



A FOOL'S HOPE



RULALIN LOOKED BACK over his shoulder at Col Marena. Flames from some of the buildings in the small port city rose in the distance, sending plumes of smoke into the dark sky. It was early Third Watch, ushering in the second day of Winter Rise. The wind was cool and the rain steady, so Rulalin wished himself a bit closer to the fire in the distance, if only to be near the heat.

“Rulalin,” Soran whispered sharply. Rulalin turned. Soran said nothing but motioned with his head toward Farimaal’s tent not more than ten spans away. Rulalin peered through the dark night, seeing only two cloaked figures standing before the tent, partially lit by the torches. As Rulalin watched, the men started across the grass in their direction.

As they neared, the man nearest them looked up at Rulalin and Soran and nodded with a smile as he passed. Rulalin clenched his teeth and returned the faint nod with an even fainter one of his own. He still didn’t know what role Synoki

played in Malek's service, or how highly Malek might prize him, but Rulalin figured just about everyone was higher in rank than he, so he'd better be polite to them all, regardless of how he felt about it.

The two men disappeared into the darkness, and Rulalin turned back toward Farimaal's tent. Tashmiren stood before it now, and he motioned to Rulalin and Soran to come over. Even though it was too dark to make out any details of Tashmiren's face from this distance, Rulalin envisioned the look of smug, arrogant disdain that Tashmiren wore so frequently. He felt rising inside him a different kind of loathing for Tashmiren than the loathing he felt for Synoki. He trusted neither man, but he sensed with Synoki a need to be wary, for mystery surrounded this man he had first met so long ago and so far away. Even Synoki's revelation inside the Mountain had not fully explained the mystery. Though he didn't like to admit it, at some level, Rulalin feared him.

He did not fear Tashmiren. To be sure, he feared what might happen to him if he did to Tashmiren any of the things he'd like to do, but to Rulalin that was an important distinction. As he crossed the damp grass swiftly, he fantasized about how good it would be to bury his sword up to the hilt in Tashmiren's chest. Pushing that thought from his mind, he nodded in acknowledgment, and Soran remained outside as Rulalin stepped through the open flap.

Farimaal was in his usual position for receiving company, slumped sideways in the wide wooden chair that had been hauled from inside the Mountain. The grey stubble on his face was thicker and scragglier than usual, and Farimaal was scratching it with all four fingers of his right hand as Rulalin came in.

"Sit," Farimaal said without looking at him.

Rulalin settled onto an uncomfortable bench, the only other piece of furniture in the large tent. Rulalin didn't enjoy

sitting on that bench for any reason, especially not tonight, when their enemy had eluded them and slipped out to sea. He waited for Farimaal to speak.

“We have a quandary,” Farimaal said at last, and still he didn’t look in Rulalin’s direction. Rulalin waited, and another long pause followed. Farimaal turned from whatever he had been gazing at and fixed his stare on Rulalin. “This Aljeron Balinor, your friend, has taken all the ships in Col Marena.”

“Yes, sir, I know,” Rulalin said, coughing and clearing his throat.

“Most of them are still visible out in the Bay of Thalasee, but we think he’ll head south soon. Do you?”

“Yes. The only explanation I can think of for his refusal to defend Shalin Bel or Col Marena is that he wanted to slip away to try to find aid among the Suthanim. I’d guess he’s headed for Cimaris Rul.”

“As are we,” Farimaal answered, turning his head back to the side of the tent, scraping at his stubble again.

After a few moments, Rulalin asked, “You mean to go through the marshes?”

“Yes.”

“The wagons won’t make it.”

“We won’t take them. At least, we won’t take most of them. We’ll have to rely on the land to feed us along the way.”

“It is a long way, and there are long open stretches with little but grass. It will be muddy and slow going in all this rain.”

Farimaal gazed at Rulalin. Rulalin saw in those bright eyes the flash he had seen there before. Was it laughter somewhere buried deep below the impassive face? He couldn’t tell, and as quickly as it came it went. “We will move quickly, for we don’t want to give him time to fortify Cimaris Rul. When we reach the city, if it still stands, your services will be again required, both as a soldier and as an ambassador, though I suspect they won’t surrender as long as Balinor leads them. Between now

and then, I may need you as a guide. You are the only one among us who has passed through Suthanin anywhere west of Lindan Wood. At least, you are the only one who has passed that way in the last thousand years.”

Again the sparkle rippled through Farimaal’s eyes, and once more he turned his head away. “Go and prepare your men for the crossing of the marshes. We leave at dawn.”

“Yes, sir.” Rulalin rose and exited into the wet, cold night.

“Well?” Soran asked as they walked away together through the darkness.

“We are leaving at dawn.”

“Where to?”

“South. We are headed to Cimariss Rul.”

“As you guessed. And the route?”

“We are making for the marshes.”

“As you feared.”

“Yes, as I feared,” Rulalin said, keeping his head down to shield his face from the cool rain. “I imagine it will not be the last time that following Malek will take us somewhere I don’t want to go.”

Aljeron stood at the port side of the *Summer Sun*, gazing across the dark waters of the Bay of Thalasee at the fires that still burned in Col Marena. They began early that morning, in the half-light of dawn, and continued all day. Even so, Aljeron hoped that the steady rainfall had tempered their spread and that much of Col Marena might survive to be rebuilt one day. *There is much that will need rebuilding, but who will be around to do it?*

It was not a cheery thought, for it took Aljeron’s thoughts many leagues east to Shalin Bel. The enemy had pressed hard after them, so it was possible Malek’s armies had not stopped to burn the city, pull down the walls, or pillage its buildings. It did not take long to start fires, however, and the destruction

of Col Marena did not give Aljeron much hope for Shalin Bel, now empty and exposed.

It is the people, not the stones that matter, he reminded himself as the fires burned in the distance. If Allfather had been merciful, the people of Shalin Bel were many leagues north or south by now. He hoped Malek's pursuit of his army had diverted the enemy forces long enough. While he could offer no protection now to the Werthanim on the run, he had bought them precious time that might keep them alive, at least a while longer.

He scanned what little he could see of the port city. He hated sitting out here on the water in safety when he didn't know who might still be alive and desperate to get out of the city. Men of his, perhaps, separated during the flight down the coast, might even now be trapped between their pursuers and the sea. For the first time in the last month, Aljeron prayed for the ever-present, all-pervading rain to fall harder, faster, and stronger. He prayed for the rain to put out the fires and preserve what few shelters and hiding places might remain in Col Marena.

A step behind him on the deck drew his attention, and he looked back over his shoulder to see Aelwyn approaching. She was wrapped in the heavy dark-grey cloak that she'd worn all the way from Shalin Bel. An image of her setting out, sitting astride her sleek black horse in the cold grey morning came back to him. He had looked back over his shoulder as they rode out from the city, and he saw almost instantly in the vast crowd her face, beautiful and determined and turned toward him, her long black hair pulled loosely behind her.

As she approached now, her hair was pulled much more tightly and secured in a simple knot at the back of her head, but she was no less beautiful; indeed, she was even more so as she smiled at him. She reached up and took his arm gently. "Why stand here alone, Aljeron? Your closest friends and advisors are gathered here. Why do you avoid their company?"

“It is not their company that I’m avoiding, but their questions. I would happily go to them to be advised; it is the advising I wish to avoid. I cannot give them the guidance that they seek.” Aljeron gazed once more across the water. “I was comfortable as commander of the army of Shalin Bel. I was confident besieging the city of Fel Edorath to bring Rulalin Tarasir to justice, but that’s no longer my role. I’ve suddenly become Aljeron Balinor, commander of the Werthanim in flight before the might and power of Malek, and I have no idea how to do that. It is beyond me. It is beyond any man.”

Aelwyn didn’t answer but held onto Aljeron’s arm. He looked down at her and saw not only compassion but affection. Thoughts of fire and rain and war slipped away from him for the first time in days. He smiled.

“It is so good to see you smile,” Aelwyn whispered, reaching up to stroke the smooth skin of his unscarred cheek. “You carry so much weight, so many burdens. If I bring no other good to you and to this army but an occasional smile, I will consider my service to you and to Shalin Bel meaningful.”

Aljeron turned toward Aelwyn, placing his big hand on her cheek, touching the smooth skin of her face for the first time. Aelwyn blushed, but she did not pull back. “I don’t understand, Aelwyn, why me?”

“Because you are beautiful,” she answered, without hesitation.

“But my face—”

“Yes,” Aelwyn said. She lifted her other hand and ran her fingers along the ridges of the large scars that dominated the other side of Aljeron’s face. “I know you don’t think anyone could think you are beautiful because of these, but that’s rubbish. Anyone who can’t see beyond the scars can’t see at all.”

Aljeron looked intently into Aelwyn’s eyes. He saw complete sincerity and earnestness there. “Aljeron, I want you to do me a favor.”

“What?”

“You’re free to love me or not love me, but I’m asking you to accept that I love you the way any woman would love a man. Time, our time, may be short. Let’s not go over this ground again.”

Aljeron nodded. “All right. I’ll take you at your word.”

“Thank you.”

“As for loving you,” Aljeron said, “I hardly know where to begin. I’ve been consumed by war for so long. I’d given up on the possibility of love, but when you touch me, when I feel your hand on my arm or your fingers on my face, I feel like a boy again. Laughter is never far from my heart when I dream of a face like yours to look into my own. Do I love you? I don’t honestly know, but I know that I’m glad you’re here. I know that when I think there’s nothing beautiful left in this world, seeing you reminds me that I’m wrong. I know that if our lives weren’t unraveling with each passing day, I’d gladly devote my days to spending time with you. These things I know, Aelwyn. It may not be an answer to your question, but it’s a start, isn’t it?”

“It’s a start,” Aelwyn said, smiling. “And a start is all we need right now. I’ve adored you since I was a little girl. I don’t expect you to be on my timetable.”

“Ahem.” They turned, and Aljeron could feel his face blushing as he looked up into Aelwyn’s sister’s face.

“Good evening, Mandarin.”

“I trust I wasn’t interrupting anything too important,” Mandarin said, smirking as she looked back and forth between them, “but I’ve been sent to find you, Aljeron. Gilion just arrived by longboat. Everyone is here now.”

“Have the others gathered?”

“Yes. All we need now is you.”

“Thank you. Please take word to them that we’re coming.”

“I will,” Mandarin said, turning and heading back across the deck.

Aljeron turned back to Aelwyn, "I'm sorry, Aelwyn."

"Don't be. Every moment we are able to steal together is a gift. Let's treasure each in hope for a day when we'll have all the time we want."

"Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Yes, it would."

The large, open stateroom that belonged to the wealthy merchant who owned the *Summer Sun* was opulent, bright with gilded wood furniture, including a long oval table engraved with swirling patterns. Tall, bronze lamps firmly bolted to the walls to prevent them from tumbling over in rough seas and setting the ship ablaze lit the room. Even the timber pillars that supported the deck above were dressed up with painted landscapes that must have been hung there to remind the merchant of home during his long sojourns at sea.

Spread out on the large table was a great map of the western coastline of Kirthanin, stretching all the way from the Bay of Thalasee to the mouth of the Barunaan River in the south and the great city of Cimarís Rul. Which of the ships the map had come from, Aljeron didn't know. Certainly no one in the fleet had objected. The sailors and crews who worked these ships were only too willing to set sail once they understood from what they were fleeing. Not all the captains and owners were as happy to relinquish control to Aljeron's officers, but as the flames rose from Col Marena early that morning, a change of heart overcame even the most stubborn. For most of these men, the only thing worse than losing control of one's vessel was losing the vessel itself.

As Aljeron and Aelwyn joined the meeting, he took in the weariness that characterized the faces around the table. It was a weariness mixed with sorrow, for Valzaan's passing was still fresh with them all. Even now, images of the prophet's demise flashed before him. He could see the swirling sands whipping

around the heads of the Vulsutyrim, and the sinking sands beneath the Black Wolves. He could hear the children of Rucaran howling on the beach, and the terrified neighing of the horses as they reared in fear, many of them throwing their riders.

He could also see the dark and horrible form of the Bringer of Storms walking through the maelstrom, his arm raised, holding that mighty hammer. He could see the whole scene unfold as the giant stood opposite Valzaan, dwarfing the prophet. Valzaan's mouth moved, calling down Allfather's pronouncement of doom upon the arrogant creature, and then the sound of deep laughter and the flash of incredibly bright light flew out from the Vulsutyrim's hands and struck Valzaan, casting him backward into the sea. Aljeron had stared for a moment, stunned as he watched the body of the white-haired old man soar above the waves. Then Valzaan struck the water and disappeared beneath the whitecaps, and the spell was broken. Aljeron wheeled his horse around and charged after his men, who were flying ahead of him down the beach. Fear and rage drove him, and somehow they reached Col Marena ahead of their enemy. They managed to drive through the town to the docks, calling out for the people to flee at once. As they loaded every ship in the harbor with both man and beast, he expected to see their enemy charge into the city, but the Bringer of Storms never arrived. They loaded until darkness fell, then the ships in the harbor, seventy-three in all, sailed out from Col Marena to wait in the dark waters far from shore.

Aljeron's only explanation for the delay of their enemy was that Valzaan's final effort to throw the enemy into confusion with the shifting and sinking sand must have persisted even after his death. Perhaps they could not recover from their disarray. Whatever had happened, whatever had held them up, he thanked Allfather with all his might. Without Valzaan, they could not have held the enemy at bay while the ships were

loaded. They would have been cut down on the quays, and all would have been for naught.

“Aljeron?” He flinched in surprise. Evrim, lean and weary, rose from his seat and stepped closer to Aljeron. “Is everything all right?” he asked quietly.

“Well, no,” Aljeron said just as quietly. “I wouldn’t say that. But I’m all right, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I was,” Evrim said, smiling. “Good. Everyone’s ready, come take your seat.”

Evrिम motioned to an open chair at the head of the oval table, then took the seat at Aljeron’s left hand. Before sitting, Aljeron stooped by Koshti, who was curled in the near corner of the room. Aljeron had been on a ship with Koshti before, on that ill-fated journey to the Forbidden Isle so many years ago, and Koshti’s feelings about travel by sea had not changed much. He had not left this room since before the ship left port. “It’s all right, Koshti,” Aljeron murmured as he rubbed his battle brother’s head and scratched his ears playfully. “We will return to land before long, don’t worry.”

The tiger looked up at Aljeron, not appearing to be much consoled, and Aljeron stood reluctantly to take his place at the table. Aljeron sat, looking down the table at the place beside Mindarin where Aelwyn had settled herself. She looked up at him, and he smiled again. He couldn’t help it. She blushed, but she didn’t look away.

Aljeron forced himself to survey the room. Gilion sat to his right, the captain’s beard and clothes as fastidious as ever. No situation could ruffle him, or at least no situation could make him look ruffled. Next to Gilion was Caan, his long grey hair braided and resting on his shoulders. The sparkle that normally shone in Caan’s eyes was gone, and Aljeron tried to gauge the warrior’s intensity. He knew the man grieved, for Valzaan’s loss was heavy news to Caan, but there was more. Aljeron sensed anger, deep anger, and Caan did not grow angry lightly.

Beside these elder statesmen sat Corlas Valon, the young officer from Fel Edorath, and beside him were the three Great Bear, who filled the rest of that side of the table. Even had there been enough chairs, the bears would not have needed them. As it was, their heads towered above the table and almost touched the ceiling's support beams. Sarneth sat closest to Valon, and next to Sarneth was his son, Erigan, and then the patrol bear from Lindan, Arintol.

Brenim sat at the opposite end, leaning back in his chair with a dejected look. Aljeron knew that on top of the despair they all felt was the disappointment that Rulalin lived. They had come so close to bringing him to justice for the murder of Brenim's brother, Joraiem, but now he was roaming free and, worse, aiding the enemy. The discovery was hard on everyone, but perhaps hardest of all on Brenim. Mindarin and Aelwyn sat next to him, huddled close together where two chairs had been forced into the group to accommodate them.

Next to the women was Saegan, who perhaps showed the least wear of the past several weeks. He looked to Aljeron little different than when the anticipation of their impending victory over Fel Edorath had buoyed their spirits. Beside Saegan was Bryar, her hair cut short and her clothes rough, a stark contrast to the sisters. Pedraal and Pedraan occupied the middle of that side of the table, and beside them was Benjiah. The young man sat upright and still, the staff Valzaan had entrusted to him leaning against the table, the carved windhover atop it hooked on the edge to keep it from slipping. Next to Benjiah was Evrim, completing their number.

Ten men, three women, and three Great Bear; Aljeron thought as he studied them. The fate of the Werthanim, and perhaps the fate of Kirthanin, was entrusted to them. How had it come to this? What had brought each of them to this moment, where so much would depend upon their decisions, so much would depend upon their actions? They would have to choose

well and act decisively, and even then their choices and actions might avail little. The strength against which they were matched was too great. If Valzaan could not stand against it, who could?

“Thanks for coming,” Aljeron started. He knew that the meeting would not begin until he spoke, and yet he didn’t know where to lead them. He had made Valzaan a binding promise on the beach, and he had not yet spoken of that promise to anyone. He decided to discern the spirits and thoughts of his men first. “What report from you, and what report from the men who serve under you?”

His question was not followed by silence as he had expected, for Gilion jumped on the question. “We have escaped the net of our enemy and are safely put out to sea. Whatever clouds still hang over us, even these unnatural rains that have followed us from the Mountain, we have gone farther than most believed we would. See where Allfather has brought us; He will take us on from here, though it might now seem impossible.”

“It is true,” Evrim said. “We have achieved no small feat in outrunning our enemy. I don’t know what kept them from falling upon us in Col Marena, but I can think of nothing other than divine deliverance to account for this providential escape.”

“You speak of providence and divine deliverance,” Brenim said, scowling. “Tell me how we have but delayed our doom? Will we think ourselves fortunate that we did not fall in Col Marena or Shalin Bel or Zul Arnoth when our enemy throws his full might upon us in Cimaris Rul? And now Valzaan has fallen. Who will hurl sand and stone against our enemy next time? There is no hope for us. Wherever we go, Malek will find us, and we will be destroyed.”

“No!” Benjiah said, leaning over the table, his right hand gripping Valzaan’s staff so tightly that Aljeron could see his

knuckles turn white. “There is always hope, always. As long as Allfather rules the heavens and the earth, there is a power greater than Malek. If Valzaan taught us anything, that is it. Did we not despair at Zul Arnoth when the Bringer of Storms came against us? And yet Valzaan threw him back. And again we despaired upon the beach, and again Valzaan delivered us. And though Valzaan has fallen, Allfather has not. It was not his own power that Valzaan wielded, but Allfather’s, and that power remains with us. I cannot say where we should go, for I cannot see it, but I know that we are not hopeless. I will carry Valzaan’s staff, but we must all carry his hope.”

“Carry what you like, Nephew,” Brenim replied, “but Valzaan is at the bottom of the sea. All the hope in the world couldn’t save him.”

“You dare not—”

Caan rose from his seat and motioned to Benjiah to sit back.

“Enough, both of you. We will not argue, not tonight. Though a soldier never has a guarantee that he will survive his mission, a good soldier always undertakes the task set before him. We will do what must be done, or we will die doing it. That is all. I don’t want to hear another word about whether it can be done. That is irrelevant.”

“So,” Aljeron said as Caan sat back down, knowing that the real questions of the evening could not be delayed. “What do we do?”

Several looked up at this question, and Saegan, who didn’t usually say much at these meetings unless he was called upon, leaned forward and looked down the table at Aljeron. Their eyes met, and Saegan held his gaze for a long, probing moment before speaking. “I’m not sure I understand the question, Aljeron. Our objective is clear: We must head south to Cimaris Rul and rally support among the Suthanim for a stronger defense of Kirthanin, right? What’s changed?”

The eyes and attention of all those gathered turned in unison from Saegan to Aljeron. The moment could be avoided no longer. "Valzaan spoke to me before he opposed the Bringer of Storms. He said, in effect, that Sulmandir might be alive."

Whispers and exclamations spread around the table. Everyone turned to see if the shock of the statement had registered on their neighbors' faces, and each of them found that it had. As quickly as the chatter flared, it died, and they turned once more to Aljeron for answers.

"What is this?" the normally calm and dignified Gilion said for them all. "Could it be?"

"I know only what Valzaan told me. He said that when Sulmandir flew from Agia Muldonai and was never seen again, he did not die, at least not right away. Valzaan went north some nine hundred years ago, and at least at that point, Sulmandir was alive. Why Valzaan never spoke of this, I don't know. I had no time to ask questions. Perhaps Sulmandir wished him not to, or perhaps Allfather bid him keep it silent. Even so, Valzaan could not guarantee that Sulmandir was still alive. He said he had not seen Sulmandir since."

"Not seen in nine hundred years!" Brenim said. "Then there is indeed little hope that he is alive. Why speak of it now?"

Aljeron looked down. "Valzaan said that finding Sulmandir might be our only hope against our enemy. He made me promise to go and look for him."

"What?" Pedraan said, his face betraying his shock. Aljeron looked at him, but only for a moment, as he wanted to see the reaction in Aelwyn's more restrained expression. She met his eyes, but only for a moment, quickly looking down into her lap. It was evident, even in that brief moment, that she might not be far from tears. "Why did you promise to go north?" Pedraan said again. "We need you. Your place is here with us."

"I promised because a prophet of Allfather bid me promise!" Aljeron replied hotly. "What's more, it now constitutes Valzaan's dying wish, and I will not betray my word to him."

"How can you question Aljeron, Pedraan?" Mindarin asked. "You knew Valzaan. He would not lead us astray."

After a pause, Corlas Valon leaned forward, gazing up and down the table at the others. "Far be it from me to contradict a prophet of Allfather, but surely this is a fool's hope. Nine hundred years since Sulmandir was last seen alive, and even with all his knowledge, Valzaan could not give you more surety than that. What's more, what if the Father of Dragons is alive? What hope do you have that you will survive the long trek through the wilderness that is Nolthanin? And where exactly are you to look for him? Are you to comb all the land above the Holy Mountain and below the Great Northern Sea?"

"Valzaan said his lair was in Harak Andunin."

"Harak Andunin!" Gilion said, wonder in his voice.

"What is Harak Andunin?" Benjiah asked when no one else said anything.

"It is said," Caan began, looking at Benjiah, "that when the Nolthanin fled their home, the men in the army named the tallest mountain in the Tajira Mountain Range 'Harak Andunin,' or, 'the Spear of Andunin.' The name was a testament not to Andunin's might, but to his shame. They loved him dearly, as they proved by following him even when they knew Malek's plan would not succeed, but they felt the burden of his betrayal of Allfather and the sorrow of their impending exile."

"Where is the mountain?" Aelwyn asked quietly, and Aljeron saw she had composed herself, looking as calm as any of them.

"I'm not sure," Aljeron said, "but if the old maps of Nolthanin are right, it is a long journey north and east from

here. The Tajira Mountains run south from a place where the range almost touches the Great Northern Sea. Once we find it, we'll look for the biggest of them all."

They sat quietly until Corlas spoke up again. "I don't know who else I speak for here, but your answer is neither comforting nor encouraging. Harak Andunin may indeed be the biggest mountain in Nolthanin, but it may not be any easier to find than the tallest tree in a great forest. I say it again, this is a fool's hope."

"A fool's hope it may be, but I will keep my promise. The rest of you will go south, as planned. I will go north, alone."

"No," Evrim said. "You will not!"

"If Sulmandir is dead or the wilderness is impassable, I will not need your help to discover these things. What's more, if Sulmandir is alive, then I will find him just as quickly alone as I could with a whole company at my command."

"I don't care," Evrim replied. "Some dangers can be overcome only with the help and strength of many men. Don't be foolish. At least a handful of men should go with you. So few will not greatly diminish the strength of the army, but so many will greatly multiply your readiness to meet the unknown trials of that road."

"I will go with you," Benjiah said, looking intently into Aljeron's eyes. "Perhaps Allfather will reveal through me the location of the mountain or the road to take there."

Aljeron shook his head, "You will not come, Benjiah. With Valzaan gone, your responsibility is to the people of Kirthanin, not to me alone. In all likelihood, Malek is already planning his move south. He surely knows that is where our army is headed, and he will move with his full strength to sweep over the land. Peril lies in every direction, but as Allfather's prophet, you must go with the leaders of the army to aid and advise them as Allfather enables you. I am sorry. You cannot come."

"I agree," Evrim said, looking at Benjiah before turning back to Aljeron. "My responsibility, however, is to you personally."

"As is mine," Gilion echoed.

Aljeron raised his hand to quiet all those who looked ready to speak and perhaps to volunteer as well. "You cannot both come, for I must entrust the guidance of the soldiers to someone. I am afraid it must be you, Gilion, for you are the officer they know best and have known longest. Evrim, if you are insistent, you may come, but I am resolved that most of the rest of you will go south. Caan, having lived in Sulare for so long, your aid in this southern campaign could be invaluable, and your leadership is essential. Brenim, you are a Suthanim, so you, too, must go south and help where you can. Pedraal and Pedraan, your commitment to Wylla Someris to see Benjiah safely home also takes you south. Sarneth, your draal lies that way, and it may be that your influence with the Great Bear will be needed before long. You also, Corlas, as the commanding officer of the men of Fel Edorath, you must head south. Mindarin and Aelwyn, the women you have led here will look to you for leadership, as Saegan and Bryar will continue to be needed by the scouts."

"Command of the scouts can be left ably in Bryar's hands," Saegan said. "Leave the scouts in Bryar's care while I go with you."

After a moment, Aljeron nodded, feeling relief. Though he had come determined to go only with Koshti, he was bolstered to think that Saegan and Evrim would accompany him. "So be it. You will come too."

"As will Erigan and Arintol," Sarneth said. "I will go south, and I will rouse the support of the Great Bear as Allfather grants me opportunity, but Arintol and Erigan will go with you. Their wisdom and strength may be of use to you in that desolate land, and they are not easily lost, even in a great wilderness."

Aljeron looked from Sarneth to the other two, but he found their faces as serene and inscrutable as ever. In the end

he simply nodded. "I will gladly accept your offer of aid, Arintol and Erigan. I am honored."

Gilion addressed Aljeron, his voice betraying a hint of dissatisfied resignation. "If this is your will, what directions do you have for me and for us?"

"Only that you, Gilion, and you, Corlas, submit yourselves and your men to Caan, for it is Caan who must lead you all now. We are no longer men of any one city. We are Kirthanim, and men of Shalin Bel and Fel Edorath must unite. None of us knows what you will find when you reach Cimaris Rul, but I trust you to make the best of it. Go there as quickly as you can and summon what strength they have. Secure the city if you think it defensible. If not, you will need to decide whether to retreat by land north to Amaan Sul or to sail around the coast up to Kel Imlaris. I cannot give you any further guidance; all I can do is promise that I will seek Allfather's blessing upon you every day that I am gone."

"And you?" Caan said when Aljeron finished. "What will you do and where will you go from here?"

"I will stay behind with the others on the smallest of the ships. If the flames die down and there is no sign of the enemy ashore, tomorrow night I will try to see if any of our missing men have survived and are in Col Marena."

"Why?" Aelwyn said. "Your promise to Valzaan does not mandate this."

"No, it doesn't," Aljeron said, "but my responsibility to my men does. I will not take any needless risks, and if I see evidence that the city is still held against me, I will be on my way. Either way, my course will take me across the Bay of Thalasee to Avram Gol."

"Avram Gol." Evrim whispered the name.

"Yes," Aljeron said. "We will each of us go where we must go, and for me, my journey will begin there."