

Prologue

“Lay the body there,” Chanathan said pointing.

The three men carrying the corpse dropped their burden with a meaty thud to the forest carpet. The men looked disgusted by their task. An owl hooted and one of the men looked around, fear glinting in his eyes as he scanned the hidden recesses between the trees.

“It’s an owl,” one of his companions said. Chanathan could hear the tenderness in the voice. Only months ago the sight of another man’s fear would have elicited sarcasm or even bullying, but after the recent horrors there was a greater bond between these men. *Battle brothers* was a common enough expression, but only men who had stood shoulder to shoulder in the darkest moments of combat truly understood what that meant, men who had felt blood splash their hands and blades and experienced the pervading stench of blood, sweat and steel in their nostrils. That was how such close bonds were forged.

Chanathan stepped up to the corpse and spat in its eyes. The body was that of a man in his thirties. He wore a robe whose colour in the dark of the forest was difficult to decide. It did nothing, though, to conceal the bloodstain that marked the deep wound that had killed him.

Chanathan turned on his heel. Coming between the trees in file were others who had fought demons only hours before. It had been close, but Drachar’s death had finished the bloody conflict and even now, men of the alliance were hunting down the enemy as they sought to escape. Many of the approaching men were sorcerers and all were clearly bone tired, stumbling as they came into the clearing. Even though they were exhausted Chanathan knew that one final act was required to guarantee an end to the bloody war.

Ashona approached Chanathan. She looked close to tears, and Chanathan felt pity overwhelm him. His own tears threatened and he choked down his emotions, but could not stop himself from taking her hand. Victory felt so

very hollow, not at all how he had imagined it to be so many months ago — death still befouled his mind like a toxin.

“Swiftly, we must bind his spirit. It must *not* be allowed to escape or the demons will crown him their king,” Chanathan said.

“Surely not,” Ashona replied. “How can the demons still follow *him* after what has happened? He *failed* them. He is dead. We have killed sorcerers by the score. They cannot summon demons — not for a hundred years at least.”

Chanathan shook his head. “You are wrong, I fear. *He* made a pact with the demons, a pact that even death cannot undo. He has given the demons everything they wanted. Countless souls sent screaming to their world for eternal damnation. If they get *his* soul too, they will bow to him and call *him* Lord.”

Ashona sobbed. “Then we have failed!”

“No. Not if we can banish his soul.”

“And how can we do that?” Ashona pleaded. Chanathan looked past the grime of battle and into her eyes. With more affection than he had ever felt before he stroked a strand of hair from her face.

Without replying he turned to the other sorcerers who by now had spread themselves around the clearing. They looked a sorry bunch, blood-soaked and covered in gore. Some distance away he could hear the army celebrating; men calling out to each other, glad to find friends and relatives alive; drinking away the cold fear instilled by demons only moments before. Abruptly singing filled the air. Only troops fresh from the horrors of war could show such emotion. By comparison the men around Chanathan were silent, begrimed with blood and barely able to stand.

“We must act swiftly. Until this night is done his shade will be confined to his earthly body. You there, Carlan, Aswall and Harecht, draw a rune of binding around the corpse. Tarlam and Herest, summon elementals at each corner of the rune. Air, fire and water will do for what we need.”

The men set to their activities while the others fell back to watch. As they worked, the din from the army became background noise. Forest creatures occasionally called out, distracting Chanathan from his musing. What he planned had never been tried before and he had to think, if this went wrong he would doom his men, and himself.

Finally the others were ready. He looked down at the corpse now lying at the centre of a rune, diligently drawn in the dirt. At each of the rune’s corners, tiny elementals glowed; their small voices clear even with all the other sounds around them.

The sorcerers gathered while the three soldiers hovered to one side, knowing they were witnessing a truly significant moment in history. This was a solemn time.

Chanathan raised his eyes skyward, Casting a rune in the air with his hand he called aloud, “Drachar, I summon you!”

Nothing stirred. A breeze caused the trees to sway and for a moment the rustle of leaves drowned out the distant celebration.

“Drachar!” Chanathan called more urgently. “You are summoned to pay for your crimes.”

A pungent smell filled the clearing. Unable to help themselves some men stepped back, fear pounding their hearts like poison coursing through their veins. A silver shape appeared, hovering eerily above the corpse.

“Bind them, both body and soul,” Chanathan ordered and others immediately spoke, casting runes to strengthen their earlier spell.

The glow took strength and the indistinct form of a man appeared. Hollow eyes stared deep into Chanathan’s soul and for a moment he nearly quailed, but then, by his side, Ashona squeezed his hand. All at once he was glad of her presence.

“Foul creature! Abomination!” Chanathan roared.

The spectre laughed. “But I am one of you,” a ghostly voice whispered, grinding the nerves of all present. “I, too, am one of the Eldric.”

“How dare you!” Chanathan shouted, suppressing a shudder. “You forsook us the moment you looked upon the demon world. Your twisted craving for power has destroyed you. You were banished. You were unmade and unnamed; the sands of your soul stained forever by the blood of betrayal. How dare you compare yourself to us?”

“You forget,” answered the now mirthless voice. “We were all banished. We left our homeland hundreds of years ago because our ancestors dared to look upon the demon world. I am more like you than you would care to admit.”

Chanathan was stunned into silence. The spectre faded briefly and for a moment Chanathan thought it was gone.

“Bind it!” Prince Ellard said, stepping forward, looking up at the spectre. “You are a traitor! You killed the King!”

“He killed me first,” the spectre said in a peevish tone.

“Damn you! You betrayed your people! We will not let you find your way to the demon world,” said Ellard. To Chanathan it seemed that his eyes flamed with passion.

“But you cannot stop me! I am Drachar! I do as I will, and *I will* damn you all.”

There was a silence for a moment. Even the revelry seemed to have stopped as though the world was holding its breath.

“But you are wrong,” Ashona said softly. At the start of the war she had been such a gentle soul, but looking at her now Chanathan held his breath at what he saw. Her eyes bored into Drachar’s and her shoulders were set in utter defiance. “We will banish you but not to where you expect to go! Prince Ellard, give me your sword. Only one of the seven will help with this spell casting.”

Ellard stepped forward and handed his weapon over. Except for silver runes that danced along its length it was a dull black that seemed to absorb what little light there was.

“What are you going to do?” Fear tainted Drachar’s voice, and he appeared to shrink.

Ashona chanted as she drew a rune over the blade. Chanathan realised then her intent. The sword amplified the power of the person holding it. The rune was to open a gateway to another world and for a moment Chanathan feared Ashona was opening a gateway to Hell. He did not recognise the rune at first and then comprehension dawned.

Prince Ellard must also have realised for he rushed over to take back his sword, but Chanathan laid a hand on his shoulder. “It is all right. She knows what she is doing. She is opening a gateway not to another world but between them.”

Ellard frowned. “The nether regions?” he asked

Behind them Drachar wailed. His form glowed brighter and the surrounding sorcerers’ voices became more urgent. At that moment an elemental expired, its scream echoing into the night air.

“Help them,” Chanathan ordered and others joined the sorcerers about the rune, summoning elementals to bind Drachar in place. Furiously he struggled and then the gateway was complete, purple and green streaming from it.

“Go!” Prince Ellard commanded, laying his hand on his sword. The ghostly shape drifted towards the gaping rent in space. An icy wind gusted, a prelude to the nothingness beyond.

“You shall not stop me!” he screamed. “I will return and then I will destroy you, your children and their children.” The light from his ethereal form was being slowly sliced thinner as it progressed through the gaping wound. Then abruptly it was gone. Ashona stopped casting the rune and the rent slammed shut, Drachar’s final scream fading away.

Night noises about the forest returned as though the banishment had forbidden sound.

All at once Chanathan sensed that it was too much for Ashona. She sat on the ground as though her legs could no longer support her. Others were leaving but at her collapse, they paused.

Ashona cried out, "I see it! I see the future. Drachar *will* return! I see the fires! I see the death!"

Chanathan knelt by her side. "Calm yourself. That is not possible." The three soldiers came over, wanting to help but hesitating, too afraid to come too close.

Chanathan gently took her face and made her turn to look at him. "We have won. We have banished Drachar's shade. This land is safe now."

Ashona stared past Chanathan. He sensed she was seeing into another world.

Her voice was so low that he had to strain his ears to hear her. By his side one of the soldiers gasped. "It is a prophecy," he murmured in awe.

*When Tallin's crown once more does shine,
Drachar's shade will rise sublime,
Three Princes Royal through time will sleep,
An appointment with destiny three kings to keep,
Trosgarth's arm across the land will reach,
Of war and famine his army will preach,
And one will stand to oppose his throne,
A king resurrected from within his mountain home,
Of air, fire and water he will be born,
To aid the people when all else is forlorn*

"Ashona!" Chanathan wailed, shaking her shoulders, "Ashona!" he sobbed.

The light in her eyes dimmed. She was too close to her shaol, her guardian spirit, and that had always worried Chanathan.

"Ashona," he cried.

Slowly she shook herself as though waking from a dream. "Thank the Kalanth!" Chanathan sighed, grinning broadly.

Chanathan helped Ashona to her feet. By their side a soldier made a warding sign against evil, his mouth agape. Chanathan turned to him, "Forget what you just heard. Do not mention it to anyone." He doubted he would; when she had spoken Chanathan, too, had felt the compulsion in her tone. The man stared back blankly, angering Chanathan.

"All of you!" Chanathan commanded. "Forget what happened, under pain of death."

Ashona looked at him bewildered. "Why? What has happened?"

Chanathan looked at her, truly glad she was back. “Nothing. We have won a great battle and darkness has been banished from the world.”

Taking her hand he guided her from the forest, towards hope and an uncertain future.

Behind them the three soldiers remained, but for a while only. Sensing the evil of the departed soul they took to their heels, seeking the company of the living, eager to tell the tale of what they had just heard.

Chapter 1

Escape

“Please, Emma,” Kaplyn said, giving her his most charming smile and using his softest tones normally reserved for special occasions, and this rated very high on his list of special occasions.

Emma pouted and Kaplyn knew he had won and she would do as he wanted, but for the sake of the game he continued the flattery. “You are very special to me and when I return...”

“And what will happen when you return? I am a serving maid. That is all...” Emma flashed and Kaplyn knew he had made a mistake.

“But you are special to me, regardless of your position. You know that,” Kaplyn wheedled, coming closer and putting his hands on her shoulders, looking deep into her eyes, the way he knew she liked. He smiled again, raising his eyebrows in a questioning manner.

Emma returned the smile and beneath his hands he felt her melt.

“How long will you be gone?” she asked.

“Three weeks, perhaps four at the most,” he replied. In truth he had no idea. His plans were half formulated. Emma looked downcast all at once.

“I need to go, Em,” he said softly, using her pet name. “I am stifling here; I hate it.”

Emma looked up and he could see the confusion in her eyes. “Most people can only dream of being in your position. How can you hate it so much?” she questioned.

“I just do,” he replied. “I have no freedom. I am followed everywhere I go. That’s not a life.”

“But you are a prince...”

“Some prince!” he interrupted. “I’m ninth in line to the throne and some of my own brothers don’t even know me. Please,” he continued, “I am not asking a lot. Just distract the guard so that I can leave.”

“Not asking a lot? I know Sanfred. He’ll have his hands all over me before I can say how the *Kalanth* are you?”

That's exactly what Kaplyn was hoping for. He too knew Sanfred and he also knew Sanfred fancied Emma. In his mind it was tonight or never and, to escape, sacrifices were needed.

"Look, here's some gold," Kaplyn said taking out a purse he had earlier put a couple of sovereigns in for just this occasion.

Emma's eyes widened as she felt the coins within. "I would help you even without a bribe," she said. "You know that."

"Of course I do," Kaplyn said taking her in his arms. The warmth of her body and scent of her hair almost made him reconsider the folly of his leaving, but then he hardened his resolve. His mind was made up.

"And when are you leaving?" Emma asked.

"Tonight," he replied, huskily.

Emma pulled back, staring at his face as though trying to commit every line to memory. "You will come back?" she asked.

"I will return with tales to make my brothers green with envy," Kaplyn grinned.

He went over to the bed and took up his sword, buckling it about his waist. A saddlebag was next, filled with provisions for the road, and then four cloth sacks with lengths of twine followed. "I'm going to get Star," he said. Go down to Sanfred shortly. Make sure he is *inside* the guardhouse. That way he'll not see me leave.

Kaplyn pulled on a woollen cloak, not particularly suited for an Allund prince, but one that he hoped would help him to blend in with a crowd. Looking at himself in a mirror, he saw a young man in his early twenties, long dark hair partly obscuring a handsome face that often won the heart of a young lady. His leather jerkin he had secretly acquired at the market a few weeks ago. Again is it was practical rather than flashy, as was his norm. His riding boots were expensive and, besides his sword, was the only item that might give away his privileged upbringing.

Kaplyn kissed Emma and, without a backward glance, left the plush rooms of his childhood, sweeping swiftly along the deserted corridors. Thick carpet covered his footfalls. The hour was late and lanterns lit the brightly decorated corridor.

Kaplyn's heart was hammering but even still he grinned broadly. He was actually doing it. He was escaping. Through silent corridors, he traced his way to an exit, and all the while fortune remained with him. After descending a tight spiral stair, he made it to the palace back door without meeting anyone. Pausing by the heavy oak door, he listened before opening it a crack. As the door swung silently inwards, the smell of the stables greeted him. He couldn't

believe it was going so easily. The sounds of voices came to his ears, but the speakers were a long way off judging by the muffled tones.

Kaplyn stepped out into the night. The air was cool, not surprisingly so for early spring. Quickening his pace he hurried to the stables, not pausing to step into the deep shadow of the open door. Horses fidgeted and, ignoring these, Kaplyn went to Star's stable, swinging open the wooden gate confining her. Star nodded her head in welcome. On a peg Kaplyn kept his bow and a full quiver. He took them down for later.

He took the cloth sacks and tied one about each of Star's hooves. She nickered and, knowing her as he did, he sensed that she didn't understand what was happening.

"Don't worry," he whispered stroking her warm flank. "Just a night ride. That's all."

He went to fetch a saddle and a blanket and then set about preparing Star for their journey, talking to her softly all the while. Once he had completed his preparations, he took her rein and led her from the stable. This was going to be the difficult part, he realised, leading Star across the cobbled roads to the gate linking the palace to the town. Once through that he was confident he would escape.

As they went he was surprised how effective the sack cloths were proving in dampening the sounds of their passage and, before long, he came in sight of the gate. He blessed Emma for there was no sign of Sanfred. Hurriedly he led Star towards his goal, the pounding of his heart in his ears sounding loud enough to alert anyone in the vicinity. A few yards away, behind a door leading to the palace gardens, a dog started to bark. Kaplyn quickened his pace and then he was alongside the gate. He felt his skin prickle with excitement and, at any moment, he expected to be discovered. And then, all at once, he was through. Before him a narrow road, flanked with tall, rickety looking buildings, led to the city gates. The shops to either side were closed; although even this late there were already sounds of activity and a few lights within.

A little farther on and he encountered the first people. They were probably staff going to bakeries or other employment requiring fires to be stoked. A few cast Kaplyn enquiring looks and, for a moment, he feared that his clothes blended less well with the common folk than he thought. It then dawned on him what the problem was. Star still had the sackcloths over her hooves. He stopped to remove them before continuing, but the din of her iron shod hooves was too much to dare going much farther. Kaplyn walked her deeper into shadow in the lee of a large building. He had to wait for the dawn

before the town gates were opened and reasoned that this location was as good as anywhere.

Gradually, as the sky lightened, more people started to appear and with them the occasional cart pulled by tired, dispirited looking horses. Kaplyn joined one as it passed, keeping a short distance behind it. With his heart seemingly in his throat, he followed the cart and driver to the gates. They were being opened and the guards were waving traffic out. There was no attempt to stop anyone leaving, and Kaplyn simply rode through the gate as though he had every right to do so.

A short way from the city walls, he kicked Star into a trot. A smile broke out over his face and he punched the air. "Yes!" he exalted. He had escaped, but what future lay before him he did not know.

Chapter 2

Ambush

The cracking of dry branches snapped Lars from his melancholy. Daydreaming was dangerous in a wood, especially with night approaching. Lars' staff came up automatically and he turned to face the potential threat. A man crashed through the thick undergrowth, a cudgel raised in his right fist. His wild eyes screamed silent hatred as he bore down on the big man. Lars was a fighter and instinct took over. Other men might have blocked the cudgel's downward stroke, but Lars knew that, in a fight, time was crucial. Without thinking, he lashed out with a straight arm blow, aiming the staff's end at the man's throat.

The combination of the man's momentum and Lars' blow snapped his assailant's head back, jarring Lars' arm in the process. His assailant's legs buckled and he fell to the woodland floor, a scream impossible through his damaged throat. His eyes bulged and his hands went to his windpipe as he thrashed for air, grunting with the effort to breathe. Turning, Lars sought new enemies and, to his chagrin, several men advanced, forming a ring around him. Seeing their comrade disabled so quickly, they were cautious, but greed and poverty drove them on.

"Surround him," one of the men shouted. Again Lars cursed his earlier lapse of concentration. A foolish mistake he should never have made. Slowly he turned, assessing the men before him, his staff held out, ready to counter an attack. They were a mixed bunch. All were filthy and covered in months of accumulated grime. Their clothes were torn and, where they had bothered, badly repaired. Most carried knives or cudgels and only two held swords.

"Move in together," the man who had spoken earlier demanded. He seemed to be their leader. He pointed his sword towards Lars, but didn't go forward himself. Lars kept turning but no one moved. His eyes kept straying to the leader's sword, speckled with rust, the edge chipped and blunt. If the

blade did not kill him, blood poisoning would. *Focus; watch their shoulders and eyes, not their weapons*, he thought.

The wounded man's thrashing became wilder. Others glanced down at him. His face had turned blue and his tongue protruded as though seeking to absorb the air he so desperately needed. A few final kicks and then he was still, his body contorted in the final spasm.

"He's killed Ballan," one of the shorter men said unnecessarily. The others grumbled and then one man shouted a curse, leaping forward, his knife raised. Lars' back was to him, but hearing the shout and cracking of twigs, he span around, sweeping the staff in an arc. The man ducked back as the staff whistled by his head, his eyes instantly turning from anger to fear. Lars stabbed down at him but he was already scuttling back out of range.

"He's one man! Everyone attack him," their leader shouted.

"You've got a sword. You attack him," a man sneered.

Lars stared into the leader's eyes, daring him. He was as tall as Lars, but lean. His nose must have been broken many times and so odd was the shape that it was barely recognisable. The leader waved at Lars with the sword's tip. "After three," he said. "One, two ... *three!* he shouted, lunging forward.

Lars threw the staff forward, allowing it to slip through his fingers until he judged the length right. He grabbed the staff before the end left his hand and punched at the leader's face. He felt the staff connect, but he was already turning, using all his strength to swing the staff in a wide circle. If anyone else was going to move, his action stopped them in their tracks as they rocked back on their heels to avoid the blow. Lars was strong and he put all his effort into the blow. The wood whooshed through the air, leaving no doubt as to his strength.

The leader fell back, cursing and clutching his head in his free hand. When he removed his hand to inspect it for blood, there was a neat red circle on his brow where Lars' blow had connected.

"Anyone else who moves, dies," Lars declared. He was afraid, but knew that he daren't show that. These men were bullies and, no doubt, cowards, but their numbers might overcome their fear.

He started turning again so he could see them all. "Kill him," a man wearing a fleece urged. He spat at Lars but made no move himself.

"He isn't worth it," another man said. He was fat and bald. One eye looked infected and was weeping, making it look like he was crying.

"He looks as poor as we do," the man with the fleece commented.

"We are not quitting *now!*" the leader said. "He killed Ballan!"

"What do you care? You hated him," the man with the weeping eye growled.

The leader smiled. Black gaps made his teeth seem all the more uneven. "Not until this fat pig is dead," he spat.

"We need a bow," one man said.

"Then go back to the camp and get one," the leader raged. The man didn't need further urging, and ran off between the trees, disappearing in an instant in the growing gloom.

Lars muttered a prayer, "Slathor, give me strength!"

"What did he say?" one of his tormenters asked.

"How *the Kalanth* do I know!" the leader roared.

Lars realised he had to do something before the other man returned with a bow. Turning, he tried to determine which man might break if he charged him. He assessed each man in turn, but one seemed more likely to break than the rest. He was a short man, with wild dancing eyes and an ugly, uncaring face. He held a sword awkwardly but if Lars had judged correctly, the sword would not matter. The man was also closest to the tree line, and if Lars could make it there then he could escape into the darkness.

His mind made up, Lars roared, leaping at the man and swinging his staff. He had selected his target well, but, instead of fleeing, the man stood his ground, petrified by the suddenness of the larger man's attack. Lars swung his staff, its length keeping him from the other man's sword. The staff cracked against the other man's temple sending him flying. The blow was well timed and its shock raced along Lars' arm.

Not stopping, Lars leapt over the body as two men sought to cut off his escape. Now that the action had started, adrenalin conquered the other men's fear. With shouts they were all converging in on the big man. Lars flicked the staff out at the man on his right, missing his opponent who dodged to one side. It slowed him, but already the man to Lars' left was closing the gap.

"He's killed Arland," Lars heard from behind him. "Take him alive!"

Someone threw their cudgel at Lars' back, catching him between the shoulder blades and knocking the breath from his body. Lars stumbled forward, his attack on the man to his left failing as his loss of balance threw off his aim. Lars gasped for air as the man to his left grabbed his staff but, rather than slow down, Lars let go, abandoning the weapon. The other man, not expecting to take the weapon so easily lost his balance, falling to the ground.

Someone from behind Lars tumbled into his legs, throwing him to the woodland carpet. Another man lashed out with his cudgel, striking Lars across the shoulders. He gritted his teeth and grabbed a handful of dirt in agony.

"I want him alive," the leader roared.

Twisting, Lars threw one man off him but the others had caught up. Fear of their leader stopped their blows. Lars lashed out with his fist, catching one man under the chin and throwing him backward. Someone grabbed his arm and a man threw himself across his legs. Roaring his defiance Lars threw out another punch. Lars yelled as his hair was grabbed from behind, forcing his head back. A knife pricked his flesh and a thin trickle of blood ran down his neck. Lars stilled.

“Don’t move,” the man with the knife said. His breath was foul and combined with the stink of his clothing was almost overpowering.

Cursing, the leader ran at Lars and booted him in the face. Lars rocked back on the ground while the men struggled to hold him down.

“You killed my brother,” the leader screamed, kicking Lars in the ribs. “Tie his hands and feet. I will make you suffer,” the leader continued, breathless with rage, his eyes bulging and spittle running down his chin.

The men did as they were asked and shortly Lars could not move. “Pick him up and carry him to the camp,” the leader ordered.

It took three men to lift Lars, whilst two more picked up the body of the short man Lars had killed. Lars could see the bruise on his temple where he had crushed his skull.

Lars tried to escape and his efforts caused the men carrying him to let go. He made it to his knees before the leader stood over him, his sword aimed at Lars’ heart. “Tonight you will die,” he said. “Slowly. And before you die you will beg me for mercy, but do not expect to receive any.”

Lars summoned all of his strength, trying to break his bonds. He must not die. He had to find his wife and son. With a roar of rage he threw every bit of his strength against his bonds. His muscles bunched and for the briefest moment he felt his bonds give.

The pommel of the leader’s sword crashed against his temple, blackness engulfed him and he knew no more.