on each other. Meridas’s hand was at his side, white smoke curling as his Blade was summoned.

“Stay out of this, Jasnah,” Taln said. “I will try not to kill him.”

Meridas smiled at that.

“Why do you need that sword so badly, Taln?” Jasnah asked. “Aren’t you worried that he’ll kill you? Who will fulfill your quest if that happens?”

Taln shook his head, dismissing Jasnah’s argument. “The odds now are not as they were at the feast. I need that sword. I’ll have to risk death for the good of the very quest you mention.”

Jasnah ground her teeth as Meridas raised his Blade. “You need the weapon to determine where your brothers are, correct? It will point you in their direction?”

“Yes,” Taln said.

“So you only need to hold it for a moment, right?”

Taln paused. “Yes,” he admitted.

Jasnah turned to Meridas.

“What?” the nobleman asked with amusement. “You expect me to give my weapon over to the madman?”

“Only for a few heartbeats,” Jasnah said.

“That’s long enough to kill a man,” Meridas said.

Jasnah rolled her eyes. “I’ll take both Blades, then stick his in the ground near the cave entrance. Then I’ll give yours to him. If it looks like he’s going to try and attack, you can run over and take the one from the ground. We’ll let him hold it for a count of a hundred, then he has to give it back.”

Meridas smiled. “Ah, my dear Lady Jasnah, you forget. I am a simple merchant by heart. What have I to gain from such a bargain? Why would I let him hold my Blade, if only for a moment? There is nothing in it for me.”

“You are wrong,” Jasnah countered. “There is something in it for you.”

Meridas raised his eyebrows.

Jasnah gritted her teeth. She had considered this bargain during the length of their trip in darkness. Meridas was a shrewd business man, if nothing else. She had only one gem to offer—and even it would be a gamble.

I’m sorry Nelshenden, she thought silently. “There is something you want, Meridas,” Jasnah said. “Me. We are not married yet. If you ever intend to see that ceremony completed, then you should be wary of offence. I will not look favorably upon a suitor who ignores my will in this matter.”

Meridas snorted. “Suitor? Your brother has already given you to me, my dear. The betrothal, at least, is still official.”

“It was official as long as Elhokar had me locked in his palace,” Jasnah replied. “He no longer has that palace, and the only guards I see here are my own. I could be persuaded to see my brother’s will in this matter, if it were for the good of Alethkar. But, make no mistake, I will not again put myself in a position where I will be forced to wed. If you wish my hand, then you will need to convince *me* that such a union should occur.”

Meridas paused, frowning slightly. Taln was still tense, newly-captured Shardblade gripped before him. Both, however, were considering her proposal. Jasnah sighed at the necessities of sating masculine pride—one would think that a god and a *Parshen* would be a little less childish. Unfortunately, she wasn’t finished yet—it would do her no good to solve this argument if she just had to quell another one on the morrow.

“There is one more thing, my lords,” Jasnah said forcibly, drawing their attention back to her.

“Lords?” Meridas asked, emphasizing the plural.

“He holds a Blade now, Meridas,” Jasnah said. “Taken from a Shardbearer in battle.”

“Taken falsely,” Meridas spat.

“He took it in the defense of Alethkar’s people,” Jasnah said. “Something you did not seem very concerned about doing. We will see which man retains his Blade once I tell my brother how you walked away, leaving me to fend for myself in a palace filled with enemy soldiers.”

Meridas’s frown deepened.

Jasnah sighed. “My lords, the First City has fallen, and our king’s back is exposed to an enemy he doesn’t know exists. There is no time for squabbling—we need to act decisively. This troop, wearied though it is, must bring word to my brother. We can’t afford to be divided—we need one leader, not three. That leader will be me.”

“Excuse me?” Meridas asked.

Taln didn’t respond, though his eyes narrowed slightly.

“You will be in command of the group, Meridas, as befits your rank,” Jasnah said. “But I will decide where we go and what we do. It is vital that we get word to my brother, and that we do so without revealing ourselves. Taln, you get to hold Meridas’s Blade for a hundred heartbeats. Meridas, you get my hand in betrothal. In exchange, you will both do as I say until such time as my kingdom has been rescued from its invaders.”

“You promise to accept the marriage?” Meridas asked carefully, speaking with the tongue of a merchant. “By your oath?”

Jasnah’s stomach twisted. “Yes.”

“I cannot give myself over to your command,” Taln said. “I need to seek my brethren.”

“What will be faster?” Jasnah asked. “Seeking them on your own, without having touched your Blade, or seeking them with both your Blade and the messengers of a grateful king to serve you? Protect me now, during our time of need, and I will see that you have the resources of Alethkar at your disposal.”

She was making many promises—difficult promises. It was only after she was done, Taln and Meridas considering their separate rewards, that she realized she was doing it again. Protecting Elhokar. It had proven her folly once before, and because of her oversight, Nelshenden and Shinri were dead.

No, she told herself forcefully. This is for Alethkar, not my brother. I will not see the kingdom of my fathers fall to invasion.

“Very well,” Meridas suddenly declared, stabbing his Blade point first into the stone ground. In the distance, the peasants were resting from their journey, Brother Lhan distributing the evening rations, Kemnar’s soldiers at his side. Kemnar himself had edged closer to Jasnah’s conference, eyes glittering with curiosity. He stood, Jasnah noted, within distance of striking at Meridas, should the man prove dangerous.

“I will give you a hundred days,” Taln finally decided. “If we have no success by that time, then I must seek my brethren alone.”

It was the best she was going to get. “Very well,” Jasnah said. “Swear to obey my will, swear it by the Tenth Name.”

“Kevahin,” Meridas whispered.

“Kevahin,” Taln said.

Jasnah nodded, and Meridas turned, leaving his Blade in the stone. “One hundred heartbeats,” he said. “You need not take his own Blade away. I . . . trust him.” His eyes said he believed nothing of the sort, yet he walked away anyway, back turned to Taln—as if daring the madman to strike against him.

Taln ignored the retreating noblemen. The false Herald rammed his Blade in the ground, then grabbed Meridas’s abandoned weapon with a reverent touch. She heard him whisper something under his breath—a single word that sounded like a name. Then he grew apprehensive, almost uncertain.

His grip stiffened with determination, and he raised the Blade in two hands.

There was a pause. Finally, he exhaled in relief. "It works," he said. "The Blade's powers remain, even if mine do not." He raised the point of the Blade, turning it to the northwest. "There. That direction."

Jasnah frowned. "Taln, there's nothing but wilderness to the west."

Taln glanced up, judging the position of the stars as they began to appear. "Riemak," he said.

"The Kingdom of Riemak fell hundreds of years ago," Jasnah said. "That land is nothing more than a back country of despots and isolated villages. You know that." *You came from Riemak.* She left the last part off.

"That is where they are nonetheless," Taln said. "Jorevan. They must have gathered there."

Jasnah frowned. Jorevan, the Holy City, had once been the center of Vorin power. "It was sacked soon after Riemak fell. A local tyrant now controls the Oathgate."

"Why would my brethren gather there?" Taln asked, as if her comments were made in line with his own strange reasonings. "And send me no word? What do they know that I do not? Could they have foreseen that Ral Eram was doomed? Balear'Elin is an Onyxseer. If his powers still work, then perhaps . . ."

Taln looked over at her, then jammed the sword back into the ground. "We must go there, to Jorevan. We must know what they know."

"Taln, I . . ."

He held up a hand. "I know. You do not believe me. We must go there nonetheless—besides, where else would we go?"

"That, we must decide," Jasnah said. "Go and get your monk friend. I will return Meridas's Blade to him."

"If TALN SPEAKS CORRECTLY, then we are here," Kemnar said, placing a small rock on the map he had scratched into the stone ground.

Firelight illuminated the white scrapings. Across the short plateau, Jasnah's people had been arranged into a tenseset different camps, each with their own fire. Their wood—taken from water barrels and boxes of food—would not last long, but they deserved a warm meal following the extended trek through darkness. They would worry about supplies later.

Around the fire with Jasnah sat Taln, Lhan, Meridas, Kemnar, and—at Taln's suggestion—a broad-figured palace maid named Denia. Jasnah vaguely knew the woman for her gossipy ways and reputed firmness with

her undermaids. During their journey, Denia had somehow become the unofficial leader of the citizens.

Jasnah studied the map. The Mount of Ancestors was represented by a massive circle drawn at the bottom. A rock on its eastern side represented Ral Eram. Taln placed their group directly on the other side of the mountain, on its western side. She found it amazing that they had traveled so far, bypassing the entire mountain. If it were known that such a direct path lay beneath Ral Eram . . .

A short distance to their west lay the border between Alethkar and the Riemak wilds. The demarcation ran directly to the north. Crossguard, Jezenrosh's palace and the probable location of Elhokar's army, lay on the far eastern side of the country. It would take weeks to reach it.

"We can't make directly for Crossguard," Kemnar said, voicing her own thoughts. "Not only is it too far, but we can probably assume that King Ahven plans to do more than simply take Ral Eram. If he strikes at Elhokar now, he could take the entire country. The Vedens will likely be moving toward Crossguard in an attempt to strike at Elhokar's forces from behind. If we go directly east, we have a good chance of broadsiding their army—and their scouts will undoubtedly see us before we see them."

"Agreed," Meridas said. "The battle at Crossguard is probably already finished. His majesty planned to strike quickly and efficiently. However, such a plan likely cost him considerable troops. If the Vedens take him in the open, with Crossguard destroyed . . ."

"We have to get him word," Jasnah agreed. "Suggestions?"

"Kholinar," Kemnar said, placing a rock along the curving line he had drawn. "It's almost directly north of us, and Lord Dalenar has considerable forces at his command—forces that are rested and well-equipped. If we can alert him, his messengers could probably get word to King Elhokar in time."

"That's still several weeks' march, my lords," Lhan noted. "The people are tired. Could we find nothing closer?"

"We should go to the first village we can find," Jasnah said. "We can drop off the peasants there, appropriate some horses, and then ride for Kholinar."

Taln shook his head. "Dangerous," he said.

"Why?" Jasnah asked.

"This Veden, King Ahven," Taln said. "He was clever enough to get access to the Oathgates, then strategic enough to capture the palace quietly. We can assume he holds the city now, and he will be very disappointed to find that you, my lady, and Lord Meridas are missing. His soldiers know

someone was in the cellars, and that they disappeared. We didn't have time to mask our presence there. They will see the dust scuffed where we removed barrels and boxes. They know we escaped."

The group fell quiet, the maid Denia's face paling slightly. "You . . . think we're being followed, Lord Talenel?"

"I know it," Taln said. "I heard echoes in the caverns. We lost them early, but they will eventually find their way through the maze. There are few exits, and all of them come out on this side of the mountain. If the Veden King is half as clever as his attack implies, he will have spies watching this side of Alethkar to make certain that his surprise attack on King Elhokar is not spoiled."

Taln bent down, pointing at the map. "He'll expect us to head north to Kholinar. That, then, is the thing we absolutely cannot do. If the situation is as you imply, then he will be less worried about warning the king and more worried about warning the surrounding lords who did not ride to war against Jezenrosh. Elhokar will know of Ahven's force soon enough. King Ahven's task will be to force a battle with Elhokar before Alethkar can gather reinforcements. In order to succeed, he must control the information between Elhokar and his allies."

Kemnar rubbed his chin. "He has a point, my lady," he said. "The Vedens will probably strike quickly at King Elhokar, then move on to take the separate lords one at a time. They'll probably lay siege to some of the larger lait cities and spend considerable time hunting scouts and messengers."

"Then that means we have to get word to Kholinar all the more quickly," Jasnah pointed out.

"No," Taln said. "It means we need to be careful. We crossed the mountain quickly, but the invaders have horses. They will have riders watching for refugees all across Alethkar, and those riders will have orders to kill. Elhokar himself sealed the Oathgates, and since he is probably using Awakeners to supply food, he won't need a supply line, and information from the capital will not be a priority. The rivers do not flow during the Searing. The invaders will probably allow visitors into Ral Eram; they will just stop traffic from going out. Information will be slow to spread. By the time anyone hears that the Oathgates have fallen, your king will be dead."

"What, then, do you suggest, madman?" Meridas said with a snort. "You say we need to inform the king's allies, but you claim we cannot ride to them, lest we reveal ourselves."

Taln moved his finger a few inches, crossing the border into Riemak.

“These are wilds,” he said, “poorly inhabited and solitary. If we head northward through them instead of up through Alethkar proper, we have a much greater chance of remaining unseen. We can still send messengers to Elhokar from the villages we pass, but we must do so quietly, without telling the city inhabitants of our identities. Then we can cut back into Alethkar and travel to Kholinar from the west, instead of the south. It loses us a week’s travel, perhaps, but the gain in safety is far greater than the loss.”

Jasnah narrowed her eyes. “That path takes us conveniently close to the ruins of the Holy City, Taln,” she said.

Taln shrugged. “Does that make it any worse a plan?”

Kemnar looked up. “It does seem sound, my lady.”

She knew it did. There was a reason Elhokar had trusted her with his army’s tactics—she saw Taln’s explanations, and knew that they were right. King Ahven’s army would act as Taln suggested, being careful to isolate Elhokar from his allies. Ahven would have scouts on the major roads, watching for refugees or for messengers. They would kill any riders they saw, trying to sow confusion and keep his secrets as long as possible. Jasnah’s troop was hardly inconspicuous. Even once they abandoned the peasants, Taln and Kemnar had Shardblades that could not be dismissed, and Meridas carried himself too much like a nobleman. Riding through Alethkar, it would take a miracle for them to reach Kholinar safely. Riemak, however, with its unkempt roads and sparse population, would mask their travel quite well.

Jasnah nodded. “I will consider it,” Jasnah said. “First, we need to find a village and some horses. Then we can decide upon a final path.”

JASNAH HUDDLED ON THE FRIGID STONES, her back to a boulder, watching the pitiful remnants of the once-fire smolder before her. The wood hadn’t lasted long—barely long enough to give a reminder of warmth, something near-forgotten during their ten days in the dank mountain confines. Her wedding slippers were in tatters, and the once-beautiful dress had fared little better. She’d been forced to allow Kemnar to rip it up the side, so that she could walk with a masculine stride, and the fine tassels and frills had not been designed for extended use. She was cold, sore, and hungry.

The night was cool—they were still at a relatively high elevation, and the mountainside provided little shelter from the wind. The people lay huddled together, clothed only in what they had been wearing when they escaped. Several of the women, like Jasnah, didn’t even have cloaks.

Yet, her personal problems were secondary to those facing the group as a

whole. The coals couldn't help but remind her of the difficulties to come. So much wood to burn bespoke empty food stores, more than half depleted. They were horribly low on water, and this was the Searing—rain wouldn't fall for another two weeks. Even then, it would come with the most furious tempest of the year—the Almighty's Bellow. She had to find the people shelter by then. Being caught on the stormlands during the Bellow would certainly bring death to the weakened and young in the troop.

Footsteps scuffed rocks behind her. "It's an odd place, our Roshar," Taln's voice noted. "Even during the Searing, the hottest month of the summer, the night winds chill to the soul. Perhaps it's the lack of vegetation—there's no humidity, nothing to keep the heat in. This is such a lonely, barren rock of a world."

Jasnah frowned as the madman crouched beside the coals, stirring them with a half-charred piece of wood. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

Taln shook his head. "Nothing that matters any more, I suppose."

Jasnah eyed him for a moment, his broad form illuminated only slightly by starlight and the weak coals. "Tell me," she finally asked. "How did you remember your way through those caves? I presumed us lost a tenset times over. Yet you found the exit. You must have traveled its depths many times."

Taln shook his head. "Only once," he said quietly.

Jasnah raised an eyebrow. "You memorized a map, then? Even still, navigating that well from memory was quite a feat. I should like to see the map itself sometime."

"There is no map. As far as I know, I'm the only one to ever travel through those caverns and see the other side. The passage we went through wasn't really meant to be an escape from the palace—it was built to . . . hide things. The last time I traveled those tunnels, I did so by chance, tracking a traitor who is now centuries dead. I followed him for seven days, and when the trail ended, I found only a corpse dead of thirst."

Jasnah frowned. "That's a ridiculous story, Taln. How could you possibly find your way out of those caverns after wandering them for seven days?"

"It's a hard thing to explain," he said quietly. "A Stoneward can feel the rocks, much like a Windrunner can sense movements in the air, or an Onyxseer can see the patterns of time itself. Fortunately, I remember the path I once took, for the stones are silent to me now."

Jasnah sat incredulously, trying to comprehend how a man could say such words and sound so believing. And yet, Taln offered no further explanation, and she knew by now that confronting him about his madness was useless.

She settled back against her boulder, but it was impossible to find a

comfortable position. The quiet sounds of laughter floated over the plateau, and Jasnah glanced to the side. Only one fire still burned; Meridas had appropriated the last of their wood for his own needs, and now sat presiding over a small gathering of nobility. Tenin and Chathan, the two palace couriers, and Jasnah's three ladies-in-waiting sat around his flames, as did one of Kemnar's soldiers. Meridas held himself slightly aloof, seated munificently beside the fire, directing the conversation.

Jasnah shook her head. "We sit without provisions, hunted and exposed to the weather, and he acts as if he were a feasting king."

"He gives them comfort," Taln said with a shrug. "He reminds them that they're special—for here, away from courts and balls, they have little else to give them strength."

Jasnah snorted. She suspected that comfort or no, both the citizens and nobility of their group would be better off without Meridas to remind them of their differences.

"You would really marry him?" Taln asked.

The question caught her off-guard. She masked her instant revulsion to the concept, turning back to Taln with a calm expression. "To save Alethkar? Yes. Besides, I could hardly ask for a better union—though he needn't be informed of that fact."

"Ah," Taln said, nodding with the expression of one who thought he understood things.

"Not for myself, idiot," she snapped. "For Alethkar. Meridas is my brother's closest advisor. As a *Parshen's* wife I could keep an easy eye on both of them." *And, perhaps, revenge myself upon them.*

Taln frowned slightly. "You used to speak of your brother with such devotion. What changed?"

Jasnah paused. When had she spoken of Elhokar to Taln? Hoping the darkness covered her slight flush at his astute question, she glanced away. "It is of no concern to you, madman."

He sat quietly for a moment. "You should sleep," he finally said. "We'll need our strength in the days to come."

She turned back coldly. "Wise words from a man who sits awake himself."

"I don't need as much sleep as normal people," Taln said. "I shouldn't need any at all, actually. But . . . something has changed. This Return, things are different. I can no longer draw strength from places I once could."

Jasnah frowned, and a sudden curiosity struck her. This man before her seemed so simple, yet his mind was keen—except for the strange taint of

madness. He appeared able to separate the two pieces of his life, functioning with capability, even cleverness, when the need arose. But he clung unwaveringly to his delusions at the same time. What had happened in his life to create such a division? What had broken this mind that seemed so confident, so strong?

“What was it supposed to do?” she asked. “The Sign?”

Taln raised his eyebrows, her question as unexpected as his about marriage. “It . . . is something Prael’Elin devised. The Elin have a bond within them, a link to the Nahel and the Soul Tones. We can manifest this, if we wish. The bond appears like a scattering of thousands upon thousands of tiny lines of light, extending into oblivion from the center of our bodies. Beautiful golden threads, each one a life.”

He sighed, pulling something from a pocket in his cloak. It was a tiny piece of amber—one that looked like it had once been the knob to a chest or closet. He rubbed it wistfully. “The bond,” he finally said, “appears to have been weakened. I dare not fear destroyed. I can draw no power from it. It is odd that I should seek for abilities lost, while you hide and suppress what you have obviously been given.”

Jasnah flushed again. She felt exposed before this man, and she nearly hated him for it. He had seen the secret that, before interrogating the assassin with Kemnar and Nelshenden, she had shown to only one man. Taln had a power over her she hadn’t entrusted to even her father or brother.

“Why do you hide it?” Taln asked, pressing the issue despite her obvious anger.

“You will speak no further of this topic,” Jasnah commanded.

“Very well,” Taln said. “Though, I can’t help wondering if your opinion will change if you see these people starving when you could have made them grain, or freezing when you could make the very rocks burn.”

“Such things require far more skill than I have,” she said.

Taln shrugged. “If you lack skill, it is likely because you haven’t seen fit to develop what the Almighty has given you. Your Soul Tone must resonate strongly, or you would never have been able to open the lock on the passage. It was made to respond only to Heralds.”

Jasnah felt a chill that was not of the winds. “How can you speak like that of Awakening?” she hissed. “You profess to be a man of wisdom, a man sent of gods, and yet you encourage me to . . . let *it* take my soul? You know what it does to people? How it twists their minds . . . how it changes them?”

Taln actually dared smile at the comment. “Everything changes us, Lady Kholin. Can you honestly say that our escape did not alter you forever,

slightly change the way you regard the world? In a small way, does not every person you meet leave their own small mark on your life?"

"That's different."

"Is it?" Taln asked. "Ask yourself this. Is the physical act of Awakening what changes its practitioners, or are those changes simply a reaction to new experiences? Once a man's vision expands, and he learns to see things as they are and not as they appear, will he not begin to react differently? Does Awakening change them, Jasnah, or do they change themselves?"

"I can't answer that," Jasnah snapped.

Taln smiled. "You could." Then he rose, unclasping his simple cloak and extending it toward her as he passed. "Take it," he prompted as she hesitated. "The cold doesn't bother me."

Her pride urged her to refuse, but her aching back and shivering arms proved more persuasive. She accepted the cloak, wrapping herself in the warm shennah as Taln wandered over to join Kemnar on watch.

chapter 46

SHINRI 8

A CREAK IN THE DARKNESS made Shinri pause, her body tense. It was, of course, nothing. After a moment of anxious listening, she forced herself to relax. She needed sleep—she had been so tired and drowsy last afternoon that she hadn't been able to think properly. Yet, when night came, she again found herself unable to sleep, even in the vast comfort of the queen's chambers.

Sighing, Shinri sat up in the bed, resting against the backboard with her legs pulled up against her chest. Ahven had not come for her since that first horrible day, but she did not doubt that he would eventually return. He needed an heir to seal his pact with Shinri's father. She didn't know what kept the Idiot King away—whether it be simple busyness, or whether he feared her father might send assassins against him once an heir arrived.

Whatever the reason for the delay, she blessed the Almighty for it. She glanced to the side, toward the wooden bedstand that formed a shadowy blot in the darkness beside her, and thought of the knife she had hidden beneath its lip. It had seemed like such a brave move in the daylight, but in the darkness she wondered if she'd have the will to use the weapon if Ahven did come for her. The man had a strange power to him, a domineering will . . . a momentum. When she met him in the hallways, she made sure to stop and lower her eyes. She told herself the subservience was simply an act, a way of making him believe that she had been quelled.

And yet, she knew that his arrogant humiliations of her had been at least marginally effective. When she cringed at his sudden motions, she wasn't completely feigning, and when she glanced down in his presence, she did so partially because she loathed looking into those calm eyes of his. She was not beaten, but she had been wounded.

It was worst at night. Night, when she lay in bed, not knowing if he would come or not—and not knowing what she would do if he did. Even still, after weeks without a visit, she could feel his dry touch on her skin. She felt him upon her when she closed her eyes, and she heard his footsteps in every night sound. There was little wonder that the insomnia of her childhood had returned.

And now the First Palace had become his. It had never been a place of true comfort to Shinri, but it had become home. It was the place where Jasnah had made a lady from a wild and insufferable child, and it was the first place that Shinri had found acceptance. Yet when she walked its hallways now, she saw only signs of *him*. His servants. His soldiers. His palace. He had moved into the Veden wing, and while it was similar to the Aleth section, the similarities only made the differences feel more alien. She had returned to the Aleth section only once. The bodies had been removed by that time, but the stink of death seemed to remain. Shinri hadn't been able to spend long in those familiar hallways, now so eerily empty of life and motion, before despair for those who had been slain—many of whom she had known and cared for—drove her away.

Drove her back to him, back into his lair and power. There was no escaping it, not yet. Not while he maintained such a careful watch over her. She was allowed to go where she willed within the palace, but if she tried to leave the Veden section, she was quickly given an escort. Men watched every hallway—there were plenty of soldiers to spare, for the majority of Ahven's time had been centered around bringing his entire army through the Oathgates. Even if she were to escape the palace, large contingents of several hundred men stood guard at each ramp down to the city.

And so Shinri forced herself to wait. With gritted teeth, she adopted an air of half-feigned subservience, and endured the shame of knowing what it did to her. Lady Jasnah's lessons were invaluable. The calming exercises helped Shinri contain her frustration, and the hours spent practicing her political face helped her keep the rebelliousness from her eyes. If Ahven knew she wasn't completely suppressed, he gave no sign—quite the opposite, for the sight of her bowing practically to the ground when he passed gave him obvious pleasure.

She tried, forcibly, not to think of him. Unfortunately, other topics were equally discomfoting. Somehow, it appeared that she had opened the Oathgate. She had been the one who loosed Ahven's soldiers upon her friends. She didn't know how her betrayal had occurred, but she felt guilty nonetheless.

She couldn't remember the experience completely—the feelings and desires she'd felt during that moment when she'd touched the Oathgate's control opal were gone now. Yet she could remember that she had felt *something*, that her thoughts had been expanded somehow. What had she done, and why had it worked? The Oathgates were supposed to be impervious. Both sides had to be open before one could pass through.

But somehow she had been able to bypass that rule. Why? What about her had made the Oathgate react in such a way? Was it her personally, or was there a specific set of circumstances that had demanded that someone like her touch the opal at that moment?

One question was more disturbing than the rest. How had Ahven known to use her in such a way?

Again she had no answers. Her current state was even more frustrating than being locked up in her room, not knowing who had captured her. She could walk about and ask questions, but no one had answers for her. No one but Ahven.

At least Jasnah had escaped. Ahven had attempted to suppress the news, but soldiers and servants talked. There was little he could do to stop the rumors, especially considering the dramatic nature of Jasnah's disappearance. Shinri's handmaidens whispered about the large group of servants who had locked themselves in the palace cellars, apparently to make a last stand before being killed. When the soldiers broke down the doors, however, they had found only empty rooms scattered with dust.

It figured that Jasnah would find a way to escape even an impossible situation. There was something about the woman that . . . defied reality. It was as if she could pit her determination against fate, and change the workings of the world through sheer force of will. The rumors, in typical Veden fashion, dramatized the event to almost mystical proportions—speaking as if Jasnah had managed to gather some near-supernatural warriors to aid in her escape. Despite the embellishments, one thing was certain—Jasnah was gone. The fact that Ahven had sent work crews to tear down the cellar walls was enough to confirm that fact.

Shinri froze. Another sound? This time it wasn't just her imagination—she could definitely hear the sound of voices coming from beyond the

door between her bed chamber and Ahven's. She sat rigid in her bed, jaw clinched, trying to suppress a shiver. Would he come? Would this be the night?

The voices continued. One was undoubtedly Ahven. The other was probably the strange Shin man the king kept as his primary counselor, the man many of the servants feared for some undefined reason. The Shin were a strange and arrogant people anyway, and this one seemed even more discomfoting. His eyes haunted, his movements so unnaturally smooth, Shinri found him nearly as disturbing as the king himself.

He's probably the one, she realized. The king's assassin. The Shin are frighteningly good warriors—Jarnah's invasion proved that much. She could see the man's graceful danger slipping in and out of bedchambers, leaving only corpses behind. Someday soon he would probably take Shinri's own father.

Or maybe even me.

No, that was foolish. Ahven had no reason to kill her—he assumed she was already his. One heir could die of disease. He would want more.

If you run from him, he might decide he wants you dead. The thought was like the voice of a frightened child in her head. Shinri didn't want to think of such things. She was strong. Or, at least, she thought of herself as being strong. That had always been her greatest resource. When she had resisted her father's will as a child, she had done it telling herself she was stronger than he—stronger than his manipulations, stronger than the whims of the other nobility. She had resisted the monks, then the stormkeepers, with the same strength.

Then there had been Jasnah, the first one to show Shinri that there were different kinds of strength. Many assumed that Jasnah had simply beaten Shinri into submission, forcing her to obey through a battle of wills. But that hadn't been it at all—that was the mistake her father and the others had all made. Jasnah had offered Shinri something—the ability to control her surroundings—then had let Shinri decide for herself that she wanted it. It hadn't been a battle that had transformed Shinri, but a simple, factual conversation about the realities of noble life. Jasnah had offered power, and Shinri had consented to learn.

In the end, Shinri's acumen for what Jasnah taught had led to internal battles of their own. However the strength had always been there. Shinri was strong. That was why she had learned Jasnah's lessons, and why she had applied them. Shinri couldn't let herself be manipulated by the courtgoers and her own ignorance.

Sitting quietly, shivering in the dark at the mere sound of a man's voice,

Shinri finally had cause to question her perceptions of strength. Was it weak to fear the creature who had done such terrible things to her? Was it timid to worry that she wasn't the determined, capable person she had always assumed? Was it wrong to fear that face of his? That cold, inhuman expression—one made all the more horrific by her memories? She could still see those eyes looming above her during the moment of passion. Those horrible eyes that had revealed to her the monstrosity that had become her husband.

This was the creature from which she feared to flee. Though she had made her decision to escape, she couldn't stop the child-like whispers of fright from within. He had proven that he was not a man to be defied. What would he do when he discovered that she had run? Would he send the Shin assassin to kill her? Would she awake one night to find those graceful hands at her throat?

Or would it be something even worse? Something she hesitated to imagine—a humiliating, even crippling, retribution? Something that would break the strength she thought she retained, leaving her a docile and cringing husk? As the voices continued, Shinri's imagination devised tensets of tortures the demented man could force upon her. These were the things that awaited her if she invoked Ahven's ire.

I'll just have to make sure I'm not recaptured, she thought with a determination that she wished were completely unfeigned.

chapter 47

TALN 9

“**T**HERE,” TALN SAID, pointing in the evening light. Lights sparkled in the distance.

Kemnar stopped beside him, squinting in the darkness. “I don’t see anything,” he said.

Still too distant, then, for normal eyes, Taln thought. “Let’s move up a little farther,” he suggested. He had lived so long as a Herald that he often forgot what it was like to have the senses of a regular man.

Kemnar nodded, and the two continued to pick their way across the stony ground, scouting ahead of the refugee group. A few moments later, Kemnar paused. “Well leave me in the rain and take my cloak!” he mumbled in surprise. “There *is* a town up there! It’s about time.”

“Does it help determine where we are?”

Kemnar cocked his head thoughtfully. “It will once I know which one it is. It looks fairly big—at least Sixth City size. Danajel? Marcabe, perhaps?” He shook his head. “I’ve spent too little time on this side of the kingdom, Taln. We’ll have to get a little closer. It’s probably Danajel, but I didn’t think we were that far east.”

Taln nodded, trusting Kemnar’s judgment. Taln himself was practically useless at pathfinding. While Kholinar and a couple of older cities remained where they once had, the general landscape of the kingdom had changed

greatly in the nine hundred years he had been gone. He had only been able to explain the general location of the mountain exit, and they had been forced to strike out uncertainly. Only finding a town or major intersection would tell them exactly where they were.

Kemnar led the way. As they had traveled, Taln had come to trust his original impression of the man. Kemnar was competent but humble, curious but unassuming. He seemed to be completely unconcerned with rank or privilege, an odd quality in a nobleman. In fact, he had proven strangely more comfortable with the simple people of the troop, despite his lordly heritage. To a Herald still uncomfortable with the devotion he was paid, Kemnar's attitudes were unspokenly familiar.

The town lights were still in the distance when Kemnar spoke quietly, a slight smile on his lips. "Lady Jasnah's going to be displeased when she finds out we investigated without going back to report first."

"You don't seem all that concerned about her displeasure," Taln noted.

Kemnar's smile widened. "If we went back, she'd just order us to visit the town anyway. This saves time."

Taln raised an eyebrow, walking around a particularly large rockbud. "The lady certainly is fond of controlling her surroundings—and the people in them."

Kemnar chuckled, but Taln hadn't intended the comment lightly. During his travels the last week, he had often questioned the oath of obedience he had given Jasnah. Why had he agreed to such a thing? It wasn't that Taln chafed at letting another lead—in fact, he usually preferred to leave decision-making to one of the other Elin. Jasnah, however, knew so little of what was really happening in the world—she was only concerned with getting word of the invasion to her brother. In addition, her methods were annoying. While she wasn't a tyrant with her power, she also seemed incapable of trusting a man to do his duty properly. She had to be involved in every detail of their work, and had to control practically every decision they made.

Only two things kept him from leaving to seek the Holy City on his own. Foremost was the peaceful knowledge of his brethren's location. Before, he had felt lost and uncertain—worried that something had happened, and that he was alone to protect mankind. Now that he knew that the other Heralds had gathered, his tension relaxed and the fires of defeat retreated. Jezrien, Prael, Nale, Chanaral, Ishar . . . these were men far wiser than himself. Though his own efforts this Return had been ineffectual, the others would have matters in hand. He could afford a slight diversion, even

suffer Jasnah's commands, if it would build friendship and indebtedness with the leaders of Alethkar. When he joined the other Elin, he would be able to deliver that much, at least.

His second reason for staying was a matter of honor. He felt a responsibility to the people he had helped rescue. The palace servants looked up to him—he could feel their growing respect; and while their devotion made him uncomfortable, he knew that he should encourage it. These ones would spread knowledge of the Return and prepare the common people of Alethkar. He would not betray their budding dependence on him by leaving them to the desolation of summer highlands.

"You know," Kemnar said after a few moments of walking, "she's not really as bad as you think."

"Jasnah?" Taln asked.

Kemnar nodded. "She's a bit overbearing, I agree, but at least she cares. That's more than I can say for most of the nobility in Alethkar. Lady Jasnah . . . she just tries a little too hard, I think."

"She is fortunate to have a man such as yourself following her," Taln noted.

Kemnar chuckled wryly. "Not for much longer, it appears." He tapped the oversized pack on his back—duffel-wrapped with two poles sticking out the side, it ostensibly held a tent. The two Shardblades within were too obvious to carry in the open, yet neither man would consider leaving them behind. The pack was awkward, and a little strange, but it was the only alternative.

"She says that since I'm a Shardbearer, I'm too high a rank to be a common bodyguard. I should have never accepted the blasted thing—now that I have a Blade, everyone's going to expect me to start acting respectable."

Taln shrugged, thinking of his own Blade. Since they had no opals, both weapons had begun to revert to Blanks, and their length had shortened slightly. Taln wasn't accustomed to the process—he had never really been forced to bond a Blade before.

It bothered him how easily Meridas had bonded Glyphting, erasing the familiar patterns that had lined its blade for millennia. Instead of the elegant efficiency of Taln's touch, it had become the stunted, straight-backed weapon Meridas seemed to prefer. Chanaral had hypothesized that the Elin Blades, if adulterated by an imperfect opal, would act the same way as the imitation Blades crafted by Epoch Kingdom weaponsmiths. He had been right—Meridas had been able to bond Taln's Blade as if it were nothing special. Losing his Blade to such a man . . . it felt like an invasion to Taln, a perversion.

Taln shook his head, glancing at Kemnar's pack. At least he had a Blade. It was no Glyphting, but it would have to do, for now. In truth, human-crafted Shardblades shouldn't even exist. Though the legends claimed otherwise, Taln's brethren had never intended mankind to have access to Blades. Ishar claimed it was one of the great mysteries of time that men, so innocent and unskilled in the Three Arts, had managed to craft such impressive imitations of the weapons they had seen their Heralds wielding.

Shalesa had been the one who spread the rumors that the weapons had, indeed, been gifts of the Heralds, granting them some measure of control over the development. Still, Taln doubted that men understood the meaning of the Blades they wielded. To them, the weapons were simply another tool—a powerful one, true, but still just a tool. They saw a Shardblade as a trophy to possess and exploit, not a chip from one's very soul, a link to both *nahel* and *lhel*. None of the Heralds took the opportunity to explain the difference—it was bad enough that mankind had the weapons. Almighty protect the world if they ever found out the true power locked within those Blades . . .

"She's fond of you, you know," Kemnar said.

Taln cocked an eyebrow. Kemnar was still on the topic of Lady Jasnah. "I doubt that," he replied. "More frustrated than fond, I would say."

Kemnar shook his head. "She likes people who are a bit odd—they interest her. She could have chosen practically any Aleth nobleman of lesser rank to lead her guard. She could have had brilliant duelists, keen strategists, or could have at least made clever alliances through her choices. Instead, she picked me and . . . Nelshenden." He paused quietly for a moment when he said his friend's name. During the last week, Taln had pried from Kemnar the true events surrounding Elhokar's departure. The truth had only given Taln one more reason to someday find a way to duel Meridas.

"Anyway," Kemnar said, "she chose us. We were hardly the finest swordsmen in Alethkar, and our political connections . . . well, let's just say that in my case, she'd been politically better off *before* she chose me. I have something of a reputation in court. Nelshenden wasn't much better. A man as simply honest as himself earns a measure of respect from his peers, but Nelshenden was no Dalenar. He didn't have mighty deeds or a firm, commanding air to back up his ideals. Most court members found him self-righteous and disapproving. In a way, he was even more excluded from their ranks than myself.

"And yet, we were the two men Lady Jasnah chose to lead her soldiers. Despite all her manipulations at court, when it came down to her own

guards she chose men she could trust.” He paused, eyeing Taln. “And I think she trusts you. Or, at least, she would, if . . .”

“If I weren’t insane,” Taln said

Kemnar laughed, clapping Taln on the shoulder. “None of us are perfect, Taln.”

They fell silent as they walked. Ahead, the city was getting closer in the night. Hopefully they would arrive before the taverns began to close. Kemnar walked quietly at Taln’s side, alert and watchful despite his conversational attitude. This was a man accustomed to slinking through darkness and watching for foes—another attribute Taln would not have thought to discover in a Kanaran nobleman.

The town was relatively large for an outlying, non-lait village. Taln suspected it augmented income, and therefore population, by trading across the Riemak border a short distance away. Eventually, the two men passed through hillsides free of rockbuds and other vegetation, though their feet scuffed the remnants of inavah stalks. The bulbous grain-providing plants would have been harvested in preparation for the coming mid-summer highstorm. As they drew closer to the city, Taln was comforted to see that they weren’t too late—at least a half-tenset taverns shone brightly across the city.

Architecture appeared to have changed little in the centuries he had been gone. Simple stone dwellings were the norm. Here, away from the prettiness of Ral Eram, many of the buildings had been allowed to grow over with the minerals dropped by highstorm rains. Over the years, countless winters filled with almost unceasing rains had caked the buildings with sheens of rock not unlike those created from drippings inside caves. The transformation made the structures look less like man-made creations and more like things that seemed to have grown up as natural hills. Stalactites dripped from overhangs, and more ancient structures almost resembled melted piles of wax.

Kemnar smiled, pausing at the base of a hill a short distance from town, standing so his body would not be silhouetted against the night sky. “My father is lord of a city not unlike this,” he noted. “On the southeast corner of the kingdom. Despite the layout of the buildings, this could have been the very place I grew up.”

Taln nodded. “What are the current customs regarding travelers? Will anyone note our visit as irregular?”

“Oh, they’ll note it,” Kemnar said. “Strangers are always noticed, my friend. But will it be unusual? No, not likely. Most communities like this

depend on trade to survive—they'll need the leathers and metals their parent city produces with its Awakeners. The war will make people edgy, but I doubt travel will cease. Wandering duelists, monks, and craftsmen will still pass through. Families looking for a new city to settle will often visit—*The Way of Kings* promises them Right of Travel."

"What's our story, then?" Taln asked.

Kemnar paused for a moment, looking over their outfits. "A pair of men-at-arms," he decided. "Traveling back to our lord's city after performing a task. Not noblemen, but moderately high-ranking peasants—Third Citizens. You have that knife you took off the dead nobleman?"

"Of course," Taln said, revealing the long-bladed knife.

"Make sure to display it prominently. It's the sort of thing a high citizen would wear—it's short enough to be considered still a knife, but long enough to almost be a sword. We'll be expected to have spears or, more likely, axes, but could have left those behind with our packman. Our story is that we stopped for refreshment and news, but intend to press on through the night and next day before we stop for the Bellow. Our home city is Spiremount, our master Fourth Lord Khranshel. Our task is no one's business."

Taln nodded.

"And . . ." Kemnar added hesitantly "you might want to let me do most of the talking. That accent of yours will be fairly recognizable here, close to the border. We could explain it away, but I'd rather not draw attention."

Taln frowned, but nodded again. Despite the man's friendliness, Kemnar obviously regarded Taln as Jasnah did—a lost wanderer from Riemak, addled in the head. Jasnah had yet to commit to a final course for the refugee group, but Taln was growing increasingly eager to travel through the western land to the Holy City. Beyond searching out his brethren, this would let him see this area that everyone assumed was his home.

The city turned out to be Marcabe, a Sixth City tributed to Ralinkan. They were admitted through the city gates on Kemnar's story. Though the hour was late, the taverns were still quite busy. Kemnar explained that because the harvest was in, there would be little for the town's men to do the next day, and no reason for them to rise early. In addition, the town inns would be full of people who had come to the city to seek shelter from the Bellow. Taln and Kemnar walked leisurely through the town, and Taln noticed not a few city guards watching at intersections, keeping a wary eye on both townsfolk and newcomers. The city even had a monastery, though it was too dark and too distant to tell which order practiced within.

Kemnar picked a tavern with moderate occupancy. It was a well-kept, but

out of the way, place that lay several streets off of the main thoroughfare. Taln wasn't certain how Kemnar knew where to find it, yet the nobleman seemed to have little trouble—he simply glanced at where the other main taverns were, and then struck off the central thoroughfare and walked directly toward his chosen location. The tavern was an older building, its sides slick with cromstone. At first glance, its outside appeared to have been abandoned to the elements, but on closer examination Taln noted the uniformity of the stalactites, and how the cromstone curled inward around the windows, allowing for unobstructed sunlight. The doorway was also well-maintained.

Inside there was a surprising amount of wood furniture. Apparently, the Aleth managed to maintain a stable Awakening economy even far from their capital. With the right Awakeners placed beside working quarries, the cost of emeralds could be off-set by the ease of transporting wood instead of stone. The result was a substance that, while rare in natural occurrence, was nearly as cheap as good building stone.

The structure's layout was unfamiliar to Taln. Instead of traditional Kanaran pillars, the tavern had been built with enormous wooden support beams in the ceiling, allowing for a more open atmosphere. A large stone serving bar ran down the exact center of the room, with an opening down the middle for the barkeep to serve drinks. Men sat upon stools on both sides, talking amongst themselves. Nearly all the lanterns in the room burned along this central bar, and there were more secluded, darkened tables lining the walls. Kemnar shunned these, making directly for a pair of stools at the bar. He set down their pack, pulled out a couple of glazed sapphire chips to buy drinks, and waved for Taln to sit beside him.

Taln eased into the seat, mindful to keep his tongue as the barkeep brought their drinks. The mugs were metal, though they had obviously been crafted from clay first, then Awakened. The barkeep himself was a short man with Aleth coloring. Despite his size, he had a wiry build and a no-nonsense glare that reminded one to be mindful of causing trouble in *his* bar. None of the patrons seemed inclined to disobey. There was an air of hesitant relaxation about them. As Taln listened, he was able to pick out tenses of conversations, his Herald's mind instantly dividing the voices one from another and following the different discussions.

The men were relieved that the harvest had come in well—insects had been found inside the first polyps of inavah harvested, the grain eaten or spoiled from water leakage. Fortunately, the vermin hadn't gone far, and the general harvest had been a success. The monastery—Order of Ishar,

interestingly enough—had planned a feast in honor of their good fortune, and it was to take place on the day after the Bellow. Following the feast, the people would repair their city from the highstorm, then begin preparations for the summer planting, which had to be ready twenty days after the Bellow—the day when normal highstorms began again.

For now, however, there was rest. The harvest had finished early, leaving the men with nearly two weeks of freedom before the Bellow. Most had busied themselves with common tasks put off until such a time. Yet there had been plenty of opportunity for leisure. At first, the men had been worried that a conscription call would be made for the King's Army, as had happened several times during the Pralir War. This time, however, it appeared that Elhokar intended to be finished before a conscription could be gathered, and for that the men were relieved. Anyone with adventurous inclinations had already been taken, and the last few calls for soldiers had required their local lord to begin choosing young men—and sometimes older ones—regardless of their desire. Men had stopped going to the monastery for weapons training—remote monasteries such as theirs trained in all of the arts, regardless of their order—for fear that such would single them out for military duty. Taln took this little tidbit in with a bitter frown. His brethren had instituted citizen arms training during the Epoch Kingdoms era to ensure that everyone would be able to defend themselves against the Khothen. Unfortunately, the palace servants' performance during the Veden invasion proved that many had grown lax in their training.

Kemnar did more than just listen. Soon after they settled into their places, he began grumbling about his duties, his noble captain, and the lengths he was required to travel. His dissatisfaction with his superiors prompted general agreement from those around him, and soon he had a small group of confidants grumbling with him. The grumbles turned to smiles as Kemnar offered to spend a few of his lord's chips to buy his new comrades a mug or two of inavah beer. Within a short time, Kemnar was chatting with the men as if they were childhood buddies, skillfully probing for information about current events.

Taln was impressed at Kemnar's tact. The townsmen soon revealed that they were annoyed by the number of strangers in town this time of year—they didn't even pause to think that they were speaking with one such—and that the bars along the main strip had raised their prices to capitalize on the influx. The Damp Stone—their own bar—appeared to be the favored spot for the common men, and was rarely visited by the passing rabble.

The men had no news from Ral Eram. Through a series of careful

questions, Kemnar was able to gather that no one had come through town recently asking about travelers, and there was no word in the underground about a group such as Jasnah's. That fact was comforting, though Taln had hoped that somehow the fall of the First Capital would be known. Either the invaders had succeeded in taking the town quietly, or word simply hadn't reached this corner of the kingdom yet.

Of the war at Crossguard, the men knew little of substance. Apparently, this section of the kingdom was loyal to the king, and they spoke of Jezenrosh with spiteful voices. Their own city lord rode with the king, as did his sons, and the townsmen spoke of this fact with pride—though Taln doubted Elhokar had any care for a tributing sixth lord or his offspring. Several men claimed to have heard that the siege had begun, a few guessed it already over, but the majority professed ignorance. Elhokar was moving quickly, and they had heard little from their sons or friends in the army. They all expected it would be a quick, easy battle. After all, the king had taken his wrath to Prallah, running down the Traitor who had killed his father. After that, dealing with a pest such as Jezenrosh would be simple.

Kemnar was winding down the evening's discussions by asking after any horses that might be for sale when the atmosphere changed.

Taln perked up, though no one else in the tavern seemed to notice it. Something had happened. Something subtle, something even he couldn't pick out. His senses were such that his unconscious mind often discerned trouble long before it actually arrived. He sat tensely, hand resting on Kemnar's pack, fingers inching toward the Shardblade hilt within, as a newcomer entered the bar.

Taln tracked the young man, noting his excitement, his slightly drunken posture, and his quick, searching eyes. This was a man with news. Taln elbowed Kemnar, nodding toward the newcomer.

He needn't have bothered. When the young man spoke, his voice was loud enough for the entire bar to hear. "A nobleman in the city!" he exclaimed to his friends at the other end of the bar. "High of rank, with a Shardblade. They say he's come with the king's sister herself!"

Kemnar and Taln exchanged a glance, and were out the door a heartbeat later.

A CROWD HAD GATHERED near an inn on the main thoroughfare. This building was one of the few in the city kept clean of cromstone, and it stood more like a structure from Ral Eram or Kholinar, with strong stone sides and pillars at the front. A surprising number of townspeople had gathered,

many of them looking as if they had been roused from sleep, and they stood whispering to themselves, trying to press up against the inn's door or windows for a look. Taln and Kemnar paused at the outer rim, ineffectually trying to push their way through the mass of bodies.

With a sigh, Taln nodded to Kemnar, and they removed their Shardblades from the pack. Taln handed Kemnar's weapon to him, then hefted his own weapon, exposing the distinctive silvery metal and pommel, which still bore the dark black opal of its previous owner. It only took the townspeople a few moments to notice them, and suddenly the crowd's focus changed directions. The people parted with alarm, people bowing with shocked or excited expressions.

Taln pushed through the front door and saw precisely what he had expected and dreaded. This inn was lavish compared to the tavern they had left, with rugs on the floor, ornamented pillars, and even some marble coatings on a few surfaces. Most of the furniture in the common room had been cleared, making room at the center for two wooden tables—one for the men, one for the women. A haughty-faced Meridas sat at the head of the men's table, a lavish meal being laid out before him. Jasnah sat at the other table with her ladies-in-waiting. She seemed less pleased than Meridas, though her face was always difficult to read.

"So much for stealth," Taln muttered. As he stepped inside, he noted that the rest of the refugees were eating a short distance away, in a separate, larger dining hall.

Kemnar snorted in agreement, but said nothing.

Meridas smiled as soon as he saw Taln. "Ah, madman," he said. "And the good *Lord* Kemnar. I had hoped you would wait until dinner was finished to return, as to not spoil the taste, but I suppose we can find a place for you somewhere."

Taln ignored him, stalking through the room to Jasnah's table. He stood beside her, folding his arms expectantly.

"You should have come to report as soon as you saw the city, Taln," she said, stabbing a piece of glazed meat with a small, spear-like fork. "We wondered what happened to you, and sent other scouts."

Taln raised an eyebrow. Her words were scolding, but they lacked her usual sting. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't realize you would be foolish enough to reveal yourself by coming inside to look for us."

Jasnah shot him a veiled glare at that one. "We had to come in sometime," she said. "We need supplies."

“Kemnar and I could have gathered them without exposing ourselves to our pursuers.”

“And what of those?” Jasnah said, waving toward the refugees in the other room. “You knew we needed to drop them off. How did you expect to do that without ‘exposing ourselves to our pursuers?’ Or did you somehow expect us to travel quickly to Kholinar while carrying with us the wounded and the weak?”

Taln gritted his teeth in frustration. “*Do not reveal our destination!*” he hissed, glancing back at the peasants watching outside. “Do you want the invaders to know all of our plans?”

Jasnah paused, flushing slightly.

Beside them, however, Meridas laughed openly. “You are a fool, madman. Though I suppose it is too much to ask anything else of you. There is no proof of these ‘pursuers’ you mention other than your own word—which we already know to be often delusional. Did you really think we would simply pass this town by, quiet as Stormshades? As Lady Jasnah noted, we have to rid ourselves of excess weight. Besides, we must send messengers to his majesty and Lord Dalenar. You expected us to do such things without inspiring gossip from messengers’ family and friends? Better we come in openly so that we might prevent rumors. Information is our ally, not that of our enemy.”

Taln ground his teeth. Unfortunately, the foppish man spoke some measure of truth. It was highly unlikely that they could have passed Marcabe without revealing themselves. Later villages they could avoid with stealth, but not this first one. They would simply have to hope that their pursuers were slow to find their trail.

“It really is for the best, Taln,” Jasnah informed. “Meridas was right, this time. We needed to come in. Besides, without the authority of the crown, we wouldn’t have the necessary funds to do as we need.”

Taln glanced down, realizing for the first time that their group hardly had the money to pay for such extravagant meals, let alone horses, which were apparently still extremely rare in Kanaran Roshar.

“They will loan us gems against the king’s name?” Taln asked.

Jasnah nodded. “Marcabe is loyal to my brother, and Meridas is known here. He was a merchant until just recently, and this was one of his main trade stops. We can borrow from the lord’s own stewards. Probably not much, mind you, but enough to get us by.”

Taln sighed, seating himself at an open stool beside Jasnah—the move

causing snickers from Meridas's table. Taln ignored them, frowning at his own foolishness. He should have returned rather than visiting the city—he had left Jasnah open to Meridas's manipulation. Perhaps revealing themselves was necessary, but certainly this level of pomp was excessive.

"Pout if you must, madman," Meridas noted, as if he had known what Taln was thinking. "But I, for one, never planned to give up this last opportunity for comfort. Lady Jasnah has spent the last two weeks traipsing through tunnels and across stormlands. You don't think she deserved a warm meal and a night of rest after such?"

Taln groaned inwardly, wondering how much Meridas was going to reveal of their secret flight. Probably everything. By the morning, the entire story of their escape would be known to the town.

Well, perhaps that is a good thing, Taln told himself. He eyed Meridas. The man was such a pompous fool, yet there was a hidden cleverness to him. Meridas's comment about information had been lucid—secrecy was the agent of the invaders. If even rumors reached King Elhokar, it would serve as something of a warning. And the surest way to spread rumors was through drama. A midnight entry, followed by an expensive and highly visible meal and accompanied by a daring tale of escape . . . It was just the sort of news that would move quickly and eagerly, especially once men left the village following the Bellow. If Jasnah's group had to expose themselves to the city, perhaps it was better that they did so with flare, using the situation to their advantage.

Meridas did not reveal whether he was making such a calculated and daring move, or if he simply wanted a warm meal. He caught Taln's studying eye, and smiled. One thing was certain—here, in the city, Meridas was once again in his element. Taln would not get the better of him while within its borders.

Taln sighed, giving into Kemnar's prompting and joining the men's table, where he allowed himself to be fed before the gawking townspeople. Reasons aside, it had happened—they were in the city, exposed. The best thing to do was to make use of the conveniences, then get out as quickly as possible.

chapter 48

MERIN 11

A COLUMN OF SMOKE TWISTED toward the Dwelling—a black streak that faded to translucence, barely visible in the starlight. Merin stood, stepping away from their meager fire—a fire whose smoke had masked the wind’s ominous scent. A scent familiar, but unwelcome.

Burning flesh.

“I can smell the burning stations,” Merin said, scanning the darkness for other columns of smoke. “The battlefield is close.”

Renarin didn’t respond. Merin turned back, glancing through the embers of smoldering rockbud shells. Renarin crouched in the ruddy light, one hand clutching his onyx sphere, the other pinching a worn bit of charcoal between two talon-like fingers as he scribbled on the stone beside their campfire. The light barely illuminated his figure, leaving his face dark, faintly outlined in red.

“Renarin?” Merin prodded.

There was a long pause, then Renarin looked up, his movements slow—as if impeded by a great weight of stone. He blinked. “Yes?”

Merin pointed toward the sky. “I just noticed those smoke trails—they’re probably from burning stations.”

Renarin blinked, then slowly stood, eyes becoming more alert. *It’s like he has to pull himself away from . . . somewhere else*, Merin thought. *Like he has to rejoin this world before he can interact.*

“They’re close,” Renarin said in a monotone voice, moving over to stand beside Merin.

Merin nodded. “We stopped too early. We could have made it tonight after all.”

Renarin stood for a moment, looking up into the night sky, the last waves of dusk creeping away in the west. “You want to go on?” he finally asked.

“Yes,” Merin said eagerly. “Probably better to go at night anyway. We’ll need to sneak past the king’s lines and get into Jezenrosh’s camp.”

“All right,” Renarin said, though he turned his eyes toward the campfire as he spoke, staring down at the ground. Toward his strange notations.

Merin hurriedly gathered their supplies and repacked the saddlebags. Renarin watched the ground until Merin stamped out the embers, stealing the light.

“We should probably lead the horses in the darkness,” Renarin said, accepting his beast’s reins from Merin.

“All right,” Merin said, leading the way to the south, toward the lines of smoke. Fortunately, Renarin followed, trailing along behind like a wisp from their now-dead fire.

You shouldn’t be so worried about him, Merin told himself. Everyone says that Renarin is strange, and you haven’t really known him that long. Maybe this kind of distraction is actually normal for him.

Better to worry about more pertinent problems—like exactly how they were going to find Aredor. Merin had mentioned sneaking past the king’s lines and entering Jezenrosh’s camp, but he doubted it would be that simple. For one thing, there was a good chance that Jezenrosh had chosen to remain besieged in his city rather than face Elhokar in the open. If that were the case, Merin wasn’t sure how they were going to get past the city walls.

What would Merin and Renarin do if confronted by scouts or sentries? And, assuming they did find Aredor, how were they going to persuade him to return? Aredor hadn’t been willing to listen to such arguments on the day he left Kholinar; what made Merin think this time would be different?

He expected us to come, Merin thought. He left instructions regarding us. He thought we might come and help him—come fight with him.

And he probably had a right to expect it of them. Leaving Kholinar had been an act of disobedience itself—what more would it hurt by joining Aredor in his fight? Could Lord Dalenar really blame Merin if he were acting alongside the man’s own sons?

The hike took longer than it might have during the day, but it still

only took them about an hour to reach Crossguard. Merin kept careful, but untrained, watch for any scouts or sentries—knowing with a sort of resigned gloom that he probably wouldn't see them before he himself was spotted. Strangely, however, he didn't see anything—nor was he stopped by oncoming soldiers. In fact, Merin rounded a hillside and practically stumbled into the camp itself.

Merin quickly ducked back into the shadows, waving Renarin to follow. The sky was lit by fires and torches, but Merin had incorrectly judged the light's proximity.

"Leave the horses," Merin whispered, bending down to tie his reins to a rockbud polyp. Then he waved Renarin to follow as he scuttled up the hillside.

The camp below was arranged in a familiar fashion. Those tents and neat blocks had been the patterns of Merin's life for a very long time. There were far more burning stations than he had expected, and the scent of smoke was strong in the air. The city of Crossguard was a dark block in the near distance—more like a large keep than a proper city.

Renarin shuffled beside him. "This is wrong, Merin," he whispered. "Too much fire."

"There was a lot of death this day," Merin said with a bitter taste in his mouth.

"No," Renarin said. "Not just that. Those are the fires of death, but also of victory. This war is over. We are too late."

"That can't be," Merin said. "Look—lights burn atop the city wall, and the keep looks like it's occupied. There's too much . . ."

Merin trailed off as Renarin pointed toward the city. At first, Merin couldn't make out the reason for the gesture, but slowly his eyes discerned shapes half-hidden in the darkness. He could see through the wall in one entire section, could see the twinkling of lights beyond. An enormous chunk of the wall was simply . . . missing.

"Awakeners," Renarin whispered.

Merin closed his mouth, Renarin's hushed word hanging like a dread curse. Never, during the entire Prallah war, had the king used his Awakeners in battle. Lord Dalenar would have forbidden it—but now, that restriction was gone. Even still, to use Awakeners against his own kinsmen . . .

"Aredor," Merin said, standing. "We have to find him."

Renarin reached out, grabbing ahold of the edge of Merin's cloak. "We're too late, Merin," he whispered.

Merin pulled the cloak free. "Wait here," he said. "I'm just going to go

look around a bit. I have to find out what happened to Aredor. If the king has him in captivity, Lord Dalenar needs to know.”

Merin continued down the side of the hill. A part of him realized that he wasn't thinking rationally, that he didn't want to consider the implication of Renarin's statement. But what was he supposed to do? Come all this way, then turn around and face Lord Dalenar's disappointment without even a word of news about his son and heir?

As Merin strode forward in the night, he heard Renarin scramble up behind him. “Put up your hood,” Renarin said. “Our cloaks are Kholin blue, and you have a Shardblade. If we stay away from the main camp, maybe no one will notice that we bear my father's glyph.”

Merin nodded, doing as suggested. He rested his Shardblade on his shoulder, then continued forward in the night, walking directly toward the gap in the city wall. Men in Elhokar's army might recognize him, but the townspeople of Crossguard wouldn't. Perhaps some of them could give news.

If they're not all cowering in their stormcellars. In fact, King Elhokar probably declared a curfew. That's what he did in all the Prallan cities we captured. What am I doing? This is foolish!

But he'd been foolish twice before. He'd jumped to attack a Shadbearer while the rest of his squad scattered, grabbing ahold of an armored man and pulling him from his mount. He'd stood beside Aredor to fight two experienced duelists with superior equipment. Both times bravery had served him well.

The few soldiers they passed bowed and moved quickly away, seeing the Blade but not the shadowed faces. Merin approached the Crossguard walls, each step seeming to take him into a deeper state of numbness. Chunks of rock lay scattered across the ground around the gap in the wall—the Awakeners had only needed to destroy the foundations, and the section of stone had collapsed. The broken hole in the wall approached with the looming despair of a city shattered. Defeated. Conquered.

Two lines of torches stood just inside the gap, running corridor-like into the city. As Merin grew closer, he realized that there was something standing in-between each pair of torches. Something vaguely illuminated by their light, something thin.

“Merin, let's turn back,” Renarin encouraged. His voice seemed distant. Removed.

Merin stepped up to the gap in the wall. It was at least a hundred feet across. The torches were closer now, and he walked toward the line closest

to him. It was odd to find no sentries by the city wall. Perhaps Elhokar didn't see anything else to fear from Crossguard. There was some movement inside the city, mostly what looked like guard patrols in the streets. Merin had been right—there would be no interviewing city occupants this night. However, Merin's interest no longer lay in the townspeople. He walked up to the lines of torches, toward the objects they guarded.

"Merin . . ." Renarin said.

Merin ignored him, striding right up to the first pair of torches, where he found Aredor waiting for him. The heir's decapitated head was strangely recognizable. For some reason, that didn't seem right. This gruesome thing stuck to a spear shouldn't have been so familiar, shouldn't have reminded Merin of laughter and camaraderie. He should have seen only death in it, not a strong reminder of the man who had befriended and guided him.

Merin turned back toward Renarin. The boy stood with sorrow, his torchlit features hauntingly similar to the ones atop the spear. "He's dead, Merin," Renarin whispered. "We couldn't have changed that. We were too far away, and we left too late."

Merin turned back to Aredor. "This isn't the way it was supposed to be, Aredor," he said. "I came to get you, to take you back . . ."

"Merin," Renarin said with a quiet urgency. "Those guards have noticed us. We should go."

Merin stared into Aredor's dark, dead eyes. *Why? Why wasn't I in time? Where is the Almighty now? He helped me save the king's life twice, only so that very man could kill Aredor? Where is the justice in that?*

"Merin!" Renarin said with further urgency. Merin allowed the boy to pull him away from the line of torches and its grisly faces. As the faces fell into darkness, however, the questions they asked didn't leave Merin alone. It was fortuitous that they managed to reach their horses without incident, but Merin barely noticed. His body did its duty, carrying him forward as they untied their horses and escaped out into the night—heading west, toward Kholinar, for lack of anything else to do. They rode silently.

Aredor can't be dead. That thing atop the spear; it wasn't him. Merin didn't want to think, he just wanted to walk in the darkness. What was the use of Bajerden and Sheneres, the *Arguments* and nobility, if they didn't protect the men who followed them?

Neither man spoke complaint as they trudged eastward, riding impassively for hours. Merin wanted to be far away from that place, for he knew when he finally did lay down to sleep, he would see dead eyes watching him, accusatory, in his sleep. He was actually surprised when a shadow appeared

before him, and he realized a faint light was shining on the horizon behind him. Had they really walked that long?

A voice suddenly snapped in the air.

The figures were upon them like a sudden storm, pulling Merin to the ground and ripping his Shardblade from his fingers. He cried out as something heavy pressed against his back, holding him down.

The voice sounded again, speaking in a language Merin didn't understand. Rough hands grabbed Merin, hauling him to his feet. Dazed, he saw Renarin undergoing similar treatment a short distance away. A group of soldiers in Aleth blue surrounded them, watching with wary eyes. The king's soldiers.

Merin shook his head, trying to dispel his stupor. Had they really been tracked all this time? Followed by . . .

"Where is the Lady Kholin?" the voice demanded, speaking Aleth with a strange accent. The speaker was the only one who didn't wear blue, but was instead dressed in simple brown clothing of little note. His face, however, was odd. His eyes were wide—a little too big, like those of a child—and his skin had a bleached paleness to it.

"Where is the Lady Kholin?" the man repeated. His voice was calm, but there was a danger to it—an implication that his was a question best answered as quickly, and as truthfully, as possible.

"Lady Jasnah?" Merin said with true confusion. "What are you talking about?"

The strange man frowned slightly. He stepped forward, moving with an almost inhuman liteness, slinking like a passing breeze and not a creature of flesh. He studied Merin for a moment, then turned to Renarin.

"I recognize you," the strange man said in his lightly accented voice. "The son of Dalenar Kholin."

Renarin hung limply in his captor's arms.

The stranger watched them both for a moment. "These are not the ones we are looking for," he finally said. "But the king may desire to speak with them. Regardless, they cannot be released now. Bind them and search them for weapons."

Their captors moved to comply, quickly binding Merin's arms. He didn't struggle until he saw one of the men holding his Shardblade. The man raised a rock toward the pommel.

"No!" Merin yelled, suddenly frantic. His hundred days was nearly up. He almost had the Blade bound. If he lost it now . . .

One of the soldiers cuffed Merin neatly on the side of the head, dazing

him. The other man let the rock fall, knocking the nearly-blackened opal free from its bindings. Merin watched with despair as the gemstone fell to the stones, discarded as useless.

Merin watched with stupefaction, his head throbbing from the blow. It took a sudden motion from the side to make him focus again.

Renarin was free.

The boy jumped away from the soldiers, clutching something protectively in his fingers: his onyx sphere. He turned to dash away, but one of the soldiers tackled him, throwing him to the ground. The sphere flew free from protective fingers, smashing to the ground a short distance from Merin. The sphere shattered as stone met stone, scattering dark chips into the air.

Renarin cried out in despair, scrambling forward, then falling to the ground as one of the soldiers grabbed his foot.

Merin yanked against his surprised captor's grip, free for a sudden and marvelous moment.

Then *he* was there, the Shin man, moving like flowing water. He grabbed Merin by the neck and threw him down with a smooth spin of the body. Arms still tied, Merin hit the ground hard, and blackness took him.

chapter 49

JASNAH 11

“I’M SORRY, MY LADY, but there just aren’t any horses to be found.”
Jasnah frowned. Twentieth Lord Nivedesh, Lord Ivenal’s steward, was an aging man who appeared to have seen some battle in his younger days, for his face bore a massive scar that left part of his scalp hairless. If he noticed the oddity of being questioned by a woman—rather than Meridas—he made no outward display.

“Not even one?” Jasnah prodded. The innkeeper had provided one of his back sleeping chambers to her for use as an ‘audience hall.’ The decorations were of a faux lavishness, with just enough seasilk, marble, and expensive woods to give hints of richness. The room was uncomfortably hot—Jasnah had accustomed herself to life in Ral Eram, and the city’s elevation had kept its temperatures chill even during the summer. It had been some time since Jasnah had been forced to spend the Searing out in the countryside.

Her high-backed chair, at least, was comfortable, and the local maids had cleaned and perfumed her dress, removing most of the stains. They couldn’t do anything about the tattered edges or ripped side, but at least it was a little more presentable. She sat, keeping her posture lady-like despite the heat, as the steward spoke.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” the man said. “But Lord Ivenal was commanded

to collect every horse the town could provide. King Elhokar needed them to march against the fallen *Parshen* of Crossguard. We sent every beast in every stable—though that was, in truth, a small number. We are not a rich town, my lady, and horses are a great expense. Even my lord himself kept only six.”

Jasnah kept her face calm, but inside she seethed at her lack of options. She could, of course, continue on to another town and ask for mounts there. However, she had an unsettling feeling that if Ivenal had been commanded to send for all his horses, the other lords in this area would have been given the same order. Southwestern Alethkar was one of Elhokar’s main bastions of support. She would have to travel halfway to Kholinar itself before she found one of Dalenar’s tribute cities, which would have remained neutral at their lord’s command.

Her feet ached at the thought of traveling so far without horses. After just a week’s travel she felt sore and fatigued—and this week had been done at a slow pace to accommodate the wounded and elderly. She had blisters in a tenseset of places, and though a pretty new set of slippers hid the bottoms of her feet, she could feel the raw flesh throbbing beneath.

She gritted her teeth against the pains. Others had endured similar problems without complaint, and so would she. Fortunately, she probably wouldn’t have to do much more walking herself.

“Have the messengers been sent?” she asked.

The steward nodded. “Yes, my lady. Four of our fastest lads, two sent running to Kholinar, two sent to the king’s army, all four by different routes.”

Jasnah nodded, trying not to feel guilt for the way she used these people. She had explained the danger to them, but sensed that they didn’t realize just how great a threat the invaders presented. The people assumed that King Elhokar, whose victories in Prallah had come with such relative ease, would similarly have little problem driving the Veden invaders from Aleth stone. They didn’t understand the army’s fatigue, the casualties they had incurred by fighting in Prallah, and the morale losses they would suffer by being forced to fight their kinsmen in Crossguard.

Vedenar would not be under-equipped, as Pralir had been. Its soldiers would be well-trained—better warriors, even, than their Aleth counterparts. Vedenar hosted the finest weapon and armorsmiths in Kanaran Roshar, and had a military discipline as strict as Alethkar’s noble code of propriety. Elhokar would have had difficulty fending off this foe even if his men were rested and prepared.

Jasnah dismissed the steward, sending him back to his lord's palace. She knew he was withholding things from her—he claimed funds were low in his master's departure, and had given her barely ten kingsmarks worth of gemstones. To a common citizen—or even many lower noblemen—that amount would be a fortune, but she had to save most of it on the chance of finding horses to purchase.

She sighed, rising on protesting feet then waving for Kemnar and his guards to follow her from the room. A crowd no longer lingered outside the inn. The palace stormkeeper warned that the Almighty's Bellow was now imminent, and had calculated that it would strike sometime during the next day. With the natural procrastination of man, the village people had realized they'd left a tenseset separate preparations to the last moment, and the town was now furiously getting ready for the storm.

Glad for the respite of onlookers, Jasnah passed through the common room and entered the feast hall—the large, rectangular room that had been used to feed her people the night before. It no longer bore the remnants of feasting. Taln had appropriated it, much to the inn owner's chagrin, to be used as a base of operations. Here is where he had organized and catalogued the provisions they would need for their trek. Grains, dried meats, and waterskins lay in careful heaps, along with the weapons they had brought with them from the palace. Taln himself stood inside, beside his monk friend, looking over a scroll of paper written in his own hand. A young scribe stood at the side of the room, and she blushed as Jasnah entered, glancing down in shamed discomfort. Jasnah shook her head at the scene—Taln still seemed unaware of how unnatural his ability to read seemed to most Rosharans.

Jasnah waved the poor girl free, and the child scampered from the room with a bow. Taln looked up from his list. "Well?" he asked.

Jasnah shook her head. "We'll have to do it without horses."

Taln nodded, scribbling something at the bottom of his list with a charcoal pen. Meridas probably wouldn't take the news with such disconcern—the lord had spoken quite fondly of being able to ride again, as opposed to walking like common footmen.

"I'll need to know the size of the group, then," Taln said. "And the path we're going to take."

Jasnah folded her arms, frowning. She had put off these decisions until she knew for certain about the horses. With mounts, a quick gallop straight north—made in the hopes of outrunning any Veden spies or pursuit—would

have been a distinct possibility. Without horses, however, their slow speed would make them relatively easy to locate.

The messengers will go with speed, Jasnah told herself. Our duty is to go with safety. We must survive to bring Elhokar news, should the messengers fail.

"Very well," she said. "We'll do as you recommend."

Taln kept his smile to himself, though she could see the sparkle of satisfaction in his eyes. She could think of no better plan, however, than to travel north through Riemak. A direct path to Kholinar would be suicide if they really were being pursued, and a diversion to the east would only place them closer to Ral Eram and its invaders. Striking west, into less-known and less-inhabited lands, made simple and strategic sense. If Taln thought, however, that she would be diverted even further—even if only for a few days—by taking him to the Holy City, he was mistaken.

"The group will be myself, you, Kemnar, Meridas, Kemnar's three guards, and four packmen," Jasnah informed him.

Taln smiled visibly this time. They would be leaving behind most of Meridas's coven of followers. The group would become a small, efficient fighting party, rather than a band of refugees. They hardly needed to worry about attacks from Riemak bandits—not with three Shardbearers in their company—and a small party would help them remain undetected.

"Brother Lhan comes as well," Taln said, gesturing to the monk. "Or, would you have us go without Vorin blessings?"

Jasnah frowned, but said, "Very well." She wasn't certain what function the monk served—he had taken very little part in the leadership of their group, though he did seem to enjoy spending time with servants. He professed no knowledge of fighting, and even less knowledge of geography or strategy. Yet Taln seemed to rely on him.

As Taln turned to make further scribbles on his scroll, Jasnah noticed something odd. There were only two windows in this room, but both were crowded with faces watching from outside. She cocked her head—the other room, and her own audience chamber, had been free of gawkers. Yet here, a room containing nothing more interesting than supplies, seemed a center of distinct attention. Why . . . ?

Jasnah's curiosity tapered as she heard a word float from a whispered conversation happening outside the near window. "Herald."

"Madman!" she snapped, drawing Taln's attention from the cluster of lanterns and oil beside which he knelt. "Have you been preaching to these people?"

"Preaching?" he asked with amusement.

"You know . . ." she said. "About who you think you are."

Taln smiled. "I have told them of my mission, yes," he said. "And explained the coming dangers."

"I commanded you not to do so!" she said.

"No, actually. You did not," he said. "Or, at least, not since our agreement began."

"Well, I intended to," Jasnah said.

"Even when I had my powers, Lady Jasnah, they did not extend to mind-reading. Or, at least, not the reading of human minds."

Jasnah felt frustration rising within. His careful practicality had lulled her, almost letting her forget about his insanity. This was no loyal servant or capable soldier, she reminded herself. This was a deranged man who could not separate fact from fantasy. His delusions seemed harmless, but only because they had yet to spark a catastrophe.

"Well, you shall no longer—"

"Jasnah," Taln said, quietly, yet forcefully, interrupting her. "If you wish to see a Herald become oathbreaker, finish that command. I will not forsake my sacred duties simply to honor a manipulatory bargain made with a spoiled noblewoman."

Jasnah felt her face brighten with rage and embarrassment that the onlooking peasants should see her so contradicted. She forced herself to at least appear calm, clenching her teeth and adapting the stoneish demeanor that so often gave her strength.

Taln looked back at his ledger, his face betraying a slight amount of guilt, as if he regretted the harshness of his words. "You don't think they were talking, anyway?" he asked. "The ones from the palace, the ones who saw me fight and open a passage through the depths of the mountain. I heard them speaking to the townsfolk about me, and decided that it was better that I give them truth as opposed to rumors."

Truth. Jasnah glanced toward the windows, where the people watched with still anticipation. The city was small—really more of an overgrown farming community than an urban trading center. Its people's Vorin training would be strongly corrupted by mystical Elinrah teachings, which focused so intensely on the deific nature of the Heralds and waited breathlessly for apocalyptic Returns. They would be easily fooled by one as charismatic as Taln, especially considering his obvious talent with swords and his propensity for ignoring social conventions.

"These people don't need a Herald, Taln," she said. "They have enough troubles already. Their nation has been invaded by an outside force."

“Only a hint of the chaos to come, I fear,” Taln whispered.

Jasnah’s retort was interrupted by motion from the common room. She turned as Meridas entered, resplendent in what was obviously a new seasilk outfit. Deep maroon in color, the ensemble had a pair of open-cuffed, straight trousers, a white seasilk shirt, and a long, open-fronted sencoat instead of a cloak. The black leather belt was wide and bejeweled. The change was hardly necessary. His blue wedding outfit had been martially cut, and had worn well during their travels. Briefly, Jasnah regretted dividing their provision funds between Taln and Meridas. Apparently, the merchant nobleman had a different interpretation of ‘necessary provisions’ from Jasnah. She had expected him to purchase extra cloaks and strong boots, not fine new outfits.

Before she could object, however, Meridas waved for an overweight, well-dressed man to enter. He bore bejeweled fingers, but wore no sword. Probably not a nobleman, but a very high-ranked citizen.

The man eyed her, rubbing one of his chins. “Yes, my lord,” he said. “She is slight of build, but not incredibly so. My tailors should be able to alter some things for her rather quickly. You’ll be leaving the day after tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Meridas said.

The merchant nodded. “I’ll have my girls work through the highstorm. By the time you go, your betrothed will have a wardrobe to match her station.”

A master tailor, then—a First or Second Citizen who supervised a large group of underworkers. “Your efforts are appreciated, master . . .” she said.

“Mendalin,” the man said, bowing.

“However,” Jasnah continued, “we hardly have the funds right now for such things.” She shot a glare at Meridas and his fine outfit.

“Nonsense!” Meridas said. “You are the betrothed of a *Parshen*, Jasnah. If you do not look your station, no one will take you with any measure of seriousness. Besides, Master Mendalin is a long-time associate of mine. He has indicated that he’ll give us a respectable discount, assuming that once Alethkar is rid of its invaders, you will be certain to indicate to the other court women who it was that outfitted you in your time of need.”

Jasnah raised an eyebrow. “How much of a discount?”

“Enough of one that it hardly even covers his costs,” Meridas said. “I got all of this for twenty ishmarks.”

This gave her pause. It was, in fact, an incredible deal—Mendalin was betting heavily upon Elhokar’s victory, and subsequent thankfulness to those who had helped his sister during her refugee trek.

Jasnah glanced down at her dress, the same, tattered clothing she had been wearing for nearly two weeks. If this man were really willing to sacrifice pay for publicity . . .

“Very well, Master Mendalin,” Jasnah said. “Let us see what you offer.” She waved for Kemnar to fetch her a chair, stopping herself too late. It was going to take time to accustom herself to Kemnar’s new station as a Shardbearer. He wasn’t making it easy for her—despite his new rank, he continued to serve her as if nothing had changed. She had even gone so far as to officially dismiss him from her guard, choosing one of the remaining three soldiers—Vinde—as her new captain. Kemnar took it all in stride, never offering an objection, then completely ignored the fact that he was now nearly the same rank as she.

Mendalin turned, waving several aides into the room. A powerful merchant such as himself didn’t really have much to do with the production of his wares, but he acted as if each design were his own. He knew his stock well, and produced a tenseset different gown designs for her to inspect. Apologetically, he admitted that she was restricted to the colors he presented, since he wouldn’t have time to create completely new garments. Yet, considering her situation, he offered an impressive number of choices.

Jasnah was surprised to find such lavishness in a Sixth City. The gowns were constructed with a richness to match many she had seen in Ral Eram. Their delicate embroideries, cleverly-accentuated folds, and rich colors were impressive. Soon, she found herself debating between not one or two selections, but instead trying to narrow her purchases down to five or six.

A vague shadow fell across the room as Jasnah ordered one of Mendalin’s models to turn, so she could inspect the gown’s train. Jasnah glanced to the side at the change in light, to find Taln standing just inside the supply room, his powerful frame taking up nearly the entire doorway.

He inspected the frills, silken hang-ribbons, and trains with a critical eye. “I would have thought you’d pick something a little more practical,” he said.

Jasnah frowned. “Meridas is correct, Taln,” she said. “I am an emissary of House Kholin—I need to present myself in a respectable manner.”

“We aren’t going to present ourselves at all,” Taln pointed out. “From here, we’re traveling by stealth.”

“Yes, well,” Jasnah said, switching tactics. “Master Mendalin’s offered prices are very humble. As long as I can get finery for the price of more mundane outfits, why not choose the finery?”

Taln raised an eyebrow. "If he will give you rich gowns for such a price, then how much less might he charge for something more sensible?"

Jasnah flushed. Again. She could withstand the fury of kings and stare down Awakeners, yet this man could make her blush in shame with barely a phrase.

Meridas, unfortunately, was the one who came to her rescue. "Cease your pesterings, madman," he snapped, waving Taln away, "and leave us be. This is something about which you obviously know nothing."

Taln snorted, leaning against the doorframe with folded arms, his posture indicating just how unlikely he was to 'leave them be.' "I know something about crossing stormlands," Taln said. "Our path so far has been easy. Once we leave Marcabe, we will need to increase the pace drastically to avoid pursuit. I'm surprised that women can stand up in those outfits, let alone walk."

Jasnah sat for a moment, confused, until she realized the source of Taln's indignation.

Meridas voiced her same thoughts. "You expect Lady Jasnah to *walk* all the way to Kholinar?" he said, voice twinged with amusement.

Now it was Taln's turn to pause uncertainly. "We have no horses," he said. "How else . . . ?" He trailed off as he glanced through the open inn doorway, toward the merchant's carts and litters outside, eyes widening slightly with surprise.

He glanced at her accusingly. "You expect us to carry you?"

"Well, you wouldn't be one of the bearers," Jasnah said. "You are a Shardbearer. But it is customary for a lady to travel by litter. That's why we're bringing the four packmen."

Taln appeared as if he didn't know whether to be angered or amused. Finally he just shook his head. "I thought we were to travel inconspicuously."

"Litters are not uncommon," Jasnah said.

"Along the path we'll be taking?" he asked, obviously careful not to reveal too much.

Jasnah paused.

"And how fast can it be?" Taln continued. "Really, Jasnah. Are you so charmed by your own arrogant grandeur that you would risk the safety of your kingdom in exchange for a little comfort?"

Meridas hissed, crossing the room with a flourishing red cloak. "You shall not speak so familiarly to my betrothed, madman," he informed him sternly—pointing at Taln with his left hand, right hand held to the side in a Blade-summoning posture.

“Meridas!” Jasnah snapped. “The mad . . . Taln has a point. We should think of Alethkar first. I can walk.” Her sore feet and tired legs groaned at the thought.

Meridas’s eyes thinned as he glanced at her, and she could see something in them. Jealousy? Anger? Or perhaps just frustration. It was gone in a flash, and the nobleman contained himself. “Very well,” he said. “Merchant, bring the lady some more . . . simple outfits.”

“Masculine cut,” Jasnah requested, “with a full stride.”

“Of course, my lord and lady,” Mendalin said, waving for one of his assistants to be off. “In the meantime, shall we see to outfitting my lord’s attendants?”

“Yes,” Meridas said, waving for Tenin and Chathan, the younger palace noblemen, to step forward.

“You needn’t bother,” Taln said with almost gleeful bluntness. “They won’t be coming.”

Meridas froze, then glanced at Jasnah for confirmation. She gave it with a small nod. Instead of rising to Taln’s bait, however, Meridas smiled with thin lips. “And is the monk coming?” he asked.

“Yes,” Taln said.

“I see,” Meridas said. “So we leave behind two capable swordsmen who could wield a Shardblade, should one of us fall, and instead bring a self-professed idler with no combat experience?”

Behind Taln, Jasnah saw Brother Lhan flush at the comment.

“We have my guards, Meridas,” Jasnah said.

“And do we not ride to the rescue of our kingdom?” Meridas asked. “Your brother, the king, is he not in great danger? One would think we would bring any with us who might prove useful to the king’s war effort.”

Meridas and Taln stared at one another. Despite Meridas’s words, it seemed that the two of them were not arguing about swordsmen or armies, but instead locked in some sort of personal struggle. Jasnah, however, could not ignore the logic of Meridas’s words. What were two more men to an army? Not much, true. But they wouldn’t slow the group that much, and Alethkar’s armies were going to need every swordsman they could get.

In the end, however, her decision came from a different logic. She realized Meridas had been shamed. He had brought her one of his personal contacts, a man willing to make great monetary sacrifices on her behalf. Then, she had refused his finest wares in the name of practicality. She cared little for Meridas’s honor, but as she watched the staring match between the nobleman and Taln, she realized that the pair could not see her playing

favorites. She had listened to Taln's counsel regarding the litter. She needed to at least appear to give Meridas the same level of consideration. She didn't trust him—she didn't even like him—but she *did* need him.

“Very well, Lord Meridas,” Jasnah said, breaking the silence. “You are correct. We cannot refuse my brother the king soldiers he may need. You may bring your men to help defend Alethkar.”

Meridas smiled, nodding, and Taln disappeared back to his supplies with a dark look.

chapter 50

SHINRI 9

IN THE END, AFTER ALL of her waiting in the darkness, shamed by her fears, Ahven never came to her bedchamber.

Instead, he summoned her to his.

It makes sense, Shinri thought ruefully as her handmaidens quickly prepared her *talla* and hair. *Why did I assume that he would go through the inconvenience of actually coming to my room?*

She stood stiffly as her women worked, surprised at her own fatalistic resolve. Not that she wasn't afraid—in fact, her heart beat with an almost buzzing intensity, and she could feel the sweat gathering on her brow and at the base of her neck. Outside the window, the evening darkness bespoke an ominous hour. He had finally ordered her to his bedchamber. She hadn't escaped after all.

She'd had chances to attempt an escape. Not very good ones, admittedly, but opportunities nonetheless. Times when she could have ducked into an alley in the city, or run from her pursuers, hoping to be lost in the crowd. Each one had seemed too dangerous, however. She saw the haunted fear in the eyes of the city men. All of the guards and soldiers had been mercilessly executed. Those who remained understood the monster that ruled Ral Eram, and she doubted they would help to hide her from his searchings. In addition, Shinri had never lived outside of noble accommodations; she

suspected she would have nearly as difficult a time surviving on the city streets as she would in the wilderness.

Wait for a better opportunity, she had told herself. You need to try and escape through the Oathgates, seek refuge with a foreign power—someone who can protect you.

Unfortunately, there seemed to be few places of refuge remaining in the world. Alethkar invaded, Ral Eram captured, Prallah in virtual ruins . . . How she wished she had taken King Amelin's suggestion that she stay with him in Thalenah. Her meeting with the king seemed so distant now, as if it had occurred during a different epoch—one where Shinri had been Jasnah's ward, a simple girl doing another woman's errands.

Shinri tensed her left hand, fingers gripping the knife hidden within her enveloping left sleeve. She was a woman now, by virtue of title or events, and had to decide upon her own actions. Perhaps she had made a mistake; perhaps she should have tried to escape into the city, despite her reservations. Those opportunities were gone now, and events left her with only one certain determination.

She would not let that man touch her again.

The handmaidens finished their primpings. *So soon?* Shinri steeled herself, clenching her right hand to still its quiverings, and began to walk forward. She didn't move toward the door that connected her bedroom with that of the king, but left in the direction of the main hallway. Ahven had sent specific instructions for her to be seen leaving her rooms and entering his.

The knife was a strangely calming weight in her hand. She had stolen it off of the men's table during a feast, swiping it from the place before an empty seat as she passed. She knew her intent to kill Ahven was, from one viewpoint, ridiculous. A simple dinner knife wielded by an untrained woman would hardly provide a serious threat for the man who had killed Talshekh Davar in a duel. However, she didn't really expect to succeed—killing Ahven was just one of the potential victories she could obtain this night.

How would Ahven respond to being threatened, perhaps even wounded, by his own wife? Would he kill her in retribution? If he did, he would suddenly find himself without a tangible link to House Davar. The two houses would be cast back to the same uncertainty they had faced that night so long ago, the night of the dueling competition. One man with an army, the other with a throne. Ahven or her father would have to die—and either event would suit Shinri just fine.

And if he doesn't kill you? Shinri thought with trepidation as her ladies led her to the king's chamber door, which was opened by a steward. *What if he leaves you alive, and just decides to . . . punish you?*

That was an option for which she was also prepared. She would not live in such a situation. Either she would escape, or she would . . . remove herself from his power in another way.

Ahven's rooms were oddly simple. They were adorned as one would expect for one of his position, but none of the furniture or art seemed to display any measure of personal taste. They were indicative of position without being showy, as if placed out of necessity rather than actual fondness. The only item that seemed even marginally original was a group of minstrels who sat at the far end of the sitting chamber, ready to act upon their master's call even at the late hour.

Shinri's handmaidens led her to the bedroom chamber doors, and the steward knocked, then opened the door for Shinri. He and the others remained behind as Shinri stepped into the room.

Ahven stood consulting the map that hung predominantly on one wall. He looked over as she entered, his eyes flat, and waved for her to shut the door. She did so with a quiet hand.

"Kenor," Ahven said. "She is here."

Shinri frowned slightly as a different door opened, and a man walked into the room. Of medium stature and perhaps in his sixth decade, the newcomer wore expensive but not lavish clothing—a fine and square-cut pair of trousers, a long white sencoat, and a loose blue seasilk shirt.

"Come here, woman," Ahven ordered.

Shinri did as commanded, gripping her knife uncertainly.

"This is Kenor Isavar," Ahven said with a direct tone. "He is a physician. Soon your father and I will leave to deal with the remnants of the Aleth military. In a few weeks' time, you will inform your ladies that you believe yourself to be with child. Kenor has been assigned as palace physician. He will examine you, and declare that you guessed correctly, then send a message to your father and myself declaring the happy news. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord," Shinri said.

"Good," Ahven said. "Two months later, assuming I have not returned, you will feign pains in your abdomen and send for Kenor. He will excuse all but his assistants from the room, and attend to you. Afterward, he will sadly inform the palace that you have suffered a miscarriage. He will provide proof of the child's death, and you will substantiate anything he says. Do you understand?"

“Yes, my lord,” she said. *In more ways than one.*

“And why do you think I am doing this?” Ahven asked.

The question caught her off guard. “I am not sure, my lord,” she said, lowering her eyes. “But I am just a simple woman. I will do as you command.”

Ahven snorted derisively. “Do not play with me, child,” he snapped. “You were trained by Jasnah Kholin, and you have the spark of intelligence in your eyes. You think you can fool a man who was himself forced to feign stupidity for the better part of two decades?”

Shinri flushed, looking up. “You fear that once my father has an heir, he will try to have you killed. However, if the Davar noblemen assume you aren’t trying to make good on your promise of uniting the houses, they might not give you the support you need. So, you have devised this plan to make it appear as if you have produced an heir, then lost it to chance.”

“Very good,” Ahven said with a nod. “Now, take off your clothing and throw it in the corner.”

Shinri froze, suddenly becoming tense. “What?” she demanded.

“Your women and my servants think that I am bedding you right now,” Ahven said. “If you come out as pristine as when you entered, the facts will be obvious. So, go throw your clothing in the corner, mess up your hair and facepaint, then go sit on the bed and make the proper noises so those listening at the door will have gossip to spread. Kenor and I must confer.”

Shinri balked, only for a moment, but it was too long for him. Suddenly, his hand was at her chin, gripping her face between cool fingers and twisting her head up so her eyes met his.

“You forget the lessons you learned on our wedding day so quickly?” he whispered. “You will do as I command, child, both today and when it comes time to feign pregnancy. A clever woman can either be an asset or a grave hindrance—and I am generally inclined to believe the latter. If I think—even for a moment—that you will betray me, then you will die. I would sooner kill you and your father, then take my chances with the other Davar noblemen, than have to worry whether or not you will obey me. Do you understand?”

Shinri gripped her knife. She could do it. She could raise her arm and plant it directly in his chest. But . . . *He’s going to leave you alone. He’ll humiliate you again, true, but he’ll have to leave you in the palace when he leaves—he can’t take the chance of having you with him on the battlefield, pretending to be pregnant when your father and the other Davar noblemen are close enough to send their own physicians. Survive this night, and you won’t have to wait in tension and fright. He’ll be gone, and you can escape.*

Shinri lowered her eyes and nodded, shivering slightly.

“Good,” Ahven said, pointing toward the bed.

Shinri followed his commands with as much dignity as she could gather, undoing her beautiful *talla* then tossing it in a heap beside the bed. Ahven watched the process with obvious lust in his eyes, smiling with a leering twist of the lips. He was so cold most of the time, but in this one thing he obviously had difficulty masking his emotions. Or, were there any masks? Was this, perhaps, the only emotion he actually felt? Could a man really be that . . . broken?

Shinri paused, glancing down at her white seasilk undershift. He hadn't said to remove it as well, but he could probably argue that it should be wrinkled. She could feel his eyes and his smile. The room felt quiet despite the physician's calm voice, telling Ahven of the drugs he would give Shinri to feign morning sickness and to stop her woman's issue.

Ahven watched. He was waiting. *A test? I need him to believe*, Shinri thought. *Believe I'll do as he says, so he'll leave me here. Alone.*

She removed her underclothing and wadded it up, dropping it in a pile. Then she sat on the bed, quickly pulling the bedding up and wrapping it around her. To the side, she saw Ahven's eyes linger on her for a moment, then the physician drew his attention, and the king began speaking to the man in a low voice.

Had she passed some sort of test, or had she simply encouraged his lusting? Shinri sat miserably, trying to wash away the feeling of his eyes upon her. Ahven said something to his companion, speaking in a voice too quiet for Shinri to hear. The physician nodded in response, waving his hand to the side in a gesture of emphasis. As the hand flickered, Shinri thought she saw something beneath the cuff of his shirt, something coloring the back of his wrist. An Elinrah tattoo.

An Elinrah brother? Shinri thought. Coincidence? Or is the king involved with them? Before, when gloating over his ability to see through her submissiveness, Ahven had bragged of his ability to hide his intelligence for so long. And, despite the reputation of idiocy he had founded, he had still managed to seize power. The events seemed near-impossible, even for a brilliant man. If the Elinrah were backing him, however, it all suddenly became more plausible. Shinri focused, closing her eyes, trying to piece together what the king was saying to his companion.

“Noise,” Ahven suddenly said in a louder voice. “Those outside expect to hear sounds from within, woman. I will not tell you again.”

Sighing softly to herself, Shinri did as ordered, destroying any chance she had of eavesdropping on the conversation.

THE KNOWLEDGE THAT AHVEN had no intention of risking a child by her made Shinri's nights pass a little less tensely. Unfortunately, the days only grew worse. Ahven had complete power over her, and he seemed to take amusement from expressing his control. He would order her to his rooms and have her sit naked on his bed while he worked on his maps and went over troop counts. He took her to social functions—even in the midst of war preparations, the nobility felt the need for occasional mingling. At each of these meetings, Shinri was told to keep her eyes down, to remain at his side, and never speak without direct permission.

Shinri saw discomfort and fear in the eyes of the other noblewomen. Ahven employed no female scribes—he used monks in the open and Elinrah in private. Shinri heard little, since she was allowed minimal time for socializing, but her handmaidens reported some of the local gossip. The Veden women were concerned with their king's behavior, primarily his treatment of Shinri. They whispered that he was dissatisfied with the power women held over Kanaran politics, and that he intended his treatment of Shinri to become the model. The Veden were a people dependent on tradition—they would not be easy to change. However, the generals and noblemen watched Ahven, and some of them displayed quiet approval.

So it was that Shinri wasn't the only one who was relieved when Ahven finally announced the army's departure. The declaration sent a wave of anxiety through the soldiers and their commanders, and for the first time Shinri realized that, to many, the preparations might seem rushed. She had waited and prayed for Ahven's departure, and each added day had seemed to drag like a winter highstorm. However, two weeks was not that long a time to move an entire army in through the Oathgate and to organize it in the city below.

Ahven seemed to be waiting for something. Even after the army began to move down the slopes to the base of the Mount of Ancestors, Shinri saw Ahven in frustrated conference with his generals. He often glanced northward, his eyes uncharacteristically troubled. He looked toward Kholinar. Was he worried about Dalenar, or was it something else?

It was about that time that Shinri realized she hadn't seen the king's Shin henchman in quite some time. With a feeling of dread, she realized she knew where he might have been sent. Ahven had focused a great deal

of energy on capturing Ral Eram in secret, but someone had escaped. Lady Jasnah.

Shinri's anxiety returned tenfold. The Shin were said to be warriors of almost supernatural ability—if anyone could track Lady Jasnah's escape, it would be such a man. If Shinri's guess was correct, this man had already slain a half-tenset Shardbearers, slaughtered children, and mercilessly advanced his master's domination of Vedenar. If such a creature had been sent to hunt Jasnah . . .

Shinri wouldn't let herself worry about such things. She had more pertinent problems—such as her own escape. She still had no idea how she would manage it. Perhaps expecting her plans, Ahven had set a special guard over the Oathgates. Ten men and one Shardbearer stood guard at all times, and none of them made any move to join the departing army. Even with the withdrawal, the palace hallways were still well-patrolled by soldiers, as were the ramps leading down to the city—not to mention the guards on the city walls themselves. Ahven obviously felt it worth the cost of a few thousand troops to maintain a hold on Ral Eram, and he was probably right. Still, the preparations made Shinri's escape look less and less probable.

However, she could do nothing before Ahven's unyielding eyes. She needed to see him gone, sent to his unfortunate task with a surety of her submissiveness. So, when Ahven finally declared that he himself was riding to battle, Shinri prepared herself in her finest dress and jewelry to bid him a properly triumphant farewell.

Ahven's honor guard gathered on the palace plateau, along with several of the more important noblemen—including her father. When Ilhadal noticed her, his eyes didn't linger. He hadn't displayed indignation, or even offence, at Ahven's treatment of her—she had expected neither. In fact, from the way her father had treated her when she was growing up, Shinri suspected that he highly approved of Ahven's new etiquette.

Ahven made his appearance in a suit of brilliant white Shardplate. Shinri didn't recognize it—he had probably had the armorers paint and adorn it especially for the occasion. The helm bore a fan-like crest that came to several points, and the shoulderplates were draped with golden seasilk. The breastplate was embossed in the form of a magnificent *palh*-burst bearing the glyph *pel*—the symbol for intelligence. The opposite of idiot.

Ahven was accompanied by two Shardbearers who had, until just recently, been common guards. They had been awarded the only two Blades captured during the taking of Ral Eram—Ahven had made a great display of them,

but Shinri heard whispers that the same number of Blades had been lost to Jasnah's escaping group.

Ahven made no speech, nor did he acknowledge her—though she was certain he would have been angered had she not been there, with her ladies, kneeling on silken pads beside the palace entrance. He waved for his white charger and was moving to climb into the saddle when an approaching figure caught his attention.

Shinri glanced up. A messenger in false Aleth blue scrambled up the palace ramp, then made his way to Ahven's side and voiced a message. Ahven nodded once, waving for his entourage to halt their preparations. A few moments revealed the reason. A squad of horsemen, looking harried and fatigued in the afternoon light, clopped up the ramp. Shinri immediately recognized the man at their front.

Ahven's Shin assassin didn't have the same worn look as the rest of his group. The man rode with lithe dignity, slipping off his beast before it even came to a halt. He was to Ahven's side like a pre-storm breeze, washing across the stones and bowing before his master. Shinri perked up. She was too far away to hear their exchange, but she had a good line of sight to Ahven's face.

Whatever the Shin man's message, it did not please the king. Shinri breathed in relief. Perhaps the man hadn't been sent after Jasnah—but if he had, his mission had not found success. The Shin man stood, waving back toward his squad of men. The soldiers moved aside, revealing what Shinri had assumed to be pack horses. Settled atop them were two bodies. Several of the party's soldiers untied the bodies, and as one of them struggled lethargically, Shinri realized they were still alive. Captives, then, not corpses.

One of the prisoners managed to stand on weak legs, and Shinri caught a shocking glimpse of the face. Even from a distance she recognized Renarin Kholin's muted features. The other one, tossed groggily to Ahven's feet, proved to be the young peasant Shardbearer, Merin Kholin.

Probably not a Shardbearer any more . . . Shinri thought ruefully, looking at the poor boy's condition. Her pity was immediately stamped out by another emotion—an irrational, yet still potent, anger.

This was the man who had killed Tethren.

It was foolish, and she realized that. Merin Kholin wasn't really responsible for Tethren's death—Ahven had somehow ordered her fiancé to his doom, and Merin had acted justly to try and protect his king. Yet, looking down at Merin, Shinri was ashamed to feel a kind of twisted satisfaction

at his fate. The boy didn't deserve her loathing, but he also didn't deserve to bear Tethren's Shardblade.

Ahven didn't lose his frown at the presented gifts, but he did seem placated slightly—as he should have been. If he intended to capture Alethkar, he would have to face Dalenar Kholin at some point. The Tyrantbane's son and adopted ward would prove powerful bargaining gems, even against a man as noble and unyielding as Lord Dalenar. Ahven waved for several of the soldiers to bear Renarin and Merin into the palace while another man brought forth a Shardblade and proffered it before his king. Tethren's Blade.

Shinri felt a crawling chill as Ahven reached out and accepted the Blade, then shot a look in her direction. With an obvious motion, he summoned his own Blade, then removed the opal and placed it in Tethren's Blade. The weapon immediately shifted, the strange Awakened metal melting and reforming like molten steel, until it was a copy of the king's former Blade. Ahven presented his own now-discarded Blade to another member of his honor guard, but Shinri wasn't paying attention. The thought of Ahven's hand on Tethren's Blade . . .

Better Merin bear it than him, she thought with a sick feeling. There was no reason for Ahven to switch Blades—both would be identical when they bore his bonded opal. No reason at all except to make one final display of his power over Shinri. He controlled her past, decided the fate of those she loved, and sought a grip on her very emotions.

Shinri glanced to the side. The soldiers were dragging Merin and Renarin into the palace.

Into the palace. To be kept in one of the secure cells in the west-central wing. Ahven knows that the palace is the most secure building in the city—the best place to keep a pair of important political prisoners.

It was also the place closest to Shinri. Swallowing her guttural dislike of the boy who had taken Tethren's life, Shinri forced herself to consider advantages and facts. Merin Kholin was rumored to be a brilliant duelist—he had saved the king's life twice—and while Renarin wasn't the finest warrior in Alethkar, he had been trained in the great monasteries of Kholinar. And now these two men were being held just a few hallways away from Shinri's own rooms.

Ahven had just delivered her a means of escape.

chapter 51

JEK 8

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, felt a slight and discomfoting surge of satisfaction at his failed mission. For the first time, Jek had been unable to fulfill his master's will. Not that he hadn't tried to locate the Lady Jasnah. Jek's sense of honor was absolute—he could not sabotage his mission intentionally. He was required to use all of his facilities to serve his master's will, for that was what Truth demanded.

This time, however, no amount of competence had been enough to bring success. Perhaps the Lady Jasnah had avoided Jek's scouts, or perhaps they had missed her by simple luck. More likely, she hadn't gone northward at all—Jek had done a fairly thorough search of the area, extending as far toward Crossguard as he dared, and his scouts had discovered no trace of her passing.

Regardless, the woman was safe from Jek's blade. The satisfaction of guiltless failure gave him a brief smile as he rode beside his master, their horses marching at the head of the Veden honor guard. Ahven looked troubled, and he had a right to be. From all accounts, the Lady Jasnah was a masterful tactician. She would waste little time bringing news of Ral Eram's fall to her brother.

Ahven's success was by no means guaranteed. Alethkar was wearied from war, true, but it was also armed with the spoils that came from a successful

invasion. In addition, Ahven's army didn't represent the entirety of Veden might—he only had command of those armies that Talshekh had been able to raise. If King Elhokar were warned in time, there was a chance he could escape Ahven's offensive, withdrawing to gather support and leaving the Veden forces exposed in the center of a hostile kingdom.

Unfortunately, Jek had little practical knowledge of large-scale tactics. His clan was—or, rather, had been—the Nalenthath, a Clan of the Knife. His training was not in battlefield warring. While he had the practical leadership training of any Shin lord—basic command skills focusing on small-squad leadership—his true focus had been in the arts of stealthy killing. The Nalenthath won wars by executing the enemy commanders—as honorable a method as any other, in the eyes of the Shin. It had always amused Jek that the easterners considered themselves too 'honorable' to overtly use assassination as a practical method of warfare. Oddly, despite their sensibilities, the men who came into possession of Jek's Bondstone seemed to have few qualms about using him to further their plans.

Jek kept to his thoughts as Ahven's party left through Ral Eram's massive steel gates and began down the extended stone path leading toward the mountain's base. There was so much *stone*. Moving away from the cliffside as they were, Jek suddenly became aware of the oppressive mountain looming above. The troop of men wound its way down the ramp-like path, cliffs to either side, leaving the First Capital behind on its ledge-like plateau sheltered in a massive rock crevasse.

Was it any wonder that the easterners didn't understand the sacredness of stone? There was so much of it here in the east that even Jek often found himself treating it as a mundane substance. He could almost forgive their heresies at times. Of course, at other times he felt overly-sensitive to the desecrated rock around him—as if he feared losing his sense of Truth, and could only maintain a hold on it through exaggerated piety.

Could there even be piety to one such as he? *There is no truth in this world*, Ahven had claimed. The words had stayed with Jek all through his hunt for the Lady Jasnah. What good was Truth when it led Jek to commit atrocities? What good was honor when it gave a terrible man like Ahven such a marvelous tool in a Shin assassin?

Jek had considered similar questions beneath other eastern masters, but never had a master pushed him as harshly as Ahven did. Blood dripped from Jek's fingers even when they were clean. He knew that this very guilt was the purpose behind his punishment, a fitting judgement for one such

as he. But, had the Holetental really understood the extent to which these easterners were willing to go?

Several hours of riding didn't provide any answers. Jek spent them in silence, the air growing increasingly hot as they descended the mountain. Yet the heat was different here in the east. It was dryer, especially in the summer. Here in the east, the Searing was a dangerous time. Groundwater was tainted and undrinkable, and rivers were low even within laits. Jek glanced up at the sky, and the angry sun overhead, glad that he wasn't a peasant living in one of the many remote Rosharan villages.

Ahven didn't seem to mind the heat. He rode quietly, his ease on horseback just another item on the list of his educational irregularities. The king must have learned to ride in the same place he learned to wield a Shardblade and to perform a masterful oration. The quiet Elinrah brothers kept their distance from the Idiot King, probably to keep suspicions to a minimum. Yet once Jek determined to watch for them, he easily began to pick out signs of Ahven's silent companions.

There were some soldiers who hung too close to the Idiot King. Some minor couriers who were given too much leeway in the workings of the court and army. Some supposed stormkeepers who held conferences with Ahven that even Jek could not attend . . . Each of these revealed an Elinrah tattoo on his shoulder or forearm. The marks were easy to miss and even easier to hide, but Jek was trained to see that which others overlooked. Most people wouldn't have made the connection—Elinrah were growing more common amongst even the upper class, especially in Vedenar, and the tattoos were hardly irregular. However, after what Jek had seen in the temple of Nale'Elin, he could not ignore the coincidence.

As for the other things he had seen . . . well, he was not yet convinced. The children had acted like Onyxseers, true, but it was not so difficult a thing to mimic descriptions from records or stories. Besides, the alternative was almost too unsettling to consider. Ahven was an evil enough force on his own. If he were backed by the Hোকalletap—the powers called 'Epellion' in the east—then he would present a danger such as Roshar had rarely known.

As nightfall loomed, Ahven's caravan approached his aggregated armies. The group was gathered in a secure valley, and was well-camouflaged for a force so large. Even Jek's keen eyes had trouble discerning its presence from a distance. Of course, no amount of hiding would keep their secret if Lady Jasnah reached Crossguard. And she wasn't the only danger—a

passing merchant train, the eyes of a wandering peasant . . . any number of passing coincidences could doom Ahven's expedition.

"You were right," Jek said. "You need to move quickly. The armies are committed—any more hesitance could doom the invasion."

Ahven looked up, eyeing Jek. The words were the first either had spoken during the five hour ride. "Lord Davar still thinks we're moving too hastily," the Idiot King noted. "He wanted to hold Ral Eram and gather strength, forcing Elhokar to come to us."

Jek shook his head. "The first rule of assassination is surprise," he said. He turned, meeting Ahven's eyes. "And that is exactly what you are doing—trying to assassinate an entire army."

Ahven cocked his head, then smiled deeply at the analogy. "Well put," he said, kicking his horse forward.

Jek followed, guiding his horse down a short incline toward the army's sheltered hiding place. There were some fifty thousand men in the force—a considerable number, though they were forced to travel without archer towers. Ahven kept a tenseset of Awakeners to provide food and water for the men, and there were an impressive sixty Shardbearers in the troop. From the latest reports, King Elhokar would be hard pressed to provide three fourths their numbers, even if the battle for Crossguard had gone well.

Ahven's pavilion lay in the nobleman's quarter of the camp, and he rode toward it with a reaffirmed regal air, daring show no fatigue despite the extended ride. Soldiers paused in their chores as the king passed, their eyes showing excited realization. Ahven's arrival marked the end of waiting; the king wouldn't have left the safety of Ral Eram unless he intended to attack. The captains wouldn't give the order to disassemble the camp until the following morning, but only the dull-minded or unobservant would be caught surprised.

They reached the royal pavilion, and Jek climbed off his horse, annoyed at the slight soreness he still felt after his extended ride searching for Lady Jasnah. No Shin man should suffer from going horseback; his people raised and trained most of the beasts ridden here in the east. Yet, forced to serve another's will as he was, Jek often didn't have time for daily riding exercises. He either spent his days in continuous riding to fulfill some assassination order, or he spent them cramped within one blasphemous stone room or another. There was no moderation.

Jek stretched, then followed Ahven and the king's bodyguards into the royal tent.

Someone was waiting for them.

Jek reached the intruder first, of course. He snapped across the pavilion's rug, drawing his yahnakatakak before the guards even realized the room was occupied. Jek positioned himself between the intruder and Ahven, reflexively moving to protect the man who was his enslaver, and had his long-bladed knife at the intruder's neck within three heartbeats.

The old man did not flinch. He sat pleasantly in Ahven's chair, as if unconcerned about the blade pressed against his skin.

Ahven regarded the intruder with curious eyes that showed only a shade of worry. He pushed back the tent flap, waving for one of the door guards to enter. "Did you let this man in?" he asked the soldier.

The guard paled. "My lord, no! We let no one pass!"

Ahven nodded, waving the soldier away. The king turned back toward the intruder, his expression growing even more intrigued.

The intruder said nothing. Jek held his knife still, his muscles tense. There was something strange about the intruder, something subtly unnatural about the way the man had remained motionless as Jek struck. In appearance, the intruder was mostly unremarkable. He was irregularly straight-backed for his age, and his silver hair was full and well-groomed. His wrinkled skin was aged, but his body wasn't decrepit. He looked more . . . stately than he did elderly.

"I fell like I should recognize you, old man," Ahven noted carefully.

"We have never met, Ahven Vedenel," the intruder said, the movements of his jaw pressing his neck against Jek's blade and drawing blood. "Though I have watched you for some time. Taking Alethkar is a bold move—one I had always hoped you would attempt."

Ahven stood thoughtfully for a moment, studying the intruder, before finally adopting a confused expression. "You're the old Aleth king's storm-keeper," he said. "The one called Balenmar."

The intruder, Balenmar, nodded slightly—though Jek's knife kept the motion to a minimum.

"Where is the Lady Jasnah?" Ahven asked, taking a step forward.

"I hear that she escaped into the caves beneath the city," Balenmar said. "She always was a clever child."

"You did not go with her?" Ahven asked.

"No."

"Then how did you escape my soldiers?"

The intruder simply smiled. "You are an interesting man, Ahven Vedenel," he said. "Whether you are clever or foolhardy, I have yet to determine."

Either way, I have decided that I can be of use to you. So, I have come to offer my services as an advisor.”

Ahven snorted. “You expect me to trust a man who so easily betrays his homeland in favor of its invader?”

Balenmar shrugged. “Trust? No, I don’t expect your trust. But, do you ‘trust’ the would-be king who fights at your side, a man barely quelled by the prospect of a grandson on the throne? How about the Shin assassin who holds his knife so diligently at my throat—a man who would betray you without thought if you happened to misplace his Bondstone? Do you really trust anyone around you, Ahven Vedenel? What is trust to a man like you?”

“True,” Ahven admitted. “But each of those you describe, trustworthy or not, brings me an edge I could not otherwise obtain. You, however, have a very poor record as an advisor. King Nelshenden lies in the catacombs of Ral Eram, dead at the hand of his best friend, and his son is about to fall to my armies. Your advice seems to have been of little productive use.”

Balenmar snorted. “I’m an informant, not a bodyguard,” he said. “Besides, neither man—son or father—had keen enough ears for my suggestions. If they had listened, perhaps they would still live. Don’t make their same mistake.”

Jek could tell, however, that Ahven was no longer paying attention. The king’s eyes had moved away from the captive man’s lips, and he was thinking carefully to himself. Would Ahven execute the old man, torture him, or simply hold him for later purposes? Jek thought he knew which Ahven would choose—the Idiot King was not fond of loose ends, or of men who knew too much about him.

“I can give you Jasnah Kholin,” Balenmar said idly.

Jek glanced toward Ahven, and saw that the king had noticed the words.

“There are only a few exits from those caverns,” Balenmar continued. “They all open out onto the eastern side of the mountain. Too far from Crossguard to be of use to King Elhokar, but dangerously close to Kholinar. What do you think, Ahven Vedenel? Can your armies face both Elhokar and Dalenar at once? Elhokar might be a fool, but his reckless temper should not be underestimated. How would your army fare against Elhokar’s ferocity if the calm rock of the Tyrantbane were pressing you from the east?”

“You can tell my men how to get through the caverns?” Ahven asked.

“Bring in a scribe,” Balenmar said. “I’ll give precise directions.”

Ahven didn’t move immediately. Eventually, the lure proved too great, and he waved for a soldier to relay the message. Then the king nodded to Jek, who slowly lowered the blade from the old man’s neck.

Balenmar smiled pleasantly, pulling out a handkerchief and carefully wiping the trickle of blood from his neck.

“What do you ask in return for this knowledge?” Ahven asked, eyes still suspicious.

“Nothing you aren’t already willing to give,” Balenmar said.

“Be more specific,” Ahven ordered.

Balenmar’s affable smile didn’t leave his eyes as he spoke. “Just make certain your men kill Lady Jasnah and her companions on sight. None of them must survive.”

chapter 52

DALENAR 4

HIGHSTORM CLOUDS BULGED in the distance. It had only been twenty days since the last storm, but it seemed like so much longer. The lait's plants drooped in the constant sunlight, many retreating within their shells. What had been green just a week before was now withered and wan. The great Kholinar river had slowed to practically a trickle. The effects of the Searing were strong here, even in the most fertile area of Alethkar.

But a highstorm was coming at last. And it was no ordinary storm—this was the Almighty's Bellow, most powerful and impressive storm of the year. It would bring both life and destruction. Outside the lait, in the less-sheltered farmlands, all spring crops would have long been harvested. Most people would be tucked within safe granite homes; those too poor to afford good stone houses would wait in the village stormshelter. No man—beggar, thief, or traveler—would be abandoned to the Bellow's fury.

In the lait, less concern was necessary. Yet even here they had to be cautious. The Bellow's power would be dulled by the steep valley walls, but not rendered impotent. Wise men remained indoors.

Dalnar stayed on his balcony, watching the storm approach. During recent weeks, it seemed he had little reason to call himself 'wise.' He knew not how Merin and Renarin had managed to elude his trackers, but he was only mildly surprised at the feat. Both boys had often proven themselves too clever for their own good. Dalnar kept his men searching, but he

had little hope that he would discover them before they arrived at their destination. Even riding at a moderate pace, two unencumbered men would have been able to reach Crossguard in two week's time.

All of Kholinar knew of the disappearance, of course. Most people had even guessed at the boys' destination. What had been a scandal when Aredor left had since become a catastrophe. Dalenar's men reported a feeling of unrest in the town. The barrooms were full of questions wondering who would be heir, and postulations on whether or not Dalenar would have the honor to disinherit both of his sons. Even quieter were the grumbles that claimed the boys were right—that it was wrong to wait like women when the rest of the kingdom fought. Dalenar had lost his courage, they whispered. The Tyrantbane no longer had the will to fight.

And they were right. Dalenar knew they were. His neutrality was a weak move, an indication of uncertainty. The old Dalenar would never have done such a thing—he would have made a decision, then followed it with tenacity, no matter what the consequences. That was honor. Holding to one's word, and being willing to give it in the first place.

Instead, he waited. Without the Oathgates, and with the river being too low to carry boats, information from the east was scarce. The battle would have started days ago. Men probably fought and died even as Dalenar stared at the approaching clouds. Or perhaps the fighting was over. Elhokar would have had to strike quickly to counteract the grumblings of his allies, who were already fatigued from several years at war.

Dalenar gritted his teeth, fingers gripping his balcony's stone rail. He needed information. In the past, he had been one of the first to receive battlefield news. This time, however, he had placed himself in a tangential position—since he had chosen to support neither combatant, neither would see any urgency in keeping him informed. That left him with his own messengers, sent to gather what they could. These were few, however—Aredor, Renarin, and Merin's pilferings, combined with the horses Dalenar had been required to give their pursuers, had left his stables depleted of its best stock.

The storm was near. It was even darker than most, and its approach was like the shadow of night. Dalenar thought he could feel it nearing—the air cooling, as if in frightened worry. The breeze curling with anticipatory winds. While his cultured Vorin senses reminded him that there was nothing mystical in the storms, he couldn't help shivering slightly as the Bellow approached. Its unnatural blackness. Its expected rage. Its inevitability.

A rider appeared on the lait ridge.

The man sped down the switchbacks at a reckless pace, his cloak flapping with familiar blue. The land darkened behind him, water beginning to pour down the rocky slopes. In the distance, Dalenar could hear a low roar—the surging Kholinar river, swelling in its banks as sudden and furious waters fed its long-dried thirst. The rider reached the base of the slope as the rains overtook him, obscuring Dalenar’s view.

A moment later, darkness took the palace, and a wave of wind-driven rains smashed into Dalenar. He tightened his grip on the rail, squinting his eyes in the powerful tempest. All was dark. He felt his cloak writhing and whipping behind him. Chill water bit his skin, instantly soaking his clothing. He could hear nothing beyond the incessant slam of raindrops against stone.

He took one rain-laced breath, then fled into his rooms, throwing his weight against the stormshutters and closing them behind him. Compared to the chaos outside, even the rattling shutters and background roar of the rain seemed peaceful. Dalenar wiped his face, dripping water onto the sittingroom rugs. Kalkanah would have been furious; Kinah would only see them cleaned and dried, offering neither complaint or reprimand.

Dalenar stood for a moment, thinking about the messenger. The man’s news was probably inconsequential. It was unlikely that he was a rider from Crossguard; he was probably just one of Renarin’s pursuers, returning to give further word of defeat. Or perhaps he was just a rider from one of the outer tribute cities, come to make a report.

Yet why would such a man have risked the Bellow? Why ride with such direct zeal, rather than stopping for shelter? A quiet, worried impression told Dalenar to seek refuge from the news as he had fled the storm winds. There was something very wrong about the messenger’s arrival.

Dalenar quietly changed his clothing, then walked through hushed hallways toward his audience chamber. Servants and minor attendants watched him, yet none moved to speak or interrupt. He arrived at the hall and seated himself in his chair.

All was still. Then the audience doors burst open.

The messenger stood haggard and wet. “My lord,” he gasped, apparently surprised to find Dalenar already waiting in the chamber. He fell to one knee, though he looked so wearied he could barely maintain the posture.

“Speak,” Dalenar said.

“My lord . . .” the man said, trailing off, a look of despair in his eyes. He was one of the men Dalenar had sent to Crossguard. The messenger

looked up, gathering strength, but Dalenar knew the words before they were spoken.

“My lord,” the messenger said, “your son, Aredor Kholin, is dead.”

Dalenar didn’t react. He didn’t yell out his grief, cry out in pain, or even close his eyes in mourning.

“How?” Dalenar asked, surprised at the stiff strength in his voice.

“Executed, my lord,” the messenger said. “By the king, along with Lord Jezenrosh and his sons. Crossguard fell eight days ago, the walls destroyed by Awakeners. The king himself led the charge inside.”

“Renarin?” Dalenar asked.

“No word, my lord,” the messenger said, looking down. “But . . .”

Dalenar nodded. The boy had no Shardblade. There was a good chance that, if killed, Renarin would be ignored amongst the bodies.

A small group of noblemen was gathering behind the messenger, just outside the audience hall. Dalenar saw confusion and shock. And, with those emotions, he saw something else—something Dalenar felt burning within his own breast. Something stronger than fatigue, surprise, or even logic.

Anger.

Dalenar stood. The noblemen outside stopped their whispering and waited with expectant eyes.

“Lord Echathen,” Dalenar said, still amazed that his voice could sound so solid and determined when, within, pain squirmed and wept. “You made an offer to me the first day of your arrival a week ago.”

The firm-faced man stepped to the front of the group and nodded. “I remember, Lord Dalenar.”

“Gather your allies and mine,” Dalenar commanded. “Prepare them for war. Tell them . . . Tell them that the Tyrantbane is needed again.”

chapter 53

JASNAH 12

THEIR INN HAD ITS OWN STORMSHELTER, and Meridas appropriated it for Jasnah, himself, and the other noblemen—including, much to his obvious regret, Taln and Brother Lhan. By Jasnah's order, Meridas had grudgingly consented to let the innkeeper, his family, and several other high-ranked citizens share the space as well.

Not that there wasn't enough of it. The inn stormshelter was broad, and looked to be of unworked stone—the building had probably been built in this location to monopolize on a natural cavern. The shelter obviously doubled as a cellar for the inn, and it was cluttered with boxes of winebottles and other provisions. Even with such, however, there was plenty of room—enough that Jasnah felt guilty for letting Meridas insist that the other refugees be housed in the city's common shelter, which was undoubtedly crowded with travelers.

Still, the shelter's emptiness did make for comfort. Jasnah sat in a chair brought down from above, and had situated it near one of the room's four lanterns, ostensibly so she could study a book she had borrowed from the monastery. She was too nervous to read, however. She told herself that it had nothing to do with superstition—that she didn't give any heed to the stories of Stormshades or other creatures that were supposed to stalk the land during this, the grandest highstorm of the year. Yet she felt an eerie sense

of foreboding as she sat in the dark, cave-like shelter. She could barely hear the tempest's fury overhead—only the occasional noise of distant-sounding winds, mingled with the sound of a leak dripping lethargically, gave clue of what occurred above. Somehow the sounds seemed all the more haunting for their unobtrusiveness.

Jasnah wasn't the only one in the room who appeared a bit fidgety. Theirs was an impatient group. They planned to begin their march northward as soon as the Bellow ended, giving them a full twenty days of travel before the threat of another highstorm. It made sense to wait out the Bellow in Marcabe, but Taln had finished preparing their provisions early the previous day, and they had only needed to wait a little longer for their clothing to be finished. They could have left long before, had the Bellow not been imminent.

Instead they waited, Taln's warnings of pursuit tickling their minds, mingling with thoughts of an invading army sneaking cleverly through the Oathgates, slowly approaching the weakened Aleth armies.

Jasnah sighed. For the moment, her mind should be focused on their travel to Kholinar. Water would be tight, but Taln was confident they could make it—without horses to worry about missing footing on the uneven ground, they could travel mostly at night and conserve liquids. He did suggest, however, that they remain close enough to the Aleth border that they could seek out a village in case of an emergency.

The madman himself sat near the far wall, looking over his list of provisions. Meridas stood chuckling with his young nobleman adjuncts, who were becoming more and more comfortable with the idea that a *Parshen* was paying them favor. They probably realized that he only did so because there was no one better, but their noblemen's instincts wouldn't let them pass up the opportunity to pander.

Only one man didn't seem even slightly nervous about their impending flight. Brother Lhan sat with his back to the stone wall, using only a single cushion for comfort. He noticed her regarding him and smiled, rising and strolling over to her chair, then seating himself on the stone floor beside it.

"Lady Jasnah," he said, his affability seeming strange within the dank confines of the stormshelter.

"Brother Lhan," she replied.

"I just wanted to say that I appreciate the new boots," he said, smiling down at the pair she had purchased for him out of the group's funds. "I dare say, they are the finest present I've received from a heretic in my entire life."

Jasnah raised an eyebrow at his lack of decorum. She suspected that

Taln's favor of the man came, in part, because they were both incurably blunt with their opinions.

Lhan smiled happily.

"You seem to accept my supposed heresy without much concern," Jasnah noted dryly.

"Supposed, Lady Jasnah?" Lhan asked. "I believe I've read one of the essays you wrote during your days at the New House. Any man who only 'supposes' that you reject Vorinism might as well climb out into the Bellow and 'suppose' that he'll get wet."

Jasnah frowned. "You won't persuade me to change my views, monk," she said. "More zealous men than yourself have worked on me to little avail."

"Oh, I'm not 'working on you,' my lady," Lhan assured. "I'm just trying to amuse myself."

"How relieving," she answered, turning away from the short monk, glancing over at Taln again. The madman was staring at the wall across from him, his eyes lost to memories and his own thoughts.

"He sees things—and remembers things—that scare him," Lhan said in a quiet voice.

Jasnah glanced away from Taln, looking back down toward the monk. "What kind of things?"

Lhan shook his head. "He won't tell me. I don't think he really ever confronts them himself. I think, maybe, they are why he acts like he does."

"Insane?"

Lhan frowned. "I don't know. He's not like other madmen I've known, Lady Jasnah. Perhaps he's not really mad at all."

"You believe him?" Jasnah asked incredulously.

"Believe is a strong word, my lady," Lhan said. "Do I think he's some sort of deity? No, I don't believe that. But, what are these Heralds that we worship, really? Beings sent by the Almighty, creatures whose purposes are to protect and to warn. Throughout lore, the Elins have cared for mankind, going where the Almighty cannot, lest his tenfold perfection destroy the flawed world around him. The Heralds have been heroes and sages, bringing peace when possible, and leading war when inevitable. I wonder—is this a path we should dissuade a man from emulating?"

"He doesn't try to emulate, Lhan," Jasnah said. "He thinks he *is* one of them."

Lhan shrugged. "If the end result is the man who sits on the stone over there, then I think that we could be far worse treated."

Jasnah paused, then spoke in a more hushed tone. "It's not that simple,

Lhan. You were there, that evening of the duels. You saw his eyes; you know how he can get.”

She waited, her silence prompting him to grudgingly nod his head. “Yes, I saw.”

“He frightened me that day,” Jasnah said. “Frightened me more than, perhaps, I should admit. Now that I have seen him fight, I’m frightened even more. I saw him kill two Shardbearers in the space of three heartbeats, Lhan. I saw him slaughter nearly a tenseset of men with casual grace. Mix that with what I’ve seen in his eyes . . . the uncertainty, the instability . . . What will happen then, Lhan? Will anyone in this group be able to stop him?”

Lhan shifted uncomfortably, and Jasnah felt shame at her words. She wanted to tell herself that Taln would never do something that horrible. Yet she couldn’t be certain. At times, he seemed so stable, so stalwartly wise. Then he would mention one of the other Heralds, if only in passing, and she would remember that glint in his eyes. Could anyone truly trust such a man?

Jasnah shivered as she looked at Taln. She sensed something else from him, something unrelated to wisdom or madness. At times, when he stared off like he did at the moment, he didn’t seem like soldier, lunatic, or Herald. He just seemed . . . lonely. Alone, like Jasnah felt when she would admit the emotion to herself.

“Is there nothing you can do for him?” she asked quietly.

“My lady,” Lhan said seriously, “one of the first things I learned at Peacehome was that there was little I could do to help anyone. At best, I can know when to listen and know when to speak; when to comfort, and when to annoy. Even if I were better at such things, I don’t know if anyone could understand how to help Taln. He’s a special case. With normal madmen, there’s little to do in the way of ‘curing;’ but you can help them understand how to fit themselves into regular society.

“With Taln, I don’t think that’s necessary. He understands society—in fact, he seems rather adept at finding his place and doing well by it. I don’t know what to tell you. Perhaps he will confront what he hides, and will realize that he doesn’t need to be a ‘Herald’ to protect those around him. Or perhaps he will continue on as he is, using the crutch of madness to keep from facing those images that haunt him. That decision, unfortunately, is left to him—or, more appropriately, to whether or not his mind is capable of recognizing it as a decision at all.”

Lhan let the words hang between them, and a moment later Jasnah realized that the sounds of wind above had ceased. Sure enough, a pounding

came on the door a few moments later, followed by a voice telling them that the Bellow had passed.

REMNANTS OF ROCKBUDS formed the bulk of the refuse. Broken shells, limp stalks torn from their purchase, and mashed leaves lay scattered across the village. The fragments must have been carried with the storm for miles, for the hills immediately surrounding Marcabe had been cleared for farming.

Mixed with the scattered pieces of foliage, of course, were other scraps that showed a human touch. Pieces of stormshutters, strips of leather, and even fragments of worked stone were littered about, most laying morosely in vast pools of crom-clouded water. Village peasants moved through the wreckage, picking through the broken scraps for anything worthy of salvage.

Jasnah had seen far worse. Ral Eram lay exposed to highstorms on the side of the mountainface. Even its mighty walls and clever positioning didn't make up for the lack of a lait valley, and many of its houses were lavish, with expensive woods and rugs. If such a home's stormshutters broke, the Bellow found a plentitude of delicate items upon which to expend its wrath.

Here, in Marcabe, few of the buildings seemed to have suffered any serious damage—though a couple of older homes had finally given into the elements, stone walls or roofs collapsing upon themselves. Hopefully the occupants had been smart enough to realize the danger, and had spent the Bellow inside the common stormshelter.

"Well?" Taln asked, climbing up the stormshelter steps and pausing beside her.

Jasnah nodded. "Let's be going, then. Gather our things."

Taln waved for Kemnar and his soldiers, then ducked inside the inn to gather their packs. Jasnah stood waiting. Her new clothing felt . . . uncomfortable. Unnatural. She wore pants divided for a masculine stride—like trousers, though they maintained some semblance of femininity by remaining relatively loose and flowing. She wore a sencoat instead of a cloak. The garment—essentially a cloak with sleeves—was far more practical than her delicate feminine cloaks. It was sturdy, barely embroidered, and designed to be easily tied closed in case of a storm or chill—which would be common, since they were to travel mostly at night. Beneath the sencoat and tucked into her pants, her shirt was barely distinguishable from that of a man.

She had four other outfits similar to it. They weren't indecent—such clothing had been worn by Kanaran women for centuries in places

such as Lakhenran and even Jah Keved. However, Alethkar was far more conservative. For an Aleth noblewoman, especially one so closely related to the king, to wear such things . . . well, it probably wouldn't be *quite* a scandal, but it would certainly earn her some gossip in the court.

No one from court can see you, Jasnah reminded herself. Still, she wished she had given into Meridas's clothing suggestions as opposed to Taln's. Even after she had made the decision to walk, Meridas had suggested more traditional clothing, while Taln had pushed for brutal practicality.

He displayed such as he left the inn, a large pack on his back. He dropped a similar pack beside her, and she didn't even have to ask to realize that he expected her to carry it. Hers was far smaller than his, true, but she had assumed that agreeing to walk would be enough. Still, she didn't argue. She stood quietly, expecting someone else to make her objection for her. And he did.

"Surely you jest?" Meridas asked pointedly.

Jasnah turned with a smile, then was surprised to see that Meridas wasn't looking at her, but at the large pack Taln was holding out for him to carry.

"If you want to drink or eat on this trip," Taln said, "you'll need to carry some food. We're going too far, with too little expectation of relief, to let anyone go without helping."

Meridas sneered at the pack, but accepted it. Despite her own frustrations, Jasnah was amused to think how out-of-place his rich clothing would look with the utilitarian brown pack strapped on his back. Meridas's two attendants received their own packs without complaint, now that their master had acceded to the necessity.

Taln looked over their small group, nodding to himself. Then he gathered up a set of captured spears and began distributing them, one per person, even to those who were already wearing weapons.

"You'll appreciate them as walking staves, if nothing else," Taln said before anyone could object. "And we might have need of them. All right, we ready to go?"

"Of course not," Meridas said. "We have to wait for the others."

Taln froze. "Others?" he asked. "There are no others."

"Indeed there are," Meridas said. "Lady Jasnah ordered me to gather them. Do you not remember?"

"*What?*" Jasnah demanded, speaking even before Taln could voice his own question.

"Surely you remember, my lady," Meridas said smoothly—this was an argument he had been anticipating. "It was while you were deciding on new

garments, two days before. You told me that, if I wished, I could bring men to help in Lord Elhokar's war efforts."

"I was talking about Tenin and Chathan," Jasnah said.

"Ah," Meridas said. "You did not make that clear. I'm afraid I may have done something rash in promising the others they could join us, then."

Jasnah opened her mouth to ask, but closed it as they began to arrive. Men, both young and old, gathered around the inn. Tenset upon tenset of them came, all bearing a weapon of some sort—spears both crude and fine, axes for the wealthiest, cudgels for the poorest. They wore their own packs, but most looked laughable compared to Taln's well-planned, carefully-organized supplies.

"I apologize, my lady," Meridas said as the men continued to arrive. "I gave them my oath, and that of the king, trusting on what you had said to me. I promised them that they could join us in liberating Alethkar from our enemies."

Taln stepped up beside her, his face hard with anger.

"What?" Jasnah asked quietly, so only he could hear. "What is he doing? There must be nearly a hundred men here. I thought it was decided we were to travel by stealth!"

"He never wanted to," Taln said. "He wanted to go straight north."

"He'd intentionally sabotage us for the sake of his pride?" Jasnah asked.

Taln shook his head. "No, this is about something greater. This is about power, not just pride. Before, the only soldiers in the group were your guards. Meridas just changed that. He's made himself an army."

A short distance away, Meridas smiled as he regarded his 'troops.' Some of them were from the original refugee group, but many were from the village. "Think, Lady Jasnah," he declared, "and I believe you shall see this is for the best. Why ride to our king's warning with just a couple of soldiers, when we could bring a hundred men instead!"

"And of our need for haste?" Jasnah demanded.

"They are young, able men," Meridas said. "And there really aren't so many of them to be bulky. We can move as quickly as before. Besides, we have sent messengers."

"And our pursuers?" Taln demanded.

Meridas raised an eyebrow. "If you recall, madman, most of us still disbelieve that pursuit comes as quickly as your paranoia indicates. We're a good four weeks march from Ral Eram. We will be gone long before enemies arrive. And if they send horsemen, we now have the numbers to

resist them. If they send Shardbearers . . . well, we'll distract them, and you can just attack them from behind with your usual flair."

Taln sighed, turning to Jasnah. "We can't take them."

"Leaving them would make an Oathbreaker of Meridas," Jasnah said, "and by association myself, since he acts on my orders."

"Oaths and intricacies of honor are not reasons to risk a kingdom's safety," Taln said.

"You don't care about the kingdom," Jasnah reminded. "You just want to get to the Holy City."

"True," Taln said. "But I'd rather get there alive. You think this fluff will be of help?"

Jasnah glanced at the troops, then at Meridas, and felt a sudden swelling of shame. Meridas should never have been able to surprise her this way.

What is wrong with you lately? she thought angrily at herself. *Ever since the attack on Ral Eram, you've been missing things—important things.*

There was time to ponder her deficiencies later. At the moment, she needed to make a decision. Honor or no, she could order Meridas to leave the men behind. The good of Alethkar came first.

Yet Jasnah hesitated to disperse the men. She studied them, and she was impressed by the resolve she saw in their eyes. They were a rag-tag mix, true, but they had honor. These men might have avoided military service during the Pralir campaign or Elhokar's attack on Crossguard, but now that an enemy had invaded, they came willing to serve. They had heard of the slaughter at Ral Eram and they knew, as she did, that this was one war they could fight confident that their side was in the right. Could she deny them the opportunity to serve?

"Meridas does have a point," Jasnah said to Taln. "These men will be of use when we reach my brother. He will need fresh troops."

"They're untrained," Taln pointed out.

"Most rural men in Alethkar are at least marginally skilled in the spear and formations," Jasnah said. "Weren't you supposed to have set up that little suggestion, several centuries back?"

Taln gave her a thin-eyed look, then regarded the troop of would-be soldiers. "This is ridiculous," he said. "We'll have traded one group for another nearly as large."

"We'll have traded the weak, young, wounded, and female for potential soldiers," Jasnah said, growing more confident in her decision.

“You’re actually going to consider this?”

Jasnah nodded. One word from Meridas’s earlier comments stuck in her mind: paranoid. Was Taln really imagining this ‘pursuit’ he supposedly heard in the caverns beneath Ral Eram? He continually spoke of the coming of the Stormshades, warning that all of Roshar was in danger of destruction. She wanted to trust his judgement, but that look in his eyes at the duels, when he had faced her, when she had thought—for just a moment—he would grab a weapon and cut down every person in the room, nobleman, servant, and noblewoman alike . . .

When the truth surfaced, she knew she would rather have a hundred armed men at her back and face Taln’s pursuit then pass up the soldiers. Perhaps she had spent too long at war in Prallah, or maybe it was the suspicious, distrustful nature that Elhokar seemed so fond of claiming she had. Either way, she made her decision.

“We take them,” she said.

Taln held her eyes, but he did not glare. Finally, he nodded. “We can’t leave for several more hours, then. We’ll need to spend some of your horse money to buy pushcarts and supplies for all these men.”

IT WAS DARK BY THE TIME they left Marcabe. That wasn’t a problem in itself—the Dwelling was high in the sky during the summer months, and the intense collection of stars provided fine light for marching.

As the first hours of the march progressed, Jasnah took a serious look at herself. She had decided to bring the hundred men, but she was still angry at herself for letting Meridas maneuver her into the position of having to decide. She simply didn’t give the man enough credit—and that would have to stop.

Unfortunately, her underestimation of Meridas was a sign of a greater problem. Ever since she’d left the palace comforts behind, she’d had trouble controlling her surroundings. As she trudged along beneath the starlit sky, Jasnah was forced to admit her deficiencies.

She had commanded armies. She was a master of tactics, both on the battlefield and in the political court. Yet she had never done *this* before—she had never been forced to walk across stone hills beside regular men. Even during the Pralir campaign, her place had been one of comfort. She commanded the court, true, but she was also dependent upon it.

With everything she knew removed, she found herself grasping toward whatever flimsy reminders she could devise. Meridas’s offer of pretty clothing had tempted her not because of its luxury, but because of what that luxury represented—comfort, familiarity, and control.

You will have to do better, Jasnah. You can't depend on what you knew before. You have to learn to work in a different environment now.

The first thing she had to do was remind herself that Meridas wasn't just a fop. He was a dangerous enemy. She had to remember the cool hate she had felt on that night of the dueling competition as she knelt over Nelshenden's corpse.

With that thought firmly in mind, she was able to notice things she should have seen earlier, and recognize the extent of her mistakes. The hundred villagers marched around her, but they were not *her* men. They belonged to Meridas. In the city, she had assumed that since she had Meridas's oath, she would have control of the soldiers as well. She had misjudged—always before, when she had been allowed to meddle in military affairs, she had done so at her brother's indulgence. Meridas intended to give her no such leeway, and he had both tradition and law on his side. The command of fighting men was a Masculine Art. As long as their group had been made up of refugees, a female could claim leadership. As soon as it became a military expedition, however, her authority found its end.

Scouts did not report to her. Great consideration was given to her comfort, but Meridas's two nobleman lieutenants felt no need to ask her opinion or consent for their actions. She could command Meridas, of course, but she could only do so in private, and he could easily conceal information from her with excuses.

As the evening march progressed, Jasnah realized that she had work to do—Meridas could not be allowed to remain in control. Somehow, she would have to re-take command of the group.

Unfortunately, the march soon revealed a second, even more humiliating mistake in her reasoning. She had been wrong to assume she could easily maintain a quicker speed. Meridas set a fervent pace, and the men followed without complaint—some of the older citizens had served in the military in their youth, and even those who weren't accustomed to military discipline had spend their lives working in fields and doing other kinds of manual labor. She would have thought Meridas himself to be plush from his life as a merchant, but that was obviously another error. He seemed completely unfazed by the strenuous pace.

The pain in her feet grew worse, and aches from their previous march returned with vengeful anger. Until the escape from Ral Eram, she had been carried almost everywhere she went, and it was discomfoting to discover just how unprepared she was for an extended hike. Soon she was sweating despite the cool air, and she felt pains in her chest and side.

Taln's pack was heavy on her back, as if he had filled it with stones just to spite her.

She wouldn't complain, however. She wouldn't call for them to slow their pace just to appease her weakness. Taln's words from before had stung more than he probably knew. *Are you so charmed by your own arrogant grandeur that you would risk the safety of your kingdom in exchange for a little comfort?* She had acted no differently than any noblewoman would, but apparently that wasn't good enough for him. Well, he would get no further pleasure from mocking her weakness. She would keep up; she would continue placing step after step, forcing herself to keep moving, until Meridas called halt. Or she collapsed.

"It will grow easier," a voice said beside her. "You may not realize it, but our hike to Marcabe strengthened you. Your body is still unaccustomed to extended movement, but it will grow stronger. Today and tomorrow will be the worst."

Jasnah glanced to the side, not bothering to mask her spite. Taln marched with apparent ease. No sweat marred his brow, despite his enormous pack, and his step even had a bit of a spring to it. *Of course he's happy*, she thought, *Meridas may have recruited himself an army, but we're still moving toward Taln's goal. He doesn't care about Alethkar—he simply wants to feed his delusions. As long as we continue toward the ruins of the Holy City, he will be happy.*

Taln eyed her, smiled slightly, but didn't say anything.

"What?" Jasnah demanded, raising a hand to wipe her brow. "No mocking words? Or is the sight of me walking along like this enough of an amusement on its own?"

"You're tired," Taln said, "and that has made you irritable. Try and take your mind off of your misery."

"And perhaps you'd like to tell me what to think of instead?" she snapped.

Taln nodded toward the front of the line. "Well, we could decide exactly what we're going to do about *him*."

Meridas and his attendants marched at the head of the group, their silhouettes distinguished by their broad nobleman's cloaks. When they had begun the night's trip, Jasnah had been near the front, but she noticed with chagrin that she was now trailing the main body by a short distance. There was little formality to their march—no neat lines, just men in clusters, talking and joking with each other. It was amazing to Jasnah that they could be so lighthearted when the pace left her gasping. Meridas had organized the troops into ten-man squads, and rotated scouting duties between them

for now, until he determined which men were more proficient at the duty than others.

The teams also traded turns pulling Taln's four supply carts, which rolled and bumped across the uneven ground. They had left behind the farmlands, moving once again into rolling hills growing with rockbuds and other wild foliage. Creeping roshree vines, engorged with water from the Bellow, curled in shadowed places alongside larger boulders or crevices. Cratters, with their four arrow-shaped leaves, clung to stone surfaces—most were dead and dry. They would only begin growing again with the steady fall highstorms.

Something bothered her about the scene. Meridas seemed . . . too comfortable. True, he had been in the Pralir war with Elhokar, and was no stranger to troops or even leadership. However, a court dandy shouldn't know how to organize and command troops—moreover, he shouldn't know how to carry himself as he did. Like a man to be followed, a strong commander of soldiers.

He's done this before, Jasnah decided. It wasn't that his foppish mannerisms were a show—she suspected that he really was exactly as he presented himself. There were just more sides to the man than she'd first assumed—he wasn't simply a merchant who had talked his way into her brother's graces. He was a clever man, with a background and experience, just like any other.

"What do you think we should do about him?" Jasnah said, trying to overcome her physical pains and focus on the dialogue.

"Well," Taln said, "first I suggest that you and I stop squabbling."

Jasnah eyed him. "A truce?" she asked.

"An alliance," he corrected. "One not born of forced oaths, Jasnah, but of simple honesty. I respect your opinion and your right to lead these men. In turn, all I ask is that you respect my desire to reach Jorevan."

Jasnah shifted her pack from one uncomfortable position to another, studying the man who walked beside her. What did he owe her, really? What did she even know about him?

"I want to reach the Holy City," Taln said, "but I have no intention of breaking my oath at this time. I want to see this people cared for and trained, the same that you do. You can trust me, Jasnah. I will not betray you."

She felt a desire . . . almost a *need* to trust him. And, to an extent, she thought she could. There was a piece of him that could never be trusted, however. The madness.

We'll worry about that later, she decided. For the moment, Meridas was a far more pressing problem.

"Very well," she said. "Let's work together."

"Good," Taln said, nodding forward again. "What do you know of him—particularly of his life before he came to court?"

"Not much," Jasnah said with a sigh. "I looked into his background, of course, once my brother started paying attention to him. Meridas's recent record as a merchant is well-known—he was active in Alethkar for about a decade before he came to the capital. Before that . . . well, I know that he came from a Fifth city in southeastern Alethkar, where he was of a lesser noble line. I could find no close living relatives, however."

"Nothing about his childhood?" Taln asked. "Or where he got his military experience?"

Jasnah shook her head. "What I could discover didn't lead me to believe he *had* any military experience."

"That's obviously not true," Taln said, studying the man's form up ahead.

"I know," Jasnah said. "I noticed the same thing. But he could have learned these skills during the war in Prallah. He spent a lot of time with my brother, though Meridas himself was never given any major commands. Also, most noble boys—no matter what their rank—receive training in the arts of military leadership."

"Perhaps," Taln said doubtfully. "Kemnar said that Meridas dueled well at the competitions."

"He dueled very well," Jasnah said. "Or, at least, he did the one time he decided to fight—when he wanted to humiliate Lord Dalenar's heir. But I've met tensets of traveling dandies who can swordfight with the finest of soldiers. That doesn't mean they're much use in real war, once you remove the formalities and conveniences of the dueling ring. I don't know, Taln. He carries himself well, but maybe he's just good at mimicking what he sees in others."

Taln nodded. "Some things, however, cannot be faked. Kemnar also told me Meridas had an opal to place in Glyphting, once the king granted it to him. Why did he choose my Blade from the pile?"

"I don't know," Jasnah said. "Because he wanted to spite you?"

"No, he and I had no rivalry then. He chose my Blade because it was a soldier's weapon—it was weighted the best, and formed the best, for practical use. He saw that, even if he did so unconsciously, and selected it."

Jasnah sighed. She didn't mention that she had been there when Taln lost 'his' Blade. The weapon's opal had been newly placed, still clear, which

meant its imprinted form would have belonged to the man who owned it before Taln. Taln, however, would never admit that.

Taln was still studying Meridas. “This man has been oft underestimated,” he decided. “And he encourages such misunderstandings.”

Jasnah nodded. “Our first task should be to keep him from gaining absolute control of these men. I realize you don’t approve of my decision to bring them, but that is past us now. It’s going to be a *very* long march to Kholinar if we let Meridas remain in control.”

“Agreed,” Taln said.

“However,” Jasnah continued, “it’s going to be difficult to do anything about his leadership. Meridas is the ranking nobleman of the group, and he was the one who organized the men in the first place.”

Taln paused, frowning slightly. “He told them of our departure, true. But I don’t know that he is the only reason they decided to join us.”

He nodded forward again, and Jasnah noticed occasional glances from the men up ahead—glances backward. The few close to Jasnah and Taln seemed to be trying to watch the madman without actually looking at him. Suddenly, Jasnah remembered the stories, the whispers, and the stir that Taln had caused in Marcabe. The initial refugee group had regarded Taln with almost worshipful reverence, though Jasnah had attributed the sentiment to his saving their lives. If, however, they had passed their feelings on to the people of Marcabe . . .

Taln was right. The stories of his rescues in Ral Eram, mixed with the common man’s superstitious nature, would have persuaded many to wonder if, indeed, he was a Herald—despite Jasnah and Meridas’s insistences otherwise. These men had not come simply because Meridas had asked. They had come, at least partially, because they hoped to see proof of Taln’s possible divinity.

“Offer to train them,” Jasnah said. “See if they’ll spar with you. I’ll order Meridas to let you provide them with lessons—he won’t have any grounds to object, since the men obviously need instruction if they’re to be of any use to my brother.”

Taln nodded. “A good suggestion. As I spar with them . . . well, we’ll see where their loyalties truly lie.”

OVER THE NEXT few days, Taln proved annoyingly correct about her fatigue. The first few days of marching were by far the worst she had experienced yet, but the pain and fatigue did begin to decrease by the third day.

Meridas made no formal objection to Taln’s training of the soldiers,

though he did argue with Jasnah in private, claiming that Taln would ‘taint the men with his madness.’ Though Jasnah worried about the same thing, she remained firm in her command. Not only did Taln’s training undermine Meridas, but she soon realized that—whatever its motivations—the lessons made quick and vast improvements in their troop quality.

Though she had spent little time on battlefields themselves, she suspected she knew more about troops, fighting, and combat units than any other noblewoman. Meridas might have some unexplained military experience in his background, but it was soon obvious that Taln himself was the far better commander. The men obeyed Meridas, but he treated them with the same terse arrogance that he used with all of his inferiors. Even after just three training sessions—each performed at the end of a day’s march—Jasnah could see that the men had grown to respect Taln far more than they ever would Meridas. Meridas spoke to them as a nobleman commander; Taln spoke to them as a fellow soldier.

On their third day out of Marcabe, a second, smaller group of men approached in the distance. There turned out to be about forty of them—men of Marcabe who had decided belatedly that they didn’t want to miss out on the chance to accompany Taln and Meridas on their quest to save Alethkar. Taln easily folded the newcomers into the main body of troops, giving only a passing comment to Jasnah that they would have to be certain to watch for settlements with which to trade, since the influx of men would drain their supplies.

They crossed the border into Riemak sometime during the fourth day. When they stopped for their midnight meal, one final group from Marcabe caught up with them. This one contained only twenty men, and Jasnah was surprised when Kemnar was the one who went out to meet them. He returned with a short, wiry peasant man, and both walked directly toward Jasnah.

“What is this?” Jasnah said, rousing from her seat—a shennah blanket thrown over a small boulder.

“My Lady,” Kemnar said, resting a hand on the man’s shoulder. “This is Fourth Citizen Nachen, owner of the Damp Stone—the finest tavern in Marcabe.”

“Citizen Nachen,” Jasnah said as the man bowed.

“Before we left,” Kemnar continued, “I mentioned to Nachen that someone might come looking for a group fitting our description. He was kind enough to keep watch for me.”

Jasnah frowned. She had given Kemnar no such command. However . . .

“Since you’re here, citizen,” Jasnah said. “I assume that Kemnar’s prediction was well-founded?”

“Yes, my lady,” Nachen said. “They arrived a day and a half after the Bellow. Five of them, all on horses—lords I suspect, though they weren’t dressed in finery. They wore glyphs that proclaimed them to be of King Elhokar’s army, and said they were messengers on an important task. They fooled the rest of the town, but I lived in Vedenar during my youth—my elder brother married a Veden merchant’s daughter—and I recognize a Veden accent, even a subtle one. Besides, those men were too tall to be Aleths, and they seemed too blunt to be noblemen trained in one of our courts.”

Jasnah raised an eyebrow, surprised at the man’s knowledge. “What did they say?”

“Nothing overt, my lady,” Nachen said. “They kept to the bars, asking too many questions, listening a little too well, being a bit too free with their chips—kind of like Lord Kemnar here did, the first night he came to town.” Kemnar blushed at this, but Nachen continued. “Anyway, it was obvious who they were after. They asked too much about your ladyship and the Herald. They rode off that very night—heading back the way they came.”

Jasnah frowned. It appeared that at least one of Taln’s suspicions was no delusion. King Ahven was searching for them, and his soldiers had just found the proper trail.

“Go and make the same report to Lord Meridas,” she told the innkeeper. “But leave out Lord Kemnar’s part in it. Say you decided to warn us on your own.”

“Yes, my lady,” Nachen bowed again, then paused, looking back. “I didn’t believe you at first, my lady—I thought you were a fool for trying to pass your man off as another Herald pretender. But, well . . . if there are Vedens on our soil, the other things you said might be true too. That’s why I brought my cousins and sons with me. We won’t see our homeland taken by their like, no indeed.”

Jasnah blinked in surprise as the man bowed again, then moved off to obey her command. “What was that?” she demanded of Kemnar. “He thought *I* endorsed Taln’s lunacy?”

Kemnar shrugged. “You travel with him, and you obviously trust his judgement.”

“I don’t trust his judgement,” she snapped. “He’s insane!”

Kemnar just shrugged again.

Jasnah sighed. “Well, answer this, then. How did that man know where to find us? We told the villagers we were heading straight north.”

At this, Kemnar flushed slightly. “I told him,” he said. “I thought it better to risk having an informant behind, just in case. If no pursuit came, then I’d betrayed nothing. If it did come, then I figured we’d rather know for sure that we were being followed, even if it risked giving away our location.”

“You didn’t come to me with such postulations, Kemnar,” Jasnah said angrily.

“You’re the one who’s been telling me that I should be independent, now that I have a Blade,” he said. “Besides, you wouldn’t have let me tell him, no matter how trustworthy a man he was.”

“And I would have been right,” Jasnah said. “What if he’d led them straight to us?”

Kemnar shook his head. “You have to trust people sometimes, my lady.”

I did, Jasnah thought. *I trusted my brother, and look where that got me*. She shouldn’t have told Kemnar their path—she should have let everyone, including Meridas, think they were going north.

Except . . . this time, Kemnar had been right. *You have to trust people sometimes*. Who? The madman who thought himself a demigod? The oily man who thought to own both her bed and her brother? The servant who was no longer a servant, a man who thought so little of her judgement that he simply avoided asking questions that he knew she’d answer in a way he didn’t like? No, trust was not something she would easily give again.

Yet, she no longer had a heart to chastise Kemnar. He was right—he had to make his own decisions now. He had entered the game. He was a player now, no longer a pawn. He had to learn that.

And so did she.

chapter 54

MERIN 12

AREDOR WAS DEAD.

Merin had seen men die before. Despite superior equipment and training, the Aleth spearmen had hardly been immune to danger. Arrows had claimed their share, and Prallan spears an equal portion. Heavy infantrymen, with maces and hammers, had occasionally wreaked havoc on Merin's line. And, even more rarely, his companions had faced the terrifying Blade of the Shardbearer. He had lost squadmates, even friends, to that near-unstoppable force.

But Aredor's death was different. Aredor was . . . something more. He had been so confident and so capable. Everyone knew Aredor was one of the best duelists in Alethkar; Merin had seen his performances both on the practice field and while fighting the assassins that night of the dueling competition.

Aredor represented nobility—the new nobility, the truth that Merin had learned it to be. Not distant or ponderous, but affable and helpful. Aredor had bespoken a simple honor which went beyond words read by monks or scribes, a goodness even the stories hadn't quite been able to capture. Aredor was . . . he was like Lord Dalenar. Such men weren't supposed to be mortal.

Merin shivered slightly, leaning against the corner of his cell, the flats of two different walls scraping his back. The room was bare, without furniture

or even blankets; the guards had only given him a rusting chamberpot and a small bowl to hold his meals. The room was barely tall enough for him to stand, and he could cross from one side to the other in five paces. He hadn't been given any opportunity to explain himself—the guards who brought his food never spoke to him. King Elhokar obviously felt no need to demand information from his captives—he just wanted Merin to suffer.

And Renarin too, Merin thought sickly. If I was going to get myself into this, I could have at least left poor Renarin behind. He had heard nothing of the younger Kholin—Merin couldn't tell if there were any other cells in the hallway, but if there were, Renarin hadn't answered to his calls.

Merin shivered again, pulling his cloak close. At least they had let him keep that. His cloak—Lord Dalenar's cloak. Lord Dalenar, who had just lost his second of three sons. Did he know yet? How would he react? *He'll fight, Merin thought. He'll have to. How could the king do such a thing, putting his cousin's head upon a spear like that? Aredor saved the king's life that night. It—I could barely duel a blind man. Aredor defeated those Shardbearers. And now he's dead.*

Hopefully, Aredor had died in battle. Even King Elhokar couldn't have been cruel enough to execute his own cousin. But . . . Jezenrosh was the king's cousin too, and the king had risen against him. Aredor had believed the king was wrong—had believed it strongly enough to disobey his father's commands. What was it he had said the day of his departure?

There's something very convenient about the way those assassins struck, giving the king a perfect opportunity to move against Crossguard. Could a man be so eager for war that he would exaggerate an attempt on his own life?

Aredor's desiccated head, lit by uncertain torches, was an image not easily forgotten. Even if the king hadn't gone to war under false causes, then he had at least been responsible for Aredor's death and desecration. This was the man Merin supposedly served—the man the ballads, and *The Way of Kings*, said was supposed to be the most honorable man in the realm.

He was also the man whose life Merin had helped save on two separate occasions.

It didn't make sense. Why would the Almighty preserve King Elhokar's life under such remarkable circumstances, only to let him act the tyrant upon his own people? What of Merin's supposed heroism? His great deed, the salvation of the king and earning of his Shardblade, suddenly seemed tainted. Merin's nobility was linked to that of the king—if Elhokar was unworthy of his station, then that transformed Merin's act from one of holy bravery into something more like random misfortune.

The questions bothered him so much that he actually asked his guards to

bring him a monk, so he could demand to know why the Almighty would preserve one man just so that he could murder a much better one. The guards, of course, ignored the request. They only came to bring food, and even that happened far less often than Merin would have liked. In fact, it appeared that his cell was completely unguarded. His small barred window provided an empty view of a blank hallway. It was lit only by the sunlight that must have come in through an unseen window.

The days passed in painful lethargy. The room was maddeningly small; the closed-in walls, with no sight of the sky, made him frantic at times. His head still hurt from the blow he had taken, and Aredor's death weighed upon him—mixing with his grief for Lord Dalenar, who probably thought Renarin dead too. It was nearly too much. As his worries loomed, Merin began to fear for his sanity.

He was rescued by an unlikely source. It happened by accident, during a moment of particular desperation. Logically, Merin knew the walls of his cell were made of immobile stone—and yet, he could see them creeping forward, sliding toward him. Rather than snapping, however, he found himself seeking refuge in the now-familiar stances Vasher had taught him. Strangely, the forms brought him a measure of peace to combat the frustrations of captivity.

He had learned long ago, as a young spearman, that focus was the first skill a warrior should learn. The man who could focus on the battlefield—remembering his training despite arrows, screams, and enemy spears—was usually the man who lived. Vasher had expanded upon this training, forcing Merin to focus on his stances and styles until he knew their moves as part of himself.

It appeared that within this focus, the sounds and dangers of battle weren't the only things that could be ignored—it allowed him to push back the walls, breath deeply despite his enclosure, and keep himself strong. The forms didn't help with his grief, but at least he didn't have to fight depression and claustrophobia at the same time.

Either one alone was more than bad enough.

MERIN STARED AT HIS FINGER, focusing on the double images in front of him. Slowly, he let one eye become dominant, and one of his finger-images became clear, then invisible. He smoothly switched his attention to the other eye, letting one image of his finger fade away while the other one reappeared. He couldn't make both disappear at once yet, but he was getting close. A few more days of meditation, and he would have it.

A few more days. Before his captivity, he would have groaned at the thought of such forced meditation. Now, however, he knew that he needed to fill his time and his mind—lest he think too hard about his small enclosure. And so, when his body tired of the dueling forms, he moved on to the little meditation exercise Vasher had taught him.

Merin had heard that monks spent long hours in meditation, pondering philosophy—or sometimes thinking about nothing at all, instead just letting their minds be clear. Perhaps Vasher had gotten this particular exercise from some form of monastic training. Whatever the original source, Merin was grateful for it. It wasn't performing its original function—Merin was beginning to doubt he would ever return to Kholinar to learn to 'skep,' whatever that was. However, the meditative exercise was serving a far more vital purpose—it was keeping Merin sane.

Sane for what, he still wasn't sure. The cut of stone used in the walls told him he was probably being held in Ral Eram. Either King Elhokar would order Merin executed for treason, or he would order Merin released to Lord Dalenar—who, in turn, would undoubtedly strip Merin of rank and Blade. After all, that was what Merin had earned through his disobedience.

Merin paused, letting his eyes focus and lowering his finger. Had he imagined that sound?

A small stone from the wall directly in front of him suddenly popped free and fell to the floor with a crack. Merin stared at it for a dumbfounded second, then looked up.

"There you are," said a muffled, yet familiar, voice. "I thought the rock would never wiggle free. How are you holding up?"

"Renarin?" Merin said, jumping to his feet in an enthusiastic motion. The hole was in the back wall, the one opposite the door. "Renarin, where are you?"

"I'm in a cell, of course," Renarin replied. "Much like yours, I suspect. I would have spoken to you earlier, but I've been busy."

"Busy?" Merin said, rubbing his fingers along the hole's sides, trying to expand it. There were a few cracks in the wall here, where the stones had settled over time, but none of the others seemed loose. "Busy how? You said you're in a cell."

Renarin didn't respond.

"Renarin?" Merin asked, a bit frantic.

"Yes?" a distracted voice said a moment later. "I'm glad you're all right, Merin, but I do need to get back to my work."

Blessed winds, Merin thought. *He's snapped. Like I almost did.*

“Renarin, how can you talk like that?” Merin asked. “How can you be so calm after what happened to Aredor?”

“I knew Aredor was dead before we left Kholinar,” the voice responded. “Or, well, I knew he was dead without actually knowing it. Anyway, I was ready for what we found. We have to think of other things now—other works. The ones who control this palace could very well capture all of Alethkar unless we find a way to help.”

Merin paused. “Those who control the palace?” he asked. “Renarin, what are you talking about?”

No response.

“Renarin?” Merin asked a little more loudly. “Who controls the palace?”

“The Vedens,” Renarin eventually said. “That’s right—you were still unconscious. They kept hitting you to keep you down. Men fear Shardbearers, even when they aren’t unarmed. Those weren’t Aleths who took us, Merin. They were too big, too . . . Veden. Anyway, they’ve taken the Oathgates. I saw their army as we rode up into the city. It was big.”

Merin stepped back, blinking in surprise. The Vedens? Invading Alethkar? With the Aleth armies weakened from fighting one another . . . Even to his untrained strategic senses, that sounded very bad.

“We might be able to do something,” Renarin was saying through the hole. “I’m not sure yet—I’ve still got so much work to do.”

“Us?” Merin asked with a sinking feeling. “Renarin, we’re locked in cells. Besides, without my Blade, what am I? Even with it, I couldn’t help Aredor.”

Throughout my time in Kholinar, I kept wondering what my place was. I could never find it. Maybe that’s because I didn’t have a place. I wasn’t supposed to be there.

“Possibly true,” Renarin said. “Possibly untrue. I really don’t know yet. But you were the one who convinced me to go try and save Aredor, and we knew that was a hopeless battle. What reason do we have to give up now, when things are remarkably less predictable?”

“Less predictable?” Merin asked. “Renarin, we’re *locked in a dungeon*. And, unless you know of a couple more loose stones, we’re probably going to be here for a while.”

“You might want to look for more stones,” Renarin said. “Ral Eram is well-built, but sometimes we forget how old it is. The Oathpact Kings built it in the Sixth Epoch—that makes the palace a good two thousand years old. Still, I doubt you’ll be able to pry your way out. Some chipped rocks

in a dividing wall are one thing, but a potential escape route—well, don't hope too much. Now, if you'll excuse me . . .”

“Excuse you?” Merin said. “What is so pressing?”

“Work,” Renarin said distractedly.

“Work?” Merin asked. “What work?” There was no response. Merin nearly screamed in frustration, not wanting to go back to the lone silence. “Renarin?” he said, grasping for anything. “Renarin, I'm sorry your sphere got destroyed.”

At first he assumed there would be no response. Then, blessedly, Renarin's voice returned—though much weaker this time. “Destroyed?” Renarin asked. “Oh, I broke that on purpose.”

“On purpose?” Merin asked with surprise.

“Of course,” Renarin said. “How else was I going to get a shard of stone small enough to slip past our captors? Oh, and I grabbed this for you.”

There was a slight scraping sound. Merin peeked through the hole between their cells as Renarin pushed something through, forcing it forward with his soup spoon. Merin reached out to catch the object just as it plopped free from the wall.

It was a shiny black opal. Merin's opal, from his Shardblade.

Merin stood in stunned amazement for a full ten heartbeats. “Renarin!” he said with a joyful cry. “Where . . . how . . . ?”

“Right after I broke the onyx sphere,” Renarin said. “I pretended to stumble, then grabbed your opal off the ground. There were so many pieces of black rock on the stone then that they didn't notice one missing, even if it was a bit larger. I figured you would want it.”

Merin closed his fingers around the smooth stone. He almost felt . . . like he had been given a piece of himself back. A sane, hopeful piece. As long as he had his opal, he could restore his Blade—if he ever managed to get another one.

“Thank you, Renarin,” he said through the hole. There was, however, no response—whatever weirdness Renarin was about, it had claimed his attention again.

chapter 55

TALN 10

ALL WAS NOT RIGHT. The Return had begun, over three months lost already. The other Heralds had not contacted him. Ral Eram was held by invaders, while the Epoch Kingdoms—the few that remained—squabbled amongst themselves. Something was wrong with his *nahel* bond, and the powers it granted had failed him.

Yet, standing before troops again, making soldiers out of common men—this was something Taln understood. There was a comforting familiarity to it.

He had quickly updated his knowledge of modern strategies by speaking with Kemnar and the other soldiers. The use of mobile towers was a newer invention, developed as bow technology—historically useless against the crystal-boned Khothen—came into favor. Awakeners, thankfully, were rarely used in battle. Taln well remembered the chaos of the Awakener Wars of the Third Epoch—wars the Heralds themselves had sparked to overthrow Kanar.

Modern battles revolved around Shardblades, as Taln would have projected. Versatile formations of men, organized by armament, formed the landscape upon which Shardbearers dueled. The formations of men weren't unimportant, of course—they were used to gain position and strategic dominance on the battlefield. The Shardbearers, however, were the focus of the battles themselves.

So, the first thing Taln taught his men was not to be frightened of a Shardblade.

His teachings bothered Meridas, and that was all the more reason to continue them. The nobleman shot troubled glares toward the soldiers as Taln allowed each one to hold his Blade and take a few swings, hopefully dispelling some of the mysticism surrounding the weapons. Taln showed them the delicate art of parrying a Shardblade, teaching them to slap the weapon on the flat of its blade, deflecting it without letting one's spearhaft touch the sharpened edge. He forced them to face him, one man at a time, and spar with him until they learned to focus less on the weapon and more on their opponent.

Even Kemnar, who was normally so accepting, found this training a little unnerving. Shardblades, weapons forged to protect mankind from a demonic threat, were coveted and revered. It troubled the noblemen to see their mythological aura dispelled. Taln did not stop his training. Demystifying Shardblades was only a small step—in seven months, these men would have to face the Khothen themselves. Even during the days of the Epoch Kingdoms, when men had believed in the Stormshades and been trained to fight them, Taln had seen many a brave man frozen by fear when faced by a legendary demonic horror.

And so, he trained them—not for Jasnah's war, but for the one that would come afterward. He taught them discipline, then explained why it would save their lives more often than would any spear or shield. With the increased numbers from Marcabe, they were nearly two hundred strong. Not an army, but a reasonable task force. Their weapons were poor in quality, their armor non-existent, but their will was strong, and Taln saw that their training was good. By the time a week had passed, he had them marching with discipline, and Meridas was able to increase his pace from the leisurely march he had kept during the first few days.

Taln could see the effect the increased speed had on Jasnah. She was shorter than most of the men in the group, and was unaccustomed to walking with a natural stride. Her life had been one of ease, at least physically, and her body protested at the strain of forced marching. Yet he knew she would endure. There was warrior's determination in her eyes; not all battles were fought with spear and sword, and though her life had left her physically weak, it had given her a will as strong as that of any general. He didn't patronize her, saying little of her travails. Her body would accustom itself to the exercise, and she would be stronger for it. In the months to follow, she would need a body as tough as her mind to survive Khothen invasions.

The one who surprised him most was Brother Lhan. The plump monk joined in the battle training with the other men, though Taln had never suggested he do so. In fact, Taln had expected Lhan to have as much trouble as Jasnah. If the monk felt the pains of extended walking, followed by intense spear training, he didn't show it. In fact, he continued to work even after the training, for each night—or, rather, morning, since they slept during the day—he gave a recitation from the *Arguments*. He quoted flawlessly, despite his claims that he had never had the patience for memorization. Taln could see the appreciation in his soldiers' eyes. Meridas gave them legitimacy, Taln gave them skill, but Lhan gave them faith.

“KEMNAR, WOULD YOU TAKE OVER for me?” Taln asked.

The bald warrior nodded, and Taln clapped him on the shoulder before leaving the sparring area. Morning was approaching, almost time for the men to bed down, and a light was pooling on the horizon. The soldiers continued their practice around him, Kemnar taking charge as Taln left. There was little for him to do, however—the squad commanders saw that their men performed the proper exercises and formation practices. Kemnar simply had to walk among them, being seen inspecting the practice.

Several things were evident from the landscape around them. The first was the undeniable fact that Riemak, cradle of Vorinism and most noble of the Epoch Kingdoms, had fallen. The roads, once the kingdom's pride, had fallen into disuse. Or perhaps 'disuse' was an understatement. The few scattered trails they passed were so weathered it was difficult to tell if they had really once been roads, or if their apparitional lines were simply tricks of the eye. Everything was overgrown with rockbuds and weathered by highstorm floods. The occasional stone bridges they passed were worn and often broken, and rubble remains of villages and towns were regularly reported by the scouts.

However, scattered among the shadows of what had once been, one could find the facts of what now existed. Riemak, or the area it had once covered, was not as empty as Taln had been led to believe. Frightened, defensive villages farmed inavah among the hills, their buildings huddled and weathered by cromstone—as if they were trying to mask their presence from outsiders. Meridas sent men to trade with these when possible, and the reception they received was cold at best. Still, Jasnah's gems were valued commodities, as they would allow for trade across Alethkar's border. Taln worried at the necessity of exposing themselves, but knew that there was little he could do. The trompings of several hundred feet left broken

rockbuds and trampled foliage. If the men who chased them were able to discern their initial direction, finding their trail once they passed out of the barren inavah fields would not be a problem. Taln simply had to count on their head start, and the enemy's hopeful lack of horses, to keep his men away from their pursuers.

He sighed, ladling a precious bit of water to his lips as his men trained in their formations. They shouldn't have to worry about pursuit. Men should not fight men—they had a much more dangerous foe to consider. Men would give parlay. The Khothen only sought death. Even the slaughter at Ral Eram's palace would be tame by comparison to what the Stormshades would do if they caught the people unaware. But thinking about the infantile quarrels of men—even for the hundredth time—would not change the situation. He dropped the ladle, noting how low their water stores were. Fortunately, the highstorms would begin again in about a week. Of course, those would bring their own problems.

He found Lady Jasnah sitting beneath her canopy—little more than four sticks with an awning, it was nonetheless the closest thing they had to a tent. She sat on her blanket, massaging her feet, but stiffened and stopped as soon as she noticed Taln. He had to smile at her appearance. Despite their extended march, despite the hardships she suffered, Lady Jasnah forced herself to maintain the proprieties of a perfect Aleth noblewoman. She insisted upon enough water to wipe herself clean at the end of each day, and she kept her hair immaculately braided despite her lack of serving women. In fact, her bearing was still that of the calm, commanding noblewoman—the only clues to her predicament lay in her humble clothing and the slight tan her fair skin had begun to adopt.

As usual, she wore no gemstones—no rings, no hairjewels, not even a pendant. It was so striking an irregularity that Taln was surprised he hadn't made the connection to her Awakening powers long before she revealed them.

Taln waved away the pair of guards who stood guarding the lady's tent. They glanced at Jasnah for confirmation, which she hesitantly gave. These men, at least, were loyal only to her. That was good.

Taln squatted down as the men left, seating himself on a short boulder beside her blanket. Jasnah stared up at him with a cool expression. It probably angered her that he should see her weak, but he was of little mind to put up with feminine stubbornness, so he ignored the glare. He reached into his cloak pocket and removed a small bag. From this he dumped a small pile of gemstones.

She paled just slightly. “What are those?”

Taln raised an eyebrow.

Jasnah rolled her eyes. “Yes,” she said dryly. “I know they’re gemstones. What are they for?”

“You know that too,” he said calmly. “The funds you gave me were mostly sapphires and emeralds—I had to do a great deal of searching in Marcabe to find a good sampling of each Polestone.”

Jasnah glanced down, eyes drawn to the gemstones despite her obvious distaste. Yes, she had the look of an Awakener. He should have seen it, the way her eyes lingered on the stones, the way she obviously had to force her hands to remain in her lap. She had Kemnar handle all of her funds, so she would never have to touch currency, and never wore gemstones—all so she could try and pretend that she wasn’t an Awakener.

He remembered that call. It wasn’t an easy lure to resist, especially at first. In fact, though he had long since overcome the call himself, a piece of Taln felt dead whenever he touched gemstones this Return. Where they had once sung, they were now strangely silent to him—just as they had been to him before the creation of his *nahel* Bond. He gritted his teeth against the memories of Awakening, focusing on Jasnah.

“You have to learn,” he told her.

She looked away from the stones, regarding him with hostile, angry eyes. “We have had this discussion.”

“Your abilities are a gift from the Almighty,” Taln said sternly. “He would not have given them to you if He didn’t wish you to use them.”

“The Almighty?” Jasnah snorted. “You’ll need a better argument than that, Taln.”

“Very well, then,” Taln said. “What of your people? What of duty to your kingdom? With leather, I could make armor for these soldiers. With steel and Awakener’s fire, I could forge better weapons. With the power of Awakening, we could carry a simple pouch of zircons and emeralds, rather than lug four pullcarts full of water and grain. This is a military expedition, and so far you have been useless to it. Meridas provides leadership and I give the men training, but you are only a liability—especially since you refuse to make use of the one invaluable ability you could provide.”

Jasnah recoiled, her face growing even more icy. “You speak to me of duty? You, who care nothing for this expedition or its people save that it takes you closer to the Holy City? You, who would have left Ral Eram without even a fight, sneaking away from the invaders without giving warning? Yes, Lhan told me of your plans that day, when you knew of the

attack and were preparing to run. One wonders why you even got involved? Did you go to the invaders to see if, perhaps, they might make a more powerful ally? After all, what are kingdoms and deaths to you—you've lived three thousand years. Considering all that experience you've supposedly had, one would think that you'd be leading the armies of man, not traipsing along with a half-equipped band of untrained soldiers, having abandoned the First Capital to invaders. If you really are one of the Ten Heralds, then I *do* hope the other nine are more competent than yourself, otherwise it's a wonder mankind hasn't been destroyed already."

The other nine . . . How could she know? How did she see what he was—the least of ten, surely an embarrassment to the others? Who was he, a simple soldier, to be chosen to join them? Kings, men of great wisdom, brave heroes and masterful knights, all of them—all of them except Taln. Taln the footman. Taln, who should have never been made one of them. Taln, who had doubted their course, the capture of the *Magnatah*, the formation of the *nahel* Bond. Memories buried beneath three millennia surfaced, bright and hot as when they had first been imprinted. The other Heralds must be working to save Roshar, for if it were up to Taln, mankind was doomed. If it had been up to him, mankind *would* have been destroyed long ago . . .

The flames came again, the first time since the dueling competition. The canopy disappeared in an explosion of burning strips of cloth. The sky overhead bubbled with fire, and all was red around him. The stones melted to lava. His flesh curled, black. And the howling began. Horrid, chilling screams. The screams of a thing that should be dead, but could not die. It appeared from the burning whiteness, a creature wreathed in darkness, a pitiful yet horrifying monstrosity. And it came for him. He stood to face it, hand groping for his Shardblade.

"Taln!"

Her voice was pure, and almost he could hear her Soul Tone in the call. Hostility had been replaced with concern, and he saw her, kneeling with fright amidst churning lava and smoking fires. She didn't burn. She never did.

"Taln, I like not that look in your eyes," she pled. "What is happening? Taln, speak to me!"

Lava cooled beneath his feet and the fires above withered. The canopy reformed itself, growing from ashen sticks back into normal, wooden beauty.

Taln exhaled, seating himself. He held out a forestalling hand to calm

Jasnah's concern, but she pulled forward anyway, laying a hand on his knee. "What was it?" she asked quietly. "What did you see?"

"I . . ." It was not a thing he could explain, for it was not a thing he yet understood. Something was . . . very wrong with this Return. "It is nothing, Jasnah," he said. "Just . . . burdens. When you've lived as long as I, you pick up many of them." He paused, then smiled tiredly. Suddenly he felt exhausted. "We certainly are growing proficient at manipulating one another. I thought we'd agreed not to squabble any more."

Jasnah blushed slightly, moving to sit back in her original position. She froze, however. Her unshod foot had touched one of the gemstones, which had been carelessly dropped from uncertain hands when the fires came. The Polestones now lay scattered across the stones at Taln's feet.

Jasnah sat for a moment, and he knew what she would be feeling. She could hear the Pole Tone, the pure and resonant sound of an unsoiled Essence. She heard it, but not with a regular sense. She heard it vibrating with her own soul, and she would find it beautiful. It would be even more powerful for her than it had been for him—the Elin, by virtue of their Bond, had powerful Soul Tones, unchangeable by Awakening. Though he had used the power for many, many years, he had never been very strong at it, and his body had never displayed any of the changes Awakening caused. He was far better at Stonewarding.

Jasnah stiffened suddenly, pulling her leg away. Taln stooped down, gathering up the gemstones. "I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have tried to shame you into Awakening. I am just amazed that your kingdom would pass up an Awakener—during most eras, your kind were far too valuable not to train."

"They're still valuable," Jasnah said. "My father and uncle would have forced me to join with the Awakeners, had they known of my skill."

Taln paused, frowning. Then he dumped the rest of the gems in the pouch. "How is that possible? What of the *Charan*? Please tell me that it has not been forgotten? We worked so hard to institute it."

"The *Charan* is still performed," Jasnah said. Her voice was slow, and had an absent quality to it—not distracted, just reserved. "I discovered my abilities before I came of age."

"Ah," Taln said. It was rare—very rare. Usually, a soul had to hear another Soul Tone for its own latent power to mature. That was one of the prime reasons for the *Charan*—to use Awakening on every young adolescent so that if they had skill themselves, it could be discovered. For a child to learn Awakening without the *Charan* . . .

“I was only seven at the time,” Jasnah said.

“By the winds,” Taln breathed. So young. She would be incredibly powerful.

Jasnah continued to speak, her voice quiet. “I did it by accident the first time. I didn’t even know what I was doing, but it was so strong . . . so powerful, and violent. I was visiting the home of a distant cousin. His city obtained most of its profit from an obsidian mine. So much of the stone . . . it called to me even though the mine was well outside the city wall. I went to it, and . . .” She shuddered slightly.

During the days of the Epoch Kingdoms it had been called the Conversion. The very first time an Awakener or Epellion used his or her abilities, it came out as a magnificent roar of power. It took most Awakeners decades to reach a point where they could reproduce an effect like that first, amazing Remaking. With a child of her strength, the Conversion must have been extraordinary.

“They never discovered what happened to the mine,” Jasnah said. “Fortunately, I went there at night, drawn almost mindlessly to a call I did not understand. The burst of destruction, the conversion of a thousand brickweights of stone into black smoke, went unseen in the darkness. I left a gouge in the land the size of a mansion, causing the entire cavern complex to collapse. I . . . don’t know how I crawled back to the city. I don’t even know how I survived. I remember the vibration, though. Inside me, inside my soul. I felt agony, so much that I couldn’t even think. It felt as if . . .”

“As if you were going to be consumed by the Soul Tone of the gemstone you touched,” Taln said. “As if you, too, would be transformed into smoke.”

“And puff away,” Jasnah said, staring out into the morning sky. “Like the rocks I had destroyed. My parents thought I had caught a shaking fever, and that the fever delusions had led me from the house and made me wander the streets unseeing. I was bed-ridden for two months, spitting blood, shaking from a thunderclap no one else had been able to hear.

“From that day on, I could hear gemstones in my mind. I knew what that meant, and knew what . . . it would do to me. I’d heard the stories, even seen my father’s Awakeners on occasion. At first, I was just frightened. I didn’t want to admit what it was, even to myself.”

“Did you never have an impulse to seek out help?” Taln asked carefully. “Tell your parents what you were?”

“I considered it, of course,” Jasnah said. “I was almost convinced to go to my father. But, then something happened in court. The son of Lord

Daves, one of my father's Shardbearers, was discovered to be an Awakener at his *Charan*. And they took him away—away from his parents, away from his friends . . . I couldn't do that. I wouldn't let them take me; I wouldn't let them bring back that pain I had felt, let them transform me into one of those alien creatures that served my father. Even if they found out now, they would take me away. They would take the court from me, and lock me away in a virtual prison, where I wouldn't be allowed to have anything to do with anything." She reached up, feeling the single tear on her cheek, then holding it up uncertainly, as if confused by its appearance. Finally, she rubbed finger against thumb and looked back at him. "The court is everything I have, Taln. It is everything I've ever had. I won't let them take me from it."

Taln nodded slowly, regarding her. She was so young, barely into her thirties. He had seen as many millennia pass as she had seen decades, and he felt he hadn't really begun to understand the world until he was well into his tenth century. And yet, she was so capable—she had learned so much, considering her short time alive. Sometimes it put him to shame, how much these people could accomplish when they didn't have the crutch of immortality.

He rose to go.

"Leave the bag," Jasnah said. "I will consider your suggestion. I won't reveal myself, but I may find time for some . . . practice."

chapter 56

SHINRI 10

SHINRI'S FIRST OBSTACLE was her own reticence. Despite her decision to escape, despite her knowledge that she wouldn't soon find another opportunity as good, she found herself hesitating and delaying.

Those eyes were always with her. His eyes, looking at her as if from the side making her question her judgement. Ahven was not a man whose threats were trivial; he would send his assassins after her.

But Jasnah escaped from him, Shinri reminded herself as she walked down a quiet palace hallway, her right-hand fingers trailing along the wall beside her, her left hand carrying a reed-woven basket.

Jasnah's escape lent Shinri strength, for it meant that *he* was not infallible. Ahven's power over Shinri seemed complete, but it wasn't. She could escape. King Amelin had offered her protection, and so she would flee to him. Ahven wouldn't be able to follow after her.

Or would he? Shinri paused in the hallway beside an open window, looking out. The vantage overlooked the lower plateau, and the spread of the town below—a city full of people as much prisoners as herself. If she did escape to Thalenah, what assurance did she have that Ahven wouldn't be able to come after her? The strange power Shinri had over the Oath-gates—what if others had it as well? Perhaps she had just been the most convenient one for Ahven to control. She still didn't even know how he

had discovered her ability. Why would he know things about herself that even she did not?

You're second-guessing yourself again, Shinri, she thought. King Amelin can keep his Oathgate guarded. Even if Ahven does find another like you, he'll have a far more difficult time assaulting a city that's prepared for his trick.

Shinri sighed, resting against the window's rim and placing her basket on the sill. The hallway behind was empty—she was in the Riemak wing of the palace, a section that hadn't been used regularly in centuries. Servants still visited and cleaned, closing the stormshutters for highstorms and keeping the stones free from crom, but there was little need for either activity during the Searing. For the moment, at least, she was alone.

Ahven's departure had left her with a shade more freedom. While many soldiers remained in the city, the great majority had gone with him to Crossguard. The direct manifestation of this was Shinri's lack of guards. Of course, the ramps down to the city were very well-guarded, as were the Oathgates. In a way, the palace itself was just a massive prison.

Even without a guard escort, Shinri had been forced to work a little bit to obtain true solitude. Handmaidens could be a very tenacious lot, especially when they assumed that becoming Shinri's confidant was a sure and quick way to political power. Most of them had yet to realize what Shinri knew instinctively—that Ahven had no intention of leaving political maneuvering to the women. Shinri would be no pathway to power. Instead, she would be a symbol of Ahven's new courtly feminine ideal. To him, a woman was a thing that looked pretty and was always obedient, more like the Shin women were said to be. Unfortunately, Ahven's intentions for social revolution were only the most minor of the dangers he posed to Roshar. She could see his intention in those eyes, laid bare by the connection and understanding he had given her through their forced intimacy.

He would not stop with Alethkar. Ahven wanted what no man had ever obtained—total dominance of Roshar. He wished to succeed where the Seven Conquerors—even legendary Jarnah—had failed. That was why she had to escape; not just for herself, but for Roshar. If she stayed, he would use her to open the Oathgates. He would strike against Prallah, Thalenah, and Shinavar. The last would be difficult, but with the united forces of the Kanaran Peninsulas behind him . . .

Ahven Vedenel could not be allowed to claim the known world as his own. The creature who owned those cruel eyes could not be entrusted with

the fates and lives of so many. That knowledge was what finally gave her the strength to overcome her fearful reluctance.

The handmaidens had been her second problem. No escape would have been possible beneath their clinging eyes. Fortunately, she had found an easy pathway to freedom.

Kanaran women did not like to walk.

Shinri stood, stretching slightly, then picked up her basket and continued her wandering down the disused hallway. A thin sheet of dust bespoke the recent absence of cleaners. Had Ahven left orders for servants to clean the unoccupied wings? If he hadn't, the dust would quickly mount. Idly, Shinri wondered if that would be such a bad thing. The dust had its own beauty about it—the beauty of sleep and restfulness, of a place undisturbed.

Getting rid of her attendants had required more walking than even she was accustomed to. However, the new palace members had quickly come to understand that Shinri was a woman of . . . odd mannerisms. She remembered with a smile the first time she had idly tipped over a vase, letting it crash to the stone floor and shatter into a thousand ceramic shards. Jasnah would never have let her get away with something so blatant. Now, however, Shinri was the one in charge—at least, ostensibly. Destroying the vase had gone a long ways toward unwinding her tension, and she had been able to turn back to her glyph painting with a far more relaxed hand. The other women in the room, however, had sat for a long while, staring at the broken vase with confusion and a hint of fright. After that, Shinri had been certain to break things far more regularly.

No, they had not thought it all that uncharacteristic for the eccentric Lady Shinri to begin taking five-hour strolls through the palace. The more resilient ones tried to tag along at first. Then the blisters and the sore feet had appeared. After that, not ten days had passed before Shinri was able to consistently set out on walks and find herself completely unaccompanied.

Shinri passed through several intersections, slowly making her way back toward occupied hallways, though she stayed away from the Oathgates. The last time she had lingered too close, the guards there had escorted her back to her rooms, then left her under guard for an entire day. Shinri did not doubt that they had acted upon specific orders from Ahven—and she didn't want to consider the punishments he had left should she ignore this first warning.

No, the Oathgates were still a couple of steps away; she had other things to consider first. One of the more important lessons Jasnah had taught her was one of perspective. Vast problems differed from small ones only

in the number of steps it took to overcome them. When clever people failed, it was often because they tried to accomplish those steps in the wrong order.

The Oathgates were guarded by ten men by day and five at night. Both shifts had a Shardbearer, and even the regular men were sworded noblemen. The prison section of the palace, however, was only guarded by one aging soldier. Shinri turned one final corner, and found him exactly where he usually was—half-dozing in a chair at the end of the hallway.

The detention cells were on the other side of the central arcade from the Oathgates. This sector of the palace, while used occasionally, was populated only sparsely—mostly by guard patrols or palace staffmembers on errands. There were two double-hallways of cells, none of which had been used very often during Elhokar's reign. There were far more appropriate dungeons for common citizen criminals—the palace cells were intended for prisoners of more important reputation.

Men such as the son and adopted Shardbearer of Lord Dalenar Kholin.

The fact that Merin and Renarin had been placed in the palace cells indicated that Ahven saw their potential worth as bargaining tools; however, the lax guard indicated that Ahven currently thought them to be of little value. Ahven intended to defeat the Aleth armies with ease; Renarin and Merin were backup tools, not vital prisoners.

Or, at least, that was what Shinri hoped. If she was wrong, then a goodly amount of planning would have to be revised. She shifted her basket to the other hand, then walked down the hallway with what she hoped was an innocent-looking step. The guard perked up lethargically, standing and bowing slightly as she approached. He was a nobleman—a sword was at his waist—but he couldn't have been very high-ranking, else he wouldn't have earned such an undesirable post.

"My lady," he said.

Shinri paused in front of him. "Evening's blessing, soldier," she said. "I've come to bring the prisoners some food."

The guard rubbed his chin, which bore a Veden-style square beard. "They've been fed already, my lady."

"I'm sure they have," Shinri said. "Though I doubt the meal was of enviable quality. I think they would appreciate something a little more healthy."

The soldier frowned. "It isn't good to keep prisoners *too* healthy, my lady," he said. "It encourages escape."

"It isn't good for them to be sickly either," Shinri replied. "My husband may have need of these men—and I intend to see that they are kept alive

in case that need arises. Cruelty may be your prerogative, solider, but mercy is mine—a right granted me by the Almighty.”

The man’s face grew troubled as he considered. If he were too low a rank, he would take the matter to his superior. Shinri was counting on his noble upbringing and the independence it usually inspired.

“I brought some for you too,” Shinri noted, pulling back the napkin to reveal the bread rolls underneath. “It’s only bread, soldier. I doubt you’ll find that it makes your prisoners too healthy to be manageable.”

“I’ll have to check the basket first,” the soldier finally said.

“Very well,” Shinri replied, handing it to him. *You’re a little more clever than I had hoped, aren’t you? That’s a pity.*

He opened the basket, then systematically began breaking each roll in half to check for contraband—as if a high lady would actually have bothered to cook them herself. Shinri sighed inwardly, folding her arms and waiting upon the man’s inspection. “How have they been so far?” she asked as he worked. “I trust you haven’t been keeping them *too* unhealthy.”

The soldier shrugged, ripping apart a roll. “The one on the left stays pretty quiet—he’s a little one, and I doubt he could be of much trouble if he wanted to. The one on the right . . . well, he’s obviously a soldier. Tall lad and well-muscled. Could have been trouble, but I think the captivity took the heart out of him. He screamed and yelled a lot at first, but then got really quiet.”

Shinri frowned. “He’s still alive, I assume.”

The soldier snorted. “He eats his food, my lady. That means he’s alive enough, but I don’t know if he’s still got his mind or not. I’ve guarded men like him before—men who couldn’t deal with being kept locked up. They usually quiet up after a while, if only because they get tired of yelling.”

What a delightfully kind-hearted one you are, Shinri thought sourly as the man selected a few rolls for himself, then handed the basket back to her. *I guess that’s how you ended up a jailer.*

Shinri nodded her satisfaction, then brushed past the man into the hallway. He stayed behind, thankfully, settling into his chair to work on the rolls. Technically, Shinri was a First Lady—his queen. Even if he had denied her entrance, he should never have treated her with the disrespect he had displayed. Ahven’s touch, virulent and destructive as a winter mold, was spreading already.

Shinri selected the leftmost hallway. The hallways were relatively well-lit and kept clean, unlike some dungeons Shinri had heard of, but there was a definite smell of unwashed bodies to the place. The cells were all open but

one, and it bore a stout wooden door. A small window at the top provided a glimpse inside, though it was high enough up that Shinri would have trouble looking in without getting up on her toes.

She approached the door with trepidation. "Renarin?" she asked in a quiet voice, glancing back toward the guard.

There was a pause.

"Oh, hello, Shinri," Renarin's familiar voice eventually said back. "How are you?"

Shinri started slightly. "Um, I'm fine," she lied, frowning. *Even locked in a cell, kept half-starved, you're a strange one, Renarin.* "My family is allied with King Ahven. I talked the guard into letting me bring you some food."

"That was kind of you," Renarin said. His tone sounded . . . distracted. But, well, that was kind of how he always was. "So, you're the one who opened the Oathgate? I wasn't expecting it to be you, but I probably should have been able to figure it out. I'm far too new at this."

Shinri nearly dropped the basket in shock. "How did you know that?" she hissed.

There was no answer.

"Renarin!" Shinri said a little bit louder.

"We need to escape," Renarin finally said, ignoring her question.

"That's why I'm here," Shinri said, bending down and sliding back the feeding plate at the base of the door. "Here, take these rolls so the guard doesn't get suspicious. I was thinking that we should—"

"Oh, don't tell me," Renarin said, "tell Merin." Renarin's face appeared in the opening. He didn't look too haggard, though he hadn't shaved in a while. His beard was dark, and a bit patchy, making him look even younger than he was. Behind him, Shinri could make out something on the floor. Something that looked like . . . scribbles of some sort.

Renarin accepted the bread. "Merin is on the other side," he said. "He can work with you on getting us out. I'm too busy right now. Thank you for the bread."

With that, he slid the plate closed with a motion that felt oddly like he were locking her out of his private study. Shinri knelt, stupefied, for a moment.

I will never understand that boy, she thought with frustration, rising. She walked back down the hallway, shooting a glance at the guard, then turned down the second parallel corridor. Merin's cell was directly opposite Renarin's, and here Shinri paused, basket held before her, staring at the blank door.

She had avoided thinking much about Tethren. Everything else—her marriage, the invasion, Ahven—was just too recent. Her soul already bore a tenseset fresh wounds; there was no need to prod at one that had begun to scab over. She didn't completely believe that Tethren was dead, but she knew that she probably wouldn't ever be completely satisfied, for she had seen no body. She had made what peace she could during those months spent searching out what had happened to him.

Her grief for Tethren was a distant thing, dulled by time and distance. In a way, her guilt over not feeling worse was even more painful than her sense of loss. Yet for reasons she knew were irrational, the boy inside the cell before her was a focus for both emotions. She needed him if she were going to escape—even from a distance, she had heard rumored praises of Merin's natural fighting ability. The court's men had been intimidated by this boy who had saved the king's life twice, a boy who already—after just a few months' time—knew how to duel well enough to stand against noblemen who had been training all their lives.

Yes, she needed this boy—Renarin alone would not be enough to get her past the guards and to the Oathgates. Unfortunately, Shinri knew that if she was going to work with Merin Kholin, she would need to know the truth about Tethren. *Bad news is not a thing to be avoided*, Lady Jasnah had always said. *Better to learn things that bring you pain than to remain in the greater agony of ignorance.*

Shinri stepped up to the cell door's window, going up on her toes and peeking in. The cell was sparse and small. Merin looked little better than Renarin did, though he appeared far more a man with his soldier's build and even beard. He sat at the back of the room, legs folded, hand held before him with one finger pointing toward the ceiling. He was staring intently at the finger, as if in some sort of trance.

Wonderful, Shinri thought, anticipating another conversation like the one with Renarin. *The guard was right. His mind's gone.*

"Merin?" she asked. "Merin Kholin?"

The boy looked up, lowering his hand slightly and focusing on the window. He sat for a moment, then leapt to his feet with excitement. "I know you!" he said, rushing to the window. "Lady Jasnah's ward!"

Shinri paused, slightly taken aback. "Shinri Davar," she said, lowering herself from her toes and speaking through the door.

"Am I to be released?" Merin asked with excitement. "Has King Elhokar retaken the palace?"

"Hush!" Shinri said, glancing toward the guard, who didn't appear to

have noticed Merin's exclamation. "The palace is under Veden control. I am suffered because I am a . . . relation of their king. They think I'm only bringing you some bread."

"Oh." Merin's voice sounded disappointed. "Renarin and I need to escape," he said after a few moments. "Can you help us?"

"Perhaps," Shinri said. "I might be able to discover a time when the Oathgates will be open for us. But they are guarded by five men."

"Us?" Merin asked.

"I'm going with you," Shinri said. "It's complicated, but I cannot stay in Ral Eram any longer."

Merin was quiet for a moment. "I'll need my Blade," he finally said. "You need to get me a Shardblade."

You say that as if finding one were as easy as sneaking extra dessert from the palace kitchens. "That may not be possible," Shinri said. "Let me think about it." *Today I just wanted to make sure you were both fit and sane—or, in Renarin's case, as close to sane as possible.*

"It's just good to talk to someone," Merin said, his voice sounding relieved. "Someone other than Renarin, that is. He's a good man, but he's a little . . ."

"Strange?" Shinri asked.

"Strange," Merin agreed.

"I need to give you the bread and be going," Shinri said, kneeling down. "I'll be back, though."

"When?"

"I don't know," Shinri said. "In a few days at most." She slid open the feeding plate, then opened her basket. She paused, however. "There is something else," she said, moving to hand him the bread. "The man you killed on the battlefield, the one whose Shardblade you earned. Can you remember anything about him?"

Merin's face appeared behind the plate. He frowned in confusion. "The man in Prallah?" he asked.

"Yes."

He shrugged. "I don't know. There wasn't much time to think, and he wore full Shardplate. I didn't see his face, only his horse charging toward the king."

Shinri kept her face expressionless as Merin accepted the bread. "Nothing else?" she asked. "There was nothing distinctive about him? Nothing you remember about him or his armor?"

Merin paused. Then he suddenly grew excited, setting his bread on the

floor beside him. He grabbed a small rock from behind him and scratched something into the stone. “Do you recognize this glyph?” he asked eagerly.

Shinri frowned at his awkward scrawl, obviously made by the hand of one who didn’t know proper slants or line orders. It was still recognizable, however, as *nan*, one of the more common glyphs.

“Yes,” Shinri said. “Why?”

“I found a rock carved with this symbol tucked inside the dead Shardbearer’s gauntlet,” Merin said. “What does it mean?”

Shinri’s frown deepened. The symbol was slightly off. It might have been Merin’s unpracticed hand, but there were a few extra lines. It looked almost like . . .

Shinri couldn’t stop her slight intake of breath.

“What?” Merin asked. “There’s something special about it, isn’t there? It’s a glyph of power. I . . . I think it’s magical somehow.”

“Don’t be silly,” Shinri said. *He’s just a peasant*, she reminded herself. *To most of them, all writing is mystical. Don’t snap at him.* “The glyph means ‘lightning,’” she said. “I’ve seen it hundreds of times. There’s nothing magical about it.”

“Why the reaction then?” Merin demanded.

“Those lines you drew at the sides,” Shinri said. “They’re familiar to me. They make the symbol look very similar to a stylized glyph, the type used by noblemen to differentiate their various lines.”

Merin frowned. “Well, whose glyph is this one?”

Shinri closed her eyes, sitting back. “The queen’s,” she said. “Queen Nanavah.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Merin complained. “Why would the Shardbearer be carrying it?”

He wanted my sister. Even from a distance, Ahven’s words taunted her. *He loved her with the deep, foolish love men reserve for something unattainable.*

“The stone,” Shinri said. “Carved with a lady’s glyph. It is a . . . sign of favor, given to a friend or loved one.”

“You have to be wrong,” Merin said.

I wish I was.

“There’s no reason for the man to be carrying a stone carved with Queen Nanavah’s glyph,” Merin said. “Maybe I drew it wrong. I’m telling you, there was something *magical* about that glyph. I can’t really explain it, but trust me—it was there.”

Maybe his mind has been affected by the captivity, Shinri thought, standing. “I’ll return,” she said, picking up her basket.

He never really wanted you, Ahven hissed in her mind. He couldn't have—you were given to him freely.

“Get me a Shardblade!” Merin repeated, his face appearing in the cell window. “I have to go help Lord Dalenar.”

Shinri nodded, turning and walking down the hallway. Before, she'd had the benefit of presumption—as long as Ahven's words had been her only proof of Tethren's love of the queen, Shinri had been able to disbelieve. But now . . .

The man is dead, Shinri told herself. Months gone. His infidelity shouldn't matter. What power has he over you?

“You were in there a long time,” the guard said as she passed. “Spent a while chatting, didn't you?”

Shinri paused, wrestling down her emotions and giving the guard a flat stare. “I had to make certain the prisoners were fit,” she said. “My only concern is that they be healthy enough to be of use to my husband.”

“Of course,” the guard said, reclining in his chair. “Very good of you. Next time, bring some money.”

Shinri thinned her eyes slightly at the man, then nodded and turned down the hallway to make her way back toward her chambers.

chapter 57

LHAN 1

LHAN RADENMEV HAD ONLY EVER been good at two things in his life. The first was avoiding responsibility. The second was helping people.

Some called it altruism. That, however, was far too noble a word. Lhan understood himself, and—with all frankness—knew himself to be a selfish, lethargic man. However, he had always been interested in people. When growing up, his only inborn asset had been his tongue—he could get anyone to talk to him, even those who didn't particularly like him. The variety he saw in personalities, attitudes, and opinions had fascinated him even as a child.

Others thought that because Lhan had little regard for possessions, he was humble. That was a mistake. If Lhan ignored the baubles and finery that had delighted his brother, sister, and their noble friends, it was only because he was busy with objects far more splendid: people.

The young Lhan had met as many individuals as he could, prompting them to speak, using his strange ability to put them at ease to discover their true opinions and emotions. He had a gift in his ability to make strangers open up and speak to him as if they were confiding in a spouse, rather than some random Shardbearer's son. Lhan listened to their ramblings with rapt attention, collecting minds in the same way a wealthy merchant might gather precious works of art. The more interesting and strange the personality, the more excited Lhan was to speak with its owner.

The benefit his subjects gained from these discussions had been quite unexpected. He soon became a topic of discussion among the Kholinar elite; the ladies in their sitting groups would speak about Chaden Radenmev's firstborn son. They referred to Lhan by all manner of praiseful adjectives—respectful, wise, sober. That last one had particularly bothered Lhan, and so he had decided to disprove it by getting himself quite drunk on his twelfth birthday.

Lhan's father hadn't quite known what to do with the boy. In Lhan's mind, Chaden had been anything but interesting. He was a straightforward, stout, bull of a man, a loyal Shardbearer to King Nolphonar, but otherwise rather unimpressive. Looking back, Lhan thought that his father had probably been a very good and noble person, a man whose only crime had been being less clever than his son would have liked. At the time, however, Lhan had found his family incurably boring, and had instead preferred to spend his time with more lively subjects—such as the gossiping palace maids, or the men confined to the stocks in the courtyard, or even (when he could manage it) the mysterious Awakeners of Nolphonar's court.

Regardless of the reasonings, Chaden hadn't seen in Lhan the 'wise young man' that the court seemed to think he had spawned. To him, Lhan had just been a disrespectful slop of a boy who refused to learn proper discipline and who found great amusement in mocking his own father.

Back then, people often told Lhan that his tongue would get him in trouble, but he usually quipped that there wasn't any trouble his tongue could bring that his wit wouldn't be able to solve. Then the day had come when his father had realized an amazing fact—that there was an easy, court-approved way to remove Lhan from the succession, thereby allowing Chaden to pass his Blade and title on to Lhan's younger brother, a boy far more modest in both acumen and action.

Lhan had found himself in the monastery the very next day.

It hadn't even been a scandal. People had often remarked that Chaden's thoughtful little boy possessed a gift for helping people. What better place was there for such a person than in Peacehome monastery? No amount of wit had been able to free Lhan from the pact his father made—Lhan was Birthgiven, and would remain a monk until the day he died.

At first, Lhan hadn't realized how perfect the monastery was for him. After all, it gave him wonderful opportunities to develop both of his strengths: there had been no lack of responsibilities to avoid, and Peacehome—as an Order of Kavel monastery—saw a constant rotation of

the poor, the wounded, and even the insane. Fascinating personalities abounded.

It hadn't taken long for Lhan to bless his father's decision rather than resent it. The other monks had been surprised by Lhan's willingness to work with the mad, but they had been more than willing to give him the duty—in many of their minds, it was a fitting punishment for his fondness of avoiding work. Only the wizened Peacehome First Monk had seen some of the truth in Lhan's motivations. The man had never gone so far as to forbid Lhan's work with the insane, but he had always warned—as if speaking with the same spirit as those who had spoken of Lhan's trouble-making tongue—that Lhan's fascination with madmen would eventually lead him to poor ends.

For the first time in his life, Lhan had a mind to agree with the old corpse.

What was Lhan—lover of peaceful mornings, relaxing afternoons, and quiet evenings—doing on a cliffside in northern Riemak? Why was he standing beside soldiers and Shardbearers, holding a spear as if he thought he might know what to do with it? The idea was so ridiculous that, at times, he laughed.

And yet, there he was, standing in the evening light, wearied from marching, drawn halfway across the continent by the most fascinating personality he had ever found.

Taln stood at the very edge of the cliffside, scanning the rock plains below them. Apparently, northern Riemak was a progressive gradient, the land rising to what would eventually become the desolate stormlands of Kavenar. Several days before, the group had arrived at a set of step-like plateaus leading up. Lhan cringed when he remembered lugging his pack all the way up those switchbacks. There were apparently more plateaus ahead, but they had passed the greater deal of the climbing.

The land they would now have to travel consisted of a series of broken plateaus, the stone pocketed and slashed by rainchannels. It was colder than Lhan would have expected, despite it being the Searing, and the winds swept across the army's line unbroken and strong. He hated to think how it would feel in a highstorm.

Taln the Madman looked down toward the path they had taken just a few days before, scanning for something the scouts had reported. Of all the minds Lhan had seen, this was the strangest. At first, Lhan had assumed that Taln was just another delusional man—Lhan had met many during his days at Peacehome. Taln had soon proven himself different from any other

person Lhan had met. Other delusionals did not like to be confronted by the truth—they couldn't listen to criticism, and argued violently when their 'truths' were confronted. Taln did none of this. In fact, most of the time he seemed quite accepting of others' perception of him.

Yet there was a kernel of the standard delusional in him. An instability that manifest at certain times of great stress. Yes, Taln was a madman—the fact that he didn't completely fit the profile was what made him so fascinating to Lhan.

Now Lhan was paying the debts for his curiosity. Why had he thought to accompany Taln on his quest? How had he let himself be drawn away from Peacehome and his life of comfort? It wouldn't be so bad if Lhan hadn't felt so out of place. The men expected spirituality from him, but Lhan had neglected that side of his training. Fortunately he had been able to pilfer several pages from the *Arguments* from the monastery in Marcabe to use for crash memorization sessions.

There was more. The men expected certain things from a monk, and these Lhan could fake. Taln, however, often looked to him for . . . what? Reliance? Suggestions? Lhan had ignored his childhood lessons in military tactics and Masculine Arts, and had never seen fit to revisit them during his monastery days—despite the fact that any art, whether it be tactics, painting, or swordplay, was open to him as a monk. What did Taln want from him? Lhan had forced his way into the man's company, but now—instead of resenting him, as many would—Taln looked to him for advice. That fact was discomfiting enough, but Lhan's sincere desire to make Taln proud of him was a completely unexpected emotion.

Lhan was a fool. He had known that fact for most of his life, but having the knowledge and facing it were apparently different things. Alethkar was in danger of being destroyed by invaders, and Lhan had an opportunity to help save it—only, he had no skills, little knowledge, and poor training. All three situations were his fault.

"There," Taln said suddenly, pointing below.

The other members of the command group—Lord Meridas the Arrogant, Lord Kemnar the Unassuming, and Lords Unimportant the Flunkies—perked up at Taln's comment. Meridas looked as if he would challenge Taln's assertion, but held his tongue. The scouts had already told them that there were groups of men below—it would be foolish to challenge Taln. Besides, the madman's eyesight had proven itself superior on several occasions.

Meridas. Now, there was another fascinating person. The lord had given

Lhan little opportunity to speak with him—Meridas guarded his time not for its own sake, but for the way it made him look by always being too busy to take visitors. However, Lhan could easily tell there was more to this fop than he projected. There was a strength below the arrogance, and the wit to use it well. Of course, despite his unusual attributes, Meridas was still a fop. Apparently, even fops could have some depth to them—and that fact made the nobleman twice as fascinating as any humble, Bajerden-studying lord.

“How many?” Kemnar asked.

That was another one. The nobleman who felt guilty for his own privilege, a man who avoided leadership not because of the responsibility it brought, but because he worried that he wouldn’t do a good enough job. A man who sought out the company of thieves because, subconsciously, he found their morals less threatening than the ones he himself was expected to live.

Yes, despite the hardships, despite the humiliation, Lhan decided that he was glad to be on the trip—if only for the people it contained. One didn’t often find men like Kemnar, Taln, and Meridas—let alone get the opportunity to watch the three interact.

“At least fifty people,” Taln said in response to Kemnar’s question. “And other specks in the distance that could be more.”

“Soldiers?” Meridas asked.

Taln squinted in the waning light. “They’re too far away,” he said. “We’ll have to wait until the scouts get back.”

Meridas frowned, folding his arms. Of course, the nobleman had good reason to be frustrated. The fractured crags and valleys of the Riemak plateaus had frustrated the army’s progress. The highstorms would begin again in a couple of days, and those in the know claimed that flooding would prove dangerous. Taln kept mumbling at the terrible loss of Riemak’s highway system, a thing that hadn’t existed for over half a millennium.

Trackers claimed to have discovered several trails, though when they pointed them out, Lhan saw only scattered rockbuds and monochrome rocks. Yet Taln claimed the rockbud polyps there were smaller and younger, bespeaking routes sometimes used by passing caravans. But if they took the army down one of the supposed roads only to find themselves blocked when the path dead-ended at a wash or rift in the rock, the time wasted backtracking and trying again would be great. Scouts could move far more quickly than the army itself, and they had been sent to find high ground and determine the best way north.

Even Meridas had agreed that waiting for the scout reports was a move

that would, ultimately, save time. However, waiting in the same place for three days had made Meridas tense. As far as Lhan had heard, there were no reports of immediate pursuit. Taln claimed that their marching speed would make it difficult for non-mounted enemies to catch them. Unfortunately, they also had no information from the east. The status of Alethkar's armies—if they hadn't been destroyed already—was an ominous worry common to most of their company. The men spoke of their concerns often to Lhan, wondering if they should have remained behind, to defend Marcabe if invaders came. Lhan carefully pointed out that without Taln's weapons and formation training, they probably wouldn't have been of much use to their town. They were better off where they were, marching to their king's defense.

"If it is a Veden attack party," Kemnar noted, "our position at the top of the ridge is enviable. It wouldn't be wise to move now."

"More delays," Meridas said with thin-lipped frustration, marching forward to stand beside Taln and scan the plains.

Kemnar snorted quietly beside Lhan. "I'm surprised Meridas even bothers with the act," he said quietly. "He can't expect us to believe he cares for Alethkar or its king. I'm half certain he'd join with our invaders if he had the chance."

Lhan shrugged. "I wouldn't say that. Meridas has put a lot of effort into Alethkar, effort he probably doesn't want to see dashed by an untimely change in governments. Besides, he's a well-known associate of the king. If they capture the kingdom, Elhokar's *Parshens* will be among the first noblemen to be executed. No, I'd say Meridas has a very healthy desire to keep Alethkar safe."

Kemnar raised an eyebrow at the comment, but nodded thoughtfully. Lhan looked away from him, toward where Meridas was studying the plains below. Lhan could see distrust in the man's eyes. Meridas probably thought that Taln was lying about being able to see the men below in order to enhance his reputation for having superior senses. Perhaps he was right. Taln was, after all, only confirming what the scouts below had seen.

"We will wait," Meridas finally announced. Then he swept away, attendants in tow. He paused a few steps later, however, glancing back at Lhan and the others. "Oh, and by the way, dear Lord Kemnar. I don't think that you have any place questioning my loyalty."

Kemnar blushed deeply as he realized his comment had been overheard. "Instead, perhaps you should ask yourself this:" Meridas continued.

“Why exactly is the madman so concerned with the training of our men? Does he work for Alethkar’s good, or for his own?” With that, he left.

MERIDAS’ WORDS TURNED OUT to be almost prophetic, in a twisted way.

Their pursuers were indeed armed, but they were not from Vedenar. Lhan stood with Meridas’s troops, his spear held at the ready, sweating nervously like the rest of them. Their captains had seen to their placement, organizing them in formations that could quickly be manipulated to accommodate the unpredictability of battle. Still, with only a hundred and eighty men, theirs seemed a small army. Lhan was near the front, and he was able to see the cautious group of ten men that climbed up the final incline to the plateau’s top.

They were a ragged bunch, yet they held their spears with warrior’s hands. They wore dark leather armor—stained with dye, sweat, and probably blood—that had been patched in numerous places.

“Who are you?” called one of Meridas’s attendants—Lhan thought it was Chathan, though he got the two mixed up.

The newcomers paused, regarding the soldiers arrayed before them with grim eyes. One stepped forward. “We seek the Herald’s army,” he called.

There was a pause at this. Finally, Chathan—acting as Meridas’s mouthpiece—spoke again. “To whom to your loyalties belong?”

“They belong to you, if you’ll feed us,” the man said. “Are you recruiting soldiers or not?”

And, apparently they were, for Meridas eventually accepted the mercenaries into their company. They were not the last. Lady Jasnah claimed that she should have seen it—Riemak was historically the place militaries went when they needed to hire additional spears. It would stand to reason that the mercenary bands would be in a state of flux, kicking out and gathering new members even as the groups themselves were dissolved and reformed. Their members would always be seeking work.

Some came as those first, seeking work. Others came, not as mercenaries, but as pilgrims. Somehow, stories of Taln’s exploits in Ral Eram had managed to reach even the assumedly-sheltered communities of Riemak. Tales had spread, stories of Taln defeating hundreds of soldiers on his own. Rumors claimed that the Return had come, and that the Stormshades were attacking mankind again. Stories whispered that Taln had come to refound Riemak, and to free its people from their lives of uncertainty and chaos. Some said that he was insane, but that he had the power of an Awakener, and was commanding an army of thralls. Others said that all Ten Heralds

were in his company, and that they had come to seek support for Alethkar's war—though why Heralds would care about protecting one kingdom from another was a point of uncertainty. The more rational among them claimed that there was no Herald—that the army belonged to Alethkar itself, and it was seeking mercenaries to help against the Veden invasion.

All of the stories agreed on one thing: someone was gathering an army. And so, they came. Some to fight for money, others to fight for hope. Some came for religious reasons, others for simple curiosity. Early in their trip, Taln had suggested to Lhan that the land of Riemak was hardly as underpopulated as some had claimed. Lhan hadn't understood what made Taln so certain, but the madman certainly proved himself correct as hundreds of soldiers, refugees, and pilgrims dribbled into their ranks.

Taln accepted them all into his training sessions, despite Meridas's protests that their group was growing too bulky. Lhan suspected, however, that the nobleman had received very definite orders not to turn anyone away.

Lhan also suspected that he had been the only one who saw the musing, devious glint in Lady Jasnah's eyes on that first day, when the mercenaries asked for the 'Herald's Army.'

chapter 58

JEK 9

J EKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, didn't have to sneak to get into the fallen city of Crossguard. King Elhokar's guards barely gave Jek and his group a passing glance. The ease of the passage was almost insulting.

Jek had been born into the tradition of his Clan, trained how to misrepresent himself from the day he could walk. As a child, he had been required to adopt different personas before being given his evening meal—he would spend one day as a lord, the next as a beggar. He learned the stance of the soldier, the air of the craftsman, the step of the entertainer, and the humility of a holy pilgrim—practicing each mannerism so carefully that changing personas eventually came as naturally to him as putting on a different cloak.

All of this was wasted in the east. The Crossguard soldiers needed see only his Shin features before waving him into the captured city. The only Shin that came to the east of their own choice were members of the merchant clans, and these were the only Shin most Kanarans had met. Jek needed only the most perfunctory disguise to be believable.

A waste.

Jek ordered his 'servants' forward with a barked command—spoken with an intentionally strong Shin accent. None of the easterners would realize that his normal accent was far too light to belong to a visiting merchant,

of course, but Jek wasn't about to let their ignorance spoil a good disguise. Still, he knew that if he did ever manage to get back his Bondstone and return to Shinavar, his skills would need some serious refinement.

Jek's men—a group of ten soldiers who had been chosen for their packman-like appearances—moved forward at the command, carrying large packs on their backs. Jek stood, ostensibly overseeing their progress through the gate. His eyes flickered to the sides, however, doing a quick head count of soldiers on the city walls.

There were fewer men than he had expected. King Elhokar had obviously won Crossguard quickly, but he had done so at a great price. Ahven's spies had estimated Elhokar's army at forty thousand strong before the assault; including the men camped outside, Jek counted barely twenty five thousand remaining. A heavy toll indeed, though Crossguard had obviously suffered worse.

The massive gap in the city wall stood as a testament to King Elhokar's corruption. The city-goers—both soldiers and townspeople—tried to avoid looking at the crumbled structure. Even they knew that the Holy Powers were not supposed to be used in such a way. Yet Elhokar's desecration had won the day—and Jek doubted any other Kanaran leader would have done differently. Honor was simply a word to these people; when the time came to test their devotion, beliefs crumbled faster than the Crossguard stones. This was not the first time Awakeners had been used in battle, and it would not be the last.

Other than the wall, however, the city was remarkably hale. King Elhokar was not so much a fool that he would allow the looting of his own city, and the people obviously knew this. While there was a strong military presence in Crossguard, the common citizens bustled about their business as if their local aristocracy hadn't just been purged in a bloody assault.

In fact, Jek suspected that Crossguard was even busier this day than normal. Armies were good business; there was a reason Jek had been allowed into the city so easily. Now that the fighting was through, merchants from across the region would be flocking to Crossguard to relieve the soldiers of their battle pay. The city taverns—of both the lord and the citizen variety—were likely full every night, and the local whores busier than usual.

Jek shook his head, stepping forward to trail after his 'packmen.' Something bothered him about the troop arrangements, but he couldn't quite decide what. It had been nagging him ever since he had first counted

numbers while passing the camp on his way into the city. There was something . . . odd about the way the camp was arranged.

Unfortunately, while he had been trained to imitate a soldier, he actually knew very little about tactics or armies. He would need to gather more information, and bring it back to those who could properly interpret it. Most importantly, he needed to discover King Elhokar's plans. Fortunately, Jek had access to a resource that was often as informative as any spy or secret informant.

"There," Jek commanded, pointing toward a large, if unimpressive, stone tavern built alongside the street ahead. A few gems given to a passing merchant on the road outside had given Jek the location. Every city had its preferred mercantile gathering places, most of them unofficial. If a man didn't have the skill necessary to discover the location, then he probably wasn't a good enough merchant to bother trading with.

The packmen stayed outside, as they had been ordered previously. They set down Jek's 'goods' in a pile, then arranged themselves around to guard, similar to several other caravans' worth of packmen along the street. A few barmaids moved among the groups, selling drinks from the tavern.

Jek stepped into the building alone. It didn't take the tavern patrons long to give him a collective dark look—one quickly covered up by accommodating faces. Kanarans resented the Shin sense of superiority in the same way a child resented his parents' freedom and control. While few merchants would willingly pass up dealing with their Shin counterparts—the sale of rare Shin goods was a very lucrative market—fewer still were respectful in their transactions.

"Friend!" a voice suddenly called, as if to directly contradict Jek's thoughts. "Here, drink with me. Barkeep, bring this man some good wine!"

Jek paused, careful and suspicious. The speaker was a tall man, not broad of chest but definitely broad of voice. He was waving enthusiastically toward Jek with one hand while at the same time gesturing toward a barmaid with the other.

Jek approached carefully, and the man actually reached out and clapped him on the back with a familial hand, then gestured toward a seat at his table. The man appeared to be dining alone.

"Do I know you?" Jek asked.

"Never met me before in your life," the man said, shooting a glare at the barmaid and increasing the speed of his impatient gestures. "However, whatever you're selling, I want to buy it."

Jek hesitated. "What makes you so certain?"

"You look like a suspicious type," the man said. "You really should try to get over that. Bad for the health, all that worrying. Sit, sit. Barmaid, where is that wine!"

Against his better judgement, Jek allowed himself to be forced into the seat. The man, finally convinced that the barmaid wasn't ignoring him, slid down into his own chair.

"Why are you so eager to work with me?" Jek asked again.

"You know, you people shouldn't be so grim all the time," the man said. "That's why no one wants to work with the Shin—or, that's what I think. Don't people smile over there on the first peninsula? Or do you all just sit around and scowl at each other all the time?"

Jek gave the man a pointed scowl, an action that prompted a guffawing laugh.

"Explain yourself or I will find another table," Jek said.

The man leaned forward, giving Jek an intense look and pointing with a firm gesture. "Guess how many times I've worked with Shin merchants."

"I really have no idea," Jek said flatly.

"Twenty-three times," the man said, speaking with his hands as well as his voice. "Twenty-three business deals. I count these things. Every good businessman should. Now, let me ask another question. Guess how many of those deals went sour? None. Guess how many times I got cheated. Not once. You people are honest as stones, and if the other merchants don't want to work with you, then I say let the storms take them. I'll deal with any Shin who passes my way, that's certain. Devon Lhale never passes up a good deal, and you, my friend, are the best deal in town. I know that already."

The man punctuated his remarks by occasionally slamming his fist against the table, each blow rocking the three different mugs that held his drinks. The barkeep delivered Jek's wine, and she got a wink and a pinch from Devon. Jek watched the exchange with dissatisfaction as he tried to read his companion. It seemed incredible, but he could detect no falsehood in Devon's mannerisms. If the boisterous attitude was an act, then it was one that could fool even a trained Shin assassin.

"So, what is it?" Devon asked. "What are you selling? You people never buy—I know that. It's always about what you can sell, as if our goods weren't good enough to take back with you. You know, I'll bet that's why people don't want to deal with the Shin—you make them feel like Kanaran goods just aren't worth your time, which we both know is ridiculous. You really should work on that."

Jek paused. His Aleth was good, but he was less practiced at it than he was at Veden. Following this man's conversation was a task unto itself.

"I . . . see," Jek said slowly.

"So?" Devon said. "Goods? What are they?"

"Boots," Jek said. "I have a hundred pairs with me as a sample, and could have a thousand here within three weeks. I need a retailer."

"Boots, eh?" Devon asked, rubbing his beardless chin. "Shin work, I assume? Yes? Good craftsmanship, those. You people really need to teach some of our people how to make them as good as you do."

"It's not in the art," Jek said, "but in the materials. We don't desecrate the Holy Arts to get our leather, but instead tan it from livestock."

"You see, there you go again," Devon said, pointing. "I love you people, but you really have to stop making excuses. Awakened goods are the same as non-Awakened, and that is the truth. But I suppose if you want to keep your secrets, that's your business. Three weeks, eh? That's too long, friend. Never can tell what will happen in three weeks . . ."

Jek perked up immediately, sensing something in the merchant's attitude. "What's wrong?" he asked. "King Elhokar's army doesn't appear to be going anywhere soon. His kingdom just suffered from civil war—he'll need to stay here for a while and maintain order."

Devon shrugged with an exaggerated motion. "I'm just saying . . . Well, you would do well to be a little less curious. It'll only give you worries, I say." He paused, glancing at Jek with eyes akin to those of a performer demanding applause.

"If I'm going to work with you," Jek said, taking the prompt, "I'll need to know what you know."

"Well, since I know you'll keep quiet with it . . ." Devon said with an eagerly conspiratorial air.

"Of course," Jek said.

"You see, friend," Devon said with an amazingly quiet voice. "There's another army coming here, to Crossguard. The king's forces might not survive another three weeks."

Another army. Jek kept his shock from his face, but on the inside he cringed. Ahven's forces had been discovered. Well, it had only been a matter of time. But why then wasn't King Elhokar running? Ahven's army was nearly twice the size of the Aleth force. Elhokar had time to retreat, moving to the west to gather troops to his cause. Surely the lords who had been reticent to take arms against Crossguard wouldn't be so restrained concerning a foreign invader.

“Yes indeed,” Devon whispered. “When the Tyrantbane is done with dear King Elhokar . . . well, I plan to be gone from Crossguard by the time he arrives.”

Jek froze. “The Tyrantbane?” he asked. “*Dalenaar Kholin* is on his way here?”

Devon nodded. “I have it on very good word. The king’s mobilizing his forces for battle again, but I doubt he’ll last long against Lord Dalenaar. Should have never executed the *Parshen*’s son, that’s what I say. Bad idea, that.”

Dalenaar Kholin. That changed things drastically—more drastically, even, than if Elhokar had discovered Ahven’s army. Had Lady Jasnah reached Kholinar, then, or was Dalenaar’s coming a coincidence?

“Don’t know why I’m telling you these things,” Devon said, sitting back in his chair. “Guess it’s because you’re Shin. Good people, you are. Never lie, that’s what I’ve been told. I sure know I’ve never been cheated by one of your kind.”

The thing was, Devon was probably telling the truth. Shin merchants did not break their word; they followed Truth, and it declared that only the lower Clans—the warrior clans, those who ruled to serve—could kill, lie to, or hurt another man. It was doubly sinful to cheat an innocent or a child—and easterners counted as both.

Jek’s mind kept returning to Lord Dalenaar’s impending arrival. Ahven would want more information—numbers, if possible.

“How many?” Jek said. “How many in Lord Dalenaar’s force?”

“I really couldn’t say,” Devon said. “My source doesn’t even know that. For some reason, there’s been some confusion amongst the king’s scouts. I’m surprised nobody discovered the Tyrantbane’s army sooner. True, it’s moving quickly—without towers or Chulls—but it got within four day’s march of Crossguard before anyone brought word of it.”

That’s because Ahven’s death parties are riding the main roads, killing anyone they see—especially messengers on horseback. For a time, at least, information in Alethkar was going to be very slow to travel. Elhokar could be dead before the noblemen on the far side of the country even knew that Alethkar had been invaded.

“This information troubles me, friend Devon,” Jek said honestly. “I think I shall retrieve my goods and bring them here anyway, however. After all, Lord Dalenaar’s army is going to need boots too, eh?”

Devon laughed. “That’s true. You Shin are always so pragmatic. You know, you really should try to loosen up more sometimes. That’s probably

why people don't want to work with you—you're always so stiff. Always working. But, if you're bringing the boots, we might as well arrange a deal. I'll watch for you in town when you return. Promise me you won't sell them to anyone else until you find out if I'm here or not!"

"Of course," Jek said. "But I must be going, now, to make arrangements."

"Good, good," Devon said. "I'll see you another time, then, friend. Remember your promise—of course, I don't need to tell you that. I've never met a Shin who lies!"

You just did, Jek thought, standing.

chapter 59

JASNAH 13

“**H**OW LONG UNTIL IT HITS?” Jasnah asked worriedly, looking up at the darkening sky.

Taln shook his head. “Two hours, maybe a bit more.”

Jasnah nodded. The Searing was over; highstorms would fall again. She shivered slightly. The Riemak highlands weren’t as cold as those of Pralir, but she did not look forward to the soggy chill of highstorm rains—not to mention the fury of its winds. This storm wouldn’t be anything like the Bellow, but on the highlands in the middle of summer . . . it would be bad enough.

“I’m almost sad to see them start again,” Jasnah said.

“I’m not,” Taln said. “I’m amazed we’re not dying of thirst as it is, considering that.” He waved his hand toward their growing army.

Despite its ragged and disjointed nature, Jasnah had to smile at the size of the force. Several larger mercenary companies had tracked them down, and that addition, mixed with the increasing numbers of refugees, put their force at nearly eight hundred strong. Admittedly, that number contained many who had barely a week’s worth of training beneath Taln’s tutelage. Still, they were of hardy Riemak stock, well-aquainted with fighting and their weapons, even if they didn’t have formalized knowledge of formations or battlefield tactics. It was a varied group—mercenaries

mixed with farmers, Herald believers with men who just wanted the thrill of battle—but Taln was quickly working to change that, making them into a cohesive force.

What had begun as a refugee band had become a fighting force of significant size. Now if she could just get them to her brother in time. The army continued to maintain a good speed, despite the increased size. Even if she had stayed with the originally-planned group of seven, she doubted they could have been more than a few days ahead. It would be worth the delay to deliver an army instead of just a warning—assuming they arrived while there was still a war to fight, of course.

Unconsciously, she glanced toward the east. Toward Alethkar.

“Worry less about your homeland,” Taln said, “and more about how you’re going to feed all these men.”

Jasnah looked back toward the camp. Some of them had brought their own provisions, but they all obviously expected to be fed for their time. The mercenaries wanted something more substantial than just food, of course, though many of them were desperate enough to accept promises of coin once they reached Alethkar—but before they fought—as long as their stomachs were filled. She had hunting groups gathering what they could from the land, but boiled cromlins were only barely palatable, and rockbuds were notoriously foul-tasting. The hunting parties occasionally captured a whitespine or, on blessed occasions, a wild pig. However, the highlands weren’t good for hunting, and the size of her army was too prohibitive to expect it to live off the land completely.

That left . . . “There,” Jasnah said, pointing at the returning Kemnar, who was walking with several scouts. “He’s announced our presence to the town leaders. We can go to trade now.”

Taln raised an eyebrow. “And how much coin do we have left?” he asked.

“Enough,” Jasnah said. *For a little while, assuming we sell Meridas’s fine clothing and jewelry.* He had not been happy about that little command, and had insisted on keeping at least two outfits and a couple of rings. Still, his contributions—along with some more of their dwindling horse funds—should be enough to keep the army fed for another two weeks. Barely long enough to reach Kholinar, if there were no more delays.

“Go get dressed,” Jasnah said. “The city leaders will want to see our Herald.”

Taln’s expression darkened. “We need to talk,” he said, not moving.

“Later,” Jasnah promised.

Taln sighed, then nodded, going off to put on the fine cloak and shirt

she had appropriated for him from Meridas's stock. Despite tailoring, they didn't quite fit, but the rich colors—mixed with Taln's Shardblade—made for a passably impressive presentation.

The city was only a short distance away. They had camped the army far enough outside its borders to not be too threatening, but close enough that it would be visible from the wall. Since entering the highlands, the landscape had flattened out, and villages were more rare. Yet, the mines to the north—the prime locations of despotism—made certain that caravans passed this way fairly often. So, although the towns were less frequent, they tended to be larger. And even more suspicious, if that were possible.

Unlike the villages to the south, this city had a wall. The fortification was coated with enough cromstone to make it look almost like a natural growth, and it was topped by a line of suspicious guards. Evening was quickly approaching, and if the impending highstorm hadn't darkened the sky, the setting sun would have. It was still possible to make out faces in the dim light, however, and theirs were expressions of rough determination. The message given by soldiers, closed gates, and black walls was clear: this was not a city ruled by an outside tyrant, and nor would it soon be taken.

Kemnar led Jasnah, Taln, Meridas, Lhan, and their honor guard of twenty soldiers to the front gates. Meridas still looked annoyed that he wasn't allowed to ride at the head of the group. Jasnah allowed herself a smile. During the last week, the center of power within their force had changed yet again. The newcomers came to see a Herald, not an unknown nobleman. Before, she had allowed Meridas to command because he represented the best hope for Alethkar. By the same reasoning, she now required Meridas to let Taln take at least a figurehead role at the fore of the army. Ostensibly, Meridas was still the top nobleman in the group—but everyone knew that deities ranked aristocrats.

"Where is the Herald?" one of the wall-top soldiers called down. No one made any moves to open the gates.

Taln stepped forward and faced them, holding his Shardblade point-down at his side. Jasnah wished—not for the first time—that she had been able to persuade him to wear Kemnar's Shardplate. Standing between Kemnar and Meridas in their Plate, even Taln's rich cloth seemed wan.

She knew what they were thinking atop that wall. *This? This is the supposed Herald Talenel? This soldier with the height and muscles of a normal man? An indistinctive face and simple bearing? Where is the aura of power, the glowing eyes, the towering height and booming voice?*

"Why have you come to Galevan?" the guard called down.

“My man has explained our desires already,” Taln yelled back. “Open your gates so we may trade with your merchants.”

There was a pause. Finally, the man called down again. “We’ve changed our minds,” he said. “We don’t want your trade, nor do we need you stealing our soldiers when we have few enough to defend ourselves. Be on your way, False Herald. We’ve seen your kind often enough.” A second later, the man continued, as if in afterthought, “And don’t think to threaten the siege of our city. We’ve counted your numbers. Eight hundred troops can hardly think to threaten a walled city—especially when those troops are as poorly equipped as yours.”

Beside her, Meridas’s expression darkened, as if an insult against the troops was also one against him. Jasnah just sighed to herself. It wasn’t the first city they’d been turned away from. For every person who seemed willing to accept Taln’s claims, there were the more rational thousand who saw through him. Apparently, the tempestuous Riemak countryside was no stranger to men claiming Heraldship as a means of gathering fame and troops.

She turned to go. Taln remained where he was. “Choose from among yourselves your five greatest warriors,” he called up to them, “and send them down here.”

“We already told you,” the wall-top man said, “you will find no recruits here!”

“No recruiting,” Taln said, jamming his Shardblade into a nearby boulder. “Just a challenge. I will fight them all at once, and do so without a weapon. If they defeat me, you may have my Blade.”

Jasnah raised an eyebrow. This part was not expected—apparently, Taln had decided to improvise.

The guard laughed. “You expect me to trust your word?”

“How often does a town like yours get an opportunity to win itself a Shardblade,” Taln called back, “even if that opportunity is dubious?”

This brought pause. Finally, after some debate from those on top, a rope ladder was thrown over the side of the wall, and five spear-wielding men descended and approached Taln, suspicious of a trap.

Within thirty heartbeats, all five lay on the ground, groaning to themselves. The guards atop the wall were silent.

Taln whipped his Blade from its boulder sheath and pointed it at the guards. “You think I need an army to take your city?” he demanded in a loud voice. “Stone and wood are no obstacle to a Blade, and I have two other Shardbearers at my command. You think we couldn’t brush past

your fortifications like a storm through a paper glyphward? You think we three alone couldn't slaughter your entire defensive force? I come not for my good, but for yours! Death comes one year from the day of my Return. Barely six months remain. Forbid me or accept me, I care not, but know this. You are warned!"

Silence. Then, finally, the gates clunked and crept open. Jasnah shot a triumphant, self-congratulatory smile at Meridas. The nobleman had watched Taln's exchange with eager eyes, hoping—she knew—that the madman would overextend himself and fall with a spearhead in his gut. Now, Meridas suffered her subtle mockery with dignity. He had complained against Jasnah's insistence that their force become the 'Herald's Army,' but he had not disobeyed her. He knew a good opportunity when he saw one. Despite his deceptively mundane appearance, Taln had a . . . momentum about him. Where he strode, rumors sprouted, and where he fought, respect was gained.

The city only had one inn, and it was here that Jasnah implemented the second part of her well-tested plan: she put Taln on display. She gained him a conference with the city leaders—a group of three merchants who controlled the water in the summer, the shelter during storms, and the walls at all times. She made certain that Taln's discussion with them happened in the common room with open stormshutters and plenty of curious ears.

Taln explained his purpose, telling them of the Return and the other nonsense his mind had contrived. However, since he absolutely believed what he said, his words carried weight despite their ridiculous nature. That honesty, mixed with the display at the gates, was sure to make Galevan one of their more successful city visits. Jasnah smiled to herself as she tallied up expected recruits. Smaller cities than this had yielded tensets of men. They could probably expect a good fifty soldiers from Galevan itself, and the rumors its people spread would bring even more from outlying communities.

She must have appeared too gleeful, for once the conference was finished—the merchants returning to their homes for the night—Taln sought her out to have his 'talk.' He came to her room—one of three gifted by the innkeeper to his prestigious guests—completely unconcerned with etiquette or decency. He barely even paused to knock before he entered.

Jasnah yelped quietly as he opened the door, jumping up to throw a cloak over her nightgown. Taln shut the door behind him, his face distracted. Only then did he noticed Jasnah's disheveled blush, and he paused, hand still on the doorknob.

“Have you no sense of propriety?” She demanded, flustered as she seated herself back on the stool beside her dressing mirror, pulling her cloak closed at the top to hide the exposed flesh beneath. “Bursting into a woman’s rooms at night, far past modest hours?”

Taln stood for a moment, as if stunned by something completely unexpected. Then he blushed deeply and looked away. “I . . . apologize,” he said. “It has been a very long time since I have had to consider such things.”

Jasnah snorted. “For an immortal deity, you certainly can be remarkably dense sometimes, Taln.”

He smiled wanly, but didn’t make any moves to leave, so she settled herself on the stool as if she were in her audience chamber back in the palace. Behind her, the room’s stormshutters rattled from wind and rain. The highstorm had finally hit. Back in the camp, the regular men were about to spend a very damp evening.

“If you don’t consider ‘such things,’” Jasnah noted, “then I assume this is not a social call?”

Taln nodded, not bothering to take a seat. “You’re using me,” he said. “I don’t like it.”

Characteristically blunt. “And how, exactly, is it that I am using you?” she asked.

Taln raised an eyebrow. “Don’t play at your games, Jasnah. I’ve noticed how Meridas holds back and lets me speak. I realize how you place me at the forefront when we visit these towns, how you encourage me to speak of my purpose and my mission. I know how you send newcomers to gawk at me during training, how you encourage visitors and townspeople to spread the word of the ‘Herald’s Army.’”

“And?” Jasnah asked. “You have a problem with these things? I thought you wanted to warn the land of its danger. Are you not pleased with the attention you are receiving, and the control you have been granted?”

“By *Kevahin*, Jasnah!” Taln snapped. “This land isn’t your court, to be flirted and manipulated. We’re not dealing with balls and squabblings over ranks! These are *people*, Jasnah, not political prizes. Good people, who’ve lived hard lives, and now you’re enlisting them to march to their deaths. You don’t care about my cause—you still think I’m insane! You just want an army you can bring back to show off to your traitorous king of a brother.”

Jasnah stiffened at the attack. “I don’t see what it matters to you,” she said coldly. “You get what you desire—a population warned of the Return. I get what I need—soldiers to aid my homeland in its defense. Where is the argument?”

Taln leaned down, looking her in the eyes. "One thing politicians never seem to understand is that *intention matters*. It matters to these people, it matters to the Almighty, and it matters to me. I will not gather this army under false pretenses. Better they remain here, warned, than they come with me and die in Alethkar, leaving their families undefended." He stood, his expression dark. "I will not be your puppet any longer. I had hoped we could discuss this, but I should have realized better. You and I can never 'discuss' anything." He turned, reaching for the doorknob.

"I'll take you to the Holy City," Jasnah said.

Taln froze. Outside, the tempestuous highstorm raged, but in her room there was only silence.

"We'll go there," Jasnah said. "The entire army. Despite the diversion and the wasted time, we'll go—just like you want. No broken oaths, no abandoned soldiers."

Taln stood, hand gripping the knob. Finally, he turned. "Must everything be a deal to you, woman?"

"Yes," Jasnah said quietly.

Taln stood, staring at her with dark eyes.

"Oh, sit down, Taln," she said with exasperation. "I can barely think with you looming over me like that."

He sighed, letting go of the knob. He didn't bother to find a stool, he simply settled himself on the ground, leaning with his back against the door.

"It is a good offer, Taln," she said. "If your brethren are actually there, gathered in Jorevan as you claim, then we can deliver them an army trained and ready. These last few months won't have been wasted at all. If they aren't there, then you'll have to reassess your goals. You can hardly face the Stormshades without an army or a center of operations. But, with Alethkar stable and free of invaders—and with my promises of aid—you can go about your preparations without further hindrance. Either way, you are better off than if you decided to leave us now and start over in another kingdom."

Taln sighed again. He sat for a moment, as if listening to the rain strike stone outside. Finally, he spoke. "Why is it so hard for you to believe that I am who I say that I am?"

"Because I've seen proof to the contrary," Jasnah said. "The Sign refusing to work. You have flawless—if accented—use of the Aleth tongue despite a supposed thousand years in absentia. You display an inability to give any display of power, divine or otherwise."

Taln shook his head. "Those aren't your reasons, Jasnah. You may see them as validations, but they aren't the core of your doubt."

“Oh?” Jasnah asked. “And what is?”

“Your disbelief in the Almighty,” Taln replied simply.

Jasnah paused. She hadn’t expected him to be right. “I’ll admit,” she said, “that my skepticism of *his* existence doesn’t exactly encourage me to believe in his divine servants.”

“What happened?” Taln asked. “What happened that could make you so determined not to believe?”

“Why do people always ask that?” Jasnah demanded. “They act as if there were some catastrophic event in my life that made me reject God, as if I were turning my back on a distasteful bowl of soup. It’s not like that, Taln. Nothing ‘happened’ to me. Why do the other people believe in the Almighty, other than that they’ve been taught to do so since they were children? What ‘happened’ to them?”

“Surely there must be reasons,” Taln said.

“There are,” Jasnah said. “But it’s the entire concept—not just one or two facts, not just a bad experience—that disturbs me about Vorinism. The idea that morality is based on some external, all-powerful being makes me uncomfortable. The monks teach that all goodness comes from the Almighty. One of them actually told me that without the Almighty, there is no *reason* for goodness in men, for the Dwelling and eternal consequences provide the only equalizing pressure upon the souls of men. Don’t you see how insulting that is? They imply that there can be no inherent good in people, that we depend on fear of retribution to keep us doing what’s right. To them, anyone who doesn’t agree to their moral superiority is damned.”

“I see,” Taln said quietly.

“The Almighty provides an escape,” Jasnah continued. “A means of avoiding responsibility. If we do what he supposedly wants, then we don’t really have to worry about learning right and wrong for ourselves. By contriving for ourselves an external source of truth, we’re left to be carnal and wrong, as long as we’re ‘striving’ to Remake ourselves as the *Arguments* teach. It also allows the monks to have an absolute monopoly on morality. They get to decide what is good and what isn’t, since they speak for the Almighty. The rest of us have inferior, even defective, souls that are in need of their repair.”

“I . . . see,” Taln repeated thoughtfully.

Jasnah sat defiantly, preparing her counter-arguments. He would find that no matter what holes he tried to poke, she had plugs long-formulated. She’d had countless discussions with Ralmakha and other theologians,

and none of them had been able to give any solid defense to her attacks on their religion.

"It must be hard to live, not believing in anything," Taln said.

Jasnah raised an eyebrow at the unexpected path. "I don't find it so hard."

"Don't you?" Taln asked, sounding genuinely inquisitive. "Your brother betrayed you, the other members of your family are all dead, and you have no god to rely on. What is there left for you?"

The words hurt more than she would ever give him the satisfaction of admitting. "I have Alethkar," she finally replied. "And I will do anything to protect it, Taln. I'll use these people, I'll even exploit you. My kingdom is all I have left."

"Intentions," Taln mumbled. "That one, at least, has some merit." He sighed. "We will go to the Holy City, and I will continue your charade. But, assuming you are right, and these people end up fighting for Alethkar, you will care for them. Give them homes inside your kingdom, and send for their families to join them. You will give them a better life than these harsh lands."

"Of course," Jasnah answered honestly.

Taln rose. Behind her, the winds had grown still—the highstorm had passed. Taln nodded once, looking oddly tired, then left. She walked to the door, watching his back as he traipsed down the stone hallway to the room he would share with Kemnar. There was nobility in belief—even delusional belief. That much she could admit, even admire, though she would never have it herself.

"Enjoy your tryst?"

Jasnah jumped in startlement. Meridas stood in the shadowed corridor that led to the common room, watching her unseen. He stepped into the light, glancing after Taln, smiling—no leering—slightly. "Tell me, Lady Kholin. What is it like, bedding a god?"

"You insult my honor," she hissed.

"Oh, come now," Meridas said. "You make such claims standing there, your cloak half-open, your undergown more flimsy than the wind, your hair mussed from your lovemaking? The entire camp knows how you look at him, and he at you. It must be terribly inconvenient not having any tents in which to plan your . . . diversions."

Jasnah pulled her cloak tight, realizing just how much she was revealing, and blushed. She tried to think of a response. What did he mean 'how you look at him'? She did nothing of the sort. Unfortunately, she realized how things must appear at the moment.

“We are people of . . . understanding, Jasnah,” Meridas said, strolling forward. “I care not what you do—I only care for the political union. But, do try to keep your relations with our dear Herald a bit more subtle. For the sake of propriety, I will have to claim you were a virgin on our wedding night.”

Jasnah thinned her eyes. He claimed he didn’t care, but she could tell that he was lying. He was jealous . . . very jealous. She could see the anger flash in his eyes when he mentioned Taln, a seething hatred that she finally understood. He assumed she was seeing Taln behind his back, and had assumed it for some time. Meridas was usually so good at hiding his emotions, but she could sense his jealousy even through his uncaring façade. And, for some reason—despite what she thought of Meridas—knowing of his jealousy made her feel a little bit more confident.

He dispelled that emotion quickly. “Do not forget that you are mine,” he said in a low voice. “For now, I allow your playing. But when the time comes, when our union is sealed, I will allow no further dalliances. Do not embarrass me, Jasnah.”

He was not jealous because he cared for her, he was jealous because he saw another man possessing something that belonged to him.

“You disgust me,” she whispered.

This made him smile. “If you’ll excuse me, my lady, I have business to be about. Apparently, this town has a proper brothel. I do hope the ladies there are more satisfactory than the tavern whores available in the other villages. Don’t worry yourself about gossip—some of us know how to be discreet.”

He turned, ducking into his room, then emerged a moment later and strode down the hallway, obviously enjoying her hateful look. He didn’t get far, however, before he was practically shoved aside by a worried Kemnar.

Kemnar ignored Meridas’s look of indignation, instead rushing to Jasnah’s door. “My lady,” he said urgently. “We need to get out of this city, *now*.”

“THEY’RE ABOUT TWO DAYS’ march away, my lords and lady,” the Galevan soldier explained. “They made a deal with the lords of our city; I carried the messages myself. We’re supposed to keep you in the city for two days, until they can get their forces here to attack you.”

Taln looked nonplussed despite the haste of their preparations for departure. Kemnar had organized the honor guard, and it waited nervously

in the street as Jasnah and the others left the building. The night air was damp and cool from the highstorm, and the stones were still slick.

The soldier who spoke was a short, nervous man who bore the beginnings of a bruised face—Nachin was one of the five who had fought Taln at the city gates. He scuttled beside them, speaking in a low voice. “You have to get out before the lords know you’re alerted,” he said. “If you can escape the city, I doubt they’ll pursue.”

“If what you say is true,” Taln asked as they joined the honor guard outside the inn, “why did the guards turn us away at the gates?”

“The city lords didn’t want to appear too eager to let you in,” he said. “They knew you had camped for the night, and planned to send word to you later.”

“And why are you telling me these things?” Taln asked pointedly.

Nachin looked ashamed. “I’m not right sure, my lord,” he admitted. “But, well, I fancy myself one of the best fighters I’ve ever known—I win eight out of ten bouts against serious opponents. I’ve rarely been beaten as soundly as when I fought you today, and with four others . . . Well, my lord, if you’re not a Herald, then you’re certainly like no other man I’ve crossed spears with. Besides, what the city lords do just isn’t right—and I’ll never see any of the coin they get for it.”

Taln nodded.

“You believe him?” Meridas asked quietly—not with the voice of a challenge, but the voice of one who took threats seriously.

Taln paused. “Dare we not?” he asked.

“Agreed,” Meridas said, waving for the honor guard to escort them out of the city.

“You’ll have to go with us,” Taln said to Nachin. “Do you have family in the village? They will be in danger.”

Nachin paled. He might have been a fine warrior as he claimed, but he seemed very new to intrigue.

“You’ve been seen with us by the innkeeper and anyone passing on the street,” Taln said. “They’ll know who spoiled their deal. Kemnar, take four men and go get his family. Go quickly; we’ll wait for you by the gates.”

Kemnar nodded, waving for a squad and taking Nachin by the shoulder. The rest of their group made for the city gates, where a group of apprehensive guardsmen barred their exit.

“Um, we can’t let anyone out after dark, my lord,” the gate leader said, waving for one of his men to dash off in the direction of the city palace. “It’s against city law.”

Taln nodded. "Send a messenger to the city lords, if you would," he said in a civil voice. "We have just had word of an emergency back at our camp. We need to return immediately."

The captain nodded, then, a bit uncertain; he waved for a second man to follow the first—obviously just keeping up pretenses.

"Will they attack?" Jasnah asked with worry as Taln rejoined their group.

He glanced back at the gate guards. There were perhaps a couple tensets of them—not enough to face the honor guard and two Shardbearers, but perhaps enough to hold the gatehouses until help arrived.

"That depends on whether or not they have orders to kill us," Taln said. "The invaders might want you and Meridas alive."

Thankfully, Kemnar arrived before the messengers returned. He towed a worried-looking woman and three children along with the soldier Nachin. As soon as Taln saw them, he turned to the gate. Without warning or preamble, he whipped out his Blade and launched himself at the wood. Three swings flashed in the darkness, then Taln kicked a door-shaped rectangular chunk of wood free from the gate. It thunked down against the stones outside.

"Through," Taln ordered as the gate guards cried out in alarm. Kemnar took position on the other side of their group, holding out his Blade threateningly as several soldiers approached. Jasnah ducked through the opening in the gate; outside, she could see movement on the walls. Taln was right—their escape depended a great deal upon whether or not the townspeople had been given orders to kill. A squad of archers atop the walls would have little trouble picking them off as they escaped.

No arrows fell, though Taln walked at the back of the group nervously, Blade held at the ready as if to swipe the missiles from the air. Either the city lords didn't respond in time, or they feared Taln's retribution, for no pursuit was given. Jasnah didn't relax until they reached camp, however, a few minutes later.

"Break down the camp!" Taln commanded. "We leave tonight. You," he pointed at Nachin "come with me." He led the man to Jasnah's canopy, where Kemnar prepared their makeshift map of Riemak—drawn from memory by Taln and Kemnar with help from some of the local mercenaries.

"Where are they camped?" Taln asked Nachin.

"Here, my lord," the man said, pointing at a place on the map not far from the city. "Or, that's where they were when I spoke with them—that was only yesterday. They seemed very rushed to try and catch up with you. They sent riders ahead to the city, but my masters wanted confirmation

of their size—and your size—before choosing sides. I was the one who scouted you both out.”

“How many?” Taln asked.

“Looked like about a thousand,” Nachin said. “Mostly on foot—only about ten riders. Most of the riders were noblemen, though, and only half of them carried swords.”

“Five Shardbearers,” Meridas cursed. “And an entire tensquad of infantry. They want to capture us badly indeed.”

“They must have managed to keep their capture of Ral Eram a secret,” Taln said. “And fear we’ll bring troops to warn or to flank.”

“They’re traveling quickly, my lord,” Nachin said. “No wagons at all.”

“How do they eat?” Jasnah asked.

Nachin shrugged. “I only know what I see. They didn’t even carry sleeping tents.”

Outside the canopy, soldiers and people were rousing, and shouts were called as camp was broken down. Jasnah understood Taln’s consternation. Their own army was ragged, underequipped, and was accompanied by an increasingly large group of civilians. They could never hope to outrun the larger force, and they certainly couldn’t fight it. They would be slaughtered.

“The city?” Jasnah asked.

“Will never let us in now that we’ve fled,” Taln said. “The guards were right, no matter what I claimed—we’d have trouble capturing it, even with three Blades. Even if we did, the Veden force has more Shardbearers than we—if we can get through the fortifications, then they will have even less trouble following.”

“Well, we can’t stand here,” Meridas said angrily. “We may need to take the lady and escape quickly.”

“And leave everyone else to die?” Jasnah asked, horrified.

“They’ll leave the army alone if you’re not with it,” Meridas said unconvincingly.

Jasnah regarded him with a flat expression. “These soldiers belong to the same force that tried to massacre everyone in the palace just to keep word of the attack from escaping. They won’t leave a force of eight hundred troops at their back.”

“She’s right,” Taln said.

The group fell silent. The map ruffled slightly in Taln’s grip, wind blowing through the camp carrying the sounds of frightened men, many still new to war, barely trained and inexperienced. Jasnah breathed in the wet air, trying to think in the darkness.

“Meridas, I’ll need my Blade back,” Taln said, taking out his own weapon and jabbing it into the ground, then knocking the opal free. “You can have it back if I return.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Meridas said, summoning his own Blade. The implication in his voice was blatant—it wouldn’t be necessary because Taln wouldn’t be returning.

“What?” Jasnah asked as they exchanged weapons.

“Cut east,” Taln said, still speaking to Meridas. “The lady has agreed to travel to the Holy City, and you might as well start now. Perhaps it will throw them off. Even if it doesn’t, there are ruins there. They could provide a defensible position.”

Meridas nodded, affixing his old opal to the new Blade. The claw grips on the pommel immediately bent back into place, grabbing hold of the new stone, and the metal flowed like liquid, changing into his straight-backed, shorter Blade.

“Taln?” Jasnah demanded of him. “What are you thinking?”

Taln nodded farewell to Kemnar, to Meridas, and finally to her. Then he turned, hefting the Shardblade onto his shoulder, and began walking into the night.

Jasnah dashed over, grabbing him by the arm. “Taln, this is foolishness!” she snapped. “One man cannot face a thousand men, even if that man is you.”

“One man can slow them,” he said. “If he attacks at night and in storms, killing lone men.” His eyes were grim. He intended more. He intended something very foolish. He was a madman, with no understanding of his own limitations.

“Taln, I—”

“Think before you say those words, Jasnah,” he warned. “Before you forbid me, think about what you said earlier. You told me that only Alethkar mattered—that you would use me to your ends if it would save your homeland. Even if I buy you only a short amount of time, would it not be worth the chance you might find better ground for defense, or even reach the Holy City and find a way through its Oathgate?”

“Slim hopes,” she whispered.

“But less slim if I go,” he said. “You either let me go, or you send back a couple hundred troops to stand and die as a delaying move. You can either sacrifice two hundred men, or you can sacrifice just one. What will you decide, Jasnah Kholin—she who loves Alethkar?”

Jasnah stood in the cold night, then slowly let her hand slip from his arm.

Taln nodded, then continued walking. She watched him disappear into the darkness, then stood there until Meridas came to get her. The self-satisfied smile in the man's eyes sickened her even more than her own guilt.

"Kemnar," she said, looking around. As usual, he stood only a short distance away, waiting quietly—almost unnoticed—upon her needs. "Go after him," she said. "Watch him and see what he does. Try and keep him from killing himself. I need . . . we need him to hold this army together." *Assuming it lasts long enough to matter.*

Kemnar stood for a moment, then nodded in the darkness, face illuminated by one of their few lanterns. He turned, waving to Vinde, second in command of Jasnah's guards. Jasnah watched with confusion as Kemnar pulled out his Shardblade, then knocked the opal free.

"What are you doing?" Jasnah asked.

Kemnar handed the Blade to Vinde. "You're probably going to need that here," he said, then moved to quickly gather some supplies.

Vinde watched Kemnar go, holding the Shardblade with awed fingers.

"Kemnar!" Jasnah said with alarm. "You are *not* allowed to get yourself killed. Do you understand? Watch over him, but don't endanger yourself."

Kemnar slung a waterbag over his back. "I don't intend to," he said. "But I also don't know that I'll be back in time to help defend you. Don't worry—I fully expect to reclaim that Blade. Vinde, don't get too attached to it."

Vinde smiled a toothy grin, gripping the sword with a firm hand. "It'll be waiting for you," he promised. "Even if I have to wet it on a bit of Veden blood."

Kemnar nodded to him, bowed to Jasnah, and jogged off into the night—obviously intent on catching up with Taln. Meridas's smile only deepened as he watched Kemnar's retreating figure, and Jasnah was forced to confront what she'd just done. Without Taln, or even Kemnar, to counteract Meridas . . .

Meridas turned to the camp, barking orders without reservation now that Taln was gone. The Herald's Army would have to do without its Herald for a time.

chapter 60

DALENAR 5

CROSSGUARD WAS A FINE CITY. While many men looked to the past for great architecture—idealizing cities such as Kholinar or Ral Eram—Dalenar had always been impressed with the modernity of Crossguard. The ramparts were designed to shelter bowmen, and the walls were constructed of fine stone. The inner architecture used contemporary techniques of construction, allowing for buildings much taller and thinner than traditional squat, columned Aleth structures. Many even had a second story, like buildings in Shinavar.

The majestic city walls had not fared well beneath Elhokar's siege. In fact, 'siege' was too calm a word—it implied time spent in blockade. Elhokar had not come to force surrender, he had come to destroy. The once-proud walls, walls that had served Alethkar so well during the Jarnah War, now lay pocked with blackened scars—their stone remade to fire by attacking Awakeners. A particularly massive hole gaped in the eastern wall, revealing rubble remains of some buildings. The bodies of soldiers—followers of the king or of Jezenrosh, but all Aleths—lay in heaps.

A double-line of spears stood driven into cracks in the stone a short distance from the broken wall. Each was tipped by a decapitated head. The wretched displays were only shadows in the distance, yet Dalenar turned away, sickened, lest he imagine his son's face on one of the spears.

Elhokar's army waited in Crossguard's shadow. They hadn't sought

refuge within the city—that wasn't the Kanaran way, and Jezenrosh's loss proved the relative ineffectiveness of fortifications. No, Elhokar would meet Dalenar head-on and arrogant. The king would ride against his *Parshen* with the same bravado he had used against both Pralir and Crossguard.

"Jezenrosh put up a good fight," Echathen said, riding at Dalenar's side. "It looks like he forced the attack all the way into his city, up to the palace itself, I'd guess. Elhokar may have taken Crossguard, but it cost him a good number of his men."

Dalenar nodded. Elhokar had suffered great losses, but his force was still a good twenty-five thousand strong. Dalenar had barely twenty thousand at his command—and it was a wonder he had been able to gather that many. Fortunately, Echathen hadn't been the only one to quietly gather troops in preparation for Dalenar's possible call—it almost seemed that everyone in the nation save Dalenar himself had known that he would eventually go to war with his nephew.

The parlay tent was ready. Dalenar nodded for Echathen and his Shard-bearers to join him, then rode down the slope to meet with the king. As he approached, the destruction was even more vivid. Dalenar kept his eyes off of the corpses—the corpses of dead men, as well as the corpse of the city itself. The blackened holes in the wall were unnatural. Awakeners should not be used in such a manner—on that topic both Heraldic lore and *The Way of Kings* were quite firm.

Elhokar waited in the tent, sitting in a rich wooden chair—Dalenar wouldn't have been surprised to find the chair had been pillaged from Jezenrosh's own room. A fine wooden table stood at the center of the tent, with an empty chair at its other side.

So civilized, Dalenar thought to himself. The gesture, like so many other things in his life, seemed incongruous. Rich woods sitting among the smell of burning bodies; courtesy on the part of a man who had just executed his own cousin.

Dalenar's son. Aredor. With the boy's face firm in his mind, Dalenar climbed off his mount and walked to the tent.

THE FIRST TIME ECHATHEN KHARDINAR had seen Elhokar, the boy had been a youth, come with his father to make allies of its northern friend. Even then, Elhokar had been a spoiled child. Echathen could still remember the young prince's haughty demands and quick temper during that feast so many years before.

Power had only made the boy worse—and a boy he still was, despite his

age. He sat with a dark, almost pouting expression, as Dalenar took the offered seat. They faced each other, one in golden sunburst armor, the other in simple—yet elegant—silver and blue. Echathen had met the Tyrantbane for the first time during that same feast two decades gone.

He had been waiting for Dalenar to take the throne ever since.

You should be proud, Elhokar, Echathen thought, taking off his helm and holding it under one arm as he moved to stand beside Dalenar's chair. *In your own way, you'll help build a greater Alethkar. If not for your incompetence, Dalenar would never have had a reason to become king.*

If Dalenar had one weakness, it was a romanticized sense of duty. A more pragmatic man would never have let the kingdom come to such ruin under Elhokar's reign—there were ways of making certain an unstable king did not live long enough to destroy his nation. Dalenar would never consider such options. Yet Echathen could not find it within himself to blame the man for his sense of honor. Those very ideals—outdated though they may be—were what had earned Dalenar the loyalty and respect he now carried.

The tent remained silent as the two men regarded one another. Echathen, at the head of Dalenar's Shardbearers, stood with a relaxed posture, trying to catch Elhokar's eye in the hopes that he might be able to give the boy an unnerving smile. Elhokar did not turn toward him, however—Echathen always had been beneath the king's consideration.

"You don't have to do this, Uncle," Elhokar finally said.

"You killed my son, Elhokar," Dalenar replied in a tired, solemn voice.

"Your son was a traitor," Elhokar said. "He disobeyed me *and* he disobeyed you. The kingdom has just suffered a civil war—you wish to put it through a second?"

Echathen snorted quietly, the noise finally bringing a contemptuous glare from Elhokar. Echathen smiled, showing teeth and narrowing eyes set in a scarred face, and locked Elhokar's gaze. The king finally glanced away.

Oh, I see the truth in your words, boy, Echathen thought. *So does everyone in this tent. You'll never trust Dalenar again—not after this. He can't back down now. You would just do to him what you did to Jezenrosh.*

Dalenar finally sighed, his breath deep like the winds themselves. "Here is what we are going to do, Elhokar," he said. "You will abdicate in favor of Ahrden, your son. You will take the vows of a monk, and renounce your titles and lands. I will let you live."

Elhokar laughed. "You'll 'let' me, will you, Uncle? How kind of you, especially since my scouts place the strength of my forces far above yours! I have the edge in troops, towers, *and* Blades! Your army won't even be a bother for us."

Dalener took the scorn with a flat face. When it was through, he looked away from Elhokar, instead turning to regard the collected Shardbearers and lords who stood behind the king.

“My forces will wait one day before attacking,” Dalener told the men. “Hear well—Elhokar refused my offer of peace. By attacking his countrymen and shaming his honor, he has forfeited the throne. Before the Almighty, I take the regency in the name of Ahrden Kholin, the rightful heir.” He paused, then spoke with clear force. “If any of you wish to seek penance for what you did here at Crossguard, you may join my camp. Your aid will be welcome.”

Elhokar sat, stunned. “You actually think they would switch sides?” he asked incredulously.

Oh, now that's not the right reaction, Echathen thought. Where's that infamous Kholin temper?

Echathen leaned forward, placing a gauntleted hand on the table. “Oh?” he asked. “Look behind you, idiot.”

Elhokar glanced to the side unconsciously. His loyal soldiers did not display the looks of outrage that he had obviously expected. Far too many of them appeared thoughtful, and a few were even nodding. While they immediately tried to hide their expressions, the damage had been done.

Elhokar's face flushed red at the sight.

“Give this up, lad,” Dalener said quietly.

Elhokar growled, then stood suddenly, grabbing the side of the table and throwing it to the side with Plate-enhanced strength. Echathen smiled to himself, summoning his Blade as the wooden table smashed to the stones a short distance away. Looks like they wouldn't have to wait after all.

Dalener lay a hand on Echathen's arm, and shook his head slightly. “We will not spread blood in the tent of parlay.”

Echathen frowned, glancing at Elhokar. The king obviously had no such compunctions. Smoke spouted from the boy's hand, a Shardblade forming. None of the king's men moved to join him, however, and Dalener's raised hand kept his own men from acting.

“You act so honorable, Uncle!” Elhokar spat. “But I know this is what you've been waiting for. An excuse! You don't approve of me—you never approved of me. You and my sister always tried to control me; you never let me be king. Well, I've killed two traitors so far. Another will not prove so hard, I should think!”

Elhokar swung, Blade appearing even as his arm descended. Echathen tensed, cursing Dalener's reticence. He moved, but was too slow to block the Blade.

Dalনার's hand came up. Blade met Plate as Dalনার caught the weapon on the back of his armored fist, then deftly turned his hand around and caught Elhokar's sword on the back of its blade.

Elhokar yanked the weapon, but Dalনার's grip held firm, Plate-enhanced fingers remaining tight. The tent was silent save for the sound of Elhokar's curses.

Then, slowly, Dalনার stood. He released the Blade, causing Elhokar to stumble slightly. A full head taller than the king, massive and dignified in silver and blue, Dalনার seemed to tower over Elhokar—a king who was still little more than the spoiled boy who had visited Echathen's court, jealous of the attention his cousin Sheneres had received.

Elhokar regained his footing. He appeared as if he were going to swing again, but paused, looking up at Dalনার.

Yes, Echathen thought. *Look and see true nobility, Elhokar. See what you should have been, and be ashamed.*

"One day," Dalনার said, then turned and strode from the tent.

Echathen gave Elhokar one final smile, then turned and joined his friend as the men mounted up again. "That went well," he noted.

Dalনার just shook his head.

"You didn't really expect him to abdicate, did you?" Echathen said.

"Perhaps," Dalনার said. "Elhokar is not an exemplary man, but he does have some sense of honor."

Echathen snorted. "I haven't seen any such."

"He found and defeated his father's murderer," Dalনার said. "Even with Crossguard, I sense that I'm missing something—some part of Elhokar's logic. His actions make ethical sense in his own mind, I think."

"You give him too much credit."

Mounted, Dalনার turned, glancing back toward the parlay tent. Elhokar stood at its edge, watching Dalনার, face still red.

"He's a self-indulgent fool, old friend," Echathen said, shaking his head. "He always has been."

"Yes," Dalনার admitted. "But that doesn't make him harmless. He may be foolhardy, but he has passion. I've seen him kill men that had twice his skill, all because he fights with single-minded intensity."

"Such men as he die quickly," Echathen observed.

"True," Dalনার said. "And we must see that he doesn't take the kingdom with him when he goes."

chapter 61

JEK 10

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, made very good time back to King Ahven's camp. He and his soldiers had abandoned their disguises as soon as they were out of sight of Crossguard, rendezvousing with the other three members of their group, who had been left to watch the horses. Still, despite the speed of their travels, it still took them a day and a half of hard riding to reach the main body of the army—or, at least, the place where Jek assumed it would be.

Jek reined in his horse, calling halt to his group. The men—thirteen in number, as two had been left behind when their horses gave out from the exhaustive ride—did as commanded, slowing around him.

He scanned the horizon, looking for signs of the army's passing. They were close, that much he could sense, but how close? The endless Kanaran hills rolled around him, similar to solidified dunes of sand. It was remarkably easy to hide even a large army among their valleys, if one were clever and set a very good perimeter.

And that perimeter was what worried Jek. "Dismount," he commanded. "Teledach and Jansmere will stay with the horses. The rest will continue with me on foot."

"My . . . lord?" asked Jershel, the squad captain. He was a smaller man, a quick and clever swordsman—the type that Jek preferred to work with.

He also rarely questioned Jek's command, which was another qualifying feature for any man Jek chose to serve under him.

This irregularity, however, was too much for even Jershel's obedient nature. "We can ride forward without fear, my lord," he said. "We have the pass-flag."

"I know," Jek said, climbing from his horse. "Do as I order."

"Yes, my lord," Jershel said, waving to his men. The appellation of 'lord' still bothered Jek; as a Truthless, he no longer had a title. The men, however, tended to have trouble following anyone they couldn't verbally distinguish as their better, so Jek suffered the usage.

A bit of light flashed in the afternoon sun, sparkling just briefly atop a hill in the near distance.

There, Jek thought, orienting himself. He watched carefully for a second sign of watchers, but unfortunately, nothing obvious presented itself. Forced to trust his instincts, Jek made the best guesses he could, then led his men quickly toward a nearby mid-hill valley.

Alone, he would have no trouble getting into the camp unseen. That, however, would be an unfair test of the army's perimeter. He was trained to avoid Shin warriors; sneaking past easterners was more bothersome than it was dangerous. However, slipping an entire party of men into the camp . . . that would be a true challenge.

Let's see just how good your watchmen are, Idiot King, Jek thought, whispering his men some basic instructions, then leading them in a careful path toward what Jek guessed was the center of the camp.

They moved quickly at first—they were still far enough away that there was little danger of being spotted, so long as they kept to the backs of hillsides. Once they got near to where the perimeter probably began, Jek whispered a halt, then crawled up to the top of a hill to scout.

The stone was cool beneath his fingers. Not rough, like most rocks back in Shinavar, but instead uniformly smooth—except, of course, for the palm-sized rings of stone that marked where long-dead rockbud polyyps had once clung to the hillside.

There were living buds too, though they were closed at the moment. Jek crouched beside a particularly large one, its dome as wide as his forearm.

Odd, he thought, running his fingers across its brittle, rocky shell. *Even the plants are blasphemous here. They use the stone to their own ends.*

Of course, it wasn't really stone that the rockbuds used to form their shells, it was the crom. The ubiquitous substance fell with the rain, providing

nutrients for the rockbuds and other plants, as well as giving them minerals to grow their shells.

Jek sighed as he lay against the stone. This wasn't the way land was supposed to be. Instead of endless hills of rock, there should have been plains and grass, trees and streams. In Shinavar, there was no crom—who would have thought that a bit of brown sludge could make such a difference?

That sludge, however, hardened over time. In the Kanaran Peninsulas, dust could not settle and dirt could not form, for the crom fell and hardened everything into the same uniform stone. Buildings grew stalactites over time, and any object left alone for too long would eventually become one with the stone. It took years, but it would happen. This is what made the lands to the east both holy and desecrated—they were lands where stone truly ruled, lands where men were not meant to live. Only in Shinavar, where the steep mountains surrounded the entire peninsula, could man find soil and life. Green life—Jek had almost forgotten what real plants looked like.

This geography, however, was very good for hiding. The numerous hills of the Kanaran lowlands allowed Ahven to set up a very strict perimeter. Keen-eyed scouts could watch from hilltops, spying intruders both intentional and accidental. Anyone who wandered into the perimeter was killed. No mistakes could be suffered.

Unfortunately, Jek couldn't find any outposts. He studied the hilltops for a few careful moments, then decided he must have misjudged the distance to the camp's center. He turned and began to slink back toward his men, then froze in reflexive alarm as his senses warned of unseen danger.

The arrows began to fall a few seconds later.

Jek's men cried out, pulling out useless swords or hiding behind shields. Jek was close enough that several arrows flew toward him, and for a brief, joyous moment, he thought one might strike him.

His hand snapped out and grabbed the arrow. Death would not serve his master, and would break his vows. End his punishment. That could not be allowed, no matter how much his heart wished that it was an option.

Two more arrows flew his direction, and he unfortunately was able to snatch them both. Below, Jershel pulled the pass-flag from beneath his cloak and held it high.

Jek smiled despite himself. He hadn't ordered the man to bring the flag, nor had he ordered Jershel to display it. However, he had no right to complain—one did not choose clever men as companions if one did not wish them to do clever things.

The arrows stopped falling as a group of ambushers revealed their position atop a nearby hill. Five of Jek's men had taken arrows, two of them serious wounds. Jek passed through the valley and walked up to meet the archer's commander as Jershel saw to the wounded.

"My . . . lord!" the commander said with surprise, recognizing Jek. "We had no idea it was you, my lord! We would never have fired if we had—"

"Your orders are to attack anyone who passes into the perimeter unless they raise the pass-flag," Jek snapped. "Even me."

"Um, yes, my lord," the captain said with embarrassment.

"I was watching for you," Jek said, trying to keep the testiness out of his voice. "How did you remain hidden so well?" Failing to find Lady Jasnah was one thing, but letting himself get ambushed . . . Had it finally happened? Had he spent so long among the heathens that he had begun to lose his edge?

The captain waved to a member of his squad, who pulled up a deep brown blanket, crusted with a rocky substance—probably clay that had been Awakened to stone.

"The watchmen now lay beneath these," the captain said. "It was King Ahven's idea."

Clever, Jek admitted, studying the stiff contraption. The stone coloring blended very well with the hill rock. From a distance, a man hiding beneath it would be impossible to see—though the covering would be horribly hot during the day.

"We almost didn't see you, my lord," the captain admitted. "Actually, we only noticed you because one of my men heard your group scraping the rock."

I should have had them remove their boots. "It is a good thing you did see us," Jek said, eyeing his wounded men. "If I had managed to get a group of twelve soldiers past you, King Ahven would likely have had your head. Lead me to the camp—I have important news for His Majesty."

JEK WAS ALREADY IN A SOUR MOOD from the ambush—what he heard when he entered the royal tent did not improve his disposition.

Ahven was in council with the Aleth man, Balenmar, again. Jek paused just inside the tent door, frowning to himself. It was alarming how quickly Balenmar had gone from prisoner to advisor, and even more alarming how quickly Ahven had apparently come to trust the stormkeeper. They didn't even know whether or not Balenmar's map through the caves would lead

to Jasnah's capture, yet Ahven already treated the aging man as a respected councilor.

The tent room was lush, as a king's should be, but Jek knew from experience that Ahven cared little about such conveniences. He kept the rugs, pillows, and wood furniture out of a desire to maintain appearances, and nothing else. The pavilion itself was large, with four rooms, but Ahven kept mostly to the open central chamber. It was in this chamber that Ahven now stood, speaking carefully with Balenmar, who sat in a plush wooden chair beside the tent wall.

The two men stopped speaking when Jek entered. *What were they discussing?* he wondered with annoyance, then was further annoyed that he should care. He didn't trust Balenmar, true, but what did that matter? Jek wanted Ahven to fail—all the better if the king were betrayed by one he had so foolishly accepted into his confidence.

"You're back early, assassin," Ahven said with his firm, yet not overly loud, voice.

"Dalenor Kholin marches on Crossguard," Jek announced, walking into the room.

Ahven hissed a long, quiet breath through his teeth. "You are certain of this information?"

"No," Jek said. "I was unable to validate my source. However, I believe the fact to be truth. When I entered Crossguard, I noticed something odd about the Aleth army, but couldn't quite place it. I later realized that the camp looked too . . . orderly. Too on guard. It wasn't the camp of a group that had just won a war, but rather that of an army preparing for battle. King Elhokar executed Dalenor's heir when he took Crossguard. Apparently, this act finally spurred the Tyrantbane to action."

Ahven's frown deepened, and he leaned one arm against a large wooden cabinet in thought.

"That does sound like Dalenor, Lord Ahven," Balenmar said. "Though why he would let his son ride to Crossguard baffles me."

"Aredor Kholin was allowed to become too independent," Ahven said off-handedly. "He wasn't raised to be the heir, and was given far too much leeway. He must have gone to Crossguard without his father's permission."

"You know this from the songs?" Jek asked.

Ahven nodded slightly, his thoughts obviously still troubled. He tapped his fingers against the cabinet—the one piece of furniture Jek knew the king valued. It was the one that contained his birds. Only three remained alive.

“Yet,” Jek said, catching Ahven’s attention, forcing him to read Jek’s lips, “you didn’t predict this possibility? You claim to have known that Dalenar would stay out of the war, but he has not. What of your clever knowledge now?”

Ahven’s eyes thinned. “You will not mock me again, assassin,” he ordered. “Even subtly.”

Jek’s face flushed, and he noted a glint of mirth in Balenmar’s eyes. *Control yourself, Jek told himself. Do not let these easterners rile you.*

“Dalenar Kholin is . . . a problem,” Ahven finally said. “No, I didn’t predict this. I’ve had trouble understanding Dalenar recently. He used to be an easy man to predict—he was straightforward, a lover of strong martial ballads with firm, unyielding beats. But recently his tastes have become more . . . longing. He still favors battle epics, but rather than songs of brilliant victors, he requests ballads about men who fight and tragically lose. Introspective pieces. Questioning pieces. Dalenar is not the man he once was, and I don’t quite know what he has become.”

“Dalenar Kholin has grown increasingly unpredictable over the last few years,” Balenmar agreed. “It began with his wife’s death, I believe, but the biggest changing point came when he lost both brother and eldest son to the Traitor. I think you will have trouble predicting what he will do, my lord.”

Who are you to speak of traitors? Jek thought with an inward snort.

“All men are predictable, old man,” Ahven said curtly. “And all men are erratic. We are beings of moods and passions. A man’s taste in music can change from one hour to the next—it is understanding the whole, and the meaning of that whole, that gives insight to his actions. For, while moods change, motives are stable. Dalenar Kholin has a strong affection for all members of his family. I did not predict his coming, but I can deal with it. In many ways, he will be an easier foe to fight than Elhokar.”

“Unless Jasnah is with him,” Jek said, carefully watching the king’s eyes for a reaction.

Jek was not disappointed. The mere mention of Jasnah’s name made Ahven’s eyes flash with momentary uncertainty. *Dalenar isn’t the one he fears at all,* Jek thought, confirming his suspicions. *It’s the woman.* Ahven’s dedication of an entire tensquad of troops, along with five full Shardbearers, to hunt down Jasnah was only further proof of that fact.

“She won’t be with Dalenar,” Balenmar said. “The caverns let out far from Kholinar—even if she managed to find horses, she could conceivably have

reached the city by now, but there's no way she could have arrived early enough to send Dalenar to Crossguard. He left of his own avail."

Jek bristled slightly at the man's tone. The old stormkeeper didn't talk like a traitor or a conspirator, but instead like a kindly grandfather—one who suffered Jek and Ahven because they amused him, rather than because they had anything important to add. Everything about the stormkeeper felt wrong.

"You never told us how you escaped the attack on Ral Eram, old man," Jek said.

"Of course he did," Ahven replied. "Or, at least, he told me. Do not think you are privy to all that I know and do, assassin. You are a tool."

And a slave, Jek added.

"Even if Jasnah Kholin is with them, we will prevail," Ahven said, as if to bolster his own determination. "She is a brilliant strategist, but every strategy can be broken, and every tactic countered."

"True," Jek said. "Assuming your side has the better commander." It was as close to a question of Ahven's abilities as he would let himself get. Horseback riding and foreign tongues could be taught in a secret classroom, but command skills . . . those required practice and experience to develop. Clever though he may be, Ahven had neither.

Ahven regarded Jek with a terse, yet delving, glance. "You underestimated me from the beginning, assassin. You assumed I would be turned over by my own people, yet I took their armies for my own. You assumed I would never reach Ral Eram, yet I passed through the Oathgates with the power of the Heralds themselves. Now you tell me I cannot win this war. Someday, perhaps, you will understand. One doesn't need brilliant military strategies if one can predict what his enemy is going to do."

"And you can predict Jasnah?" Jek asked.

"Everyone is predictable," Ahven repeated.

"Even you, Ahven Vedenel?" asked Balenmar, almost forgotten during the tense exchange between king and assassin.

Ahven didn't hear the comment, but he saw Jek glance at Balenmar. The Idiot King's eyes flicked to the side, focusing on the aged councilor.

"Are you predictable, King of Jah Keved?" Balenmar asked. "What are your motivations? Why do you conquer?"

"Because no one has succeeded before," Ahven answered, almost without thought.

"And that's all?" Balenmar asked curiously. "That's your grand purpose?"

“No man has ever ruled it all,” Ahven said. “Four thousand years of history, and no man has ever conquered all of Roshar.”

“And you would be the first?”

Ahven paused, then nodded firmly.

Balenmar studied the king’s face, eyes thinning slightly. “There’s more,” he finally said. “That answer is too easy, King Vedenel. Perhaps you believe it, perhaps not. It is not, however, the reason you conquer. The lure of power motivates many men, true, but it doesn’t inspire hatred and pain such as your eyes hide.”

The room was quiet. “Go,” Ahven finally said, pointing at the tent door. “Both of you. Leave me.”

Jek nodded, bowing slightly and retreating. Balenmar moved less alacritously, and as Jek left the tent, he caught sight of the old man’s face smiling broadly in satisfaction.

chapter 62

SHINRI 11

GETTING MERIN A SHARDBLADE was, of course, an impossibility. As far as Shinri had been able to determine, there were only three Shardbearers left in the palace, and they would all be master swordsmen. No, she had enough trouble coming up with a way to steal and conceal two regular swords, let alone worrying about a Shardblade.

How to get a pair of swords? The Aleth section of the palace had been thoroughly looted. She searched through several of the rooms, hoping that a departed or slain nobleman might have left a spare sword behind, but if such weapons had existed, then the Veden conquerors had already found them. She considered simply demanding a pair of swords and hoping that her title and air would be enough to keep questions to a minimum. That, however, did not seem like a very good gamble, especially considering the way Ahven's noblemen guards treated her. Most likely she would not only end up without weapons, but raise a great deal of suspicion in the process.

Even if she did find the swords, keeping them hidden would be a task unto itself. She wouldn't be able to bring the weapons back to her rooms, lest one of her ladies see her or stumble upon the hiding place. She could hide them in a hallway somewhere, but what if she were seen carrying them? And, even more pointedly, how was she going to sneak them past the prison guard? The man was greedy, true, but she doubted any bribe would

be enough to turn his eyes from a pair of weapons obviously intended to arm his own prisoners.

It was at that moment that Shinri realized something very important. Perhaps her problems weren't several, but singular. Or, rather, what if the two problems were simply solutions to one another?

So it was that she found herself approaching the prison hallway with a pouch of coins and a large jug of wine. A visit to Ahven's physician had not only let her pretend to be playing along with the plan, but also let her complain of sleepless nights—a claim her ladies had been able to substantiate. The resulting herbs, intended to help her sleep, had instead gone into the wine. The only trick would be getting the slovenly guard to drink while still on duty. Shinri doubted, however, that he would be able to resist the wine for long—especially since she intended to arrive near the beginning of his shift.

The guard carried a full longsword and a typical nobleman's knife, a weapon with a blade as long as a man's forearm, intended to be rammed through the slits of armored helms or chinks in Shardplate. The weapons weren't the two swords she had hoped for, but they were by far the most accessible—especially since she already needed to deal with the guard anyway.

Either way, she was feeling rather proud of herself when she entered the hallway to find the prison completely unguarded.

Shinri paused abruptly, the heavy jug thumping back against her leg. The guard's chair and table sat empty. She stepped forward, peeking into the prison hallways themselves. He wasn't in either one.

Apprehensive, Shinri set down her jug then approached Renarin's cell. "Renarin?" she whispered.

"Oh, good," his familiar voice returned. "You're here."

"The guard's gone!" Shinri said with confusion.

"I know," Renarin said. "He came with some others and took Merin."

"Took Merin?" Shinri asked. "Where?"

"I don't know," Renarin replied. There was something odd about his voice, something Shinri couldn't quite place. Then she realized what it was. He didn't sound distracted or withdrawn at all. In fact, his voice was firm. Focused.

"Listen to me, Shinri," Renarin said gravely. "Merin is in a great deal of danger. Your Veden king has arrived to attack Elhokar's forces, but instead of one army, he found two. My father had begun marching on Crossguard before King Ahven even left Ral Eram."

“Your father?” Shinri said. “How do you know these things. And why would Lord Dalenar go to war now, when before he—”

“There isn’t *time*, Shinri,” Renarin said firmly. “Lord Dalenar goes to war to avenge my brother Aredor. You can’t think about that now, however. With Merin goes our only hope to escape this city. *You have to free him.*”

Shinri stood, stunned, all of her cautious plans crumbling to dust. “Free him?” she asked. “How? I don’t have time to come up with—”

“They’re probably taking him to the stables,” Renarin interrupted. “Merin will fight, if given the chance. You have to give him that chance, Shinri. Are you wearing any jade?”

Shinri paused. “Jade?” she asked, dumbfounded.

“Yes,” Renarin said.

“My bracelet is jade,” she said, fingering the inset green stones.

“Give it to Merin,” Renarin said urgently. “It doesn’t matter how you do it, but make certain he gets that bracelet. Go, Shinri. *Go now!*”

Shinri stumbled back away from his cell, taken aback by the intensity in his voice.

“*Go!*” Renarin said.

She did, rushing out of the hallway in a near-daze of confusion. She didn’t have time to think of the things Renarin had said. Aredor, dead? Merin, taken to the stables? Why? Why would they try to use Merin against Lord Dalenar? Why not send Renarin, the far better bargaining piece?

Unless they intended to give a warning—proof of what they would do to Renarin if Lord Dalenar did not back down. There was one thing Merin was that Renarin was not.

Expendable.

chapter 63

MERIN 13

THE MEN AROUND MERIN SPOKE in a language he almost understood. Many of the words sounded familiar, they were just . . . off somehow. Close enough to his own tongue to make him think he should comprehend, but different enough that trying to do so left him frustrated. He was pretty sure he understood one word when it was spoken, however. A name: Dalenar.

Renarin was obviously right about Jah Keved controlling the city. Merin kept his head down, walking through the First Palace hallways with a stumbling, slump-shouldered gait. The three men had come to his cell expecting a fight, so Merin hadn't given it to them. Far better they assume him broken until Merin was certain of their intentions.

But what did they want with him? Perhaps they were going to interrogate him—the heroes from the stories were often tortured for information. In fact, Merin had been slightly surprised that so far no one had made any demands of him. His stomach turned slightly at the thought. The heroes always withstood their sufferings with an almost passionate zeal—to them, torture was simply another test of bravery. Merin, however, didn't think it would be that easy.

Well, he thought, at least I don't have any information to betray—though they probably won't believe that.

He would have to try and escape. Unfortunately, the situation did not

look good. His wrists were manacled together in front of him, clasped so tightly that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to hold a weapon. There were only three guards, but they were big men—and they kept an alert eye on him despite his weak shambling. The palace hallways were well-guarded, with soldiers at many intersections and the occasional random patrol. When he did decide to struggle, he would probably bring another half-tenset soldiers running.

Of course, there was the chance that he wasn't going to be tortured, but released. That made little sense—if anyone were to be ransomed, it would be Renarin. He was not only Lord Dalenar's son, but now that Aredor was gone, Renarin was the heir to Kholinar.

The soldiers led Merin through a less-ornate section of the palace. There seemed to be fewer guards here—fewer people in general. The corridors were darker, the stones dirtier. Exactly the kind of place one would expect to find a chamber of tortures.

Merin glanced up at his captors. One soldier stood at his left, leading Merin by the elbow. One walked behind Merin, the other in front. Merin's spearman's training had included some rudimentary unarmed combat moves, and Vasher's stances had expanded upon this knowledge. Still, one weakened, unarmed man against three noblemen with swords . . .

He wouldn't have a better chance. Merin tensed, preparing to elbow the man at his side. Then he paused as he caught the scent of something familiar—a smell he hadn't come to know until his elevation to nobleman. The smell of horses.

Perhaps they were going to let him go after all.

A few seconds later his captors led him into a large, high-roofed stable. Horse stalls lined the walls, and the smells of feed and dung were strong in the air. Some stablehands worked preparing a fine-looking roan stallion, its saddlebags packed for an extended trip. Merin stood in confusion as one of his captors pushed him against a wooden stabledoor, then walked over to bark at the stablehands in his foreign tongue.

Merin stayed where he had been put. The three soldiers eventually adopted bored postures, and it became obvious that they were waiting for something.

The something turned out to be a *someone*. He strode into the stables, dressed in fine seasilks. These Veden men appeared to prefer tighter clothing than their Aleth counterparts, for this man's rich trousers and shirt were tailored to fit snugly. He wore a broad, squareish cloak, and had a short beard.

He also carried no sword.

Merin maintained his slumped posture, but watched the newcomer with careful eyes. The nobleman checked over the horse, and Merin noted for the first time that the beast's livery matched the glyph on the newcomer's cloak. The man finished his inspection and waved the stablehands away, apparently commanding them to leave the stables. Then he finally turned to Merin. He held out his hand to the side, white smoke gathering around his palm as Merin's suspicions about the man's nature were confirmed.

Merin glanced at the horse—the only saddled beast in the room. Only one man would make a journey this day. Then he looked at the Shardbearer, whose weapon was appearing and whose eyes showed a measure of grim resolution. Two guards appeared at Merin's shoulders, grabbing him in tight grips, and Merin realized that he had waited too long. The Vedens weren't going to set him free—they were going to use him to prove to Lord Dalenar that they had Renarin held captive. For that purpose, Merin's severed head would serve just as well as his living testimony.

Merin slumped in his captor's grip, trying to gain a bit of slack in preparation for a struggle. The Shardbearer's Blade appeared, and he stepped forward, raising it.

A sudden yell snapped in the air. Merin didn't understand the words, but he recognized the voice. Lady Shinri stood at the palace stable entrance, breathing deeply and looking disheveled. She yelled a demand at the soldiers in Veden, her tone intolerant. The men, unfortunately, ignored her.

So Lady Shinri started throwing things.

She had very impressive aim. The large vase that smashed into one of Merin's guards must have made an unwieldy projectile, yet it struck true, shattering against the man's temple and causing him to cry out in shocked pain. Merin threw his weight against the second guard, ramming his elbow into the man's stomach as the Shardbearer turned and raised a wary hand to fend off a flurry of thrown ceramics, horseshoes, and even what appeared to be jewelry.

Merin brought his manacled hands around, smashing the metal clasp into the face of his still-stunned captor. The guard went down, though the other two men were quickly advancing on Shinri's position. The Shardbearer turned his attention back to Merin as Shinri was forced to focus on the two soldiers.

Suddenly, something flipped through the air in Merin's direction. He tried to duck, but Shinri's aim was nothing short of amazing, and it smacked him square in the forehead.

In that moment, whether from the daze of being hit or the confusion of the moment, Merin thought he saw something. For just a brief second, Merin felt the winds returned to him. Shinri's projectile—a green and silver bracelet—bounced off his forehead and dropped toward the ground. Merin snatched it with a reflexive, yet awkward, grab.

And, like a breath exhaled from the Almighty himself, the air around Merin shifted. The winds curled and twisted, viscous and obvious. They whispered in his mind again, expanding his knowledge and his senses. The deep, bitter longing he had suppressed suddenly burst forth and was sated.

The Shardbearer's swinging weapon flashed in the sunlight, air twisting around it. Merin jumped back, desperately trying to avoid the blow, and his fingers—which gripped Shinri's bracelet—flared with a blazing pain.

The winds moved.

They lost their chaotic twirling, a tenseset different currents whipping like streamers before him. They turned with surprising uniformity, their flows reorienting to push against Merin. The burst of wind shoved him back, out of the Shardblade's path. Merin raised his bound hands at the same time, overcoming the flaring pain caused by a bracelet that suddenly seemed to be burning with an inner heat. Winds swept around his arms, guiding his hands in the path he directed, moving them faster than muscle alone could provide.

The Shardblade flashed before Merin in a broad swing, passing directly between his manacled hands and shearing through the metal bonds.

Merin stumbled back, falling to the ground and drooping the bracelet with a groan of pain. The air immediately returned to plain mundanity, as invisible to him as it was to everyone else.

The Shardbearer stood, dumbfounded, as the shackles fell free from Merin's hands and thunked to the floor beside the bracelet. There was a moment of silence, then the Shardbearer looked up at Merin, raised his weapon again, and advanced.

Merin scrambled frantically, looking for a weapon. The soldier he had attacked lay on the ground a short distance away, and Merin grabbed for a hilt sticking out from beneath the man's unconscious body. Unfortunately, as Merin grabbed the hilt and pulled it out, he was rewarded not with a sword, but a nobleman's knife. Merin stumbled to his feet anyway, holding the weapon in a stance. However, the foot-long blade looked depressingly inadequate when facing the enormous Shardblade. The Shardbearer had an amazing reach, and he could easily shear through metal. He smiled as he regarded Merin's defense.

Suddenly, Merin felt the terror Vasher had spoken of, the fear that came from facing a Shardbearer. He was back on the Shieldhome sands, holding a simple arrow while his opponent advanced with a steel blade. He felt the stance, and saw the flaws in his opponent's form. The Veden wasn't a warrior, he was what Vasher had taught Merin to defeat—a man who relied not on skill, but upon his weapon. The man's form was neat—he was obviously a duelist—but it was strict and rigid, and it was confident. Far too confident.

Overconfidence is really just a problem of flexibility, Vasher's voice whispered. Presumption creates predictability.

The Shardbearer struck with an almost snide swing of his weapon. It was a one-handed blow that had undoubtedly cut down many a cringing battlefield peasant—an arrogant, demeaning attack. Merin dodged to the side, feeling the winds though he couldn't see them, then lunged forward—ducking beneath the man's surprised backhand—and rammed his dagger directly through the Shardbearer's forearm.

The man screamed in pain, dropping his Blade. Merin leapt for the fallen weapon, lifting it in two hands. Merin saw that same terror in the fallen Shardbearer's eyes—the realization of what he faced, of what was coming—just before the Blade took him in the neck.

Merin gasped for breath, standing over the corpse with dazed surprise. “Merin!” a feminine voice screamed.

Merin spun, raising the Blade. It was awkward and unfamiliar in his hands, but Vasher had taught him to deal with that. The two remaining guards held a frantically struggling Shinri, oblivious to what had just happened behind them. Both men died before they had time to realize their mistake.

Shinri stumbled back, rubbing her wrist where one of the men had grabbed her. Her eyes flickered to the dead men, but she didn't gasp or pale when confronted by the corpses. Merin stood for a moment, listening for signs that the struggle had been heard, waiting for the sudden rush of soldiers.

They didn't come. The stables were secluded, and the Shardbearer had sent the stablehands away so that they wouldn't witness Merin's death. Everything was oddly quiet.

“You killed them messily enough,” Shinri said, bending down to search one of the bodies.

“Shardblades aren't known for their cleanliness,” Merin replied as he wiped the Blade free of blood.

Shinri snorted, picking up a fallen soldier's sword and returning it to the sheath she had removed from his belt. "For Renarin," she said to his questioning glance. "I assume you intend to go back for him?"

"Of course," Merin said firmly. "But you'll have to show me the way."

Shinri nodded, waving him to follow. Merin stepped back first, however, studying the bracelet she had thrown at him. It sparkled with opaque green stones—the same stone his glyphward had been made from. It did not seem hot to the touch—nor did his hand show any burn marks, though he could still feel traces of the agonizing pain in his fingers.

"Are you coming?" she asked.

Merin nodded, grabbing the bracelet and standing. His vision changed immediately, granting him sight of the flow and ebb of the room's subtle wind currents. Touching the silver casing, however, gave no such reaction.

It wasn't the glyph at all, he thought with a numb mind. It was never the glyph. It was the stone.

"What rock is this?" he asked as he joined Shinri in the hallway.

"Jade," Shinri said. "It's fairly common among women's jewelry."

"How did you know to throw this to me?" he asked.

She eyed him with a glance that told him just how little she appreciated his tone. "Renarin," she said. "He told me to give it to you. Why? What does it matter?"

Merin just shook his head. "I . . ." How did one explain such a thing? He had seen the look in her eyes when he had spoken of magic before.

"I thank you for the rescue," he finally said. "You have incredible aim."

Shinri shrugged. "I've had a lot of practice, though not recently. Anyway, your rescue is my own rescue. Come on, I think I can get us back to the prison hallway without incident, but we'll have to move quickly. Someone will discover those bodies before long."

Merin nodded, following her lead. He clutched the bracelet in a tight grip, making certain that the jade stone touched his skin. The winds had finally returned; he wasn't about to let them vanish again.

APPARENTLY, SHINRI'S PLANS FOR their escape were in-depth, and she had considered the stables as a back-up to the Oathgates. She knew the patrol routes, and she had memorized every guard post. She led the two of them through a furtive, yet uneventful, dash toward Renarin's cell.

Merin spent the trip waiting, expectantly, to hear calls of alarm from behind. None came, but that didn't help his nerves. Still, he felt a strong measure of satisfaction at finally having been able to do something. The

weeks of captivity were finally over—he had his Blade back, and he had the winds. Those two victories alone made him exuberant. Now if they could only escape the city.

Shinri paused. Before them lay a hallway Merin vaguely recognized—he had only seen it once from the outside. It was empty.

“No guards?” he asked with surprise.

Shinri shook her head, leading him forward. “There was only ever one guard, and he was one of the ones you killed in the stables.”

Merin nodded, joining her at Renarin’s door.

“I found the keys on the jailer’s body,” she explained, pulling out a large ring. “We just have to—”

“We don’t need keys,” Merin said, raising the Shardblade. “Renarin? Are you in there?”

“Of course,” a voice replied.

“Stand away from the door,” Merin said, then rammed his Blade between the door and the wall and sliced free the lock’s bolt.

Shinri raised an appreciative eyebrow, discarding the keys, and Merin pulled open the door. He stepped inside a cell that was unsurprisingly similar to his own. It had no furniture and a set of blank walls, unmarked by—

“Oh, Blessed Lordmaker!” Shinri gasped.

Merin spun and immediately saw what she meant. Not all of the walls were blank—the one that held the door was covered with scribbles. Some of the writing was scratched into the stone, and some of it was written in a crusty, red color. Apparently, Renarin had used his own blood as ink.

The boy himself crouched near the far eastern side of the wall, scratching the stones with a small rock. “Just a moment,” he mumbled. “I’m almost done here.”

Merin stepped back, stunned by the display. The entire wall was covered with the insane scratchings. The tiny numbers seemed to have their own flow, lining together in ways that almost made them seem like painted patterns. Lines of scribbles spun and melded, some rotating around central points, others falling in neat rows. There were thousands of them, each written with the delicate precision of madness.

“Renarin . . .” Shinri whispered. “What *is* this?”

“I had to use this wall so the jailer wouldn’t see when he looked in through the window,” Renarin said, as if in response to the question.

“Is that blood?” Shinri asked, paling slightly.

“It made for the best writing,” Renarin said. “Scratching takes much longer, and I can’t see it as well when I’m done. When I started to feel

light-headed from losing so much blood, though, I realized I would have to scratch during the less important sections.”

He's gone mad, Merin realized. It started before, when he traveled with me, but Aredor's death mixed with the captivity must have pushed him too far.

“Renarin,” he said quietly. “We have to go. We left bodies behind us—they’ll discover our escape soon.”

“We have a bit of time yet,” Renarin assured him, not looking up from his scribbling. “By the way, I should tell Lady Shinri that she did very well. The permutations spoke a very different story for the rest of us should your execution have been successful. She even got you a Shardblade, I see.”

Merin looked down at the weapon. “Yes,” he said. “Renarin, we really need to go.”

Shinri was still staring at the numbers, and she showed a hint of fear in her eyes.

“I know,” Renarin said. “I just . . .” he trailed off, making a few final notations. Then he paused.

“Renarin?”

Renarin sighed, setting down his rock and shaking his head. He stood, inspecting his unnatural mural. “I’m too new at this, Merin. I focused my vision too narrowly. All of this work doesn’t tell me much. You’re right here, in the section I was working on, and I’m on the other side of the door. Lady Shinri is in the center. We’re important, especially you two, but I looked so closely at you that I can’t see the larger scope. I see days, not years. I’ll need to start again.”

“You’re mad,” Shinri finally whispered.

Renarin smiled. “It’s a possibility, I suppose, though I certainly hope that I’m not. I feel . . . a wonder. A joy that I’ve never missed, yet at the same time known that I should have felt. I can finally see the true patterns that hid just at the edges of my sight. Shinri gave you the jade, Merin?”

Merin started, looking down at the bracelet. “How did you . . . ?”

Renarin looked at him, eyes alight. “How do you feel when you touch the jade, Merin? Does truth open to you? What do you see that others cannot?”

Merin shivered beneath Renarin’s gaze. “I see the wind,” he whispered. “I see the air moving.”

Renarin nodded, smiling. “I should have known the answer when you showed me that glyph months ago. I’m sorry—my eyes weren’t open yet. I didn’t make the connection, though I had, of course, heard of Windrunners.”

Windrunners. Merin had heard of them too, in legends and stories. One

of the Ten Epellion, Epoch Warriors dedicated to the preservation of the peace of men.

“But—” he began, but Renarin cut him off again.

“And Lady Shinri,” Renarin said, turning to her. “I realize that your experience is limited, but how did you feel when you touched the Oathgate’s opal? What did you see?”

She glanced at him, obviously still uncomfortable. “I didn’t see anything,” she challenged.

“Ah, but you did,” Renarin said. “You felt things, knew things, that others do not—if just for a moment. Tell me, Shinri, when were you born?”

Shinri frowned. “We need to go,” she said, tone growing cool. “If we don’t get to the Oathgates, then—”

“Please,” Renarin said firmly. “Please answer my question.”

Merin frowned slightly. Something about Renarin had changed. It wasn’t just his strange actions, it was something about the boy’s temperament. He seemed far more confident, less withdrawn. The old Renarin would never have been able to command a conversation, yet this one forced even a courtly-trained lady into acquiescence.

“The sixty-fifth year of the century,” she said. “On the tenth day of Mar-Kav.”

“You, Merin?” Renarin asked.

“The same year,” Merin said. “Nine-hundred and sixty-five. On the tenth of Mar-Nolh.”

Renarin nodded. “And I was born on the seventeenth of Mar-Taln, during the same year. Merin, Shinri, and Renarin. Jade, opal, and onyx. Three births in the same year. Perhaps, rather than asking if I am mad, we should be wondering something else. What happened seventeen years ago that awakened the old powers again?”

Merin stood quietly, unable to shake off the aura of those words. He stood, holding Shinri’s bracelet, rubbing his thumb against the smooth green stone . . . just like Renarin did with the shard of onyx held at his side. The air floated and curled in its uncaring way, its dancing performed only for Merin. The others could not see. Was it too much to believe that Renarin saw something in those insane and scattered marks, something plain and clear to him, but invisible to everyone else?

“We have to go,” Shinri said, her voice shocking Merin out of his stupor.

“Just a moment,” Merin said. “Renarin, my opal?”

Renarin reached into a cleft in the wall’s stone, retrieving the dark black opal Merin had shoved desperately through the hole between their cells once

he realized the men intended to take him. Merin accepted the black stone, then rammed the Shardblade's pommel against the edge of the stone door, knocking free the previous owner's opal. The metal clasps immediately bent back, resting open, like the maw of an insect. Merin placed his own opal inside, and the claw-like silver tines bent closed, locking the stone in place.

The change was immediate. The Blade glistened, shimmering like it was made of a silvery liquid. It stretched slightly, thinning and adopting a slight curve. The patterns shimmered, forming the familiar glyphs that had once lined Merin's Blade, then outlining them in the same wave-like pattern. The weapon's hilt lengthened and formed to fit his grip, changing from awkward to familiar in the passing of a few heartbeats. When the process was finished, the weapon Merin held was indistinguishable from the one that had been taken from him a few weeks before, that day after they had discovered Aredor's body.

Merin raised the Blade, its presence comforting him like that of an old friend. The silvery metal glistened, and for the first time Merin realized that he had been wrong about the blade's markings. The patterns weren't those of rivers or waves, as he had once assumed. No, they were imitations of the air patterns around him. If the winds were somehow solidified and trapped in metallic form, they would look something like the Blade's design. It had known him, even before he had known himself.

"Can we go now?" Shinri asked testily.

"Yes," Merin said. "Lead us to the Oathgates."

THE FIRST GUARD DIED before the other four realized they were under attack. Merin cut down a second man, pushing his way into the Oathgate chamber as the last three men reacted. As instructed, Renarin ducked around the corner behind Merin, leaping at one of the soldiers and drawing his attention. Merin struck at the other two. One man raised his sword, the fear starting to dawn in his eyes.

Few men, nobleman or citizen, could face a Shardbearer and maintain still nerves. Apparently, a Shardbearer had guarded the room before—but it was the same man who had been ordered to bring Merin's head. The other soldiers were just regular men.

Merin's Blade sheared his opponent's weapon in half, then continued on through flesh. Merin turned on the last soldier, who held his sword in sweaty palms. He probably knew what to do—the way to attack a Shardbearer was to strike quickly, hoping that luck or skill would guide the blow. A regular man could not defeat a Shardbearer in an extended fight.

The soldier was a younger man. Merin could see his tension, see him preparing for his strike—the last one he would make.

Shinri's voice suddenly snapped in the air. Merin gritted his teeth in annoyance as the woman entered the room, oblivious to his suggestion that she remain outside until the fighting was complete.

Merin's opponent shot a glance at the soldier Renarin was fighting. Both men lowered their weapons and backed from the room, keeping wary eyes on Merin. A moment later they were gone, dashing down the hallway, screaming for aid.

"What was that?" Merin demanded, lowering his weapon.

"I suggested that they go for help," Shinri said, walking into the room. "We'll be through the Oathgates before they return, and our escape route will hardly remain secret for long with these corpses laying around."

Merin didn't look down, ignoring her gesture. "Let's go," he said, turning and walking into the central chamber. The white marble floor was wondrous, yet the ten sculpted gateways—resplendent with cuts of stones and gems, many of which Merin couldn't name—made even the marble look drab.

"Why do you do that?" Shinri asked curiously, joining him among the Oathgates.

"What?" Merin asked.

"You refuse to look at them," Shinri said. "The men you kill."

Merin gritted his teeth, not turning, careful to face away from the carnage near the room's entrance. "That's what they taught us," he said. "Two years ago, when I was trained as a spearman. The veterans told us to focus on the fighting, not the dead at our feet. They said never to look down."

"I see," Shinri said curiously, studying his face with the infuriatingly knowing look all the courtly women seemed to have mastered.

"Merin, we need to talk," Renarin said, sheathing his sword and tugging on Merin's cloak. "We have to decide where we're going."

Merin frowned. "What decision is there to make?" he asked. "We're going to Kholinar."

"Maybe," Renarin said. "We need to talk, though."

"Choose quickly," Shinri advised. "I intend to be in Thalenah before those soldiers return, and you'll need me to open the gate for you."

Merin allowed himself to be drawn to the side. "What?" he asked. "Why not Kholinar?"

"The city is likely to be besieged," Renarin said. "King Ahven would have been a fool not to send forces to watch both Kholinar and Orinjah. They're both in laits."

“So?” Merin asked.

“Laits make wonderful positions for cities because of the rivers and the climate,” Renarin said, “but they’re horribly difficult to defend. Trapped in a steep valley, your opponent always has the high-ground advantage. A small containing force can usually hold a much larger one within a walled city, given that city is in a lait. If I’d been Ahven, I would have immediately sent forces to hold Kholinar and Orinjah to keep Elhokar from receiving reinforcements. It makes tactical sense.”

Merin frowned. “I don’t mean to offend, Renarin, but I thought you didn’t know very much about tactics.”

“My problem has never been knowledge, Merin,” Renarin said. “Leadership isn’t as much about what you know, but about how confidently you display it. That’s immaterial now, however. I just . . . don’t think we should go to Kholinar. We’ll be trapped.”

Merin’s frown deepened as he noticed the onyx in Renarin’s hand and the quick, tense exhales of wind coming from his nostrils. “Is this a guess . . . or something else?”

“A little of both,” Renarin said. “Like I said—I made my projections on too small a scale, which limited my view. I don’t think we should go to Kholinar.”

“Where then?” Merin asked.

“Lakhenran,” Renarin said confidently.

“Lakhenran?” Merin asked. “That’s part of Jah Keved—a conquered kingdom. Why would you want to go there!”

“I don’t know,” Renarin said with equal confidence.

Merin sighed, shaking his head. “It isn’t that I don’t trust your opinion, but . . . I don’t know, Renarin. Can you really do what you say? I mean, see the future?”

“It’s not like that,” Renarin said. “It’s like . . . I can see the very edges of something massive, some enormous wealth of information. I dare not get too close. It’s tremendous, and if I step inside, I fear what I might see. Yet, standing on the edges, I get hints of things. Possibilities. I see them in the way the numbers arrange, the way the permutations fall when random elements are incorporated. You have to trust me.”

Merin turned, eyeing Shinri, who stood nervously beside the Thalenah Oathgate. If soldiers returned, she would obviously have no qualms opening her own Oathgate and leaving Merin and Renarin behind.

Merin turned back to Renarin. Kholinar, with the safety of Lord Dalenar’s wisdom, had seemed like such an obvious choice. But, at the

same time, there was going to be grave disappointment within those wise eyes.

“My father won’t be there anyway,” Renarin said. “He’s marched on Crossguard already.”

Renarin seemed so certain of himself now, so different from the quiet, unassuming boy of before. “All right,” Merin said. “We’ll go to Lakhenran. I hope you’re right about this.”

Merin turned back toward the Oathgates, but Renarin caught his arm.

“There’s something else,” Renarin whispered. “We need to take her with us.”

Merin froze. “What?” he demanded quietly.

“Lady Shinri,” Renarin said. “She must not go to Thalenah. Even if we only consider political reasonings, we need to keep her with us—she has power over the Oathgates, Merin, and she’s the wife of the man invading our homeland. We can’t let her just slip away.”

Merin felt his stomach turn. “You can’t be suggesting what I think you are,” he said through gritted teeth. “The woman just saved my life!”

“And we should show our thanks by making certain she doesn’t fall into enemy hands,” Renarin said. “I’ll take care of it. Just be ready to back me up.”

Merin closed his eyes. There wasn’t time for arguing, however. The room would soon be flooded with Veden soldiers, and Shardblade or no, Merin couldn’t fight an entire palace worth of soldiers.

“Lady Shinri,” he said. “Please open the Gate to Lakhenran.”

“Lakhenran?” She asked with surprise. “What wind takes you *that* direction! Why not just go to Veden City itself!”

“Just do it, please,” Merin said.

She sighed, walking over to a rectangular Gate constructed of a ruddy bronze metal, inset with smooth, bubble-like red gems. She reached out to the large opal at the side of the Gate, and lay her hand upon it.

She made a sudden intake of breath, visible only to Merin, and held it. Her eyes closed, and her face adopted a strangely excited look.

It’s like Renarin said, Merin realized. She sees things within the opal, things like the wind, or Renarin’s numbers.

Misty-white smoke fell from the top of the Gate, coating its center like an undulating sheet. The Gate was active. Merin took a breath and strode forward, through the sheet, and stepped into an empty, dome-like room lit by several windows.

Renarin approached the Gate behind him. Merin could see him through

the patch of disturbed smoke, standing beside the still-enraptured Shinri. Renarin met Merin's eyes, then reached out and grabbed Shinri by the shoulder, pushing her through the Oathgate before him.

Shinri yelped in surprise, her eyes snapping open and she stumbled—and nearly fell—through the smoke. Renarin came through afterward, still holding firmly to Shinri's arm.

"What is this!" the girl screamed, struggling. "Let me go!" She twisted in Renarin's grip, turning to flail against him with a barrage of feminine punches. Renarin held her as best he could, but the woman was amazingly agile. She squirmed and writhed in his grip, trying to leap toward the still-open Oathgate and escape.

Merin sighed. *Almighty forgive me*, he thought. *Because this certainly doesn't feel very noble . . .*

"Enough!" Merin snapped, raising his Shardblade, point-first toward Shinri. "Close the gate, Lady Shinri. We don't want the Vedens knowing which Gate we chose."

Shinri froze, eyes falling on the glimmering Blade just a few inches from her chin. She looked up, enraged anger flaring in her eyes. "How dare you!"

"Listen," Merin said. "The soldiers are coming on the other side. You don't have time to escape through another Oathgate anyway. Close the portal. Otherwise they'll pour through and take us captive. You think they'll let you have another chance to escape after this?"

Slowly, something coalesced in Shinri's eyes—her rage cooling to an icy hatred, then dropping behind a veil of control. Her face grew flat, and she shook off Renarin's hands with a dignified motion. At that moment, Merin noticed something odd—her sleeve was turned inside out, and the inside lining of the cloth was unraveled in a twisted mess.

"You're no better than *him*," Shinri said, laying her hand on the Gate's control opal. This time she did not close her eyes. The smoke dissipated, and the Oathgate fell still.

Merin breathed in relief. A moment later, the doors to the Oathgate chamber burst open, and two tenset worried soldiers piled into the room.

"Congratulations," Shinri said. "You've managed to lead us from one prison into another."

chapter 64

JASNAH 14

TALN'S DISAPPEARANCE DIDN'T STOP the influx of soldiers and recruits—apparently, the momentum of the Herald rumors were too strong to be bothered by something so trivial as the actual Herald's absence.

The army was a frighteningly diverse group. Many of its members showed surprising, even alarming, faith in Taln's ability to defeat their pursuers. If these believers had been in charge, the army would have turned to follow its god—not to help, but to watch in wonder as their Herald destroyed the infidels.

Jasnah listened to such sentiments with stupefaction. Most of those who spoke hadn't even heard of the army a few weeks before, yet they were already fanatically devoted to their 'god.' Granted, most of them were Elinrah believers, and while orthodox Vorinism had given up on the myth of the Returns long ago, Elinrah still taught men to watch for signs of the coming Heralds. Yet Jasnah couldn't help thinking that if these people's faith was truly as powerful and as loyal as they claimed, they wouldn't be willing to transfer it to Taln so flippantly. They were exactly the sort of chaotic element that made her uncomfortable with religion.

Others in the army were far more skeptical. The mercenaries formed the keenest edge of this sentiment, and Vinde—Kemnar's lanky second—had difficulty keeping the zealots from turning on their more secular comrades.

Even with Vinde's policing force—formed from some of the army's more stable elements—there were occasional brawls. Of course, some of that could be blamed on the overall tension in the army; for while there were a good number of both zealots and skeptics, the majority of the people were just frightened.

This core group of people believed that Taln was a Herald, while at the same time worrying that he wasn't. Jasnah could see their tension. Many had joined the army less from design and more by happenstance—they had come by curiosity, whim, or desperation. There was no way to keep news of army's pursuit quiet, not with Nachin and his family in camp. Rumors of the Veden tensquad ran through the camp, bringing with it a anxiety that wasn't dulled even by the firm marching speed Meridas instituted.

The rumors only grew worse when, several days out of Galevan, one of Meridas's young runners arrived at the camp with confirmation of the Veden army's existence. According to the scout, the invaders had gained on Jasnah's group. He admitted that there was no sign of Taln or Kemnar.

They had their first desertions that night. It was a poor precedent, even if their recruits still far outnumbered the disappearances. However, it reminded the men of what they really were—not a cohesive army, trained by a formal nation and in its employ, but a random band of pseudo-refugees held together tenuously, if at all. There would be no hunts for deserters, no executions of those who fled. They had come on their own; they could leave the same way.

Morale was not improved by the marching conditions, or by the need for rationing. Before leaving Galevan, Meridas had surprised Jasnah by managing to arrange a nervous trading session with the city lords. His argument had been simple—he reminded them that every moment the city delayed them, even by trading, was a moment it could claim to have helped its Veden conspirators. The strange reverse-argument acquired the army much needed supplies, though the session drained a good portion of their remaining chips.

Even with the purchases, however, the food would not last long, and it was difficult to hide this fact from the men, since they were the ones carrying it. Jasnah knew that the camp must assume that she had far more currency than she did, otherwise the desertions would have been much greater. However, if the Veden army did approach, she had little doubt that most of these people would abandon her. They had come to fight for

a Herald, for food, and for pay. Soon, they would find themselves without any of the three.

“HIS NAME IS ANEAZER, and he calls himself the ‘Lord of Riemak,’” Nachin explained. “Everyone in the area knows about him, and a good number of the cities pay him a protection tribute.”

“‘Protection’ from his own men, no doubt,” Vinde spat. The long-limbed man sat looking at Kemnar’s map, Brother Lhan and the escaped soldier standing with him. Jasnah sat apart a short distance, listening quietly.

“True, Lord Vinde,” Nachin agreed. “Any city that refuses him is . . . persuaded otherwise. However, Aneazer does make good on his contract. When raiders or bandits try to attack cities or caravans under his protection, he makes swift retribution. In a way, it’s one of the safest areas in Riemak—or one of the most dangerous, since it’s oppressed by the tyrant with the most men and the best equipment.”

“And he controls the Holy City?” Vinde asked. The lanky man was trying very hard to carry Kemnar’s position the same way he carried the man’s blade, but neither was an easy task. Jasnah had been forced to take upon herself some of the duties Kemnar had been doing—making certain food distribution happened in a timely manner, meting out minor disciplinary actions, and other basic tasks. The aggregate was simply too overwhelming for a man such as Vinde, who was an honest soldier and a well-trained duelist, but who had never commanded anything larger than a squad of ten men.

Nachin, however, had proven a surprising resource. He quickly proved his word on being one of the best fighters in the area, his knowledge of tactics was sound, and he was remarkably honorable. Of all the men in Galevan, only he had come to her with the truth behind the city’s betrayal. While several other soldiers had drifted out of the city, deciding to throw their lot in with the Herald, none had Nachin’s skill or determination. He didn’t look much like a soldier with his small, awkward build and twitching eyes, but he certainly acted like one.

“Will this Aneazer trade with us?” Lhan asked. The monk had, at Vinde’s pleading, taken a more active hand in camp administration. Though he had little experience, Lhan’s position as a Vorin clergyman had gained him the respect and goodwill of the general soldiers. Vinde gained some measure of authority simply by being seen counseling with the monk.

Nachin shrugged. “Trade? No, I think Aneazer will likely to consider us

a threat. An armed force, traveling through his territory? He'll think we've come to try and capture his Oathgate."

Oathgate. It was easy to forget about the Jorevan Gate. It was used rarely, and then only by merchants willing to pay the exorbitant fees demanded by the despot who controlled the Holy City. She supposed that was probably this 'Lord Aneazer.'

"Oathgate!" Nachin exclaimed. "That's right! Maybe we can . . ."

"Doesn't work that way," Vinde said with a shake of his head. "Both sides have to be open, and the one in Ral Eram is most certainly sealed. It's a hope, I suppose—but a flimsy one."

"Oh," Nachin said, let down. His eyes glanced toward Vinde's—Kemnar's—Shardblade. To Nachin, born away from civilization in Riemak's wilds, a Shardblade was probably a legendary thing, perhaps even thought mythological.

"It just seems like a bad idea, Lord Vinde," Nachin said. "No Oathgate, no money to trade, and a city ruled by the most powerful despot in Riemak. Why even go to Jorevan? Why not head for Alethkar?"

"Talenel told us to meet him in the Holy City," Jasnah said, surprising the two with her entrance into the conversation. "That, then, is where we shall go."

Vinde blushed. "Yes, my lady," he said. "Of course. We didn't mean to . . ."

"I know you didn't," Jasnah said, turning away.

Unfortunately, Nachin was right. She had heard other army members speak of Aneazer. All agreed that he was a ruthless man, especially with those who posed him a threat. Even though Jasnah's men were poorly equipped and barely trained, their numbers were quickly approaching a thousand. Theirs was not an incursion that could be ignored.

Of course, without Taln, they might as well disband the army anyway—with the Vedens approaching, her men wouldn't last long beyond his failure to return.

Failure to return. It had been six days. He would have met the Vedens five days before, around the same time as Meridas's scouts. Whatever plan Taln had intended, he had likely executed it by now.

Nachin and Vinde trailed away, their conversation stilled by her comment. Brother Lhan remained where he was.

"It's probably too soon for him to be back," Lhan said. "There is little sense in worrying about him, though I doubt you can help yourself."

Jasnah stifled a blush. "What makes you think I was . . ."

Lhan nodded to the south. "You've been staring in the direction he went for the last hour. You do that a lot, these days."

This time she did blush. She glanced away. "I'm just worried about the army," she said. "The rumors that he'll never return are growing stronger, and we had more desertions yesterday than we had new arrivals."

"Well, *that's* certainly something worth worrying about. I'm afraid we're making something of a mess of your army."

"You're doing fine, Brother Lhan," she said.

Lhan raised an eyebrow. "I made only a passable monk, my lady. I'm not sure what possessed me to think I might make a good general. It's Vinde's fault—I told him that I would be of no help, but he wouldn't listen. You see, I've spent my entire life striving to be as useless as possible."

"You say that as if you are proud of it," Jasnah said with a frown.

"You have to admit," Lhan said, "it is a something of an accomplishment. Few men can truthfully claim to be as vestigial as myself. The only problem with my success is somehow I've arrived in a position where there are tasks I actually wish to accomplish—and, unfortunately, I find myself woefully underqualified." He sat uncomfortably for a moment before speaking again. "It's breaking apart, my lady. Even I can tell that."

"I know," Jasnah said. "Taln was their heart—the reason they came."

"It's more than that," Lhan said. "Kemnar and Taln . . . they knew things. Understood things. They could make certain all the jobs got done, and that everyone wanted to do them. Vinde tries—in fact, I worry that he tries too hard. But he's no substitute for Kemnar, and Meridas doesn't care to even try to be a replacement for Taln."

I shouldn't have sent Kemnar after him, Jasnah thought, not for the first time. She hadn't realized how vital the man had become to the army's running. Regardless of whether Meridas or Taln were in charge, the people had come to Kemnar to settle their disputes. His efficiency had made certain everyone had enough to eat, everyone knew where to sleep, and that guards were always posted. Meridas knew how to organize an army, but he obviously expected these little details to be covered by others. Though Taln had carried the people's hopes, Kemnar had carried their day-to-day, functional respect.

And all this time I was using him as my personal messenger. Kemnar's duties as her guard had been a little more important than that, of course, but she had always used his raw effectiveness for uninspired purposes. If his ability to organize this army was any indication, Kemnar could have become a senior general in the King's army despite his low noble rank. She hadn't

realized what she'd kept him from. He probably didn't either—ambition seemed a foreign word to the man.

And now they might both be dead. The thought made her stomach twist. She had come to rely on them both so much—Kemnar for what he did, Taln for . . . something else. She told herself it was his ability to unite the army, that she wanted so desperately for him to return only because she had based her play for troops upon his growing reputation.

He was so frustrating. He rarely did what she told him, and—despite his oath—he always found a way to wiggle out of her commands. Even worse, he was condescending. It wasn't intentional, of course, but it was there. Sometimes he acted as if she were simply a child, though he couldn't be more than five or six years her senior. More bothersome than his insubordination and his self-importance, however, was his determination to see the world he wanted to, rather than as it really was. She had always hated people who deluded themselves—whether they did so through religion or through unrealistic expectations. Taln, however, put such mild offenders to shame.

Jasnah nodded to herself. He was a madman. It was better that he be gone, thereby leaving the army to understand their true situation. The ones who stayed once they realized that Taln wasn't going to return would be the strong ones, the ones she wanted anyway. Yes, it was certainly better that he had left. Left her. Alone.

"Don't worry," Lhan said. "He'll return."

"Don't be a fool, Lhan," Jasnah snapped. "He went to die out there—to slow the Vedens down as much as possible and take as many of them with him as he could. He won't be returning. We both know that."

"Actually," Lhan corrected with a pleasant voice, "I *don't* know that. And, unless you've been hiding a talent for numerology, I doubt that you know it either. I've seen him do some amazing things. Perhaps he will return."

"Unlikely," Jasnah said.

Lhan sat back with a thoughtful expression. "You know, people say you're paranoid," he said. "The citizens of Ral Eram talk about you a lot. The king's heretic, distrusting sister, the woman with a heart as chill as a highland storm."

Jasnah adopted a cold expression, not dignifying the insult with a comment.

Lhan continued as if he hadn't noticed her icy glare. "They're wrong about you. I know paranoia—trust me, when such people come to the monastery, I'm the one who gets to take care of them. You, my lady, are not paranoid."

"I'm not?" Jasnah said flatly.

"No," Lhan said. "You're just a pessimist. Not the overt kind—the man who complains that his lot isn't as good as that of his neighbor, or who tells his friends their ideas are foolish. No, you're a true pessimist. A planning, thinking pessimist. You assume things will turn out for the worst, and so you prepare for them to do so. You distrust not because you logically determine that someone will betray you, but because you know that their betrayal is the worst possible outcome of the relationship. You find fault to prove to yourself that you are right. And, most importantly, you refuse to believe—for in belief, there is always the worry that you might be wrong. That's not a worry you can endure, for your mind is always nagging that if you *might* be wrong, you probably are."

Jasnah opened her mouth, then found herself shockingly unable to respond. Something about the monk's solemn, friendly gaze made her want to squirm uncomfortably. Was this the same insulting, mocking man that had traveled with them for so long? How had he suddenly learned to be so . . . observant?

"I realize you don't believe in the Almighty, Jasnah," Lhan said. "And, to be honest, there are times when I don't know that I believe in Him either—though those times usually come when I'm scrubbing yet another floor. The faith of religion is, perhaps, something that will never suit you. You could, however, try to believe in your friends."

Friends. Ladies of the court didn't have friends. They had their allies, their enemies, and their husband. Jasnah looked up, containing her introspection and instead studying the smiling monk.

Lhan shrugged. "Instead of analyzing your personality, I could just make fun of you for a while—if you think it would make you feel more comfortable."

Jasnah snorted. "Go see if you can find a way to bother Meridas," she said, waving her hand. "The winds know, he could use a little humility."

"I shall do my best," Lhan said valiantly, then wandered off in the direction of the rations cart.

Jasnah sighed, pulling her cloak close and looking again to the south. At the speeds Nachin had given for the enemy army, the invaders would catch Jasnah's group in another day, two at the most. They would soon know whether or not Taln's delaying tactics had been effective.

chapter 65

JEK 11

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, pulled his cloak tight as he stood atop a stone hill, watching northward. The wind was indeed strong here, in the lands of the east. He could feel it even when there was no highstorm. In Shinavar, trees and brush blocked its wrath, but in Kanar the only foliage grew low to the ground, quelled by the wind's domineering will. Almost, he could believe the wind to be a god, as the easterners believed. It certainly did seem 'almighty' at times.

To the north, men were dying. Ahven's army was still a day's march from Crossguard, sequestered in a large rift in the ground, remarkably undiscovered. The Veden pointmen had done their work well. Elhokar and Dalenar would be fools if they didn't suspect something, but Ahven hoped they blamed each other for their missing scouts and dead messengers.

Jek thought he could see the battlefield. It was a clear, bright day, despite the wind. There was a dark blot on the horizon. Armies? Perhaps, but it was equally likely that Jek's eyes were simply seeing what his mind thought that they should.

The messenger came on time, his red and white pass-flag flapping very prominently from the saddle. His news would be several hours old now; he had probably left Crossguard the moment the fight between Elhokar and Dalenar had begun. Jek tracked the man's horse, then turned and walked

back toward the camp. He reached Ahven's pavilion before the messenger, and waited quietly for the horseman to approach.

Ahven stood at a map table that had been erected in the open air before the pavilion. Several of Ilhadal's generals stood nearby, chatting quietly with their king. Ahven was friendly but reserved, dignified without seeming removed. He was exactly the type of leader the Veden people liked—young, handsome, straight-backed, and disciplined. Whoever had trained Ahven to act this part had done a good job. The generals treated Ahven with respect, and he in turn listened carefully to their suggestions. His willingness to listen made him seem wise, yet the way he spoke when he made the final decisions left no question as to who was in charge.

And Vedens always felt more comfortable when they knew exactly who was in charge.

I wonder if Ilhadal realizes how thoroughly his army has been stolen from him, Jek thought. The Davar First Prince probably thought himself still in control. However, he would never be a force in Kanaran politics again.

The generals quieted as one of them noticed the approaching messenger. To the side, Jek noticed Balenmar, the aged Aleth councilor, step from his tent and wander toward the table. The elderly man's eyes were curious.

The messenger dismounted, then rushed forward with the bearing of one who had important information. He stopped before Ahven's table, dropping to one knee.

"The battle has begun, my lord," the man informed. "It began soon after dawn, both armies engaging at once. The final counts put Dalenar Kholin with near twenty-one thousand troops, and King Elhokar with twenty-six. Elhokar has thirty-five Shardbearers, but Dalenar only twenty-six."

The generals nodded at the information. "The king has the advantage, then," one of them declared to general assent. Both armies were well-rested, and previous counts had placed Elhokar with more archers and better equipment than Dalenar. They also had the advantage of several towers captured from Crossguard, as well as the city walls to use as archer stations. Elhokar's force trumped that of Dalenar in every area.

"The Tyrantbane will win the day," Ahven said.

The talk grew quiet. "Why do you say that, your majesty?" one of the generals finally ventured.

"Because he is Dalenar Kholin," Ahven said simply, as if his reasoning were obvious. "Elhokar has the edge in men and equipment, but that edge is slight. Dalenar's men will fight harder, for they best believe in the nobility

of their lord. On the morrow, when our own forces attack, we will face Dalenar Kholin, and not his foolish nephew.”

The generals glanced at each other, but they obviously had too much respect to contradict their liege. “Either way,” one offered, “it will be a broken army we face. Dalenar’s arrival was certainly fortunate! Once the Aleth destroy one another, there won’t be any left to resist us.”

This restored the mood, and the generals turned to interrogating the messenger for specific troop placements, so that they could theorize how the battle would proceed. Ahven dismissed himself from their group with an acknowledging nod, then strolled over to stand beside Jek. He didn’t speak for a moment, instead watching the generals deliberate. The man was different when he was in public—he had a charismatic, aristocratic air about him. Regal, even. Jek could almost believe him to be an honorable man.

“You were surprised at my words,” Ahven finally said, turning to look at Jek.

“Yes,” Jek admitted.

“You disagree?”

“No, actually,” Jek said. “But I did not expect to hear you speak of nobility and honor. I would have thought that you would view Dalenar Kholin as a fool and a traditionalist.”

Ahven smiled to himself. He glanced back at the generals and their aides for a few more moments before returning to the conversation with Jek.

“What do men want in a leader, assassin?” he asked.

Jek frowned. “Eastern men, or Shin men?”

“They are the same,” Ahven said.

Hardly. Jek did not wish to argue the point, however. “Men look for strength. They want a leader who makes wise decisions, and moral men seek a leader who will act with honor.”

“Close,” Ahven said. “They do look for honor. But it is not morality that spurs them to do so—it is guilt.” Ahven turned away from Jek, looking over his army. “Man’s greatest desire is to delude himself, assassin. He seeks every opportunity to do so—in love, in faith, and especially in war. It is vital that soldiers be able to convince themselves that their leader is honorable, for only then can they place their sins upon him. They can pretend not to think; they can simply do as they are told. This is why men gravitate toward leaders with grand reputations for honor. Deep inside, however, we all know the truth. The leader’s duty is to accept the guilt of his followers—to give them reasons to kill, to lie about his nobility so they can cling to their fabricated beliefs.”

Generals deliberated and soldiers chatted, but Jek only heard the wind above. *The leader's duty is to accept the guilt of his followers . . .*

Suddenly a number of things made sense.

"That's why you do it," Jek whispered. "The random killings. You're trying to force yourself to be heartless."

"A leader cannot afford a conscience, assassin," Ahven said quietly. "He must be strong where his people are weak. When the difficult decisions arrive, he will have to make them—everyone will expect him to make them. Invading another kingdom, causing the deaths of thousands . . . No regular man could be expected to bear the guilt of such a decision. But a leader . . . a king . . . this is what they ask of him."

Jek suppressed a shiver. There was a twisted nobility to the concept, and it unnerved him. "Bajerden thought differently."

"Bajerden the Wise?" Ahven asked with amusement. "Author of *The Way of Kings*? Assassin, I learned these things from him."

Jek snorted. "Then you weren't listening very carefully. Bajerden, Fandeladana in our tongue, is the only Kanaran man to ever be granted a Truthname by the Shin."

"And your people were wise to do so," Ahven said. "For Bajerden truly understood the ways of men. What is *The Way of Kings*? A book that describes the ideal leader, a nobleman who sacrifices his will for the good of his people. Bajerden's 'Sovereign' is a perfect man—a man of nobility, of mercy, and of virtue. An impossibility. Bajerden set up an ideal that could not be reached, and he did it intentionally, as an object lesson. He wanted to prove that no man could be what his people desired. Yet at the same time, Bajerden showed that this ideal man is what the leader must appear to be. The more perfectly a leader maintains the appearance that he is infallible, the more his soldiers will be able to ignore their own guilt, and the better they will fight. But if he falls . . ."

Jek shook his head. Disgust welled within him. "You are a broken embarrassment of a king, Ahven Vedenel," he said quietly.

"Oh?" Ahven asked. "And what of you? What of the murders you have committed? The helpless and the young? What of their slaughters?"

"Those were your—" Jek broke off.

"My fault," Ahven said, smiling slightly. "My guilt, not yours. You are a tool."

"Your earlier logic does not hold," Jek said angrily. "I don't look to you for honor."

"That is because for you, the illusion is broken," Ahven said. "And for

that, you hate me. If, however, I were someone you wanted to trust—say, one of your Shin holy men—things would be different. What if one of your Stone Shamans ordered you to kill a child? What if he convinced you that that child's death would protect the greater good? Your shamans are the only ones who can order a violation of your all-powerful Truth, are they not?"

"They would never do such a thing," Jek said. "You think you understand our ways, but you know nothing. The Holetental would not command the death of an innocent as you have."

"Oh?" Ahven asked. "And what of the invasion nearly twenty years ago?"

Jek paused. "That was different."

"Was it?" Ahven prompted. "You sided with Jarnah, the Conqueror. You invaded the Kanaran Peninsulas, slaying thousands, capturing Thalenah, Vedenar, and Prallah. And you did it all upon the word of your shamans, who claimed the Return had come again, that the Stormshades had returned to Roshar."

Jek held his gaze firm, but he felt like looking away in shame. The Jarnah invasion was something few Shin wished to discuss.

"What happened at the end, assassin?" Ahven asked. "Did you find any demons to slay, or did you just find innocent soldiers? What of the claimed Return? Seventeen years have passed without sign of any monsters come to destroy humankind. Your shamans were wrong, but you listened to them anyway. You killed upon their word. Conquered, just as I do. What did your shamans see? Were their visions wrong? Or, perhaps, did they have a simpler motive? A desire to capture the lands to the east . . . an excuse."

"Enough!" Jek snapped.

Ahven nodded with sagacious understanding.

You understand nothing, Idiot King, Jek thought furiously. *You twist and pervert.* The self-convincing, however, wasn't strong enough to dispel the questions Ahven had raised. Jek stood for a few uncomfortable minutes, wrestling with what the Idiot King had said, until an annoyed Ilhadal appeared on the scene.

"Why was I not informed of the messenger's arrival?" the hefty man demanded.

"Obviously you were, Lord Davar," Ahven said smoothly. "Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"Only because I left one of my men here to watch in case news arrive!" Ilhadal said. "I'm leader of House Davar—I should be sent for *before* an important messenger gives his report."

One of the generals mumbled something to his companions, who smiled

in agreement. There was a general opinion that Ilhadal shouldn't leave aides to listen to the battle plans, but attend the meetings himself. However, Ilhadal hadn't returned to the battle meetings ever since embarrassing himself on the first day, when he had displayed a noted lack of tactical understanding.

"An oversight," Ahven promised. "No offence was intended, Lord Davar. Besides, this wasn't really an important messenger. He simply told us that the battle had begun, but we knew that it would anyway."

Ilhadal looked partially soothed by the words. "The two Aleth forces have met, then. When do we march?"

"Soon," Ahven promised. "Tomorrow morning, likely. We will arrive that evening, then attack the following morning. Whatever forces are left will give us little trouble—though, if you wish, you may join with our generals as they plan our attack . . ."

Ilhadal paled just slightly. "I have no time," he said. "I must prepare my men to march. Good day, Ahven."

The king smiled as Ilhadal scrambled away, a host of attendants and aides trailing behind him. "That man will have to be dealt with eventually," Ahven said quietly, so only Jek could hear. "I cannot have a man beneath me, even a House Leader, who shows such disrespect. It weakens the soldiers' confidence in me."

Jek found himself nodding, then paused. He would never be able to take one of Ahven's comments about leadership the same way again.

"He needn't be killed," Jek said quietly. "You could always just embarrass him. That seems to work well with . . ." he trailed off as he realized Ahven wasn't watching his lips. The king's eyes were instead focused on something in the distance.

Jek turned, squinting against the late morning light, and made out another rider approaching, pass-flag flapping in the wind. Like the previous messenger, the man approached Ahven's pavilion directly. When he dismounted, it was obvious from his expression that he bore urgent—and probably unpleasant—news.

Jek frowned. He didn't recognize the messenger, a youthful, thin man, short enough that he could have been mistaken for a child. A long-distance messenger, chosen for his post because of his light body.

"You aren't from the battlefield," Ahven said with surprise, just as Jek realized the same thing. "You came from Ral Eram."

"Yes, my majesty. I bring important news."

Ahven frowned, glancing at the generals. He obviously wasn't pleased

that the messenger had sought him out in public. "Does this relate to the war against Alethkar?" Ahven asked carefully.

"Not directly, my lord," the wiry messenger said.

Relief flashed briefly in Ahven's eyes. "Then we will speak in private," he said, gesturing toward the pavilion.

The messenger nodded. "Yes, your majesty."

Jek trailed behind the two, and was not forbidden, though Ahven did glance at him. *He probably expects to have to send me to kill someone*, Jek realized as he pulled the tent flap closed.

"Speak quietly," Ahven said to the messenger, "and do not repeat your message to anyone else. If you have bad news, I will need to control it for the good of the army. We go to war on the morrow."

"I understand, my lord," the messenger said.

"Good. What is your news?"

"It's about your wife, my lord," the man said uncomfortably. "She . . . appears to be in league with the Aleths."

Ahven actually paled. "What happened?"

"She fled the city, my lord," the messenger said. "She helped Lord Dalenar's son and the other Aleth nobleman escape, then fled with them through the Oathgates."

Ahven reached out, as if looking for something to steady himself. His eyes flashed shock, then uncertainty, then finally rage—a deep, wild rage, so passionate that it made him tremble. Jek watched with interest, and the messenger took a step back in surprise.

Ahven gritted his teeth, eyes wide, breathing deep, as a buried instability manifested. Jek had always wondered if it were there—a man such as Ahven could not be completely sane.

"Where did she go?" Ahven finally forced out between hissing breaths.

"We . . . we don't know, my lord. The Oathgates have stopped working."

"All of them?"

"Yes, my lord," the messenger said.

Ahven's struggle to regain control of himself was manifest in his twisting expressions. Eventually, he pointed toward another room of the pavilion. "Go there," he told the messenger, "and stay. Speak to no one."

Even as the messenger was bowing his response, Ahven stalked from the room with a hurried gait. Jek trailed behind, walking from the tent and passing the curious generals. Ahven walked only a short distance, toward a dark brown tent that Jek had never seen him enter.

Jek frowned as they approached, realizing he didn't even know the tent's

purpose. It was in the lord's section of the camp, but it flew no glyphs or other identification. It was tucked out of the way, off the main pathways, though it did bear a couple of soldiers as guards.

The men bowed as Ahven approached, but the king didn't acknowledge them. He threw back the entrance flaps with an impatient gesture, then stalked into the room beyond.

Jek slipped in behind, and was met by a familiar sight. It must have been difficult to transport the large onyx block so far, but apparently Ahven thought the gain worth the effort. The three youthful seers sat atop the black stone, as they had in the temple back in Veden City. Except this time, one of them—the youngest boy—lay on his back instead of sitting. The boy was not moving. The other two sat, staring at their trickling sands and the patterns they made on the floor.

"What is happening!" Ahven demanded without preface. "The girl is lost to me, and the Oathgates have collapsed."

"I . . . I don't know," said the oldest of the three seers, a girl of perhaps sixteen years. There was a powerful weariness to her voice, and more than a bit of frustration.

"*You don't know?*" Ahven all but screamed. "Tell me what you see!"

"You're pushing them too hard, my lord," said a robed figure at the side. "They don't have the—"

Ahven held up a stiff hand, cutting the man off. "Speak!" he commanded the female seer.

"It's muddy," she complained. "Someone is changing things."

"Someone?" Ahven asked. "This Windrunner you've warned me about?"

"No," the girl said. Jek stepped closer, trying to get a better look at the youths in the dark light. The air was musty with incense, light provided only by a dim brazier.

"It's not him," the girl continued. "It must be a seer, one of us. Another one, somewhere."

"So powerful . . ." said the seer beside her, the boy who was sitting up. "He's so powerful."

"He? Who is he?" Ahven prodded.

The girl shook her head. "Everything used to be clear, but now . . . it's as if someone has reached out and scattered my sand."

"He's interfering intentionally?" Ahven asked.

"No," the girl said. "He's just . . . so powerful that he makes it difficult for the rest of us. His light is bright enough to make the shadows of what we might have seen disappear."

“He helped take the Elsecaller,” the boy whispered. “And she is linked to everything. We told you to take her, and to hold her, but you let her go. She is the key. He who controls her controls the world.”

Ahven gritted his teeth, but most of his rage appeared to have dissipated. He was in control again, though he was still obviously frustrated. He glanced at the third child, the one who was lying on his back. Jek edged a little closer, and saw to his horror that the child wasn't just resting. The young boy was staring sightlessly into the air, his eyes blank. His body was rigid and motionless, a bit of spittle dribbling slowly down his cheek. Somehow Jek knew this was no trance or passing fit. Something had happened, something that had taken the child's mind.

“When did he go?” Ahven demanded, nodding toward the boy.

“A short time ago, my lord,” the cloaked figure said. “We were going to tell you tonight.”

“The void took him,” the female seer whispered. “He saw something in the sands that frightened him.”

“What?” Ahven demanded.

The girl shook her head. “He wouldn't tell us, but it scared him. Terrified him. The muddled sands wouldn't tell him any more about it, and he grew frustrated. He looked where men should not, though we told him not to.”

“He had to know,” the non-comatose boy said. “It calls to us, you know. The knowledge.”

Jek shivered, backing away from the pedestal and its youthful seers. Ahven, however, looked more annoyed than he did frightened.

“Only two left, and they are of no use,” the king said. “Keep looking. Do not rest until you discover where that girl has gone!”

The female seer nodded, though from the look of her tired face, Jek doubted she would be able to remain awake much longer.

Ahven stared at the seers for a moment longer, then turned and threw the tent flaps out of his way and stalked outside. He pointed at the first guard he saw.

“You!” he commanded.

“Yes, my lord?” the man said.

“Go to the generals by my pavilion,” he told the messenger. “Give them an order on my behalf.”

“What order, my lord?” the soldier asked.

“Tell them to prepare the men to march,” Ahven said. “We leave for Crossguard within the hour.”

“Yes, my lord,” the guard said, then bowed and backed away.

“Crossguard?” Jek asked with surprise.

“There has been enough waiting already,” Ahven said. “I will sit no longer. It is time to attack.”

“The generals won’t like moving this quickly,” Jek noted carefully. Ahven’s temper was probably still lurking beneath the newly-restored calm face.

“Their preference is immaterial,” Ahven said. “By the time we arrive, Elhokar and Dalenar will likely have finished killing one another. Even if they haven’t, their separate forces will be weakened irreparably. I will not wait three more days to claim Alethkar. We march tonight.”

Jek nodded, more because he saw the inevitability of the march than because he agreed with it. Besides, there was another topic he was curious about.

“What happened to that boy?” he asked, glancing back toward the brown tent.

“It takes them all, eventually,” Ahven said with a dismissive gesture. “The temptation to look is too great.”

“To look at what?” Jek asked.

Ahven glanced at him, annoyance glaring in his eyes. Jek bowed his head, a signal that he was done asking questions.

“I’m trying to decide whether to send you after her or not,” Ahven finally said.

“Who?” Jek asked. “Your wife?”

“She should not have run,” Ahven said. “I warned her what would happen if she disobeyed me.”

“Why send me after her?” Jek protested. “We don’t even know where she went. Are you certain you want to waste me on another frivolous chase?”

Ahven didn’t answer. He turned and stared toward the army. Men were already starting to bustle about—the messenger had obviously spread his news. The generals would soon come looking for Ahven, demanding an explanation.

“You will hunt her eventually,” Ahven decided, “but not today. Come, we have preparations to make.”

chapter 66

SHINRI 12

SHINRI SAT QUIETLY ON HER stone bench, knees pulled up against her chest in a very unladylike position, watching as the Shardbearer Merin repeatedly summoned and dismissed his Blade. He appeared fascinated by the process.

Merin held out his hand. The milky smoke gathered in his palm, then it lengthened, vaguely outlining the shape of his Shardblade. The smoke then coalesced, transforming into the silvery Shardblade. Merin stared at it with a thoughtful expression, then dismissed it, his eyes trailing the smoke as it rose toward the sky. It happened the exact same way it had the last tenset times, yet he regarded it with wonder.

He was still just a boy, despite his manly girth. Yet he was a boy who had slain three Shardbearers in a period of just a few months—two of those times he hadn't even owned a Blade himself. In fact, he had defeated the final one with his hands manacled together and his body weakened from extended captivity.

He was also a boy who had been brave enough to fight for his freedom, but heartless enough to kidnap the very woman who had helped him escape. He was a boy who had accidentally killed the man Shinri was to have married, a boy who had saved King Elhokar's life on two separate occasions. He was both a fool and a hero.

Merin summoned and dismissed his Blade again, ignorant of Shinri's judgements.

Renarin's bench sat up against the southern wall, to Shinri's right. Like Merin and Shinri, he had been allowed to retain his possessions, and he held his onyx chip between two fingers, caressing it with an almost motherly touch. There was a strangely . . . patient air about him. In Shinri's opinion, he was far too unconcerned about their captivity. So far, he hadn't begun any more of his strange number patterns, but he kept glancing at the wall longingly. If he remained a captive much longer, Shinri didn't doubt that he would begin scratching at the wall like he had in the other cell.

Shinri wasn't certain what to make of their current accommodations. They sat in the same three-room chamber that the guards had ushered them into several days before, just after their escape from Ral Eram. They had not been treated poorly; yet neither had they been given permission to leave their rooms.

Nanah, the capital of Lakhenran, sat against a series of seaside cliffs, and Shinri's prison had been built near the top of one of the inclines. The main room bore a large window on one side, granting a view of the city and its harbors, with the ocean spreading out beyond. Nanah was a city of domes and spires—the Lakhenran had always been an artistically-inclined people. The rooms were sparsely furnished, but Shinri and the others had been given every requested amenity. Merin's Blade had not been removed from him, and while their captors had given them nothing in the way of audiences or information, they had been treated with respect.

Despite Shinri's fears, no Veden soldiers had come for them. The guards at their chamber doors wore Lakhenran light blue—though the white Veden crests that marked their shoulders bespoke the true rulers of this nation.

What did it mean? Surely the Veden soldiers had come through the Lakhenran Oathgate looking for Shinri and the others. While the Vedens probably assumed that their captives had escaped to Kholinar, they would have been fools not to check through friendly Oathgates just to be certain.

Shinri shook her head. She wasn't certain why they hadn't been taken back to Veden City yet, but Merin and Renarin's choice to travel to Lakhenran was pure insanity. And bringing Shinri through against her will . . .

Merin summoned and dismissed the Blade. Shinri kept her anger contained, contenting herself by giving the boy an icy glare that he could

not see. Renarin had been the one to pull her through, but Merin had drawn his Blade against her. Though they were both at fault, it was difficult to maintain any measure of proper anger with Renarin. He was just too unassuming to be provoking. Merin, however . . . everything about him was infuriating.

It wasn't just his common blood, either—Shinri half-wished she were petty enough to let that provide her a reason for disliking him. No, she knew her emotions came from something deeper, and something a bit more shameful. She was jealous.

Merin had only been a lord for three months, yet he already seemed more comfortable in his place than Shinri did. He spoke to Renarin as an equal—even as a superior. Back in Alethkar, on the few times she had interacted with Merin, he had seemed uncannily comfortable with Aredor and the others. Merin didn't seem to have the same worries and concerns that she did. He didn't seem to feel the same sense of internal falseness—the same conflict between loathing the nobility and wishing to emulate them.

Who was he to slay Shardbearers and so easily take his place among kings? Who was he to be so comfortable when Shinri felt anxious? The injustice of it all was frustrating.

Merin summoned and dismissed his Blade again, and Shinri couldn't hold her tongue.

"Is that really necessary?" Shinri snapped. "I believe you've quite firmly established that if you call, the Blade will come."

Merin looked up with surprise, then flushed. "I'm sorry," he said. "It just . . . seems to help me think."

He seemed so harmless. Shinri read him, gauging his personality, trying to look past her biases. He was an earnest man; it was easy to tell from his treatment of others that he cared what they thought of him, and considered their evaluations to be more truthful than his own. He wanted to be trusted, and he wanted to do what was right—or, at least, what others told him was right. He didn't like small spaces—he constantly paced, and insisted that the window remain open at all times except during highstorms. He didn't know how to talk to women—Shinri's study of him obviously made him nervous. Harmless indeed.

But what was it Renarin said about him? A Windrunner? That was, of course, ridiculous. Windrunners were things of legend. They were one of the Ten Epellion Knighthoods—sects of mystical Epoch Warriors who had supposedly been founded to keep peace in Roshar and fight the

Stormshades. Merin was a fine duelist, especially considering his limited training, but he was hardly legendary.

And yet, there was something to Renarin's words, something that made them difficult to dismiss idly. Perhaps it had been that odd look in his eyes—one that had been strange even for Renarin. Or perhaps it had been the combined effect of his eerie, maddened scriblings and his foreboding words. And then there was her own memory, her . . . longings. She *had* felt something when she'd touched the Oathgate opals. She had difficulty remembering specifics, but there had been something there—something marvelous, and something she had an amorphous longing to feel again, even if she couldn't quite recall the experience.

She did have power over the Gates—that much could not be disputed. *What happened seventeen years ago . . . ?* Renarin's whispered words returned to her. She tried to dismiss them as the ramblings of a strange mind, but she couldn't. Not quite.

And that frustrated her even more.

THERE WAS SOMETHING VERY ODD about the sensation of summoning and dismissing a Shardblade. Merin couldn't quite define it, even after tensets of repetitions. When he called the Blade, there was an anticipation within, like a held breath. His heartbeats seemed to thump more loudly as the summoning progressed. And then the Blade formed, falling into his waiting grip, never taking him by surprise or catching him off-balance.

The dismissal was like a puffed breath. There was no anticipation, no waiting for heartbeats; it simply happened. Yet in that brief moment when the Blade vanished, Merin felt a sharp sense of familiarity. That fraction of a heartbeat, gone before he could do more than acknowledge it, gave him pause, causing him to summon and dismiss the blade repeatedly. He felt like he had dismissed a Blade sometime before, though that was impossible. He hadn't Bonded his Blade until earlier that very morning, his hundred days—extended slightly by time spent separated from the Blade—finally up.

That sensation . . . it was so *familiar*. He almost reached out his hand to summon the Blade again—he felt that if he could try just a few more times, he would be able to pinpoint where he had felt that dismissing sensation before.

He caught himself, however, lowering his hand. He didn't look at Lady

Shinri, but he didn't have to look to know that her eyes were on him, studying him, understanding him. He didn't want to meet those eyes, for he knew his own guilt would show. Why had he let Renarin persuade him to bring the girl? If they hadn't kidnapped her, she would be safe. There was no reason for her to be with them, held in yet another cell—which was exactly what it was, despite their guards' assurances that they were only being detained for their own protection.

At least Merin had his jade. He looked down at the bracelet around his wrist. He had managed to pry the thin metal backing off of the bracelet, and then pushed down the stones so that they touched his skin when he put on the piece of jewelry. He wore it always, despite its feminine designs, and the world around him wiggled with motion invisible to everyone else.

He also had his Blade. Ironically, his possession of the weapon was what kept him from trying to break free from the captivity. Leaving a Shardbearer with his Blade was a very dangerous move—one that indicated a hesitance. Perhaps their captors weren't sure what to do with Merin and the others. Perhaps there was still a chance that he would be set free.

That would be for the best. Merin didn't want to try and fight his way to freedom. He bore these people no anger—from what he understood, they were a conquered people themselves. Unfortunately, if they held him much longer, he would have little choice. He had to get back to Alethkar so he could help Lord Dalenar.

The room's guards obviously understood the precarious nature of the captivity. If Merin did decide to try and escape, he could slaughter tensets of men before he was subdued and his Blade taken—if, indeed, he was subdued. The soldiers acted with respect, and not a little nervousness; none of them wanted to be the man who sparked a conflict. They pretended that the 'delay' wasn't really incarceration, and for the moment Merin pretended the same.

But for how much longer? So far, Renarin seemed contented to wait, so Merin did likewise. Yet how long could they waste? Alethkar was under attack, and Lord Dalenar had undoubtedly gone to war. Merin's place was at his lord's side.

And yet he had allowed Renarin to persuade him to come to Lakhenran—a path that took him away from his lord. Had it been cowardice that had driven Merin to accept Renarin's suggestion? Did he fear facing Dalenar and receiving punishment for riding to Crossguard?

The internal accusations were difficult to ignore, and the guilt only made him more fidgety. *When will we go?* Merin thought with increasing frustration, shooting a glance at Renarin.

Renarin sat with complete disconcert. Merin had to assume that his friend knew something, or had guessed something, about their predicament. Renarin would know best—he had far more experience with political matters than Merin.

Merin sighed, standing and walking over to the window. The ocean below held tensets of ships—even more than the day before. Several more vessels were visible in the distance, slowly approaching the city. The docks were infested with scrambling workers.

“What are they all doing here?” Merin wondered.

“The ships?” Renarin asked from his bench beside the window. “That’s the Lakhenran fleet. It’s obviously gathering at King Ahven’s command.”

“Now?” Merin asked. “Isn’t it too late? Ahven has already attacked Alethkar.”

“It does seem a bit tardy,” Renarin agreed. “I don’t know why they haven’t left already.”

“He didn’t expect to leave Ral Eram so early,” Shinri mumbled from the other side of the room. “He planned to stay a few more weeks, until the naval forces were in place.”

“Why?” Renarin asked curiously. “What made him leave early?”

“Lady Jasnah,” Shinri said. “She and some others escaped the city, and Ahven feared that she might expose him. So he left early, hoping to attack King Elhokar’s forces before they were warned of the danger.”

Merin frowned, scanning the collected fleet. He knew little about navies—the first time had seen the ocean had been when the Aleth armies marched passed the Point of the Sea of Chomar on their way to Prallah. “What good will a navy do?” he asked. “I mean, the fighting will take place inland, won’t it?”

“Yes,” Renarin said, standing and leaning against the windowsill beside him. “However, the Lakhenran troops those ships hold are equally as important as the vessels themselves. There are at least four tenset transports out there—they could land an army large enough to provide serious flanking danger. Then, once the troops are off-loaded, the ships themselves can sail the coast and make certain Alethkar doesn’t receive any support from Aleth Pralir or Thalenah. Help will have to land on the other side of the Sea of Chomar, which will create a delay of at least two months.”

Merin’s frown deepened. He glanced at Renarin, speaking in a lower

voice. “Renarin, we can’t delay any longer. We have to get this information to Lord Dalenar.”

“I agree,” Renarin said cheerily. “Have you decided to try and escape, then?”

“What do you think?”

Renarin shrugged. “It’s up to you. You’re the ranking nobleman—that means you’re in charge.”

Merin froze. “*What?*” he hissed, shooting a glance back at Shinri. He kept his voice low, so she couldn’t listen in with her judgmental ears. “Renarin, I’m not in charge. You are.”

“I’m not a Shardbearer,” he said. “You outrank me.”

“So?”

“So people won’t listen to me,” Renarin said. “I have a reputation, even this far south. Everyone knows my father, and they know me by association. I’m no leader of men—I don’t pay enough attention to them, and I can’t speak in the ways that inspire loyalty. I’m no warrior, Merin. No, you’re in charge. When you decide to leave this cell, we will go.”

Merin shook his head. “Renarin, I *can’t*. I . . .” he trailed off, trying to gauge his own emotions. How could he explain the guilt he had felt while imprisoned in Ral Eram . . . the guilt he still felt?

“I don’t want to decide,” Merin finally said. “I don’t know what I’m doing, Renarin. I thought I did—I thought I was living in a story, that I was some kind of hero, like in the ballads. But heroes don’t betray their lords, and don’t let their friends ride to battle alone. Don’t let them die alone . . .”

“Leadership isn’t about choosing right all the time, Merin,” Renarin replied quietly. “It’s about accepting consequences. Surely Bajerden’s words taught you that much. How many recitations of *The Way of Kings* did you listen to?”

“A lot,” Merin said. “But I found the book kind of boring.”

Renarin smiled. “It is. But it’s true anyway.”

Merin sighed, then he glanced at Renarin. “Who are you to tell me about responsibility? You’re trying to avoid making decisions too.”

“I’m not a Shardbearer,” Renarin said, “nor am I a Windrunner.”

Merin paused. Windrunner. He wasn’t certain how to handle that comment. The stories spoke of Windrunners and the other Epellion—Stonewards, Dustbringers, and the others—with a tone reserved for the greatest of heroes. Merin didn’t belong in their midst—especially after what he had let happen to Aredor.

“I don’t know, Renarin,” he said sickly. “It’s more than just making bad

decisions. I *still* don't know what is right. Should I have gone with Aredor at first? Maybe he would still be alive. Should I have remained firm and stayed behind? If I had, then I would be at Lord Dalenar's side, defending Alethkar instead of sitting in a cell far to the south. I wavered in between, and I still don't know which decision would have been right."

"There was a third decision," Renarin said. "The one you did make—leaving afterward, trying to find a way to bring Aredor back with you. If you hadn't made that decision, then we wouldn't have been able to help Lady Shinri."

"Help her?" Merin asked. "Renarin, we kidnapped her."

Renarin shrugged. "This was the right place to come, Merin. Lakhnenran was the best choice of many."

"But why?"

Renarin shrugged. "The Almighty curse me if I know."

Merin closed his eyes, leaning against the window sill and feeling the breeze from without. It was colder here in the south, but pleasantly so.

"Merin," Renarin said encouragingly, "you're doing fine. It's natural to think of past decisions—that will help you understand how to choose better in the future. However, don't let your worries make you useless in the present—especially if there are current decisions you need to be making."

"Like what?" Merin asked. "Like whether or not I should take my Blade and cut down those poor men who have been assigned to guard us?"

"That's one decision you could make," Renarin said. "However, I think there's something more important you need to consider. I think, perhaps, it's time to ask yourself if you really want to be a nobleman. Do you?"

Merin stood quietly for a moment. "I don't know," he said. "It seems like a ridiculous question, doesn't it? Who wouldn't want to be a Shardbearer? But . . ."

"Being a lord isn't about carrying a Blade," Renarin said. "Though I don't think I understood that until I lost my own. It can't just be about the sword, Merin—otherwise any fool who managed to get a Blade would automatically become a good leader. No, there has to be more. In the end, I think it's all about decisions. A spearman doesn't have to make them; he can wait until he's told what to do. A lord has to be willing to decide—and not just for himself, but for others as well."

Merin nodded quietly.

"You were given a Blade," Renarin said, "but I don't think you ever really decided to be a Shardbearer. It's more than loyalty. It's more than doing

what Lord Dalenar tells you. It's about doing what you think is best, even if there isn't anyone else there to give commands."

There was an unspoken suggestion in those words. *Decide now. What will it be? Lord or citizen?* Ever since that first day on the battlefield, Merin had been trying to figure out what his place was. No one seemed to be able to tell him exactly what he should be doing.

And it didn't appear that anyone was going to.

"Renarin," he said slowly, still leaning on the sill and looking out the window. "Do you think the reason we came here might have something to do with those ships?"

Renarin turned speculatively. "I wondered that myself," he said. "Perhaps. Knowledge of the fleet's numbers and position would certainly be valuable information for the Aleth forces to receive."

"And if the ships never left at all?" Merin asked.

Renarin paused for a second, then he shrugged. "That would be even better, obviously."

Merin nodded, standing. "All right, then. Let's go." The smoke appeared in his hand almost without conscious summoning. Ten heartbeats. The Blade fell into his fingers as he crossed the room toward the door.

Lady Shinri stood. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

Merin ignored her. "Who rules Lakhenran on King Ahven's behalf?" he asked Renarin, pausing before the door to their rooms.

"A council of regents," Renarin said. "Three men, each one representing one of the Lakhenran houses who allied with Vedenar during the invasion."

"Traitors, then," Merin surmised.

Renarin nodded. "They are not well-loved by the Lakhenran people."

Merin nodded.

"Merin, what are you planning . . . ?" Shinri asked again, her voice apprehensive.

Their door was locked, of course. Merin raised his Blade, then with three strikes cut it off of its hinges and bolt. He kicked it, and the oaken portal fell outward, crashing to the stones outside with a single, vibrant crack.

A guard stood on either side of the doorway, their terrified, yet unsurprised, expressions proving that they had expected Merin's attack to come eventually. They drew their weapons with nervous hands, and Merin could see a third man dashing down the hillside toward the center of town.

One of the soldiers raised his sword threateningly. Merin sheared it in half.

“Take me to the council of regents,” Merin said. “I need to speak with them.”

The soldier stared back with a mixture of defiance and worry, catching Merin’s eyes. The move was obvious enough that Merin wasn’t surprised when the second man tried to attack him from the side. A swipe of the Shardblade divided that man’s blade from its hilt as well.

Merin raised his Blade toward the first man’s chest. He was an older soldier, greying, probably chosen for guard duty because of his age.

“I won’t take you,” the man said in thickly-accented Aleth.

Merin paused. Maybe the man’s age wasn’t the only reason he had been given the duty. Merin eyed the second man, who looked equally resolute. *They’ve had plenty of time to consider this moment. These men have been ready to die for three days.*

“Oh, this is foolishness,” Lady Shinri snapped from behind. “I know the way. Stop terrorizing Kalden and Chanmed.”

Merin paused, lowering his Blade as Shinri pushed past him. “How do you know their names?”

She gave him a flat look, weakening his newfound resolve. “They have been bringing our meals for the last three days, Merin. One doesn’t have to be all that observant to listen when men speak to one another.”

Merin blushed as Shinri started down the hill, walking in the same direction as the departed soldier. Merin and Renarin followed behind, as did the two unarmed, and slightly confused, soldiers.

Merin kept a wary eye behind as they walked. Renarin, however, still looked more thoughtful than worried.

“Do you think this is too drastic?” Merin asked in a low voice as they walked.

Renarin shrugged. “We couldn’t wait forever, and this is certainly the most direct way to free ourselves. I am a bit curious to see how you intend to get us out of the city alive, though.”

The city sloped down toward the ocean. The valley might have been called a *lait*, but it was a bit too broad. A wide riverbed ran through the center of the city, its dry banks hinting that the river was usually far thicker than the current summer trickle. The people Merin passed were Kanaran, but their clothing felt oddly . . . informal. Almost more like bedclothing than formal outfits. They showed far too much skin on both sexes, and there was something else very odd. It took Merin a moment to realize what it was.

No cloaks. None of the people wore cloaks. This was almost strange

enough to make him pause in place. He slowed, studying the streetgoers—who, in turn, watched his hustling pace with curious expressions. It was true. Not a one of them wore a cloak. In Alethkar, even the poorest of peasants owned a cloak—a starving man would sell his shoes before he sold his cloak. Yet here, no one seemed to bother with the garment. The absence only added to the sense of indecency; without cloaks, the people seemed almost . . . naked.

Merin blushed, hurrying forward, his masculine stride allowing him to quickly catch Shinri, who—despite her hurry—maintained a graceful, proper stride.

“Where?” Merin asked, glancing backward. Only one of the guards was still tailing them; the other had disappeared somewhere, likely to seek reinforcements.

“Not far,” Shinri said. “That building ahead.”

The structure in question was a massive golden dome. As they approached, Merin could see signs of decay. It wasn’t that the building was in poor maintenance—the doors still hung firmly, and the stone was in good repair. However, what had once obviously been intricate reliefs had been allowed to fall prey to corm buildup, the once-delicate features melding together beneath a uniform stone patina. Where there once might have been Awakened embossings, there was now simple white-washed stone.

A group of about ten soldiers was gathering near the entrance. Merin recognized one member of the group as the guard who had fled. Oddly, none of the men were Shardbearers—a fact both comforting and disturbing. He could probably take all ten by himself, though it would be a close fight. Without Shardplate, a group of ten trained soldiers was large enough to be of appreciable danger.

Merin’s Blade still rested in his hand. Shinri paused, then glanced apprehensively toward Merin as he strode past her to face the soldiers. Only two of the men were noblemen, but the eight spearmen could prove even more deadly, their spears affording them longer reach. Merin stood for a moment, listening to his opponents shift uncomfortably beneath his gaze.

What now? He asked himself. *Fight my way in?*

“Merin,” Renarin said quietly, stepping up beside him, “these men aren’t our enemies.”

“They kept us captive,” Merin replied.

“And didn’t turn us over to Vedenar,” Renarin said.

“I need to speak with the council of regents,” Merin said, eyeing the soldiers. He could see the nervous breaths puffing from their lips.

"They'll never let a hostile Shardbearer in to see their rulers," Renarin said. "This is a captured nation—no Lakhenran warrior is allowed a Shardblade of his own. If they let you in, you could slaughter all three regents and their guards before anyone could stop you."

Merin gritted his teeth. It was a good argument, of course. It was hard to trust a man while he proverbially held a Shardblade at your neck. But, the alternative was to . . .

Merin looked down at his Blade. *It can't just be about the sword . . .*

Merin stepped forward, causing a wrinkle of apprehension in the soldiers, then rammed his Blade into the ground. "You," he said, pointing at their former prison guard—he knew the man spoke Aleth. "If I let you confiscate my Blade for the duration of the meeting, will you take me in to see the regents?"

The man started. He blinked a few times. "Excuse me?" he asked, as if uncertain that he had interpreted Merin's words correctly.

Merin repeated his request. The guard's confusion became shock, and he slowly turned to his companions and said something in a language Merin didn't understand.

"That . . . isn't exactly what I thought you would do," Renarin noted. "Do you have any idea how unorthodox a move it is to let a stranger hold your Blade?"

Merin glanced at his weapon. Gone from his fingers only a few moments, he already felt an itching desire to grab it back and dismiss it. When he had thought it gone, taken from him, the sense of despair had been so painful that he didn't even want to consider what would happen if he lost it again. He hadn't even named the Blade yet—he was supposed to do that when the Bonding completed, but he hadn't been able to determine a suitable title. He'd wanted to ask Lord Dalenar for advice . . .

Assuming he lets me keep it, Merin thought sourly. Perhaps it was better to lose the Blade now to treachery. *No*, he immediately thought. *Better not to lose it at all.*

The soldier reached forward with a timid hand, picking up the Blade uncertainly, as if waiting for a trap. He hefted the weapon, and Merin recalled his own first moments holding a Shardblade. Hopefully, this man wouldn't decide to test the Blade's sharpness on Merin, as Merin had once done with the rock outside his healer's tent.

"Come with me," the soldier said, nodding to his companions. The group split, giving them passage into the building.

Merin stepped forward, then glanced back toward Shinri and Renarin. Renarin looked unperturbed—an expression that was growing increasingly common to his features. Shinri, however, looked . . . thoughtful, which surprised Merin.

“No words of disdain about my foolish loss of a Shardblade?” he asked as they stepped into the building.

Shinri eyed him, the look somehow conveying that she was annoyed he would think such of her. “Is a Shardblade worth the deaths of ten innocent men?” she asked. “Is it worth the death of even one? I’m surprised to admit that you might have done the right thing, Merin Kholin.”

Her praise gave him a reflexive burst of confidence as he entered the dome’s central hallway. Here too he noticed signs of modest decoration. The carpets were monochrome, rather than woven with designs like those in Ral Eram. The glyphward tapestries on the walls were simple and relatively unadorned. The atmosphere of the hallway was utilitarian.

Or was there perhaps something deeper? Was the lack of ornamentation an order from the Veden conquerors, or was it an unconscious symbol of the Lakhenran people’s beaten-down temperament? If the first were true, Merin’s task might be easier than he thought. However, if the people really were so subservient that they intentionally decorated with plainness in order to placate their foreign masters . . .

A throne room lay beyond a set of double doors at the end of the hallway. It unexpectedly contained an actual throne, and a lavish one at that. Merin quickly realized, however, that this was another symbol of the nation’s conquered nature. The throne sat on a dais, and was unoccupied. Three simpler chairs sat below—the regents were required to rule beneath the empty throne, a likely representation of the absent Veden king.

Merin stepped into the room, soldiers and companions crowding into the chamber behind him. The three regents were aging men, all of about the same age, perhaps in their sixth decade. They wore squared Veden beards, though few of the men Merin had seen on the streets wore any facial hair. Their clothing was of a Veden cut—militaristic, form-fitted, and non-revealing. All three wore cloaks.

“You should have stayed where you were put, young man,” the center regent said, leaning forward in his pseudo-throne. He was the thinnest of the three; his skin hung on him in folds, giving a drooping kind of moroseness to his features. He was surprisingly good at the Aleth tongue.

“In your prison?” Merin asked.

"It was for your protection," the man replied. "There are a lot of Veden soldiers in Nanah. This city is not a safe place for Aleth noblemen, especially ones of your affiliation."

Merin paused. "You know who I am?"

The rightmost regent smiled. "Do you know when a Kanaran peasant last earned himself a Shardblade, Merin Kholin?" the plump man asked.

"Not exactly," Merin admitted.

"Well, it didn't happen during my lifetime, I will say that much," the fatter regent explained, leaning back in his throne.

That long? Merin thought with shock. He had realized the event happened rarely, but . . . once in fifty years?

"His identity is no longer important," the final regent suddenly snapped in a terse tone. "I say it's about time we interrogated him. Tell us, boy. What did you do to our Oathgate?"

"What do you mean?" Merin asked.

"The Oathgate no longer seems to work, young man," the middle regent explained. "We've been waiting for our Lord King to send men through the Oathgate looking for you, but none came. Finally we had one of our Awakeners try and open the gate from our end. He worked for some time, but nothing happened. He says something is wrong—the opal doesn't respond to his touch."

Merin barely kept himself from glancing back at Shinri. What had the girl done? Why hadn't she told them? "I don't know what is wrong with your Oathgate," Merin said truthfully. "I do find it curious, however, that you were waiting for the Vedens to come for us. You implied that I should have stayed in my prison so that the Veden soldiers wouldn't see me—yet you were just planning to hand me over to them anyway."

The hefty regent chuckled. "We do as our king commands," he said. "As of yet, he hadn't commanded—which left us a little confused at what to do with you."

"That's unimportant now," said the snappish regent. "Every soldier in town must have seen that blue cloak flapping on the boy's way here. When the officers discover we have a Kholin in the city, and that we've been keeping him hidden for several days . . ."

The central regent raised a tired hand, stilling his companion. "We will do as we must. They cannot take too harsh an action against us—without orders from the Lord King."

Merin should have felt far more intimidated. These were aged lords, the

leaders of a nation. A conquered nation, true, but they were still the most powerful men of their race.

And yet, he found very little anxiety within. Instead, he felt . . . pity. Pity and a bit of anger. Where was the honor in these men? They seemed more tired and crotchety than they did intimidating. There was an uncertainty in their voices, a tone that Merin recognized. Some of the soldiers in his tensquad had born that same tone—the ones who cringed whenever a lord spoke, the men who had been trained or employed by harsh masters.

“Do not judge us, young Kholin,” the central regent said, studying Merin’s face. He was no aged gaffer, not yet, but he sat with his back bent as if by age. He regarded Merin with eyes that tried to hide the guilt within.

“Your council comes too late,” Merin said. “I judged you the moment I heard that only you three—out of all the houses of Lakhrenran—had chosen to side with your invaders when the conquerors came thirty years before. I judged you to be cowards and traitors. Dare you call my judgement hasty?”

The central regent actually cringed before the accusation.

“You don’t know what kind of situation we were in!” spat the man on the left. “All three Veden Houses invaded jointly! We didn’t have the men to resist that kind of attack. Would you have had us die instead?”

“Instead of this?” Merin asked, nodding toward the three men and their lowly thrones. “Yes, I think I would have rather died, had I been you.”

“This from a peasant,” the regent said back.

“A *citizen* has pride,” Merin said. “He has a tradition. He can be proud of the work he does and the service he performs for a lord he trusts, a lord who cares for his welfare. If his lord betrays this trust, the peasant still has solemn Right of Movement granted him by *The Way of Kings*. He can protest his lord’s indecency by moving to another village, taking his family’s numbers from that lord’s census and giving them to a more honorable ruler.”

“A pleasant sentiment,” the portly regent said. “But it is hardly practical to move an entire kingdom, lad. *The Way of Kings* doesn’t grant protection if the kings themselves ignore it. Your peasant would continue to serve the dishonorable master if swords were presented to threaten his children.”

“Send for Lord Evenar,” the leftmost regent ordered, pointing toward a soldier. “Tell him we have a gift for him at the Regent’s Dome.”

The soldier nodded, but glanced at the central regent for confirmation. The haggard man began to nod.

“Wait!” Merin said. “I came here for a purpose. I wish to ask a favor of you.”

The leftmost regent snorted. “And that is?”

Merin continued to look at the center man. “I want you to detain your fleet,” he said. “Don’t send it to Alethkar—delay it, so that King Ahven doesn’t receive the troops in time to do him any good.”

The room fell silent, then several men chuckled—including the two outer regents.

“You’d sooner persuade the winds to stop blowing,” the rightmost regent noted. “There are Veden officers on every one of those ships.”

“How many officers?” Merin asked. “A couple per ship? And how many of your own soldiers walk the decks? Tensets?”

“What you suggest now wouldn’t be ‘delaying’ our ships,” the leftmost regent laughed. “It would be open war. We can’t kill Veden officers! Ahven’s armies would return to destroy us. Besides, there are *five Shardbearers* overseeing the loading of those ships. You expect us to fight them too?”

“You could defeat them,” Merin challenged. “Shardbearers can be killed by common men. Do I need to remind you of how I got my own Blade?”

“Perhaps,” the portly man said. “But what of the repercussions? What about when Vedenel comes back? Should we sacrifice our own people to protect yours?”

“You should do something!” Merin said. “Even if King Vedenel does return, he will be weakened. His armies will have fought Alethkar—if he has lost, then his morale will be low. If he has won, then he will have to leave a force in the north to occupy. You could resist! How can you sit here dying before me, then claim to be worried of the death Vedenar will bring upon you? Now is the time when your enemies will be weak! If your leaders are unjust, then the Almighty gives you the right to throw them off. Even peasants know that!”

The room fell still. The central regent didn’t move, didn’t even seem to breathe, for a long moment. Then he slumped a little further in his throne.

“I’m sorry, young Kholin,” the regent said. “But our enemies are not weak. The three houses are unified, and I have heard . . . news of our new king. This is not a man to disobey. Besides, your suggestion is impossible. Perhaps it is easy for you to consider the slaying of five Shardbearers, but you are a man who has experienced both privilege and fortune. We have neither. Our men have never seen a Shardblade except in the hands of our oppressors. They have seen their comrades cut down for speaking out of

place. To them, the Veden lords are almost as the Heralds themselves. We cannot resist them.”

The man raised a weary arm, motioning for the messenger to continue on his duty.

Merin closed his eyes, groaning slightly to himself. He had been wrong. This wasn't simply an oppressed people; it was an enslaved people. He had hoped that maybe they would be willing to strike back, but it had been a flawed hope from the start. After all, weren't these the very men who had bowed before Vedenar years before?

No, they wouldn't fight. Renarin had said that nobility wasn't about the Shardblade—and in a way, he was right. But these people couldn't see anything but the Blade.

Merin paused. *Anything but the Blade . . .*

There wasn't time to think. “Stop!” Merin said, opening his eyes and turning toward the messenger, hand upraised.

The man paused just outside the throne room doors.

Merin turned to the regents. “And what if I defeat them for you?”

“Them?” the portly regent asked.

“Your five Veden Shardbearers. If I duel them and win, you won't have to fear their Blades anymore. Will you take command of your ships then? Delay them, as I have asked?”

“You're mad,” said the leftmost Regent. “One man against five? You don't even have Plate—by the winds, you haven't even been a Shardbearer for half a year!”

“Well?” Merin asked, ignoring the man, staring directly at the center regent. The man wouldn't meet his eyes.

“Fight,” Merin pled. “You have a chance now. Isn't that what you told yourself thirty years ago? That you would just appear to serve the Vedens, but wouldn't give them your heart? You thought you would wait for a better time to fight, a time when they weren't so strong.”

The man looked up, and Merin could see that he had guessed correctly. Suddenly the regent's depressed figure made sense. He was worse than a traitor—he was a man who had lied to himself, but seen through that lie. A coward.

“They'll kill you,” the regent warned. “These men are all fine duelists. I have seen them spar.”

“Better they kill me than I starve in a dungeon somewhere,” Merin said with as much bravado as he could muster. Suddenly his decision was beginning to seem a bit brash.

The regents said nothing. *That's how they deal with things they don't want to face. They avoid them, lock them up in a prison above town, refuse to look at them.*

"Fine," Merin said before his resolve could weaken any further. "I'm going to the docks. I assume that's where these Shardbearers are?"

No one contradicted him, so he nodded, turning. He walked up to the man who still held his Blade. "This will be a lot easier if you return that to me," he said. "Otherwise I'll have to kill the first one with my knife."

The soldier glanced at his regent, but received no support. Finally he turned back to Merin. Then, taking a deep breath, he held up the Blade with a reverent touch. "Good luck, my lord," he said.

Merin accepted the sword back, the room's air curling around his arm in a playful spiral, and strode out the way he had come.

chapter 67

MERIN 14 & SHINRI 13

SHINRI HUSTLED TO KEEP UP with the men, silently cursing their lack of courtesy in not summoning her a litter. Of course, most people in the room—regents included—had probably been too surprised by Merin’s declaration to think of such things.

She could see him up ahead, continuing down the hillside toward the docks. Had he stepped with that same proud bearing before, back in Kholinar? Had he seemed so natural and firm a leader? She hadn’t paid much attention to him at the time—she had been too busy worrying about things of presumed importance.

Merin’s blue Kholin cloak billowed behind him, his foreign dress distinguishing him from the gathering crowd that trailed behind. The regents scuttled at the head of that crowd. Did Merin realize what he had done? Probably not—from the way he had spoken to the regents, he probably assumed them to be lesser noblemen, not men far above his own station. Perhaps Merin’s firm stride wasn’t related to his self-confidence as much as it was his ignorance.

Or maybe just his stupidity. *Five Shardbearers? What is he thinking?* The boy had never even taken part in a dueling competition; how could he presume to fight against men who had been training their entire lives? He would get in no surprise blows this time, would receive no aid from Aredor or another. Merin was in an enemy kingdom.

Her foot caught a crack in the stone, and she nearly tripped. Shinri flailed for a moment, but fortunately managed to catch her balance. She stood for a moment, cursing the Nanah streetsmothers. Her delicate seasilk slippers hadn't been intended for such abuse—one was already tearing and unraveling.

"We need to hurry, Shinri," Renarin said quietly from beside her. Only he had slowed his pace to match hers—though she wasn't certain if that was due to respect or simply a desire to make certain she didn't flee. She eyed the spindly nobleman. She might be able to escape from him. Merin's disturbance would probably create enough chaos to keep their captors from searching her out, at least immediately. If she could get to the Oathgates . . .

Unfortunately, her own curiosity was too strong. She gave Renarin a cool look at his suggestion that she 'hurry,' then continued on with as much speed as she could manage. She could find a better time to escape later—after all, Merin would probably be dead. At the very least, he would no longer have a Shardblade. The regents hadn't been able to communicate with Ahven, which meant they probably didn't know about her power over the Oathgates, and she . . .

Shinri paused in her thinking. What was that the regents had said? Their Oathgate no longer worked? They had implied that it wasn't just due to a locked gate on the other side—they said that the Awakener had felt something different. The opal just . . . didn't work.

What did you do? they had accused Merin. But he hadn't been the one. What had Shinri done? She couldn't remember much—only peace, and then . . . she had been yanked away by Renarin, pulled through the gate. When she'd closed the gate, her mind had been a blur of anger and longing. And, the truth was, she'd never closed an Oathgate before. Perhaps she had done something wrong.

She faintly remembered a breaking, a reaction from the gate to her being pulled away. Had that been part of it?

"I should have looked further," Renarin mumbled, his eyes growing slightly troubled as he walked. Down below, Merin had nearly reached the docks. "I don't know what's going to happen to him, Shinri, but I fear the worst."

"And what of me?" she challenged. "Are the things you saw the reason you kidnapped me?"

He didn't look down with shame as she had expected. He had changed, somehow, during the last few months. There was a hint of guilt in his eyes, true, but an equal amount of determination. "You, Shinri . . . you affected

everything I saw. I didn't bring you because of any specific foretelling, but because of all of them. In the times to come, the one who has your aid will have a great advantage. You are more valuable than any Shardblade—more valuable, perhaps, than an entire army.”

“There are only ten Oathgates, Renarin,” Shinri said flatly. “Being able to open them is an advantage, true, but not as great a one as you imply. Once the various kings understand that the gates are no longer secure, the advantage of controlling me will decrease measurably.”

Renarin shook his head. “There's more, Shinri. There has to be. Something beyond just the Oathgates.”

Shinri frowned. His tone implied that whatever it was ‘beyond’ her power over the Oathgates, he wanted to control it. “I expected better of you, Renarin,” she said icily.

He blushed, showing a hint of the old Renarin, then hurried her forward. They reached the docks a few moments later.

MERIN COULDN'T LET HIMSELF STOP. The weight of what he intended to do pushed him forward, the momentum of the crowd rolling behind him like a physical force. The winds above were straight and steady, like a sunset overlapping rivers in the sky.

“They're on that ship, my lord,” one of the soldiers said, nodding him toward a particularly ornate vessel.

Merin nodded. *Can't stop. If I think too long . . .* He strode forward, walking up the gangplank toward the ship's deck.

A group of confused sailors watched him approach. They had stopped their work, the sudden dockside crowd drawing their attention. As Merin crested the plank and stepped onto the ship's deck, he could feel them studying him, marking his clothing—which, despite being worn from his extended captivity, was still obviously that of a nobleman. They muttered to each other in their unfamiliar tongue, and he could feel them connecting the color of his cloak to the glyph on its back.

He summoned his Blade to help move the inferences along. The weapon's appearance sparked another bout of conversation among the sailors, and one of them soon scampered off toward a cabin doorway.

Barely five anxious heartbeats passed before a group of cloaked forms strode from the cabin. Their heraldry was white, their clothing rich but bearing the typical Veden blockishness. Their ages varied from youthful to distinguished, and each wore the same square-cut beard favored by Veden fashion.

Three of the five wore Shardplate. Merin exhaled slowly in disappointment—he had hoped he wouldn't have to face that particular disadvantage.

You can do this, he told himself. *Just face them one at a time. Five duels in a row, against far more experienced swordsmen, three of them in Plate . . .*

Gritting his teeth resolutely, he lifted his Blade and pointed it at the Shadbearer whose Plate looked the most lavish, an older man with a grizzled, commanding face. It was probably best to face their most skilled man first, when Merin was still fresh. Afterward, perhaps the others would be honorable enough to let him don the defeated man's Plate before the next bout began.

Assuming, of course, Merin won the first duel.

Uncertain whether or not the man spoke Aleth, Merin fell into a dueling posture.

The five Vedens regarded each other with perplexed eyes. "What is this?" one of them finally asked in heavily-accented Aleth.

"I challenge you," Merin said. "I am Merin Kholin, Shadbearer of the court of Lord Dalenar Kholin."

"You challenge who?" asked a younger Shadbearer in silver and white Plate.

"All of you," Merin said. "One at a time, beginning with the older man in green and white."

The men regarded each other with bemused expressions. The older man at the front said something to his companions, and the group laughed, glancing at Merin derisively.

The older man waved his companions back, stepping forward and summoning a burst of white smoke from his palm. Blades were raised, and the duel began.

Sweat wetted Merin's grip, and the sudden reality of what he was doing struck him. Aredor couldn't protect him this time. There was no refuge of a friendly army, no companion at his side to watch for enemy spears. He was alone.

His enemy studied him carefully, wind curling around his form. *This will be my first true duel*, Merin realized nervously. He glanced down at his bracelet. He felt . . . like he was cheating somehow by watching the winds. This was no ad-hoc battle, this was a formal duel. There were rules, Protocol.

Vasher would tell him it didn't matter, that he should use every available advantage. But what would Lord Dalenar say?

Merin didn't need to think very long at that question. As his opponent

advanced, still watching, Merin carefully unclipped the bracelet and let the air return to painful clarity around him. He could almost hear Vasher cursing him a fool in the back of his mind, but . . . what he did felt right. He barely had time to stuff the bracelet into his cloak pocket before his opponent struck.

The Veden attacked with a series of sharp, precise blows. Merin hadn't studied the Dueling Forms enough to know which style the man used, but it was very efficient, moving with blurring—yet controlled—speed. Fortunately, Merin's training knew what to do even if he consciously did not. Merin was surprised to find himself in one piece at the end of the exchange.

The Veden's eyes took on an appreciative glint as he withdrew slightly, still studying Merin. The next exchange came with even more vigor, and again Merin surprised himself by parrying or dodging each blow. He even returned a slash of his own, smacking his Blade against his opponent's forearm.

The blow would have sheared off a regular man's hand, but it struck only a glancing blow on the Plate—not even making a proper dent. His opponent moved with Plate-enhanced strength, whipping his forearm to the side as Merin connected, pushing back Merin's Blade and throwing Merin off-balance.

Merin didn't try to maintain his footing, instead allowing himself to be pushed back. The Veden smirked, falling into an aggressive stance and pressing his advantage. The fight began in earnest.

And again, Merin felt it—the old feeling of inadequacy. Merin just wasn't good enough. When fighting the assassins with Aredor, or even when he had sparred with Vasher's friends, Merin had felt the same way. The forms Vasher had taught him felt flawed—they just didn't quite fit. They hadn't become intuitive enough, Merin knew. They weren't a part of him.

Because of that he would lose this duel. And because of his loss, the Aleth armies would soon find themselves flanked by an unexpected foe. The kingdom could very well fall because Merin hadn't managed to learn his dueling forms well enough.

He was already weakening—each blocked blow was delivered by Plate-enhanced arms. He wouldn't be able to—

The opening came so quickly that Merin didn't consider. He spun away from the Veden's latest blow, an uncharacteristically wide strike. Though Merin couldn't see the wind, he could almost feel it as he spun, letting the motion propel his Blade.

The Veden turned too late. Merin's Blade smashed into the side of the man's helmet, marring the beautifully-gilded metal.

The form knew what to do next. As the Veden stumbled in surprise, Merin continued his motion, spinning one more time and delivering a second blow at exactly the same angle as the first. Air whistled around his Blade as it approached the Veden's head.

At the last moment, Merin turned the Blade down and let it crack against the helmet in a slightly lower position. The already off-balance Veden stumbled to his knees, the wood groaning beneath him.

When the man re-oriented himself, he found Merin standing beside him, Blade raised as if to strike the helm a third time. Both knew that this time Merin wouldn't avert the blow from the weakened section of Shardplate.

"Yield," Merin ordered.

The Veden glanced toward his own Blade, which had slipped from dazed fingers. Then he eyed Merin's upraised weapon. "I yield," he hissed in angered shame, glancing down at the deck.

Merin stepped back, shocked. *I won*. It felt like a fluke—there had been no careful planning, no strategy. He had simply seen an opening, and his body had attacked reflexively. All of his opponent's clever precision meant naught before Merin's fortunate strike.

The aging Veden warrior obviously thought something similar. His eyes were dark with anger as he stood and retrieved his Blade.

"I demand your Plate and Blade as spoils," Merin said. "I'll put the Plate on, then I'll duel you," he said, pointing at the younger man in silver and white.

The other four Shardbearers looked as stunned as Merin felt. Well, they would each soon have an opportunity to focus their anger. Merin tried not to think too hard about the fact that he still had four bouts to go. At least now he would be able to withstand a hit or two.

He glanced to the side to check on the status of his Shardplate. The Veden man had only removed the broken helm. He made no move to take off the rest, however. Instead, he was regarding Merin with a disgusted look.

"I demand your Plate and Blade as . . ." Merin began, speaking slower. He trailed off, however, as he saw the look in the man's face.

Something was wrong. The Veden glanced at the other four, then growled something in his native tongue. There was a brief moment of silence.

Then all four attacked at once.

Merin cried out, screaming something about Protocol, but it was obvious that these men had no intention of obeying etiquette. Merin ducked backward as Shardblades began to appear, swinging at the first man who came into range. The man's Blade hadn't appeared yet, but he wore Plate, and he took the blow with an upraised arm—stalling Merin while the others armed themselves. Anxious sailors ducked out of the way as Merin tried to jump toward the gangplank, but the Veden in silver and white rammed into Merin from the side, throwing him to the deck.

Merin grunted in pain, holding his Blade up to keep from cutting himself as he slid across the slick wood, propelled into a half-tumble by the Shardbearer's blow.

Merin wheezed, trying to catch his breath. Smoke dissipated, and soon all five men held glimmering Blades. Merin regarded them with stupefaction, still amazed that they would so blatantly break Protocol. Vasher's disappointed voice seemed to whisper a condemnation to him. *You should have expected this. In battle, honor belongs to the victor. Men will do whatever they have to in order to win. Use every advantage . . .*

Merin scrambled to his feet, lifting his Blade to block a blow while he reached inside his cloak pocket.

As soon as his fingers touched jade, the winds returned to him.

He pushed away his foe, hurriedly clasped on the bracelet, then raised his Blade to block a second attack. A third struck at him from the side, and Merin's Blade seemed to flow naturally into a parry, turning the man's weapon.

Something happened that moment as he fought. The broad, exaggerated swings Vasher had taught him had always seemed too wide to Merin—almost as if they were supposed to be beautiful flourishes instead of attacks or parries. Yet facing down five men at once, Merin's form seemed to take on a new, flowing quality. It wasn't just the wind—in fact, this didn't seem to have anything to do with the wind at all. His wide swings kept multiple enemies at a distance, and the rounded flourishes helped each swipe curve into the next, carrying Merin in a continuous and fluid defense.

Everything seemed to fit—all of the holes in his form, all of the inconsistencies and awkwardness. It had never been him after all. It had been the form.

I'm an idiot. Vasher explained it to me once, and I never paused to think what he meant. He didn't train me to duel.

He trained me to fight.

The winds spoke to him. Merin could feel them, could sense when

bodies disturbed their flow. Incorporating this knowledge into his form, he blocked attacks he couldn't see. He moved smoothly from one strike to another.

He stood squarely in the middle of five opponents—and for one graceful, convergent moment, he fought them all at once.

“THEY BROKE PROTOCOL!” SHINRI HISSED.

Renarin nodded as if this were an expected event. They stood beside the regents atop a nearby ship, one that sat just a bit higher in the water, affording them a view of Merin's deck.

“But I know that man,” Shinri said. “Lord Denvashacha is one of the most respected noblemen in Vedenar! His reputation is spotless!”

Renarin shook his head. “When this is over, he'll just claim that Merin broke Protocol first, and that he ordered the other Shardbearers forward in retribution. That's usually how it happens.”

“But . . .” Shinri trailed off, forcing down her anger. “We have to do something,” she said frantically, turning to run down the ramp.

Renarin caught her on the arm. It was an oddly tender gesture, but it only reminded her of the last time he had touched her—the time when he had grabbed her and pulled her free from the Oathgate's control opal. Kidnapping her.

She shook herself free, but Renarin had her attention. “Look,” he requested.

She turned back toward the other ship, where poor Merin was so horribly outnumbered. She expected to find him dead already.

Instead she was treated to a sight that left her standing stunned in the cool southern winds. Merin stood at the exact center of a ring of Shardbearers, wearing no Plate, practically defenseless.

And he was winning anyway.

Or perhaps not winning. But he was certainly holding his own. The five honorless Vedens struck at him repeatedly, their attacks showing frustration. Yet Merin blocked each blow. Every strike, whether swung alone or in tandem, was turned aside. Merin moved with surreal grace, moving to parry each attack almost before it began. He spun, never facing just one man, somehow never seeming to leave his back exposed. His were not the motions of a man desperate; he bore none of the frantic tension one would expect. Instead he fought with elegant superiority. Almost as if he weren't flesh at all, but like . . .

“He moves like the winds themselves,” whispered Tamar, the Head Regent, who stood beside her. “By the Almighty—he doesn’t just speak like a king. He fights like one too.”

MERIN WAS IN TROUBLE. He held his opponents at bay for the moment, but it took the sum of his concentration and skills to do so.

And he was getting tired.

The combined power of Vasher’s dueling style and Merin’s ability to feel the winds was great, but the Veden Shardbearers still had three suits of Plate. Their blows shook his arm, and facing them all at once forced Merin to focus completely on defense. Eventually he would fail to block a blow.

In addition, there was still a slight problem with his form. He couldn’t understand what it was. His parries would build toward a single, careful attack—but each of these attacks was easily blocked. He felt that he was still missing something—a secret of the form. Why would it have such obvious strikes? He felt as if each of these capstone blows should hit, yet he logically knew that there was little chance of them getting past his enemy’s defenses.

He couldn’t continue to fight as he was—he needed to divide the Vedens up. Striking with one final flourishing blow, Merin spun and ducked to the side, breaking between the two unarmored Shardbearers. He felt the winds brush his leg, and knew he had just barely missed having his foot sheared free. He jumped, pushing with senses he was only beginning to be aware of, and his wrist blazed with a sudden pain. The winds spun behind him, blowing him forward, carrying him a little farther than he should have been able to jump, pushing him a little faster than he should have been able to go.

He landed on the gangplank and jumped again, whipping his Shardblade beneath him as he did so. The weapon easily sliced through the wood, and Merin landed on the docks below to hear the splash of two gangplank halves dropping into the water behind him.

He spun as the docks thumped, a plated form easily dropping the twenty feet to land beside him. Merin could see the other two Shardplate-bearing Vedens preparing to jump, but the two unarmored men had paused beside the railing, judging the distance skeptically. One called to a soldier, presumably demanding a rope, as the final Plated Veden leaped over the side.

Merin ducked a swipe from the Shardbearer in silver, swinging his own

Blade downward—toward the docks themselves. Merin's blade cut a massive gash in the planks, then he ducked to the side as the falling Shardbearer landed beside him. There was a satisfying crack as the weakened wood split, followed by a yelp of surprise—one that cut off in a splashing gurgle as the Shardbearer's corner of the dock collapsed into the water.

Merin spun to face his two opponents. The young Shardbearer in silver jumped forward, trying to thrust through Merin's faceplate. Pain flared in Merin's wrist as he commanded the winds, pushing himself to the side. The threatening Blade whistled in the air just a fingerlength from Merin's ear, but the wind shoved Merin just out of the way.

Merin brought up his own weapon mid-dodge, pushing his arms with the force of a river of wind. Where the Veden's weapon had whistled, Merin's wind-driven blade roared. It connected with Plate and kept going, ripping through the Awakened metal with a force even Merin hadn't anticipated.

The pain from his wrist was nearly overwhelming. Merin collapsed to the ground, completing his dodge, as his opponent fell to the docks in two pieces. Merin gasped in agony, his left hand—the one bearing the bracelet—spasming rigidly. There wasn't time to pause, however. He stumbled to his feet, holding his Blade in one hand and lurching away from the fallen man.

The final Plated Shardbearer, the older man Merin had fought originally, paused quietly, looking down at the dead man. There was both wonder and fury in his expression. Merin didn't look down, though he knew what he would have seen had he done so. Somehow, he had cut through the Shardplate as if it weren't there, killing the younger man as easily as one would a common solider.

The aging Shardbearer raised an unhelmed face toward Merin, rage burning in his eyes. He raised his Blade.

Merin backed away, moving toward the dock's edge. He felt and heard the splashing near the dock's side, and moved over to see the Shardbearer who had fallen into the ocean climbing up onto the docks. He no longer wore his Plate, of course, though he still carried his Blade. With a mercilessness that would have impressed his old spear commanders, Merin jumped toward the man and swung.

The sodden man didn't even have time to react. Both corpse and Blade fell back into the churning waters, and Merin looked as the two men above finally began to descend on a rope ladder. Merin tried to get close enough

to swing at them while they were climbing, but the elder Shardbearer immediately launched an attack, drawing Merin's attention.

The man was good. Either the death of the younger man had encouraged him, or he just hadn't taken Merin seriously before, for this offensive was measurably more potent than the previous attacks. It bore the fuel of a man's fury, and Merin's pained and exhausted body was reacting more and more slowly. He barely turned aside the blows, and each parry came more slowly.

The two other men approached from behind—Merin could feel their movements on the wind. His sword arm was depleted, and his other hand burned so much it was barely usable. He had to attack. He had to—

A fist—the Shardbearer's fist—came at him unexpectedly. Merin cursed, reflexively gathering the winds to push it away.

They failed. Somehow, the Shardplate resisted the winds, deflecting them.

Merin's stupefaction nearly cost him his life. He barely remembered to push against himself instead, moving his head away from the blow, counteracting some of the fist's momentum. In a moment of lucidity, he dismissed his Blade so he wouldn't lose it.

The metal fist took him in the side of the head.

The world flashed, then grew black, but fortunately returned as Merin crashed to the ground. Though his eyes refused to focus, he could feel a sword descending, and he used the wind to push himself to the side—bearing the bracelet-induced flash of pain.

Merin stumbled across the docks, dazed, seeing double, his Blade unsummoned.

Seeing double.

It came back to him, the answer to a question that he had been so close to discovering. Like a name spoken that had been forgotten, like a memory suddenly recalled, he realized why dismissing and summoning his Blade felt so familiar.

He hadn't done it before—but he had done something just like it. The meditation exercise Vasher had taught him, the one where he made his finger vanish and reappear, felt exactly the same as summoning and dismissing a Blade.

Another attack came, and this time Merin didn't bother to block. He jumped back, retreating across the dock, summoning his Blade and trying to gather his wits. Dockworkers and gawking nobility scattered as Merin

backed away from his advancing opponents. They could sense his weakness, could see the growing sloppiness of his form.

Sweat trickled down his cheek. Why? What did it mean? Vasher's exercise had to have a purpose—the coincidence was just too great.

Merin threw himself into an attack, trying to surprise the men. However, they smartly coordinated a three-pronged offense, and Merin's attack turned into a frantic defense. He retreated again, weakened, puffing haggardly, before they could surround him.

The three men approached in a close line, their postures daring him to attack. Merin continued to back away, forcing his mind to work, struggling against pain and exhaustion.

There was a secret. Vasher had taught him too well—Merin could sense what the dueling form was supposed to do, even when it didn't perform as expected. He had felt the truth on several occasions.

There were times when he knew he should have hit, but his attack was easily parried. It was almost as if . . .

He didn't have much strength left. Gathering his concentration, his energy, and his determination, Merin gripped his Blade in two hands, gritted his teeth, then dashed forward and jumped.

The winds curled in and pushed him from behind. The flash of pain was expected, and in his moment of stubborn focus, Merin didn't let it distract him. The winds carried him forward in an amazing leap, driving him toward the elder Shardbearer.

If the man was surprised by Merin's supernatural jump, he didn't display the emotion. Only anger showed in his eyes—anger and satisfaction. Merin's attack was obvious. The trajectory of his jump, the angle of his raised arms, made the proper parry intuitive.

The Shardbearer raised his weapon with a curled lip.

As Merin fell, he dismissed his Blade. It instantly changed to smoke, as always, but Merin didn't quite let it vanish. Just as it began to change to smoke, he grabbed ahold of it with his mind, holding it halfway into existence—like the finger he could not see, but only because he ignored that it was there.

His incorporeal Blade passed through the parrying Shardblade. Merin immediately called to his weapon, bringing it back from the edge upon which it teetered. Rather than taking ten heartbeats to summon, the weapon appeared immediately, growing firm in his hands again.

The Veden man's eyes widen in shock right before the Blade sliced through his unprotected head. Merin's wind-fueled jump carried him

forward, past the dying man, with supernatural speed. The other two Shardbearers weren't prepared as Merin landed before them, maintaining his fluid swing as he cut them both down in a single motion.

Merin stumbled to a halt, and three corpses dropped to the docks behind him. He gasped in anguish and exhaustion, dismissing his Blade and reaching over to rip the bracelet off with a claw-like grip. As he dropped the jade, the air returning to normal, the pain in his arm dampened slightly—but not enough. He fell to his knees, sweat staining the wood before him as great drops streamed from his brow.

Merin clutched his wrist with his uninjured arm, his entire body shaking. He struggled to remain conscious.

After a few moments of dealing with the pain, he finally became aware of the strange stillness. He forced himself to look up.

Eight boats stood along this section of the docks, and men crowed atop them, looking down at him with an eerie silence. Merin turned to the side. The dockworkers and other onlookers stood with equally stunned postures.

I don't blame them, Merin thought with a groan. *I'm not sure what just happened myself.*

Ahead, a group was walking down a gangplank, their richly-colored clothing identifying them to Merin's fuzzy, sweat-blurred vision. The regents.

Merin climbed to his feet, then lurched across the docks, slowly gathering the Blades of the fallen men. He regained some of his strength as he worked, but the ache in his arm faded only a bit, and he found himself cradling it to his chest as he worked. When he was forced to move it to carry a pair of Blades, it felt stiff and awkward. Numb, yet painful at the same time.

The regents and collected nobility watched Merin's work with a respectful silence. Finally Merin approached them, forcing himself to walk upright, with his tired head held high. The regents waited expectantly, but Merin ignored them.

Instead, he approached Renarin and rammed a Blade point-first into the wood before his friend. "It's yours, if you want it," he said.

Renarin paused, then smiled, reaching out to accept the Blade. "I suppose it would be a bit anti-climactic if I refused."

Merin nodded, smiling weakly. He turned to the regents, and let his face grow more stern. "What of you?" he asked. "What of these fleets?"

"I think our soldiers have decided for us," the head regent said, nodding to the side.

Merin heard the splashes even as he turned. White Veden cloaks flapped in the wind as the Lakhenran soldiers began to throw their officers over the sides of the boats. The silence burst, sailors and dockworkers breaking into exuberant cheers. They couldn't have known about Merin's goal, but somehow they sensed their freedom. The Lakhenran lords might have been quelled, but the once-kingdom's citizens were more willing to fight.

This time, Merin's smile bore no trace of weariness.

"These ships will not sail to the north," the head regent said quietly, "though I know not whether our reward will be freedom or destruction. Either way, Vedenar will receive no support from us in this war."

Merin turned back toward the three regents. "That's not good enough anymore." He raised two more Blades, ramming them into the wood before the two regents who had been most supportive—leaving the third, bitter man out.

"Not good enough?" the head regent asked as the third man sputtered at the slight.

"These ships *will* sail," Merin said firmly. "But they will join with Alethkar, not our enemies. You want to be free of Jah Keved? Well, you will have to earn it."

The chubby regent frowned. "Follow one master instead of another?" he asked. "What proof do we have that Alethkar won't just occupy us like Vedenar once did?"

Merin sighed. "None, and I'm too tired to argue with you. Take the Blades; we're sailing north."

The two men glanced at each other, then reached forward to take the offered Shardblades.

"Yours is at the bottom of the ocean," Merin said to the third regent. "You should send someone to fish it out for you. Renarin and I get a suit of Plate; I don't care what you do with the third set."

The man continued to sputter, but he immediately waved for a servant, snapping a few orders in Lakhenran. Merin ignored him, turning eyes on the collected soldiers. Some were yelling with the dockworkers and citizenry, but many of them were either staring at Merin or regarding the scattered corpses of the dead Shardbearers.

Merin found the face he was looking for. He strode forward, waving a few people out of the way, then stopped before a familiar soldier—the man who had been their guard, the one that Merin had given his Blade to before entering the palace to meet the regents.

"It takes a man of rare honor to give up a prize as fine as a Shardblade,"

Merin said to the soldier. He rammed the final Blade into the ground before the man. "And rare honor deserves rare rewards."

The man's eyes widened, then he looked up, his eyes thick with gratitude and wonder. Then, surprisingly, he knelt. "A Shardbearer must have a Lord," he said. "Will you accept my Oath, my lord?"

Merin paused. He wasn't really certain if he was of the right rank to take such oaths. He opened his mouth to turn down the offer, but paused as he saw the soldiers around him. There was so much respect in their eyes—respect and determination. He would need both if he was going to help Lord Dalenar.

We'll fix it later, he told himself. "Very well," he said. "I accept your oath . . ."

"Kalden, my lord," the man reminded in lightly-accented Aleth.

"*Lord Kalden*," Merin replied. "Your first duty is to spread the word that I want these ships ready to leave as soon as possible. We sail to Alethkar, where we will do to the Veden armies what I did to their Shardbearers today."

Merin thought that a fitting metaphor, but was completely unprepared for the shouts of exuberance and devotion the soldiers gave as Kalden translated his words.

chapter 68

JASNAH 15

DURING THE NEXT FEW DAYS of travel, Jasnah waited in quiet tension, expecting to hear the inevitable truth: that the scouts had spotted the Veden army approaching from behind.

The report never came.

The Herald's army moved like a wounded animal, fleeing desperately for safety, yet hampered by its own weight and broken limbs. Despite the anxiety of being chased, theirs was hardly an organized, disciplined group. People slept in. Food was distributed inefficiently. Men squabbled, and when they approached towns, she often found out too late that some of the men had broken orders and sought out a tavern. Desertions continued—but strangely, recruits continued to straggle in. Apparently, any large mass of people drew attention, bringing men wanting work or refugees seeking sanctuary. Jasnah turned away those she could, but many were persistent, and inside she knew that if an attack came, they would need every soldier—no matter how unpromising—they could get.

They traveled for four more days, entering Aneazer's territory with little circumstance beyond the distant sighting of a few mounted men that might have been scouts. Though no one moved to challenge them, Jasnah was certain that this was only because of their size. Local or traveling squads would leave them alone, for now. An army of twelve hundred marching directly for Jorevan was obviously a matter to be handled by their lord

himself. Aneazer would make a move, Jasnah was certain of that. Until he did, she would simply push onward, hoping that the uncertain enemy ahead would prove more agreeable than the known enemy behind.

Taln did not return. Jasnah found herself watching southward more and more, her tension growing. She told herself she was being foolish. Whatever Taln had done, it had obviously slowed the enemy army greatly—slowed it enough that even Meridas's distant-roving scouts caught no sight of it. Such an impressive event would not be accomplished without price. The delay had cost his life. He would not be returning. It was foolish to sit and dote with worry.

And yet, Lhan's raw assessment of her personality remained vivid in her memory. She had been called paranoid before, and had dismissed the allegations. Usually, the same people who referred to her in such a way ended up depending upon her foresight. For Lhan to describe her as a woman without belief, however . . . as a person frightened by hope . . . left her feeling sick. What would it mean if Taln did return? Did she always have to expect disappointment?

His continuing absence—along with that of the army he had gone to stop—bred rumors from rumors within the camp. As the days passed, and it became less and less likely he would return, some claimed the absence as an obvious sign that he had never been a Herald. Others claimed that the disappearance of the Veden army was instead proof of Taln's obvious divinity. Still others supposed that he was testing them to see who would remain loyal and who would desert. The more rational part of the soldiers pointed out that it didn't really matter where the supposed Herald was, as long as the Veden army went with him.

Some dared whisper that there never had been a Veden army, attributing Taln's disappearance to his desire to flee the camp for some untold reason. Jasnah dismissed this supposition with ease. It was possible that Nachin had lied about the existence of a Veden army, but the scouts would not have. Besides, Taln and Kemnar would have quickly discovered the truth if there was no army. Their continued absence meant at least one thing—they had found someone to fight.

Someone to kill them, a piece of her whispered. And still, perhaps as a stubborn response to Lhan, she told herself to continue hoping. To keep looking southward. To expect the best, even if she had to force herself to do so. Taln would be her test.

Three days from the Holy City, a messenger appeared and demanded to be taken to the army's leader. Without thought, the guards took him to

Meridas—and Jasnah was not invited to their conference. Meridas assumed Taln dead, a fact that lent him new levels of arrogant presumption, and Jasnah's place in the group had been regulated to that of the protected and coddled woman, fiancée of the general. Fortunately, Lhan was one of the few people in the army who could read, and as such he was allowed into the conference in case the messenger brought a letter. The monk later told her that the messenger had come in warning, giving Meridas an opportunity to withdraw from Lord Aneazer's land, lest he face retribution. Apparently, Meridas's response had been less than respectful.

Jasnah considered giving into Meridas's demand that they not go to Jorevan, but turn and head to Alethkar. Even if she did allow herself a bit of forced hope regarding Taln, she did not doubt that going to the Holy City was going to be dangerous. Her men could not face a trained enemy on its own—she would have to fold it with more seasoned troops once they reached Elhokar's main army. She still wasn't certain how they were going to persuade a tyrant not to destroy them.

Several things kept her from turning the army around. First was the fact that Aneazer had sent them a messenger. A man more confident about his chances probably wouldn't have bothered with a warning—that meant that Aneazer was at least a little worried. He couldn't know how inexperienced Jasnah's troops were; perhaps he saw only their numbers, and didn't relish fighting them. Perhaps he would let them camp near his city and await Taln's return.

However, even if Aneazer didn't attack, her second reason for continuing would come into play. They couldn't turn around—they didn't have enough food to reach Kholinar. In fact, their supplies wouldn't even last them to the Alethkar border. The small fortune she had requisitioned in Marcabe had been expended, the last few gems spent in a town two days back. Soon their resources would be gone.

And once that happened, Jasnah had no idea what she would do. They rode toward the fortified stronghold of a ruthless despot, they had lost their unifying leader and finest warrior, and they were almost out of food. In the face of such challenges, Jasnah found hope illusive indeed. Lhan could preach all he wished, but the facts were grim. At best, she would have to disband the army, giving each man a bit of food to last him on his own. She didn't know how she herself was going to reach Kholinar.

Hopefully, the messengers we sent from Marcabe reached Elhokar, she thought one depressed evening. For I'm certainly not going to get to him in time to bring word.

“TALENEL’ELIN! HE WHO IS called Stonesinew! The Soldier, the Eternal Warrior! He appeared to you, to us, and gathered us!”

The speaker was an older man, clothed in a dusty red sencoat and a pair of trousers that might have once been white. He wore a beard, which was far more common in the wilds of Riemak than it was in Alethkar, and carried a spear that bore some traces of ornate trim. His wide nose was flared with passion, his eyes wild as he spoke before a crowd of soldiers in the evening darkness.

“I hear some of you whisper that he has abandoned us,” the old man called, “but this is an obvious falsehood. We know the Heralds are always with us, as the winds and the stones themselves. He traveled with us for a short time, for it is promised that the Heralds must Return on occasion. Indeed, you heard him warn of such things! He came to gather an army, which he did. We are His, to do His duty.”

“Who is he?” Jasnah asked quietly. She stood with Vinde at the periphery of the gathered crowd. The would-be prophet had drawn a fairly large group, at least a hundred people. He stood beside a bonfire of his own making, though Jasnah didn’t remember requisitioning him any of their precious wood supplies.

“He calls himself Janelken, my lady,” Vinde explained.

Jasnah raised an eyebrow. The name meant ‘Gift of the Heralds.’ She didn’t recognize him, but there were now many faces in the army that she didn’t know.

“He claims that before Talenel left, he granted Janelken his mantle of leadership,” Vinde explained quietly. “He claims to be able to hear the words of the Heralds on the winds, and says it is his duty to speak for them. He hasn’t gone so far as to claim that command of the army should be his, but . . .”

“He probably isn’t far away from it,” Jasnah said. “You were right to bring this to my attention.”

“You would have heard of him soon anyway,” Vinde said. “I didn’t realize that he had gathered such a following.”

Jasnah frowned. Kemnar would never have let the situation come so far—he would have dealt with this Janelken quickly, the moment the man even displayed a potential for treason. Vinde, however, was not Kemnar. At least the man had the presence of mind to recognize the danger. If this self-proclaimed prophet convinced enough of the Elinrah believers to support him, he could conceivably overthrow Meridas’s command regardless of title or Shardblade.

Jasnah gritted her teeth at what she had to do next. She could not quiet this man on her own, not now that he was so popular. Or, at least, without Kemnar she couldn't do so as quickly as was required. She would have to do something unpleasant.

"Come," Jasnah said. "We need to bring this to Lord Meridas's attention."

Meridas had acquired himself a tent a few towns back. She didn't know what he'd traded for it; she certainly hadn't given him any gemstones. He hadn't thought to get one for her—though he had mentioned with a leering smile that she was welcome to come and 'share' it with him any time she wished.

Two guards stood at the tent's entrance, and they watched her approach with wary eyes. They reflected Meridas's newest method of subverting her. His oath required him to follow her commands, but only in as much as she could give them to him. If he barred her entry to his presence, she couldn't make him do what she said. The guards straightened their postures as she stopped in front of the tent. She could easily read their orders from their faces. She was not to be admitted.

"Tell Lord Meridas," she said loudly, almost shouting, "that I command him to let me see him."

The men flushed at the idea of a lady 'commanding' their general. Jasnah stood back, folding her arms, waiting. The guards made no move to relay her message, but that didn't matter. After several heartbeats, an annoyed voice came from inside the tent.

"Let her enter," Meridas snapped.

Jasnah smiled. Even dishonest Aleth noblemen considered themselves honorable, a fact which she had exploited on more than one occasion.

The guards parted as Jasnah brushed past, though they didn't give Vinde leave to enter behind her. The inside of the tent was lit by a single lantern burning a weak flame. At least he understood the need to conserve. The tent itself was hardly lavish, without rugs or cushions—only the thick Shennah walls. Meridas himself sat on a barrel, using one of the emptied pullcarts as a 'table' upon which he studied Kemnar's map of the landscape.

He looked up as she entered. His clothing was showing signs of misuse. For the first time, she realized how grateful she was for Taln's instance upon her practical clothing. Her sencoat and trousers, designed for travel, were sturdy and colored to mask stains. Now that water for washing was more plentiful, she had been able to keep them clean and in good repair. Meridas's once-fine outfit, however, was well-worn. Though seasilk was hearty, several of his tassels were torn, and the cuffs of his trousers were

frayed. The bright red color highlighted the cromstains from highstorms and from sleeping on the ground.

“Well?” Meridas asked with annoyance. “You realize your little display outside is going to weaken morale. It won’t do good for the men to see their commander bowing to the whims of a female. Hopefully they will just see it as a man indulging his betrothed.”

“You left me little choice,” Jasnah said, folding her arms and rebuffing his scorn. “I had to see you. There’s an Elinrah prophet in the camp preaching that he’s the real leader of the army.”

Meridas waved a dismissive hand. “I know,” he said, turning back to his map. “Is that all?”

“Well? What are you going to do?” Jasnah asked.

“About the prophet?” Meridas asked. “Nothing. You may go.”

Jasnah clenched her jaw. “You will lose control, Meridas. I have little fondness for your leadership, but letting you command is better than giving the army up completely. You have to move to counter this man—discipline him publicly, perhaps even execute him.”

Meridas shook his head. “The man is irrelevant. We will reach Jorevan soon.”

“All right,” Jasnah said. “And what do you plan to do about *that*? What do we do if Aneazer attacks? The scouts report flat landscape ahead, giving us little opportunity for cover. If Aneazer has archers, then we’ll need to—”

Meridas held up a hand, silencing her with a suffering glance. “It is under control,” he said.

Jasnah flushed. The implication was obvious—if he didn’t give her information, she couldn’t command him to do other than what he planned. Fortunately, that tactic depended upon her remaining ignorant.

“Meridas,” Jasnah said evenly, “I command you to tell me what you are planning.”

His eyes flashed with frustration. Finally, he waved her toward a second sitting barrel. “Fine,” he snapped. “I will hold to my bargain, woman, though there is little reason now that the madman is gone.”

“The bargain was for my hand, not his,” Jasnah said, not sitting. “His absence doesn’t affect what is between us. Your plans, Meridas.”

“I have heard of this Lord Aneazer, though I have never traded with him personally,” Meridas said. “He is not a man to be regarded with any levity. He is said to maintain a standing force of nearly three thousand men, all well-armed. If a city defies him, he has no qualm slaughtering half its

population to bring the other half into line. He exacts heavy tributes on his cities, and suffers no dissent.”

Jasnah felt her heart drop at the description. “There is no trading with him then?”

“Of course there is,” Meridas said dismissively. “His control over the area and its caravans proves he is a man of logical rulership. He understands the line between domination and destruction, and knows how to retain leadership in a chaotic land. He is indeed a man who can be bargained with, assuming one has something he wants.”

“Of which we have nothing,” Jasnah said.

“On the contrary,” Meridas replied. “We have something he wants very much. He often sends raiding parties to collect ‘recruits’ for the garnet mines he controls just to the north of Jorevan. He also supplies labor to other cities in the wilderness.”

“Labor?” Jasnah asked. “You mean slaves!”

Meridas shrugged. “I only know that we have brought him a very nice selection of workers. Most of them will be useless to us—the mercenaries and veterans we can bring to Alethkar, but the romantic zealots and the alms-seekers are only a bother. We can probably shed a good six to seven hundred members of the group without much loss.”

Despite herself, Jasnah felt her legs quiver slightly. “You are a monster,” she hissed. “These people trust us. You would sell them as slaves to a tyrant!”

Meridas regarded her with hard eyes. He held up a finger. “Do not lecture me, woman. Since this expedition began, you have ignored my council. I would have led us to safety in Kholinar. Instead, you saw fit to meander through a dead land following the whims of a lunatic.”

“I—”

“No,” Meridas interrupted. “You *will* listen, woman. You gathered these people. You used them, lied to them, and manipulated them. You let them believe that the madman was a Herald. You have led them to the fangs of a warlord, and are now trying to coax them inside his mouth. What did you think to do? Fight Aneazer, stand against his three thousand?”

“We could disband,” Jasnah said.

“And send the people to die,” Meridas said. “We have no food, woman. These are stormlands, not some fertile lait. If you abandon the people now, where will they go? The cities we’ve passed have no food for them. Those you send off on their own will starve before they find a place that can support them.” Meridas leaned forward, looking her in the eye. “*You* killed this people, Jasnah. *I* will save them. They will be slaves, yes, but they will

live. Besides, Aneazer treats his laborers fairly. They have food, which is more than can be said of most the people in this winds-cursed land.”

Jasnah sank down onto the sitting barrel, stunned, Meridas’s accusations repeating in her mind. He let her sit there for a few moments before continuing.

“You will say nothing, of course,” he said, not looking up from his map. “It will be difficult to get the army into a position where it can be dismantled and safely turned over, but leave that to me. We should reach Jorevan sometime tomorrow, and I assume that Aneazer will confront us before then. By the evening of the next day, I plan to have horses and proper supplies, then make good time for Kholinar.”

“There must be a better way, Meridas,” Jasnah said.

“If you think of one, then I will be very surprised,” the man replied. He glanced over at her. “No more complaints about my foolishness? I thought not. The problem with you, Jasnah, is that you have always underestimated me. That is one flaw your madman did not display, which was why I was happy to see him go.”

“And if he returns?” Jasnah demanded, surprising herself by asking the question. She looked Meridas in the eyes. “When Taln comes back, do you really think he will let you betray this people?”

Meridas paused, showing the faintest flash of uncertainty. He studied her eyes. Slowly, his hesitance was replaced with a self-satisfied smile. “You know he’s not coming back, no matter what you say. I can see the truth in your eyes, Jasnah. You think he is dead. He won’t let me betray this people? Why not, when he has already betrayed you?”

Meridas shook his head, turning back to his map. “Your brother always said you thought yourself far more clever than you are,” he noted. “I see good evidence of that trait. It is a good thing I like your face, otherwise I would seriously reconsider this union.” He studied the map for a moment longer before waving at her with an off-handed gesture. “You may go. Prepare yourself—it has been four days, and there will likely be a highstorm this night.”

JASNAH HUDDLED IN THE SCREAMING darkness. She crouched in a nook between two touching boulders, the cloth of her canopy stretched a few inches overhead to form a slight barrier between herself and the storm. Even still, water streamed from a tenset different slits and cracks, soaking her with its chill fingers. Wind whipped and buffeted the canvas, blowing across her sodden form, making her shiver anew with each passing.

It will end, she told herself miserably. *It's a summer storm. It will be quick. No longer than an hour.* Future comfort was little consolation in the face of the cold wind, however. Her teeth chattered with a pathetic sound, her hair matted to her head as she pushed herself farther into the stone crack, though the boulders retained little warmth.

Think of the men outside, she reminded herself. *They don't even have the meager protection of your canopy. They're wrapped in their bedrolls—if they even have one—suffering far more than you.*

Thoughts of the men, however, only reminded her of Meridas's intentions. On the morrow, the majority of them would be sold into permanent servitude. The one thing they retained in their pitiful lives, their freedom, would be taken away. Meridas wouldn't even get a good deal for them. The despot Aneazer could probably demand slaves from the villages he controlled, and would have little shortage of workers. Yet Jasnah did not doubt Meridas would be able to bargain for his own freedom—even if Aneazer held the upper hand, he would be a fool to fight and lose trained soldiers when he could simply ride away with the enemy army under his control.

How had she gotten herself into such a situation? What was she doing in the wilds, suffering before an open highstorm, waiting to betray those who followed her? She had assumed herself competent because of her experience in the Pralir wars and with the courts of Alethkar. Now that she had true control, however, she had led her followers nearly to their dooms. Meridas was right. She had failed.

The reason was obvious. She shouldn't have listened to Taln. Shortly before, she had spoken bold words about the madman's return, but Meridas had seen through them. Taln wasn't coming back, and why should she hope for him to? Giving heed to Taln's judgement had brought her to disaster. Why? Why was she such a fool? She knew he was mad, and yet she gave him leave to do virtually whatever he wished.

She had also made too many concessions to Meridas. He had been the first one to bring unnecessary troops along, simply because he wanted to wrestle command from her. And, foolishly, she had given him leave. Politics was a game of compromise and balance. Commanding troops, however, required absolute strength and no concessions. She had played one as if it were the other, never understanding the difference. And now she had failed.

The wind curled around her stones, pulling up the cloth and spraying her with a fresh burst of rain.

She couldn't even blame her failure on Taln, not with any seriousness. He couldn't help himself. He had proven that he could not distinguish

between reality and fiction. He truly thought that the Holy City would hold a solution to their problems. She should have been more clear-headed. Taln had pulled her along with his delusions, despite her resistance, and now he was dead.

The storm finally blew itself out, the rains falling slack and the wind slowing to a slight breeze. Jasnah remained curled in her makeshift tent, back pressed against the uncomfortable stone, face and body draped by the thick canopy cloth. Chill water trickled down her face.

She had to find another way. She had to *think*. She couldn't let Meridas sell the people that had come to the army, men who had come answering her subtle prompting. She had been the one to encourage Taln's reputation, the one determined to manipulate his madness into giving her an army. The people were her responsibility. Taln was dead, but he was not the only one that could resist Meridas. She would find a way. Perhaps—

Jasnah paused, suddenly coming alert. She had heard something. Something that sounded like . . .

Hoofbeats. The camp was under attack.

She threw off her cloth covering, spraying droplets of rainwater into the night air, and scrambled to her feet. Her intended call of warning, however, never left her throat.

Jasnah froze, staring at the monstrous creature that stood before her in the darkness. It seemed to absorb the starlight, a massive black scar, darker even than the sky behind it. It stood twice her height, and a pair of twisting wings billowed in the air behind it, their motion a furtive and abstract black upon black. The body was a bulbous mass, indistinct, with strangely placed limbs.

She could make out no details, but she could *feel* that it was there. The thing seemed to pull upon her, weakening her, taking her life and replacing it with awful, horrifying despair. Fear wouldn't let her scream; it wouldn't even let her shiver. Stories she'd heard since childhood, stories that frightened even the aged, told of the death that came with highstorms. Demons. Khothen. Stormshades.

A light sputtered to life a short distance away—one of her guards lighting a lantern. The illumination dispelled both darkness and imagination, taking away the fear and replacing it with reality. The light revealed no monster, but instead a man, sitting on horseback, his cloak fluttering in the wind behind him. His head was bowed slightly, leaving the eyes and face darkened, but she recognized the powerful, lean body and the Shardblade tied at the horse's flank.

“Taln,” she whispered.

He seemed . . . tired. His body slumped in the saddle slightly, and when he looked up, his face was wearied. His eyes were dark with something beyond lack of light, and the weak illumination left his face pocked and haunted with shadows. He turned, sliding out of the saddle and landing firmly on the wet stone despite his obvious fatigue, then reached over and twisted the Shardblade, allowing the supernaturally sharp edge to slice away its own bonds.

He turned, standing before her. A short distance away, the guard set down his lantern then ran to spread the news. Taln stared down at her, half of his face hidden in darkness. Standing before her as he was, he seemed massive—like a boulder, not a man. She reached a hand forward, toward him, but stopped. She pulled the arm back, against her sodden chest.

“It is done,” Taln said quietly.

“What?” Jasnah asked.

“Those who followed no longer hunt this people.”

Jasnah shivered within her wet clothing. For the first time, she noticed that Taln’s outfit was colored with irregular darkness. Blood stains. His face was smeared with something that looked like soot, though most of it had washed away in the storm.

“You fought them all?” Jasnah asked. “A thousand men?”

Taln smiled, the weak expression eerie in the darkness. “No,” he said. “Herald I may be, but I have the body of a man. With my powers, and with a small passway to defend . . . perhaps I could have fought them, for a time. Without either, I had to use other methods. The ones that still live will not continue the chase.”

On the other side of the camp, lights winked to life as people woke. The stir seemed to be going too quickly—pieces of the camp were awakening that couldn’t possibly have gotten the news yet.

“What . . . ?” she asked.

“That will be Kemnar,” Taln said, stepping away from her and seating himself on one of her boulders with a deep sigh. “With the horses, and our captive.”

“Captive?” Jasnah asked.

“Go and see,” Taln said. He no longer seemed dark or menacing, only . . . exhausted. Like a man who bore some great weight. He looked up at her, and for the first time since his arrival she saw in him the man she had known. “Go ahead,” he said. “I’ll be fine. I just need to . . . rest.”

Jasnah nodded, though she was hesitant to leave him. The irrational side

of her worried that he wouldn't be there when she returned. She forced herself into motion, ignoring the cold winds and her numb, shivering body. She hurried across the camp, seeking out the source of the far disturbance. As she did so, she heard ecstatic calls of 'The Herald has returned!' She had to force herself not to join in the celebrations.

Taln had returned. That didn't, of course, mean that her problems had been fixed—they were still out of food, and they were still marching toward a hostile army four times their size—but suddenly everything seemed easier to face. It was silly, she knew, but never had she been so happy to be proven wrong.

There were about two tenset horses in all. Jasnah found them at the edge of the camp. Kemnar stood nearby, carefully giving a group of soldiers instructions on equine care. He smiled when he saw her, then turned back to his explanation. All of the animals bore saddles and saddlebags, but none of them bore mounts—save one. As soon as she saw him, she realized why Kemnar was having so much trouble keeping the other soldiers' attention.

The newcomer wore black.

His features were obviously inhuman, which meant he had been an Awakener for a long time indeed. His face was . . . sharp, and too linear. Like most Awakeners, it was hard to distinguish specific differences between his face and those of a regular person. The fine edges of his features, such as the nose and eyes, were just . . . too distinct. The smoothed parts, such as the cheeks, were too smooth. He didn't blink—in fact, he didn't even move. Not a muscle twitched as he sat, looking toward Kemnar.

And then, he was looking at her. Jasnah started. The man hadn't seemed to move at all. Instead, it was as if . . . he had simply ceased to be in one location, and appeared in a second. He sat there, staring at her for a long moment, drawing her attention so soundly that she jumped when Kemnar touched her elbow.

"Unnerving, eh?" he asked. "I can never catch him moving, even if I'm looking at him when he does. It's like he isn't real, but a series of paintings of a person, each in a slightly different position."

Jasnah nodded. The creature was still staring at her. "Where . . . ?"

"He was with the Veden army," Kemnar said. "That's how they moved so quickly. They didn't have to carry food with them, or even stop to gather water. Taln's saddlebags carry a sack of emeralds as big as your head, and mine carry another one filled with zircons." Kemnar paused, and when he continued, she could hear discomfort in his voice. "Convenient way to

travel, I guess, if you can put up with the company. Those things are . . ." He trailed off, his voice becoming guilty.

He'd forgotten that I'm one of them.

She forced herself to turn from the creature, instead looking at Kemnar. He was a bit ragged and tired from a long ride, but overall he looked well. He'd let his beard get a little longer than he usually did, but there was an excited twinkle in his eyes.

"You have news," she said. "What happened out there? What did he do to the invaders?"

"I don't know everything," Kemnar said. "But I can guess."

"Why don't you know for certain?" Jasnah asked. "Weren't you with him?"

Kemnar shook his head as the two of them backed away from the ring of torches and the men caring for the newly-acquired horses. "No," he continued. "Taln lost me the second day of our travels—he was gone when I woke up. Do you have any idea how hard it is to track a single person in the stormlands? Fortunately, I knew the general direction of the army. I found them, but . . ."

"What?" Jasnah prompted.

"Well," Kemnar said. "Everything seemed normal, and there was no sign of Taln. The army stopped for the night, and I made my own camp a short ways back. That night there was a disturbance. I didn't know what it was at the time, but I talked to some deserters a few days later. Apparently, someone had killed every single one of the guards on watch that night. He left the bodies, decapitated, beside their watch posts, with strange patterns carved into the ground around them. I saw some of these when I followed the army the next day. Taln obviously cut them with his Shardblade, but the army didn't know that. They only saw eerie patterns in the stone, odd things that looked kind of like glyphs, but somehow not quite right."

Jasnah frowned. "He was trying to scare them?"

Kemnar smiled in the wan light. "Yes, and it worked. Each night, Taln killed every man set on watch, until they began to set their watches closer and closer and set more and more men up at night. That, however, only made the army more tired when it marched the next day—slowing it considerably. Then Taln started killing the scouts and their horses too. Soon, no one wanted to ride point, and the scouts they did send always stayed within view of the army. This slowed them even further, since they couldn't watch for gullies or wash-outs.

"If they sent out patrols to villages, those patrols never returned. If

anyone went to the privy alone at night, they were found beheaded when morning came. By the fourth day, the desertions began—and Taln let them leave without being killed. Well, that probably didn't help morale any, and soon the Vedens had to set watches on their own men. Taln even got into camp sometimes and killed these watches, though I don't know how he did it unseen."

Kemnar stopped.

"And?" Jasnah said.

"And that's all I know," he confessed. "The next night, he found me and told me not to follow any more. He gave me a few horses that he had stolen, kept one for himself, and told me to stay where I was. He said that if he didn't return in three days, I was to ride and find you and tell you what I knew."

"And you did what he commanded?" Jasnah asked with annoyance. "You stayed there?"

"My lady," Kemnar said flatly. "He was not in a mood to be disobeyed. I thought it wise to accommodate him."

Jasnah paused, thinking back to the dark, unnerving expression Taln had borne when he first arrived back in camp. "All right," she said. "There's little we can do about it now. What happened then? He returned, I assume?"

Kemnar nodded. "There was a highstorm late the next evening—that was four days ago—and he found me a day later. He led a group of horses, one of them bearing the Awakener. When I asked him about the army, he simply said that it would follow us no more."

Jasnah folded her arms in dissatisfaction. Kemnar looked away guiltily, and she saw—really saw—for the first time how tired he was. "Go and get something warm to eat," she told him, "then get some rest. I'll deal with Talenel."

Kemnar smiled. "Thank you, my lady," he said, bowing. Then he disappeared into the night. Jasnah stood, watching the men remove saddles and hobble the horses, another bringing grain for the beasts to eat. The Awakener climbed down from his mount, and it was as Kemnar had said—he didn't seem to move. It was as if with him, her eyes didn't work—they registered him as if she were blinking rapidly, only catching sight of him for brief glimpses, each one freezing him mid-motion. Yet he changed positions from sitting horseback to standing beside the animal—he just did it without any apparent motion.

Jasnah shivered as she watched, though this time it really was from the cold. Her sodden clothing was plastered to her skin—it probably wouldn't

dry until it got sunlight the next day. Suddenly, someone set a cloak on her shoulders. It was wet too, but was still warm from the body that had worn it, and her skin relished the delightful heat. It was far too big for her.

“He’s a Taln Pole,” Taln said from beside her, looking at the Awakener. “The Essence, I mean. Stone. He’s only moderately strong, but he should be able to make enough grain to keep the army fed—at least, on half rations. It would be unwise to overtax him.”

Jasnah pulled the cloak tighter. Taln looked down at her, meeting her eyes, and smiled. The shadows she had seen in him before were still there, but they were masked now. “I’ll tell you,” he said, obviously noting the question in her eyes, “but not right now. Later.”

She sighed. “Very well.”

He nodded thankfully.

She looked down, away from his face. “Taln, I . . . I didn’t think you would return. I assumed you were dead, that whatever you had planned, it had failed. I told Meridas otherwise, but he saw the truth in me. I didn’t trust you.” She didn’t know why she spoke; her words sounded foolish in her ears. Yet she felt a need to somehow explain herself, to expose what now seemed like such a betrayal.

He chuckled. “I half expected to die myself,” he said. “Almost did, actually. But then I felt it.”

“It?” Jasnah asked.

Taln held up his Blade—his own sword, the one he had taken back from Meridas the night before he left. “The presence of my brethren,” he said. “I feel them, through the sword. They’re here, Jasnah. Ahead, in the Holy City. They’re waiting for me. I couldn’t die, not until I had found them and knew they would see to your safety.” He raised his head, nodding toward the camp. “To all of your safety.”

Jasnah frowned. He obviously still held to his delusions. And yet, she had thought that Lhan was delusional for saying that Taln would survive. She looked up at Taln. So humble, yet so strong. So innocent, yet still intelligent. Could she trust without believing? For a moment, she was almost willing to do so.

“What would they be doing there?” she asked. “Your brethren, I mean. Jorevan is ruled by a tyrant.”

“Someone controls the Holy City?” Taln asked.

Jasnah nodded. “He calls himself Lord Aneazer, and he claims to rule the surrounding area, dominating the nearby towns.”

Taln frowned. “He has an army, then?”

“A large one,” Jasnah said. “At least, for a single city, and for a despot in Riemak.”

Taln nodded knowingly. “It makes sense. This wouldn’t be the first time we’ve been forced to work with undesirable allies, assuming there were no others to be found.”

“It’s going to be difficult to get you into the city,” Jasnah warned.

“We’ll manage it,” Taln said, smiling.

She smiled, then paused, her logical side giving whispered warning. “Taln,” she finally said. “Remember your promise. If they aren’t there, if . . . for some reason, we don’t find the Heralds, you said you’d return with me to Alethkar.”

Taln just shook his head. He reached out, touching her lightly on the shoulder, and Jasnah felt herself blush slightly.

“Ah, Lady Kholin,” he said. “Someday you’re going to have to lose that skepticism of yours. We’ll find them, you’ll see. You’re just going to have to learn to trust me.”

Trust me. His hand remained on her shoulder, almost tender in its touch. Finally she just shook her head. “Well,” she said, “we shall see. For now, let’s take you to Meridas. I wouldn’t want to miss his expression when he sees for himself that you have returned from the dead.”

chapter 69

DALENAR 6

EACH BOY DALENAR STRUCK DOWN seemed to have the face of one of his sons. Aredor died a tenset times before him, his eyes those of every Shardbearer Dalenar slew. Poor Renarin seemed to be every frightened spearman, boys with lives and loves, but whose worth was rendered as naught because they couldn't face a Shardblade. Even Sheneres, now years dead, appeared in the proud faces of the noblemen Dalenar fought.

Dalenar killed them anyway. This was war; this was death. Through most of the Pralir campaign he had remained at the command tower, directing the carnage from afar. This time he could not stay back—he could not order his soldiers to kill their cousins and brothers while he rested far from the terrible work. So, he fought amidst them, Shardblade making the air red with his guilt.

He killed tensets of men. He fought with the horrible, full capacity of a Shardbearer—a warrior virtually untouchable by regular troops. And yet, that didn't stop them. The men were Aleth soldiers, well-trained and disciplined. They attacked with coordination, knowing that it was occasionally possible for a group of twenty to pull down a Shardbearer then slip past his armor with knives or spearheads. They knew that if someone didn't face Dalenar, he would simply cut through their ranks, decimating them anyway.

And so they died. Occasionally, one of Elhokar's remaining Shardbearers would appear to challenge Dalenar, and a duel would follow. Dalenar

followed Protocol, but it was a dirty, battlefield kind of Protocol. He had slain five Shardbearers before the afternoon sun was overhead—most of them young men who had, just months before, fought for honor in the dueling competition.

Dalনার faced courtly acquaintances, distant cousins, and even friends. These were the worst, for he knew some of them to be men of honor—men who believed that it was their duty to follow the throne regardless of the king's actions. Dalনার understood their decision; in slightly different circumstances, he knew he would be with them, fighting at Elhokar's side.

He killed them. Somewhere near late afternoon, he began to lose the melancholy reticence that had afflicted him for most of the Pralir campaign. Old spirits awakened—passions that were a memory of the old Dalনার, the man before he became known as Tyrantbane, the man who had slain hundreds on the battlefield, and had enjoyed every moment of it.

As afternoon passed, he began to fight with fury instead of shame.

Within his heart, he knew that this war was not about duty. He spoke of Elhokar's offenses and inability to lead, but the would-be honor within Dalনার would not accept those reasonings. As the anger came free, giving him strength once simple resolve tired, Dalনার was forced to admit that this was no war of justice. It was a war of vengeance.

As evening approached, it became increasingly obvious who would win this day. Elhokar had suffered massive desertions the two nights before the battle, and while many had not joined with Dalনার instead, some had—including a fair number of Shardbearers. Elhokar's towers fell early in the battle, as per Dalনার's battle-orders, and Dalনার's Shardbearers put heavy pressure on the infantry—forcing Elhokar to commit his own Shardbearers to duels. By noon, the forces were balanced. By early evening, Dalনার held a strong advantage. Without men to duel them, Dalনার's Shardbearers sheared through the regular troops almost unhindered.

Elhokar would not surrender. Dalনার had known that the boy wouldn't, and within the fury, Dalনার didn't really care. He remained rational—he hadn't entered a mindless frenzy. Yet, he could kill without pain. Guilt and questioning were fed to the anger, allowing Dalনার to continue without their annoying buzzings. The old, frightening joy returned—the thrill of a perfect battle, the excitement of facing a foe and proving yourself his better. It wasn't about fair contests or duels; it was about destroying, and knowing the power of having destroyed.

And then he saw Echathen.

His friend's light blue Shardplate ran red with the blood of his enemies,

many of whom lay in pieces at his feet. The ground was damp and pooling with the lives of the fallen, and Echathen swept through a squad of heavy infantrymen, his Blade easily cutting down the well-armored men, whose bulk made for difficult maneuvering.

Echathen smiled as he fought. Dalenar knew that smile, he felt its strength within himself. Yet, when he saw the pleasure in Echathen's eyes, something shattered within Dalenar. He stopped mid-swing, though his honor guard quickly finished off the man he had been about to kill.

Dalenar lowered his Blade and looked down at his bloodstained armor, then at the bodies around him. Aredor, Renarin, and Sheneres looked back at him again.

I cannot do this, he thought sickly. I cannot be this man again.

He stood for a moment, suddenly feeling old, sore, and impossibly tired. Then he raised his blade and pointed toward Echathen, indicating for his honor guard to meld with those of the Khardinar lord.

Echathen gave Dalenar a broad smile as he approached. "I feel alive again, Dalenar!" he said. "Like before everything went wrong, before the traitor, Pralir, and that fool boy took the throne!"

Dalenar could not express the disgust he felt for his old friend at that moment. He knew, however, that he had to reserve an equal portion of that same disgust for himself.

"The battle is going too long," Dalenar said over the din of fighting. Was it really that loud, or were his ears simply ringing after countless—yet ineffective—strikes to his helm? "We have obviously won the day; Elhokar needs to surrender."

"I don't think he intends to," Echathen replied.

Dalenar shook his head, scanning the battlefield. "I don't intend to kill every lad here, Echathen. These are our people—their only fault is loyalty to their king. Perhaps if we pull back, there will be more desertions tonight."

"Pull back?" Echathen asked, waving for his honor guard to form a perimeter so the two lords could continue talking. It was a barely necessary gesture—few squads of men were willing to attack a pair of Shardbearers who seemed to have no intent on killing for the moment.

"Retreat when we're winning so soundly?" Echathen asked. "Dalenar, you know as I do that we need to continue. The victory must be decisive, otherwise those factions loyal to your nephew might get ideas a few years down the line."

Dalenar looked up, toward the sun. There were still several hours of daylight remaining, and Echathen was probably right. Show weakness now,

when his reign was beginning, and Dalenar might have to fight another war soon thereafter.

You're already calling it 'your reign,' he realized. *What of Ahrden? What of your promise to abdicate when the boy reaches age?*

"It must be done, Dalenar," Echathen said. "You must be firm—at least, until we find and dispatch Elhokar. I'm surprised he hasn't sought you out, actually."

"So am I," Dalenar said with a frown. Striking out to duel Dalenar directly was exactly the sort of brash move he had expected from Elhokar.

"Perhaps the boy's more clever than we give him credit," Dalenar said. "He's fought with me for years, and I with him—he'll know what I expect him to do. That in itself is good enough reason not to do it."

Echathen shrugged, then sighed slightly, stretching an arm where the Shardplate was scarred from a duel. While the light of destruction had not completely left Echathen's eyes, it had abated somewhat. By unspoken agreement, the two lords commanded their honor guards to lead them back to safety, where they could rest for a time and reassess the battle strategies.

At their mobile camp a short distance away, Dalenar was pleased to find that his engineers had managed to right one of the captured towers. As Echathen went to replace his tarnished pauldron with a spare off a man he had killed, Dalenar forced himself to climb the ladder up three flights to the top of the tower.

He ignored salutes, feeling his fatigue as he made his way to the front of the tower and scanned the visible battlefield. The war was going even more poorly for Elhokar than he had assumed below. The king's forces were boxed together with only marginal chances for a retreat, and Dalenar's forces were making headway on the fourth flank.

You foolish, foolish boy, he thought with a sigh. What had gone wrong? How had the child turned out so differently from the father? Was it because Nolhonarin had been absent so often, campaigning to restore Alethkar's borders? Had it been because of his obvious favoritism of Jasnah? Despite his reverence for the fallen man, Dalenar was forced to admit the grand flaw of his brother's reign. Somehow, the great king had failed his kingdom in a way more subtle than he would have ever acknowledged—by ignoring his heir, Nolhonarin had left his people with a failure for a king.

"That boy just doesn't know when he's beaten," Echathen said, clomping across the tower top. He stepped up beside Dalenar, handing over a waterskin.

Dalenar took a long drink. He was tempted to wash the blood free from his armor, but it seemed a futile gesture. More would simply follow.

“Perhaps I could make him an offer,” Dalenar said. “His surrender in exchange for banishment.”

“So he could raise an army to come get back his throne?” Echathen asked.

Dalenar shook his head. His musings were simply that—he knew what needed to be done. He moved to go—there were still men he had to kill. As he turned, however, he promised himself one reserved vow. He would not enjoy the killing. The men he slew deserved that much, at least.

Echathen didn’t follow. Dalenar turned, frowning at his friend. “You coming?”

Echathen didn’t respond. He leaned against the tower rail, squinting. “Dalenar, do you see something—there, to the southwest?”

Dalenar paused, then walked back up to join his friend. He followed the gesture. “There *is* something there,” he realized. It looked like a shadow, but there were no clouds in the sky . . .

“An army,” Echathen breathed. “By the Almighty, that’s why he keeps fighting. He’s managed to get reinforcements from somewhere!”

Dalenar cursed, realizing Echathen was right. He pulled off his helm, wiping his brow as he called for aids and messengers. He would not be returning to the battlefield anytime soon—reinforcements changed their battle plan severely, and he would need to direct troop reassignments.

“HOW MANY, WOULD YOU say?” Echathen asked.

Dalenar looked up from the piecemeal battle map thrown together by his scouts. The new army was close now—it was moving at a very quick march. Only an hour had passed since Echathen had pointed it out, but it was already nearing the battlefield.

“I don’t know,” Dalenar said somberly. “Looks like at least forty-thousand by scout reports.”

Echathen whistled softly. The Khardin lord had removed his helm and gauntlets, and stood with his bald head exposed. He had wiped most of the blood away.

“Don’t forget,” Dalenar said, turning back to the map. “You’re the one who persuaded me to do this in the first place. You’re not allowed to get timid now.”

“Oh, I’m not worried,” Echathen assured with a smile. “I just want to make certain we have an accurate count—for when the ballads are sung.”

Dalenar snorted, but he could feel little mirth at the comment. The reports were not good. His men were tired and wounded; their retreat

would be slow. He had lost nearly a third of his force, and while Elhokar had suffered far worse, that wouldn't matter now. Dalenar's troops could not stand against three-to-one odds, especially if the reinforcement army hadn't been marching long.

The only option was to do Elhokar had not. Dalenar had cursed the boy's pride in not surrendering, but now the situation was reversed. If Dalenar gave himself up, most of his men would undoubtedly be spared—Elhokar would need them too much, considering the losses he had suffered. Only Dalenar—and probably his generals, Shardbearers, and high lords—would need die.

Echathen obviously saw the look in Dalenar's eyes. "There's not going to be a ballad about this day, is there?"

"Not unless it's one with a very depressing ending," Dalenar said. "We'll try a retreat, but it took us too long to disengage. They'll give chase, and they'll catch us. After that . . ."

Echathen nodded.

"You will flee," Dalenar said. "Elhokar won't dare invade Khardinar, not with so little resources. You should—"

"Dalenar," Echathen said softly, "we both know that Elhokar is not the type to forgive a grudge. He'll come for me eventually—and he'll take my family too. If I go now, then he will probably leave them alone."

Dalenar nodded. He looked up from the map and out over his forces. They had come to serve the Tyrantbane. They had come for justice, but had found failure. Now they knew the truth about him, the truth he had been hiding for over fifteen years. He hadn't ever intended his secret to be manifest quite so dramatically, but he probably deserved it. No man was to take a kingship upon himself—though he had acted in the supposed name of justice, he had violated the strongest and most revered tenet of *The Way of Kings*. He had become a conqueror.

The reinforcement army arrived. Dalenar made the orders for official retreat—he had begun the process as quickly as possible, but the main body of troops hadn't been ready until just moments before. As he stood, watching his people withdraw, he noticed something.

Elhokar's forces weren't moving to meet with the reinforcements. It was a strange move—they should have retreated as soon as possible to join the larger force, lest Dalenar make a desperate strike to try and capture Elhokar before the reinforcements could arrive to help.

Yet, Elhokar kept his forces together in their defensive block. Though they were a distance away, they didn't look like a force welcoming long-awaited allies.

Dalener's frown deepened. "Do we know who they are yet?"

Echathen shook his head. "The only thing we know about them is that they're winds-cursed good at killing scouts."

The reinforcements began fanning out into an offensive line, preparing to curl around Elhokar's forces. Dalener watched, slowly comprehending.

"Those aren't reinforcements," Dalener said.

Echathen didn't need to be told. He was already watching the third army, as were the scribes and messengers on the tower top.

"By the Almighty!" Echathen said with relief. "They've come to help us, not Elhokar. Who are they!"

Dalener sensed a wrongness. "No," he said with growing understanding. "No, Echathen, they aren't here to help us." *I should have realized. Forty-thousand men. That's not the size of an unnoticed reinforcing party.*

"I want messengers out now!" Dalener bellowed. "Split our forces, leave a column in the center for Elhokar to retreat through us! Send light cavalry to harry the newcomers, and double-pace the retreat!"

Echathen frowned. "What?" he asked as the messengers jumped into motion. "What is this?"

Dalener shook his head. "Those aren't reinforcements for either side, old friend. Alethkar has been invaded."

ELHOKAR'S FORCES WERE HESITANT to accept aid, but that was only natural, considering its source. Eventually, the king was forced to make the best of two unenviable decisions. If Dalener's forces betrayed him, then he would die. If he stayed, he would die. Better to hope upon the honor of his uncle and the danger of a common enemy.

Dalener watched the retreat, determined to stay atop the broken tower as long as was safe. Fortunately, the invaders hadn't been given full time to spread out their army, and a retreat was still possible.

But, who are they? Dalener thought, trepidation increasing. He feared he knew the answer. Months ago, on the stormlands of Pralir, another phantom army had appeared. It had left thousands of men dead in its wake, then disappeared into the uncivilized wilderness of the east. *Rantah*, the rebels of Pralir, had apparently decided to bring their fight to Alethkar.

But where had they gathered such an army? Scout reports were sparse—there was too much chaos, and the invaders' army had obviously been keeping careful watch for spies. However, early reports said that the enemy was amazingly well-equipped, with full squadrons of heavy infantry and archers. No towers, but such would have been difficult to move stealthily.

Dalenar shook his head. He should have known better—this was the price of internal squabbling. This is why Bajerden warned against the lords of a kingdom taking up arms against one another. At their strength, even after Pralir, the Aleth forces would have had little difficulty facing an army of forty thousand. Now, however, they were a shattered and wounded group.

“Keep that eastern flank moving!” Dalenar ordered, waving toward the messengers. One man jumped into motion, climbing down the tower to deliver the order.

The order would go to men who were expecting it, however. The officers were undoubtedly trying their best to keep their men moving, but the infantry would be weak. Dalenar tried not to think about the wounded and exhausted—both would have to be abandoned by the main force. Hopefully, these invaders would show honor to the captured.

Below, great troops of men—barely organized in their flight—backed away, retreating northward. Elhokar’s forces marched down the middle, in the gap left by Dalenar’s split flanks. Only the cavalry remained behind—mounted archers used to harry for a retreat. They were taking heavy casualties, however—Dalenar could see that much without hearing the reports, and he cringed at the loss. Horses fell and died, each beast more valuable than a hundred suits of armor.

Suddenly, a group of horsemen broke off from Elhokar’s ragged line. Dalenar leaned forward, frowning. He could barely make out a gold-armored form leading the force to the east.

“What is that fool boy doing!” he demanded. No one responded—only messengers waited atop the tower; Echathen had gone below to lead the harrying forces.

Arrows fell from the invading army as Elhokar passed, but none hit the king. Elhokar spurred his horsemen quickly, making straight for the broken city of Crossguard. A force of horsemen left the invading army, trailing him.

Dalenar waited tensely as Elhokar disappeared into the city. It seemed odd that he should now be fearing for the boy’s safety—just hours earlier, he had been trying to kill Elhokar. However, the people would need their king—for a time at least—to face this new invader. Personal arguments had to be discarded.

The invaders reached Crossguard just as Elhokar’s forces burst through a hole in the wall on the other side. Elhokar’s horsemen turned, making straight for the main body of the king’s army.

What was that about? Dalenar thought with frustration.

The invading force was getting close—it was about time to abandon the tower. Fortunately, the invading army was moving more slowly than Dalenar had expected. There was a sluggishness to their motions, one almost as obvious as that of his men.

They're tired from marching, Dalenar decided—it was the only answer that made sense. They must have come a long way to make their assault.

It was a chilling realization. If the invaders had waited just another hour or two, they would have caught Dalenar's forces in camp for the night, even more weakened from the day's exertions, Elhokar's forces presumably destroyed.

"Abandon the base camp," Dalenar ordered, waving his messengers to climb down from the tower's top. He waited until they were all down, then followed behind, bellowing for his aids and scribes to retreat. The scene at the base of the tower was one of insane chaos, soldiers and civilians scattering every direction, officers yelling for this chore or that, and people crying that they needed more time. White-robed women scurried about, trying hurriedly to gather up their scribing materials.

Dalenar waved for his horse, then mounted. The action seemed to bring a bit of focus to the various groups, and many paused, looking up at him.

"Go!" he ordered, pointing north. "Leave everything you can behind. I don't want anyone collapsing during the night's march because they decided to bring a few extra books. Everything can be replaced but you!"

The words gave them direction, and their fervor seemed to become a little more directed. Dalenar waited a few moments to make certain they moved as per his order, then turned his horse and galloped toward the back of his troop line.

Too many men straggled behind, clutching wounds barely bandaged. Many just sat where they had collapsed, waiting. Dalenar cursed his inability to help, ignoring their calls as he passed. Fortunately, his main body of troops had retreated well ahead of the oncoming invaders. Most of men would escape—assuming the invaders didn't press too hard a chase during the night.

How long Dalenar's army lasted after that was a matter he didn't bother worrying about for the moment. They couldn't run forever—eventually they would be forced into a battle. That would happen another day, however. There would be plans, traps, and perhaps even hope. Perhaps.

He turned his horse, galloping toward his now-retreating squad of harrying archers. A smiling Echathen nodded to Dalenar as he joined the group, staying just ahead of the oncoming invaders.

“They were obviously focused on getting to the battlefield in a hurry,” Echathen yelled. “They barely even bothered with us—we killed ten of them for every one we lost!”

But every one you lost was one on a horse, Dalenar thought. A horse that could have carried a wounded man. He had sent two hundred horseback archers to harry. Barely thirty had returned—in just a few moments, Dalenar had lost nearly half his army’s mounts.

The point was irrelevant—Echathen’s forces had slowed the enemy, if just a bit. Every moment would count.

The horsemen turned and galloped back past the line of wounded, and Dalenar reined his horse in, grabbing by the arm a young spearman with a wounded leg. The youth looked up in shock as Dalenar lifted him up with a grunt, placing him on the saddle behind. By unspoken command, the other horsemen did likewise, each helping a wounded man up behind them. There were sudden cries from the field nearby as the wounded realized that this time Dalenar would not ride them by without thought.

There were only thirty horses, however, and hundreds of wounded. Steeling himself against the wails of those left behind, Dalenar ordered his group forward before the other wounded could get too close. The horsemen started forward again, moving less quickly this time, but still fast enough to stay ahead of the main body of invaders.

The youth on the saddle behind Dalenar held to his Plate with rigid hands as the men behind watched their lord abandon them.

Dalenar edged his horse closer to Echathen, who rode with a dazed-looking boy that had a head wound.

“Did you see Elhokar ride past your force?” Dalenar asked over the sound of hoofbeats.

Echathen nodded. “He galloped past us in a mean hurry, that pretty wife of his on the horse behind him.”

Wife. So that was what it had been about—Nanavah had come to war with the king. It made sense, of course; the queen often served as king’s scribe during times of war.

“Did you see a boy in her arms?” Dalenar yelled.

Echathen shook his head. “I was kind of busy at the time.”

Almighty, let it be that he left the prince at home.

Aredor was dead, Jezenrosh and his family executed, and Renarin missing. If Elhokar’s son died with the rest of the army, it would mark the end of the Kholin line.

chapter 70

MERIN 15

IN THE DUSK LIGHT, the ships of Merin's convoy were dark blots upon the blue seas. He leaned against the gunwale of his flagship, wind ruffling his cloak as he looked southward. To his eyes, the air current above was little different from the water below. His flagship left two wakes behind it—one in the air, one in the water.

His arm still ached. Though he could find no visible marks, his hand had gone numb in the hours following his duels. He had begun to fear that it would remain that way, but a sharp prickling had awoken him that night—the first night at sea. Slowly, like a limb reawaking after being slept upon in the wrong position, sensation returned to his hand. Except, rather than just the normal tingling, this reawakening had brought with it sharp pains.

He hadn't been able to sleep that night.

Fortunately, the pain had dulled. Only the ring of flesh around his wrist, the place where the bracelet had sat, continued to burn with any real pain. The rest of his arm just ached dully, like muscles overworked by spear training.

Despite the pain, he had only lasted two days without the bracelet. It glistened on his wrist at that moment, gifting him with its strange powers. The winds ahead whispered to him as they parted for his ship, and he was tempted to do more than just watch. He wanted to *feel*. Feel as he had during

that duel, feel the wind cradling him, driving his swings and boosting his movements. The longing was odd, since it was accompanied by an acute memory of the flaring pain. How could he both crave the sensation and fear its agony at the same time?

He resisted the impulse to call the wind to him. Not only did he worry about the pain and the damage it might do to his arm, but there was something more. He hadn't noticed it the first time he'd used the wind, but his second combat had done something to the bracelet. When he had taken it out after the two-day hiatus, he had found the jade on the inside powdery and flaking. A good half of it had brushed away at his probing. Whatever he had done when he called the winds, it hadn't just hurt him, it had burned away the jade as well—just as it had when he had destroyed the glyphward back on the night of the dueling competition. Merin had been forced to have one of the Lakhenran armorers rework the bracelet to fit the newly thinned stones so that they would still touch his skin when worn.

The winds rustled behind him. "My lord?" a voice asked.

"Yes?" Merin asked, turning to find Kalden standing respectfully, his new Shardblade—still unbonded, of course—resting on his shoulder. Since swearing his oath to Merin, the soldier had taken it upon himself to be a liaison between Merin and the Lakhenran royalty.

"The new scout reports have arrived, my lord," Kalden said. "His Majesty has requested your presence at the debriefing."

Merin nodded, trying to ignore the worshipful glint in Kalden's eyes. Merin had incorrectly assumed that the impression would fade as time progressed. The young soldier still regarded Merin with the same mixture of reverence and respect he had displayed on that first day.

You shouldn't blame the man, Merin thought. *You probably spent your first weeks as a Shardbearer in a similar daze.* The soldier's respect was discomfiting nonetheless.

"When?" Merin asked.

"Shortly, my lord," Kalden said. "After the king finishes his meal."

Merin nodded, and Kalden took the gesture as a dismissal, though Merin would have preferred that the man stay. Merin felt almost as alone as he had during his days of captivity. Renarin stayed locked in his quarters most of the time, Shinri always made Merin feel guilty with those looks of hers, and the Lakhenrans universally regarded him as some kind of divine hero. Since his failure to save Aredor—and subsequent discussions with Renarin—had convinced Merin of just how *unheroic* he was, the people's general regard made him feel deceitful somehow.

Merin sighed. This night's report would be like the others. He would sit quietly, not saying anything as the captain of the fast-moving scout ships relayed what his men had discovered from talking to villagers along the coast. Merin's silence had a simple and practical motivation: he had nothing to add. What he knew of war came from a spearman's viewpoint, and was of little use to macroscopic plannings. He had no experience with scouting, foraging, or planning assaults.

Yet the other men in the conference—King Tamar, along with the other two former regents as his *Parshens* and the collected Lakhenran admirals and generals—always mistook Merin's silence for thoughtfulness. When he did say something, they all nodded appreciatively—as if his single sentence contained truths beyond what normal men could comprehend. They always consulted him on decisions regarding the fleet, and even went so far as to ask his permission for minor course changes.

Merin sighed, turning to stroll down the left side of the ship. Port? Starboard? He thought that left meant port, but if he was wrong, no one had the courage to correct him. He walked undirected—the others always sent Kalden's warning a good amount of time before the actual meeting began, so that Merin would have time to 'prepare.' Merin probably had about an hour before he had to climb aboard one of the ferrying boats to be taken to the king's vessel.

He found himself wandering toward the cabin area, past the rowing men and up the steps to the central tier. He didn't go to his room, however, but paused in front of the one beside it. Renarin's chamber.

He knocked. As usual, there was no answer. This time, however, Merin wasn't in a mood to be dissuaded—he had to talk to someone who didn't look at him as some kind of Heraldic savior. So he just opened the door.

Renarin sat in a chair in front of the door, staring directly at him.

Merin jumped slightly. It soon became obvious, however, that Renarin wasn't looking at Merin, but beyond him, his eyes thoughtful. "Come in and close the door," Renarin said quietly.

Merin entered the room, doing as instructed. The boat's frame creaked weightily as it rocked, but Merin felt as if he had entered another world—one of strange, foreign markings. He had expected to see numbers on the walls—Renarin had been spending a lot of time in the room, after all—but seeing them still left Merin with an eerie feeling. Renarin had carved his numbers directly into the wooden walls and floor, etching each one with a careful and precise hand. Thousands upon thousands of glyphs defaced

the room, which Renarin had emptied of all furniture save for the single chair and some wrinkled bedding in the corner.

The numbers were tiny this time, even smaller than the ones Renarin had drawn in his cell. And there were far more of them. There seemed to be a . . . logic to them, one that Merin couldn't quite apprehend. Some of the numbers moved in broad formations, like marching armies, and others looked like they would form murals if one stood far enough away. All four walls were coated with scribbles, as was the entire floor. Only one section of the room was still clean—a circular place directly in the center of the door Merin had entered through.

"What do you see?" Merin asked, stepping over to stand beside his friend's chair.

"Questions," Renarin said. "Problems. Wars. We live in . . . strange times, Merin."

Wind seeped through cracks in the door. "I know," Merin said truthfully.

"I did as I wanted," Renarin said. "I looked at the larger tapestry—I looked at movements, not individuals. And I found myself horribly unprepared to do so. I don't have the answers I want, Merin. I can *almost* see so many things, but the answers . . ."

"I don't understand," Merin said. "What do you *see*, Renarin? When I touch jade, the wind becomes real to me. It's like that for you?"

"Kind of," Renarin said, still staring at the wall. "But not so clear. It mostly feels like I am given only a shadowed glimpse of the truths I want, a seductive taste. There is so much more that I can't see, but . . . I fear to touch it."

Merin shook his head. "Fear? Why?"

"Because it's so vast," Renarin said. "When I hold onyx, I feel like there's an immensity pressing against me, a force of incredible power. Or of incredible information. The two feel very similar to me now."

"A . . . force?" Merin asked. "Like the Almighty?"

"Maybe," Renarin said. "You see the winds when you hold that jade, but there is something more you can do, isn't there? You have a power beyond simply seeing—a power to affect and change."

"Yes," Merin said with surprise. "How did you know?"

"The histories speak of it," Renarin said. "When you change and direct the wind, rather than just see it, you expend the jade somehow, don't you? Windrunners from the histories always needed a steady stream of jade to fuel their powers."

Merin glanced at his wrist, then nodded in acknowledgement—though he wasn't certain if Renarin saw the gesture or not.

"I think there's something more I can do too," Renarin said in a quiet, haunted voice. "A way to change, a way to find answers. A power greater than I see now, a way to do more than just guess at patterns—a way to see pure truth. When I hold my onyx, I can sense it, sense . . . something calling to me. A luring call to seek the knowledge that waits just out of view."

Renarin paused, looking up at Merin for the first time. His eyes were . . . chilling. "I fear to do it, Merin," he whispered. "I fear what would happen to me if I seek those answers. In the histories, the seers never needed more onyx. They never expended it. I don't know why."

Merin shivered. He glanced at Renarin's hand, which clutched his familiar shard of onyx. Rubbing it with his finger. Caressing it.

"Don't do it," Merin said impulsively. "Whatever it is, Renarin, don't do it. These things we do . . . they're dangerous. We don't know enough about them."

Renarin nodded. "The Epellion have been lost for too long. I still can't see what caused them to come back—it's too closely related to why they disappeared in the first place."

"When I use my ability," Merin said confessionally, "something happens to me. When I really *use* it, not just see with it. It brings me pain—a sharp, burning agony in my skin where I touch the jade."

"There must always be a cost, Merin," Renarin said. "Nothing is ever achieved without a cost being paid."

"And my pain is that cost?" Merin asked.

"No," Renarin said with an almost amused tone as he turned back to toward the door. "No, the pain isn't the cost, Merin. It's just a side effect of the cost."

Merin shifted uncomfortably. "Then what is the cost?"

Renarin didn't answer. His eyes remained focused on the hole in his patterns.

"Renarin?" Merin prodded.

"I don't know, Merin," Renarin said, though Merin couldn't tell if he were speaking about this amorphous cost, or about something completely different. "I don't know if I'll be able to resist. There are dangers coming, dangers that will affect everyone—not just us, not just kings and thrones. I saw hints of it when I worked in the cell, but this pattern . . . it shows me how ignorant I was."

“Though I tried to make my calculations for the broad scope, every avenue I try focuses me back toward a single event. That is the hole you see there, the one question that defies every permutation.”

Merin frowned, glancing toward the door. If he looked with a cocked head, it seemed like the hole in the writing were indeed a focal point of all the other patterns. Strings of numbers ran across walls, through massive collections and patterns, only to end abruptly at this one central . . . nothingness.

“I can’t find the answer,” Renarin said. “Yet I need it. *We need it.* Without this, all of the different possibilities end the same . . .” He stopped, then turned toward Merin and whispered a single question, “How do you kill a man who cannot die?”

The room fell still. Merin felt a sudden apprehensiveness strike him, a desire to run and flee, to escape the chill unnaturalness of Renarin’s cabin.

Renarin turned away from him. “I need to start again,” he decided. “I can find the answer—I have to. I’ll need another room. Will you trade with me?”

And come sleep in here, with all of these numbers staring at me? I’d sooner swim to Alethkar. “I’ll arrange for you to get a new cabin,” Merin said carefully.

Renarin nodded distractedly, and Merin fled the room. Suddenly, the discomfort of sitting through another scouting report seemed blessedly tame.

chapter 71

TALN 11

TALN COULD STILL HEAR the men riding away from him in terror, screaming as the waters roared toward them. He had done what he could to save them, trying so hard to scare them into deserting or retreating. Their commanders had been stubborn, however. At first, they had been determined to continue on toward Jasnah's army. Eventually, their determination had instead become focused on finding the man who had killed their guards and scouts.

They should have been frightened away. A lesser army would have been. However, it appeared that the descendants of the Epoch Kingdom of Vedenar retained their ancestor's discipline and militaristic zealotry. They had always held such notions, even at their foundation so long ago, in the city then called Suur.

And so, they had continued onward. True, some had fled, but not as many as Taln would have wished. Even after the desertions, even after he himself had killed a good fifty of their number, they had still been strong enough to crush Jasnah's untrained force.

He closed his eyes, trying not to think of the rushing waters—the highstorm flood, crashing through the narrow canyon. He'd killed their scouts;— they hadn't known how small and high-walled the fissure would become. They were tired, slow to react. They had marched after him—the

entire army, since none were willing to go alone—once he had revealed himself, as if by accident, as if caught by their trap. Instead, he had led them to a trap of his own.

Men screamed in his memory—screamed as they were pulled beneath the waves, the powerful current smashing them against rocks. Man had always been a limp puppet before the powers of nature, and such was even more true here on Roshar, where the highstorms were so stark. Eight hundred men. Dead as Taln watched, holding to his Shardblade with slick hands, the weapon jammed at an angle into the stone wall to give him purchase. He should have died—a regular man probably would have—but he had felt the presence of his brethren pulsing through his Blade. He had to find them.

The army had left some of its spare mounts at the entrance to the canyon. And the Awakener . . . well, Taln had been surprised to find the creature alive, sitting complacently at the bottom of the canyon once the waters receded. But Awakeners rarely acted as expected. Prael and Balear were far more learned Lhonomists than Taln; they might have been able to give an explanation. Taln had never understood Awakening very well, even when he did it himself.

He opened his eyes with a sigh. He rode at the head of the re-inspired army, beside Jasnah and Meridas. With them rode five new Shardbearers, men who had received the weapons Taln had gathered from the fallen Veden soldiers. He had awarded three of the Blades to Jasnah's guards, then grudgingly given the last two to Meridas's nobleman attendants. The men were the only others in the army who had any real dueling experience.

If Meridas had been surprised by Taln's return, he had not revealed it. Already warned by the festivities, Meridas had received Taln like a monarch welcoming a returning hero—to do anything else would have revealed him as petty and jealous. He had accepted Taln's gift of the Shardblades as if given to himself—in fact, as if they had been expected. Taln had left that night less certain of his ability to regain control of the army.

Regardless of its leader, however, the army marched under Taln's name. They walked behind, proud and reassured that they had made the right decision in joining him. The believers felt vindicated; the disbelievers were more inclined to listen to his warnings. Neither group would ever truly know what he had done for them, never understand what it cost. He should never be forced to kill men.

Yet their Herald had returned. Their devotion was too close to worship, he knew. He had rebuked the 'prophet' who had claimed to preach in Taln's

name, but such a man was more a symptom than a problem. Still, for the moment, Taln did nothing about their devotion. There would be time to teach correct truths once he was certain that mankind was prepared to face the challenge that lay ahead.

With three thousand years of life behind him, it was rare for Taln to feel impatience. Yet he had felt a remarkable amount of anticipation as they rode that day, the army's speed seeming frustratingly lethargic. His brethren waited just a short distance ahead. Once he found them, everything would be all right. They would know what to do.

Finally the army crested a hillside and looked down at the ruins of what had once been Jorevan, the Holy City. Taln despaired to see what had become of its beauty. Once, it had been one of the three most magnificent cities in Roshar—a monument to the Almighty and His worship. Now only rubble remained of its fine metals and polished marble. Instead of alabaster, the city was a dull grey. Its massive streets, once lined with statues, were broken and weathered. Its careful architecture was grown over with moss-like cromstone, the patina gift of a thousand highstorms.

An army waited in front of the city. It was easily three thousand in number, and its men were well-equipped. Metal armors shone in the sunlight, and there were even two archer-filled towers.

"At least we hold the Shardblade edge," Meridas noted, studying the field.

"We needn't go to arms against them," Taln said, nodding toward the already-constructed parlay tent. "This is not an enemy army, but a force gathered by my brethren."

Meridas rolled his eyes toward one of his attendants, who smiled at the gesture. Jasnah held up a hand before any banter could ensue.

"I will speak for us," she said. "And do the negotiations. You two will remain silent—*both* of you."

Taln frowned, an action mimicked by Meridas. "A woman cannot—" Meridas began.

Jasnah quieted him with a stare. She had given her order, and they were both sworn to obey. "Kemnar, choose twenty men to join us as an honor guard. Leave the army in Vinde's command. He, with the other four Shardbearers, are to remain here. In case of a trap, I don't want all of our Blades in one place."

She kicked her horse into motion and they followed, Meridas frowning at the necessity of leaving his two attendants behind. As they approached, Taln was able to make out a man waiting beneath the parlay canopy. He

sat at the table, his posture unconcerned—this was a man who understood that he clearly held the advantage.

Lord Aneazer was a gruff-looking man with a wild mane of greying hair. He wore a full beard, also grey, and utilitarian clothing. He looked more like some crazy hermit than he did a military commander—or, at least, he did until one looked into his eyes. They were solid, the eyes of a man who yielded little and suffered no foolishness.

Jasnah dismounted. She had composed herself from the previous night's storm-filled oddity, and again wore her practiced political face, her hair done up with perfection, her motions graceful and controlled. Taln and Meridas dismounted as well, walking beside her. There was only one seat on their side of the table, and Jasnah took it without hesitation.

Taln entered the shade of the canopy, searching among Lord Aneazer's companions. They were hardened warriors in metal and leather, and not a one was familiar. Taln touched the hilt of his Blade, feeling for his brethren—they still waited ahead, in the city.

"Who is the Herald?" Aneazer asked bluntly, and Taln smiled. His brethren had warned of his approach.

Jasnah didn't betray surprise. "That is him," she said, nodding toward Taln.

Aneazer studied Taln for a moment. "You could have found someone who looked a bit more heroic," he said. "This man is burly, but hardly the pretty face people expect from a Herald."

Taln frowned, but Jasnah continued without pause. "He was the best man for the position," she said. "He can make others believe in him."

Aneazer grunted. "I guess that is what matters." He eyed Jasnah. "You have the look of a Kholin. Raising troops, I assume. But for which army and which king?"

Jasnah betrayed none of the confusion Taln felt. "Does my position matter to you?"

"It does if you have sided with the loser instead of the victor," Aneazer said with a grunt. "So which is it, Jasnah Kholin? Which do you follow, your brother or your uncle?"

"I no longer support my brother's right to the throne," Jasnah said smoothly. Though she was undoubtedly as lost as Taln, she seemed confident, as if she were the one holding the advantage and Aneazer the one who needed to bargain. Taln had heard of her political savvy, her uncanny ability to dominate a court, but he had rarely seen it applied. She had always

been more open with him—though he suspected that was because she saw nothing to gain from him, rather than because she felt more familiar with him.

“I should like to fight at the side of the Tyrantbane,” Aneazer noted, rubbing his bearded chin in thought.

“It will not be that simple,” Jasnah said with a disapproving tone. “I have heard of the way you treat the people in this area. You are a despot.”

Aneazer shrugged. “The difference between a thug and a king is nothing more than a royal banner-glyph. If a man acts in his own name, he is a tyrant. If he acts under in the name of ‘The Kingdom,’ he is hailed as monarch. This is a harsh land, Lady Kholin, and it needs a harsh ruler. I have brought peace, if not ease, to their lives.”

Jasnah frowned thoughtfully. “I would be willing to look past your . . . deficiencies, I suppose.”

Aneazer laughed, leaning back in his chair. “By the winds, woman, you have gall. I could destroy your little army right here. Don’t think you’re the first person to think of using a ‘Herald’ to try gathering troops in Riemak. I’ve destroyed half a tenset such armies in my lifetime, slaughtering the false Heralds who ran them. I will suffer no instability here in Riemak—either we make an agreement, or I will destroy you right here.”

“Then let us deal,” Jasnah said, not looking at all intimidated. “But let me assure you, ‘Lord’ Aneazer, if we fail to agree, then I *will* leave here safely. Do not think that my uncle will not exact retribution upon you simply because you hide here in the wilds.”

Aneazer frowned slightly. “You are certain he will win, then?” he asked. “Your brother has the legitimacy of the crown.”

“My uncle is a far better warrior,” Jasnah said dismissively. “And he has the loyalty of the people. But things have changed. Both brother and uncle have another foe to worry about.”

Aneazer’s frown deepened.

“Vedenar has invaded,” Jasnah explained.

“Ah . . .” Aneazer said. “I had wondered why you would come to Riemak for mercenaries, when Alethkar has always been so proud to fight with only its own men. But weakened by civil war . . .”

“So let us dispense with threats, Aneazer,” Jasnah said. “Will I return to Alethkar with your aid, or will I go alone?”

“That depends on whether or not you’ll pay my price,” Aneazer said.

“Name it,” Jasnah said. “But know that I, of course, carry no chips with

me. You and I shall make a standard mercenary contract, to be paid after the war is finished or once one year passes, whichever comes first.”

“Ah, but I have little need of more gems,” Aneazer said. “I only end up giving them back to your country or others, buying the supplies I need to stay safe. No, I need something a little bit more . . . permanent than what is offered in ‘standard mercenary’ contracts.”

Jasnah’s eyes thinned. “What?”

Aneazer leaned forward. “Legitimacy,” he said. “Nine hundred years ago, your Oathshard King conquered Riemak. You destroyed the kingdom’s infrastructure and subjugated its people. Then, when Prallah threatened your border two centuries later, you simply left. Your people claimed Riemak, then abandoned its people to despots, squabblings, and raids from the barbarian Kavanars. *You* destroyed a proud kingdom. Well, I want you to take it back.”

He waved to an attendant, who pulled out a map and spread it on the table. It was a very detailed representation of Alethkar and Riemak. The aging Aneazer looked over it eagerly, standing and pointing at a line drawn from Alethkar’s border, to the Holy City, and back down to the south.

“You see,” he said. “With this perimeter you could easily form a defensible border within Riemak. It would make the Holy City and all of the towns I control part of Alethkar, as well as give your kingdom direct access to the northern mines.”

Jasnah studied the map. Then, showing the first hint of emotion since the negotiations had begun, she looked up at Aneazer’s face. “You really aren’t a tyrant.”

“Ha!” he said. “Of course I am. But I’m one who’s winds-cursed tired of fighting every bandit who tries to steal my place. I’m getting too old to worry about mutiny and rebellion. I’ll let Aleth troops into my city, I’ll even give up control of the Oathgate, as long as you name me as an independent lord with no tribute.”

Jasnah looked down at the map, smiling slightly. “My brother spent three years trying to conquer Prallah,” she said. “I wonder how he would have responded if he had known that Riemak was simply waiting to let us take it.”

Aneazer snorted.

“Very well, then,” she said, rising. “I see no reason why your price cannot be accommodated. You’ll have to get final agreement from my brother first, of course.”

“Or your uncle,” Aneazer said. “Depending on which one still lives. Very well, my men are ready to march. When do we leave?”

Taln stepped forward. “As soon as you show me to my brethren,” he said, eliciting a faint frown of displeasure from Jasnah.

Aneazer looked toward her with a frown.

“Lord Aneazer,” Jasnah said. “Have any other . . . false Heralds come to Jorevan recently?”

“No,” Aneazer said with confusion. “What is this about?”

Taln turned, walking back to his horse. “I’m riding into the city,” he said. “Follow if you wish, but do not try to stop me.”

chapter 72

JASNAH 16

JASNAH CURSED TO HERSELF quietly, riding behind the galloping Taln toward the Holy City of Jorevan. Lord Aneazer followed behind, looking very troubled. Their alliance was tenuous, their armies still poised to attack one another.

If you ruin this, madman . . . she thought threateningly. Aneazer's willingness to join with her—at the simple price of allowing himself to be conquered—was an unforeseen and remarkable boon. His men were obviously well-trained, and were numerous enough to be a great help to her brother. During the negotiations, it had been all she could do to keep herself from gasping at her remarkable good fortune. If Aneazer had known how desperate they were, that they had not come to recruit him, but had arrived by happenstance . . .

She didn't even want to think about her brother and Dalenar being at war. What could have convinced her stoic uncle to start a civil war? Her brother must have done something terrible indeed—either that, or Dalenar had discovered Elhokar's ruse to frame Jezenrosh. Either way, she had to get back before King Ahven destroyed them both.

And Taln's recklessness was threatening it all. Unfortunately, there was little she could do beyond follow him, trying to catch up. Behind, she could hear Meridas explaining about Taln's madness to Aneazer. The despot, fortunately, accepted the explanation—chuckling as he praised Jasnah

for finding an actual lunatic to be her false Herald. The ease with which he accepted her willingness to deceive people in order to gather troops was chilling, especially since she knew he was absolutely correct in his assumption. Aneazer was a harsh man, but men worse than he had made good leaders. She knew Elhokar would have no trouble granting Aneazer a title, for the move would give Alethkar control of the Riemak garnet mines. Dalenar might have more trouble accepting the despot, but he would feel bound by Jasnah's promise.

Those eventualities, however, assumed that either one still lived. Jasnah sighed, urging her horse faster. Ahead, Taln had slowed as he entered the city itself. He had his Shardblade out, and he paused for a moment, holding it. Then he took off again, guiding his horse across shattered streets and around fallen statues. Jasnah followed, as did Aneazer, Meridas, and both honor guards. The Holy City itself—what little she was able to see of it as she rode past—wasn't very impressive. Most of it was covered with cromstone, leaving whatever details had been left in the rubble covered with a thick rock skin. It was like a city melted, an area filled with giant waxy lumps.

A few buildings still stood, however, and Taln made for one of these. She caught up to him as he reached a large, pillared structure that betrayed very little decay, all things considered.

"Taln!" she called, but he ignored her, swinging off his horse and rushing into the building. She cursed, climbing off her beast with a less-adroit scramble, then followed him into the building.

The inside was dark, and smelled of old stone. Though cromstone coated windows and piled at their bases, most of the enormous hallway still stood intact. Ornate pillars disappeared into the depths above, and massive marble blocks made up the floor stones. The hallway had been stripped of anything worth carrying, but a few broken statues stood at its ends, their shattered faces staring through sun-lit, dusty air.

Taln's footsteps echoed from in front of her. She dashed behind him, her masculinely cut clothing letting her move far more quickly than her usual courtly shuffle. She was puffing by the time she reached the end of the large corridor.

A room rose around her, as grand in proportion as the hallway that led to it. It had also been robbed of finery, but its dominant features still stood untouched. Ten enormous statues stood along the walls of the circular chamber, their height making her gape in amazement. She had heard stories

of the legendary Elinshenten, one of the wonders of Epoch Kingdom glory. She hadn't realized the magnificent statues still stood.

She recognized each one, of course—she had been trained in Vorin teachings as a child. Balear Soulsong, the Timeless. Jezrien Stormrider, the King. Vedel Keywatcher, the Elsesmith. Nale Suneyes, the Just. Shalesa Ashmaker, the Scatterer. Kavezeren Lightcall, the Healer. Prael Smoke-wish, the Discerning. Chanaral Bondseal, the Maker. Ishar Holydawn, the Sacred.

And Talnel Stonesinew, the Steadfast. Taln stood in the cavernous room, staring up at the statues, as if in a trance. Then he looked down at his Shardblade.

Taln fell to his knees and plunged his Blade into the stone at his feet. She could hear his harsh breathing, as if he were weeping, but there were no tears. The others arrived a few moments later, and Meridas made to step forward, but Jasnah held out a hand to stop him.

They stood in silence, watching Taln attack the ground with a random vengeance, muttering to himself, his Blade throwing up chunks of stone as he worked. Jasnah could see the wildness in his eyes, the confusion, the despair . . . and the danger. This was not a time to confront him.

Perhaps he's finally realized the truth, she thought, though seeing his tortured face, she could find no joy in the concept. *He's been forced to admit his delusions.*

What if he couldn't accept the truth? What if his mind snapped? His echoing mumbles gave her a chill. What if she had destroyed him by bringing him here? Would not the delusional, but functional, Taln be better than a man who had broken? She cursed her own lack of sensitivity. She should have tried to help him—should have led him away from Jorevan and the confrontation it represented. Instead, she had come eagerly, anticipating the satisfaction of proving herself right and Taln wrong.

Her heart broke with his at the empty room. Suddenly, she didn't want him to know, didn't want him to have to be disappointed.

Ahead, Taln stopped digging. He knelt in the hole he had dug with his maddened swinging, chunks of stone gathered around the lip. His head was barely visible over the rubble. She approached quietly.

"Taln?" she asked.

When he looked up, she didn't see the madness or the frenzy she had expected. Instead she saw only confused, tired grief. Taln stood and slammed his Shardblade into the stone before her.

Except, *it wasn't his Blade*. He held his own weapon beside him. The new Blade was beautiful and ornate, not a Blank, but a Blade with swirling designs, like the fringes of curling mist.

Taln looked down at the new sword with wearied eyes. "It was Jezrien's," he said with a haunted voice. "I can feel the other eight buried here as well." He looked up, meeting her eyes. "My brethren are dead. This time, mankind must face the Khothen alone."

"THEY APPEAR TO BE TOMBS of some sort, my lady," Kemnar said. They stood at the mouth of the massive chamber. Men worked inside, cutting with Shardblades to search for any further prizes hiding beneath the stone. "The passage slopes downward, and so the rainwater that got through the hallway windows here would have pooled in the statue chamber. The cromstone there is dense, several feet thick. It appears that there were ten caskets set into the floor's brickwork. Nine of them had Blades in them; one was empty."

"The empty one," Jasnah said. "How did he get the Blade out?"

"There were a lot of cracks in the floor," Kemnar said. "From a quake or other disturbance. Most of the sarcophagi were broken as well. We didn't look too hard before we began cutting, but it's possible one of the cracks went all the way down to the Blade chamber. Anyway, the swords have been here a long, long time—probably since the Epoch Kingdoms, most definitely since before Riemak fell. It would take centuries for this much cromstone to build up."

Jasnah nodded. Taln sat inside the room, watching the work with dull eyes. Meridas and Aneazer stood at the side, supervising. She clenched her jaw as she saw them—she hadn't been paying enough attention to Meridas since the discovery. He was already becoming too close to the despot lord for her tastes.

"These blades are strange, my lady," Kemnar noted, drawing her attention again. "None of their opals are black, yet they hold their forms anyway. They should have reverted to Blanks long ago. They change like any other Blade if we put a Bonded opal in them, but there's still something . . . odd about them."

Jasnah nodded. "Knock all of the clear opals off, but keep ahold of them—and keep digging. There might be more Blades to be found."

Kemnar nodded. "It isn't likely we'll find more though. None of us can feel whatever it is that Taln claims lets him sense the Blades, and we've already dug up the eight he said were here."

“Keep going anyway,” Jasnah requested, leaving Kemnar behind and walking over to join Meridas and Aneazer. The despot lord regarded the excavation with troubled eyes, obviously uncertain how to react. He had been sitting on one of the greatest treasure finds in the history of modern Roshar, and never known it. Nine Shardblades; a man could have found mythic Lura itself and not been so well-rewarded.

“As a token of goodwill, Lord Aneazer,” Jasnah said, “I grant you half of the Blades we have discovered. Find four good men to bear them.”

The wild-haired man regarded her through narrowed eyes.

“Yes, Aneazer,” Jasnah said in a suffering tone, “I know you could kill us and take all of them for yourself. But what would that really gain you? Our several positions have not changed since our negotiations, and you still want membership in Alethkar. If you do become a lord, you will have to grow accustomed to the fact that you have superiors—if just a few of them. Sometimes they will make decisions you don’t agree with. Part of having a title is honoring it, following your betters even when you are dissatisfied.”

Aneazer regarded her for a moment longer, then smiled. “You are an impressive woman, Lady Jasnah,” he finally decided. “I see why Lord Meridas chose you to be his bride.”

“Lord Meridas did not choose me,” Jasnah corrected. “That is something else you’ll have to accustom yourself to. In civilized lands, women arrange the marriages. Learn quickly, I suggest, since I hear that you are unwed. The court women won’t long let a powerful lord such as yourself go unmatched, and you will need heirs.”

Aneazer shrugged. “I have heirs,” he said. “Just no wife to go with them.”

“You’ll need *legitimate* heirs, Lord Aneazer,” Jasnah said. “You are an Aleth nobleman now. You will need to learn to act like one.”

Aneazer just smiled again. Jasnah left him, picking her way through the rubble room and around the exhumed sarcophagi to where Taln sat alone at the feet of a massive statue.

“Taln?” she asked gently, kneeling beside him.

He sighed deeply. He had been despondent since the discovery earlier in the day. Night was quickly approaching now, and the men worked by lanternlight.

“Something has gone very wrong, Jasnah,” he said softly. “I’ve known it since the Return began. The failure of the Sign, the unresponsiveness of my *nahel* bond, my missing powers, and now my brethren . . . They’re connected, all of these problems. Something went wrong a thousand years ago, but I wasn’t there to see what. I died too early.”

"Taln, you're not dead," she said. "You're right here."

Taln shook his head. "We all die, every time, Jasnah. Either we die at Khothen hands or our own. We can't stay in this world, not for very long. Sometimes we can remain for several decades, but we always have to go eventually. There are . . . reasons we cannot be here. I died early last time, defending the Keep of Veletal, as your legends explain. I often die early, since I do the most fighting. Regardless, I never saw the end of the Return last time. Something must have happened after I died. The book I took from your library, it claims that the Elin declared the cycle of Returns broken. I don't believe that is possible. Even if it were, I would be dead right now."

He paused, nodding toward the room before them. "This was a place of men. We never asked for it, but they built it anyway. To put our bodies in each Return after we died."

"But," Jasnah said, "there aren't any bodies in the caskets. No bones or anything, just the Blades."

Taln shook his head. "There wouldn't be bodies," he said. "When Heralds die, their bodies turn into smoke after a time. The songs teach of that, do they not?"

Songs she had always thought of, and still thought of, as silly. Still, he had his mythology right.

"Look, maybe you're over-reacting," she said. "Perhaps they're not dead—maybe they just never came to get their swords." She couldn't believe what she was saying, that she was feeding his delusions so. But if it brought back the Taln she knew . . .

"No," Taln said. "It doesn't work that way. When we are reborn in the other world, our Blades come to us. That is what the opals are for—the summoning and dismissing of Blades is an improvement Mankind devised. When a Herald dies, his Blade goes with him to the next world. When he Returns, it comes to Roshar with him. How do you think I got my Blade back when I Returned?"

"And you didn't know the Blades allowed you to sense only where the other Blades were, not where the other Heralds were?" Jasnah asked.

Taln shook his head. "You'd think that would come up over the centuries, but it didn't. We are never without our Blades, Jasnah. That's the other reason I know that my brethren didn't abandon them here. Our powers are tied to our swords; they are part of us. We don't just leave them behind."

"You say that the Heralds never leave their Blades behind, yet here they

are,” Jasnah said. “You claim the Blades go with them when they die, but they haven’t. So they can’t either be alive or dead. Don’t you see how circular this is?”

Taln nodded. “And that is what has me confused. Like I said before, something must have happened at the end of the last Return. I was the first to die. If something happened to the *nahel* bond after I left, perhaps . . . I don’t know. Maybe my brethren aren’t in either world. Maybe they really are dead. Killed, somehow. Permanently.”

And this, she sensed, was what made him so depressed. He had worked through it all on his own already. He had arrived at the same double dead end, and worried that the other Heralds—men he knew of only in his delusions, but who were real to him nonetheless—were all dead.

“Wouldn’t you have seen them in the Dwelling?” Jasnah said. “During the times between Returns? Didn’t you ever wonder what happened to them?”

Taln shook his head. “Things are . . . complicated on the other side, Jasnah. I wouldn’t have known if they came back or not. I assumed that they did, but I don’t know.” He turned toward her, haunted. “I’m the only one left. Even if they are alive somewhere, I’m the only one who came for this Return. Mankind only has me. They needed brilliant, intelligent leaders, but they received only Talenel.”

This time, Jasnah spoke honestly. “Taln, you do yourself injustice. What do you think you are? An idiot of some sort? You’ve a clever mind, far more intelligent than most of the men I’ve known. Why must you insist on self-deprecation?”

“No self-deprecation, Jasnah,” Taln said. “Just truth. Three thousand years has taught me some things, but the others . . . They are brilliant, Jasnah. Ishar wrote all ten *Arguments* and founded a religion. Chanaral designed the Oathgates and the Shardblades. Bajerden wrote *The Way of Kings* primarily based on the things he learned from Jezrien. Nale gave the Suur their Code, which became the standard of law throughout Roshar.

“The others weren’t just men, but geniuses—every one. Listen to their names. Lightcall. Discerning. Holydawn. Timeless. What am I? Talenel the Steadfast. That’s what I’ve always been. Reliable and stalwart, but not a leader. I am no man of great wisdom; I’m just a warrior. That’s why I was so eager to come find the others. They know what to do, how to organize mankind. Without them . . .”

“Self-pity will serve you nothing, Taln,” Jasnah said. “You’re too quick to

judge. Maybe the others left their swords here for good reason. Maybe they never died last time; maybe they're still out there somewhere. You haven't really looked yet—they may not even know you're back."

Taln sighed. "It is not self-pity I feel, Jasnah. Three millennia have helped me learn to avoid sullenness. However, the time has also taught me a few things about the Khothen. The odds are not good. We have one Herald instead of ten, and the few people who have come to know me best since the Return began still think I am insane. One cannot consider such difficult events without some measure of sorrow."

She wasn't sure how to respond to that. "Taln . . ." she said. *Come back with me. Come to Alethkar and forget about your failure. It doesn't matter.*

Forget about your insanity. It wasn't that easy. Instead, she asked, "Do you intend to continue with us?"

He shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I will have to consider it. Things are . . . troubling."

She didn't press him, though she wanted to. It wasn't her place. Hers was in Alethkar, in a union that brought her power. Icy, comfortless power with the snide man who stood on the other side of the room, watching her and Taln with the unveiled rage of jealousy.

So she left Taln sitting in the room, below the statue of a massive, muscular man with a chiseled face and heroic expression. Taln the man, sitting at the feet of Talanel the legend.

THE AGGREGATE ARMY LEFT JOREVAN the next morning. Aneazer was impressed to discover that they had an Awakener, and it seemed to increase their standing with him. He offered to share some of his equipment with Jasnah's men, and she accepted gratefully—though she suspected Meridas had something to do with the offer. Either way, Aneazer saw that each of her men at least had a spear, if not a metal cap and leather jerkin. There were even some shields to spread around.

The despot lord and Meridas rode together, and Jasnah had trouble thinking of a reason to command otherwise. Still, she was suspicious of Meridas's motives. If Elhokar and Dalenar really had gone to war, she had little doubt as to which side Meridas would be on. That put him and her at odds even more soundly, since she would back Dalenar in the conflict. However, for the moment there was a greater threat. She could only hope that her uncle and brother had realized that fact, and now resisted the invaders together.

Taln rode alone, rebuffing even Lhan's attempts at conversation. He didn't leave the army, though Jasnah still feared that he might. When asked directly, he implied that he hadn't decided whether to help her in Alethkar or not, claiming that the disputes of nations were none of his concern.

The army was still vaguely under Taln's banner. Though Aneazer's troops were not religious zealots, but instead battle-hardened soldiers, Aneazer himself had agreed to visibly accept Taln's claim as a Herald. This didn't change many of his men's attitudes—they followed because they believed that their lives would improve greatly once they were accepted as Aleth citizens—but it did give a strong measure of legitimacy to Jasnah's recruitment efforts. In addition, the more believing part of Jasnah's forces were quick to tell stories of how Taln had singly defeated a thousand men and had saved so many in Ral Eram. Slowly, his reputation even with Aneazer's soldiers began to swell.

Jasnah now had two methods of persuading men to join her banner—they could either come to fight for the Herald they had heard rumors of, or they could join in the hopes of earning a higher citizen rank when Aneazer's cities were folded into Alethkar. The combined prongs aided them greatly in gathering forces, especially in Aneazer's 'tribute' cities. Soon their army was approaching six thousand in number, and Shale—their Awakener—had to work constantly to provide grain to supplement what they could get from trade and foraging.

Despite her success in recruitment, however, Jasnah rode with frustration. She worried for Alethkar. If Elhokar and Dalenar had gone to war over the throne, then King Ahven could have exploited their weakness, taking both armies when they were already fatigued. Most of the cities in Alethkar would be undefended, and supplies would be scarce. She worried about the people she knew. Who of her family still lived? What of Dalenar's sons? Did Alethkar even still stand, or was she bringing her army to the certain death of a conquered kingdom?

Taln worried her as well. Despite his noble words about avoiding sullenness, he looked like he was doing a fair job of moping. She didn't know if it was because he thought his Heralds dead, or if there was a deeper reason—one derived from his failure to prove his delusions. Perhaps this was the time to press him, to make him confront his insanity. Yet what if his mind couldn't take that much stress?

She wanted him back. But he would barely speak to her. He rode staring into the distance, his mind working on problems she could only guess at.

They approached the border to Alethkar, their scouts warned to watch for organized resistance. They found none. The villages they soon located knew nothing other than that Lord Dalenar had ridden to battle some weeks before. Whatever was happening in the center of the kingdom, it hadn't reached such insignificant locations.

So they turned their bulky trail along the northern Chamaven ridge, a line of stormlands that pointed directly east. At their current marching speed, they would reach Kholinar in less than a week.

There, Jasnah hoped to find answers.

chapter 73

SHINRI 14

THE OCEAN AIR SMELLED ODD to Shinri. There was a . . . coolness to it. A purity. The gentle rocking of the waves was calming in its repetition. It was so peaceful at times that she was almost able to ignore the twisting frustration she felt within.

The peace was a lie. Though the boats moved with a sluggish rocking, their ponderous motions hid a demonic inevitability. They were taking her back to Ahven. All of her attempts to escape, all of her planning and her worrying, had been useless. In fact, her efforts had been worse than useless—before her escape, she had at least been separated from him. Fate was a gleeful satirist, taking her struggles and using them to bind her even more closely to the man she hated.

Though she sat primly on the deckside bench, wearing a new *talla* and shaded by a parasol, she felt as if she were drowning—as if she were tied to a boulder and sinking beneath the waves, being pulled toward the black depths despite her frantic struggles to swim back up.

You're being foolish, Shinri told herself firmly. You're going north, true, but you aren't going to him. Merin won't turn you over. In fact, he'll probably leave you somewhere secure when he takes his armies to aid Alethkar.

But Merin didn't understand King Ahven. Ahven was so powerful of both mind and will. Merin had fought well on the Nanah docks, but he was still just a boy. Ahven was something else. Something barely human,

something more like Lady Jasnah—capable of manipulating the emotions and politics of entire nations with frightening consistency.

Could Merin protect her? Shinri doubted it. Only distance would keep her from Ahven Vedenel.

Several Lakhenran handmaidens sat beside her, and they suddenly began whispering excitedly in their tongue. Shinri didn't need to look to know that Merin had emerged from his cabin. He walked the foredeck often, obviously preferring the open sky to the confines of his quarters.

Shinri eyed the handmaidens, noting with dissatisfaction their dreamy looks and giggling blushes. In a way, however, they had a right to their idolization. They didn't know Merin; to them, he was simply the handsome young warrior who had so dramatically defeated five Shardbearers at once. He had single-handedly ended thirty years of oppression, freeing Lakhenran and restoring its monarchy. Sensational retellings of that day had embellished the truth, making it seem like Merin had flown with the winds themselves, making hundred-foot leaps and striking down his foes with ease. How could the girls not fawn over such a seemingly-legendary figure?

Shinri forced herself to look at him, studying the man Merin Kholin. He wore new clothing, though—like always—he had kept the deep blue Kholin cloak that didn't quite fit him. He stood straight-backed and confident as he looked northward, several aides speaking quietly at his side. He had a power too, though not the same kind as Ahven. Merin didn't control events consciously, but he had a habit of putting himself in extreme situations and surviving. Such people as he created stories unintentionally, influencing the world by presence rather than design.

Of course, there was more to him than that. The stories told of that day on the docks were exaggerated, but Shinri had been there to see the truth behind them. She had seen Merin leap from the deck of a ship and land safely on the wooden docks some twenty or thirty feet below. She had seen him jump toward his enemies, covering an unnatural distance in the air, then swing his Blade with inhuman power. He had sliced a man in Shardplate completely in two, treating the Awakened metal as if it were nothing more than common steel. Renarin had been right; Merin Kholin was not a normal man. He was indeed both a fool and a hero.

And he was also her enemy.

There was no quibbling about this fact in her mind. Shinri's captivity was unspoken, but it was real. Merin had refused her request to let her remain in Lakhenran, showing a hint of guilt in his eyes as he did so. He knew that she was no guest, nor just a lady beneath his protection. She was his prisoner. His tool.

Yet he was not an undefeatable enemy—he was no Ahven, capable of quelling her with a single glance. Beneath the hero, he was still a confused boy. Shinri could see the worries and uncertainties in his eyes. He was growing more self-confident, of course, as his authority increased. That, however, would only make him more vulnerable. Lady Jasnah had often said that noblemen were far more easy to manipulate than peasants—peasants would do what you said, true, but their simple honesty often made their hearts difficult to sway. A nobleman learned to be more . . . compromising, and a man who compromised could be exploited. Citizens only had one imperative—follow commands. Noblemen had to follow multiple masters, and the reconciliation between their ethics, their beliefs, their commands, and their goals was another potential source of exploitation.

Shinri was fairly certain she had determined Merin's weakness: his honor. She watched him carefully, waiting for him to dismiss his aides. He usually did so, eventually, for he liked to watch the waves alone. After a few moments, he waved the men away, then stepped forward to stand beside the gunwale in his customary position.

Stillling her nerves, Shinri rose. Days spent in contemplation had determined that she had only one chip to play. Hopefully, it would be enough.

Merin glanced at her as she approached, then turned back toward his contemplation of the ocean. The blue sea was dotted with ships, the other four tenset vessels of the fleet floating around their flagship. Smaller vessels scuttled between the ships, delivering messages or shifting supplies.

Now, standing closer, she could see that Merin's face was even more troubled than usual. He stared toward the ships, not toward the goal ahead.

"They keep looking toward me for instructions," he said.

Shinri paused. Was he asking her advise? "Shouldn't they seek your leadership?"

"I don't see why they should," he said. "Who am I to have anything important to say?"

"You are their savior," Shinri said carefully.

Merin snorted. "I didn't bring them salvation, Shinri; I just killed some men. It's nothing special—that's what I've been trained to do. If they want a savior, they should look to the monk who trained me in dueling, or perhaps the sergeants who taught me the spear."

"You did more than just kill people, Merin," Shinri said. "You gave the Lakhensrans courage. You gave them a will to fight, then convinced them to sail north to face their enemy. And you could quite possibly save your own kingdom in the process."

Merin didn't appear persuaded by her logic. He leaned against the gunwale pensively, tapping his finger against the wood. He was wearing the jade bracelet again, she noticed—he had gone without it for several days after the battle, but now it was back.

"Tamar is king now," Merin said. "He leads this people, not me. Yet he keeps sending messengers to ask my will for the fleet—as if I would know about water foraging or scouting processes. He wants my input on everything. It almost seems like he wants my approval. Do you think, perhaps, that he was beneath Veden command so long that he feels inadequate leading on his own?"

"Perhaps," Shinri said, "but not likely."

"Why, then?" Merin asked. "Why keep looking to me?"

"Well," Shinri said. "You did kind of appoint him as king."

"No I didn't," Merin complained.

"Sure you did," Shinri said. "What did you think you were doing when you walked up and 'bestowed' that Shardblade upon him? Everyone had just seen the way you fought—there are already whispers of your being an Epoch Warrior, and I wouldn't be surprised to find Renarin behind them. Either way, you set yourself up as something greater than a monarch—something capable of off-handedly granting a king a Shardblade, then commanding him to lead his people at your will. And you're surprised that now he thinks he has to seek your approval?"

Merin blushed at the comment, glancing down toward the passing waves below. He was so . . . earnest. That didn't stop him from being her enemy, but it did make him somewhat more tolerable. A part of her—a very small part, true, but it was there nonetheless—was reticent to take advantage of his weaknesses.

However, she felt far more terrified of returning to Ahven than she felt guilty for using Merin. "There is something I must . . . speak to you about," she said carefully, trying to make her voice sound weak and feminine.

Merin looked up, sensing a change in the conversation. "This is about our returning to Alethkar, isn't it?" he guessed.

Shinri nodded.

"I have already promised you that you will be in no danger," he said. "I won't bring you into the war, Shinri, but I have to see that you are kept safe. I can only do that if you are here, with the fleet." *Where I can keep track of you*, his voice implied.

"I just . . ." she trailed off, allowing a little bit of her fear to show in her eyes. It came out more forcefully than she had expected, her

honest emotions boiling free. She was surprised to feel a tear run down her cheek.

“What?” Merin asked with alarm, perking up.

“I can’t go back to him, Merin,” Shinri whispered.

“Who?” Merin asked. “King Ahven?”

Shinri nodded. “I . . . Merin, that man took me as his wife. He claimed me, made me his own, and forced himself upon me.”

Merin paled, his Aleth sensibilities rung by her blunt words. She exaggerated, of course, but he needn’t know that she had gone willingly that first time.

“I can’t go back,” she said intensely. “I can’t be near him. Even with your promises of safety, I spend nights awake, terrified. If he defeats you, if he destroys the Aleth armies, he will come for me. Whatever keep you sequester me in, it won’t be strong enough to resist his rage. He was harsh to me before, when he thought me subservient. If he catches me now, after I defied him and tried to run . . .”

She paused, looking up and meeting his eyes. “He hurt me before, Merin,” she whispered. “If he finds me again, it will be worse. Far worse. If you bring me to Alethkar with you, then what he does to me will be partially your fault.”

This was her chip. She could see the struggle of honor within him, the weight of her words pressing against his desire to help Alethkar. He was a good man, and good men—unfortunately—were often the easiest to manipulate.

He opened his mouth to respond, but Shinri cut him off with a calculated plea. “Send me to Thalenah,” she asked. “On one of the smaller scout ships. I know King Amelin; he is a friend. You won’t be losing me—you’ll be putting me in a safe location. A fortified island, well-patrolled and well-defended. I can plead Alethkar’s need before the king. He will listen to me, and perhaps send support.”

Merin considered her words. “I don’t know . . .” he finally said.

“You don’t know?” she said. “You would use me. Just like *him*. At least he only took my body—you want my powers too.”

“No!” Merin objected.

“Then let me go,” she challenged. “Prove your honor, Lord Kholin. Prove that you deserve the respect this fleet has seen fit to give you.” *And now, the most powerful words of all—at least where Merin is concerned.* “Ask yourself, Merin. What would Lord Dalenar tell you to do?”

Merin closed his eyes. Finally he took a deep breath and turned away from her. “Very well,” he agreed.

chapter 74

TALN 12

WHEN THE ARMY MADE camp for the evening, Taln went searching for height. High land wasn't hard to find in Roshar, this world of barren stone. Though the winds pushed the land toward uniformity, the rains formed gulches and crags. Stone crumbed to dust, which in turn blew off with the winds and mixed with the iron minerals to harden into rock once again. The resulting land was broken, full of cliffs and hills.

Taln found his way to a small plateau, one only a short distance from the army but hidden from its eyes. The overlook let him see into the distance, across farmlands and hills.

The grim stone still seemed a harsh sight to Taln, even after all these years. Where the common people saw fertile hills, perfect for planting their grain polyps, Taln saw only the lifeless rock. To him, fertility would always imply greenness. Trees and grasses. Buds, fruits, and flowers. Color. The memories seemed so real—even after three millennia, he could recall stark images from Lhar. Other events faded, but his home—a place of peaceful waves and temperate rains—remained.

Perhaps the image was so strong because it was simply the delusion his mind was most fond of imagining.

His doubt felt like a betrayal. Yet how could he not wonder? Perhaps there was a reason the Sign didn't work. Perhaps there was a reason he couldn't find the power he kept reaching to touch. If he was no Herald,

then there was no power. No lost *nahel* bond, no missing brethren. Just a confused man with some very vivid delusions.

But could madness fabricate such realism? He remembered his mother's face. He remembered and knew the other Heralds—not just by appearance, but by their habits, their interests, and their favorite phrases. He remembered standing on a hilltop, watching the great city of Kanar fall to the powers of Awakening. He saw Khothen, not as stories or songs, but as they were. He knew their spindly limbs and their eyeless heads—heads split by a bone ridge that made the creatures appear as if they wore a perpetually wide, malicious smile. Taln had fought and died. He could remember the pain of crushed limbs and ribs. Could madness imitate the memories of an entire lifetime?

What of the things he knew? The passage beneath Ral Eram, the location of the nine Shardblades? His ability to fight? These were not the possessions of a random farmer from Riemak. But could they have come from somewhere else? Forgotten experience fighting as a mercenary? Lost maps or other texts, read during a time before the madness came? What did he really know that couldn't, conceivably, have come from either a book or a delusion?

He could see the darkness lurking on the horizon, and he welcomed the coming highstorm. He stood and walked to the edge of the plateau, standing on its very lip, waiting as the highstorm approached. He raised his arms before it, Glyphing held in a firm grip, and let the winds crash into him with sudden, icy force.

"Why?" Taln demanded of the gale. "Why must you make me question?" Rain splashed his face, water quickly soaking clothing and skin.

"You said we took this task upon ourselves!" he challenged. "You said you would grant our wish. You warned that we would bear our burdens alone, but you never said you would take away our self-confidence!"

The storm, the voice of the Almighty, gave only more rain and winds as an answer.

"How can I be stalwart if I don't know who I am!" Taln screamed. "How can I be determined when I am uncertain of my own sanity? How can I save a people if I don't trust the truths I teach? We know the error of our decision. Must you prove it further? Is not the time between Returns enough? Must you steal from us our short time of life as well?"

The rain fell, snapping against his face and proffered chest.

"They're your people too!" Taln yelled. "Would you abandon me now? Would you abandon them?"

Wind tore at his cloak. No answer came.

Eventually Taln raised his arms, gripping Glyphting in wet palms. His dueling form was as old as man's time on Roshar; it represented three thousand years of perfecting and practice. Men did not live who could face it in battle. He fell into it now, swinging his blade through sheets of rain, sparring as if with the winds themselves.

He practiced for some time, seeking solace in the forms he had used so long. But even this familiar activity brought no peace. Were his forms the tool of an ancient Herald, or just the fabrications of a crazed mind? He swung Glyphting vengefully, spraying drops of water into the wind, only to have them blown back upon him again. Eventually he lowered Glyphting, his breath coming in gasps from the wild swinging. He sighed, turning to seek shelter.

And discovered that he was not alone on the lonely plateau.

He looked upon her, standing by herself, and knew the source of much of his frustration. His questions wouldn't have held as much weight if he hadn't known of the reward a right answer could bring. She stood in the rain, dark hair pulled from braids to streak across her face. Somehow, she had escaped her watchful guards—a fact not half as disconcerting as her ability to approach him unheard. Even in the midst of a storm, he should have noticed her arrival. He had been far too absorbed in his sparring.

She stepped forward, her wet brown sencoat tied at the front, sleeves dripping streams of water. Her face, stripped of facepaint by the rains, was pale and concerned.

Taln let Glyphting's tip tap against the stone below. The winds blew over the cliffside behind him, buffeting Taln with one vengeful burst before tapering slightly as the storm lulled.

"Taln . . ." Jasnah said. "You should come back to the camp. Lord Aneazer brought tents. You could escape the rains." Her voice was weak above the sound of the falling rain.

Taln shook his head, turning back over the cliffside, toward the now-darkened farmlands below. "No," he said. "I have to think. I have to know why I live when my brethren are dead. There don't seem to be an answers."

Jasnah paused. "Perhaps there are answers," she said. "Just not the ones you want to find."

Taln looked back at her. She looked . . . apprehensive, as if her words might have set off something within him. She still thought him mad. *Of course she does. You've given her no reason to think otherwise—in fact, you've begun to question it yourself.* Still, her uncertainty hurt him. It was painful

to see the doubt in her eyes, to sense that she didn't trust him, and never could—not as long as she thought him insane.

"Taln," she said, "what if there is another answer? What if that answer lies with a warrior from Riemak? A mercenary or wandering spearman like those we've gathered as we've traveled? A good man, a knowledgeable man. One who taught himself to read somehow. Perhaps . . . a general or a leader of some sort. A man to whom something very terrible happened, something he doesn't want to remember.

"What if, instead of remembering his own life, this man remembered stories he had heard from his childhood. Stories of heroes and gods, stories of Heralds who seemed beyond the pains of normal men. He knew of the Holy City and its statues. He went there, and within the cracks of the floor discovered a Shardblade. This became his proof, the sign that he was indeed a Herald. And so, he left his old life, striving to warn of the Return. To try and stop others from hurting, so that maybe he could stop the hurt within himself . . ."

She looked up at him guiltily, her lashes and brows dripping rainwater, as if she had exposed his secrets for the world to see. If there was any truth to her postulations, however, Taln could not sense it.

"I . . . don't know, Jasnah," he said.

"You can't remember anything?" she pressed. "Brother Lhan says that often when a man loses his . . . memories, it's because of something terrible he experienced."

Taln turned from her. "You once asked me what happens to me when I lose control during those times when I feel close to despair. I see fires around me. Everything burns, and I feel as if something dark is approaching—something I must never let touch me. A terrible, monstrous dark creature. And I hear screaming. I hear mad, terrible howls, the screams of some wretch being put through inhuman agony." He looked back, meeting her eyes. "I recognize the voice which screams, Jasnah. It is my own."

She raised her arms slightly toward her chest, her slight gasp lost in the waning highstorm sounds. Her face was . . . disturbed? Concerned? Some of both?

Taln turned away. And then she was there, crossing the distance between them in a couple of steps and grabbing ahold of him with wet arms. The warmth of her body was an alien feeling against his cold skin. He let Glyphing slide from his fingers, the Blade clanging softly to the stone, and wrapped his arms around her.

"Come to Alethkar," she pled, her cheek pressed against the wet cloth

of his chest. “Come and help me drive away the invaders. I will see you rewarded with a city befitting your honor and a title to match your nobility. Forget about the things you have dreamed, Taln. Don’t let them hurt you any longer. Come back. Come back with me.”

“And Meridas?”

“Meridas can rot,” Jasnah spat.

Taln closed his eyes, breathing deeply the wet air. Most men could ask nothing more than this. A kingdom to honor and a woman to hold. But could he? *Forget the things you have dreamed . . .* “Could it all really be a dream?” he asked quietly. “And you my awakener?”

She stiffened slightly at the word. Yes, she knew what it was to hide from one’s self. If his memories made him who he was—if his memories gave him purpose—what would he be without them?

You would have her. He had forgotten—perhaps intentionally—how much he missed that. Upon Jezrien’s request, the Heralds had forsaken themselves of intimate relationships. They needed to remain clear-minded, able to give their lives in a moment. They could have no bonds to this world, lest it pull them back and threaten the stability of their purpose.

Yet, if he were no Herald . . . Her warmth was so comforting at his side.

But what then? He would still remember. If the anxiety of wondering at his sanity were so great, how much more potent would his insecurity be if he thought he’d abandoned the world to destruction? How could he live? Even considering such things made his uncertainty rise, and the fires began to smolder. He contained them by looking at her.

He looked into hopeful eyes. “I will have to think about this, Jasnah,” he said.

Think. Think about what? Admitting that he was insane, that everything he knew and remembered was nothing more than a delusional lie? *Yes*, he told himself, *that is exactly what I will consider. I must confront this.*

“I will think,” he repeated.

“. . . AND WE’LL HAVE TO MOVE in through the north, through the valleys, to mask our approach. Even still, they’re bound to have . . .” Meridas trailed off, looking up from his map as he noticed Taln standing in the tent doorway.

Aneazer frowned openly at the intrusion, but Meridas was far better at hiding his displeasure.

“What is this?” Taln asked. “The scouts have returned with news of Kholinar? Why was I not informed?”

“We thought this beneath your notice, holy one,” Meridas said with a smooth voice. “It is only a preliminary report, and your divine presence hardly needs—”

“I may or may not be insane, Meridas,” Taln interrupted. “But I am definitely not an idiot. Do not patronize me.”

Meridas simply smiled.

“What did the scouts find?” Taln asked, striding forward and regarding the tabletop map. Aneazer had brought more than men to their expedition—his supply carts carried tents, furniture, and some surprisingly detailed landscape maps. His knowledge of eastern Alethkar was so remarkable, in fact, that it was suspicious. One had to wonder what his plans might have included, should Alethkar have fared worse in the Pralir wars.

“Kholinar is besieged,” Aneazer said. “Held by a force of several thousand.”

“How many is ‘several,’ Aneazer?” Taln said, scanning the map. A smaller section had been arranged with a crudely-sketched layout of Kholinar and the surrounding territory, and this was marked with several troop groupings. The larger map, which showed the surrounding geography, told him something that the other two had already noticed—that their own army would have to change its route slightly. With care, they might be able to get within a few hours march of the city without being discovered.

“Three thousand foot, six hundred heavy infantry, and perhaps five hundred archers—with towers.”

Taln grunted.

“Smaller than our force in numbers,” Meridas pointed out.

“But with the advantage of location, not to mention the archers,” Taln said. “I am new to this epoch’s methods of war, but I suspect that those towers will be problematic.”

Aneazer nodded. They had been forced to leave the man’s own towers behind in the name of speed, and their force had barely two hundred archers. “We do have the advantage of Shardbearers, I would assume,” he said.

“Yes,” Meridas said. “Most armies carry barely one Blade per tensquad. Assuming averages hold true, this force will be lucky to be armed by three or four Shardbearers. Fewer probably, since they haven’t attacked the city itself yet. It might be best for us to skirt this army entirely. We need to join with the bulk of Alethkar’s forces.”

There was a sudden commotion outside the tent, marked by the presence of an angry feminine voice. Beside the table, Meridas rolled his eyes and Aneazer smiled in amusement.

“We should probably suffer her,” Meridas said with a sigh. “She won’t leave us alone until she’s been placated. Her brother indulged her by allowing her to play general with his armies.”

“Surely you don’t—” Aneazer said.

Meridas laughed. “By the winds, no. Elhokar is a soft-hearted brother, and he indulged her far too much. You can see the result. The woman will learn her place once our wedding is official.” If he caught Taln’s dark look at that last comment, he gave no obvious indication. “Anyway, for now there is little to do besides let her in and humor her momentarily, so that we may be rid of her quickly.”

“As you say, Lord Meridas,” Aneazer said, waving for an attendant to relay the message. Taln himself hadn’t had any trouble gaining entrance—the army was still ostensibly his, and they couldn’t very well bar him from the command tent. Jasnah, obviously, was not afforded the same consideration.

She stalked into the tent chamber a few moments later. Another woman might have thrown a tirade, but she simply shot Meridas a thin-eyed glance, then strode over to regard the various maps.

“We are too late to bring my brother warning, then,” she said.

Meridas raised an eyebrow.

“After taking Ral Eram from the inside, the invaders could hope to keep the city’s fall a secret,” Jasnah replied, “but they could never lay a siege like this without word eventually reaching my brother. At least we know that Alethkar hasn’t been conquered yet.”

“We don’t know that,” Meridas said. “The invaders could have already destroyed King Elhokar’s army, then sent separate divisions to capture the larger cities and quell rebellion.”

Jasnah shook her head. “This is too small a force,” she said. “And it’s arranged for an extended siege, not an offensive. It is meant to cut off Dalenar’s retreat, and to disrupt his supplies. If the invaders had won, they would not have wasted any time before taking Kholinar—it holds an Oathgate and, other than Ral Eram, is the most important city in the kingdom. The invaders wouldn’t waste time with a siege—they would attack quickly and decisively. Trying to starve the city would be an act of foolishness, consider the number of Awakeners it holds.”

“She’s probably right,” Taln agreed. He didn’t look toward Jasnah. Every time he met her eyes, he saw the appeal therein.

“We need to attack,” Jasnah decided. “We can’t leave this enemy at our backs, and freeing Kholinar would be a powerful aid to our allies.”

“Yes, well,” Meridas said, “we will consider it.”

Jasnah ignored him, leaning down closely, running her finger along the map as if tracing a path. “We can do it easily,” she said. “They won’t be expecting a force to come upon them from the west. We should send a smaller contingent to strike toward the gates quickly from the east, and they will assume it’s a breaking force, meant to try and bring a message from Elhokar’s army into the city. They’ll react quickly, pulling their forces forward to defend the city gates, exposing them to fire from Kholinar itself and leaving their towers relatively unguarded at the back of the main body. We can send mounted Shardbearers to cut down the towers, then attack from the east and retain the height advantage as we come down the lip of the Lait.”

“As I said, Jasnah,” Meridas said with obvious annoyance, “we are quite capable of—”

“No, wait, Meridas,” Aneazer said, pulling at his frazzled grey beard, studying the map with consternation. “The woman’s words have merit.”

“Kholinar undoubtedly still has troops guarding its walls,” Jasnah continued. “When they see our attack, they’ll raise the gates and sally, trapping the Veden army between two hostile foes. They’ll be boxed—armies to the north and south, arrows falling from the west, and a lait cliffside to their west. Their towers will have fallen, and I doubt the force has even a single Shardbearer—it would be foolish to waste Shardblades on what is intended to be little more than a blockade.”

Meridas frowned. “It is too early to make definite plans,” he finally said. “Let us get closer to Kholinar, where we can perform better reconnaissance, then we will develop a firm strategy.”

Aneazer nodded in agreement, and after a brief pause, Jasnah nodded as well, admitting the truth to Meridas’s words. The two noblemen left together, Meridas postulating whether or not the Awakener knew how to create Shinavar Dalaltatan, and suggesting that the two try the vegetable for their evening repast. Taln stood, feeling a sudden tension as Jasnah’s eyes fell on him, then hurried out of the tent without looking at her. She remained behind, beside the battle map, watching him go.

He stepped out into the late afternoon light, taking a deep breath to still his tension. He knew it was foolish to avoid her, as if he were a child fleeing before the censure of a displeased parent. And yet, those eyes of hers only lent fuel to his own questionings and uncertainties. He had to decide, but he couldn’t do so with her looking at him like that.

The aggregate Herald’s Army was arrayed before him. Aneazer’s troops

were well-disciplined, their dark brown tents arranged in careful squadrons of a hundred men, each one emblazoned with the Zar glyph. Zar: Preparation. Indeed, this was no despot's ragged, bullying collection of thugs. This was a true army. Its presence helped discipline within Taln's own troops. The men became stronger and more unified simply by being forced to march alongside Aneazer's superior warriors. The two groups of men retained a division, true, but the whole was a far more effective group than Taln's men had been on their own.

Yes, this was an army now. The men were beginning to feel like soldiers, and their training reflected that. Taln had once told Jasnah that he would not lead these men under false pretenses. He had persuaded himself to continue even after he had discovered her manipulations, for he felt that training the men would help them against the Khothen. But, if he was no Herald, then he had perpetuated lies of the most blasphemous degree. His self-righteous proclamation that 'intention mattered' now seemed laughable. What of the intentions of a madman? What good did it matter to the soldiers whether they had been gathered by a man who sincerely thought himself a Herald or not? The result was the same. They had been lied to.

Taln sighed, walking away from the command tent. Years of conditioning kept his head high, his step firm, despite his inner turmoil. That too was a lie. The men saw him, and gathered strength from his supposed confidence. But that was the way it had always been, hadn't it? His questioning was like a rodent, digging and gnawing at a wall that had been poorly patched. Jasnah's questions unearthed shames and uncertainties Taln had thought long buried. Even during his moments of greatest confidence, they had been there—a tiny but unnoticed leak in the presumably indestructible wall of his own morality. He knew, even when he tried to forget, that the Heralds were not what mankind presumed them to be. He knew secrets, things that his brethren hid from their own people. Burdens taken in the name of the greater good.

But what were these things? Ravings? Reflections of his own paranoia? As he walked, he saw the horse pens. Aneazer kept two tensets of the animals; Taln had known kings with less fine stock. He remembered the difficulty in bringing the beasts to Roshar, and—upon visiting again eight hundred years later for the Second Return—he remembered his relief upon discovering that mankind had found a way to breed and keep horses despite Roshar's harshness. Almost every other sign of Lhar had died out, but horses remained. What of these memories? These things seemed so logical to him—was his mind so wounded that it could fill in holes in its

own reasonings, accepting for fact things that others would have found laughable?

This army would go to war in just a few days. He had little time to decide. If he determined that he was not a Herald, then he could no longer ride at their head—this much he promised. He would not lie to others as he had lied to himself. Yet, if he was a Herald, he had no business going to war on Alethkar's behalf. After the destruction of Kanar, Jezrien and Nale had decided that Heralds could not engage in the politics of men. The Elin were to leave the wars of mankind alone unless absolutely necessary for the protection of the greater good. As a Herald, it was Taln's duty to move on. Probably to Thalenah, which he had heard retained a very stable monarchy.

And if you are a Herald, where are the others? The swords had been buried for hundreds of years. If he was a Herald, then he was alone. That in itself was almost a powerful enough worry to make him wish to be mad, rather than face the prospect of protecting Roshar on his own.

And, behind all of his fears and deliberations sat those beautiful, concerned eyes. Even more powerful than uncertainty was another emotion he had never thought to feel again. There had never been time or opportunity for it before, and now that it came upon him, he was completely surprised by its appearance—and equally uncertain how to deal with it.

Taln sighed, looking east, toward Kholinar and the concerns of men. He would soon be forced to make a decision, one way or another.

chapter 75

DALENAR 7

DALENAR PULLED OFF HIS HELM, wiping the blood from his brow as he led his horse back toward his army's main body. Beside him, Echathen's voice rang with the mutterings of a tenset curses.

Light infantry marched around them. What had begun as a tensquad had taken serious casualties, leaving barely five hundred men alive. The ambush should have gone far better. It wasn't that Dalenar had expected to do serious damage to the Veden army—this ambush, like others, had simply been another delaying tactic. As long as the Vedens feared ambush, they would move more carefully, and Dalenar's struggling force could stay ahead. No, this day's skirmish had not been intended to deal any serious damage.

Elhokar Kholin had obviously thought differently.

"Kenalhin, Kepralin, and Kechahin!" Echathen swore, using the first three names of the Almighty. One of Echathen's tributing lords, Lord Tenmach, had been among those killed this day. Tenmach's squad had been cut off from the main troop, flanked by enemy forces who should have been detained by Elhokar's tensquad. Elhokar, however, hadn't stayed back as the plan dictated—instead, he had pushed his troops forward, trying to cut through to the Veden commanders. By the time Elhokar had realized the futility of the action, Dalenar's force had already suffered massive casualties.

Dalenar glanced behind. The Veden force was there, of course, ever

behind them like a dark mold on the horizon. They weren't giving specific chase to Dalenar's group—their leader, whoever it may be, was too clever for that. For all he knew, Dalenar's hasty retreat was leading into a second, more devastating ambush. The invaders had a two-to-one advantage in troops—they were big enough to be confident, but still too small to take hasty risks. That was, perhaps, the only reason why the Aleth forces were still alive.

The men marching with Dalenar were a morose, solemn lot. Morale was terrible, as could be expected—no army liked to be on the perpetual retreat. However, the Aleth forces suffered from an even greater problem, and the men could sense it. Though Dalenar and Elhokar's armies remained separated out of principle, they were required to rely on one another to work against the invaders. They camped beside on another, and coordinated delaying tactics. However, neither group held the obvious command.

The army was like two pigs tied to one rope. Each move was a struggle, each plan a potential disaster. Elhokar refused to meet with Dalenar face to face, instead insisting that they communicate via messengers. The sense of disorder, mixed with the foe behind, left the men with very little to rely upon.

The main troop had already set camp in the evening light—or, more appropriately, it had set up two separate camps that happened to sit next to one another. Dalenar made for the western camp, which was slightly larger. To the right, he could see Elhokar's own ambush force marching into camp.

Dalenar reined in his horse as the men lethargically made their way toward the mess tent. He looked over at Echathen. The Khardin man had always been a soldier of great energy, but even he was beginning to show signs of fatigue. His Plate was a mismatch of pieces, half his regular light-blue, half scavenged from the suits of the fallen—it would take several weeks for his own twisted and scarred pieces to reform themselves. Dalenar's own Plate looked little better—he kept more of his original pieces, but they were covered with dents, gashes, and nicks.

"Come, my friend," Dalenar said. "We have planning to do."

Echathen nodded. "For all the good it will do us," he muttered.

IMPRESSIVELY, THE INITIAL RETREAT had been performed with relatively little loss. Some of the bulkier items—such as tents and furniture—had been left behind out of necessity. However, their stores of emeralds, sapphires, and basic food-preparation items had mostly survived the chaotic withdrawal. Dalenar could only ascribe the miracle to the effectiveness of

his stewards. If the army somehow survived the next few weeks, he vowed to raise the men all a rank or two.

Dalener's pavilion had been far too bulky to bring. However, his stewards had located a smaller tent—brought by a lesser nobleman—and appropriated it in Dalener's name. The tent was smaller than he was accustomed to, but at least it was shelter—many of his men didn't even have that much.

There were no chairs inside—Dalener had ordered all lords to abandon any furniture that had survived the original withdrawal. It was too heavy to carry; Dalener wouldn't have servants collapsing from the rushed march simply because their lord wanted a comfortable place to sit his posterior.

Echathen, his Shardplate removed, settled himself on a cushion as the scouts entered the tent to give their report. Dalener remained standing.

Palhen, the head of Dalener's scouts, was a thick-necked man with a warrior's build and a bristly mustache. He was a lord, but as the mustache indicated, he had little care for courtly ways. Solitary and curt, but observant, he served well in his place.

"Well?" Dalener asked. Palhen didn't care much for formality.

"They're definitely Veden, my lord," the man said in his grunting voice. "I got close enough to the main body to see glyphseals from all three of Veden Houses. I recognized a couple of the faces, too."

Dalener nodded. He had concluded the same during this last battle. For a time, he had maintained his belief that the invaders were the mysterious army from Pralir, but that had apparently been a hasty conclusion.

"Filthy hogs," Echathen said. "It's little wonder they wouldn't give much aid to the Pralir campaign. They were planning to betray Alethkar as soon as it got back."

"You didn't send help to the Pralir war either, my friend," Dalener pointed out.

"Yes, but I always gave my reasons," Echathen said. "The Vedens, they hedged and promised. It's a wonder that Nolhonarin ever signed that treaty—everyone knows Vedens are about as trustworthy as smoke."

"Were you able to determine who leads the Veden army?" Dalener asked.

Palhen shook his head. "Their scouts are storm-cursed good, my lord. I lost three men on this mission as it is. We couldn't get close enough to read the glyph on the central tent."

Dalener nodded with a sigh. The army was probably led by Talshekh Davar—before the nonsense with Crossguard began, the man had been arranging a coup of the Three Houses. Apparently, he had decided not

to stop with his own throne. Dalenar wished he knew how the man had managed to get past the southern Aleth fortifications so quickly and quietly.

“My lord,” Palhen continued. “I passed by the scene of your skirmish on my way back. They were killing the wounded again.”

Dalenar closed his eyes, exhaling softly while Echathen muttered a few more curses. Dalenar had sent scouts back to Crossguard, hoping that they would discover that a Veden holding force had been arranged to hold the abandoned men. Instead, they had found only corpses. Anyone Dalenar abandoned was slaughtered.

“Thank you, Palhen,” Dalenar said, dismissing the scout.

Palhen nodded. “A messenger from Kholinar arrived while you were gone, my lord,” he said as he withdrew. “Shall I send a scribe to read the letter?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The tent flap rustled as the beefy scout left, and Dalenar shared a look with Echathen.

“This isn’t good,” the Khardin man noted.

Dalenar nodded. He walked over and unrolled his map of Alethkar, then weighed it down on the stone floor with rocks at the corners. His female calligraphers had marked the army’s current location, as requested, as well as that of the trailing army.

They were near the middle of the kingdom, a little to the north and east. At first, Dalenar had hoped to make for Kholinar, where he could have, perhaps, rallied some more forces. Their pursuer, however, had anticipated this intention. The Veden King kept his forces eastward, herding the refugee group to the west, away from Dalenar’s center of power.

“So what are our choices?” Dalenar asked. “We can’t continue to wander as we have.”

Echathen cocked his head slightly, as if not in complete agreement. “We need to take the path with the most valleys, Dalenar. Every potential ambush will slow them down.”

Dalenar shook his head. “Slowing them won’t save us in the end, my friend. They’ll catch us eventually, no matter how clever our pathfinding. We need to make a stand somewhere.”

“Khardinar?” Echathen offered. “I brought most of my forces with me, but there are some remaining. Our passing would gather several thousand more troops.”

“And bring an inevitable war to your people,” Dalenar said. “No, I won’t

do that to the Restful City. Besides, it's too far. We'd be dead before we got there."

Echathen grunted, leaning over, his shadow falling across the map as he studied their options. "Teth-Kanar," he finally said.

Dalenaer nodded. The port city was their only option. It was a Third city, of goodly size and fortification.

"Our only problem will be Lord Intara," Echathen said.

"Intara's not a problem," Dalenaer said. "He's an advantage. He was the only major Aleth lord who didn't send troops to either myself or Elhokar. He'll have men to add to the army."

"If he even lets us in the city," Echathen said with a snort.

"He won't have much choice if we plant three armies on his doorstep," Dalenaer said, smiling slightly. The image was increasingly appealing. Teth-Kanar was one of the more defensible cities in the kingdom, despite its . . . unpleasant heritage. The real trick would be persuading Elhokar that it was the best place to go.

A knock came at the tent post, and Dalenaer stood, calling for the visitor to come in. A white-robed woman in her forties entered. He thought he recognized her, but the face was difficult to place—standard dark Aleth hair, cut short and without braids. The wife of a lesser officer, probably, who had become a scribe so that she could remain with her husband during extended campaigns.

The woman bowed. "Which message would you like me to read first, my lord?" she asked, holding up two sheets of paper.

Dalenaer paused. "There are two?" he asked. "Who from?"

"The first is from your wife, my lord," the woman said. "The second is from her majesty, Queen Nanavah. It came just a few moments ago."

Nanavah? Dalenaer thought, shooting a glance at Echathen. The bald-headed warrior shrugged, leaning back on his cushion in a relaxed position.

"Read the one from Kinah first," Dalenaer ordered.

"It is very short, my lord," the scribe said. "It reads: 'My dearest betrothed. I don't know if you got my other messages or not. I did receive your man. He was very brave in escaping the forces that chased him. Kholinar is still under siege, though the army hasn't attacked us yet. I put two tenset men in painted armor and have them walking the ramparts. Perhaps the invading force will think that we have more Shardbearers than we do. The citizens are training at Shieldhome with all diligence, but I don't think we have the forces to resist an attack. I don't know what happened at Crossguard, but I trust you have defeated the king. Please, return to Kholinar with all haste.'"

The scribe looked up. "And it is signed 'With love, Kinæ Khardinar.'"

Echathen smiled with pride at the letter's content, and Dalenar didn't blame him. Kinæ was an impressive young woman—resourceful, clever, and determined. Despite her youth, she would preside over Kholinar in its time of need, giving the people the firm leadership it needed.

However, her words worried Dalenar. Cutting off Kholinar so decisively was a very clever move. When Talshekh had begun his campaign in Jah Keved, Dalenar had commissioned his spies to prepare a report on the Davar House leader. Nothing in that report had led Dalenar to expect such a competent enemy. Talshekh was supposed to be a fine warrior, but only a passable tactician. Yet the moves he had made so far showed amazing subtlety and preparation.

He did attack Crossguard too early, Dalenar reminded himself. That was one error. Whoever it is that leads this invading army, he can make mistakes. The trap isn't inescapable yet.

"And if Teth-Kanar is besieged too?" Echathen said.

"Then we will die," Dalenar said. "We can only hope that the Vedens weren't able to infiltrate that far—they would have had to risk sending a force dangerously close to Crossguard to get to Teth-Kanar. We will also have to hope that Kholinar can hold out long enough for us to defeat the main Veden force."

He didn't add the obvious—that if they didn't defeat the main Veden force, Kinæ and the rest of the upper Aleth nobility would be executed.

"The second letter, please," Dalenar said to the scribe.

"It reads: 'My dear Lord Dalenar, I write this in the hopes that you might retain some measure of influence over my husband. Though you two have come to arms recently, you must know the level of respect with which he regards you.

"My lord, I am deeply afraid. I feel weak admitting this, but I don't know to whom else I can turn. The force chasing us must belong to Talshekh Davar, and its cohesion means that he has undoubtedly slain my brother, Ahven Vedenel. My son's life is in great danger. Not only is Ahrden the heir to the Aleth throne, but he is also now the rightful ruler of the Three Houses. Talshekh will have to make certain that the boy is . . ."

The scribe trailed off.

"What?" Dalenar asked.

"I apologize, my lord," she said. "The writing is smudged. It must have gotten wet. I think it says 'Will have to make certain that the boy is killed, for Ahrden is a threat to his stability.'"

“It continues: ‘I have asked—even pled—with my Lord Elhokar to let me take Ahrden and flee. There are those who would hide us. We needn’t stay with the main bulk of the army, but could ride ahead and seek refuge in Khardinar, or perhaps find passage to Thalenah. Elhokar, however, insists on keeping his son with him during these dangerous times.

“Please, my lord. Send a request to Elhokar. Persuade him that he must not let the Kholin line die here. He must let me flee.”

The scribe looked up. “It is signed ‘Your queen, Lady Nanavah Vedenel.’ The words are written in a very hasty hand, my lord. I do not think she was in a . . . completely solid state of mind when she penned them.”

Dalনার nodded thoughtfully. He could see the woman behind the words—a terrified, uncertain girl. Nanavah had come far during the last year, but before that she had displayed a spoiled immaturity and unwillingness to perform her duties as queen. She wasn’t ready to face the possibility that being Elhokar’s wife might very well mean her death.

“Do you have your writing tools with you?” he asked the scribe.

The scribe nodded. “They’re outside, my lord,” she said.

“Fetch them,” Dalনার requested.

“You intend to do as she asks?” Echathen asked curiously as the scribe left.

Dalনার nodded. “I need to send Elhokar a message anyway and complain of his actions today. Not that it will stop him from doing whatever the winds tell him, of course. Still, perhaps I can compose a letter that will make him agree that Teth-Kanar is the place to make our stand.”

“Don’t tell him you plan to fight there,” Echathen said, reclining. “Tell him you plan to get a ship at the port, then flee to Pralir. He’ll want to go there for certain.”

Dalনার frowned. “He’s not that selfish. He wouldn’t leave his men behind to die.”

Echathen shrugged. “I think you’d be surprised.”

Dalনার frowned. However, when he composed the letter, he did as Echathen had suggested.

chapter 76

JASNAH 17

THE MEN FOUND OUT about the impending battle at Kholinar, of course, and it gave them the apprehensive excitement of an untested force. They understood that by the next evening they would be lamenting injuries and deaths, yet for the moment such things were only possibilities. Odds of thrown chips, the turn of a Numerologist's soothsaying glyphward. Until the battle began, the men could imagine honor and excitement, victories won and bravery proven.

Jasnah was more pragmatic. Not only was she naturally that way, but she had much experience—thanks to her brother and father—with warfare. She knew both losses and victories, and understood that the two often felt hauntingly similar. Men would die at her command. True, many of them knew exactly what they were doing—Aneazer's force, while untested in large-scale battle, had the mindset of a mercenary force. Many of the other men, however, were more idealistic. They had come, not truly at her beck, but at the call of the man they thought a Herald.

A man Jasnah feared would fail them.

Jasnah watched Taln as the army went about its morning preparations, getting ready to march the short distance to Kholinar and spring her trap upon the Vedens camped there. Taln had barely spoken to her over the last three days, and when he met her eyes, she saw the confused pain therein. He confronted his own insanity, and he did it for her.

She wasn't certain what brought her more shame: the knowledge that he suffered so for her sake, or the worry that asking him to question himself would destroy her army. She still needed him at its head. While traveling from Riemak, they had gathered even more followers. News of Lord Aneazer's acceptance of the Herald Talnel had provided vast credibility to her claims, for he had been the man to squash the last three false Herald uprisings. The Herald's section was now just as large as Aneazer's section of the force. It had nearly thirty-five hundred people, many gathered from Aneazer's own villages and by his suggestion. These men followed Taln, not her or Meridas. Without the banner of Heraldship, there was a good chance they would not fight.

She knew she shouldn't consider such things. She had confronted Taln for his own good. Yet she worried. What if he did overcome his hallucinations? He would probably denounce himself before the army, and in doing so destroy it as surely as an enemy ambush. She would never be able to take Kholinar with just Aneazer's forces.

A part of her didn't care. That part—indignant that she would put her own lies before Taln's well-being—wished desperately for him to admit he was no Herald, for it would remove the great barrier of delusion that kept them apart. Yet the voice that whispered such things was the same underdeveloped piece of her that had always warned her not to manipulate others. She had always quieted it in the name of a better, more dominant good. What was the betrayal of a minor court ally if it gained her the knowledge she needed to protect the crown? What was the death of one squad of soldiers on a battlefield when their unwitting sacrifice protected a tensquad others? What was the mind of one man, when compared to the cohesion of a vital fighting force?

That was the guilt she bore. It was not helped by seeing what she had done to him already. Where he had once stared forward with firm confidence, he now looked down in uncertainty. Where he had once declared, he now remained quiet. With misery, she realized that his stubborn self-confidence—the thing that had frustrated her so often—was also the very thing that had made Taln so compelling to her. Seeing him lost and indecisive was painful enough to make her wince whenever he looked her direction.

What right did she have to ask him to change? Who was she to make such a demand, especially when she followed it with only the hint of a promise? He saw himself as the holy protector of an entire world, and she had asked him to give that up. For her.

She sighed, stretching and standing to the side as a group of soldiers dismantled her tent. Though Aneazer had purchased her a relatively nice *talla* in one of the towns they had passed, for now she wore trousers and one of her tough seasilk sencoats. It was odd how quickly she had grown to prefer the loose, comfortable clothing. When she had tried on the *talla*, she had found herself trying to walk with a full stride, and had nearly tripped in surprise. The constrictive dress had made her feel short-of-breath and trapped, as if she were bound in tight ropes. She would have to grow accustomed to *tallahs* again, eventually—but for now she could maintain that wearing her sensible clothing was necessary, lest she ruin her only luxurious outfit.

As she waited, she saw Meridas and Aneazer leave the command tent, and allowed herself a moment of seething frustration. Meridas was still firm in his declarations that a woman did not belong in the command tent. Though they had adopted her plan for attacking the Veden force—and even came to her for suggestions on strategy—they forbade her entrance into the daily planning meetings. While most of the things they discussed were minor issues, it was annoying to be left out. Besides, she knew more than they did. While the men had heard recitations from the great and historic strategic works, she had actually read the books—and there was a difference, especially since she had read not only the dictations by the generals, but the often more-enlightening comments added by their wives and daughters in the Justification.

Meridas bid Aneazer farewell, saying something in a low, almost suspicious, voice before parting. Jasnah thinned her eyes, watching the two go about their morning duties. Their allegiance was another item of great concern. She trusted Meridas about as much as she trusted the winds not to blow, and Aneazer's reputation was proof enough of his nature. Both men would do what best gained them power, and there was little she could do to check them. She had worked to build Taln's reputation, and therefore power, among Aneazer's troops, and she had encouraged her guards to make friends with those in Aneazer's personal bodyguard. Her resources were, unfortunately, very limited.

Meridas noticed her watching, and unfortunately decided to stroll her direction. He barked a few orders at attendants, sending the men to do his will, and approached her alone.

"Lady Jasnah," he said with a panderer's smile. "I had hoped you would wear Lord Aneazer's gift this day, since we might enter Kholinar by nightfall. It wouldn't do for the court to see you dressed so, lest they mistake you for a stableboy."

"I shall change once we obtain victory, Lord Meridas," Jasnah replied flatly.

"Of course," he said, glancing around. "I don't see our resident deity nearby. What shall you do without him to amuse you?"

Jasnah didn't reply, instead folding her arms and adopting an icy glare.

"Of course," Meridas noted, looking back at her with eyes hiding a violent jealousy, "there will be another highstorm tomorrow morning. The two of you can just run off then and amuse yourselves."

Jasnah started. *That night, on the highlands. You were seen asking after him, then left your guards and went to find him alone. There would have been talk. Of course Meridas knows about it.*

"I thought I told you to be discreet," Meridas said in a low voice.

"I was worried, so I went to see where he was," Jasnah said. "Nothing more."

"Of course," Meridas said.

She gritted her teeth, hissing slightly. "Go!" she snapped, pointing. "Leave me."

His eyes flashed with anger, and he looked at her with . . . satisfaction. Jasnah paused, pushing aside her feelings of revulsion. There was something in his eyes, something he probably didn't mean to reveal.

"No matter," Meridas said. "This will be over soon anyway." He stalked away, leaving her feeling somehow soiled by the entire conversation.

Jasnah stood for a moment, forcing herself to focus on the oddity she had sensed in his words. "Kemnar?" she requested.

"I am here," he said, stepping forward from his almost unnoticed position beside the working tent soldiers. Having him back was such a wind-blessed relief that she had stopped worrying about releasing him from service. She needed him too much, for the moment at least.

"Meridas is planning something," Jasnah said.

"Of course he is," Kemnar said.

"Something specific," she said. "I need to know what it is. I need a list of any commands he and Aneazer have contrived in their planning councils over the last three days. Take Lhan to scribe for you, and ask around. I need to know any changes they've made to the army's structure or orders, no matter how insignificant, and I need to know them before we attack this afternoon."

"Yes, my lady," Kemnar said, already moving to do as she bid.

THIS TIME IT FELT DIFFERENT. She would have thought that war would be familiar to her by now. Her first tastes of battle had come during her childhood, when her father and his brothers had fought against Jarnah the Tyrant.

By then, Jarnah had already conquered most of Roshar. His mysterious allegiance with the Shin clans had allowed him to roll across the Second Peninsula like a raging highstorm. Once Davar, Vedenel, and Prallah had fallen, Alethkar had found itself threatened from both the south and the east.

This she knew from the histories. Her memories of those days were different—memories highlighted by the emotions she had seen on her father's stout face. Fear, confusion, and worry. Every nation on Roshar, even the island kingdom of Thalenah, had fallen to Jarnah's conquering—what hope did Alethkar have?

But then Dalenar had slain the Tyrant himself in single combat. Jarnah's empire had fallen upon itself. Several of his generals had tried to lead the armies, but fracturing and rebellion had turned them against one another. Jasnah's first true experiences with war hadn't come for another several years. Those days, once Jarnah's armies had been defeated, her father had sought to reestablish Alethkar's historic boundaries. She had been young during the first Prallah Wars, not even eighteen, but her father had quickly realized his daughter's tactical ability. Never a man who had cared much for propriety, Nolphonarin had used her from that day onward. It had been a simple matter for her to transfer that service to Elhokar, when he took his war of justice to the Pralir highlands.

Why should this battle feel so different from the others? She sat nervously in her saddle, waiting as the runners did one final scout of the enemy camp. The unfamiliar horse shuffled beneath her, and Jasnah wished for a litter, for she had little experience with riding. The army waited with barely-contained vigor. Perhaps that was the reason for her unsettlement. Before, her strategies had always been given at others' behest. They had been the ones venturing men's lives, and ultimately the guilt of failure had been theirs to bear.

That was it. She had gathered these men, and for the first time the responsibility of their lives was hers. Meridas insisted on controlling battle command, and Taln's was the banner under which they rode, but they were Jasnah's men. They would die because she had brought them here.

Her horse stirred, and a sudden touch on her leg made her jump. She looked down to find Kemnar and Brother Lhan standing beside her. Had she been that distracted?

"I'm sorry it took us so long, Lady Jasnah," Kemnar said, nodding for Lhan to produce a sheet of paper, scribbled with lines of text. "But here it is—a list of the commands Meridas and Aneazer made over the last few days, with the more unusual ones listed at the top."

Jasnah took the proffered sheet, noting the spear Lhan carried in his other hand. She held up the sheet, scanning the list, as she spoke. “Brother Lhan, you are not to take part in the battle.”

“Excuse me?” the monk asked.

“You will withdraw to the command tent,” Jasnah said. “You are one of a few people in this force who can read, and I am not going to let you die on that battlefield.”

Lhan glanced away with bitter eyes. “Well,” he said, “my streak for proving myself useless continues unabated. Thank you, my lady—one wouldn’t wish to break such a delightful streak of laziness. I suppose I’ll go find a place to nap while everyone else dies.”

“You have too much knowledge and training, Lhan,” Jasnah said. “Regardless of your newfound desire to be heroic, you cannot be risked. Do as I command.”

Lhan sighed, then stalked off. For the first time Jasnah remarked on how young he was—barely twenty, if that old. His monk’s robes, mixed with his strange ability to see to the truth of a person’s soul, made him seem far older.

Kemnar bowed and retreated to the battle preparations. Jasnah let them both leave, turning to scan the list they had worked to prepare. What had she expected to find? There had to be some clue to Meridas’s plans manifest in his orders—whatever his schemes, he could hardly actuate them without giving commands.

Most of the list was unremarkable. Squads had been assigned to separate camp duties; changes had been made in personnel groupings to better mix the untrained with the skilled. Men had been sent to hunt for food supplies to supplement what the Awakener created. Meridas had made orders as to how the tents were to be arranged, and who was to pack them each day. Once again, Jasnah remarked on what she had noticed so long ago. When Meridas had first taken command of that first hundred men from Marcabe, he had displayed far more knowledge about the workings of an army than a simple merchant should possess.

There wasn’t much on the list that was of any interest. She almost tossed it away before she made the connection. Meridas had made many orders about troop locations for the upcoming battle, obviously intentioned on placing Aneazer’s better-trained soldiers in key positions. One of those changes, though unremarkable at first glance, suddenly gave her a chill of realization.

Meridas had replaced Taln’s inexperienced honor guard with men from

Aneazer's own personal guard. Jasnah recognized some of the names as Aneazer's most loyal and well-trained soldiers. Ostensibly, it was a sign of respect for Taln, putting the Herald under the protection of the finest soldiers in the army.

Jasnah saw the truth. She remembered vividly the jealousy in Meridas's eyes and his conspiratory familiarity with Aneazer.

Taln would not survive the battle.

I have to warn him. Thankful for an excuse to leave the horse behind, Jasnah slid out of her saddle and went looking for the madman. She found him sitting alone, close to the front of the army, yet somehow apart from them. He looked up when she approached, and she could see something in his eyes: resolve.

For ill or gain, he had made his decision.

A sudden panic struck her. She had hoped that he would wait, at least until the battle was over, to decide. Now she realized that was not possible. He had delayed as long as his conscience would allow, but the scouts would return within the hour. After that, it was to battle—and he would either stay with certainty in his Heraldship, or go with his madness honestly declared. If he did expose himself, the men would have to ride into battle with an uncertain morale, having just listened to their leader swear himself a madman.

He could yet destroy their army before the enemy had a chance to strike.

Taln's eyes were grim. Was that because he had finally realized the depth of his fantasies? Or, instead, was it because he knew she would be disappointed in his decision to remain a 'Herald?' Jasnah wished sharply that she had never brought this decision before him.

She paused a short distance from his stone perch, and he stood. He still refused to wear Plate, though he bore his Shardblade in a calm grip. He had traded his noble, seasilk cloak for the simple brown one he had been given in the monastery. What did that mean?

"You are in danger," she said quickly. "Meridas has replaced your honor guard. I'm afraid he intends you to suffer an 'accident' on the battlefield."

Taln snorted. "Meridas is the least of my problems at the moment," he said, waving his hand dismissively. He stood quietly for a moment, eyes distracted. Then he looked right at her, eyes decisive. "I—" he began, but didn't get beyond that first word before Jasnah interrupted.

"Don't speak!" she pled. "I don't want to hear what you have decided."

Taln paused. Then he frowned. "What game do you play, woman?"

"No game," Jasnah promised. "I . . . oh, Taln. I had no right to ask you

to betray yourself. This is who you are—even if your memories are false, they are what give you life.”

“Perhaps you had no right to ask the question,” Taln said. “But you certainly have no right to make the decision for me, Jasnah. Let me speak my piece.”

“I can’t,” Jasnah said. “It’s not a decision you should have to make. At least give it more thought.”

“I have put it off long enough,” Taln said with a shake of his head. He looked down at her with those solemn brown eyes of his. “You realize that, either way, I cannot lead this army any longer. As a Herald I must leave you here; as a man I must step down from my position of lies. Either way, I will not ride to battle at the head of the Herald’s Army.”

And without him, it would fall. Even as he spoke, a plan occurred to Jasnah, though she cursed herself for it. *Must everything be a deal to you, Jasnah?* She had told him yes, and for once she had spoken with complete honesty.

“Those aren’t the only two options, Taln,” she said. “As a Herald you could ride with us, then reap the benefits of a befriended nation.”

Taln shook his head. “That is what you offered before, but it isn’t enough. I would need more than just a ‘friendly kingdom,’ Jasnah, I would need a nation that believed in me.”

“And you would have it,” Jasnah said. “I vow to you, Talenel. Help me fight off the invaders that threaten my kingdom, and I will see that you have whatever resources you need. I will profess you a Herald with my loudest voice, and build you allies amongst the courts of Roshar. You say the Stormshades will come in one year. I give my oath that when this invasion is repelled and Alethkar is safe, our nation will prepare for the Return as if what you say were true. We will train our armies as you proscribe. We will stockpile and plan. We will listen to your preachings, and we will obey. If your demons do attack Roshar, then they will at least find one kingdom ready for them.”

Taln listened to the speech, the confusion in his eyes shining again. His frown deepened. “Your king would honor this vow?”

“I don’t know,” she confessed. “But my uncle, Lord Dalenar Kholin, will. Even if he doesn’t hold the crown when we return, he is a powerful man—even more powerful than my brother. You’d like him, Taln. He’s a lot like you—a little stuffy and incorrigibly proper, but honest and good. I promise you he will honor my vow.”

Taln fell silent, considering. His grip on the Shardblade tightened

unconsciously. “You have a sure talent, Jasnah—whenever I think I see clearly, you can make smoke to dim my understanding.”

Smoke. Onyx.

He looked into her eyes. “Do you always get what you wish?”

“Usually,” Jasnah admitted. *Though I have often regretted wanting the wrong things. Especially recently.*

“A Herald cannot be a man, Jasnah,” he said quietly. “If this is who I am to be, then I will live it as best I can. No more questioning. I will be a Herald, and you must understand what that means. Heralds are . . . above the regular concerns of men”

“I understand,” Jasnah replied softly, trying to keep things from breaking inside. She had to remain strong. “I would rather know you as Talenel the Herald than be with you as Taln the broken madman.”

Their eyes locked, and lingered, something unspoken passing between them. She would never know his answer—she would never know whether or not he had been willing to give up everything he was in order to be with her. With shame, she admitted that she would also never truly know whether she had forbidden him to decide for his own good, or simply because she wanted to keep the army together.

Taln dropped to one knee, driving his Blade into the rock. He bowed his head before her in an oddly humbling gesture. “Thank you,” he whispered. Then he stood, strong-backed and sure again, Talenel the Steadfast, a Herald determined to protect Roshar from the demons of its mystic past.

Jasnah watched him go, something unacknowledged crumbling within her. If only she could do as he did, abandon reason in favor of fantasy. What would it be like to ignore the harsh truths of the world, replacing them with beliefs far more palatable?

But she could not. Whatever it was within her that placed logic over fancy and truth over delusion was also the thing that gave her strength. She would rather find success in the real world than have all the pretend treasures of Taln’s false one.

It’s gone, she realized, somewhat stunned. It’s over. I never deserved him anyway.

And she knew then what she had to do. Distasteful, yes, but necessary. Someone had to be practical, even if practicality brought pain. She was accustomed to that.

She found Meridas going over his battle orders with Aneazer and some of their officers. Kemnar was there, as were all the Shardbearers—this

was not a time for political bickering, and even Meridas could see that. Jasnah stood quietly, close enough to be noticed but not close enough to be intrusive. She watched Meridas with a calm look, catching his eyes. A few moments later he excused himself to walk over to her.

When he arrived, his eyes were curious, and he spoke no insults. He obviously sensed a change in her. "Yes?" he asked quietly.

"You plan to have Taln killed," Jasnah said calmly. "Do not try to deny it. You replaced his honor guard, and I see the hatred in your eyes when you see him. You loathe that this is 'his' army, and you hate how he looks at me."

Meridas' eyes thinned. "You wish me to return his honor guard to the way it was before."

"It would do little good," Jasnah said. "You are a resourceful man, Meridas. I do not doubt that you will find a way to remove Taln sooner or later. I do wonder how you intend to keep the army together without him, however."

Meridas raised an eyebrow. "You overestimate his worth, my dear. If our . . . illustrious Herald were to fall to an enemy blade today, the army would not suffer grievously. We need him at the beginning of the battle, true, lest the men break during the initial assault. However, once the battle is through, we will have the resources of Kholinar. That means pay for the men and promises of titles for the officers. I think you will find that worldly rewards will replace spiritual ones quite nicely for the great percentage of the troops."

Jasnah frowned. "It appears that we have need to deal. The madman must live. The cost matters not, Meridas, as long as you see that he is not harmed."

Meridas snorted, eyes flashing with jealousy. "What?" he demanded in a quiet hiss. "I am to make certain your lover remains so that you can bed him behind my back? You would marry me, true, but only to make a fool of me before the court!"

Jasnah regarded him flatly. "Taln is bound by an honor beyond what you can understand, Meridas," she said. "He would do no such thing. You have my oath of honor."

He calmed, eyeing her distrustfully. Yet there was enough decency in him not to question her word. "You wish an accord?" he asked. "Very well—you have only one thing to offer. It will happen in Kholinar this evening, after we defeat the enemy force. No more complaints, no more evasions, and no more deals. You are far too proficient at promising the same thing over and over for greater rewards. This evening we will wed."

“Agreed,” Jasnah said, feeling a coldness within. “I will take your hand, Meridas. But there shall be no heirs until this war is finished with Taln still alive.”

Meridas’s expression darkened. “Very well, but I add my own stipulations. First, I will be free of my oath. No more obedience to your commands. Second, should the madman die from actions beyond my control, you will provide an heir once the war is through.”

“I am to trust his life to your generosity?” Jasnah asked.

“You are to trust it to my word,” Meridas spat. “I will not kill your beloved, Jasnah. As long as you don’t make a fool of me in court, I care nothing for his life. Warfare, however, is unpredictable—as you well know. I will not have my future dependent upon a madman’s ability to keep himself from harm. I will see that he is protected as best I can. Should something unforeseen happen, however . . . well, you are a woman of great resources. I’m certain you will be able to determine that I had nothing to do with the death. I give my oath that he will not die by my hand or intention. I will give my allies the same command.”

He would offer no more. Jasnah closed her eyes and nodded. When she opened them, Meridas bowed slightly, then returned to his plannings.

chapter 77

TALN 13

AS TALN SUSPECTED, JASNAH WAS WRONG about Meridas's intentions. The nobleman's soldiers didn't try to kill Taln—in fact, they were frustratingly over-protective. Taln stood, ringed by a double-line of Aneazer's best troops, fuming at his inability to take part in the battle. Even Meridas and Aneazer themselves weren't so well coddled.

It was probably a subtle insult of some kind. That would be like Meridas, keeping Taln from the fighting out of a supposed wish to protect him. Still, there was good reason to place Taln where he was. His honor guard stood at the top of a hill, his banner—gold with a brown *taln* glyph—flying to reassure and give strength. He would have placed his troop in the middle of the battlefield, where it would lend even greater morale, but he was more confident in his ability to keep himself alive than any mortal man would have a right to be.

Any mortal man. He was a Herald. The only things he had were his memories, and they had served him well so far. Denying who he was would present far too great a risk. If he held to his memories, the only thing he risked losing was Jasnah. If he abandoned them, he risked the future of mankind. It was good that Jasnah understood that.

Besides, the solution she had presented was a very good one. He didn't gamble much—not really. A year was not so long to wait. If the Khothen did not invade, then he could revisit his personal searchings. If they did attack,

then all of Roshar would have been better because of his determination. It was a very good compromise.

Jasnah's battle plan worked well too. Either the Aleth forces had tried before to get a breaking force into the castle, or the Vedens were expecting such a move, for they reacted with remarkable speed once the diversionary force was spotted. The invaders gathered their ranks, moving carefully into intercepting positions without exposing themselves to much bowfire from the walls. Fortunately, their speed and positioning left their towers behind, and exposed their forces to an easy ambush.

Meridas might not have approved of the plan's origin, but he made use of it with finesse. Within a few tenset minutes of the call to attack, the Veden forces were surrounded on three sides. The towers fell quickly, captured rather than destroyed.

From his vantage, Taln could easily see the workings of the battle—both armies were only of moderate size. Much of what he saw unsettled him. The Aleth Shardbearers were by far the central forces on the battlefield. The Aleth spearmen, trained carefully in their formations, worked at positioning the enemy troops. The Shardbearers were the ones who caused the most destruction. With proper support, a single Shardbearer could break an enemy formation, leaving tensets of corpses before him. The spearmen could then move in, decimating the fallen line. Where resistance was stronger, the Shardbearers simply slew more men.

The twin edges of ambush and Shardblades proved overwhelming. Taln couldn't see faces below, but he could feel the panic in the movement of the Veden lines. Even without Taln, the Aleth force still had fourteen Shardbearers—an incredible number. Soon, Veden dead covered the ground, and Taln felt less displeased about being left behind. His presence was needed in this battle, but his Blade certainly was not, and the slaughter did not make for an appealing temptation.

This is what his Brethren had feared—Shardblades turned against men. This was one of the reasons prohibitions against conquering and fighting other men had been placed in both the *Arguments* and *The Way of Kings*. The Heralds had suffered men to have Shardblades because of the weapons' awesome effectiveness against the Khothen. Obviously, Blades were even more effective against men.

Meridas himself duelled the Veden commander. The bout was short, and once the man fell, his sub-commanders were within their honor to surrender—which they quickly did. The Vedens had lost nearly half of their force in a matter of a couple of hours.

Taln stomached the destruction, as he had so many other times. Time had done odd things to his perceptions of death. He had seen so many people pass—mighty lords and simple farmers, scholars and tyrants. Yet, time had not dulled his concern for them. Indeed, their lives were the whole of his purpose. He fought through the eternities to protect them, and loathed seeing their lives spent so easily.

“Come,” he said to his unwanted honor guard, riding down toward the battlefield. He could already see the gates opening again, the besieged Aleth nobility coming out to greet their saviors. Taln shunned their fanfares, turning away as Meridas rode proudly toward a group of well-clothed aristocrats.

“My lord?” one of his guard captains asked as Taln led them away from the gates, toward the battlefield itself. “Should you not present yourself to those inside the walls?”

“Later,” Taln said, climbing off of his horse as they neared the area that had seen the most fighting. The groans of men were low in the air, as if the sounds themselves were weak and dying. Most of the living wounded bore the mangled wounds of spearheads rammed under or past armor. Of the men hit with Shardblades, there were few in one piece, let alone alive. Tired soldiers moved among the carnage, searching out the survivors.

“We did not fight,” Taln told his men. “So we can use our strength for this effort. Help me find the wounded and tend to their injuries.”

Mouths turned down at the prospect of doing such menial, grisly work, but Taln’s orders left little room for complaint. Reluctantly, the honor guard followed him across the bloodstained rocks while their fellow officers rode into Kholinar to feast.

IT WAS DARK BEFORE Taln finally released his soldiers from their task. Bloodied and weary, the twenty men probably wished they were among the wounded themselves. Taln sighed, laying one final soldier down in the healer’s tent. Aneazer’s force was weak on healers and attendants for the sick, but Lord Dalenar’s betrothed had sent men from the city to see to the work. And there was much to be done. It was surprising how tenaciously a man could grip life, how long he could lay among the dead, whispering for help through strength-sapped lips.

Taln did what he could. He understood the body as only one who had used the *nahel* to heal could. He was no surgeon—his understanding was instinctual, rather than specific. However, he had lived a very, very long time, and had acquired many skills over the centuries. He put to use what

he had, training his men quickly and helping the healers by moving bodies and bandaging wounds.

Taln stood wearily. There was still work to be done, but it would have to be someone else's duty. Taln had avoided his political responsibilities long enough. If he was going to prepare Alethkar, as Jasnah's oath said he could, then he was going to need to keep up at least some proprieties. He left the tent behind, promising to send soldiers to help move the wounded—those who survived the night—inside the walls the next day, before a highstorm could drench them.

He left the lighted tents behind, the fresh, unbloodied air outside strange to his senses. The great city of Kholinar glowed with triumphant torches on the walls. Taln paused for a moment, staring up. The celebrations seemed odd, compared to the suffering he had left behind, but he knew they were necessary. Victory must be encouraged, the men rewarded, for they were still an uncertain and untried force. A quick success now would give them a great deal of motivation.

Kholinar. It looked . . . old. Not broken or unkempt; its walls were still as sure as they had been centuries before. Yet there was something to the massive city. It looked as Taln felt—aged without wrinkles, tired without frailty. Some things from the past, at least, lived on. This was Bajerden's city, and here he had learned philosophy and truth from the lips of Jezrien, Ishar, and Balar—the wisest of the Heralds. From his discussions with them, especially Jezrien, had come the grand work *The Way of Kings*. Yes, some things did endure. There was goodness in men, though oftentimes their foolishness overrode it.

Taln entered the city without fanfare or recognition. Dressed in his common cloak, his clothing stained dark with the blood of the wounded, he might seem like just another wearied soldier who had drawn the unpleasant duty of seeing to the wounded. The streets were busy with people, some soldiers, the majority civilians. Apparently Lord Dalenar's call to arms had been very well-received, and most of the city's men had gone with him to battle against their king.

The revelers gave him wide berth, noting both his mood and his clothing. He made his way to the palace—the way was sure to him, even if much of the cityscape had changed over the centuries. At the palace gates, a pair of guards moved to bar him entrance, but Taln hefted his Shardblade off his shoulder and presented it mutely. The soldiers quickly flushed at their mistake, bowing.

The palace was well-maintained. Rich, indeed, but not as gaudy as the

one at Ral Eram. Taln was beginning to suspect that he would indeed like this Dalenar, as Jasnah had implied. The palace hallways were busy with servants bearing the remnants of the evening feast, and Taln's stomach that shouldn't need food growled hungrily. He ignored its protests for the moment, following the flow of people toward the main feast hall.

The room was oddly quiet. He turned the corner, expecting to see people sitting at their segregated tables, lethargically drinking away the end of the feast. Instead, he found a solemn gathering. The nobility were seated quietly at their tables as they watched something at the front of the room.

Meridas stood—wearing what appeared to be a new outfit—before the kneeling Jasnah. Her dress was a deep blue, not as ornate as the one in which she had escaped from the palace, but gossamer and beautiful nonetheless. Her hair was done up in one of her traditional Aleth braids, her face properly made up, her head bowed as she listened to the Vorin monk preach.

It had been a long time, but the Vorin ceremonies had been fairly immutable since the Eighth Epoch. Taln recognized the wedding quite easily.

He stood, stunned, simply staring.

We've reached civilization now, he realized after a moment's stupefaction. *She was engaged to Meridas. Now that a proper ceremony can be performed . . .*

That was why she had approached him earlier. That was why she had been so impatient that he make a choice between Herald and man. Taln had thought her solution of waiting a year a simple delay, but it had been more than that. Without a promise from him, she would do what was expected of her. Considering her dedication to Alethkar, it was amazing she would even consider otherwise . . .

Suddenly he realized that he wasn't the only one who had been forced to consider abandoning everything that he was. He wanted to look away, but he could not. Heralds were not supposed to feel like such fools. They were supposed to be immune to such pain in their hearts. They were supposed to be perfect, not prone to foolish sentimentality . . . or love.

But he had never made a very good Herald.

Jasnah reached up and took Meridas's hand, and the room's men cheered while the women nodded to each other approvingly. Jasnah stood. It was over. She was married.

And Taln understood that he had allowed something very, very precious to blow away with the wind.

chapter 78

DALENAR 8

DESPAIR KILLED AS MANY OF DALENAR'S men as did skirmishes with the Veden army. They simply gave up, sitting down or collapsing against the stone, knowing that their companions couldn't pause long to encourage them onward.

Even those who kept going seemed to have lost heart. They knew that they marched toward their doom. A final stand at Teth-Kanar would be no more meaningful to them than a final stand on the empty plains. They would die either way, and their country would fall to the invaders.

Perhaps this is how the soldiers of Pralir felt, during those last months, Dalenar thought as he urged the men forward, giving encouragement where he could.

Behind him, Elhokar's army provided cover. The Vedens had gotten too close again, and one of the armies had needed to provide time for the other to retreat. After the disastrous ambush several weeks before, both leaders had determined that there would be no more joint ventures.

Dalenar reined his horse in as he reached the lip of the Rift of Northal. Too wide and steep-sided to be a lait, the Rift was a massive crack in the ground. Dalenar loathed using it as a pathway, for it would provide his enemies with the high ground—not to mention an easy trail to follow.

However, at the army's current rate, there wouldn't be enough men to fight even if they did reach Teth-Kanar. The bed of the Rift was a steady

decline, far easier to march along than farmland hills. It also provided a direct path to the Teth Lait. Taking the Rift would cut as much as a week off their march.

The Aleth army's situation was too dire for caution. They would have to risk danger from above. Dalenar pulled his horse back, watching the curving line of his forces pass him and begin down the decline. Fortunately, the side of the Rift sloped here, allowing for the army to move down. The natural stone ramp was narrow enough that the column of men bunched up somewhat at the lip, waiting their turn to begin downward, but it was wide enough to be manageable.

Dalenar remained where he was, mounted, his Shardplate's scars hidden by the darkening dusk sky. Hopefully, the sight of him sitting confidently would give the men strength.

Unfortunately, Dalenar had trouble persuading himself to be anything but pessimistic regarding the army's chances. He had worked through every version of the Teth-Kanar battle he could envision, and they all ended with his defeat. His army was too fractured, its men too despondent, and the enemy was just too strong. He kept trying to convince himself that the Almighty would see them to victory, but he wondered. What had Alethkar done to deserve deliverance? Conquer Pralir? Bicker with itself, forcing its soldiers to fight brother against brother? Perhaps Alethkar had already been judged, and the Veden army was a form of divine retribution.

An hour passed as his army moved down the ramp, but Elhokar held off the Vedens long enough—barely. The king's withdrawing forces began to arrive at the ramp just as the last of Dalenar's army was reaching the bottom of the Rift. Dalenar saluted the Shardbearer at the head of Elhokar's troop, then urged his horse down the rift, leaving the king to his fate. If the withdrawal were handled poorly, the Vedens would box Elhokar up against the side of the rift, and his army would be slaughtered.

The bottom of the Rift lay in shadow. Dalenar wanted to call camp for the evening, but he couldn't risk stopping where the Veden forces could attack so easily from above. He gave the order to continue marching, moving his men away from the base of the ramp to make room for Elhokar's forces.

He rode with his men, urging them onward. They seemed so few now—barely ten thousand. He had to work to keep the despair out of his voice as he gave his orders. After he was certain they were on their way, he left Echathen in command and rode back to check on Elhokar's progress.

Even as he approached, he could see that something was wrong. Elhokar's army had reached the bottom of the Rift safely, and there appeared to

be no pursuit from above. At first, Dalenar was confused as to what had prompted his initial feeling of wrongness. He called halt to his honor guard, holding up a hand and staring ahead with a frown.

And then he saw it. The ramp was gone. Or, at least, half of it was. If he missed his guess, the other half would soon follow.

Dalenar cursed, kicking his horse into motion, forcing his honor guard to break into a marching-jog to keep up. He rounded Elhokar's forces, making for the ramp. The king himself, golden armor stained red from the fighting above, stood at the base of the ramp. However, he was not the source of Dalenar's attention.

A group of figures stood on the ramp, their forms barely lit by the evening light. Light flashed before them—crystalline, refracted light. The figures wore black.

"What are you doing here!" Dalenar demanded, throwing himself off of his horse and stalking toward Elhokar.

The king turned. He bore a wound on the bottom of his cheek, probably from a spear-thrust, and his eyes gave Dalenar pause. He hadn't seen the boy since their meeting weeks before, beneath the tent of parlay outside Crossguard. There was something different about Elhokar—the same youthful arrogance remained, but there was a hardness that hadn't been there before.

"I am doing what must be done, uncle," Elhokar said.

"You are using Awakeners in combat!" Dalenar yelled, waving toward the forms above. "Have you no sense of honor or propriety?"

"Have you no love for your men?" Elhokar snapped. "Is your storm-cursed honor more valuable to you than they are? Besides, this *isn't* combat. The fighting ended an hour ago. I'm just making certain our people have half a chance traveling down this deathtrap of a chasm! This ramp is the only way down on this side for miles."

Light flashed from above, a chunk of rock changing from stone to fire, then vanishing. A column of smoke was rising in the dark sky as well—the Awakeners would be using all three destruction Essences. Fire, air, and smoke.

Dalenar shivered. Besides during his *Charan*, he had only seen Awakeners perform their art twice, and both times it had been by accident. A perpetual glow hung before the creatures as they called forth the power of their gems, then released their fury upon the stone rampway. They worked incredibly fast, Remaking thousands of brickweights of stone in a matter of a few minutes.

Dalena turned back to the king. Perhaps the boy was right, but Dalena wasn't in the mood to admit so. Elhokar's frustrating refusal to work with him over the last few weeks had worn down barriers of patience. "You should have consulted me," Dalena said.

"Why?" Elhokar spat back. "I am still king, Uncle, despite your little proclamation back at Crossguard. *I* rule Alethkar, and your armies travel here by *my* choice. Be glad I haven't ordered you executed yet!"

"You may be king in name, boy," Dalena said. "But you have never been king in my heart, nor have you been one in the hearts of your people! They can remember a time when a true man held the throne—the man you might resemble, but the king you will never be. How Nolphonarin birthed such an idiot of a son, I will never know!"

"*Be gone!*" Elhokar shouted, his face red. Smoke formed in his hand as he pointed, his Shardblade coming to life.

Dalena gritted his teeth, then spun and marched toward his horse. As he walked, he couldn't help but notice the faces of those around him. His honor guard and Elhokar's, regular soldiers from the force, and servants carrying supplies had all stopped to watch the exchange. Their eyes were haunted as they watched Dalena mount up and ride away.

chapter 79

JEK 12

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, shook his head to himself. For a people with a supposed ‘warrior tradition,’ the Veden noblemen certainly found a good number of reasons to avoid entering combat personally.

Perhaps it was just his company. Ilhadal Davar, despite all his boisterousness, obviously had very little actual combat experience. A lifetime of sycophantry had not prepared him for the demands of high-level leadership, especially of the martial variety. He was obviously relieved when Ahven made few overt moves to enter the fighting, for it allowed Ilhadal himself to remain back as well.

The Idiot King was probably restrained more by practicality than by fear. His philosophy of leadership demanded that he keep himself from danger—for if he fell or were seriously wounded, the men would have no one to look to for strength. As a result, Ahven stayed near the fighting, but rarely entered himself—and when he did attack, he always struck against demoralized groups of light infantry, making a great show of cutting down the poor men with his Shardblade.

Most of the time, however, Ahven simply rode behind the ranks, presenting the perfect image of an inspiring king at war, giving his men encouragement.

Not that they needed it. Jek scanned the battlefield, which was scattered with relatively few bodies. The Aleth forces had fled again, as expected.

Though Ahven pushed his forces hard to follow, he was having a great deal of trouble cornering the Aleths. His force was not only larger, but he was in hostile, unfamiliar territory. He couldn't afford to be as frantic in his movement as Elhokar's forces.

The Idiot King was obviously annoyed with the continued harrying. Jek moved his horse up beside Ahven's, studying the king's face. The day's battle had been a quick one, barely even worth stopping. The Aleths had disengaged shortly after the fighting began, a move that had cost them a number of losses.

"Why did they do it?" Jek asked after catching the king's attention.

Ahven shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "Dalenaar and Elhokar struggle against one another for leadership of the armies. This smacks of the king's impetuosity, rather than Dalenaar's caution. Elhokar thinks himself a clever man; it's probably some kind of trick or delaying tactic."

Jek nodded, glancing to the side as Ilhadal Davar rode up on a fine stallion—too fine, in fact. An old Shin adage said "Never ride a horse better bred than yourself, lest men wonder if you should be carrying it instead." The House Leader, of course, had seen no combat—not that there had been much time for him to have done so, had he been inclined.

"This is your fault, Vedenel," Ilhadal announced as his horse pulled up.

Ahven raised an eyebrow. Behind him, soldiers picked through the field, ending the lives of any living Aleths and calling for the healers when they found a Veden survivor.

"My fault?" Ahven asked. "I am not the one who ordered the Aleths to retreat again."

"We wouldn't have this problem if you had waited to attack Crossguard," Ilhadal announced, as if he had suddenly become a master of tactics. At least his Shardplate, bronze in color and ornamented with engraved stallions, hid his age-fattened body and drooping muscles.

"Waiting another day would have done nothing, Davar," Ahven said. "If Dalenaar or Elhokar had won decisively before we attacked, we'd only be fighting a smaller force, which would make them even more difficult to follow."

Ilhadal snorted his reply, but he did not argue. Ahven turned northeast, scanning the terrain. Dusk was approaching, however, and it was growing increasingly difficult to make out distant forms in the darkness. Even if it had been light, there probably wouldn't have been much to see—the scouts said that the land sloped downward ahead of them, into a chasm that wasn't quite a lair. The Aleth forces must have found a pathway down. That would leave them vulnerable, however, with the Vedens on the high ground above.

Ahven turned his horse to the south, toward where the men were setting up evening camp. He kicked his horse into a trot, not bothering to bid Ilhadal farewell or order Jek to follow.

“THEY’RE PROBABLY MARCHING THROUGH the night,” Ahven decided. “A desperate move. Their current pace already forces them to abandon the wounded and the weak—by marching all night, they will lose even more men to fatigue. But where are they going? Khardinar would provide safety, but it is a good distance away. Palanor is the best fortified in the area, but it was probably depleted of troops long ago. Teth-Kanar? It has ships, and Elhokar could flee—but how would he have been able to persuade Dalenar to go along with such a plan?”

The king paced slowly in his tent’s main chamber. Ahven obviously didn’t want any interjections from Jek—the few comments Jek had tried to make had been ignored. Balenmar sat on the other side of the room, content in his thoughts. The old advisor didn’t seem concerned about the king’s state of mind—however, he rarely seemed to care very much about Ahven’s mood.

“The seers still see very little,” Ahven continued. “And some of the generals are beginning to wonder if that idiot Ilhadal is right—they think that the Aleths must be leading us along some elaborate trap.”

Jek frowned. The disappearance of the girl Shinri had produced a quite unexpected effect on Ahven. He seemed more unstable, less in-control, than he once had been. Her disappearance seemed like such a small failure, but it obviously meant far more to Ahven. During the last few weeks, the king had become prone to pacing and mumbling, as he did now, trying to vocally work through problems that he had once solved in his head.

“If only they would have their minstrels play! I would know their feelings, perhaps know which of the two truly leads. It’s like they cannot decide themselves, and they take turns making decisions . . .”

A knock came from the entrance post outside—but, of course, Ahven couldn’t hear it. Jek had to get the king’s attention, pointing at the tent flaps as the knock came again.

“Come in,” Ahven ordered, pausing in his walkings.

“My lord,” a guard said, poking his head in the flap. “A messenger has arrived. He says his message is important”

“Show him in,” Ahven said with a wave of his hand.

The messenger entered shortly, then went to one knee before his king.

“My lord,” the messenger said eagerly. “I have just come from the city of Ramvar, on the eastern coast of Alethkar. We have made contact with the

Lakhenran fleet. They say that they are on course, and that there were no problems with their launch.”

Ahven paused, then took a deep breath and nodded. “Good. Go deliver the same message to each of the First Generals in the army, then finally to Ilhadal Davar.”

The messenger nodded, then retreated. As he left, the same guard from before poked his head into the tent again. This time, his face was confused.

“My lord . . .” he said, “I apologize for bothering you again, but it appears that you have . . . a visitor.”

Ahven frowned. “Who?”

The guard parted the flaps, and a red-haired woman strode into the room. She wore a deep brown cloak, tied closed as if to hide her in the night, and held a young boy in her arms. There was something familiar about her features.

“Nanavah?” Ahven said with stupefaction. “What are you doing here?”

“Avy?” the woman asked, looking at him with amazed eyes. “It is you. They said that you . . . I mean . . . blessed be the Almighty!”

Nanavah Kholin. Ahven’s sister, Elhokar’s wife. *This isn’t good*, Jek thought with a foreboding feeling.

“You should not have come here, Nanavah,” Ahven said slowly.

“And why not?” the woman said. “Avy, someone had to come speak with you. Invading Alethkar? We’re your allies! Who convinced you to do this thing?”

Ahven didn’t answer, his face troubled. Across the room, Balenmar leaned forward with interest, and Nanavah finally noticed the old man.

“You!” she said with shock. “What is the meaning of this?” She paused, looking from Balenmar to Ahven, eyes widening slightly.

Balenmar chuckled. “No, child, I’m not the one who ‘convinced’ your brother to attack. He made that decision quite pleasantly on his own. I’m simply here in an advisory capacity.”

“Traitor!” Nanavah said.

Balenmar shrugged. “I wouldn’t be quite so accusatory, my dear. If you were simply coming to plead for your brother to cease his attack, why did you bring your son with you? Could it be that someone feared she was on the losing side, and decided to defect?”

Nanavah covered her embarrassment with the customary skill of a Kanaran noblewoman. She did not, however, deny Balenmar’s accusation. “The army was moving too quickly,” she finally said. “And I was slowing them. I came to plead the bond of kinship, and ask for protection and passage to Vedenar.”

A politically practical move, Jek thought. *Very much a Kanaran noblewoman.*

“Leave us,” Ahven said quietly, waving to the guard.

Nanavah looked up, her political visage melting slightly as she regarded her brother. “Oh, Avy,” she said. “How you’ve changed! It is a miracle, truly.”

She reached out, cradling the sleeping boy in one arm, brushing Ahven’s cheek with the other.

“You always did treat me differently,” Ahven said. “The others were so cruel, but you . . . you sang to me. When I could still hear, if only a little. You would sing, and those are the only songs I can still remember. The only things I can still hear . . .”

Nanavah smiled. “I remember,” she said.

Ahven shook his head. “I killed them, Nanavah.”

She frowned. “Who?”

“Our brothers,” Ahven said with a quiet sigh. “All four of them. I killed them one at a time, when everyone thought me an idiot.”

Nanavah. “No, Avy. You didn’t do that. They died by accidents.”

Ahven shook his head. “The more suspicious elements in court assumed it was Karathach, of course—especially when I let him assume command when I came to the throne. No one suspected me. Poor, dim-witted Ahven, a pawn in the Veden court. A man thought a fool simply because he lost his hearing as a child, and didn’t learn to speak when he should have.”

Nanavah didn’t notice the curling line of smoke around Ahven’s hand.

“You shouldn’t have come,” Ahven repeated. “Do you realize that when I take Alethkar, the old king’s wife and son will be the greatest threat to my throne?”

Nanavah looked too shocked to reply. “But, Avy . . .” she said. “You speak nonsense. Who is telling you these things? Let us speak to them—you don’t have to listen to what they say. You’re king.”

“Yes,” Ahven said. “I am king.” He stared at her for a brief moment, a deep sadness showing in his eyes. “I remember those songs still, Nanavah. Sweet. Beautiful. Like . . . a songbird.”

Ahven looked up, glancing toward Balenmar, then Jek, then at the door. Neither man needed further prompting.

This was one task Ahven would perform with his own hands.

WHEN JEK RETURNED, HE FOUND AHVEN sitting quietly between two bodies. There had been very little screaming—even at the end, the woman hadn’t really understood what was happening. Even sharp political minds often had trouble seeing past familial prejudices.

Ahven looked up at Jek's entry. Jek had expected to see grief, even madness, in Ahven's eyes.

He was not prepared to face calm coolness instead.

Ahven stood. "The Aleth forces are traveling to Teth-Kanar," he said firmly.

Jek looked up from the gruesome corpses of Nanavah and her son. "You're certain?"

Ahven nodded sharply. "I can see it in their movements. Teth-Kanar is the largest city in this region, and will have soldiers and gemstones to lend. Its lord, Intara Teth, is a sot. Like Dalenar, he refused to join with either Elhokar or Jezenrosh—but he also refused Dalenar's call to arms. He would probably just squat in his keep forever and let the kingdom fall around him, content to his parties and his grief, but he won't be able to ignore his countrymen if they arrive in such a state."

Jek frowned at the change in Ahven's demeanor. The king was certain again. In control.

"Clean this up," Ahven said, stepping over the body of his sister without looking down. "Make certain no one discovers what happened here. It wouldn't be good for morale." With that, he left the tent.

Jek stood in the stillness. For the first time, he realized that the chest in the back of the room was open. He approached, and found the cage inside was now empty. The last two birds lay dead at the cage bottom, their necks snapped with a quick, efficient hand.

Ahven had no birds left. Jek looked up, staring after the king, wondering what the move meant.

He killed his sister, the only person I've ever seen him show affection for. Perhaps what Jek had seen in Ahven earlier—the indecisiveness, the emotion—was not madness. Maybe it had simply been humanity.

And it was gone now. Ahven had become the perfect leader he had spoken of—a man free from conscience. He had no room for love, guilt, or sorrow.

He had already destroyed everything that could have produced any of the three.

chapter 80

MERIN 16

MERIN STOOD IN HIS ACCUSTOMED place at the ship's bow, trying to look supervisory as the sailors quickly prepared for the highstorm. There was a practiced anxiety to their motions as they worked, wrapping the sails tight, securing ropes and furniture. The ship itself huddled with a half-tenset others in a sheltered cove, one of the many along this section of the coast. They had spent the better part of the day finding shelter for the fleet—an annoying delay, but a necessary one. Land-side highstorms were bad enough; at sea, they were terrifying. Merin was constantly amazed that the storms—with their furious waves, groaning woods, and terrible winds—didn't leave his fleet decimated.

Yet his sailors were skilled. They worked efficiently, securing his flagship quickly, despite the fact that Merin had insisted on seeing to the rest of the fleet's safety before seeking shelter himself. He hadn't left them much time—the fleet stormkeeper warned that the storm would arrive within the hour. Merin could already see the horizon darkening.

“Do you believe in omens, my lord?” Kalden said from his side.

Merin eyed the tall Shardbearer. During their few weeks of travel, Kalden had begun to open up slightly. He was a steady, emeraldic man—not slow of mind, but someone who had been content with his place as a guard. The more time Merin spent among the nobility, the more he came to realize that there was a division among the aristocrats of Kanar that was as stark as

the difference between citizens and lord. The lesser nobility—men without cities to rule or Shardblades to wield—were lords in title only. Kalden's forefathers, for instance, had been twentieth lords for generations. For him to receive a Shardblade had been nearly as monumentous an event as Merin's own acquisition.

"Omens?" Merin asked. "What kind?"

Kalden nodded to the side, toward the rocky beach. Merin could barely make out something whitish brown lying on the shore. At first he thought it was just a rock, but it was too uniform a circle. Long and flat, it looked like some kind of massive disk, perhaps as wide as a man was tall.

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

"Shanadal," Kalden said. "An ocean creature. They're supposed to be immortal."

Merin paused. "But this one is dead."

Kalden nodded. "It is a very bad sign, my lord. Only a portent of great doom can kill a Shanadal."

Merin studied the corpse—more of a shell, he noticed, and from a distance it seemed that the creature's body sparkled with quartzine encrustings. Noblemen weren't supposed to be superstitious, he had learned—or, at least, Aleth noblemen weren't supposed to be. Many of the things Merin's family and friends had taken as undeniable facts were considered foolish rural mysticisms by Merin's fellow noblemen. Yet what was Renarin's strange power, if not mysticism?

Merin breathed deeply, looking up into the skies. The air rivers flowed with particular turbulence, like they always did before a highstorm. Sometimes, when he closed his eyes and didn't look at the winds, but instead just experienced them, he thought he could . . . feel things. Not emotions, or even sensations, but hints of both. Perhaps he was just fooling himself, trying to project for himself the same abilities Renarin displayed. Yet . . . there was something. A foreboding.

"What do the winds say, my lord?" Kalden asked.

Merin cracked an eye. The rumor that he was a Windrunner had grown quite widespread among the fleet's troops. Though Merin quickly denied that he was the reincarnation of Jezrien'Elin—as some had begun to whisper—honor forbade him from refuting the Windrunner comments. His silence was rightfully taken as acquiescence.

"The winds are pensive," he said slowly. "Something . . . something's coming, Kalden. More than just the storm. Something's going to happen."

"Something bad?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know," Merin confessed, feeling the winds twist around him. "But it's something important."

"There!" Kalden said.

Merin opened his eyes to find Kalden pointing with his Blade toward a small boat scuttling around the edge of their cove. Merin instantly recognized the scout ship, and cursed quietly. "They take a great chance," he said, glancing up at the darkening sky and spinning winds.

"They must have news, my lord!" Kalden said eagerly.

"I'd rather they survive and bring it to me later than risk getting caught in that storm," Merin muttered. However, his worry was obviously unfounded in this case. The scout ship quickly scooted up beside Merin's flagship, pulling in its oars and settling between two larger vessels to shelter itself from the oncoming winds.

The messenger, Merin noticed with discomfort, didn't seek the king's ship first, instead climbing up the ropes to the deck of Merin's flagship.

"Lord Kholin!" the messenger said in accented Aleth, approaching and falling into a one-kneed bow, according to the Lakhenran custom. "I bring news. We've located the rest of your army!"

My army? Merin thought. "You mean Alethkar's forces?" he asked.

The messenger nodded eagerly. "We encountered some Veden scouts. Our captain was able to convince them that the fleet is still beneath Veden control, and got news on troop movements from them. The Aleth King is retreating to the east, and King Ahven follows behind, trying to force Alethkar into battle. If the fleet hurries, it can meet with them as they cross the Point of Chomar!"

"That's only a few day's sail away," Kalden whispered eagerly. "Good news indeed, my lord."

Merin nodded. The kneeling man was still waiting for something. "Good job," Merin admitted, and saw the man swell with pride. "But you took a great risk in bringing this to me now. The news could have waited until after the storm."

"There was no danger, my lord," the man said. "With you in command, none of us need fear the winds. We haven't lost a single ship to the highstorms since the convoy began!"

Great, Merin thought. "Take your message to the king and his councilors," Merin said. "Tell him I recommend making for the Point with all haste."

"Yes, my lord," the messenger said eagerly, bowing his head then backing away.

Kalden was smiling beside him, his ‘omen’ from before obviously forgotten in the excitement. Kalden’s attitude was not unique—Merin sensed a strong anticipation from both the sailors and the troops. They had spent decades as a conquered people; they were ready to strike against the kingdom that had oppressed them.

Merin shook his head. These were the same men who hadn’t been willing to overthrow a few Veden captains just a few weeks before. What was it about a people that they would turn from slaves to revolutionaries at the beck of a foreign leader? They were the same men now—they must have had the same anger, the same desire for freedom before. They hadn’t been willing to release it until Merin arrived.

I am their symbol, Merin thought. The concept made him uncomfortable, especially when the men continued to whisper about Jezrien Elin despite Merin’s angered denunciations. This was one fact about which Merin was firm—he might, indeed, be a Windrunner, though he still found the idea strange—but he was no Herald. The men who followed him would receive no divine supernatural protection. They would die just like other men.

And Merin feared that when they did die, they would do so cursing him as a liar.

“What is it?” Kalden asked.

Merin sighed, breathing in the cool, wet wind. “That wasn’t it, Kalden,” he said, realizing for the first time what was making him so apprehensive. “That wasn’t the event I was anticipating.”

“But what else could it be?”

Merin shook his head. The feeling was still there. The messenger’s arrival had been a coincidence—his news, while important, tangential to whatever Merin had sensed on the winds.

What else could it be? Destruction from the highstorm? A hidden threat?

No, it wasn’t an event so . . . tangible. It was something far smaller, yet far more implicative at the same time. Monumentous but small.

And suddenly Merin realized what it was. Perhaps the winds really did whisper to him, or perhaps unconscious intuition led him to the realization. Either way, he immediately recognized the source of his discomfort.

“Renarin!” he said, looking toward the cabins.

Kalden’s surprised question faded behind as Merin turned and dashed in the direction of the ship’s cabins. He burst into the small hallway, then scrambled toward the last door in the row.

It was locked.

“Renarin!” Merin yelled, throwing his weight against the wood. It didn’t budge.

Merin cried out in anger, throwing his hands forward and summoning the winds. Air howled in the hallway, and his wrist burst into flaming agony—the first since his battle on the Nanah docks.

The winds obeyed his unconscious command, slamming against the sturdy door and ripping it free from its hinges. Splinters exploded into the air, and Merin’s ears popped painfully at the sudden pressure in the hallway. The door burst into the room, tumbling and collapsing against the glyph-covered floor.

Renarin stood at the center of the room, in the direct center of the glyph writings. The same patterns extended from him as in the other rooms. Detailed, arcane, foreboding.

The same hole remained in the center of the patterns. The hole Renarin hadn’t been able to fill, despite three tries filling three separate cabins with his insane scriblings. This time it had fallen at the exact center of the room’s floor, and Renarin stood within it.

Renarin turned toward Merin—expectant, yet determined. He held the onyx chip in his fingers. He met Merin’s eyes.

“Renarin, no!” Merin yelled. The air around him writhed as he jumped toward his friend.

He was too slow.

The air fell. Not quiet, but *still*. Completely motionless, inert and frozen. Renarin gasped sharply, his body and face growing stiff with a sudden jerk, and Merin knew he had done it. The boy had reached toward the onyx, calling to it, no longer just seeing, but influencing—like Merin did when he called the winds.

When Merin commanded the winds, the action brought pain. However, pain wasn’t what Merin saw in his friend’s face at that moment.

It was fear.

Something reflected back in Renarin’s dark eyes. Even as Merin dashed forward, he caught an indefinable image in those eyes. Its vastness washed over Merin, oppressing him like a brilliant light seen through closed eyelids. It was terrible and awesome at the same time. Despite only sensing a shadowed reflection, Merin knew that whatever Renarin saw, it was too massive—too incredible—for one man’s mind to hold. It was everything. It was enormous. And it was terrible.

Merin caught Renarin as his friend fell backward. Merin gripped the

trembling body, watching helplessly as Renarin's eyes quivered in horror, staring into space at something Merin could barely even sense. Renarin's mouth opened slightly, as if to scream, yet the whimper that escaped Renarin's lips was far more terrible than any shout could have been.

And then, Renarin grew stiff, the light of consciousness fading from his eyes.

"No!" Merin screamed, shaking Renarin's suddenly loose body. "Renarin, don't go! I need you!"

Renarin's lips suddenly moved, his eyes burning to life for just a brief moment, locking onto Merin's face.

"I am the answer!" Renarin hissed with a passionate intensity.

And then Renarin's life fled. Like a campfire light stirred by the winds, then doused by the same, the flame that was Renarin slipped away. The eyes grew dull again, and while the boy's body still lived, Merin knew that the mind within was gone. It had been destroyed by the terrible vastness that it had seen but could not comprehend.

Merin lay the limp body—little more than a corpse despite its continued heartbeat—down on the wooden floor, directly in the center of the hole in the glyphpattern. Merin waited through the entire highstorm, ignoring the men that gathered in the hallway, ignoring the howling winds outside, ignoring the bucking ship around him.

The light never returned. Renarin was gone.

chapter 81

DALENAR 9

HOURS AFTER THE RETREAT into the Rift, Dalenar's anger had finally cooled enough for him to admit that his argument with Elhokar had been a terrible mistake.

He sat on a rock, body fatigued from climbing up the other side of the Rift. Now that Elhokar had destroyed the ramp down, it made a great deal of sense to climb up a similar incline on the other side, thereby removing any chances of attack from above. Unfortunately, the nearest ramp up had been several hours away.

That night's march had been the most difficult of the last few weeks. Dalenar had forced his men forward after just two hours of rest, joining Elhokar's force as they marched their way through the sheer valley and finally up another ramp, this one much steeper than the first.

He still wore his Plate. Not only did it look good for the men, but it gave him strength and stamina—both of which he had needed after giving up his horse to help carry the wounded.

Dalenar closed his eyes, sighing in exhaustion. But he didn't want to sleep, not yet. The rock upon which he sat lay a short distance from the edge of the camp, beyond the range of the moanings of the wounded and the evening lanternlight. He'd left both officers and honor guard behind, finding solitary quiet in the night to seek some serenity of thought.

It was slow in coming. His exchange with Elhokar would only fuel

the sense of hopelessness in both camps. It was bad to be seen arguing with one's allies even in the best of times—now, with the armies held together only tenuously, the kingdom on the very edge of being conquered, Dalenar feared his temper would bring a terrible cost.

"It's peaceful here, isn't it?" a voice asked—a familiar voice.

Dalenar looked up. Elhokar was alone, his golden armor scratched and scarred. How tired was Dalenar that he hadn't heard a man in Plate approaching?

The king walked forward, looking up at the sky. In the east, dawn's light was beginning to warm. They had marched all night—no wonder Dalenar felt so fatigued.

"It's not like Prallah at all," Elhokar said. "Not cold or bitter, but temperate and calm, even outside the laits. I spent so long there, I almost forgot what it was like back home."

"It's peaceful now," Dalenar said quietly. "But the storms will come. They always do."

Elhokar nodded, and for the first time, Dalenar could see the exhaustion in the boy's face. The gouge on his face bore no bandage, and his eyes were red from tiredness. All masks dropped, Elhokar seemed to be nothing more than a haggard, worn-out man. He stopped beside Dalenar's rock, then squatted down.

"I should have enjoyed the time before the storm a bit more, I think," Elhokar said. "I was too worried about my preparations."

"To attack Crossguard?" Dalenar asked.

Elhokar nodded. "I knew it was coming. I knew it from the day Jezenrosh left the Pralir campaign to marshal the nobility against me. I know what you think of me, Uncle. I suspect you might be right. But I've tried to do as I must—tried to do what would keep Alethkar safe."

"You shouldn't have attacked, Elhokar," Dalenar said. "There are other ways. And even if Jezenrosh had come against you, the nobility would have stood with you. I would have stood with you."

Elhokar shook his head. "I'm not sure of that," he said. "You don't know what Jezenrosh was telling them, do you?"

Dalenar frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"He came to me with it first, in Pralir," Elhokar said in a worn voice. He seemed a man drained, sucked free of strength, determination, and even hope. "He claimed that the war in Prallah was without merit, that I was leading the men to conquer, not to avenge my father."

"Men make such claims about all wars," Dalenar said.

“No, this was different,” Elhokar said. “You see, Uncle, Jezenrosh claimed that the entire foundation for our war was false. He said he had proof that the Traitor didn’t kill my father.”

Dalনার paused. The morning suddenly seemed a bit colder. “Proof?” he asked. “What proof?”

“A witness,” Elhokar said. “He even produced the man, though I didn’t believe his claims. That’s what we argued about. Jezenrosh’s argument was foundless, of course, but he held to it. When he gathered my enemies against me, this was the lie he told them. Your son believed it. Aredor spat in my face and called me a conqueror, claiming I knew that the Traitor was innocent. I shouldn’t have struck him, but I did, and I was wearing Plate . . .”

Dalনার closed his eyes.

“I couldn’t let those lies continue, Uncle,” Elhokar said, a bit of his usual passion returning. “Jezenrosh would have corrupted the kingdom with his tales. Before long, the Traitor would have become a martyr to them. Pralir would have risen against us, and there would have been chaos.”

“There is chaos now,” Dalনার said quietly, opening his eyes.

Elhokar was still for a moment. “I know,” he finally said. He bowed his head. “Nanavah’s gone.”

Dalনার frowned. “What?”

“Talshekh doesn’t lead that army,” Elhokar said. “I finally got a spy close enough to find out who leads the Veden forces—it’s Ahven Vedenel, Nanavah’s brother. I don’t know who is controlling him; the soldiers in his army evidently believe that his mind has been healed by the Almighty, and that he’s been given a charge to attack Alethkar. A convenient way to get around Bajerden’s forbiddance of conquering.”

“Men always find ways,” Dalনার said.

“Anyway, Nanavah must have decided that she would be safer with her brother than with me. She slipped away as we retreated, and by the time I discovered she was gone, I had already destroyed the ramp. She took my son with her.”

“I’m . . . sorry,” Dalনার said.

Elhokar shook his head. “She might be right. I didn’t want her to go—I . . . needed her strength. This is so hard, Uncle. All of it is so hard. Everywhere I turn, I find another enemy. I can’t do what I need to in order to protect the kingdom, for old rules and traditions confine me. And even when I do find a way to try and defend the throne, I discover I’ve only led the kingdom into an even worse storm.”

The boy stood, turning from Dalenar and facing south. Toward Ral Eram, or toward the army behind? Eventually, Elhokar turned toward him again.

“You know why I’ve come to you.”

Dalenar nodded, forcing himself to his feet. “This cannot go on,” he agreed. “The men need a leader. One leader, not two.”

Smoke curled around Elhokar’s palm, trailing out to form a sword. In the east, dawn broke.

“If it matters, Uncle,” Elhokar said, raising his Blade. “I forgive you for what you have done. You didn’t know about Jezenrosh. I never believed you a traitor, not really.”

Dalenar summoned his own Blade, and looked into Elhokar’s eyes. There was a question therein.

“You killed my son, Elhokar,” Dalenar said regretfully, raising his own weapon. “You will get no forgiveness from me. Your sorrow does not change the fact that you’ve led our kingdom to destruction.”

Elhokar nodded. The change Dalenar had noted before was again evident in the man’s face. He was harder now, stronger. Perhaps he had learned. One thing was certain, he looked more like his father now than he ever had.

Can I do this? Dalenar thought with exhaustion. *Can I kill your son, Nolhonarin?* This was the boy Dalenar had trained to duel, Nolhonarin’s only son. All Dalenar had ever wanted during those years was to serve the brother he loved. What was there left for Dalenar now? Two sons dead, the other likely having joined them. His brothers had both gone to the Almighty as well. His honor would never be the same again, after having made a grab for the throne. What was left of Dalenar that was worth keeping?

Elhokar bowed, then fell into a dueling stance. Dalenar prepared himself. There was one last service he could perform for his beloved brother and king. He could let Nolhonarin’s son live to atone for his mistakes.

At that moment, Dalenar realized something. The thought of sacrificing his life to Elhokar’s Blade didn’t sadden him. He was ready to die—he’d been ready to die for some time now.

Blade met Blade in the peace of morning, and the duel began.



chapter 82

JASNAH 18

GOOD SUNRISES WERE RARE in the summer. Once, during Jasnah's youth, a stormkeeper had explained the reason. In the summer, there weren't enough clouds to reflect the sunlight, and the most vivid colors required their distorting interference. Without clouds, the light simply escaped into the sky, bland and uniform.

Jasnah watched the sunrise anyway. She sat beside the open window-flap of her tent, waiting as the horizon came alight like a ribbon of fire. False dawn rose in the east, heralding the coming of morning like messengers before an army. The sun itself was a majestic king, sending forth its spearmen and archers to brighten the land. There were no brilliant colors, true, but Jasnah was not disappointed. This was not a time for subtle artistry. It was a day that needed power and strength—not reflections or distortions. This day, the sun rose not to provide beauty, but to fulfill its greater duty of illuminating the land.

A hand fell lightly on her shoulder. Jasnah turned, giving Meridas a flat glare. The man knelt in a lord's traditional evening clothes—loose seasilk trousers and a matching, open-fronted shirt.

Meridas bore her stare for a few moments, then obediently withdrew his hand. She had moved into his tent to keep up appearances, but there were two sleeping pallets. She intended to maintain this one last reservation as long as she could.

Meridas smiled as he stood. He knew, as she did, that he would prove the eventual victor in this struggle. Her position of power as his wife was too vital to risk letting him continue long without a heir.

He stretched, then pushed apart the dividing flap and left the sleeping chamber for another section of the pavilion. Jasnah shivered as he left. Being vulnerable before him—wearing only a light sleeping robe, her left hand exposed, her hair loose—unnerved her more than she would admit.

She sighed, then rose to go about her morning preparations. The army's brief stop in Kholinar had provided a host of comforts, not the least of which included two more Awakeners to help provide food and fresh water for the army. Jasnah now had a group of trained lady's maids to attend her—no more masculine-cut clothing and unprimed features would mar her image. Yet as she submitted to their care this morning she couldn't help longing for the days in Riemak when she had taken care of herself. There was a strength in seeing to one's own needs, an independence Jasnah had never known before.

When the maids finished—Jasnah's face expertly painted, her hair combed and braided, her clothing immaculate and colorful—she was ready to be presented to the world.

Not that it mattered any more. The addition of reserve forces from Kholinar had swelled the army's numbers to nearly eight thousand, but Jasnah had very little to do with their management any more. Her marriage to Meridas had elevated him in most people's eyes, signaling a unification of power in the camp. While the people still considered themselves the Herald's Army, Meridas was universally accepted as the unnamed second in command.

Her loss of control was not an enormous problem, however. Jasnah had achieved her goals. Messengers had been sent to Dalenar, warning of the invasion, and the army itself was marching to him. As long as these things happened, Jasnah didn't really care who directed the daily operations of the camp.

By the time she was washed, clothed, and fed, the rest of the army was nearly ready to march. She had forgotten how long things could take when one was attended by proper maids—during the previous part of their march, Jasnah would have overseen the feeding of the men, the disassembling of sub-camps, and the organization of the marching columns. Now she barely had time to finish off her morning meal before the soldiers came to break down Meridas's pavilion and stow it in the supply carts.

Her litter waited outside. Jasnah shuffled over to it—though a week had passed since her return to ‘luxury,’ she had yet to reaccustom herself to the *talla*’s restrictive motion. She waited patiently while the soldiers worked on the pavilion—the same men would become her litter-bearers once they were finished.

As the men worked, she turned toward the main body of the army, watching as its members moved about now-familiar patterns of organization. She felt some measure of pride as she watched them. What had been refugees, wandering mercenaries, and isolated farmers had become an army beneath her tutelage. Though they had no formal uniforms, they marched with increasing cohesion. Kholinar and Aneazer had armed them, and each man carried a weapon of good worth—most even had good armor, scavenged from the dead Veden force at Kholinar. Taln’s training had proven remarkably effective, considering its limited time. The man had an amazing ability to change peasants into soldiers—somewhere in his past, he had done such before.

Thoughts of the would-be Herald prompted her to seek him out with her eyes. He was not difficult to spot. Taln always stood at the center of activity—though she wasn’t certain whether that was because he sought it out, or because he created motion and activity wherever he went. A gathering of soldiers and guards stood around him, giving advice and taking orders. The sight gave her a smile; no effort on Meridas’s part, even marrying Jasnah, had shaken free the people’s reliance upon Taln. Rather the opposite, actually. Even Lord Aneazer’s mercenaries were beginning to accept Taln’s divine authority. He made a powerful symbol, standing broad-chested and self-assured, always calm and friendly, ever competent at his duties. Few sane men could claim such an impressive list of credentials. Jasnah watched him with pride.

Taln made a few more commands, then apparently excused himself from the group. As he began walking, Jasnah realized with a start that he was moving toward her tent.

She quickly composed herself, pretending that she hadn’t been staring in his direction. He had spoken with her little during the past week, as was proper. She was now married—it would not do for the men to think her unfaithful to her union.

Besides. She could see the hurt in his eyes—he had always been easy to read, considering his supposed age. She had rejected him. Perhaps he understood the necessity of her actions—the two of them were

obviously incompatible. However, that knowledge obviously didn't lessen his hurt.

Nor did it hers.

She adopted a look of passive curiosity as he approached. "Lord Talnel," she said respectfully as he paused beside her litter.

"Lady Jasnah," he replied, nodding slightly. "I thought you would wish to know that the scouts have located your brother's army. If the Aleth armies remain where they are, we should reach them by mid-afternoon."

"That close?" Jasnah asked with surprise.

Taln nodded. "They're camped near the Rift of Northal, due east. The scouts mark their numbers at just over twenty thousand."

So few! Jasnah thought with concern. "The Veden army?"

"Camped on the other side of the rift, obviously waiting to move until your brother does." He paused. "The invaders have a force about twice the size of your brother's army."

Jasnah closed her eyes. *Strength. At least they still live.* "Is Lord Dalenar with them?" she asked, opening her eyes, keeping her voice firm.

"Both flags fly," Taln said. "We can assume they're both there."

Jasnah nodded. "Thank you, Lord Herald. I rarely get the scout reports in a timely manner, these days."

"I know," Taln said. He appeared to have nothing more to say, but he did not leave. The silence soon became awkward. Eventually, he turned from her, moving to walk back toward his command group.

"Taln," she said after him, making him pause. "I haven't . . . been with him. Our arrangement is political, not physical."

Taln turned. He stepped closer. "We made our decisions, Jasnah," he said softly. "Even though I didn't realize what I was agreeing to at the time, I hold to it. What you do is for the good of Alethkar, and what I do is for the good of all Roshar. I learned long ago that the love of one cannot be allowed to overrule the love of all. What good would my affection be if it came with the taint of an entire race abandoned?"

Jasnah nodded, keeping back tears. She wished that she could make it work, that she could have everything—the safety of Alethkar, the love of Taln, and the willingness to ignore his madness.

Unfortunately, for the first time in her life, she had finally found something that she couldn't manipulate, contrive, or undo. Taln wouldn't be bent by her, and that made him all the more precious.

"You will always have my heart, Jasnah," he said softly. "However, Roshar

must always have my sword.” He nodded to her with a slight half-bow, then turned and walked back toward the front of the army.

THEY FOUND DALENAR’S ARMY just after midday. Jasnah watched through the side of her litter as they approached, expecting to see relieved enthusiasm from Elhokar’s men. Instead, the men gave only wan, half-hearted cheers. Many of them didn’t even do that much—they simply stood and watching as her troop entered their midst. Their faces were marked with fatigue and depression. They looked as if they didn’t have the will to celebrate, especially since her force was obviously too small to save them outright.

What have these men been through? Jasnah thought with horror as her bearers carried her into the center of camp. The men seemed half-dead, their eyes empty and fatigued.

She knocked for her bearers to put her down, then pushed her drapes open fully. “See if you can locate my brother or Lord Dalenar,” she ordered one of the men.

The lead bearer nodded, moving off. Jasnah sat patiently, waiting for a response. The five hours of marching had done her good, allowing her to reaffirm her internal logic. Everything had grown . . . messy with Taln’s arrival in Alethkar. She couldn’t afford to let herself grow distracted—the kingdom would need her focused if they were to overcome current threats.

Minutes passed before her bearer returned. His face was troubled. “My lady,” he said. “I believe . . . you should come see this.”

SHE FOUND HIM AT THE EDGE of the camp, sitting apart from the tents and main body of troops. A crowd of noblemen and attendants waited a respectful distance away, and she ordered her litter bearers to put her down near Lord Echathen. She probably shouldn’t have been surprised to find the Khardin lord in the camp—he had always been one of Dalenar’s closest friends.

“How long?” she asked Echathen as she disengaged herself from the litter.

“It happened at sunrise,” the man replied. “None of us knew about the duel—they must have arranged it in secret. By the time any of us knew what had happened . . .”

Jasnah nodded, then slowly walked across the cool stones. A figure sat quietly on a boulder, Shardblade stuck into the ground before him. Beside

the blade lay a corpse in golden Shardplate, blood forming a small lake around it.

Dalenar looked up at her with tired eyes. “Jasnah,” he said. “I’ve killed your bother.”

Jasnah steeled herself, and looked into the face of the dead king. Dalenar hadn’t closed her brother’s eyes—they stared up, as if accusatory, from within a pain-frozen face. She found herself feeling an odd sense of closure, mixed with a surprising stab of grief. Elhokar had proven himself to be a horrible man, but he had been her brother. She couldn’t completely divorce the man who had betrayed her from the young boy she had loved. A boy she had protected, it appeared, long after he deserved the attention.

“I trained him in the sword, you know,” Dalenar said quietly, still looking down at Elhokar. “I knew his strengths, and I knew his weaknesses. He was good, as you know, but he was never a clever enough fighter. He insisted upon forms that didn’t suit him. Passion will only get you so far.”

Jasnah looked up at the grief in the aged *Parshen’s* voice. *Not Parshen any longer*, Jasnah realized. *King.*

“I told myself I’d let him win, for the good of Alethkar,” Dalenar continued. “No. Not for Alethkar. For Nolhonorin. I decided that I would die for the love I bore my brother. The army needed one leader. Better Elhokar than me, I reasoned. He’d learned much during these last few weeks. I was certain he would be a better king in the future.”

He turned to her, finally looking away from Elhokar’s dead face. “But, you see, I couldn’t do it. In the end, I remembered Aredor. It turns out I loved my son more than my brother, Jasnah.”

Jasnah reached out, laying a hand on his Plated shoulder. “Dalenar . . .” she said quietly. “There was no other way for this to end. Alethkar didn’t need him—it never did. It does need you, however.”

“You should hate me,” Dalenar replied. It was almost a request.

Jasnah shook her head. “He had me imprisoned, Uncle. He killed my guard, Nelshenden—a man as good and honorable as any I have known. Elhokar did it to keep his secret quiet, a secret my men and I discovered. Jezenrosh never tried to have my brother killed—Elhokar orchestrated the assassination attempt himself. He hired a group of men and had some of them impersonate Jezenrosh’s Shardbearers, all so he would have an excuse to go to war. You are not to be blamed for ridding the kingdom of such a king.”

Dalenar nodded. “I suspected he had done something like that,” he said. “He had been planning the attack on Crossguard for some time—apparently,

Jezenrosh was spreading rumors that the Traitor didn't kill your father, and that the war in Prallah was negotiated on a lie."

Jasnah frowned. "That's foolishness. Balenmar was there when father died—he witnessed the traitor's betrayal."

Dalনার nodded. "I don't think Elhokar believed his cousin, but he did fear the rumors. Feared them deeply. Your brother was not a . . . tolerant man."

"Come back to the camp, Uncle," Jasnah said. "Alethkar still needs you. The army is a mess; the soldiers need to see you strong and confident. You'll need to formally assume the throne—we'll have Brother Lhan give you the Vorin blessing and the ladies prepare an appropriate glyphward. Then we need to get moving. That Veden army isn't going to sit and wait on the other side of that crack forever."

Dalনার sighed, then nodded, rising. Had he looked so old before? His body still bore the firm physique of a warrior, but his face seemed far more aged than she remembered. He hadn't shaven this day, and his stubble was coming in grey.

He straightened as he walked, however. Dalনার was a man who understood duty. Responsibility would not pull him down, no matter how heavily it weighed upon him.

Jasnah paused as they walked back, turning to look one final time at her brother's corpse. It lay in the shadow of the boulder, and the gilding seemed wan without the light to sparkle it. The once-golden metal was scarred and dried with blood.

In her experience, summer sunsets were rarely as spectacular as one expected.

chapter 83

DALENAR 10

THOUGH ELHOKAR WAS GONE, his parting gift to Alethkar was the crack in the ground he had placed between the Aleth forces and their pursuers—and that move translated to a two-day lead on the Vedens. It was amazing how much difference that made. The threat of destruction still loomed behind, of course. However, the mixture of an enemy made unseen and a slackened pace caused a remarkable change in Dalenar's army.

Or perhaps it was the company. Dalenar stood watching the so-called 'Herald' leading his men in daily spear training. The man was an impressive fighter, and an equally capable instructor. There was something about him that commanded attention—he bore a natural charisma of optimistic leadership that Dalenar found himself envying.

A rustling of silk announced Jasnah's arrival. The woman stepped up beside Dalenar, arriving at the appointed time. The day was a warm one, still a little humid from the morning's highstorm, but morale was improving despite the wet weather. Talenel—or Taln, as Jasnah called him—had chosen a relatively flat space near the center of camp to do his training. Hundreds of men clogged the area, split into square sub-groups, each beneath the tutelage of a Taln-approved leader. The Herald himself moved among the groups, giving examples and training.

“He’s good,” Dalenar noted, “but I don’t know that I like entrusting the training of my men to a madman.”

Jasnah smiled faintly. “I know how you feel, Uncle. But I can promise that Taln is trustworthy. His . . . condition has remarkably little effect on his capabilities.”

Dalenar didn’t abandon his frown.

“It would help morale greatly if you would endorse him, Uncle,” Jasnah noted.

“I will not lie to my men, Jasnah.”

“They need something to believe in,” she said. “Dalenar, we face terrible odds, and our men know it. They need to believe that the Almighty favors them, otherwise they’ll think that failure is inevitable.”

Dalenar shifted uncomfortably as Jasnah mentioned the Almighty. Her atheism was not a topic the two of them discussed, but if she was determined not to believe, couldn’t she at least refrain from using the men’s faith as another of her tools?

Dalenar shook his head. “I won’t do it, Jasnah. I will not endorse a false Herald. I will honor the oaths you gave in my name—I will let him train, I will let him preach . . . I will even let you prepare Alethkar if we survive this war. I won’t lie about my beliefs, however.”

Jasnah sighed, turning toward the training. “It doesn’t matter,” she finally said. “They’ll believe even without your endorsement. The rumors are already circulating. You’ve noticed an improvement in your men, haven’t you? They’ve heard of the assault on Ral Eram and Taln’s fight there. They know that he defeated a thousand men on his own, and that he led us to a cache of nine Shardblades in the Holy City. They want to believe, Uncle. I’ve come to realize that hope is far more powerful than despair.”

Dalenar sighed, but made no response—he knew better than to argue with Jasnah when she used that voice. “What is the state of the army?” he asked instead.

“Not good,” she said. “The men are moderately well-equipped, but many of Elhokar’s soldiers discarded their armor sometime during your flight. We’re running low on sapphires, and the Awakeners are feeling pensive. They seem to think that you don’t like them.”

“I don’t,” Dalenar said flatly. “You went and spoke with them?”

“Of course I did,” Jasnah said. “They’re people, Uncle, just like us.”

Hardly like us. Hardly even people, anymore. He let her continue, however.

“Some of your men are malnourished,” she said. “I don’t think they’ve

been eating properly these last few weeks—perhaps they didn’t see the point. Anyway, I’ve ordered the squad captains to maintain strict watch on the men during meal times. Every man is required to eat what is given to him. Awakener-made grain may not be the most appetizing of foods, but it will keep a man healthy.”

Dalener nodded his thanks. Jasnah’s presence in the army made a subtle, yet far-reaching, difference. It wasn’t that Dalener or his aides were incompetent. Jasnah and her attendants just provided something special. Her organizational skills and logical mind made her an ideal military strategist and administrator. When Dalener had offered her control of the daily coordination of the separate armies, she had accepted with as much eagerness as he had ever seen her display. Apparently, she had been regulated to a somewhat perfunctory position in the Herald’s Army; and if there was one thing Jasnah Kholin loathed, it was being ‘perfunctory.’

Ahead, the man Taln paused as a group of soldiers pulled him aside, obviously making some sort of request. Dalener watched half-interested until Taln pulled out his Shardblade and handed it to one of the soldiers. He then took the man’s spear, and waved the soldier to attack him.

“What is that man doing?” Dalener asked with a frown.

“Hmm?” Jasnah asked, looking up from the list in her hands. “Oh, that’s one of the soldiers’ favorite lessons. He’s been teaching them how to defend against a Shardblade.”

As Dalener watched, the soldier stepped forward in a controlled, slow motion, and Taln demonstrated knocking the Shardblade aside by hitting it on the flat of the blade with the haft of his spear. The two repeated this several times for the onlookers, then the soldier backed up and attacked with an unrestrained blow. Taln pushed the Shardblade aside as casually as another man might brush away an offending lock of hair.

No man can be that good, Dalener thought uncomfortably. The display must be staged—Shardblades were too dangerous to risk such a sparring match, even in a controlled environment. Yet the attacker didn’t seem to be holding back, and his motions didn’t seem to follow any particular pattern. The madman knocked aside every strike.

Once the display was finished, the madman jogged over to the side of the practice yard and retrieved a bundle of what appeared to be swords. Dalener watched with increasing trepidation as Taln handed them out to half of the soldiers in the group, then had the others practice knocking the weapons aside as if they were Shardblades.

“He’s giving them swords,” Dalener pointed out.

“Yes,” Jasnah said without looking up from her list. “He does that sometimes.”

“Those men aren’t noblemen,” Dalenar said.

“He’s not letting them carry the weapons, or even use them in combat—he just uses them for practice. You can forbid him, if you want. He’ll do as you ask.”

She was probably right. The madman had been admirably cautious about overstepping his authority. However, the Riemak soldiers weren’t as tactful. They continued to refer to themselves as the Herald’s Army, despite their integration into the Aleth army. They seemed to hold themselves up as some sort of elite force, though they had far less training or experience than Dalenar’s regular troops. He worried about his authority in commanding them; their loyalty seemed to be to the man who had gathered and trained them, not the kingdom that might get them killed.

Though is it any wonder they respect him so? Dalenar thought. *If he can turn Blades with such ease, perhaps some of the other stories are true as well.*

“He certainly is an interesting man,” Dalenar said.

Jasnah smiled slightly, looking up. “Yes. Taln is . . . a unique find.”

“But,” Dalenar cautioned. “We mustn’t rely on him too much. Do not forget that his sanity is suspect.”

“Oh, trust me, Uncle,” Jasnah said quietly. “That is one thing I’m not likely to forget.”

Dalenar frowned, a thought occurring to him. “Perhaps . . . perhaps he isn’t mad at all. Have you wondered whether it all is an act? Claiming to be a Herald—whether or not it makes him look mad—certainly has gained him a lot of authority in this group.”

“His skills and heart gained him the authority,” Jasnah said dismissively. “He believes what he says—I’ve never questioned that.”

Jasnah not suspicious? Dalenar thought, eyeing the woman. That in itself was cause enough to be dubious.

“There is another item of business we must consider, Uncle,” Jasnah said thoughtfully. “Have you decided who to make your *Parshens*?”

Dalenar shook his head. “Echathen will be one,” he said. “As for the second . . . I’m not certain. It almost feels like there isn’t anyone left.” War had killed all of Dalenar’s close male relatives, the men who should have received the title. That left a number of Fourth and Fifth Lords, any of whom would make fine leaders. Yet a *Parshen* was supposed to be more. He was the king’s most trusted advisor and friend, a voice and advocate for the throne at all times.

Hopefully, whoever Dalenar chose would serve him better than Dalenar himself had served his own king.

"I have a request, then, Uncle," Jasnah said. "Please consider letting my husband retain the rank."

Dalenar started. "Meridas?" he asked with surprise. "That man is . . ." he trailed off. Meridas was Jasnah's husband now. Though she had not spoken of the event, Dalenar had gathered the facts from other sources. He had assumed that the marriage happened before she escaped Ral Eram, and had been confused to find out about the Kholinar ceremony. However, as he considered, the move made sense—at least for Jasnah. Her political career had always been her most important passion.

"I don't think I can place a man I don't trust as *Parshen*, Jasnah," Dalenar said bluntly. "Besides, Meridas is a panderer and a fop. A lord must display some measure of competence to serve as *Parshen*."

"I think he may surprise you, Uncle," Jasnah said. "He has me. Meridas isn't quite the man we thought him to be. But that can wait until after Alethkar is safe."

"Let us pray that day comes," Dalenar said quietly.

Jasnah nodded her agreement, frowning slightly.

"What?"

"I just worry about our . . . upcoming accommodations," she said, glancing westward.

"You think we should have turned toward Kholinar instead?" Dalenar asked. It had been an option—five days ago, when King Ahven's army had been trapped across the Rift, the Aleth forces could have broken west instead of east.

Jasnah paused, then shook her head. "No, this is the best way. You took everything of value from Kholinar, and I brought most of what you left. The Herald's Army drained the Aleth villages of potential soldiers as it crossed the distance between the Rift and Kholinar. No, there is nothing left for us in that direction. That doesn't stop me from worrying about Teth-Kanar—or, rather, the man who rules it. I don't particularly care for Intara Teth."

"I've met few men besides wine merchants who do," Dalenar said with a snort. "Though his feasters will claim otherwise."

Jasnah nodded. "Alethkar faces a very serious threat, and I grow nervous every time Intara is involved in something 'serious.'"

"We don't have much choice, now," Dalenar said.

Jasnah nodded, and he knew she was already working on ways to

manipulate Intara into helping defend his kingdom. For once, Dalenar didn't feel in the least bit sorry for the subject of her plans.

After a few moments of silent watching, Dalenar caught sight of a familiar figure making its way through the camp toward him. Palhen wore a standard brown scout's cloak, and he walked with an unhurried step. Of course, that meant little—Palhen was not the type of man to express urgency in his posture or motions.

Dalenar caught Jasnah's attention, then nodded toward the beefy soldier. "My head scout has returned," he said.

Jasnah turned, raising an eyebrow. "I still don't think that man is properly employed, Uncle. How good can he be as a spy—I've seen mountains that were less conspicuous."

"He gets the job done," Dalenar said simply, nodding to Palhen as the man approached and gave a perfunctory bow.

"The Vedens are still gaining on us," Palhen said bluntly. "They're a little over a day behind. Once we reach Teth-Kanar, we won't have much time to prepare before they're on us."

"Did Kemnar return with you?" Jasnah asked, frowning slightly at the man's absence.

Palhen shook his head. "He stayed back—wanted to see if he could catch a glimpse of the old queen or her son."

Dalenar nodded, noting the unmasked disapproval in Palhen's eyes when Kemnar's name was mentioned. Shardbearers were not supposed to be scouts—that duty was reserved for lesser noblemen, men such as Palhen, whose family ties didn't provide enough income to support them. Kemnar was a greater lord now; it wasn't right for him to risk himself by scouting the enemy army. Once this all was over—assuming Alethkar hadn't fallen—Dalenar would have to take Kemnar aside and explain to him the duties that came with the privilege of carrying a Blade.

He dismissed Palhen, who bowed his head and withdrew. The man hadn't spoken the obvious. Teth-Kanar was still several days march away; at their current pace, the Vedens could very well catch up before Dalenar's force reached the city.

The men wouldn't like it, but Dalenar had no choice but to increase the pace again. He couldn't afford a repeat of their earlier flight, with constant harrying and worry—the soldiers were only just beginning to shrug off their depression.

He turned to note as much to Jasnah, and found that she had been distracted by the madman's training again. She stood, watching Taln correct

a young spearman's stance, her face characteristically flat and unreadable. Her eyes, however . . . there was something in them. A hint of emotion slipped past her walls, and Dalenar found himself studying her curiously. It wasn't often that one caught Jasnah off-guard. Dalenar glanced at the madman, then back at Jasnah. It almost seemed like . . .

Dalenar caught himself, then shook his head, chuckling softly to himself. No, he was obviously reading too much into her expression.

It was, after all, Jasnah Kholin he was considering.

chapter 84

TALN 14

TALN LOOKED DOWN AT WHAT was now called the Teth Lait, toward the bay below. It was a short Lait, barely more than a few miles long, and its only real habitable area was here, near the ocean, where the valley expanded to form a natural, secluded bay.

The new city lay almost in the same place as the city of Kanar once had. Looking down upon it, Taln was surprised to realize that he felt nothing.

What did you expect? he thought, shaking his head. Two thousand years had passed since Kanar's fall—or, more accurately, since the Heralds' destruction of the city. Nothing was left of the grand city that had once stood over the bay. After the city's defeat, its very stones had been changed to water by Marnah Awakeners, Kanar's substance sent to mix with the ocean and be forgotten.

"So, this is where we stand," Kemnar said, scanning the valley.

"Teth-Kanar," Brother Lhan agreed. "I've never been here before, if you can believe it. I asked for a transfer a tenseset times over—there's a perfectly nice monastery in the city. No one ever listened to me, though."

"An oversight," Taln said, urging his horse down the slope. He had tried to give up his mount for the carrying of the wounded, but his men would not hear of it. They were the Herald's Army, and their Herald would ride, as was proper. "From what I hear, the city would agree with you."

Lhan sighed, "I know. It's a pity."

Kemnar paused for a moment atop the ridge, then he moved his horse forward, joining Taln and Lhan on their way down. “Where do you think the battle will take place?” he asked.

Taln studied the landscape as they moved, Dalenar’s army piling over the ledge behind them. The valley was wide and squat for a lair, with plenty of flat ground to fit an army or two. “There,” he said, pointing toward an open plain to the south of the city. “If Dalenar puts us there, he will have the city to his back and the ocean to his left. It’s a good, solid position—ideal for a defending army.”

“The river would cut off retreat to the northwest,” Kemnar noted.

“I know,” Taln said. He left the rest unstated. There would be no retreat from this battle. The Veden armies had slaughtered the occupants of Ral Eram, and it was doing the same to any stragglers it passed. King Ahven intended to leave no survivors to rise against him in the future.

The Aleth army continued its march down into the valley. Their force was obviously expected—the army arrayed beside Teth-Kanar’s walls was small, perhaps two thousand in number, but it had obviously been gathered recently, for it was arrayed in tents rather than housed in the city. A small party detached itself from the army below and began moving up the slope.

“Come on,” Taln said to his companions, nudging his horse to the side so that he could join Dalenar and Jasnah at the head of the line.

Lord Intara turned out to be a short man, not overweight as Taln would have assumed from the stories. Instead, he had a blockishly rectangular face with chiseled features, a thin wiry form, and a head of lightly curly hair that was more brown than it was black—not unusual, considering his family’s proximity to Prallah. Intara hadn’t shaved in several days, and his beard was coming in a light red. He smiled broadly as Dalenar and Echathen reined in their horses, halting the column. Jasnah’s bearers turned her litter to the side, and she pushed back her drapes. Taln, Lhan, and Kemnar rode up on one side just as Meridas and Aneazer joined on the other.

“Ah, good,” Lord Intara said. “It took you long enough to get here. You’ll want to hurry and arrange your men so you can be ready for the feast tonight.”

Dalenar frowned. “We don’t have time for your nonsense, Intara.”

“Oh?” Intara asked lightly. “Well, you’d better find some time for my nonsense if you want into my city or to use my troops. I haven’t had a proper feast in some time.”

“The last I heard, Lord Intara,” Jasnah noted calmly from her litter, “you have a feast every evening.”

“Ah, the incalculable Lady Jasnah,” Intara said with a slight bow. “Undoubtedly working on a half-tenset schemes to whip me into line, eh? Well, I shall save you the trouble. You’ll notice that I said I lack ‘proper’ feasts—my nightly parties are always attended by the same dull people. It’s rare that I have guests to entertain. So, come play with me this evening, and I will command my men to play with you on the morrow.” He turned his horse with a flip of his hand and began riding back down the valley slope.

“Intara,” Dalenar called after the man.

The short man paused, turning back with a questioning look.

“To what do we feast?” Dalenar asked.

Intara smiled. “To our deaths, Lord Dalenar. Ours, and that of our kingdom. It will be the finest funeral feast I have ever prepared.” He turned again, leaving an annoyed group behind as he trotted lightly back to his city.

“IT SUPPOSEDLY STARTED AFTER his wife died,” Kemnar explained, climbing off his horse and handing it to a stableboy. “Intara tried to drink himself to death. Unfortunately, he found himself surprisingly resilient to the effects of wanton partying.”

“Resilient?” Taln asked with a raised eyebrow. Around them, the soldiers were setting up camp once again—only this time, there was a finality about their actions. If they won the battle, there was a good chance they would remain camped at Teth-Kanar for a moderate amount of time, recovering from wounds and fatigue. If they lost . . . well, they wouldn’t have to worry about disassembling the camp then either.

“Lord Intara would feast all night and drink himself into a stupor,” Kemnar said. “But the next day he would supposedly suffer amazingly trivial effects from the punishment. He didn’t glut himself to fatness no matter how much he ate, nor did he waste away to nothingness no matter how much he drank. Instead of dying slowly from his indulgences, he just grew healthier and healthier. It’s been going on for ten years now.”

“A feast every night,” Lhan agreed. “Teth-Kanar is a Third City with a strong income, and Lord Intara keeps few Shardbearers or other noble adjuncts to drain his funds. He spends nearly everything he earns on the feasts. A rather inspiring story, in my estimation.”

Taln snorted, then spun and punched at Lhan. The monk jumped quickly in alarm, reflexively dodging and falling into a trained battle stance. Taln smiled, withdrawing his fist. “Eventually you’re going to have to abandon that lazy façade, Lhan,” he noted. “It’s becoming less believable every day.”

Lhan raised an eyebrow, joining Taln and Kemnar in walking through

the half-erected camp. "If you don't think I'm useless, Taln, then you should see me thrust a spear sometime."

"Anyway," Kemnar explained, "Intara hasn't changed much over the years. Jasnah sent me to investigate his court a couple of years back—she was convinced that no one could possibly be as indulgent as Intara's reputation made him out to be, and suspected some kind of political maneuvering in the background of the feasts.

"I worked my way into his staff and watched him for several weeks. Every night was the same—a ridiculously lavish feast, filled with the kind of revelers and sycophants that wanton spending attracts. Intara drank until he passed out at the high table sometime in the early morning, then his servants—he has special men dedicated to the task—carried him to his chambers and put him into bed. He was always up early the next day, and didn't display even minor hints of a hangover."

"And this is the man we have fled to for refuge?" Taln asked.

"From what I understand," Kemnar said, "we didn't have much choice."

"Where did he get the troops?" Taln asked, nodding toward the group of soldiers camped beside the city. "If they are made up of men who frequent Intara's feasts, then I doubt they'll be of much use against Ahven."

"I don't think he keeps a standing army," Kemnar said, studying the tents. "Too expensive. He probably called them up from his tributing lords. But, anyway, Lady Jasnah asked me to report to her once I was settled."

Taln nodded his farewell, and Kemnar dashed off toward the nobleman's section of the camp. Taln and Lhan stood for a moment, uncertain.

"What now?" Lhan asked. "The feast doesn't start for another couple of hours."

"I'm not sure," Taln admitted. "I want to visit the men and give some final encouragement, but that should wait until they have their camp assembled."

Lhan adopted a fond smile. "It's almost like those days back in Ral Eram before the attack—the two of us, standing around without anything to do. I suppose you could go preach to someone, though it wouldn't be half as amusing now as it was then. I doubt anyone would throw you out of camp, no matter what kind of loony things you told them."

Taln snorted, considering his options. "I know what to do," he finally said, choosing a direction. He picked his way through the growing camp, past men erecting tents, organizing supplies, and unpacking armor for the upcoming battle. Most men paused when they saw him, and many bowed—including some who weren't from the Herald's Army. It

was amazing how quickly tales of him had spread through the various sub-camps, exaggerations piling on top of exaggerations as the word was passed. He tried to correct where he could but, as always, the momentum of his reputation was far too vast a thing for one man to hinder.

He led Lhan to a group of decorated litters that lay near the outskirts of the camp. A group of soldiers worked quickly here, erecting a massive black pavilion. Their quiet, hasty movements made a strong contrast to the bustling interaction of the main camp. The soldiers finished tying down the last of the tent ropes even as Taln watched, then began scuttling away, eager to distance themselves from the pavilion and its occupants.

The Awakeners emerged from their litters a few moments later. Taln was disappointed when he noticed Lhan drawing back slightly in fear—not that the reaction was unexpected. The Heralds had helped foster the current sentiment regarding Awakeners, though they hadn't intended it to go so far. As long as the people were skeptical, it would be difficult for another Awakener-dominated empire to arise.

There were nearly three tensets of them—the collected Awakeners from Elhokar, Dalenar, and Jasnah's separate armies. Many were young to their art, and manifested only the most trivial of physical changes—colored fingernails or eyes, tinted skin, or the occasional crystalline manifestation. A few, however, were in the more advanced stages. One man, probably a Shin Pole, had completely translucent skin. Another Awakener was likely aligned toward Kav, for they were beginning to grow a rockbud-like shell, their fingers slowly growing together as their body changed from flesh into wood. Repeatedly touching the Soul Tone of a particular Essence had an effect on one's own Tone, lethargically changing the harmonic within.

"Friends," Taln said, bowing with respect. "I have come to thank you for your efforts on behalf of my men."

"What efforts?" a younger, female Balev Pole asked. "You give us gems to touch; the goods you receive are simply a by-product."

Taln smiled. "So you may claim," he said. "So you've been taught to say; but I know better. You are still men, Awakeners. You can feel that you have been carelessly used, or you can feel that your skills are appreciated. Regardless of whether or not you enjoy the work, it cannot be easy to provide food and water for an army of twenty thousand."

"That much," the translucent agreed, "is true." His voice was soft, like a passing breeze, and his eyes—translucent though they were—bore a deep wisdom. This one had not much time left; he was probably centuries

old. Not old enough, unfortunately, to remember the last Return—no Awakener lasted that long. However, perhaps they had seen or noticed things that more short-lived men might have missed.

“I have a question for you, ancient ones,” Taln said. “You have lived through many kings and wars. During the passing of decades, have you ever felt a . . . weakness to your powers?”

Several of the Awakeners trailed away as he spoke, moving into their tent and toward the gemstones undoubtedly placed within. Awakeners were not known for their patience regarding mortal concerns—that which didn’t interest them often got ignored.

The translucent-skinned man stayed, however, as did the younger Balev Pole—marked by her slick, dark hair and glistening skin. The wood-skinned Awakener—gender indistinguishable beneath the overlapping sections of bark—moved over and settled down within earshot, but said nothing.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand the question,” the translucent said. “What do you mean by a ‘weakening?’”

“The old powers—the Epellion—disappeared centuries ago,” Taln said. “I’m trying to discover what happened to them. I was once an Awakener and a Stoneward, and both abilities seem lost to me now. It appears that mankind can’t use Stonewarding either—but they can Awaken. I want to know if the second power is diminishing to them in any way.”

“You were an Awakener?” the young woman asked, frowning skeptically.

“It is a matter of historical record that all of the Heralds could Awaken,” Taln said. “It doesn’t change our Soul Tones like it does yours. We have . . . a certain resiliency to such things.”

The woman raised an eyebrow, folding her arms and pursing her lips in disapproval. No, Awakeners were hardly inhuman. Save for her skin, this young lady could have been a woman of the court—she was probably some nobleman’s daughter.

“The old powers were mere legends when *I* was a boy, young man,” the translucent finally answered. “I don’t know what you wish to discover from us. I have not grown weaker in Awakening, but rather grown stronger as I practiced. The tones grow more tempting each time I touch them, and it is increasingly difficult to bring my own soul back into harmony at the end. No, there is no weakness here. Whatever ails you, it is an individual problem.”

Taln nodded his thanks, and the remaining Awakeners trailed away—

except for the wood-skinned Awakener, who remained squatting where they were even as Taln left.

IT HAD BEEN TALN'S INTENTION TO SKIP the evening feast altogether. Jasnah or Meridas could satisfy the fool Intara—Taln's place was with his men. However, when he arrived at his pavilion, he found a messenger from the city waiting patiently by the tent door.

"My lord Intara wished me to escort you personally to the feast, Lord Herald," the tall man explained, bowing. "He has reserved a place for you beside him at the lord's table. He is very eager to speak with you."

Taln frowned. "Tell your lord that I am a soldier, not a courtier. I have no place at a feast—if Intara wishes to know about me, he can give my place to the monk, Lhan, and speak with him." Lhan had gone to his own tent to make preparations—the monk wasn't about to miss out on a lavish meal, regardless of the circumstances.

"My lord was very insistent," the messenger said, not stepping away from Taln's doorway. "He implied that if you personally do not attend the feast, then he will consider it a violation of his agreement to let your armies camp here."

Agreement? Taln thought. *All I remember is an ultimatum.*

"Very well," Taln said with a sigh. "Lead the way."

The messenger paused. "Don't you wish to change, my lord?"

Taln looked down. He wore the same rough riding clothing as always, his shoulders hung with the functional, but drab, cloak he had been given in the monastery all those months before. "No, this will do," Taln said. "If Lord Intara wishes to force a soldier to attend his feast, then a soldier he will get."

The messenger sighed, then nodded for Taln to follow. The sky was only beginning to darken in the east—apparently, Lord Intara liked to start his parties early. Taln shook his head critically as the messenger led him through the gates and into the city itself. Teth-Kanar might have been built on the same rocks as the legendary city whose name it shared, but the two had little else in common. Kanar had been a majestic creation, a metropolis in a time when populations were scattered and often nomadic. Teth-Kanar, however, was run-down and poorly maintained. Cromstone grew unrestrained on most of the buildings, and there was a sense of abandonment to many of them. Teth-Kanar was a large city, true, but it was a place of alleys and beggars. The poor clogged nearly every corner, hands outstretched, eyes hollow.

This sort of thing isn't supposed to be able to happen, Taln thought with disgust as they approached the palace at the center of the city. *Bad rulers are not supposed to prosper—the Right of Movement allows his people to seek a better life elsewhere. As his population decreases, so should his rank. This man should not be a Third Lord.*

There were flaws in every system, however, and Teth-Kanar was obviously one of them. Taln was curious to know how Intara maintained such a large population while at the same time proving himself incompetent. Perhaps it was simply location—the Bay of Kanar was one of the finest ports in the area, and had historically been Alethkar's main thoroughfare for international trade. Apparently, even a wasteful fool could keep up his population while in possession of such a fine location.

Taln walked up the palace steps, expecting to find lavish wastefulness inside. Selfish lords tended to enjoy the purchase of extravagant decorations, and would spend money with ridiculous pomposity even while their people starved.

Taln was quite surprised, then, when the entry hallway proved to be rather inconspicuous. In fact, if anything, the palace chambers looked even more unkempt than the city streets. The few tapestries were faded and worn, and the carpets were frayed. Only about a third of the wall-lamps were lit, and many were missing. As he turned down a side hallway, Taln reached out and brushed his fingers against the ridges of a column. They came back tipped with dust.

This isn't a man who cares only about himself, Taln realized. *It's a man who has stopped caring about anything.*

Except feasts, apparently. Taln could already hear the sound of clanking dishes and murmured conversation from ahead. The hallway grew brighter until it burst into a massive dining room, lit by enormous hearths at each corner. There was a primitive, unrefined feel to the chamber. The haphazard arrangement of tables, mixed with ruddy hearthlight and ununiformed servants, made for quite a contrast from the other contemporary feasts Taln had seen. Even Elhokar's dueling competition had felt far more formal—everyone there had been restrained, sitting in their appointed places or standing in pre-arranged viewing sections. Like most of what Taln had seen of Aleth culture, the competition had been designed to minimize chaos and maximize occasions for political fraternizing.

Not so here. Intara's feast felt more like something Taln would have seen two thousand years before, when visiting the uncivilized people in what would eventually become Riemak. Large platters of food were distributed

with very little variation between masculine and feminine dishes, and the room was stuffed with performers and minstrels.

The messenger led Taln to a table near the front of the room where, as promised, Intara sat with an open seat beside him. Lord Dalenar sat near the other end of the table, watching the evening's proceedings with obvious disapproval. Jasnah was correct—the new Aleth king was a good man. A little too conscious of formality for Taln's taste, but in this case they shared a sentiment. The feast was a waste of time.

"Ah, Lord Herald," Intara said, standing as Taln approached. "I am honored that you chose to attend."

Taln raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't given a choice."

"Ah, perhaps," Intara said, gesturing toward Taln's seat. "But it isn't nice to point such things out. Please, seat yourself."

Taln paused, then sighed, sitting.

Intara smiled broadly, returning to his own seat. "I couldn't let you stay in camp, Lord Herald," the man explained. "You see, I mostly threw this particular feast for your benefit—or, at least, to get you here."

"And why is that?" Taln asked.

"Well, it isn't often that a man gets to meet a Herald," the short man said. He still hadn't shaved, and his clothing—upon closer examination—looked about as worn as some of the tapestries. "I heard that you were accompanying the army here, of course—even one such as I cannot ignore an army of twenty thousand men marching upon his city. When I heard who you were, I realized what an opportunity I had. You see, I have been without a spiritual advisor for some time, as the local monks refuse to attend my feasts any more. I never imagined that I would have the opportunity to speak with an actual Herald."

Taln sat quietly, trying to sort through the man's eager words. Intara actually seemed . . . excited. There was no irony or mockery in his words.

Taln blinked in surprise. "You believe my claims that I am a Herald?"

Intara didn't even pause. "Well, of course," he said. "I mean, it's been some time since we had a Return—nine hundred and eighty years! I've been expecting that you would come sooner or later. I haven't studied much in recent years, ever since my . . . problems began, but I used to be very fond of history. Tell me, where are the others? Your brethren and sister?"

Taln sat, dumbfounded. Months of fighting against disbelief had conditioned him so that he wasn't certain how to respond to someone who was actually willing to believe.

But, of all the people I've met this Return, why did it have to be him?

"I don't know what happened to them," Taln said, still a bit uncertain whether Intara was honest or not. "I located their Shardblades, all buried at the Holy City. They must have returned, as I have, but is very strange this time. Their Blades should have disappeared when they died a thousand years ago—I don't know, however, since I died before anyone else."

"Ah," Intara said. "That's right—the Battle of Veletal, only three months into the Return. You were killed when the Stormshades surrounded and overran the keep."

"That's right," Taln said.

"Odd how they singled that keep out for attack," Intara said. "I always found the move to be strange—it wasn't really a strategic point in the battle, and moving to Veletal in such numbers cost them some serious losses elsewhere."

I can't believe I'm having this conversation, Taln thought. The background noise of minstrels and balladesses faded. Jasnah had come to care for him, and Kemnar obviously respected his ability to fight, but neither actually believed he was sane.

"The Stormshades are coming, then?" Intara asked.

Taln nodded. "In a little over half a year," he said. "And mankind isn't ready."

"We never are," Intara said. "But, if that is the case, what are you doing here? Why fight for Alethkar? Don't you have better things you should be doing?"

Taln glanced unconsciously toward Jasnah. She was back in her element, the regal noblewoman, perfectly in control, flawlessly beautiful. "I have certain . . . obligations," he said, turning back to Intara. "Besides, I have had some trouble gaining momentum this Return. Alethkar's leaders have promised to support my preparations if I lend them aid in this battle."

"But," Intara said, frowning. "The Aleth army is doomed. Even I can see that—the men are exhausted, a lot of them wounded, and Vedenar has a far larger force."

"I have fought for causes far more hopeless," Taln said. *Like every time I support mankind against the Khothen.* "What comes will come. Is this why you wished to speak with me? To ask about the upcoming battle?"

Intara blushed. "Well, no," he admitted. "I have something of a more personal question, and I thought you might be able to answer. I was just wondering—why hasn't the Almighty killed me?"

Taln paused. "Excuse me?"

"I've tried to be a poor leader," Intara said. "Though it wasn't intentional

at first—I really wasn't all that rational after my wife died. I thought the feasts would dull the pain, so I became a drunkard and an idler.

“Months had passed before I realized I really wasn't suffering much from my excesses. In fact, I felt healthier than I ever had—and that was wrong. You see, I wanted to suffer. I *needed* to suffer. But He wouldn't let me. So, I decided to see how far I could go before He struck me down. I made the parties more and more lavish. I drank myself stupid every evening. I ignored the duties of my station. In fact, I started using *The Way of Kings* as a guide book—taking all the things Bajerden taught, and trying to do the reverse.

“Only, it didn't work. My parties created a booming industry, and attracted merchants from across Roshar. My feasts were piled with food far beyond what my attendees could eat, and so the extra was distributed to the needy the next morning—and as soon as word of that got out, fleets of the poor began coming to my city, increasing my numbers even further. Rather than destroying Teth-Kanar, I raised it up from a Fourth City to a Third!”

Intara sat back, shaking his head. “And, through it all, I couldn't make my body waste away. Alcohol barely seems to affect me anymore, and I always have energy, no matter how much I eat or starve. I can't seem to get fat—though I've tried, trust me. I've attracted every useless, idle, fool of a nobleman in the nation—and not a single one has had the decency to have me assassinated so he can take my place.” The short man sighed, waving his hand toward the feasting people. “I mean, look at this. It's ridiculous! You are a Herald of the Almighty—you have spoken with Him. You know Him. What does a man have to do before he gets a little divine judgement?”

Taln frowned, studying the nobleman. “What happened?” he asked quietly.

“What happened when? With my parties? You can see for yourself—I keep making them bigger, but it doesn't seem to make a difference.”

“No,” Taln corrected. “What happened to make you this way?”

Intara paused. “My wife died,” he finally said.

“Many men have lost those they love,” Taln said. “They don't react like this. What really happened?”

Intara looked away. He didn't respond at first. “I don't see what that matters,” he finally said.

“It does,” Taln replied.

Intara reached out, fiddling idly with a knife on the tabletop, spinning it around on one of the rivets that held the wood to the steel. “What

happened?” he asked. “She loved me, that’s what happened. She loved me too much, far more than I deserved. I never bothered with her, you see. Those were the days of the old king—good, just Nolhonarin, a man who demanded much of himself and twice that from his lords. I traveled everywhere, visiting his court, bringing his wisdom to my vassals. I was a young man then, eager to prove I wasn’t just the quiet scholar everyone whispered me to be.

“And still she loved me. I saw her perhaps one day out of ten, and she did not hate me for it, but admired my dedication to my people.” He paused, looking at Taln. “I’ve often wondered something, Lord Herald. Is it possible for a man to so fill his life with important things that he doesn’t have time enough left for the ones that are vital?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Taln answered honestly. Something about the man’s words, however, left him feeling strangely guilty. Had he not spent his life—all three thousand years of it—serving those things that were vital? Was not the survival of mankind vital?

“I ignored that which I should have loved most of all, Lord Herald,” Intara said. “I even took a mistress in Ral Eram—not because I loved her, but because she excited me, and it made me feel politically powerful. I don’t know if my wife knew about the mistress, but I think she did. Either way, she loved me despite it. She loved me right up until . . .” he trailed off, looking away again.

“I wasn’t there when it happened,” he said. “But my steward related her final words. Do you know what they were? Do you know what she had the gall to tell me? She said ‘Tell my lord that I love him. And that I forgive him.’”

He fell silent. “And, well, that brings us here,” Intara finally said, feigning nonchalance. “The monks teach that when good men die, they go to the Dwelling to be with those they love. Well, if that’s so, then I have to make certain I don’t go there. I couldn’t face her, not knowing the kind of man I was. I won’t have it, Lord Herald. Now, you tell me. What must I do to ensure that I am punished as I deserve? What further steps must I take? Must I stop giving food to the poor? I haven’t been able to force myself to do that as of yet—why make them suffer just so that I can die? But if you say it is necessary, I shall do it. The sooner I am gone, the sooner they shall have a finer man to be their lord anyway.”

Taln folded his hands on the tabletop. Theology wasn’t exactly his specialty—better that Ishar had been here to speak with the poor, confused

lord. Unfortunately, Ishar wasn't to be found—neither were Balear or Prael. Only Taln.

"I don't think the Almighty works like you're assuming He does," Taln said as a tall, red-haired serving man refilled Intara's goblet. "If you were Him, what would you do?"

"About a lord with my excesses?" Intara asked, nodding his thanks to the serving man. "I'd strike him down immediately. Make him die of some wasting sickness, caused by too much drinking."

"And what would that accomplish?" Taln asked. "I don't know, Intara. I've always been more of a soldier than a philosopher, but even I can see that the Almighty isn't likely to respond when men make selfish demands of Him."

"Asking Him to kill me is selfish?" Intara asked.

"Of course it is," Taln said. "Especially if He has something else He wants you to do. You complain that you ignored your wife, focusing only on yourself. Well, I don't see you doing much better now."

Intara sat thoughtfully. "So what should I be doing instead?"

Taln groped for answers. *Say something wise—this is the only lord you've met who actually believes in you.*

"I don't know," Taln said. "You seem like you have a great understanding of history—you said yourself that men thought you a scholar. What happened to that curiosity? A man with a firm knowledge of the past could be a great help in the dangerous times to come."

Intara cocked his head. Then he waved over a courier beside the wall and whispered a short message. The courier walked down the table and related the message to a younger man sitting near Lord Dalenar. Taln didn't recognize the man—he wasn't a member of their army. Probably one of Intara's regular feasters.

The young man stood and walked the length of the table, pausing beside Intara, frowning in confusion.

"Lord Herald, this is my nephew, Netis," Intara said. "He's a fine boy—my heir, since I have no sons of my own. Netis, the Lord Herald just told me to go to Thalenah and become a stormkeeper. I leave this evening. You are now Lord of Teth-Kanar."

The boy started. "Now?" he asked incredulously. "You make me wait five years, then you give me the city the night before we're about to be destroyed by the Vedens?"

"Oh, don't whine so," Intara said, standing. "The Lord Herald says you

might actually win—though if you do, I'll have wasted a good funeral feast. Anyway, I guess I'll be going."

"Now?" Taln asked.

"Why not?" Intara asked.

"It might be bad for morale to have the lord of the city flee the night before battle," Taln pointed out.

Intara paused. "Oh," he said. "I didn't think about that—I'm not much of a warrior, if you didn't notice. Very well, then. Netis, I'll abdicate tomorrow, after the battle. Go sit back down, and don't tell anyone of this."

The young man rolled his eyes—apparently, he was accustomed to dealing with Intara's ways.

Taln sighed as the lord sat back down. *Might as well eat*, he thought, turning, finally, to the lavish meal Intara had prepared. As he did so, he noticed a newcomer walk into the room. He had the clothing of a merchant, but he walked with the fluid step of a warrior. Of course, that wasn't rare for a man of his race.

Strange, Taln thought, heaping some glazed pork onto his plate. *I wonder what a Shin man is doing in town.*

chapter 85

JEK 13

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, stood from his table. The mission was a failure. Ahven's spies in the city had informed the king of the upcoming feast, and he had sent Jek to spy on Dalenar and Jasnah. Jek was supposed to have gathered what information he could, particularly about their battle plans, by placing himself close to the lord's table and eavesdropping on the conversations.

Obviously, Ahven hadn't understood what kind of feast it was to be. Jek could barely hear men at his own table, let alone those at the lord's table. In order to overhear what Lord Dalenar or Lady Jasnah were saying, Jek would practically have had to stand behind their chairs. His internal sense of scope, the thing that kept him from taking outrageous risks lest he get himself killed and fail in his service, whispered that even coming to this feast had been a foolhardy act. His connection to Ahven was well-known in the Veden camps. If his description reached the Aleth and someone made a connection . . .

But he could only do as his master commanded. He had come. However, there would be no report—he had heard nothing of particular interest. Lord Dalenar didn't even want to be at the feast; it was unlikely he would discuss any of his battle plans with the infamously negligent Lord Intara.

Jek made his way toward the room's exit. Ahven would not be pleased. The Veden king had asked Jek to take special notice of the songs the various

lords requested of the feast's balladesses—however, there were no ballads being sung. Or, rather, there were tensets of them being sung—all by separate minstrels or performers who stood beside individual tables. Jek couldn't distinguish one song from the next—he would be able to provide no new clues of personality for Ahven to pick apart and analyze.

Jek paused by the door, giving the feast hall one final glance before retreating. And at that moment, he saw something that nearly made his heart stop.

Standing at the lord's table, wearing servant's clothing and pouring wine for the important men of Alethkar, stood Ahven Vedenel.

Jek stood frozen by the door, watching the king with stunned eyes. No one in the room was paying Ahven any attention, except to demand more wine. And Ahven did as requested, moving with the alacrity of a trained servant, keeping his head down and his posture slumped—though he did keep his eyes up, watching lips as he moved.

It's a good thing the room is so noisy, Jek thought. *He'll have an excuse as to why he didn't hear those who call for wine.*

It was ridiculous; it was foolhardy; it was insane. But there he was, moving to Lord Dalenar's side and refilling the Aleth king's own goblet. And yet, as Jek watched, he realized that it would have taken quite a fluke for someone who didn't know Ahven personally to connect this subservient wine-pourer with the Idiot King of Vedenar. Ahven did an admirable job of disguising himself, both in appearance and in posture. And, this close to Prallah—with its less-uniform breeding stock—a man with red hair was not so unusual as one would be in central Alethkar.

He spent thirty years passing himself off as an idiot, Jek thought. *He knows a few things about disguise.* The king's idiot façade then had been flawless enough to fool even Jek, who had training from the finest Shin masters.

Even still, coming to Teth-Kanar was a foolish move. Ahven's army was still a couple hour's march from the city—if the king happened to be recognized, or somehow got into trouble . . .

Ahven looked up as he poured, noticing Jek, and nodded toward the doorway with a covert gesture. Jek stepped outside and sought a shadowed alcove. Ahven joined him a few minutes later.

Jek stood for a moment, uncertain how to begin. Ahven, however, was at no loss for words.

"She's here," the king said with intensity. "I had to be certain."

"Who?" Jek asked.

"Jasnah Kholin," Ahven said with a soft, concerned voice.

Jek frowned, and he had to catch the king's attention again before speaking. "What is it about that woman that frightens you so?" he said. "You've been unnaturally fixated upon her ever since this campaign began."

Ahven paused. "The seers told me that either I would destroy her or she would destroy me," he said, glancing toward the feast chamber. "She worried me even before that, assassin. The woman is crafty. Without her, there would be no Alethkar as we know it today—she was the force behind her father's throne, the true reason for his victories. She was the only thing that kept that fool Elhokar from making a disaster of his Pralir campaign. Dalenar I can face. The man Meridas I can defeat. Jasnah Kholin . . . she troubles me."

"Troubles you enough to get yourself captured?" Jek asked pointedly. "Why did you come to Teth-Kanar? You sent me to be your eyes."

Ahven shook his head. "You cannot see as I can, assassin. You cannot . . . hear, as I hear."

"There is nothing to hear," Jek said. "No ballads were played this evening."

"Ah, but that is not true," Ahven corrected. "There are minstrels aplenty, each one seeking recognition from a lord or lady to further their career. Those with courage approach the lord's table and ask if they may play a song—Dalenar himself has been forced to request two this evening."

Jek frowned. *Ahven has been here that long? Why didn't I notice him before?*

"But songs aren't the only way," Ahven continued. "No, they are just one sign. Watch a man—watch how he reacts, what decisions he makes, and you will know him. What does he think of this feast? Does he find it too loud, or does he enjoy himself? How does he deal with the battle on the morrow, and the knowledge that he is outnumbered? That will affect how he leads his men. These are the things I must know, for tomorrow will be vital. I will face Jasnah Kholin—and, regardless of the armies and Shardbearers, she and I will be the ones who battle."

Jek's frown deepened. Ahven had an over-inflated view of one person's place in events—perhaps it was because he thought himself so influential. The king made it sound as if none of the other warriors had anything to do with victory and loss. If that were the case, then what was the purpose of having a larger army than one's foe?

"I must return," Ahven said, holding up the wine pitcher again. "I am playing the role of a simpleton from Riemak, taken in by Dalenar's army as a refugee. There are so many strangers in the city that the palace cooks were willing to accept my story—they are short-handed. Intara throws many feasts, but this one is extravagant even for him."

Jek paused. His oaths prompted him to speak. “I suggest that you let me go back, and you return to camp. This is too dangerous.”

Ahven shook his head. “No. I *must* send some of the minstrels to Lady Jasnah. I have to watch her, read her lips, study her. Something is different about the woman. She has changed since I last studied her. If I don’t understand what happened to her, I will lose the battle. Of this I am certain.”

He didn’t wait for further argument. Jek sighed, waiting a few moments, then returned to the feast chamber. He took his previous seat—a place at a table of medium-ranked lords. Aleths weren’t certain how to treat Shins—the Kanaran system of nobility was so stratified that it made them uncomfortable to deal with those who had no quantifiable rank. So most of them just considered all Shin to be somewhere above citizens but beneath lords. Posing as a very wealthy merchant, Jek could safely place himself with the lesser nobility without drawing too much attention.

He watched uncomfortably from the corner of his eye as Ahven continued his act. The king hovered between Jasnah and Dalenar’s tables, his eyes darting from side to side—and Jek realized that in this environment, Ahven was the perfect spy. Within the cacophony, men would likely feel at ease speaking their minds, confident that no one would hear. But, as Ahven had said, others did not ‘hear’ as he did. He could read their lips from a goodly distance away, piecing together conversations far too quiet for another man to overhear.

As Jek watched, minstrels did indeed approach Lady Jasnah—and some even stayed to perform, though how they expected to distinguish themselves among the sounds of other players, Jek did not know.

Only once did Jek consider betraying Ahven. It was a shameful thought, but it was born of a seed Ahven himself had planted. The war could be stopped with a single, covert meeting. If he went to King Dalenar and told of what he knew, Ahven would be captured, punished, his armies sent home . . .

But no. Jek’s fallen honor—the memory of promises he had made before his Truth was taken—was all he had. The Holetental knew best, and they had commanded him to this action.

To atone, and to sin.

It was a long, uncomfortable evening. Eventually, Dalenar and Jasnah both retired, off to their camp to prepare for the next day’s battle. Ahven disappeared into the kitchens a few moments later.

Jek found the king again on the outskirts of town. The gates were still

open—with so many men passing from the city to military camps outside, it would have been impractical to close the city. The two men walked quietly until they were well outside of the city, and had retrieved their separate horses.

“Did you find what you needed?” Jek finally asked.

Ahven frowned. “I’m not sure,” he said. “You will know tomorrow evening—by then, either Jasnah or I will be dead.”

chapter 86

FINALE

IT WAS A HOT, MUGGY MORNING, despite the seaborne breeze. Taln stood on the battle line, waiting in the heat as the Veden army assembled atop the lait ridge.

The men around him shuffled anxiously. Not an honor guard—in Taln’s experience, an honor guard was just something to get in the way, something to keep a lord out of danger.

He did not intend to stay out of danger.

The lives of too many men would depend on this battle—men he had trained, men who trusted him. It was a dangerous position for him to be in, helping one kingdom above another. Heralds were not supposed to fight men’s wars for them, nor were they supposed to favor one faction over another.

Yet working with them—training them from disorganized scavengers into a cohesive army—had caused an affection to grow within Taln. How could it not? The men who stood by him, therefore, were no honor guard, but comrades. They carried spears, not swords, and they wore no expensive armor. Taln chose to fight beside the spearmen he had trained, and this time Jasnah could not complain. At Kholinar, he had been too valuable to risk, but in this battle they were all at risk.

The heat did not abate, and his men began to grumble. “Steady,” Taln cautioned, glancing toward the ridge and the army that sat on its lip. The

Veden army had not pushed their march hard—they would have been foolish to do so. No, they were rested and prepared.

But so were his men. Though Taln was loath to admit it, the previous evening had done his men good. Intara had sent them food and drink—though not much of the latter. After so much marching and fleeing, an evening of relaxation had helped their overall strength. Perhaps they had been able to forget, for a moment, the danger that was coming.

The danger that had arrived. The Veden warriors lined up in great formations atop the ridge, ready to march down the slope. Lady Jasnah had arranged the Aleth forces as Taln had projected, placing their backs to the city. The Vedens would march down from the southwest, exposing themselves to bowshot from the city walls. The Aleth armies would keep Veden Awakeners from getting to and destroying the walls themselves. There was no room to back away, however. If the Vedens overran them, the Aleth forces would be crushed against the city.

The men continued to shift. They had only seen true battle once, at Kholinar. This fight would be different—in fact, it was opposite. The Veden forces held the high ground, and would come crashing down upon the smaller Aleth armies. Hopefully, none of his men saw the connection—that this was almost exactly the same strategy they had used against their enemies at Kholinar.

The men were nervous, but Taln expected that. He had stood with many a nervous, untested line during his extended lifetime. He had been a Herald for so long that he had forgotten what it was like to fear death. How nice it would be, that fear of the unknown. True, it was uncomfortable, but at least it contained a measure of hope.

Taln was left with something far worse. He knew exactly what awaited him when he died: madness, torture, and pain. He had to struggle not to think of it, lest the fires return.

They threatened anyway. It had been a while since he had felt their creeping touch. They had stayed away almost all that time with Jasnah, but now she was lost to him.

Is it possible for a man to so fill his life with important things that he doesn't have time enough left for the ones that are vital? He had said he didn't know, but that was a lie. He knew the answer, even if he didn't want to admit it.

The sky turned red. The heat of the day suddenly seemed weak compared to the fires in his mind.

No! Taln thought. *Not now! I will not fail these men!* He forced the fires away, quenching them with determination.

A figure moved up beside him, though Taln was so distracted by the conflict within that he barely noticed its arrival. He breathed deeply, controlling himself, before finally looking to the side.

Kemnar smiled, glistening in his Shardplate.

“Shouldn’t you be with the lords?” Taln asked.

Kemnar shook his head. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned, my friend, it’s this: when there’s a battle, I want to be as close to you as humanly possible.”

Taln smiled, and somehow Kemnar’s friendly face gave him the final boost he needed to push away the fires. Kemnar was a link to Jasnah.

Kemnar tensed suddenly, and the men around Taln grew still. Taln turned in time to see the Veden forces begin piling over the ridge in neat formations.

The battle had begun.

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, rode beside his master and lord, King Ahven of Vedenar. The king trailed the last columns of men down the side of the lait wall, moving to join the mobile command center that the Veden officers immediately organized at the back of the lines.

The sounds of battle had already begun by the time Ahven dismounted and joined the generals.

“Why don’t we stay up there?” Ilhadal Davar asked anxiously, nodding toward the lait ridge. The Davar First Prince obviously didn’t enjoy being so close to the actual fighting.

“Because,” Ahven said simply, “we would be too far from the battle itself.”

“And if they break through to attack?” Ilhadal asked.

Ahven looked up, glancing at his generals, who smiled with amusement. “Let us hope they do,” Ahven said, looking down as several aides erected a table and battle map. “How many Shardbearers do you count in the immediate area, Ilhadal? You, myself, Generals Tenata, Jenazen, Lhanmar, Dentara . . . I worry for any soldiers foolish enough to wander this direction. Of course, if you wish, you may wait atop the ridge with the scribes and the servants.”

Ilhadal flushed.

“General Tenata,” Ahven said, looking up from the map. “Your battle arrangement is stunning. I commend you.”

“Thank you, your majesty,” the man said with a modest nod.

“If you would indulge me, I do have one request,” Ahven continued.

“Of course, your majesty.”

“Send scouts along the battle lines,” Ahven requested. “Discover the sub-

commanders and Shardbearers who lead each section of Aleth resistance. As you know, I have been granted some measure of political understanding from the Almighty. I might be able to lend you some insight into how our enemies will resist.”

“I will make the order immediately, your majesty,” the general said.

Ahven stood up straight, looking across the field of battle. “Her touch is here, assassin,” he said, quiet enough that only Jek could hear. “She controls this fight, as expected. It is so similar to tactics she has used before, but something is different, and I still can’t place it. The songs she requested last night seemed random—‘The Song of a Hundred Lovers,’ ‘The Blessing of Minalah,’ ‘Windborn Fate’ . . . Something has changed.”

Jek did not answer, and Ahven just shook his head, looking down at the table again.

TALN FOUGHT.

He truly fought. Not as he had before—no short, quick battles, executed with restraint and poise. No, this time he fought as a warrior. As a Herald.

He attacked with some of the skill he normally reserved for the Stormshades. Against men, such power seemed egregious. Taln was as a storm blowing across scraps of paper. Soon after he began, Kemnar and the spearmen moved back, giving him room to fight. Where Taln struck, lines buckled, squads exploded, and men died. He had to continue moving, otherwise the corpses around him grew too thick to allow other foes to approach.

And as he fought, the fires began to mount. They were far, at first, but they crept forward—hungering for his sanity. In the distance, far away, he could hear the screams—the terrible inhuman yells that accompanied the dark thing that came with the fires.

The dark thing that came for him.

This shouldn’t be! Taln thought as he fought, shearing through three men at once, spraying their blood across the line of men behind. A Shardbearer stepped up to stop him, but the man was little more than a bump in Taln’s path. The Shardbearer fell like the others, killed by swordstrokes that came faster than the man could register.

Why do the fires come for me? Taln thought with frustration. *I’m not failing. I am strong!*

But he knew he had failed. He was serving one side, true, but he was destroying another. Every life he took was a man who would not stand with humankind against the Khothen. When the armies of human-

kind were overrun, how would Taln be able to justify those men he had killed?

There was a deeper failure beyond that. He said he was determined to serve mankind—but how could serve mankind if he himself were not stable? He had found someone who drove the fires back, someone who brought peace to a soul that had been darkened by far too many years. If he had dedicated himself to her, and accepted the sanity she offered, would not that have been better for mankind?

He thought to sacrifice his own love for the good of Roshar. It wasn't until after he had done so that he realized his love of Jasnah and his love of Roshar were not opposing needs, but one and the same.

“YOU'RE SHELTERING HIM.”

Jasnah looked up with surprise. Their command center lay in one of the corner towers of the city wall. From the tower's vantage, they could watch the battlefield with ease. An open, square room, it was designed for archer placements—but had easily been converted to hold a large map table.

“Here,” Dalenar said, pointing toward the map and indicating a section of the eastern flank. The section where Taln fought. “I realize that he is important to your plans, Jasnah, but there's no reason to protect the Herald now. He has helped the morale of the troops, but you cannot waste resources protecting him. Besides, from all reports, he's almost an army unto himself. I don't think you need to worry.”

“Of course,” Jasnah said quickly, covering her flush. Dalenar was right—she was dedicating too many resources to Taln's side of the battle. She made a few commands, fixing the problem.

Dalenar nodded. “I'm going to that hill near the docks,” he said. “We've lost two Shardbearers there—I need to find whoever's dueling them.”

“Take a troop of heavy infantry with you,” Jasnah said. “Have them block that hole east of the hill—I've sent three squads of spearmen there, and it still keeps weakening.”

Dalenar nodded, sending a messenger to prepare his horse. He paused, looking back at her. “I'm glad you're here, Jasnah. There is no one I'd rather trust my battlefield to than yourself. With you here, I think we can win this.”

Jasnah nodded thankfully, and he was off. Unfortunately, his brave words were no match for her logic. It was going to be a difficult battle—she had never faced such poor fighting conditions. The enemy odds weren't overwhelming, but they were great enough to give ominous signs on the map.

In addition, the enemy commanders were obviously competent. Not geniuses, but neither fools. They used a straightforward, stable offense—they didn't need flashiness to win, only consistency.

Beyond that, there was a . . . hint of something else. While most of the moves were basic, the enemy maneuvers contained occasional hints of brilliance. An offensive strike would work particularly well for a reason she couldn't quite discern, or a squad of troops would defeat a commander who should have had no problem with such numbers.

It could have been coincidence. But, collected together, the incidents formed a pattern. Someone on the other side was either very gifted or very lucky.

Jasnah looked up from the map, glancing through the window toward the battlefield itself. Several lines of troops were marching back to join her reserve forces—the first of the squads she had withdrawn from around Taln.

He will be fine, she thought. *He doesn't need any help—he's Taln*. Besides, there was always Kemnar—good, efficient Kemnar. Though she had decided not to give him any more orders, she had given him this one final request: to watch over Taln.

He'll be fine, she repeated to herself. *The winds know—of all the people you need to worry about on this battlefield, Taln is the last*.

THAT MAN FIGHTS LIKE A STORMSHADE, Dalenar thought, shivering slightly despite the heat.

Before going to the hill he had mentioned to Jasnah, Dalenar had decided to come see if the reports and rumors were true. It was more than just curiosity. There was something in Jasnah's voice when she spoke of the madman, something Dalenar couldn't place. At first, he had thought it to be affection, but such wasn't likely to come from the Lady Jasnah.

Eventually, he had realized what it was. She was starting to believe. Despite all of her logic, all of her words against the Almighty and His worship, Jasnah Kholin was coming to believe in this madman Herald. And so, Dalenar had come to see for himself—had come to watch the man who could inspire belief in a woman such as Jasnah.

And he was impressed.

Taln wasn't just a Shardbearer. Though he fought without Plate, he took no wounds. Though he had the bulk of a long-time warrior, he moved with the grace of a dancer. And he was brutally efficient. None of the men he struck arose, few even moved. No weapon could come close to him without

being sheared in two, and no man could stand against him without being brushed aside.

He was almost too good. It was like . . . like he didn't even need the army at his back, like he could take the entire Veden force on his own.

Dalenar shivered, turning his horse to seek out his destination. He knew what it was like to be good at killing, and wondered what burdens this false Herald carried.

Perhaps they were what had driven him mad.

“BAH!” GENERAL TENATA SAID. “I'm not sending another Shardbearer to the eastern flank. That man has killed five already! Let him slaughter spearmen all day, if he wishes. Our Blades will do more good elsewhere.”

Jek studied the map. The Veden forces had tried pushing against the east first, but the man who called himself a Herald formed too strong an opposition. It wasn't just him—where he fought, other soldiers seemed to do better as well. Together with them, the Herald formed an impenetrable flank that had rebuffed every offensive.

The west, however, was another story—it was here that Ahven had been focusing his subtle, yet telling, suggestions. Slowly, Jek was beginning to wonder if the Idiot King's philosophy was not justified—one man, Ahven Vedenel, was having a very profound effect on this particular battle.

“General,” Ahven said, drawing Tenata's attention. “Might I make another suggestion?”

“Your majesty,” Tenata said, “the last seven suggestions you've made have brought down entire sections of the Aleth line. Whatever it is, you need not ask our permission to give the order.”

Jek saw Ahven's subtle smile. These men would reject a usurper, especially one with little obvious battle experience. But, like most soldiers, they responded quickly to results.

“The Aleth forces have just shored up this far western section with a group of heavy infantry,” Ahven explained. “That squad is led by one Taven Reintar, a high-ranked lord—but one without a Shardblade. Taven is a stalwart man, not prone to quick judgement. However, he tried the entire Pralir campaign to earn himself a Blade and failed. Most of the few mistakes of command he made were performed because he was so desperate to get himself one of the weapons.”

“Your command?” Tenata asked.

“Send a Shardbearer who doesn't have Plate to attack the spearmen a short distance from Taven. Taven won't be able to resist sending his

squad to attack, and you can have your forces ready to surround and destroy him.”

“It will be done,” Tenata said, moving off to give the orders. Most of the other generals had gone to the battlefield somewhere, working as Shard-bearers to seek duels, fill in weak sections, or do extra damage to the enemy.

Ahven placed his hands on the map, as if trying to see his personal enemy through its numbers and movements. “She’s there,” he whispered. “She fights me, but she doesn’t realize it. I know her, and she doesn’t know me. That is her weakness. And . . . there is more. But what?”

He became fixated on the map, standing over it even as scribes approached and replaced it with another, marked with new troop placements and formations. Ahven stared at it after they had gone, his mind distant.

Then he looked up, an almost demonic smile forming on his lips. “‘The Song of a Hundred Lovers.’ ‘The Blessing of Minalah.’ ‘Windborn Fate.’ Do you recognize these songs, assassin?”

“No,” Jek said. “Should I?”

Ahven’s smile deepened. “They are the same songs that were favored by the man Tethren Rienar.”

Jek frowned.

“Romantic ballads, assassin,” Ahven explained, eyes alight, voice going soft. “Lady Jasnah Kholin is in love.”

“Of course she is,” Jek said. “Your spies say she was recently married.”

Ahven shook his head. “The man Meridas, her supposed husband, is over here—in a section of the battlefield receiving almost no attention. These are songs of unfulfilled love, assassin.” He looked down at the map, speaking quietly. “Yes, the over-defense of the fourth eastern line makes sense now. Everything makes sense now. I know you, Jasnah Kholin. *I understand you.*”

He looked up, staring into Jek’s eyes. “She has bothered me for too long, assassin. She escaped my trap, she ran from my soldiers, but she cannot hide from you. It is time for you to earn your title.

“It is time to destroy Jasnah Kholin.”

THE FIRES EVENTUALLY DESCENDED upon him. The men around Taln burst alight, bodies flaring until he fought figures made only of flame.

Cloaks, he thought. *Focus on the cloaks*. He forced himself to maintain this one detail of reality—flames in blue were allies. Flames in white were enemies.

After that, he dueled with the flames. He stood in magma, ignoring its searing touch. Each figure he struck sprayed fire into the air, tiny molten

droplets flashing red. The mountains beyond were pyres to the dead, and the sky above was a dome of burning rage.

The screams hounded him, but he kept fighting. He couldn't tell which yells came from the flames inside and which came from the deaths of his enemies. He stopped caring, and only fought. He knew that hundreds had died beneath his sword already, and hundreds more would come.

He struck across the inferno, protecting the blue, killing the white. Here a blue stumbled, and he moved, their protection. Here a white stumbled, and he moved, their death.

He barely felt the prick in his side.

It was a small thing, really. A blue moved away, a man Taln had been defending, and his addled mind had to struggle to make the connection.

One of his own men had struck him.

He tried to keep fighting, but his side gave into the fires. He reached down with a bemused hand, and then lifted it up. His palm and fingers flared red, blazing, matching the sky and sun overhead.

He grew weak. Heralds were strong, and they were powerful, but their bodies were not immortal—only their souls. They died every Return, eventually.

All was alight. And from within the depths of the flame came the dark, screaming thing—the thing that always stalked him. He knew it now, finally. It was a piece of him, the section of his mind that was completely mad, the piece of his soul that he had banished months before.

Taln stumbled to his knees as the churning, insane thing approached him. It held memories that Taln did not want to face, memories of an eternity in agony, memories of a man broken.

He wanted to push it away, but he was getting weak . . . so weak. He wanted to scream at it, but he could no longer speak. He fell backward, smashing to the hard stones beneath, and the dark thing loomed over him.

He had no voice for yells, only a whisper. "Jasnah," he mumbled as the dark madness took him.

And the flame that was Taln fled into the void.

THE FALSE HERALD COLLAPSED, dead. Jek pulled up the side of his stolen Aleth cloak, obscuring his face as best he could as he screamed, "*The Herald!*"

Men stopped fighting on both sides to regard the dead man.

"The Herald is dead!" Jek screamed in a terrified voice. "We are doomed!"

Around him squads shattered. A group of men ran forward to the

Herald's side, as if to protect him—but they were, of course, too late. They were too focused on the corpse, and the Veden aggressors cut them down.

A surge of revitalized strength pumped through the Veden line. The beast that had tormented them had fallen, and suddenly they remembered that they really were on the dominant side of this particular battle. An equal surge of sudden despair washed across the Aleth ranks as the horrible truth struck them. Their god was dead. He would protect them no more. And if he could be killed, then what hope did they have?

As Jek fled the battle, Ahven's voice whispered to him from the past.

The more perfectly a leader maintains the appearance that he is infallible, the more his soldiers will be able to ignore their own guilt, and the better they will fight. But, if he falls . . .

Behind Jek, the Aleth line crumbled.

JASNAH SAW THE RANKS falter through her window, but she didn't know the horrible truth, not until the beleaguered messenger arrived.

She nodded at his words, but stopped listening halfway through. He was obviously speaking lies, she decided as she sat back onto her stool, eyes unfocusing. Men shouldn't lie to battle commanders. It created all kinds of confusion.

It was a few moments before Jasnah realized the man was trying to get her attention. She said yes to whatever he was asking, though she couldn't understand his words. They were garbled. Ridiculous.

Lies.

THE SHARDBEARER FINALLY YIELDED. Dalenar stepped back, puffing and dismissing his Blade as a squad of soldiers rushed forward to take the enemy Shardbearer captive, stripping him of Plate and Blade. Former Aleth Shardbearers who had lost their Blades waited back at the city, hoping to be equipped with captured weapons so that they could rush onto the battlefield and bolster their side.

Dalenar grimaced, holding his arm. His opponent's Blade had bit deeply there, scarring the metal and pushing a strip of it into Dalenar's shoulder. He could feel blood seeping into his gauntlet, and cursed the foolish mistake that had given him the wound. He would have to return to the city to be bandaged.

As he turned and pulled himself, with some effort, onto horseback, he noticed a messenger dashing his direction. Dalenar moved back away from the line, riding slowly to meet the man.

“My lord!” the messenger said, puffing. “You are needed at the command center! The eastern line is crumbling!”

“What?” Dalenar demanded. “What is Jasnah doing?”

“She cannot help us, my lord. Something’s . . . happened to her.”

“What?” Dalenar asked. “Is she hurt?”

“No, my lord,” the messenger said. “The Herald fell. When she heard the news, she was stunned. None of us can get through to her.”

Dalenar cursed, kicking his horse into motion. He arrived at the city a few minutes later and clinked up to the command center, moving with a Plate-wearer’s speed.

He found Jasnah sitting quietly, a sub-general furiously giving commands and trying to organize the eastern flank. The man sighed thankfully as Dalenar entered.

Dalenar stepped up to the window, and saw the horrible truth. The entire eastern flank had fallen, and a spurt of white was pouring through the gap, dividing the Aleth forces into two. It was like the final note of a tragic ballad. Perhaps if it had been plugged sooner . . .

Do not fool yourself, Dalenar, he told himself. Face the truth. The enemy has a fourth as many troops as you, better equipment, and stronger men. This battle was doomed from the beginning. It’s remarkable we held out as long as we did.

Dalenar turned to Jasnah. He knelt down, shaking her slightly by the shoulders. “Jasnah?”

She blinked a few times, then focused on him. “Uncle?” she said, as if in a daze.

“Jasnah, our lines are breaking. We need you!”

She became a little more lucid, glancing around. “Is it true?” she asked. “Is he dead?”

“Apparently,” Dalenar said.

And then a chilling event happened—something Dalenar had never thought to see, had he lived to be a thousand.

A tear rolled down Jasnah’s cheek. “I loved him, Uncle,” she whispered.

Kevahin, Dalenar thought, dumbstruck. Even as a child, Jasnah had been so somber, never screaming like other girls. She had always been collected and controlled, even from her youth. In a way, he had almost stopped thinking of her as human. Jasnah was something else, something not affected by foolish emotions.

But she *was* human. All too human. “Oh, child,” he said, pulling her close.

“My Lord Dalenar!” an alarmed voice called. Dalenar stood—Jasnah’s pain would have to wait. Alethkar was falling.

He turned, several aides—finally realizing his wound—rushing forward to remove his pauldron and pull out some bandages. A messenger stumbled up the stairs. Not the man who had fetched him on the field, but a different one—a man who, as Dalenar recalled, had been stationed on the lait ridge.

“My lord,” the messenger said, his face hinting that his news was not good.

“Speak,” Dalenar said, sighing.

“The scouts have just spotted ships in the distance,” the man said. “It’s the Lakhenran fleet, my lord. At least thirty vessels. Troop ships.”

Dalenar closed his eyes, grunting as the aides pulled his bandage tight. “So it was a game all along,” he said. “They knew we didn’t have a chance. They pushed us to the coast, then brought in their fleets.”

Thirty or more vessels. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, more men.

In a strikingly unnerving thought, Dalenar realized something. *I am the last king of Alethkar.*

JEK ENTERED THE VEDEN COMMAND camp to a scene of general jovialness. Two of the generals who had been afield had returned, and they stood around the map table, smiling and congratulating one another.

At their head stood King Ahven. They recognized him for what he was now. When the generals saw Jek, they appraised him with new eyes—no longer was he simply Ahven’s strange attendant. Now they understood him to be a warrior. They probably thought he had fought and killed the false Herald in a fair duel.

“You’ve been keeping him from us all this time, your majesty,” one of the generals chided.

“A secret weapon is of no use when it is widely know, Lord Jenazen. Jeksonsonvallano is a tool to be used . . . strategically.” Ahven smiled, full of himself. There was more to his joy than a simple victory. From now on, in future battles, the generals wouldn’t just listen to ‘suggestions.’ They would give him command, for he had earned it.

And there would be further battles. Jek glanced at the man Balenmar, who stood quietly at the edge of the command center, watching the proceedings but never interacting. He had spoken truth. Ahven would continue on, would become a conqueror after this day. Ahven didn’t want Alethkar; he wanted all of Roshar.

“My lord,” an aide said calmly, approaching and bowing. “The Lakhenran

fleet has made contact. They intend to land on the beach to our south, then bring their troops up to be dispensed as you command.”

“Hardly necessary now,” General Tenata said, chuckling. “We’ve almost got the Aleth forces broken into a third section. Only five hours into the battle, and the end is already in sight.”

“Come now, generals,” Ahven said. “Did you ever think they would give us any real trouble? After what they’ve been through, it’s surprising they didn’t just surrender after the first hour.”

Jek glanced to the side, and in the distance he could make out several tensets of dark spots approaching on the waters.

The realization was painful, but Jek had to make it. Ahven had executed this day perfectly. From the manipulation of his own generals, to the defeat of Jasnah Kholin, to the destruction of Alethkar and timely arrival of reinforcements, the Idiot King’s genius was manifest.

He was the most horrible man Jek had ever served, but he was also the most competent. Alethkar had never really stood a chance.

ACROSS THE WATERS, COMING IN from beneath a western wind, Merin Kholin gripped the ship’s gunwale and squinted at the approaching shoreline.

“It’s not looking good, Lord Merin,” said Tamar, former Head Regent and now King of Lakhenran. “The Aleth forces are divided and dying. One side is mashed against the city wall, the other force is much smaller, and can’t escape because of the river at their back.”

Merin nodded, still watching the shore. Wind patterns shifted in the air, as if a dozen different translucent sheets shimmered between himself and the land.

“Does Lord Dalenar’s glyph still fly?” he asked.

“Well, yes,” Tamar said. “His banner is the highest above the city wall, marking him as the ranking nobleman at this battle.”

“That is all I need to know,” Merin said calmly.

“My lord,” Tamar said hesitantly. “We can’t land on the shore as you ordered. That’s just not the way it is done. The tide and winds are wrong. We’ll have to stay out in the bay and ferry our men in with the smaller vessels. It will take a great deal of time, and when we are finished, I fear that—”

“Tell your men to be ready,” Merin said.

Tamar sighed, but waved over a messenger to deliver the order. Behind him stood Kalden and several other men, all watching Merin expectantly. There was far too much faith in their eyes.

Merin looked away from them. So much was confusing lately. Renarin wasn't dead, but neither was he really alive. Shinri had gone, and he hadn't even really grown to know her. Kalden could have been a friend, but he was too . . . worshipful.

They expected so much from him. And what did he have? A few of Renarin's confusing explanations? A promise that he was a Windrunner?

He did know one thing for certain. Back at the dueling competition, when the need was great, he had called the winds. They had proven themselves his ally. Perhaps they would come again.

He stood up and held aloft a jade pitcher scavenged from one of the quarters of a former Veden captain. He closed his eyes.

In the distance, the far, far distance, he could feel it. A highstorm, still hours away from Roshar. It raged over the Stone Desert, blowing steadily in his direction.

He didn't call to it, but he memorized it, felt it, *knew* it. And then, he called upon the jade and commanded.

Pain flashed up his arm, and he gritted his teeth. A breeze passed over the ship, but he didn't need a breeze. He needed winds and fury—he needed a storm.

He pushed the pains further, though they horrified him. Not because of their agony, but because of what had happened to Renarin. *The pain is only a side-effect*, his friend had said. There was something more, a greater price. If he pushed too hard, would he lose his mind too?

If that is what I must suffer, then let it be, he thought, crying out at the pain as he pushed the winds with increasing strength. He focused on his responsibility. Months ago, he had made a mistake—he had broken his oath to Lord Dalenar, and had betrayed his friendship with Aredor. He would set both right at once.

Lord Dalenar needed him.

The ship lurched as the winds strengthened. Merin pushed against forty different sails with a weight that was not his own, driving them forward. Everything hurt now, not just his arm. It was like he was tearing himself apart.

Like, he finally realized, he was trying to throw himself into the wind—to become like it, fluid rather than solid. His body resisted, and felt as if it would break, his bones snapping, his flesh ripping apart.

The coast approached, but Merin did not stop the winds. They blew across his vessels like a sudden storm, furious but unilateral. The air roared, sails flapped, and wood lurched. Merin pushed his fleet onward, lining his vessels up along a great swath of the coast. Then, with a final agonizing

heave, he slammed the boats up onto the rocky shores themselves, spraying waves of water across the sand and rocks.

His command ship lurched to a stop, nearly throwing Merin over with its force. The pitcher shattered in his hand, fully half of it crumbling to dust from the stress of his mighty effort.

Merin groaned, slumping against the gunwale, his body fuzzing to numbness. Behind him, Tamar and the others watched Merin with reverent awe.

Great, Merin thought, leaning back against the ship's railing and puffing slightly. "Well?" he demanded. "Get your men out! We have to attack before they realize there aren't any Vedens captaining these ships!"

The men moved. Hundreds flooded over the sides of the ships, gathering on the shore. Kalden approached with Merin's Plate, and Merin allowed the man to help him put it on. He had learned something odd about the Plate—it interfered with the winds, somehow. While Merin was wearing it, he couldn't push against himself. Neither could he touch a man wearing Plate with the winds. Something built into the armor's magics protected men from the effects of his powers.

This day, however, he didn't feel that he was going to be pushing with the wind much more. He couldn't afford to spend the entire battle numb—he had already hurt his body too much. He felt as though he could barely move, though the Plate lent him some strength, pushing back the fatigue of Windrunning.

Merin forced himself to stand up straight, ignoring his numb, useless arm. He took a breath, nodded to Kalden, and the two of them leapt over the side of the ship and landed on the shore beyond. He waved to a group of several hundred soldiers, then began marching toward the battlefield. Other squads followed, forming into quiet ranks at first—moving exactly as the Vedens had ordered.

It wasn't until they were up close that they broke with what was expected. The Veden line stood exposed, its back to Merin's force, completely unaware.

Merin summoned his Blade, and held the weapon aloft with his good arm, then broke into a Plate-enhanced dash.

DALENAR COMMANDED AN ARMY of dead men. He did what he could, directing the battle from the wall-top tower, organizing the forces as defensively as possible. Unfortunately, forcing his men to pull back meant further isolating the two halves—one of which he couldn't even reach with his messages.

He could only help extend their death throes. He could not save them. *So this is how it ends, Nolphonarin*, he thought, staring out over the battlefield. *Trapped in a city that isn't even my own, fighting an enemy I thought was my friend. After Pralir, I thought I was through with war. I thought I would seek my hearth and spend time with my sons.*

He had no sons left. That part hurt the most. Bright, noble Sheneres. Charismatic, witty Aredor. And quiet, understanding Renarin. The three boys had been so different, yet they had each been a piece of him—and a link back to the woman he had loved.

At least they could be his final thoughts. It wasn't good for a father to live to be the last of his family.

Jasnah sat behind, trying to help. Most of her old self had returned, but the Herald's death had shaken her, and Dalenar was loath to leave her in strategic command again. However, he doubted he had a choice. The men were faltering with Taln's death—they needed a leader, so they could at least die knowing whose honor they served.

He turned to inform her of his decision, but paused as he noticed a strange man speaking with the guards at the bottom of the command tower. He was dressed as a messenger, but he wore unfamiliar livery.

Light blue? Dalenar thought. *Who wears light blue?*

The guards eventually decided to let the newcomer pass—though they accompanied him up to the command center.

“Lord Dalenar Kholin?” the messenger asked.

“Yes?” Dalenar responded cautiously.

“Lord Merin Kholin, commander of the Lakhenran fleet, sends his greetings. He would like to know if there are any specific strategies you would like his armies to follow.”

Dalenar frowned, not certain if his mind had snapped, or if the man was just spouting nonsense.

“My Lord!” one of the sub-commanders cried. “Come look!”

Dalenar glanced out the window. There, at the back of the enemy line, he saw an incredible sight. The Lakhenran armies were charging the back of the Veden lines.

Dalenar turned back to the smiling messenger. Hope, an almost unrecognizable sensation, glimmered within him. Behind him, Jasnah stood, hurrying to the window.

“Merin?” Dalenar asked. “Young Merin, from Alethkar?”

“Yes, my lord,” the messenger said. “He freed the Lakhenran from Vedenar, and we have come to pay back his heroism. He has told our

armies to follow whatever battle commands you or Lady Jasnah might recommend.”

Merin is alive. “My son?” Dalenar demanded. “Renarin. Does he live?”

The messenger hesitated. “He has suffered a grievous wound, my lord.”

“But he lives?”

“Yes, my lord,” the messenger said.

That is reason enough to continue fighting! “Jasnah, you can command here?”

“Yes, Uncle,” she promised.

“Bring my horse!” Dalenar bellowed, replacing his pauldron as he pushed past the messenger and rushed down the stairs.

MERIN’S ARMIES CRASHED AGAINST the exposed Veden lines. However, Merin himself saw a more ripe target. “Kalden, Tamar!” he yelled, pointing at what was obviously the Veden command center. “Bring your squads!”

Three hundred men broke off the main column, following Merin as he rushed the chaotic command center. The Vedens reacted with alarm, calling out in their foreign tongue.

Three men in Shardplate stood around a table at the center of the camp. Merin rushed the first one, barely allowing the man enough time to raise his Blade to initiate a duel.

Merin spun, striking with a fluid blow. The Shardbearer raised his weapon to block the obvious attack, and Merin skepped his Blade, phasing it briefly into smoke. His Blade passed through that of his opponent, a small bit of smoke puffing free. It winked back into existence just as it slammed into the man’s throatguard. The Shardbearer stumbled back, stunned, and Merin threw his weight into a second swing, shearing the man’s head from his shoulders.

Merin didn’t stop to pause as he moved onto the second Shardbearer. To his side, Kalden attacked the third man.

Merin engaged his opponent, attacking quickly, not giving the man time to react. To Merin’s side, several people watched the duels—an older man in stormkeeper’s robes, and a tall, red-haired man with a commanding bearing stood out. Within moments of the attack on the command center, the tall man was surrounded by nervous guards. He wore no Plate, but Merin saw smoke forming around his hand as he calmly watched the battle’s proceedings. *This is their leader,* Merin decided.

Merin’s current opponent was not very good. Short of stature and aging, the man fought like one practiced with a Blade—but not a master of it.

Merin needed no winds or skepping to turn aside the man's attack, then slam a couple of blows against his shoulders.

"I yield!" the man cried, lowering his Blade and holding out his hands.

Merin snorted, slapping the Blade out of the man's hands. Several soldiers ran up to take the Veden prisoner—already, Merin's men had secured most of the camp. Some Veden soldiers from the main line were making an attempt to fight through to their commanders, but someone was rallying the Aleth near the castle. The Veden army had gone from a powerful aggressor to a defender smashed between three different enemy forces.

Merin pointed at the Veden leader within his Blade. "Take this man captive," he told his men. "Unless, of course, he wants to duel me with that Blade of—"

Movement flashed at the edge of Merin's vision. Before he could turn, before he could raise his weapon in defense, he caught a glimpse of a small man in loose clothing dashing toward him. The man carried a long, efficient-looking knife.

Merin recognized him. The Shin warrior—the one who had taken him captive on the plains of Alethkar. The man with the unnaturally fluid step.

Merin's reaction was sudden and guttural. Even as the Shin man jumped at him, Merin summoned the winds. Pain flared in his wrist, and the winds curled and twisted around him. A column of air smashed into the Shin man, throwing him backward, ripping the knife from his fingers.

The Shin warrior was tossed across the camp in a blast of wind. He smashed through the map table, then crumpled to the ground on the other side. Merin stood breathing deeply for a moment, trying to fight away the flaring pain in his wrist. To his side, Kalden wasn't faring very well in his duel—the man had only received his Blade a short few weeks before, and he had very little sparring experience. Merin spun, turning toward the Veden leader—who was now ringed by two tensets of Lakhenran spearmen. The man stood alone. Where was the other, the old stormkeeper? The aged man had disappeared.

Merin raised his Blade commandingly toward the Veden leader. "You lead these forces, do you not?"

The imperious man regarded Merin and the Lakhenran troops as if they were merely curiosities. He glanced toward the Shin warrior.

"The Windrunner," the Veden leader said, looking back at Merin.

"Yes," Merin said.

“I was warned about you,” the Veden said. “It occurs to me that my source should have been a little more specific.”

“Command your army to surrender!” Merin ordered, trying to maintain his confident attitude. Something about this man was unnerving.

“I did nothing wrong,” the man decided. “I made no errors of judgement or mistakes. I could not have known that the Lakhenrans would betray me.” He paused, studying Merin. “I lost by a fluke.”

“Give the command!” Merin said, glancing toward Kalden. His friend wouldn’t concede the duel, no matter how much better his opponent was than he.

The Veden leader frowned, then glanced toward his forces. Merin had been on enough battlefields to tell that the Veden army was not faring well. Surrounded and suddenly outnumbered, it would not last long.

“Very well,” the Veden man said. “The day is yours.”

EPILOGUE

IT TOOK A SPECIAL KIND of man to claim he was a god and to actually have people believe him. In the Vorin tradition, humility was a sign of nobility, and a man seeking to take leadership upon himself was immediately suspect. To set oneself up as a Herald . . . well, to accomplish the deed successfully would take an incredible combination indeed. He would have to be humble but not self-effacing, powerful but not domineering. He would have to be an excellent leader and a fine warrior, yet be as wise as an aged stormkeeper. He would need straightforwardness in purpose, yet retain an indefinable weight of mystery about him.

He would need to be the greatest of men.

You made me want to believe, Jasnah thought, laying a hand on Taln's cold cheek. *And that's more than I've ever felt before.*

Taln lay on a stone altar in the funeral tent. A sheet covered the lower half of his body, but he was naked from the waist up. Only one wound marred his body—a small thing, really, placed expertly between his ribs. It seemed a mockery that such a mighty man had been felled by a wound so seemingly innocent.

I always told him to wear Shardplate, Jasnah thought. *But he never would. Such a stubborn man you were, Talenel'Elin.*

Perhaps she had let the men rely upon him too much. The logical, prudent Jasnah should have foreseen the damage his death would cause to morale.

Yet she realized now that she too had come to rely upon him. Too much? Perhaps. One side effect of being heartless was that one rarely had to deal with emotional shock. She had been far too unprepared for the backlash of grief she had felt at his death.

A crowd had gathered outside—she could hear their shuffling and their murmuring. Many now claimed that they had always seen through Taln's façade, that they had only pretended to believe because they knew it was good for troop cohesion. Others were still faithful. They waited for the final proof Taln had promised them, if inadvertently.

When Heralds die, their bodies turn to smoke. He had spoken the words in the Holy City, when explaining why there were no bones to accompany the buried Shardblades. It was a popular legend, known to many of the people. Heralds were not truly human, despite their form. When they died, their bodies were taken to the Dwelling to await the next Return.

Taln did not turn to smoke. Jasnah didn't want to let the people dwell on this fact. Barely a few hours had passed since the final battle with Vedenar, but she had ordered his pyre readied anyway.

Oh, Taln . . . she thought. She wanted to weep, but there was nothing within to give. That was another side-effect of being heartless.

Besides, what reason did she have to complain or grieve? She had received what she had always desired, had she not? A strong political union that gave her a great deal of power, a king who respected her and gave her freedom to be involved in his affairs. With Meridas as her husband and Dalenar as her king, she would always be at the center of Alethkar's workings. She had never wanted love—love was for people who couldn't hope for something supposedly greater. Power.

What a waste my life has been, she thought with a sudden feeling of sickness.

"My . . . lady?" a guard asked from the tent door.

Jasnah turned. "Yes?"

"There is a man here," the guard said hesitantly. "He . . . well, my lady, he claims to know the Lord Herald."

Jasnah frowned. "Know? Know how?"

"He claims to be the man's brother-in-law," the soldier explained.

Jasnah felt a chill. "Let him in."

The man who entered was of humble stature. He had a ring of baldness at the top of his head, and he appeared to have a nervous twitch of the fingers. He kept his eyes low, though he did glance at Taln's corpse.

"What is this foolishness you told my guard?" Jasnah asked.

"I'm sorry for being foolish, my lady," the man said quickly, his voice thick with a Riemak accent. "But, I do speak the truth. That man, the Lord Herald . . . well, his other name is Taven. He married my sister, my lady. We come from a village in Riemak—Callenhas. Your army passed it on the way north, back when you were there . . ."

He looked up hopefully, as if expecting her to remember the village.

"Go on," Jasnah said. "Why didn't you speak of this earlier?"

"Well, my lady," the man said with embarrassment. "Taven seemed to be doing so well for himself, you see. And when I spoke to him that once, he didn't even seem to recognize me. I figured that he either didn't want me to tell others about him, or that he didn't right remember himself. Ever since the accident happened . . . well, Taven never was right in the head after that."

Jasnah eyed the man critically. *Come to seek after some compensation by claiming to be Taln's relative? That would be a very bold move, and this man doesn't seem the type.* "What proof do you have of these allegations?" she asked.

"Proof, my lady?" the man asked, as if he had never considered that she would ask such of him. "Well, I don't know. Taven did have a rather strange birthmark on the back of his neck."

Jasnah relaxed. She had seen no such thing while helping prepare the body for its cremation. The man was either mistaken or lying.

"It's there, right near the hairline, my lady," the man promised. "You should look."

Jasnah paused. Near the hairline . . . she might not have seen it, if Taln's hair were in the way.

She didn't want to look. However, the logical side of her was fed up with being ignored. She reached out, turning his head and pushing back the hair. She paused.

"What did this birthmark look like?"

"Um, an oval sort of shape, my lady," the man said. "Or, at least I think that's what it was. He was kind of sensitive about people looking at it, he was."

Jasnah lowered her hand, then placed Taln's head back in its restful position. The birthmark was there, and the mystery had been solved. She had been right all along. Why did that make her feel so depressed?

"Tell me about him," she requested. "You say . . . that he was married?"

"Well, he was when my sister was still alive," the peasant said. "Taven was always a special man—he could make people listen to what he had to say."

They liked him, even when they first met him. He grew up in Callenhas, in the house next to my own, but he left when he was just a lad. He promised my sister he'd come back, and he did, some five years later. Said he'd spent the time training with a mercenary group—learning to fight, he said. He was tired of Callenhas being pushed around by any bandit or thief who decided to force us to give him a levy.

“Well, he organized us and taught us. We learned to fight pretty well, I'd say. He married my sister. He was a smart one, Taven was. Said he'd learned to read with the mercenaries, from a woman who'd once been a noblewoman in Alethkar. He didn't care that it was a woman's art—to him, it was just another skill to learn. He had books too, my lady. I don't know where he got them, but they were old. He found them fighting somewhere in Riemak, I suppose. Maybe the Holy City itself, do you think?”

“I really don't know,” Jasnah said. “Continue.”

“Well, he knew all kinds of strange things,” the peasant said. “Was always telling them to people, though they didn't make any sense to us. Pretty random, those things he said and things he knew. But he did train us good—and he fought like nothing else, my lady. He was so good at it. Bandits soon learned to stay away from Callenhas, I'll tell you that! Ten years he led our town, and we were beginning to think pretty good of ourselves. But then . . .”

“Well?” Jasnah asked.

“Well, the local despot—a real nasty man, named Kess. He decided he was tired of Callenhas ignoring his threats. He got together a lot of men—more than were even in our village—and he attacked. In the end, we just couldn't stop them. Riemak's a hard place, my lady. Seems like for every man who has a mind to work for his food, there are two men waiting to take it from him. They got through eventually, though Taven—he killed a number.

“In the end, Kess left Taven alive. Killed my sister and Taven's son, though. Killed them in an awful, brutal way, and made Taven watch. After that . . . well, Taven wasn't the same, like I said. We learned to do what Kess said, but Taven—he just left. Walked away in a daze, and none of us had a mind to stop him—not with Kess's men watching us.

“And, well, that's about it. That was five years ago. I thought Taven dead for sure, until that day your army passed and I went out to see the Herald for myself. I don't know what he did during those five years, but I really don't think he recognized me. Taven wasn't ever very good at pretending.”

Jasnah nodded, closing her eyes. *Oh, my deal, poor Taln. Is that what you*

saw those times when your madness almost took you, the times where your eyes fuzzed, and you got that look of terror in your eyes? Was it her, being tortured? No wonder you wanted to forget.

Jasnah opened her eyes. "Thank you, citizen . . ."

"Praesh," the man said.

"You will be compensated, Citizen Praesh," Jasnah promised. "But I do want you to keep quiet about these things. The army wanted a Herald, and your brother-in-law became one for them. I don't want to taint their memory of him."

"Of course, my lady," the man said. "But, if it pleases you . . ."

"What?" Jasnah asked.

"I didn't come here for gems, my lady," the man said, hands still twitching slightly. "I came for his body. You see, well, I want to make certain he's properly taken care of."

"I will see to that," Jasnah promised.

"But—"

"That is all, Citizen Praesh," Jasnah said firmly.

The man jumped slightly, then bowed and backed from the room.

Jasnah turned to regard Taln's slumbering corpse again. *I don't blame you for the lies*, she finally decided, resting a hand on his shoulder. *For, to you, I don't think they really were lies. In fact, I think Brother Lhan was right. We could use a few more liars like you.*

MERIN STEPPED QUIETLY INTO THE ROOM. The battle was over, his armor removed, yet his arm still felt numb from his calling of the winds.

Lord Dalenar still sat inside, cradling Renarin's near-lifeless body. Because of the battle's chaotic aftermath, the reunion—such that it was—had only happened a few minutes before. Dalenar had been warned, but that hadn't made much of a difference.

The great Tyrantbane, the king of Alethkar, was crying.

Merin stood, embarrassed, in the doorway of the stone chamber, one of many in the Teth-Kanar palace. *This is my fault. I didn't cause Renarin's injury, but I am responsible. That's what Renarin himself taught me. It isn't about choosing right, it's about accepting the consequences for what you have done.*

"You saved my kingdom," Dalenar whispered, not looking up from his son's comatose face. "But you took my last son from me. I don't know if I can reward you enough, and I don't know if I can ever forgive you."

There was only one response—Merin had steeled himself for it weeks

before. He walked into the room, stepping firmly, and stuck his Shardblade into the ground at Dalenar's feet.

"You gave a command, many months ago," Merin said. "You said that any who disobeyed would be stripped of Blade and rank. I accept your judgement." He reached out and, clenching his teeth, knocked his opal free of the Blade.

He would almost sooner have knocked the heart from his chest.

He picked the black stone up off the ground, and put it in his cloak pocket. Dalenar's cloak. That he did not intend to return.

Merin turned, knowing there was no more to be said, and walked toward the doorway.

"I do not demand this of you, Merin," Dalenar said from behind.

"No," Merin said, turning. Dalenar had finally looked up at him. "But I believe honor does. Besides, I don't think I was ever really that good at being a nobleman—or a soldier, for that matter. Not in my heart, at least."

"What will you do?" Dalenar asked.

Merin paused. "Go back to my village," he said. "Or perhaps find a different one—a place where I can become a farmer again. I think I need a break."

"I shall see that you have a horse," Dalenar said, "and a constant supply of feed to keep it. Go with the thanks of Alethkar."

Merin nodded, and turned to leave. He couldn't help noticing, however, that Dalenar didn't seem to feel much sorrow at Merin's abdication.

To him, I will always be the one who persuaded his son to leave, then brought the boy back as a mindless invalid. Honor wouldn't let him shun me for it, but it would let him hate me.

It was better for both of them this way.

ON A SULLEN, MISTY MORNING, Shinri's ship finally reached the Thalen docks.

She stepped from the vessel, thankful for the firmness beneath her feet. Though she had come to enjoy the ocean, there was a rightness to the solid ground. It felt good to step upon it again.

She paused, looking northward for a moment, pulling her cloak tight and staring across the open waters. She couldn't see much through the fog. Eventually, she turned and called out to the dockmaster, asking him to send for a city guardsman. She had learned her lesson last time—she would not make King Amelin search for her this time.

He came immediately. In fact, she was surprised at how quickly the

king made it to the docks. She had expected him to send a litter for her, but not to come in person. Yet after just a short period of waiting, she saw him emerge from the mist beside her ship, trailing his Awakener and stormkeeper councilors behind him.

As soon as he saw her, he smiled, but his eyes grew troubled. "Shinri, it *is* you."

Shinri smiled. "King Amelin. I seem to recall you offering me sanctuary in Thalenah some time before. Is the proposal still in effect?"

"Oh Shinri, child . . ." Amelin said. "Wife of King Ahven Vedenel. Elsecaller with power over the Oathgates themselves."

"Are those things problems?" Shinri asked hesitantly.

"No," King Amelin said sorrowfully. "But they are terrible, terrible advantages. The kind of advantages a king prays to receive, but then fears the Almighty might actually listen to him." He sighed. "But, come, child. We will see you situated."

Shinri paused. Something seemed wrong. She pulled her cloak tighter. "And if . . . I change my mind?" she said, glancing back at her ship.

"Then I will be forced to insist," Amelin said, waving for several soldiers to appear out of the mist and move toward her ship.

Shinri backed away, growing cold. "Not you," she whispered. "Not you too."

"I am not a monster, child," Amelin promised. "You came here for refuge, and I will give it to you—and anything else you desire. But, when the time comes, I may need your . . . assistance."

Another prison, Shinri realized. Each one prettier than the last, but each one just as restrictive. She lowered her head as two more soldiers appeared from the mist and moved to her sides.

Nowhere was safe, she realized. No one could be trusted. How many times would she need to learn this lesson?

She raised her head, steeling herself as Jasnah had always taught. She had escaped from Ahven and then from Merin. She would simply have to do the same again.

"MY LADY?" SAID A FAMILIAR, yet surprising voice.

Jasnah looked up from her funeral preparations, and was stunned by what she saw. "*Balenmar?*"

The old man smiled, shaking his head in amazement as he walked into the tent. "Lady Jasnah," he said warmly. "I never thought to see you alive again. How did you survive the attack on the palace?"

"I was led out by a friend," Jasnah said, "through a passage in the cellars. What of you? I had given you up for dead!"

Balenmar's grandfatherly smile deepened. "I was visiting relatives in an outlying city at the time—pure chance, though I thank the Almighty for it. I guess these old bones have some years in them yet."

"But how did you come to be here?" Jasnah asked.

"The Veden forces took me captive when they passed through my town," Balenmar said. "Someone must have betrayed me. I know not why the Veden king didn't execute me—he seemed to enjoy interrogating me, though I tried to explain that I was just an irrelevant, tired old man."

"Amazing," Jasnah said, shaking her head.

"Indeed. But you must return to your preparations," the old man paused, glancing at Taln's body. "There will be time for chatting at another time."

JEKSONSONVALLANO, TRUTHLESS OF SHINAVAR, stumbled, his hands and feet bound, as the soldiers tugged him through the city. His body was weak and battered. The Windrunner's power had thrown him with a nonchalant twist of air. If Jek had doubted the Onyxseers, he could no longer delude himself. The old powers had indeed returned to the men of the east.

But such things were no longer his problem. Execution undoubtedly awaited him—by now, the Aleth commanders would be discovering just who he was, and how closely he had served Ahven. When they discovered who had slain their Herald . . .

Perhaps they already knew. The guards were being unreasonably rough with him. Yes, he could see it in their eyes. They hated him. Well, after his sins, he looked forward to a good, clean execution. He had waited a long time to die.

Your master still lives. The warning of honor came from within as Jek stumbled against yet another stone, falling against the rocks. Holy, blessed stone.

How he wished he hadn't seen Ahven being held captive. How he wished he could convince himself that the Idiot King was dead.

Your master still lives. Jek had to serve still, though he hated and loathed himself for it. He had to serve.

The soldiers were getting impatient. One tugged on the rope again. Jek lay a few streets inside the city gates, near a stone house crusted with cromstone.

"Please," Jek said, intentionally increasing his accent. "Do not let me

rot in a cell. There is no Truth. Give me a knife. Let me kill myself here, honorably.”

One of the guards snorted, but the idea seemed to appeal to the second man.

“I give my oath,” Jek said, his stomach twisting. “I will use the blade only on myself. In Shinavar, this request would never be rejected by men of honor.”

The uncertain guard looked to his companion. Finally, the man shrugged. They were in an inconspicuous location. “I suppose,” he said slowly.

The other man pulled out his belt knife and tossed it at Jek’s feet. Jek picked up the weapon in bound hands, crouching pathetically before the two soldiers, both obviously confident that they could control one wounded, helpless man.

“It’s all right,” the second soldier said. “In my entire life, I’ve never met a Shin who would lie.”

Jek closed his eyes, unsheathing the blade. *You just did*, he thought.

THE FUNERAL CEREMONY TOOK PLACE as evening finally fell. Thousands came for the event—despite the work to be done, despite wounds and losses, despite fatigue, they came to see. They came to witness.

Taln lay on a pyre of wood, unarmored, but holding a sword—not his Blade, of course, but a fine nobleman’s weapon nonetheless. The crowd was oddly silent as they regarded their fallen god.

Jasnah stepped from the tent. She was to speak first. Brother Lhan would come second, followed, finally, by Dalenar. The king stood to the side with a group of upper nobility. His face still showed a haunted grief—for a short time, he had thought he still had a son. It almost would have been better had Renarin never returned.

Jasnah regarded the crowd, the nobility, and the dead man before her. She glanced to the side. Meridas stood by Dalenar. The man would retain his title as *Parshen*, as per Jasnah’s request. Dalenar needed the merchant’s connections and wealth, for a time at least, to ensure that Alethkar survived the next few years. It would be a difficult time—so many men dead, so many resources expended.

Meridas. She hated him, she realized. Not just because of his slimy personality and situational nobility. No, she hated what he represented about herself—that she would choose a man like him over Taln, simply because she somehow rationalized the match as being better for Alethkar.

She looked at Taln again. Then she raised a hand and held out a small, black gemstone. Obsidian. Dalenar frowned, and the crowd murmured.

They fell silent immediately after the gemstone began to glow.

Jasnah took a deep, fulfilling breath. The pure, clear harmony of her Soul Tone hummed in her ears, and she stroked the gemstone with its vibrations. The obsidian's dark light increased, and it rose above her hand, shining and spinning in the night.

It was brilliant, like a star floating above her palm. She could hear its music—the beautiful, unearthly note that she had feared for so long. It whispered to her, embraced her like a child who had wandered astray but finally returned.

With a flick of her mind, she sent the gem spinning toward Taln's corpse. The life gone from him, the *Charan* no longer had effect. The gemstone shattered, transferring its Tone to the flesh, and Jasnah held it steady—forcing the corpse's Tone to change and match that of the gemstone.

Taln's body puffed instantly to smoke. Outcries began, yells of fear and of surprise, but Jasnah ignored them. She stared upward, toward the white smoke that floated away from the pyre. Away with it went her political career, her title and station, her place in the court. Away with it went everything that she had been, everything she had let define who she was.

For those were the things that had kept her from him.

"When Heralds die," she whispered, though by that time no one could hear her over the yells of outrage, "their bodies turn to smoke."

It had been truth to him. She would let it be truth for her as well.

THE PEASANT STOOD AT THE OUTSKIRTS of the crowd, a little surprised by Jasnah's display, but hardly shocked. Few things shocked him any more.

Though his features were those of the man who had gone to see Jasnah a short time before, begging to take the Herald's body, his posture was different. His hands still shook, that was no artifice, but he stood more straight-backed, his mannerisms somewhat more confident.

"That was close," the peasant's companion said. He was a square-faced, hard-eyed man with a flat cut of firm hair.

"Not really," the peasant said. "Even if she hadn't Awakened him, they would have burned the body. If I'd realized she was going to have the funeral so soon, I wouldn't have bothered trying to talk her into giving me the corpse."

"Still too close," the companion said decisively. "If she'd waited just one

more day to hold the funeral . . . Anyway, it's over now. He's gone for good this time."

The peasant nodded, eyes trailing the last bits of smoke evaporating above. Around the pyre, men were yelling in outrage—one in particular demanding an end to his marriage, based on the fact that his wife had hidden her nature as an Awakener from him.

The peasant ignored such screams. He focused only on the smoke. No more immortality. Though they didn't age, they could no longer be reborn. The cycle was over. Death was final, now.

His companion was ready to leave—impatient to be moving, as always. The peasant, however, was more thoughtful. "Why did he come back, Nale?" he asked. "It's all supposed to be over."

"I don't know," Nale snapped. "What did I ever care about these things? Perhaps he found an Elsecaller or something—there are several ways he could have gotten here."

The peasant nodded. But then he asked the harder question. "Do you think . . . *they're* coming too?"

Nale snorted. "Don't be foolish, Prael. After this long? It's all over, just like Jezrien promised. Come on, we've got a long walk ahead of us."

Prael nodded obligingly, and he began to trail after his companion as he slipped away from the crowd. Prael paused, however, when he caught sight of someone standing at the front of the group, with the noblemen—a man who had been hidden from Prael's sight earlier by the large pyre.

He reached out with a shaking hand, catching Nale on the shoulder.

"What?" Nale asked with annoyance.

"Nale!" Prael whispered, pointing back toward the crowd. "Look!"

Nale paused, then suddenly grew tense. "Well, I'll . . ." The man trailed off. It wasn't often that one saw Nale stunned silent.

"He's supposed to be dead!" Prael said. "Dead for good. No coming back this time!"

"I never did see a body," Nale said thoughtfully. "Did you?"

"No, but—"

"Well, I guess we were wrong then," Nale said, turning.

"We can't . . . go, can we?"

"Why not?"

"Because," Prael said, floundering. "It's *him*."

"None of our business," Nale said. "That's what we promised a thousand years ago. No interfering, no looking for one another. It's over. Let's go."

Nale walked away, not waiting for his companion to follow. Prael lingered, looking toward the pyre.

There, standing almost unnoticed by the noblemen, was an aged, beardless man. He had a full head of silvery hair, and he wore the robes of the new scholars people were calling 'stormkeepers.' He was probably posing as a simple learned man from the south.

However, Prael knew him to be someone different. That man was Ishar'Elin, spiritual leader of the Heralds, founder of the Vorin religion, author of the *Arguments*, and designer of the Oathgates. Ishar'Elin, arguably the most powerful of the ten, undeniably the most wise.

Ishar'Elin, the man who had betrayed the other Heralds a thousand years before, breaking the Oathpact and shattering the cycle of Returns.



Nazrif

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