



CHOSEN OF THE GODS

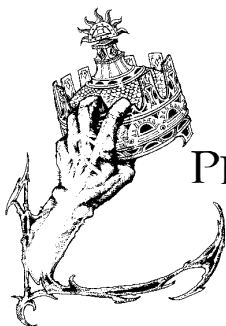
KINGPRIEST
TRILOGY



VOLUME ONE

CHRIS PIERSON





PROLOGUE ▼

ELEVENTHMONTH, 922 IA

The Lordcity of Istar was the center of the world around which all else revolved. Capital of an empire vaster than any other Krynn had ever known, it sat upon the shores of the sapphire lake that shared its name, its high, white walls encircling it like a mother's arms. Half a million souls—more than mighty Palanthas and Tarsis to the west combined—dwelt within that embrace. It outmatched other cities not only in size, however, but also with splendor. There was a legend that the great statues that stood atop its gilded gates had wept at the city's beauty when they were first raised, though they were crafted of solid marble.

Everywhere one looked in the Lordcity, there were wonders to behold. Vast manors and churches lined its wide, tree-lined streets, roofed with domes of gold and alabaster, and smaller buildings gleamed in the light of sun and moons alike. Broad plazas held gardens where a thousand different colors of flowers bloomed, and fountains sent water spraying high into the air, to glitter like diamonds as it plunged back to earth. Silken sails filled its harbors, overlooked by the God's Eyes, twin towers where beacons of polished silver blazed day and night. Idols of the gods of light stood watch from the city's heights, more than ten men tall, hewn of lapis and serpentine, sard and chalcidony. Its marketplace bustled with noise and laughter and a

riot of trade riches: spices and satin, wine and pearls, brightly hued songbirds and the skulls of long-dead dragons.

Even in such a marvelous city, some wonders stood out. In the western quarter was the School of the Games, a vast arena draped in banners of silk, where gladiators had once fought and died and mummery now played out tales of wars long won, kingdoms long since conquered. In the north stood the Keep of the Kingfisher, a huge, strong-walled fortress that served as headquarters for the Solamnic Knights within the empire. To the east, high above the domes and treetops, surrounded by an enchanted grove of olive trees, rose the crimson-turreted Tower of High Sorcery, where the wizards dwelt.

All of these, however, were nothing beside the Great Temple. Sitting in the Lordcity's midst, the marble-paved streets radiating out from it like a wheel's spokes—or a spider's web, some said—the Temple was the most resplendent edifice ever built. Those travelers lucky enough to have seen the halls of the elven kings spoke of them as mere shadows of the Temple's glory. A wide plaza, the *Barigon*, surrounded it, large enough that nearly every soul in the Lordcity could stand within it and look upon its graceful, buttressed walls and seven golden spires that reached up like fingers clutching at the heavens. Within, amid lush gardens and pools filled with jewel-hued fish, stood more than a dozen buildings, each more glorious than the last. Among them were the entrance hall, itself larger than most cities' cathedrals, and the towering, silver-roofed cloisters where the clergy resided. The imperial manse, where the Kingpriest dwelt, surpassed even these, and at the eye of the Temple was the true heart of the city, the center of the world. There, grandest of all, was the basilica, a vast dome of frosted crystal that shone with its own holy light, like a star plucked from the heavens and set upon the earth.

This night First Son Kurnos glowered at the basilica from the steps of his cloister. A stocky, powerfully built man with thinning red hair and a bushy beard frosted with silver, he was the head of the Revered Sons of Paladine, the most powerful of all the world's orders, and adviser to the Kingpriest himself. He

was also shivering with cold. The sky was dark, and though a month still remained until autumn's end, snow danced in the air above the Temple. It dusted the paths of crushed crystal that wound through the church's grounds and lit on the moonstone monuments of the Garden of Martyrs, which bore the names of those who had died serving the church. It was a rare thing—the Lordcity's winters were known for rain, not snow—and another time, Kurnos might have found it beautiful. Now, however, his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Quickly, boy," he growled, cuffing the ear of the acolyte who stood beside him. "I haven't got till sunrise."

The younger priest, clad in a gray habit that seemed all the plainer beside Kurnos's embroidered white robes, hurried past, down to the garden path. The same lad had woken Kurnos half an hour ago and given him the missive. It had come in a tube of platinum, inlaid with amethysts: a single sheet of vellum, scented with rosewater. Its seal was azure wax, bearing the triangle-and-falcon signet of the Kingpriest. It bore only Kurnos's name and three words in blue ink, written in the church tongue: *Tam fas ilaneis.*

Thou art summoned.

Kurnos felt uneasy. He had been First Son for five years and a lesser member of the imperial court for another ten before that. In that time, he had received numerous imperial summonses—but never in the middle of the night. Never, not even once, written in the Kingpriest's own hand.

Before him, the acolyte raised his hands to the cloud-heavy sky. He began to speak softly. "*Cie nicas supam torco,*" he murmured, "*Palado, mas doboram burtud.*"

Though I walk through night's heart, Paladine, be thou my light.

As he finished the orison, a soft glow, as of silver moonlight, rose around him. The First Son felt a twinge of jealousy. The boy's powers were minor but more than most priests could wield—Kurnos among them. In ancient times, when evil was rampant in the world, the clergy's holy might had been vast. In Holy Istar, however, centuries of holy war had left the forces of darkness weak and scattered, and the power to work miracles

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had dwindled along with the need for them. The god, the church's doctrine taught, was sparing with his gifts.

"The way is ready, *Aulforo*," murmured the acolyte.

Kurnos nodded, stepping out into the magical moonlight. "Go," he said, waving the boy away.

The acolyte retreated into the cloister as he set forth across the garden, past the graven monuments. The moonlight followed him over ornamental bridges and up marble steps, past almond and lemon trees, where nightingales sang. He turned aside from the basilica, making instead for the imperial manse. A pair of Solamnic Knights stood guard outside, clad in polished, antique armor; they dipped their halberds as he approached and stepped aside without a word.

The manse's doors were huge, made of beaten platinum. They swung open silently as he approached and stepped through into the vestibule. The entry hall, like everything in the Kingpriest's private residence, was richly appointed, with the finest furnishings from the empire's many provinces: mahogany panels from the jungles of Falhana on the walls; gold-threaded arras from sun-drenched Gather; carpets woven by the desert-dwelling folk of Dravinaar. Columns, crowned with rose-petal capitals, ran down its length, and in its midst stood seven onyx pedestals, bearing alabaster statues of the gods of light.

Paladine, the supreme god of Good, loomed above the others, a long-bearded warrior in armor shaped like dragon-scales. Kurnos genuflected to the idol, kissing the platinum medallion that hung at his throat then pressing it to the god's glistening feet.

A door opened as he knelt there, and an old, bald cleric in a white cassock emerged. Kurnos recognized the man: Brother Purvis, the Kingpriest's chamberlain. His eyes were bleary as he bowed to the First Son.

"Your Grace," he said. "You are expected."

Kurnos rose without reply and handed the old man his fur-lined cloak. Together they walked down a broad, marble hall and up a stairway to a door of polished silver. It opened

at Purvis's touch, and the chamberlain stepped aside to reveal a well-appointed waiting room.

"Revered Son," said a gentle voice.

Loralon, Emissary for the elves of Silvanesti, rose from a cushioned seat on the room's far side. As he did, he signed the sacred triangle—one palm atop the other, thumbs extended to a point beneath—that was the holy sign of Kurnos's order. It was a courtesy, for the Silvanesti took the pine tree, not the triangle, as their gesture of blessing. Kurnos nodded in reply, stepping forward as Purvis shut the door behind him.

The elf gestured toward another chair, and Kurnos sat, regarding him carefully. Loralon was as always: calm, reserved, eyes sparkling in the glow of the lamps that lit the room. He was old, even for his long-lived people, having seen more than five hundred years. Though his face remained unlined by age, his hair had turned silver, and a snowy beard—rare among the elves, found only among the most ancient—trailed down his chest. He was clad in full raiment, from the golden circlet on his head to the jeweled slippers upon his feet. He looked neither tired nor annoyed, and Kurnos wondered, not for the first time, if the elf ever slept.

They exchanged pleasantries, then sat in silence for a while, sipping from jeweled goblets of watered claret, mixed with spices from Karthay. In time Purvis returned, leading a tall woman, whose long, raven-black hair was pulled back into a severe bun that made her look older than her forty years. She wore robes of pearly satin trimmed with lavender and silver jewelry at her ears, wrists, and throat. Her dark eyes swept the room.

"It seems," she declared, signing the triangle as Loralon and Kurnos rose, "that I'm the last to arrive."

"First Daughter," the elf said, smiling kindly. "You were always the deep sleeper."

Ilista, leader of the Revered Daughters of Paladine—companion order to Kurnos's own—folded her arms. "What is this about?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

Kurnos and Loralon exchanged tight-lipped glances.

"I think it likely," the elf replied, "but as to why His

Holiness has called us here at this hour, milady, I fear neither of us know any better than you.”

Purvis stood aside while the Kingpriest’s advisers greeted one another. Now he stepped forward, making his way to a pair of gold-chased doors at the room’s far end. Engraved upon them was the imperial falcon and triangle—the one, symbol for the empire, the other for the god. The doors opened at his touch, letting white, crystalline light spill through; then he turned to face the three clerics, bowing low.

“His Holiness bids you welcome,” the chamberlain intoned. “*Gomudo, laudo, e lupudo.*”

Enter, behold, and adore.

The audience chamber was smaller than the great throne room that occupied most of the basilica, but it was still far more opulent than those of other sovereigns. It brought gasps from those beholding it for the first time, but to Kurnos it was a familiar place. He scarcely noticed the mosaic of interwoven dragon wings that covered the floor, the strands of glowing diamonds that hung from the ceiling, the platinum triangles and lapis falcons that adorned its walls. Instead, his gaze went directly to the marble dais at the far end, beneath a violet rose window. Atop the platform stood a golden throne, wreathed with white roses and flanked by censers of electrum that gave off tendrils of pale smoke. His eyes slid past these, focusing at last on the man on the satin-cushioned seat.

Symeon IV, Kingpriest of Istar, Paladine’s Voice on Krynn, was not a physically imposing man. Nearly sixty years old, he was small and plump, pink-cheeked and beardless. At first glance, he looked almost like a child, though there was sharpness in his black eyes that left no doubt he was the most powerful man in all Ansalon. Many men, expecting him to behave in the manner of a eunuch, had quailed and broken before that unrelenting gaze. His golden, jeweled breastplate and the sapphire-studded tiara on his brow gleamed in the white light. He raised a hand that sparkled with precious stones.

“*Apofudo, usas farnas,*” he said, beckoning.

Come forward, children of the god.

Obediently, Kurnos moved to the dais with the others and mounted the first step. They bowed their heads as the Kingpriest signed the triangle over them, murmuring a soft benediction. Symeon sat back, smoothing his silvery robes.

"You have questions," the Kingpriest said. "Here is my answer. I have called you here because the time of my death is near."

Kurnos started, surprised. Beside him, Loralon's brow furrowed, and Ilista's eyes widened.

"Sire?" the First Daughter blurted.

Symeon was a hard man—not cruel, but distant. All knew that while Istar honored him, there was little love for the Kingpriest among the common folk of the land. His midnight eyes glinted, and Ilista looked away, unable to meet his stare.

"Holiness," Loralon ventured, drawing Symeon's gaze away from the First Daughter. "How can you know this? Has something happened?"

"Yes," the Kingpriest replied. "Something *has*. Tonight, as I was reciting my midwatch prayers before taking to my bed, a visitor came to my chambers. A dragon."

"What?" Kurnos said, and all at once the imperious glare was on him. He weathered it, though he could feel his face redden. "Pardon, Holiness, but there *are* no dragons left in the world. All know that Huma Dragonbane banished the wyrms of evil a millennium ago, and Paladine himself bade the good dragons leave soon after."

"I *know* the history, Kurnos," the Kingpriest declared coldly. "Nevertheless, the dragon was here. Its scales shone like platinum in sunlight, and its eyes were diamonds afire. It spoke to me, in a voice of honey and harpstrings. I knew at once it was Paladine himself, taken flesh.

"'Symeon,' said the dragon, 'most beloved of my children. Within a twelvemonth, I will call you to uncrown. From that day, you shall dwell evermore at my side.'

"And so, my children, I have called you here to share this news. The coming year shall be my last."

The audience hall was utterly still. Kurnos and Ilista stared in shock. Loralon stroked his beard, lost in thought. The rose window made the only sound, hissing as snow pattered against the glass from outside.

Finally, the First Son cleared his throat. "How can this be?" he asked. "It's only seven years since you were crowned, Majesty."

The Kingpriest nodded. "Yes, but Paladine's word will not be denied. Soon I shall be with him."

"There is precedent," Loralon added. "A century and a half ago, the god appeared to Kingpriest Ardosean I as he lay dying." The elf regarded Symeon evenly. "You are fortunate, Holiness. Most clerics live their entire lives without beholding such a sight."

"Our luck is as poor as yours is good," Ilista added. "It is hard not to envy Paladine for taking you from us."

The Kingpriest nodded, accepting the compliment as his due. "There is another reason I have summoned you three here," he said, his gaze falling upon Kurnos. "If I am to go to the god, I must name my heir."

For a moment, the First Son blinked, not understanding. Then he saw the way the dark eyes glittered, reflecting the gems of Symeon's tiara, and he felt his throat tighten. His skin turning cold, Kurnos tried to speak, but his voice failed him. He looked down, unable to meet the imperial gaze any longer.

"Yes, *Aulforo*," Symeon said. "It is my wish that you take my place upon the throne. When I am gone, you shall be the next Kingpriest of Istar."



The rest of the audience passed in a blur. Later, Kurnos dimly remembered the rite of succession that followed the Kingpriest's pronouncement: a long liturgy by Symeon, to which he responded at the proper times, like a man half-awake. Loralon and Ilista both served as witnesses, vowing before Paladine and Symeon alike they would support Kurnos's rule. Finally, the Kingpriest recited the final "*Sifāt*"—*Be it so*—and the ritual ended.

After, Purvis escorted the imperial advisers from the audience hall, then out of the manse and back into the night. Loralon and Ilista took their leave, returning to their quarters to find some rest before the new day. Kurnos didn't retire, however—sleep was the furthest thing from his mind. Instead, he lingered in the Temple's gardens, wandering the snowy paths about the gleaming basilica. This time he hardly noticed the chill in the air, and he also took no notice of the monks and knights who passed him as he walked. His mind roiled, the thoughts coming back and back again to the same four words:

I will be Kingpriest.

It had always been a possibility—in Paladine's church, he was second in stature to the man who sat the throne—but he had never truly credited that it would happen. The Kingpriest usually chose a patriarch from one of the empire's provinces to wear the crown after him, as a way of maintaining the peace. Symeon himself had been high priest of Ismin, to the west, until his own coronation. Anyway, Kurnos was past his fiftieth year and had been sure he would grow into an old man by the time the Kingpriest died.

All those assumptions had crumbled now, replaced by a thrill that plunged through him like a silver arrow. He was the heir. Before long, the powers of church and empire would be his to wield. It was an intoxicating thought, arousing a hunger that had lain dormant in him for many years. He thought of the power that came with the Kingpriest's sapphire tiara and felt giddy. All the things he could accomplish!

A glimmer of light caught his attention, and he stopped in his tracks, looking up. The sky was clearing now—the snow had stopped, he wasn't sure when—and through the garden's trees the velvet black of night was giving way to violet. The red and silver moons hung low in the east, both razor-thin crescents, and beneath them, the clouds were glowing saffron. He blinked. Dawn had been hours away when he'd left the manse. Had he truly wandered the Temple's gardens so long?

As he was wondering, a dulcet sound arose from the basilica: the chiming of silver bells within the Temple's tall, central

spire. The crystal dome caught the sound, ringing to herald the coming dawn, and the Temple grounds suddenly burst into life as priests and priestesses spilled out of the cloisters, answering the call to morning prayer. Many exclaimed in wonder at the unexpected snowfall, and Kurnos watched as they made their wide-eyed way past him to the basilica.

Suddenly, he began to weep.

He tried to hold it back at first, but soon his cheeks were wet. The tears he shed were not born of sorrow, however, but of joy. He even laughed, his heart singing along with the music of the bells. Smiling, he wiped his eyes, clearing his vision—and stopped, sucking in a sudden breath.

Down the path, in the shadow of a great ebony tree, was something that did not belong in this place: a tall, grim figure swathed in black. It was a man, his dark hood covering his face save for the tip of a thick, gray beard. He stood motionless, and though he couldn't see the man's eyes, the First Son was sure the dark-robed figure was looking at him. The chill in the air seemed to sharpen as he met the man's gaze.

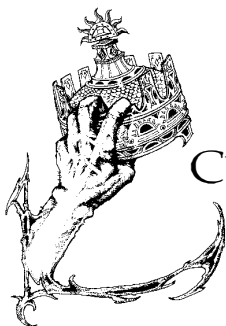
Yes, hissed a cold voice. The hooded head inclined slightly.
It will do.

Suddenly terrified, Kurnos cast about, searching for one of the Knights who patrolled the Temple grounds. There was none nearby, though—and what was more, none of the other clerics bustling past seemed to see the shadowy figure at all. Swallowing, Kurnos turned back toward the tree, intending to do something, perhaps cry out . . .

And stopped. The dark figure was gone.

He stepped forward, peering deeper into the shadows, but there was no sign of the man. Kurnos swallowed, shaken. Perhaps I imagined it, he told himself. I'm tired—jumping at shadows, that's all.

In his mind, however, the dark figure remained, lurking and watching as he turned toward the basilica to greet his first day as the Kingpriest's heir.



CHAPTER I ▼

FOURTHMONTH, 923 I.A.

The drums of war hadn't sounded in Istar for years.

The empire had not known peace in all that time, of course—goblins and ogres still lurked in the wildlands, for one thing, despite repeated Commandments of Extermination from the Temple, as did cults that worshiped dark gods. And while most realms paid homage to the Kingpriest, some—notably the distant Empire of Ergoth—refused to do so. It was enough to keep the imperial armies from growing idle, but Istaran hadn't fought Istaran in over half a century, since the end of the Three Thrones' War.

The *Trosedil*, as the church tongue named the war, had arisen when three different men, each with their own followings, laid claim to the throne. Such factional splintering had happened before, when a Kingpriest died with no named heir, but this time it was particularly tragic. For two decades the dispute had bloodied the empire's fields, until Ardosean IV, also known as Ardosean the Uniter, had defeated his rivals, beheading Vasari II and imprisoning Theorollyn III, thereby becoming the one true sovereign.

With the war's end, prosperity returned to the empire. Gold flowed freely, filling the coffers of castle and temple alike. By the time the Uniter died, ten years after the

Trosedi's ending, the realm was almost completely healed, the old divisions forgotten.

Not everyone shared in the bounties of peace, however. Taol, westernmost of Istar's provinces, had no spices, no silks. Its hills yielded copper and iron, not rubies and opals. Its people had been barbarians at the empire's dawning, until the priests came to pacify them and teach them the ways of Paladine. Even now, they remained simple borderfolk, and though they were poor compared with people who dwelled in the lands to the east, they had long been content with their lot.

Ullas obefat, the old saying said. *All things change.*

The troubles had begun the previous autumn, with a blight that devastated harvests all over the borderlands. Famine followed, and with it came plague, a terrible sickness called the *Longosai*—the Slow Creep—that started at the provinces' fringes and worked its way from town and town as winter came on. When they saw the troubles their people faced, the Taoli nobles had acted quickly, sending riders to the Lordcity to plead for help. Before the messengers could reach the lowlands, however, the snows had come, vicious blizzards that buried the lands and choked the roads. The riders vanished into the storm and were never seen again. The food and healers the borderfolk needed never came. The *Longosai* spread, made worse by starvation.

Even then, however, matters might have mended, had the first travelers to ride into the highlands when the thaws came been traders, priests, or even Solamnic Knights. Instead, however, it was the Kingpriest's tax collectors who sojourned to Taol when the roads cleared at last. They came as they always did, at the dawning of springtime, to collect the annual tithe from the borderfolk to bring back to the holy church. What they found instead, however, were sickness, empty larders, and men and women made desperate and angry by suffering.

Inevitably, it came to bloodshed. The *Scatas*, the blue-cloaked imperial soldiers who accompanied the tax collectors, killed several bordermen who tried to fight. The highlanders struck back, slaughtering soldiers and clerics alike. The survivors fled back to

the Lordcity, bringing word of a peasantry risen in revolt. The Kingpriest closed the roads that led to Taol and issued an edict demanding the heads of the rebels' leaders. By the time the last snows melted, the borderlands were dry tinder, awaiting a spark.

The war drums hadn't sounded in Istar for years. They wouldn't remain silent much longer.



Tancred MarSevrin thrashed and thrashed, fighting with all his might. He was too weak, though, and his struggles soon began to weaken, his cries grew silent. Finally he slumped, defeated, his wild, fearful eyes staring at nothing. His legs kicked one last time, then were still.

Cathan kept his hand over the dead man's mouth, counting slowly to ten and fighting the urge to scream. Finally, knowing it was done, he pulled back and stood above the bed, staring at the body. He ran a shaky hand over his face, then reached down and closed Tancred's eyes. Sucking in a shuddering breath, he drew a blanket over the pinched face.

"Farewell, brother," he whispered.

The bedchamber was plain, stone below and thatch above, a closed, wooden door leading to the front room. A second blanket hung over the lone window, drenching the room in shadows. The furnishings were spare: a straw bed and two wooden stools, a foot chest with no lock, a clay chamber pot crusted with filth. The only ornament was a sacred triangle of white ceramic hanging on the east wall. No one had changed the rushes on the earthen floor in some time, and their sweet smell had long since yielded to the sour reek of sickness.

Cathan looked down at the shrouded corpse, feeling hollow. When the tears came, he let them flow.

The *Longosai* was a terrible way to die. It began as an innocent-looking rash on the hands and feet, but that harmlessness didn't last long. It steadily worsened, erupting into weeping sores that crawled up arms and legs and blossomed on swollen

groins and throats, wasting away the flesh and turning its victims into skeletons wrapped in loose folds of corrupted skin. As the end came on, so did madness, bringing a wild sheen to the eyes of the dying and bloody froth to their lips. Death soon followed.

The plague had missed the village of Luciel as it raged across Taol, somehow leaving it untouched all winter while ravaging the hamlets nearby. Oveth, Fliran, even Espadica only two leagues away had all succumbed, but when the snows finally began to melt, Luciel remained intact. The townsfolk had sighed, thanking the gods they had survived such a harsh season . . . then, on the third day of spring, they'd begun to die.

Drelise had been the first victim. A priestess of Mishakal the Healing Hand, she had been an old woman—the winter just past her ninetieth—and her goddess hadn't been able to spare her from the Creep's killing touch. Both her apprentices soon followed, leaving the village with no one to mix balms and poultices, or bleed the dying to purify their flesh. A week later, twenty folk were dead; after another, the toll had risen to a hundred. Soon blue mourning cloths hung by the doors of nearly every house in Luciel's valley, and more than a few stood as empty as old skulls, derelict and silent.

Before the *Longosai*, the MarSevrin clan had numbered five. Utham, its head, was a weaver, his wife Luska a midwife. Tancred, the eldest of their children, had been twenty-two, a quick-fingered lad set to inherit his father's loom. Cathan, four years his junior, seemed his brother's twin, sharing his shaggy brown hair and clever eyes. Wentha, their younger sister, was a pretty, golden-haired girl who had just begun to catch the fancies of the village's young men. The MarSevrins had been happy, content to live in a land that, though sometimes hard, lay nonetheless beneath Paladine's blessing.

Luska had been one of the first twenty victims. Utham had followed a few days later. Cathan himself developed the telltale rash a few days later, but he had fought it off, as some did, and

it had left only a few pockmarks on his skin when it waned. Tancred hadn't been so lucky: For the past ten days, Cathan had tended to him, bringing his brother water to drink, porridge to eat, and bowls to puke in, while his life ebbed away.

Cathan had woken at dawn that morning, curled up on the floor by the bedside, to find Tancred staring at him. He'd looked a stranger—once tall and strong, he was as thin as one of Wentha's old twig-dolls, his face gaunt and sallow. His bloodshot eyes had gleamed unpleasantly as he raised a bony hand to beckon Cathan near.

"Brother," he'd rasped, sounding like a whetstone on rusted iron. Cathan gave him a swallow of water, most of which dribbled down his chin. "How is Wentha?"

"She's well," Cathan had said, his throat thick with tears. Their sister, though devastated by the loss of their parents and Tancred's decline, had yet to show any sign of the plague. She lived across town now, with Fendrilla, an old woman who had lost both her daughters to the Creep.

Reaching out, Tancred had taken Cathan's hand. His once iron-firm grip had been sweaty and feeble, and his eyes shone like embers. Cathan had seen that look in his mother's eyes and then his father's. He'd known that, before long, Tancred would begin to rave. He'd known, too, what he had to do and had wondered if he could carry through with it.

"Promise me," Tancred had hissed, his breath stinking. "Swear you'll not die like this. Neither of you."

Coldness twisting his guts, Cathan had looked away.

"Swear!"

Cathan had squeezed his eyes shut, grinding his teeth to keep the sobs at bay. Finally, he'd managed a nod, Tancred had smiled, a horrible rictus filmed with blood.

"Very well, then," he'd said and settled back to wait.

They'd made the pact together, as they stood by the pyre where their parents had burned. They knew what the *Longosai* did in its last days and had sworn that neither they nor Wentha would suffer so. Cathan kept his word: as Tancred lay still

before him, he had covered his brother's face and smothered him. It was merciful, but that didn't stop the tears from coursing down his face as he looked down on the unmoving form in the bed, so wretchedly small after the Creep's ravages.

Later, he would find a wagon and haul Tancred to the pyres at the edge of town, as he had his mother and father. By nightfall, his brother would be ashes, gone. How much longer, he wondered, before I follow him?

He turned and looked across the room, at Paladine's sign on the wall. He'd prayed before it every day, at the proper times—dawn, midday, sunset, even midnight—while Tancred lay wheezing behind him, his life draining away. He'd begged the god to spare his brother's life, to drive off the disease. Now, his mouth hardening, he strode over to it, tore it down, and flung it across the chamber. It smashed against the gray stone, shards pattering down among the dirty rushes.

"Damn you, Paladine," he spat and stormed out of the room.



A fortnight later, Cathan crouched in a gully as cold rain dripped down from the branches of pines above. Shivering, he drew his brown cloak about him, but it was already soaked through, along with the stained tunic he wore underneath. A cough tickled his throat, and he fought it back with a grimace.

Another man stirred beside him in the ditch, turning a hooded head his way. Within the cowl, a smile lit a plain face, beneath a downy blond moustache.

"You look," Embric Sharpspurs whispered, "like you'd rather be some place else."

Cathan coughed shaking his head ruefully. "Wouldn't you?"

The gully was one of many that cut through the stony ground, deep amid Taol's hills. The land around them was gray and barren, rocky crags fringed with scrub bushes and oaks not yet come into spring leaf. The clouds above were low and leaden, giving off a maddening drizzle so fine it

was almost mist. Thunder muttered somewhere far away.

Embric shrugged. "Could be worse," he said, his mouth crooking into an almost-grin. "Could be sleeting."

Cathan shook his head and was opening his mouth to reply when a hand touched his shoulder. He twisted, reaching for the long dagger he wore on his belt. He had the knife halfway out of its sheath when he stopped, meeting the gray, flinty gaze of an older man.

"Easy, MarSevrin," said the man. He was small and wiry, clad in hunting leathers and a mail shirt beneath his gray mantle. A few white hairs dusted his dark beard, and an angry red crease ran from his left ear to the corner of his mouth. "A boy your age should know better than to play with sharp things. Both of you, keep quiet. If you give us away, I'll hang the both of you by your balls for the others to throw rocks at."

"Yes, Tavarre," Embric and Cathan said together.

"Good," the older man said. "Now sit tight, and wait for the signal." He patted Cathan's shoulder, then was gone, vanishing into the brush like a ghost.

Before the plague, Tavarre had been *Baron* Tavarre, the lord of Luciel Vale. He had seldom come down to the town in those days, keeping mainly to his keep, but Cathan's father had named him a fair man. He was also an avid hunter, often roaming the highlands in search of game. It was said he knew every tree, every rock, for miles around. Staring at the bushes where Tavarre had disappeared, Cathan believed it.

The *Longosai* hadn't left the baron's keep untouched, so folk said, though Tavarre never spoke of what had driven him to flee its halls and take to the wilds. Others had joined him, men and women whom the sickness had spared. They were bandits now, roaming the hills in search of prey. Embric, a boy of twenty who had been a childhood friend of both Tancred and Cathan had been one of the first to join Tavarre's band, and he'd urged them to join up too. They'd refused, however, not wanting to leave their family.

That was before.

Cathan had gone to the bandits as soon as Tancred's body was burned, demanding to be brought to Tavarre. The baron had looked him over carefully, then nodded, agreeing to take him on. Since then, they had kept to their camp, hidden in the wilds, waiting. There was more waiting to banditry than Cathan had thought, and his restlessness grew to anxiety, even with the training at arms his fellows gave him. He needed someone to lash back at, a target for his grief.

Finally, the chance had come. The day before yesterday, Tavarre's scouts had ridden into the camp with news. A party of *Scatas*, soldiers of the imperial army, were riding through the wilds nearby. There were a dozen of them, but they didn't interest Cathan as much as the other who rode with them: a cleric of Paladine.

So they'd set out, two dozen men with Tavarre in the lead. The baron had chosen a likely spot for an ambush, along the road the *Scatas* traveled, and the'dy settled in and begun to wait anew. That had been last night, with four hours still lacking before dawn; it was nearly midday now, and Cathan was beginning to wonder if there really *were* soldiers nearby.

Just then, though, he heard the sharp, trilling song of a bluefinch. It wasn't an unusual sound in the wilds, but Cathan's muscles tautened anyway. Tavarre had taught his men several calls to use for signals, and the bluefinch was one of the most urgent. It trailed away, then came a second time, closer and shriller. He bit his lip as he reached beneath his cloak, feeling for the leather sling he kept looped through his belt. When he had the weapon in hand, he reached for a pouch he kept at his belt, and pulled out a jagged, white lump—not a stone, but a bit of broken ceramic. He'd taken the remnants of the holy symbol he'd smashed before his brother died. Now he rolled the shard in his hand, his mouth a hard line.

"Tancred," he whispered, "be with me."

He could hear them now: the thud of hoofs on the muddy road, a dozen paces away. Beside him, Embric loaded a battered crossbow, and together they turned to peer over the gully's

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edge, at the road below. Cathan sneered as he saw the *Scatas*, their blue cloaks soaked, clouds of breath-frost blossoming from within their plumed, bronze helms. Behind them, beneath a canopy carried by a pair of drenched acolytes, rode the cleric. He was a fat man, his satin robes stretched tight where his prodigious belly pressed against them.

Hating him immediately, Cathan tucked the shard into the pouch of his sling and prepared for the attack.



Revered Son Blavian sniffled, loathing the accursed weather. It wasn't like this in the lowlands. True, it was the rainy season in the Lordcity now, but at least there it was *warm*. Despite the covering his servants carried, and the warm, vair-trimmed vestments he'd brought with him, he was cold to the bone. He blew on his pudgy hands, trying to warm them.

"Paladine's breath," he grumbled. "What manner of man would *want* to live in this place?"

He expected no answer. The *Scatas* had spoken little since they'd set forth from the Lordcity for Govinna, Taol's highland capital. They bore several coffers of gold coins and orders for Durinen, the province's patriarch, from the Kingpriest himself. Blavian wasn't sure just what the message said, but he had a good idea. Before he'd left, First Son Kurnos had spoken to him about the brigands who had absconded to the hills. No doubt the Kingpriest meant for Durinen to fight back against the robbers. That would explain the gold: waging such a campaign would not be cheap.

Whatever the reason for his journey, though, Blavian was proud the First Son had chosen him. Kurnos was the imperial heir, after all—it was good to have his favor. Hopefully, that would make up for having to slog through this damp, frigid country . . .

He heard the strange, trilling song again. He frowned, looking up to call out to the soldiers—*pray, what bird makes*

such a call?—and saw something, just for a moment: a dark shape, moving behind a pine-dotted hummock. He gasped, and was drawing breath to shout a warning when the hill-sides came alive.

It happened so quickly, it seemed over almost before it began. The *Scatas* had time enough only to lay their hands on their swords before more than a score of cloaked figures rose from the bushes to either side of the road, crossbows loaded and ready. A few others held slings, whirling them slowly above their heads. Blavian cast about, a cold stone deep in his gut as he realized quite a few weapons were trained on him.

“Show steel, and you’ll be dead before you finish the draw,” warned one of the ruffians, a wiry man with a scarred face. He perched atop a mossy boulder, a naked sword in his hand. He waved the blade, looking past the soldiers. “Let down His Corpulence’s covering, will you, lads? Let him feel the weather.”

Wide-eyed and white with fear, the acolytes tossed the canopy aside at once, and moved away from Blavian. The Revered Son winced as rain pattered down on his balding pate, then puffed out his chest as the man on the boulder laughed.

“What are you about?” he demanded. “Who are you?”

“I’d think that must be obvious.” Grinning, the man hopped from the rock down onto the road. He nodded toward the soldiers, who were glancing at one another, fingering their weapons’ hilts. “Tell your men to throw down their swords, Reverence, unless they want to leave this place with more holes in their bodies than they came with. It’s all right—we only want to rob you.”

“What!” Blavian exclaimed. He thumped a fist against his thigh, his voice rising to a roar. “This is preposterous! You have no right—”

Something hit him then, a mass that seemed to come from nowhere to slam into his collarbone. He heard a gruesome snap before he toppled from his horse, splashing down into

the mud—then the pain hit, gagging him. He yowled, writhing, but his acolytes stayed where they were, too afraid of the bandits to move.

The lead brigand's smile didn't waver. "Reverence, you've seen what my men can do," he said. "Next time, they won't aim to wound."

For a moment, the only sounds Blavian could manage were small, pained grunts. After a few tries, though, his voice came. "You heard him. Swords down, all of you."

As one—some with visible relief—the *Scatas* unsheathed their blades and tossed them to the ground. The scarred man signaled to his fellows, and several dropped their crossbows and darted in, snatching up the swords. Another took the reins of the pack horses that carried the Patriarch's gold, and yet another pair emerged from a gully and came toward Blavian himself. One held a cocked crossbow, the other an unloaded sling. The Revered Son knew at once that the second man—no, a boy from the looks of him—was the one who had dared to strike him.

"Your purse, sirrah," said the crossbowman, "and your jewels."

Blavian goggled, reaching for the heavy golden necklace he wore as an emblem of his potency within the church. "You cannot do this!" he cried as the robbery continued around them. "I am a servant of the god!"

The slinger bent down, ignoring his protests, and plucked a small object up from the ground, a white chunk half the size of a clenched fist. Blavian thought the thing that had hit him had been a stone or perhaps a lead pellet. Instead, he saw it was a chunk of broken ceramic. The boy pressed it briefly to his lips, then tucked it into his belt. Then he turned to the cleric, his lip curling.

"This is for Tancred," he snarled.

The Revered Son had only a moment to wonder who Tancred was before the boy drew back his foot and slammed it into the side of his head, crashing his world down into blackness.