

ONE

Passing down the corridor leading from the stairs, lamplight glowing on the rich wood wall-panels, I counted off four doors; quarters of the Counsel members. The sergeant escorting me knocked at the fifth door.

At a barked command from inside, he opened it and ushered me through. I jumped slightly when the door closed behind me, fighting a sense of entrapment. In a wide, plain room warm with firelight and the glow of lamps, two men sat in conference at a table strewn with papers at the far end. Teren I recognised instantly. I could not mistake my Commander's blond hair and broad shoulders. The other, with his hook nose and close-cropped hair, must be Bajan, Ran-Kanasa of the Ona Tamal, leader of our order.

"Ran-Kanasa, Commander." I pulled myself into a salute.

"Anneth," Teren said. "Glad the shoulder's mended. Have you met Bajan?"

"It is an honour," I answered, bowing.

He inclined his head. "I trust the journey was not too strenuous, Captain." He considered me a moment. Unease rose in me; I wondered if more questions about the ambush awaited me. "When last did you have contact with Ran Ikana Dalan?"

"Dalan?" The question took me by surprise. "How would I have any contact with one of the Na-Astakran, and one of the Ikan Ibat at that?" I answered, frowning. "What is he to me? Or I to him, for that matter?"

"Anneth, as the priest in your village before his election to the Counsel he would have guided your earliest steps in our faith," Bajan said. "That is not a bond lightly broken. So I ask again. When did you last have contact with him?"

“It is a bond broken more completely by his own actions than by any other,” I returned harshly. “Why do you ask this of me?”

“You would do well to remember to whom you speak, Captain,” Teren snapped.

Bajan waved him silent. “It is possible Anneth is not aware of what passes here, Teren. We have the obligation to explain to her as far as we are able.” He paused, watching me. “The stricter forms of Service advocated by the northern Taram tribes regain their popularity here in the south with the increasing famine,” he continued. “Dalan, at their head, appears to be seeking to consolidate his position.”

“It is rumoured,” Teren added, “that he seeks to persuade Jalasena that his age is a burden to the Counsel, and he would do well to stand aside.”

I stared at them, wondering that anyone dared suggest that Jalasena, last of the disciples of An-Lal, had become too old to lead the Counsel.

“How long is it since the ambush?” Teren fired the question at me, shattering my thoughts.

“Four months,” I answered, scrambling to gather myself.

He frowned at the document in his hand. “So, you have heard of the other incidents?”

“I have heard . . .”

“Of course.” He cut me off, returning his attention to the document. I felt Bajan watching me, but kept my attention on Teren.

“What do you think is happening?”

“I know not. As I said in my reports before the ambush, the Sannite army increases its numbers, slowly, building up back from the border. That, at least, is not known in the camps. But the talk of camps is that they have stopped sending their raids, though there are a

thousand different answers to say why this should be so,” I replied.

“And do you wish to add anything to your last report?” Bajan asked, intently.

I shook my head. “How should I? I have not been on active duty since the ambush.”

“Are you aware of Varanvana’s Prophecy?” he asked.

The change of direction threw me off balance.

“Well?” he barked.

“I know what it is. How could I not? But only the Ustan Ibat have access to it, so I have not read it.”

“But you are aware of its content?” Teren asked.

“I know that it foretells the return of An-Lal,” I answered.

“Amongst other things. Do you believe that He will return?”

“Did not An-Lal say that in the end He would not forsake us?”

Bajan rose abruptly to his feet. “Teren, enough. Anneth, you will join us in the Counsel of the Na-Astakran tomorrow morning.”

My dismissal clear, I saluted and left them. Making my way down the wide stone stairs and out to the courtyard, the eddy of my thoughts swirled uncertainty through me. Again, as so many times in the last month, I wondered what Teren wanted. With my shoulder healed, the doctors declaring me fit for Service once again, what reason could there be for summoning me here rather than returning me to my duty at the border? Why the need for this long journey south? The Citadel walls rose thick and strong before me, functional and unlovely, the huge bulk of the Gatehouse shading out the last rays of the sun. Opposite it, the glass dome arching above the entrance to the Temple of An-Lal reflected those walls, softening the harsh stone to a liquid shimmer. The sight of the Temple cheered me, despite the forbidding, unadorned

blankness of the lower levels of Vanirsk Citadel behind it. I looked up. The rose illumination of the evening sun on the windows of the upper levels drew gleams of red and gold from the glass. That the ambush hung no question over my Service seemed clear. Dalan's election to the Na-Astakran? Old news, but knowing him I felt no surprise that he sought to elevate himself further. Suspicion flared through me. Could it be that he sought now to become Astan, to impose his version of Service upon the whole of An-Lak? I shivered away from such thoughts, disgust rising in me at the harm he might do countless others, at the harm he had done me. Passing through the narrow doorway into the South Tower, the guardroom distracted me: men talking, sitting around eating, drinking, cleaning weapons, filling the stone chamber with noise. I climbed the quiet stone stairs up to the second level and walked the long corridor to my quarters. Why does Bajan want me to attend the Counsel tomorrow? And why does Teren speak of the Prophecy?

The door closed behind me. A fire burning merrily in the grate and my bed made up spoke of Laseth's touch upon the room. A slight surge of guilt tainted my gladness at being alone. Tired from the long month of travel and too dull to make any sense of these questions, I refused the bright noise of the dining hall. But even this need Laseth anticipated. When I answered the knock at my door a servant presented me with a tray, a bowl of stew and a slab of bread sat upon it. I thanked the servant, smiling. Laseth served me well, I acknowledged, but I did not want her company now.

I ate well enough, sat in the silence of my room with the fire singing happily in the grate behind me, but the plain fare only served to tighten the restlessness coiled inside me. Images of this last day of my journey burned within me: the sun's first rays scoring vivid scarlet trails across the sky, firing the surface of Lake Hasan to molten metal; the ship

working its way up the Lake to a rhythm of thuds and curses. Abat Ikan white-mantled with snow, ice crusting the shores. Watching Vanirsk draw ever closer, until we made fast at the quay with its dark bulk blocking out the evening sky. The quiver and burn in my legs when Laseth and I reached the top of the long tunnel from the docks. I sighed. When last I left this city, it felt like exile. The airy squares no longer felt like home to me. And beneath it all, the questions surged, seeking answer.

I wished Sutral were here with me, the sharp stab of loss at the thought of him as tangible as the sudden throb of pain from my almost-healed shoulder. The image of his fall burned sharp through me again, the bitter taste of treachery stinging my tongue. Betrayal on betrayal, neither assuaged nor answered by my time in hospital. And now Teren chose to summon me back to Vanirsk.

It took time for the ebb and flow of my thoughts to subside into tranquillity. I held myself still awhile, feeling the promises of An-Lal speak in the small, calm places of my heart, subduing the darkness that stung me with its cold, insistent, ‘Why?’

Exhaustion drove me to bed, to be tossed in dreams that rolled through my sleep like waves beneath a ship. When morning arrived, I remembered only a sense of deep, cold currents, though my arms ached as if I had been wrestling water all night.

Dressing, I studied the embroidered cloth of the wall-hanging in my room. It showed An-Lal leading the first battle against His brother, words from His Book stitched intricately around its border. This morning it filled me with unease, whispering an unspoken, hidden warning. Apprehension rippled through me, wondering again what Teren wanted of me. Even in the temple, the words of Lal-Lanat Ibat failed to soothe me. “An-Lal, my trust and happiness this morning is in Thee . . .” gave no rush of renewal. And so, with neither peace

nor security, I made the long climb up to the top of the Citadel. Teren met me at the head of the stairs, and together we strode through the double doors into the Counsel Chamber.

A fire burned in a huge grate at the other end, little of its warmth reaching us. A rich tapestry covered the length of the inner wall from floor to ceiling. Depicting a scene from the Book of An-Lal, the jewels and gold thread woven into it shimmered in the firelight. The eleven members of the Na-Astakran were already sat at the oval table dominating the floor, the murmur of low-voiced conversations filling the room. The view from the mullioned window running the entire length of the room drew me to it. Vanirsk sprawled at my feet, enclosed within the protective elongated hexagon of its walls. The tree-lined Avenue, wide as the broad front of the Citadel, led my gaze from the imposing mansions of merchants through the busy commercial district bright with awnings to the cluttered jumble of artisans' yards and workshops against the walls. Teren touched my shoulder, pulling my attention back into the room. I took a seat next to him on a long bench against the wall. Another of the Kanas Ibat sat on the bench. I did not know him, and Teren did not acknowledge him.

The Na-Astakran rose to their feet and we rose with them. Ancient Jalasena, disciple of An-Lal, Astan of the Na-Astakran, entered. He looked withered and frail, his white beard reaching nearly to his knees, but his voice belied that frailty.

“Brothers and Sisters, I thank you for joining us. Let us give thanks to An-Lal and ask that He give us the wisdom to guide An-Lak in this time of trouble.”

He took his place at the head of the table, gesturing for everyone to be seated. Bowing his head, he waited for the room to settle before continuing.

“Brothers and Sisters, I look around this table, and I see that all I and my fellow disciples sought to achieve has reached fruition. Many more years ago than I care to count, my

brother Disciple At-Alam and I conceived this Service of An-Lal, and split it into its constituent parts. And An-Lal approved what we attempted, for He saw that He would need such Service, and His people also. I see you now before me: Ran-Ustana of the Ustan Ibat, your dedication to understanding the Word of Prophecy and the Songs of the Land does your Service credit. Ran Ikana of the Ikan Ibat, you give your Service well to the people, that they may remain in the light of An-Lal's Thought. Ran Kanasa of the Kanas Ibat, your Service goes hard with you, for your comrade of the An-Inut yet absents himself, but still you contrive to keep us defended against the Sannites."

He sighed. "I have lived long, and have seen war and famine and pestilence. They have come to our Land before, and they will come again after we all go from this place to sit at the right hand of Lal and His Son, Our Lord. Yet though I have seen these things, for the greatest part of my life I have been blessed with peace, blessed with prosperity, blessed with health. If that peace is at an end, perhaps one younger than I is better fitted to the task of leading the An-Laks in war. If that prosperity is at an end, perhaps one stronger than I should bring the An-Laks through famine. I am old, and it seems to me that an old man has no right to ask the people to go where he may not lead them. I submit myself to you, therefore, that none may say I sought my own good above the good of our people."

Bajan's response came quickly, leaving no space for any other to answer. "Revered Jalasena, it is true that trouble has come to us, but we are not yet at war, and war may not yet come to pass. True enough, famine is upon the Land, but in good faith and by the will of An-Lal are you Astan, and thus will you remain until He decrees your task at an end. I doubt not that my Brothers and Sisters of the Na-Astakran believe this also. Let us, therefore, set aside such talk, for we have much to discuss."

A movement of a blue robe caught my eye. Ran Ikana Dalan would have spoken, but a glance and frown from one of the Ran Kanasa silenced him. I just caught the grim look that flickered briefly across Bajan's face. It passed; had I really seen it? Perhaps not, but alert now, I watched carefully. Jalasena seated himself, everyone else in the room swiftly following. I studied Dalan, his folded arms resting on his paunch, sweat gleaming on his bald head. I saw little change in him since his condemnation of me all those years ago, only now perhaps he seemed more self-important, more certain of himself.

“Rajath, what news do you bring us of the Prophecy?” Jalasena asked.

The mention of the Prophecy claimed my attention, the word drawing cold through me, my dreams of the night before echoing faint alarum calls deep within me.

“Brothers and Sisters, I thank you for hearing me.” She paused, glancing around the room. “Well do you know that we of the Ustan Ibat have devoted many centuries to the study of the Prophecy left to us by the Disciple Varanvana.”

“Whilst it is clear that Varanvana's visions are signs leading us ever closer to the return of the warring Brothers, the obscurity of the Word mocks our attempts to discover when these signs will come to pass. Once the sign is reached, however, its meaning comes clear to all in its passing.”

She looked up to face the Na-Astakran, her voice gathering strength. The blue robes of the Ran Ikana, the green robes of the Ran Ustana, the plain black garb of the Ran Kanasa sat still before her, few able to brave that clear gaze for long.

“We see such signs have passed that but few remain 'ere our Lord return, and His accursed Brother with Him. With their return will the fate of the Land turn eternally to good or ill.”

“Why then are our revered Brothers and Sisters of the Ustan Ibat so sure that trouble is upon us, since you freely say you may not predict when these signs will come to pass?” Dalan interrupted.

“Brother Dalan, I do not gainsay you,” she replied, tucking a lock of dark, curly hair back behind her ear. “We may not be certain that the return of An-Lal approaches, for in the Prophecy time is naught. In its terms, it could be but the blinking of an eye between the passing of one such sign and the next, or it could equally be that the turn of many centuries lies between them.”

“So, my Sister, I ask you again, what gives you this certitude?”

“We of the Ustan Ibat study not only the Prophecy, but also the way of the stars, the seas, the beasts of the forest and the dance of the skies. Our studies of these give us knowledge that illumines the Word of Prophecy. A student has read a sign in the stars that coincides too closely with a warning in the Prophecy about a time of famine for us to lightly dismiss it.”

“So. We are to take the word of this student.” Dalan paused to allow his scorn to sink in. “No matter that he is not yet fully initiated into the order of the Ustan Ibat. On the word of this student, we are to throw the An-Laks into conflict, send the Kanas Ibat to death. Surely we need more than this before we alarm the people?”

I could see some of the Na-Astakran nodding their agreement. Rajath refused them, shaking her head. Jalsena gestured for her to continue. I leant forward, eager for her words.

“At first we thought as Dalan now says, but we were constrained to consider the claim of this student, for surely this is the purpose that the Ustan Ibat Serve. We examined his findings and closely studied the Word of the Prophecy.” She paused, passion gathering in her

voice. "Thus it is not on the word of a mere student that I bring this to Counsel. No, nor on my word do I bring you this, though that should suffice. It is on the word of Varanvana herself that we depend, that her light might safely guide us through the darkness. For it is the darkness that assails us now. The priests of San-Lal draw nigh upon An-Lal's Talisman, hoping that with it they may free their accursed Lord. If we do naught to prevent this, San-Lal and Leth will be freed upon the land. Then surely will the darkness prevail, whilst Our Lord, An-Lal, perishes in the darkness of His eternal exile. I say to you: we must act!"

She slammed her palm down upon the table.

The force of the blow cracked it. The room, shocked silent, erupted in argument. Excitement surged through me, the blood quickening in my veins. And beneath, an undercurrent of fear.

Rajath sank back into her seat, her gaze avoiding the damaged table.

At length Bajan rose to his feet.

The room fell silent, attention focussed on him.

"Our thanks, Sister Rajath. We hear you. What say you, my Brothers and Sisters? I for one would prefer to be prepared for such an event, rather than let it take me sat by my hearth-fire. Even if Dalan speaks the truth when he says that these are but tall tales to frighten small children, should we not at least discover the intent of our enemy?"

"Aye, it is well known that the assassins of the Ona Tamal relish such dark work."

Dalan's words sent a flicker of surprise around the table. "Brothers, Sisters, do not dissemble. Surely ye know that our revered Brother, Bajan, is of the order of Ona Tamal? Has he not brought his murderous spies even into our Counsel Chamber?"

His gesture brought Teren and I under the gaze of every person in the room. I returned

Dalan's stare, refusing to be cowed by his contempt. He dropped his eyes. "Rajath," he continued, "I know it is no more than a desire to feed your brother's thirst for blood that drives you to this. Enough, I say. Let us return to peace. Bajan will gain entertainment enough in the tales of bloodshed and sabotage his spies bring back from the Sannite cities they haunt, from the villages they lay waste at dead of night and the ambushes they set for unwary troops moving on the border."

"Dalan, enough. Your doubt is unjustified. Do not our Brother and Sister serve us well?" The words of the Ran Kanasa who earlier silenced Dalan did so again. He glanced around the room, but found no encouragement in the faces watching him. Deflated, he collapsed into his seat.

"My apologies, Bajan, Rajath."

Both nodded in his direction.

Jalasena rose. "I hear your words, but cannot discount Dalan's fears. We may not throw the An-Laks into fear when we remain unsure even amongst ourselves that San-Lal is abroad in the Land or that his priests have laid their hands upon the Talisman. Bajan, you will send agents to discover the intent of the Sannites. If they are indeed seeking An-Lal's Talisman, surely will we hear of it. When they return, you will make your report to us, and then we will take our decision."

He left the room, closely followed by most of the Na-Astakran. Those who remained split into small groups. I noticed Dalan at the far end of the room, talking to two others. One I recognised, the Ran Kanasa who had checked him, the other from his own Service, but they were too far away for me to hear what was being said. Intent in my study of Dalan's animated gestures, I did not see Bajan approach.

“Anneth”

I bowed to him, and Rajath, stood at his side.

Teren lightly touched my shoulder. “Shall we go.”

It was an order rather than a request.