

CHAPTER ONE

Caraskand

My heart shrivels even as my intellect bristles. Reasons—I find myself desperate for reasons. Sometimes I think every word written is written for shame.

—Drusas Achamian, *The Compendium of the First Holy War*

Early Spring, 4112 Year-of-the-Tusk, Enathpaneah

There had been a time, for Achamian, when the future had been a habit, something belonging to the hard rhythm of his days toiling in his father's shadow. His fingers had stung in the morning, his back had burned in the afternoon. The fish had flashed silver in the sunlight. Tomorrow became today, and today became yesterday, as though time were little more than gravel rolled in a barrel, forever brightening what was the same. He expected only what he'd already endured, prepared only for what had already happened. His past had enslaved his future. Only the size of his hands had seemed to change.

But now . . .

Breathless, Achamian walked across the rooftop garden of Proyas's compound. The night sky was clear. The constellations glittered against the black: Uroris rising in the east, the Flail descending to the west. The encircling heights of the Bowl reared across the distance, a riot of blue structures pricked by distant points of torchlight. Hoots and cries floated up from the streets below, sounding at once melancholy and besotted with joy.

Against all reason, the Men of the Tusk had triumphed over the heathen. Caraskand was a great Inrithi city once again.

Achamian pressed through a hedge of junipers, fouled his smock in the sharp branches. The garden was largely dead, the ground rutted and overturned during the height of the hunger. He stepped across a dusty gutter, then stomped about, making a carpet of grasses gone to hay. He knelt, still searching for his breath.

The fish were gone. His palms no longer bled when he clenched his fists in the morning. And the future had been . . . unleashed.

"I am," he murmured through clenched teeth, "a Mandate Schoolman."

The Mandate. How long since he had last spoken to them? Since it was he who travelled, the onus was on him to maintain contact. His failure to do so for so long would strike them as an unfathomable dereliction. They would think him mad. They would demand of him impossible things. And then, tomorrow . . .

It always came back to tomorrow.

He closed his eyes and intoned the first words. When he opened them, he saw the pale circle of light they cast about his knees, the shadows of grass combed through grass. A beetle scrambled through the chiaroscuro, mad to escape his sorcerous aspect. He continued speaking, his soul bending to the sounds, giving inner breath to the Abstractions, to thoughts that were not his own, to meanings that limned the world to its foundation. Without warning, the ground seemed to pitch, then suddenly here was no longer *here*, but everywhere. The beetle, the grasses, even Caraskand fell away.

He tasted the dank air of Atyersus, the great fortress of the School of Mandate, through the lips of another . . . *Nautzera*.

The fetor of brine and rot tugged vomit to the back of his throat. Surf crashed. Black waters heaved beneath a darkling sky. Terns hung like miracles in the distance.

No . . . not here.

He knew this place well enough for terror to loosen his bowels. He gagged at the smell, covered his mouth and nose, turned to the fortifications . . . He stood upon the top tier of a timber scaffold. A shroud of sagging corpses loomed over him, to the limits of his periphery.

Dagliash.

From the base of the walls to the battlements, wherever the fortress's ramparts faced the sea, countless thousands had been nailed across every surface: here a flaxen-maned warrior struck down in his prime, there an infant pinned through the mouth like a laurel. Fishing nets had been cast and fixed about them—to keep their rotting ligature intact, Achamian supposed. The netting sagged near the wall's base, bellied by an accumulation of skulls and other human detritus. Innumerable terns and crows, even several gannets, darted and wheeled about the macabre jigsaw; it seemed he remembered them most of all.

Achamian had dreamed of this place many times. The Wall of the Dead, where Seswatha, captured after the fall of Trysë, had been tacked to ponder the glory of the Consult.

Nautzera hung immediately before him, suspended by nails through his thighs and forearms, naked save for the Agonic Collar about his throat. He seemed scarcely conscious.

Achamian clutched shaking hands, squeezed them bloodless. Dagliash had been a great sentinel once, staring across the wastes of Agongorea toward Golgotterath, her turrets manned by the hard-hearted men of Aörsi. Now she was but a way station of the world's ruin. Aörsi was dead, her people extinct, and the great cities of Kûniûri were little more than gutted shells. The Nonmen had fled to their mountain fastnesses, and the remaining High Norsirai nations—Eämnor and Akksersia—battled for their very lives.

Three years had passed since the advent of the No-God. Achamian could feel him, a *looming* across the western horizon. A sense of doom.

A gust buffeted him with cold spray.

Nautzera . . . it's me! Ach—

A harrowing cry cut him short. He actually crouched, though he knew no harm could befall him, peered in the direction of the sound. He gripped the bloodstained timber.

On a different brace of scaffolding farther down the fortifications, a Bashrag stooped over a thrashing shadow. Long black hair streamed from the fist-sized moles that pocked its massive frame. A vestigial face grimaced from each of its great and brutal cheeks. Without warning, it stood—each leg three legs welded together, each arm three arms—and hoisted

a pale figure over the heights: a man hanging from a nail as long as a spear. For a moment the wretch kicked air like a child drawn from the tub, then the Bashrag thrust him against the husk of corpses. Wielding an immense hammer, the monstrosity began battering the nail, searching for unseen mortises. More cries pealed across the heights. The Bashrag clacked its teeth in ecstasy.

Immobilized, Achamian watched the Bashrag raise a second nail to the man's pelvis. The wails became raving shrieks. Then a shadow fell across the sorcerer. "Anguish," a deep voice said, as close as a whisper in his ear.

Intake of breath, sharp and sudden. The incongruent taste of warm Caraskandi air . . .

For an instant his Cant faltered at this memory of the world's true order, and Achamian glimpsed the Heights of the Bull framed by a field of stars. Then there he was—*Mekeritrig*—standing over him, staring at Nautzera where he hung flushed and alive among gaping mouths and groping limbs.

"Anguish and degradation," the Nonman continued, his voice resonant with inhuman tones. "Who would think, Seswatha, that *salvation* could be found in these words?"

Mekeritrig stood in the curiously affected manner of Nonmen Ishroi, his hands clasped and pressed into the small of his back. He wore a gown of sheer black damask beneath a corselet of *nimil* that had been worked into circles of interlocking cranes. Tails of *nimil* chain followed the gown's pleats to the ground.

"Salvation . . ." Nautzera gasped in Seswatha's voice. He raised his swollen gaze to the Nonman Prince. "Has it progressed so far, Cet'ingira? Do you recall so little?"

A flicker of terror marred the Nonman's perfect features. His pupils became thin as quill strokes. After millennia of practising sorcery, the Quya bore a Mark that was far, far deeper than that borne by any Schoolmen—like indigo compared with water. Despite their preternatural beauty, despite the porcelain whiteness of their skin, they seemed blasted, blackened, and withered, a husk of cinders at once animate and extinct. Some, it was said, were so deeply Marked that they couldn't stand within a length of a Chora without beginning to salt.

"Recall?" Mekeritrig replied with a gesture at once plaintive and majestic. "But I have raised such a *wall* . . ." As though to emphasize his declaration, the sun flared across the wall's length, warming the dead with crimson.

"An obscenity!" Nautzera spat.

The nets flapped about the nailed corpses. To his right, near to where the wall curved out of sight, Achamian glimpsed a carrion arm waving back and forth, as though warning away unseen ships.

"As are all monuments, all memorials," Mekeritrig replied, lowering his chin toward his right shoulder—the Nonman gesture of assent. "What are they but prostheses that pronounce our impotence, our debility? I may live forever, but alas, what I have lived is mortal. Your suffering, Seswatha, *is* my salvation."

"No, Cet'ingira . . ." Hearing the strain in Seswatha's voice filled Achamian with an eye-watering ache. His body had not forgotten this Dream. "It need not be like this! I've read the ancient chronicles. I studied the engravings along the High White Halls before Celmomas ordered your image struck. You were great once. You were among those who raised us, who made the Norsirai first among the Tribes of Men! You were not this, my Prince! You were never this!"

Again the eerie sideways nod. A single tear scored his cheek. "Which is why, Seswatha. Which is why . . ."

A cut scarred where a caress faded away. In this simple fact lay the tragic and catastrophic truth of the Nonmen. Mekeritrig had lived a hundred lifetimes—more! What would it be like, Achamian wondered, to have every redeeming memory—be it a lover's touch or a child's warm squeal—blotted out by the accumulation of anguish, terror, and hate? To understand the soul of a Nonman, the philosopher Gotagga had once written, one need only bare the back of an old and arrogant slave. Scars. Scars upon scars. This was what made them mad. All of them.

"I am an Erratic," Mekeritrig was saying. "I do that which I hate, I raise my heart to the lash, so that I might remember! Do you understand what this means? You are *my children!*"

"There must be some other way," Nautzera gasped.

The Nonman lowered his bald head, like a son overcome by remorse in the presence of his father. "I am an Erratic . . ." Tears sheened his cheeks when he looked up. "There is no other way."

Nautzera strained against the nails impaling his arms, cried out in pain, "Kill me, then! Kill me and be done with it!"

"But you *know*, Seswatha."

"What? What do I know?"

"The location of the Heron Spear."

Nautzera stared, eyes rounded in horror, teeth clenched in agony. "If I did, you would be the one bound, and I would be your tormentor."

Mekeritrig backhanded him with a ferocity that made Achamian jump. Droplets of blood sailed down the wall's mangled length.

"I will strip you to your footings," the Nonman grated. "Though I love, I will upend your soul's foundation! I will release you from the delusions of this word 'Man,' and draw forth the beast—the soulless beast!—that is the howling Truth of all things . . . You *will* tell me!"

The old man coughed, drooled blood.

"And *I*, Seswatha . . . *I will remember!*"

Achamian glimpsed fused Nonman teeth. Mekeritrig's eyes flared like spears of sunlight. Orange-burning circles appeared about each of his fingertips, boiling, seething with fractal edges. Achamian recognized the Cant immediately: a Quya variant of the Thawa Ligatures. With volcanic palms, Mekeritrig clenched Seswatha's brow, serrated both body and soul.

Nautzera howled in voices not his own.

"Shhhh," Mekeritrig whispered, clutching the old sorcerer's cheek. He squeezed away tears with his thumb. "Hush, child . . ."

Nautzera could only gag and convulse.

"Please," the Nonman said. "Please do not cry . . ."

And Achamian howled, *Nautzera!* He couldn't watch this, not again, not after the Scarlet Spires. *You dream, Nautzera! You dream!*

Great Dagliash stood mute. Terns and crows swept and battled through the air about them. The dead stared vacant across the thundering sea.

Nautzera turned from Mekeritrig's palm to Achamian, heaving, heaving chill air. "But you're dead," he gasped.

No, Achamian said. I survived.

Gone was the scaffolding and the wall, the stench of rot and the shrill chorus of scavenger birds. Gone was Mekeritrig. Achamian stood nowhere, struck breathless by the impossibility of the transition.

How is it you live? Nautzera cried in his thoughts. We were told the Spires had taken you!

I . . .

Achamian? Akka? Is everything okay?

Why did he feel so small? He had reasons for his deception—*reasons!*

I— . . .

Where are you? We'll send someone for you. All will be made right. Vengeance will be exacted!

Concern? Compassion for him?

N-no, Nautzera. No, you don't understand—

My brother has been wronged! What more must I know?

An instant of mad weightlessness.

I lied to you.

Then long, dark silence, at once perfect and raucous with inaudible things.

Lied? Are you saying the Spires didn't seize you?

No—I mean, yes, they did seize me! And I did escape . . .

Images of the madness at Iothiah flashed through the blackness. Iyokus and his dispassionate torments. The blinding of Xinemus. The Wathi Doll, and the godlike exercise of the Gnosis.

Remembered men screamed.

Yes! You did well, Achamian—well enough to be written! Immortalized in our annals! But what's this about lies?

There's a—his body in Caraskand swallowed—there's a fact . . . a fact I've hidden from you and the others.

A fact?

An Anasûrimbor has returned . . .

A long pause, strangely studied.

What are you saying?

The Harbinger has come, Nautzera. The world is about to end.

The world is about to end.

Said enough times, any phrase—even this one—was sure to be leached of its meaning, which was why, Achamian knew, Seswatha had cursed his followers with the imprint of his battered soul. But now, confessing to Nautzera, it seemed he'd never uttered these words before.

Perhaps he'd simply never *meant* them. Certainly not like this.

Nautzera had been too shocked to be outraged by his admission of betrayal. A troubling vacancy had dogged the tone of his Other Voice—even a premonition of senility. Only afterward would Achamian realize that the old man had simply been terrified, that, like Achamian himself a mere few months earlier, he feared himself unequal to the events unfolding before him.

The world was about to end.

Achamian began by describing his first meeting with Kellhus, that day outside Momemn's walls when Proyas had summoned him to appraise the Scylvendi. He described the man's intellect—even explained the man's improvements on Ajencis's logic as proof of his preternatural intelligence. He narrated Kellhus's inexorable rise to ascendancy in the Holy War, both from what he himself had witnessed and from what he'd subsequently learned through Proyas. Nautzera had heard, apparently through informants near to the Imperial Court, that a man claiming to be a prophet had grown to prominence among the Men of the Tusk, but the name Anasûrimbor had become Nasurius by the time it reached Atyersus. They had dismissed it as simply one more fanatic contrivance.

Then Achamian described everything that had happened in Caraskand: the coming of the Padirajah, the siege and starvation, the growing tension between the Orthodox and the Zaudunyani, Kellhus's condemnation as a False Prophet—and ultimately, the revelation beneath dark-boughed Umiaki, where Kellhus had confessed to Achamian even as Achamian confessed now.

He told Nautzera about everything except Esmenet.

After he was freed, even the most embittered of the Orthodox fell to their knees before him—and how could they not? The Scylvendi's duel with Cutias Sarcellus—the First Knight-Commander a skin-spy! Think, Nautzera! The Scylvendi's victory proved that demons—demons!—had sought the Warrior-Prophet's death. It was exactly as Ajencis says: Men ever make corruption proof of purity.

He paused, a peevish part of him convinced Nautzera had never read Ajencis.

Yes yes, the old sorcerer said with soundless impatience.

He came upon them like a fever after that. Suddenly the Holy War found itself unified as never before. All of the Great Names—with the exception of Conphas, that is—knelt before him, kissed his knee. Gotian openly wept, offered his bared breast to the Anasûrimbor's sword. And then they marched. Such a sight, Nautzera! As great and terrible as anything in our Dreams. Starved. Sick. They shambled from the gates—dead men moved to war. . .

Images of the already broken flickered through the black. Gaunt swordsmen draped in strapless hauberks. Knights upon the ribbed backs of horses. The crude standard of the Circumfix snapping in the air.

What happened?

The impossible. They won the field. They couldn't be stopped! I still can't rub the wonder from my eyes . . .

And the Padirajah? Nautzera asked. Kascamandri. What of him?

Dead by the Warrior-Prophet's own hand. Even now, the Holy War makes ready to march on Shimeh and the Cishaurim. There's none left who might bar their passage, Nautzera. They've all but succeeded!

But why? the old sorcerer asked. If this Anasûrimbor Kellhus knows of the Consult, if he too believes the Second Apocalypse is nigh, why would he continue this foolish war? Perhaps he said what he said to deceive you. Have you considered that?

He can see them. Even now, the purges continue. No . . . I believe him.

After Sarcellus's death, over a dozen men of rank and privilege had simply vanished, leaving their clients astonished and delivering even the most fanatical of the Orthodox to the Warrior-Prophet. In the wake of the Padirajah's overthrow, both Caraskand and the Holy War had been ransacked, but as far as Achamian knew, only two of the abominations had been found and . . . exorcized.

This . . . this is extraordinary, Akka! What you say . . . soon all the Three Seas will believe!

Either that or burn.

There was grim satisfaction in thinking of the dismay and incredulity that would soon greet Mandate embassies. For centuries they'd been a laughingstock. For centuries they'd endured all manner of scorn, even those insults that jnan reserved for the most wretched. But now . . . Vindication was a potent narcotic. It would swim in the veins of Mandate Schoolmen for some time.

Yes! Nautzera exclaimed. Which is why we mustn't forget what's important. The Consult is never so easily rooted out. They'll try to murder this Anasûrimbor—there can be no doubt.

No doubt, Achamian replied, though for some reason the thought of further assassination attempts hadn't occurred to him.

Which means that first and foremost, Nautzera continued, *you must do everything in your power to protect him. No harm must come to him!*

The Warrior-Prophet has no need of my protection.

Nautzera paused. *Why do you call him that?*

Because no other name seemed his equal. Not even Anasûrimbor. But something, a profound indecision perhaps, held him mute.

Achamian? Do you actually think the man's a prophet?

I don't know what I think . . . Too much has happened.

This is no time for sentimental foolishness!

Enough, Nautzera. You haven't seen the man.

No . . . but I will.

What do you mean? His brother Schoolmen coming here? The thought troubled

Achamian somehow. The thought that others from the Mandate might witness his . . .

. . . humiliation.

But Nautzera ignored the question. *So what does our cousin School, the Scarlet Spires, make of all this?* There was a note of sarcastic hilarity in his tone, but it seemed forced, almost painfully so.

At Council, Eleäzaras looks like a man whose children have just been sold into slavery. He can't even bring himself to look at me, let alone ask about the Consult. He's heard of the ruin I wrought in Iothiah. I think he fears me.

He will come to you, Achamian. Sooner or later.

Let him come.

Every night the ledgers were opened, the debtors called to account. There would be amends.

There's no room for vengeance here. You must treat with him as an equal, comport yourself as though you were never abducted, never plied . . . I understand your hunger for retribution—but the stakes! The stakes of this game outweigh all other considerations. Do you understand this?

What did understanding have to do with hatred?

I understand well enough, Nautzera.

And the Anasûrimbor—what do Eleäzaras and the others make of him?

They want him to be a fraud, I know that much. What they think of him, I don't know.

You must make it clear to them that the Anasûrimbor is ours, Achamian. You must let them know that what happened at Iothiah is but a trifle compared with what will happen if they try to seize him.

The Warrior-Prophet cannot be seized. He's . . . beyond that. Achamian paused, struggled with his composure. *But he can be purchased.*

Purchased? What do you mean?

He wants the Gnosis, Nautzera. He's one of the Few. And if I deny him, I fear he might turn to the Scarlet Spires.

One of the Few? How long have you known this?

For some time . . .

And even then you said nothing! Achamian . . . Akka . . . I must know I can trust you with this matter!

As I trusted you on the matter of Inrau?

A long pause, fraught with guilt and accusation. In the blackness, it seemed to Achamian that he could see the boy looking to his teacher in fear and apprehension.

Unfortunate, to be sure, Nautzera said. But events have borne me out, wouldn't you agree?

I will warn you just this once, Achamian grated. Do you understand?

How could he do this? How long must he wage two wars, one for the world, the other against himself?

But I must know I can trust you!

What would you have me say? You haven't met the man! Until then, you can never know.

Know what? Know what?

That he's the world's only hope. Mark me, Nautzera, he's more than a mere sign, and he'll be more than a mere sorcerer—far more!

Harness your passions! You must see him as a tool—a Mandate tool!—nothing more, nothing less. We must possess him!

And if the Gnosis is his price for "possession," what then?

The Gnosis is our hammer. Ours! Only by submitting—

And the Spires? If Eleäzaras offers him the Anagogis?

Hesitation, both outraged and exasperated.

This is madness! A prophet who would pit School against School for sorcery's sake? A Wizard-Prophet? A Shaman?

This word forced a silence, one filled by the ethereal boiling that framed all such exchanges, as though the weight of the world inveighed against their impossibility. Nautzera was right: the circumstances were quite mad. But would he forgive Achamian the madness of the task before him? With polite words and diplomatic smiles Achamian had to court those who had *tortured* him. What was more, he was expected to woo and win a *prophet*, the man who had stolen from him his only love . . . Achamian beat at the fury that welled up through his heart. In Caraskand, twin tears broke from his sightless eyes.

Very well, then! Nautzera cried, his tone disconcertingly desperate. The others will have my hide for this . . . Give him the Lesser Cants—the denotaries and the like. Deceive him with dross into thinking you've traded our deepest secrets.

You still don't understand, do you, Nautzera? The Warrior-Prophet cannot be deceived!

All men can be deceived, Achamian. All men.

Did I say he was a "man"? You haven't yet seen him! There's no other like him, Nautzera. I tire of repeating this!

Nevertheless, you must yoke him. Our war depends upon it. Everything depends upon it!

You must believe me, Nautzera. This man is beyond our abilities to possess. He . . .

An image of Esmenet flashed through his thoughts, unbidden, beguiling.

He possesses.

The hills teemed with the herds of their enemy, and the Men of the Tusk rejoiced, for their hunger was like no other. The cows they butchered for the feast, the bulls they burned in offerings to flint-hearted Gilgaöl and the other Hundred Gods. They gorged themselves to

the point of sickness, then gorged again. They drank until unconsciousness overcame them. Many could be found kneeling before the banners of the Circumfix, which the Judges had raised wherever men congregated. They cried out to the image; they cried out in disbelief. When bands of revellers passed one another in the darkness, they shouted, "We! *We* are the God's fury!" in the argot of the camp. And they clasped arms, knowing they held their brothers, for together they had held their faces to the furnace. There were no more Orthodox, no more Zaudunyani.

They were Inrithi once again.

The Conriyans, using inks looted from Kianene scriptoriums, tattooed circles crossed with an X on their inner forearms. The Thunyeri, and the Tydonni after them, took knives drawn from the fire to their shoulders, where they cut representations of three Tusks—one for each great battle—scarring themselves in the manner of the Scylvendi. The Galeoth, the Ainoni—all adorned their bodies with some mark of their transformation. Only the Nansur refrained.

A band of Agmundrmen discovered the Padirajah's standard in the hills, which they immediately brought to Saubon, who rewarded them with three hundred Kianene *akals*. In an impromptu ceremony at the Fama Palace, Prince Kellhus had the silk cut from the ash pole and laid before his chair. He planted his sandals upon the image, which may have been a lion or a tiger, and declared, "All their symbols, all the sacred marks of our foemen, you shall deliver to my feet!"

For two days the Fanim captives toiled across the battlefield, piling their dead kinsmen into great heaps outside Caraskand's walls. Innumerable carrion birds—kites and jackdaws, storks and great desert vultures—harassed them, at times darkening the sky like locusts. Despite the bounty, they squabbled like gulls over fish.

The Men of the Tusk continued their revels, though many fell ill and a hundred or so actually died—from eating too much after starving for so long, the physician-priests said. Then, on the fourth day following the Battle of Tertae Fields, they made a great train of the captives, stripping them naked to make manifest their humiliation. Once assembled, the Fanim were encumbered with all the spoils of camp and field: caskets of gold and silver, Zeūmi silks, arms of Nenciphon steel, unguents and oils from Cingulat. Then they were driven with whips and flails through the Gate of Horns, across the city to the Kalaul, where the greater part of the Holy War greeted them with jeers and exaltation.

By the score they were brought to the black tree, Umiaki, where the Warrior-Prophet sat upon a simple stool, awaiting their petitions. Those who fell to their knees and cursed Fane were led as dogs to the waiting slavers. Those who did not were cut down where they stood.

When all was finished and the sun leaned crimson against the dark hills, the Warrior-Prophet walked from his seat and knelt in the blood of his enemies. He bid his people come to him, and upon the forehead of each he sketched the mark of the Tusk in Fanim blood.

Even the most manly wept for wonder.

Esmenet is his . . .

Like all horrifying thoughts, this one possessed a will all its own. It snaked in and out of his awareness, sometimes constricting, sometimes lying still and cold. Though it seemed old and familiar, it possessed the urgency of things remembered too late. It was at once a screeching call to arms and a grievous admission of futility. He had not simply lost her, he had lost her to *him*.

It was as though his soul only had fingers for certain things, certain dimensions. And the

fact of her betrayal was simply too great.

Old fool!

His arrival at the Fama Palace had thoroughly flummoxed the Zaudunyani functionaries. They treated him with deference—he was their master's erstwhile teacher—but there was also trepidation in their manner, an *anxious* trepidation. Had they acted suspicious, Achamian would have attributed their reaction to his sorcerous calling; they were religious men, after all. But they didn't seem unnerved by him so much as they seemed troubled by their own thoughts. They knew him, Achamian decided, the way men knew those they derided in private. And now that he stood before them, a man who would figure large in the inevitable scriptures to follow, they found themselves dismayed by their own impiety.

Of course, they knew he was a cuckold. By now the stories of everyone who had broken bread or sawed joint at Xinemus's fire would be known in some distorted form or another. There were no intimacies left. And his story in particular—the sorcerer who loved the whore who would become the Prophet-Consort—had doubtless come quick to a thousand lips, multiplying his shame.

While waiting for the hidden machinery of messengers and secretaries to relay his request, Achamian wandered into an adjoining courtyard, struck by the other immensities that framed his present circumstance. Even if there were no Consult, no threat of the Second Apocalypse, he realized, nothing would be the same. Kellhus would change the world, not in the way of an Ajencis or a Triamis, but in the way of an Inri Sejenus.

This, Achamian realized, was Year One. A new age of Men.

He stepped from the cool shade of the portico into crisp morning sunlight. For a moment he stood blinking against the gleam of white and rose marble, then his eyes fell to the earthen beds in the courtyard's heart, which, he was surprised to note, had been recently turned and replanted with white lilies and spear-like agave—wildflowers looted from beyond the walls. He saw three men—penitents like himself, he imagined—conferring in low tones on the courtyard's far side, and he was struck that things had become so sedate—so *normal*—so quickly. The week previous, Caraskand had been a place of blight and squalor; now he could almost believe he awaited an audience in Momemn or Aöknyssus.

Even the banners—white bolts of silk draped along the colonnades—spoke of an eerie continuity, a sense that nothing had changed, that the Warrior-Prophet had always been. Achamian stared at the stylized likeness of Kellhus embroidered in black across the fabric, his outstretched arms and legs dividing the circle into four equal segments. The Circumfix.

A cool breeze filtered through the courtyard, and a fold rolled across the image like a serpent beneath sheets. Someone, Achamian realized, must have started stitching these before the battle had even begun.

Whoever they were, they had forgotten Serwë. He blinked away images of her bound to Kellhus and the ring. It had been so very dark beneath Umiaki, but it seemed he could see her face arched back in rigour and ecstasy . . .

"He is as you said," Kellhus had confessed that night. *"Tsuramah. Mog-Pharau . . ."*

"Master Achamian."

Startled, Achamian turned to see an officer decked in green and gold regalia stepping into the sunlight. Like all Men of the Tusk, he was gaunt, though not nearly as cadaverous as many of those found outside the Fama Palace. The man fell to his knees at Achamian's feet, spoke to the ground in a thick Galeoth accent. "I am Dun Heörsa, Shield-Captain of the Hundred Pillars." There was little courtesy in his blue eyes when he looked up, and a surfeit

of intent. "He has instructed me to deliver you."

Achamian swallowed, nodded.

He . . .

The sorcerer followed the officer into the gloom of scented corridors.

He. The Warrior-Prophet.

His skin tingled. Of all the world, of all the innumerable men scattered about all the innumerable lands, he, Anasûrimbor Kellhus, communed with the God—the *God!* And how could it be otherwise, when he knew what no other man could know, when he spoke what no other man could speak?

Who could blame Achamian for his incredulity? It was like holding a flute to the wind and hearing song. It seemed beyond belief . . .

A miracle. A prophet in their midst.

Breathe when you speak to him. You must remember to breathe.

The Shield-Captain said nothing as they continued their march. He stared forward, possessed of the same eerie discipline that seemed to characterize everyone in the palace. Ornate rugs had been set at various points along the floor; the man's boots fell silent as they crossed each.

Despite his nerves, Achamian appreciated the absence of speech. Never, it seemed to him, had he suffered such a throng of conflicting passions. Hatred, for an impossible rival, for a fraud who had robbed him of his manhood—of his wife. Love, for an old friend, for a student who was at once his teacher, for a voice that had quickened his soul with countless insights. Fear, for the future, for the rapacious madness that was about to descend upon them all. Jubilation, for an enemy momentarily undone.

Bitterness. Hope.

And awe . . . Awe before all.

The eyes of men were but pinholes—no one knew this better than Mandate Schoolmen. All their books, even their scriptures, were nothing more than pinholes. And yet, because they couldn't see what was unseen, they assumed they saw everything, they confused pinpricks with the sky.

But Kellhus was something different. A doorway. A mighty gate.

He's come to save us. This is what I must remember. I must hold on to this!

The Shield-Captain escorted him past a rank of stone-faced guardsmen, their green surcoats also embroidered with the golden mark of the Hundred Pillars: a row of vertical bars over the long, winding slash of the Tusk. They passed through fretted mahogany doors and Achamian found himself on the portico of a much larger courtyard. The air was thick with the smell of blossoms.

In the sunlight beyond the colonnade, an orchard soaked bright and motionless. The trees—some kind of exotic apple, Achamian decided—twined black beneath constellations of blooming flowers, each petal like a white swatch dipped in blood. At different points through the orchard, great sentinels of stone—dolmens—towered over the surrounding queues, dark and unwrought, more ancient than Kyraneas, or even Shigek. The remnants of some long-overthrown circle.

Achamian turned to Captain Heörsa with questioning eyes, only to glimpse movement

through braces of leaf and flower. He turned—and there she was, strolling beneath the boughs with Kellhus.

Esmenet.

She was speaking, though Achamian could only hear the memory of her voice. Her eyes were lowered, thoughtfully studying the petalled ground as it passed beneath her small feet. She smiled in a manner at once rueful and heartbreaking, as though she answered teasing proposals with loving admissions.

It was the first time, Achamian realized, that he'd seen the two of them together. She seemed otherworldly, self-assured, slender beneath the sheer turquoise lines of her Kianene gown—something fitted, Achamian had no doubt, for one of the dead Padirajah's concubines. Graceful. Dark of eye and face, her hair flashing like obsidian between the golden ribs of her headdress—a Nilnameshi Empress on the arm of a Kûniüric High King. And wearing a Choraë—a *Trinket!*—pressed against her throat. A Tear of God, more black than black.

She was Esmenet and yet she wasn't Esmenet. The woman of loose life had fallen away, and what remained was more, so much more, than she'd been at his side. Resplendent.

Redeemed.

I dimmed her, he realized. I was smoke and he . . . is a mirror.

At the sight of his Prophet, Captain Heörsa had fallen to his knees, his face pressed to the ground. Achamian found himself doing the same, though more because his legs refused to bear him.

"So what will it be the next time I die?" he had asked her that night she had broken him. "The Andiamine Heights?"

What a fool he'd been!

He blinked womanishly, swallowed against the absurd pang that nettled the back of his throat. For a moment the world seemed nothing more than a criminal ledger, with all he'd surrendered—and he'd surrendered so much!—balanced against *one* thing. Why couldn't he have this *one* thing?

Because he would ruin it, the way he ruined everything.

"I carry his child."

For a heartbeat her eyes met his own. She raised a hesitant hand only to lower it, as though recalling new loyalties. She turned to kiss Kellhus's cheek, then fled, her eyes seemingly closed, her lips drawn into a heart-frosting line.

It was the first time he had seen the two of them together.

"So what will it be the next time I die?"

Kellhus stood before one of the apple trees, watching him with gentle expectation. He wore a white silk cassock patterned with a grey arboreal brocade. As always, the pommel of his curious sword jutted over his left shoulder. Like Esmenet, he bore a Trinket, though he had the courtesy to keep it concealed against his chest.

"You need never kneel in my presence," he said, waving for Achamian to join him. "You are my friend, Akka. You will always be my friend."

His ears roaring, Achamian stood, glanced at the shadows where Esmenet had disappeared.

How has it come to this?

Kellhus had been little more than a beggar the first time Achamian had seen him, a puzzling accessory to the Scylvendi, whom Proyas had hoped to use in his contest with the Emperor. But even then there had been something, it now seemed, a glimpse of this moment in embryo. They had wondered why a Scylvendi—and of Utemot blood, no less—would seek employ in an Inrithi Holy War.

“I am the reason,” Kellhus had said.

The revelation of his name, Anasûrimbor, had been but the beginning.

Achamian crossed the interval only to feel strangely bullied by Kellhus’s height. Had he always been this tall? Smiling, Kellhus effortlessly guided him between a gap in the trees. One of the dolmens blackened the sun. The air hummed with the industry of bees. “How fares Xinemus?” he said.

Achamian pursed his lips, swallowed. For some reason he found this question disarming to the point of tears.

“I—I worry for him.”

“You must bring him, and soon. I miss eating and arguing beneath the stars. I miss a fire nipping at my feet.”

And as easy as that, Achamian found himself tripping into the old rhythm. “Your legs always were too long.”

Kellhus laughed. He seemed to shine about the pit of the Choraë. “Much like your opinions.”

Achamian grinned, but a glimpse of the welts about Kellhus’s wrists struck the nascent humour from him. For the first time he noticed the bruising about Kellhus’s face. The cuts.

They tortured him . . . murdered Serwë.

“Yes,” Kellhus said, ruefully holding out his hands. He looked almost embarrassed. “Would that everything healed so quickly.”

Somehow these words found Achamian’s fury.

“You could see the Consult all along—all along!—and yet you said nothing to me . . . Why?”

Why Esmenet?

Kellhus raised his brows, sighed. “The time wasn’t right. But you already know this.”

“Do I?”

Kellhus smiled while pursing his lips, as though at once pained and bemused. “Now, you and your School must parlay, where before you would have simply seized me. I concealed the skin-spies from you for the same reason you concealed me from your Mandate masters.”

But you already know this, his eyes repeated.

Achamian could think of no reply.

"You've told them," Kellhus continued, turning to resume their stroll between the blooming queues.

"I've told them."

"And do they accept your interpretation?"

"What interpretation?"

"That I'm more than the sign of the Second Apocalypse."

More. A tremor passed through him, body and soul.

"They think it unlikely."

"I should imagine you find it difficult to describe me . . . to make them understand."

Achamian stared for a helpless moment, then looked to his feet.

"So," Kellhus continued, "what are your interim instructions?"

"To pretend to give you the Gnosis. I told them you would go to the Spires otherwise. And to ensure that nothing"—Achamian paused, licked his lips—"that nothing happens to you."

Kellhus both grinned and scowled—so like Xinemus before his blinding.

"So you're to be my bodyguard?"

"They have good reason to worry—as do you. Think of the catastrophe you've wrought. For centuries the Consult has hidden in the fat of the Three Seas, while we were little more than a laughingstock. They could act with impunity. But now that fat has been cooked away. They'll do anything to recover what they've lost. *Anything.*"

"There have been other assassins."

"But that was before . . . The stakes are far higher now. Perhaps these skin-spies act on their own. Perhaps they're . . . directed."

Kellhus studied him for a moment. "You fear one of the Consult might be directly involved . . . that an Old Name shadows the Holy War."

He nodded. "Yes."

Kellhus did not immediately reply, at least not with words. Instead, everything about him—his stance, his expression, even the fixity of his gaze—grew sharp with monumental intent. "The Gnosis," he finally said. "Will you give it to me, Akka?"

He knows. He knows the power he would wield. Somewhere, beneath some footing of his soul, the ground seemed to fall away.

"If you demand it . . . though I . . ." He looked to Kellhus, somehow understanding that the man already knew what he was about to say. Every path, it seemed, every implication, had already been travelled by those shining blue eyes. *Nothing surprises him.*

"Yes," Kellhus said with a peculiar moroseness. "Once I accept the Gnosis, I yield the protection afforded by the Choraë."

"Exactly."

In the beginning Kellhus would possess only the vulnerabilities of a sorcerer, none of the strengths. The Gnosis, far more than the Anagogis, was an analytic and systematic sorcery. Even the most primitive Cants required extensive precursors, components that damned

nonetheless for being inert.

"Which is why you must protect me," Kellhus concluded. "Henceforth you will be my Vizier. You will reside here, in the Fama Palace, at my disposal." Words spoken with the authority of a Shrial Edict, but infused with such force of certainty, such inevitability, that it seemed they *described* more than they demanded, that Achamian's compliance was some ancient and conspicuous fact.

Kellhus did not wait for his reply—none was needed.

"*Can you protect me, Akka?*"

Achamian blinked, still trying to digest what had just happened. "*You will reside here . . .*"

With her.

"F-from an Old Name?" he sputtered. "I'm not sure."

Where had this treacherous joy come from? *You will show her! Win her!*

"No," Kellhus said evenly. "From yourself."

Achamian stared, glimpsed Nautzera screaming beneath Mekeritrig's incandescent touch. "If I cannot," he said with a voice that seemed a gasp, "Seswatha can."

Kellhus nodded. Motioning for Achamian to follow, he abruptly turned, pressing through interlocking branches, crossing rows. Achamian hastened after him, waving at the bees and fluttering petals. Three rows over, Kellhus paused before an opening between two trees.

Achamian could only gape in horror.

The apple tree before Kellhus had been stripped of its blossoming weave, leaving only a black knotted trunk with three boughs bent about like a dancer's waving arms. A skin-spy had been pulled naked across them, bound tight in rust-brown chains. Its pose—one arm trussed back and the other forward—reminded Achamian of a javelin thrower. Its head hung from drawn shoulders. The long, feminine digits of its face lay slack against its chest. Sunlight showered down upon it, casting inscrutable shadows.

"The tree was dead," Kellhus said, as though in explanation.

"What . . ." Achamian began in a thin voice, but halted when the creature stirred, raised the shambles of its visage. The digits slowly clawed the air, like a suffocating crab. Lidless eyes glared in perpetual terror.

"What have you learned?" Achamian finally managed.

The abomination masticated behind lipless teeth. "*Ahh,*" it said in a long, gasping breath. "*Chigraaaa . . .*"

"That they are directed," Kellhus said softly.

"*Woe comes, Chigraaa. You have found us too late.*"

"By whom?" Achamian exclaimed, staring, clutching his hands before him. "Do you know by whom?"

The Warrior-Prophet shook his head. "They're conditioned—powerfully so. Months of interrogation would be required. Perhaps more."

Achamian nodded. Given time, he realized, Kellhus *could* empty this creature, own it as he seemed to own everything else. He was more than thorough, more than meticulous. Even

the swiftness of this discovery—wrested, no less, from a creature that had been forged to deceive—demonstrated his . . . inevitability.

He makes no mistakes.

For a giddy instant a kind of gloating fury descended upon Achamian. All those years—centuries!—the Consult had played them for fools. But now—*now!* Did they know? Could they sense the peril this man represented? Or would they underestimate him like everyone else had?

Like Esmenet.

Achamian swallowed. “Either way, Kellhus, you must surround yourself with Choraë bowmen. And you need to avoid large structures, anyplace where—”

“It troubles you,” Kellhus interrupted, “to see these things.”

A breeze had descended upon the grove, and countless petals spun through the air as though along unseen strings. Achamian watched one settle upon the skin-spy’s pubis.

Why bind the abomination here, amid such beauty and repose—like a cancer on a young girl’s skin? Why? It seemed the act of someone who knew nothing of beauty . . . nothing.

He matched Kellhus’s gaze. “It troubles me.”

“And your hatred?”

For an instant it had seemed that everything—who he was and who he would become—wanted to love this godlike man. And how could he not, given the sanctuary of his mere presence? And yet intimations of Esmenet clung to him. Glimpses of her passion . . .

“It remains,” he said.

As though provoked by this response, the creature began jerking, straining against its fetters. Slick muscle balled beneath sunburned skin. Chains rattled. Black boughs creaked. Achamian stepped back, remembering the horror of Skeaös beneath the Andiamine Heights. The night Conphas had saved him.

Kellhus ignored the thing, continued speaking. “All men surrender, Akka, even as they seek to dominate. It’s their nature to submit. The question is never *whether* they will surrender, but rather *to whom* . . .”

“Your heart, Chigraa . . . I shall make it my apple . . .”

“I—I don’t understand.” Achamian glanced from the abomination to Kellhus’s sky-blue eyes.

“Some, like so many Men of the Tusk, submit—*truly* submit—only to the God. It preserves their pride, kneeling before what is never heard, never seen. They can abase themselves without fear of degradation.”

“I shall eat . . .”

Achamian held an uncertain hand against the sun to better see the Warrior-Prophet’s face.

“One,” Kellhus was saying, “can only be tested, never degraded, by the God.”

“You said ‘some,’” Achamian managed. “What of the others?” In his periphery he saw the thing’s face knuckle as though into interlocking fists.

“They’re like you, Akka. They surrender not to the God but to those like themselves. A man. A woman. There’s no pride to be preserved when one submits to another. Transgress, and there’s no formula. And the fear of degradation is always present, even if not quite believed. Lovers injure each other, humiliate and debase, but they never *test*, Akka—not if they truly love.”

The thing was thrashing now, like something brandished in an invisible fist. Suddenly the bees seemed to buzz on the wrong side of his skull.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because part of you clings to the hope that she tests you . . .” For a mad moment it seemed Inrau watched him, or Proyas as a boy, his eyes wide and imploring. “She does not.”

Achamian blinked in astonishment. “What are you saying, then? That she degrades me? That *you* degrade me?”

A series of mewling grunts, as though beasts coupled. Iron rattled and screeched.

“I’m saying that she loves you still. As for me, I merely took what was given.”

“Then give it back!” Achamian barked with savagery. He shook. His breath cramped in his throat.

“You’re forgetting, Akka. Love *is like sleep*. One can never seize, never force love.”

The words were his own, spoken that first night about the fire with Kellhus and Serwë beneath Momemn. In a rush, Achamian recalled the sprained wonder of that night, the sense of having discovered something at once horrific and ineluctable. And those eyes, like lucid jewels set in the mud of the world, watching from across the flames—the same eyes that watched him this very moment . . . though a different fire now burned between them.

The abomination howled.

“There was a time,” Kellhus continued, “when you were lost.” His voice seethed with what seemed an inaudible thunder. “There was a time when you thought to yourself, ‘There’s no meaning, only love. There’s no world . . .’”

And Achamian heard himself whisper, “Only her.”

Esmenet. The Whore of Sumna.

Even now, murder stared from his sockets. He couldn’t blink without seeing them together, without glimpsing her eyes wide with bliss, her mouth open, his chest arching back, shining with her sweat . . . He need only speak, Achamian knew, and it would be all over. He need only sing, and the whole world would burn.

“Not I, not even Esmenet, can undo what you suffer, Akka. Your degradation is your own.”

Those *grasping* eyes! Something within Achamian shrank from them, beseeched him to throw up his arms. *He must not see!*

“What are you saying?” Achamian cried.

Kellhus had become a shadow beneath a tear-splintered sun. At long last he turned to the obscenity writhing across the tree, its face clutching at sun and sky.

“This, Akka . . .” There was a blankness to his words, as though he offered them up as parchment, to be rewritten as Achamian wished. “This is your test.”

"We shall cut you from your meat!" the obscenity howled. *"From your meat!"*

"You, Drusas Achamian, are a Mandate Schoolman."

After Kellhus left him, Achamian stumbled to one of the massive dolmens, leaned against it, and vomited into the grasses about its base. Then he fled through the blooming trees, past the guards on the portico. He found some kind of pillared vestibule, a vacant niche. Without thinking, he crawled into the shadowy gap between wall and column. He hugged his knees, his shoulders, but he could find no sense of shelter.

Nothing was concealed. Nothing was hidden. *They believed me dead! How could they know?*

But he's a prophet . . . Isn't he?

How could he not know? How—

Achamian laughed, stared with idiot eyes at the dim geometries painted across the ceiling. He ran a palm over his forehead, fingers through his hair. The skin-spy continued to thrash and bark in his periphery.

"Year One," he whispered.