

D. K. HANSEN



QUADRANT
OF BALANCE
LORE

THE WRAITH CRYSTAL

The Wraith Crystal
—
QUADRANT OF BALANCE
LORE

D.K. Hansen

Nirwood Publishing • Copenhagen, Denmark

2022 Nirwood Publishing

Copyright © 2022 by D.K. Hansen
All rights reserved

First edition

Cover design by: Elementi.Studio
Map maker: Jackson O. (Instagram: artist_jacone)

Author web page: <http://dkhansen.com>

Quadrant of Balance – The Wraith Crystal is a work of fiction.
Names, characters and places stem from the imagination of the
author and are used fictitiously.

Contents

Chapter 1 – The Ultimate Sacrifice

Chapter 2 – Evacuation

Chapter 3 – Hope is not Lost

Chapter 4 – The Crime of Ambition

Chapter 5 – Unforgivable

Chapter 6 – The Price of Power

Chapter 7 – A New Home

Epilogue

Jarren Heartwood - Prologue

ELONIA





Chapter 1 – The Ultimate Sacrifice

“Do you understand what must happen?” Kasparian asked in a severe tone.

Before him, on a large stone slab, lay a man. His blue shirt had once been an expensive piece of clothing, but it was torn and dirtied now. Sweat ran from his forehead, dripping onto the stone. His hands and feet were bound, and his eyes ran nervously around the room. “Y-yes. My sacrifice will give you the power to cure my daughter. P-please, help her. I have given everything.”

Kasparian looked at his ten disciples standing around the altar at the heart of the cave. A set of large white wings decorated the chest of their robes, and their faces were lit only by the crackling torches that hung along the cave’s crude walls.

Kasparian took a deep breath and placed his hand on the man’s moist forehead. “I will save your daughter and give her what my family never got – the gift of life.”

The man swallowed hard. “T-thank you, my lord bishop. Bless the gods and the followers of Gjandir.”

Kasparian summoned a smile, but a hollow one. He couldn’t afford to fail again. The look in the eyes of the poor souls turning to him for salvation haunted him every night. It would never have come to this if the gods would help everyone, not only true believers.

He brought out two items from a deep pocket in his robe – a purple crystal and a pitch-black onyx that he clenched in his hand. From the stone slab, he picked up a small knife and looked around at the men and women standing in a circle around him. Like the man who was about to sacrifice himself, his disciples looked to him for guidance and meaning. He had picked each of them from

the streets and taken them into his house. They had all suffered terrible losses, and studying their gazes, he understood how far they would go to follow him. Their loyalty was undeniable.

“My friends, my family. We are here tonight to take matters into our own hands. For centuries we have prayed to the gods, hoping they would come to our aid. But where has that taken us?”

“To poverty and desperation!” one of the men shouted.

“I was forced to work in brothels when my husband died. Why didn’t they hear my prayers?” asked a small woman, scars covering her forehead and one cheek.

Kasparian nodded. “We have all suffered because of the so-called gods. Imagine what we could do with powers like theirs!” He raised the knife up high, and the man on the stone slab started shaking, the robe cutting into his flesh as he squirmed in anguish at the blade pointing down at his chest.

“The deepest desire of this man is to save his daughter from certain death. Like so many others, he is willing to sacrifice his own life for hers.” Kasparian looked down into the man’s eyes. “Pray to the gods. Pray that they will gift me all the energy your life force can provide. With that energy, I will be able to help your daughter.”

The man’s eyes widened, and he started praying, first as a whisper but then louder and louder. “Adalyn, the loved one – the most glorious of all the gods. Help me! I give my life to save my daughter. Hear my plea. My life for hers.”

The knife plunged into his chest, and he gasped for air, staring at the bloodied blade stabbing into his torso, again and again. His lifeblood streamed down the stone and dripped onto the floor. His head fell back, and he breathed out one last time.

Kasparian plunged his hand into the gore without hesitation, cutting out the man’s heart. He held it in both his hands together with the crystal and the onyx as he started whispering, “Gods, hear our prayers. This man gave the ultimate sacrifice, like Gjandir many centuries ago. Grant us your power. Show us the extent of

your divinity, and we will perform miracles in your name.” He squeezed the three items in his hands, chanting, “E’hir nunor Adalyn, omira tasina.” He paused for a second before continuing with a flare incantation. “Mentiro illu av’ror.” Squeezing the heart further, blood ran through his fingers. He could feel the shadow energy of the black gem rushing up his arm as he activated the onyx and summoned a dark shroud that engulfed them all. He had performed this trick many times, but the utter darkness this illusion of the assassins created still made him shudder.

An eerie silence fell over the cave. The howling wind and the flickering flames of the torches were the only sounds heard.

When darkness slowly crept back into the onyx, the disciples all stared at him, but none dared to speak. Kasparian opened his hands slowly. The heart, the crystal and the onyx were still there. Nothing had changed.

He roared out as he threw the heart onto the floor, the last of the blood spraying on his boot. “False gods!” he shouted at the ceiling of the cave. “When will you listen? How many lives will it take?”

A woman sunk to her knees, and two others sat down further back in the cave – everyone with disappointment painted on their faces.

Kasparian was furious. He had failed them again. How many people had he sacrificed in his attempts to acquire just a fraction of the gods’ powers? Twenty? Twenty-five? He had lost count along the way. With anger rushing through his veins, he stuffed the two gems into his pocket and paced out of the cave into the chilly night.



An hour later, racing east on his mare across the plains to Kanthos, Kasparian’s blood had cooled slightly. Hatred had replaced anger – hatred against the so-called gods.

Far ahead, hundreds of large braziers burned atop the great walls of Kanthos. Kasparian growled as he looked over the city. The bishops probably slept safe and warm in their extravagant homes at this hour. The patriarchs of the followers of Gjandir were not lacking. Were they really worth more than the man in the cave who sacrificed himself for his daughter? Why had he less right to the divine power of those pompous birds in the sky than anyone else? Everyone worshipped them as gods, but Kasparian knew the truth. They were only wisaris, a foreign race living in the Realm of Light. Still, he couldn't deny their rejuvenating powers.

Kasparian forced his heels into the mare, pushing it even harder. He had given his youth to the followers to save his family. His father was the first to die from the strange disease that took all four, slowly turning them into empty, mindless shells.

He had prayed day and night when his mother fell ill. The gods even took several years of his life when he offered it. In the beginning, it seemed to work, and she got better. But then the disease came back, and she started fading away once again. Why had they accepted his sacrifice only to let her die anyway? How could the gods be so cruel?

Years later, when his sisters fell ill, he was Bishop of Khur Cathedral. As a bishop, he understood the ways of the gods better and made his first human sacrifice. The woman was homeless and had come into his cathedral to pray. He'd offered food and wine in his private chambers and prayed for his sisters as he choked the woman, hoping one life could restore another. But even in his elevated position, it didn't work. The gods didn't accept a sacrifice not given willingly. Since that day, even simple prayers had stopped working for him. He could no longer use the prayer of intensified sight or heal injuries by drawing on his life force.

Galloping across the plain, Kasparian was deep into his own thoughts when a large, winged shadow cut through the air above his head. He pulled the reins back so hard that the horse's rear

hooves dug into the dirt, desperately trying to obey its rider's command.

A cloud of dust rose as the horse finally came to a halt. Its heavy breathing was so loud and the dust so dense that both rider and mare were caught off guard once more when the winged creature landed less than five metres away. The mare kicked out several times and threw Kasparian from its back before racing off.

Kasparian hit the grass shoulder first, and a sharp pain stung him as he rolled over several times. But he forgot all about the pain as soon as he laid eyes on the creature standing before him. It was one of them – one of the gods.

The great feathery wings and the large eagle talons vanished as it moved closer, leaving a perfectly normal set of arms and legs. The man seemed young. He was slender and moved gracefully, his long white hair blowing in the wind and his bright yellow eyes almost glowing in the night. "Corrupted by heart. Betrayer of your own kind. You no longer deserve your title, bishop." His voice was light, but his tone severe.

Kasparian stood and brushed the dirt off his trousers and shirt. His eyes narrowed at the wisari before him. "Are you... real? Have you come?"

The wisari frowned. "We know what you have done. We have seen how you treat those you claim to serve. If your cause were true, you would sacrifice only yourself."

Kasparian shook his head, unable to take his eyes off the wisari. "B-but if you have seen everything, why didn't you listen? Please, give me what I'm asking for – a chance to help everyone."

"NO! Justice is the only thing you will find. You deserve to live the rest of your life in pain and misery for your sins. Yet, your fate is not up to us."

Kasparian moved closer and reached for the wisari's shoulders, wanting to shake some sense into the thing, but he never managed to touch it. It shoved Kasparian back to the ground with blinding speed and went into a defensive stance.

Kasparian got on his knees and shook his head. “Who are you to decide our worth? You rule the sky and might believe yourselves to be gods, but you’re nothing but imposters!”

The wisari’s wings and eagle talons reappeared, and it turned around, about to take off. The young man looked over his shoulder and said, “We did what we could to help, but your family was beyond saving, even for us. You went too far, and we had to make sure you would never hurt anyone again.”

Kasparian frowned. “What have you done?”

“We no longer involve ourselves in the affairs of Elonia. However, we will always aid those who believe in us, those willing to sacrifice themselves for others.” The wisari paused for a moment, his eyes narrowing. “When someone claiming to serve the light falls as far as you have, we have to act. You have broken your vow, and the bishops will judge you.”

The massive pair of wings whirled up dust as the wisari took off, rising fast into the air.

Kasparian’s lip curled as he eyeballed the wisari until he could no longer see it in the night sky. Back on his feet, he sprinted towards the eastern gate of Kanthos. He had to make it back before the bishops arrived. He had to save the rest of his disciples, those who had not joined them in the cave.



Chapter 2 – Evacuation

Heart pounding and entirely out of breath, Kasparian rushed into the open square of the Khur District. It was still dark, but on the opposite side of the open, paved area, the outline of his simple villa stood right next to Khur Cathedral. This was his domain. He was the authority – or had been. If that self-righteous winged bastard were right, soon the bishops would come with their holy warriors to take it all from him.

His gaze moved up to the four imperial palace towers, reaching taller than any other building in the grand city of Kanthos. The palace grounds took up more space than the Khur District, which housed almost two-thousand souls. A tower stood at each corner, and large blue crystals decorated the top, reflecting the little light from the stars.

As a child, the large shiny crystals had always enchanted him. He'd spent hours imagining how he would one day look out at the glory of Kanthos from one of the upper windows. He shook the foolish thought from his mind and pressed on.

When Kasparian reached his villa, he burst inside and slammed the main door behind him, his palms still on the timber as he tried to catch his breath.

Two women dressed in grey robes came into the hall. "Bishop Tellis? What's going on?"

Kasparian moved to the heavy oak cabinet in the hall, attempting to push it towards the door. "The bishops are on their way. We have to get to the cave."

The two women looked at each other before moving to Kasparian's side, helping him with the cabinet. It made a terrible screeching sound as they forced it across the tiles.

With the front door blocked, he looked at his two loyal disciples with a satisfied smile. “Find the others. Tell them to pack quickly. We leave in five minutes.”

The two women rushed off. One ran up the squeaking staircase and the other into the adjoining rooms, rousing the people sleeping there.

Kasparian moved through the thick black door leading into his chambers. It was a simple place but still the best-furnished room in the house. A large mahogany desk stood in the centre, several bookcases spanned the breadth of the left wall, and further back was his bed. Only one painting hung on the wall, and Kasparian moved straight to it. He kissed his fingertips and placed them first on the woman, then the man and lastly on the two young girls. “I’m sorry, my dear sisters,” he whispered. “I’m afraid I still need more time.”

From the main desk, he took several books, his journal, ink and a handful of crystals and threw them all into a leather bag. He pulled off his shirt with a grimace and studied his shoulder in a round mirror. Purple marks had already appeared.

A noise from behind startled him, but he quickly calmed down, seeing a woman dressed in grey like the others. Her long red hair was bound behind her neck, and her white cheeks had dozens of freckles. “You startled me, Mura. I will be ready soon. I just need another shirt.”

Mura swallowed. “T-they are coming, my lord. I saw them from my window upstairs.”

Kasparian’s eyes widened. He pulled on the same dirtied shirt and moved to the window, carefully peeking out from behind the curtain.

Rows of holy warriors marched from the main road into Khur Square. Every step echoed off the stone walls, and the rattling sound of their shiny armour got louder and louder as more entered. He looked at them in frustration. Four, eight, twelve,

sixteen fully armed warriors, tailed by two men on tall black horses. They expected a fight.

The robes of the bishops of Kanthos, embroidered with golden wings across their chests, gave the two men on the horses away. Rongart and Orenka were bishops of the two largest districts of Kanthos: Siruna District, named after the brightest star, and Ahil District, named after the founder of Kanthos.

“So, this is what it took for them to visit the Khur District,” Kasparian mumbled. “We need to get out of here before it’s too late. Get the horses ready. I will stall them,” he commanded Mura and handed her his bag.

The young woman gave him a brief but intense embrace that stunned him before she ran from the room.

It took him a few seconds to regain his posture. He pulled the curtains to the side and opened the window. “My lords. What a pleasant surprise. I never thought you would set foot in these whiffy parts of our fine city!” he said, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

Bishop Orenka was not a tall man, but from atop his horse, he looked very intimidating. His dark skin was almost a match to the beast he sat on, and his voice was deep when proclaiming, “Kasparian, your crimes have been revealed to us. How could you fall this far? How can you believe yourself above the gods?”

The esteem he felt seeing his old mentor took Kasparian by surprise. Then again, he never hated the bishops. Most of them were trying to do good. But he did hate the fact that they believed in the false gods. The wisaris were holding them back. How could they not see? He flashed his teeth, shouting, “The gods are fake! Real gods would never allow the terrible things in these districts. You would know if you stopped smoking herbs and spending all your coin on fancy aromas.”

“The gods are the light – the only reason darkness didn’t triumph more than eight hundred years ago,” Orenka retorted.

“They don’t deserve our faith. Helping only those who offer their life in return is not god-like,” responded Kasparian.

Bishop Rongart had stayed in the background but now steered his horse forward. He was a big man, so big that he looked almost ridiculous in his robe. He would be a better match for the ranks of the holy warriors. “Keep your blasphemy to yourself! The gods aid the true believers, and you have lost their favour. Come out and receive your punishment,” he shouted.

“I’m the authority here! Khur District is my responsibility, and I have helped so many,” Kasparian retorted.

“You have murdered people, and your evil deeds end now. Break down the door!” Rongart commanded.

The first two rows of warriors drew swords in almost perfect synchronisation and moved towards the villa.

Kasparian knew he needed to buy more time for his disciples. He pulled a simple iron rod from his belt – a red crystal sat at its top. Pointing the rod out the window, he screamed, “Proiecto masa!”

Dozens of small fiery projectiles burst from the crystal and flew towards the group of warriors who had to throw themselves onto the sandstone tiles of the square to dodge the spell.

Darting out of his room, Kasparian heard Orenka shouting, “He’s one of them! A dualion. Burn the house down!”

Running through the hall, he passed through the door further back, ending up in the kitchen. Pots and pans were neatly placed on shelves, and everything was cleaned after last night’s supper. Rushing through the room, he banged his hip into the long table. A large stable of plates toppled and broke into hundreds of pieces as they hit the floor.

He staggered onwards as a loud banging sounded from the front of the house, followed by plates and cups breaking when the large cabinet crashed into the hall floor. Their attempt to block the main door had only delayed the warriors a few seconds.

Kasparian ripped the backdoor open and found his disciples packing up their five remaining mares. “Go to the others in the cave. The warriors are coming,” he warned and watched them jump onto the horses two and two.

Kasparian gripped Mura’s hand, and she pulled him up. As she kicked the horse into motion, he grabbed the red-haired woman’s waist tightly to avoid falling off.

The five fully loaded horses raced off just as one of the holy warriors came out the back door, sword ready. He swung the large blade, missing the rear of their horse only by a few centimetres. “They are escaping!” sounded his cry.

The stone buildings flew by in a blur, and the sound of hooves rang out as they rushed through the Khur District. The streets were lit up only by the occasional torch or lantern on the houses that could afford such.

The eastern gate wasn’t far away, but as soon as it came into sight, the horses up front suddenly slowed down and stopped.

Mura urged her horse on and rode past the others, joining the first rider. “Why are you stopping? We need to get out of here!”

A man with a grey beard sat on the front horse, nodding at the road ahead. Three guards were closing the big wooden gates, preventing their escape. Above the gateway, huge braziers lit up the area, and two more guards stood there, arrows nocked in their bows.

“Turn back! Go to the gate at the docks,” Kasparian shouted.

Having turned their horses around, they found themselves blocked by Bishop Orenka, his big black stallion breathing heavily. “Kasparian, stop this madness. *Your* life is over, but do not let these people suffer the same fate.”

Kasparian looked around at the faces of his trusted disciples, all of them nodding their allegiance to him.

“You saved us all, Lord Tellis. Without you, I would be dead. You gave us hope that it is possible to prevent others from experiencing the same loss we did,” said the grey-bearded man.

Kasparian smiled. He was lucky to have these people by his side now that he no longer had his family. “Go,” he whispered to Mura.

The young woman rushed the horse forward, prompting Orenka to pull his longsword from the gold scabbard. The bishop raised his sword at the sky while whispering a prayer. A dim white light appeared around the blade, and the bishop accelerated right at them.

Kasparian pointed his simple iron sceptre at his former mentor when less than ten metres were between them. “Conratu spinura.”

The bishop moved to throw the sword, but instead, he froze up, forced into a painful paralysis triggered by Kasparian’s curse.

They all rode right past the bishop, and Kasparian looked back, seeing Orenka fall from his horse. As soon as he hit the ground, Kasparian raised the curse.

The guards from the gate came rushing to Orenka’s aid. The bishop scrambled to get back up.

Mura turned left, down the wide street leading to the docks. Kanthos’ twenty-three districts of different sizes and layouts made it difficult even for the inhabitants to find their way around. Still, Kasparian knew the way, having sneaked out many times. The docks were the largest district, holding massive warehouses, ships from all of Elonia and several inns for visitors from the sea. It was always busy, which made it easier to blend in.

As they closed in on the gate between the Khur District and the docks, Mura pointed to the wall. “Archers!”

Four guards with bows ran on the wall towards the gate.

“Dammit. I should have seen this coming. We should have left long ago,” said Kasparian.

Mura didn’t reply but sped up the mare even further, overtaking two of the others in the race to the gate.

The first two horses made it through before the first arrows whistled by their heads, barely missing. Exiting on the other side of the wall, Kasparian looked back up.

All four bowmen were aiming at them and fired simultaneously.

Kasparian pulled Mura's arm, making their horse turn left. One arrow missed them by just a few centimetres. The remaining arrows weren't intended for them, but he hoped none was hit. He guided Mura again and turned left, racing down a narrow alley before reaching the open area by the ships.

A man in tattered clothes had to jump for his life. Kasparian had no time to worry about anyone other than himself and his disciples.

Exiting at the other end, they were now only a short distance from the gate and their freedom. Mura forced the horse around the tight corner and straight at the big gate built for carriages from the farms and plantations east of Kanthos.

The guards were already fighting to close the heavy doors, but as they heard the hoofbeats of the five horses approaching, they pulled their longswords, facing the riders.

Kasparian didn't want his disciples to get hurt, but at this moment, it seemed inevitable. He thought so hard that his skull was about to crack. His flare trainer had shown him an incantation that could be of use, but he'd only tried it a few times a year earlier. With the sceptre in hand, he shouted, "Dasta matelli nunstra!"

Everything around them turned into a blur. It was like being inside a bubble obfuscating their view of the outside world. The mares became uneasy, and one almost threw both riders off.

The guards at the gate turned their heads from side to side, one shouting, "Where did they go? I can still hear them."

"There! I see something," yelled another.

Kasparian and his disciples rode right past the guards, their appearance blurred by his spell.

The effect of the mirage only lasted a few more seconds, but by then, it was too late for the guards to correct their mistake. They could only watch the five horses escape into the dawn.



Chapter 3 – Hope is not Lost

“They will find us eventually,” Mura argued.

“They will... But for now, this cave is the only place we have,” Kasparian replied.

A scream went out, drawing everyone’s attention to the large stone slab in the centre. A woman lay there on her stomach, an arrow shaft sticking out of her back.

A young skinny man who tried to pull it out turned their way. “It’s stuck in her spine,” he said with concern in his voice. “I don’t know how much damage it has done.”

Kasparian nodded, moving to the woman. He took her hand and knelt to look her in the eye. “Pull it out,” he said.

The man yanked hard and tore the arrow free from the woman’s back. She cried out as blood coloured her robe.

“You were so brave, my dear,” whispered Kasparian. “Don’t worry now. We will take care of you.” He stood and nodded to the man. “Bandage her and stay with her day and night. She’s one of us, and we treat our own with the respect they deserve.”

“Of course, Lord Tellis,” replied the young man.

Kasparian moved into a small alcove in the back of the cave, Mura following along.

She handed him his bag. “Find a way to make this work. I will take care of everyone until you do.”

Kasparian studied the score of men and women sitting around the cave. “This is not a fitting home for you,” he whispered. “I promised you more.”

“At least we have a roof,” Mura grinned. “I will find food and water. We’ll make it work.”

Kasparian placed his hand on Mura's shoulder. "I'm proud of the woman you've become. I don't know what I would do without you."

The young woman smiled as she took her leave.

Kasparian sat on a rock and emptied the contents of his bag onto the ground. The crystals bounced off the floor, and the books landed with a hollow bump. He looked at the items, scratching his head. Was it all just a folly? Would he ever be able to wield the power of the gods, or were their abilities an impossibility for a mere human?

Flicking through his journal, he stopped at a drawing of the night sky above Kanthos many years earlier. It showed a wisari taking off from the top of a building in the Ahil District. Seeing the thing had excited him, but now the drawing made him angry. Why did they insist on keeping the power to themselves? With abilities like theirs, he could save people. He could have saved his parents and younger sisters, and now those abilities were the only thing that could save them from certain doom when the bishops found them.

With a sigh, he started going through the books. One was about the Shadow Academy and the assassins. It theorised about the onyx's link to the Realm of Shadows and how it was possible to manipulate shadows using the gems. He had once seen an assassin take out a merchant and his two guards. She had manipulated shadows to confuse her enemies, making them believe attacks came from several directions. Kasparian had never succeeded in creating more than darkness, but from what he knew about the assassins, anything beyond it required years of training, so it had to be enough for what he had in mind.

His attention turned to the next book, one about the Flares of the Sun and how they trained to channel fiery energy through the core crystals.

He had read both several times and remembered every word. They wouldn't give him answers. As he leant back on the cold

rock wall, he thought about what Orenka had called him back in Kanthos: Dualion. The meaning was obvious – someone who drew power from more than one source. What surprised him was that there was a word for it. If others had done it, why hadn't he come across the term or any details during his time in the libraries? Perhaps all records had been erased, but why?



After four days of research and reading up on his notes, Kasparian was pulling out his hair. He already knew everything from these books, and the endless notes scribbled down from their many failed attempts gave no hints. What was missing?

He looked up as Mura approached. She offered him a piece of bread and sat down by his side. “Last night, we took some grain from one of the farms. I hope they won’t notice.”

Kasparian nodded, grateful for any food he could get and the break from his thoughts. What if there were no answers to find? Would he fail these people who he genuinely cared for? “How is Ilsa holding up?” he asked, trying to ignore the depressing thoughts.

“She’s slowly recovering and should be able to walk again. She was very fortunate,” Mura said. “What have you figured out? What’s our next step?”

Kasparian exhaled deeply and threw his journal onto the cave floor. “I don’t know. Maybe what I want is simply not possible.”

Mura looked at the open pages of the journal and then turned to him. “How did you do that thing at the gate?”

Kasparian shrugged. “It was just a trick, an incantation I learnt from a flare. I used the heat from the red sun to create a mirage.”

Mura picked up one of the core crystals. “What is the red sun?”

Kasparian knew that Mura was curious. She had always kept close when he had brought books or trinkets to the villa. “The red sun exists in the Realm of Destruction, but I don’t know much.

After losing my sisters, I tried finding more information at the Kanthos libraries, but not much is known.”

Mura wrinkled her brows. “How did you learn to use the crystals? I’ve heard the flares train for many years?”

Kasparian smiled, easily guessing why Mura was asking. “I found a flare. He agreed to train me for a fee, of course. But that is not all. I also studied the black gems the assassins wield and their mysterious illusionary abilities.” He retrieved the onyx from his pocket and showed it to Mura.

She ran her finger across the smooth surface of the black gem. “But why? What do you hope to achieve?”

Kasparian studied the young woman. He trusted her more than any of the others. Perhaps he could share a bit more of his plan. “Why serve only the light if we can hold even more power in our hand? Because of this idea, I started bringing you all in – people who have experienced the same loss and share my beliefs. Together, we will gain more power than the wisaris. And, more importantly, we no longer have to beg for it.”

Mura nodded. “It is only fair. My parents believed in the gods but never stood a chance when the disease took them.” She cleared her throat. “But do you think it wise to combine the powers? What if you cannot control it?”

Kasparian smiled and patted the young woman on her shoulder. “Don’t worry. We will control it, and people will no longer worship the wisaris when we show them the truth. They are false gods who keep their powers from us, refusing to help even the most desperate.”

Mura gazed into his eyes. “The path seems clear, then. What is holding you back?”

Kasparian’s head dropped. “You can learn the power of core crystals and the assassins’ gems, but the wisaris are different... The gods seem to be born with their abilities. Yet, they must draw on something bigger. We need to figure out how to tap into that thing.”

Mura straightened her back and nodded towards the stone slab in the centre of the cave. “The others say that you take their hearts. Why?”

Kasparian’s expression darkened. Mura wasn’t supposed to know what he’d done. He wanted to protect her from that. “I-I believe the heart holds our ability for hope, faith and honour. The traits the gods cherish and expect.”

Mura nodded. “If you are right, perhaps the power is in their hearts?”

Kasparian smiled at her naivety. “I don’t think...” He suddenly froze. Their hearts... Could it be that simple? Why had he not seen this sooner? It wasn’t the heart of an innocent soul that would make him fulfil his destiny. It would take no less than the heart of a god. He placed both hands on the young girl’s shoulders. “You just saved us all.”

Mura’s forehead wrinkled. “How?” but already asking the question, she seemed to realise what he meant and said again, “But, how?”

Kasparian scratched his head. “It won’t be easy, and we need to do horrible things before they show themselves again. However, they came to me once, and they will come again if we leave them no choice.”

Mura swallowed. “What will you do?”

Kasparian shrugged. “I don’t know yet, but we need to prepare.” He gathered the handful of core crystals from the floor. “Find some wooden sticks and bring me the eight most loyal disciples.”



An hour later, Kasparian stood before eight of his disciples outside the cave in the late summer sun. With Mura by his side, he held out his hand, revealing eight crystals. “My friends, my family. I have asked a lot already, and you have trusted me so far.

I'm afraid what I will ask now will not only be deadly. It will also challenge your faith in me even further."

Mura raised her chin. "If it wasn't for Lord Tellis, where would we be?"

Kasparian moved to the men and women. He handed each of them a crystal and hugged them, whispering into their ears, "Hope and faith restored. For a future where no one has to die from disease."

Mura followed and gave each of them a wooden rod.

When they had given all eight of the disciples the rod and crystal, Kasparian raised his arms towards the sky. "For years, I thought the answer to our salvation was in our hearts. But I was wrong. It is not the heart of an innocent human being we need. It is the heart of one of them!" He pointed up.

A few stared into the sky while others frowned and looked down at their crystals.

"W-we cannot kill a god. No one can," stuttered a burly dark-haired man.

"I know this is a lot to ask, but I promise you that we can. They are not gods, but merely oversized birds from another realm," explained Kasparian in a spiteful tone.

"No... We cannot kill *them*. They are pure and good," said an older woman.

Kasparian looked down and folded his hands. "I understand how you must feel but remember why we do this. We can change the fate of so many. We have all suffered loss, but with the wisaris' abilities, no one ever has to. We can cure disease and heal broken bodies. Perhaps, we will even be able to bring back those we lost. Who knows what powers they keep from us?"

The woman took a step forward and threw the crystal and stick on the ground. "I'm sorry, Lord Tellis. I owe you everything, but I can't do this. It's not right."

Kasparian nodded. "I respect your decision but remember that we are branded as traitors. The wisaris will never come to our aid

again, and the only way we can ever return to Kanthos is if we succeed. With the power of the gods in our hands, the bishops will treat us like kings.”

The woman walked away, but the other seven remained.

“We are with you, Bishop Tellis. What do you need us to do?” said the burly man.

Kasparian rubbed his hands together. “Like the flares, you need to learn how to use the power of the core crystals. With it, we will be able to catch a god.”

“But how will we get them to come? I have never seen one,” asked the man.

Kasparian shrugged. “Leave that to me. For now, I will teach you what I know about the crystals. Focus on that, and the rest will come.”

Mura grabbed his shoulder. “I want to learn, too.”

“I know,” Kasparian smirked, handing her another crystal.



Chapter 4 – The Crime of Ambition

“Conratu spinura,” shouted Mura, pointing her sceptre at another of the disciples standing ten metres from her. He was a young man, not much older than Mura, muscular and with thin black hair. His arms, upper body and head bent backwards, forced to the breaking point by the spell. The young man’s mouth and eyes were wide open, but not a sound crossed his lips, not even a whimper.

“Yes! Masterfully done,” praised Kasparian. His expression revealed his disappointment when he looked from his favoured Mura to the paralysed man. “We have been at this for nearly a month, Lee. You have to do better. We don’t know how much time we have before the bishops find us.”

The young man could do nothing but stare back at Kasparian, his body not responding to any command.

“It’s enough,” Kasparian barked.

Mura lowered her sceptre, and Lee fell to the ground. “I-it’s too much. We can’t do this,” he breathed, rubbing his arms and legs.

“I know you are scared, but duelling is the best way to learn, and you need to learn fast. By risking pain and injury, you will start reacting instinctively,” Kasparian explained. He offered his hand to the man and pulled him up. “It’s our only chance. We ride for Pineview in two days.”

“Pineview? What’s in Pineview?” asked Lee.

The other seven disciples moved closer.

“Pineview is just a small town, but they have something essential to our plan – a cathedral and a bishop,” Kasparian explained.

Mura nodded. "I have heard of him. Bishop Lindell's kindness is known across Elonia. He is the reason Pineview has a growing population despite its location inside a soggy pine forest."

"Lindell is the key. The gods favour him," said Kasparian.

"You mean to kidnap a bishop?" Lee asked sceptically.

"I do. But we won't hurt him unless there's no other way."

"Lindell does what we want to do as well. He shares our goal. What do you hope to achieve by kidnapping him?" Lee continued.

"We need to show the gods that we won't stop. We are still here and won't be easily disregarded," explained Kasparian. "If we kidnap their revered bishop, they will have no other choice than to act."

"They will come for blood this time. Your blood," Mura said, concerned.

"Which is why we are training. We need to be ready when they come," Kasparian said as he moved back into the cave.



Two days later, Kasparian, Mura and the seven other disciples hid in the shade of the pine trees that enveloped Pineview. They gazed at the large wooden structure just inside the clearing, forty metres from their location. Every building in Pineview was made from wood, even the cathedral.

Kasparian scanned the area visible from their location – the town seemed abandoned. When a cheer came from inside the cathedral, a grin spread across his face. "He's preaching when the sun is at its highest, just as the bishops of Kanthos."

Mura nodded. "We still need to be careful."

"They are woodsmen, not warriors," a man in the group snorted.

"Don't underestimate them. This place is not like Kanthos. There are dangerous animals, brigands and a harsh environment, making these people a steadfast bunch at least," Kasparian

explained. He signalled the others. “Remember what we planned and be careful. We don’t want to hurt anyone if we can avoid it.” They all followed as he snuck closer to the clearing.

At the tree line, he looked over the town’s empty streets. Those who weren’t working in the forest had to be inside the cathedral, listening to Lindell’s undoubtedly wise words. When he raised his foot, intending to take the first step forward, his eyes suddenly caught movement.

Across the clearing, he saw the outline of two people standing on a small platform in the treetops. Kasparian couldn’t make out the details, but gazing across the trees, he saw two more platforms, one of them less than thirty metres to their left.

He quickly signalled for the others to move back into the forest. He had expected Pineview to have some kind of protection, but nothing this organised. His mistake could have cost them dearly.

“What?” whispered Mura.

“Hunters, up high. Several of them are watching the town,” replied Kasparian. “We have to wait until everyone leaves the cathedral. Hopefully, that will draw the hunters’ attention.”

“Hopefully...” Lee grunted.

Less than ten minutes later, the sound of doors slamming open followed by a buzz of voices filled the clearing. Soon after, more than a hundred people streamed out of the cathedral. Women, men and children, all talking and laughing.

Kasparian studied them. Fifteen years earlier, this was what he’d hoped to achieve – to inspire people and give them hope. He just wanted to make a difference. Kasparian turned to his disciples and nodded before leading them forward. They sprinted into the clearing and went straight for the cathedral.

Following the pine log wall, they arrived at a simple door in the back of the building. Without thinking twice, Kasparian forced it open and ran inside.

He found himself in a small chamber with a single bed and several cabinets full of books. It was the bishop's quarters, but there was no sign of him. Kasparian continued through the room and tore the next door open, moving into a larger room with a round table large enough to seat half a dozen people. Several paintings decorated the walls, and Kasparian knew every one of them. They told the history of the followers of Gjandir, the faction that worshipped the wisaris who inhabited the Realm of Light. Eight hundred and fifty years earlier, when Adalyn showed herself to the people of Elonia, she came with a warning that caused the faction of light to be formed.

When voices went out behind the next door, Kasparian wasted no time and darted across the room. Through the door, the cathedral rose before him. Despite the simple demeanour of the place, Kasparian was impressed by the resemblance to his former cathedral in Kanthos. Rows and rows of artfully crafted benches, chandeliers and several wooden carvings and figurines of winged beings decorated the place.

An older man with short grey hair, wearing simple trousers and a white shirt, moved towards them. At his side walked a younger man in a robe. Most likely Lindell's apprentice, his blond hair and beard trimmed neatly.

As Kasparian and his eight disciples barged in, Lindell's forehead wrinkled. "What is this? Who are you?" he said, his voice powerful for an older man.

"Take him," Kasparian commanded.

Mura and two others moved to the bishop and dragged him along.

The robed man grabbed Mura by her shoulder. "Stop! What are you doing?"

She wrenched free and pushed him so hard that he fell to the floor.

Kasparian looked deep into the bishop's eyes. "Do as we ask, and by my word, no harm will come to you," he said as his disciples dragged Lindell on.

"Your word? What good is the word of a criminal who has defied everything we stand for?" Lindell grunted.

Kasparian sighed. Lindell knew who he was. Had the bishops of Kanthos warned him? Was that the reason why they had hunters watching the town?

The disciples pulled Lindell through his own quarters and out the back door. However, as they exited, they froze just outside, leaving no place for Kasparian.

Kasparian squeezed through, "Go on, we have to..." Stepping into the clearing, he realised why his disciples had stopped.

Two men and a woman were there, dressed in green and brown clothes, perfectly camouflaging them in the dark forest. It was the hunters, and they had arrows aimed at them.

"Let him go," snarled the woman, curling her lip at Mura and the other disciple holding Lindell. She had piercing brown eyes that perfectly matched the colour of her hair.

Mura turned her head and looked back at Kasparian, who found himself surprised by the look in her eyes. It wasn't fear or doubt. Mura was silently asking for permission to attack.

Kasparian looked at the three hunters. He'd feared it might come to this. They wanted to help people, so they needed Lindell, but the hunters would never understand. "We won't harm your bishop. We need his help," he tried to explain.

"You have a strange way of asking for help," the brown-haired woman said. "Last warning!" She pulled the bowstring back another two centimetres.

Kasparian couldn't let Mura or the others do his dirty work. He already had many lives on his conscience, so what would a few more do? He pulled the sceptre from his belt and forced it out between two of his disciples who stood between him and the hunters. "Proiecto masa."

All three of the hunters' eyes widened, but none managed to dodge as dozens of flaming projectiles blasted through their bodies. Their arrows flew, but only one hit its mark, digging into Lee's shoulder.

The young man cried out in pain, and Kasparian placed his hand over his mouth. "Get to the horses, quick." He looked down at the three bodies on the ground, exhaling heavily before running off with his disciples.

As Kasparian took the first step into the forest, now sheltered by the trees, the sound of a hammer ringing a bell rang out.

"You should have let me help," argued Mura as they ran through the forest as fast as they could, dragging Lindell along.

"It wasn't your burden," breathed Kasparian, looking back at several shadows moving between the trees. "But you might still get your chance."

Lee groaned, doing everything to keep pace with them, the arrow shaft protruding from his shoulder.

Arriving at the horses, Kasparian jumped onto the back of his mare and signalled for Mura. She shoved Lindell up, and Kasparian pulled the bishop to the back of his horse. "Hold on," he grunted.

Lindell's expression was grim, looking up at his kidnapper. "W-why are you doing this? The bishops have condemned you to death. Is this about money?"

Kasparian snorted. "What I need is worth far more than all the wealth of this world."

As they raced through the forest, pine needles whipping into their arms and faces, several arrows whistled past them. None of them came too close. The hunters clearly didn't want to hurt their precious bishop.



Chapter 5 – Unforgivable

“You killed them – they were innocent,” Lee breathed, lying on his back outside the cave while an older woman attended his wound. She had removed the arrow and was stitching him up.

“I did what I had to,” grunted Kasparian. “They would have killed us.”

Lee squirmed as the needle entered his skin. “They had every right. We have doomed ourselves by kidnapping Lindell. The gods will never forgive it.”

Kasparian barred his teeth as he kneeled next to the younger man. “We are what no one wants to be. Outcasts, condemned, doomed. Call us what you want, but it is necessary.”

Lee shook his head. “You are crazy. We should never have followed you.”

Kasparian grabbed Lee’s arm. “For some people, life is not a gift. There will be moments of utter darkness, moments to decide whether to fight or leave it all behind. This is such a moment – the greatest challenge of our lives. If we succeed, if we don’t lose faith, then the reward will be worth all our sacrifice.”

Lee shook his head, baffled.

“Only you can choose. You can leave, but remember, you are not safe in Kanthos.” Kasparian cocked his head. “Or in Pineview.”

Lee’s head dropped, and he let the woman do her work.

Kasparian nodded. “We need you, Lee. Every one of you is a pillar supporting our goal. Our path may not be virtuous, but our destination undoubtedly is.”

When Lee sighed, Kasparian moved into the cave. He paused for a few seconds while his eyes adjusted to the low light and then moved to the stone slab.

Lindell lay on the stone altar of sacrifice, where many others had died. He lay on a blanket, shielding him from the cold rock, a blanket that one of his disciples must have placed there. It pleased Kasparian to know that none of them took this lightly. They were still humane, and he intended to keep it that way. If it were up to him, he would be the only one carrying the burden of murder.

The bishop had his eyes closed, almost as if he were at peace. When Kasparian stepped up next to the rock, Lindell's eyes popped open. "I'm terribly sorry for all of this. Help us, and you will be returned unharmed in just a few days," Kasparian explained.

There was no indication that Lindell had heard him. He just kept staring.

"I never meant for anyone to get hurt, and I will do everything to make up for what happened to the three hunters," Kasparian continued.

Lindell cleared his throat and said in a calm voice, "I know who you are. Word reached us weeks ago, but I never thought you would be reckless enough to attack Pineview." He looked around the cave. "What about these good people? Have your dark mind corrupted their hearts as well?"

Everyone in the cave paused and looked at the two men.

"If you know who I am, you will know that I am not the one who's cruel. These men and women are here of their own free will. You have to look to the sky for the real corruption," Kasparian proclaimed.

"You took them in pretending to care. You brainwashed them to believe your evil actions make sense. Dammit, you even trained these people in the destructive ways of the flares, and you call yourself the victim?"

Kasparian's lip curled. He loved his disciples. They were his family – the only ones he had left. His hand grabbed the knife in his belt, but his hand froze just as he was about to cut into the bishop's chin. He took a deep breath and calmed himself. Lindell didn't have to believe in what they were doing. He was just a pawn in his plan, and pawns didn't need to speak to be of use. He cut a piece of the blanket and stuffed it into the bishop's mouth. "Pray. Tell them where you are and what I'm doing to you," Kasparian whispered, gently running the knife's edge down Lindell's forehead, over his nose and lips.

Kasparian kept at it for hours, threatening without hurting the bishop, but the old man wasn't easily intimidated. Or perhaps he believed that Kasparian wouldn't dare to hurt him. But he would soon learn otherwise.

That evening, the former bishop of the Khur District moved out of the cave as everyone else had fallen asleep. He greeted the two women standing watch at the entrance before moving into the night.

He fell to his knees in the tall autumn grass, gazing into the sky filled with thousands of stars. Up there were so many worlds and many unknown races. Was anyone out there about to commit an act as unforgivable as him? What if it wouldn't work? What if the wisaris didn't come, or his disciples were no match for them?

He threw himself to the ground and rolled to his back. Lying there he saw the faces of his two sisters before his eyes. They had lived to the age of sixteen before the disease had struck them. None of them had borne children or had the chance to experience the beauty of Elonia. Their lives and deaths were meaningless. The only thing they had brought to his world was pain.

He picked himself up, realising there was no other choice. All those families and all those children having loved ones ripped from their grasp. He had to act when the gods would not.

Kasparian rushed back to the cave, the knife ready in his hand.

Lindell's scream ripped through the silence of the night, but it didn't stop Kasparian. He raised the blade and made another cut into the bishop's shoulder.

Mura came rushing to his side, and so did the rest of the disciples, torn from their slumber by the dreadful scream of an old man realising his gods wouldn't be able to save him.

Kasparian looked at the faces of everyone around him. "This has to be done. It's the only way they will come. You are my family, the only one I have, and together we will stand up for what we believe in. We can create a world without loss and pain. Are you still with me?"

Mura was the first to pull her sceptre. "You have given me more than just life," she said, looking at the crystal in the sceptre. "You have given me a taste of how things could be. I'm with you till the end!"

The disciples shouted in unison, "Hope and faith restored!"

Kasparian glanced as three shadows slipped out of the cave. He knew it was a lot to ask. "So be it. Prepare yourself, just like we planned. They will come soon."

Mura led everyone away from the stone slab, and Kasparian turned his focus back to the bishop. "Pray. Tell them how the monster Kasparian Tellis is torturing you and will take your heart."

Lindell's eyes widened. He groaned through the cloth he still had in his mouth when the knife bit into his skin again.

Kasparian ripped the old man's shirt and ran the blade down his chest, drawing a long red line of blood.

The cloth muffled Lindell's agonising cry, and when the knife stopped, his nostrils expanded and pulled back rapidly as he fought to breathe.

Frustrated by Lindell's stubbornness, Kasparian moved the knife up and started again. If he continued like this, the bishop might bleed out before he could reach out to the gods. Kasparian

moved closer and whispered in Lindell's ear, "Soon, it will be too late. You won't see the men, women or children of Pineview again. I *will* take your heart if you don't do what I ask."

Lindell's mouth moved, but the sounds made no sense. Not before Kasparian pulled the cloth from his mouth. "W-what do you hope to gain? They will never give you their power even if they could. More likely, they will kill you for what you have done."

"They *will* give me their power, whether they want to or not. And with that power, we will do what the gods won't. We will help everyone, not only those deemed worthy by the wisaris twisted view of humanity." Kasparian moved the knife towards the old man's torso.

Lindell fought to move out of its path. "If there's one thing our world should learn from your demise, it is to keep a closer eye on those who greedily seek power." He nodded at the knife. "I will pray, but you only have yourself to blame for what will happen next."

Kasparian watched as the bishop closed his eyes and started whispering.

"Beings of light, hear my prayer. Adalyn, mother of gods, I beg for your aid..."

With a grunt of disgust, Kasparian wiped Lindell's blood from the knife and took his leave. He moved to the cave entrance and watched as his remaining disciples ran about, preparing simple wooden spears and nets. "My friends!" he shouted. "Our goal is near – closer now than ever before."

The disciples positioned themselves in a half-circle around the opening of the cave.

"It is often at the final, most dangerous step when courage falters and loyalty fades. But we are family. Together we will fight through this day of fear and despair only to come out stronger, with everything we have searched for all these years."

Some smiled but most kept glancing to the sky, prepared for a fight yet fearful of what the coming hours would bring.

“Be ready. Fight, but don’t throw away your life,” Kasparian said and moved back inside with Mura and the seven others, trained in the ways of the flares.

Bishop Lindell was still praying as they entered the cave. The wounds on his chest were still bleeding, and Kasparian ordered a disciple to bandage him and cut the rope around the bishop’s hands. As he did, Lindell turned his head, staring at Kasparian. “There will be no redemption for you. No way back from the dark path you chose,” the bishop gasped.

“Can you not see? Redemption is not our goal. The gods could have prevented all of this had they only listened,” grunted Kasparian.

The bishop opened his mouth to answer but was cut short by a woman rushing into the cave. “They are coming! We can see it in the sky. It’s a god!” Her tone was desperate.

“It’s not a god and not a human being. It is just a creature from another realm. Take your positions!” Kasparian barked and ran to the cave entrance, his gaze following the woman’s finger as she pointed up.

A black shadow against the blue skies grew larger and larger as it quickly approached. “Only one?” Kasparian mumbled. Why would they only send one? Perhaps they were conceited, thinking humans were no match for them? Or maybe they wouldn’t risk more than one of their kind? No matter which, it only added to their benefit. “Get it to the cave!” he shouted and took a step back into the protection of the cave.

The wisari descended rapidly, and when Kasparian’s men and women raised their wooden spears at it, it responded by stretching its clawed legs.

It moved fast – faster than anything Kasparian had ever seen before. None of the spears ever touched it as it crashed into a grey-haired man, forcing him to the ground with blood spraying from his chest. Surrounded by the disciples, the wisari stared at them in turn, waiting for their move.

“Take it down!” Kasparian shouted from the cave, prompting his disciples into action.

A man forced his spear forward, but the wisari moved out of its path long before it hit its target. The elegant winged being launched at the man, gutting him with its long claws. Triggered by the attack on their brother, the rest of the disciples charged in.

So much for the mercy of the gods, Kasparian thought, watching the spectacle unfolding before his eyes with increased concern. The eagle form allowed the wisari to move extremely fast and strike with utmost precision. His disciples stabbed and swung their spears at it, but it danced around them or leapt high into the air, supported by a beat of its wings, only to drop back down, tearing into the attackers with its powerful claws.

When only three disciples still stood, Kasparian forced his gaze from the captivating dance of death. “Get back inside!” he shouted and watched them running towards him.

The wisari didn’t follow. As soon as the disciples threw the spears and ran, it let them go and instead looked directly at Kasparian.

He recognised it as the same wisari that had approached him that night when everything fell apart. When it spread its large wings, jumping into the air and rushing at him, Kasparian spun, running inside as fast as he could. “It’s coming!” he shouted.

The three disciples were the first to enter, but the wisari came right behind them. It had to land and fold its wings to enter the narrow entrance but stayed in eagle form, ready to strike.

Kasparian was waiting for it, his knife on Lindell’s throat. “Stop! Or the bishop dies.”

Inside the cave, the wisari bent down and spread its wings, staring hard at Kasparian. “You should have accepted your punishment. Now, all of you will pay.”

“Now!” shouted Kasparian.

Mura and the seven disciples, trained in the arts of the flares, leapt forward. They all pointed their sceptres at the wisari, yelling, “Conratu spinura!”

The wisari’s eyes widened just before its body froze up, its great wings and upper body slowly being forced back from the united power of the eight disciples and their crystals.

Kasparian grinned as he let go of Lindell, who fell to his knees, watching his paralysed god in horror. “No! You cannot do this,” he begged.

Kasparian ignored the bishop and closed in on the wisari. “Do you feel like a god now?” he asked. “We know the truth. You are nothing more than selfish beings, using your power to make us puppets of your will.”

He raised the knife, but the wisari suddenly started moving. With great difficulty, it regained its posture and attempted to strike.

Jumping back, Kasparian pulled his sceptre. “Conratu spinura.” He used the same incantation, joining the rest of his disciples in holding the god in place.

The willpower and strength of the wisari were admirable. Even with the power of nine crystals, it held back but was in no condition to fight.

“We can’t hold it!” Kasparian heard Mura shout from behind. He moved closer, keeping his sceptre pointed at the wisari and looked into its eyes as he plunged the knife into its chest, again and again.

Dark red, almost black, blood streamed down the magnificent being. With its lifeblood escaping, it could no longer withstand the incantation and quickly got forced backwards.

Kasparian lifted his curse and placed the sceptre back in his belt.

The others followed his example and moved to his side, looking down at the beautiful wisari, bleeding out on the cave floor. Its body lay on a bed of its great grey-feathered wings, and

it looked up at them, a tear escaping its bright yellow eyes. “You don’t know what you have done,” it said in a frail voice.

“You left us no choice. We will take what you keep from us,” replied Kasparian.

The wisari started cramping up. “A-all we wanted was to help. We should never have interfered. We should have let you suffer the Aratulan.”

Kasparian kneeled. “The *what?*”

The wisari’s head dropped, barring its slender neck.

Kasparian sighed. It was disturbing how much these things looked like humans, removing the wings and talons from the equation.

“W-we killed one of the gods. Did you hear what it said? They saved us, and this is how we repay them?” a black-haired female disciple said, staggering back towards the stone slab.

Kasparian ignored the woman. He forced the knife into the chest of the wisari and started cutting out its heart. It was bigger than a human heart but otherwise much the same.

“You have doomed us all,” said Lindell, still sitting on the floor, staring at the dead god.

Kasparian ripped the heart from the chest of the winged being and stared at it intensely, a smile spreading on his face. He had been searching for a way to wield the power of the gods for years. This had to be it.



Chapter 6 – The Price of Power

“Lord Tellis, you better get out here,” a male voice shouted, interrupting Kasparian’s thoughts.

Wrinkles appeared on his forehead. What now? With the wisari’s heart in hand, he moved to the man and gazed out at the grassy plain.

A few hundred metres out, a dozen rows of holy warriors marched in their direction, the sun’s rays reflected in their shiny plate armour.

Kasparian’s jaw dropped. There had to be close to a hundred of them. He recognised the green cape of Captain Jillana in front. She was responsible for handpicking and training the holy warriors who served the followers of Gjandir and was leading the force towards the cave.

“What will we do?” asked the man. “We cannot fight them.”

Kasparian stared at the many rows of seasoned warriors and then at the older man next to him. Without a word, he raced back inside.

“What is it?” Mura asked.

“The bishops. They have sent an entire company of warriors.”

Mura’s eyes widened. “We cannot fight that many,” she argued.

Kasparian didn’t answer. He moved to the stone slab and, from his pocket, pulled the onyx and the purple crystal he’d used at all the previous attempts. He placed the two gems and the wisari heart on the altar.

“We will do everything we can to delay them,” Mura said and moved out of the cave with the rest of the disciples.

Kasparian barely heard her – his focus tuned in on the task at hand. He took a deep breath before picking up all three items. He squeezed the heart, onyx and core crystal in his hands.

He started citing a prayer, knowing that the wisaris would never answer now. Then again, they had abandoned him years ago. Next, he began a flare incantation, “Mentiro illu av’ror.”

His excitement grew when a tingling sensation moved through his hands and up his arms. He quickly activated the last component – the black gem, summoning a black shroud that filled the entire area with darkness.

Silence descended upon the cave. The only sound was the heavy stomps of the hundred seasoned warriors, moving closer by the second.

The tinkling suddenly stopped. Kasparian could still feel all three separate components in his hands, and his heart sank. What was he doing wrong? What if it wasn’t possible to combine the power of the realms? Would they all die here, making him responsible for the deaths of his disciples as well?

Hysterical laughter went out from the other side of the shrouded cave. “What did you think would happen? That you would suddenly get divine powers?” breathed Lindell.

A wave of feelings crashed down on Kasparian. Anger rushed through his veins, boiling his blood. Regret and sadness for killing the wisari filled his heart, and in his mind, hatred took over as he blamed the bishops for everything. He opened his mouth, unable to contain all these emotions, and let loose a howl that sounded more like the roar of a beast.

At that moment, a burning agony engulfed his hands. He could feel the heat of the fire on his face and chest when his hands burst into flames. Unable to let go, he kept screaming as the pain intensified. Was this Adalyn’s punishment for his sins?

To Kasparian, it felt like minutes passed before the fire slowly diminished together with the dark shroud covering the cave.

The first thing he saw was Lindell's frightened expression, but then his attention moved to the blue and purple flames that ran across his hands. He wanted to let go, but his excitement outweighed any agony at that moment.

He slowly loosened his grip when the last flames faded from his scorched hands. The large purple crystal resting in his blackened palms brought pride and joy to his eyes. He wanted to cry out in joy and jump up and down for finally achieving what he'd set out to do years before. But then his eyes caught movement inside the crystal, and he turned it around to get a better glimpse.

Shadow and flame caressed each other inside the gem in a lover's dance. Kasparian couldn't take his eyes from the fascinating spectacle.

Mura's voice called him to action, "Kasparian!"

He clenched the crystal in his crippled hands and moved out of the cave into the daylight.

Thirty metres down the hill stood the army of warriors with Jillana and Bishop Rongart in front. They both stared up at Kasparian and his burned hands. "We have come to carry out your judgement. You and your disciples will die for your crimes, but your deaths will be swift if you lay down your weapons!" shouted Jillana.

Kasparian's laughter was borderline insanity. He held the crystal out. "You're too late! Their power is mine now."

Mura and the other disciples glanced at him.

Rongart took a step forward. "Your own disciples left you. They told us what you intend to do. Do you believe yourself greater than the gods? You lost someone close to you, but if it weren't for them, none of us would be here," the bishop shouted in his deep voice.

Suddenly both Jillana and Rongart froze up, staring at the cave entrance.

Kasparian turned his head and saw Lindell staggering out into the daylight. “They... They killed it! They murdered a god and took its heart,” the old man yelled.

First, an eerie silence swept across the plains, then the expressions of all warriors, the captain and the bishop, turned to wrath. Jilana curled her lip and charged up the hill, followed by her warriors.

“Stop them!” Mura commanded and launched fiery darts at the charging force, the other seven disciples joining in. But the small projectiles caused little damage to the plated warriors. Only a few fell as a dart found an opening in their armour or visor.

Mura looked back at Kasparian again. He knew why she looked to him, but he had no idea how to make the crystal work. He’d hoped for more time, but time was not in their favour with a charging force coming right at them. He nodded at Mura and turned his attention to the purple crystal.

Mura and the disciples changed tactics and began using the curse they had learnt to take down the wisari. “Conratu spinura!”

Eight of the first warriors fell into the grass on their way up, frozen by the curse. However, the remaining part of the force still came right at them.

Kasparian tried the same incantations as his disciples, but the purple crystal didn’t function the same as a core crystal. He watched in dread as the holy warriors reached the first disciples, cutting two of them down with ease. In desperation, he slammed the crystal into his forehead. How did the gods trigger their abilities? He thought about the young wisari they had killed - its bright yellow eyes, wide wings and big clawed talons. A cold sensation rushed through his arms, and fear found him – fear for his life and fear for the lives of his remaining disciples.

The crystal began vibrating, and something touched his head. It felt like tentacles latching out, caressing his brain and entering his mind, but he didn’t let go. If this were his punishment, it was time to accept it.

Suddenly, everything fell silent. It was almost as if time had stopped. At first, he didn't dare to open his eyes, afraid of what he may find. But when he gazed out, he found that time hadn't stopped, only the holy warriors. The scores of followers were kneeling before him, most of them with mouths open and eyes wide. He looked down himself but saw nothing out of the ordinary. What the hell was going on?

Mura rushed to his side. "Is it still you?" she asked with a baffled expression.

"Of course, it's me," he grunted.

"You... You look like one of them. A wisari." She grabbed him by the waist. "Whatever you're doing, don't stop," she whispered, pulling him away.

Kasparian had no idea what was going on, but he found it best to follow Mura's advice. He had no interest in the fate that awaited if the holy warriors saw through the ploy.

As Mura pulled him along, he felt his link to the crystal wane. He tried to concentrate, but the vibration from the crystal still stopped.

Jillana was on her knees, only ten metres from Kasparian. She shook her head violently, the long braid on the back of her armour swinging over her shoulder. "It is not a real god; it's Tellis! Take them down!"

Mura jumped on her horse and grabbed Kasparian's arm, pulling him up. He almost dropped the crystal, no strength left in his burned fingers.

"Go, Lord Tellis. Change the world. Show them our dream of stopping death and disease," said one disciple who found no horse to take him away.

"Hope and faith restored," Kasparian whispered to the grey-bearded man on the ground.

When Mura kicked the horse, racing off with the six remaining disciples who had trained in the arts of destruction, Kasparian looked over his shoulder.

The older man smiled as if nothing in the world could touch him. He kept looking in their direction, even as the wave of warriors cut him down.

Swallowing hard, Kasparian turned his attention to the crystal. He could still feel its slight vibration. “W-what happened?” he stuttered.

Mura was silent for a while. “One moment Kasparian Tellis stood at the top of that hill, and the next, a god. An even bigger one than the one we took down inside the cave.”

Kasparian’s forehead wrinkled. A god? Had he turned into a wisari? Or at least made it appear so? He remembered his incantation that had created a mirage and saved them at the Kanthos gate. Could this be similar? An illusion of some kind? He looked into the crystal with a crooked smile. What other powers would this hybrid crystal give him?



Chapter 7 – A New Home

“Are you all right?” Mura asked, placing her hand on Kasparian’s shoulder.

He looked away from the crystal up at the young red-haired woman. She’d stood by him through it all, and he mustered up a smile. “I will be. Find us a place to stay. I will soon understand its secrets.”

Mura bent down and stared into the crystal. “It’s beautiful and ominous. It looks like... Like a wraith dancing in fire.”

A wraith? Kasparian scratched his chin. A wraith wasn’t exactly a creature of light, but neither was the power he felt from the crystal. Had the onyx’s dark energy corrupted it? The assassins used the black gems’ illusionary powers to cause fear and gain the upper hand in combat, but had he been too greedy in wanting to control all three kinds of energy? “We’ll understand more in a few months. By then, we will be ready to return to Kanthos and show them why all of this was necessary. When we cure the sick and heal the wounded, everything will be forgiven,” he said, reassuring himself as much as Mura.

Mura raised her eyebrow as she helped him up but said nothing. She did pause to study his burned hands, though. “We need to get them bandaged.”

Kasparian shook his head. “I deserve this. The pain will be a reminder of the price of power.”

Mura grabbed his arm. “If it gets infected, we have to take your hands.”

With a sigh, Kasparian nodded and let the young woman clean his wounds and wrap them in cloth. “Thank you,” he whispered afterwards, looking into her eyes.

Mura gave a simple nod. "Tell me it was all worth it?"

Kasparian smirked as he raised the crystal. "We have our price right here. It took more from us than I had hoped, but it was worth it, I promise."

Mura sighed and helped him up on their horse. She nodded at the other disciples, sitting in silence with their heads low. "Faith is not forever. So far, that thing has cost us nothing but suffering and death – the exact opposite of why we chose to follow you."

Kasparian looked around, only now realising how depressed and lost his disciples appeared. They were not fighters, yet many of them had died fighting for him and for what he believed. "My friends!" he called out. "I've asked for too much. We have lost too many, and we did things none of us is proud of." He pressed his forehead against the crystal. "The power of this thing is immense. It is destined for greatness, and when I understand how to control it, we can return to our home."

"It could take years. Where will we stay?" asked a slim man.

"We all deserve peace after everything that has happened. What we need is a place far from prying eyes. We will find those things in Melorn Forest," Kasparian said.

"Melorn? That is dryad territory," Mura reasoned.

"Dryads are kind and empathic beings. They will leave us alone. They don't care much about the gods or bishops," Kasparian explained.

A few moments later, they all rode north towards Miller's Island. Two bridges connected the island with the north and south of Elonia, making it the fastest way for farmers to cross with their carriages. Merchants had realised this long ago and built several windmills on the island to mill the farmers' grain.

Less than ten minutes before reaching the first bridge, Kasparian and his disciples met such a farmer, the sacks on his wagon all cut open, spilling his precious flour at every bump in the road. "Morons. Stupid metal fools!" he swore.

Kasparian patted Mura's arm, wanting her to stop. "Excuse me, sir. What happened? Were you robbed?"

"Robbed? Was I robbed? This was much worse. Those Gjandir nutters think they can do whatever they want. Spilling a man's bread and butter on the ground," the farmer snorted, adding, "A stone has more brains than those freaks."

"That's something we can all agree on. They have the bridge blocked, then?" Kasparian asked.

The man grunted, whipping his horse to get it moving. "They are looking for smugglers or thieves, I'm guessing. But that doesn't give them the right to throw away my hard-earned product."

Kasparian exhaled, watching the farmer drive off. "We cannot cross here. We have to go to Larien. The dryads can get us across."

"Why would they help?" asked one of his disciples.

"It is who they are. If we treat them with respect, they will do the same to us. I met several of their kind in Kanthos, trading dryad medicine and herbs for tools and food. They are kind and naive," Kasparian replied.



Hours later, the group rode into the forest south of the large river that split the land of Elonia in two. Many tree stumps stood around them, the people of Kanthos responsible as they needed the timber. But the great forest still stood tall the farther north of Kanthos they got.

Sitting behind Mura, Kasparian only glanced at the great trees and thick vines, unable to keep his focus away from the crystal for long.

A few hundred metres into the forest, Mura clapped his leg and nodded at the trees on their right.

A slender, green-skinned man was studying them, pausing his work of plucking berries. But it wasn't the dryad who'd caught Mura's attention. Next to the man lay a long slender beast, a serpent of some sort but with four sturdy legs. It raised its scaled head and glared their way, flashing its many sharp teeth in a dreadful hiss.

"I thought you said these people were harmless?" Mura asked, passing the man and his pet.

"They are harmless but not defenceless. From what I have heard, they have some form of symbiosis with nature. The dryads can manipulate the forest and its beasts," Kasparian explained. "As long as we treat them with respect, we will be safe."

All eight riders nearly broke their necks from looking up and around as they entered the dryad city of Larien half an hour later. The trees were enormous. These people of the forest lived in them and in smaller huts underneath. The forest provided shelter, food and everything else they needed.

When three children ran across the road farther ahead, Kasparian frowned. Two of them were *not* dryads. They were humans, just like himself and his disciples. A closer look revealed that several of the men and women who now approached were also human.

They stopped the horses as an older woman stepped out from the group and raised her arms. "Welcome to Larien, travellers. We offer hot soup and shelter to those who come in peace – why are you here?" She had a powerful voice and spoke with a foreign but melodic accent.

Kasparian hid the crystal inside his cloak before he got himself down from the back of Mura's horse. "We come in peace," he said with a smile. "We are travelling north and seek passage across the river. We will pay."

The woman studied them closely, obviously looking for weapons. Then she smirked. "Keep your coin – they are of no use

out here. Let us take care of those magnificent animals so you can share your stories with us.”

Kasparian bowed and signalled for his disciples to hand over the horses.

When the woman led them under great trees as wide as a small house, she grinned at their expressions. “You have never visited the dryads before? Our city, Éira, in the north, is our pride.”

Kasparian stared at the thick vines growing up the trees, full of colourful flowers, and when they arrived at the city’s centre, his jaw dropped. Humans and dryads, men and women, sat together around the forest floor. Some baked bread or cooked soup; others spun cotton into thread or made clothes.

Children ran around, playing with each other or their animal companions. One had a serpent, smaller than the one they had seen outside the city but still large enough to be a threat. But the beast didn’t seem aggressive around the children.

Several other creatures shared the forest with the people living here, most of them foreign to Kasparian. Some had wings, some looked mostly like plants, while another resembled a green ape with long arms that it dragged along. Most had scaly green colours, but some had thick fur that seemed to change colour when it got near the children.

“You allow humans to stay with you?” Kasparian asked, surprised by how many there were.

The dryad woman signalled for them to sit at a small fireplace where three women prepared vegetables for soup. “The forest is for everyone who sees the beauty of nature and has love in their hearts.” She smiled and nodded at one of the women at the fireplace. “This is Arthana. Her father is a dryad, and her mother is human. She will make sure you are fed and find a place for you to sleep for the night.”

Kasparian reached his hand out. “Thank you. Are you the... matriarch?” he asked, not knowing the titles or hierarchies of the dryad society.

The older woman laughed. “We don’t have rulers. Everyone here has tasks to carry out, ensuring we are dressed and fed. Beyond that, they are free to do as they like.”

Kasparian raised his eyebrow. How could a city function with no one in charge? “These people look up to you. I can see the respect in their eyes.”

The woman smiled. “I’m a seer, responsible for communicating with the guardians and protecting the people until a new elder will be appointed.” She took Kasparian’s hand and studied the bandages. “I think we can do better. Arthana, fetch some kortan salve.”

The young woman nodded and sprinted off.



Later that night, Kasparian lay on his back next to the fireplace, studying his hands. They were grim to behold, and it was a miracle that he could even move a few of his fingers. The pain was gone, though, thanks to the dryad salve.

Beyond his hands, he found thousands of stars shining down on them. But why could he see the stars? Earlier, the trees had blocked out the sun and blue skies. This place was strange and magical, and for a moment, he forgot about the purple crystal.

Mura sat at his side, talking to the woman Arthana. “Why did your mother come here?”

“There was nothing left for her in Kanthos. The noise, the filth – it all just became too much. She met my father at a market. He traded dryad wares for tools, one of the few things humans possess that can make life easier out here,” the half-dryad replied.

“Why do you stay?” Mura’s forehead wrinkled. “You could leave and go back to Kanthos?”

“I could,” Arthana confirmed. “But why would I? I have everything I need right here, and everyone lives in unity. In

Kanthos, I would be poor, perhaps even living alone on the street. The spirits take care of us here, and we will never be poor.”

Listening to their conversation, Kasparian sighed. In this place, he almost felt at peace. As if some magical power dampened the hatred in his heart. If more people knew about it, he was sure that many more from Kanthos would choose the way of the dryads.

Kasparian’s peace didn’t last long, though, as his mind wandered back to the crystal. His hands found it inside his cloak, and he turned his back to the two women, turning the gem as he studied every aspect of it.

A sudden shouting cracked the silence of the peaceful city. “Search everywhere! They are here. You saw the tracks.”

Kasparian sprung up, recognising the voice. It was Jillana, the captain of the holy warriors, but he could not see anyone in the darkness. All the small fireplaces burned low by now.

He heard the voice of the seer, then. “Do you come in peace or with ill intent?”

“Seer Irnuva, we come in peace. But if you are sheltering enemies of Kanthos and the followers of Gjandir, the punishment will be severe,” a deep male voice replied, one that Kasparian also recognised. It was Bishop Rongart.

He pulled Mura up, roused the others and ran through the city in the dark of night. He was confident the seer would sell them out. No one could be trusted – not even these people.

When they reached the sandy shore, Kasparian pulled a dryad from a small fireplace where he sat with two others. Placing his knife to the dryad’s throat, he pointed at the four rafts lying on the sand. “Get us to the other side. Now!”

The three dryads nodded and ran to the rafts, picking up their paddles.

“Burn the three others,” Kasparian commanded. He climbed on board the raft, watching Mura use her sceptre to fire arrows at the other vessels.

This night, there was almost no wind, but the three dryads still paddled furiously, afraid for their lives.

Kasparian, Mura, and the other disciples gazed back at the shore from the open water. A long row of holy warriors was lining up, the flames from the burning rafts reflected in their shiny armours.

“Will we ever be safe?” asked Mura, not taking her eyes from the company of plated warriors.

“They won’t be able to find us where we are going,” Kasparian said.

They all stared at the shoreline in silence. The number of warriors had doubled since their last encounter at the cave. The followers of Gjandir clearly intended to wipe them out. Perhaps they even wanted the crystal for themselves? Kasparian clenched it tightly.



Epilogue

Kasparian sat at his simple wooden table in the dark cottage. The smell of soot and decay hung thick in the air, but it didn't seem to bother him. His grey hair and beard hung down, and at his side stood a tall wooden staff, the Wraith Crystal attached to its top.

A whisper carried through the cottage: "Zarakkhi."

Kasparian looked up. "What do you want from me?"

The whisper sounded more determined this time: "Zarakkhi."

He wanted to call out to Mura, Lee or any of his disciples, but they were all long gone. He took a deep breath and kept writing. When finished, he placed the piece of parchment on the table to dry up:

My eager search for power is why I'm now trapped in this hideous bubble, incapable of escaping. Only the animals of the forest can keep me alive, but I see fewer every day. I fear that I might never be free again to feel the rush of life through my veins.

According to my calculations, I have been trapped for more than thirty years. The vile people of the forest found my house. They killed my disciples but were no match for the power of the Wraith Crystal. When they realised this, they sealed me within this barrier.

Many have come to claim the crystal for themselves, and all have died trying. Their core crystals are now my trophies.

The Wraith Crystal is the answer to everything we have been searching for. It spoke to me. It told me how to create an army, but its power over me grew, weakening me more and more. I feel its presence in my mind. The word "Zarakkhi" keeps repeating. I dare not use its powers until I am once again rejuvenated if that will ever happen.

He leant back on his chair, stretching his aching body. If he were to die here, never having shown the power of the Wraith Crystal to the world, it would all have been for nothing. He grabbed his staff with a heavy sigh and used it for support as he moved outside.

Kasparian stopped in the doorway, looking out into the small clearing, a narrow creek winding through it. “What a beautiful place you found for us, my ever-loyal Mura,” he mumbled before stepping out of the cabin. There was no wind in the trees, no birds either. The only sound came from the water running down the small creek.

Closer to the stream, he stopped at a line of rocks placed on top of grass-covered heaps. “My friends. This is not how it was supposed to end. The Wraith Crystal is the answer – I know it is. I just didn’t have enough time to understand its secrets.” With great difficulty, he bent down and removed straws of grass from one of the rocks. “Mura, my dear Mura. Those filthy dryads will pay for what they did. The bishops as well... They will all pay!” he shouted.

The old man sank to his knees. How could he make good on that promise? He had outlived them all, thanks to the powers of the Wraith Crystal. This time, though, it seemed his life was indeed coming to an end. If he could just get a few more years, a few years to communicate with the crystal, then it would reveal all its secrets, just like it had told him how to make people follow his every word. He looked at the large crystal in his staff, again hearing whispers inside his head. “Zarakhhi, onra nu ramroy.” Was he going insane? Was the voice real or just his imagination?

Still gazing into the purple crystal, he replied, “You are beautiful and dangerous. I’ve tried to understand your secrets for more than fifty years.” His lip suddenly curled. “Even if it takes fifty more, I will find a way out of here. I will show the world the truth of those foolish bishops and their false gods.”

Slowly he moved back into the soot-filled cabin. His stomach growled at the sight of an old pot hanging in the fireplace. Kasparian suddenly realised he hadn't eaten for days. As he bent down to pick up a bucket, he began coughing uncontrollably. Every cough hurt his lungs, and it got worse each day. Regaining control, he studied the fragile hand holding the bucket. He hated this wretched old body. There hadn't been any animals or flares searching for his crystal in years. They were the only way he could restore his body. Exhaling heavily, he moved towards the creek.

He bent down to fill the bucket with one hand still on the staff, and at that moment, his eyes caught a lone figure entering the clearing some twenty metres away. The young man wore a black cloak and carried two blades in his belt. By his looks, he was an assassin of the Shadow Academy, and it brought several furrows to Kasparian's forehead. Usually, the Flares of the Sun sent their own to acquire his crystal. This was new.

The young man raised his hand in greeting. "Good day, sir! Can you help me find my way to Ridge End?"

Kasparian blinked several times, still not sure if the man was there. He stood back up to get a better look, a crooked grin spreading on his face. Fortune had favoured him once again. This young man was his salvation. He raised his staff as quickly as his weak arms allowed and shouted, "Estutro croar granor!"

In a world on the brink of collapse, a young boy, Jarren Heartwood, joins the Shadow Academy. Vengeance is all he has on his mind, returning to Nirwood. But nothing is what it seems, and his search for the Wraith Crystal leads to a hidden world and astonishing revelations of his past.

Follow young Jarren on the adventure of a lifetime in the first book of Quadrant of Balance right here:

[Quadrant of Balance – Jarren Heartwood](#)



Jarren Heartwood - Prologue

Life is a journey. There are many sayings in this world, but this one is special to me. It carries weight, and it is a reminder of the burdens we all carry on our shoulders.

My journey, and my mother's, nearly ended moments after my birth. My father's quick actions saved us, but he was lost to us on that fateful day. Ten years later, I had already witnessed greed, despair and murder, and you could say that my life hadn't been easy – that a child should never experience what I did. But in truth, I was fortunate – fortunate because I had my beloved mother and fortunate because of her crucial secrets.

I was eighteen and in a dark place before I learnt of those secrets, but by then, they changed my life forever. In the years to come, I would meet new people, gain new friends and find a new family.

During those years, dangerous trials, bloody battles and terrible losses haunted all of us, but we kept fighting because there was no other way. My biggest regret is that it took so long to mend the chip on my shoulder. It would have spared us from many a trouble but now serves only as a painful lesson. A lesson that the worst enemy is often our own mind. By constantly expecting betrayal and harm, we miss out on the joys and wonders in life.

-Jarren Heartwood

What readers say

“The perfect beginning to a thrilling and exciting new adventure. Jarren Heartwood is the best surprise this year.”

Michael Wernebo

-

“An epic story in the making. I can only hope that the next book will be just as intriguing.”

Charlotte Taylor

-

“Assassins, warriors and wizards in a brand-new world. What’s not to like?”

Bryan Jones

-

“Jarren Heartwood is an exciting and complex new character with simple goals. I can’t wait to learn more about Ameida and Sepheus.”

Madeleine Fischer