

THE BROKEN BLADE

THE BROKEN BLADE

No man can serve two
masters forever.

THE KNIGHT OF ELDARAN
BOOK 3

ANNA THAYER



LION FICTION

To
*My wonderful husband, Justin, who has been my companion,
critic, and champion in the editorial process;
Proverbs 27:17 springs to mind!
And to our delightful son, Leo
– and his new sister, due to arrive at any time!
You are, and will always be, a blessing and a joy to us.*

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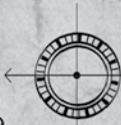
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MAP OF THE RIVER REALM AND ITS WORLD

THE LAND
OF THE
SEVEN SONS



THE
MERCHANT
STATES

SKAANIA

LAMIGLIA

ISTANARIA

KARLIETTUJA

LIBELSHA

MARUKSOSHYK

QUYOSHTANATE

DIADOGUS

JARMASARIQ

GALITHIA

THE
RIVER
REALM

GIBLIRIA

MARBOCIA

SIB'LEMIA

THE SOUTHERN WASTES

RATANA

CALATIA

MARBORISTA

ETRAIA

ANOURA

LUSARLIA

FUERIA

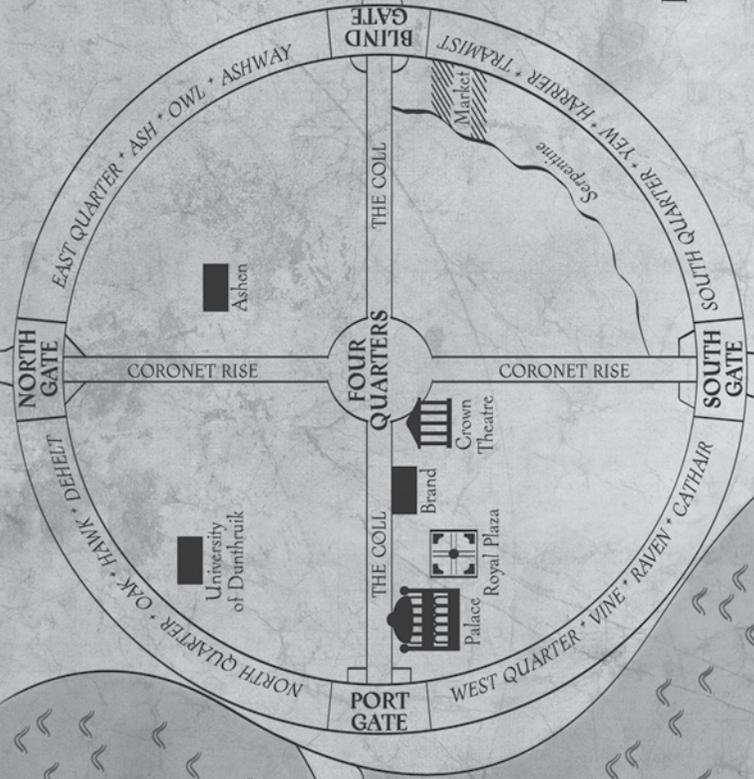


MAP OF THE RIVER REALM TOWNS AND PROVINCES

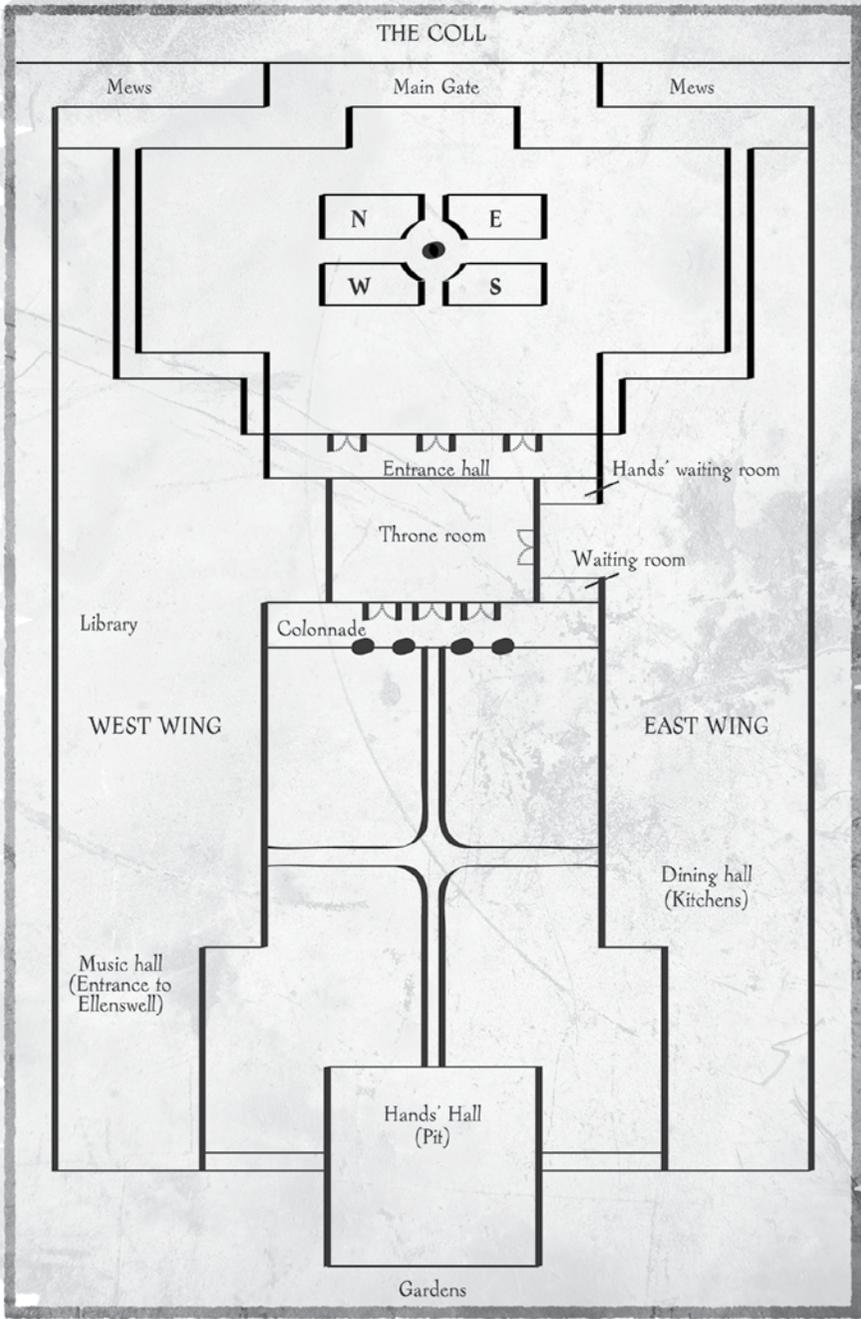




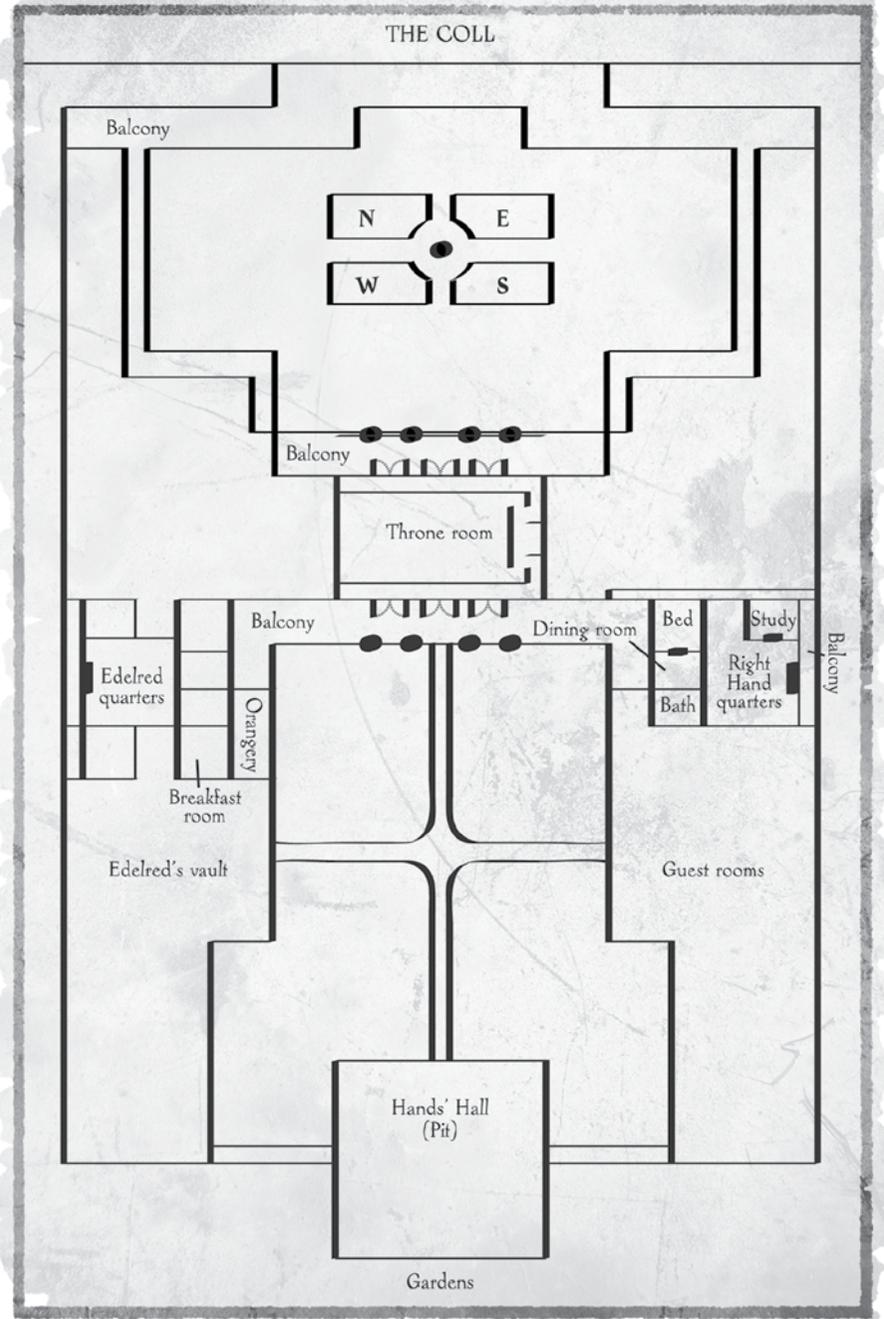
THE CITY
OF
DUNTHRUIK
*In the time of
the Throned*



EDELRED'S PALACE - LOWER FLOOR



EDELRED'S PALACE - UPPER FLOOR



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is the culmination of long years of dreaming. So many people have worked to support me in telling Eamon's story since I first began to pen it nearly a decade ago – too many to give them all the mention that they deserve.

Huge thanks must go once again to my old friends Esther and Jonathan, whose contributions of sound-boarding and encouragement have been immense; but, in this third book especially, I owe thanks to Esther for the moving words to Ilenia's song, and to Jonathan for his tireless and exhaustive dedication to all things military. It would have been far beyond my power to write a convincing – and logical – battle narrative without him.

Though he has already won himself the dedication to this book through his dedication to it, I am enormously indebted to my husband Justin, for his editorial acumen and plot-untangling skills – especially during the times that I have been suffering from Eamon over-exposure and baby brain! This trilogy would be much the poorer without everything he has given – and given up – to help me sculpt it to its final form.

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Were the skies to be fretted with consuming fire and the mountains to devastate their roots beneath; were the seas to overpower their trembling coasts and every hill and vale and field to fall to wreck and ruin; were the world to be extinguished and go out before my very eyes, still would I know the promise – and still would I hold.

Fragment of the Bellwood Letters

CHAPTER I

At the Master's command, he rose. He stood before the throne, unwitting of darkling Hands and visions of death. He felt neither the weight of cloak and blade nor the malice of staring foes. Nothing could lay any hold on him.

How he had risen!

He had once been a Gauntlet cadet, struggling to find a lost dagger in the mud and wretched dark. He had laid his palm upon a mark of glory and swearing, become an ensign imbued with the power to breach. Then as a lieutenant he had delivered a hard-sought tome to his Master. And so he became a Hand. He had returned from the Serpent's lair bearing the head of his enemy, and by that triumph rose as a Quarter Hand whose deeds caused the whole East Quarter to pour praise upon his Master.

Rising from knees to feet in that ruddy hall, he ascended higher than most men dared. Now the whole of the River Realm held but one more powerful than he. Now he was second only to the one who had seized the throne from the mottled corpse of a King.

Rising, he became the Master's Right Hand. Rising, the hopes and dues of his bloodline came full circle. All that once tarnished his mocked and defamed house was unworked, the way to glory opened.

A Goodman stood before the throne, receiving all that the Lord of Dunthruik, of the River Realm, and of the world, could offer. No fawning wretch or treacherous slave was he; this Goodman's service was mastery.

In rising, he was everything.

Yet he was also nothing. The lieutenant who breached had also surrendered his sword, turned his back upon his marked palm, and given his oath to the King. The Hand who had so earnestly championed Edelred's glory had been no Master's man. All that he had done was done for the house of Brenuin, the true house. The King would soon return to his own.

These latter thoughts strengthened Eamon's heart as he stood before Edelred. Though the Master's gaze caressed him, Eamon subdued his fledgling arrogance.

In rising he had been named the Right Hand, but long before that day he had risen to his feet before another and answered to the name of First Knight.

He would not forget it.

The Master smiled at him. "Son of Eben, sheath your blade."

Eamon looked to the curved dagger in his hands. Its sinister writing glinted back at him. The blade was a symbol of his new authority; it was the same blade that had taken Eben's life. It felt terrible and binding as he pressed it into its scabbard.

"The King's house will hold, Edelred!"

Eben's cries sounded in his mind, as though from a faraway room. Eben could never have known it, but he had been right: the house of Brenuin had held.

So would the house of Goodman.

Eamon looked up. Edelred's bold, burning face was before him. The Master watched him with delighted intensity.

"Son of Eben," he commanded, "dismiss my Hands."

Slowly, Eamon turned to look across the hall at the other Hands, their faces grim with new and seething wariness. Not one of them could now gainsay him. Arlaith's black look might have crippled any other, but it could not land on him. The Master was behind him; who, then, could dare stand against him?

Eamon smiled. His voice came, fell and arrogant, to his lips:

"Leave."

The Hands bowed, spoke to the Master's glory, and departed.

Eamon fixed his gaze upon them. How they went! Did they not go, cowed and trembling, before him and his might? For well they knew that he could pay them back for their black-hearted plots and harrying. Would he not delight in such a venture?

He closed his eyes and grappled to cast back the web-like trappings of pride and power. Vengeance was not his calling, nor was the power given to him to be used as its tool. To be an instrument of calculating wrath and spite could only bind him to the Master, as every other Right Hand had been bound before him. Such pursuit would never serve or honour the King whom he loved.

A light touch fell on his shoulder. He froze.

"Son of Eben." The Master's whispered words were close by Eamon's ear.

Eamon turned to face him. The throned surveyed him with a look of whimsy and affection that was more terrifying than any that Eamon had yet seen.

"My Right Hand." The Master ran his hand along Eamon's shoulder, straightening the folds and creases of the cloak upon it. "This raiment and this blade are birthrights long denied you."

"I will not deny them, Master," Eamon breathed. He scarcely knew what words he spoke.

"Many have said as much. Few have done so."

"I will be loyal," Eamon answered.

The Master laughed. "Loyal," he repeated. Then he smiled, and his hand strayed from Eamon's shoulder to his face; power and will were in those fingers. That same hand moved across his face and, in a gesture of unimaginable gentleness, smoothed the hair upon his brow.

"Will you be loyal to me, son of Eben?" the Master asked. "Or will you love me?"

Eamon gazed at him, over-awed. The piercing grey eyes looked through him at some other whom Eamon had never been, nor could ever be. Yet how he yearned to be the object of that look!

Eamon bowed his head away from the impaling force of the

Master's gaze. "I... I will undo what Eben did, Master. I will redeem my house."

Edelred smiled. "So Ashway said," he answered, withdrawing his hand.

With a tremor of joy Eamon looked up once more. But the Master's face was closed to him. It filled him with distress and then with doubled horror, for part of him ached to be all that Edelred sought.

"Come." With that word Edelred stepped away, turning his steps from the throne and along the hall towards the great north balcony. It was the balcony on which Eamon had first seen Edelred at the majesty.

It was where he had danced with Alessia.

The Master climbed the steps and Eamon followed him, catching a glimpse of the Royal Plaza through the drapes that framed the doors. As the Lord of Dunthruik passed out onto the balcony stones, all things shrivelled and shrank before him, as though before a column of flame.

Enthralled beyond measure, Eamon followed him. He lingered among the curtains as the Master swept forward to the ledge. The stones were red-veined.

Without turning to look back at him, the Master spoke. "Gird your blade, Eben's son."

"Yes, Master."

Trembling, Eamon attached the dagger to his belt. The Master did not look at him.

"Follow me," Edelred commanded. Then he crossed to the main sweep of the palace walls.

An archway, marked with red stones, separated the balcony from the walls. The Master stepped through it. Eamon trailed after him. He could scarcely walk, and yet he followed Edelred down the length of wall that bound the plaza. They came to stand above the palace gates.

The Master stopped. Eamon hung uncertainly behind him.

"Come and stand beside me, son of Eben."

Slowly, Eamon stepped forward. The Master's presence drove all other sense from his flesh.

"Tell me what you see, son of Eben."

"I see Dunthruik," Eamon answered. It took his breath from him.

The mist cleared, and beyond the plaza and palace walls the whole city lay beneath the sudden, piercing blue of the morning sky. It was a myriad wash of stones, of red and gold, of voices. The people in the Coll and in the streets below moved about their business; Gauntlet moved among them. The stone statues of the Four Quarters gazed back at him as crisply and clearly as though he stood beneath them. Before him lay the North Quarter and the tall, distinctive towers of the university, its spires gilt with eagles. To his left was the Port Gate, and beyond it, the sea; to his right the dome of the Crown Theatre, and far beyond it, the tip of the Blind Gate. The city walls embraced Dunthruik, the parapets dotted with men in red. Beyond those walls the mountains marked the northern border; their very valleys and crags seemed as clear as his reflection in a mirror. Below the mountains lay the hills and fields and plains and the River itself, the city's lifeblood. To the south, the River coiled its way like a mighty serpent through the plains towards the city, where its mouth met the unassailable sea.

Shaking, Eamon pressed his hands against the stone before him and stared. Dunthruik was a seat of awesome power. Even if he harried every region of the River Realm and mastered the southern stretches of the River, even if he had the help of the Easters and had taken Edesfield, even if he was the last true heir of the house of Kings...

Even if he had done all those things... against the whole host and might of Dunthruik, what hope did Hughsan have?

None, son of Eben, the voice whispered. *He has none.*

Yet as he stood and gazed out from the very heart of Edelred's stronghold, for the briefest of moments Eamon saw the King beside him. The vision wakened the hope that slumbered deep inside him.

The throned watched him.

“You know well, son of Eben, that the Serpent closes upon us.”

The Master’s voice had taken on a strange tone: dark, burdened with emotion beyond his ken. As he met the throned’s gaze he caught frayed glimpses of forgotten battles and of the Nightholt, raised high in the Master’s hand.

He said nothing.

The throned gazed out across the city. “With my own hands I razed this land,” he said, “and from ashes did I raise it again, setting my name and glory over it. The Serpent would take my realm and this city, tearing stone from mortar and shedding blood from vein.”

Eamon swallowed. Surely nothing but destruction could follow when the King came?

He fixed his eyes upon the distant sky, filling them with its endless blue. Hughan was not a man of witless and unheeding violence. He was a man of compassion and justice. A man of valiance.

“The whole of the Serpent’s heart is set upon the demise of my city.” The Master’s voice called him from his thought. “But, son of Eben, we will break it. When he comes against me we will take his heart in our hands and rend it. No graft of his house will remain.

“After he is slain there will be much for you to learn and do.” The Master turned to look at him at last. “Until that day when the Serpent’s blood has been trampled into the dust, your task, son of Eben, is to prepare this city to receive him and his sodden corpse.”

Eamon met his gaze. Visions of Hughan’s body – broken, torn, and humiliated beyond all imagining – harrowed his heart, rendering him speechless.

“You will begin this day,” Edelred told him. “Take Lord Arlaith to the East Quarter and install him there. You will then be shown your quarters. And you will oversee this city as it prepares for our foe. You will report all things, and all manner of things, to me.”

Anguish gripped him, but Eamon bowed his head. “Yes, Master.”

“Lord Arlaith awaits you,” Edelred told him. “Go.”

Eamon bowed down low.

“Your glory, Master.”

Edelred did not look at him again. Eamon withdrew.

He descended from the balcony gallery and left the throne room. As the great doors pulled shut behind him, Eamon shuddered and drew a gasping breath. He glanced down at his shaking hands; they seemed pale and feeble in the light, whilst his head was awash with fire. He touched at it feverishly; it was as though his frame was not enough to endure the Master’s vision and... affection.

“Might I serve you, Lord Goodman?”

Eamon turned to see the doorkeeper. The man’s face bore a knowing smile.

“I am well,” Eamon answered. It took all of his strength. “Where is Lord Arlaith?”

The doorkeeper bowed. “He is here, my lord,” he answered, gesturing to one side.

A figure grimly emerged from the Hands’ waiting room, its face contorted into a clenched sneer thick with malice.

“Lord Arlaith.”

“Lord Goodman.”

“I will lead you to the East Quarter.”

Arlaith bowed, shallowly and stiffly. “His glory, Lord Goodman.”

As they left the palace gates, throngs of men bowed, all their eyes on Eamon. It only darkened Arlaith’s mood.

They went in silence, exchanging neither word nor glance as they passed through the city streets. At last the Ashen rose before them and Eamon caught a glimpse of the Gauntlet ranks, drawn up to welcome their new master. In his mind his household huddled behind darkened windows to watch as the new Lord of the East Quarter arrived.

Eamon could offer no comfort to the house that was no longer his.

They reached the centre of the square and Captain Anderas’s sword was the first of hundreds raised in formal salute. The lines

of men, Gauntlet, and Hands of the East Quarter were faces that he knew, whose love and respect he had earned. As he halted in the square he knew that he could show them none of his former affection; Arlaith held them now.

Eamon surveyed them all.

"I come in the name of the Master," he began. "Let none gainsay me. I bring to you a man after the Master's heart, chosen by him."

He faltered, feeling Arlaith's thunderous presence at his side. Was he to entrust those that he loved to a man who hated him?

He had no choice.

"I declare that this man shall henceforth be Lord of the East Quarter."

Silence filled the Ashen.

"Declare yourself, lord," Captain Anderas called.

Eamon pressed his eyes briefly shut, resisting the urge to respond.

"I am Lord Arlaith."

There was a long pause as hundreds of men, men from the Quarter and from distant regions to whom the Quarter now played host, turned their gazes to the one who had once been the Right Hand. Eamon realized that for Arlaith it was a moment of utter humiliation.

"Lord Arlaith, choice of the Master, be his Hand among us."

Anderas spoke primly, his every word crystal on the air as he led a second formal salute. Bar the sound of steel rising to attention, the Ashen was silent. Arlaith stared at the men before him, hatred in his bearing and his look.

"To his glory," Anderas called, a cry echoed by the men all around him.

"To his glory!"

It curdled Eamon's blood.

As the cries filled the square, Arlaith turned to him. The man's hatred was drawn into one long glare. Wrath writhed in every facet of Arlaith's being.

"Enjoy your little coup, Lord Goodman," Arlaith hissed. "While it lasts."

Was he not the Right Hand? As calls to the Master's glory filled the air, Eamon matched Arlaith's gaze.

"Speak to me in such a way again, Lord Arlaith, and it will go ill with you."

Arlaith raised one dark eyebrow. The chilling familiarity – and utter otherness – of the man pierced Eamon as never before.

"You would threaten me, Lord Goodman?"

"I make no threats, Lord Arlaith: I am a man of my word."

"So you are," Arlaith sneered. He glanced at the assembled college and at the doors to the East's Handquarter. Slater stood ready to welcome the new master of the house.

Arlaith looked at Eamon but said nothing. No smile or scowl or grimace crossed his face. He bowed once and then virulently crossed the Ashen.

Eamon watched him go, feeling oddly alone. Anderas stepped forward to greet Arlaith and presented himself faultlessly; the captain never once met Eamon's gaze. He could not.

"Lord Goodman."

A man stood by him. Gauntlet. He held his low bow.

"Rise," Eamon said quietly. In the corner of his eye Arlaith was speaking with Anderas. Weariness assailed him.

The man rose. He had a lean face, dark eyes, and a smile that Eamon disliked for no reason that he could place. The man had two flames at his collar.

"Your name, lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant Fletcher, my lord," the man answered. "Formerly of the South Quarter. I have been afforded the great honour of standing as the lieutenant to your office, while it is pleasing to the Master."

The words came as a blow to Eamon. "Congratulations on your appointment, Mr Fletcher. I am sure you will perform it well."

"Thank you, my lord."

"And what of Mr Kentigern?"

The man inclined his head respectfully. "I understand that he took ship this morning for Etraia. He will serve the Master in

another fashion, henceforth, and I am sure he will serve well. He was very likeable.”

Eamon reeled: Ladomer was gone.

He rounded on the lieutenant. “It is not your place to speak of your likes and dislikes to me.”

Why had he not sought Ladomer out and spoken to him? He feared that his friend’s prediction – that they would not see each other again – would turn true.

Fletcher bowed swiftly. “Forgive me, my lord.”

Eamon blinked, forcing back the tears biting at his eyes. Perhaps it was his own mind, and his own grief, that made it so; the lieutenant’s words sounded insincere to him.

“Mr Kentigern and I were close of late,” Fletcher advised him. “He taught me my duties thoroughly. I will serve you to the fullness of my strength, to the Master’s glory, Lord Goodman.”

Eamon nodded once. He wished that there were someone who could do him the same service. “My first service to you is to be that of showing you your quarters in the palace.”

“Then we shall return to the palace.”

Fletcher bowed again. “I will procure you a horse, my lord.”

“Procure it from the Handquarter stables,” Eamon told him suddenly. “Ask the stablehands for my horse. It is a loyal beast, and I love it well. I will take it with me.”

“Of course, my lord.” Rising from his bow, Fletcher turned and moved across the Ashen.

Eamon stood alone. The Gauntlet filed from the Ashen and returned to their various duties. Lord Arlaith stood upon the Handquarter steps. Eamon looked at him. The Lord of the East Quarter gazed back. In that moment before he turned to enter his house, Arlaith met Eamon’s look and smiled.

CHAPTER II

Eamon felt, but scarcely heard, his footsteps as he walked through the palace halls into the East Wing; banners and faces whirled past him in a daze, and no man spoke a word to him. He recognized some of the passages; they threw his mind back many months to a cool September day when he and Mathaiah had followed Cathair and Ashway into the palace’s ancient bowels, seeking Ellenswell.

Mathaiah was dead. Now, Eamon followed Lieutenant Fletcher.

As they passed through the passageways the clear light of that morning – the last morning in April – touched his flesh. He pressed it from his eyes.

Fletcher led him up an elaborately panelled stairwell in the East Wing into one of the highest parts of the palace. Following, Eamon paused to glance through a window; it gazed, like an eye, down over the complex of the Hands’ Hall and across the long throes of the palace buildings and grounds. Wind played through the aperture. A flight of swallows wheeled past, their voices caught high in the air.

They passed on and the stairs spilt out into a wide landing. Two Hands stood at the stairwell, solemn in their black. They bowed low and did not rise until he commanded it.

The landing was thickly paved in red-veined marble, each streak flowing into the seamless joins of the stone. The walls that bound the hall were clad with elegantly grained wood and interspersed with arched windows that looked over the palace gardens. Great curtains hung to either side of these openings and sunlight struck through them to cast further traces of red into the high hallway.