

Excerpt from

Malirou Cutorim:
War for the Throne

Chapter 1

The story of two good men in conflict with each other, each claiming the right to be king.

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1 – BEGINNING

The soft rumble of thunder intensified steadily until it shook the ground.

It stopped, leaving a silence in the night that seemed to make the darkness even darker. Lightening flashed silently far to the west, reflecting shards of light off the clouds overhead, briefly revealing seven shadows sneaking through the darkness, avoiding small pools of light as the city lay asleep. Small unseen whirlwinds of dust formed and died with the quick gusts of wind, a prelude to the storm steadily advancing on the capital that rested in the gigantic horseshoe of the mountains. The streets seemed deserted save for the hooded, dark clad men advancing on their targets. They snaked quickly and silently, clothed by the darkness, a domain in which they felt completely at ease.

This part of the city was mostly residential, multiple blocks of homes surrounding several open markets, small businesses, and inns. Oil lamps hanging from lamp posts were lit each evening, but with the wind from the approaching storm, fewer than every other one was still burning. Through the windows of houses here and there a candle was lit, perhaps to comfort the children or light the arrival of someone away so late.

Despite the growing volume of the thunder from the approaching storm, the sound of footsteps soft against the cobblestone street forced the men to halt and melt into whatever structure they were next to, ready to act if necessary. An old man struggled under a heavy pack strapped to his back, each step laboring to remain on his feet. Though it was dark, all seven could clearly distinguish his features. A wrinkled, leathery face hid behind a long, gray beard that jutted from the hood of his robe like hay from the sides of an overloaded cart. His head bowed to the street ahead, his old eyes struggled to see through the darkness to discover any unexpected object lying in the road that would trip him to his knees. He looked worn down from life, as if his years had been filled with unrewarded hard labor. Within minutes he disappeared down the street behind them.

They continued.

These were not ordinary men. They were members of the Society of Sicaret, assassins of legend able to penetrate any defense and surmount any obstacle to carry out a contract. Having been trained from youth, failure was never a thought for those in the Society. Once given a task, a Sicaret would complete the task or die. Sicaret were very good at meeting their objectives.

Numbers were important to the Society. Numbers were symbols of reality. Numbers represented the significance of events, such as the death of a noble. Most contracts required a single assassin, some perhaps two or three depending on how many were to meet their end. Five Sicaret had been tasked a century before with killing a king hidden in a mountain fortress. Five is symbolic of the hand, more specifically a fist – thus it was the “Fist of Meteos” responsible for that king’s death. Though guarded by over a thousand men and knowing of the coming attack, he had failed to prevent his bloody demise.

Seven Sicaret had been sent this night. Seven. The number for completeness, for luck, and more obscurely for total destruction. Seven, to signify the total destruction of the House of the King. Tomorrow a vacuum of power would be present in this nation which would enable a new house to rule, and things would change in a new direction. That direction mattered nothing to these men. All that mattered was that they complete their mission. Except for the one leading them, Termae.

Cold, calculating, and intelligent, he ranked highest of everyone in the Society outside of the Council. Having been a Master for over two decades, his reputation was legendary among the Sicaret, his exploits spoken of with awe. His reputation rivaled even that of Solgamane, the most famous of all Sicaret in history – of course, a history known only to those within the Society.

Termae was a reflective man, though that was supposed to have been removed from him long ago. He often considered the effects that rippled across the world resulting from those the Society killed. He recognized the role his own actions had played in shaping the destinies of nations and those who ruled. His thoughts always led to the same conclusion – why could not the Society claim a larger role in directing the affairs of nations? Not an overt role. A subtle role, where the Society became the power behind the thrones guiding

decisions. Such a thought was anathema, but it was there nevertheless. Soon he would become a member of the Council. This night's success would certainly solidify his claim for ascendancy, and once on the Council he had plans.

The wind blew stronger and colder; the lightning flashed brighter and faster; the thunder rumbled louder and longer. For brief moments the Sicaret became clearly visible, the white light from the lightning making it as bright as afternoon. Termae raised his hand and the men paused once more, melting into small pockets of darkness. Voices had carried from a side street on the wind, but soon it was clear those conversing were moving farther away. Termae signaled and they started forward.

Soon after, they reached Gregory's Wall, the first wall built in the city eight hundred years before. Waiting under the canopy of awnings in front of a long row of shops, almost two hundred feet of open space separated them from the wall. This was the mall, a cobblestone avenue running the entire length of the wall containing trees, ponds, benches, and small patches of grass. During the day the mall was filled with people, noise, laughter, playing, talking, the music of birds, the sounds of horses and carts; at night it was lonely and quiet save for the chatter and subdued laughter of guards carrying over the stones.

Several long flashes of lightning accompanied by loud crashes of thunder illuminated the mall for several moments. The massive seventy-foot-high wall stood gray and heavy, built of large stones mortared and fit together in no apparent pattern. It curved from Mount Palton in the east to Kintop Peak in the west and split New City by the lake from Old City behind the wall. The cities were misnamed.

New City, where they currently stood facing the wall, was actually the oldest part of Santir Satin and had started as a fishing community on Crystal Lake behind them long ago. Over the centuries, the village had grown larger and spread up the plateaus. There were three plateaus, all of which gradually ascended into the mountains. The lowest plateau was by the lake. The middle plateau rested about twenty feet higher than the lower plateau, split by a rocky cliff before the wall had been built. The third plateau rested about five to ten feet higher than the middle plateau. A wall had been

built along that edge as well; building walls along the edges of the plateaus that curved between the mountains had seemed natural. Sometime in the past the city resting on the middle plateau had adopted the name Old City. The oldest part of the city had subsequently adopted the name New City. No one knew how this had happened, but the misnomers had stuck so that now people who did not know history believed the city had started on the middle plateau.

They turned left and headed east, the hard wind swirling and howling, the wall to their right. Constant flashes of lightning followed by the short bursts of darkness created a strobe effect of illumination. Even if the assassins happened to be spotted, they would be gone in the next instant, making one question if he had seen anything at all.

The gates in the wall were higher than New City, opening to the plateau above and reached by stone arch ramps rising from the mall. Parapets stood to either side of each gate, majestic towers holding large volumes of small rocks that would be poured through iron grates resting on the walkways if the doors were ever closed for defensive purposes. Each gate was a large slab of rock resting on rollers that moved into cavities in the wall, powered by a winch and pulley system of heavy chains controlled by wheels behind the wall. When closed, the doors were as much a part of the wall as the rest of the wall itself.

Guards patrolled along the walkway atop the wall as well as on the ramps leading to opened gates. Gates that were closed were not guarded; the gate where they were headed was closed. As expected, no guards were anywhere near the eastern-most gate when they arrived. The stone door stood closed, but they were not reaching Old City through the gate.

At the base of the wall to the left of the ramp abutment, a hidden stone door fitting the pattern of the wall was cracked open. Few would have noticed it, and no one could have seen it open at night unless standing right next to it. They stopped under the canopy of the shops along the mall, waiting. Termae scanned the area once more for any guards in the mall or atop the wall, but the Sicaret were alone. Signaling, they sprinted to the door. Soon all seven were inside, where they quickly climbed several flights of steps in the half-

landing stairwell until they reached a short hall leading to a wooden door.

The door was cracked open, enabling Termae to look beyond for guards. He saw none. Signaling, Termae led the assassins through the door and into another mall like the one in the plateau below. The last man passing through closed the door before following. Arriving at the nearest row of shops, they continued their journey south, moving west this time through the city.

Then the rain started to fall.

The streets in the middle plateau twisted and turned, many of them turning back on themselves. This was intentional, the idea being that an invading army would have a much more difficult time advancing towards the higher part of the city than if the roads were straight. This part of the city was predominantly open markets, businesses, shops, and factories. The homes were larger, and the yards were enclosed by walls on all sides. More guards patrolled these streets, so the Sicaret were forced to stay closer to the structures they passed. Few lamps were lit due to the wind. Although the lamps themselves were designed with metal shields to protect from light rains, strong winds tended to blow out the flames.

They wound their way through the Old City quickly, stopping several times to avoid guards who passed them without a clue they were so close to death. They finally stopped at the end of an alley that opened to yet another mall area resting before the Old Wall, one hundred feet away. The wall rose fifty feet above the mall, and in front of it was a thirty-foot deep dry-moat two dozen feet wide. A short wall built on the edge of the moat served as protection against people accidentally falling in.

The Old Wall was built of chiseled stone larger at the base and progressively smaller up to the top. Three arched doorways were accessed via drawbridges that opened from the wall using giant chains for support. After passing through the wall, the roads sloped up to the level of the plateau within inclines like giant ditches that had been dug with beveled edges. At night each gate was guarded by six men. East Gate, Middle Gate, and West Gate remained open always, except when closed for maintenance. The Sicaret stood before West Gate, waiting and observing.

Beyond Old Wall lay the government grounds, several buildings

and some residences where the government of Menlokian operated. Beyond the grounds was the Hedge, planted by a merchant long ago that had grown tall and thick through the years. Beyond the Hedge lay the Royal Grounds where the King and his family lived and was the destination of the seven assassins. In the morning, all who breathed on the Royal Grounds would be dead.

The guards patrolling atop the Old Wall were as lazy as those at Gregory's Wall. Those Termae could see were far off and huddled under tarps protecting them from the worst of what had turned into a heavy downpour, their faces staring into the flames of small fires burning in what appeared to be metal barrels. The light from the fires nearly destroyed any chance they might see movement below. No guards could be seen at the gate in front of them or above on the wall. This was expected. While the Sicaret possessed skills to gain the grounds without aid, assistance had been promised.

Termae signaled. One of his companions quickly ran to the gate and disappeared behind the wall momentarily, then reappeared and signaled for all to follow. The remaining six men leapt forward and soon joined him past the gate. They were now on the government grounds.

Lying on the beveled edge on the left were three guards whose throats had been cut deeply, stunned looks etched on their faces. The other three guards expected to have been present were nowhere to be seen. Cutting a man's throat was not the most effective or noiseless way to kill; nevertheless, the gate was unmanned, and no alarm had yet been raised.

The assassins split into three groups. One pair headed towards the barracks where reserves of the Royal Guard resided. The second pair headed towards Middle Gate to the left. Termae headed towards the Hedge due south, followed by two of his companions. Passing several stately government buildings, the three finally stopped behind a large oak tree dripping with water and waited. The wind continued to blow hard, but the rain had eased substantially. The thunder and lightning had moved off to the east behind the mountains, but more thunder and lightning were coming from the west.

Thuja Green Giants comprised the Hedge, tall and slender trees that looked more like giant evergreen bushes with branches low to the ground. Through the years the branches had grown long and

interlaced with each other, providing a natural barrier between the government grounds and the Royal Grounds. It stretched half a mile between the mountains and was several feet thick, the trees themselves having been planted in no apparent pattern through the years. A thorny vine known as darkberry grew along the ground and interwove with the lowest branches of the Giants, yielding dark berries each spring that could be eaten. In daylight, one could not see through to the other side except through the four openings in the Hedge that served as doorways.

Each doorway was guarded by four men of the Royal Guard. More men patrolled on either side of the Hedge, which served as the primary defense against anyone who might attempt to gain access to the Royal Grounds. Most who had tried through the years had been stopped by guards before getting a step into the Hedge, but occasionally some had penetrated the Hedge unseen, only to get stuck in the darkberry, requiring assistance from the guards to be extricated.

Termae stared at the opening, looking for movement but saw none. Although instructions indicated the guards at this doorway would be taken care of, his instincts required that he verify. Finally satisfied no guards were present, he signaled and the three men sprinted forward once again. At the opening on the other side of the Hedge, the bodies of four guards lay on the ground, their throats also having been cut. Termae wondered who had done such sloppy work and for a moment considered whether the mission might be endangered. He rejected the thought – no alarm had been raised.

The rain intensified in spurts, coming down hard then relenting. At the moment it was coming down harder, drowning out all other sound. Several gravel paths led in many directions from the doorway, lined with different varieties of trees such as oak, maple, elm, cherry. Off in the distance, a small fire burned under a canopy as four guards huddled underneath in a vain attempt to protect themselves from the rain. Termae's two companions headed that direction. Within minutes the four guards lay dead. Termae then started towards the castle, a dark monolith that stood heavy and gray in the flashes of lightning that still soundlessly spider-webbed in the clouds above. Several old clinging vines grew on its walls, the leaves rustling in the strong winds.

Two towers stood at the front corners of the two-story stone structure, a remnant of the architecture when Warlords ruled the land. Though it looked to be built for protection from enemies, it was little more than a drafty, cold building that would not stave off any army strong enough to surmount the Old Wall. Nor would it save the king and his family this night.

Termae moved like death itself— he is death! Taking a life is triviality, not murder. It is not a crime, as many would think it. It is Art. It fills one with a sense of power and purpose. It is impersonal, yet deeply personal and sacred. It is vile and beautiful. It is holy.

True, those slain possessed hopes, dreams, and desires. Some had families, some fame, many had power, certainly all had enemies. Sicaret did not consider such things. Once a person was gone, the void of that person's absence mattered only to those who knew him. In a hundred years, what would it matter to the universe?

And so it was that many died this night. Guards patrolling the grounds, servants sleeping in their beds, anyone living beyond the Hedge perished. Some awoke just before the end, perhaps by some perception of life's finality, but it did them no good. Too late. Not that it would have mattered anyway. No screams marked the passage of the assassins; the Sicaret were too fast and too good in their task. The howling wind, the booming thunder, the falling rain and rustling leaves, the disturbing *thunks* of their stilettos were the only sounds to be heard. It was a night of silent terror.

Meeting his two companions by the castle wall, Termae gestured and they split up. He scaled the wall using a vine to the balcony above where he would enter through the door to the king's suite. One of his companions headed left to enter through the kitchen in the rear and the other right to address any guards at the side door opening to a library and a hall leading to the servant's quarters. Any guards met along the way would be killed. The thought crossed Termae's mind that things were proceeding as planned; it was too easy.

His companion heading towards the kitchen had the same thought. He had been an Artist for over ten years and reflected on the ease of the night's mission. Certainly the king could not be guarded by so many inept! While that was the only stray thought that came to him that night, it was a costly mistake.

Wade Guinness had only two weeks ago been promoted within the Royal Guard to his current post, night duty on the royal grounds. After years of hard work and months of intensive training which had nearly killed him several times, he had finally achieved his goal to be counted among the elite warriors in the nation. Born to a fisherman in a small village on the shores of the Great Blue, for as long as he could remember he had looked beyond that life for something more meaningful for him. That drive had guided him to this moment, this night, standing in a nook of the Royal Castle guarding the Royal Family.

As is true with all those new to a position, he was scrupulously vigilant in his duties. During the many months of training he had observed with no slight irritation the lack of discipline among the ranks, particularly with the guards along the walls. The contrast between the leadership within the army and the Guard confirmed to him that he had chosen the correct path with the Guard.

His job was easy really. He simply was supposed to walk the grounds in no pattern looking for unusual activity. The joke among the Guard was that the most that could possibly happen was a falling rock from one of the cliffs or an animal penetrating the grounds. The idea that someone might sneak past the guards posted at the doorways in the Hedge was beyond ludicrous. All new Guardsmen in the capital worked this post early in their careers before moving to other assignments. Night duty itself was not intensive in the least; it was the training and rigorous schedule maintained by all in the Guard that made each man so good, far superior to most everyone in regular service of the army.

Wade often reflected on his past to compare where he might have been had he not gone his own way. His father worked hard for a meager living, having done that his entire life. While Wade was not ashamed of his father nor his work ethic, he had never believed fishing was for him. Instead, when he had had the spare time he watched the soldiers practice at arms, mesmerized by the forms they trained with blade on blade. That had been where his heart lay.

You must read the signs in the wind, the water, the sky, his father would teach him. The same thing had been trained into him after joining the army. Yet it came as a surprise when he saw the lack of

discipline enforced among the ranks after his initial training. While no major battles had been fought for years, certainly one should be prepared for an unexpected situation where his skills would be needed. That is the difference between life and death!

He was somewhat glum about the wind and rain this night, so sought the relative shelter of an inside nook of the castle away from the wind, if there was such a thing. The wind swirled on the upper plateau in heavy gusts so that few places were protected from it. It just seemed to blow a lot less in his nook than any place else. Perhaps it was the tall bush growing next to the nook that did the trick.

While during the day the guards wore uniforms, at night they were allowed a more relaxed wardrobe. Wade wore loose pants, comfortable leather boots, a dark cotton short-sleeve shirt, leather body armor, and a lightly oiled robe to ward off the rain. He was a young man of average height but strong and muscular, blue eyes and brown hair. Facial hair was optional for those in the Guard, but Wade preferred to shave. Some in the guard wore helmets, though this was not preferred among the men. Wade did not wear a helmet.

Shielding his eyes with his hands from the intensity of the lightning overhead, he watched the movement of the trees waving in the wind. He sensed more than observed something was off, but he could not put his finger on it. It was some detail his mind must have picked up on unconsciously. Maybe it was the wind and darkness playing tricks on him? The constant flashes of light and dark with all the thunder certainly was not helping his senses. But it was still there, that nagging feeling that he needed to observe the signs.

Intruders? Doubtful, the guards posted at the Hedge would have raised alarm. Still, he felt the need to work out a problem he did not yet understand. And then it was there! In a flash of lightning three dark hooded shadows moving quickly and parting ways. One headed his direction; the other two disappeared behind the front of the castle. Ten thousand butterflies fluttered inside his stomach; he ignored it with an iron will. Raise the alarm! No, his decision was made instantly – at a minimum the guards at one doorway in the Hedge were not going to be coming. Three here likely meant more elsewhere. An alarm was useless, even though that was protocol.

He waited motionless, hoping the darkness of the nook and thin bush hid him from the approaching figure. The man moved like a

cat! It was a man, Wade realized. How was this possible? Were there any guards close who could offer aid? Should he engage this man or let him pass and find help? But the questions stopped just as quickly as they started. He knew what to do. He now had to employ all his skills and training to stop these men as best he could. With one last quiet exhale of breath, he emptied his mind of all questions and emotions. Calm settled over him. All that remained was the man and the task to stop him.

The man did not see him, and as he moved past, Wade suddenly kicked out with his right foot, striking the right knee which had just come down bearing all the man's weight. The knee cracked and collapsed; the man let out a loud gasp of pain and surprise. As his weight drove him to the ground, Wade had already drawn his sword and pierced the man through his side with a mortal wound. The man did not utter a sound beyond the gasp; he lay face down, struggled momentarily to rise, then fell back down for good. Wade pulled his sword free and quickly looked around, hunched slightly. Nothing. Two more were here at the castle, and probably more elsewhere.

He remained calm as he stalked towards the rear of the castle. Fear was swelling in the back of his head, but he continued to focus on the calm. The thought flitted through his mind that this was the first man he had ever killed in his life and that he was supposed to react a certain way. But he felt nothing about that. He focused to a clear mind, taking note of everything as he looked for signs of the other two. Suddenly it struck him like one of the bolts of lightning in the sky above – the Royal family!

He ran quietly and quickly to the back of the residence and peered around the corner, but no sign of either man. Realizing he still wore his robe, he pulled it over his head and let it fall to the ground; nothing could be allowed to encumber him. The wind howled and the leaves rustled loudly. Fear kept pushing against his calm; he felt his heart rate increase. The blood pounded in his ears despite the noise of the storm.

Again he paused and cleared his mind, emptying it of all thoughts and focused on his breathing. Time was running out, but time would not matter if he was not mentally prepared. His breathing relaxed and his heart rate dropped, somewhat. It was time. He sprinted towards the nearest door, which led to the kitchens, and

slipped inside quickly. The oil lamps hanging on the walls were not burning, the room was illuminated from the flashes of light coming from outside. He waited, listening.

Nothing. Or something. Just the faintest sound of a shoe moving across the floor, a quiet whoosh. Even with the wind outside, he knew the source of that sound. He moved towards the doorway leading to the hall, dark and foreboding. His eyes were adjusted to the dark; all the doors down the hall were open – the servant's quarters. Pressing himself against the wall on his right he moved forward as quickly as he dared. It was a struggle to keep his wet shoes from making noise against the ceramic floor. He pressed on. A door opened beyond the hall – the squeak from the hinge betraying the intruder. That was the second man. Where was the third?

He passed the first open doorway and looked inside. A body lay on the bed motionless, soundless. It was safe to assume that all the occupants in the rooms whose doors were open were dead. If one of the men was still on the first floor, perhaps no one had yet reached the second floor where the royal family slept. He had to make a quick decision. Just as he decided to sprint to the end of the hall, the second assassin emerged from there, sprinting directly towards him with stiletto in one hand and a bichuwa in the other, a long curved dagger. He was almost on top of Wade before Wade had prepared to meet him.

He paused momentarily, just beyond sword length from Wade, then with his bichuwa up for protection, moved at a slight crouch within sword length, the stiletto moving straight towards Wade's groin. It was a quick and impressive move; Wade was quicker and better. Sidestepping the path of the stiletto and stepping back a half step to his right, Wade used the defensive movement of the bichuwa and swung up with his sword at the hand with the stiletto, cutting the assassin at the wrist, sending the stiletto clanging to the floor. The assassin stumbled slightly at the blow, a momentary delay that allowed Wade to bring the sword back down in a swift stroke deep across the assassin's neck. Before the assassin could react to this blow, Wade's sword struck through the man's side under his left arm pit. Wade allowed the assassin's fall to the floor to unsheathe his sword from the man's body.

He turned and sprinted to the end of the hall, which opened to a foyer where a circular staircase led up to the second floor. Looking around he saw no sign of the third assassin, so immediately sprinted up the stairs to where the family slept. Reaching the top of the steps, he tripped over Timothy, the four-year-old son of the king who was sitting on the floor staring down the hall. Wade quickly regained his balance and looked in the same direction. The third assassin was sprinting towards him like the one downstairs.

Except he stopped a few feet from Wade and stood, not moving. He also carried a stiletto in his right hand and a bichuwa in his left. This man was different; Wade sensed that immediately. The man remained motionless, almost relaxed, with his hands resting at his sides and the daggers pointed towards the floor. Wade stood with his right leg slightly forward, arm bent, sword point up, ready. They waited

Finally, Wade broke the silence. "What have you to do with this family?" It was almost fatal.

The assassin darted forward so fast that Wade barely managed to block the bichuwa slice to his neck. He was unable to avoid the stiletto puncturing his thigh, but did not feel the pain of it right away. The assassin backed off and stood, again like he was totally relaxed and had nothing better to do than stare. Wade's leg began to throb, the blood soaked his pants. It was a deep puncture, but had missed his main artery. The calm was much harder to maintain with this man, and Wade found himself fighting a sense of panic.

Almost as if the assassin sensed what he felt, he darted in again, faster than Wade was ready. This time he made a feint with the bichuwa, forcing Wade to retreat a step and block it, then jabbed towards his abdomen with the stiletto. But Wade recovered, blocking the bichuwa then quickly slicing down and hitting the stiletto with his sword, then as quickly swinging back up and slicing the assassin's arm, redirecting the bichuwa so that it caught Wade's side, cutting through his leather armor. The armor saved his life, but his side hurt fiercely.

The assassin backed off once more to his familiar repose; Wade readied himself again, the calm within him almost shattered with the realization that he was in trouble with this one. He had barely grazed the man, but it was more luck than anything else that he had survived

both attacks. Instinctively he knew this man was better than he. How long he could last he was unsure, but it was clear that no help was coming. Enough noise had been made that if anyone in the royal family were still alive they would have come to the hall already. Wade had to finish this man alone. The problem was he was uncertain he would be able to defend another attack. The calm of his mind was fragile, but he held it, pushing back the fear.

A memory came to his mind of a day long ago when he and his father were out on the ocean and he had caught a fish with a pole and line. He fought with that fish for a long time, struggling to bring it in. Finally, his dad said to him, “Why are you fighting it? Do you not see, boy, the fish has tired you out? Let it think it has its way with you, and when the moment is right you will bring him in. Do you understand?” He lost the fish, but remembered the lesson. He relaxed, the fear gone. Don’t think of the outcome! Become water. Flow!

Wade did not wait this time. He moved forward, forcing Termae to adjust to a different posture, which he did. Wade did not think, he just moved. He went through the forms he had been taught and practiced for years, forcing Termae to move left and right, bringing up each weapon to defend. Each attack from Termae was turned away, followed by his own attack. Wade was not attempting to beat the man or look for a weakness; he simply moved and attacked, defended and moved, moved and attacked. The man’s quickness had disappeared, or at least it seemed that way. The calmness filled Wade as he moved, his wounds a distant feeling but of no consequence.

He noticed a pattern in the assassin’s movements. It was more a silent observation than a quiet thought. This man was good, but Wade knew how to beat him now. It was not a conscious thought; it did not need to be when the oneness filled you. He just knew. To beat this man was going to require sacrifice, but that was his job.

So quickly it even surprised Termae, Wade exposed his left side to a thrust of the stiletto, allowing it to penetrate his side through his armor. Unanticipated by Termae, this put him off balance just enough. Wade backed up a step, blocked the bichuwa, then came down and sliced Termae from his shoulder to hip, then with the same quickness pulled his sword back and thrust it straight through

Termae's heart. The look of shock was apparent even in the dim light from the lightning outside.

Wade stared for a long moment, disbelieving that he had beaten this man. The man was better than he, and quicker, yet he had bested him. He let the moment sink in before looking around and noticing that the young prince had not moved during the fight. The pain in his left side was worse than the cut in his right side, yet they were both excruciating. He fought it down; there was more work to do. He did not seem to be bleeding much from those wounds, but his leg was even though it hurt far less. He would need to take care of that before going out into the rain.

“Get up, Prince. Get up and come with me.”

Timothy did not respond, but stared down the hall, his face expressionless. Wade debated whether he should leave the boy here and check the rooms or take him along. Another assassin coming from below while Wade was away would end badly for him. Yet if Timothy saw his family dead, that would surely traumatize him even more than he appeared to be.

Wade made a quick decision, the only one he thought he had. Whispering loudly in Timothy's ear, he said, “Wait here, Prince! Don't move! Do you understand?” Timothy looked up at him and nodded, then turned back towards the hall. Wade moved quickly to where Timothy stared.

The halls were normally lit by the dim light of oil lanterns, but they were out now. The lightning still flashed regularly outside so there was enough light in the rooms to see what had happened. In the first room to his right the eldest daughter lay with her eyes closed, a small hole behind her ear with a small pool of blood trickling onto the sheets. She had never woken up.

The next room was the same, two more daughters killed in their beds the same way. Across the hall in the first room two of Timothy's older brothers lay still, killed the same way. Timothy's oldest brother and next in line to the throne lay dead on the floor in the next room. Wade saw that the eldest prince had been awake and had fought with his attacker, but the fight had ended quickly. The prince's sword lay on the ground not far from his hand. He had been slashed across the neck and punctured in the chest. The slash across his neck left a large pool of blood on the floor.

The last room was where the king and his wife slept, and Wade was certain what he would find. The door to the balcony was open, letting in the wind and rain. The sleek curtains blew hard in the wind, waving violently. The lightning illuminated a macabre scene. The king and his wife lay dead in their bed. The king had been killed with the stiletto behind his ear, but he had also been slashed across the neck and cut open at his side. Wade was not sure why. His wife lay across his chest, a deep gash to her neck and a stab wound in her back. She had obviously awakened to witness what happened to her husband. Wade's guess was that she moved to confront the attacker from where she slept.

Wade sprinted back to Timothy, stopping at the top of the steps pondering his next move. The royal family was dead, and certainly Timothy being alive was not intended. These assassins were good; Wade wondered if they were the Sicaret of legend. Likely there were more and the danger had not passed. So far, no alarm had been raised, which would mean seeking help would probably be the most dangerous thing he could do. He could not stay here long, but he needed to think this through.

It was obvious that at least one of the doorways through the Hedge would be absent guards at best, or lying dead at worst. The assassins showed no compunction with killing the living; they had demonstrated that by killing the servants below. Any other assassins would be making their way here soon enough to confirm the royal family was dead. Wade and Timothy had to be gone before they arrived. It meant that Wade had to assume no help was coming and that raising any alarm would simply point any remaining assassins in his direction.

He made his decision. He created his objective and knew the path he would take. He would leave the royal grounds and get Timothy into the city and away from danger. He would proceed with the assumption that there were more assassins out there that he had to avoid. His destination was a man he was certain would help.

“Come, Timmy. We need to go. Be quiet and make no sound. Up now!”

Timothy stood, staring at Wade, and raised his hand. Wade took it and they started down the stairs, but it was too slow. Wade picked him up and carried him down the steps that remained and to the door

in the back of the foyer. Timothy was not heavy, but Wade had been wounded and it hurt his side to carry the boy. He felt himself move with a slight limp, favoring the leg that had been wounded. At the door he set Timothy back on the floor and took a couple of breaths to make the pain go away as much as possible. It did not work.

Wade opened the door slightly and looked for more assassins by the light of the lightning, but saw no one. He had considered going through the front door, but decided it would be too exposed. How many more? Were all sixteen men who guarded the doorways dead? How was this possible? No alarm had been raised, yet three men had made it to the castle and killed everyone here except for Timothy and himself. Wade told himself it did not matter how it had been done; it had been done. Yet it was important to know the how because he had to pass a doorway in the Hedge to escape the royal grounds. He thought through the path he had decided to take once more before leaving.

When he had been standing in the nook and first saw the men, he had been facing east. The assassins appeared to his left, on a line from the middle left doorway (known as Milton's Door). If they had come from the western most doorway (Sarah's Door), they would have approached on the other side of the castle and Wade would never have seen them. Yet coming through one of the middle doorways was a greater risk for an alarm to be raised, so he concluded the assassins came through Sarah and proceeded to Milton to kill the guards there. Of course, there were other possible paths, but that one seemed to him the most likely.

Were assassins waiting at either doorway? Doubtful. Why bring men just to wait? They would each have their own mission orders to fulfill, which would mean they were all stalking. He estimated that there were probably ten to twenty men out there in addition to the ones he had killed. But that many men would have been difficult to get through the city without some notice by anyone. So ten men? If he were to face more than one at a time, he knew there was no way he was surviving that. He had to get out of the royal grounds undetected.

Passing through the Hedge was the first obstacle. Then to pass through the government grounds and Old Wall. Based on what he had seen so far, he assumed that many of the guards were dead. If

the assassins had been able to kill men of the Guard, dispatching the men who guarded the wall must have been easy. Even so, no alarm had been raised, something that Wade kept coming back to. Why had no alarm been raised by anyone? Even in the storm, the horns would have been heard all along the upper plateau.

One possible answer was that the assassins were just so good they could penetrate the defenses before any alarm could be raised. If that were the case, then Wade had no chance if there were twenty men. However, the more likely explanation was they had received help from the inside. If so, then to whom could he turn? Who could he trust? This answer did not matter at the moment; he had already decided his path despite the assassins receiving inside help, if in fact they had. He was not headed for anyone in the Guard or army.

The wounds in his leg and shoulder were throbbing. His leg still bled. He pulled his shirt from his pants and using his sword to start a cut, he ripped a length tracing along the bottom of his armor and tied it around his leg, covering the wound. He could do nothing for the wounds in his sides, but they did not bleed as badly as the leg. He could feel himself beginning to tire and thrust that thought from his mind. Was he bleeding to death? He had once read where a general in a battle long ago had been wounded in the leg but refused medical treatment. He led the battle throughout the day atop his horse, refusing several times the insistence of medical staff to treat the wound. The general had won that battle, but passed out and fell from his horse dead, having bled to death.

It was time to go.

Turning to Timothy he said, "Listen. Be very quiet. Not a single word. Do you understand?"

Timothy shook his head that he did.

"Good. We are leaving, and we don't want anyone to know. It is like a game of hide and seek. We want to get away so that no one can find us. Are you ready to play?"

Again Timothy shook his head.

"Ok, let's go. Remember, not a word."

Opening the door gently for one final look, Wade picked up the prince and jogged out into the darkness to the right. Arriving at the first corner, he stopped and looked around, searching for any movement separate from the shadows moving in the breeze. It was

dark! Yet he could see the trees, the paths, and the movement of the branches. The wind blew hard in gusts; it was difficult to hear anything but the wind and the trees. The rain had subsided, but a few sprinkles were beginning to fall. Or more accurately, they were swirling on the wind and hitting his face from different directions.

Seeing no movement, he leapt towards the path leading to Sarah's Door, hoping that no one saw him. He had sheathed his sword so he could hold Timothy with both hands, and the boy was now getting heavy. They reached the canopy of the trees along the gravel path and continued a few dozen yards. So far his luck held and he encountered no one else.

Then the rain started falling hard again, like a floodgate being opened and the water coming all at once. The rain was cold, and his shirt pasted to his body under the leather. Timothy was no better wearing only a heavy night robe of white linen which was soaked almost instantly, his feet bare. Wade chided himself for not thinking of retrieving coats before leaving the castle, but it was too late now.

The rain was a blessing. While it was making it difficult for him to see anyone who might be close, it would be just as difficult for anyone to see him and Timothy. Because of the rain he debated going to one of the barracks for shelter, but quickly abandoned that idea. They would be exposed to the rain for a while longer. Getting closer to Sarah's Door, a flash of lightning revealed a dead guard lying on the ground not far off the path. Wade ignored it and moved on.

They reached the trees just a few yards from Sarah's Door and stopped. Wade looked around once more for assassins but could see nothing beyond a short distance, so left for the doorway. They reached it and received a brief respite from the pouring rain as he walked through the Hedge, stopping at the opening on the other side and attempting to see anything in the rain. He could detect the faint sound of bells. Visibility was worse, so he leapt forward along the path, making his way more from memory than what he could see. Timothy was getting heavier and his breathing was becoming a struggle with all the moisture.

Wade's feet contacted the stones of a road. He followed it north towards the Old Wall. He had to make it to Old City. As suddenly as the rain had started it stopped, improving visibility dramatically. Some oil lamps had remained lit through the deluge, which provided

a bit more light for him to navigate his way. He avoided looking at any of the lamps directly for fear of ruining his night vision. His head swiveled constantly, looking for anyone, but it seemed he and Timothy were the only ones on the government grounds. Certainly he should have seen other guards by now, if they were alive.

Wade was scared and angry. This was growing old. The calm had disappeared and all that filled his mind was to get away. Every step he feared being discovered, and the stress continued to build the closer he got to safety. The pain from his wounds was getting worse. While sensing he was moving away from the danger, it seemed to be more dangerous. Finally he had to stop to take a break, his arms felt tired and heavy and carrying Timothy was draining him as fast as the loss of blood he suffered from his wounds. Finding a tree, he set Timothy on the ground and kneeled on one knee, taking deep breaths. He closed his eyes and searched for the calm in his mind once more. It was slow in coming.

Wade reviewed his situation. They were almost four hundred yards from West Gate in the Old Wall by the road, and much further from Middle Gate. There was the mall beyond that, and he estimated another mile until he reached his destination. Considering he had to carry Timothy coupled with the weakness from blood loss, he estimated another half hour to go. If he encountered more assassins, this would add more time. He was uncertain how long he had before he needed to treat his wounds or pass out. He was bleeding less, but he was still bleeding.

Tired, he rose to his feet and picked up Timothy. His lower back was getting sore, but he ignored that new pain as well as the wounds. The fire in his left side was much more difficult to manage, and he remembered an old army sergeant telling him that the secret to withstanding the pain is to not mind it. Far more difficult to practice than to believe!

Halfway to the gate he paused once more and put Timothy on the ground so he could catch his breath. The rain had stopped, but the wind continued to blow and it was cold against his wet skin. Timothy sat on the ground shivering, but there was nothing Wade could do but recover slightly and press on. Once more he picked up Timothy and they headed towards the gate. He stopped by an old oak tree a little distance from the gate and set Timothy down once

again. The wind blew water from the branches onto him as he waited, looking. He could not see anyone. Lightning flashed behind the mountains to the east. It appeared the storm had finally passed the city, leaving it damp and quiet save for the sounds of dripping water.

Wade waited as long as he thought necessary, then decided it was time to make a dash for the gate. If anyone spotted him, then so be it, but he could not wait here any longer. Something inside him was telling him that time was running out and that he had to move now! He picked up Timothy and sprinted towards the gate, still looking around for anyone. As he descended the road that sloped down to the opening in the wall, he spotted three dead guards lying on the slope of the bevel. He knew their names but pushed them from his mind. No distractions.

He ran through the opening and quickly passed through the wall, ran out onto the bridge that crossed the dry moat, and entered the mall at a quick jog, heading for the nearest row of shops by the road he intended to go. Timothy spoke for the first time the entire evening, whispering into Wade's ear, "There is a man following us." Instantly Wade set Timothy on the ground, unsheathed his sword and turned to face the person approaching. That quickly, he found his oneness again.

It was another assassin jogging after him, carrying weapons as the others had. The man attacked him immediately, swinging his arms with the bichuwa and stiletto quickly, alternating blow after blow. Wade blocked each blow, lost in the oneness, flowing like water, waiting for his opponent's weakness to reveal itself. And there it was, the man dipped his shoulder each time before placing all his weight on his right foot, a slight imbalance. Wade simply saw it and recognized it; he did not think about it. And when the assassin moved that way again, he adjusted his movement; he did not think about it. He cut the man in the side deeply, yet the man reacted very little. The fight continued and there it was again; Wade cut him again, this time sending the stiletto flying. This wound was beyond the man's training, and within two more swings of his sword the man lay on the ground dead.

Wade exhaled, leaning his hands on his knees to catch his breath. He was tired and unsure of how many more men he could fight. Yet

he would fight as many as needed to get the Prince to safety. Timothy had remained in the same spot, standing and watching the fight. Wade walked over and placed his hand on Timothy's shoulder.

"Let's go. Stay quiet."

They walked directly to the row of shops nearby, then turned left. He had bested four men this night, four men who were very good. The king was dead; the news would spread through the capital in the morning. Things were going to be very bad, Wade was certain, but that was not his concern. His concern now was making it to the manor of the one man he knew he could trust, the one man he was certain was not behind the murders nor would have been a party to them. While that man did not know Wade, Wade knew him. He would know what to do.

Reaching the end of the row of shops on the corner, Wade looked down the street for any more assassins. It was empty and dark. A lone lamp had miraculously remained lit where the street curved a few dozen feet away. The wind still blew but had subsided considerably. The sounds of dripping water on the pavement filled the air. Wade took Timothy by the hand, and walking down the middle of the street they disappeared into the night.

"Three are dead, and the other is missing," one of the remaining assassins said.

"And the family?" a second assassin asked.

"All but one dead. The last remains missing, the four-year old prince. The guards are dead, as are the animals."

"And the brothers?"

"The bodies are gone. We need to find Nalum," the third assassin.

"Then let's find him. We meet in an hour."

The first assassin sprinted through the Hedge to search the royal grounds. The second remained on the government grounds. The third passed through Old Wall to search the mall, first heading east, then retracing his steps back to the west. There he found Nalum, lying face down motionless. The assassin checked for a pulse but there was none; Nalum was dead. Reaching into a pouch at his waist, he removed a small vial, removed the top, and poured its contents

on Nalum's body. Quickly Nalum's clothes moved, like giant bubbles gurgling to the top of a boiling stew. The stirring grew more violent, creating a mist and smell of death. Within a minute the body was gone entirely, the mist and smell vanishing into the wind.

The assassin retrieved Nalum's weapons and searched a fair distance down each street connecting to the mall close to where he had discovered the body, but they were all empty. There were too many streets. If there had been any blood it would have been difficult to detect with all the water at night, even with his eyes. It was time to meet his partners, so he ran to Middle Gate where his companions were already waiting.

"So you are certain that the boy is gone and alive?" the second assassin asked.

"I am certain," the first assassin replied. "I checked every place the boy could have hidden, but Nalum's body makes it clear the boy escaped with help. Because no alarm has been raised yet, we know it must have been a guard in the house who Nalum saw with the boy here in the mall. This guard killed four of our brothers! He killed Termae!" There was the hint of awe in his voice.

"Then we must pass through the city as quickly as we can and attempt to find them. I have already searched down several streets but found no trace of their passing. In all likelihood they are gone to us. Still, we must use the darkness that remains to search. We must pass Gregory's Wall before alarm is raised. That gives us about three hours. Meet in four at the appointed spot beyond the wall."

The assassins separated, blending in with the night in search of a guard and a boy. They searched streets, back alleys, roofs, stables, even in some houses where the doors were unlocked. But with only three men in a city this size, the task was nearly impossible. They had thought to use *nebarute* to aid the search, but had been instructed not to use magic in this city. The first reached out anyway, but there was nothing. *Nebarute* was not working.

Just before daylight, they were on the southern edge of Crystal Lake, looking out over the waves hitting the beach violently, a reminder of the passing storm. It would be a fortnight's travel back to the Sanctuary, but the mission was not a total loss. After all, what harm would come of the youngest son surviving? He could not rule, and so the hand that had been played last night would still win.

Besides, the youngest might even be assassinated by the major player, and that would be the end of it. For these three, however, the trip back would be their last. They had been instructed to kill the entire royal family, but one had escaped. This would result in the end of their lives, but their deeds and their names would live on within the Society.

The second assassin considered his options. Maybe there was a way out for him. If the other two were killed, maybe he did not have to return to Sanctuary. He would think on it.

As they began their journey home, the second assassin wondered, what could a young boy do?