



THE STREETS OF SHALIN BEL



THE BEAUTY OF SHALIN BEL was evident even in the autumn twilight. Though a sprawling city, with many buildings of carved stone rising along seemingly endless streets in every direction, it was also a vibrant and living city, with trees lining the streets as far as the eye could see. Autumn was an especially beautiful time in Shalin Bel, and anyone who visited in that season treasured the colorful memories they took with them when they left.

Oblivious to the beauty around him, a solitary man hurried along one of the smaller side streets. The sun was well below the western horizon, and if the man had been able to see past the buildings and beyond the edge of town and into the many leagues of farmland, villages, and farmhouses, he would have been able to see the sunset reflected on the peaceful Bay of Thalasee. But the man did not even take in the resplendent

beauty around him. The trees, tall and stately, with leaves turned brilliant hues of orange, red, and yellow, and illuminated by the last light of the day, went unnoticed. He was late, and he did not like to be late. It wasn't so much that the friend he was meeting would be annoyed, though he might be. No, it was more his own conscientious nature that drove him onward. He didn't like to keep anyone waiting, especially when the news was good.

Turning the corner, he almost ran into the lamplighter, who was coming the other direction and had already lit the many lampposts along the street, though it wasn't even yet the beginning of First Watch. The days were growing ever shorter. As the man apologized and moved on, he was reminded of how much remained to be done before winter. It was hard not to be excited about the prospect that soon, the war could be over. Victory was within their grasp, and barring some unforeseen catastrophe, all that remained for them was to reach out and seize it.

A strong, cold wind whisked down the next street, and the man pulled his heavy cloak even tighter around his body. He was not a native of Werthanin, but he had been here the better part of seven years now, long enough to know that this was unseasonable cold. If this was Full Autumn, he shuddered to think how cold Full Winter would be. With any luck, though, everything would be over by then and he could be on his way back to Suthanin with his family.

He tried to envision a warm summer day at home, but it didn't do him much good. His wife seemed able to visualize home easily and be comforted, but he lacked some crucial ability that made this possible, for he was rarely able to conjure up anything more than weariness and homesickness. Almost as quickly as the thought of home had come, he was busy pushing it away again. It was a distraction he didn't need right now. The less he thought about going home, the more he

could focus on doing his job, and the better he did his job, the sooner he could think about going home.

Turning onto one last street, he finally reached his destination. Two young men had just emerged from a large wooden door to a popular inn, The Flute and Fiddle, and when they had passed him with a nod, he entered.

The accumulated warmth of several large fires and many bodies hit him, and he gladly removed his heavy cloak and draped it over his arm. The sword dangling at his side made him feel self-conscious. Even in days like these, he felt awkward bearing arms in a friendly inn, but as he had often reminded his friend, they couldn't afford to be unprepared or caught off guard, not when they were so close.

He stood in a narrow hall, which had three large common rooms branching off it. On a busy night like tonight, he had no idea where his friend would be. He poked his head into the largest common room, the one immediately on the right. True to its name, The Flute and Fiddle was providing music. A trio of young women were playing, rather beautifully, a sad, old song that he felt sure he had once known, even though its name eluded him now. One of the women played a flute, another a fiddle, and the third sang with her eyes closed and hands clasped. Though most of the men and women in the room were busy conversing with one another, they showed their obvious approval for the song and for the musicians when they finished. Then, after a brief pause, the trio began again, playing a much livelier song to which the singer also danced.

Scanning the room quickly, the man saw that his friend was not there, which was a pity, for he would have enjoyed the music. He continued down the hall, the music and song drifting along behind him. The second room was about half the size of the first, though equally packed and dense with smoke. Though he saw a few familiar faces, including a few officers who had been injured earlier in the war, he didn't see the man

he was looking for, so he stepped across the hall to the common room on the left.

The last of the common rooms was almost as big as the first, and two large fireplaces lit and heated it. His friend sat near the fireplace farthest from the door. He was always easy to spot, not only because of the large scars that ran down the right side of his face, but because Aljeron was the only man around who always had a tiger with him, even when he was taking a late supper in a public inn where tigers were generally discouraged.

“Sorry I’m late,” Evrim said as he approached Aljeron at the table.

“Never mind that now,” Aljeron said, looking up with an expressionless face. “Did the messenger come?”

“He did.”

“And?”

“Gilion says that things are right on schedule. Brenim is back and they’ll be ready as soon as we can get there.”

“Good.” Aljeron leaned back in his chair. He sipped from a large mug and looked thoughtfully into the fire. Reaching down with his free hand, he stroked Koshti’s head. The tiger closed his eyes and signaled his approval with a contented growl that Evrim had come to recognize as the tiger’s version of a purr. While Aljeron was lost in his thoughts, Evrim caught the attention of one of the stewards and ordered a cider.

He had received and finished half of it before Aljeron’s attention returned to the table. “Sorry, but I’ve already ordered. Are you eating?”

“No, I grabbed a bite while I was waiting.”

Aljeron nodded. “You dispatched my message to Gilion in return?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He reached over and patted Evrim on the shoulder. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate having you with

me. It makes all the difference in the world to have competent people around. I don't even know why I bothered asking. You've never failed to do what you've been asked."

"Not if I could help it."

Aljeron sighed. "As glad as I'll be to see this finished, I'll be sorry to see you go home. I've gotten used to having you around. You're not just a good officer; you're a good friend. Any chance you'd consider staying in Shalin Bel?"

Evrin took a drink. "I don't think so. Kyril wants to go home and so do the girls, though they've adapted to life here pretty well. I want to go too. Shalin Bel is truly amazing, but we'd like to finish raising the girls in Dal Harat. It's home, after all, even if it is just a little place."

Aljeron nodded. "I understand. Though I'll likely never marry now, if I were to, it would be hard for me to settle down somewhere else when I could be here. It isn't so easy to leave home in the end, is it?"

"No, it isn't."

"That was the only thing about marrying Wylla that was bittersweet for Joraiem, you know, having to leave Dal Harat. He knew he'd be happy in Amaan Sul with her, but leaving the family, leaving you, well, it pained him. "

"I know," Evrin answered, finishing his cider and signaling to the steward for another. "And it wouldn't have been easy to see him go. It wasn't the same when he left for Sulare, and it hasn't ever been the same since. But things are what they are, right?"

"Right."

Evrin looked at Aljeron as he stared across the room at nothing in particular. For a moment, Aljeron's face had softened, and he had seen a glimpse of what others called "the old Aljeron." But the cold, hard look had returned upon mention of Joraiem's name, and Evrin had a pretty good idea what he was thinking about.

“Fel Edorath is going to fall, Aljeron, and we’ll get him. He won’t escape justice this time.”

“I hope so, but he isn’t mine yet.”

The steward reappeared with Evrim’s second cider and Aljeron’s meal, a large bowl of steaming hot stew with half a loaf of bread and cheese. Aljeron thanked him and ordered another cider. When the man had gone, Aljeron leaned over the meal and looked intently at Evrim. “I’ve waited seventeen years for this, Evrim. Seventeen years. It infuriates me to think he has been alive and well all this time. He’d better hope that he dies defending his city, because if I take him alive, he will be sorry that I did.”

Evrим leaned over the table too. “I’ve waited just as long, and I despise him just as much. I know how much you want to be the one to kill him, but I’m not making any promises that you’ll have that chance if I get my hands on him first. He was my best friend and my wife’s brother.”

Aljeron stared at Evrim, and Evrim knew his own eyes mirrored the intensity in Aljeron’s. Evrim rarely betrayed his feelings, but on a few rare occasions, he had shown Aljeron a glimpse of the fire that burned within. Evrim knew this shared passion was why Aljeron trusted him absolutely, even though they had barely known each other when Aljeron had first made Evrim an officer in his army. Both men had loved Joraiem Andira as though he had been their brother, and they both smoldered with the desire to make Rulalin Tarasir pay for taking his life.

Aljeron smiled, and the fierce fire in Evrim’s heart dissipated. He leaned back in his chair. “Don’t worry, Evrim. I wouldn’t begrudge you the right to do what you had to do. If there is any hand in Kirthanin other than my own that I could accept his end from, it would be yours, and maybe Brenim’s. Of course, that would go for Monias too, but his support for what we are trying to do here has always been reluctant.”

“He wants to see justice done, Aljeron, believe me. But even before Joraiem died, he was never very keen on the use of weapons. He accepted their necessity with Malek and Malek’s creatures living right in the middle of Kirthanin, but I’m not surprised that he finds it difficult to support a war like this between men.”

“I know.” Aljeron swallowed some of his stew. “It would just be easier to make our case to the Assembly with his full support. For that matter, it would be easier to make our case to the Assembly with Wylla’s full support. Their voices clearly and unashamedly supporting us would go a long way.”

“We have Wylla’s support, Aljeron, but you know why she isn’t going to go before the Assembly and give a fiery speech about the necessity of this war. She was Joraiem’s wife, but she is also the Queen of Enthanin. The war will end, and we will need to knit Kirthanin back together. It is going to be hard enough to reunite Werthanin and restore peace between Shalin Bel and Fel Eдорath without bringing Enthanin into it all. Besides, she’s trying to raise Benjiah without bitterness. She doesn’t want him to be consumed by the hate that burns in you and me, and I don’t blame her.”

Aljeron sighed. “No, I don’t blame her either.” He paused from his supper and reached down to stroke Koshti some more. “Do you think we will be free of it when this is done and he is dead?”

Evrin shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know, but I hope so.”

Aljeron continued eating, but Evrim remained silent, gazing into the fireplace. The room wasn’t quite as full now, as several of those who had been eating when Evrim had come in had finished and gone. Five men still wearing their heavy outer cloaks entered and took a table across the room. Evrim glanced up, but he didn’t recognize their faces.

“Have you heard from Kyril and the girls recently?” Aljeron asked.

“Not since their arrival in Amaan Sul in the spring. I’m sure they are enjoying themselves, though. They always do. Kyril and Wylla get along well. From the moment they met, even with circumstances being what they were, they were close. Kyril looks to Wylla as an older sister for guidance and for help, and from what I can tell, Wylla loves to have Kyril around. Maybe she’s the little sister Wylla never had. Goodness knows Pedraal and Pedraan wouldn’t have given her many opportunities to fulfill her natural big sisterly inclinations.”

“No, I imagine not.”

“And the girls, well, they adore Benjiah. He can do no wrong in their eyes. Halina and Roslin could barely wait to go and see him again.”

“What is he like, Benjiah?” Aljeron asked, looking up from his supper thoughtfully.

“He’s a handsome boy. His hair is blond like his father’s was, but it is hard to tell who he resembles most in the end. He has his father’s eyes, but I think his face resembles most clearly Wylla. The last I saw him, three years ago, he was only thirteen, but I could tell already he was going to be a tall, strong boy. I am sure that he has changed a lot since then.”

“What’s he like as a person?”

“Strong, quiet . . . angry.”

“I can imagine.”

“You know,” Evrim said, setting his cider down and leaning in over the table toward Aljeron, “you really should go and see them when this is done. I know it would be hard, but I think it would be comforting too, and I don’t just mean for them. Wylla would love to have you visit, and meeting Benjiah might help you to be more at peace with Joraiem’s death.”

Aljeron seemed to consider this. “Perhaps you’re right. Maybe after Rulalin is dead, maybe then I can go and see him. I have often felt like I have failed the boy by not avenging his

father sooner. Maybe afterward I'll be able to look him in the eye and know that I have done what justice required."

"You haven't failed him, and no one sees it that way but you. If you don't visit, you will do both Benjiah and Joraiem a disservice. You were his father's friend, and he should sit beside the fire with you and hear your stories of his father. I have told him mine, and of course Wylla has told him hers, but I'm sure that he would love to hear of his father in the Summerland and Nal Gildoroth and the rest from you. I know that he admires you."

"Benjiah admires me?"

"He does."

"How do you know?"

"The last time we were together, Benjiah was playing a game with Halina and Roslin, where he was running around with a stick, slaying imaginary enemies while they were sitting together under a bush. They were supposed to be prisoners in a cave or something. I asked him what he was doing, and he said that he was killing the Malekim so that he could set the girls free. He was re-enacting your pursuit of the women after they were abducted on the Forbidden Isle. I told him that his father had used Suruna, not a sword. Do you know what he said to me? He said, 'I know, but today I'm pretending to be Aljeron.'"

Aljeron finished eating quietly and looked up at his friend. "Thanks. I hadn't considered what it might mean to him to meet me. I will go when this is through, Evrim, and I will tell him how much I loved his father."

They sat in silence, the warmth of the fire heating their faces as they gazed into it. Koshti's eyes were closed, and from his even, rhythmic breathing, it appeared that he was asleep. The room was now almost completely empty, and the music, which had been steadily drifting down the hallway the entire evening, had stopped now. The crackling and popping of the warm fire filled the silent void in the room, and though it wasn't

especially late, Evrim and Aljeron knew that most of Shalin Bel would have already retired for the night. The shops were closed, and while most of the inns would be open for several more hours, even they would have few people eating and drinking within. It was cold outside and most people in the city would be home by their own bright fires and in their own warm beds.

“Well,” Aljeron began at last. “We should probably get back. Tomorrow I have to convince the council that seeing this through to the end is the only reasonable path before us, and after that we still have many things to do before we head back to Fel Edorath. Let’s get some rest.”

“Sounds good,” Evrim said, standing and stretching. “Whenever I know the time is approaching to return to the front, I always savor those last few nights in a real bed. You know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

“When do you think we will be ready to go?”

“If we are ready to go by Midautumn, my thought would be that we could celebrate the rites here, then head out the following morning. That should give Gilion and Brenim plenty of time, and as soon as we get there, we will bring Fel Edorath to its knees and end this war.”

After listening to the innkeeper remind him how much he had loved Aljeron’s parents, Aljeron stepped outside, followed closely by Koshti and Evrim. Aljeron was certainly glad he had wrapped his cloak tightly before going out. The wind was blowing twice as hard as he remembered, and the evening air was twice as cold. It was very dark now, though the moon was almost three-quarters full and shone brightly over the city. The lamps along both sides of the street gave off a soft glow that illuminated most of the roadway, though patchy spots here and there remained in darkness.

Aljeron tried to say something over his shoulder to Evrim, but the whistling wind obscured his words so much that he doubted Evrim understood. Even Koshti looked up intently at Aljeron as though to say he had heard his voice but didn't know if the words had been meant for him. Evrim shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Aljeron tried again, a little louder, but Evrim still didn't hear. This time, Aljeron waved it off as unimportant with a look of frustration and kept walking.

They made their way down several streets. They passed the occasional pedestrian, invariably walking quickly and clinging tightly to a cloak. The usual social niceties were replaced by simple nods as everyone seemed anxious to get where they were going. In addition to the cold, small droplets of rain were beginning to fall. Aljeron felt the first drop hit his hand. Looking up, he took the next one in his eye. He rubbed it to get the water out. The drops started to fall faster, and Aljeron stepped up his pace as he glanced over his shoulder with a look at Evrim that he intended as, "It figures."

They weren't far now from the Council Hall of Shalin Bel. The Council Hall was an enormous stone building that was really more of a complex than a single structure. At the center was the Hall proper, where the Novaana who lived in and around Shalin Bel met with the prominent merchants and city elders to discuss the city's affairs. Since many of these people owned extensive lands outside the city itself and traveled into town for meetings of the city council, one large building off of the Council Hall was dedicated to two large kitchens and five separate dining areas, and two more large buildings were full of chambers in which visitors stayed when they came into town for the council. Most of those chambers were allocated more or less permanently to their users. Evrim and his family were a case in point, and Aljeron had seen to it that they received some of the best quarters to be found. So a spacious four-chamber suite had been dedicated to them ever since.

Aljeron's use of the facility was more typical. The Balinor estate lay an hour's ride beyond the western gate, just south of the road to Col Marena, so his parents had kept a suite of chambers at the Council Hall when staying in the city. In fact, their quarters were undoubtedly the best, for the Balinors were generally acknowledged to be the most prominent of all the Shalin Bel families, though they had never asserted any such position and happily functioned as one family among many in the city council and in the Werthanin delegation to the Assembly.

That was exactly how Aljeron's father had seen it and how Aljeron had been raised to see it, but at times like this, it was a decided inconvenience. Reining in the Shalin Bel council and getting it to support the war had never really been easy, even in the early days, but especially as the conflict had dragged out longer than anyone had expected, the number of dissidents had steadily grown. Aljeron might not have minded so much if the objections had been principled, as Monias's were, but he was sick and tired of economics and pragmatics dominating the debate when justice was the more important consideration. He cared of course about the well-being of those merchants and farmers who depended on commerce and trade between Shalin Bel and Fel Edorath, and he found no joy in their sustained hardship, but he couldn't just abandon justice so that business would pick up again. Many men had sacrificed more than profits or fortunes in the last seven years on the plains between Werthanin's two great cities. He wasn't about to let their efforts die in vain when the end was within sight.

The Council Hall was still some distance away, and the rain became heavier. Aljeron's soaked hair lay in clumps on his shoulders, and his hands were trembling with the cold. He rubbed them again on his wet clothes to try to dry and warm them, even if just a little bit. He looked over his shoulder at

Evrin and noticed that he was having much the same problem. He was holding his hands up to his mouth, blowing on them fiercely. Aljeron tried it too, but it didn't really help and the bottom of his cloak kept blowing open.

At the next corner, he crossed the street, and a faint sparkle of light caught his eye. He turned his head in time to see a flash of steel pass less than a hand in front of his face and hit the side of the building beyond him. The resulting ring was just barely audible above the wind. Ducking quickly around the corner and drawing his sword, Daaltaran, at the same time, he turned to see Evrin and Koshti close behind, though he could tell Koshti was likely to go dashing back out into the street if he heard any sign of further danger.

"What was that?" Evrin shouted as he leaned over Aljeron's shoulder.

"A knife meant for my head, I imagine." Aljeron pointed out through the rain at a cloaked figure darting from a dark doorway across the street. "Come on," Aljeron added.

He ran out into the rain with Koshti at his side and Evrin just behind, and he focused as well as he could on the elusive figure that ran ahead of him. For a moment he thought he had lost sight of him altogether, but suddenly he saw the man turn into a dark, narrow alley. The alley ran a long way between two rows of buildings and emptied out onto a lit street. Aljeron paused just long enough to pick up the silhouette before plunging into the alley after him.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Evrin shouted as blackness swallowed them. "He may not be alone."

Aljeron didn't reply but kept on running through the alley, which was so narrow that they were forced to proceed single-file. Koshti had taken the lead. One second Aljeron could see nothing before him, and the next Koshti had broken back out into the light and so had he. They paused again, but this time Aljeron could see no hint of his attacker. Koshti, though, took

off to the left up the street. The men followed, trusting that Koshti's senses were doing what theirs could not.

Not far ahead Koshti led them into another alleyway. This one was dark like the first, but seemed to have no outlet and threatened to dead-end in darkness. There was no way without light of some kind to know just how far back the alley went. Immediately they halted, sensing that unless the man had made a mistake, they could be in a very precarious place.

A knife whistled through the darkness, slicing through Aljeron's sleeve and making a clean if passing cut in his arm. Immediately they backed out of the alley and around the corner into the lighted street. As they did, several men in dark cloaks with swords drawn pursued them, and soon they found themselves trying to gain firm holds on their swords' slippery hilts.

As Aljeron gradually processed what was happening, he realized that about half a dozen men were pressing them back, each wielding their swords as if they knew what they were doing. Clearly these men had seen combat, probably recently and against his own army. He gripped Daaltaran tightly and soon had shifted from defensive strokes to offensive attacks against two of the assailants.

One of them slipped on the wet paving stone and Aljeron found the opening he needed. With a quick, furious attack at the other man, Aljeron forced him back half a span. Wheeling rapidly toward the man who had slipped, he caught him still off guard and drove Daaltaran completely through him. As quickly as he had buried Daaltaran, he withdrew it, now dripping with blood and shimmering red in the rain, and turned to meet the counterattack of the other man. The attack was quick but predictable, and Aljeron had soon driven him back to the corner of the street and alley, where he made quick work of him.

Turning, he saw a third man dead at Evrim's feet, and a fourth lay before Koshti with one of the tiger's massive claws resting on his chest. Koshti's teeth were bared and bloody, and

Aljeron recognized in his eyes the glint of battle fury that came over him in the middle of combat.

Running to Evrim, he called, "Where are the others?"

Evrin still held his sword warily before him. "I saw only five, and the other one ran back into the alley when he saw Koshti tear his friend open like a feather pillow."

The sound of something metallic falling on stone rang out from the alleyway, and before Evrim could even think of protesting, Aljeron was running back into it. As it turned out, the alley didn't go very far back, and it took only a moment to realize that the man wasn't there. Something loose under his foot told Aljeron that he was standing on the cause of the metallic ring. He bent over and picked up a sword. Groping in the dark, he found a tall, slender ladder tied up against the side of one of the buildings that faced the large street. It was common in the city for homeowners and even some of the shop owners to use their rooftops, which were generally flat, for a number of different purposes. Holding up the sword before Evrim's face, which he could now make out in the alley's darkness, he said, "I bet he didn't want to drop this. Let's go up and get him."

Koshti remained in the alley, pacing at the foot of the ladder, as Aljeron and Evrim went up. Soon both stood on the roof, swords ready. The building was attached to a line of shops, and Aljeron and Evrim began to make their way carefully from rooftop to rooftop.

The lights from the street illuminated at least a portion of their passage. Still, it was fairly dark and puddles of water met their feet at every step. After they had crossed perhaps a dozen buildings, Aljeron grabbed Evrim's arm. With Daaltaran he pointed to a dark figure, perhaps three buildings ahead, paused at what must have been another street, for lamplight framed his dark form nicely. Quickly and quietly they turned slightly and took a more direct path toward him.

They were about to step onto the roof where the man was standing, peering over the edge of the building, when he turned and looked at them. They both froze instinctively, and the man took a step that put him right at the edge of the roof.

“If you surrender we will take you as a prisoner of war,” Evrim shouted through the storm, though Aljeron wondered if the man could hear.

The man made no reply but began move slowly along the edge of the roof toward the corner, where the light wasn't so bright. Evrim called out again, “Stop moving and kneel! We will take you prisoner and spare your life.”

The man stopped, but didn't kneel as they came closer. He turned and looked quickly over the edge again, then looked back at them. They had crossed half of the roof and in a few moments would be in a position to take him prisoner. The man seemed at that moment to realize this fact as well, for he suddenly leapt out over the street and disappeared.

As both Aljeron and Evrim raced to the edge, they heard the crack of his body hitting the street. The man lay almost directly under the light of a street lamp and did not move. Aljeron looked up from the street after several moments. “Fool,” he said to Evrim as he turned away from the edge. “Come, let's see if the bodies tell us anything about these men.”

Koshti was waiting impatiently at the bottom of the ladder, and he seemed to discern almost immediately from Aljeron that the fighting was over. His body relaxed and he fell in behind them as they went to examine the dead men.

The bodies didn't tell them a thing. All five were dressed in nondescript clothes and cloaks, and none of them carried anything except for a sword and a small pouch of silver and gold coins. Two carried knives. When it was clear they weren't going to learn anything from the attackers' possessions, Aljeron and Evrim headed off to inform the city guard so that the bodies could be removed before morning. There was

enough tension in the city and concern over the war without people thinking that they were no longer safe in their own houses and in their own shops. Something like this the night before he met with the council could be quite a nuisance.

When everything had been taken care off, they arrived at last at the Council Hall. And after doing their best to converse nonchalantly with the guard at the gate, they passed through.

Evrin followed Aljeron through the long maze of hallways to his chambers, and they stepped inside with Koshti. Aljeron quickly kindled a fire, and the two men gladly removed their soggy cloaks and huddled by the fireplace. After the fire was burning strong, they sat back in two wooden chairs beside it and warmed their hands until they were positively glowing with the heat.

During all of this neither of them spoke; in fact, they barely looked at one another. But when they were just about completely dry, Evrim broke the silence. "They were the men from The Flute and the Fiddle."

"I know."

Evrin shook his head. "Can you believe the temerity? To think that they showed themselves to us, sitting right across the room for the better part of an hour. They might as well have waved and said hello."

"They were having a drink before going to work."

"Well, at least it was their last."

"I should have known they were trouble."

"How?"

"They never took their cloaks off. It was warm in there, and they sat cloaked the whole time to conceal their weapons. I saw it, but it didn't register."

"That's twice now," he said turning to Aljeron again. "I don't think you should go out alone or at night again until after we return from the Fel Eдорath victorious. Even then you might want to think twice about it."

"I'm not going to live like a prisoner in my own city," Aljeron growled. "Besides, the last attempt was over a year ago, and that was just one man. He could have been anybody with a grudge or grievance."

"But he wasn't. You know that."

"Even so, Fel Edorath barely has enough men left to slow down my entrance into the city. They won't waste any more men on what even Rulalin must realize is a suicide mission."

Aljeron reached down to stroke Koshti's head, which was still drying. The tiger, for all his heavy fur, seemed to tolerate the heat more than Aljeron could. In fact, neither heat nor cold seemed to wear on Koshti, as long as he was dry. He didn't enjoy being wet in either.

"I think you underestimate Rulalin's desperation and determination," Evrim continued, undeterred. "We can't be the only ones who see his end is near. Do you really think he's just going to accept defeat and bow out gracefully? Let you walk into his city and take him captive? He means to get you if he can."

"I don't doubt either his desperation or his determination. I'm just not going to allow him to take anything from me, my freedom or my life."

"Aljeron, why—"

"Look," Aljeron said, turning toward his friend and speaking firmly. "I understand what you're saying, but I'm not going to cower in my room. Besides, we've only got a few days left here before we head back to Fel Edorath, and unless he sent more than the five we encountered tonight, there is no way anyone else is going to arrive in time to find us, much less attack us. Don't worry about it."

Evrим apparently recognized the finality in Aljeron's voice. "All right, but at least let me stay here tonight and take me with you wherever you go the next few days. I can sleep here in the parlor."

“Don’t be silly. Who was talking tonight about savoring his last few opportunities to sleep in a real bed before going back to the front? You’re going to trade that in for the floor of my parlor? And for what? You think a band of assassins is going to try to overpower the guard and make their way into the Council Hall?”

“Why risk it?”

“Look,” Aljeron said, sitting back in his chair and gazing into the fire. “I appreciate your concern, even if you are obsessive, but I don’t want you sleeping on my floor. Koshti will already be sleeping there, and he’s as intimidating and effective a bodyguard as I could ask for. I want you to go back to your own chamber and get a good night’s rest, not only tonight but every night you get the chance.”

Evrin gazed at Koshti and sighed. “All right, Aljeron. I give up. You’re going to do whatever you want to, but at least think about taking me with you outside the Council Hall, especially if you are going out at night.”

“I promise to think about it.”

“That’s a start. Think of it as being kind to a lonely man. With Kyril and the girls in Amaan Sul, my chambers feel big and empty. An invitation out and about could be your gift to me, your mercy offered to a friend.”

Aljeron laughed. “You don’t give up. Poor Evrin, all alone, eh?” He stopped laughing and turned back to the fire. “Sure, I’ll try to include you whenever I can, that way you can make sure I’m not killed by assassins, and I can make sure you aren’t wasting away from loneliness.”

“Deal,” Evrin said quickly.

“Well, now that that’s settled, would you like a drink?”

“No thanks,” Evrin replied, standing. “It’s late.”

“Do you want me to come with you? You know, I could check under the rugs and tables and even in your bed for possible threats.”

“Funny. Do you want me to meet you here tomorrow, or in the Hall?”

“Here is fine. Meet me at the beginning of Second Hour, then we’ll have some time to review things before the Council begins.”

“All right,” Evrim replied as he walked over to the door to the hall. “I will be here at Second Hour.”

“See you then.”

Evrin slipped out into the hall and down the corridor. Aljeron closed the door behind him and then returned to the fire. He sat beside Koshti and stroked the fur along his back, which was not only dry now but warm and bristly. “You were great tonight, old friend,” he whispered softly as he rubbed him gently. “You are always there when I need you. So many years now, and you never fail me.”

Koshti rolled on his side so Aljeron could stroke his stomach and looked up at Aljeron. Not for the first time, Aljeron wondered what the tiger was thinking. Despite their close bond, the intuitive communication they shared, and their many years together, he didn’t know. It was a question that not even Valzaan had been able to answer.

Valzaan. The name brought back so many memories. Aljeron slipped out of the chair and lay next to Koshti. It had been many years since he had last seen the prophet, and many more since they had first met in that great field of grain near the dragon tower on the road to Sulare. How much those days came to him now like a wondrous, golden era of youth. He saw it now as one of the best years of his life. The friends he had made there, especially Joraïem, had filled the one void he hadn’t even realized he had, close companionship outside his family with a real person. That was what he had found with Joraïem. Though it had been difficult and even terrifying at certain points, he looked back at their adventures together as one of the highlights of his existence.

But then Rulalin had murdered Joraïem and robbed Aljeron of that friendship. How clearly that morning remained in Aljeron's memory. Wylla had come into the Great Hall for breakfast without Joraïem, and Aljeron had asked her where he was. Her answer had made Aljeron shudder. He had sensed something was wrong, but there had been no opportunity to do anything about it. Word had come immediately after that Joraïem was hurt down on the beach, and they had all raced to him. He had often wondered if Joraïem was alive when he'd asked Wylla where he was, or if the cold shiver that rippled through him had been some kind of supernatural awareness that his friend was dead.

That moment had changed everything. Life ever since had been misery and toil. He had taken Joraïem's body back to Dal Harat and grieved his loss anew as Joraïem's family grieved it for the first time. He had returned to Shalin Bel and grown ever more frustrated by the inability of the Assembly to bring Rulalin to justice. And as his anger and bitterness had grown, he had been forced to deal with the loss of his mother, and then several years after, the loss of his father. He had buried them both, and now he was more alone than ever.

He rose and walked into his bedroom. It was dark, and he was glad. He opened the window. The rain was still falling steadily, and the cold air that rushed in made him shiver. He inhaled deeply, shut the window, and got into bed.

Loneliness. Evrim had spoken of it, and Aljeron didn't doubt Evrim was lonely. He was afflicted with the loneliness of a man used to being surrounded by family. He had a loving wife and beautiful children.

Aljeron's loneliness, though, was of another sort. It was bone-deep. The emptiness threatened at times to consume him. His parents. His best friend. All he had ever had. All lost. He had nothing now, except this war, and the council would decide tomorrow if he still had even that.