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CHAPTER ONE

GARREN MANERA, FORMER hierarch of the Church of Auld, came to himself, and it wasn't a good awakening.

He stood on a grassy slope, woods and green meadows stretching below him. Behind him lay roiling terror, a miasma of foul, crawling, voices. He stumbled forward several steps, trying to get away; the voices rang in his mind, cascaded over the One, the current of life that filled the world. They were fear, illness, terrible anger, calling to him, reaching for him, flailing at him.

The voices lessened as he moved. He stopped, looked back. A haze sat at the top of the hill, the air distorting, changing, obscuring what lay behind it.

The barrier. That's what it was, the barrier around the Source. But he'd gone into it, he knew he had. Their party reached that odd village, and the Sentinel had taken him and Efthelzra in, leaving his priests and her Gatekeepers behind. That was the only way through the barrier, that's what the Sentinel had told them. So what was he doing here? He remembered nothing of being in the Source.

Well, that was consistent from his earlier experience, when he'd been made the successor to the old hierarch. He'd been brought here to meet the Masters, to be indoctrinated into his duties, and he remembered none of that, either. One didn't remember what happened inside the Source; the Masters, or perhaps the barrier, wiped it all away.

He was holding something in his hand, a shiny piece of black stone, half the size of his palm. He regarded it with some wonder. He'd seen stone like this before, the leftover from volcanos; when chipped, it left a razor-sharp edge. But why was he holding it? It had an odd feel to it, cold. Nothing of the One came off it; stone normally exuded threads of the One: strength, solidity. This one was simply dead; it was darkness, nothing emanating from it, or moving around it.

The Sentinel. The Sentinel had held a stone like this, and the feeling Garren had experienced from it, standing near the man as they'd entered the barrier, had been the same.

He looked at the barrier again. The voices were still there, as unpleasant as before, at a lower volume.

"Bearable. Just bearable. Time to move."

He felt the stone with his fingers. It was precious, powerful, not to be handled carelessly. He slipped it into a pocket. In his other hand he held a stout, metal shod staff. On his back was a full pack. Apparently, he was going somewhere. Well, for now, he needed to get away from the barrier. He began to walk.

He reached the bottom of the slope, moved into an open meadow. He crossed it, grass brushing feet and legs. New green was everywhere; it must be spring. Of course, he had no certainty about what the season was, having been in the Source, and forgotten his time there. But the sun was high in the sky, warm. A soft wind blew, brushing his skin, sending grass rippling in waves, the leaves rustling in the trees.

He stopped, closed his eyes, and listened to the One. Water coursed around here, and he could feel it, the currents and waves moving through his mind. The glow of the sun was curling tendrils from above, the breeze carrying it swirling through him. The earth here was rich, powerful, layers of strength beneath his feet.

Still, the edge of the voices was there. He opened his eyes, looked back again; the entire slope was hazy now, indistinct. He turned away from it and walked.

He went on for a few hours. He had no idea if anyone was following him, or where to go, but he felt the urge to get as far from the barrier as he could. The unpleasant sounds coming over the One

vanished in a short while, but he kept going until late in the afternoon, stopping only to sip some water from the streams that flowed through the area.

He found a pleasant spot to camp, a raised clearing, surrounded by trees and low bush, alongside a small, clear rill. The creek sang to him as he dipped his hand in it, and he smiled at its ringing voice. Such beauty, as always.

He put down his pack and sat on a boulder by the water. What was he doing here? Where was he supposed to go? He couldn't go back to Auld or Eften, he'd wind up in a prison the moment he appeared. For whatever reason, he was no longer in the Source. He could return by using the stone, but as he remembered none of it, he wasn't certain he wanted to; there had to be a reason he'd left.

He had a full pack, which he assumed meant food, and perhaps something to sleep in and shelter him. But that was only going to last so long. He wasn't a young man, nor terribly wise in the ways of the wild. He needed to get somewhere, find a food supply, and some shelter.

He was hungry. Best check and see what he had. He pulled his pack over beside him, undid the ties at the top. He pushed back the flap, looked inside.

A leather folder sat there, on top of everything else, paper peeking out from the edges. He reached in. What was this, left to be the first thing he'd see?

He took it up and pulled out the sheets of rough paper. They were filled with writing, his writing; he knew his hand, clear and strong, in heavy black ink. He forgot his hunger, began to read, frowning, the expression deepening as he did so, incredulity growing as he went. When he finished, he went back to the start, reread the entire manuscript. Then he placed the papers carefully back into the folder, tucked it into the top of the pack. He pulled out a small, hard loaf of bread, some dried meat, and ate, considering what he'd read, and what he needed to do.

"Do I believe it all? It looks like my writing. Was I forced to write it?"

He shook his head. It had to be true. He'd have left clues if he'd been forced to do that. It was all too crazy, and too contrary to

everything he'd ever done and believed in. And it had that memory in it:

When you were young, you heard the voices of the One. You wondered what they were, and you were afraid. So you went into the mountains, alone, to a high place, surrounded by stone and water. A great storm had come, the rain pouring down, and you opened yourself to the voices. They went through you, and you knew the power, you knew what it could be, what it could do.

He'd told no one else about this, at least not before he went into the Source. His father was a priest, and Garren knew what happened to those who heard the voices, those whom the chants of the precepts didn't control, whether they were children of church officials or nobles or commoners. They were witches, and the church 'fixed' witches by removing access to the One, leaving them mindless, cut off from all emotion.

He'd gone on from there, trying to understand, and was eventually discovered by his predecessor, Hierarch Gathenza, who, instead of punishing him, had seen his strength. She'd trained him as her replacement, to do the church and Source's bidding as leader of the Church of Auld.

The pages said there were things he needed to do, none of which he really understood. He had been, still was in his eyes, the hierarch of the Church of Auld. He'd believed strongly in the grace and power of the One, how it must be kept out of human minds, not manipulated by them. But what was written in the pages contradicted what he believed.

"By the One!" His fists clenched, tight rocks on his knees. What to do? He owed nothing to anyone. He could simply ignore everything and walk away, try to find another place to survive and live. Or simply die, if that was all there was.

But he was Garren Manera. He'd never done anything for selfish ends. He'd been cruel and hard because he had to be, because he believed in the tasks he had. From the pages he'd read, he now knew how much of what he'd believed was a lie. But that didn't mean he walked away from what was right, what needed to be fixed.

The explanation about the rock was also in his book. He pulled the stone out, wondering at its feel, its power, rolling it around in his hand, tasting its odd blankness with his mind. This too was proof of the words, because what else could this be, but what the writing said? He stowed it safely, reverently, in his pack.

He looked at the little stream again, listened to its gleeful singing. He'd been wrong about so much. Of course, he'd also been lied to and manipulated.

And he'd discovered other information, news about himself and his past. He needed to deal with all that, too.

He sat for a while longer, meditating on the One, letting its calm fill him, quieting the emotions floundering through his mind. The sun set, the night sky opened, stars and moon sparkling above. It was late when he straightened, stretched. He opened his pack, pulled out the wool blanket inside, and unrolled the mat that had been tied to the straps. He looked at the sky as he lay back, his pack a pillow, the song of the creek dancing through his head.

"West it is, then."

And he fell asleep, content. He was not a man to dither or feel anguish over his choices. This was what must be, and he'd make it so.

He rose early, packed, and set the rising sun to his back.

CHAPTER TWO

EFTHELZRA INARRION, FORMER hierarch of the Church of Eften, waited inside the border of the Source. A stone bench sat here, at the end of the road that led to and through the barrier that kept the country safe from the outside world; it also prevented the servants of the Masters of the Source from leaving.

Efthelzra was one of those servants. “At least for now,” she said to no one in particular, smiling at the thought.

The barrier was close enough here she could feel the crawling, insidious, angry touch of the trapped souls inside. It was words and sounds at the back of her mind, scraping fingernails on her feelings, unpleasant whispers and furious curses. She shut it all out, as well as she could. The Masters’ magic, from the power of the Well of Souls, was nothing to be played with, or endured at all if there was any way around it.

Unfortunately, Efthelzra needed to bear it for a while. The moment she arrived here, a summons had triggered in the village outside of the barrier. The person called would be here soon.

The barrier appeared as an opaque haze. It was impossible to see what lay beyond it, or more than several feet into it. The road dwindled to a paved path; she knew this, but it wasn’t visible from where she waited. Entering the barrier without the proper protections brought the full weight of the angry voices of the trapped souls down, and terror and madness quickly followed. Significant acts of power,

thousands using the One en masse, or the magic possessed by the Masters, were the only ways through it.

Or, one needed to possess a piece of the stone that surrounded and kept the Well of Souls in place. Such a piece was in the possession of the one she waited for. She also had some of those stone fragments, but they weren't enough to protect her from the full power of the barrier; she needed to remember what she'd been doing. Hence coming here, and the summons.

A figure appeared in the haze, approaching her. One hand was held out in front of him, and a shining piece of black stone sat in it. He slowly came into focus, getting near the edge. A tall man, Azzali, with black skin and brown hair tied in a long tail down his back. A wide beard covered the top of his chest.

He stopped several feet from the edge. Truth to tell, he couldn't come much farther; he wasn't allowed to. His task as the Sentinel was to control access to the Source and take those permitted to do so back and forth through the barrier. He looked at the elderly Efteni woman who waited, shorter than him, stocky, her long hair, once the deep auburn of her people, now silver, her skin dark brown.

"I received no word," said the Sentinel, "that you'd be leaving the Source today, Efthelzra."

She rose from the bench, walked over as close as she could to the edge of the barrier. "No, you didn't, as I'm not going anywhere. Good day, Sharmal Promaren."

"I am the Sentinel."

"Yes, you are. But that was your name before they gave you this task. Would you like to remember more?"

He stood silent for a moment, frowning. "Who are you to offer anything to me, when I'm the Masters' servant?"

"Things are going to be different, Sharmal."

"How so?"

"I, and others, are intent on changing how the Source is run, such as deciding who is a Master, and who is not."

"Powerful words. The Masters have reigned for centuries. What makes you think you can oppose them?"

“Why, because some of the current Masters are with me, of course. Some of the old Masters are weak, Sharmal. They’re broken, afraid. They’ve made too many mistakes from being timid. Now isn’t the time for us to succumb to their fears.”

He considered this. “What exactly are you offering?”

“To come back inside. To remember your life, your name. To see the family you have in here, that you’ve forgotten.”

“I have family?”

“You do. Not many, but they’re there.”

“I see.” He frowned. “And you have the power to do this, to take these compulsions from me?”

“I don’t. But others do. They’ll know who helped me.”

The Sentinel looked at her without expression. Then, “What are you asking of me in return?”

She smiled. “I left my three Gatekeepers in the village. I assume they’re still there and are healthy.”

“Of course.”

“Bring them to me.”

He took a long breath. “Three warriors? Are they enough to win the Source?”

“With the current support I have amongst the Masters, yes. I can share no further plans with you. But it shall be as I say. Bring them in. When the time comes, you’ll be promoted from Sentinel to a new post inside. Continue to support me, and later there’ll be more.”

“And if you and these others rule the Source, what will you do then?”

“Why, take down the barrier, and go forth and conquer. Masters of the world, Sharmal. You can be part of that.”

He remained a moment longer, then without a word, turned and walked into the barrier. Efthelzra went back to the bench, sat down to wait, to see who came through next. The dice had been rolled, and they rattled around on the board.

It took a while. Promaren had to go, collect her people and bring them through. Or try to send a messenger to the capital. Or decide to do nothing at all, knowing that eventually she’d have to leave.

Movement in the haze. The Sentinel stepped forward, arm outstretched as before. Right behind him were three tall figures. They were so close they touched him, cringing from the feel of the barrier, trying to get as close to the stone in his hand as they could.

He stopped, gestured, and the three moved quickly past him. Wrapped in red from head to toe, only the eyes and hands visible. Swords and daggers at their waists.

They collected themselves, shaking off the pain of the passage. “Hierarch Efthelzra.” The three bowed, hands crossed on their chests.

“Gatekeeper Tannan, Gatekeeper Bekka, Gatekeeper Akklan. Blessings of the One. It’s so good to see you, my loyal friends.” She turned to where the Sentinel stood in the haze. “I’ll remember, Sharmal. This I promise.”

He bowed as the Gatekeepers had, then without a word he walked away into the barrier, heading for the village.

She faced the three scarlet clad figures. “All the plans we laid before can come to fruition. We’ll have the power of the Source, and we’ll train an army like yourselves.”

“Your holiness, what do we need to do?”

“Remove a few people when the time comes. But for now, you’ll have to stay out of sight. Come, I have horses below.”

They followed her down the hill, mounted, and rode after her into the Source.

CHAPTER THREE

PIPER PALMERES, MINSTREL, freshly made Count Aldessen of the Kingdom of Auld, woke to the sun streaming through the window. A cool, spring-scented breeze moved the curtains; Alaria, his wife and consort, partner in music, and formerly a Gatekeeper of the Church of Eften, had cracked the sash open when she rose. As always, she was up early for her morning devotions to the One.

Piper wasn't so dedicated. A life as a minstrel had made him a late sleeper; late to bed after playing for his living, late to rise in the morning to compensate. Now that he was a count of Auld, with a manor and lands and a fine income, he no longer had to play for his supper. Still, old habits remained, and as much as Alaria chided him for laziness, he wouldn't change.

He also knew that if he rose, she'd drag him off with her to morning prayer, something he rarely had any inclination to do. The One was there, it existed; he felt it riding through the room, carried on the soft breeze from the window, on the beams of sunlight streaming through the glazed glass. He closed his eyes, listened, felt and heard the Song Without Words. It rippled along, melodies, but not melodies, chords, but not really chords. A gentle background to his life.

He should get up and make some music with it. That was his devotion. That was his love of the One. At one time in his life he'd hated those sounds in his mind, the emotional freight they brought with them, that overpowered him, filled him with fear. Now he knew

what it was, knew it was the muse, the eternal muse, that sat behind his own playing, and it was wonderful, and right.

Even better would be to get up and make some music with his beautiful wife. He could feel her, over the bond that lay between them, a gentle hum in his mind, love and happiness coming to him, as she sensed he was awake. He knew exactly where she was, sitting in the arbor, overlooking the river; she usually went there for her devotions when the weather was good.

He sent the same emotions back to her, then rose and dressed, walked out of the bedroom. The manor was already bustling, servants moving through the rooms, cleaning and tidying. Messam, head servant and overseer for the manor, was waiting nearby. His round, youthful face, framed by black curls, split into a smile when he saw Piper.

"Waiting for me, Messam? You have work for me today?"

"Not so much, my lord. Lady Alaria wanted me to tell you to get up, but I thought I'd delay a while."

Piper laughed. "Thank you. Not exactly disobedience, and much appreciated."

"I thought so. Also, breakfast and tea have been taken out to the arbor, my lord."

"Thank you, Messam."

He walked to the back of the house, through the great room that looked out over the sward to the river. One wall was lined with musical instruments, on stands or hanging from hooks, gitterns, viols, flutes, harps, drums and percussion of various kinds. Shelves of books and sheet music stood nearby, stands with music open on them sat in front of padded stools. The room was a place to entertain and also served as the main music space. Wide windows showed the grass, gardens and river beyond, and Piper, Alaria and their guests, often other musicians, found it a view that never ceased to inspire them.

The double doors to the garden were open, and he walked through them out onto the stone path that led to the southwest corner of the grounds. He passed fragrant flowers and blooming bushes, vibrant with spring color. The day was warm already, the heat of the

sun bringing the garden's perfumes to him on the breeze. He inhaled deeply as he walked, smiling, to the arbor.

He walked up the wood stairs to see his wife sitting in a chair, cup of tea in hand, fresh and steaming from the pot that sat nearby. A platter of cold meats, cheese and bread lay before her, and fruit in a bowl.

But his eyes didn't see the food. He saw Alaria. Tall, as tall as he was. But where his hair was the black curls of Auld, and his skin pale white, her hair was a long, thick, auburn cascade, sweeping over her shoulders. Her skin was a rich brown, and her eyes were a blue so deep they were purple in the arbor's shade. Her face was long, her nose slender, her cheekbones running in two curving lines beneath her eyes.

Two scars, silver lines, accented that perfection, one on the cheek, one on the chin; even those were beautiful on Alaria. They'd been won in battle during her time as a Gatekeeper, a warrior priestess of the plains people. Her hands were similarly scarred; still, her fingers were nimble enough when playing the flute.

She was dressed today in deep blue, a long, warm robe wrapped around her. It would have been chilly when she first came here this morning. She was singing softly, wordlessly, weaving the One into her tune. She stopped as he stepped into the arbor, smiling.

"My lazy love," she said. "Blessings of the One. Messam woke you?"

"Blessings of the One, my dear. No, he didn't." He laughed. "You're cruel to send him to do so. He didn't want to wake me, but didn't want to disobey you, you know how he feels. So he lingered, and I rose on my own."

She laughed in turn. "He's too devoted to you. I'll have to work on that."

"Ha! To be honest, I think if you pushed him even a little, he'd obediently whack me over the head and feed me to the dogs."

She waved a hand at him. "Perhaps. I'll keep that in mind."

He sat, reached for the food, and soon had a plate filled with fine fare in front of him, and a cup of tea to wash it down. He piled slices of sausage on bread with mustard, devoured that, then spent a more

leisurely time working his way through a handful of berries and some dried apples from the previous fall.

When he was done, he sat back, sighed contentedly, and sipped his tea.

She smiled at him. “Today was a fine day for devotions.”

“It’s always a fine day for your devotions. You love them no matter what the weather.”

His meal done, he rose, and went and sat beside her on the wide seat, cup of tea in one hand, his other arm wrapped around her. She leaned into him, head on his shoulder. They sat, and listened.

The One rang all around them here. The wide flow of the river was close by, the water rushing, brown now, full of the detritus of spring. The breeze came and went, the sun’s strength flowed and spun, the ground beneath them hummed its strength. They felt it all, swirling in an unseen breeze through the open sides of the arbor.

Everything they felt, they shared over the bond. It was possible to lessen that traffic, so one’s partner wasn’t bombarded constantly with your feelings, but now, at times like this, they simply opened, and let the feelings flow. The wonder, the beauty, the sheer joy of the Song Without Words flowed over, between, and through them, and they knew each other, as completely as two people can, communicating without words, each letting the other see how they felt, and that feeling was rich and deep, carried by the voices that moved around them.

Alaria sighed, and a small tone of disquiet came to Piper.

“What is it, my love?”

“The Well, love, the Well of Souls. I was thinking about it this morning, during prayer.”

“Aren’t you supposed to concentrate on the One?” he asked.

“Yes, but thoughts of the One led me to thoughts of the Well.”

“What of it?”

“You know. Still under the control of the Masters, inside the Source.”

“Ah.” He reached up and touched the scar on her cheek. “There’s not much we can do about that, still. I know it bothers you. It bothers

me. It bothers the hierarchs of the churches, and the kings of both Eften and Auld. But it's sealed off from us."

"The Masters use the souls of the dead as their slaves."

"Not to mention," he replied, "using that power to enslave or punish anyone in the Source who annoys them."

"Yes. I'd free them, too. But my faith is appalled at the way the Well is used."

"Until we can figure out how to get through their defenses, the Masters are safe."

"There has to be a way."

He kissed the top of her head. "Humph. While I worry about these things too, my love, I worry more about your obsession with the Well, the Source, the Masters."

She laughed a little. "I know you do. You keep telling me this. But a lifetime of piety, concentrating on the One and the Well as a Gatekeeper, is difficult to ignore."

"I know." He was quiet for a moment. "I still at times fear I'll lose you to your faith, your need."

"And I fear I'll drive you away. But the bond is there, Piper, it'll never let us go. You know that as well as I do. So why do we fear?"

"I fear what's happened before." He grimaced, as unpleasant memory crept in. "I fear the return to the state we knew when I built the barrier against the One in myself, and the bond was blocked. I'm afraid of how we felt when we were separated after the battle against the Source, and all we could feel in the bond was distant fear."

She was still; he sensed the answering emotions inside her, welling up. Her arms around him clasped a little tighter. "I know. I fear the same thing."

"I don't know that I could take the separation again. I think I'd go mad."

She sat up and kissed him softly. "I would, too. We won't let that happen, ever again."

"Of course not." He laughed ruefully. "It's not logical to have that fear. But, it's human nature, when you have something that means so much, means everything, to be afraid it's going to be taken away."

"Yes, it is."

They curled into each other, and sat in silence for a while,
watching the river flow by, the deep current singing quietly as it went.

CHAPTER FOUR

KING EFTELLAR THE 12^{th} of the House Shalmari, ruler of Eften, was riding north from his capital, Almara, along the road that paralleled the River Ef. Not a young man, his hair was white, long, no longer the fierce auburn of his youth. His skin was the shade of the rich earth of the fields they passed, his shoulders wide and strong, unbent by age. He wore no armor today, but his sword hung at his side. He was dressed in a forest green tunic and trews, finely embroidered with swirls and flames of red. A scarlet cloak hung from his shoulders, though truly it wasn't needed; the heat of the coming summer was already in the air.

He was, of course, not alone. A company of Efteni lancers, armed and armored, rode at his back, and two of their number rode ahead, scanning for danger in the fields and occasional stand of trees. Not that there was much to fear this deep into Eften, but he was the king, and was protected.

At his side were his two sons, Iftann and Harmush; Harmush the elder and heir to the throne, taller than Iftann, the younger, who was broader of chest than his brother. Both were grown men in their twenties, both carried their swords, and their bows hung from their saddles, with quivers of arrows just behind. Like their father, neither was in armor, dressed comfortably for the road.

"Ha, Iftann," laughed Harmush. "You know, you've told us so much about being an ambassador and living in Auld for this past year, the

rain, the mountains, the food. More important — how are the Auld ladies?"

Iftann snorted. "They're fair enough, brother. Like the fresh air from the rain, the winds off the mountains."

"Fair indeed! You forget the soft brown skin of Eften, brother?"

"Hardly. No, I'll never forget that. It's perfectly all right to love both, the brown and the white, auburn curls and black."

"Indeed," said the king with a chuckle. "All have their charms. I tell you, if Lady Brethanna hadn't formed the bond with that Azzali hermit, I had some thoughts there, as well. She's a lovely woman."

"The world has changed," said Harmush with a laugh, "when a king of Eften considers an Azzali woman."

Eftellar shrugged. "My sons, black, brown and white, we're all the same. And a beautiful lady, a handsome man, are beautiful and handsome no matter what."

"That's the truth, father." Harmush turned to Iftann, grinning slyly. "And, what, dear brother, of Princess Letisha? You seemed rather close at the wedding of Piper and Alaria last year, and after your campaign to Kiffra with her."

Iftann blushed, looked away.

"Aha! As I suspected."

Eftellar frowned at his youngest son. "Is this true, Iftann? You're close to the princess?"

Iftann sat silent, then nodded tightly. "We've said nothing to each other, father, as we shouldn't. I'm not entirely sure how she feels, whether she just likes my friendship, or there's something more."

"But you'd not be unhappy if there was?"

"I'd be quite happy, father. She's strong, smart, and lovely."

"How comes her swordplay and use of the One?"

"Very well. She has a tutor from the Refuge for the One. Alaria's been working with her whenever she can, both on swordplay and the One. Salissa is also teaching her, when she's not busy training that new regiment they're building, using Gatekeeper methods. Not that the princess didn't know how to swing a blade already, but she's being taught by the best now, and she's taking it all in."

“That’s good. My son, she’s a fine young woman. I can’t speak for King Selennus at all, of course, but if you formed a bond with the princess of Auld, and it progressed to a marriage proposal, you’d have my blessing. Having my son as consort to the future ruler of Auld would be wonderful.”

Iftann sighed in relief, smiled. “Thank you, father. I didn’t think you’d object, but I’m glad you know now.”

“In matters of the heart, my son, we’ve given much leeway to the princes and princesses of Eften. I trust you two to choose wisely, and I trust you’ll talk to me before it goes too far. You’ve done both.”

“I don’t know,” said Harmush, “she’s taller than you, Iftann. I think she’d be more suited on my arm. Then she could be Queen of Auld, and I’d be King of Eften. What a pair we’d make.”

Eftellar just looked at his older son, who subsided under that glare. “Sorry, father, brother, only jesting.”

“I’m not too worried,” said Iftann with a smile, “as she did say something about my brother resembling a horse’s back end. At least, I think that’s what she said.”

Harmush guffawed, Eftellar chuckled, and they rode on in companionable silence for a while.

They came over the last hilltop and saw the Azzali settlement spread out below them. It was a scene of bustling prosperity. Green fields stretched in all directions, with people moving through the crops, weeding, thinning, propping up stalks and limbs.

“Look at all the new homes!” said Iftann. “They’ve been busy this winter.”

“They have indeed,” replied Eftellar, shading his eyes, “they’ve cleared and planted all the fields they were given.”

“They’ve also cleared all the undergrowth from the orchards to the north, from what I can see.”

Eftellar laughed. “Your young eyes are better than mine, my son. It’s good to hear. This is excellent land. It’s been developed, then laid waste by the Kiffrans and Source, then developed and laid waste again, too many times.”

“Have there been any more protests from the Efteni families who were left around here, father?” Harmush frowned. “Not that there

were many of them."

"No. I told them to talk to Kazdak. It seems they did so, and have come to an understanding."

"Old beliefs die hard," said Iftann. "They thought we'd dropped a village of enemies right beside them."

Eftellar nodded. "I explained to them how it hadn't been the Azzali, but the Source, who'd been raiding through here. It took some convincing, but they at least agreed to talk. I've heard nothing since. Come, let's head to the village."

They rode down the hill. They were spied coming, and most of the Azzali ruling council was waiting for them when they reached the main square.

Kazdak, the head of the council, a man of middle height, broad shouldered, bowed to them, and his councillors followed suit. "Your majesty."

"Rise, my friends."

Kazdak stepped forward. A smile creased the dark skin of his face. His brown hair lay loosely tied down his back, over his rough spun wool and leather clothing.

"I trust we find you well, your majesty."

Eftellar and the princes swung down from the saddle. "You do, Kazdak. I can tell you, I feel even better now, after coming over the hill there. Not that I doubted you and your people at all, but you've been busy. I see prosperity blooming everywhere I look."

"Thank you, your majesty. The help you've given us, along with what Earl Semmanth provided, has been wonderful. Lumber, seeds, beasts, tools."

"Show us, then. We'd like to see all you've done."

They walked through the village, the lines of tidy homes. Some of these had been rebuilt or repaired from what had existed when more Efteni lived here.

"Looks like you have cottages for everyone, Kazdak. It's good to see this land properly settled."

They walked through some of the nearer fields, over to the old orchards that had been planted long before. They were now tamed, old dead growth pruned away, tangles of branches gone, leaving

room for the rich fruit to grow from the blossoms now showing their delicate pink and white faces to the sun.

“Truth to tell, your majesty, there was so much ready to use, it just needed to be cleaned up.”

“We hope you feel safe here,” said Harmush, looking out over the river. Small boats lay on the shore, a few floated on the current, nets out in the water. “We’re wise to the Source now, but the Kiffrans could still come from the north again.”

“They could,” said old Irzuk, one of the counselors. His dark skin was as creased as the worn leather jerkin he wore, his hair almost completely grey. “We know them well. But your lancers have been here, training our young men and women. We can fight back now.”

Harmush nodded. “That’s good. I assume our troops have behaved themselves.”

Kazdak laughed. “As much as our young men and women have.” The king and princes chuckled with him. Kazdak’s smile slipped away. “We have safety now, and new friends and neighbors. Our young folk are happy for the opportunity to flirt with those they haven’t known all their lives.”

“You’re content with this?” asked the king.

“Yes. We discussed it. What will be, will be. I hope this doesn’t bother you, your majesty.”

“Not at all. It seems inevitable. But tell me, if we get into the Source, would you go there?”

Irzuk shook his head. “We can’t speak for everyone, your majesty, but except for Brethanna, none of us ever lived in the Source; our ancestors left long ago. This is now home. It’s a rich place, we’re building it up. We’re in no hurry to leave.”

Eftellar nodded. “Good to hear, my friend.”

They returned to the road. As they reached the hard packed earth, Iftann paused. “Do I hear hooves?” He turned, looking north, shading his eyes. “Lancers?”

They all turned to see. “It is,” said Kazdak. “Not the troop staying here. I think these went by several days ago, on patrol.”

“Yes,” said Iftann, “we’ve been doing that to watch for Source troops and Kiffrans. They’re coming back early, though.”

They stopped, waited for the riders to approach. It was a company of lancers, a hundred strong, and half a company of scouts. The soldiers slowed to a walk as they saw the group waiting outside the village.

"Commander Balman, Blessings of the One."

"Your majesty," said the commander. He swung down from the saddle and went to one knee. "This is a most pleasant surprise. Prince Iftann, Prince Harmush, Blessings of the One, your highnesses."

"And to you, commander. You come back early from your patrol."

"We do. We bring news, and a guest."

"A guest?"

Another horse moved forward. On it sat an older man, his features Auldean, with a rounder face than the Efteni around him, but like them he had red hair and an auburn beard, though well streaked with grey. He dismounted, went to one knee in the middle of the road. "Your majesty, Blessings of the One."

"Blessings of the One. You seem familiar, sir, but I can't place you."

"I'm Garren Manera, your majesty, former hierarch of Auld."

"Garren?" He looked more closely. "By the One! It is! You've been wandering around northern Eften for the past year?"

"Your majesty, I was in the Source. I left to come here, to bring information, and I'd ask for clemency, please, until I can deliver it."

"I…well, of course," replied Eftellar. He shook his head. "I don't think it would be for me, but for King Selennus to judge you. But I'll have to keep you under guard. Let's go to the village." He frowned. "Be aware I've had my seals removed, as have the princes and most of our lancers, and we've had training in defending ourselves with the One."

"Your majesty, I'm not here to cause trouble, believe me. There's work needs to be done."

The king stood still for a moment longer, one hand pulling on his beard. "Alright."

The lancers proceeded on to the village, along with Garren and the Azzali councillors. Commander Balman stayed with the king and

princes, walking his horse beside them.

"Where in the name of the One did you find him?" asked Eftellar.

"He showed up at our camp one night, your majesty, starving. We wondered what he was doing wandering the wilderness. We thought maybe he'd been separated from the army last year, or deserted. When he told us who he was, I couldn't believe it, but he insisted, and asked to be brought to you. He wouldn't tell us more, other than it was important." The commander shook his head. "What would he have to say of such import?"

"News of our enemies, Balman, of the Source. We were sure that was where he and Efthelzra were headed after they were deposed from their churches."

"Well, then it's good we found him."

"Let's hope so."

They spoke with Garren that night. When they were finished, Eftellar asked Kazdak to give Garren a place to sleep. Then the King sat with his sons, and discussed what needed to be done.

"It's too strange to believe," said Harmush. "He just shows up here, out of nowhere?"

The king shrugged. "You were with the army last year that went to the Source and back. There's a lot of wild country with no roads or villages between here and there. He just headed west, started walking. He's lucky we found him before he starved to death. If he'd gone a little farther north he might have run into some Kiffrans." He turned to Iftann. "You'll need to return to Auld. Ride with us to Almara in the morning, and head out immediately."

The prince nodded. "Of course, father. What should I tell them?"

"Just tell them who we've found, and that he brings news, not all of which he wants to share until they're here. Tell them to send some emissaries. In particular, he said he needs to speak to Piper and Alaria, though he doesn't say why. It'd be good to have someone senior from Auld's church there; Hierarch Artemus should probably come to pass judgement on him. He asked for Brethanna to come as well, to verify what he has to say."

"As you wish, father."