

The Wars of Light and Shadow
8

Stormed Fortress

Fifth Book of the Alliance of Light



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The Wars of Light and Shadow
VOLUME 8

FIFTH BOOK OF
THE ALLIANCE OF LIGHT

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*For three, whose enduring commitment
to the literature of the fantastic
has enriched so many. Betty Ballantine Ellen Datlow Terri
Winding*

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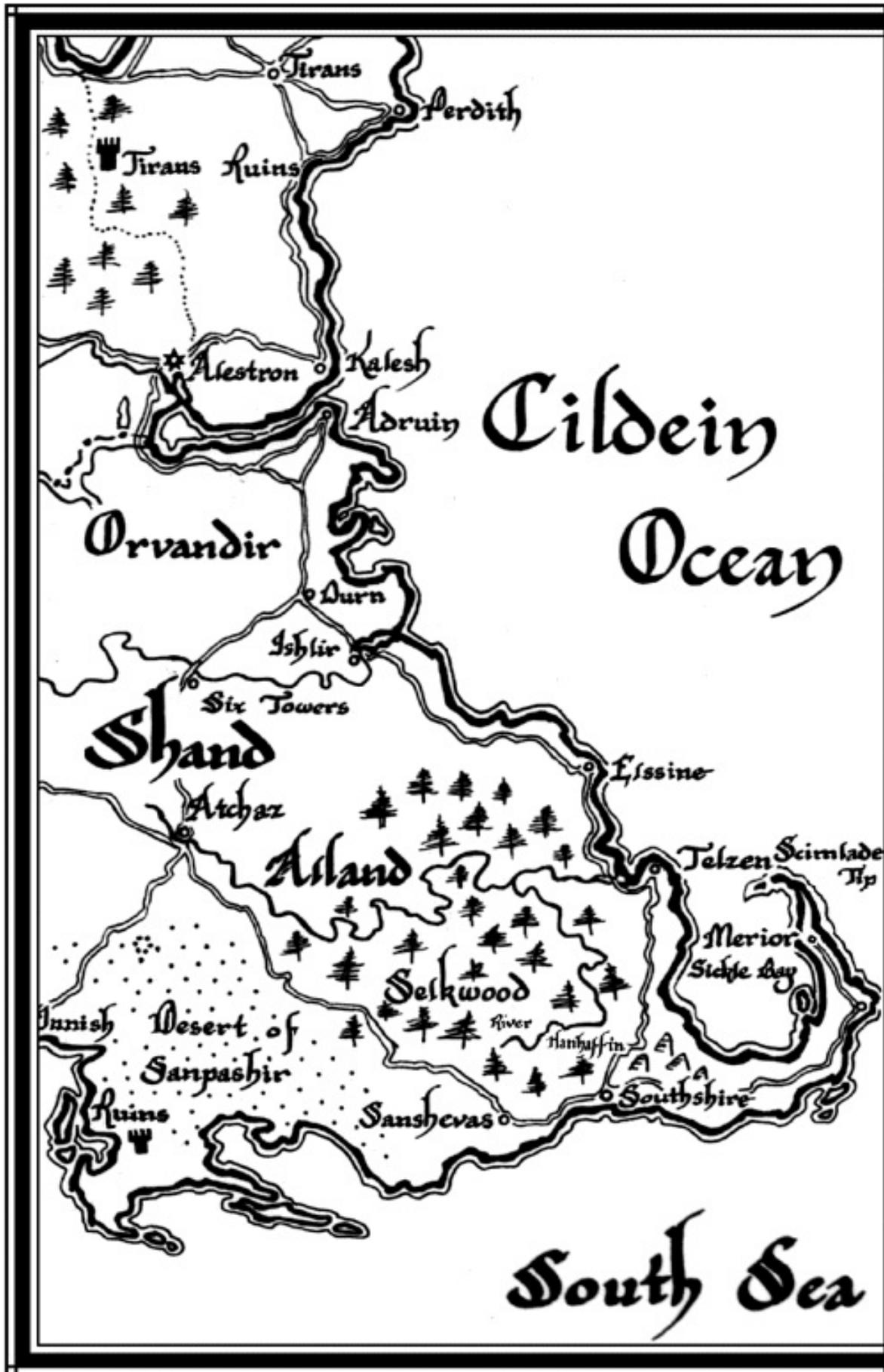
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Story Time-line What Has Gone Before

Third Age Year

5637—The half-brothers Arithon s’Ffalenn, Master of Shadow, and Lysaer s’llessid, gifted with Light, exiled through West Gate, are met as they arrive on Athera by the Fellowship Sorcerer Asandir and Dakar, the Mad Prophet, whose West Gate Prophecy forecast the defeat of the Mistwraith, Desh-thiere, and return of the sunlight that had been lost to Athera for five hundred years.

Arithon meets his beloved, Elaira, who is under a life vow of service to the celibate order of the enchantresses of the Koriathain.

5638—The Mistwraith is contained at Ithamon by Lysaer and Arithon and driven into captivity through their combined powers of Light and Shadow.

The Fellowship Sorcerers’ effort to crown Arithon as High King, and reinstate Rathain’s monarchy fails when the Mistwraith places the half-brothers under its curse: they will be enemies, bent upon each other’s destruction until one or the other lies dead.

War follows. Lysaer, whose cardinal virtue is the s’llessid gift of justice, leads a war host ten thousand strong from Etarra against Arithon, who is backed by the clansmen in Strakewood Forest. Lysaer and Etarra lose eight thousand men, and the clans suffer the Massacre at Tal Quorin, when Etarra head-hunters destroy their women and children to draw the fighting men into the open. To spare his allies, Arithon is forced to use his mage talent to kill. And in the aftermath of this massive insult to his royal gift of compassion, he loses access to all facets of his trained mastery. Survivors of the debacle made possible by his sacrifice include fourteen young boys, named as Companions, and Earl Jieret, twelve years of age, who becomes Arithon’s ‘shadow behind the throne’ – or *caithdein*.

Lysaer returns to Etarra to begin the alliance of town forces against Arithon and court his beloved, Talith.

Arithon apprentices himself to the Masterbard, Halliron, and takes on the disguised persona of Medlir to deny his half-brother, and the directive of the curse, a fixed target.

5643—The Fellowship Sorcerers reinstate crown rule in Havish, under High King Eldir. In redress for irresponsible conduct, Dakar the Mad Prophet is assigned to Arithon’s protection.

5644—Dakar tries to escape his charge and links up with Halliron and ‘Medlir’ on the eastshore, whereupon his scapegrace behaviour with town authorities in Jaelot leads to Halliron’s death and Arithon’s breaking his disguise, then achieving the title of Masterbard of Athera.

Arithon relocates down the eastshore en route to the southcoast, with Dakar’s escapades earning him the enmity of the powerful clan family of Duke Bransian s’Brydion of Alestron.

Elaira receives her longevity from the Koriani Order for the purpose of keeping track of Arithon, since the sisterhood considers him a danger.

Lysaer solidifies his alliance of town interests, rebuilds the ruined citadel at Avenor, marries Talith, and begins his manoeuvres to claim ancestral title to rulership of Tysan.

Against the climate of building war, Arithon founds a shipyard in the fishing village of Merior, where he constructs blue-water sailing vessels with intent to escape to sea. He meets and befriends two fatherless twin children, Fiark and Feylind. He encounters Elaira, under orders from her Prime to involve herself in Arithon's affairs. Their affection deepens when a joint attempt to heal an injured fisherman creates an empathic link between them.

5645—Lysaer leads a war host to Rathain, with intent to sail south and crush Arithon in the fishing village of Merior. But Arithon hears, and uses wiles and Shadow to trigger the Mistwraith's curse beforetime. Inflamed to insane rage, Lysaer burns the fleet he intended to transport his war host, leaving his campaign stranded and delaying his assault through the winter.

Arithon's escape plan suffers a set-back when a rancorous, displaced field-captain from Alestron burns his shipyard at Merior, with only one vessel left fit to be salvaged.

5646—On the run as war builds, Arithon takes refuge in the strategically difficult terrain in Vastmark. Faced by a war host and impossible odds, he takes Lysaer's wife Talith as a captive to stall the onset of open war.

5647—Talith is ransomed by Lysaer, under auspice of the Fellowship Sorcerers and High King Eldir. Although she is safely returned, the experience leaves an irreparable rift in her marriage.

Lysaer masses his war host, thirty-five thousand strong, and marches on Arithon's smaller force in Vastmark. Arithon resorts to desperate measures to turn them, including the Massacre at the Havens, in which five hundred of Lysaer's men are killed outright. The tactic fails, and is followed by the main engagement at Dier Kenton Vale, in which twenty thousand Alliance troops die in one day in a shale slide.

The campaign collapses at the onset of winter, with Duke Bransian s'Brydion of Alestron changing sides and forging a covert alliance with Arithon.

Faced with a ruinous defeat, Lysaer decides to create a faith-based following and cast Arithon as evil incarnate.

Arithon escapes to sea to search for the lost Paravian races, who, as Ath's gift to redeem the world, offer hope he might break the Mistwraith's curse. Feylind sails as his navigator, and Fiark is apprenticed with a merchant-factor in the town of Innish.

The Prime Matriarch of the Koriani Order casts an augury showing that Arithon will cause her downfall. Since she is aging and has only one flawed candidate in line for her succession, and her death will cause an irreparable loss of the sisterhood's knowledge, she becomes Arithon's inveterate enemy.

Still in love with Arithon, Elaira saves the life of an infant during childbirth in the grass-lands of Araethura. Named Fionn Areth, he owes her a life debt, and a prophecy entangles him with Arithon's fate.

Back at Avenor to rebuild his following, Lysaer sets the clanborn who refuse to

join his alliance to eradicate the Master of Shadow under a decree of slavery. His estrangement with Talith leads to her incarceration.

5648–9—For endorsing slave labour, Lysaer is cast out of the Fellowship’s compact, which allows Mankind the right to inhabit Athera.

5649—The Prime Matriarch of the Koriathain confronts the Fellowship Sorcerers to lift restrictions imposed on her sisterhood and the use of their grand focus in their Great Waystone. The petition meets with refusal, sealing her determination to take Arithon captive and use him as leverage to force the Sorcerers to accede to her order’s demands.

5652—Arithon fails in his search for the Paravians. He returns to the continent and discovers Lysaer is enslaving the clanborn. This leads him to infiltrate Lysaer’s shipyard at Riverton, to steal vessels and assist the clansmen in their effort to escape the persecution of Lysaer’s Alliance by fleeing to sanctuary in Havish.

5652–3—The Prime Matriarch of the Koriathain sets a trap to take Arithon by suborning his covert colleagues at the Riverton shipworks, only to have her grand plan undone by ambitious meddling on the part of her sole candidate for succession, Lirenda. The trap springs, but Arithon escapes into a grimward, chased by a company of men allied with Lysaer, under the captaincy of Sulfin Evend.

5653—Lysaer’s wife Talith is murdered by a conspiracy in his own council, with her death made to appear as a suicide. Sulfin Evend survives the grimward and is appointed to the rank of Alliance Commander at Arms.

The Koriathain fail to forge an alliance with Lysaer against Arithon, and in disgrace for her meddling, Lirenda decides to claim the life debt owed by Fionn Areth to Elaira. The child is shapechanged to mature as Arithon’s double, to be used as bait in a second, more elaborate trap to achieve his capture.

5654—Of their own accord, the s’Brydion duke’s brothers decide to avenge the mishap at Riverton, against Arithon’s better judgement. When an argument with Parrien leads to injury, Arithon is awarded the service of two trusted s’Brydion retainers, Vhandon and Talvish.

5654—Lysaer marries Lady Ellaine as a political expedient. On the day of the wedding, the s’Brydion vengeance plan destroys Lysaer’s fleet and his shipyard at Riverton. Sulfin Evend’s uncle, Raiett Raven, joins Alliance service as Lysaer’s advisor and is eventually appointed as High Chancellor of Etarra.

5655—Lysaer and Ellaine’s child, Prince Kevor, is born.

5667—Ellaine learns that her predecessor, Princess Talith, died as a victim of murder, arranged by Lysaer’s council at Avenor.

5669—The Koriani plot to trap Arithon using Fionn Areth sends the boy into the town of Jaelot, where he is taken and condemned, mistaken for the Master of Shadow. Arithon is drawn ashore to prevent the death of an innocent accused in his stead. On winter solstice day, Fionn Areth is snatched from the scaffold. The Koriani conspiracy fails, with Lirenda disgraced and Elaira exonerated.

Now desperate and dying, with no available successor, the Prime Matriarch seizes her moment and distracts the Fellowship Sorcerers by inciting a sweeping upset of the energetic balance of the world. Although she fails to take Arithon captive, she successfully resolves her predicament by taking over a younger candidate, Selidie, in possession. As ‘Selidie’ assumes the mantle of Prime power,

the Sorcerers' hands are tied. The upset has left the Mistwraith itself on the verge of escaping from containment, and other, equally dangerous predators left by the absent Paravian races pose further perils.

As the terrifying portents unleashed by Morriel's meddling cause sweeping panic, young Prince Kevor settles the riot that erupts in Lysaer's absence at Avenor. The brilliant statesmanship earns the young prince the love of the populace and the undying enmity of Lysaer's High Priest, Cerebeld.

5670—Fionn Areth's idealistic belief that Arithon is a criminal spoils the free escape from Jaelot. Alone, under pursuit by Alliance troops and Koriathain, Arithon is set to flight over the mountains and into Daon Ramon Barrens.

Young Prince Kevor is entrapped by the machinations of High Priest Cerebeld, and although he survives to become an adept of Ath's Brotherhood, his presumed death sends his mother Ellaine into flight to escape Lysaer's corrupt council at Avenor.

While Dakar and Fionn Areth are diverted to Rockfell Peak to assist the short-handed Fellowship Sorcerers' recontainment of the Mistwraith, the clans of Rathain, under Jieret, are left to face the combined Alliance war host, under command of Lysaer and Sulfin Evend. With their help, Arithon escapes the troop cordon that has closed to take him, but at cost of seven Companions' lives and Jieret's execution by Lysaer.

To evade capture, Arithon is driven into the dread maze under Kewar cavern, built by the Sorcerer Davien the Betrayer, whose hand originally caused the uprising that unseated the high kings and heated the conflict between town and clanborn. Arithon survives the arduous challenge of the maze, achieves mastery over the Mistwraith's curse, and recovers his mage talent. He takes sanctuary there, under guest welcome of Davien.

Defeated, since none dare follow Arithon's passage through the maze, Lysaer and the disheartened remains of his troop depart for Avenor.

After the successful reconfiguration of the wards containing the Mistwraith, Dakar and Fionn Areth are foiled in their plan to rendezvous with Feylind's ship, *Evenstar*, when the Koriathain attack them in a wayside tavern. To rejoin Arithon's retainers, Vhandon and Talvish, who await them at Duke Bransian's citadel at Alestron, they must continue their journey afoot. When they reach the fortress, a prank of Dakar's runs Fionn Areth afoul of their s'Brydion hosts, resulting in the grass-lander's imprisonment in the duke's dungeon.

5670—Across the continent, the defeated remains of the Alliance war host are en route to Avenor, when Lord Commander Sulfin Evend discovers that Lysaer is trapped under the influence of the Grey Kralovir necromancers, through dark blood rites initiated by the priest scryer used to locate the enemy. To salvage his liege from evil practice, he solicits the learned help of the wise woman Enithen Tuer. She informs him that he is directly related to the s'Gannley lineage, in outbred descent, and, in return for knowledge and a knife with the arcane properties needed to free Lysaer from enslavement, insists that Sulfin Evend swear a *caithdein's* oath to the land. Sulfin Evend is forced to compromise his honour by accepting, since he knows no other way to save Lysaer from Kralovir influence, or defend against the cult influence that also has suborned the high council at Avenor.

Arithon, still in recovery in Kewar with Davien, learns that he has awakened the ancient rogue talent for prophetic far-sight, latent in his mother's lineage.

Meantime, the stress introduced to the earth's lane tides by the Koriani bid to upset the Fellowship Sorcerers resulted in aberrant weather and crop failures in the western kingdoms. Threat of famine sends Feylind's brig, *Evenstar*, to Havish, bearing relief supplies. There, to avoid open war, King Eldir asks her to transport Lysaer's runaway wife, Princess Ellaine, eastward to sanctuary with the s'Brydion. The duke dispatches her to a safer refuge with the master spellbinder, Verrain, at Methisle, who in turn, remands her case to the Fellowship Sorcerers, who arrange for a permanent residence with Ath's Brotherhood, at Spire. There, she is met by her lost son Kevor, now become an adept. This information, returned to Avenor by spies, gives Lysaer's cursed nature the opening to move for war against Alestron, on grounds of treason. He bides his time to launch the campaign, preferring to determine the truth in the charges himself.

At Alestron, Feylind boards Dakar and Fionn Areth upon *Evenstar's* departure, only to have her brig targeted by Koriathain, who send a plague of fiends to sink the ship and force Arithon to leave his refuge at Kewar to defend his friends. Arithon defeats the assault by tapping the powers of the Paravian sword, Alithiel, and in the process, learns that his shadows have the power to suppress and even manipulate the fiends to do his bidding. He then turns the tables, with Selidie Prime left with the Great Waystone polluted by an *iyat*, as his machination turns her own spell in reverse.

5671—During their winter return, Lysaer and Sulfin Evend successfully curb the Kralovir cult's incursion at Avenor. The council hall is left a total ruin in the aftermath. While both men know an enclave still infiltrates the Alliance in Etarra, the active influence of Desh-thiere's curse makes Lysaer too murderously unreasonable for Sulfin Evend to act on the danger.

Meantime, the Alliance and Lysaer's religion have won enough towns to their cause to threaten the clan enclaves that protect the free wilds across the continent. Throughout the spring and summer, Arithon uses every talented skill he possesses, including *iyats*, to engineer embarrassing incidents and humorous attacks on the Light's followers, knowing the ridicule will eventually draw Lysaer into the south. His tight and intricate plan aims to pin Lysaer down there, then stop the spread of the false faith, end the persecution, and bring a lasting peace between town and clan to protect the free wilds that the Paravian presence requires for survival. But he fails to win the powerful and cantankerous s'Brydion duke into support. This forces Arithon to sever his relationship with Alestron and refuse them his backing, since his rogue talent forecasts the involvement of Desh-thiere's curse, and the near certainty of their utter defeat. He will not countenance being a party to war, and the brutal sack of Alestron that will likely follow should the Alliance come to attack.

On the heels of such set-back, the Fellowship Sorcerers lay a summons on Arithon to help them curb the Kralovir necromancers. The cult's invasive foothold in Lysaer's following at Etarra now poses a consummate danger, with Lysaer on the move with determined intent to muster the eastshore to arms to destroy Alestron. The hope of peace Arithon has worked to achieve is brought to a premature end and leaves his clan allies in deeper jeopardy than ever before, as he must abandon his

efforts and travel at speed to Etarra.

His journey takes him by way of Halwythwood, where his effort to console young Jeynsa s'Valerient for her father's loss also misfires. Further, his one opportunity to consummate his undying love for Elaira is forced to an unrequited end by the dreadful discovery that the Prime Matriarch has laid a spell seal on his beloved, with intent to engineer the birth of their talented child for the co-opted use of the order.

Left emotionally raw, aware that Lysaer is building another armed campaign to ruin every trust built among his vulnerable clan allies, Arithon must move on to Etarra where, at risk of his life and sanity, he uses innovative tactics and successfully annihilates every standing member of the Kralovir cult. In the aftermath, the Sorcerer Davien rescues him and transfers him to the focus circle at Sanpashir to recuperate.

Now, with the peace plan ruined, and the demise of the Kralovir taking out several of the Light's highly placed officials, including Etarra's High Chancellor, fear has galvanized town interests against the Master of Shadow. The curse of Deshtiere is awakened, driving Lysaer and the Alliance of Light to target the s'Brydion as Arithon's collaborator. War is building to raze the citadel at Alestron, with a troop muster sweeping the entire eastshore of the continent and Sulfin Evend recruiting on the southcoast. The season is summer, and the year, Third Age 5671.

Summer 5671



I

Binding Ties

Alestron the Bull whipped Adruin at darts. Kalesh slipped behind with a knife in the dark. Atwood's secure, but East Halla's at war, and the widows are ever in mourning.— From an eastshore water-front lay, Third Age

On the night that the portents had named to the elders, stars blazed in white splendour over the obsidian sands of Sanpashir. Their icy light flooded the vista in mercury, knifed with black shade where the ruin cast shadow over a landscape of crumpled dunes. As the signs had bespoken, when the hour foretold by the seers became manifest, the laid pattern of the Paravian stone circle did not arouse to harness the raw powers of the elements. Lane forces did not waken. The indigo coils of starred light did not bloom, as they would for the workings of Sorcerers.

Where nothing had been but barren stone and the trackless waste of bare sand, the figure of the man just arrived seemed to shimmer, then settle into firm form. Naked, he sprawled as though asleep at the grand junction of the ancient focus.

His appearance summoned the tribesfolk who lurked, alert and waiting amid the cragged ruin. They sang. Soft chanting that whispered under the starlight: of a hope renewed, promised to them for millennia. They moved out of cover, silently approached. Their seamed hands were gentle as they gathered him up and wrapped his chilled frame in rough blankets. His skin was not marked, except by old scars. Yet the rifts that he bore in the weave of his aura ran deeper than flesh, bone, and blood.

'*Keir've arish,*' the oldest cautioned in dialect. 'Take him most softly.' She pressed forward, brushed back the man's tangled, black hair, and touched a crabbed finger to still the lips that quivered as though to cry out from a nightmare memory of an unbearable agony. 'The shock to his life-force has been deep and harsh. He

must not arouse through our handling.’

Such damage demanded their vigilant care. Many hands lent assistance. Attentive to need, swift and silent, the desert-folk lifted his form, without jostling.

Respectful, they bore him on, past the looming, brick walls of the ruin. Through the cracked, weathered arches that marked the east gate, they turned their steps towards the dawn and made their way into the desert.

The path they walked held no sign-post. Shifting, dark sands erased all past traces of the ancestor’s steadfast footprints. Here, guidance lay in the notes of the stars, heard by the ears of their wisest old man. Staff in hand, with slow steps, he led the company bearing the litter.

Yet before they reached the rock outcrops and the spring that promised them shelter and ease, the crone in their midst raised her palm and charged the procession to stop. ‘I will require eight dartmen to serve. For there is another. Before night is done, a traveller will set foot on our shores from the decks of a ship bearing in from the west.’ To the chosen handful of warriors, she pointed the way, and declared, ‘I name him as our guest. Fetch him back.’

The waves crashing onto the black shingle at Sanpashir’s cliff head had a muttering voice all their own. From the decks of the Sunwheel Alliance’s flagship, under the ghostly flutter of the gold-blazoned banners, Sulfin Evend watched the white spume jet up and subside, bright and brief as the sparkle of diamond. Sable waters reflected the brilliance of stars, small light to his dark apprehension. This brooding shore-line of rock was a desolate destination. Only adamant use of his superior rank had brought the state galley to anchor. This territory was proscribed, demarked as free wilds, and no town-born man’s place to trespass. Even the lord who held the command of the Alliance of Light’s amassed war host should shun the prospect of landing.

Sulfin Evend took no comfort from the disciplined industry of the deck-crew, launching off the small tender at his insistence. His charge to leave the safe decks of the galley and pursue the unknown course of a promise was unlikely to settle his wracked peace of mind. He could scarcely stem the dread course of the future. Yet the hand-wringing nerves of his subordinate troop captain failed to unseat his resolve.

‘Why should you do this?’ Gold braid and Sunwheel surcoat reduced to pin-prick glints under starlight, the kindly man tried one last time to dissuade his conflicted Lord Commander. ‘The desert tribes are not lenient with strangers. They poison the barbed points on their weapons.’

Sulfin Evend breathed in the sea air, freighted with blown salt and the rock-scented dew swept off the crags of the headland. ‘Because the cause that we serve is grievously flawed. I cannot engage Lysaer’s orders to recruit, or bear the Alliance standard to assault the s’Brydion citadel. Not before doing all in my power to secure a defensive talisman against the wanton destruction posed by Desh-thiere’s curse.’

‘Such strength and courage may not save your skin,’ the galley’s master broke in from the side-lines. Experience backed up his claim, that no task in this wasteland should ever be tried, even for dire necessity.

‘What is my life, if not the desire to stand true at the side of a friend who’s

endangered?’ Sulfin Evend shrugged under the weight of a mail shirt that offered haphazard protection from darts. ‘Best I die here than fight at Alestron, leading a force of deluded fanatics blinded by Light, with no heart.’ Beyond any words, the thought never spoken: the memory of Lysaer’s private anguish, turned into a pillow to silence an onslaught of weeping fit to tear spirit from flesh. The stamp of the Mistwraith’s design on such greatness was a sorrow not to be borne.

The davits squealed, and the tender struck the face of the sea with a splash that slapped wavelets against the state galley. Its crew of four oarsmen scrambled down the side battens. The coxswain assumed his post in the bow and pronounced the craft ready to board.

Since danger was unlikely to change the granite set to the Lord Commander’s intent, the galley’s master stepped back, his face creased with concern under the glow of the deck-lamp. ‘Fare safely, then, and may the Light’s blessing guard you until your return.’

Sulfin Evend snapped off a nod, then strode to embrace the poised jaws of his fate.

Settled in the boat, he claimed a seat in the stern, where his anxious, hatchet-nosed equerry awaited, clutching his hobnailed boots. ‘I’ve brought your cloak,’ the servant added with diffidence. ‘The night wind has a bite.’

The Light’s Lord Commander clapped the man’s shoulder as thanks, while the reluctant rowers threaded their looms into the rowlocks, and slashed into black water with the launching stroke. The prow of the boat knifed into the darkness, towards the restless thread of cream surf and the stark shore of Sanpashir.

A landing through snags of rock and tumbling breakers taxed the seamanship of the men, accustomed to harbour-side docks, and the light chop behind sheltered jetties. When the craft reached the strand, the keel jarred against the obsidian sands, tossed like a chip in a mill-race. Sulfin Evend leaped the thwart, boots clutched to his chest, his cloak left behind in the white-knuckled grasp of the servant. Soaked to the waist, and buffeted by cold combers necklaced with foam, he helped steady the boat, shouting against the thundering waves that he would require no escort.

Since the craft would upset if the men stalled for argument, the coxswain shrilled orders for the oarsmen to change seat and reverse stroke back to the flagship.

Sulfin Evend strode free of the clawing surf. Barefoot and chilled, stumbling in the ebb currents, he stepped onto the wet sand under the vertical crags of the cliff head. Here, the clammy sea-breeze smelled of flint. The forbidding summit reared above, punch-cut against pre-dawn stars. Except for the wind and the tide, nothing spoke. The night of the dark moon cloaked the rock-face in secretive shadow. All civilized movement seemed far removed from this vista of primal wildness.

Or so Sulfin Evend was wont to presume, until he arrived at the weathered rock above the shingle. He had little chance to stamp on his dry boots. A male warrior issued a challenge out of the night. His speech was in dialect, most likely a fierce demand that the stranger stand forth and declare himself.

Sulfin Evend lost the last hope he had to soften his moment of reckoning. Answer, and he would be tagged by his town-bred, Hanshire accent. Stand silent, or try to run, and his infringing presence must provoke a lethal reaction. Never mentioning the fact that his Alliance rank as Lysaer’s first commander, and his birth

as the son of a mayor, marked him out as an enemy.

‘I come on a mission of peace,’ he announced, and gave nothing else but his name.

No sound attended the flurry of movement arisen out of the shadows. Eight men stepped forth, clad in loose, desert robes, with blow-tubes and darts at the ready. Sulfin Evend’s blood ran chill at the sight. No routine patrol, this many warriors suggested the uncanny thought that his arrival *had been expected*.

The man at the fore changed tongue and addressed him again, clipped as sparks hammered off hot steel. ‘Whom do you serve with your heart? Whose loyalty binds your body? Whose cause rules your mind?’

Sulfin Evend clamped his jaw. A year ago, he could have given the query an honourable, direct answer. Then, his oath to Avenor and Lysaer had not yet been flawed by the shoals of moral conflict. His hesitation drew the eyes of the dartmen, measuring him with cruel calculation.

Courage could not stem the blank well of his terror. Yet he answered with truth. ‘Heart, body, and mind, I’m blood-bound to the land though the ache of that weighs like a shackle.’

The leading desertman arched his brows in surprise. ‘What would you give for release, then?’

‘No coin is left,’ Sulfin Evend replied. ‘None that won’t cost me my life, or far worse, the ruin of a friend who’s endangered.’

Again, the ring of robed dartmen advanced, the one at the forefront closest of all. The dusky features under his hood held a scouring intensity that might read a man’s very thoughts through his skin. ‘Sacrifice brings you to Sanpashir’s free wilds?’

The sorrow welled up, then, too fierce to deny. Sulfin Evend shook his head. ‘No. Concerning a pledge to a Fellowship Sorcerer, I have come to your tribe to consult.’

If that startling statement was greeted by murmurs, the lead dartman’s gesture restored his warriors to formal silence. ‘Your friend,’ he said carefully. ‘He needs no defence. Not if he still lives, and so has the power of choice.’

Sulfin Evend disclosed the unsavoury fact. ‘He is cursed. A vile binding that clouds his sight and warps his nature until he cannot know how much his will has been compromised. I have given my pledge to stand guard for him, and for that claimed burden, I place my appeal.’

The lead dartman bowed his mantled head. ‘By your will, then, disarm. All your weapons. You will also strip off every item you own that is not woven or braided from sun-ripened fibre.’

At Sulfin Evend’s stiff resistance, the lead dartman smiled, a flash of white teeth in the gloom. ‘This is our way, town-bred! You are advised. One chance is given to respect our customs and stand on the truth that has brought you. Do you merit?’

Sulfin Evend shot back his most cynical smile. ‘Surrender, or else I’ll be taken?’

The lead dartman bridled. ‘Did you think the least step of your path is not known? Our eldest has Seen you! Your trespasser’s foot on our shores bears a portent, locked tight in the wheels of destiny. You will come, town-bred man. Though how you embrace the fate that awaits you as yet remains to be written.’

Sulfin Evend caught back his self-deprecatative laughter. Had he wished to turn

back, the moment was forfeit, gone with his past consent to a Sorcerer's knife cut. He had no option but to lift off his helm, doff his belt and surcoat, shed his coat of mail, then peel off his laced leather gambeson. Stripped to his linen shirt and soaked breeches, and still braving the cruel rocks, barefoot, he unhooked the thong that secured the wrapped bundle that hung at his neck. The sheathed knife inside should not be left with the other steel weapons abandoned to rust on the beachhead.

He extended the wrapped dagger. 'This blade is flint, and not fashioned for killing. The deer-hide still shrouds it, as it was entrusted to me by the woman who made me its bearer.'

The lead dartman stepped forward, a wraith in jet robes. Backed by his tense dartmen, he lifted lean hands. His clasp, light and warm, briefly caged the slim bundle, overtop of the townsman's cold fingers.

'*Feiyd eth sa!*' he snapped to his dartmen, in dialect. The inflection sounded amazed. Then he tipped his head, perhaps with respect. 'I will take charge of this knife, town-bred man. It will be unveiled, and its purpose made known to you if you come to win the petition you've asked for.'

Upon his signal, the robed dartmen closed in. They offered no word, no grace of assurance. Sulfin Evend found his hands strapped at the wrists. A blindfold obscured his vision. Then an impatient prod urged his stumbling, first step into an unknown future.

The same stars that wheeled above Sanpashir's headland bathed wan light over the vista of waste, due east of the Paravian circle. The ruin's gapped wall, with its forlorn tracery of carved arches, was not visible from the barren vale where the desert tribe's elder signalled her people to pause. The litter-borne man was let down on black earth, his blanket-swathed frame aligned to the north.

'Softly, now. His deep shock will release, soon.' The wise crone who spoke as the voice of the tribe settled herself on the ground at the crown of the unconscious one's head.

Stillness reigned then, while the night sky revolved around the pole star that glimmered at its fixed axis. The dark moon passed nadir, reversed its fierce grip, and gave way at last to the hush that preceded the dawn. At that hour, the life tide that swept through land and air breathed through all things on Athera. First herald of the paean that came with the sunrise, its current was acknowledged by the circle of male elders, also seated in cross-legged stillness.

To their listening presence, the subtle quickening recharged the nerves like a sweet flare of lightning. The wounded survivor tucked in the blankets would not be overlooked by that benison. In thanksgiving for all things that lived, the ancient woman raised her voice and sang welcome, eyes trained upon the man at her knees as though his limp flesh held the flame of a lamp indescribably precious ...

Arithon Teir's'Ffalenn recovered the full range of his senses one disparate strand at a time. The alkaline tang of dry mineral came first: the unmistakable, signature scent of the wind hissing over the bleak sands of Sanpashir. With sound came the lilt of an old woman's voice, crooning over his head. His limbs were kept warm by a rough, goat-hair blanket that bristled his sensitized skin. That discomfort lost