

Jewel of Truth

Boundary's Fall

Path of Glory
Sword of Honor
Jewel of Truth
Forge of Faith*

* Forthcoming

Jewel of Truth

Book Three of Boundary's Fall

by
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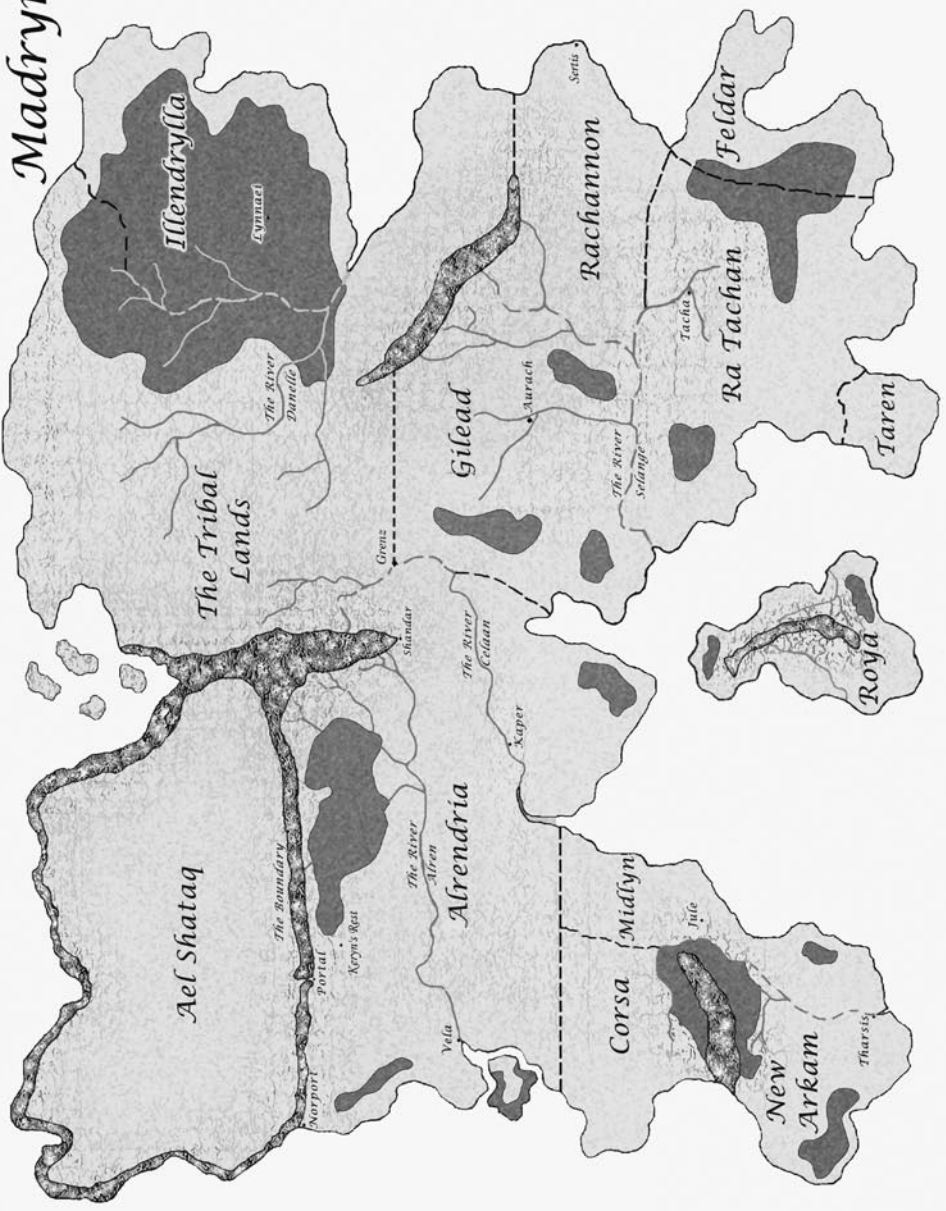
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Madryn



Remembrance

He galloped across the plains, his sandy blonde hair blowing in the wind. Guardsmen trailed behind him, sword or bow in hand, none sure what to expect. The hills whipped by, and the only sound other than the wind was the thunder of his horse's hooves.

He urged his mount for greater speed. "Faster," he cried. "We must go faster!" The powerful horse snorted a cloud of steam and lowered her head. They pulled ahead of the Guardsmen; the soldiers' mounts could not keep pace with his magnificent warhorse.

"Gods," the rider prayed, "don't let me be too late. If you will ever answer one of my prayers, answer this one!" Mindless of the rough terrain, the rider squeezed his eyes shut to force away tears. He trusted his mount completely; she had seen him through more dangers than he could count and into more battles than he had ever wanted to fight. She did not need him to guide her.

He rode for an eternity, until the Guardsmen were distant specks. Topping a hill, he brought his horse to a skidding stop. From his vantage point he surveyed the countryside. To the east a line of wagons burned. Lifeless shapes littered the ground around the caravan.

"Maybe he saved her!" Hope surged, and the white mare bolted forward, flying down the hill as if she were fresh from the stable. In a matter of moments they reached the bottom and approached the wagons.

Even before reaching the caravan, an evil pall enveloped the rider, clinging thickly to the air. Uneasiness descended upon the rider, and he dropped from the saddle, sword in hand. He moved forward slowly, expecting an ambush at any moment.

Bodies littered the ground, many more than he had seen from the hilltop. A few wore the armor of the Guard, but most were clad in the dark grey of the Durange. Arrows riddled most of the corpses, but a few bore the grievous wounds of heated melee. A groan drew the rider's attention, and when he saw a Tachan roll over, he fought the urge to make the man suffer for his crimes.

I won't torture him! No matter how much evil the Tachans bring to Madryn, I won't become like them! The rider repeated this thought while he searched. He combed through the wreckage and despaired of ever finding what he sought. When a solitary moan drifted to his ears, the rider winced. The cry was full of anguish, but the voice was a familiar one. He sheathed his sword and hurried through the carnage, calling out her name.

He found her in the shadow of a wagon, beaten and broken. The blood staining her lips was the only color on her too-pale face. Her eyes were closed,

sunken and swollen; her lustrous black hair matted and disheveled. A tattered dress barely covered a body blackened by dark bruises.

Despite her wounds, she still had a radiance to her, a great beauty. The abuse suffered at the hands of the Durange had marred her body, but they had not despoiled her spirit. Tears filled the rider's eyes at the sight of her. Her still body made him think her dead, and he cursed himself for being too slow.

"Tachan monsters!" he screamed. "Of all your crimes, this is the worst! I'll see you dead for this. All of you! Dead!" He regretted the words instantly. She would have disapproved. She had always been the voice of peace, the voice of reason.

He reached out and touched her, and his tears—this time joyful—fell anew when her eyes fluttered open and she whispered, "Aryn?" Carefully, he picked her up and, shocked by her near weightlessness, he carried her away from the burning wagon.

He set her upon lush grass in a field of wildflowers, the last of the season, and unhooked a small flask from his belt. Falling to the ground beside her, he cradled her head in his lap and tenderly touched the flask to her lips. She responded to the touch, drinking deeply.

Her eyes opened, and as he gazed into those twin orbs of brilliant blue, so full of pain, a wave of grief washed over him. For her sake, he hid his pain and forced a smile. "Aryn," she whispered, her voice strained and hoarse. "Good... see you."

"Peace, Illendre," Aryn told her. "Don't speak. You must save your strength. All will be well."

"Baby...."

Aryn reached down and touched Illendre's swollen abdomen. Almost immediately he felt movement. "The child is well, Illendre. Now rest. Help is on its way."

"No...." came Illendre's weak reply. "Aryn... baby... comes. You must help—" A violent contraction cut off the rest of her words. Her body spasmed, and she groaned.

"Gods!" Aryn whispered fiercely. He removed his coat and tucked it beneath Illendre's head as a pillow. Then, he carefully worked himself out from under her and moved to her legs. He stared for a moment, and then frantically said, "I don't know what to do!"

A strange sound reached Aryn's ears. It sounded weak and lifeless, so unlike Illendre's musical laughter. "The baby is well," Illendre said, having regained some small measure of strength. "You have but to catch him when he comes."

She propped herself up, though it took much effort, and adjusted her makeshift pillow. "There's some time yet," she told him, patting the ground at her side. "Sit by me a moment. I'll tell you when the baby needs you."

Aryn obeyed, and he took Illendre's hand as he sat beside her, squeezing it gently. Some color returned to her face, and a measure of her beauty had reappeared. She was still but a shadow of her self, and though Aryn refused to believe it, he saw death in her eyes.

"Where's Alic?" he asked, hoping a change of subject would lessen the

weight on his heart.

Illendre shook her head weakly. Another wave of pain rolled across her eyes. "He ambushed the Tachans before midday." Aryn looked at the sky; the sun stood well past its zenith. "They came as if from nowhere, howling like they, themselves, were wolves. I saw Alic several times during the battle. He was wild, almost unrecognizable." She shivered.

"His love for you is strong," Aryn told her. "So strong it clouds his reason. When news of your capture came to us at Merriadoc, Alic begged King Faldar to release him from his Guardsman's oath so he could search for you." The memory was a painful one for Aryn. "I think he would have come even if Faldar had refused."

A smile touched Illendre's lips, brightening her face. "Ever was Alic impetuous," she said, "and given to rash thought. Not like you, my sweet, sagacious Aryn."

Aryn stroked her cheek fondly, and she wiped the tear from beneath his eye. "But where's Alic?" he asked. "Surely he wouldn't abandon you after crossing half of Gilead!"

"I tried to escape in the"—another contraction wracked Illendre's body, and she raised a hand, begging Aryn's indulgence—"in the confusion of the battle. But I was careless, and someone struck me from behind. When Alic came upon me, he found me motionless. I heard his words of apology and regret, but could speak none of my own, nor could I reassure him that I lived." The admission pained Illendre, but Aryn could say nothing to ease her hurt.

"Rage overcame Alic's sense." At this, Illendre chuckled, though the laugh turned to a cough, and a thin stream of blood trickled from her mouth. "I always believed there to be a bit of Garun'ah in my beloved's veins." Aryn returned her smile, but his eyes drifted to the hilltop, and he willed help to arrive quickly.

"His rage overcame him," Illendre repeated, "and he swore to hunt down Tylor and exact his revenge." Aryn's heart ached at Illendre's suffering. He wanted to lessen her pain—he would have taken it if he knew how!—but all he could do was watch her suffer and daub her brow with a moist strip of cloth torn from his shirt.

Illendre's smile faded. "What of my father?" she asked. "And the Magi?"

Aryn shook his head. "The Magi remain hidden. If they aid us, we have yet to see it. Nor has anyone seen Aemon." Illendre's eyes closed sadly, and Aryn hastily added, "But there has been evidence of his passage, if one knows what signs to look for. Your father may be keeping his whereabouts unknown, but he still fights for Alrendria."

With that news, Illendre breathed easier, but a prolonged silence, broken only by Illendre's contractions, ensued. Watching her, Aryn's hope began to wane, and as usual, Illendre saw into his heart. "Yes, my friend," she confessed. "My time grows short. Soon my son will be born, and then my purpose will be ended."

Aryn scrubbed at his eyes. "You can't leave me!" he insisted. "You can't leave Alic! You're needed now more than ever."

"And yet my life is spent just the same." For an instant, the fire returned to

her voice, and her eyes flashed a brilliant blue. "The world existed long before my coming. It will survive my passing just as easily."

"I will not," Aryn told her. "This world will be cold without the warmth of your smile, dark without the sparkle of your eyes." Illendre slumped, and for a moment, Aryn feared her dead. "Don't leave me, Illendre!" he cried, taking her hand. "I love you!"

Her eyes opened again, and a smile, this one sad, pulled at her lips. With a trembling hand, she caressed Aryn's cheek. "And I love you, Aryn. In many ways, you are dearer to me than Alic." Aryn turned away, and Illendre chided him for his guilt. "It is never a crime to love, my friend, and loving does not mean you have betrayed the trust of a friend. Or a brother. Alic and I share a heart, and my love for him will always be pure. But you and I share a soul, and my love for you is just as great."

Illendre paled, and she groaned suddenly. This time, the contraction lasted far longer. "It's time," she told Aryn when she could again speak. "This child will wait no longer." Aryn made to move, but Illendre held his arm, and the force of her grip surprised him.

"You must promise me something," she said fiercely, and Aryn could tell that no refusal would be accepted.

"Anything!" he assured her. "Should you wish it, I'll carry your body to Shandar and dig your grave with my own hands. Should you want the Darklord killed, I'll walk the blighted lands of *Ael Shataq* until Lorthas lies dead at my feet!"

"Dear Aryn," Illendre replied, and her laughter was a balm to his pain. "What I ask is far less dangerous, though no less important." Her eyes tightened as another contraction tore at her body, and she fought the urge to cry out. "I ask only that you care for my son, your nephew, as if he were your own."

"That... That is Alic's duty," he said, shaking his head.

Illendre nodded, though a shadow lay across her eyes. "And I would not take such a grand duty from him," she assured Aryn, "but I'd rather my son become an artist and poet like you than a warrior like his father."

Again Aryn protested, but Illendre silenced him. "I know he'll have battles to fight, and his own burdens to bear. Much like you. But Alic is all warrior, more akin to Tylor Durange than he'd ever admit. He hasn't found the balance you have, and he would raise our son as he was raised."

"Your son will need such training," Aryn reminded her. "He'll be the First of House Odara after Alic."

"And he'll receive it," Illendre assured him. "If not from Alic, then from you and Mathis. Or Gideon. Or Joam. Or even Iban, though I'd never have suspected such a tiger lurked beneath the dove's wings. There are thousands to teach my son how to command, but few who can teach him how to care."

"You have an understanding few outside the Magi ever attain," she added, "and even fewer truly appreciate. My son will be surrounded by teachers, and Alic will have him protected by a thousand swords, but there's only one guardian who I trust with such an important task."

A tense silence followed as Aryn warred with himself. "I swear on my life

and House Odara to care for your son, to protect him from all harm, and to teach him all I can, meager knowledge though it may be."

"A poet to the last, sweet Aryn," Illendre chuckled. "I will take this memory of you to the Heavens, and wait eagerly until we walk the Twilight World together." Illendre's eyes turned dim and distant; her voice grew strained. "Now quick! The baby comes!"

Despite the blood and the eternity of pained screams, it was over faster than Aryn expected, and in only a few moments, Aryn held a screaming child in his arms. He drew his belt knife and cut the lifecord, then used what remained of his water to wipe the blood and birth from the newborn boy.

The child cried loudly, though whether from cold, hunger, or something else, Aryn could not tell. He had eyes much like Illendre's and a shock of black hair upon his head. The nose was Alic's. As Aryn held the child, he felt an instant bond of love. "Look at your son, Illendre," he said, holding up the baby. "Never has a more beautiful creature been born in all of Madryn!"

He received no response, and when Aryn leaned to the side, he saw that only lifeless eyes beheld the child. Drawing a shuddering breath, he willed his grief to leave until he found a better place to mourn.

With the child cradled against his chest, Aryn composed Illendre's corpse and closed her eyes. Then he took the coat from beneath her and swaddled the baby in it. Behind him, he heard the thunder of hooves as the Guard galloped down the hill. Torin, Aryn's subcommander, dropped from the saddle before his horse had fully stopped. "It was foolish to run so far ahead, Lord Odara."

Aryn laughed, though he felt no joy in it. "I follow my brother, Torin. We'll find no living Tachans within a league of his passage."

Torin nodded and seemed to notice for the first time the bundle in Aryn's arms. His gaze quickly dropped to the ground, and a strangled cry escaped his lips. "We're too late!"

"I arrived with time enough to watch her die," Aryn said. He looked for the last time upon the Lady Illendre. Black hair circled her head in a cloud, a warm smile was on her lips, and some small measure of color had returned to her cheeks. She looked to be asleep, and Aryn knew he could not bear to ruin this memory of her.

"One duty remains to us," he told Torin. "We must ride to my brother's aid, and lead him back to Alrendria. The Tachans are routed. The war is over."

"What of the child?" Torin asked. "Should I have him taken to Kaper?"

"The boy rides with me!" Aryn snapped. He regretted his anger, but he did not apologize for it. "He goes to meet his father." He gestured toward Illendre's body. "Select five of your most trusted men and have them take her to Shandar. She's to be buried beside her mother."

The baby shrieked, and Aryn glanced at the child squirming uncomfortably in its swaddling. "We passed a farm not many leagues back. Send a Guardsman to fetch some milk, or better yet, have him bring someone who knows about the raising of children. The rest of the Guard is to follow me!"

Jedelle came to Aryn's whistle, and he climbed easily into the saddle. Horse and rider were so well suited that he rode at full gallop without fear of falling,

even with the infant tucked awkwardly under one arm. They rode for leagues, to the south and east, until the sun hung low in the western sky. When they topped a rise overlooking a broad field and saw two armies facing each other, Aryn slowed. When he realized that the two forces faced each other without fighting, he stopped completely.

A lone rider broke away from the nearest army and hurried to Aryn's side. Aryn put his hand on his sword, ready to draw at the first sign of danger, but he relaxed when he recognized Larence, one of his brother's subcommanders.

"Lord Odara!" Larence said, bowing from horseback. "Welcome to the battle. I urge you to hurry should you wish to see the end of this fight. They've battled half the day, and though no clear victor is in sight, mere men can't fight so fiercely forever."

Confused, Aryn cast his gaze into the valley. "I see no fight, Larence. Only two armies staring at each other as if hard looks could cut like arrows."

"Then you don't look well enough, my Lord," Larence replied, "for your brother has challenged Tylor the Bull to single combat. As we speak they wage a private war between the bounds of their armies.

A worried frown creased Aryn's brow. "Wait here, Larence," he ordered. "No, wait in the valley behind me. I lead a host of Guardsmen nearly equal in strength to my brother's. Intercept them before they're seen and bid them travel in secrecy to the far side of the valley."

"Lord Alic has promised freedom to the Tachans should he be the one to fall!"

"And should he fall," Aryn replied, his tone doubtful, "then they'll have it. Tell Torin to stay his attack until our armies are joined, but have him ready to fly at a moment's notice! I don't trust the Tachans. Treachery follows them close."

Larence saluted, fist-on-heart, and rode west to meet Aryn's Guardsmen. Aryn, in turn, rode into the valley, and before long he heard the clash of steel on steel, the angry taunts of Tylor Durange, and the stoic replies of his brother.

The Guard stepped aside at his approach, and Aryn rode through without comment, intent on reaching the front line. Joam scrubbed a hand through his thick, curly brown hair and smiled when he saw Aryn. "Glad you could join us!" he laughed. "You're just in time!"

Aryn nodded but did not reply. He focused his attention on the battle. Alic stood near the Alrendrians. He had aged since Aryn had last seen him, though it had only been days. His sandy blonde hair, streaked grey at the temples, was slick with sweat. New wrinkles cut deep rents across his once fair face, and his brow sagged as if drawn down by a heavy weight. The scowl he wore added winters to his life.

Alic saw his younger brother out of the corner of his eye and ducked his head in grim greeting. Tylor noticed the movement and stepped back. At just over thirty winters, the Bull of Ra Tachan was nearly a score of winters Alic's junior. A mane of thick, dark hair capped his arrogant face. He wore full armor, but had cast aside the bull-headed helmet that gave him his name. Angry eyes glared at Aryn. "So, you decided to join the fight after all. Good! I'll deal with you after I finish with your brother. Then this feud will be ended!"

"So it will, Durange," Alic answered, his voice a booming baritone, "but long before you lay a hand on Aryn. And even should I fall, I'd be wary of challenging him. Small though he may be, he's still an Odaran wolf, and his bite stings as much as mine!" With that, Alic unleashed a volley of attacks.

Tylor retreated, but he quickly regained his footing and his return attack was ferocious. Alic, a master of the blade, easily turned it aside, and the two combatants fell into a rhythm, much like a dance. It was a mesmerizing thing to watch.

The rider to Aryn's right leaned toward him. "How fares the war?"

Aryn risked a brief glance. "Gideon!" he called out joyfully, but his mood quickly sobered. "The war goes well. We won back Merriadoc, and the Tachans have been driven from Alrendria. The remnants of their army flee across Gilead, hoping to find shelter in Ra Tachan." He could not tell the good without the bad, and a pang of loss entered his voice. "But the victory is bittersweet. Faldar fell at Merriadoc. Mathis is king."

Joam let out a strangled cry, but he quickly wiped away his tears. Gideon's expression grew grim. "Bittersweet indeed, my friend. Faldar will be missed. But what is that in your arms? Do you desire a family so much you've taken to coddling your sword as you would a child? If so, then perhaps a battlefield's no longer a site you should frequent."

Gideon's words brought a genuine smile to Aryn's lips. "No, Gideon," he said, holding up the infant. "I hold Alic's son."

Dark brown eyes widened in shock. "Then she lives!" Gideon said, and his words carried the excitement of newfound hope. "Alic swore she was dead."

"She is now," Aryn snapped. "Alic's rage blinded him to the truth, and this feud has cost him a wife who might have lived."

"If that is Alic's son," Joam said, "then Gideon's right. This is no place for you!" Gideon agreed, and the two warriors urged Aryn to leave.

"I'll stay to show Alic his son," Aryn replied as he turned his attention back to the duel. He refused to let their words sway him. "If battle is joined, I'll take the boy to safety."

The fighting had grown fiercer, as if the combatants grew less tired with the passage of time instead of more so. They exchanged blows constantly, though few hit armor; most were parried or dodged long before they struck. Alic and Tylor spun in a tight circle, neither able to get the upper hand, and both armies watched, awed by the display.

Tylor taunted Alic throughout the battle, casting aspersions upon his House and Alrendria both. Alic ignored the jibes, except to laugh them off, and his indifference infuriated the Bull, driving Tylor to make even more cutting comments, to speak of things closer to Alic's heart.

"Your wife was sweet, Odara!" Tylor laughed when he saw his words strike home. "Did you truly think I had her all this time, drugged so her 'Gift' was useless, and not avail myself of her?"

"She'd never have allowed it!" Alic snarled. "Drugged or no, she'd never have allowed it."

"Perhaps not," Tylor shrugged, swinging his sword in a vicious backhand.

"But I held the life of her child forfeit, should she resist." His smile was cruel. "A beauty, Illendre was. Sweet as no other creature in all of Madryn. It was awkward at first, but in the end, I think she enjoyed herself!"

Alic screamed, and Aryn's cry echoed it. Both Gideon and Joam had to restrain him. "It's single combat!" Joam cried out as Gideon whispered in Aryn's ear, "The child! Don't forget the child!"

Alic needed no help; Tylor's words were boon enough. He pounded Tylor with a series of mighty blows, bellowing with every strike. Tylor realized his mistake too late, and he retreated across the field, unable to do anything other than deflect Alic's onslaught.

With a mighty swing, Alic slipped his blade through Tylor's guard and sliced a gash across the Bull's face. Tylor screamed and clapped a hand over the left side of his face. He raised his own sword for an answering blow, but Alic was faster. His blade clanged against Tylor's and the black sword shattered. It fell to the ground in pieces.

With his remaining eye, Tylor stared dumbly at the broken remnants of his sword. Blood gushed from beneath his hand, running in a river down his arm. He fell to his knees; the hilt of his sword dropped useless to the grass. "Mercy, Odara," he whispered.

"Mercy?" Alic repeated. "What mercy did you shown the Gileans? What mercy did you show Shandar or the Magi who dwelled there?" Alic's gaze turned hateful. "What mercy did you show Illendre?" He drew back his sword for the killing blow.

"Wait!" Tylor begged, and Alic stayed his hand. Weak laughter bubbled from the Bull's throat. "You claim to be so much better than me, Odara! Yet in the end, I discover we're the same. Hatred burns in you as hotly as it does in me. You're no nobler than I. Just luckier!"

Alic hesitated. Slowly, he lowered his blade. "I'm not like you, Durange!"

A shadow burst from among the Tachan soldiers, and Aryn realized what was happening too late. "Alic!" he yelled as Salos stepped from the shadows. "Betrayal!"

Alic moved, but not fast enough. The dagger, thrown from an impossible distance, drove through Alic's armor with a sickening screech. Alic's eyes widened in surprise, and then closed for a moment. His blade fell to the ground beside Tylor's.

Gideon drew his own sword. "Betrayal!" he shouted. "For Alrendria and Alic Odara!" The Guardsmen rushed forward, surprising the Tachans with the speed of their attack. The army that appeared on the hill behind them surprised them even more.

Alic fell to his knees opposite Tylor. Only a few hands separated him from the Bull of Ra Tachan. "Ironic," Tylor chuckled. "It looks like you'll beat me to the Twilight World after all, if only by a few moments!"

Aryn rushed to his brother's side and drove a fist into Tylor's head. The Bull crumpled to the ground. With a satisfied grunt, Aryn turned to his brother.

Though many winters separated their births, they were as close as brothers could be. Aryn felt the weight on his shoulders grow heavier when he saw the

expression on Alic's face. He had seen the same look in Illendre's eyes. "Don't you leave me too!" His voice brought Alic back from the brink.

"Aryn," Alic said, opening his eyes. A warm smile replaced his frown, exposing teeth stained red with blood. "Don't have much choice. Shouldn't have trusted the Tachans. But I had to avenge Illendre."

"It was the Scorpion," Aryn explained, easing Alic into a seated position.

Alic nodded knowingly, but shook his head when Aryn reached for the blade. "Leave it," he commanded. "Pulling it will do no good, and leaving it will prolong my time with you, if only for a moment."

He looked at the bundle in Aryn's arms. "What's that you bring? My Naming Day's yet a few days off, and I'm unaccustomed to getting presents in the field."

Aryn cleared the covers from the infant's face and held the child out. "It's your son!" he announced loudly.

"My son?" Alic blinked in confusion. "Then she lives?" Hope and regret tinged his words.

"No longer," Aryn told him, and though the heat of his anger had departed, he added, "Yet she lived when you came upon her, you fool!"

"My son," Alic repeated, cocking his head to the side. "She is there!" he said triumphantly. "I can see her in his eyes!" He reached out a hand, then withdrew it quickly. "May I hold him?" he asked, as if he had no right to his own child.

Aryn gave the boy to his father but stayed close, lest Alic's strength fail. Around them, the Guardsmen drove the Tachans from the field. Some small pockets resisted, pockets of desperate men who feared to face justice for their crimes, but the Alrendrians would not let their betrayal go unpunished. "I can see both of you in him," Aryn assured his brother. "He'll make you proud."

"Jeran," Alic said suddenly, clutching the child to his chest. "Call him Jeran." He held the child a moment longer, then handed the bundle back to Aryn. "Best you hold him. I don't know how much life remains within me. My legs grow numb."

A strained silence followed. "How fares the war?" Alic asked, but when Aryn tried to tell him, he raised a hand. "No, there's less time than I thought. Soon I'll join Illendre in the Heavens, and then I'll learn all I need to know." Alic's skin grew paler, and the fire in his eyes died. "You must promise me something, little brother," he said, his voice growing weak.

Aryn nodded, fighting to hold his tears in check. "You'll be First after me," Alic told him, and something in his brother's voice told Aryn that this was not the promise. "That much I discussed with Faldar, and he agreed. But now an even greater duty falls to you. You must raise Jeran in my stead, as both father and mother. You must teach him how to be a warrior, how to lead men so he can take the title of First when you are finished with it."

Aryn started to shake his head, but Alic grabbed his arm. "There are few enough in this world I love, little brother, and none but you to whom I'd entrust my son."

"I swear to do what you ask of me, Alic, to the best of my abilities. But I've already sworn a promise to another, and doing both may prove impossible."

The smile on Alic's face grew broader. "She got to you before me, eh?" he asked, and laughed weakly when Aryn nodded. "I accept your promise, Aryn, though it's not the one I wished for. Train my Jeran how to lead and I'll be happy, but train him first how to love, for I'm sure such was the oath you swore to Illendre."

Alic's swayed, and Aryn gently guided his brother to the ground. "I can see them!" Alic said, awed. "Paeya and Yurien, and a stranger who beckons for me to join them. And there's Faldar! You beat me there, you old devil! And..." Alic's voice faded, but his empty face suddenly came alive. "There she is! Can you see her, Aryn? She's as beautiful as ever, with her hair blowing in the wind and such a sweet smile on her face! She's waiting for me."

Struggling for breath, the great warrior slowly raised his hands to his throat, and with great difficulty, he removed the wolf's-head medallion from his neck and offered it to Aryn. "For Jeran, little brother, when the time is right." Aryn, his hand trembling, took the necklace, and Alic's eyes closed to near slits.

Tears stained Aryn's cheeks, but he made no move to wipe them away. Alic's eyes cleared one last time. "You always were a crier!" he laughed before growing still.

"And you were always a hero, Alic," Aryn replied, reaching out to close his brother's eyes.

He sat there until the battle was over, with Jeran cradled in his one arm and Alic's head in the other. When Gideon returned, he led a long line of Tachan prisoners, the Scorpion among them. "What should we do with them?" Gideon asked. "Kill them here?"

Aryn shook his head. "Take them to Kaper. Their fate is King Mathis' decision." As he stood, Aryn looked at the trampled field and the weary faces of his men. "Dress Tylor's wounds," he ordered. "Bind him and the Scorpion tightly, and keep them both under constant guard. If any of their wagons remain unburned, we'll give them a taste of their own tender care.

"Five Guardsmen ride to Shandar bearing the body of the Lady Illendre," he added, looking down at his brother's body. "Alic would want to be near his wife."

The Guardsmen hurried to carry out Aryn's orders, and after pausing to lay a comforting hand on Aryn's shoulder, Gideon led the prisoners from the field. Aryn looked at the child in his arms, all that remained of his family. "Well, Jeran," he said, and it seemed as if the boy smiled at him, "We have a long ride ahead."