

Character List & Glossary
at the end of the book

CHAPTER 1 : The Discovery

“I knew at once something was wrong with it,” a sallow-faced, prematurely aged man murmured, crouching over a glowing egg-shaped object bathed in golden light.

Another man—in his early forties with a long, serious face—exclaimed, “You dared uncover the very heart of this beast?”

“*Beast?* For a guild member of high standing, you speak like a mystic. This is the energy patterning device belonging to a mechanism of such enormity that—”

“You need hardly lecture me about this place. After all, I have been your guide, have I not?” The fleeting tone of levity left his voice. “But we already know—this device has some defect, a perturbation in its energy fields.”

The sallow man, his green eyes glinting over his breathing mask, leaned closer to his companion. “But it is *not* defective. What is *wrong*, is that it belongs in Taronushal, not here.”

“In the Master—”

“Yes! This is the key, which has been missing for over six hundred years.” He straightened, grimacing as if his back troubled him. “You know what must be done and how urgent this task is.”

The other man, his breath puffing within his breathing mask, pointed to the glowing orb. “Then we must extract it at once. There are tests I must make to confirm this. But . . . if you are correct, it must be taken to Taronushal and emplaced there. Our best hopes for survival hinge on that. Yet without someone specially attuned to this device, the chance of success is exceedingly slender. Even I would have the greatest difficulty unlocking the powers of this ancient artifact.”

The man with the green eyes declared, “There is one *turned* in the manner you describe, and I know where he is to be found.”

“Then we must seek him at once. Disaster draws ever closer to our world.”

CHAPTER 2 :

Visions

Krer 8, 158 After Founding (8/8/158 A.F.)

“The casting of the pebbles by the skilled may auger the will of the gods.”

—Hadrethan saying

Soon the moment will come. Tur-Pegan, Guardian of the Hadrethan, crouched lower in the gully, pulling her faded cloak closer. *The Anakkans' defeat is augured. Their crimes will be repaid!* Behind Tur-Pegan hid two thousand tribespeople, steadying their gaunt mounts, loosening sheathed knives, and unslinging bows. An expectant murmur passed through the ranks.

One more scout had yet to return. If her report was favorable, Tur-Pegan would signal the attack. She glanced back at the tumbled, shadowed slopes of the Mountains of Mirage, fifty scalars southeast. A brightening aura lit a low point in their crest. The attack would begin when the first rays of the sun shone through that notch.

Though only thirty-four, prolonged exposure to sun and dust had already leathered Tur-Pegan's brown skin. The robes on her lean figure blended with the dun-colored strata of the gully. From her belt hung a curved dagger. Strapped across her back lay a long, black-sheathed sword. These, with the bow and lance, were the weapons of the Hadrethan. As their head priestess and Bearer of the Four Elements, Tur-Pegan wore the ceremonial dagger, *Susthetil*, Wind Scorcher.

Nothing stirred on the arid, stony plain. The air was still, clear, not yet shimmering with the heat of the coming day. In narrow arroyos and behind crumbled rocks, squat plants hoarded the remnants of dawn dew, their fleshy leaves and spines inclined away from the rising sun. Animal and insect burrows dotted the sandy soil between the rocks. The last crawling denizens hurried to their lairs, not to reappear until sunset.

Within the shaded slit of her veil, Tur-Pegan's violet eyes glimmered like gem facets. *May the Eternal Protector lend strength to our attack.* She focused on the scene a scalar distant.

Indistinct dots moved on the horizon. An Anakkan patrol leaving the enemy fort. *Soon they will feel the bite of our arrows. Today we shall make the augury come to pass.*

Over the past two days, Tur-Pegan's scouts had observed the fort's comings and goings. Enemy strength and weaponry, the location of their stables, wells, and roads—all had been painstakingly assessed.

Once they took the fort, the route north to Anak's pastures and croplands would be open. *They left us to famine and starvation.* She bitterly recalled how the Anakkan king had twice rejected their petitions for food. *We will now take what we need, and they shall pay the price.*

Dust eddies lifted from the desert floor, obscuring the distance. The sun did not yet quite show above the mountains, but the stirring breezes heralded its ascension. Very soon, the copper corselets of the guards atop the battlements would blaze in the first shafts of brilliant sunlight. At that instant, Tur-Pegan would signal the attack.

The enemy . . . Once, so it had been told, the Anakkans had come from the cold deserts out of the far east. She had heard tales of how the Anakkan's great Arishan, Kah-Nush, had settled the Plain of Syrimdas and renamed it Anak. *That was in the youth of my great-great-grandmother.*

Studying the scored surfaces of her hands, Tur-Pegan considered how, over the generations, the Anakkans had softened and grown fat in the benevolent climes north of the Stony Desert. *Once, we ruled that land. Our auguries show the King of Anak in chains. Justice is coming.*

A thin, chill draft made the hairs rise on the back of her neck. Fingering the hilt of Wind Scorcher, she searched the rows of her people for a ripple of movement marking the scout's return. *Our wills must unite. I must be spirit.* Once they broke cover, their fates would be cast like grains of sand on the winds. *None can foretell where the winds will come to rest.*

Some of her captains, especially each tribe's *loi*—chieftain—believed they should invade deep into Anak and topple the kingdom, fulfilling the auguries. *No, that task is beyond us—our peoples are too weak. When we have regained our strength, then . . .*

Drought had gripped the Hadrethan realm for the past three years. In the Stony Desert, the few small crops and grazing fodder were almost entirely withered. Many of their cattle had perished. The old and weak among her

peoples were dying; the rest hungered and ached.

My kinsman, Loi Teleman of the Clear Spring Clan, petitioned the Anakkans for food, only to be struck down. He lingered in great pain and died on the day he was brought back to us.

She swallowed hard, the anger and hurt still raw.

Unbidden, the vivid girlhood memory of her grandmother, Tur-Durgond, came to her. She saw again the coal-black, glinting, recessed eyes; the narrow, lined face; and the compelling gaze of her ancestor.

"Long ago, we ruled the Plains of Syrimdas," Tur-Durgond had said, her long, thin hands sculpting the air. "Once we numbered far greater, knew bounty, splendor, and power that today is hardly believed. One day, girl, we shall regain our loss. Another Turning will come, perhaps even the Great Turning, when all will be shifted, all changed."

A ripple of movement among her forces broke Tur-Pegan's reverie. Far down the gully, the scout hurried toward her. *The moment has come.*

The scout, young and breathless, reached Tur-Pegan. "No change, Honored Guardian. They go about their usual affairs. The loi warriors draw close to the gate."

"Well done. Quickly, to your place." Tur-Pegan peered above the rim of the gully to scan the barrens separating them from the Anakkan fort.

On the gated north side of the fort, hidden from the view of Tur-Pegan's army, two disguised soldiers—those referred to by her scout—led a pair of rickety mule-drawn carts, seemingly filled with sacks and bales. As planned, the loi warriors approached the gate as the sun crested the Mountains of Mirage. Besides the disguised soldiers, the carts held more fighters hidden among the

wagons' stock. The two loi would feign illness, hunger, and would promise jewels in return for food—anything to tempt the Anakkans to open the gate. To entice the enemy, they carried a few valuable baubles.

They should already be at the gate, pleading for admittance. Tur-Pegan's heart thudded in her chest. At that instant, the sun gleamed on the armor and weaponry of the fort's sentinels. Tur-Pegan emitted a long, whooping whistle—an animal call commonly heard at dawn and dusk in the desert. The signal repeated, each time farther away.

Swinging onto the mount a loi fighter held for her, Tur-Pegan led the column out of the gully, sun at their backs and Anakkan fort directly in front. No screaming charge would announce this attack. This time, they advanced in a tightly grouped, silent canter, taking maximum advantage of their opponents' blindness in the face of the rising sun.

Avid as an eagle diving on its prey, Tur-Pegan rode hard. Rumor hinted that the garrison's strength had been recently depleted—a third of its troops had departed north. Whatever troubles beset the land of Anak, she didn't care.

She pulled back her hood, reached over her shoulder, and drew her sword. Its gray blade barely reflected the low beams of sunlight. To reinforce the disguised fighters at the gate, she would lead one-half of the force around the fort's north side. The other half would scale the wall facing the sun. Already they neared the fort. Very soon, they would be seen, but it would be too late for the Anakkan defenders.

Raising her sword, she kicked her heels against her horse's flanks. Faint yells of alarm came from the fort's defenders. Battle fury overcame her.

“*Sithrusil ashal te!*” she cried in the ancient holy language. Let the prophecy be true!

CHAPTER 3 A King's Choices

Meald 10, 158 After Founding (07/10/158 A.F.)

“Kings must rule from places of power, yet places of power have in the distant past betrayed us.”
—from the Nethaldic tracts

“Folly! Madness! Those are the only words for it—and it’s a betrayal of everything your father stood for,” one of the generals shouted, thumping his hand on the council table.

King Kriggus Calagaris stood, chest heaving. Leaning his fists on the table, he glared at his council. “Sending envoys to Shan does *not* betray my late father’s principles. It supports the first and most important principle—the safety of our realm. Isn’t our realm safer if we persuade Shan to enter into a trade agreement? One hundred years of hostility—we have a chance to *end* that for our country’s benefit and bring increased prosperity to our people.”

His senior councilor slowly shook his white-haired head. "You speak in airy abstractions. The reality is Shan will not enter into any pact."

Another general leaned forward. "Majesty, you are new to kingship. Shan will see this as an act of weakness. When a new king ascends Anak's throne, a show of force must accompany it, not a gesture of timidity."

A scowl twisted Kriggus' misshapen face. "Our army and our border forts are at full strength. And the frontier is quiet. I will send these envoys—the very notion that the King of Shan would respond by moving against us is preposterous. He knows the strength of our armies and the capabilities of our generals. *That* hasn't changed since my father's death."

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Krer 10, 158 A.F. (08/10/158)

Alone atop a high battlement of the Castle of Anak, Kriggus paced, gazing over a broad expanse of dusk-shrouded plains. His thoughts were as gloomy as the shades of night darkening the eastern sky. *I had my way despite their objections, but at what cost?*

Since that acrimonious council meeting, twenty-five days—one full *nintal*—had passed with no word of the envoys' fates. *Even accounting for the distance and Shan's bad roads, word should have come days ago.*

Every day, his councilors' sidelong looks and arched brows told what they thought of his decision. *Yet Shan twice sent envoys to my father Crogon in the last year of his life.* But Crogon had rebuffed both embassies. *Surely, King Jedrial of Shan has at least given mine a hearing.* While the odds of a trade or peace treaty were small, he felt compelled to try. *Why must the council consider this dishonoring my father?*

My father is dead. I am king. Even after fifty days, he couldn't get used to it. Kriggus stroked the deformed left side of his face. During times of stress, the childhood injury still ached.

He had taken to carrying Crogon's heavy sword, belted to his waist. On impulse, he drew it partway. The blade, pale as untrammelled snow, rested in a jeweled scabbard that winked like cat's eyes in the fading light. *I carry this blade to remind me that Father withstood horrors I hope never to face. I must honor him by showing I have his strength.*

With a sigh, he thrust the blade back into its scabbard. He stared at his right hand where a silver ring glinted in the gathering dark. *I will be wed to Anedria soon. May our wedding mark an end to the hurts and losses haunting my family. Our family may rule Anak, but a cruel fate has ruled us. When I was only nine . . .*

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Nine-year-old Kriggus came running from a courtyard where he had been playing hide-and-seek with one of the servants. He heard his mother's voice, sharp-edged, calling for him. *What have I done?* He hurried, panting, into the cool shade of the roofed garden adjoining one wing of the Castle of Anak.

In the doorway stood his mother, Drunil, and a blank-faced attendant, a half-pace behind her. Tears streamed down his mother's face; her eyes aflame.

"Oh, Kri, Kri! Come to me." She kneeled, her voice throbbing.

As Kriggus rushed into his mother's embrace, her distress washed over him. "Mama?"

"Kri, Kri, it's your sister. *Blessed Nethaldis.* Oh, Kri." Her voice sank to a whisper, only to rise to a wail. "Saron is dead!"

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Tightly gripping the edge of the castle battlement, Kriggus tried to clear his head of the memories. *I must return to the council chamber. Business awaits.* Yet, the past pulled at him. *Three years later, when I was twelve, I too fell from a horse, like Sarona.* He had lived, albeit disfigured. Three years after that, fever had claimed his mother.

After this, his father had regarded Kriggus with melancholy detachment, grudgingly recognizing him as his heir. Because of his fall, Kriggus had shied from trials of physical bravery, preferring the scrolls of Anak's temples and law courts to drill and combat—choices his father repeatedly criticized. *Had I been a more warlike youth, perhaps the generals wouldn't be so quick to question my judgment.*

And now I am king. He continued moving along the battlements. *If my decision finds a way forward with Shan, then let that success reflect honor on you, Father. Any day now, the envoys must return from their visit to King Jedrial of Shan.*

Stepping away from the crenellations, he rubbed his hands together and inhaled deeply. *And Anedria, my betrothed, waits.* A light breeze ruffled his hair, bearing a hint of spicy perfume. As he turned toward the tower stairs descending from the battlement, a vision blotted out the scene.

He stood atop the battlements of another castle—atop a high hill. In the west, the sun caressed a treed horizon. South, pastures and fields of crops stretched to a distant haze.

Something made him lift his eyes. In the sky a few wisps of cloud lazily trailed.

A brilliant flash lit the sky, so bright, it struck him blind.

Then he was back atop the Castle of Anak, blinking

and gasping. In the tower's arched entry, torches cast wavering shadows.

An officer, bent with exertion from the long climb, burst into view. "Lord Kriggus, Maj'ty."

Kriggus crossed swiftly to her. "What is it, Captain? Is it a messenger from the north?" *At last. Perhaps news of the envoys.* He ignored two other guards emerging from the doorway.

"Mess'ger, Liege, from—uh—south." The captain struggled to recover her breath.

"From the *south*? What are you talking about?"

"Majesty, des't tribes 'tacking . . . Fort—uh—Southern Gap sacked, Lord."

"Sacked? The Fort of the Southern Gap, *sacked*? You mean *attacked*, don't you?" From time-to-time, desert tribes raided Anak's southern border but were usually minor irritants.

"My liege, the mess'ger—the messenger said 'sacked.' Said the des—the desert army has two . . . two thousand soldiers."

"Two thousand? That can't be." Kriggus goggled at the officer. "When? Where is this messenger?"

"Waiting in the presence cham . . . chamber, with the field commander."

"Who else knows?" Icicles flowed in Kriggus' veins.

"The Senior Councilor has been sent for," the captain answered, her chest heaving.

"Captain, follow me and send word for the council to assemble at once. I'll talk to the messenger first, then come to the meeting."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Saluting, the captain hurriedly followed once the king plunged down the stairs.

"When was the attack?"

"Don't know. I—"

"Where are the attacking tribes now?"

"Your Majesty, I didn't—"

"Next time, ask." Kriggus raced two steps at a time, fighting the shock fogging his brain.

As he flew past two landings, he feverishly calculated times and distances. Riding flat-out, with changes of horses, it would take a day-and-a-half to reach the castle from the Fort of the Southern Gap. The fort was at less than full strength. On the day of his father's passing, a detachment of five hundred had been ordered to reinforce the northern garrisons to guard against any Shannian mischief. Replacements had not yet reached the southern strongpoint.

Sweat dampened Kriggus' palms. *Who knit together all the desert tribes?* A force of two thousand was less than a fifth of Anak's militia, but with the bulk of Anak's army in the north, its southern region was endangered, especially the fertile river valley north of the fort. *And that is the location of Anedria's family holdings.* The thought of her reaction when she heard the news made his stomach burn.

But an even worse risk occurred to him. *What effect will this news have on Shan? Word of this debacle will eventually reach Jedrial of Shan. These tribes must be repulsed quickly and decisively, or disaster will result.* He could imagine his generals' thinly veiled contempt. Barely two nintals after Crogon's death, Anak caught napping. The generals would lay fault at his feet.

They gather in the council chamber. Kriggus entered the main hall of the castle, for once thankful for the weight of the Sword of Adamant. *There will be no wedding until these tribes are defeated.* After the council meeting, he

would have to broach the news to Anedria—yet another grisly chore.

Father, have I miscalculated? Was I a fool to send those envoys to Shan? Kriggus felt his chest tighten. What will my choices cost?