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The Hero of Ages

A MISTBORN
NOVEL

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BOOKreviews

Author of **ELANTRIS**

BRANDON SANDERSON

THE HERO OF AGES

BOOK THREE OF MISTBORN

BRANDON SANDERSON



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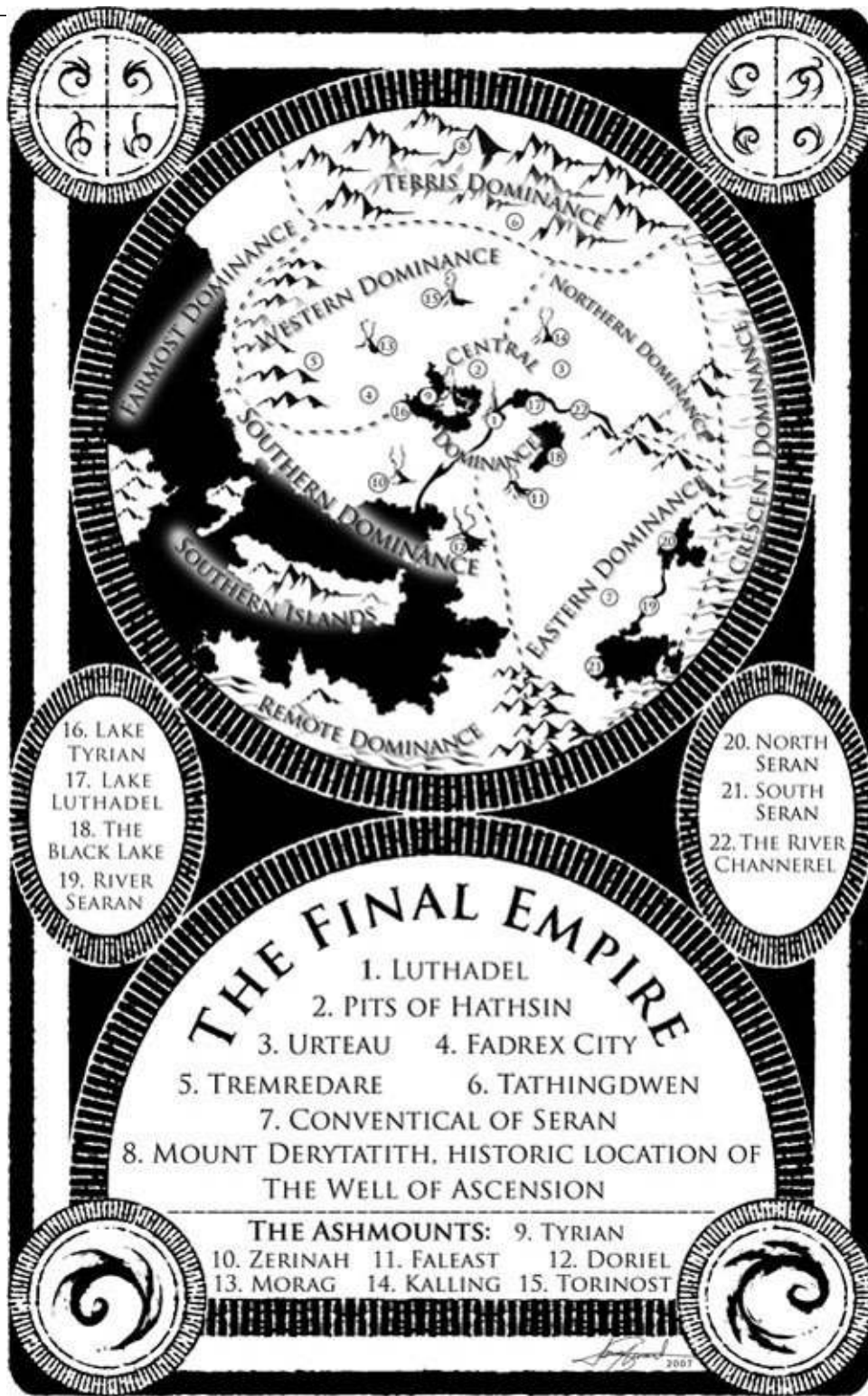
FOR JORDAN SANDERSON,

Who can explain to any who ask

What it's like to have a brother

Who spends most of his time dreaming.

(Thanks for putting up with me.)



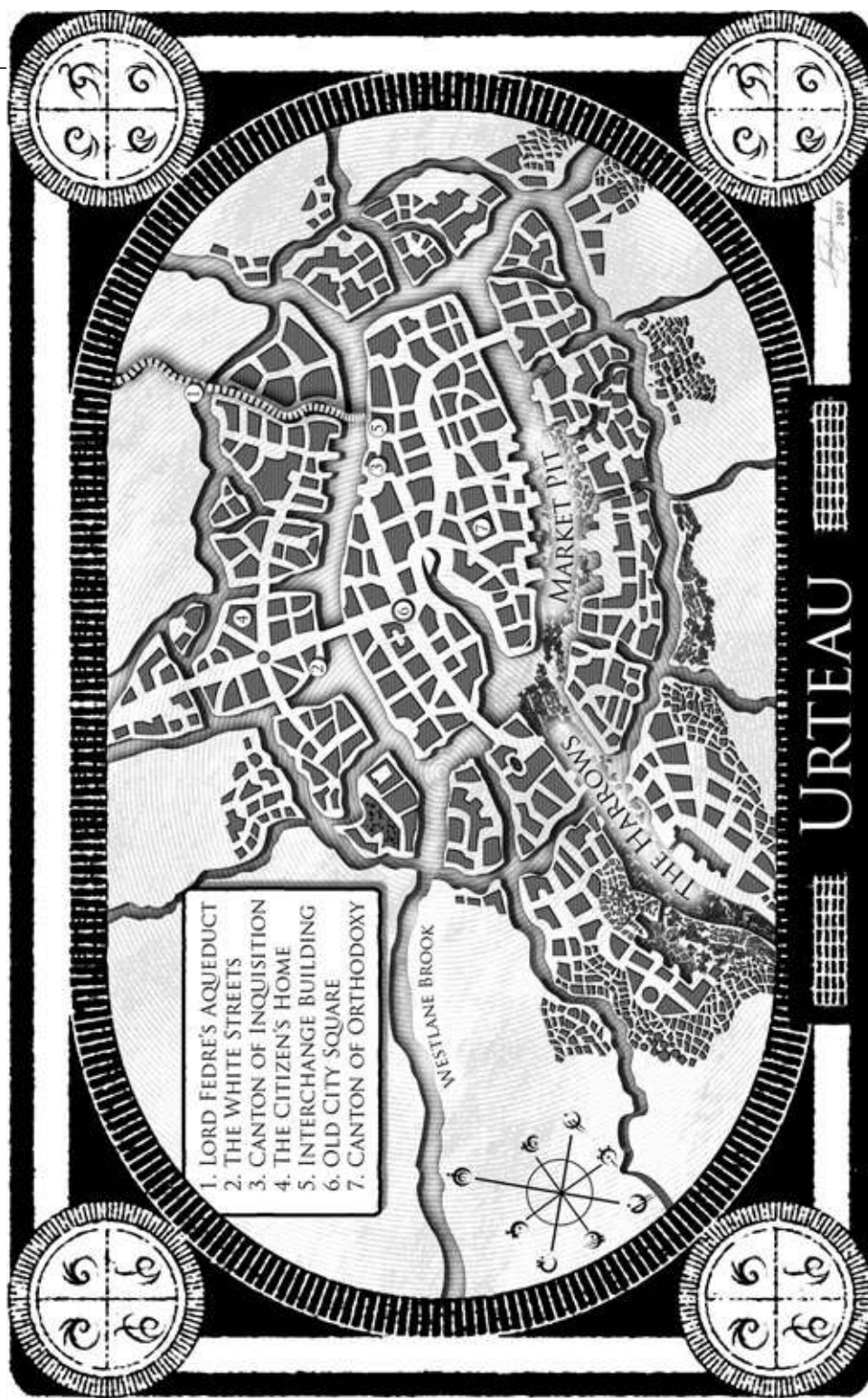
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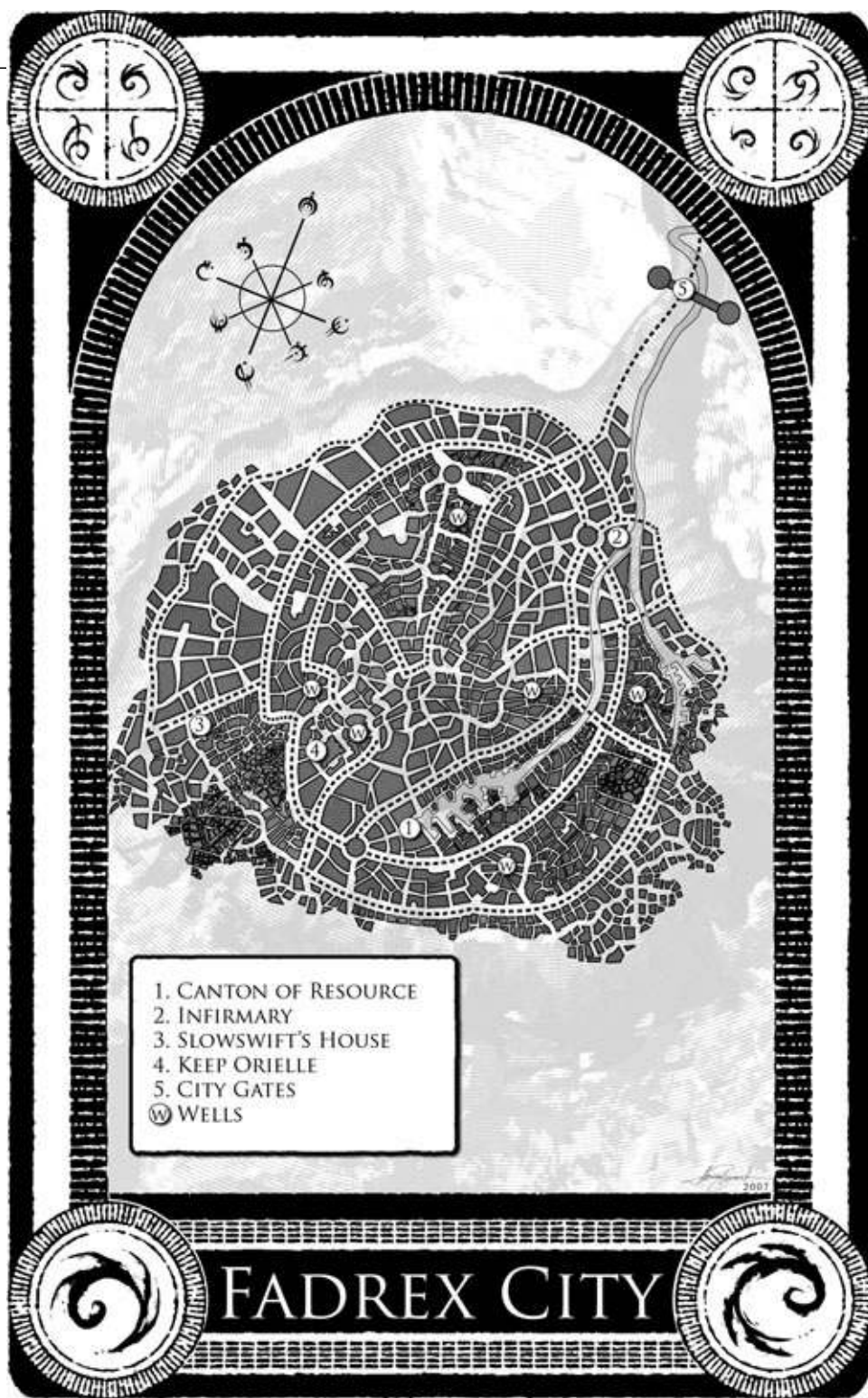
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TOR BOOKS BY BRANDON SANDERSON

PROLOGUE



MARSH STRUGGLED TO KILL HIMSELF.

His hand trembled as he tried to summon the strength to make himself reach up and pull the spike free from his back and end his monstrous life. He had given up on trying to break free. Three years. Three years as an Inquisitor, three years imprisoned in his own thoughts. Those years had proven there was no escape. Even now, his mind clouded.

And then *It* took control. The world seemed to vibrate around him; then suddenly he could see clearly. Why had he struggled? Why had he worried? All was as it should be.

He stepped forward. Though he could no longer see as normal men did—after all, he had large steel spikes driven point-first through his eyes—he could sense the room around him. The spikes protruded from the back of his skull; if he reached up to touch the back of his head, he could feel the sharp points. There was no blood.

The spikes gave him power. Everything was outlined in fine blue Allomantic lines, highlighting the world. The room was of modest size, and several companions—also outlined in blue, the Allomantic lines pointing at the metals contained in their very blood—stood with Marsh. Each one had spikes through his eyes.

Each one, that is, except for the man tied to the table in front of him. Marsh smiled, taking a spike off of the table beside him, then hefting it. His prisoner wore no gag. That would have stopped the screams.

“Please,” the prisoner whispered, trembling. Even a Terrisman steward would break down when confronted by his own violent death. The man struggled weakly. He was in a very awkward position as he had been tied to the table on top of another person. The table had been designed that way, with depressions to allow for the body underneath.

“What is it you want?” the Terrisman asked. “I can tell you no more about the Synod!”

Marsh fingered the brass spike, feeling its tip. There was work to do, but he hesitated, relishing the pain and terror in the man’s voice. Hesitated so that he could . . .

Marsh grabbed control of his own mind. The room’s scents lost their sweetness, and instead reeked with the stench of blood and death. His joy turned to horror. His prisoner was a Keeper of Terrisman who had worked his entire life for the good of others. Killing him would be not only a crime, but a tragedy. Marsh tried to take command, tried to force his arm up and around to grab the linchpin spike from his back—its removal would kill him.

Yet, *It* was too strong. The force. Somehow, it had control over Marsh—and it needed him and the other Inquisitors to be its hands. It was free—Marsh could still feel it exulting in that—but something kept it from affecting the world too much by itself. An opposition. A force that lay over the land like a shield.

It was not yet complete. It needed more. Something else . . . something hidden. And Marsh would find that something, bring it to his master. The master that Vin had freed. The entity that had been imprisoned within the Well of Ascension.

It called itself Ruin.

Marsh smiled as his prisoner began to cry; then he stepped forward, raising the spike in his hand. He placed it against the whimpering man's chest. The spike would need to pierce the man's body, passing through the heart, then be driven into the body of the Inquisitor tied below. Hemalurgy was messy art.

That was why it was so much fun. Marsh picked up a mallet and began to pound.

PART ONE



LEGACY OF THE SURVIVOR

I am, unfortunately, the Hero of Ages.

1



FATREN SQUINTED UP AT THE RED SUN, which hid behind its perpetual screen of dark haze. Black ash fell lightly from the sky, as it did most days lately. The thick flakes fell straight, the air stagnant and hot, without even a hint of a breeze to lighten Fatren's mood. He sighed, leaning back against the earthen bulwark, looking over Vetitan. His town.

"How long?" he asked.

Druffel scratched his nose. His face was stained black with ash. He hadn't given much thought to hygiene lately. Of course, considering the stress of the last few months, Fatren knew that he himself wasn't much to look at either.

"An hour, maybe," Druffel said, spitting into the dirt of the bulwark.

Fatren sighed, staring up at the falling ash. "Do you think it's true, Druffel? What people are saying?"

"What?" Druffel asked. "That the world is ending?"

Fatren nodded.

"Don't know," Druffel said. "Don't really care."

"How can you say that?"

Druffel shrugged, scratching himself. "Soon as those koloss arrive, I'll be dead. That's pretty much the end of the world for me."

Fatren fell silent. He didn't like to voice his doubts; he was supposed to be the strong one. When the lords had left the town—a farming community, slightly more urban than a northern plantation—Fatren had been the one who had convinced the skaa to go ahead with their planting. Fatren had been the one to keep the press gangs away. In a time when most villages and plantations had lost every able-bodied man to one army or another, Vetitan still had a working population. It had cost much of their crops in bribes, but Fatren had kept the people safe.

Mostly.

"The mists didn't leave until noon today," Fatren said quietly. "They're staying later and later. You've seen the crops, Druff. They're not doing well—not enough sunlight, I'd guess. We won't have food to eat this winter."

"We won't last 'til winter," Druffel said. "Won't last 'til nightfall."

The sad thing—the thing that was really disheartening—was that Druffel had once been the

optimist. Fatren hadn't heard his brother laugh in months. That laughter had been Fatren's favorite sound.

Even the Lord Ruler's mills weren't able to grind Druff's laughter out of him, Fatren thought. But these last two years have.

"Fats!" a voice called. "Fats!"

Fatren looked up as a young boy scrambled along the side of the bulwark. They'd barely finished the fortification—it had been Druffel's idea, back before he'd really given up. Their town contained some seven thousand people, which made it fairly large. It had taken a great deal of work to surround the entire thing with a defensive mound.

Fatren had barely a thousand real soldiers—it had been very hard to gather that many from such a small population—with maybe another thousand men who were too young, too old, or too unskilled to fight well. He didn't really know how big the koloss army was, but it was bound to be larger than two thousand. A bulwark was going to be of very little use.

The boy—Sev—finally puffed up to Fatren. "Fats!" Sev said. "Someone's coming!"

"Already?" Fatren asked. "Druff said the koloss were still a while away!"

"Not a koloss, Fats," the boy said. "A man. Come see!"

Fatren turned to Druff, who wiped his nose and shrugged. They followed Sev around the inside of the bulwark, toward the front gate. Ash and dust swirled on the packed earth, piling in corners and drifting. There hadn't been much time for cleaning lately. The women had to work the fields while the men trained and made war preparations.

War preparations. Fatren told himself that he had a force of two thousand "soldiers," but what he really had were a thousand skaa peasants with swords. They'd had two years of training, true, but they had very little real fighting experience.

A group of men clustered around the front gates, standing on the bulwark or leaning against its side. *Maybe I was wrong to spend so much of our resources training soldiers, Fatren thought. If those thousand men had worked the mines instead, we'd have some ore for bribes.*

Except, koloss didn't take bribes. They just killed. Fatren shuddered, thinking of Garthwood. That city had been bigger than his own, but fewer than a hundred survivors had made their way to Vetitar. That had been three months ago. He'd hoped, irrationally, that the koloss would be satisfied with destroying that city.

He should have known better. Koloss were never satisfied.

Fatren climbed up to the top of the bulwark, and soldiers in patched clothing and bits of leather made way for him. He peered through the falling ash across a dark landscape that looked as if it were blanketed in deep black snow.

A lone rider approached, wearing a dark, hooded cloak.

"What do you think, Fats?" one of the soldiers asked. "Koloss scout?"

Fatren snorted. "Koloss wouldn't send a scout, especially not a human one."

"He has a horse," Druffel said with a grunt. "We could use another of those." The city only had five horses. All were suffering from malnutrition.

"Merchant," one of the soldiers said.

"No wares," Fatren said. "And it would take a brave merchant to travel these parts alone."

"I've never seen a refugee with a horse," one of the men said. He raised a bow, looking at Fatren.

Fatren shook his head. Nobody fired as the stranger rode up, moving at an unhurried pace. He stopped his mount directly before the city gates. Fatren was proud of those. Real, true wooden gates mounted in the earthen bulwark. He'd gotten both wood and fine stone from the lord's manor at the

city center.

Very little of the stranger was visible beneath the thick, dark cloak he wore to protect himself from the ash. Fatren looked over the top of the bulwark, studying the stranger, and then he glanced up at his brother, shrugging. The ash fell silently.

The stranger leaped from his horse.

He shot straight upward, as if propelled from beneath, cloak whipping free as he soared. Underneath it, he wore a uniform of brilliant white.

Fatren cursed, jumping backward as the stranger crested the top of the bulwark and landed on the top of the wooden gate itself. The man was an Allomancer. A nobleman. Fatren had hoped those would all stick to their squabbles in the North and leave his people in peace.

Or, at least, their peaceful deaths.

The newcomer turned. He wore a short beard, and had his dark hair shorn close. "All right, men," he said, striding across the top of the gate with an unnatural sense of balance, "we don't have much time. Let's get to work." He stepped off the gate onto the bulwark. Immediately, Druffel pulled his sword on the newcomer.

The sword jerked from Druffel's hand, yanked into the air by an unseen force. The stranger snatched the weapon as it passed his head. He flipped the sword around, inspecting it. "Good steel," he said, nodding. "I'm impressed. How many of your soldiers are this well equipped?" He flipped the weapon in his hand, handing it back toward Druffel hilt-first.

Druffel glanced at Fatren, confused.

"Who *are* you, stranger?" Fatren demanded with as much courage as he could muster. He didn't know a lot about Allomancy, but he was pretty certain this man was Mistborn. The stranger could probably kill everyone atop the bulwark with barely a thought.

The stranger ignored the question, turning to scan the city. "This bulwark goes around the entire perimeter of the city?" he asked, turning toward one of the soldiers.

"Um . . . yes, my lord," the man said.

"How many gates are there?"

"Just the one, my lord."

"Open the gate and bring my horse in," the newcomer said. "I assume you have stables?"

"Yes, my lord," the soldier said.

Well, Fatren thought with dissatisfaction as the soldier ran off, *this newcomer certainly knows how to command people*. Fatren's soldier didn't even pause to think that he was obeying a stranger without asking for permission. Fatren could already see the other soldiers straightening a bit, losing their wariness. This newcomer talked like he expected to be obeyed, and the soldiers were responding. This wasn't a nobleman like the ones Fatren had known back when he was a household servant at the lord's manor. This man was different.

The stranger continued his contemplation of the city. Ash fell on his beautiful white uniform, and Fatren thought it a shame to see the garment being dirtied. The newcomer nodded to himself, then began to walk down the side of the bulwark.

"Wait," Fatren said, causing the stranger to pause. "*Who are you?*"

The newcomer turned, meeting Fatren's eyes. "My name is Elend Venture. I'm your emperor."

With that, the man turned and continued down the embankment. The soldiers made way for him, and then many of them followed behind.

Fatren glanced at his brother.

"Emperor?" Druffel muttered, then spat.

Fatren agreed with the sentiment. What to do? He'd never fought an Allomancer before; he wasn't even certain how to begin. The "emperor" had certainly disarmed Druffel easily enough.

"Organize the people of the city," the stranger—Elend Venture—said from ahead. "The koloss will come from the north—they'll ignore the gate, climbing over the bulwark. I want the children and the elderly concentrated in the southernmost part of the city. Pack them together in as few buildings as possible."

"What good will that do?" Fatren demanded. He hurried after the "emperor"—he didn't really see any other option.

"The koloss are most dangerous when they're in a blood frenzy," Venture said, continuing to walk. "If they do take the city, then you want them to spend as long as possible searching for your people. When the koloss frenzy wears off while they search, they'll grow frustrated and turn to looting. Then your people might be able to sneak away without being chased."

Venture paused, then turned to meet Fatren's eyes. The stranger's expression was grim. "It's a slim hope. But, it's something." With that, he resumed his pace, walking down the city's main thoroughfare.

From behind, Fatren could hear the soldiers whispering. They'd all heard of a man named Elend Venture. He was the one who had seized power in Luthadel after the Lord Ruler's death over two years before. News from up north was scarce and unreliable, but most of it mentioned Venture. He had fought off all rivals to the throne, even killing his own father. He'd hidden his nature as a Mistborn and was supposedly married to the very woman who had slain the Lord Ruler. Fatren doubted that such an important man—one who was likely more legend than fact—had made his way to such a humble city in the Southern Dominance, especially unaccompanied. Even the mines weren't worth much anymore. The stranger had to be lying.

But . . . he *was* obviously an Allomancer . . .

Fatren hurried to keep up with the stranger. Venture—or whoever he was—paused in front of a large structure near the center of the city. The old offices of the Steel Ministry. Fatren had ordered the doors and windows boarded up.

"You found the weapons in there?" Venture asked, turning toward Fatren.

Fatren stood for a moment. Then, finally, shook his head. "From the lord's mansion."

"He left weapons behind?" Venture asked with surprise.

"We think he intended to come back for them," Fatren said. "The soldiers he left eventually deserted, joining a passing army. They took what they could carry. We scavenged the rest."

Venture nodded to himself, rubbing his bearded chin in thought as he stared at the old Ministry building. It was tall and ominous, despite—or perhaps because of—its disuse. "Your men look well trained. I didn't expect that. Do any of them have battle experience?"

Druffel snorted quietly, indicating that he thought this stranger had no business being so nosy.

"Our men have fought enough to be dangerous, stranger," Fatren said. "Some bandits thought they'd take rule of the city from us. They assumed we were weak, and would be easily cowed."

If the stranger saw the words as a threat, he didn't show it. He simply nodded. "Have any of your men fought koloss?"

Fatren shared a look with Druffel. "Men who fight koloss don't live, stranger," he finally said.

"If that were true," Venture said, "I'd be dead a dozen times over." He turned to face the growing crowd of soldiers and townspeople. "I'll teach you what I can about fighting koloss, but we don't have much time. I want captains and squad leaders organized at the city gate in ten minutes. Regular soldiers are to form up in ranks along the bulwark—I'll teach the squad leaders and captains a few

tricks, then they can carry the tips to their men.”

Some of the soldiers moved, but—to their credit—most of them stayed where they were. The newcomer didn't seem offended that his orders weren't obeyed. He stood quietly, staring down the armed crowd. He didn't seem frightened, nor did he seem angry or disapproving. He just seemed . . . regal.

“My lord,” one of the soldier captains finally asked. “Did you . . . bring an army with you to help us?”

“I brought two, actually,” Venture said. “But we don't have time to wait for them.” He met Fatren's eyes. “You wrote and asked for my help. And, as your liege, I've come to give it. Do you still want it?”

Fatren frowned. He'd never asked this man—or any lord—for help. He opened his mouth to object but paused. *He'll let me pretend that I sent for him, Fatren thought. Act like this was part of the plan all along. I could give up rule here without looking like a failure.*

We're going to die. But, looking into this man's eyes, I can almost believe that we have a chance.

“I . . . didn't expect you to come alone, my lord,” Fatren found himself saying. “I was surprised to see you.”

Venture nodded. “That is understandable. Come, let's talk tactics while your soldiers gather.”

“Very well,” Fatren said. As he stepped forward, however, Druffel caught his arm.

“What are you doing?” his brother hissed. “You *sent* for this man? I don't believe it.”

“Gather the soldiers, Druff,” Fatren said.

Druffel stood for a moment, then swore quietly and stalked away. He didn't look like he had any intention of gathering the soldiers, so Fatren waved for two of his captains to do it. That done, he joined Venture, and the two walked back toward the gates, Venture ordering a few soldiers to walk ahead of them and keep people back so that he and Fatren could speak more privately. Ash continued to fall from the sky, dusting the street black, clustering atop the city's stooped, one-story buildings.

“Who are you?” Fatren asked quietly.

“I am who I said,” Venture said.

“I don't believe you.”

“But you trust me,” Venture said.

“No. I just don't want to argue with an Allomancer.”

“That's good enough, for now,” Venture said. “Look, friend, you have *ten thousand* koloss marching on your city. You need whatever help you can get.”

Ten thousand? Fatren thought, feeling stupefied.

“You're in charge of this city, I assume?” Venture asked.

Fatren shook out of his stupor. “Yes,” he said. “My name is Fatren.”

“All right, Lord Fatren, we—”

“I'm no lord,” Fatren said.

“Well, you just became one,” Venture said. “You can choose a surname later. Now, before we continue, you need to know my conditions for helping you.”

“What kind of conditions?”

“The nonnegotiable kind,” Venture said. “If we win, you'll swear fealty to me.”

Fatren frowned, stopping in the street. Ash fell around him. “So that's it? You saunter in before the fight, claiming to be some high lord, so you can take credit for our victory? Why should I swear fealty to a man I only met a few minutes before?”

“Because if you don't,” Venture said quietly, “I'll just take command anyway.” Then he continued

to walk.

Fatren stood for a moment; then he rushed forward and caught up to Venture. “Oh, I see. Even if we survive this battle, we’ll end up ruled by a tyrant.”

“Yes,” Venture said.

Fatren frowned. He hadn’t expected the man to be so blunt.

Venture shook his head, regarding the city through the falling ash. “I used to think that I could do things differently. And, I still believe that I’ll be able to, someday. But, for now, I don’t have a choice. I need your soldiers and I need your city.”

“My city?” Fatren asked, frowning. “Why?”

Venture held up a finger. “We have to survive this battle first,” he said. “We’ll get to other things later.”

Fatren paused, and was surprised to realize that he *did* trust the stranger. He couldn’t have explained exactly why he felt that way. This was simply a man to follow—a leader such as Fatren had always wanted to be.

Venture didn’t wait for Fatren to agree to the “conditions.” It wasn’t an offer, but an ultimatum. Fatren hurried to catch up again as Venture entered the small square in front of the city gates. Soldiers bustled about. None of them wore uniforms—their only method of distinguishing a captain from a regular soldier was a red band tied around the arm. Venture hadn’t given them much time to gather—but, then, they all knew the city was about to be attacked. They had been gathered anyway.

“Time is short,” Venture repeated in a loud voice. “I can teach you only a few things, but they will make a difference.

“Koloss range in size from small ones that are about five feet tall to the huge ones, which are about twelve feet tall. However, even the little ones are going to be stronger than you are. Expect that. Fortunately, the creatures fight without coordination between individuals. If a koloss’s comrade is in trouble, he won’t bother to help.

“They attack directly, without guile, and try to use blunt force to overwhelm. Don’t let them! Tell your men to gang up on individual koloss—two men for the small ones, three or four for the big ones. We won’t be able to maintain a very large front, but that will keep us alive the longest.

“Don’t worry about creatures that get around our line and enter the city—we’ll have the civilians hidden at the very back of your town, and the koloss who bypass our line might turn to pillaging, leaving others to fight alone. That’s what we want! Don’t chase them down into the city. Your families will be safe.

“If you’re fighting a big koloss, attack the legs, bring it down before you go for the kill. If you’re fighting a small one, make certain your sword or spear doesn’t get caught in their loose skin. Understand that koloss aren’t stupid—they’re just unsophisticated. Predictable. They’ll come at you the easiest way possible, and attack only in the most direct manner.

“The most important thing for you to understand is that they *can* be beaten. We’ll do it today. Don’t let yourselves become intimidated! Fight with coordination, keep your heads, and I promise you that we *will survive*.”

The soldier captains stood in a small cluster, looking at Venture. They didn’t cheer at the speech but they did seem a little more confident. They moved off to pass on Venture’s instructions to the men.

Fatren approached the emperor quietly. “If your count is correct, they outnumber us five to one.”

Venture nodded.

“They’re bigger, stronger, and better trained than we are.”

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