

MYTHBORN

Rise of the Adepts

by

V. Lakshman

MYTHBORN
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family.

*They are my first champions, the joy in my life,
and I'm grateful for their love, faith, guidance,
and unending support.*

I love them with all my heart.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

I have been working in the publishing business as an editor and author for more than twenty-five years, and spent fifteen years as an editor of fantasy novels for Wizards of the Coast, which is one of the biggest fantasy publishers in America and a subsidiary of transmedia giant Hasbro. I have worked with some of the most significant authors in the genre, and brought to publication more than a dozen New York Times best sellers. I am myself a best-selling author, with fifteen published books to my credit, including *The Guide to Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction* (Adams Media, 2010), which is currently the number one book on the subject.

The strength of *Mythborn* rests on three essential foundations: characters, worldbuilding, and the writing itself.

The author's characters are richly-realized and strongly motivated. Each of them possess a unique personal attachment to the world, the other characters, and the story at hand.

The creation of a compelling fantasy world, what we refer to as "worldbuilding," is the single element that differentiates fantasy from the other genres. It is absolutely at the heart of it. *Mythborn* presents a world with exceptional depth and imagination that draws from the archetypes of the fantasy tradition, which are vital touchstones for the fantasy audience, with a subtle and thoughtful hand, thoroughly avoiding cliché.

The author's writing exhibits an entertaining balance of action and adventure with emotional clarity. The story has a fascinating ethical dilemma at its heart. There is never a dull moment in the pacing, language, and truly surprising twists and turns.

It's been a delight working with Vijay and *Mythborn*, and I am this book's, and this author's, biggest fan.

Philip Athans
Editor

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

As a first time author, I want to thank everyone for their help and support with the *Mythborn* series. It's been an amazing road, and you, my fans, are my biggest motivation to write.

This story is about an assassin-in-training, a boy named Arek, being led to his death. Armed with this knowledge, what will Arek do over the next seven days? What would *you* do?

It's the exploration of the villain's arch that most interests me, and I hope entertains you. The story may seem to start off like every other fantasy novel, but don't be fooled. I'm using things that look familiar to open you up something truly different and unique!

If you stick with it, you'll see a world unfold unlike anything you've read before, with dwarven assassins, ultra-lethal combat, and no simple clichés; a place where death is only the beginning, and gods of our own making walk amongst us.

I've enclosed a sneak peek of the next book, *Bane of the Warforged*, at the end of this book for your enjoyment.

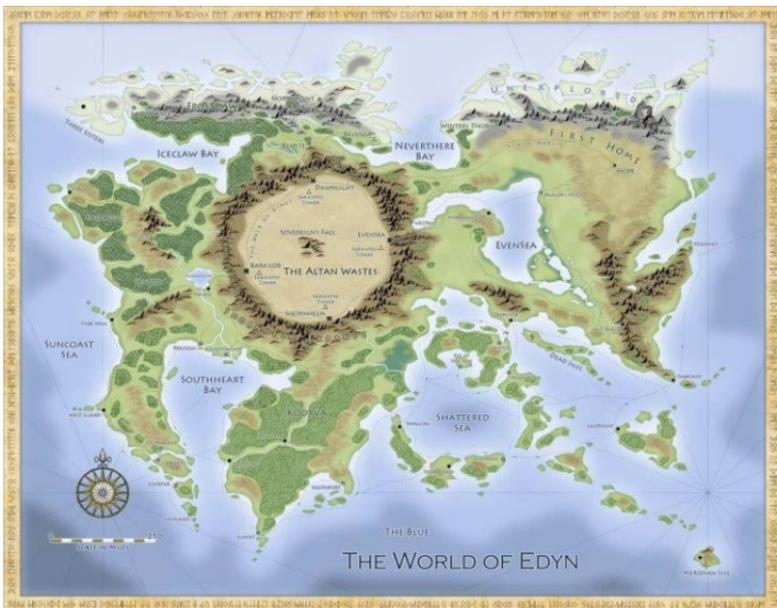
I hope you enjoy reading *Mythborn* as much as I did writing it.

Thank you all!

V. Lakshman
Jan 2014

*“Any sufficiently advanced technology is
indistinguishable from magic.”*

—Arthur C. Clarke



HISTORIES:

SOVEREIGN'S FALL

“War is not about who is right.

It is about who is left.”

—General Valarius Galadine, High Marshal

The final battle lasted for days, leaving the ash slopes littered with the dying and dead. Bodies lay strewn about with the haphazardness of violence passed. King Mikal Galadine stepped his horse forward carefully, mindful not to trod upon those who had fallen in his name. His gray eyes drank in the scene, the dark earth of the volcano's slope now stained with the blood of men. In that gaze, the toll the past years had taken was there for all to see. New lines creased his face, and his shoulders slumped with the weariness of a man who had labored far too long at the task of war.

Too many sacrificed, he thought, and now one final duty. He motioned to his armsmark.

“My lord?” the armsmark grunted.

Mikal sighed, then ordered, “Bring your men forward.”

“At once, sire.” The mounted armsmark turned and cantered back to the lines, barking commands at the assembled soldiers.

The ground shuddered. Mikal's horse whinnied, then stepped to the left, the animal's senses attuned to the minor rifts occasionally snapping into and out of existence around them. He'd been told to expect small quakes, by-products of the magic that allowed a space between their world and the demon plane to open. The tremors would pass, now that the Gate was closed.

Mikal gave his horse a few pats on the neck then turned his attention back to the slope and the ragtag band of men and women descending it. They stumbled along slowly, supporting each other, with barely the energy to breathe, much less walk. Hundreds had gone up to do battle with the demonlord Lilyth, but barely twenty staggered down from that final struggle, their black uniforms gray with soot.

But they had succeeded, and the demon was dead, buried in the volcano's smoking pit. Lilyth had destroyed vast stretches of the land in her quest to subjugate and rule, and much work remained to bring back what her all-consuming hate had perverted. An army of lore-masters had bought new hope, but the price of their service had cut deep.

So many signs had been missed, and so many mistakes made. A younger Mikal Galadine might have dwelt on such regrets and allowed them to change his heart, but the elder king's sense of justice took over, silencing any doubt. Mistakes had indeed been made, but some debts are paid for in blood.

The survivors came down the last rise. At their lead was Mikal's friend Duncan, who raised his hand in greeting. The king could see the effort it cost him.

"Rai'stahn has pulled the dragon-knights back. The gods be praised, we were successful. Lilyth is no more." Duncan lowered his pale eyes. "I am sorry... for the loss of your brother."

The king brushed off the concern that was plain in his friend's voice, and said, "Whatever was left of him died years ago. We do what we must."

Duncan turned his attention to the people behind him, missing the look of determination on his friend's face. "Your leave to move to shelter? Sonya is especially drained." Pride shone in his eyes and a slight smile escaped, despite his immense weariness. His leaden arms moved automatically to support his wife, who stood a bit unsteadily beside him, though her eyes were clear and alert. "She truly is the Lore Mother to us all." At his touch, she leaned into the comfort of his embrace.

"A moment," King Galadine said, holding up a mailed hand. His armsmark cantered forward and handed him a scroll. After he'd backed away, the king undid the black ribbon and unrolled the parchment.

Confusion ran for a moment across Duncan's face. "My lord, can this not wait?"

For the first time, the king met his eyes. "No, it cannot." He looked down at the parchment and began to read:

“On this day, the twentieth of Peraat, I, King Mikal Petracles Galadine, proclaim the Way of Making false. It shall no longer be practiced in the lands of Edyn. Those who continue to adhere to and follow its teachings shall be put to death. Those who exhibit the Talent shall be sacrificed for the greater good of the land.”

The king met his friend’s confused gaze, “Never again shall we find ourselves under the yoke of the Way.” A breath passed, then two, and in that instant the two knew each other’s hearts. Then Mikal bellowed, “Archers, forward!”

The armsmark repeated the command and one hundred archers moved forward in lines on either side of the king.

Duncan looked about in alarm, then shook his head in disbelief. “What are you doing?”

“I killed my brother for the safety of this land, archmage. Why would I spare you?”

Duncan dropped all pretense of mannered speech and exclaimed, “We fought side by side! Now we’re to be executed?”

“No. You are a casualty of war.” The king turned and nodded.

Bows bent and released, their strings thrumming as deadly shafts sped to their targets. Having defeated Lilyth, few mages had any strength left to defend themselves. Arrows pursued the few who tried to flee, ripping through flesh and finding vital organs. Most died where they stood.

Sonya screamed, diving at her husband, who had not moved. She caught hold of his chest, placing herself in the way of coming death. In a moment the sound of bowstrings stopped. She cautiously opened her eyes and found the rest of her friends and compatriots scattered about. All were dead or dying. Only she and Duncan remained.

Duncan looked around in shock. “You... they defend you with their lives.” He looked up numbly. “They had children, families...”

“No,” the king said.

His answer caught the archmage off guard. The king’s dead gaze never shifted as he watched a sickening realization set in across Duncan’s features.

“You killed them, too?”

Mikal remained silent, his eyes searching the blasted landscape for an answer. Then he looked back at his friend and said, “This can never happened again.”

Duncan shook his head, “Women and children?” He paused for a moment, then added, “Why have we been spared?”

The king motioned with his hand and a runner came forward with Valor, the fabled bow of House Galadine. "You have not, for I share the burden of my law." He grasped the weapon, rune-carved and ancient. Its black wood seemed to soak up the little light left. "Hold each other. I will make it quick."

Sonya stepped forward, her hands protectively over her belly and said, "You'll be killing three of us."

It was simply said, but delivered with such intensity it swept aside any royal formalities, speaking directly to the man she had called friend these many years, instead of a king who now sat in judgment.

Mikal's gaze fell to her stomach, her meaning instantly clear. Slowly, his chin dropped to his chest and he slumped forward, every part of him physically echoing the grief he felt. He sat there for a moment in silence, then answered her from under his helm, his voice sounding hollow even to himself. "It is the worst thing I have done," he said, even as he slowly nocked an arrow. "But not the worst I will ever do."

"How can you live with yourself?" she accused.

The king took a deep breath, then raised himself and met her incredulous stare without flinching. "Make no mistake, my lady, for I am damned as well. I have killed the innocent, those pledged to my service, even children. Unborn shall be put to death for no crime they can control. Is this justice, fairness, or misery I now spread in the name of safety?"

Neither answered, but the battlefield replied with the moans of the dying, and the cawing of crows. Then, Duncan turned to his wife and held her close. Their eyes met, the years behind their gaze speaking more than any words could. Their hands touched tenderly, and in that briefest of moments a small blue spark jumped from her to him, unnoticed by anyone else. Duncan looked at her, first with astonishment, then with anguish.

She grabbed him tighter, then whispered something in his ear, to which he slowly nodded. Their embrace lasted only a moment before Duncan met Mikal's eyes and said, "Nothing dies." It was an age-old adage, warning of the ghosts injustice always raised.

The king's grip tightened, but he said nothing. He sighted down the shaft, his hands steady, and slowly drew back. Valor groaned, as if the runebow knew what was about to happen and ached for release. Then, its *twang-thrum* echoed across the battlefield, the sound scattering a few black-winged thieves, their bellies full of the flesh of men. Two bodies fell, pierced by one arrow.

The king looked down, drew a shuddering breath, then turned back to his handiwork. His eyes, however, didn't waver with remorse or regret, for there was none. They remained hard, like the granite rocks surrounding him, and just as dead.

Many years passed while King Mikal Galadine descended further into grief. Some heard a cawing of crows whenever the king was near. Others heard screams echoing from a far off battlefield. The word, 'scythe', was cautiously whispered, but no one knew why. Perhaps none wanted to say, 'curse' – that the king now reaped what he had sown.

Madness soon overcame grief, ghosts of a friend's last words haunting Mikal's every waking moment. No one knew exactly when he decided to take his own life, only that the deed was done after an heir had been born.

Darker times, though, were still to come...

Part I

THE LORE FATHER

In combat, make every intention

To kill your opponent.

Every cut, every strike, every breath,

Must feed victory.

—Kensei Tsao, The Lens of Blades

You ask me to put my apprentice in harm's way," Silbane Petracles addressed the council, his voice firm. Second only to the lore father, none doubted his wisdom or power. That power now ran through his voice, echoing with an undercurrent of anger.

His hair stood cropped close to his head, and a goatee framed a lean face. His body followed suit, with dark clothing, functional and well-used. Silbane's flesh, where it showed, had the weather-beaten look of a man who spent much time in the sun, with corded muscles bunched tightly around a thin, tall frame. His eyes sparkled with intelligence. Normally they would be laughing, as if an unspoken joke lay forever at the tip of his tongue. But the mood of the council now reflected in Silbane's eyes: hard, cold slate.

"We haven't interfered in the land's business since Sovereign's Fall," Silbane continued, turning to address the lore father directly, "and now you want us to help the Galadine royal family? You and Thera suffered the most under their rule. Have you lost your mind?" His arms opened, demanding an answer.

The other adepts stared at the lore father. Though they mostly agreed with Silbane, a hesitation hung in the air, an unspoken acknowledgment that if Lore Father Themun Dreys himself petitioned the council for action, the need must be dire indeed. Themun picked his weathered frame up and took hold of his runestaff of office. He made his way around the table until he stood side by side with Silbane who, with a respectful bow, released the floor and retreated.

Themun didn't look as ancient as his years would indicate. Power still coursed through his veins. The same power that earned him his place as lore father also gave him the appearance of a man in his late fifties, though he was centuries old. Still, compared to the other adepts, Themun Dreys looked old and tired.

He let his gaze sweep the arc of the chamber, fixing each of the council members with an icy stare. As the others waited, he started to speak, his surprisingly deep voice cutting through the room. "Silbane speaks truly. I have walked two-hundred years or more on this blessed land and have seldom taken action without reason." He encompassed the watching adepts with a gesture, his eyes softening. "We are all that's left."

Themun paused, then in a fluid motion brought his runestaff up and slammed the black metal heel onto the floor. Sparks flew and in a blinding flash of light, a knight appeared. Tall and outfitted in plated armor, distinctive for both its archaic form and the single, circle-shaped sigil emblazoned on his chest, he stood motionless yet commanded the attention of everyone in the room. Even without the trappings of knighthood, though, they all knew instantly who he was. Beneath a visored helm stared pale blue eyes glowing with malice.

A few adepts instinctively raised their flameskins at the first hint of violence, colored fire igniting around their bodies in protective halos. The lighter the fire, the more powerful the Adept. It was a gesture not lost on the lore father, who nodded and said, "You'll protect yourselves, at least. Maybe *that* will be worth something." He turned to an adept, this one built like a bear. "Name him."

The adept, Giridian Alacar, stood in response, long brown hair falling below his muscular shoulders. His face was square cut, with bright eyes beneath dark, bushy brows. His ursine form moved with grace, and as he strode out to the center floor one could see he was a man accustomed to his own size.

Giridian knew the question was rhetorical, the lore father's way of setting them in their place. He quenched his emerald flameskin without a thought. "I don't need the history lesson," he growled in answer, these theatrics obviously both frustrating and angering him.

A strikingly beautiful woman chose then to speak. Long black hair spilled down to her waist while blue eyes called to mind ocean waves. Thera Dawnlight radiated an air of steadfastness in a storm. "I think it safe to say none of us do. Lore Father, this behavior ill becomes you."

Themun smiled, ignoring Thera, his eyes never wavering from Giridian's own. "Then I shall name him." He walked around the image of the knight, his runestaff glowing faintly. "He is General Valarius Galadine, brother to the king who decreed we be killed on sight." Themun's staff hit the granite floor at the end of his statement, punctuating the point.

"How have the last two hundred years passed for you?" the lore father went on. "In safety, raising families to love and cherish?" He spat these words, knowing the sacrifice each of the gathered adepts had made to keep their knowledge alive. "Or have those two centuries been spent in hiding? Here, if lucky, alone and hunted if not? What of the children in the land born with Talent?"

Giridian shook his head then addressed the lore father, "The persecutions are over! The latest Galadine has put an end to them."

Themun scoffed. "You think we're now welcome in the land?"

Giridian answered, "Master Silbane is right. You ask him to take his apprentice into harm's grasp? I, too, cannot agree."

Rubbing his beard, Silbane said, "And you haven't yet told me why he's so important." Silbane referred to his own apprentice, but the statement could just as easily have applied to the conjured image of the general in armor.

Themun nodded, then said to the assembled adepts, "I have a simple question. You know of the destruction caused by Valarius when he opened the gate to Lilyth's world. Would any of you allow such a tragedy to replay itself if you could prevent it?"

Giridian shook his head, angry, ignoring the question and pointing instead at the image. “There hasn’t been a fully trained adept of that power in centuries! Even you, Lore Father, have mastered only a fraction of the Old Lore.” Giridian bowed in apology and quickly added, “I don’t discount the very strength it took for you to survive, but it would be folly to call ourselves their peers. For all our training, we’re still a shadow of what we once were.”

Then there was steel in his voice as Giridian continued, “But perhaps it is the Lore Father who requires a history lesson.” He looked at the assembled adepts. “We can lay devastation to dozens of men, but who can still call lightning from the sky?” His eyes wandered until they met Thera’s. “Who has the oceans at their command?” He shook his head, and in a sad voice said, “Two centuries under the yoke of Galadine persecution have forged us into deadly warriors, but not one of us wields the might of the Old Lords.”

Themun replied in a low and dangerous voice, “We may not have the Old Lords’ knowledge, but we still serve this land. It has need of us now.” He searched the familiar faces, hoping to find allies. He finally came to Silbane, who held his gaze for a moment before breaking contact and looking away.

It was then, Themun realized, that without some answers that even his old friend had reached his limit. He paused, then took a breath, reminding himself a patient hand was needed. What they were about to learn would require each adept’s commitment to its fullest.

“I stand here now only by chance,” he started to say but then stopped, looking at the image he had conjured for the first time. He stood there in silence, then came to a decision. Better they know what they faced, now. In a forthright voice that didn’t waver he said simply, “The demon, Lilyth, was not destroyed.”

Dragor Dahl, a powerfully built adept whose dark skin bespoke of an ancestry from the southern continent of Koorva, motioned for permission to speak. With a nod from Themun, he said smoothly, “And you bring this up now? Your timing seems... convenient.”

Themun’s eyes hardened at the implied challenge and in a low voice he replied, “Would you tell a people weary of war, who blamed you for the summoning of such a creature, that you were unable to eradicate it?” He waited for a response but there was none. Dragor stood firm, his skepticism plainly written on his face and stance for all to see, waiting for the lore father to continue.

A moment passed, then Themun said, "I thought not. For what it is worth, we will never know what the First Council planned to do. King Galadine saw to that.

"My father taught me much before he passed, but I also learned from the world itself. I grew in power, and over the years became one with the Way. When that happened, the knowledge of the lore fathers who came before me sparkled, like points of light before my eyes. Through this, I learned the fate of Lilyth. I know the demon still lives."

Themun wished this burden had fallen upon another council, one better prepared to shoulder the responsibility. He sighed but continued, his voice firm, "I share this knowledge with you now, hoping you can see the need for action."

Silbane looked at the lore father and simply asked, "Bara'cor?"

The lore father nodded. "A Gate rests at Bara'cor, once under King Bara's watchful eye."

Giridian asked, "Why worry? None were left after Sovereign's Fall, so who could know of its existence?"

Themun sighed then answered, "None but Bara. We assume he guarded it, but when he and the dwarves of Bara'cor disappeared, the guarding of this rift ended with them."

"What is it you would have us do, challenge the king's forces?" challenged Master Kisan Talaris. "I have dealt with their ilk more than you, Lore Father. They don't parley, even when I whisper death in their ears."

Kisan Talaris looked no more than thirty, though she was in fact close to her fiftieth year. Her appearance was a study in composed lethality. Her features were lithe, her eyes bright and alert, and though she was opposite to Thera in most ways, Themun still considered her quite beautiful. But she was as stubborn as the day they first met, an irksome trait undiminished by age or experience.

Yet Kisan was the only other besides Silbane to have earned the rank of Master, having progressed quickly. Next to Silbane or the lore father, she was perhaps the most powerful adept in the room. And Kisan killed Magehunters on sight, a dangerous reality he would have to balance when even hinting of coming to the aid of Bara'cor.

Themun thought for a moment and then directed a more careful answer to the listening adepts. “King Bara was as old as the rock around him and as wise. This rift was nothing new or special. Its existence had been known since the fortress’s forging by the first *builders*, but its purpose remained a mystery. I believe Bara waited for the Old Lords to return from battle, to determine what to do next. Bara’cor is dwarven-made, naturally resistant to magic, so I doubt it overly concerned him. That is, until no one returned.”

Themun looked down for a moment, gathering his thoughts. He began haltingly, almost speaking to himself, “A moment ago I wished this problem had fallen to others, a childish thought.” He raised his head and looked at the assembled adepts, his gaze hardening, his voice finally finding the strength to become firm once again, “This task falls to us, and we carry the burden.”

When none responded, he shook his head and said simply, “Indulge me.”

He gestured with his runestaff and the middle of the chamber’s floor glowed in response, a pulsing blue spreading outward from the center. Slowly, a featureless expanse of sand and desolation became visible, as if seen from high above.

“You know the Altan Wastes... roughly circular, and at each cardinal point—” Themun pointed at a miniature castle, no bigger than his thumb, which rose on his map—“lies one of the great strongholds. The middle area is barren, deadly to those not desert bred.”

Kisan said, “The nomads are the only people known to be able to survive there. They have little regard for outsiders.”

“It isn’t just Bara’cor that lies besieged,” Themun went on, “but some force has attacked and destroyed the other fortresses of the desert.” He turned on the shocked faces surrounding him. “Shornhelm, Dawnlight, now EvenSea, *gone*. Something has overcome inconceivable odds, a fact I find both frightening, and hard to comprehend. By chance or design, Bara’cor stands alone.”

The council chamber fell silent, each adept weighing this new information. They knew Themun had the ability to see things happening elsewhere in the world. It was this power that had saved so many, bringing them to Meridian Isle. Now he used the same Sight to warn them of a danger they couldn’t have seen themselves. To have Bara’cor under siege was believable. To hear something had destroyed the other ancient guardians of the desert was unimaginable.

Giridian leaned back, a question in his eyes. “You believe whatever force this is, it seeks the Gate hidden within Bara’cor? But what does Silbane’s apprentice have to do with this?”

“If this were an isolated incident, with one fortress under attack, I would likely ignore it. The Galadine line seems to enjoy waging war whenever the outcome favors the royal black and gold. The siege of Dawnlight not even twenty years past is testament to that.”

Giridian countered Themun with, “Bara’cor is a natural target, as it defends the one pass to the lower, fertile plains, and the capital city.” He waited, but the lore father didn’t say anything in reply.

In the silence, Kisan asked, “You’re suggesting we aid Bara’cor, home of the Magehunters and their filth? And assuming we’re successful, how do we close this Gate?” She took a moment to make sure she had everyone’s attention, then said, “Instead of risking an apprentice, why not infiltrate the nomad encampment and kill their leaders? Two of us could do this and escape, unseen and unscathed.” Her indifferent proclamation of death hung in the air, a task that could be accomplished as easily as saying the words.

Themun remained silent, leaving the rest of the council to wonder if the lore father weighed Kisan’s suggestion seriously or not.

Dragor was the first to break the silence. “You would murder people who had done nothing—”

“According to the lore father, they are responsible for the destruction of three other fortresses,” retorted Kisan. “They’ve killed thousands already. In my mind, that is enough. We hunt them down and do what we must.”

“We don’t know it was the nomads,” said Thera. “And, Kisan, is this not crossing the line? We have never meted out punishment in such a manner. Even the First Council never took it upon themselves to be both judge *and* executioner.”

“They might have lived longer if they had,” Kisan replied.

“Is that your answer to everything? Kill?” Thera shot back.

Looking at Kisan was to look death in the eye, and still feel a strange elation when that gaze was returned. To Themun it was like comparing the beauty one found in a flower with a finely crafted blade. Both were beautiful, but the blade represented a deadly simplicity, an instrument forged for only one purpose. Kisan dealt death, and in doing so insured change.

But Thera nurtured life, and in doing so cherished harmony between all living things. They each represented complementary ideals that while necessary, were philosophically antithetical. Because of this, no deep friendship had formed between the two, for neither could truly understand the other. Yet life and death had their places, and when channeling the Way in its purest form, each were stunning to behold.

“What of Themun’s father, who was certainly responsible for saving *you*?” Kisan replied, realizing that Themun wouldn’t yet intervene. She fell back into her chair and planted the barb, arms crossed. “Quite a killer, Themun’s father, from what I understand.”

“You’re right,” Themun finally said, icily. “My father *was* a killer. But before you attack Thera or his memory, you’d be wise to remember his sons are, too.”

He locked eyes with the younger master, who tried to meet his gaze but could not, breaking contact to inspect the tips of her fingers. “No offense was meant,” she said coolly.

Silbane held up a hand, then said in a measured voice, “There are other things to consider. Getting into and out of the nomad camp won’t be so easy. If the other fortresses have been defeated, someone or something is clearly helping them.”

Themun waited a moment longer, until he was satisfied that Kisan knew her place, then nodded, “I agree.”

“Now *he*’s all knowing?” Kisan scoffed, meaning Silbane.

“These nomads are horsemen and traders,” Silbane retorted, “not experts in siege warfare. Perhaps the lore father is correct and they are being helped, by someone with knowledge, experience, and power.”

Dragor stepped forward and asked, “Are we not the last?”

Silbane turned to the questioning adept and said, “Think. We have created hundreds of disciples, both wayward students and those with true Talent, who failed to achieve the Black. Our last combat instructor, Keren, makes her home near Moonhold. She seems at peace with her life, but others bear watching.” He paused, thinking, then said, “We are here, so we must conclude there are others.”

The lore father shrugged and said, “Perhaps, but we don’t know this as fact, and none of our errant students have the power to destroy a stronghold. It comes to this: Three of the four fortresses have fallen, I know the Gate is hidden somewhere within Bara’cor, and the nomads now besiege that same fortress.”

Themun looked at each council member. “Perhaps Kisan is correct,” he offered, attempting to soothe his earlier treatment of the younger master. “Mayhap we need a falcon for this mission.” He gave her a small smile, which she gratefully returned.

Silbane shook his head. “I can’t believe the answer lies in, ‘kill first and ask questions later.’ If we follow that line of thinking, we should engineer the destruction of Bara’cor herself, just to be sure.”

“Perhaps we should,” said the lore father after a moment’s thought.

“Themun, this is insane!” Silbane exclaimed.

As if sensing the council would need a solution rather than another problem, Giridian said, “While destroying Bara’cor may be out of the reach of our knowledge, there are artifacts in the vaults below that could accomplish it.”

“You speak so easily of power and strength, but what of right and wrong?” Thera asked, sadness plain in her voice. “Should we not ask ourselves what is the right thing to do?”

Silbane paced a slow circle. “Bara’cor is the path for trade between the lower plains and the upper desert region. It would disrupt the trade routes and throw the entire land into turmoil. All this, on the *suspicion* of a Gate opening? We need to be more careful in our response.”

“Perhaps we should consider Kisan’s suggestion then, as distasteful as it may seem,” Giridian said. “Kill the leaders of the nomads before they enter Bara’cor. It will buy us the time necessary to determine what we should do next.” The adept then looked at Themun and continued, “As she says, they are responsible for the deaths of many. This would be fit punishment and limit any collateral damage.”

Themun sighed with true sadness, then responded in a soft voice, “I never meant for things to come to this.” He knew the seed had been planted, and with it the steps necessary to ensure the land’s safety. Now all he needed was time for his council to accept his line of reasoning. After that, he could address the need for Silbane’s apprentice, another subject sure to cause controversy.

Kisan stood, emboldened by the seeming support of her idea, and asked, “Can we not *control* Lilyth? I realize we speak of a demon, but with our knowledge—”

“Lilyth would possess you,” Themun replied. “You would be but a vessel for it to dominate and occupy. Once taken, it gains access to all your knowledge and powers, but most importantly, permanence on this plane of existence.”

Themun looked pointedly at Kisan, his gaze brooking no argument, then he went on, “We won’t risk ourselves to Lilyth’s influence. If the demonkind re-enter this world, they will seek possession on a scale vaster than any in the past.” He then looked at Silbane and said, “And as it has been so eloquently pointed out, we’re not what we once were.”

He stood and raised his staff, bringing it at arm’s length before him. “We shall recess for the afternoon and reconvene at dusk. When we meet again, I’ll explain about Silbane’s apprentice. Your insight is needed if we’re to plan a course of action.”

Bowing once, he excused the other council members, sinking wearily into his chair. He watched as they filed out, Kisan being the first out the door. Themun cleared his throat and caught the attention of his friend, “Silbane, a moment of your time.”

Silbane remained, a questioning look on his face.

“You must be wondering what Arek has to do with all this. As his master, you have the most insight into his abilities.” He avoided Silbane’s gaze, fingering the runes on his staff.

“You flatter me,” Silbane replied, “but despite Arek’s talent in combat, we both know he has significant shortcomings when it comes to the Way.”

Themun shook a dismissive hand and took a different tact. “It is opening. I sense it,” he said, referring now to the Gate.

Silbane furrowed his brow, a disbelieving look on his face. “As Dragor said, you have a knack for timing. It must feel nice to play us, but I don’t have the power you do. Even I can sense nothing at this distance. And claiming my apprentice is somehow pivotal and yet expendable does not help your position. At least,” he added, “not with me.”

“And what of Kisan’s suggestion?”

Silbane pursed his lips, clearly annoyed at the way Themun kept changing the subject. “You seemed overly eager to put her in her place.”

“She insults the man who made it possible for all of us to live. Stubborn and mule-headed, nothing with her has changed.”

“You are still the same, so easily angered when it comes to your father.” Silbane offered a sad smile then said, “One or two of us could get in and out of the camp with little to fear. And while trained, I don’t relish the role of assassin yet again.”

“You should have thought of that before accepting the Black. It may come to that, if no other solution is found.”

Silbane looked into his friend’s eyes. “I know, but you keep feeding us bits of information, so get comfortable with the idea of waiting.” The last bit was delivered with a good measure of sarcasm, a clear indication that Silbane was in no mood to bandy words back and forth.

Themun closed his eyes, wishing the dull headache that had recently become a part of his life would recede for just a moment. As he heard Silbane get up, he put out a restraining hand and said, “Whoever is helping the nomads could be formidable. Furthermore, the Gate *is* opening, and we need a way to seal it before it does.” Themun hesitated, then added, “We would need something to mask your approach, *and* disrupt the Gate itself.”

Silbane stared at the lore father for what seemed an eternity, then a cold weariness stole over him. This had been a charade, a game played for his benefit. It was a puerile gift from a friend who owed him more than this, more than his life. “He’s just a boy.” Silbane looked away, his eyes shut as if this physical act could keep the inevitable at bay. “He would never survive.”

Themun’s gaze fell and in a soft voice he said, “Don’t be melodramatic. He’s certainly not helpless.”

Silbane had no answer. Almost as an afterthought, likely to confirm what he already suspected, Silbane asked, “Has this decision already been made?”

Themun sensed his friend’s frustration and held up a forestalling hand. “Circumstances would have to be truly dire for us to allow the Gate to remain unchecked and unheeded. I didn’t come to this lightly.” He blew out a gust of air and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his forehead as he thought about his choices. “Yes. I’ll do what is best for the land. If that means sending your apprentice on a dangerous but vital mission, so be it.”

“And if I refuse?”

Dead silence.

Then Themun barked, “Refuse? We act for the good of this land. *All of us!* That includes you *and* your apprentice!” The same anger that told Kisan she had dared too much, now fell upon Silbane. Themun made sure the master knew there was no doubt he would make good on his next promise as he said coldly, “I will assign Kisan to the task, if you decide to ignore your Oath.”

Silbane was speechless, the Lore Father’s sudden anger shocking him. He stepped back, making his way to the double doors that led out of the chamber. There, he stopped, as though not trusting himself to speak, the sickening realization setting in that Arek’s only hope lay on what he did next.

Then, something caught his eye. The master detected a wavering of the air, as when the sun bakes the earth, except this stood in the shadows behind Themun. His gaze narrowed, but then the mirage was gone, dissipating like the release of a breath long held.

“What was that?” Silbane motioned to the space behind the lore father.

Themun paused, leaning on his armrest, but said nothing.

When it was clear the lore father was not going to answer, Silbane shook his head then turned and left, his stride betraying the anger he felt at being manipulated.

Themun watched him go. Events were unfolding, and if Rai’s tahn was to be believed, the fate of their world hung in the balance. His mind spun through every permutation to come up with a solution that didn’t involve sacrificing one of their own, but came back to the same place.

“You have to be more careful,” Themun said aloud to the empty chamber. Silence was the only answer, though he had expected nothing more. Nonetheless, it was not his place yet to question the will of the Conclave.

What, he wondered, would you have counseled, Father, and am I now living by your lessons? Privately, he doubted his father would have been proud of anything he had done today.

Journal Entry 1

Banished.

It is with a heavy heart that I share my thoughts, but history has a way of remembering us as she wants, and she is a fickle mistress. Having been branded tyrant, usurper, and worse, this may be my only voice.

Dragons are traitors, and first amongst these is Rai'stahn. I name him so you can greet him with death, for he deserves no better absolution than cold steel. He never understood his place, and now survives on the victory I seized with my bare hands.

It is a wish, and I admit a selfish one that you know of the sacrifices I made for all of us. Though they think me dead, I gain an immortality of sorts, for my legend will never die.

It is a small solace, perhaps noble to you, hollow sounding to me. I am not content with the way the dice have rolled. I do not accept my fate. It does not sit well with me. Let those who pray for my death continue to do so. Nothing they do will change who I am, but their prayers give me strength, life.

And just whose tribute do you read? Will knowing impugn your sense of fairness? Will you wish for the axe on my neck, or place the garland at my feet? We will walk the road a bit longer in anonymity, so you may yet be more charitable to my memory, in light of my many sacrifices.

It will not be the first time a hero stood maligned, nor a commoner such as yourself learns the truth.

Come, there will be much to tell you in the pages ahead...

THE NOMADS

Those who show no fear, tend to inspire it.

—Altan proverb

The desert dunes glowed red in the setting sun, shimmering from the day's heat. Occasionally a small *windspin* would swirl the sand into a cloud of grit and dust, working under any amount of protection a weary traveler might have. The Altan Wastes were inhospitable at best, deadly at worst.

A lone figure stood atop a dune, his robes streaming behind him in the hot wind. Raising a massive arm, he unhooked a pack from his heavily muscled back and dropped it to the sandy floor, grunting as he released its weight.

Hemendra, leader of the clans, tribes, families, and kinsmen who called themselves the Altan, unwound the light cotton *shahwal* from his face. His eyes squinted at the wavering image of the fortress, rising just out of catapult range. He wore the loose fitting robes favored by the desert nomads to protect himself from the harsh wind and sun. As it beat down on the sands, he reached to his belt, detaching his water skin. Taking a small sip, he then corked and replaced it with the efficiency of a man who had survived fifty years under the desert's baleful yellow eye.

He was soon joined by two other men dressed much as he was. Though both would be considered large, they were almost tiny compared to the sheer size of the clanchief. He acknowledged the leader Paksen's bow with a grunt before turning to look back at the fortress.

"Mighty U'Zar," said the lead man, addressing Hemendra, "I come to ask if you wish to pull our troops back. The Redrobe has begun the summoning of the storm and wishes our men to be ready."

Hemendra inwardly grimaced at the mention of the strange man amongst them, but was careful in his response, especially in front of clanfists as ambitious as these were. The twenty or so clans they alone controlled, the largest number under one man besides himself, had come to worship the man in red robes with an almost religious zeal, thinking him chosen by the Great Sun itself. Hemendra worried this Redrobe commanded too much consideration, but had to be careful how he dealt with it. As long as Bara'cor's walls remained intact, this man was necessary. As long as *that* remained true, his lifewater would remain unspilled.

Turning from the sight of the fortress, he addressed the lead clanfist, "We shall camp, Indry. Have the brothers dig themselves in for the storm and shield the fires." Hemendra paused for a moment, looking out over the Altan Wastes. So beautiful, he reflected, yet as deadly as a *sarinak*'s sting. Turning back to the two waiting chieftains he finished, "Tell the sun sages to begin the bloodletting for their spells. Tomorrow, under cover of the storm, we advance on Bara'cor again."

"And the Redrobe's orders?" Indry asked, looking at Bara'cor with hunger in his eyes.

Hemendra eyed this nomad chieftain, his hand casually straying to rest on the bone hilt of his fighting knife, a knife that never left his side. He saw Paksen's eyes widen as the second clanfist realized his companion's error and prayed the chieftain would react so he could kill him, too. Wisely, Paksen didn't move.

"Tell me of the *asabiyya*."

The other chieftain spun to face the u'zar, the simple question laced with deadly undertones, and realized his error. He fell to his knees and touched his forehead to the sand. "Mighty U'Zar—"

"Tell me, Indry."

The man stammered, then said, "Me against my brothers; my brothers and me against our cousins; my brothers, cousins, and me against the world."

"And what family is the Redrobe to you?"

Indry shook his head slowly, almost as if he knew his fate. "He is nothing, Mighty U'Zar."

Slowly, Paksen also fell to his knees and touched his forehead to the sand. "Of course, Mighty U'Zar, your orders are not to be questioned."

Hemendra waited for a moment, looking towards the camp. He could hear the priests chanting their spells, ones that banished fatigue or called up springlets of fresh water from the dry, wind-blown wastes. Looking down, he growled, "Look at me, Indry." At first he thought the man would refuse, as what could only be a stifled sob ran quickly through him. Then, as Indry's head slowly came up, Hemendra kicked him under the chin.

Blood spurted as the ill-fated clanfist bit through his tongue and went tumbling backward down the dune, landing in a heap at the bottom. Hemendra strode down and grabbed him by his neck, picking him up like a rag doll. Dark blood ran freely in rivulets out of the nomad's mouth, dripping off his chin and staining the front of his robes. He was on the verge of screaming when Hemendra's grip tightened like a vise, choking off any sound. "Your lifewater is accepted."

The man fought, his desire for life overcoming any fear he had for the clanchief. He tried punching, kicking, and pushing the gargantuan man, trying to find any kind of purchase or weakness, but Hemendra's grasp was like iron, unyielding. Indry's punches soon became lethargic, then feeble. Finally, they stopped all together.

Hemendra waited, watching until life drained from the man's eyes, then he released his hold. He flung the dead nomad to the desert floor, feeling his fingers stick together where blood had congealed. Stalking back up the dune he stooped to grab a handful of sand and began to rub off the drying blood. Paksen, who he noticed had not moved, slowly came to his feet and paid the proper homage, palms to forehead. I will have to watch this one, he thought, angry at himself for letting the Redrobe's presence affect him so.

He could have let Indry's lapse go unpunished—killing nomads for slight transgressions was not sustainable, not for a true leader of the Altan—and Indry had brothers and cousins who would now feel obligated to retaliate. They would die too, in a ripple of violence, but to what purpose? He had been foolhardy, he knew.

Yet another part of him forgave his harsh action. Indry *had* given him what he needed most, a show of strength in front of a clanfist as powerful as Paksen. Fear was a strong motivator, and killing one to maintain order and discipline was valuable in its own way. It also stripped Paksen of an ally, should he think to challenge the u'zar. And it was clear to Hemendra that Paksen's ambition would soon exceed his caution. He nodded permission as Paksen bowed and went to see to his orders.

His eyes followed the retreating form of the clanfist, flat and empty of emotion. That day, he knew with cold certainty, would be the day Paksen died. For now, though, he would carry the word of the killing back to the men, and sprinkle the waters of doubt into their cups of ambition.

Behind him, over eight thousand nomads made ready to assault the walls of Bara'cor again. As the Great Sun dipped below the western horizon, he could see the fortress's minarets, the flags atop unfurled and rippling in the wind: a golden lion on a black field. Hemendra rewrapped the *shahwal*, careful to cover his mouth and nose. Tomorrow the storm would be here in full force and his nomads would hide in its swirling sands.

"Once again we follow you, Redrobe," he whispered into the warm desert breeze, but the words came out like a curse.

Casting one last look around, Hemendra made his way down the dune and back to his tent to perform his evening ablutions. Storms, spells, or not, he vowed, Bara'cor would soon see its last sunset.

THE MASTER

In preparation for close combat,

Take heed of your opponent's stance;

In making a strike, his arms;

In giving and taking blows, his chest;

In all else, watch your opponent's eyes.

—Tir Combat Academy, Basic Forms & Stances

Silbane moved through the wide hallway toward the stairwell that would take him to his quarters. This is insanity, he thought. Using Arek couldn't be the only answer. There were always other options. Still, the danger to Edyn was great. Were they not pledged to serve that need? And as the lore father had pointed out, his apprentice intended to take the same oath of service as an adept, a Binding Oath. It was not a decision taken lightly.

In fact, the Binding Oath did much more once uttered, for it combined the true intent of the two who pledged it, heard and enforced by the Way. Breaking the oath had varying degrees of punishment, from something as simple as blindness or deafness, to complete annihilation. A dark cloud would appear, and the person would be forever changed. None had ever escaped its punishment, so the uttering of such an oath was taken with the utmost sincerity.

Was Arek not already committed by his allegiance to the council, and his intention to test for the rank of adept? Was he not governed by his intention to take this very same oath, whether uttered or not? Silbane didn't trust himself to answer that question now.

Another thing troubling the master was that the other fortresses of the land had been destroyed. This only strengthened the argument that something was happening, and it was not some random testing of strength. There were many other targets, ones more convenient and easier to defeat than an armed and guarded fortress of granite. Regardless of his opinion of nomad strength, Silbane knew that desert warriors armed with horn bows would not survive an assault on a fortress stronghold. At least, not without help. Themun had surely gone through the same line of reasoning, and staged that charade for his benefit. Silbane inwardly cursed, then asked himself, what had been the point?

He strode up the circular stairway, exiting on a level high above the main training halls. He ignored the bows of respect protocol demanded students and servants offer as he passed, his mind deep in thought. If Bara'cor is the last fortress standing, then the nomads have combined their strength with someone else, and Themun is correct... it didn't bode well for the security of the Gate.

Silbane strode through the double doors to his quarters, which swung silently shut behind him. Placing his things in a corner, he made his way into his personal library. There he searched the stacks for a particular manuscript on the history of Bara'cor, snapping his fingers when his eyes fell on its faded brown leather cover. Retrieving it, he settled into a plush chair near a window and began to read.

Bara'cor, it stated, stood at the southwest corner of the Altan Wastes, straddling Land's Edge, aptly named for the two thousand foot cliff face separating the upper desert region from the lush, abundant grasslands surrounding the capital city of Haven below. The fortress stood with its back to Land's Edge protecting the one safe way down, a wide road cut out of the sheer face of the cliff.

As a result, Bara'cor had found an ever-increasing amount of people traveling through its walls, the pass between the upper and lower regions creating the perfect atmosphere for trade to flourish and grow. The fortress served as the protective nexus for traders from the Wastes and those from the lower, fertile valleys to meet in a neutral place that welcomed all.

It was dwarven-made, with towers and minarets reaching gracefully into the desert sky. The stone itself was shaped in a manner unlike any known in the land, as if poured and then hardened in place. It was beautiful, and bespoke of a mastery of stonemasonry long since lost.

Still, the citizens of Bara'cor couldn't entirely dismiss the obvious intent of the original builders to protect their work of art. Bara'cor held a strong military presence and surrounding its fragile inner city were hundred-foot walls of solid granite, rising out of the desert floor. It stood alone along the cliff's edge like a great stone fist so only the walls facing the desert were open to possible attack.

Atop those walls were catapults, standing like silent sentinels. The area in front of the stronghold was mostly sand with a few boulders strewn haphazardly, as if some giant had upended a sack of rocks, none of which were big enough to afford any protection against the deadly barrage of missile fire Bara'cor could bring to bear.

One of the most astounding facts about the fortress, Silbane read, was the natural lake within its walls. Fed through underground springs, Bara'cor had an unlimited supply of fresh water, a commodity worth more than gold to inhabitants of the Wastes. Silbane sat back for a moment, the last thought repeating in his head.

Closing the book, he moved out into the main room and settled down near another large window. The afternoon sun shone with its usual springtime intensity. In the distance, he could hear the rumble of the waves crashing onto the surf. He noticed a few of the older apprentices gathering for informal practice on the hill behind the tower, their brown uniforms contrasting with the bright green of the grass.

The nomads could be after that source of water. Though it didn't seem logical, no explanation could be ruled out. But there were easier ways to get water, including trading between the people of the desert and those of the fortresses—a practice well respected and known.

Also, it failed to answer how the nomads had already destroyed three other fortresses, and now looked to the fourth. Nothing about this fit with the ways of nomadic life, nor with their favored style of warfare, fast-moving and mounted. It gave him a very uneasy feeling.

Opening the window, Silbane breathed in the cool sea air and watched the initiates gathered on the hill, not without a bit of envy. Simpler times, with simpler pleasures, he remembered fondly. Silbane had been brought here almost eighty years ago, a wide-eyed lad of perhaps nine. He had expected to see all sorts of magical beasts and eldritch incantations of power. Instead, much to his disappointment, his first years exposed him to stacks of books, none of which were magical. Themun and the other teachers had pounded the basics of reading, writing, history, and mathematics into his young mind until finally he passed his entrance examinations, proving he was intelligent enough to continue. Mathematics in particular had been emphasized. For some reason, it had been shown that those with the highest aptitude in numbers had the greatest connection to the Way.

From that day forth, Silbane had been subjected to intense physical and mental conditioning, something he had not at all expected. Each day had been dedicated to hardening his body in unarmed and bladed combat, and sharpening his mind on logic and numerical puzzles. The mantra of this phase of his training was repetition, an ideology Themun in particular seemed to inflict upon him with a special zeal.

When the time came, he had taken the Test of Potential, proving once again he had a connection to the Way. His formal apprenticeship had begun that very same day, with him turning in his old white uniform for dark green. During this time he had been regaled with the histories of the land, and the Demon Wars.

The First Council had been ill-prepared for the war. They had not concentrated nearly as much on the physical aspects of combat, instead investing much of their time on more arcane manifestations of power. This decision, in Silbane's opinion, rendered them incapable of protecting themselves when they needed it the most. Their bodies, lacking in physical endurance and stamina, had succumbed to the immense needs of facing Lilyth and the armies of demonkind that followed.

Themun and his Second Council had vowed never to let their adepts face such a situation unprepared. "A fool expects the same song to end on a different note," was another favorite saying of his instructors.

As a result, a significant portion of an adept's training now lay in the physical arts of combat. This ensured their ability to survive in situations a pure scholar could not, regardless of magical potential. The path to the Way was often thought of as hanging onto a rope, with an adept's stamina eventually wearing out. To combat this, one needed to train both the mind *and* the body, before they could truly master the Way and the arcane energies flowing unseen throughout the world.

Silbane wondered how the lords of the First Council had ever made the journey to Sovereign's Fall, leaving their cloistered lives behind. Their bodies couldn't have been ready for the hardships they would face.

In truth, the Second Council's adoption of physical and mental excellence had made them better prepared in some ways for this crisis than their forebears. Their bodies were at the peak of conditioning, and enhanced by magical energy, could accomplish feats most would consider impossible. What they lacked in raw, overt, power they partially made up for with enhanced speed and strength. If the sham of the upcoming council "vote" went the way the lore father had engineered, the final task would come down to infiltration and assassination, something Silbane was especially well trained to do.

He cursed himself for daydreaming and moved away from the open window. His apprentice's life lay in the balance, for Themun would not hesitate to send Arek with Kisan. If the Gate had opened, then Themun's solution would be to push Arek through. To Silbane, it was clear the lore father believed Arek's peculiar ability to dampen or disrupt magical energies was the reason behind this.

It *might* close the Gate, he conceded, but if successful would leave Arek stranded in Lilyth's world. Silbane couldn't live that. His only choice would be to find a way to protect his apprentice, and that meant he would have to accompany him. He could no longer trust the lore father or anyone else to keep the boy safe, and this was exactly what the lore father had counted on. Silbane could see he was being manipulated and hated it.

Putting down the leather-bound tome, he rose and went back into his library. Searching the stacks, he retrieved another book, *The Altan Nomads*. He moved back to his chair and sat down, preparing for some intensive research. Being angry at the lore father was a waste of time, he semi-chastised himself. If there's an answer to the nomad's actions, and a chance to safeguard Arek, it will be in here. Opening the old book, Silbane leaned back in the afternoon sun and began to read.

HISTORIES:

MAGEHUNTERS

A bladesman does not kill;

He allows one to live, purely by his own will.

He kills or grants life by wielding his blade.

—*The Bladesman Codex*

How often have you done this?” His voice came out nervously, looking to his lieutenant. He wore the dark mail and cloak of the king’s Magehunters, blue edged with silver. In his right hand he carried a torch, its dancing flame sputtering and hissing in the light rain. It painted his young face a lurid splash of orange and black, as light and shadow danced in the dismal night. He didn’t want to do this, but talking to his lieutenant kept him in good spirits.

“Half a dozen, Stiven, maybe more. Stop worrying.” He was not much older than the boy he spoke to. He rubbed his face clear of rain and looked up, silently cursing the weather and the clutch of new recruits like Stiven he had to look after. Dumber than a bag of onions, and not even as useful, but he couldn’t afford to have the boy panic at the wrong time. He put a conciliatory hand on Stiven’s shoulder and said, “The king’s mark is with us. She’ll deal with any trouble. Just worry about your shieldmates.”

Stiven gulped, looking at the storm clouds, then turned a wide-eyed stare back to his commander and said, “Garis said they have powers... that we can be turned into things... *unnatural* things.”

Lieutenant Kern shook his head and smiled. “What makes you think you’re so normal now?”

Another soldier bumped the kid with an elbow and said, “Don’t worry Stiv, you’ll likely be turned into a man. That’ll be a real trick.” Good-natured laughter followed as the platoon of men moved through the forest toward the village. Then the rain began to fall in earnest, ruining the moods of many. They had spent close to a fortnight on the hunt and wanted nothing more than a roof that didn’t leak and a dry, warm bed.

Their mood was further darkened by the woman who rode next to them on her black destrier. Her name was Alion Deft, the king’s mark, and her job was to hunt down and kill those who would threaten Edyn again. She wheeled her horse, then signaled Kern to stop. She cantered over and met the young lieutenant’s unvoiced question with a flat statement. “I’ll address the men here.”

Lieutenant Kern nodded, then motioned to his sergeant to have them form up but keep silent. At this distance, sound could still carry to the village, though the rain had muffled much of their progress through the undergrowth.

The men shambled into a loose square facing their sergeant. The fact the order had been obeyed instantly was the only indication these were seasoned fighting men. Some pulled their hoods farther forward as the rain fell harder. Lieutenant Kern looked at the ragtag grouping and scowled at the lax formation, but then said, “Shield rest.” The men relaxed, but only a bit, waiting for their commander to speak.

Deft moved her warhorse forward to face the men and dismounted. Her cloak was the same dark blue as the others, but her armor was silver and steel, with a circular symbol stamped upon her breastplate. Her fingers rubbed it absentmindedly, a ritual before every cleansing. She looked at the assembled soldiers and asked, “Why are we here?”

There was no answer, and she seemed to expect none. She pulled her sword from its scabbard, the steel ringing its own note of death, and continued, “There is a pestilence. I mean to remove it.” Her gaze swept the men while the clearing remained silent. The only sound, rain falling through the trees. “I act on the king’s order, and by his grace and our Fathers, so do you.” Her eyes hardened. “No mercy.”

The men shuffled a bit, but nothing they heard was new. At a nod from the king’s mark, they all knelt. Deft raised a circled hand in supplication and said, “Let us pray.”

The men lowered their heads as the king's mark intoned, "Fathers, bless our acts tonight. Aid us to smite the demons who wish harm upon your good lands. Let us be the hand that delivers justice, in peace."

"In Peace." The men responded. They slowly rose, some making the sign of the Circle and kissing their fists. Soon, they knew, it would be over.

Kearn watched Stiven look at the king's mark as she stood there in the rain. "She's beautiful," he heard him whisper, to no one in particular.

"Aye," said the sergeant who had lost an eye during one of the many border fights following Lilyth's defeat, "and deadly. Stay away from her when it starts."

"Why?" Stiven asked, in a voice that sounded like a boy more than a man.

The one-eyed man turned back and said, "Just stay out of her way." He cinched Stiven's pauldron closer, tapping it with a mailed fist to be sure it sat securely on his shoulder, then walked away, disappearing into the wet gloom.

Stiven stared at the sergeant's back until Kearn thumped him out of his reverie. "Come on, Stiv. You're assigned to the catchers. Grab some torcs." He motioned to a basket holding dozens of metal collars, dull and gray. Still, every so often the light would catch one just so, and the coppery orange metal would flash into life.

Stiven moved over and grabbed one of the collars, holding it as he had been taught. It didn't weigh much, but Kearn knew Stiven had seen what it could do. He clutched it tighter, making the thrusting motion once, twice, as if to remind his own arm how it was used. Then he took two more and hooked them onto his belt, within easy reach, and was obviously relieved to see the others do the same. Everyone knew Stiven hated standing out.

The sergeant whispered a command to douse the torches, and Stiven's went into the wet ground with a hiss. The clearing where they stood fell into inky darkness, until his eyes adjusted and Kearn could make out the rest of the men. They looked like shadows, disappearing between the rain, leaves, and trees, and death followed their every step.

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Alion Deft stood where she had delivered her prayer, scanning until her eyes came to rest on an older man, grizzled and gray. He had the look of one who scowled regardless of the weather. His mouth worked a repetitive chewing motion that spoke to the wad of *hazish* within. He stood near a small cart they had wheeled along with them. It was made of wood, and along one side held a small door, bolted closed. The king's mark nodded her chin at the cart and said, "Malioch, bring her out."

"Royal whelp." He said the words like they were a private curse, talking *at* Alion, but not about her.

The king's mark moved in front of him, her eyes fixed on the man until he acknowledged her with a spit to one side. She waited a moment longer then said, "Bring her out."

It was the flatness of her voice, the dead calm that gave the man pause. He spat again, a brown liquid, foul smelling and pungent, then produced a large iron key. The bolt unlocked with a snap and he pulled wide the door. He waited a moment, then thrust his hand inside. "Come on!"

A squeal sounded from inside the box and Malioch cursed, then grabbed a handful of hair and yanked. Out came a girl, dumped unceremoniously into the wet mud. He kicked her so she tumbled forward again, falling face down. "Curse you, witch."

Alion watched this without care, waiting for the girl to rise. Slowly, as the desire to stand and stretch overcame her inherent fear, the girl came to her feet. What was once a white robe was now matted with filth and stains, hanging from her bony shoulders. Dark hair that had not felt a loving hand in weeks fell in clumpy strings. When she finally looked up, what had been a face filled with laughter held only the frightened gaze of someone trying desperately to avoid another beating. The girl cringed with her entire body and spirit, looking far younger than her twelve summers would indicate.

The king's mark stepped forward and stooped so her eyes were level with the girl's own. She noted the prisoner still wore the torc around her neck. As she neared, the girl stepped back but Alion held up a hand, "Steady now, Galadine. You know your job, yes?"

The girl looked as if she were about to cry, but nodded vigorously.

“Do as I say and you may have your father’s love again.” Alion lied without a second thought. This vermin, along with the rest, would be food for worms long before the king forgave her sins. Alion didn’t care. Using these magelings had become a necessary evil. How else would they be able to find others like her?

The Talent ran strong in the Galadine line, their curse to bear for being faithful stewards of the land, and the king’s willingness to sacrifice his own blood spoke to his character and nobility. Still, the need to consort with this *thing* filled her with disgust. She could only imagine the royal family’s shame that they should be so afflicted.

Despite these thoughts, her revulsion, along with the deepest desire to thrust her blade into the heart of the creature, never reached her eyes. She said the words with utter sincerity, allowing the briefest hint of a smile to play across her features, reassurance that everything would be all right.

She stood and motioned to Kearn. “Take the torc off.”

As the lieutenant obeyed, she looked back at the girl and said, “Kalissa, you know what happens if you run?”

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Kalissa Galadine nodded again, not saying a word. The instant the lieutenant touched the torc, it unlatched with a small *click* and the metal collar opened.

Power flooded through Kalissa’s senses, reawakening her connection to the Way. It sang into her heart, healing minor injuries, succoring her weariness, and cleansing her soul. The pain fell as if washed away like her mud stains. She felt reborn, but knew this was only temporary. If she didn’t obey, her father would keep her here. Nothing she did, no connection to the Way, would ease the pain of what she had to do next.

She opened her eyes and saw, then pointed and stammered, “Th-through the trees. There are two you want.”

Alion looked at the girl for a moment then asked, “Just two? Are you sure?”

She nodded.

Alion looked up, her eyes calculating. “You stay near me for this.” She handed the reins of her warhorse to a nearby soldier who secured it to the cart, which would remain behind.

Kalissa came forward, standing woodenly next to the king's mark. She never took her eyes off the glowing folk she could see, amongst the less bright signs of the people in the village around them. They stood not more than two hundred paces away, beacons of Talent marking them for death.

Next to them, she saw a third, brighter than they were, someone with the potential for true power. Her eyes flicked once to the knight standing next to her, then back to the village. This third one was young, a girl not more than five or six summers old. Kalissa didn't know who she was, only that if the girl were discovered, it would likely mean her own death.

Why would the king's mark need her Talent if another, younger child were found to do her bidding? The shame of the decision to let this girl be put to the sword along with the rest of her village would have caused her anguish in the past, but now it barely registered. If her own father could give her away to someone like Malioch, why should she be any more merciful?

Adults with Talent were killed, but children were harvested and put to work, just as she had been. She would not take the chance these men would choose this new child of power over herself, and she didn't care anymore about the consequence to her own soul. She would live and that was all that mattered. It was not the first time she had chosen her own safety over others and she knew it would not be her last. It was simply a matter of survival.

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The village was small, counting no more than ten huts arranged around a central fire pit that still held glowing embers, protected by a rain shield made of some sort of metal. The rain hit it with a *pang* that sounded at once both hollow and strangely muffled. Alion could almost hear the drops slide down the shield, before they joined their brothers on the soaked earth. At best, the king's mark estimated, there were less than fifty people here. She looked to Kalissa, who pointed to the second hut on her right. Alion put two fingers up and pointed.

The men broke into smaller squads of four, each taking station silently at the entrance to each hut. The remainder of her men melded into the shadows in case any tried to sneak out, a strategy they had practiced and perfected over dozens of raids.

When they were in position, Lieutenant Kearn signaled to the king's mark, who strode into the center of the village and its fire pit. Grabbing a metal poker, she stoked the embers, then grabbed some wood from the pile. She threw this onto the fire, watching as it lit, growing slowly into a warm, orange dance of flames. Then, she casually ran the poker across the rain shield, the metal on metal creating a cacophony of sound, causing a few villagers to poke their heads out to see what was happening.

At that moment those under Defi's command exploded into action, streaming into each house and grabbing the people inside. Screams ensued as the village realized it was suddenly under attack, yet there was little defense offered. The attackers were both well-trained and alert in comparison with these simple, sleep-addled folk.

Three entered each house and battered people into submission. A fourth would move in quickly and collar them, the torc snapping into place before they knew what was happening. Instantly, any path to their powers would vanish, or at least that was the promise. These torcs could only be removed by one without Talent. It made for an infallible test of who exactly was a mage and who wasn't. If they had no power, they could remove their torc easily. If not, the king's mark would deal with them.

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Stiven raced in behind his team, torcs ready. He saw a man go down with a strike to his forehead, the flat of the blade hitting him with a dull thud. Stiven was upon him, dropping his torch and snapping a torc in place with a simple thrust of his hand. He fumbled to make another ready and looked up, only to see a woman slashing downward with something. He raised his blade instinctively, hearing the strike of steel on steel and feeling the shock of impact. The sword tumbled from his cold, wet fingers as he fell onto his back.

The woman carried a cleaver and raised her hand to strike again, but two swords plunged into her back as his squadmates came to his aid. They struck repeatedly as the woman let out a low groan, falling to her knees. They stabbed her even after she fell forward, face down and lifeless, pinning her body to the ground with their blades.

One leaned on his sword, thrust through the back of the dead woman's body, then looked up at Stiven and laughed, "She had some swing in that arm!"

He didn't answer, his mind still reeling from the speed of the attack and everything happening around him. Sitting on the ground, he watched numbly as the little girl who ran up to her dead mother's body was torced, then pulled out of the hut along with her unconscious father.

Alion smiled at the brutal efficiency of her men. The villagers put up little resistance and were soon rounded up and left kneeling in the mud of the central square. Those who were unconscious were dumped to the side under the watchful eyes of the guards. Those who had been killed were dragged from where they fell and laid out for the count, a grisly sight for the survivors. Within a few moments, the raid was over and the people of the village were fully accounted for, one way or another.

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"Wake them," Alion said, motioning to the unconscious.

Guards went to the well and roped up buckets of cold water. With these they doused the fallen, following with kicks and slaps until all were at least semi-conscious and able to kneel next to their friends.

When the king's mark was satisfied she had everyone's attention, she said, "You know why we're here. You harbor those decreed by the King's Law as a threat to this land. Point them out, and we will release you."

None said a word, which didn't surprise Alion Deft at all. Simple folk often saw those with Talent as some kind of benefit and harbored them, a mistake she would not allow to go unpunished. She moved slowly until she stood silhouetted by the fire, which blazed like a mantle of yellow power behind her. "Separate them."

At her command, the children were grabbed and moved to one side, while the adults were held at sword point. Screams ensued and one mother ran forward to grab her son. Alion moved with the swiftness of a cat. Her blade licked out, slicing the woman's head from her shoulders before returning to her scabbard in one smooth motion. The body and head fell separately, and the villagers instantly sank into a stifled hush of broken sobs and muttered curses.

"You are in violation of the King's Law, a decree designed to safeguard your lives! I bring justice and order. Where are they?" Alion knew she could have asked Kalissa, but this was the interesting part. She always wondered why people had such faith in their friends, when it took so little to turn them against each other.

"Justice?" a kneeling man asked. "The king's brother summons a demon and the land is plunged into war. For that, we pay with *our* lives?"

Alion nodded, and a guard picked the man up and brought him before her. Her eyes narrowed. "Lilyth destroyed our world. King Galadine saved it. You owe him your respect."

The man shook his head, clearly distraught, "My wife..."

The king's mark looked at the headless body and shrugged. "She chose her path, as will you." Alion grabbed him by the chin, forcing him to meet her eyes. "Where are the mages? Answer, or your son dies."

Two guards snatched up the boy in question and brought him to where the man could see him. It was clear this was the boy the dead woman had tried to save. They shoved him down to a kneeling position, and one placed his sword point at the nape of his neck.

"No!" The man looked back at the king's mark, pleading, "No, please." He then looked about the group and pointed to a man near one end. "He is the one you seek. He and his wife!"

Alion looked to where the man pointed and saw one of the men who had been unconscious. He knelt now, holding one hand to his bleeding forehead. She looked back at the man, then shoved him away. "Well done." She then looked at the guards near the accused man and said, "Bring him here."

The guards obeyed, and the man was dragged before the king's mark and dumped at her feet. Alion looked at the man and said, "Kalissa?"

The girl walked forward, a small tremble in her lips. She came slowly, fear dragging at her feet.

“Is this man one of your kind?” Alion asked.

The girl looked at the man, who now focused his eyes on her with hatred. Because he was collared, she would not be able to see his aura, a sure sign he had Talent. Normal people always shone, regardless of the collar or not, just not as brightly as those with Talent. “Yes, King’s Mark. He is one of us.”

“And the other?” Deft had pulled a dagger, wicked and sharp, absentmindedly picking at her nails.

Kalissa looked at the pile of bodies and pointed. “Dead. His wife w-was the other,” she stammered.

Alion watched the girl, then the man. When Kalissa mentioned his wife, she caught the look of anguish that flitted behind his eyes. So, she thought, the girl speaks truly, or at least it is true his wife is dead. We shall see.

The king’s mark addressed the kneeling man. “Take off the torc, and you will be released.”

The man turned his attention from the girl who had pointed him out and now looked at the tall woman before him. She was square-jawed and horse-faced, her voice without emotion. There was no love or compassion in her eyes, only apathy and death. “The Lady curses you,” he said weakly, knowing his fate.

“My Kalissa is seldom wrong. If your wife had lived, maybe I could have persuaded you to work for me, but with her dead, there’s little to compel your obedience.” Alion paused, “Unless, you have a child?”

The man shook his head. “No,” he spat, and the king’s mark could see he wished her death, or worse.

“Then take off the torc and you will be absolved in the eyes of your Fathers.”

The man slumped into the ground, head in his hands. Then he grabbed the torc in both and pulled, his neck and face straining until red. When he could pull no more, he gave up, exhausted. “What does it prove?” he muttered.

Alion turned and faced the man kneeling before her and said, “It proves you have been judged, found guilty, and served the King’s Justice.”

She brought the blade up in a short, brutal arc, stabbing under the man’s neck and through the back of his skull. The man coughed a gout of blood, clutching at the Mark’s hands. His grip was at first strong, but as his life gushed out, became weak, feeble pulls on her wrist. His last breath gurgled out of him as he died.

Alion pulled the dagger from his neck and wiped it clean, shoving the dead man onto his back with her booted foot. Then she grabbed the torc, which came undone easily at her touch, and tossed it into a basket sitting some feet away. Sheathing her dagger, she looked to Lieutenant Kearn. "Get them up."

At his command, the villagers were lined up facing the king's mark. She watched them without emotion. These were worse than the ones who sullied themselves with magic. They turned their backs on the Almighty Fathers, embracing instead the work of demons.

Her men grabbed the large basket she had tossed the torc into and placed it on the ground near the standing villagers. Alion motioned to the basket and said, "Take off your torcs and put them in the basket. Then go wait in that hut." She pointed to the back of the village. "Once I have satisfied the king's decree, we will release you and depart."

The survivors moved slowly, stiffly, reaching up and pulling off their torcs with numb fingers, tossing them into the basket. Unlike the man before them, they had no Talent, and the torcs came off easily at their touch. As each collar came off, that person was ushered into the hut to stand with his neighbors.

From the back of the line came a child's squeal. Alion looked and saw a small girl, no more than five, pulling at her torc. A nearby adult reached down, but the king's mark stopped her with a word: "Hold!"

Four men formed a circle around the girl, who looked more frightened now than ever. She sat down in the mud and buried her face in her hands. Alion moved in closer and said, "Little one, what is the matter?"

She looked up, with eyes so blue they almost glowed. Soft black hair spilled down her shoulders, and Alion found herself stunned by the child's simple beauty. The girl stifled her tears, then sobbed, "You hurt him!"

The king's mark looked back at the dead man. *Not as truthful as I was led to believe.*

She turned slowly and faced Kalissa, a little satisfied when the girl shook uncontrollably, her eyes showing white. "Did we miss one?"

With a scream, Kalissa turned to run, but was grabbed by Malioch. He punched her once in the face, then slapped the torc back on her before she tried any more mischief.

Alion grabbed Kalissa by the scruff of her neck and dragged her back to the little girl, then threw her to the ground. “Did you think to save one of your own?”

When the girl didn’t answer, the king’s mark looked to the other villagers. “Remove your torcs, now!”

The townsfolk scrambled to obey, and within a few heartbeats there were no more wearing the king’s metal collar. They were pushed and shoved back to the hut, until all were crammed inside. Guards stationed themselves at the entrance, as others circled the hut to ensure none escaped.

Alion turned her attention back to the little girl Kalissa had not mentioned. “The collar, it won’t come off?” she said sweetly.

The girl looked up, then shook her head, pulling at it. “I want my da,” she said in a small voice.

The king’s mark drew her blade. “You’ll join him in a moment.”

“Hold your arm, Deft.” The strident command came from behind her, the voice strong and composed. She saw her men turn and look. Any undrawn weapons sang out of their scabbards now with the ring of steel. She blinked once, then turned to the voice.

At the village’s entrance path stood three men. No, not men, she corrected herself, one man and two boys. They were dressed in dark, close fitting clothes without armor. They carried swords strapped across their backs, the hilts jutting up defiantly over their shoulders. Even as she watched, the man in the center stepped forward into the light of the village fire.

Recognition sparked and she paused, thinking through her options. This man was an outlaw, a malcontent, but dangerous. Her eyes narrowed and she drawled, “Captain Davyd Dreys, what a pleasant surprise.” Suddenly a simple evening’s culling had turned into a fight for her very survival, and Alion was too pragmatic to lie to herself. Still, she had to buy time and asked while readying her weapons, “How does it feel, knowing you are both a traitor and cursed?”

The man she had called Davyd looked about and said simply, “I’m no longer captain and don’t serve your king. That doesn’t make me a traitor.”

“Really? What would your men say, the ones lying dead at Sovereign’s Fall?” A smirk pulled at the corner of her mouth, for Captain Drey’s desertion was a well-known fact.

Davyd ignored her jibe and looked about, taking in the whole scene. “Still consorting with children? Have you found no better work since your days in court?”

“This is better suited to my particular tastes, but what of you? Do you not care for the mark you still wear?” She raised her arms and displayed the two interlocked circles worn by all king’s marks, tattooed on her forearms.

Davyd was hit with a fit of coughing, a phlegm-covered sound emanating from deep within his chest, and held a hand to his mouth. Beneath his sleeve, she could still see the same tattoos on his forearm, twin to hers. After a moment, his coughing subsided and he rasped, “I was too late to help my brothers, but won’t allow you to kill their children. You will face justice today.”

Alion’s eyes took on a calculating stare, and she nodded slowly. “The wasting sickness is upon you, judgment from the Fathers’ hands.” She moved to one side and motioned to her men, who moved forward in a loose semicircle. “Why chance your sons’ lives? They don’t have the benefit of the training you’ve received.”

Davyd signaled to his sons to remain steady. They, in turn, drew weapons and came to stand by their father. “I’ve taught them what I know.”

Alion Deft, the king’s mark and magehunter, bowed to the outlaw and said, “By all means then, have at us.” She looked to the brace of men still guarding the hut with the villagers inside and screamed, “Release them to their Fathers!”

At her order, her men hefted long spears and began stabbing through the thin hut walls, killing any within reach of the leafed blades. Normally they would have set the hut afire, but the accursed rain had put an end to that plan. The men at the entrance waited, stabbing any who ventured near the opening. The screams of the dead and dying soon filled the night air.

Davyd and his sons exploded into action, summoning the Way. Their forms flashed in a burst of blue fire, a flame-like skin protecting them as armor would. Without speaking they ran in three directions, with Davyd taking the shortest route to Alion and the other two winging toward the hut where the soldiers continued massacring the townsfolk. To the assembled men, the three looked like angels, shining like blue stars in the dismal night.

It was not a moment too soon, for guards began flinging their torcs at them, lethal rings aimed at the mages. The torcs didn’t need to fasten themselves to be effective, only loop around a limb, and Alion’s men knew it. They had practiced this and the air soon filled with the weapons of the Magehunters, seeking any kind of contact to deaden a connection to the Way.

Davyd blocked one, deflecting it with his sword, then ducked and rolled under another as a soldier swiped at him with his weapon. The mage raised his blade and blocked the soldier's, then opened his palm.

Blue flame engulfed the man, incinerating him in less than a heartbeat. He didn't slow as he dived through the dying man's ashes and stabbed another through the eye. He yanked his blade free and spun, slicing with his arm. A thin blue light arced out, like a line with a weight at the end, severing anything it touched. Soldiers fell screaming, their legs cut out from under them.

Alion felt the blue line come her way and dodged, rolling through it. Her armor shone, bending Davyd's spell and protecting her from its lethal cut. She thanked the king's priests and their ability to bring the power of the Fathers to protect her.

Over the blue devastating line streaked the elder of Davyd's sons, Armun. He landed lightly, swinging his blade in a tight arc and swatting aside two rings. He knelt and punched his fist downward. The ground erupted in a circle from the impact point, cracking under the soldiers' feet, but leaving the villagers unharmed.

The men caught in the spell fell into crevasses appearing suddenly beneath them. Armun stood and clenched his fist, and the earth closed again on the trapped men, crushing them in its black embrace. He looked to his father and smiled, then made his way toward the hut, cutting men in half with his blade as if they were made of paper.

Davyd leaped at Alion again, weaving a net of silver steel around the king's mark. The strikes were lethal, but each time they came near, his sword bent and twisted in his hand as if it had a life of its own. Her armor acted as if it were a reversed lodestone, repelling his blade at every thrust. He cursed, then pointed his finger and a bolt of lightning, pure blue and white, flashed at his opponent.

Alion stabbed her sword into the ground, then knelt behind it. The arc of lightning hit the air in front of her and curved around, bending the stroke into a sphere of power surrounding the king's mark, but not touching her. The lightning danced until it gathered at the hilt of her sword, following the blade down and channeling itself into the ground, leaving Alion entirely unharmed.

The ground around her exploded outward from the force of the lightning strike, scorching the earth in a radial pattern of force. From its smoking center rose the king's mark, smiling, blade in hand.

While Davyd combated Alion, his youngest son, Themun, leapt away from the clearing and began cutting down sentries and those who had managed to escape their swath of destruction through the camp. As he rounded a tree, a blade came whipping out, only to be caught on the hilt of Themun's steel.

Lieutenant Kearn pulled a shorter blade and faced his opponent, who looked no older than his new recruits. This would be simple work. "I've never heard of a mage who can fight." To his side came Stiven, holding a cudgel he had found to replace his lost sword. He held one in one shaking fist, a torc in the other.

Kearn motioned to him to attack. "Easy kill," he cajoled, "they can't stand against our—"

Themun's form blurred, moving faster than the man could blink. His blade sliced effortlessly through the torso of the hapless lieutenant, the body falling in two pieces even as he kicked the other man in the face.

Stiven tumbled and landed on his back. He threw the torc blindly at his attacker, then rolled and began feverishly crawling into the undergrowth, trying to hide.

Themun deflected the torc away, then placed a booted foot on the boy's back. He heard him scream, then watched as he rolled over and begged, "Mercy! Please, this is my first time! I knew it was wrong! From the very beginning!"

The look on the boy's face made it clear he had not expected to be facing someone his own age, but Themun didn't care. He could hear the lies fall from the man's tongue even as he spoke it. Magehunters were despicable and the song of retribution sang in Themun's heart. Only blood would quench it.

"Please, don't kill me," begged the boy again. He began to grab for a dagger.

"I'm not my father," the Themun said, then sliced twice with his blade, opening Stiven's bowels. "I'm not as good at making this painless."

Stiven screamed in agony and fell back, the dagger falling from nerveless fingers.

Themun stabbed him once in the neck, then held the boy's hand to the spurting wound. "Hold here, it'll be slow; let go, and you'll die quick. More mercy than you have shown these people." With that, he stood up and literally vanished into the undergrowth, never looking back to see what the boy chose. He simply didn't care.

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Armun didn't hesitate, speeding to the hut holding the villagers. He knew his father battled Alion and that he couldn't get there in time, so he did the next best thing. At least saving some of the villagers was still within his power. He grabbed the soldiers at the door and flung them away, his touch sending a surge of lightning through their bodies. They fell in smoking husks, dead before they hit the ground.

He pushed forward with both hands and the hut exploded outward. The grass and thatching detonating with such force that many of the larger pieces sliced into exposed skin and blinded those soldiers unlucky enough to have been looking in that direction. Armun had a special affinity with earth and trees.

He snapped his fingers and every piece of grass or wood lodged within a soldier or on their person burst. The force was not huge, but enough to break bone, tear flesh, and incapacitate them. Literally dozens of men fell dead or dying from Armun's touch. He let out a sigh and surveyed the area. In a few heartbeats he and his brother had laid waste to almost fifty men.

* * * * *

Alion and Davyd battled back and forth, their swords an intricate dance of death. When Davyd pressed, Alion pulled back, forcing the other to commit. Davyd however was too well trained to allow her to draw him in. Worse, she knew his sons would be done soon, then it would be three against one. She knew her time was running out.

When Davyd's sons returned, her life would be over. She cursed her luck again at having the errant king's mark appear now, during *her* raid. Alion was no fool, and though Davyd Dreys had not participated in the final battle against Lilyth, he was not one to be trifled with. He had been trained by the best, before going outside the law.

Had she been assigned a full complement of troops, they might have prevailed, but against one who had the combined training of a bladesman *and* the lore of the Way, this was no longer about winning, it was about survival. It didn't help that his sons were turning out to be as lethal as he was. What she needed now was leverage if she was going to get out of this with her skin intact.

At that moment, Davyd was wracked by a fit of coughing, so Alion took the advantage. She pushed forward and kicked him in the chest, then bolted to one side. In an instant, she dived and rolled, snatching up the little girl they had found. Alion put her back to a tree, a blade to the girl's throat. She didn't have to wait very long.

Davyd Dreys was joined by his two sons, neither of whom seemed particularly winded, a testament to their own training. He clapped them on their shoulders, then came to stand in front of Alion. He sheathed his blade and opened his hands. "What do you hope to accomplish?"

"Another mage, dead before she bears more filth!" Alion spat this out, her hand tightening on the hilt as she prepared to slit the girl's throat.

"Wait. You must want something." Davyd gestured to the open forest and asked, "Free passage?"

Themun looked to his father in astonishment. "She can't live!"

Another bout of coughing erupted, bending Davyd over. When the attack subsided, he let loose a breath and wheezed, "Her armor... It bends the Way. Do we take that chance?"

Themun's eyes met Alion's own, and she could almost hear his thoughts. She would do this again if left alive. He looked back at his father, "For one girl?"

Father and son regarded each other, and Alion knew Themun saw the death of this hostage as a small price to pay for eradicating someone like her. "Trust me?" He put a hand on his son's shoulder and then turned back to the woman holding the knife. "Free passage, for her life."

"You would trade? After telling me I'll see justice today?" Alion laughed. "Do you think me a fool?" Still, a part of her began to believe she might yet gain her freedom.

"I would trade even scum like you if it meant saving her," Davyd said, looking at the little girl. "Release her and I'll grant you safe passage."

“Your Oath, then? And my other girl, Kalissa? You *know* who she is.” Alion raised a bushy eyebrow. “Protect the innocent I understand, even the child of a Galadine. She must return to her father.”

Davyd stepped back, sighing. Alion knew that to let her go was against every fiber of his being, but he would not mete out justice in the same manner as the king’s men. It simply was not what he believed in. He needed to know that in some things, he and his sons were different. And she would use that against him. She remained silent, knowing he could only come to one decision, and was not surprised to hear him utter the Oath.

“By the blood of my forefathers, I bind myself,” he said. “My oath as Keeper of the Lore, no harm will befall you by my hands.” A small flash of yellow encompassed the mage at the uttering of the Binding Oath, then disappeared. “Now, do what your honor demands.”

Alion stood and released the girl, shoving her forward with a booted foot. “You’ll never survive the King’s Law, honor or not, and neither will your sons.” She looked around the camp. Of the villagers, perhaps ten survived and she had killed the two that *had* been mages. An incomplete victory, but one she could accept with her honor intact.

Armun stepped forward and said, “Be thankful we value his Oath, or your blood would water the ground here.”

“Your father is a fool,” Alion replied with a smile. She limped over to Kalissa, who lay unconscious on the ground, paused to sheathe her blade, then picked up the girl and slung her over a shoulder. Looking back at Davyd, she said, “You can’t win.”

“Perhaps, but that depends on what ‘winning’ means.” Davyd nodded to the trees. “Be gone, dog. I took the Oath, but my sons did not.”

Alion clenched her jaw at that, but said nothing. She adjusted the weight of the girl over one armored shoulder, then made her way into the trees and disappeared.

* * * * *

“You’re letting her go?” A villager exclaimed. “She is a murderer and she goes free?”

Davyd turned to the voice and said, “The message she carries back, without her men, without accomplishing what she set out to do, will strike fear into the hearts of the Magehunters.”

Though he believed this, none of the people around him did. They had lost those they loved most dearly and now sorted through the memories of their lives, strewn about because of one night’s casual violence. This was not a time to accept his point, much less care. Only their shock at this attack and their fear stopped them from exacting their own vengeance on the king’s mark.

He looked to Armun and said, “Help them, check the wounded, help who you can.” He coughed again and spat out dark phlegm that looked bloody, but neither of his sons commented. His healing had done what it could to slow the sickness, buying him maybe a few more years. Nevertheless, the outcome was inevitable.

He wiped his mouth and smiled at his youngest, barely fifteen. “Go, see to the girl. One of the villagers can take that torc off her.”

The boy scampered away and landed lightly at the girl’s feet. “Come on.” He had a shock of brownish-blond hair standing out from his head and the little girl smiled at him. It looked funny.

“What’s your name?” she asked, not understanding that this same boy had argued to sacrifice her life just a moment ago.

He turned, then offered a very formal bow and said, “Themun. Themun Dreys, and you?” He gave her a small smile, but Davyd watched his son carefully. He knew the boy’s mind was still on his decision to let Alion Deft go.

She smiled back and answered, “My name is Thera.” She looked about a little sheepishly then added, “I don’t have a last name.”

“No matter.” Themun looked toward the north and said, “The city of Dawnlight lies not too far away. We’ll call you that. Thera Dawnlight.”

* * * * *

Some distance away, Alion reached her horse and untied the reins. Dumping Kalissa's leaden weight across the saddle, she mounted, then hurried along the path that led back the way they had come. She heard a groan and realized the treacherous girl had come awake. Alion slowed and grabbed her by the back of her head, pulling her upright.

"Sit up, or I'll carry you across it all the way home."

Kalissa looked about in confusion, then said, "Where are we?"

"Alive," said Alion dispassionately. "Don't thank me." She didn't say anything else, but counted herself lucky. Losing the girl might have meant her own neck in a Galadine noose.

They rode slowly for a short distance while she adjusted to sit in the saddle as Alion had commanded.

Then both their attentions were taken by a man standing on the path, the moonlight streaming through the clearing, clouds painting his red robes the color of dried blood. Alion kicked her horse, intending to ride him down, but he raised a hand. For some reason the horse obeyed his command to stop, pulling up short with a whinny.

The man said, "Well met, Alion Deft, king's mark."

Alion vaulted off her saddle, the sword clearing its sheath as her feet touched the ground. If this person knew her, he was likely in league with Davyd. She would deal with his treachery now and be on her way.

She pulled her arm back to strike and felt her muscles go stiff. Normally her armor would have bent enchantments around it, but this time she felt as if she were encased in stone.

The man tilted his head to the side, as if examining something, and said, "Your armor won't protect you, king's mark, and neither will your simple faith in the gods. They don't care, they never did."

She tried to move, but her muscles were frozen tight, still locked in paralysis. Only her mouth seemed to work. She snarled, "So much for honor. Had I known Davyd to be so craven, I would have slit that girl's throat when I had the chance."

The man stepped forward past her blade and pulled his hood back, revealing blond hair and pale blue eyes. His gaze told her this man had nothing to do with Davyd Dreys.

His eyes gripped hers and he said, "I am the Scythe. Like the reaper's tool, I *ascend* those found worthy, or wanting." He then reached up and tapped her forehead lightly. The flesh began to blacken and shrivel away.

“I judge you wanting. You have much to atone for, Alion Deft. This spell will take several hours to kill you, and you will feel every moment of it. Call to your gods. Perhaps they will grant you solace in the next world.”

* * * * *

He stepped past her and came to stand by the girl, Kalissa, who had dismounted with a grimace that gave testament to the punishment she had suffered at the hands of Alion Deft and her men. She ran to and hugged the man, saying, “She deserved it. They all do.”

Scythe laid a gentle hand on her head, stroking the soft hair. His eyes looked back through the forest to the mountain of Dawnlight, a black silhouette of jagged rock climbing up to stand illumed in the clear moonlight. There were forces at work in the ancient city that could aid him on his quest, ones he meant to investigate.

He looked away from those moonlit peaks and could sense Davyd and the others hard at work in the decimated village. The youngest in particular bore watching, for he had Talent far beyond his father and elder brother. He could sense others too, doing what they could to create a better life far from the king’s Justice. He looked down, sadness in his eyes, then knelt in front of Kalissa.

He froze her in place, then tapped her forehead lightly, watching the blackness spread like an inky stain. “I am the Scythe. Like the reaper’s tool, I ascend those found worthy, or wanting. I judge you wanting, Kalissa Galadine. You have hunted your own kind, killed others so you might live, and sown sorrow in your wake.”

He looked again in the direction of Dawnlight, took a deep, cleansing breath and said, “Like your father, I do not show mercy.”