

Chapter 1: A Modest Request

The small keep was surrounded by a low stone wall with red banners whipping in the sharp wind. The dun of Arndeall was set on a broad hill decorated with a field of yellow flowers. A sparse forest of elm, thick and green in the midst of summer, crowded the hill on all sides except for the dirt track from the east, well worn with travel. In the cobblestone ward, a rider dismounted and handed his reigns to a waiting attendant. The hood of his white cloak was pulled to his shoulders, revealing a golden mane. Around his neck lay a silver pendant of an owl, the holy symbol of Demarest the Silent Judge.

Tharaman left his sword tied to his saddle as it had been his entire journey for these were civilized lands. Dressed in comfort for the short ride across the March of the Dunhelm, the young man wore leather riding boots and a knee-length blue tunic. His legs were bare allowing for the heat of the day. Tharaman could easily have been mistaken for a common courier and not the first son of a high knight and landed lord of Alluine. And if such a mistake had been made, it was not in his nature to rebuke it. He had just arrived at the family lands of Sir Aridan Pallenhad, the Lord of Arndeall. Over the course of many years, the two houses, Pallenhad and Abelaine, had been close allies and even distantly related through marriage. The household servants opened the iron-banded double doors at his approach, spilling light into the dim feasting hall.

Stepping past the threshold and into the coolness of the stone hall, Tharaman quietly noticed the rows of banners, trophies, and lances adorning the columns and walls. Their breadth and number seemed nearly ludicrous crowding the rafters. On either side of the entrance were two full suits of burnished plate mail holding halberds. Sitting at the opposite end was the lord of the hall, accompanied on either side by serving girls hardly older than seventeen summers. Aridan had the sullen look of a bored child, eating the fruits hand fed to him by his attendants. He wore a simple surcoat without sleeves, once white but now stained with sweat. His sword, finely crafted with a golden wire pommel, rested across his lap.

The herald stepped forward when Tharaman came close enough for a formal introduction. He wore a green hood and a beard of four days.

"My gracious Lord Pallenhad," the herald was apparently as bored as his master, yet his voice still carried through the hall with purpose. "I present the honorable Tharaman of House Abelaine, heir to the holdings of Ebandor, son of the noble Sir Alaerend Abelaine." With a short bow, the herald returned to his perch in the shadows near a sleeping minstrel to pick at the bones of his noon meal.

"Young Tharaman," Aridan's voice was thick with mead and his eyes were surly. "Pray what business do you have with Arndeall this day?" Unnoticed to the lord of the hall, each of his attendants blushed at the approach of the visitor. With his flaxen hair adorning his comely face and wearing a cloak of white, Tharaman was angelic.

"Lord Pallenhad," Tharaman, only seventeen cycles old, spoke with a baritone voice, deep and rich. "It is always a pleasure and an honor to join the company of such friends and allies of my father's house." He bowed, holding his cloak out with one hand. It politely revealed that he was wore no sword at his side and that he had come in peace.

"Aye, boy, 'tis still your father's lands even though long in the grave he rests." Aridan smiled, clearly enjoying this diversion from his boredom. His lips were darkly stained with mead and his hair was an unkempt oily mess. It was fashionable among the nobles to rub olive oil brought from the south into the hair to give it a high sheen and a sculpted curl. Aridan was quite deliberate in his courtly reputation.

"You speak the truth," the young visitor spoke without blinking. "Many years ago my father was laid to rest with my mother at the hands of villains from Learadas. Your father, may Demarest guide his soul to paradise, avenged their deaths many a time and my gratitude for it is unending."

"Many years indeed and all the while, young Tharaman labored for his life with illness and frailty." The herald looked up from his idle scavenging at the audacity of his lord's comments. Tharaman was struck ill at an early age, laboring to even breathe and often vomiting blood. Somehow, though, the lad had grown tall and covered in lean muscle.

"And during such time, the Lord Pallenhad has been most gracious to safe guard the precious relics of the Abelaine House." At the time of his parents' deaths at the hands of Learadan raiders from across the eastern border, Tharaman was still only in his third year. In the stillness of night, he believed he could still smell the sweet scent of his mother's neck or hear the soft words of his father. These memories were fleeting in the light of day. Perhaps they were only dreams after all.

With no other living relatives, Tharaman was entrusted into the care of the venerable Sir Dunstan Ealdellen, while the heirlooms of his family were placed with Pallenhad. As frail and sickly as Tharaman was as a babe, many suspected that the Abelaine House would disappear entirely. The lands of Ebandor and the treasures within would be granted to their closest relatives at the discretion of the Dunhelm, the baron's appointed lord over the borderlands.

"And guard them I have." Aridan paused to pull heavily from a tankard of dark mead, sloshing down the front of his surcoat. "And guard them I will continue to do until young Tharaman reaches the age of manhood." He followed with a derisive snort.

"I assure you that I stand before you as a man and heir to Ebandor, good Aridan," Tharaman was tall in frame with wide shoulders, well muscled. "I know in my heart that I am ready to assume the mantle of my family. I humbly ask you for the sword, armor, and signet of my father so that I may continue in his legacy." Tharaman bowed, far lower than was required from his station.

"Ah, young Tharaman," Aridan rose from his chair. He was thick through the body and arms, covered in course hair. It was a form equally crafted from feasting and fighting. "A man you claim to be, but yet I see only a boy before me still. You were put into the charge of Sir Dunstan Ealdellen. And where is he to speak on your behalf and proclaim you the man that you wish to be?"

Tharaman was silent with his head slightly bowed. He did not dare look Aridan in the eyes, lest he lose control of the rage burning in his chest. He would not disgrace himself or the memory of his father with an outburst. Aridan clearly had the right to refuse by the rules of courtly etiquette, though rarely if ever exercised would it have been to deny the request. Instead, he stood passively, outwardly appearing calm in all regards.

"Not a single tourney have I see you compete in?" Aridan was walking the length of his hall, admiring the trophies he had won. "How can you be lord and knight if you know nothing of the rigors of battle? Perhaps, young Tharaman, that a keep on the borderlands is not the life that you were intended for. There are other ways to serve his Majesty. Many fine lords seek the court of Arusador and the audience of the Baron and save themselves the horrors of war. And while you are away, House Pallenhad will continue to look after your father's effects and Ebandor."

There was silence. Aridan sized up Tharaman while waiting for his response, fully confident that he could wrestle this boy down to the stone floor and feed him horse dung if he so desired.

"Thank you, Lord Pallenhad," the words were measured carefully, "for your wisdom in this matter. I shall return when it is deemed that I am ready to fully assume the mantle of protector and master." Tharaman bowed again.

"Of course, of course." He turned back towards his two attendants, waiting at his thrown. "Now if you will pardon me, boy, I have pressing matters that must be attended to." He finished his statement with a dismissive wave without turning.

"Yes, Lord Pallenhad." Tharaman bowed again. "Thank you for your audience."

He returned to the summer day in the courtyard, much to the surprise of the servants. They had unsaddled his horse and stabled it, fully expecting the young lord to receive the hospitality of their master. With many apologies, they rushed to present the horse with saddle and tack for his ride back to the lands of House Ealdellen. Tharaman stood in the courtyard waiting for his horse, his eyes closed in prayer. His arms covered his chest, one hand holding the pendant of Demarest. He knew fully that Sir Dunstan would need to speak on his behalf barring uncharacteristic generosity from Aridan. There was only one problem. It was going to be a much more difficult task to bring Sir Dunstan to Arndeall than even Lord Pallenhad could have surmised.

Chapter 2: The Dunhelm

Two warriors, dressed in long tunics and sandals, walked abreast through the outer bailey of the fortified town of Maganlyft. The larger of the two sported a thick mustache crowned by a broad, flat nose. His tunic was red with golden trim and he wore a long sword from a simple baldric at his waist. Imposing as Sir Bannan Cyrebrand's broad shoulders, long sinewy arms, and thick neck may have been, his eyes were alight with cunning and instinct. As the Thain of Maganlyft, impregnable within the mountain cliffs, and the protector the vale below, Bannan the Dunhelm was equally a commander of knights and a judge of men.

Walking beside the Dunhelm was a smaller man, though still strong and able with a sword. He was a full head shorter than his companion and carried a thick stomach, firmly positioned over his leather belt. Sir Thancol Largerad's once raven black hair and beard were streaked with silver. Long in the saddle and service, the knight was approaching the end of his days as a warrior. Still, Thancol maintained a vibrant force of men in his lands of Adrelauras, a company of more than fifty. Despite his disappearing vitality,

his greatest strengths were strongly intact, which were his keen intellect and mind for strategy. Thancol was a favorite advisor and friend of the Dunhelm for just such traits.

"Good Thancol," Bannan nodded to a cluster of nervous footmen as he passed. "Let us turn our minds away from the Duchy of Learadan and their marauders. All plans that can be made in our defense have been. If they look to our lands for plunder once again, I can assure his Excellency, the Baron, that we are ready. How goes your preparations for the tourney in Adrelauras in a fortnight?"

"My steward assures me that all is in proper order," Thancol spoke softly in measured tones, as he always did. "I have fattened two barrows on acorns for the celebration feast and have commissioned a horn of silver from an artisan in Arusador as bounty for the champion, Lord Cyrebrand."

Bannan glanced askance at Thancol with one brow raised. He did not prefer formalities among his advisors and friends.

"My apologies, Bannan." Thancol nodded slightly. "I only fear that I may be deemed disrespectful to address you so casually in front of your men."

"They are soldiers of Maganlyft," Bannan gestured to spearmen and archers bustling about his castle, each consumed with their own duties. "But they are also my sons, each of them. I lead them into battle and I make them two promises. The first that I shall fight harder than any score of them combined, so they need not fear."

"And the second?"

"The second, that at the end of it, whether they return to their love's embrace or to the halls of their ancestors, they shall never be forgotten." Bannan took pride in his baronial appointment as protector the vale. "So address me as you would in private for we are among family."

"You are truly a hero of Alluine," Thancol noted with reverence. Bannan humbly waved the compliment aside. "Then allow me to speak plainly, my friend. I sometimes wonder if these tourneys do not defeat their purpose. Young knights of these times do not have the field of battle to seek their fame and fortune as they once did. For now sleeping Min Foraethel is content to send over raiders from Learadas. So we have turned to pageantry and sport to keep our warriors sharp and ready for war. But at what price, Bannan? No longer do our knights quest or crusade without promise of glory or gold."

"These are peaceful times," Bannan observed with a sigh. "We should be thankful that our problems are only to keep our warriors from boredom. As always, good Thancol, your mind is sharp. I too have seen the change in our knights. Traveling from faire and tourney with an escort of bards, minstrels, and women, so that their deeds may be appropriately embellished for the telling in every court from here to Tirisan."

"Our ways are not replicated over the border, Dunhelm." Thancol had spies telling him of the brutal training of the Min Foraethel imperial army, particularly the neighboring duchy of Learadas. Though the peace was officially observed between Alluine and Min Foraethel, Learadas allowed its soldiers to cross the border to pillage. "It is most concerning what tales come from over the mountains. I suspect that if the

black days of war were to fully return to Alluine, there would be a threshing of our knights, a most bloody purge indeed."

"I fear the day, Thancol." Bannan looked out over the castle walls to the stunning view of the vale below. "I fear the day."

"My apologies, my Lord," Thancol bowed. "I did not mean to tread my worries upon your heart on such a beautiful day. Let me instead speak of a curiosity that has reached my ears if I may." Bannan nodded without taking his watchful eyes on the scene before him, as if he were looking for dangers in the hillocks and forests below. "A group of raiders, too small in number to have been detected by our patrols, made it as far as Bellearn."

"Sir Dunstan's lands?" Bannan was expecting a tale of murder and robbery.

"Aye, my lord." Thancol smiled and continued with the story. "Apparently, Dunstan *the Coward* met the band on horseback with lance and slew them to the last. A group of villagers witnessed the event and clearly described the arms of Ealdellen upon his shield and lance banner to my scouts."

"Thancol," Bannan's eyes narrowed as he thought, "Dunstan must be at least sixty winters now. At least. And you tell me this story and believe it to be true?"

"Again, I say aye, my lord." Thancol shrugged his shoulders.

"Never once has he competed in a tourney and the story of his flight from battle is well known." The Dunhelm was skeptical.

"The title that he received on that day, Dunstan the Coward, is most assuredly undeserved. Sir Dunstan is a very spiritual man, close to the mysteries of Demarest. Remember that tourneys represent false glory and vanity to the righteous. There are so few true believers in number among the peerage anymore that it is hardly considered." Thancol spoke with resignation at this unfortunate circumstance, himself wearing a clergyman's beard.

"And on that day of which you speak, the Lord of Bellearn left the battlefield and certain victory for just cause. A small group of the raiders broke rank to flee, but not back to where they came. They instead ran into the soft belly of the vale, towards the homesteads and farms of common folk. Dunstan surrendered victory on that day to prevent villainy upon our people. The rest is well known; the enemy regrouped and pounded the gates of Barland until Sir Aridan came in force to relieve Sir Ruman." The bards of the day had cast Dunstan as a fool and a coward, a legacy that he never had a chance to disprove.

"Why have I not seen him at Maganlyft in many years?"

"Well, he had the charge of Alaerend's son, Tharaman. The child fell deathly ill after the murder of his parents, a true tragedy in all accounts. After consulting with healers from all over the kingdom, Dunstan took the boy into the mountains in hopes that the crisp air may remedy his ailment. They returned only last year."

"You mean Tharaman lives?" Bannan had assumed the boy had died in childhood. "He must be at least fifteen winters by now."

"Seventeen," Thancol added.

"Then he is nearly a man. The appropriate action is to send the lad an invitation to your tourney." This time it was Bannan who shrugged his shoulders. "Even though he will never live up to the legacy of his father, the true flower of knightly virtue, the courtesy should be extended. The House of Abelaine has long held honor in this kingdom and that has not been forgotten."

"I shall send a courier on horse to Bellearn where the lad remains under the care of Sir Dunstan, until he reaches proper age, my lord."

Chapter 3: The Secret of Bellearn

The front gate of the castle ran perpendicular to the entry road as it came from the west. Welande stood in the first barbican the road encountered so he could see as far as possible down its dusty traverse. He was aged fifty summers with a spry tuft of copper hair on a balding head. He wore a dark blue tunic with white hose and slippers. Attached to his belt were a thick set of keys, befitting his role as the steward and only servant of Bellearn. Accompanying the steward on his vigil was a small cup of burgundy wine that he sipped deliberately.

Twilight was approaching and Tharaman had not returned from his visit to Lord Aridan. Welande was not a lord, a knight, or even a man-at-arms, but neither was he a fool. He had given counsel to the young master that Sir Pallenhad would deny his request. Yet Tharaman had insisted, allowing for the chance of honor in even the most unlikely of persons. The notion of courtly virtue had changed considerably among the peerage. Welande noted with dry cynicism that it was perhaps only the commoners and minstrels that remembered the classical ideals of knightly valor, courage, and honor in their songs and stories.

The Bellearn castle, true to its name, was framed around a center belfry with a massive gilded bell within its heights. Carefully etched in circular bands around drum were the names of each member of the Ealdellen House with their dates of life and death. Sir Dunstan Ealdellen, the Lord of Bellearn, was a spiritual man and a large shrine had been constructed in the outer bailey for the worship of the castle household as well as pilgrims. Though the mantle wall was stoutly constructed with defensive works, Bellearn was at the mouth of the vale and far from the Learadan border. Instead of maintaining a household force of arms, Dunstan had preferred to tithe directly to the church of Demarest. The venerable knight was a relic to older times of the lone crusader, diligently serving both the crown and the church.

Welande let out a sigh of relief as the young lord rounded the bend on his horse. Tall in the saddle, broad shouldered, and blessed with radiant features, Tharaman was the vision on chivalry. Though the steward had never met the former Lord Abelaine, by all accounts Tharaman was the full embodiment of Alaerend's legacy. More than just the appearance of the Tharaman though, Welande had assisted in the young warrior's training for the last year and he was continually amazed at the feats he witnessed almost daily.

Swatting arrows from the air as if dismissing a flying pest or vaulting from horseback in full armor, Tharaman was a marvel.

Dunstan had taken the orphaned child near fifteen summers ago. Almost immediately, the infant had fallen to sickness, struggling to breath and tortured by horrible fevers. Dunstan moved his entire household into the mountains to reside at a secluded abbey, hoping that the care of the Demarene monks would heal the sick child. In time, young Tharaman recovered from his mysterious ailment and grew quickly into the image of his father. Most of his youth had been ecclesiastical training with the monks, the appreciation and investigation of the mysteries of Demarest the Silent Judge. Due to his advanced age, Dunstan was unable to fully train the young Abelaine in the martial skills of a knight. Deprived of a life of weapons training and riding, sapped by childhood illnesses, and surrounded by books and scrolls of the abbey, the warrior that Tharaman had become in just a few years was as miraculous as it was inconceivable.

Tharaman waved a friendly hand as he guided the horse casually down the tree-lined track and Welande sprang into motion to raise the portcullis. The young master entered the outer bailey, leading his horse by the reigns. He had removed his sword from the saddle and wore it slung over one shoulder. Welande exited the gatehouse after lowering the portcullis back into a place, a far easier endeavor than raising it.

"My lord," The steward was out of breath and his panting only bitterly reminded him of his advanced age. "Please let me take your horse to the stables while you rest from your journey."

"Do not be foolish, Welande." Tharaman smiled. "I shall do it. Could you start our dinner? I am truly famished. And we have much to discuss." Lord Abelaine led his horse to the modest stable to remove its saddle and tack. It was a redeeming quality of the young lord that he attended to most of his own chores, one that Welande hoped that he would not lose as he matured.

Dinner for two was set about on the table and Welande bustled about the quiet feast hall lighting candelabras. Tharaman entered, having washed his face and hands from the grime of travel. There was no pretense of class or station in Bellearn, just two men sitting together to eat, one old and one young. Together they sat on the wooden benches on either side of the table and bowed their heads in prayer. When finished in their silent meditations, the pair began eating and discussing the day's events.

"How fairs Lord Pallenhad?" Welande asked dubiously, while filling his cup with more burgundy wine.

"I do not wish to speak ill of a knight of his Majesty and Lord of Alluine," Tharaman paused for a second to consider how to continue with a cup of water in his hand. "So I shall say nothing at all." Welande laughed and clapped his hands. Though Tharaman had not intended this to be a joke, he smiled wryly down at his plate. "Welande, good friend, he has asked me to return with Sir Dunstan and again ask for the sword of my father before reconsidering his answer."

"An impossible task indeed," the steward thought for a moment and his eyes narrowed. "Upon your twenty-first year, you will be able to claim the sword and your land without his permission. But do you think he suspects?" Tharaman sat back in his chair and considered the question for a moment. There was a secret within the walls of Bellearn, one that was closely guarded by Tharaman and the steward.

"In my heart, I do not believe that he does. But I cannot fully assume that he does not. So we must be careful in how we go forward. Speaking of our most secret mission, what have you discovered?"

"Ah, Tharaman, matters are progressing most favorably." The steward leaned forward conspiratorially. "I have heard at least two accounts of the deeds of Sir Dunstan as told in taprooms throughout the vale. The tale surely has reached the Dunhelm's ear by now. Pray, what do you think we should do next?"

"We tread a narrow track for if we fail, then we will bring only shame onto both Bellearn and Abelaine. Yet I still feel that Demarest has blessed our motives. So despite the risk, I think that Sir Dunstan will ride once more in defense of the kingdom before finding his rest." Tharaman turned to the lone tapestry in the feast hall, bearing the crest of Ealdellen. "We alone are entrusted to this sacred duty of restoring honor to House Ealdellen. Honor that was never lost, my friend. In this endeavor, we must not fail."

The master's place at the end of the table was vacant as it had been for nearly a year. Tharaman, the ward, and Welande, the steward, dined without the master of Bellearn. Thus was the truth of the secret. The Lord of Bellearn, though not in the feast hall, was in fact within the castle walls. He was wrapped in white bindings and resting in the Ealdellen crypts beneath the belfry. Sir Dunstan had joined his ancestors last winter, quietly passing in his sleep beside a warm hearth.

In the years under his care and tutelage, Tharaman had seen how the reputation of cowardice, cheerfully propagated by other knights, had deeply wounded his mentor. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Ever faithful to his morals and beliefs, Sir Dunstan made no attempt to repair his tarnished image through the pursuit of glory or fame. He did not maintain a company of soldiers with heavy taxes on his hamlets. He did not fight in the tourneys for false glory and vanity. And he did not employ bards to boast of his deeds. Instead, Lord Ealdellen lived humbly and modestly, overseeing the families in his lands with care and consideration. The private quests that he had undertaken upon the request of Demarest's church, fraught with danger and heroics, were not immortalized in song or verse. Upon the death of his master, Tharaman had realized that such a noble and virtuous life had been ignored, instead of revered. He had vowed to honor the memory of his teacher.

Last spring, Tharaman found his opportunity. With the knights of the Dunhelm far away for a tourney in the southlands, news reached Bellearn of a war band of Learadan raiders that had ventured deep into the vale. The young warrior, without a single battle or skirmish in his experience, donned the armor of his master and rode forth from Bellearn. There were ten of them, vile bandits from terrible Min Foraethel, lost in the reverie of rape and plunder. Tharaman arrived in holy vengeance, the crest of Bellearn upon his banner and shield. With a storm of sword blows, the threat was shortly dispatched and the commoners once fleeing for their lives, stood in awe of the champion before them. Without word, Tharaman rode from the battlefield and returned to the castle of Bellearn. Of course their retelling of the events on that day was dismissed as the exaggerations of wide-eyed peasants, though the coat of arms of their hero had been noted and that identified Sir Ealdellen.

"My lord," Welande remembered a rolled parchment tucked into his belt pouch that he had received earlier in the day by mounted courier. "A messenger arrived and brought this. It is an invitation to the Right of Arms, hosted by Adrelauras. It is the tourney of Sir Thancol the Wise of House Largerad. It invites both Sir Dunstan and Lord Tharaman. What would you like me to do?"

"Politely decline, my friend." Tharaman then recited a passage he had memorized from the holy texts of the Demarene abbey. *"And thusly do not seek earthly glory, but instead the silent praise of righteousness."*

Chapter 4: A Holy Undertaking

In Arusador, the holy grounds of Demarest were more aptly described as a campus. With a squarely-built mammoth hall of worship, a multi-story priory, grand library, garrison, and curtain wall, the seat of the Lord Predicant was impressive. Navigating the labyrinthine maze of gardens, shrines, and alleys within was quite a challenge. Even in the darkness, Oswyn knew this place as his home, despite his long absences of late. He was an Eremite, an order of Demarene monks that sought the seclusion and meditation of the wilderness to discover the divinity of their enigmatic deity. The wilderness was one of the four recorded revelations of the Silent Judge, each with a monastic order. Much of his time was spent in silent labor in a lonely hermitage in the mountains of Alluine as communion with his deity.

His black cassock held tightly to his lean frame. A wooden holy symbol bounced around his neck as he walked. The cassock was in the fashion of his order with a simple hood attached. Oswyn had just arrived in Arusador after six months of wandering and fasting alone in the mountains. Though the city lay sleeping, the attending acolyte had directed him to immediately visit the Lord Predicant despite the late hour. It was well known in clerical circles that Father Lifwynn was a tireless worker and insomniac, though Oswyn was still surprised at his summons. His arrival in Arusador had not been planned. In fact, Oswyn had idly wandered down from the mountains to partake in the Rite of Embrocation.

The quarters of the Lord Predicant were before him and Oswyn paused to straighten the creases in his cassock. There was a soft glow in the windows and from beneath the door. With a gentle knock, he announced his presence.

"Enter." The voice seemed distracted. Father Lifwynn was probably intent on a manuscript illumination, a passion he carried from his days in the priory.

Oswyn removed his hard leather boots, an unusual item for a cloistered monk, but typical of an Eremite, and set them beside the door before entering. The room was simple with a low desk cluttered with parchment and several inkwells. A low fire crackled in a stone hearth to keep the chambers warm. The Lord Predicant indulged only in a thick rug to keep his aged bones free from chill. Lifwynn was huddled over the desk, carefully penning the uncial script of his latest work. He wore a red cassock with a thick white surplice as if he had just left from the temple services. The Lord Predicant was crowned with flowing white hair with a permanently bent posture. Yet his clear blue eyes were as sharp as ever. He turned slightly to view his visitor and, upon recognizing Oswyn, returned his quill to its well.

"Brother Oswyn," he slowly rose from his wooden stool, seemingly quite an effort. "It gladdens my heart to see you." The two clerics exchanged a kiss on either cheek as was the ancient custom. "Please join me by the fire. When you reach my age, child, you will discover that most of your time is spent warming old bones. Tell me first, why have you returned to fair Arusador?" Oswyn had dutifully remained silent in the presence of his superior until questioned directly.

"Father, I have returned to receive the Rite of Embrocation." It was a cleansing ritual that was periodically required of the pious to maintain openness to the divine mystery of Demarest.

"Then child, I will administer this upon first light." Oswyn accepted the honor with a nod of his head and a sweeping gesture of his left hand, a sign of blessing. "There is a task that I must ask disturb your meditations. It is upon your conscience to accept or deny without repercussion, though it is a matter of great importance to this church."

"Father, I am at your service as always."

"Let me begin by telling a tale." Father Lifwynn settled back into his chair. "Have you perchance heard of Sir Alaerend Abelaine?" Oswyn shook his head. The Eremite was not versed in the events of the noble houses. "He was a great knight and hero of this kingdom some time ago, while you were still within the dorter. He was a close ally of the church and a faithful follower of Demarest. Alaerend's honor may never again be equaled." The Lord Predicant broke into a fit of coughing. Speaking at length left his ancient throat dry. Oswyn returned with an ewer of water and filled a cup for the elderly priest.

"Thank you greatly, child." He continued after a purposeful swallow. "Alaerend was traveling to his the lands of his ancestor in Min Foraethel with his wife and newly born child. Times were more peaceful then with the empire. He was intent on honoring the founder of Abelaine, a tradition common to all noble houses of Alluine before the War of Severance. It was on such journey that he was beset by a host of marauders. His carriage was separated from his vanguard in the ambush. Despite his greatest efforts and slaying a few score of his attackers, Sir Alaerend eventually fell in battle. Quickly after, his fair wife fell to the beasts, as well. The vanguard fought their way to the carriage of their lord just in time to spare the life of his infant son, Tharaman."

"Such a tragedy was devastating to the realm. With the House of Abelaine in ruins, the lands were put into the charge of the Thain of Maganlyft and the young child passed into the care of an elderly knight without heir, Sir Dunstan Ealdellen." Lifwynn drank again from his cup. "The misfortune grew worse when poor Tharaman fell deathly ill. Despite all efforts, a cure for his ailment could not be found. Sir Dunstan, a faithful and righteous lord, moved his entire household to the Abbey of Greystone. The illness worsened over many winters and finally lad's beleagured body collapsed into a deep slumber. By all accounts, he was as near to death as any living soul could be. Tharaman was beyond the help of men."

"Lord Ealdellen maintained a prayerful vigil by the bedside of the boy's bed for many weeks. Then one day, the lad simply awoke. For years and years after the murder of his parents, Tharaman had been tortured by fever and weakness. And yet in his darkest hour, upon the very threshold of death itself, the curse disappeared entirely. It was assuredly the will of Demarest. Sir Dunstan and the boy remained with the brothers of the abbey for several years after. Only recently has young Tharaman returned from the mountains to Bellearn with his master."

"The eternal and all-knowing Demarest gives us omens and his holy manuscript as the compass of his will. In all things the purpose of our master is mysterious. Yet I believe I see the design of the Silent Judge within this tale. I remember the last conversation that I had with Alaerend before undertaking his quest into Min Foraethel. It occurred to me in my meditations a fortnight ago for the first time in many years, long forgotten. Alaerend spoke of the many omens witnessed during the growth of his lady's belly with

child. Upon the birth of his son, he saw the Ablacan Hart within the woods along the Eban, a fortuitous omen indeed."

"There are signs here, child," the Lord Predicant turned to Oswyn. "Perhaps Demarest has left his mark on this young lord in some manner. I ask you to travel to Bellearn and learn what you can of young Tharaman. Search his heart and find if he travels the same path as his father, Sir Alaerend, and his teacher, Sir Dunstan."

"Father, I live to serve Demarest." Oswyn contemplated the name Tharaman. It was Old Andalic, no doubt chosen for its meaning: Tharaman, *the man born from thunder*.

Chapter 5: Through Hidden Passes

Captain Luthric fingered the white scar that divided his craggy face in two. He had not shaved for a fortnight and his grey beard grew like a forest track on either side of his old wound. The scar was the wicked reminder of a punishment he had received from a former commander, a lash with a barbed whip. It had sliced through the tender flesh on his face and neck with ease. Luthric was fortunate to still live. The commander, however, had strangely fallen from his horse and drowned in a river after the incident. Gazing at the path ahead with dark eyes, the captain was in a foul mood and his soldiers knew well enough to remain silent.

They were traveling through a narrow ravine, crested on either side with low hanging trees, in single file. The journey through the mountain pass had been completed and now the company of men was making their way down the floor of the vale through forested hills cut by small creeks and streams. There were five scores of men and all were armed for battle. Each wore a simple knee length coat of mail with open-faced coif, topped with a broad kettle hat. With the same combination of weapons, a stout handled spear and a broad sword, they were armed as irregulars or, more accurately, raiders. Over the chain armor, each soldier dressed with a checkered tunic of green and white. It clearly identified them as footman from Learadas.

Of the five duchies of Min Foraethel, Learadas bore special enmity towards Alluine. Over fifty winters ago, it was a Learadan duke that held the imperial seat when humble Alluine rebelled. With a surprising naval victory, Alluine was free and the emperor quickly deposed by his rivals. Much like the scar on the face of Luthric, the independence of Alluine was a continual reminder of the dishonor of Learadas. As a result, the Iron Duke encouraged his soldiers to cross the border and return with stolen gold and crimson blades despite the treaties of peace.

The captain had been on three raids before this one, each adding to his coffers and reputation. It was the visible scar he carried on his face that drove him to return. The scar that kept his commanders from continuing his advancement. The scar that turned women's faces in disgust at his approach, holding their favors over their mouths as if fighting revulsion. Bitterness had overwhelmed him and he no longer cared for promotion or glory. The vale offered respite and rewards for his murderous ire. Now he was well known among the Learadan ranks as a butcher and a rapist. Yet these acts were lauded by the virtues of *rethelas*.

Min Foraethel was a land of warriors. The Andalic armies were known throughout all kingdoms as fearless and capable. In the rare instances when the empire united for a single goal, the vast, imperial army was nearly invincible. At the heart of this martial spirit was the idealization *rethelas*, the guiding principles of the warrior lifestyle. It dictated brutality, aggression, and stoicism to the extreme. Notions such as diplomacy, mercy, and restraint were discarded as weakness. Men were expected to nearly torture themselves in forging their bodies for war and speak only when their swords were steeped in enemy blood. Soldiers such as Captain Luthric were praised for their ruthlessness and barbarism in enemy lands.

The company of raiders continued their march into the soft heart of the vale, filled with gentle hamlets and homesteads. Over the spring, the Learadan scouts had discovered a hidden pass through the mountains, allowing columns of men easy admission past the border patrols of Alluine. It was a closely guarded secret, one that the Iron Duke intended to exploit should the time come to retake their lost prize. Before the discovery of this gateway to the vale, Learadan soldiers had to outwit mounted patrols in the narrow forests along the Eban. As a result many of their raiders rotted in the dungeons of Maganylft.

Luthric smiled despite his foul mood, a most unsettling sight. His mouth was filled with yellow teeth, cracked and worn, and his eyes were vacant of mirth. With a full company at his charge and with clear weather, the captain knew that he could turn this foray into an entire summer of burning and pillaging. Their numbers would hold up to a response from the knights of the Dunhelm. It would be ample time to wet the ground with the blood of his enemies and cover the unwilling lass in the darkness of his shadow.

Chapter 6: The Tourney

At the feet of tempestuous Storm Crowns, lay the lands of fair Adrelauras. The land was neatly sectioned into fertile tracts by low rock walls running the length of the dark clay roads. At each intersection of these roads, a small guardhouse was constructed of dark stone, adorned with the royal coat of arms on all sides and a signal brazier at the top. Though not continuously garrisoned, these way stations were patrolled throughout the day by mounted soldiers in broad routes and often served as places of trade for local merchants and farmers. Furthest from the Learadan border among the vale holdings, the common folk of Adrelauras were safe to harvest their crops and guide their flocks. Beyond the cultivated land and blossoming in pink abundance, sweet cherry trees filled the peaceful wood with serene beauty.

At the heart of Adrelauras, surrounded by four large fountains at each of the cardinal points was the castle of House LARGERAD. Four drum towers, covered in red conical roofs and topped with pinnacles holding lazy flags, rose high above the surrounding treetops and dominated the broad curtain wall. Higher still, the main keep ascended in quiet majesty with an expansive veranda at the top of the donjon. Within the bailey, a collection of brightly colored pavilions were gathered around a central tourney ground. The Right of Arms was underway and many aspiring knights had joined the list.

Gathered under the pavilion of House Pallenhad, Sir Aridan and Sir Ruman the Boar plucked from the assortment of fruits, cheeses, and breads displayed on wooden serving trays before final contest of the tourney. Joining in their light meal was an assorted retinue of household members and servants. Both

knights had performed admirably in the contest and the final prize was left only for the two of them to decide. The crowd of observers eagerly awaited the final match. It was a clash of opposing fighting styles, the powerful strikes of Ruman of Barland against the precision shield work of Aridan of Arndeaill. The pavilion was buzzing with anticipation. Standing just at the edge of the pavilion, an out of place Eremite monk dressed in a hooded cassock observed and listened as he stroked the short ears of a massive rothund.

"Lord Aridan," Ruman was eager to start the boasting, a skill that he held in such high esteem that he spawned the saying 'to boast like a barlander'. "Best to eat lightly before our duel, I would not wish you to suffer the embarrassment of filling your helm with your meal upon this hot day." The Boar roared with a full throat. The rest of the pavilion joined in the laughter, excited about the traditional boasting between knights.

"Lord Ruman," Aridan was nearly drunk from wine and the courtesan standing next to him was overcome with the stench of his breath. "It is very courteous for you to worry about the well being of Pallenhad on this day. I would recommend instead that you worry for the fortunes of your healer. I suspect you will need the aid of Demarest himself to put you back together when I am finished. Do not fret, good Ruman, it is said by the Demarene priests that even the worthy fall in battle." Aridan gulped down the rest of his goblet. "Is that not true, priest?" His question was said dismissively and clearly he did not expect an answer. Oswyn looked up from the sleepy hound at his side and sensed an opportunity to interject. When the laughter subsided, the Eremite cleared his throat.

"Unfortunately, my lord," Oswyn detested this bunch entirely. "What you have said regarding the holy texts is not true. And, my lord, I am not a priest. I am an Eremite. My apologies if I misrepresented myself." Lord Aridan returned a stare at the monk rife with ire, but the Eremite remained unfettered. "If I may ask a question, though, I was eager to see Lord Tharaman of Ebandor compete within the list on this day?"

"I assure you that the boy lord was invited to this contest of arms by Lord Thancel," Aridan spoke loudly so that all in the pavilion might hear his words. "Yet the young Tharaman strangely declined. It seems that warfare does not suit Lord Abelaine."

"Lord Aridan," Ruman's eyes narrowed at the statement. He was doubly irritated for the disrespect shown to a fellow lord and that Aridan would speak so candidly in mixed company. He was displeased with the direction this conversation had taken and preferred to return to the boasting before the conclusion of the tourney. "Remember that Lord Tharaman is by right of blood our brother as a lord of Alluine. And I need not remind anyone that he is the son of the Sir Alaerend Abelaine, a finer knight one will not fine."

"Do you think that I speak disrespectfully of House Abelaine?" Aridan was swaying as he spoke and used the table to straighten himself. "Then let me clarify my statements so that you may fully understand my point of view. Lord Tharaman is no warrior and never he shall be. In fact, he quailed before my feet in my very own feast hall, begging for his father's sword and armor with all of the tears of a woman."

Aridan laughed loudly, too loudly. The other guests within the pavilion turned in stunned silence at the insults spoken. The memory of Sir Alaerend Abelaine was still highly regarded within the vale. Ruman's brow furrowed in consternation above his flat nose and his face reddened. The minstrels under the

pavilion listened intently to the ire of Aridan, ready to save them in verse. Those minstrels that is that were not on the purse of Lord Pallenhad. It was apparent that Lord Aridan was eager to speak his mind with a tongue loosened by spirits.

"Lord Tharaman," he gestured to the attentive audience with his empty goblet. "Under the apt guidance of Dunstan the Coward, a finer warrior this kingdom has never seen. In the face of enemy, he turns to hide with the wailing women and cowering children. No wonder Learadas boldy sends their raiders across the border with this example of bravery filling their tales. And poor Tharaman would be wise to never take the list field should his frail body be crippled. Monk, mark my words, you shall never see this pathetic Tharaman upon tourney list. He is a coward, a disgrace. The Abelaine line died with his father."

Ruman abruptly stood up to his full height and his attendants immediately restrained his sword arm. Declining to struggle further, the Boar stretched his shoulders back to bear his broad chest. The breastplate of his armor was etched with a boar rampant. A full head taller than anyone else under the pavilion and weighing more than twenty stones, Lord Abaltor was a giant of a man. His mouth twisted beneath his thick red beard and his hands shook with rage. The group of onlookers tensed, fearing that Ruman might again lunge for the knight before him.

"Lord Aridan," Ruman motioned and his retinue rose as well. His voice trembled, barely controlled. "I thank you for your hospitality on this day and I extend my sincere honor to meet you upon the field of battle. I take my leave now." He briskly turned and exited the pavilion followed by his train of attendants. Oswyn at that moment decided to change his initial opinion regarding Lord Abaltor. Though he may seem simple, the Eremite decided that Ruman was genuine and loyal. Returning his gaze to Aridan, he was dismayed to see the expression on the knight's face.

The swaying that had accompanied Sir Aridan's proclamations had vanished and deviousness clouded to his eyes. The attendants immediately jumped to action, clearing the pavilion of food and readying for battle. Their master moved to the edge of his pavilion to look out upon the bailey. He watched with delight as Ruman stormed across the list field to prepare for the final test of the day. A smile crossed his lips as the larger knight hastily selected a wooden two-handed sword from his wrack of weapons. It was the smile of victory.

Oswyn had decided that he had seen enough and excused himself politely from the pavilion and, moments later, the Largerad keep. Armed with a simple walking stick, the Eremite began his journey south to the lands of Bellearn to meet the young lord face to face. His mind, though, was still digesting the spectacle he had just witnessed. Unfamiliar with the nobility, Oswyn had assumed that the old tales of valor, honor, and righteousness told before every hearth in the kingdom were accurate. Instead, he realized that these stories were the archaic dreams of commoners looking for inspiration within the walls of castles. Through his cloud of doubt though, Oswyn forced himself to believe in the wisdom of the Lord Predicant regarding the young Tharaman. How any lord could rise from this pettiness to the divine grace of Demarest was still beyond his understanding and he prepared himself for disappointment.

Yet, he conceded, the silent Demarest does work in mysterious ways.

Chapter 7: The Last Ride of Lord Ealdellen

The sun was high in the sky surrounded by thick cotton clouds, the mountain air thin with heat rising from the flat slabs of granite in the rocky earth. Screams pierced the tranquil range of grey peaks, the isolation of the place swallowing their urgency without echo. High in the vale along the southern rim, a group of homesteads too small to warrant a name was under attack. Five buildings faced the termination of an ancient road in a half-circle as if in greeting to the rare visitor from the lowlands. Beyond the buildings, several rocky paths crept to greater heights to find broad summer grasslands.

Down the main track, a woman, her left sleeve soaked in crimson, ran with wild eyes, her baby clutched to her chest. Her hair still held the dangling flowers placed there by her lover only moments ago as they languished in the sunshine of the fields. The gates of the homesteads were closed, the rest of the families locked securely inside. She searched desperately for a route to safety or a place to hide her baby from the beast stalking her. There was nothing. A sickening growl from behind froze her footsteps. Her child, perhaps sensing the final moments as well, silenced as well. Slowly pivoting, she turned to see the beast that had slain her beloved Aelfwyn in the grazing lands before she fled with their daughter.

The creature had a black carapace that carried the sheen of the sun. Crowning its head were an array of curled, ebon horns like a broken star. The rest of the creature was covered in white fur with breaks above its talons. The beast was the size of a large dog. It was some abomination long forgotten in the depths of the mountains, remembered only in myth and child's tale. Yet here it stood before her, its white, soulless eyes coldly calculating its prey. A low clucking came forward from the recesses of its throat and it lowered in its stance, preparing to pounce.

Frenzied terror washed over the mother and she whirled to shield her baby from the deadly blows with her own flesh. And yet, unbelievable, there was hope standing before her. Hope in the form of a roan horse mounted by a rider in plate armor. The steed, no larger than a riding horse, was covered in a blue caparison with a owl above a bell on either side, both in white. The rider held his lance high. Another bell decorated the banner tied to its end. The barrel helm was adorned with a white plume. She quickly ran past the horse, while the rider moved the horse sideways to protect her path. The woman rounded the corner of a homestead palisade where helping hands pulled her within the enclosure to safety.

From the tops of the walls the homesteaders looked on with awe at their champion, the Lord of Bellearn. He held his armored head forward to clearly examine the beast from beneath the visor of his helm. The two foes regarded each other with building intensity. The horse stamped at the ground with a snort. It was trained for war and its eagerness was showing. In response, the beast opened its black beak and hissed, thick white vapor floating forth. Lore masters would know the creature as a chimonar, more commonly referred to in travelers' tales as the winter death. The creature was an eater of flesh, a mountain scavenger, and armed with the breath of frost.

Held tightly in the arms of her uncle, the crying mother, Magetha, watched the showdown unfold below the wooden palisade. Slowly, the point of the lance lowered from the sky until it pointed at the beast's heart. There would be no retreat on either side today.

"Upon the honor of Demarest," the timbre of the voice rich and deep from beneath the helmet, "I order you back to the icy abyss from whence you came." Silence prevailed again for a small moment. The rider

spurred the horse forward into a short charge and the chimonar responded in kind. The settlers gasped collectively in the pause before the impact, seeming to last forever, the beast leaping past the tip of lance with its claws outstretched.

The two adversaries collided with a thick crash of steel and bone. The lance was well aimed and skewered the beast through the back legs even as it leapt to avoid the strike. It can within a whisper of penetrating its torso. Instead the steel head of the lance pierced the lower abdomen and darkly exited the croup. The chimonar's attack was just as damaging, digging its claws deep into the muscled shoulder of the horse and unleashing an icy blast from its black beak upon the rider and steed. The Lord of Bellearn disappeared in a thick cloud of mist, coating his armor and shield in numbing frost.

The horse rolled onto its side in a thunderous collapse from the attack, its strength sapped from the cold. The knight feeling the weight of his horse shift left, quickly rolled out of the saddle to his right. In moments the horse was down and struggling beneath the talons of the chimonar. The warrior had reached his feet, unnaturally graceful in his plate armor, and produced a sword from his baldric. Leaving the wounded horse, the beast continued its assault, made awkward by its useless hind quarters. The beak and claws raked the air, squealing off the iron shield and clanging from sword parries. The warrior was equal to the task and slowly flanked the advancing creature. He conserved his energy for defense, the ice still coating his armor and skin obviously affecting his strength.

It was only a slight pause in its vigorous flurry of blows, just a hesitation at the agony from the fragment of the lance still dragging the ground, but it was enough. The chimonar shrieked in pain and clawed at the splintered shaft in an attempt to dislodge it. It was at that moment that the warrior burst from behind his shield, the sword blow finishing with a powerful snap at the end of its arc. The carapace below the eye cracked and viscous blood poured like hot tar onto the earth below. The beast in its pain did not fully realize the death blow and, in its confusion, pawed at the air aimlessly before succumbing. The warrior, releasing his shield, plunged his sword with both hands through the heart of the beast.

The horse struggled back to its feet, suffering from the wounds, but not finished. Removing his sword from the fallen beast, the Lord of Bellearn took the reins of his horse and began walking back to the floor of the vale. Stunned that their hero did not take the corpse of the beast as a trophy or insist on a token of appreciation, which would have been joyfully delivered, the villagers ventured forth from the walls of their enclosures in muted curiosity. The mother, still holding her baby, pushed past the others to watch the disappearing image of her savior.

Days later as the tale of the deed spread through the taprooms and feast halls of the vale, the mountain herders would learn that four men had been slain throughout the southern rim before news reached Bellearn. Inexplicably the creature had ventured from the heights of its hunting grounds to feast upon the mountain settlements. The chimonar's body was destined for Maganlyft, carried by wagon for all to see for a modest price by an enterprising merchant, before delivery to the Dunhelm. The gratitude of the mountain settlement to their hero was boundless, many of the family elders promising to travel to the keep of Lord Ealdellen to pay respects with gifts and praise. And yet despite the growing glory, that day was the last ride of Sir Dunstan Ealdellen, who finally joined his ancestors with his legacy restored.

Chapter 8: Raiders in Our Midst

Gadrian's face was covered in dirt and soot, marked only by dried tears. The left half of his face was spotted with blood, though it was not his own. In fact, he bore no physical injuries at all. He was walking over the stony trail barefoot and his clothes were in tatters, the last items in his possession. Locked in the grasp of his left hand, dragging her behind him as he had done for three days, was Alee, his young sister. Her golden blonde locks, which had been praised and carefully brushed each night by Grandmother Aberda, were covered in grime. Her big blue eyes were lost in the torment of her memory, ever threatening to burst into sobs that would not stop.

He had one mission, a single goal. Get to Maganlyft. It had been his mantra, the sole focus over the last few days. Get to Maganlyft. It had driven him through pain, despair, and exhaustion. His Uncle Karian had served long ago as a spearman under the Thain of the Vale, before becoming lame with an arrow wound, and had told the children tales of the Dunhelm each night before sleeping. His uncle had told them of a great warlord with a powerful army at his command. For three days they had marched without eating only stopping to drink hastily from a quiet brook. Within the walls of Maganlyft, he knew the mighty Dunhelm could protect his sister.

The attack had been as unexpected as it was sudden. He had been pulled sleeping from the loft by Aberda, her long silver hair still hanging about her shoulders. Her eyes flashed with urgency, silencing his confusion, and she pushed him towards the store space beneath the floor boards. The sounds of screaming and murder were coming from just outside the door. Thoughts of his friends filled his head and he nearly pulled free of his grandmother's hands until he saw the trembling lip of his baby sister, standing in her nightgown and holding her yellow dolly.

"You must protect her," his grandmother had spoken to him that night, her last words to him. He curled into the crawlspace beneath their cottage, his sister joining him moments later. Aberda replaced the floorboards and pulled the table over them just as the door crashed from its hinges. The room filled with raiders dressed in green and white. Gadrian could see through the cracks between the boards the events as they had transpired above him.

A commander had entered the room, a terrible scar running the length of his face. The soldiers spoke no words, but fanned out through the single room of the cottage and climbed into the loft, smashing clay pots holding grain and water. In moments, Uncle Karian was laying on the ground with a soldier's boot on the back of his neck, a spear hovering between his shoulder blades. His useless legs were small and curled beneath him. Their lives were at the whim of the scarred captain, silently pretending that their begging might change the inevitable conclusion of their judgment. Standing in her robe, defiant of the intruders with curled lip, Aberda spit fully into the face of the commander.

His back hand strike had sent her reeling over the table and onto the floor. From beneath the floorboards, Alee whimpered loudly and Gadrian covered her mouth quickly, pulling her head into his chest. Before the noise could betray their position, Karian struck in the only way he could. Finding a loose kitchen knife on the floor where he lay, he plunged it through the boot top of the soldier standing above. In moments, he was filled with spear points. Aberda slowly regained her feet, her deep wrinkles pitted with blood from her forehead.

With a wave, the captain cleared the cottage of raiders. The brutal indignity that followed was born with silence by his victim. Instead, Aberda turned her face from the horrid stench of her attacker, looking upon the room which had held so much laughter throughout her life, tears quietly streaming from her eyes. When he was finished, she was too weak to fight for life. He finished her with a simple stroke of his knife, leaving the cottage to be burned. The blood of his grandmother, mixing with that of his uncle's, dripped through the cracks of the floorboards onto Gadrian's face. In silent terror mixing with rage, Gadrian and his sister held each other tightly, as the thatched roof burst into flames and crashed down around them.

The horrible memories had kept him from sleeping during their journey. He was afraid that the face of his grandmother would appear to him in his dreams to condemn him for abandoning her. Instead, his mind repeated a single verse. Get to Maganlyft. Traveling through the wilderness and away from the roads, Gadrian would not risk a chance encounter with the marauders again. The last words of his grandmother resounded through his soul. He must protect Alee. Karian had told him of the grand walls of Maganlyft looking over the unassailable cliffs. No army could ever take Maganlyft he had said. Gadrian knew vaguely that they were near. He could see the shadows of the Storm Crowns rising on the horizon.

Get to Maganlyft. The Dunhelm will protect her. Get to Maganlyft.

Chapter 9: Council of War

A collection of knights and lords gathered around a long center table within the audience chamber of the Thain. A detailed map of the vale painted on sheepskin was unrolled and surrounded with army markers, compasses, and half-filled goblets. News had reached Maganlyft of raiders gathered in such force that it could be considered an invasion. Hasty dispatches had summoned those that were close enough to the war council. Many of the same participants of the Right of Arms tourney were present, including Sir Aridan and Sir Ruman. Even in the war council, Lord Pallenhad proudly wore the victor's honors around his neck.

The room was filled with the strongest warriors within the vale and their thoughts were on the battle ahead. There was gossip as well as boasting. A fine meal had been prepared by the cooks of Maganlyft and the war council had eaten its fill. Now they spoke over wine in small groups waiting for the arrival of the Thain to convene the council. The doors of the audience chamber opened and private discussions between the assembled abated as Sir Bannan Cyrebrand entered his hall, followed closely by Sir Thancel. The Dunhelm's face was clouded with anger as he spoke.

"The circumstances we are presented are thus." He had been briefed at length by scouts and survivors in his private chambers. "A company of Learadan footmen has slipped past our guardsman on the Eban and they run rampant within our lands. They even boldly wear the livery of Learadas, though our sources tell us they are without the ducal crest. We must assume then that they are raiders and not the first wave of a Learadan invasion. The company numbers at least a hundred men, armed and armored. Lastly, our scouts tell us that they are mostly on foot, riding what horses they have stolen along their path."

"This is the largest force of foreign invaders within our borders since the Severance," the Dunhelm was pacing now about the room. "This cowardly act is a brazen challenge to the sovereignty of our majesty.

The blood of the innocents has been spilt under our vigil. Women and children put to the torch. This is the vow I now declare before the judgment of Demarest, that every last of these villains shall be laid to earth in graves unmarked and forgotten, either upon the field of battle or dangling from the gallows."

The ambition was equally shared by the warriors at the table, though their motivations were mixed. Ruman the Boar bristled at the notion of burning cottages and abandoned corpses in his land. It was his sacred charge, a promise made by the founder of his household to his Majesty several generations ago. He was a man of simple honor and he strove to keep all of his promises. Across the table, Sir Aridan was thinking different thoughts. In his mind's eye, he could see himself charging triumphantly across the battlefield with the banner of his father whipping behind him. It was the culmination of absolute glory and his heart leapt at the vision.

"Our first responsibility is to protect those that cannot fight for themselves. Our countrymen are being put to the sword and the daughters of Alluine thrown to lustful rabble." His mind returned to the short conversation he had earlier with young Gadrian, praising the boy for his courage and making another solemn promise. "And we will protect them. Mark my words, every death of our people will be revisited upon Learadas tenfold. I have asked for Lord Largerad to consider the best course of action. Thanco, wisest of us all, pray tell us your strategy for dealing with this scum."

"Aye, my lord." Thanco stepped forward to the table and gestured to the map as he spoke. "Arndeall and Barland are ready to ride. Bolstered by my own horsemen, that provides us nearly three score of cavalry set to march on this very day. Lord Bannan, my strategy is composed of two parts. Firstly, the assembled force of horsemen will ride in haste to intercept the band of raiders. Our scouts tell us that their location is just north of Barland, along the Fedan Flow. With the fleetness of our steeds ready to maneuver and flank, I predict that these raiders will not risk attacking another settlement as it will weaken their formation and surrender defensible position. Instead, they will entrench within the woodland. We shall alert them to our presence, but our horsemen will not engage them. Our forces will be fewer in number and we must respect their Andalic blood." The Andalic people were widely considered throughout all kingdoms as the fiercest soldiers. Thanco's plan was predicated on ending the bloodshed of their countrymen as quickly as possible, yet tempered with caution.

"Remember, good Thanco," Sir Ruman spoke. "Andalic blood still runs in the heart of Alluine." The War of Severance had been a rebellion dividing two sovereign between one people.

"Well noted, Lord Barland." Thanco nodded patiently. The knights of Alluine were ever chasing glory. The wiser knight knew that the key to victory was choosing the time and place of the battle. "The second element of the plan is to gather the full force of the vale for a combined attack. Lord Bannan, I propose that you take your forces south through Lilland's Hold and draw forth the levies, then continue west collecting the rest of the lords and their footmen. With the Dunhelm himself calling forth the militia, every able sword will join your banner. Our numbers will be bolstered by four hundred or more in less than two fortnights. With our numbers strong and the Dunhelm at their command, we will be prepared for all possibilities, including invasion from across the border. Upon your arrival at the Fedan Flow, together our two forces, from the north and the south, will crush the Learadans."

"Your plan is wise, Sir Thancol." Bannan studied the map with army markers. "I will accept it with one revision. Once you have made your presence known to the Learadans and they have retreated within the forest, send riders to the homesteads to gather survivors and send them to walls of Barland. Sir Ruman, I shall levy a general tallage for your household coffers so that you might see to their care."

"My lord," Ruman stood to his full height and lowered his head in respect. "Barland accepts the charge you have given, but does not require the tallage. It is our honor to feed and protect the people of the vale from our own stores. Much has been given to House Abaltor and, in return, we have much to give."

"Then on behalf of the Baron of Arusador as his chosen representative of the vale, I ask Sir Aridan and Sir Ruman to ride forth on this day in defense of our lands." The Dunhelm did not have the patience to cater to egos and bluntly stated the following. "Sir Thancol will lead you until I arrive from the south. You are the oldest and wisest of the three lords, and you are contributing the most horsemen, so the honor is yours." Bannan noted the look of distaste that crossed Sir Aridan's face at his comments, but did nothing to assuage the knight's pride.

The war council adjourned and all set about making preparations for their responsibilities. In truth, the plan of attack against the company of Learadan raiders had been carefully considered in private before being shared with the rest of the war council. The council was a merely formality, there was no time for debate on strategy or tactics. Dunhelm was a masterful field general, leading his soldiers on the field of battle to maximum effect. Thancol had a keen mind for planning and guile. Together, Sir Bannan knew they would create the best plans and needed no help from egocentric knights looking for the opportunity of glory.

Thancol walked with the Thain back to the private quarters, where a collection of scribes were preparing letters to all areas of the kingdom, including the baron in Arusador. The treaties of peace were failing in protecting the vale with Learadas sending ever greater numbers across the mountains. It was Sir Bannan's duty to urge further diplomacy or risk open warfare. It was a war that Alluine could not win and every warrior in Alluine realized that fact. Min Foraethel was simply too powerful with massive armies and a zeal for war. Yet the Thain knew the rift opening between the imperial seat and the Iron Duke could be used to stop the influx of raiders, even if it meant causing civil war in Min Foraethel.

Chapter 10: Destiny Beckons

Tharaman rested on his knees in a simple white tunic belted at the waist with a piece of cord. He was in the pilgrim's chapel within the bailey of Bellearn. His body was still raw with the bite of cold and his sword wrist sorely sprained. The church was open to all that would find hospitality under the roof of Demarest with a side room of bedding for those that needed a night's rest. Within the center of the worship chamber were stone scales topped with a white owl. In one claw it held an olive branch and in the other a writhing snake. The mysteries of the Silent Judge were revealed in his icons.

The young warrior had come to pray for the soul of his old master, Sir Dunstan. It was common among the Demarene faithful to pray for the dead. Prayers that Isham, the collector of the dead, would safeguard their journey into the After Realm. That the souls of the fallen would find peace in the embrace

of their ancestors. Tharaman had cleaned his face and hands in the fountain by the entrance, a lesser ritual of cleansing similar in purpose to the Rite of Embrocation. He lit a few candles and recited hymns from the holy texts in between his meditations. To finally put Sir Dunstan to rest, a holy man would be needed to bless the body of his friend and teacher before laying him permanently in the crypts of Bellearn.

And yet he found that instead of relief that his plans had been fulfilled, Tharaman's heart was filled with anxiety. He had been so focused on restoring the honor and legacy of House Ealdellen that his own burden had been forgotten. Perhaps, he wondered, focusing so ardently on the pledge to his teacher had allowed him to avoid his own fate for a while longer. Now there was nothing more to distract him from his purpose. He was no longer fighting as the ghost of Sir Dunstan, but now as the son of Lord Abelaine.

Sir Alaerend was the flower of knighthood, peerless in all qualities. As a boy of no more than fifteen summers, Alaerend had taken up a sword in defense of the newly crowned king of Alluine in the War of Severance. His courage was boundless and his skill in battle amazing. Entire tomes were filled with his exploits and accomplishments from the Great War alone. Later in life, granted lands to continue the Abelaine House within the borders of Alluine, Alaerend proved to be a wise ruler and dedicated servant to both the crown and the church. The holy quests for Demarest recorded in the church annals were astonishing, such as facing the giant king alone or driving the Nitherung from the southern rim. In the short history of Alluine, no single warrior or lord had done so much and been so universally loved and respected as Sir Alaerend.

Late in his life, he found the woman of his heart, a noble woman from Tirisian, Lady Anwyn. She was heralded as the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, fit for marriage to even the imperial seat. And yet she found her true love in a warrior holding the border lands in the rugged north. Again the story of their romance was captured in bardic song and tale. It seemed that anything the great Alaerend did was worthy of reverence and verse.

No one realized his greatness more than his only son. From his days in the Greystone Abbey, the young Abelaine had read every tome and scroll on the life of his father and mother until they were fully memorized. Long hours were spent gazing at the illuminations of his father within the abbey manuscripts, so proud and righteous atop his horse. Sir Dunstan knew his father well and added to the image where the tales could not. For his own part, he remembered his father only in fragmented memories from his childhood. The man he knew had soft eyes, a bright smile, and gentle hands. Tharaman remembered small moments with his parents, nothing substantial. Memories such as the smell of his mother's neck or safety of his father's large arms were all he had.

Despite living nearly his entire life as an orphan, Tharaman dearly carried his father and his mother within his heart. And this love, this reverence for the man that was his father filled with Tharaman with doubt of his own worthiness. If he did nothing and left Alluine forever, hiding his name and lineage, then the memory of Sir Alaerend would continue forever as the greatest knight in the history of the kingdom. Yet if he put on the armor of Abelaine and carried the sword of his father, then all of his failures would be judged against the ghost of his father.

And so he prayed to be worthy of the Abelaine name. Worthy to carry the legacy of his father. Deep inside, Tharaman knew that he had a special purpose. Demarest had spared him twice, once at the

swords of bandits and another in the clutches of devilish fever. There was something his life was needed for and he lived only to serve the Silent Judge.

The ringing of the bastion gong pulled him from his fervent prayers. There was a visitor to Bellearn, the first in many moons. Tharaman could hear Welande raising the portcullis. He bowed deeply to the altar in the center of the room and left the pilgrim's chapel, emerging into the brightness of the day. The steward had just appeared from the gatehouse, out of breath. He hastened over to the young lord.

"We have a visitor," he whispered. "It appears to be a Demarene monk, an Eremite I believe." A holy man was coming to Bellearn just as he had prayed only moments ago. Tharaman looked up to the heavens in amazement of Demarest. The young lord walked out to the entry path to greet his visitor. The monk was dressed in a hooded black cassock and hard leather boots, clearly marking him as an Eremite wanderer. He had a closely cropped head of golden brown hair. The monk was slight in stature and average height.

"Greetings, brother," Tharaman held up his hand in salute. The monk reciprocated. "I welcome you to Bellearn on behalf of its master, Sir Dunstan Ealdellen."

"And you must be Lord Tharaman Abelaine." The monk bowed, though not required as a member of the clergy, and the courtesy was noted. His face had a crease of concern, hinting that he had more to tell. "I am Oswyn of the Order Eremetica."

"I am Tharaman." Tharaman gestured to the steward waiting attentively just inside the portcullis. "And this is Welande, the steward of Bellearn." It was unusual for a lord to introduce a servant at a formal introduction, but Tharaman considered Welande a friend first. "Do you bring news?"

"My lord, I come with bad tidings," Oswyn quickly recounted an encounter with a small band of survivors along the roads. He had guided them through the woods to an inn for refuge after tending to their wounds. As an Eremite he was a skilled woodsman. "There are raiders north of Barland, burning and killing. I have heard the stories from those that escaped and they speak of indescribable atrocities."

"Welande, ready our horses. I ride within the hour." Tharaman's stomach filled with ice. His destiny, whatever that might be, was quickly approaching.

Chapter 11: The Battle of Broken Bridge

The Fedan Flow was a broad, deep river, slow moving through the rolling hills and forests of the western vale. Only a few leagues to the east, the Fedan joined with the Eban in the shadows of Ardeall. On the southern bank of the river, gathered before an ancient wooden bridge were the riders of Maganlyft led by Thancol. They had ridden throughout the night and their horses were lathered in sweat. Weary riders stretched their legs by the riverbank or rested in the shade of the nearby trees. Yet the effort was rewarded for the Learadan company was hiding just beyond the tree line on the opposite side of the river. The bridge covered the river, broad enough for two riders to cross abreast, was supported by wooden moorings. It led to a wide meadow surrounded by thick woodland on all sides.

Aridan had gathered his group of horsemen around him as they nursed their waterskins and dried rations. His patience with Thancol's leadership was wearing thin. Throughout the journey, the older knight had continued with constant reminders of his grand strategy. It was obvious to Aridan that Lord Largerad was planning to hoard all of the glory of this battle for himself. It burned his heart at the scheming of the old knight to deny Arndeaill its rightful place as victor and champion. He was sweating inside of his armor, which only adding to his discontent. Aridan was convinced that the raiders across the bridge were nothing more than armed peasantry. They would tremble at the charge of Alluine soldiers on horseback.

He was pulling from his waterskin when he noticed a rank of Learadan irregulars break from the cover of the woods. They were armed only with short swords dressed in chain mail. Aridan's eyes narrowed.

"Behold, the Learadans have come to challenge us." He spoke softly to his sergeant, pointing over his saddle horn. "They number only thirty men. Those foolish peasants proclaimed there were five score or more." His sergeant mirrored the smirk on his master's face. "They are poorly armed, we should charge now before they retreat back into the confines of trees. Aye, the time is now. Gather the men." The sergeant moved obediently to the other horsemen and alerted them of the situation. All were mounted and ready. Aridan cautiously looked around, Thancol was busy speaking to his own sergeants about the patrols into the surrounding lands to gather survivors to notice the opportunity. The time to strike was now.

"Onward to glory!" Sir Aridan bellowed as he led his fifteen riders across the bridge at full speed, his drawn sword pointing the way. The sudden action had caught the rest of the Alluine company off guard, scrambling to clear the way before being trampled. Thancol was shouting something incoherent to Lord Arndeaill over the sound of the hooves on the bridge.

Aridan's plan had worked, they had crossed the bridge and he was leading the charge into the enemy ranks. His household bard, disguised as a soldier, was watching from the opposite side of the river to record the events of the day. His soldiers formed a wedge behind him. The Learadans broke rank and began to flee back into the woods, but it was too late. Lord Aridan would have this day, the enemy caught under hoof from his glorious charge.

The advantage quickly turned to Aridan's surprise. From the woods another line of soldiers, two score, appeared in a tight spear formation, allowing the irregulars to pass through their ranks. Archers rose from cover on either side, arrows knocked in their bows. It was a trap.

Without considering the rush of horsemen behind him, Aridan wheeled his horse tightly to the right, forcing his sergeant to avoid hitting him by crashing his horse into an adjacent rider, both falling to the ground. Only his skill as a horseman prevented Lord Pallenhad from losing his position in the saddle. The other riders were not as fortunate as they collided in full force into the spear hedge. Six horses died immediately, their riders flying from the saddle over the line of Learadan spearmen. They were quickly dispatched by the irregulars behind the first two ranks. Arndeaill was in serious trouble, their formation broken and their horses panicked.

Across the river, Aridan saw Thancol readying his men to follow. They had no choice but to ride to his aid. Realizing that from his vantage point, Sir Largerad could only see the spearman and not the archers, Aridan tried to warn them but his shouts went unheard over the sounds of battle. Barland and Adrelauras

rode across the bridge completing the trap. As the last horses cross the bridge, raiders appeared at the water's edge from the thorny brush and pulled lines attached to the weakened supports. The center of the bridge collapsed in a flourish into the deep waters of the Fedan Flow accompanied by unfortunate rider and his horse. The archers completed the masterstroke with a swarm of arrows unleashed at the new participants.

Aridan quickly surmised the new circumstances. Their horses were trapped in a narrow meadow with forest on three sides, canceling their mobility from horseback. In addition, they were cut off from retreat with the bridge lost in the Fedan Flow. The men were seriously fatigued from a full night of travel and beset on all sides. Advancing into the meadow was a spear hedge two men deep, supported by archers on either flank. Aridan reached the same conclusion as Thancol and they both began ordering their remaining men from horseback to form a shield wall. Their long cavalry shields would serve to break the rank of spears, while the back line protected them from the archers.

Quickly they formed rings of shieldmen as they fought to close the gap between each other. The Learadans for their part were making this extremely difficult, advancing quickly into the chaotic mob of Alluine soldiers. Sir Ruman had been cut off from the rest of the group and was fighting a crowd of irregulars without aid. Aridan dismounted and poured himself into the fight, using the utmost of his skills to wound, maim, and drive the enemy before him. Despite his efforts, more raiders appeared from the woods. It was clear they were outnumbered two to one. His moment of glory had turned into utter defeat, a slaughter. And yet there was glory to be found in death.

A single horseman appeared from the opposite side of the Fedan Flow, charging the broken bridge with a readied lance. Aridan noted the colors and crest of Abelaine on the rider, a red field with a white sword. It could only be Tharaman. In a moment, the new entrant to the battle leapt the gaping expanse of collapsed bridge and charged into a line of archers. His lance pinned one bowman to a tree while his chestnut colored horse trampled over two more. Glancing around the battlefield in a brief respite, Aridan noted that Thancol had joined his soldiers around him in a tight circle and was yelling his instructions. They were moving to relieve Ruman. To the credit of the isolated gigantic knight, a crowd of dead Learadans littered the ground at his feat as he mercilessly swung his massive sword in endless fury.

Tharaman remained on horseback, guiding his horse with his legs and striking with his long sword. The power he generated with the blows of his sword were incredible, snapping spear shafts and crushing steel helmets. The horse was obviously panicked, but the young rider masterfully controlled its fear and wheeled through the melee dispensing death on all sides. He was a killing force all on his own, felling more enemies than the small clusters of shielded men. The archers on the right flank were soon dispatched and Tharaman turned his attention to the unprotected rear of the spear hedge.

Sir Aridan ordered his men to the left flank, hoping to drive the bowman from the field and provide relief for Thancol's group. The irregulars armed with swords intercepted their advance, but Aridan pushed through, killing a Learadan with a slash across his exposed neck. The archers were his alone while his soldiers maintained the shield wall behind. With one archer down, Aridan turned to the next. The bowman did not see his new threat. He occupied with his task, carefully aiming his bow into the melee. Lord Ardeall paused to follow the flight path of the arrow and saw that it was directed at Tharaman, clearly visible above the fray on his horse. For a moment, Aridan hesitated. A darkness that he did not

fully comprehend wanted the archer to shoot, to strike the young Abelaine from his perch. In a single moment, the lands of Ebandor and the precious relics of the great Alaerend would belong solely to Arndea. It was only a flash of indecision before he came to his senses and raised his sword to fell the archer, but it was enough.

The arrow left the bow with a silent mission. The archer died immediately after its release, but it made no difference. Tharaman's back was exposed to the missile and it struck true. It pierced his backplate just at the shoulder blade and sank deep to the fletchings. A wave of dread washed over Aridan as he knew the wound would be crippling if not immediately deadly. Tharaman was doomed, surrounded by enemy troops. The rider slumped forward on his horse limply, dropping his sword to the ground.

Chapter 12: Visions

Tharaman felt the bite of the arrow, an intense pressure in his shoulder, and he immediately lost the strength in his sword arm. The burning of his sprained wrist vanished, his whole arm numbed. Soon the pressure was replaced by searing pain through his entire chest. His vision dimmed and he felt as if he were floating. In a heavy crash, he fell from his horse to the ground. His shield was still firmly attached to his arm, forcing him to his back from his fall. He labored to breathe. As he looked up to the distant blue skies with combat all around him, Tharaman had a fleeting moment of clarity. He was dying.

Tears gathered in his eyes, but not on account of the pain or the fear of death. Instead, his heart filled with grief. He had betrayed the legacy of his father. He had fought bravely and to the best of his skill, but it was not enough. Demarest had spared him twice from death, yet this was to be his fate, felled by a single arrow in a border skirmish in his first battle. He was not worthy after all. Tharaman struggled to speak as if his words might be heard.

"Father," they were barely a whisper. "I am sorry. I have failed you." He closed his eyes to accept his death with the hope that when he opened them again, he might see his father in the After Realm.

The burning in wound faded and his body was at peace. The sounds of the melee were muffled from beneath his helm, the sound of steel upon steel, the war cries of desperate men, and the shrill whinnies of frightened horses. Through the din of confusion a single voice carried true through the chaos.

"Tharaman." Someone was speaking to him. The voice was calm. He opened his eyes again to see where it came from. There was no one above him. Yet he had heard it clearly. Perhaps his reason was leaving him in the final moments of his life. He closed his eyes again.

"Tharaman." The voice was calling him and he raised his head, heavy with the barrel helm to look down the length of his body. The voice sounded familiar, something from his distant past. At his feet there was someone standing over him, the sun crowning their head in a glowing nimbus. Their legs were covered in greaves and cuisses, brightly burnished into a high sheen. He looked up to see a magnificent breastplate decorated with a sword gilded in platinum set in an intricate display of etchings.

"Tharaman." The jaw was squarely cut with a blonde mustache crowning an even mouth. The eyes were beaming from within the chain mail coif. It was just as Tharaman remembered in his dreams. The speaker was his father.

"Rise, my son." Alaerend was smiling down at him, all knowing. Warm tears filled Tharaman's eyes, the vision of his father so dear to him. The memories of his youth flooded him, playing in the stable as his father brushed the horses. Nervously holding the hem of his father's tunic as he processed into the royal court to the amusement of his majesty. His parents holding him between them in their massive bed as they slept through the winter nights. It was all coming back.

"Father, I have tried to honor you." He could barely speak. "Please forgive me, I have tried."

"No, Tharaman." His father smiled once again. "You cannot see what I see. You do not know what I know. I tell you on this day, Demarest honors you and it is my privilege to be your father. Now rise, my son, and take the first step in your destiny." The apparition of his father started to disappear from his site.

"Father!" Tharaman had so much to say, but all that came to his lips. "I love you, father!" The image faded completely, though the following words drifted from the ether to the young lord's ears.

"My love will always guide you. Now rise, my son, blessed of Demarest."

The pain in his sprained wrist returned as well as the tightness in his shoulder, but Tharaman felt his strength building. His sword was by his side and he snatched it up as he regained his feet. A Learadan swordsman was standing above him, yet his eyes struck with awe. The battle had moved towards the riverbank, the Learadans pressing their foes into the deep water. The pair of them were alone near the forestline. The swordsman covered his mouth as his eyes watered. He fell to his knees before Tharaman, dropping his sword at his side.

"I have seen." He was nearly incoherent, alternating his gaze between Tharaman's face and the exposed arrow head protruding from his breastplate. "I have seen Demarest above you as you lay dying, a beautiful glow. Now you live. It is a miracle. Blessed be, I have seen and I believe. My lord, take my life as you will. I shall not stand against the righteous." He put out his hands to pray as he lowered his head for the final blow.

"Join me," Tharaman commanded. "Follow Demarest. Forsake all others and all things for his glory alone. For your inhumanity the punishment can only be death. If you take this oath to follow, then you will die and a servant of the Silent Judge will be born." Tharaman put his sword on the shoulder of the grieving man, waiting for his answer.

"For all that I have done, I surely deserve to die." The swordsman looked up at his new master with hope in his eyes. "But if you would find purpose in a new life, then I would serve until my days are finished and my body becomes as dust. I am yours to wield, my Lord."

"Then stand and pick up your sword once more." Tharaman turned to the melee at the river. "Who is the leader of that mob?"

"It is he, my lord," the swordsman pointed at the scarred captain driving his forces into the water against the hard pressed warriors of the vale. Tharaman immediately set off to the water's edge, directly for the Learadan leader. Trailing behind, the swordsman pulled off the liveried tunic of his homeland and cast it aside, wearing only chain mail. Soldiers from the Learadan company broke off from their ranks and moved to engage the pair. Beyond the soldiers of Alluine were waist-deep in the river, struggling to keep their footing.

In a flash, Tharaman dispatched two attackers with a quick flurry of his sword. From the ground, he picked up a spear and cast it through a third. The captain turned to face his new adversary, holding a bloody sword in one hand and a wicked lash in the other. A smile crossed his lips, obviously assured that his plan had won the day and this upstart knight was only a minor annoyance. His eyes spied the arrowhead piercing Tharaman's chest and he parried hard on his opponent's sword. To his apparent surprise, Tharaman had plenty of strength left in his right arm and deflected the strike easily. In return, Lord Abelaine buried his sword into the captain's stomach. The smile on his scarred lips quickly dissipated as he tried to hold in his entrails with both hands. Their faces were close and, in his dying moments, the captain did not see Demarest. Instead, he saw Isham waiting to escort him to the eternal burning of the demon pits.

The loss of their captain greatly affected the morale of the Learadan raiders. Tharaman and the new convert of Demarest assaulted the back rank mercilessly. Many more fell before their will was completely broken. In short order, the remaining raiders surrendered. The losses had been terrible for both sides. Many soldiers lay wounded and dying on the battle field. Sir Ruman the Boar was bloodied, but not bowed. Sir Thancol the Wise suffered from a leg wound that left him hobbling over the battle field. Sir Aridan, though, was unscathed.

Chapter 13: Blessed of Demarest

The remaining force of Learadans was tightly bound to nearby trees, their fate assured. The dead of Alluine were placed respectfully in rows for return to Maganlyft and ceremonial burial, while the Learadan dead were set to be burned. The wounded were quickly gathered for field care. Welande and the Eremite had journeyed with Lord Tharaman from Bellearn and managed to cross the bridge to assist in tending to the injured. Tents had been erected and meals prepared. Thancol had arranged a messenger, the disguised bard of Pallenhad, to ride forth to the Dunhelm and bring news of the victory.

Sitting in a simple one-sided tent, Tharaman intently prayed while Welande prepared to remove his armor. The Learadan swordsman, named Imin, was left in the charge of Tharaman and not destined for judgment in Maganlyft. He was currently washing himself from the stain of his guilt in the Fedan Flow. The steward was very concerned from the young lord's arrow wound and equally surprised at the his nonchalance over it. Judging from the entry and exit, it would have pierced his chest just above his heart, a mortal wound. Yet Tharaman appeared in perfect condition, occasionally rubbing his sore wrist. Welande carefully removed the pauldrons and then the arm harnesses. The padded doublet beneath his breastplate obstructed his view from inside and he determined that he would need to remove

both the breastplate and the backplate before he could clean the wound. First he removed the gorget and placed it with the rest of the armor pieces.

Welande pulled a knife from his boot. With a deep breath, he gently began sawing at the arrow shaft just at the top of the fletching. If he moved the arrow or agitated the wound, it could lead to dire consequences. Tharaman did not move. It was slow work, but eventually the arrow shaft easily snapped. The steel head of the arrow had punched right through the breastplate and Welande decided against pulling the rest of the arrow through the wound. Instead he would need to saw off the head of the arrow as well before removing the armor pieces protecting Tharaman's chest. As he gently worked on the head of the arrow, Welande carefully observed the face of the young lord. His eyes were closed in silent prayer, oblivious to the delicate work performed by the steward.

With the head of the arrow removed, Welande unbuckled the leather straps connecting the front and back plates on either side. The buckles were released and he slowly pulled the backplate free from its holdings. The arrow stub was sitting in the quilted doublet, pulling the fabric into the wound. Yet Welande was surprised at the lack of blood. He circled Tharaman and gently lifted the breastplate away. The doublet on this side was torn with white material bursting out like loose cotton. There were traces of blood, though only slight and a strange smell. Welande did not recognize it immediately.

The doublet needed to be cut from Tharaman and he obliging lifted his opposite arm for the steward to cut the hem of the garment. With two more cuts along each shoulder, he gingerly pulled the doublet free. Again, there was no reaction from Tharaman. Other than a few deepening bruises, there were no other wounds on the young lord. Welande moved to inspect the the arrow wound and was shocked at his discovery. There was almost no blood, but instead a clear filmy liquid from the wound. He rubbed it over his finger tips, realizing the odd smell came from the substance. When he realized the nature of the smell, Welande fell backwards out of the tent in his shock.

"My lord," he stammered, "I must find Brother Oswyn. I shall return." Tharaman made no move, other than a slight nod. Welande raced to the other tents searching for the Eremite. He was blessing a dead soldier for his passage into the After Realm.

"Brother Oswyn!" Welande was frantic. His voice carried to the tent of Thancol, who observed with interest. "Brother Oswyn, you must attend to Tharaman! You must come now!"

"Steward," Thancol hobbled out of his tent, concerned for the welfare of the young hero. "Calm yourself. Is Tharaman troubled by his wounds?"

"My lord," Welande looked pleadingly at the knight. "I do not know. Please come, Oswyn, for this is beyond my reasoning." Together the three of them returned to Tharaman's tent by the water. The others stayed a respectively distance as Oswyn approached.

He moved to inspect the wound, though there was little he could do at the moment since all of his unguents had been used on the critically wounded. There was so little blood from such a serious injury. Oswyn's face creased in confusion as he glanced back to Welande. He came closer and Tharaman opened his eyes.

"Brother Oswyn," Tharaman noted calmly. "How may I be of service?"

"I am without need at the moment, my lord." Oswyn flashed a polite smile and continued to approach closer. He touched the clear fluid gently oozing from the wound and brought his fingers to his nose. The smell was unmistakable, a mix of olive oil and balsam, a rich smell that filled the nostrils. As a member of the clergy, he recognized it immediately. Oswyn knew it as temple oil used in cleansing and purification rituals. The holy oil was coming from the wound as blood.

"What is troubles you?" Tharaman glanced down to his chest in curiosity at the expression of the Eremite.

"My lord," Oswyn smiled and he kissed the holy symbol dangling from his neck. "It is truly a miracle. The Silent One has spoken. Your wounds bleed holy oil, Demarest has touched you." Oswyn turned to Thancol. "My lord, he is blessed. See with your own eyes the glory of Demarest. Blessed are all that see his greatness." Oswyn pulled the trimmed arrow shaft from the wound and placed it into his satchel as a holy relic. Such a blessing had perhaps never been witnessed by the Demarene faithful in any land.

News of the miracle spread throughout the camp in moments. Soldiers began asking to be blessed with the holy oils from the wound. Tharaman awkwardly obliged their requests and permitted Oswyn to dab his wound to mark the foreheads of the faithful as they formed a silent procession. Thancol and Ruman were just as shocked and inspired as the rest of the warriors. They spoke glowingly of the young son of Alaerend, declaring it an honor to serve with him on this glorious day. All spirits were refreshed and renewed in the sanctity. All spirits save one. Deep in the woods and far from the makeshift camp, Sir Aridan wept bitterly.

Chapter 14: Honor Restored

Maganlyft was buzzing with life. Tales of the victory had spread throughout the entire kingdom. The Lord Predicant himself had traveled from Arusador with a large retinue of the clergy to join in the celebrations. A grand feast was scheduled for dusk within the bailey of the castle, because the feast hall was deemed too small to accommodate all of the guests. The lords from all over Alluine had traveled to Maganlyft to meet the son of Alaerend.

The sun was dipping in the sky and the hour of the feast was approaching. Goats, boar, and cattle were all put to roast and casks of mead and wine of the finest stock were wheeled into the bailey. Bread and cheeses were freely given to the people of the mountain town by the Demarene church so that all may celebrate the day. Soldiers dressed in their finest tabards, their armor highly polished. The crowds gathered with minstrels ready to perform their latest creations, all penned on a single subject. Finally, the dignitaries of all ranks took their places on the raised dias. Everything was ready for the ceremony and the Dunhelm officially summoned Lord Tharaman to his audience.

When Tharaman appeared at the bastion, the crowd roared to life with cheers and praise. He humbly looked to the ground, dressed in the colors of his household, red and white. He climbed the short stair to the dias and bowed before the Thain. Sir Bannan addressed the assembly.

"I present Lord Tharaman Abelaine." The crowd erupted from all sides and even the honor guard ringing the battlements joined the cheers. Standing among the thronging masses were Welande, Oswyn, and Imin, a petitioning member of the Demarene Order of Penitents. "Tharaman, you have honored your house and yourself in your actions at the Battle of Broken Bridge. This is your day and we shall feast late into the night in celebration." When the people had quieted, he continued. "But first, there is something I must address. It is a great injustice that Tharaman walk these lands as a lord of the baron's court. So I command you to kneel." Sir Bannan reached for his sword, presented by the honorary sword bearer. "With the right granted to me by the Baron, by his Majesty, and the grace of Demarest, I grant you the right to bear arms as a knight of this realm. May every hearth in Alluine share their warmth and may your wisdom be forever inspired by the Silent One in your judgment of men. Rise, Sir Tharaman."

Tharaman was about to speak, wrongly assuming the ceremony was finished, but the Dunhelm continued.

"I believe that you have shown great courage and keen counsel. It is time to restore Ebandor to its master. Lord Aridan, come forward with the relics of Abelaine." Lord Pallenhad stepped forward with a chest of items, including a sword, plate armor, and more. "In addition, I grant you full title and fiefdom to Ebandor, the gate of the bone river, upon your oath of fealty to the crown of Alluine. Swear to me your unwavering loyalty to the crown and kingdom."

"I swear it."

"Then I present to all that may hear, Sir Tharaman Abelaine, Lord of Ebandor." The Thain gestured to Thancol and Ruman waiting patiently to the side as the crowd showed its pleasure again. Thancol stepped forward to speak.

"Noble Tharaman," Thancol spoke loudly, his voice carrying to the multitudes. "You are an inspiration to us all. As your new brothers in arms, we welcome you to our unbroken circle. In all things, we shall stand together. From any one of us, you need but ask for our assistance and it will be freely given. And now Sir Ruman Abaltor and I would like to honor you with a private gift. Trapped as we were in the red waters of the Fedan Flow, our deaths were assured. Until a single champion appeared to lift the press of our enemies and win the day. We are forever in your debt, noble Tharaman."

Thancol turned Tharaman to the gates of Maganlyft, where a white horse was being led in by the reigns.

It was a magnificent specimen, a war charger. At nearly two hundred and fifty stones in weight and over twenty hands high, it was a monster, the largest he had ever seen. The grey mane was plaited in tight, intricate knots. The stallion was simply breathtaking. Thancol smiled broadly, reading the awed expression of the young knight's face.

"We have named him Utan." It was an apt name, referring the strongest of the gods in the ancient mythology. "Tharaman, our thanks." Tharaman embraced first Thancol and then Ruman. The Dunhelm came forward to finish the ceremony.

"Sir Tharaman," his voice was low so that only the nobles on the dias could hear their words. "Is there anything you wish to say?"

"My lord," Tharaman bowed his head. "I have a modest request."

"Speak it and it shall be done."

"I ask that Sir Dunstan Ealdellen be afforded the honor of a hero as he deserves."

"I have heard of his deeds of late, noble Tharaman." The Dunhelm was no fool and he could now see the truth of the matter. "Why has he not come to join in our celebrations?"

"My lord, he is no longer in this realm. He has passed to the After Realm to join his ancestors. The honor I request on his behalf shall be in the form of a burial." The young knight was careful to avoid any dishonesty. His entire scheme had been accomplished without a single lie, though it had relied heavily on the assumptions of others.

"It is granted, Tharaman. Now let us feast long into the morning before we send you back to the lands of Abelaine. Join me at my table and let me tell you of your father."

"Thank you, my lord." Tharaman smiled broadly. "I would very much enjoy that."