

Prologue (third discarded version)

[This discarded version of a prologue for book one includes an appearance by the character Alexin.]

Randolph's mind was trapped in a dream of discovery. In the real world, he was fifteen days out of Northport, sleeping on dirt and grass that were cracked and browned by the lack of rain. His body was wrapped in a heavy cloak, his legs, buttocks and back suffering from a range of aches and minor sprains after two weeks of continuous riding. But in his dream, he was walking along a massive boulevard in an ancient city with towering buildings and streets paved with burnished cobblestones. Larks and swallows swooped and sang overhead, and a frothy parade of white clouds streamed across the sky.

Many cities contained beautiful buildings, and he had seen many of the most impressive during his decades of travel. Yet he felt wondering awe when he walked—glided—toward a building with stones as tall as a full-grown man and gigantic marble columns that stretched far higher than any architect in his world had ever achieved. This city, real or imagined, dwarfed anything he had seen previously on the mainland or southern islands. It made even Setiphon, the capital of the Tiberian Empire, look small and shabby.

Perhaps some of the city's size was an optical illusion: its streets were emptied of people. This absence might be causing the city to loom larger in his perception. Still, he walked along the boulevard for hundreds of steps before reaching a wide staircase.

One man, the only visible person, awaited him at the top of the building's long front stairway. Randolph started up the steps. No wind, no smells of baking bread or sewage, no protests from the muscles in his legs, sunlight but no heat on his head or face—more evidence that this was only a dream.

He stopped across from the man and announced, "This is a dream. A dream."

The man, tall and thin like a reed, smiled broadly—his smile revealed the comfort and contentment of a person at home. His beard was pure white and shaggy, but the smile made him seem decades younger and his eyes projected a concentrated intelligence.

"Perhaps it is," the man said, while grinning. "How can you be sure when you are not conscious? If you are not conscious." The grin broadened.

Randolph grunted. "I am too tired to work on riddles. I need my rest for the day's ride."

The man shrugged, the motion somehow implying an apology without the promise of repentance. "I am sorry to disturb your rest, but I need you to tell Gillian to quit dawdling. He hasn't changed; he has a ward on his thoughts, even though you're camping in the middle of nowhere. Tell him I said to ride as if time were running out."

Dawdling? Every muscle in Randolph's body ached even in sleep. Gillian, one of his traveling companions, had set the pace of their ride, and it had been brutal. "Who are you?"

"My name is Alexin. He'll know me. Tell him. Sleep. Remember."

In the morning, Randolph opened his eyes and had nearly perfect recall of the strange conversation. A stiff breeze from the west suited the gray blanket of clouds overhead, and his joints crackled and popped as he sat and then stood.

For a while, Randolph pondered whether to share the dream with Gillian. Power drove many mages mad, so even hinting that your mind might be behaving unusually was never a small risk. Still, the dream had seemed too real to be an internal creation. He knew that Gillian had

secrets. Bringing some of them into the light was a major reason for his presence on this expedition. The possibility that this encounter was another of them did exist, so although he had not sensed any power at work, Randolph decided to share the conversation with his old friend.

Gillian listened impassively as he described the dream, although his face seemed to lose color second by second. He was at least a foot taller than Randolph and older, although the gray streaks in his hair were balanced by toned muscles and sharp green eyes. Gillian was an anomaly among the mages Randolph knew because the man somehow found the time to master weapons.

“He said to quit dawdling and ride as if time were running out,” Randolph finished.

Gillian grimaced. “That’s him, sure enough. If he’s involved, then we’re facing a greater threat than we feared.”

“Who is he?”

“A good question. I’m not sure. I do know that he’s the strongest, most skilled mage I’ve ever encountered and that he always shows up before serious trouble.”

“If he’s powerful enough to embed his words in my thoughts, then he could also implant the illusion of that monstrous city.”

“He could. But he doesn’t need to bother.” Gillian shrugged. “The city is probably real; we just don’t know where it is. How he was able to contact you, though, is an interesting question? Before we start the day’s ride, we need to search your clothing. He might have had one of his agents sew a vector crystal into a lining or something similar.”

After that disclosure, Gillian surveyed the loose cluster of their ten companions, all now engaged in packing gear, cooking, or readying horses. He called for their attention. “Be alert today, friends. We ride into danger.”

Randolph, Gillian, and their escorts mounted their horses as soon as they finished all of the necessary tasks. Gillian was traveling with five other men from his elite guard—at the least, all would be blademasters and probably instructors at the Academy of War, when they were not otherwise occupied on scouting or diplomatic missions for Queen Maurelle, Gillian’s sovereign. Randolph’s escort included only two former soldiers but all five of his companions were mages who taught at the University in Khartras, the capital of King Martin’s realm.

After such a morning, how could Randolph have been anything but alert? When Gillian had stopped at the city of Khartras on the first stage of his long journey to the northeast, Randolph had been gathering his own party for a similar journey. Strange reports and rumors from the northern lands and the Free Cities had convinced him that some power, perhaps the Corsairs of Remar, might be gathering strength for an incursion.

During their conversation, Gillian had said that he had similar suspicions, although his sources thought the threat did not come from the corsairs but from a different potential enemy. Randolph recognized obliquely expressed certainty when he heard it, but he was astounded by the gap in knowledge that Gillian’s confidence implied.

A frenzied week of research in the university’s archives had revealed only fragmented hints that Gillian’s people had fought a war close to five hundred years ago with an unnamed enemy from the east. There was a gray gap in the historical record. If Gillian’s people had more knowledge, then there was a secret between their two peoples. And secrets were dangers.

Their horses might be moving at a canter, but Randolph’s thoughts raced like a galloping stallion ran. Gillian’s people had sent small patrols to the north and east for centuries; for the cause of civilization, they had opposed the corsairs with an almost religious devotion. Yet Gillian’s words implied a greater threat. Why would his people hide such knowledge from their closest allies?

Two hours later, they rode into a small hamlet of perhaps two dozen houses and a traveler's inn. According to the map they had secured from merchant contacts in Northport, there was a diamond mine to the northwest, and the inn served as a waypoint for caravans to and from the mine. But the village had existed for centuries and might exist for centuries after the mine had exhausted itself. Cultivated fields fanned out from the cluster of houses, and a handful of men and boys led oxen in tilling the soil. It was time for the spring planting, and these people faced months of backbreaking labor to replenish their food supplies after the long winter.

Two of Gillian's men had brought down a black bear that morning, though, so they had meat and a skin to trade for leather repairs, new shoes for several horses, and news.

Randolph set aside the ornate speculations in his mind about Alexin's identity. They were not the sort of thoughts often shared among scholars at his level; they were closer to the domain of the wise women who often lived in villages just like the one they were entering. He was entering a new place, and the details of this village would be recorded in his journal later this evening. There weren't enough men working in the fields, he thought, so the village might have suffered from a recent outbreak of the plague or a food shortage during the recent winter. He would ask the village elders once he found them.

Beside him, Gillian stiffened, although the motion was almost imperceptible and probably only noticeable to someone who had spent several weeks riding beside him. Gillian's quick hand gesture generated an increased alertness among his men. So Randolph passed his own signal to his companions—scholar-mages from the University. Safety sometimes came before knowledge.

"Do you notice anything strange about this village?" Gillian's voice was soft.

Randolph surveyed the homes and people working in the yards. He used a trick that he had learned over two decades ago, letting his mind accept all that he saw and waiting patiently for anything unusual to bubble up into his conscious awareness. "Nobody is looking at us. And the elders are missing."

"Yes," Gillian said, with an oddly reflective and somehow almost anticipatory note in his voice. "We're strangers; we should be the center of attention. They always cull the old ones first—it's ruthlessly efficient, but predictable."

"They?"

Answers to his question sliced through the air. A storm of arrows from at least four different doorways and the second story of a traveler's inn hissed toward them, the metal arrowheads racing hungrily for blood.

Yet all of the arrows bounced away from the men, the shafts of several splintering with loud cracks, and fell to the ground. None had come closer than three feet to any member of the party. The shield that had repelled them must have been Gillian's, but if so, the man's control was amazing and his power subtle.

Then the hair on Randolph's forearms stood up and the air crackled with power. Yet another surprise for the day: apparently *all* of Gillian's companions were strong mages. He raised his own wards and knew his fellow mages would be doing the same.

Silence fell.

It was soon broken by Gillian's harsh bark of laughter. "Show yourself, Stradagh"—Randolph had never heard the word before—"I know you are here."

"Stradagh?" Randolph muttered. "'Viper child' or 'Snake kin.'"

"Children of the Viper," Gillian said. "I'll explain later."

"You will explain *never*," a new voice promised.

Men poured out of doorways like a flood. There were perhaps twenty-five of them.

“Five Fists for one small village.” Gillian was smiling thinly, but the expression looked more like a wolf baring its teeth. “So I was right; you have returned.”

Something of the emotion in his voice must have been apparent to their attackers. Many of them glanced at Gillian before returning their eyes to the other members in Randolph’s party.

“Who are you?” The same voice asked. It belonged to a lean man with black hair and eyes who was also dressed in a black tunic and pants.

“You must be young, if you do not recognize me.” Gillian ran his eyes over the men and then focused on the speaker. “You have a lot of friends, but where are your elders? Or are they making children fight their battles for them? Again.”

The man’s brow wrinkled; he stepped closer. “Who are you?”

“My name is Gillian Whiterose.”

The leader actually took a step backward, although he seemed unaware of it. “That is impossible.”

“The truth isn’t always comforting,” Gillian said. “Did you and your comrades kill my men? You should know the ones I mean.”

“No.” The leader spit on the ground. “But we’re the ones who are going to kill you.”

“Perhaps,” Gillian said. “Surely someone will die today. Your people owe me for those six lives.”

Even as Gillian was speaking the last word, the man screamed “Die!” and the air blazed with orange streaks of mage fire. Gillian and the man had launched their attacks almost simultaneously, and their comrades had quickly followed suit.

Randolph’s wards were still up, and he was thankful that his own companions had mimicked his actions, because enough power was blazing between the two groups to annihilate a battalion of cavalry.

He and his men had a brief respite, because quite a bit of the power from the Stradagh was aimed at Gillian. Randolph and his companions took advantage of the lull by launching their own attacks at the strangers. When in doubt, attacking the enemy of what they thought were friends seemed to be the best strategy.

The sudden unmasking and the unexpected attacks were clearly disconcerting to the Stradagh, because at least four of them fell before the first counterattacks slammed into Randolph’s shields.

For a while, it was all he could do to fend off the attacks and keep himself alive. These Fists coordinated their attacks with a precision he had never encountered, and even two or three of them working together were far more effective than two or three individuals. He and his companions were going to need to learn new tactics to survive these kinds of battles.

Here was the most frightening realization, though: Randolph could not be certain, but he suspected Gillian might have been able to triumph on his own. The man’s power was that strong. At least fifteen of the Stradagh fell to his attacks. Add his companions and Randolph and his scholar-mages, and the outcome was never truly in doubt.

The fight was over in less than two minutes.

Their battered eardrums slowly recovered and absorbed the screams and wailing of terrified villagers, many of whom could be heard even from outside of their homes.

Gillian spoke first, and his voice was loud enough to carry into the buildings and far out into the fields. “Anyone who wants to live for another day should leave this place. Go south or west as quickly as you can and as far as you can. This advice is all the help I can give you.”

He turned to Randolph. "Thank you, my friend. The Children read you as mundane, and you and yours are much stronger than they would have expected. They severely miscalculated the odds." He surveyed the trees visible beyond the village's outskirts. The leaves swayed gently in the morning breeze. "They will have more of their brothers nearby. We need to ride now."

"Will they follow?"

Gillian shrugged. "Perhaps. But if we get a good start ahead of the pursuit, they won't be able to catch us. They may not even pursue us. They're systematic and patient; they'll be content to get us later."

"So we have something worse than the Corsairs of Remar heading in our direction." He sighed and surveyed the bodies surrounding them—twenty-five mages in only one advance scouting party. "You knew they were here?"

"I suspected they were somewhere in this region, yes."

"Then why lead me and my men in with blindfolds on our eyes?"

"An apt metaphor," Gillian said, "and I apologize. I had lost too many men; I was not willing to lose another one. But I am bound not to share certain matters with outsiders, no matter how trustworthy they might be. In the meantime, I thought that if you had a true sense of what we face, you might be less angry when you learn the whole truth. Please do not overestimate the extent of what I, and my people, know. We know . . . more than you do and less than we want to. Like you, we have a theory of what might be happening. We lacked any certain evidence, which is why I am here."

"Yet you are not willing to share your theory."

"I am willing. But I cannot act on my own initiative in this matter. I must consult with Queen Maurelle and her advisors. I will urge them to lift the prohibition, and as soon as they do, I will share with you everything I know."

Randolph sighed. "I am not content at all with that answer. But forcing the issue now would be pointless. I can promise to keep your secret until we speak before the Council of the Seven. After that, the Council will deliberate, and we will act as we see fit. You know my brethren, though; they will demand that you share your knowledge of these people with King Martin."

By now they were cantering south and the village was already receding behind them, and they rode past a dozen tall oaks before Gillian turned and made eye contact with Randolph.

"Please ask them to act as they think best, so long as they are willing to accept responsibility for the consequences. None of us will need more enemies in the days ahead of us, I promise you that."

"Knowledge, rather than ignorance, makes us safer." Randolph smiled. "Give me something I can share with them, something that proves you and yours are still our friends. Tell me who Alexin is."

"Alexin watches all of us, and he helps those he believes are worthy of his help. He's older than the Tiberian Empire. Some of my people think he's a god." Gillian held up a hand. "I'm sorry, my friend, but that's all I know about him. My original fear probably would not have attracted his attention. If he is involved, we might be at the beginning of a fight for our survival. We must return home as quickly as possible, so I can speak to the queen and my people's Assembly. Tell your council, and perhaps your king, to prepare for a war, a big one. The Tiberian Empire is not the only threat to his kingdom. We will ready our defenses."

"I'm not even going to ask."

“Good,” Gillian said, “because I can’t talk about that either. Yet, at least.” He spurred his horse to a faster canter. “Let us ride.”

They had a long, brutal journey ahead of them, and it was just the beginning. Behind them, the empty buildings of a dead village stood alone until the hazy sky, its future also unknown and uncertain.