All My Holy Mountain
THE BINDING OF THE BLADE

BY L. B. GRAHAM

Beyond the Summerland
Bringer of Storms
Shadow in the Deep
Father of Dragons
All My Holy Mountain
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L. B. GRAHAM
For my father, Thomas Edward Graham,
who has entered already into the joy of his reward
and tasted of the restoration for which we long.
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The Prophecy

Corian walked to the edge of the great pavilion and looked out over the tents fluttering in the stiff winter breeze. Midwinter and the New Year had come and gone two days ago, and still the Assembly bickered and debated. Malek had shut himself inside the Mountain after the fall of Vulsutyr some seven years before, but without Allfather’s permission to go up after him, there was nothing the Kirthanim could do but wait.

He turned from the tents and looked to the Mountain itself. It rose, tall and imposing in the twilight. Not since the end of the First Age had any man dared set foot upon it, that is, until Malek and his hosts fled into its labyrinth of tunnels and caverns. Now the long-deserted Mountain teemed with dark and vile life. Some were made by Malek. All were obedient to him, living in subterranean darkness.

Corian sighed. If Allfather would not grant their petition to go up the Mountain after Malek, then the future defense of Kirthanin must be looked to. First and foremost on the list of essential matters, Corian believed, was the still-gaping wound
held open by the interrupted and unresolved Civil War. While Kel Imlaris had not been in the center of the conflict that tore Kirthanin apart (indeed, Kel Imlaris was never in the center of anything), the division touched even his beloved home city. Corian could sense the deeper divide among his brothers on the Assembly, and it grieved him.

Stepping from the pavilion, he moved out into the gathering night. He had walked this ground each year for seven years, just like the others, and still Allfather was silent. No prophet came bearing word of Allfather’s direction. In fact, Erevir had not even been seen since Malek’s retreat into the Mountain, and no one knew where the prophet had gone. What’s more, the Assembly’s attempts to solve their problems had failed over and over again.

He needed to propose his plan. He knew it would sound crazy to the others. They were men of action with little on their minds beyond building defenses or finding ways to hem Malek in if Allfather disallowed direct engagement. The subtlety and long-term value of his idea would be missed by many, but nevertheless, he needed to try. When he listened to the debates and heard the bitterness in both what was said and, more poignantly, in what was left unsaid, he understood that hope for a real and lasting peace lay not with them but with their children.

Corian stopped between two large tents bearing the red and grey of Tol Emuna, the colors mirroring the rough terrain of that formidable city. Beyond them his own tent, brilliantly decorated in the vibrant blue and yellow of Kel Imlaris, reflected the brighter world of his sunny home. He looked up at the stars beginning to shine. He’d never been much use in things military, and even in the discussions and negotiations of recent years, where he should have excelled, he had failed. He couldn’t afford to fail this time. He could feel the frustration mounting on every side. No, none of them was foolish...
enough to resort to blows again, not after all it had cost them, but they might well accept, even embrace, the cold disharmony that had settled upon the land. The once-vicious foes, though no longer at war, each looked only to their own cities and houses. Kirthanin could not afford that state of affairs to persist, not if they hoped to stand strong and stand together against the looming threat of Malek in the Mountain.

He would try to mediate an agreement that all would honor, but to do that, he would have to get Dalamere of Shalin Bel and King Sandrel of Amaan Sul to agree first. They were influential and respected men, and if they could shake hands over the agreement, then Corian could present it to the Assembly with support. The fact that such bitter rivals could agree would force the others to take notice. Yes, it had to be done, and soon.

Every year since Malek’s retreat, the Assembly gathered at the foot of the Mountain a week before the New Year. Every year, they stayed for ten days. Every year, on the evening of the third day of the New Year, someone suggested that the Assembly should be concluded, that they’d accomplished all they could, that no word from Allfather had come and did not appear likely to come. Every year, the fourth day dawned to find the great tents coming down and each delegation preparing to ride. Every year, the fourth day of the New Year ended with the pavilion and the broad clearing empty once more.

Tomorrow was the third day, and no word from Allfather had come. He could wait no longer.

The sun rose over Gyrin, its expanse stretching to the eastern horizon. Though the delegates were gathered right at Malek’s doorstep with only a token force of men from each city, Corian knew they were as safe here with the might of the Gyrindraal protecting them as they would be in far off Kel Imlaris by the shining sea. The absence of dragons in the sky was
indeed alarming, but the Great Bear remained a stalwart buffer against attack from the Mountain.

Corian called for a runner, and four young men came quickly to his tent. Two of them he sent away. The first he sent with a written request to King Sandrel, and the second he sent to Dalamere. The Assembly was not scheduled to meet until after the midday meal, and while the leaders might have meetings that morning, Corian doubted it. None of the delegations had arrived at the Mountain without a clear agenda, and most attempts to form alliances had transpired in the dusk and twilight of the first few days of meetings.

Corian knew that both men would likely see his request as a nuisance. He was not an important man, and he came from a politically unimportant city. However, he had passed his seventieth birthday two years before, and age still commanded some respect among the Novaana. They would grumble to their stewards and to their subordinates and perhaps even to the runners, but they would come.

King Sandrel arrived first. Tall and robust, his sandy locks curled upon his brow, he appeared every inch the warrior he was reputed to be. Though only in his late twenties during Malek’s Invasion, he had led the forces of Enthanin as the crown prince of Amaan Sul, and when his father fell in battle, Sandrel refused to take the crown until the war was over. He was valiant in war and wise in most matters domestic, but as stubborn and hard-headed as any in relations with the Werthanim or western Suthanim. He had inherited bitterness and hatred from his father and his father’s father as surely as he’d inherited the valor and nobility with which he ruled Enthanin. Alliances against Malek did nothing to quell the animosity. What’s more, with each passing year the common hatred of Malek that had eclipsed all other hatreds faded, leaving more room for the old rivalries to grow to their former intensity.
“Corian,” King Sandrel said as Corian went out to greet him. “What requires my attention at this early hour? I had hoped to spend a morning in quiet reflection, since all hope of peace and tranquility will pass with the approach of today’s meeting.”

“And is that not a matter of grave concern, Your Majesty?”

“A nuisance, yes, since I dislike the constant bickering as much as the next man, but a grave concern? No.”

“With Malek hidden in the Mountain and Kirthanin still deeply divided over disputes that are older than I am, disputes that should have been long since forgotten, that is not a grave concern?”

King Sandrel looked at Corian with barely masked annoyance. “Enough of the lecture, Corian. It is easy enough for the men of Kel Imlaris to forgive wrongs that were not primarily directed against them.”

Corian held out his hands and motioned with them to King Sandrel to relax. “I do not wish to lecture you, and I am aware of my city’s lesser role in the divisions I spoke of. I am also aware that if Kirthanin falls to Malek in the future, my people will suffer as much as yours, and avoiding that common fate should be the common cause that trumps all other matters, for all of us.”

“I agree, which is why I continue to come to these meetings year after year, though they have produced precious little of value.”

“You are correct that little of value has come from most of these gatherings.” Corian nodded. “Hoping to change that, I have summoned you, you and another.”

“Who?” King Sandrel tensed.

Corian indicated the figure approaching through the nearby tents. King Sandrel’s response was predictable. “Dalamere! You have wasted my time, Corian. I have had all I need of Dalamere
and the Werthanim in the Assembly meetings. I will not suffer them when I do not have to.”

“That’s a pleasant greeting,” Dalamere said. He stopped and stood with arms crossed, glaring at both King Sandrel and Corian. “Perhaps when you have finished your business with the King, Corian, you can come to my tent and tell me whatever it is that is so important.”

“Our business is already concluded,” King Sandrel replied, turning to go.

“Peace, both of you,” Corian scolded. “Treat each other like children all you want in the Assembly. Yes, perpetuate there the foolishness of your fathers that almost ruined us all, but don’t waste my time with it. I am as old as the two of you put together, and you will hear what I have to say.”

Neither man replied, but neither moved away either. In fact, both followed Corian into his tent, carefully positioning themselves in places equidistant from Corian and each other, taking wooden chairs to sit in awkward silence. Corian took a deep breath. *Allfather, grant me success and grant us peace.*

“All right,” Corian began. “Despite the way in which I just spoke to the two of you, you are here because I think you are wiser men than many of your peers. I have a proposal that I want you to consider. It is simple and will take only a moment of your time, but I believe it could have far-reaching benefits for Kirthanin. Perhaps it might even mend the divide that has separated us too long.”

King Sandrel snorted, and Dalamere ignored him, looking blankly at Corian. He said at last, “You must be a very optimistic man.”

“Hopeful,” Corian answered. “I am hopeful that enough common sense remains in the Assembly to pursue the common good.”

Neither responded, and Corian continued. “My proposal is simply this: The Assembly should establish a haven some-
where in Kirthanin. To my mind the distant southlands would be preferable, as far from the shadow of the Mountain and the divisions of the past as possible. I thought perhaps Sulare, now that it is no longer needed to keep watch on the waters of the Southern Ocean, but it isn’t pressing that we resolve that issue now. I propose that every seven years, for half a year, the Assembly should send all Novaana between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five to that haven.”


“I envision men from Werthanin, Suthanin, and Enthanin working together to run it,” Corian replied.

Dalamere laughed. “You really are an optimist.”

“I am hopeful.”

After a brief silence, King Sandrel said, “Corian, I’m not following you. Aside from the obvious impossibility that the Novaana of Enthanin would trust their sons and daughters to a place run even in part by Novaana of Werthanin, what would it accomplish if they did? How does this solve our problems?”

“The purpose of the sojourn would be to forge relationships with the Novaana who will lead the Assembly in years to come. They would be old enough to understand what is at stake and yet young enough, I hope, to lay aside regional rivalries and learn to see each other as friends.”

King Sandrel frowned at Corian, and Dalamere sat silently, merely watching him. Corian took their silence as a chance to press his point. “Don’t you see? By the time most of us start coming to the Assembly, and by the time we’re old enough to have a voice anyone will listen to, we’re so steeped in our region’s squabbles we can’t see past them. But what if each new generation could get to know one another as people, as men and women, outside of the realm of politics? What if they learn their shared humanity firsthand from one another and from wise and compassionate men of other realms? The men
we send could teach them about the world before the Civil War, when Kirthanin was united and strong. They could train the young Novaana for a better tomorrow. Could we not unlearn the bitterness and contempt that the Civil War and Malek’s lies have taught us? Could we not, through our children, undo the folly of our fathers?"

“I hear what you are saying,” Dalamere said at last, leaning forward with a look that seemed to Corian to be almost mournful, “but it is impossible. There is too much distrust. My daughter is twelve, and I would be as reluctant to send her into the care of an Enthanim as King Sandrel would be to entrust Prince Arindel to the care of a Werthanim.”

“On that,” King Sandrel added vehemently, “Dalamere and I agree. What you suggest is not only impossible, it is unnecessary.”

“Unnecessary?” Corian replied in disbelief. “Can you not see the danger we are in so long as our divisions remain unmended?”

“No, I cannot,” King Sandrel replied. “Two men need not be friends to guard the gate to my city together. They need only do their job. The men of Enthanin will do their part in the east, and if the Werthanim will do their part in the west, we will protect Kirthanin from Malek. How we feel about one another has nothing to do with it.”

“But Your Majesty . . . ”

“No more talk, Corian,” King Sandrel replied, standing and holding out his hands to prevent Corian from speaking further. “I have heard your proposal and have no interest in it. It is impractical foolishness, and I will not distract the Assembly from important matters of Kirthanin’s defense with it. Arindel will be taught and trained by no one but me.”

“Then he will learn your hatred, and another generation will be lost.”

“He will learn what is necessary.”
With that, King Sandrel stepped from the tent and started away. Corian looked to Dalamere, who also stood. “Don’t waste your breath, Corian. I can see the sense in what you are proposing, but it can’t be done. There are far too many who feel as King Sandrel does to ever approve it. Even seeing the sense of it, I don’t know if I would approve it until I knew who would be running the place, and I can imagine that choosing those men could be as divisive as the idea itself. I just don’t see how it could be implemented. Not in our lifetimes. Maybe the idea will be more palatable to our children’s generation.”

“Yes? And how will that be if they learn their view of the world from us?”

“I don’t know.”

Dalamere left the tent. Corian sighed and placed his head in his hands.

Corian looked at the stone memorial around which they were gathering. It had been established at the beginning of the Second Age, over a thousand years ago. It had been erected to remind future generations of the words Erevir had spoken to the Assembly in this place on that occasion:

So says Allfather:

There is blood on the Mountain.
    It stains the City
    And soaks the ground.

The Fountain is defiled.
    It no longer flows
    And cannot cleanse.

The deep waters will flow again.
    And then the stains
    Will be washed clean.
But until that day shall come,
The Holy Mountain is
Forbidden to us all.

The warning and the hope that message contained had once been sufficient to bind all Kirthanim together. No longer, it would seem.

The Assembly meetings that afternoon had been as useless as Corian expected. He supposed that he should take some consolation in the fact that King Sandrel and Dalamere were two of the least inflammatory voices in the disputes, but it was small consolation. Thinking back over their meeting that morning, though, had brought a little more comfort. He was still disappointed, but as the day passed and he gained some distance, his hope returned. The failure had not been total. He had expected the real antagonist in the conversation to be Dalamere, and to his surprise, Dalamere had almost been supportive. King Sandrel’s bad mood and vehement rejection could be partially attributed, no doubt, to Dalamere’s mock reverence of Sandrel’s royalty. When and where ridicule of Enthin’s political structure had entered the more complex issues dividing east and west, Corian had no idea, but he did know that insults of the monarchy remained one of the biggest obstacles to productive dialogue. He was far too old to enjoy traveling very much, but he resolved to travel constantly between Amaan Sul and Shalin Bel to keep at each man separately. Perhaps the following year he would have more luck.

Now, though, he waited with the rest of the Assembly for the formal blessing upon Kirthanim. These men gathered around him would echo the words, wishing peace to men they had barely been civil to for the last ten days, and then they would return to their tents, eat supper, sleep, and go
home as convinced as ever that they were wise and beneficent and their enemies malicious fools. He could barely stand to be in their midst.

As the gathering fell quiet for the words of blessing, a rider came out of the forest, thundering toward them along the foot of the Mountain. As he grew closer, Corian thought that the man was the most wild and striking figure that he had ever seen. His flowing green robe flapped in the wind along the side of the black horse. The man’s white hair stood out in all directions, a thick shock of unkempt tangles, and the man’s eyes, they were as blank as a page without words, as white as his hair, devoid of color. Even so, despite the man’s evident blindness, the eyes were wide open and seemed to be gazing at the Assembly. He drew his horse up not far beyond the elder about to begin the blessing.

“Who are you?” the startled elder cried.

“I am Valzaan, prophet of Allfather, and I come bringing an answer to your petition, rebuke for your folly, direction for your future, and hope for the dark days that must come.”

Though his arrival had triggered murmurs, there was complete silence now. Corian, like the rest of them, stood transfixed by this wild stranger and his wilder words.

“Allfather has heard your request to be allowed onto the Mountain in order to pursue Malek, but He forbids it. The Mountain is closed. As He told your fathers through Erevir, so He tells you. Until the Fountain flows again, washing Avalione clean, you will not go up. Ask no more for this, for He will not change His mind and you will receive no answer but this one. So says Allfather.”

The prophet on the horse paused to let his words resonate among them, and then he continued. “What’s more, Allfather has held back this answer for seven years, giving you all a chance to recognize your greatest need, to seek His forgiveness for the Civil War that ravaged this land and to repair the
breaches that caused it. You have not done so, so I bring this rebuke. For seven years Allfather will hold back the rain, and you will learn that none of you rises up in the morning or lies down at night except by Allfather’s hand, which sustains you. You will learn that these men beside you whom you despise are your brothers. If you do not learn to stand together, you will perish together. So says Allfather.

“And yet,” Valzaan continued in a gentler voice, though it still carried to the farthest edge of the Assembly. “Even in His judgment, there is mercy. Allfather will grant you a spring harvest like none you have ever seen. Your grain fields will produce beyond your imagining, and your fruit trees will sag under the weight of their yield. All this will come to pass to prepare you for the drought and famine that is coming, so long as you obey Allfather’s command and enact the wise proposal of Corian of Kel Imlaris.”

Corian was stunned to hear his name, and all nearby turned to look at him as the prophet continued. “You will not leave this place until you have agreed to the plan, settled on a place, and selected a date this spring for the training to begin. Corian will show you what you are to do, and those among you who already know the plan are charged to support it wholeheartedly. This will be done, or the harvest that I have spoken of will not come, and the seven-year drought will be disastrous beyond measure. So says Allfather.”

At this point, a voice other than Valzaan’s broke the silent reverie that had fallen upon them all. It was the bellowing voice of Trevarian, one of the most difficult and fractious Novaana in the Assembly. “This is absurd, brothers. Who is this man who comes before us without credentials to testify to the authority he claims, ordering us about as though we were children? Without such proof, why should we heed him?”

The man on the horse raised his hand, silencing any who would have replied. “The drought I have prophesied will ul-
timately confirm my authority, but that you all might know I am who I say I am, and that I speak for Allfather as I claim, I will give you more immediate proof. This man who calls you to question my authority, to doubt my claims, has long been in the service of Malek, and he remains among you like a serpent in the grass to poison those voices of wisdom and moderation who have tried to speak for peace these last seven years.”

“That is a lie!” Trevarian cried.

“Silence!” Valzaan commanded, and Trevarian obeyed as Valzaan dropped from his horse and moved through the Assembly. All parted to let him pass until he stood a few spans from Trevarian, where a small clearing formed around the two men.

“Most of you already realize that what I have said is true. Now that I have said it, you can sense it, but that you may know it beyond doubt, I will give you proof.” The prophet faced the man with his blank and fantastic stare, addressing him directly. “Even now, Trevarian, it is not too late for you. Acknowledge your wrong, beseech Allfather for His mercy, and you will be forgiven. Deny it, and you will perish.”

Trevarian trembled, looking not at the prophet but at the men staring at the spectacle unfolding in their midst. He began to shake his head slowly. “No, it isn’t true.”

“So be it,” Valzaan replied quietly. He turned and headed back through the crowd toward his horse. Without warning, a ball of fire fell from the clear sky, striking the place where Trevarian stood. It struck and disappeared, leaving nothing but scorched earth and ashes, blowing low along the ground in the cold evening breeze.

Corian gazed at the space, amazed. As soon as the prophet had spoken the accusation, Corian saw the logic of it. Wherever the deepest divisions lay, the most virulent dissension and most
bitter arguments of the Assembly, Trevarian was never far away. Corian felt, if anything, embarrassed not to have considered that something more than folly motivated the man. Now Trevarian had been punished and the legitimacy of the prophet established in a single moment. In that same moment, Corian’s great hope for Kirthanin’s future had become not only likely, but almost certain.

“So far I have given you the answer, the rebuke, and the direction. Now it is time for the hope, for indeed, dark days lie ahead. I cannot say when, for Allfather has not revealed it to me, but though you may not go up after Malek, he will come down after you. Be sure of that. A third great war is coming, and it will be terrible. Even so, fear not, for Allfather has not abandoned you. Hear now the words he has spoken:

‘With a strength that stoops to conquer
   And a hope that dies to live,
With a light that fades to be kindled
   And a love that yields to give,

‘Comes a child who was born to lead,
   A prophet who was born to see,
A warrior who was born to surrender,
   And through his sacrifice set us free.’

“So says Allfather.” Valzaan added. His blank but staring eyes swept over them. “In the dark days that shall come, remember these words of hope and cling to them, even as you cling to the words of the mound rite that Allfather spoke from of old concerning the days of restoration: ‘I shall cleanse Agia Muldonai. It shall be cleansed forevermore, as indeed all Kirthanin shall be cleansed. Never again will sword and spear be raised in war, for even they will be made anew, and
all implements of war shall be made implements of peace, and no one will dare to harm or destroy on all My Holy Mountain.’

“You have work to do.”

With that, he wheeled his horse around and was off, galloping back the way he had come.