

### *CHAPTER 3: Before Assembly*

Teran auKor stood on the edge of Kiera Lookout and stared over the peaceful Clear Sea. *I'm really here this time.* There was no disturbing dream, no exploding sun. It instead shone solidly in an indifferent sky.

He inhaled rich, moist air, hoping to calm his anxiety. But he couldn't.

The following days would be even more difficult than when his mentor, the Hegemon Han, had appointed him High Tek. Before that, the Red Council had been merciless in its testing of him—especially My Lady Kriya anTallath. She'd tried to ferret out his every secret uncertainty. He shuddered. *And now what they demand of me as High Tek is impossible! How can I achieve inner power and authority when the truth is so unclear? Why have they appointed me if they know this?*

Even worse: what would happen when he stood before Assembly? Failure to master his inner conflicts had almost led to madness when he'd put on the talking head in order to hear Komp's message. That device had almost ripped his mind to shreds. Yet he'd survived and would now, somehow, tell the Assembly of Allera what he'd received.

*Except I'm not exactly certain what that is!* He sensed the truth lay somewhere deep within, but this close to Assembly he had no clear idea what that message was. *Perhaps it's my darkest fear: that the ruin of Whole World itself is near.* He remembered his vision of the exploding sun...how real it had seemed.

Again he shuddered. And looked down on AlleraTown, his home. It nestled peacefully against the Winding River that meandered to the harbor on Forith Bay. Sunlight cut through the clouds, brightening the whitewashed buildings. It made him think of his creche years, a time that seemed so peaceful. Of course, he knew the vision was childish—what problems he'd worried about then appeared unimportant now. He also knew that the unchanging tranquility of AlleraTown was an illusion.

Change was coming, something that had not happened through all of history. An ordinary Alleran would not know this—the holding of history was officially forbidden—yet the Hegemon had gradually been making Teran aware of it, especially in his secretive allusions to “the shrines of Komp” and “the change.” A High Tek was allowed access to things kept from the general populace. That in itself was disturbing. Allera was a society that assumed an all-knowing Komp would see into the hearts of those who failed the test of transparency. Yet Han had told him emphatically he had a duty not to panic the very people whom he was supposed to lead. *Then what truth am I supposed to tell?*

He'd prayed to Komp to resolve his conflict. So far he'd received no answer.

His relationships with his closest creche-friends—Kell anStelar, Marin anHalis, and Crag anHolder—had also radically altered. They'd all known that reaching adulthood would lead them to leadership roles in Alleran society. But it had happened so quickly. When Kell became Captain of Cadres, Marin Creche Leader, and Crag Ensign of Pak Viper, their closeness had evaporated. The Red Council made sure of it. They were separated from each other, their time consumed in new responsibilities. Teran saw Kell and Marin rarely. He'd not seen Crag since he'd had to—at Han's insistence—tell the Pak that they'd been given an assignment shrouded in mystery, a mission that would take them across the boundary wall of Allera and far to the east into the vastness of Territory. Pak Viper had abruptly vanished one day before Teran had any a chance to acquire more information.

“If I have to send cadres to their deaths, I want at least to know why!” he'd demanded of the Hegemon. “They think it comes from Komp, but we know it's your idea.”

Han had been his usual cagey self, his answer couched in an enigmatic reply: “Komp knows the survival of Whole World might depend on Viper.” He'd glowered at him and walked away.

Teran knew Territory was dangerous: the land of the infamous T's, a threat used from time immemorial on Alleran children if they didn't behave. He'd heard rumors that even now, as they had in the distant past, the T's were making forays into the eastern Alleran Outlands. If so, once again Allera's military might face something more deadly than the ferocious Duran separatists to the north.

*Where is Crag now?* Teran turned his back on the Clear Sea and his thoughts east towards the distant wall of Allera. Broken cliffs edged the darkening horizon. Mixed feelings about his friend burned within. *Would I have the conviction to lead anyone into such a wilderness beyond the wisdom of Komp? Can anyone survive there?*

Teran and Crag had always competed, yet they were close as brothers. Teran knew he could never outmatch Crag as a soldier; his leadership skills were in other areas. Yet he envied Crag. Envied his confidence, his good looks, his easy athletic body, his bravado in the face of a challenge. He knew Kell admired Crag too—and felt a surge of anger, then shame. Far away in terrible danger, Crag had no support from his comrades or the Red Council. Was he even still alive?

There was more: Teran knew part of him was *glad* Crag was gone, glad he was far from Kell.

His feelings for her were also clouded. They'd often hiked up this very cliff to gaze into the distance, imagining the excitement of their future. A future inevitably together, mated. But an impossible one now because of the rules he must accept as the burden of his new responsibilities.

Filled with the anguish of knowing he might never be close to Kell again, and the guilt of partly hoping Crag might never return, Teran hunched his shoulders into a rising east wind and began his descent from Kiera Lookout, preparing to face his demons.