

R E A L M S

THE AWAKENING

E. Otto Tilley

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We've all had the experience of a dream that seems so real that our heart races uncontrollably, panic sets in, and we finally awaken with a loud scream. As we lay there in a cold sweat, we experience the second awakening; the realization that it was only a dream. It wasn't real; 'I'm here in bed and I'm okay.' Our bodies and minds begin the slow decent out of the dream state.

A dream is a fitting analogy for *Realms, the Awakening*, because in it, E. Otto offers us the opportunity to be awakened, or re-awakened, to the forces which are at work in our world.

There is a great conflict taking place throughout the world today. Its roots, as E. Otto demonstrates so forcefully in this book, are found in two powerful entities. One is evil one is good.

The remarkable part is that we have a choice; the deepest element of our human nature is such that we have the capacity to respond to either.

One timeless, universal principle is that the people in each generation make choices that will determine how they govern themselves, their society, and their world. Will they respond by making choices that give air, life, and creative power to the human spirit, producing value in society, families and individual lives? Or will they choose evil that seeks to undermine, thwart, weaken, and diminish all that is good.

— M.B. Lewis

CHAPTER FIVE

Discovered

The warrior Shinlings on the upper wall of the Great Hall were alert and anxious. The arrival of so many wisdom Shinlings had created a visible iridescence that could be seen by any spiritual being, which meant Drakans.

While many of the warriors were posted on the top of the Great Hall, there were also warriors inside patrolling the perimeter in the woods surrounding it. One of them glided swiftly along the furthest perimeter just above the tree canopy, looking down into the trees and the ground below. Suddenly there was the sound of metal against metal, and the warrior's sword belt fell from its waist. The Shinling dove to catch it before it could hit the ground, but as it plunged it suddenly came to a stop, aware of a sharp pain in its shoulder. The warrior was horrified to see that a dark blade had penetrated its shoulder and pinned it to a tree.

The shadowy figure that rose before it could see the look of confusion on the warrior's face. How had it not sensed the presence of a Drakan? Warriors' sensitivity to the Dakarian spirits enabled them to stay ahead of their foes.

"Didn't see that coming did you?" Kairas grinned.

“How did you...?” the warrior started.

“Yes, I know. I’m good like that.” With those words Kairas twisted the blade slightly to send a sharp twinge of pain. “Now, suppose you tell me what’s going on around here?”

The warrior tried to grab him, but Kairas was too quick.

“Mind your anger, young warrior. You don’t want to make this any harder than it has to be. I am a general in the army of Dakaria, and you’re no match for me.” Kairas again tweaked his blade to keep the warrior’s mind on the pain. “Now, what’s so important that you had to bring a whole regiment of warriors to protect it?”

The warrior now became tight-lipped and closed its eyes so that Kairas couldn’t use his serpent-like stare.

“Look at me!” Kairas was enraged and grew impatient. He drew his small blade for a final blow, but the warrior simply dropped its head back, opened his mouth, and let out a sound that penetrated the forest and the heavens. Kairas knew that the other warriors would be there in a matter of seconds. In frustration he withdrew his sword.

“Very clever, my friend.”

The warrior examined its wound as it drifted to the ground to retrieve its sword.

As Kairas glided away he taunted, “We shall meet again. I hope you see me coming next time.” He laughed as he darted away.

“What happened?” one of the leader warriors asked as they reached the wounded Shinling.

“It was a Drakan.”

“Did you not sense his presence?”

“No, I was caught off guard.”

“Did he say his name?”

“No, but he did say he was a general in the army of Dakaria.”

“Kairas,” the leader Shinling said with disgust in its voice. “Where did he go?”

The warrior pointed in the direction that Kairas had fled.

“Should we pursue him, sir?” one of the other warriors asked.

“No, Kairas is smart. He wouldn’t risk facing all of us at once. Return to the Great Hall and continue the perimeter sweeps. I will see if I can find the general.”

“But sir, he is very strong,” the wounded Shinling warned.

“Yes, I know.” With that the warrior glided away in the direction that Kairas had flown.

Meanwhile, inside the Great Hall Solome’ muttered in frustration and discouragement.

“What is it?” Taraan asked.

“I feel as though I am trying to find the most elusive part of the Teachings.”

“Great!” Taraan seemed truly excited.

Solome’ drew back. “Great?” he said skeptically.

“Yes, you have discovered a great truth.” Taraan went back to reading.

Solome’ stared. “And?”

“Have you forgotten your training so quickly?” Taraan seemed disappointed. “The Great Awakening is one of the

most mysterious events in the Teachings, and you know that you will be tested when you seek wisdom to understand such mysteries. How earnestly do you want it?"

"But we've been looking all day!"

Taraan looked at him in disbelief. "All day has been about an hour."

"It seems longer than that." Solome's frustration showed.

Taraan began to argue again when an analogy came to mind that he thought might help. "Do you remember what it was like courting your wife?"

Solome' nodded.

"How long did it take for her to begin to reveal her inner self to you?"

Taraan's analogy caused Solome' to sit back in his chair and smile. He understood what was being said. "Please tell me it's not going to take that long," he half-joked as thoughts of Ela comforted him and strengthened his resolve to finish the task before him.

"The Teachings hold great treasures that King Shinar has concealed for us to find. The process of searching strengthens our resolve and builds our faith. Nothing worth having is achieved without sacrifice, my friend."

"Forgive me. I guess entering the Great Hall was somewhat of a climax for me. I saw entering this room as the end rather than the beginning."

Taraan smiled. "I know. That is a battle we must constantly fight, but you must pace yourself. We'll probably spend many days here."

For a moment Solome' was taken aback by that prospect, but then he remembered his first lesson as an apprentice: patience. "Thank you."

"Oh, don't thank me yet. It will get worse before it gets better. You must be willing to stay here and wait for the revelation of wisdom even if everything in front of your eyes is telling you to go." Taraan's eyes looked deep into his.

"I will, no matter what."

Taraan looked deeper; then he simply nodded and went back to reading.



Far from the Great Hall, Kairas glided along the Forest of Ancients toward the Mountains of Shadow trying to piece together the connection between Braham Province, Lord Johan, the gathering at the Great Hall, and what he knew about the Teachings.

The warrior Shinling gave fast pursuit, knowing Kairas would probably return to his lair, which could provide an excellent opportunity for reconnaissance. But it also knew that Kairas had a good head start. At the risk of being spotted, it broke from the cover of the forest and headed straight for the Lakes of Lindar.

Lindarians patrolled the waters frequently and the langrans they rode like water horses were sensitive to the supernatural. They could see both Shinlings and Drakans, but their reactions to each were quite different. Shinlings had a calming effect on the langrans while Drakans

produced erratic and violent behavior. The warrior was counting on their sensitivity to reveal Kairas' presence. It took a position where the three lakes met at an island, and waited.

Kairas was caught up in thought as he skirted the edge of the forest. He was aware of the langrans and he usually avoided the lakes because of them, but his thoughts had distracted him. The Lindarian guard was unaware of Kairas' presence, but when his langran suddenly became erratic, he became aware of an evil presence. The langran bolted in the direction of Kairas and let out a loud screech. The Lindarian pulled back hard on the reins but to no avail. Kairas turned and bared his teeth at the annoying creature, his eye catching something more alarming. In the distance beyond the langran was a light and it was headed his way.

Kairas cursed. He knew his cover had been blown and that he would now have to deal with his pursuer or lose him before returning to his lair. He bolted for the deep cover of the shadowy woods.

The Shinling gave pursuit. Where the Forest of Ancients met the Mountains of Shadow there was heavy growth and thick cover, and it was the perfect place for a Drakan to hide. The warrior slowed and pulled his sword, every sense heightened.

Kairas hid beneath a thick growth of vine and waited. A small deer fed along the brushy cover eating the tender vegetation. Kairas could see the warrior approaching, and he gently unsheathed his sword. The deer's popped its head up and its ears came fully forward, alerting the warrior. Kairas looked at the deer, then at the warrior; his

only hope now was the element of surprise. The warrior did not know his exact location.

Kairas bolted from the cover; the deer screeched as the brush exploded. The warrior brought its sword up just in time to catch Kairas' before his sword could penetrate its head. They were deadlocked in strength.

"Hello, Kairas." The warrior strained against the Drakan's weight.

"You!" Kairas recognized this formidable foe from a previous battle in the wars of old.

"Still using your old tricks, I see."

"Still lacking in strength, I see," Kairas snarled back, trying to get the psychological advantage.

The warrior thrust its sword forward, forcing Kairas back. "Nothing lacking here."

"Well, this is interesting," Kairas sneered. "You're not going to let me go, and I cannot return to my home with you in pursuit."

"It does seem to be a predicament."

"Yes, well, I've become quite adept at handling those." Kairas kept talking to try and find a weak spot.

"I know what you're doing. There is no weak spot."

"Found it!" Kairas struck quickly. His blade penetrated deep under the arm of the warrior, causing it to drop its sword.

"This looks familiar." Kairas was taunting the Shinling now, referring to his earlier joust with the other warrior.

The warrior dove swiftly to retrieve its sword, and Kairas pursued him, swinging his own weapon, each strike greatly diminishing the warrior. Kairas saw it fading

and unleashed every bit of hatred and anger he could. Finally the warrior reached its sword, but it had become so translucent that it could not pick the sword up. Its hand simply passed through the massive blade. It turned to see Kairas standing over it, eyes red with hatred and teeth bared.

Kairas released all of his fury with a final blow to the warrior's chest, piercing the breastplate and sending the Shinling back to Glodoria where it would have to replenish its power in order to return to Evanescia. Kairas picked up the warrior's sword and threw it so hard it cleared the forest and disappeared into the Lakes of Lindar.

"Well, the next time I see that one, it might be a little bit wiser." Kairas waited a moment to ensure there were no other followers, and then returned to his lair.

Infection

When Ecel woke the next morning the sun had not yet come up. He looked at Erin as she slept and was overwhelmed with a sense of grief. Her whole world had been shattered and somehow he felt responsible. She deserved better than what he had to offer.

He watched her face, amazed that the recent events had not seemed to diminish her innocence. Watching her sleep was like watching a baby. She opened her eyes for a just a moment and smiled at him, then drifted back off to sleep. He eased out of bed so as not to disturb her and walked outside to watch the sunrise.

There was just enough light in the sky to see small columns of smoke easing up through the darkness from the campfires. There was an occasional grunt from the horses as Ecel walked toward the hill where he and Jazaal had visited the night before. He sat down and waited for the grand entrance of the magnificent orb, his eyes growing heavy. He drifted off, and was startled by the sound of clanging metal.

"Help me!" Suddenly he was back in the arena where the man was fighting the grotesque creature. The sound was deafening as the crowd of obscene creatures cheered for the demonic foe.

"Please!" the man pleaded as he fought to fend off blows from the massive black sword.

Ecel wanted to help but he was paralyzed. He could see that the creature was wearing the man down. Who was this man? Ecel could not see through the sweat laden hair that covered his face.

"I can't move!" Ecel shouted, but the man couldn't hear him. He fell to his knees, and the creature moved in to make the final blow. He stood directly over the man, raised his sword with both hands, and sent it plunging toward the breastplate.

"No!" Ecel screamed, reaching out, and at that moment was jarred awake by Jazaal.

"Hey, are you all right?"

Ecel blinked and sat up. "What?"

"You were having some sort of nightmare."

"Yeah, I'm okay. I was just having a dream."

"About what?"

“I’m not sure.” Ecel wasn’t in the mood for discussing it. Jazaal let it go. “You almost missed it,” he said.

“Missed what?” Ecel asked as he tried to focus his eyes.

Jazaal pointed to the horizon, “That.” The sun was beginning to crest over the meadow.



Elsewhere in the camp, Dagan moved quickly along the perimeter with several other Cloakans. This would be an excellent place for them to blend in with the others. There were many men from different areas who had not yet become familiar with each other. The Cloakans would intermingle with the large army and begin to look for weaknesses and ways to exploit them.

“You know what to do,” Dagan said. “Do not try to find me; I will come to you when I need information. You do *not* want to be exposed.”

Dagan’s threat was real. The Cloakans obeyed him out of fear. That is how Dakaria operates. There is no honor or respect, only fear and self-preservation.

The five Cloakans moved into the ranks of the camp at different access points with their horses in tow as the camp began to stir. They pitched in and helped break camp. Cloakans produce a numbing effect to the senses of Evanescians, often in the form of confusion or by stimulating the mind with many thoughts at once in order to dull the presence of evil. This also makes Evanescians open to more suggestive thinking because they can’t

focus on one particular thing; they become susceptible to any thought introduced by the Cloakans. Confusion is one of their main arsenals against Evanescians. The Evanescian mind is incredibly powerful, and if focused on one goal or objective, is almost impossible to stop. Indeed, when the power of King Shinar is flowing through an Evanescian mind, they are unstoppable. Only through deceptive suggestion, can the Cloakans keep them ineffective.

Jazaal gave the order to assemble and prepare for the last leg of the journey to the castle. Before departing he went inside the farmhouse to thank Grender and his wife for their generosity.

“We will be leaving soon.”

“I have some sacks of grain by the barn that I want you to take.” Grender was already making good on his part to serve the cause.

“Thank you. I will let Lord Johan know of your support.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“You’ve been very kind, and I appreciate your generosity. Keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary, and report anything that rouses your suspicion. Your property is close to the castle’s perimeter, so it is a good vantage point for an enemy to spy on our troops.”

“I will.”

“Thank you, Grender. You are a good friend.”

“Thank you, Jazaal. You are a good knight. Lord Johan should feel quite comfortable with you by his side.”

Dagan listened to their conversation from the back side of the house, and seeing that his Cloakans had successfully infiltrated the camp decided he had to find a way back out. There was too much activity to attempt to sneak out so he morphed into a soldier and approached one of the perimeter guards.

“I’m here to relieve you,” he said.

“But it hasn’t been two hours.”

“All I know is I was told by my sergeant to come and relieve you.”

“Very well.” The guard rode off slowly, looking over his shoulder.

“Something wrong?” Dagan fired back.

The guard simply shrugged his shoulders then gave his horse a kick to get it to a gallop.

Dagan knew it wouldn’t take long for the Evanescians to find out they had been tricked. He quickly morphed back into his true form and rode off at a full sprint.

The guard’s sergeant spotted him returning to camp. “What are you doing? Why aren’t you on post?”

“You sent someone to relieve me,” the soldier replied with a twinge of doubt.

“Did you recognize him?”

“No.”

“I didn’t send anyone to relieve you. Blow the horn!”

The soldier picked up the ram’s horn and began to blow. Between each blast, the sergeant yelled out, “Intruder!”

Ecel heard the sound of the horn and quickly mounted his horse, heading toward the commotion. Jazaal was right behind him.

“What is it?” Ecel asked the sergeant.

“One of our perimeter guards was relieved by someone not from this camp.”

“Where was he?” Jazaal demanded.

“At the south end.”

Ecel and Jazaal kicked their horses to a sprint.

The sergeant began to relay the order throughout the camp. “Secure the perimeter!” All the men secured their belongings and took up defensive positions awaiting orders. When Jazaal and Ecel reached the post, Ecel dismounted and began looking for tracks.

“Anything?” Jazaal asked.

“Yes, he rode off this way.”

“You follow the tracks. I’m going to circle wide ahead of you.”

“What are we looking for?”

“I don’t know, but if you see it, you will.” Jazaal’s logic wasn’t much help, but he sprinted away before Ecel could ask him to clarify. Ecel maintained a slow walk from horseback carefully following the tracks. After a while he was far enough away that the commotion from the camp had died down. Now all he heard were the familiar sounds of the forest. For a moment he caught himself dreaming of his home again.

Meanwhile as Jazaal charged through the forest he thought of how pleased Johan would be with him if he could capture this enemy. Johan was like his father, and Jazaal was always trying to impress him. He took great pride in his relationship with Johan. His horse galloped faster and faster through the woods, as if fueled by Jazaal’s desire to catch the intruder.

The tracks led Ecel to a clear path so he picked up speed, glancing down only occasionally to spot the tracks. A few moments later he rounded a bend and could see a lone rider on horseback in the distance. He stopped and observed for a moment, looking for any indications of identity, but the rider continued, walking slowly. Ecel kicked his horse to a gallop and unsheathed his sword. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do, but if this person had been in the camp he needed to at least hold him and wait for Jazaal.

The rider seemed to have heard Ecel unsheathe his sword: he stopped his horse and turned. When he got close, Ecel could see it was merely an old man, unarmed.

"I mean you no harm," the old man said in a trembling voice. "Please take what you want, Dark Rider."

"I am no Dark Rider, sir," Ecel objected.

"Oh, thank goodness." The old man seemed relieved.

But Ecel wasn't convinced. "I followed some tracks from a nearby farm and they led me to you."

"They couldn't have been my tracks. I have come from the Lakes of Lindar."

"You've been on this path the whole time?"

"Yes."

"Did you see anyone else come by?"

The old man thought for a moment. "There was a strange man that rode rather quickly by me a ways back."

"Did he stick to the path?"

"No, he headed toward the north end of the Forest of Ancients."

"Thank you. If you see a Red Knight along this path would you send him my direction?"

The old man nodded. "Certainly."

Ecel turned and headed back down the path, looking for where the tracks had exited, a bit embarrassed that he hadn't caught the escape himself. As he rode back toward camp, Dagan morphed from the old man back into his hideous form and began to laugh.

A few hours later, Ecel and Jazaal met at the camp and discussed what to do next.

"The guard relayed that the man had come from the camp, which meant that he had already infiltrated our perimeter or was part of the army when we arrived," Jazaal reasoned.

"Let's count the men," Ecel suggested.

"Count them?"

"Yes, you know how many men you had when we arrived. If the number is still the same we know he came and went. If it's one less, then we know that he was here when we arrived yesterday."

Jazaal gave the order to his sergeants, who began to count their men and report back to him. When the whole count was received Jazaal found that it was off by five.

"There are eight hundred nine men here, and we arrived with eight hundred four," he said to Ecel.

"What do you want to do?"

Jazaal thought for a moment. "The men are arranged in regiments by towns. I know all of the sergeants personally, so I can vouch for them. We'll have each sergeant account for each man in his regiment. If anyone is found who

cannot be verified by another man in his regiment, we will be able to expose him as an imposter.”

“That should work,” Ecel agreed.

Jazaal convened a meeting of his sergeants and explained to them what was going on and how to proceed. As the sergeants moved out into the ranks, word spread about what was happening. The Cloakans quickly reacted to the threat by spreading confusion. Men began pointing fingers at those they weren’t sure they knew. What should have been a very rational and easy selection process turned into brawls, baseless accusations, and general chaos. When Jazaal saw that things were getting out of hand, he ordered the ram’s horn to be blown.

“Stand down!” he ordered, and each sergeant in turn echoed the order. “We have Cloakans,” he said to Ecel.

“Cloakans?” Ecel had no idea what Jazaal was talking about.

“They are Dakarian creatures that can change their appearance to that of Evanescian likeness, but they are not Evanescian.”

“What are they?”

“I’ll explain later; right now we have to change strategy.”

Darkness Falls

Johan opened up the balcony doors, allowing the sun to warm his face, and then settled into his favorite chair. Logan and Belal sat outside the door to his chambers.

“What happened out there?” Belal could not understand what was going on.

Logan frowned. “I don’t know.”

“I’ve never seen him like this before. Are you certain that apparition didn’t get close to him?”

“I’m not convinced about anything other than the fact that we saw something that was unnatural darting through the woods.” Logan wanted to be closer to Johan. “I think we should wait inside with him.”

“His orders were to wait out here.”

“But what if that thing gets in there with him?”

Belal was determined to honor Johan’s request. “This is the only door in or out.”

“I have a feeling that *thing* doesn’t use doors.”

Belal didn’t want to admit it, but he shared Logan’s concern. Knowing that Johan wasn’t thrilled about having a personal guard, Belal told Logan to stay outside while he went in to plead his case.

“Excuse me, sir.” Belal was very tentative. He had known Drexel Johan his entire life; Johan had been much like an older brother to him. Growing up with five sisters and a father that was always away scraping out an existence on the trade routes, Johan’s brotherly mentorship had filled a great emptiness in his life. Yet even with their close family ties, Belal felt increasingly uncomfortable in approaching Lord Johan at this moment. Belal could not remember a time when he had felt this way before. Nevertheless, something greater was at stake and Belal pressed on.

Johan was sitting in his chair with his head back and his eyes closed, and the voice startled him. “What is it? I told

you to wait outside,” Johan said, clearly aggravated at the interruption.

“I’m sorry, sir, but there is concern that whatever was seen outside could get into your room by means other than the door. Would you permit Logan or me to wait in here with you?”

Johan gave a slight smile. “You may stay in here with me if you can be quiet. Logan can wait outside.”

“Thank you.” Relieved that Johan had agreed to his request, Belal opened the door to relay the message to Logan.

Johan let his head settle back onto his chair and began meditating on the reason for his existence. He began to remember how King Shinar had captured his heart at a young age and how he had determined to fight for Glodoria. He had pledged his life in service to the great King. As he meditated, though, it became harder to concentrate. His mind drifted and he fought hard to keep it focused.

Belal returned to the room and looked at Johan, who sat motionless in his chair. He was either in deep meditation or had fallen asleep. Belal looked around the room for possible entry points. The drapes flowing in the breeze from the balcony drew his attention and prompted him to stand watch from the balcony. Aside from the door and the balcony, everything was solid rock wall.

Belal settled into a chair overlooking the grounds below. There was a slight breeze blowing, and he was having trouble keeping his eyes open. Soon, both he and Johan were sound asleep.

The Drakan was proud of his work as he observed the sleeping men. Kairas would be pleased with his efforts. But never mind that, there was work to be done. He fixed his gaze on the one they called “lord” and savored the thrill of manipulating his already bewildered mind.

“Why aren’t you fighting?” Johan yelled at his men, who seemed unable to respond to him. “We can’t give up!” He was not in the same dream yet it was eerily familiar.

Johan stood side by side with his Red Knights as an immense hoard of Cloakans rushed toward them. He placed his helmet on his head and turned to inspire his men to set their fear aside and fight, but when he turned they were gone. Fear penetrated deep into his heart; *they had abandoned him.*

A large beast emerged from the center of the Cloakans; Johan saw the beast draw its sword. He reacted, pulling his sword up to try and fend off the blow. The black blade seemed to take forever to travel from over the beast’s shoulder to Johan’s sword. The jagged edge of the blade struck Johan’s sword and jolted him awake.

It took him a moment to realize where he was. He was in his quarters, but something wasn’t right. He could see the drapes blowing in the breeze from the balcony but could hear no activity outside. He staggered to the balcony and saw Belal asleep in the chair, reinforcing his fear of abandonment. Johan leaned out over the balcony and could see people moving about, yet the sounds were all muffled. The Drakan was working hard to manipulate his mind.

“They would be better off without me.” Johan spoke softly to himself. The Drakan used Johan’s love for his people to control him. “I am the problem.” This time he spoke a little louder, waking Belal.

“What did you say?” Belal was still foggy headed.

“Nothing.” Johan smiled weakly at him.

Meanwhile, Sebastian arrived and inquired of Johan.

“He’s in his quarters with Belal,” Logan responded.

“Why aren’t you in there with them?”

“Johan would not allow it. He agreed to let Belal stay only after he pleaded with him.”

Inside the room, Johan spoke, but his voice was low and sluggish. “Summon Sebastian for me.”

Belal had felt panic upon waking, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m just a little tired.” Johan leaned on a chair back, his hand gripping the fabric until his knuckles were white.

“Very well.” Belal went out the door to find Sebastian, flustered and ashamed that he had fallen asleep at a time like this. “How could I have allowed that to happen?” he reprimanded himself. When he opened the door he was relieved to see Johan’s brother already there. Belal shut the door behind him quickly to relay the message in private.

“Your brother wants to see you.” Sebastian headed for the door but Belal stopped him, “Something isn’t right with him.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s not himself. It’s as if he can’t focus; it’s difficult to put into words, but Lord Johan is simply not the same man.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll be okay,” Sebastian said, as much to reassure himself as Belal, as he entered the room.

However, one look at Johan told him Belal was right. His brother was standing at the banister of the balcony looking off into the distance, void of expression. Sebastian approached him, prompting Johan to immediately cast his eyes downward.

“I want you to take over.” He was direct and to the point.

“What!” Sebastian was shocked.

“I’ll help you run things from here, but I want you to be the face to the men.”

“They don’t want to see my face. You are their lord.”

“Am I your lord?”

“Of course you are.”

“Then you will take over when the army arrives.”

“What is driving this decision?”

“I don’t want to discuss it!” Johan’s eyes were burning. The Drakan used his emotions like a skilled puppet master. A terrible sense of dread had enveloped Johan’s mind and his thoughts turned dark.

Sebastian knew he had to be careful. Johan seemed to be on the edge of some kind of breakdown. “What do you want me to tell the people?” he asked gently.

“I’m uncertain of that. I only need you to be available to do whatever I ask. Can I count on you?” Johan moved closer and grabbed his arm, looking deep into his eyes.

“Of course you can.” Sebastian had never before seen fear in his brother’s eyes.

“Good. When Jazaal arrives with the army, I want you to convene a meeting of the Red Knights and I will tell them what I’ve asked you to do.”

“What of Solome’? He may not return for some time.”

“He will be fine. Things may return to normal before he arrives.”

“Can you at least help me understand what is going on?”

“I can only tell you that it is taking every bit of strength I have to not ride away right now.”

“Where would you go?”

“I don’t know. I fear I may be endangering the province. I distrust my suspicions of the Great Awakening and I doubt my decision to assemble all of these men. Taking them from their homes may have been a mistake. If I’m wrong, what will they think of me?”

“They don’t know the exact reason you’ve assembled them. We’ve already prepared them for a false alarm; the training they receive will serve them well. *You know these things!*” Sebastian attempted to break through Johan’s wall of despair.

“Something simply is not right.” Johan was on the verge of tears.

“Fine. You rest. I will take care of everything.” Sebastian walked out, leaving Johan to himself. His brother was strong, stronger than anyone he had ever known. Sebastian reasoned that there must be some kind of strong force behind this development. Johan needed help.

“Go back inside, and do not let him out of your sight,” he ordered Belal.

“Is he all right?”

“He will be fine. Stay with him.” He turned to Logan. “If he leaves this room, you stay right by his side.”

Sebastian strongly suspected that this was some kind of Dakarian attack, but he would need the wisdom of someone more experienced to aid him. He found Vagan in the courtyard.

“Johan isn’t feeling well. He’s in his room with Belal and Logan is close by. I don’t have time to explain right now, but you are in charge until I get back. Keep the preparations moving ahead and try not to disturb Johan.”

“Where are you going?” Vagan asked.

“I have to see someone. I should be back in a day or two.”

“Is there anything I can do to help him?” Vagan was puzzled and concerned.

As Sebastian rode off he turned and shouted, “Keep the preparations moving, and do not let up for a moment!”

Vagan nodded and waved as Sebastian rode off over the hill. He had been around long enough to know not to question anyone else about what was going on. The best thing he could do was what he was told. He immediately began walking the grounds, checking on each phase of the preparation process, something his comrade did every morning and every evening.

Sebastian rode as fast as his horse would carry him. Things were beginning to come together quickly. This sudden turn of events had not been orchestrated by King Shinar; there was too much chaos involved. Last minute changes in the heat of battle were one thing, but taking himself completely out of the picture was entirely out of

character for Johan. Sebastian rode toward the border of the Braham Province and the Forest of Ancients. He would go to Johan's old mentor, Goren, and seek his advice. Johan had served under him as a knight for many years.

As Sebastian tried to make sense of what was happening, something suddenly caught his eye. He turned to look over his right shoulder and spotted movement in the trees. It was on course to intercept him. Sebastian kicked his horse and brought it to a full gait. The mare stretched its head forward and ran with great speed. Sebastian unsheathed his sword, for the other rider was keeping up and drawing closer. It was a Dark Rider!

"Yah!" Sebastian ordered the horse. *I don't have time for this.*

The Dark Rider came alongside of Sebastian, and suddenly everything went black.



When he came around, all Sebastian could see from his vantage point lying on the ground, was the outline of two figures standing over him.

"That's the symbol of the Red Knights," one Rider said as he poked Sebastian's breastplate with his sword.

"Well, well, well... we might just be able to fetch us some money with this here prize."

"Looks like he's coming around."

"Allow me." The Dark Rider struck Sebastian with the handle of his sword. Sebastian's eyes rolled back and his head fell back to the ground.

CHAPTER SIX

Quiet Revelation

The torches flickered along the corridors of bookcases that held the Teachings in the Great Hall. Peculiar shadows moved with the dancing of the torch flames. The wisdom Shinlings were now moving about the room in a seemingly choreographed fashion, chanting in a Glodorian language. Taraan and Solome' were asleep; they had been reading for thirty-six hours and had surrendered to exhaustion. The one that arrived with Solome' hovered over him repeating the same word over and over: *see*.

The Shinling was looking over Solome's shoulder at the book that lay in his lap and massaging his mind at the same time. Putting its hands on either side of Solome's head, it moved in very close. Steadily its eyes began to glow like fire; embers at first, then growing in intensity. The other Shinlings now travelled faster and faster about the ancient room, their chorus entering a crescendo, as the glowing eyes of Solome's Shinling were now like burning flames. The gliding pattern became more of a circle that began to get smaller and smaller, now centered on Solome' and the Shinling hovered over him. With great speed and a tight formation, the Shinlings became as one body, forming a luminous funnel over the pair.