

L. E.  
Modesitt, Jr.

THE NEW NOVEL IN THE  
NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING IMAGER  
PORTFOLIO

ANTIAGON  
FIRE



# Antiagon Fire



The Seventh Book of the  
Imager Portfolio



L. E. MODESITT, JR.



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  
NEW YORK

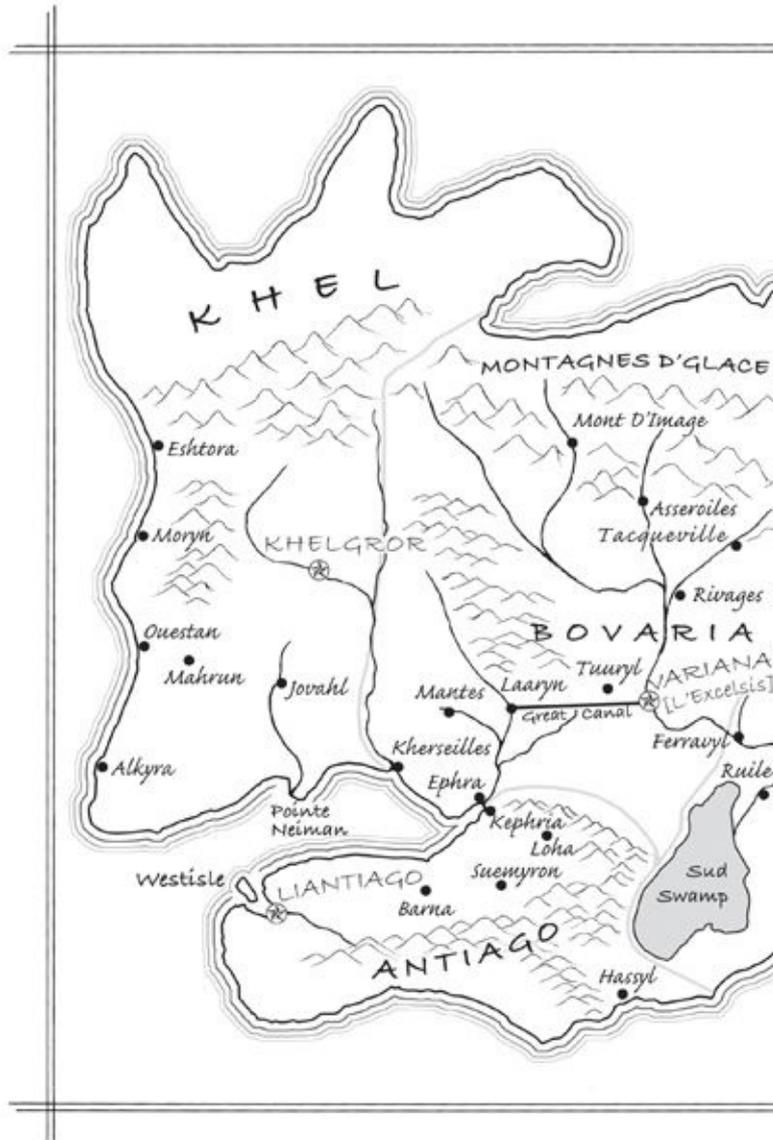
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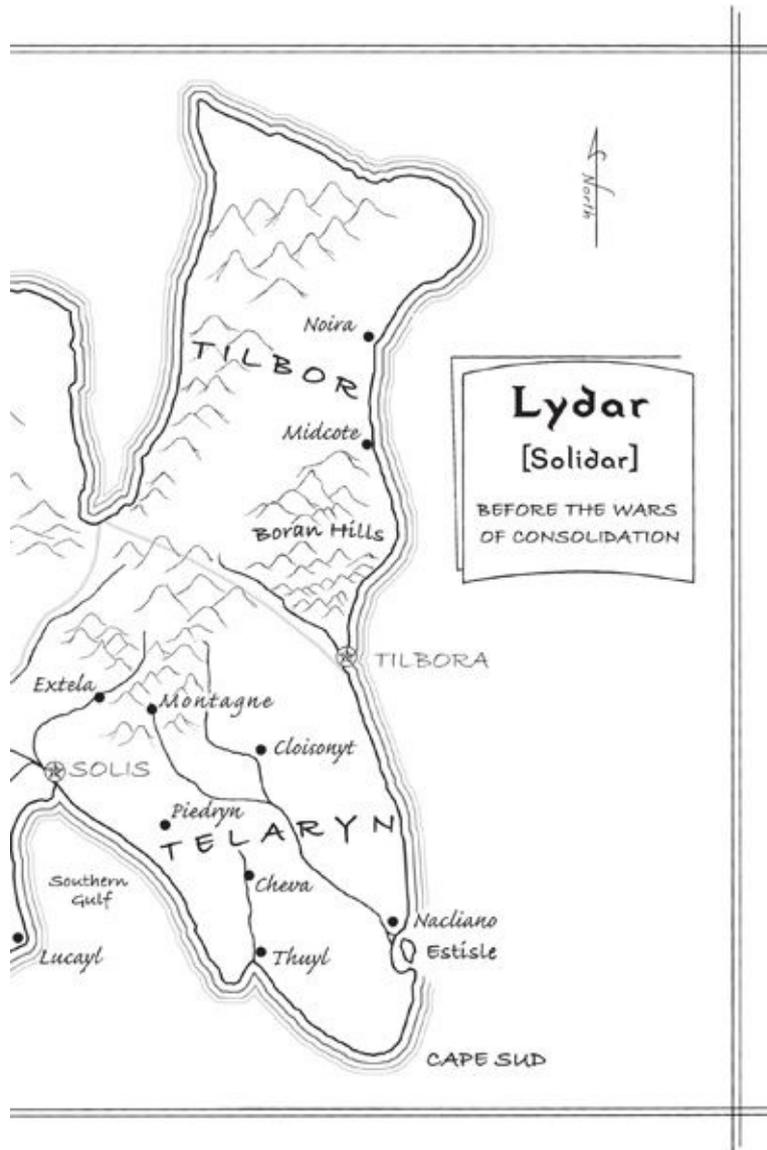
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*For Susan and Gary,  
who proved fast friends in time of need*

## CHARACTERS

Bhayar	Lord of Telaryn
Aelina	Wife of Bhayar
Kharst	Rex of Boveria [deceased]
Aliaro	Autarch of Antiago
Quaeryt	Commander, Imager, and friend of Bhayar
Vaelora	Wife of Quaeryt and youngest sister of Bhayar
Khaern	Subcommander, Eleventh Regiment
Alazyn	Subcommander, Nineteenth Regiment
Zhelan	Major, First Company
Deucalon	Marshal of Telaryn
Myskyl	Submarshal, Northern Army of Telaryn
Skarpa	Submarshal, Southern Army
Fhaen	Subcommander, Third Regiment
Meinyt	Subcommander, Fifth Regiment
Kharllon	Commander, Fourteenth Regiment
Paedn	Subcommander, Fourth Regiment
Dulaek	Subcommander, Fourteenth Regiment
Fhaasn	Subcommander, Twenty-sixth Regiment
Calkoran	Subcommander, Fifth Battalion [Pharsi]
Eslym	Major, First Company, Fifth Battalion
Zhael	Major, Second Company, Fifth Battalion
Arion	Major, Third Company, Fifth Battalion
Voltyr	Imager Undercaptain
Shaelyt	Imager Undercaptain, Pharsi [deceased]
Threkhyl	Imager Undercaptain
Desyrk	Imager Undercaptain
Baelthm	Imager Undercaptain
Khalis	Imager Undercaptain, Pharsi
Lhandor	Imager Undercaptain, Pharsi
Horan	Imager Undercaptain
Smaethyl	Imager Undercaptain





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About the Author  
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# 1

Quaeryt shivered. He opened his eyes to find himself looking up into a white sky, a sky from which flakes like icy needles jabbed at his exposed face. The low moaning of a deep winter wind filled his ears. Yet, for all that the icy needles fell upon his face, each one freezing, then burning, before penetrating his skin with a thread of chill that combined into a web that bled all warmth from his body ... there was no wind.

Standing around and above him, in a circle like pillars, looming out of the icy mist drifting down over him, were troopers in the blue-gray uniforms of Bovaria. Each Bovarian was coated in ice, and each stared down at him, as if to demand a reason why they stood there, frozen and immobile ... why he still lived and breathed.

*Breathe?*

Quaeryt tried, but his body was so chill, with the ice creeping up from the pure white fingernails of his immobile hands and from his equally white and unmoving toenails, that his chest did not move. Nor could he utter even a sound, his words as frozen as his body.

As he froze in the whiteness, the complete and utter stillness behind which moaned the winter wind of devastation, the dead troopers reproached him with their unmoving eyes and their silence ...

Quaeryt stretched, then rose from the table in the breakfast room in the summer chateau of the late High Holder Paitrak. Bhayar had eaten and departed before Quaeryt and Vaelora had come down from their tower chamber.

“You don’t have to rush,” Vaelora said quietly, in the high Bovarian she and Quaeryt always used when alone. “You should have more tea. You had another dream last night, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “They’re not quite as often.” After a moment he added, “But I do need to get ready.”

“You’re not meeting with Bhayar until eighth glass.”

“I worry about it.”

“What can he do? You handed him a great victory, and he’s now ruler of both Telaryn and Bovaria.”

Quaeryt raised his eyebrows. They’d talked about that the night before.

“All right. Ruler of the eastern half of Bovaria ... and maybe the west and north,” his wife conceded. “He can’t exactly punish you for success.”

“No ... but he can keep me as a subcommander and send me off to subdue the north, the northwest, the south, or the southwest.”

“The High Holders of the south already pledged allegiance,” she reminded him.

“Just those in the southeast.”

“Has he heard anything from the lands of Khel?”

“He hadn’t yesterday evening, and if the new Pharsi High Council there rejects his proposal...” Quaeryt shrugged.

“They’d be fools to do so.” Vaelora sighed, shaking her head slightly so that the wavy curls in her light brown hair seemed to ripple. “No, dearest, you don’t have to tell me how many fools there are in this world.” She smiled.

As he looked into her brown eyes, he couldn’t help but smile back at the woman who had raced across half of Lydar to bring him back from the near-dead. After a moment he replied, “I fear that he may send me as an envoy.”

“To prove to the Khellans that you are everything that Major Calkoran was sent to tell them you are?”

“Something like that.” Quaeryt walked to the window, where he reached out to pull back the curtains, then stopped for a moment to reposition his hand slightly. The two fingers on Quaeryt’s left hand still didn’t work, more than two weeks after Vaelora had finally roused him from a semicoma. While they didn’t hurt, and he could move them with his other hand, neither finger would respond to his desire to move. At least, with his thumb and the other fingers, he could hold and lift things. *Or draw curtains.* He was still disconcerted when he saw his fingernails—snow-white, just like every strand of hair on his body.

He eased back the curtains and looked out to the west. Most of the snow and ice his imaging had created to end the battle of Variana had melted, but the land was brown and sere, and the extreme chill had destroyed or rendered unusable many of the buildings on the west side of the River Aluse, excepting, of course, the Chateau Regis, whose walls were now alabaster white and nearly indestructible, not that anyone within had survived.

“You think the Pharsi will balk?” asked Vaelora gently.

“You know they will. That’s not the question.” Quaeryt released the curtains and turned, catching sight of himself in a small mirror on the wall. His brown-tinted green uniform—the only one of that shade in all of the Telaryn forces, reflecting his background as a scholar—looked trim enough, although he knew it was looser than it had been, if somewhat darker than he recalled. “What happens after that is what matters.”

“That’s why he’ll send you and no one else. Khel is two-thirds the size of old Bovaria. He doesn’t want to reconquer what Kharst already bled Bovaria dry to gain.”

“If he wants them to agree to his rule, he’ll have to allow their High Council to act as would a provincial governor. Perhaps he might appoint the head councilor as provincial governor.”

“I’m sure you can persuade him of that, dearest.”

That meant, Quaeryt knew, that Vaelora was telling him he needed to. “Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome.”

A slight cough at the archway to the breakfast room reminded Quaeryt of the serving girl. He turned. “Yes?”

“Would there be anything else, sir and Lady?” asked the serving girl in the rougher accent of low Bovarian. Even after almost two weeks, the girl would not look directly at either of them.

That was hardly surprising, Quaeryt reflected, and something that he’d likely encounter for some time to come. *But that too will pass. Everything passes in time.*

“Another pot of tea, if you would,” said Vaelora, in high Bovarian.

“Nothing more for me,” replied Quaeryt, also in high Bovarian.

Once the girl had provided more tea and retreated to the serving pantry, and Quaeryt had reseated himself across the table from his wife, he continued. “How would you suggest that I approach the matter? He is your brother.”

“Just tell him.”

Quaeryt laughed softly. “That’s easier said than done.”

“You haven’t had problems in the past.”

“That was before we wed.”

“I’m certain you’ve done so since then, dearest.”

Quaeryt shook his head. “Perhaps it’s not about that at all.”

“He has no other choice. Why are you so worried about it? You’ll do what’s necessary, and he’ll accept the inevitable.”

“I ... don’t want to leave you. Not after ... everything.”

“I don’t want you to leave...” Vaelora looked down.

“But?”

“We both have to do what must be done. And if Bhayar has to settle Khel by force,

it will be so much the worse.”

“He still might have something else in mind.”

“How likely is that, dearest?”

“With Bhayar, it’s always possible.”

Vaelora raised her eyebrows.

Quaeryt decided against further speculation as to what Bhayar would do, and asked, “How are you feeling now?”

“Much better ... after the first three months, my stomach settled.” She made a wry face. “Now it is merely growing. What will you do after you meet with Bhayar?”

“Return and tell you, then, if necessary, gather officers and imagers and tell them...”

They continued to talk until Quaeryt rose to make his way to meet with Bhayar.

At half a quint before eighth glass, Quaeryt arrived in the second-floor corridor outside the study Bhayar had appropriated until the repairs and the refurbishing of the Chateau Regis were completed.

The captain stationed there inclined his head, more than perfunctorily, “Subcommander, sir.”

“Just wait until the bells strike the glass.”

“Yes, sir.”

Quaeryt did note that as soon as the first chime echoed down the wide hallway, the captain turned, walked to the study door, and rapped upon it. “Subcommander Quaeryt, sir.” Before Bhayar finished speaking, the captain opened the dark oak door and motioned for Quaeryt to enter.

The study of the late High Holder Paitrak was located on the north side of the chateau, designed to be cool in the summer. Overlooking a walled garden, now brown, with snow and ice in the shaded corners, the north outside wall held narrow floor-to-ceiling windows, each separated from the next by dark wooden bookshelves exactly the same width as the windows. The shelves also ran from floor to ceiling and, with the inside shutters open, the small leaded panes radiated a coolness not entirely dispelled by the fire in the hearth set into the east wall.

The wiry Bhayar rose from behind the wide table desk positioned before the bookshelves comprising the west wall. His shortish brown hair was disarrayed, as it often was, but his dark blue eyes were intent. “You’re looking well this morning, almost back to your old self.” His Bovarian was impeccable and far more precise, Quaeryt had discovered, than the language used by most of the chateau functionaries, unsurprisingly, since Bovarian had been the court language at Solis.

“I’m feeling well.” Quaeryt smiled.

Bhayar gestured to the chairs before the desk, then reseated himself.

Quaeryt took the leftmost chair and waited for the Lord of Telaryn and Bovaria to speak.

“Matters have been going well,” Bhayar said. “The shops and factorages in Variana are all open. The High Holders in the east and south, except for those in the southwest and those within two hundred milles to the north and west, have pledged allegiance. Most have remitted token tariffs.”

“Token?”

“Bovarian tariffs are due in the first week of Feuillyt. Most claim, and have

receipts to prove it, that they had already paid. We did recover over thirty thousand golds from the strongrooms in Chateau Regis. I insisted on a token of a hundred golds from each High Holder.”

Quaeryt nodded. “What about the lands farther north and northwest?”

“Messengers have barely had a chance to reach that far.” Bhayar shrugged. “There’s also the far southwest. The clerks who survived claim that there are High Holders along the border with Antiago who haven’t paid tariffs in years. We can’t tell. Your winter freeze turned those records to mush.”

Quaeryt doubted that the cold had, but most likely the thawing had rendered poorly entered ledger entries illegible. “It’s sounding like Kharst didn’t actually rule all of his own lands.”

“He may not have. I’m not Kharst.”

“Is there anything else?” *As if that weren’t already more than I wanted to learn.*

“I’m pleased about the way your imagers have finished rebuilding and restructuring the interior of the Chateau Regis...”

“They did well. I rode there on Lundi. Or is there something else you would like done?”

“No ... The furnishings will come as they will ... but that’s not why I wanted to meet with you.” Bhayar’s dark blue eyes fixed on Quaeryt, but he said nothing more.

Because he disliked Bhayar’s gambit of using silence to force another to speak, Quaeryt nodded once more and smiled politely.

“There is the problem with Khel...”

“I can imagine. Have you heard from Major Calkoran?” The former Khellan officer had been dispatched—while Quaeryt had still been unable to hear or communicate—with the other Khellan companies to present Bhayar’s suggestion that the resurgent Pharsi High Council agree to Bhayar’s rule, under far more lenient terms than those imposed by the late Rex Kharst.

“I made him a subcommander and constituted all the Khellan companies as a battalion. He sent one dispatch from near Kherseilles. He was heading to Khelgror to meet with the new High Council.”

“What happened to the provincial governor?”

“We can’t even find any records about one. Maybe they didn’t have one. Whatever happened, I doubt it was pleasant for Kharst’s functionaries. Before Calkoran left, I revoked all the holdings of Bovarian High Holders in Khel. There weren’t many.” Bhayar frowned. “I haven’t granted any of those lands to new High Holders.”

“It might be wise not to,” suggested Quaeryt. “Not yet, anyway.”

“I’ll need to create some new High Holders...”

“I’m sure you will. I suspect you can find enough existing high holds in the former lands of old Bavaria whose holders died or who would not fit your standards to meet that need. I even ran across a few I’d be happy to recommend.”

“I’ve read your reports. There may not be enough.”

“There will doubtless be more before the consolidation is over, but you’ll only buy the same troubles you had in Tilbor—except worse—if you try creating high holdings in Khel. Besides, you need fewer High Holders, not more.”

“I’m aware of your feelings about that, Quaeryt. I’m not about to do anything in Khel until the situation is clear. Calkoran won’t be able to resolve the situation. I knew

that before I dispatched him.”

“So that’s why you’re going to send me?”

“I don’t believe I’ve mentioned that to you—or anyone else. You’re wrong. I’m not sending you.” Bhayar smiled, the expression one of pleasure, with a hint of mischief. “I’m making you and Vaelora my envoys.”

“Vaelora?” asked Quaeryt. “She is with child, you know?” He didn’t keep a slight acidity from his voice.

“She rode from Solis here without stopping more than a few glasses at any one time,” said Bhayar coolly, “and that didn’t hurt her. She’s not due until late spring or early summer. I’ve had Subcommander Khaern look into the fastest means of transport. You and Vaelora, as I was about to tell you, can take Kharst’s personal canal boat along the Great Canal from Variana to Laaryn and then down the river. I’ve already arranged for the *Montagne* to meet you at Ephra and take you to Kherseilles. From there, you can take a flatboat up the Groral River to Khelgror. You’ll have two regiments and what’s left of your Fifth Battalion as an escort. And your imagers.”

“The *Montagne* is a large vessel, but she’s scarcely large enough to carry two regiments and first company,” Quaeryt pointed out, “let alone mounts for the men.”

“I also sent the *Solis* and made arrangements to charter ten other merchanters. You’ll have to leave most of the mounts behind, but the traders in Kherseilles should have enough mounts for you there.”

Quaeryt had his doubts about fitting two regiments and a company on even twelve ships, and whether all twelve would even arrive at Ephra. “How do I know we’ll have enough mounts at Kherseilles?”

“I’ve done what I can. You’ll have to do whatever’s necessary when you get there.” Bhayar smiled again. “There aren’t any Pharsi troopers left, except the ones you commanded, and they won’t attack you. I can’t believe that any remaining Bovarian units in Khel, if there even are any, are large enough to give you, of all my commanders, any difficulty.”

“All your commanders?”

“You’ve been promoted to commander.” Bhayar gestured to a felt pouch on the desk. “All your insignia are there. I’d appreciate it if you’d put them on before you leave the study.”

“I’ll make sure I do, sir.” Quaeryt had to admit that none of the Telaryn senior officers who’d covertly opposed him would be able to say a thing, not publicly, after his imaging had destroyed almost all the Bovarian defenders, as well as the late Rex Kharst, his court and family, and all the senior Bovarian officers ... as well as more than a score of High Holders close to Kharst. Equally important, the senior Telaryn officers, especially Marshal Deucalon and Submarshal Myskyl, would be pleased to have Quaeryt out of the way. Quaeryt had no doubts that they would be planning to reduce his influence by the time he and Vaelora returned.

“Might I know the regiment besides that of Subcommander Khaern?”

“The Nineteenth Regiment from Northern Army, now headed by Subcommander Alazyn.”

“Recently promoted from major?”

“Exactly.” Bhayar laughed. “Oh ... and on the way to Ephra, you’ll also be accompanied by Commander Skarpa and the Southern Army. Marshal Deucalon

suggested that to keep Aliaro from getting adventurous ... and to make certain that the southwesternmost High Holders pledge allegiance. Skarpa will also have to deal with the elveweed problem.”

Quaeryt raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t know Boveria had an elveweed problem.” He also didn’t like the fact that Deucalon had suggested Skarpa’s new assignment. *Then again, it might have been Myskyl.*

“Everyone has an elveweed problem. As I recall, there were some factors in Extela...”

Quaeryt nodded. He didn’t like being reminded of some of the difficulties he’d encountered in his brief tenure as provincial governor of Montagne. “What is the particular problem in Ephra? Smuggling?”

“You might recall that Aliaro tried to blockade the port during Kharst’s campaign in Khel ... and that Kharst burned part of Kephria. I’m certain Aliaro hasn’t forgotten that.”

“But Aliaro sent troopers against us on the campaign up the Aluse,” Quaeryt pointed out.

“That was then. Rulers have to be flexible.” Bhayar smiled sardonically. “Then there’s the problem that several High Holders have the equivalent of battalions of private guards funded by their ... investments in elveweed and other even more undesirable substances.”

“With all that, I hope you gave Skarpa another four or five regiments and made him a submarshal,” said Quaeryt.

Bhayar laughed. “Once more, I see the wisdom of not keeping you too close at hand.”

The silence drew out, but Quaeryt refused to speak.

Finally, Bhayar said, “I already assigned two more regiments.”

“That won’t be enough, for many reasons. First, Subcommander Khaern and his regiment will be with me. Second, Aliaro will look at how many regiments Skarpa has. Third, you don’t need all of the Northern Army here in Variana. Fourth, you’ll have to strain to keep feeding the extra regiments...” Quaeryt paused, then asked, “Do you want to hear more?”

“No. From what you’re saying, I should give him four regiments more.”

“You should. Or five. And the promotion.”

“I will. I’ve learned that it’s not wise to disregard your suggestions, even if I don’t like them. But give me some reasons.”

Quaeryt refrained from smiling at Bhayar’s barely hidden exasperation. “First, the title will help convince Aliaro to behave, or at least to think before he tries some form of provocation. Second, it will give the local High Holders pause. Third, it will allow Skarpa the time, the men, and the position to plan for the eventual. Fourth, it will give both Deucalon and Myskyl pause. Fifth, you should also send Myskyl up the River Aluse from Variana to assure the full capitulation of the High Holders in the areas of Rivages, Asseroiles, Tacqueville, and perhaps all the way to the Montaignes D’Glace. By doing that—”

“I do understand that part,” said Bhayar testily.

“It also emphasizes that you’re relying on Skarpa as heavily as Myskyl—”

“And that will require Deucalon, whom you trust not at all, to be more careful in

what he does.”

Quaeryt nodded.

“I’ll promote Skarpa, but don’t you say a word. Arranging the other regimental transfers will take a bit more time. Still ... you and Vaelora should be able to leave on Lundi.” Bhayar put his hands on the wooden arms of the desk chair, as if about to rise.

“You also need to let Skarpa pick his successor as commander of Third Regiment.”

“Of course. What else?” Bhayar’s voice turned quietly sardonic.

“You’re getting what you want,” Quaeryt said quietly. “I’d like something.”

“Oh? You’re now a commander.”

Quaeryt ignored the reference to the promotion. He’d more than earned it. “You remember that you agreed to my building the imagers into a group that will support you and your heirs, and even Clayar’s heirs?”

“How could I forget?”

“They need to be gathered in a place that is both separate and isolated, yet close enough to remind everyone, quietly, that they are at your beck and call. The battle resulted in much devastation, especially along the river. The so-called isle of piers would be an excellent location for such a place. Also, by turning it into a beautiful isle scholarium for imagers, it would help reinforce both your power and your grace in rebuilding a more beautiful Variana ... Although, in a year or so, when you officially relocate your capital here, I would recommend changing the city’s name—”

“Do your presumptions never end?” Bhayar’s tone was half amused, half exasperated, and followed by a sigh.

“Have I advised or done anything that was not proved to be in your interests, sir?” Quaeryt decided against reminding Bhayar that they had already discussed what he’d just said.

Bhayar shook his head, not even trying to conceal his exasperation. “I will be glad when you are off furthering my interests out of earshot.”

“That is another reason why you might consider allowing the isle of piers to the imagers...”

“Enough!” Bhayar shook his head vigorously, but the sigh that followed was the long and dramatic one, not the short explosive one that indicated real anger. “I will hold the isle for a future reserve, for now, until you return from the so-called High Council of Khel with an agreement accepting my sovereignty.”

“You won’t get that unless you allow the head of their High Council to act as the provincial governor of Khel.”

“I can’t do that!”

“How about as princeps? That would allow your rule to be paramount, but allow the Pharsi some latitude in maintaining their way of life.”

Bhayar’s frown was thoughtful.

Quaeryt once more waited.

“Are you sure you didn’t know you were Pharsi until last year?”

“Absolutely.” Quaeryt paused. “You could use that arrangement as leverage to keep the provincial governors of Telaryn in line...”

“They’ll have to grant more than that. At least twenty High Holdings along the coast, and two or three near Khelgror.”

“I *might* persuade them to the coast holdings. I doubt that they’d agree to a high

holding near Khelgror unless you made at least one of them a Pharsi holder.”

“Do what you can, but I can’t let it be seen that the Pharsi are dictating terms.”

“In other words, you need to claim you’ve obtained the spoils of high holdings...”

“You don’t have to put it that way, Quaeryt.”

“I just wish matters to be clear between us. I’ve never spoken for you except exactly what you have stated.”

“Or what you’ve gotten me to agree to state.”

Quaeryt grinned. “You’ve never agreed to anything you wouldn’t have granted, and you know it.”

Although Bhayar grinned, if briefly, in return, Quaeryt knew he’d be in the study for at least another glass, going over details ... and then the minutiae of those details.

### 3

As Quaeryt had suspected, his meeting with Bhayar was not short, and he did not return to the quarters he and Vaelora shared until almost three quints past ninth glass. She was waiting for him in the small sitting room adjoining their bedchamber and immediately rose from where she had been seated, setting a small leatherbound volume on the table beside her chair.

“Reading *Rholan and the Nameless* again?” he asked.

She offered a mock scowl. “Are you going to tell me how things went with Bhayar? Besides getting promoted?” An impish smile appeared as her eyes took in the gold crescent moon insignia on Quaeryt’s collar.

“Did you know?”

She shook her head. “You know I’ve scarcely talked to him since you recovered. I did think he’d have to, but having to do something means he’ll usually take his time in getting around to it. What did he say about your going to Khel?”

“About what we suspected,” replied Quaeryt dryly. “Except for one thing. You’re coming with me to Khelgror. We’re both being named as envoys.”

“I thought that might be the case.”

“Oh ... you did?”

“Think about to whom you’ll be talking, dearest ... and who often makes the decisions. Especially after what happened to most of the men.”

Quaeryt nodded. He should have thought about that. Women were equal, if not more than equal, in Pharsi culture. Since much of Khel had been Pharsi—at least before the ravages of the Red Death and the bloodbath created by the late Rex Kharst’s conquest of Khel—women would definitely be involved in deciding on Bhayar’s offer. Sending not only a high-ranking Pharsi officer such as Quaeryt, but his wife, who was Bhayar’s sister and known to be of Pharsi blood, only made sense. *If you succeed ... only if you succeed.* “It’s not likely to be as easy as Bhayar thinks.”

“I doubt he thinks it’s easy.”

“And ... if we don’t get their agreement...”

“You’ll end up as princeps in Tilbor again or in the far north of Bovaria when all the fighting’s over,” suggested Vaelora. “Or, even worse, as military governor of Khel.”

“That’s assuming I survive the assignments that Myskyl and Deucalon will suggest Bhayar give me.”

“We’d best succeed.” Vaelora’s voice was firm.

She didn’t have to mention that Quaeryt had barely survived either the battle of Ferravyl or the battle of Variana.

“We’ll have two regiments, plus first company, after we leave Ephra.” He kept a bland expression on his face.

“We’re supposed to travel unescorted across Bovaria?” asked Vaelora a trace sharply.

“No ... two regiments and first company will accompany us all the way. Commander Skarpa and Southern Army will also go as far as Ephra.” He shook his head. “After that, Bhayar’s arranged for ships to take us to Kherseilles. I have my doubts about whether they’ll all show up, since ten are merchanters.” *More than doubts, knowing what you know about merchanters. Then again, he had to have made arrangements weeks ago, even before you’d recovered, but ...* He looked at Vaelora. “Did you tell him I’d recover?”

“Of course. I knew you would. I told you that, dearest. What about the ships?”

“His two warships will be there, but the merchanters...” Quaeryt shrugged. “If they all don’t make it, Skarpa could use extra battalions and regiments. Then there’s the problem with mounts. The ships can’t carry them. Bhayar claims he’s made arrangements for us to have mounts in Kherseilles, but he wouldn’t tell me the details ... and that’s not good.”

Vaelora shook her head. “No ... and he probably said he had every confidence in you. But don’t you think we could travel with fewer troopers, even if you don’t want to tell Bhayar?”

“We could. I don’t like it. Do you think I should?”

“No.” She smiled. “You should have the choice of what to do if it comes to that.”

“I still worry.”

“You’ve never had enough troops, or mounts, dearest. Neither has Skarpa. This time, you might. Don’t give them away because something *might* happen.”

*It most likely will happen, but she’s right.* In the momentary silence that filled the sitting room, Quaeryt said, “I need to find Skarpa and talk to him.”

“You didn’t tell me when we are leaving.”

“Lundi.”

“Lundi? That only gives me four days to get ready.” Her eyes narrowed. “Am I supposed to ride the entire way?”

“No. We’re to use Rex Kharst’s personal canal boat as far as Ephra. We’ll take the Great Canal from Variana to Laaryn...” Quaeryt quickly explained the arrangements.

“The Great Canal,” mused Vaelora when he had finished. “Wasn’t that where so many died in building it?”

“Kharst’s father started building it. Kharst finished it. They used prisoners, captives, and some even say imagers. It took almost thirty years to finish, and at least one scholar wrote that thousands were buried under its walls.”

Vaelora shivered slightly. “For a canal?”

“Because Bhayar and his father denied Bovarian traders free passage on the Aluse,” Quaeryt pointed out.

“So they sacrificed thousands to avoid paying passage tariffs?”

“Some rulers find lives cheaper than golds,” Quaeryt said dryly.

Vaelora shook her head, then added, “We’ll still end up riding into Khelgror, I’d wager.”

“But you won’t be riding the whole way.”

“Go find Skarpa. I need to make arrangements for more suitable clothing.”

Quaeryt frowned.