

◆ BOOKS OF THE INFINITE #3 ◆

King

R. J. LARSON



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R. J. Larson, King

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To Larson, Robert, and Katharin

Love always,
Mom

P.S. Thanks for cleaning the kitchen!

CHARACTER LIST

Akabe Garric \Ah-cabe **Gair**-rick\ Former Siphran rebel. The Infinite's chosen king of Siphra.

Barth of Siymont \Barth **See**-mont\ Royal page and son of Lord Ruis of Siymont.

Ela Roeh \El-ah **Roe**-eh\ Prophet of the vanquished city-state of Parne.

Lord Faine \Fane\ Akabe's chief advisor.

Ruis of Siymont \Roo-es **See**-mont\ A lord of Siphra. Father of Barth.

Matron Prill \Prill\ Ela's chaperone.

Cyan Thaenfall \S**igh**-an **Thane**-fall\ Siphran lord and suspected Atean. Caitria's father.

Kien Lantec \K**ee**-en **Lan**-tek\ Military judge-advocate for the Tracelands.

Ishvah Nesac \I**sh**-vaw **Ness**-ak\ The Infinite's chief priest of the vanquished city-state of Parne.

Dan Roeh \Dan **Roe**-eh\ Ela's father.

Kalme Roeh \C**all**-may **Roe**-eh\ Ela's mother.

Character List

Rade Lantec \Raid **Lan**-tek\ Kien's father. The Tracelands' pre-eminent statesman.

Ara Lantec \A**re**-ah **Lan**-tek\ Rade Lantec's wife. Kien's mother.

Beka Thel \B**ek**-ah Thell\ Jon Thel's wife. Kien's sister.

Jon Thel \Jon Thell\ A Tracelands military commander. Beka's husband.

General Rol \Rawl\ The Tracelands' General of the Army.

Bryce \Brice\ Steward or Chief Servant of Aeyrievale.

Riddig Tyne \R**id**-ig Tine\ Akabe's field surgeon.

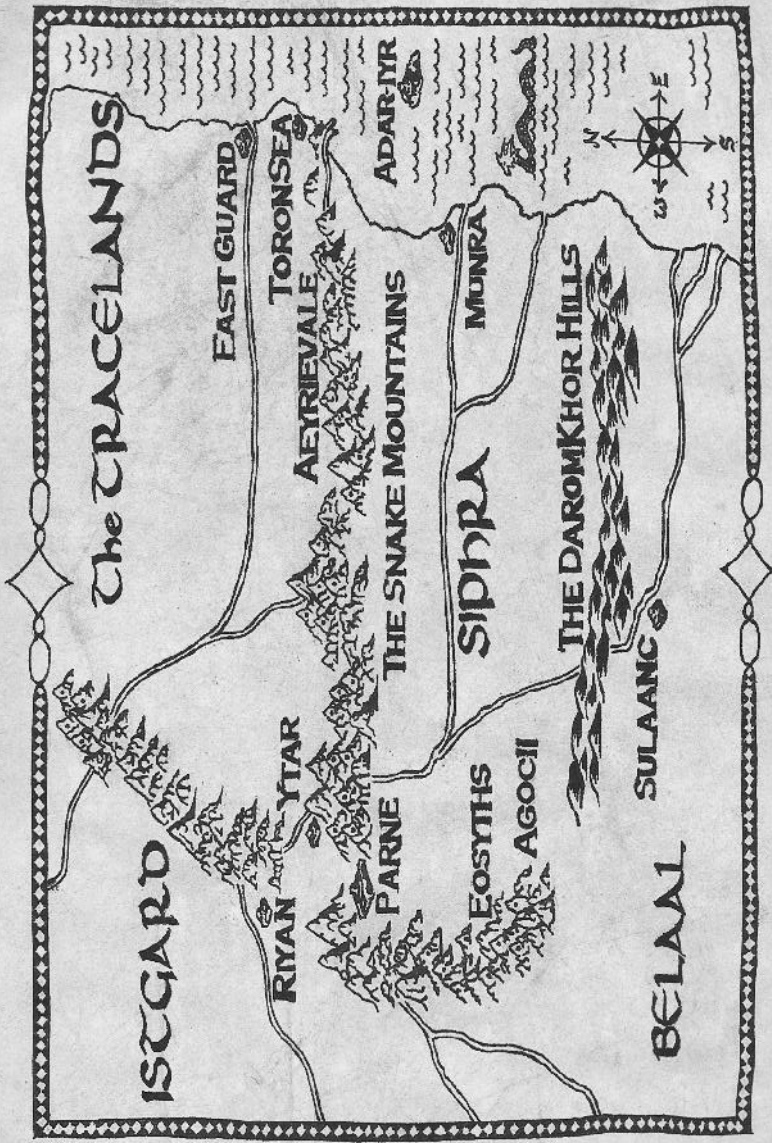
Ruestock \R**oo**-stock\ Exiled former Siphran ambassador to the Tracelands.

Caitria Thaenfall \Kay-**tree**-ah **Thane**-fall\ Daughter of Cyan Thaenfall.

Bel-Tygeon \Bell-**Ty**-jee-on\ King of Belaal.

Rtial Vioc \R**eh**-tee-al Vee-**oak**\ A commander of Belaal.

Dasarai \Da-**Sar**-ay\ Princess of Belaal. Sovereign of Women's Palace.



♦ I ♦

A salt-tinged ocean breeze lifted Akabe of Siphra's gold-embellished mantle as he stood on the uppermost white marble step before his country's razed, ruined Temple of the Infinite. Bracing himself, he called to the crowds below, "Today we have gathered to reclaim a treasure vital to Siphra, and vital to our journey through this life—the Infinite's Holy House!"

Earsplitting whistles and shouts of approval echoed all around Akabe, easing his fears. Affirmations of his decision to rebuild this place of worship, which had been toppled by his brutal predecessors.

As he waited for the enthusiastic uproar to fade, Akabe studied the multitudes in the white-paved public square below the steps. Arrayed in bright robes and mantles, the citizens of Munra, Siphra's capital, met his gaze, respectful, yet pleased. They quieted now, listening. To *him*. An almost-nobody rebel and hunter . . . turned king.

Who could ever dream of such a swift, unexpected rise to power? Not Akabe. Truly, his people were insane. Why had they accepted him as their king?

Yet he must honor their decision. Now he would earn his place—and their continued esteem.

Clearing his throat, Akabe proclaimed, "Therefore, as we celebrate the first day of work in restoring this Holy House, I ask

you all to rededicate yourselves and this place to the Infinite! Let Munra and Siphra be worthy of such a glorious and sacred crown!

“In generations past, the Infinite’s Holy House was Siphra’s glory—a gathering place for our people as we worshiped our Creator. Now, as your king, I decree that this Holy House shall be built again, on this same historic, consecrated ground, acclaimed by the priests of old as the Infinite’s own land. This place must ever be His alone in Siphra! This sacred site that our oppressors defiled, as they devastated . . . and killed . . . our defenseless people. . . .”

Akabe paused, remembering all the precious lives lost before the recent revolution. He eyed the crowd in a bid for composure.

No help there. Many of the women were now weeping into their scarves and veils, while here and there men sniffed and blinked, or rubbed their noses into their long sleeves. Not a family had been left untouched by the terrors of the previous reign.

Fighting back his own tears, Akabe forged ahead. “Today we remember our loved ones—torn from our lives by hatred! We recall their courage and their sacrifices as we feast with our workers at the very foundations of our previous temple. Let those who sought to destroy all worship of the Infinite in Siphra see that by the Infinite’s mercy, we have survived! And I, your king—with all my might!—will guard your freedoms to worship our Creator! This Holy House will again become Munra’s blessed crown!”

Munra’s citizens yelled their agreement, the men stomping and cheering, the women waving colorful scarves in celebration. Akabe exhaled, acknowledging his subjects with a grin and a wave. Success! He might yet amount to something as king.

Akabe the First. Scruffy revolutionary. Rebuilder of Siphra’s glorious temple.

Laughable thought. Sobering, actually . . .

Standing almost beside him as usual, Lord Faine—Akabe’s chief advisor—leaned into view now, his elaborately sculpted and waxed gray beard twitching with enthusiasm. “Majesty, they’re overwhelmingly for you!”

“Yes, and I don’t understand why.” Followed by his gossiping, overdressed entourage, Akabe walked with Faine across the ruined temple’s vast stone terrace, their booted feet sending bits of pale rock clattering with every step. “Until now, I’ve done nothing to merit my people’s approval.”

Faine harrumphed disagreement. “You believe that protecting others during the revolution and then defeating Belaal—our most hostile neighboring country—in battle was nothing?”

“I did not defeat Belaal, Lord Faine. The Infinite did. Give tribute to the One who deserves glory.”

“Ah, very true. Then, sir, it must be that your people are pleased because you’ve not asked for new taxes to rebuild this temple.”

Akabe laughed. “Aha! At last, the terrible truth! They love me because I haven’t spent their money.” As he spoke, Akabe glimpsed a small flurry of movement to his left. Barth, his youngest page and heir to Lord Siymont, skittered across the broad stone pavings, his short official crimson cloak askew as he chased an undoubtedly terrified miniature lizard.

Biting down a grin, Akabe shot a look at the boy’s stately tutor, Master Croleut, who obviously feared to break formation from Akabe’s attendants—much less to physically restrain a powerful nobleman’s heir.

When Master Croleut hesitated, Akabe sighed. “Barth!”

Instantly, the little boy straightened himself, but not his cloak. Flushed from the failed chase, he offered Akabe a gap-toothed smile and lisped, “Sir? I mean . . . Majesty?”

Akabe tipped his chin. “Time for lessons, Barth.”

Barth scrunched his nose as if smelling something vile. He threw an accusing glance at Croleut, who hissed at the boy, “Sst! Young sir, manners! Bow to the king!”

Barth trotted to Akabe, bowed, then protested, “But, Majesty, I finished today’s lessons.”

A valiant plea, but worthless. For the sake of training, Akabe pretended sternness. “With Master Croleut, yes. With the prophet, no. And you’ll behave for the Prophet Ela while I

inspect the temple site, Barth. No arguing with her or with the other students. I command you.”

“Yes, sir.” The little boy’s gloom deepened. But then he raised his dark eyebrows at Akabe in a teasing manner he’d obviously inherited from his father, Ruis, Lord Siymont. “Is she pretty?”

Beautiful, Akabe wanted to say. But caution restrained him. An unmarried king must avoid praising any lady overmuch, even to a child. Why provoke gossip? “You will like her. She’s defeated monsters and survived battles.”

And Ela had anointed him as king at the Infinite’s command. One deed Akabe wished she’d left undone.

He’d never wanted to be king. Worse, the Infinite had given Akabe this appalling responsibility with no true explanation or direction. Not even from His prophets. Therefore, he must make his own decisions and work for the Infinite’s glory and for Siphra’s people.

Leading his retinue, Akabe crossed the gravel-strewn terrace, his conviction becoming more assured with each brisk step. Surely he couldn’t have chosen a more magnificent, unifying task than to restore the Infinite’s Holy House to Siphra. For the Infinite.

Surely the Infinite was pleased.



Unwittingly testing Akabe’s patience, Lord Faine talked nonstop as they marched across the temple site. Faine’s broad, ring-garnished hands accented his intonations. “. . . and we are blessed, Majesty, that the foundations remain from the first temple. This will speed along the new temple and reduce costs.” Lowering his voice, glancing around, Faine added, “As a result, Parne’s treasury alone ought to easily fund the work.”

His lord-counselor’s caution was understandable. The distant and ancient city-state of Parne no longer existed. Yet Parnian refugees abounded here, brought to Munra last year by Akabe’s own army after Parne’s devastating besiegement by their mutual enemy, Belaal.

Mentioning the gold removed from Parne's own demolished temple—no matter how well-intentioned—could only wound the Parnians. Particularly their remarkable young prophet, Ela Roeh, who now waited to greet Akabe.

Her prophet's staff in one hand, Ela stood with her two formidable chaperones just beyond the fringe of her makeshift canopied study area. Akabe eyed the prophet's staff. The branch, Ela called it. An ordinary-seeming piece of vinewood. But he'd seen that branch glow like fiery-white metal, illuminating Ela's dark hair and eyes with the Infinite's power.

Healing her of fatal wounds.

Now the image of a model Siphran, Ela bowed. When she looked up at Akabe, her big brown eyes shone, serene. She appeared, for all of Munra, to be nothing more—or less—than a lovely young lady in a flowing tunic and embroidered mantle. Yet Akabe knew better than to be lulled by her delicate appearance. Strengthened by the Infinite's Spirit, this girl felled kingdoms.

Never, for as long as he lived, did he wish to become a target of this prophet's warnings.

Aware of his watching courtiers, Akabe acknowledged Ela with a nod and a polite smile. "Prophet. I have a new student for you." Master Croleut nudged little Barth of Siymont forward. Scuffing his boots over the pavings, the boy halted before Akabe with an unenthusiastic sigh.

Akabe struggled to sound serious. "Barth, remember what I said."

"Yes, Majesty." Barth looked up at Ela. His eyes widened and, ever Siymont's courtly son, he fluttered his lashes. "I have a loose tooth!"

"Do you?" Ela seemed thrilled. "Well, if it falls out during lessons, we must be careful to save it. Now, Barth, these are my chaperones, Tamri Het and Matron Prill. And they're very strict with me, so I must behave. You'll help me, won't you? Do you have a writing tablet? No? You may borrow mine."

Watching her, Akabe wished he could join the class.

Other youngsters approached, bowing shyly to Akabe before taking refuge behind Ela. Akabe greeted them with a smile, then departed to inspect the future temple's foundations.

Envyng Barth.



Kneeling between the silver-haired Tamri Het and the veiled young widow Matron Prill, Ela clenched the branch, fighting the longing to fidget. Really, she felt so restless that she ought to sit among her little students as they worked. Not good, these fidgets. They were no mere springtime restlessness. And the branch gleamed at her subtly, showing glints of light.

Infinite? What is about to happen?

Whatever it was, Ela prayed the trouble would wait until after class, when her students were safe with their parents.

Little Barth paused over his borrowed wax tablet, giving his loose front tooth a cautious nudge. Eager child. Very self-aware. Ela smiled. "Barth, did you finish your verse?"

He ceased his tooth-wiggling and flourished the wax writing tablet. "Yes—see? And I drew a scaln!"

Scaln! Ela shuddered and banished her memories of the venom-drooling, viciously clawed red beasts.

Goaded by Barth's exuberance, other students waved their work. Before they could accidentally hit each other with their tablets, Ela said, "Very good, everyone! Let's recite our verse, shall we?"

Joining the children, Ela recited from the Book of Beginnings, "'Then the Infinite said, 'Let Us form mortals in Our image that they may rule over the creatures in the ocean and the birds in the sky, over livestock and all the animals that move along the land. . . .'"

Even—ugh!—the stinking scalns.

She worked with the giggling children until a distant horn from the work site signaled the noon meal. A feast—the first meal to be shared on the temple's groundbreaking day. Ela smiled,

as excited as the children. Bless Akabe of Siphra for deciding to rebuild this place and to shelter Parne's sacred books! After Parne's temple fell, she'd lost hope of ever seeing another Holy House. But now she might live long enough to realize that dream. Infinite, thank You!

Ela clapped her hands. "Class is finished! Wait with me until your parents arrive to take you to the celebration."

As the last few children departed with their parents, Barth tugged at Ela's sleeve. "My lord-father is too busy and couldn't come to the feast. May I eat with you?"

"Of course." Ela took his hand. On either side of them, armed with scarves, mats, and baskets, Ela's chaperones, Matron Prill and Tamri Het, feigned suspicion. The thin, imposing Prill made pretend sour faces at Barth—though her joy in today's celebration peeked through.

And Tamri, an eightyish great-grandmother, flicked her festive crimson scarf at Barth while scolding Ela. "Celebration or not, I expect you to behave, prophet-girl!"

Ela pretended meekness. "I will."

Hand-in-hand with Barth and followed by her chaperones, Ela crossed the vast, stone-paved site to its eastern edge. There, massive platters of food waited—a hastily planned feast, honoring the king's unexpected proclamation of his intention to rebuild Siphra's Holy House. Roasts, steaming spiced grains, marinated vegetables, nuts, and fruits filled the air with their savory-sweet aromas. Nearby, hired men cheerfully bellowed at each other while they chipped at huge blocks of ice, spilling frozen slivers into metal and clay pitchers of juice.

Watching them and listening to their joyful banter, Ela's unease returned. Why?

As they settled down on their mats to eat, Prill arranged her food and then nodded at Ela and Tamri. "There! Now I'll fetch a pitcher of juice."

Before she could stand, a man called, "Prophet! Captivated as you are by your new student, you cannot keep him."

Ela turned, startled. The king approached and nudged Barth with a gold-embellished royal boot. “Move, young sir. I’ll sit with you for an instant. Have you anything to drink? No?”

Though his courtiers hovered behind him, Akabe sent a servant for goblets and a pitcher of juice. While they waited, he addressed Ela. “Prophet, I spoke with your father. He’s pleased by the progress his men have made thus far, and so am I.”

“Thank you, Majesty. He’s honored to serve the Infinite’s House.” As of this week, following Akabe’s signing of the land contract, Father was in charge of the team refurbishing the temple’s foundations and rebuilding the walls. And grateful for the work, Ela knew.

“Likewise,” Akabe said, “I’m pleased you’re teaching from the Sacred Books.”

“It’s my duty, sir.” Ela adjusted a cloth she’d placed over Barth’s obviously new crimson tunic to avoid food spots. “Most of Siphra’s copies of the Books of the Infinite were destroyed during the previous reign. Sharing knowledge of the Infinite may prevent future losses.”

A servant brought cups, then filled them with juice from a metal pitcher beaded with moisture. They all waited until the king lifted his cup. Following his lead, they drank.

Ela couldn’t help draining her juice, despite its tartness. Let Tamri and Prill frown at her appalling manners—she was thirsty. Finished, she looked for the servant, but he’d vanished.

Beside her, Barth grumbled, “Mine tastes sour.”

Akabe grimaced at the pitcher left in their midst. “True. The aftertaste is bitter.”

Aware of an unpleasant icy burning around her lips and down her throat, Ela flung aside her cup. “Majesty!”

She wrenched Barth’s half-empty cup from his small hands. He already looked sick.

Matron Prill threw down her own cup and said the word Ela feared to voice.

“Poison!”

◆ 2 ◆

Poison? Yes, it must be. Blisters bubbled in Ela's mouth. Searing pain scorched its way down her throat. Frantic courtiers and guards closed about them now, some calling for physicians, others kneeling beside the king, whose usually healthy complexion had turned waxen. Barth cried out and writhed against her. Prill and Tamri supported each other, gasping as if burning alive, and no wonder. Her own stomach seemed on fire.

Ela snatched the branch from the mat, pleading, "Infinite, what must we do?"

An image flashed within her thoughts, sped by a ferocious mental nudge from her Creator. *Hurry!*

Battling faintness, Ela grabbed a round of flatbread from Tamri's dish. The instant she lifted the bread, Ela saw the branch flare, its blue-white fire spreading through her and into the loaf. Frantic, Ela tore the still-glowing bread in two and thrust one half at Akabe. "Eat! Quickly!"

The king obeyed.

Ela dropped the branch and ripped off pieces of bread for Barth, Tamri, Prill, and herself.

In obvious pain, her chaperones snatched the bits of bread and crammed them into their mouths.

While Ela lifted Barth, she swallowed her own bite of bread. It went down her raw throat, quenching the poison's fire. Ela shoved

a piece of bread into Barth's mouth. He squirmed and fought. "Chew!" Ela ordered. "Barth, swallow the bread—please!"

The little boy wailed. Ela covered his mouth to prevent the bread from falling out. Holding him, she begged, "Barth! Swallow the bread, and the Infinite will save you!"

She felt his jaw clench. The little boy gulped audibly, opened his eyes, and chirped, "I feel better!"

As the onlooking courtiers exclaimed their relief and praised the Infinite for His miracle, Ela hugged Barth and kissed his soft cheek. "Infinite, thank You!" But she trembled inwardly. Someone had tried to kill the king. With four of his subjects—one a child.

Infinite? Who would do such a thing?

No answer.

Ela turned to the king. Blessedly, Akabe's complexion was no longer ghastly. He shook off his fussing attendants. "I'm well. I give you my word. Step back, all of you." To Ela he said, "Prophet, thank you."

She rocked Barth. "Thanks to the Infinite, sir, for providing the bread that saved us. I'm grateful you're alive—that we all survived."

Barth snuggled into Ela's arms, seeming content. Soon the king commanded him, "On your feet, young sir. We must return to the palace. Your lord-father ought to see you're well before rumors reach him that you were . . . ill."

"He won't mind," Barth argued, but he stood. A grim-faced official in sweeping crimson robes nudged the child toward the steps, toward the royal cavalcade of horses in the street below. Akabe departed as well, surrounded by his anxious men.

As the crowd around them thinned, Ela grabbed Tamri's and Prill's hands. "You're not too shaken?"

"Oh no." Prill's mouth pursed testily. "Just another day tending our little prophet!"

"Sorry," Ela muttered.

Tamri's grandmotherly face crinkled as she smiled. "Well, we're alive for now, my girl. Do you suppose it's safe to finish our food?"

“Yes. I’m certain only that single pitcher was poisoned.”

“The king’s men took it with them,” Prill observed. “No doubt they mean to test it.”

“Yes, no doubt.” Ela reached for her dish. Someone had kicked it, spilling half her food on the mat. She picked up scattered bits of bread and vegetables until a gruff voice stopped her.

“Prophet?”

Ela looked up. Two badged officials stared down at her, their expressions unmoving as masks. The gruff-voiced one said, “Will you answer a few questions?”

She nodded and set down her dish. So much for eating.



“Huh.” Akabe studied the dead flies floating in the gold bowl on his council table. “It’s the most effective fly poison *I’ve* ever seen.”

Unamused, his counselors stared at him, then at the bowl again. Lord Faine tapped his blunt fingers on the table. “Majesty, how did your enemies know so quickly that you’d visit the site today?”

“How indeed?” Akabe sat back in his chair. The celebration and his appearance were planned only this week, after he’d signed the land contract. “Is there a spy in my household?”

Faine sighed. “We must redouble our surveillance and your guards. Majesty . . . this was the second attempt on your life within the past seven months.”

“I’m well aware of that fact, my lord. My knife wound from last year *and* this morning’s blisters have made the dangers of kingship abundantly clear. What are you failing to say?”

Faine hesitated. “You need an heir. We’ve agreed you must marry.”

“But have I agreed?” Akabe studied his council members’ faces. To a man, they nodded, deathly serious.

“Yes, sir, you must.” Faine harrumphed, adding with an awkward cough, “Duty.”

“Ah.” Duty. Perfect reason to marry. Nothing could be less inspiring to a prospective wife, Akabe was sure. “Do you believe there’s a young lady somewhere in Siphra who is brave enough to live in this marble inconvenience of a palace—with a man who is clearly marked for assassination?” While they blinked at his acidity, Akabe continued. “Should we also warn her that she’d be sentenced to a life of cold food, perpetual gossip, and endless ceremonies? Surrounded—forgive me, my lords—by packs of staring royal courtiers who’d follow her to the privy to discuss business?”

His council members shifted guilty glances here and there. Faine attempted a joke. “Majesty, you make life in the royal court sound so *uncomfortable*.”

“It is.”

Lord Trillcliff broke their awkward silence. Stout and earnest, his eyebrows lifted in thick silver fringes over his ocher eyes. “Being the king, Majesty, you will have no lack of young ladies willing to share your . . . interesting circumstances.”

Squelching further complaints, Akabe sat back in his gilded chair and stared at the dead flies. Poor creatures. A pity they’d suffered what he’d escaped. With as much grace as he could muster, Akabe conceded defeat. “As you say, then. Have you a list of courageous candidates, my lords?”

Faine sighed as if relieved. “Not yet, sir.”

Akabe straightened. “Am I permitted to suggest a possibility?”

Clearly encouraged, Trillcliff gabbled brightly, “Any young lady of some social standing and impeccable reputation may be considered. However, sir, a foreign princess might bring—”

Princess? Akabe stopped Trillcliff with an upraised hand. Here, he must declare his personal battle lines. “No foreign princesses. And no Siphran ones either—if any exist.”

His tone approving, Faine agreed, “Indeed, sir. Foreign brides bring foreign gods, and we’ve enough to deal with, trying to protect ourselves from the Atea lovers. One of those goddess-smitten fools is likely your failed poisoner from this morning.”

Diverted by Faine's mention of the fertility goddess Atea—and her violently devout followers—Akabe asked, “Has the man who served us the poison been found?”

Faine snapped a look at Lord Piton, the youngest council member with the fewest silver hairs. Caught off guard, Piton stammered, “Er . . . um, n-not yet, sir. Your men are questioning everyone at the temple site, including the priests and the prophet.”

“They're questioning Ela?” Akabe kept his outrage in check. “Do they suspect her?”

Piton moistened his lips. “Um, no, sir. But perhaps she saw details about the intended assassin that others have missed. And she could petition the Infinite for the man's identity.”

Ela. He must speak of her before the opportunity was lost. Akabe pressed his fingertips together. “What I am about to say will not leave this room—does everyone understand?”

“Of course, sir.” Faine and the others nodded agreement. “We hope you trust us.”

Watching their faces carefully, Akabe said, “Ela Roeh is now Siphran. She's highly regarded by our people and is used to dealing with extraordinary circumstances. Not least, she's more dedicated to the Infinite than any person I've ever met. I'd prefer to marry her.”

His council showed surprise, but no opposition. Trillcliff, ever aware of rank, lifted his silver-spiked brows. “The prophet's place is unique in Siphra. Difficult to dispute, should anyone mention her status. Though she's not highborn, she's quite presentable.”

“And,” Piton quipped, “considering her swift actions this morning, sir, no doubt you'd be marrying your antidote to future poisonings.”

Even Faine laughed. But as Akabe enjoyed the joke, it upset him. Ela deserved better than to be considered a living antidote to future poisonings. Would she agree to wed a king?

Tomorrow he would seek information from someone well-acquainted with Ela.

Then he would visit with his favorite prophet and persuade her to marry him.

Faine harrumphed for Akabe's attention, his waxed beard twitching. "Now, to an equally important matter." He lifted a sealed leather pouch. "Thaenfall, Lord of the Plidian Estates, and previous holder of the temple land, has returned the signed formal agreement, giving Siphra full rights to the holy site." Pleased, he nodded to Akabe. "Majesty, you have signed, as has Thaenfall. Now, we—your council members—will add our seals to yours."

Opening the pouch, he withdrew folds of parchment . . . spilling ashes on the polished council table. His mouth sagging open, Faine displayed the agreement's charred remains with its singed gilded royal crest.

Akabe stood. "Thaenfall burned the agreement? Why? Does he want more money?"

"Majesty . . ." Faine rummaged through the ashes and scraps, smudging his fingers. "There's no explanation. But what can you expect? The man is Atean, and *they* would like nothing better than to see you fail, humiliated—with the Infinite's temple remaining as ruins."

By withholding *the* consecrated land, sacred to the Infinite from Siphra's beginning.

Seeing his dream of Siphra's restored temple dissolve amid the ashes, Akabe snapped, "Summon Thaenfall to Munra! We'll renegotiate in person. We *must* legally acquire that land—it's sacred—the only place we can build the temple!"

Trillcliff muttered, "No doubt Thaenfall is counting a fortune on the fact!"

"No doubt." Obviously, their celebration today had been premature. Fuming, Akabe departed the council chamber—and nearly stumbled over Barth. The boy was heedlessly sprawled on his belly at the base of a marble pillar, his small booted feet waving to and fro, his chin resting on his hands while he hummed.

Ha. *Someone* was happy. Pretending to scold, Akabe swooped

down, grabbed the back of Barth's tunic, and lifted him in the air like a sack of wool. "Idling on the job, are you?"

He shook Barth and swung him back and forth while the boy laughed himself breathless.

Cheered, Akabe grinned. It would be good to have a son to play with.

Yes, he would definitely speak to Ela of marriage.



Ela wished Father would finish his conversation with that very talkative young man who'd stopped him as he was preparing to leave the temple site. She and Tamri and Prill were all but dozing off after this tiresome day. Pitying her chaperones, Ela said, "Father's right there. Why don't you two leave ahead of me? Stay home and rest tomorrow."

"Are you certain?" Tamri asked as Prill retrieved their baskets. "You won't need us?"

"No. I promised to help Mother tomorrow." And she intended to play with her baby brother, Jess. "It'll be wonderful to have a quiet day." Ela hugged her chaperones, praying blessings for them. "Thank you. I'm sorry you suffered the poison with me."

Prill sniffed, not too convincingly. "You'd best be sorry! Though I suppose it was an honor to survive with you and the king."

Tamri linked arms with the matron. "That's how we'll look at it, Prill, my girl! Not 'almost died,' but *survived*. Mercy, what will the child drag us into next? I need to retire."

"I didn't drag anyone into this," Ela argued.

"Bah!" Prill said. "You attract every sort of commotion, Ela—admit it. Our lives will be so much easier when you marry. Come, Tam. While we're both young enough to walk."

Pretending offense, Tamri scolded, "Hush, Prill, you are almost a child yourself. You may be chaperoning Ela, but *I'm* chaperoning you both!"

They walked away, arguing about who was chaperoning whom.

When you marry. Ela smiled and shook her head. She'd never marry.

Father finished his conversation and Ela picked up her basket and the branch. He scowled, however, as he watched the young man stalk off in the ruddy evening light. Curious, Ela asked, "Who was that?"

"One of the foremen. Asking for a responsibility I doubt he can manage." Dan Roeh glanced at Ela's basket and the branch, then sighed. "It's been a long day. We didn't need the king's men here questioning us half the afternoon—they set us behind schedule. But at least you didn't cause another revolution."

"I didn't cause Siphra's revolution!" Well, not entirely. She gave Father a fierce look.

He grinned. "If you say so, Prophet." As they descended the steps, Dan asked, "Have you reconsidered? About marriage?"

"No." Marriage. Again! Ela kept her tone mild, despite her growing frustration. "Father, why does everyone insist I must marry? It would be disastrous!"

"I'm not convinced it would be disastrous," Dan countered. "But your husband needs enough strength and status of his own to endure everything you'll bring to the marriage."

Ela's stomach clenched. "You talk as if you're considering marrying me off! Father . . .!"

"I could," Dan said, unnervingly quiet. "And I believe I should. You're nineteen and—"

"Please don't!" Ela begged. She halted at the top of the broad steps and clasped her father's arm, babbling in rising panic. "You know what Parne's elders always said. I'm a prophet. I'm supposed to die young. 'A silver-haired prophet has failed!' I *can't* marry. It wouldn't be fair to my husband. As for children, I don't know how I'd endure leaving them!"

Father patted her hand. "Ela. Calm yourself. Thus far, none of the men who have offered themselves could survive marrying you."

What? Ela blinked. "What do you mean, 'none of the men'?"

"Why do you think I was delayed tonight?"

“That man was asking you for *me*?”

“Yes, and do not yell,” Dan warned. “It’s unbecoming to a prophet. Unless the Infinite commands you to yell, of course.”

“Sorry.” Ela sucked in a calming breath. “Father, promise me you won’t marry me off.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be sure it’s the Infinite’s will for you.”

Infinite? What if he . . . Ela shut away the thought, sickened. No. She refused to think of it. Father wouldn’t act hastily. He cared for her feelings. And if he was determined to marry her off, then only one man could be her husband. Though she hadn’t heard from *him* in weeks.

Kien. Why hadn’t he written to her? What was wrong?



Inhaling the cool night air, Kien Lantec, Judge-Advocate for General Rol, leaned against the open window of his tower room in the Tracelands. Was this his last week of freedom? Soon he would endure the first day of his open trial before the Tracelands’ Grand Assembly.

After four months of legal delays—at Father’s insistence—Kien would confront his fate.

Freedom, he must admit, was not likely if he should be condemned and censured as he feared. Then he’d suffer fines and be cast out of the military and into prison. But for how long? Months? Years? All because he’d obeyed the Infinite.

And because he’d been richly and irrevocably rewarded for protecting his friend Akabe of Siphra from an assassin’s blade. Yet not even Akabe’s written plea, signed and sealed here on Kien’s desk, would pacify Kien’s most outspoken accusers.

Tracelanders, himself included, did not bow to kings.

Kien dared not use Akabe’s plea. Yet he couldn’t ignore it either. Siphra would be insulted if the Tracelands scorned their king’s appeal, while the Tracelands would be equally offended if Kien offered the plea in his defense, causing a quarrel between the two countries.

Kien grimaced. He'd welcome wise counsel now. If only Ela were here.

Dear prophet! Kien returned to his desk and snatched a fresh piece of parchment. When had he last written to Ela? He couldn't remember. He'd been too busy. Too tired.

Perhaps she would come visit him in prison.

"Infinite," Kien murmured as he opened the ink, "please be with me, Your servant."