

One

'Failure is the province of the craven and the dead.'

— The Vestal Björn van Gelderan to one of his generals
during the Sunset Battle of Gimlalai, circa 597aV

Trell's horse snorted and shifted beneath him as a gust of hot wind surged up from the desert valley, flattening the sparse grass that grew like wisps of hair between jagged, sun-scorched rocks. The wind brought with it the smell of heat, baked earth and sand, and a gnawing apprehension that was as unwelcome as it was strange.

Trell turned in the saddle and focused grey eyes on the ridge at his back. The view was not unlike that of another ridge, this one lording over the rushing, charcoal waters of the River Cry; a lonesome ridge where he and his best friend had held off the entire Veneisean army with little more than fifty men. That was near two moons ago, however. Now his friend Graeme was dead, the Emir's forces occupied Raku Oasis, and Trell was a celebrated hero.

Gentling his stallion with a pat on the neck, Trell looked back to the view of the desert valley and the creatures flying above its vast sea of dunes—sleek, golden creatures with hides like molten bronze. He squinted at them beneath the duck-billed brim of a dun cap, which was making a valiant attempt to shade his eyes from the sun. But this was the M'Nador desert; the sands were as bright as the day, the blue sky was as parched as the land, and there was an ever-present glare that made a man's eyes tired before their time.

If only you were here to see this, Graeme... Trell thought as he gazed, captivated, at the gilded beasts soaring high above the sands. They flew with sublime grace, their enormous shadows floating across the dunes in unworldly silence. Trell was amazed at the breadth of their wingspan, at the golden-fire hue of their hides and the way their scales glinted in the long rays of the afternoon, sparkling so brightly as to leave spots before his eyes. *And are Nadori soldiers standing upon the walls of Taj al'Jahana on the far side of the Sand Sea watching you also?* he wondered. *Surely my enemies are no less entranced than I.* Though no doubt the Nadoriin would be working feverishly to find a means of destroying the creatures rather than appreciating them for their mystique and purity.

Sundragons.

They'd been summoned back from the cold, dark corners of the realm by the Emir's Mage, summoned to do his bidding and eager to please—if the stories were true—in exchange for their reprieve.

“Ghastly things, aren’t they?” a familiar voice commented from behind.

Trell glanced over his shoulder to find his friend Ware reining in his stallion. Ware was a tall Agasi who lost no height sitting the saddle of his lean desert horse. He was darkly bearded and generally hairy, but his blue eyes displayed an intelligence Trell had found common in men of the Empire; the Agasi were an educated people, be them prince, blacksmith or sellsword.

Looking past Ware, Trell noted that the rest of his men had descended the ridge and were dismounting now, a dozen Converted in all. Soon it would be time.

“They’re beautiful,” Trell answered, turning back to the distant dragons with a look of appreciation on his sharp-featured face. “I wish Graeme could have seen them.”

Ware grunted skeptically and flicked at a horsefly with his reins. “I don’t know. They’re fierce creatures. Sheik Am’aal was nearly bitten by one of the things when he got too close to its tail. The creature snapped its head around with the speed of a striking viper, and if it weren’t for the Sheik’s agility at ducking—no doubt from all those arrows he’s made a habit of avoiding—he’d have made the beast a tasty snack.”

“Reasons not to get too curious, I suppose,” Trell commented. He’d never cared for Sheik Am’aal. The man was a consummate philanderer; all those arrows he’d avoided tended to be from well and rightly-offended husbands. “A fierce beauty then,” Trell conceded, “but beauty nonetheless.”

Wearing a look of curiosity mixed with amusement, Ware broke into a crooked grin. “What are you doing among us lowbreeds, Trell of the Tides? You ought to be composing poetry in a white tower somewhere, you and your ‘beauty’ this and ‘glorious’ that and general high-minded musings—oh, don’t think I’m criticizing you,” Ware added, noting Trell’s faintly indignant look. “Not a one of us would challenge your tactical brains, but you seem to me a learned man, a man of philosophy, not one of blunt violence and greed like so many of these Converted,” and he jerked his head toward the company of mercenaries chatting rakishly behind him.

Hearing this, said men offered scatological culinary recommendations, to which Ware returned his ideas of what they could do with their suggestions. It was a friendly exchange.

Ignoring the banter, Trell allowed a slight smile. *I do, do I?* It was no secret that he remembered nothing of his past prior to awaking in the Emir’s palace five years ago, and friends and acquaintances alike were often sharing their opinions of his origins—sometimes in jest, sometimes in sincerity. Trell didn’t mind either way. On a rare occasion, someone made a comment that almost triggered a memory, and he lived for those almost moments—yearned for them every waking minute, in fact.

Ware was watching him with a keen look in his blue eyes, as if Trell was far more intriguing than Sundragons. “You could’ve been a nobleman’s son sent from Tregarion or Calgaryn to study abroad, but there was tragedy, and you wound up here.”

Trell smiled ruefully. “Triad cities, those two. But am I from a Triad kingdom, do you think?” He turned to Ware with a hint of torment in his grey eyes, a look he sported often when pondering his mysterious past. “The Emir likes to say I floated in from the Fire Sea, a gift from the Wind God,” and he threw up his hands with a flourish in imitation of their supreme leader. “Even if it is true, the Fire Sea borders many kingdoms, Ware. I’ve the same dark hair and coloring as that Barian Stormborn of the

Forsaken Lands, and the height and features like those merchants you and I dealt with in Kroth. Some say I even have the look of your own blood, Agasi—a moonchild.”

“Just so,” Ware admitted with his eyes pinned on his younger friend. “You could be any of these, Trell of the Tides.”

No one knew exactly where Trell’s nickname had originated. ‘Man of the Tides’ was what the Emir’s men had called Trell until he woke from the fever that had nearly claimed his life, remembering little more than his given name. After that, they’d tacked on ‘Trell’ to humor him.

“But I think you’re right—about the Triad that is,” Trell concluded. “I do as the Emir asks of me, but while I’ve never lost sleep over battling Nadori infidels, some part of me cringes at fighting the men of Dannym or Veneisea, as if I know I’m slaughtering my own blood.” Unthinking, Trell’s hand found its way to the sword at his hip, a sleek blade with an eagle-carved silver hilt and a sapphire pommelstone, a brilliant cut gem whose clarity and vibrant color made even the Bemothi traders envious. The sword was his only possession, his only connection to the life he’d once led, and though it was merely another mystery, Trell considered himself blessed to have it.

High above the Sand Sea, the six dragons had completed their midair rendezvous—or whatever the purpose of their gathering—and were breaking away into pairs again. They flew north, west, south, but not east. East was where the Nadori army was camped at Tal’Shira by the Sea, on the far side of the vast sea of dunes.

The war had gotten bloodier in the past fortnight, though the enemy dared not try to retake Raku again—not after the slaughter on the Khalim Plains. Trell had ridden through that wasteland of death, and he shuddered at the memory. Now the Emir’s forces were deployed along the Sand Sea escarpment, from Heziz in the north to the Qar’imali in the south, and so long as the Veneisean army remained trapped across the River Cry—which duty had been assigned to Trell’s company of Converted until their unexpected reprieve two days past—then the Emir’s troops had only to concern themselves with their northern flank. “Do you think we’ll win?” he asked Ware without removing his eyes from the dispersing dragons.

The Agasi shrugged and wiped an arm across his sweaty brow. “Who can say? I’m not even certain what you’d call a victory. There has always been war in the Kutsamak Mountains.” He glanced to the dirt beneath his boots and kicked at it with one toe. “Tis more apt to call them the haunted mountains—Raine’s truth we’re like to be walking on the dust of the dead even now.”

A whistle of alert from one of the men called their attention back to the ridge. A turbaned Basi was scampering down the steep incline and doing a much faster job of it than the horses had. He was the holy man Istalar, and he would be their guide through the shrine. “The time comes,” someone commented, referencing Istalar’s return from watching the position of the sun.

Well knowing what was to follow, Trell and Ware exchanged a look and then dismounted too. Trell grabbed his satchel with his few possessions and slung the strap diagonally across his chest. Then he turned toward the jutting cliff in front of them wearing an uneasy frown.

More unsettling than the scent of magic that permeated the air those days, raising the hackles of any self-respecting soldier, was the feel of the place they were about to go. Trell had sworn no oaths to the Emir’s desert gods—he wasn’t Converted—but he was

the first to admit that something sentient resided in the shrines of the Kutsamak, and he had no desire to question its nature any further. The Emir often sermonized on the sacred shrines, admonishing respect from his Converted, but it was the obvious divine residence that had convinced Trell to revere them. Whether this was in homage or aversion was no one's business but his own.

The holy man came to a dusty halt in front of them. He was the only Basi among their party, an elder member of the Emir's own tribe, and he wore a white and grey-striped turban, one fold of which was pulled across his nose and mouth. This he removed to speak, revealing a heavy grey beard. "It is time, *A'dal*," he reported to Trell, using the desert word for leader. "We are allowed to enter now to receive your blessing."

Trell nodded wordlessly, and the holy man led them away, skirting the ridge toward the sheering cliff at its end. Trell glanced to left and right and then followed, but he couldn't help feeling exposed on the open mountainside, even dressed in his earth-hued tunic and britches that blended so well with the sand...even with the Mage's dragons patrolling the sky.

A shadow befell them as they walked, and Ware looked up as a pair of Sundragons flew between them and the sun, casting them into blessed shadow. "Never thought I'd be grateful for those beasts," the Agasi muttered.

Trell matched his gaze, peering in his intense way. "I still wish Graeme could see them."

"Graeme was a good lad, true enough," Ware remarked, "and I know he was your brother-in-blood, but he wouldn't have appreciated these creatures as you do." The dragons moved on and the sun returned, and Ware settled Trell a discerning look. "Graeme was not your equal, my friend. Few men are."

Trell barked a laugh. "Save your honeyed words for the ladies," he chastised, aiming a punch at Ware's arm. But in truth, he was startled by the compliment.

Ware made to respond but seemed to change his mind, perhaps when he noticed that Trell's expression had quickly sobered. Everyone thought Trell spent more time in his head than was likely prudent, and most were quick to tell him so; even in battle he maintained a sort of pensive composure, an attribute all of his men had commented upon. Ware peered at him curiously. "What's going on in that head of yours today? You're even more aloof than usual."

Trell shot him a sideways look. "I am never aloof."

Ware arched a dubious brow. "You know what I mean."

Trell turned profile again and frowned, because he did know what the other man meant. *Dare I tell him? Raine's truth, I'm desperate to talk to someone.* But could a man like Ware understand the constant torment of not knowing one's own memory? Could he understand the fear Trell harbored over his unknown past, or the feelings of frustration and duty that drove him to embark on his current course? To his own shame, Trell didn't trust that he could. He said instead, "I heard you might be going on mission for the Emir's Mage."

"Aye, that's so," Ware admitted. His eyes upon Trell spoke plain enough of his wish to know in turn what Trell would be doing now that their company had been pulled from the lines—it would take a dimwit indeed not to wonder what sort of fell assignment Trell had been given that it required a god's blessing. But Ware would ask nothing of his *A'dal*, even if the question was likely burning his tongue.

"I think everyone's grateful to be away from the Cry," Ware answered, turning in profile to Trell to frown at Istalar's back, "though it may seem hard for some of these younger fools to believe anyone could tire of battle and glory. But since the Khalim Plains, I..." and Trell saw Ware glance out across the Sand Sea, his gaze darkening with the memory of what had transpired among the maze of dunes. "Well, I've seen enough of death for awhile, and the Mage is rumored to have many errands he needs run—chancy quests, they say, ripe with danger." Winking, he added, "Sounds like my kind of entertainment."

"No doubt," Trell agreed, but his smile wasn't quite reflected in his eyes.

"I dunno..." Ware continued as if compelled to explain himself to his once-captain. "After what the Emir's Mage did for us on the Khalim Plains, well...men are lining up to serve him. I guess I'm one of them."

Trell arched brows. "Lining up? I hadn't heard that."

Ware scratched at his close-cropped beard and regarded Trell shrewdly. "They say when the Mage speaks, even the Emir listens."

Trell pulled off his cap and pushed a hand through his dark hair, dislodging wavy locks that seemed perpetually tousled despite having been beneath a hat all day. *The Emir's Mage...* he thought with narrowed gaze.

The man had arrived at the front six moons ago seeming little more than the Emir's shadow at the time, a quiet stranger with a genteel manner and a compelling gaze. Six moons...and now the Emir fell silent at his command? Trell had other reasons to feel unsettled by the Mage. Since the man's arrival, Trell had found the Emir too often cloistered away behind locked doors—and himself excluded from his usual confidence. Clenching his cap in his fist, Trell turned to look full at Ware. "Have you ever met the Mage?"

"Not yet. You?"

Trell frowned. "Briefly, once."

"And you're suspicious," Ware declared. Then he goaded, "You're sure he means to take over the world and is using the Emir to achieve his own nefarious ends."

Trell opened his mouth to protest, but when he caught the teasing glint in Ware's gaze, he managed a sheepish look instead. "You know I'm suspicious of everyone."

"That's just about the only thing you have in common with the rest of these degenerates, Trell of the Tides," Ware consoled with an amused grin, clapping Trell on the shoulder. "No one has to teach a soldier to be suspicious of magic, or of those that work it."

They were coming to the end of the trail where a bare rock face edged a deep ravine. Even as Trell was assessing the high mountain cliff, there came a raucous cry, and then a second in answer. The men were buffeted by searing wind as the same pair of Sundragons that had passed earlier swooped down from the sky and alighted atop the cliff before them. Sitting forty paces tall, the beasts folded their massive wings, wrapped serpentine tails possessively around the rocks, and peered down with predatory stares.

"Look, Trell," Ware noted dryly as he squinted at the creatures, "even the Sundragons have come to honor you. You truly are the hero."

Trell gave him a withering look.

But it did seem as though the dragons had come to say their farewells.

Farewell. It seemed a wondrous word. He was still trying to absorb the truth himself: that he was leaving the Emir's service after so many years; leaving at the Emir's own insistence and with his blessing; leaving to live a future that might help him uncover his past. And leaving in the *middle* of a war...that was the most unbelievable part of all.

Trell hadn't been able to bring himself to tell his men, though he knew they would support him, even congratulate him; yet he felt a deserter for abandoning them. That his doing so was at the Emir's command lessened nothing of his guilt—war was war, and every capable hand was needed.

But he has the Mage now to help him, Trell thought more bitterly than he would've liked, his own memory of that night on the Khalim Plains springing to mind. *What need has he of an orphan with a few new tactics when the Mage can turn entire armies to dust?*

Yet for all his resentment at being excluded of late, Trell wanted to believe what the Emir had explained to him, wanted to trust that the war was nearing an end.

Ware was meanwhile peering at the Sundragons, oblivious to Trell's inner turmoil. "Wonder who's commanding those beasts now?"

"I thought you said the Mage controlled them," Trell muttered.

"Well yeah, when he's around."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that he hasn't set foot in Raku since we gained the walls. Word is, that's why he summoned those Sundragons you so admire, to watch over the army in his absence."

The dragons in question looked to be staring at them even as Ware spoke their name. They made Trell uncomfortable with their sinewy necks and those spiked crests along their heads and spines like deadly, gilded manes. "That's a good question then," he murmured while fervently hoping he didn't look a tasty treat to the creatures. "Who else could control them?"

"No one, I hear," said Faloin, a Veneisean expatriate who was walking close behind them. Trell glanced over his shoulder. All of the Converted had their eyes pinned on the dragons, and everyone seemed to share in the same unease. "They're not like horses to be ridden or cattle to be corralled," Faloin continued in a tone of wary distrust. "They say they're thinking beasts, and the Mage just tells them what to do, no different than issuing commands to you or I."

"Look out boys," Ware observed, raising his voice to include everyone. "One day we might be taking orders from them."

"But they don't condescend to speak to none but the Mage, the way I hear it," another of the Converted commented, a heavily bearded Krothian whose dark eyes were fastened on the dragons. "Even the Emir can't control them—it's 'please' and 'thank-you' if he wants so much as to gain their sainted audience."

"Do they actually talk?" someone else asked.

"What need?" came a reply from back of the line. "I heard they can read our very minds!"

Faloin snorted. "Ain't that just an ill wind."

All the men fell silent then, perhaps guarding their thoughts.

They were walking beneath the dragons' shadows with the beasts veritably towering over them, golden eyes staring down with fierce intensity, when the holy man

Istalar passed a rocky outcropping, turned abruptly, and disappeared into the mountainside.

Only when one was right on top of the cave entrance could it be seen, a jagged grey-black parting just wide enough for a man to pass between. Trell was next to follow, then Ware, and then the rest, save two who held the watch outside.

Violet glass globes set in carved niches in the walls illuminated the cave with reddish-plum light. How the candles stayed perpetually lit was quite beyond Trell, but such held true for all the sacred shrines. As he stood there letting his eyes adjust to the dim light, it occurred to him that this might be the last time he entered one of the sacred places, and the idea held both relief and unexpected sadness for him.

Following globe to globe marked the way deep into the mountainside, and Istalar led with quiet resolve. Already Trell noticed a difference in the air—the feeling was akin to walking into a den where a beast lay in wait. Something *dwelled* there, some...entity. Trell didn't know what gods he believed in, but he didn't doubt the existence of a force larger than himself, and it was just such a force that inhabited those hallowed hills—it was this very force to which the Emir had sent Trell in order to gain divine favor on his journey.

In silence then, Trell followed Istalar into the bowels of the mountain, set upon a task that he both dreaded and desired. He was accompanied by a contingent of men he had grown to respect, yet this very fact troubled him, knowing he might never see them again. So he hid this truth from them as surely as his own truths were naught but distant dreams as yet unformed.

Trell's eyes were well adjusted to the light by the time the passage opened onto a boundless cavern. Trell stopped short, for he'd never seen a shrine the likes of this. A roaring waterfall fell from the shadowed ceiling, and its spray of chill mist formed a shimmering veil of color and light. An iridescent spirit seemed to dance within the pale shaft, shifting hues with every movement. The water lit the cavern, yet its light did not pass without the hallowed walls, for Trell had not seen the light until he entered the cavern itself. The effect was beautiful, and yet so obviously arcane that Trell shook off the ghost of a shudder.

Istalar walked to the water to kneel and make an opening offering and prayer, while Trell waited apart from the rest of his men. Mist collected on his clothes, his hat, his cheeks. He pulled out a kerchief and wiped his eyes as he scanned the faces of the others. They were not so bothered as he—mostly they looked bored—but Trell knew they would not be making an offering to the god of this place, as he would, and they would not be hoping to receive a divine blessing.

As he watched Istalar bowed at the water's edge, Trell felt a surge of apprehension knowing he would soon be kneeling there in his place. He wondered what sort of response he was likely to get from the god of the shrine—him, who wasn't even Converted. Trell would have been all too happy to go on his way without visiting the shrine at all, but the Emir was having none of that. He was a religious man, Emir Zafir bin Safwan al'Abdul-Basir, and while he might have a foreign Mage working for him, he certainly didn't want his kingdom's gods working against him. Ritual offerings were necessary any time one wanted a blessing, and the Emir wanted a blessing for Trell, his near-adopted son.

Istalar finished his prayer and beckoned to Trell. Feeling as nervous as he had that day five years ago when he was first presented to the Emir, Trell walked to the water's edge and knelt on the wet stone beside Istalar. "Now," said the holy man, "you must make your offering and your prayer." Trell must've looked miserable, for Istalar encouraged, "Fear thee not, Trell of the Tides; the god of the shrine is benevolent toward you."

Trell turned to him wanting more than anything to know how he could be so certain, but all he managed was a humble, "I don't know the right words to say."

The holy man's steady gaze seemed the embodiment of faith. "The gods know our *hearts*, Trell of the Tides. Words mean nothing to them. Open your heart in prayer. They will answer you." With that, he rose and took seventeen steps away from the water—one in honor of each of the desert Gods—before straightening.

Trell whetted his lips and looked at the water, a luminous pool of liquid light. He reached into his satchel and retrieved a dagger that had once belonged to Graeme and was thereby special to him. His only other possession of value was his sword, and it was too precious to part with, even for a god's pleasure. He hoped the dagger would suffice.

Catching his bottom lip between his teeth and feeling ridiculous, Trell let the dagger slide from his fingers into the water. It was swallowed by the light.

Now what? he thought. He had no idea how to pray.

'Open your heart' Istalar had said.

Trell drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes.

His heart held painful things: feelings of loss and the frustration of years of not even knowing his own heritage. His heart held mixed emotions: it seemed a lifetime's dream of discovering the truth of his past, and yet that same dream stirred such fear in him. What if he discovered that he wasn't the man he thought he was? What if in his prior life he'd been an outcast, a bastard, a thief...a coward?

His heart held grief...and guilt.

Trell was trying to think of what else his heart held when he heard someone whisper. He wiped the accumulated mist from his eyes and turned a glance over his shoulder, but no one was near; indeed, the men were clustered far away from him involved in their own affairs. Feeling faintly unsettled, Trell turned back to the water and closed his eyes again. At once he heard the voice again. Trell strained to understand it, but the harder he tried, the more the words eluded him.

Frustrated, he dutifully recalled the torments of his heart instead, though it pained him to dwell on them so. Only then, as he surrendered to powerful pain of his deepest feelings, did the ethereal voice speak and his heart receive its message. Thusly do the gods impart their blessings: spirit to spirit, like the faintest breath of wind...

Follow the water, Trell of the Tides.

Trell sprouted gooseflesh from head to toe.

His chest ached, his throat constricted—it was as if his whole body was trying to keep his soul from escaping—and he knew; *knew* with certainty that not only a god had spoken to him, but also that his soul had resonated with its blessing.

Follow the water, Trell of the Tides.

For the space of that moment, Trell thought there was no sound on earth except that soul-capturing, melodic whisper.

Then there was only the roar of the waterfall and the low hum of male voices engaged in their usual vulgar commentary.

Overcome by the experience, Trell rose and backed away from the water in the same manner he'd seen Istalar follow. The holy man was waiting for him seventeen steps away. Trell straightened and turned to face him, looking troubled but feeling both fulfilled and strangely hollow, his soul still yearning after a touch—a presence—that had vanished beyond its reach.

Istalar smiled crookedly through broken teeth, yet his was a genuine smile. Trell had always liked him. “What did Naiadithine tell you?” he asked.

“Naiadithine?” Trell hadn't known this was her shrine, but once he thought of it, he realized that he should've guessed from the outset. Naiadithine, Lady of the Rivers, had claimed Graeme for her own when he fell into the Cry, never to resurface. It only followed that the Emir would send Trell to her for a blessing. “I think...I think She told me...” he pulled off his cap again and pushed a wet hand through his hair. “She told me to...follow the water.”

Istalar nodded sagely. “Follow the water, Trell of the Tides,” the holy man echoed.

Trell gave him an uneasy look, and another chill scurried down his spine. “Yes,” he whispered, feeling far too close to arcane dealings for any sort of comfort. “*That* exactly.”

Istalar took Trell by the arm and pulled him further away from the water and the men. “The Emir looks upon you as a son,” he said then, “and he would be bereaved should harm befall you. Before you journey into the West, there is something he wants you to understand.”

Trell didn't quite like the sound of that. “Which is?”

“You leave a place of safety for one of danger.”

Trell arched a cinnamon brow. “A war is a place of safety?”

“No, Trell of the Tides,” the holy man replied, his gaze deadly serious, “the Mage's shadow is a place of safety, and you are soon to leave it. You must learn to use your three eyes.”

“Three eyes?” Trell repeated.

“The eye of your mind—your intelligence; the eye of your heart—your conscience; and the eye of your soul—your instinct. These are your three eyes. You must use them all, and *trust* them all. This *above* all.”

Trell nodded. “Very well. My three eyes. Is that all I must know?”

“No.” Istalar pulled on his greying beard, smearing the mist that had accumulated in glittering droplets. His brown eyes looked troubled. “You must know that the realm is not at rest. Far beyond this war that plagues our people, darkness lurks where light once resided, and there are unexplained—”

A terrible rumbling erupted, drowning out his following words.

Trell exchanged an uneasy look with the holy man, and then the earth shook with a jarring force. It pitched Trell off-balance and sent water careening out of the pool. Trell and Istalar both reached for each other. “*Daw*, what was that?” Trell hissed, casting a fast glance around.

Shouts echoed from the higher cave, and another spasm shuddered through the cavern. Trell stumbled into the wet wall with another curse.

“We’re under attack!” a man shouted—Trell never knew who, though it sounded like one of the men he’d left guarding the cave entrance. The Converted’s voice was still echoing a thousand-fold *ack-ack-ack*’s when another clap of grating thunder assaulted their ears, and a veritable wall of sharp stones tumbled down, forcing those below to dodge and roll. “What’s happened?” someone called to the sentry above.

“Radov’s wielders are attacking the Sundragons. Run my fellows! The cavern is collapsing upon us!”

As if to prove his point, the floor seemed to tip and then crash into place with an angry, jarring shudder. Trell’s feet were simply no longer beneath him, and the next thing he knew, he was blinded by a searing pain as his skull met the unyielding rock. He heard it inside when he hit, a hard clap that was both a blunt thud and fiery pain, but he was only vaguely aware of the cry that left his lips, or of the chill water that soaked his garments in short bursts as waves careened out of the pool. Some small part of his mind recognized moans and shouted prayers amid the shattering of stone. Then he felt himself being roughly shaken, and he strained to focus.

Istalar crouched beside him. The holy man’s face was smeared with blood streaming from a nasty gash above one eye. He was speaking, but Trell couldn’t hear him.

“What?” Trell managed through the ringing in his ears. “What?”

The rumble in the cavern was deafening, but somehow Istalar pitched his voice above it. “You must hurry!”

Trell fought to sit up, but no sooner had he done so than he vomited. His head pounded with a vengeance, and he couldn’t tell if it was blood or water that soaked his hair—probably both. Istalar helped him to stand, but Trell had hardly gained his feet before dizziness overcame him and his knees buckled. The holy man caught him around his chest and pushed him up against the wall. “Go!” he urged. “Go now. Before it is too late for you!”

What was the man saying? He couldn’t tell who was talking, couldn’t remember talking, was anyone talking? *Gods and devils* his head was a pulsating agony, and red fog clouded his vision.

Men were scrambling to escape. Water poured across the floor, sloshed around Trell’s ankles, and then rushed along into the darkness to find its own way out. There were bodies unmoving on the floor, dark forms half-covered in luminous water. Did the god live in the water? Was the water the god? What was wrong with him? Why couldn’t he think clearly? And what was the holy man doing?

Istalar had undone his turban and was wrapping the cloth around Trell’s head. Trell pushed feebly at the holy man’s hand, mumbling, “No—not...Converted.”

This can’t be right, he thought somewhere among the fog of pain. Not now, not when he was so close to... Clarity returned in a lucid moment. *Please, Dear Naiadithine, I daren’t die before I know who I am! Where do the lost souls go?*

Istalar tied off Trell’s makeshift bandage and ripped away the remaining cloth. He took Trell by both shoulders and captured his dizzied eyes with his own. “Follow the water, Trell of the Tides!”

Trell wiped his eyes again. “Follow the water...” he mumbled.

The holy man pointed toward the deeper cavern. “Follow the water!”

Trell blinked and gazed in the direction Istalar was pointing. Then he shook his head and lifted a hand the other way. “No—there,” he protested even as the holy man was pushing him in the opposite direction.

“There is no escape that way!” Istalar insisted, half-dragging Trell toward the deeper caves. “The cave is gone!”

Trell looked over his shoulder and saw that indeed, the entrance had all but collapsed. They were trapped.

This isn't right!

Istalar half-pushed, half-dragged him out of the main cavern and into one of the caves. It was illuminated by the sacred water, its low ceiling just barely out of Trell's reach.

The mountain growled again, petulant and fierce. Tiny stones pelted Trell's head and shoulders. Istalar looked up with a sharp intake of breath, and then he pushed Trell forcefully and yelled something Trell couldn't make out because of the roaring in the cavern—or perhaps it was the roaring in his ears; it was hard to separate the two. Trell splashed face-down in the water, just barely escaping the tumble of rock that sealed off any retreat.

Dripping and shaken, he got slowly to his feet and stood for a moment staring at the fall of rock while he battled a surge of fury that pierced through his disorientation. Had the jumble of stones claimed Istalar? He felt a choking pressure in his chest at the thought.

Trell said a soldier's prayer for Istalar—for it was the only one he knew—and then stood frozen by a terrible thought: *is this happening because of me? Because I angered Naiadithine with that pathetic excuse for an offering?* But the narrow escape had imparted a surge of clarity, and Trell soon realized he was wasting precious time. The rock had sealed off his escape but had done nothing to stop the water, which poured through the cracks between the stones as if running a last flight from death.

Follow the water, Trell of the Tides.

Had Naiadithine known this was going to happen? Trell looked down at the water swirling around his ankles, luminous and pale. There was something about it, something that tugged at his memory even as the icy current tugged at his heels.

Come...follow...it seemed to say.

Trell went.

He chased the current, head pounding painfully with every splash. He could see by the water's luminous light, which cast reflective shadows on the near walls but was never bright enough to reveal the cavern ceilings. Trell let the water be his guide, and though its fingers were icy and swift, and darkness pressed as heavily upon his shoulders as it did upon his consciousness, Trell was determined not to be afraid. Fear was the worst evil ever to plague a man, for with it came hesitation and with that, inaction, failure, death.

Follow the water, Trell of the Tides.

Perhaps it was the clap to his head that had conjured such blind trust, or perhaps it was the recognition that he had little to lose save his life, and what had that been to him until now? Existence, perhaps, but a parched one. He remembered neither parents nor siblings, if he had any. He could share no childhood memories, nor boast of that one doe-

eyed girl who'd stolen his heart even as he stole her virginity. He couldn't remember his mother's smile, or his father's wisdom—assuming he was even a legitimate son.

And yet his was a life Istalar had sacrificed his own to save. This he also recognized.

So as he raced along, wet and shivering in the strange cavern of water-light, Trell knew he owed Istalar—and the Emir, and Graeme above all—at least a brave attempt to live, to escape if he possibly could. All the while, the divine water communed with his spirit.

Follow the water, Trell of the Tides.

He wandered in the chill caverns for two long hours before he reached the end, time enough for his feet to grow numb, to trade sweat for shivering. All thought was reduced to sheer determination. His teeth were chattering loud enough to echo by the time he found himself wading deeper and deeper into a stream that eventually pooled to his waist, the current strong as it tugged him toward the dark, wet rock that was the cave's—and his, he knew—certain end. He could see by the water's light that the ceiling was perhaps five paces above him, close enough to know there was no escape above and none behind.

He tried not to despair, but couldn't help thinking, *Has it truly come to this?*

Yet as he stared at the swirling water, reason prevailed. *All this water, but it doesn't rise to claim me.*

There had to be an opening somewhere beneath.

Trell ripped off Istalar's bandage and labored out of his boots. He checked to ensure his sword was secure in its scabbard and the scabbard firmly around his waist—for life without his precious sword would be worse than nothing. Then he took three quick deep breaths and dove beneath the pool of liquid light.

Icy fingers stabbed him, vindictive in their insistence that he gasp from the cold, but he held his breath with steadfast defiance, opened his eyes, and let the current carry him, only trusting that Naiadithine would not betray him in his leap of faith. He was quickly pulled into a narrow opening, a funnel for the water, barely wide enough to swim through.

Daw! he thought, agonizing as he forced himself to hold his breath, forced his arms to stroke and his legs to kick despite the icy water. If the passage thinned any more, he would be caught there, trapped deep inside the mountain's guts, left to drown.

Breathe! his body shouted.

Breathe! his lungs protested, burning in his chest.

Trell felt the fingers of desperation grip him.

Then, in a moment of surprising clarity, he realized he'd experienced this before, this dreadful panic that threatened to overpower all mental control. Somewhere, sometime...he'd almost drowned!

Trell was so elated that a sudden peace flooded him. He found a renewed determination to keep swimming.

He knew the moment the current yanked him in a new, more forceful direction that he was free of the tunnel, and he prayed as he swam upwards that he would find air at the top. It was a harrowing few seconds, but then he surged into the open with a choking gasp that echoed off a low ceiling.

The current carried him swiftly along. Slowly, the blackness cleared from his vision and the fire left his lungs, and he knew he was in an underground river. There was water-light enough to see the wide stream and the smooth, wet stone of the low ceiling, but it was a faint light, moon-pale, as though Naiadithine had done her part and was leaving him now.

His muscles cramped beneath the water; his teeth chattered, his head throbbed, and his body was numb and heavy; yet for the first time in nearly half a decade, he was grateful to be alive. He grinned stupidly as the river carried him, using his pack and its empty canteens to help him stay afloat, oblivious for the moment of any pain or danger—for *he had remembered!* Not a dreamed memory, but his own true recollection of life before the Emir's palace.

A roaring began that quickly grew in volume, and suddenly Trell was plummeting downward in darkness, falling...falling...as he felt himself rushing through air and took in one last breath. Then followed a harsh plunge into depths unknown, being caught by the current again and pulled along, only to strike against something—caught painfully on his arm, what was it?

He held on.

The greedy current tried to pull him further downstream, but he hooked his arm around the line—was it a line? He felt along it with numb fingers. *No. A chain.* Trell wrapped both arms around the chain and swam up along its length. He clenched his teeth, fought the blackness piercing his thoughts, and kicked as hard as he could.

Don't stop.

Finally the current died and he was heading upward through still water that gradually grew warmer. He let go of the chain and swam with hands of ice and lungs of fire until he burst free into darkness and saw the barest glimpse of a circle of starry sky. He drew in his breath with a shuddering gasp that echoed back at him.

He knew at once the cause. *I'm in a well.*

There was the chain attached to its post. No doubt he'd unwound it all trying to pull himself up. He reached for it again, hoping to use it for a rope out of the well, but his body was trembling so violently that he couldn't even make his fingers close around the metal. The well's edge was too high for him to reach, and the walls were too slick to climb.

With the fall of adrenaline, fatigue and hours in the cold set in to claim their share of him. Trell cried for help, but he heard only the echo of his voice, meek and trembling like an ewe's pitiful bleat. He called out several more times nonetheless, and then splashed his arms in the water until they were too heavy to lift.

But no one came.

Because he couldn't hold the chain, Trell looped one forearm within it as best he could, and then he rested his wet head against the cold metal while his teeth chattered and his body trembled. He knew it was important to stay awake, but it was only heartbeats before his eyelids won their battle to close.

As he sank into darkness, his last memory was Naiadithine's whisper...

Follow the water, Trell of the Tides.