



Giver of Roses *Guardians of Gadiel – Book 1*

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FORTRESS OF ASTARA, LAND OF GADIEL, YEAR OF THE ANCIENTS 952

A frigid wind blew down from the heavens, impaling the bleak winter's day with piercing needles of ice. The sun veiled its rays behind a hazy pall, muting the land in flat, forbidding light. Frost coated the withered brown grasses and skeletal trees, and billowed thickly from mouths of friend and foe alike.

Danae tugged the thick, dark gray cloak tightly to her, tucked back a recalcitrant lock of pale yellow hair, and hunkered yet further into the hood's relative warmth. Still, as her gaze encompassed the army slowly massing on the plains just below Astara's colossal gates, no clothing worn by man seemed sufficient to contain the sudden, premonitory chill that coursed through her body. Yet how was this day any different from the long months and years of her captivity? Why would this moment always stand apart from any other she had spent gazing down on the army of her own people, praying for deliverance?

She glanced along the line of long-tuniced and -gowned Astarians crowding the length of the rough, tan-mottled agarat stone battlements, her gaze finally alighting on the somber faces of the royal family Karayan. Horror widened the elegant, silver-haired Queen Takouhi's eyes. Worry darkened the ailing King Haig's face. Fear tightened Prince Hovan's eternally petulant mouth.

It was the stoic resolve stiffening Crown Prince Vartan's shoulders and lifting his strong, proud chin, however, that filled Danae with the greatest foreboding. Though she knew not from whence the presentiment came, somehow, some way, this day his destiny also teetered on the sheerest of precipices. She knew, and it tore at her heart.

Amid a deafening blast of trumpets, four battle clad horsemen rode to the front of the army and drew up before Astara's gates. The two outside riders bore bright red and gold banners on tall, spear-tipped poles. As the wind snapped the silken cloth to and fro, even from this height Danae could make out the emblazoned gold helmet with its horsehair crest—the symbol of the hereditary rulers of Hylas. The banners of her country, yet banners this day that filled her with dread.

She shook her head fiercely, as if the act in itself could disperse the crazed tumult of emotions churning within. This was madness. Slowly but surely, her people were winning the battle against Astara, in a siege that had now lasted three long, excruciatingly painful years.

It was past time the royal Gadielean city yield. It was past time the Hylean king's wife be surrendered, whether she wished it so or not. Yet as dearly as Danae desired the vain, selfish Queen Calandra submit to her husband's lawful authority, she feared, oh, how she feared, the price might now come too dear.

Far, far too dear if Prince Vartan lost his life in the doing.

“Hail, King Haig,” a voice bellowed suddenly from below.

Danae's gaze narrowed. That voice. She knew that voice... Her breath escaped in a horrified gasp. It was Ladon. In spite of the years—and probably *because* of long suppressed memories—a confused mix of emotions rippled through her.

King Haig shot his eldest son a questioning glance. Danae saw Vartan pause to sweep his long, wine-red cloak edged in gold back from his shoulders, then mouth Ladon's name. His father nodded and stepped forward.

“Aye, what do you wish?” he shouted back.

“I've a proposition. A proposition to end the war.”

Beneath the horsehair-crested, bronze helmet with its ornately scrolled cheek plates and nose-guard, Danae saw Ladon's mouth lift in a feral smile. She looked back to where Vartan stood, off and slightly behind his father's right. The bleak sunlight glinted on his shoulder-length, chestnut brown hair and smoothly shaven cheeks, catching then shadowing the subtle jump of muscle in his tautly clenched jaw.

Danae's heart went out to him. Vartan was no fool. Three years of thwarting King Feodras' commanding general and battle champion had surely taught him much about Ladon's brutality and treacherous ways. Nothing good would ultimately come of this proposal.

“Aye, and that proposition is?” King Haig roared back, his haggard features reddening with the unaccustomed effort. “Spit it out, man, before I lose what little patience I have with you!”

Instead of angering the Hylean warrior, his enemy's goading only appeared to please Ladon the more. “We weary of this war,” he cried. “But honor must be salvaged, as much for you as for us. To that purpose, on the morrow at midday, send down your greatest warrior. Send him down to meet me in a fight to the death. If *he* wins, Feodras gives his word he'll withdraw, take the army back to Hylas. But if *I* win”—Ladon's smile grew all the wider—“Astara must surrender.”

King Haig leaned forward and gripped the stone wall until his hands clenched knuckle white. Beneath his crown of costly jewels and hammered gold, his thinning gray hair fluttered

dispiritedly in the wind. “S-surrender?” he all but choked out the word. “And what honor is there in that? Tell your king—”

“Feodras gives his word Astara won't be sacked or its citizens harmed,” Ladon cried. “All he wants is Calandra and the satisfaction of knowing he was the victor. To gain that, he gives his word, a word he'll honor until his dying breath.” With a vicious jerk, the Hylean reined in his nervously prancing horse. “You've two hours to make your decision. Two hours, King Haig, and then the offer's no more.”

As if to add a final emphasis to his words, Ladon signaled his mount forward. Once free of the confinement of the other horses, he kned the animal into a high, air pawing rear. Then, with a burst of maniacal laughter, he pivoted his horse and galloped away.

For several tension-laden minutes, the Astarian king stared down at the four retreating horsemen. Finally he turned, meeting his eldest son's gaze.

Danae could only guess what emotions arced between them. Vartan was Astara's greatest warrior, and Ladon knew it. Vartan, at thirty-two a man in his prime and graced with keen intelligence and battle-honed strategic abilities, had always been the one sure obstacle to the Hyleans' overwhelming forces. Without Vartan, Astara was surely doomed.

Yet even as she watched the two men, Danae knew what the answer would be. For the sake of his people Vartan Karayan would risk his life, even if to risk was to retain some vestige of hope for a successful outcome. But there was no hope, none whatsoever, in a battle to the death with Ladon.

Years ago, it was said the Hylean champion had traded his limited span of years for immortality. It was said he had given his soul over to Phaon, the Dark Lord. Danae knew the rumors were true.

Vartan hadn't a chance. Ladon was now invincible.

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Ladon's offer couldn't have come at a worse time, Vartan thought as he followed his father and the rest of the royal entourage back into the palace and down the long, highly polished marmora stone corridors to one of the private reception rooms. Only this day, he had inspected the subterranean caverns that held Astara's food stores. Thanks to a mysterious leak from the city's main well—a leak no one had noticed until now—most of the remaining food was ruined.

There were barely a week's rations left. After that, they had less than a month before starvation and disease set in. Whether or not his father accepted Feodras' proposition, Astara couldn't hold out much longer.

But could Feodras be trusted to keep his word? Vartan knew Ladon couldn't. There was something crazed, indeed almost fanatical, about that warrior's hatred for Astara—and especially for him. This wasn't the first time, after all, the Hylean had challenged him to battle. Before,

though, Vartan hadn't seen any need to sacrifice himself in a foolhardy, and most likely fatal, display of masculine prowess—especially not to please the likes of Ladon.

Feodras' champion's reputation preceded him from far across the Great Sea. Not only had the man never been defeated in battle, but he had never once— *ever* —ostensibly suffered wounding of any kind. Though Vartan didn't believe in the God of the Ancients, much less in an evil counterpart, there was still something sinister and otherworldly about Ladon...

They entered the reception room, its high ceiling and walls covered in vibrantly painted scenes of the brave and valiant deeds of past Gadielean kings, and strode immediately to the huge, black marmora stone hearth in the center of the room to warm themselves. Once the servants had served them cups of bracing, spiced hot salma and the huge, intricately carved turkawood doors were shut behind them, Vartan turned to his father.

“The only question that remains isn't will or won't we accept Feodras' offer. We haven't any choice. The question is, once Astarra surrenders, can Feodras be counted on to honor his word?”

“And *I* say it isn't a matter of options or lack thereof, but one of pride,” King Haig stoutly replied. Cup in hand, he gingerly lowered himself to sit on the wide, stone bench encircling the fire. “I'll not dishonor House Karayan by sacrificing you in some fool's quest.” He sighed and shook his head. “If Ladon were a mortal man, I'd send you out and gladly. You're the best of us, my son, and few could defeat you. But Ladon...”

A bleak look clouded his pale blue eyes. “Perhaps we should just offer an outright surrender. At least then you'd live past the morrow. Or, better still, try one last time to rally the Diya al Din to us. Or even the Dwarfs of Elgar. They, at least, were once our loyal liegemen.”

“And why not the Dragonmaids of Mount Talin as well?” Hovan offered with a smirk. The sandy-haired man paused to empty the contents of his cup, then struck an exaggerated, considering pose. “But who *could* we send to ferret out their secret portal? Vartan's certainly the most pure in heart of us all, but there's still the minor matter that he *has* tasted the pleasures of the flesh at least a time or two. Still, perhaps just this once, considering our dire straits, those men-hating serpent riders might make an exception.”

Vartan sent his brother a scalding look. The sneer on Hovan's face faded. He turned pallid.

“They won't come,” Vartan growled. “We've already tried that and were rebuffed. And neither will the Greenwald Elves—not with how their king feels about me after all but eloping with his favorite child—or the Northern Rune Lords, who never even joined the first alliance. *Nothing* binds Gadiel's people anymore. Nothing has for hundreds of years, not since the time of the Ancients. And we don't have the luxury of hundreds of years to mend the wounds the treachery, deceit, and greed—on *all* sides—has caused. Not now, not with the Hylean army at our gates and us on the brink of starvation!

“As for an outright surrender, that won't save me at any rate,” he added, turning back to his father. “One way or another, Ladon will see me dead. Indeed, it's to Feodras' advantage as well. With you ailing, Father, I'm now the threat and will remain so for as long as I live.”

“But Feodras said no citizen would be harmed!”

Vartan gave a disparaging snort. “Aye, I may not be *harmed*, but I'd wager I also won't long remain in Astara, or Gadiel for that matter. And wasting away in some Hylean dungeon still ultimately serves both Feodras' and Ladon's purposes.”

His father's extended silence was confirmation he suspected the same. “Where Ladon's concerned, whether the tales are true or not,” Vartan finally continued, “if we don't surrender I'll have to meet him sooner or later. I far prefer it while I'm strong, rather than when half-dead from hunger or sickness. The morrow might well be the only chance, if there indeed *is* any chance, I'll ever have to defeat him.”

He leaned down and clasped his father by the shoulder. “It'll take a miracle, I know, but I have to try. Give me your leave, Majesty. Please.”

“Nay.” Haig's eyes filled with tears. “Not you, Vartan. Not you!”

“Then who, Father? Would you instead shame us by sending out an inferior warrior?” Hovan demanded, sidling closer. “We'd be the laughingstock of the Hylean army, we would. Indeed not only the laughingstock, but we'd risk delivering an insult that might compel Feodras permanently to rescind his offer. Are you willing to risk all of Astara for the sake of one man's life? Even if,” he added derisively, “that one man *is* your most beloved child?”

When had they ceased to be brothers and become so at odds? Vartan wondered, gazing into eyes now blazing with malevolent antagonism. When had the little brother who, six years his junior, had once hung on his every word, imitated his every move, changed into such a spiteful, selfish man?

Had it happened in that year Hovan had lived in Feodras' court, sent to learn the ways of diplomacy to prepare him for a future role in service to Astara? Or had it instead been slow and insidious throughout their youth, as Hovan inevitably discovered he'd never, no matter how hard he tried, gain the warrior's or the father's acclaim he so avidly sought. Leastwise, not the acclaim that had always come so easily for his older brother.

The old question rose once more in Vartan's mind. Must he own some of the blame for the man Hovan had become? Had he somehow failed him, in not being more of a brother than he had? But what more could he have done? He loved Hovan, as did their father. What else *could* they have done to show that love?

“Hovan's right, Father,” Vartan replied, heartsick that now, at what well might be the last hours he'd spend with his brother, there still seemed no way to quench the hatred Hovan clutched so mightily to him. “If I must be sacrificed for Astara's sake, Hovan and Zagiri will still remain.” He smiled in sudden, sad remembrance. “And Korien, too. There'll always be your grandson to remind you of me.”

“Far better,” his sire muttered, “that *you* live to be a father to your son. A son needs his father. And Aelwyd...” He sighed. “Aelwyd will always need you.”

Frustration filled Vartan. Did his father think him so self-absorbed that a hero's death was all that really mattered? He loved his son with all his heart. Korien was his pride and joy. And Aelwyd...well, though she was no longer the vibrant, exciting woman he had married, and perhaps it *was* his own arrogance that had ultimately brought them to this sad place in their bond union, she wasn't to blame. She was his wife. He'd always honor her as such.

"I don't want to die, Father. I love my family, my life. If there were any other way..."

Vartan paused, his glance momentarily ensnared as the door opened. Aelwyd, garbed in a shimmering, soft green, long-sleeved gown and followed by Danae, who carried a chubby, two year-old Korien in her arms, walked in.

The look on her beautiful face warned him of what was to come. She knew; she had heard. Vartan squared his shoulders and turned to face her.

"What do you mean to do?" his ebony-haired, Elfin wife demanded in a low voice, drawing up before him. "The news must be all over the city by now, yet *I* had to hear from a servant that that cursed Hylean warrior means to kill you on the morrow. A servant, Vartan!"

For a fleeting instant, Vartan's gaze found Danae's over his wife's shoulder. At the question burning in his eyes, her lips tightened and she gave a small shake of her head. He should've known. Danae was no gossipmonger. Some other servant had run to Aelwyd with the news.

"There wasn't time, my love." He forced what he hoped was a conciliatory smile. "We've but two hours to come to a decision. A decision that must be made as prudently and dispassionately as possible."

"In other words," Aelwyd all but hissed, her voice rising now on a thread of hysteria, "a decision made without any thought given for your responsibilities to your wife and son. How can you be so selfish? So—so puffed up in your misguided sense of self-importance that you, once again, fail to consider anyone but yourself? But why should this surprise me, anymore than all the other insensitive hurts you've inflicted on me? You're a hard-hearted, arrogant man, Vartan Karayan!"

With that, Aelwyd clasped her arms about herself and began to weep, loudly and piteously. Korien, his blue eyes wide, whimpered and squirmed in Danae's arms, reaching out to his mother. Vartan clamped down hard on his impulse to turn his wife around and march her from the room. As embarrassing as it was to expose their marital problems to others, it wasn't as if the rest of his family wasn't already aware of them. Aelwyd's erratic behavior and unpredictable mood swings, after all, had been rapidly worsening ever since their son's birth.

He heard Hovan cough behind his hand in a failed attempt to stifle a laugh. Rage seared through him. How dare his brother gloat, when his own thoughtlessness had brought Astara to the brink of disaster? Though *they* had defied the strictures against Elf and human unions—strictures Vartan now realized might well have been sound—at least Aelwyd and he were lawfully wed. At least *he* hadn't stolen another man's wife, the Queen of Hylas no less, and now lived with her in flagrant adultery!

But even that didn't matter anymore. Once their father had made the decision to shield his youngest son and his lover from King Feodras' wrath, there was no turning back. All that was left was to serve his king and people, and to do so the best, the most honorable, way he knew how.

Vartan took Aelwyd in his arms. "Hush, sweet one," he whispered into the fragrant mass of her hair. "I love you and Korien. I'd never willingly choose to leave either of you. But, if I must, I'll die to protect you. You know that."

"Nay!" she wailed. "There must be some other way. There must!"

"If there is, we'll find it, my love." Gently, he pushed her from him. "You must leave us now to do just that." Vartan looked to Danae. She stepped forward. "You must go with Danae, my love," he said, glancing back to his wife. "Will you do that?"

Aelwyd gazed up at him through her tears and, for an instant, Vartan thought she'd leave quietly. Then her jaw hardened and she savagely shook her head.

"Nay. I won't go unless you come with me. Come with me, Vartan. Please!"

Renewed frustration filled him. "Aelwyd, you know I can't. I told you—"

She reared back and slapped him in the face. "Selfish, arrogant beast!" she screamed, pounding now at his head and body. "How *dare* you deny me? I won't have it, I say! I won't...have it..."

With that, Aelwyd swooned. Only Vartan's swift response in catching and swinging her up into his arms prevented her from falling to the floor. The imprint of his wife's hand still stinging his cheek, he hefted her slight form close, then turned to his father.

Where he expected pity, he found only concern.

"Is she all right, my son?"

"I think so," Vartan ground out between clenched teeth. "I need to take her back to our quarters, though."

"And what of Feodras' offer? Time grows short."

A heavy weight pressed down on him, and he fought hard against a sudden swell of despair. "Do nothing without first gaining Feodras' word— *from his own lips* —that he'll spare Astara and all its citizens. And if, in the doing, you obtain that, then there's nothing left but to accept his offer. Whatever you decide, Father, I'll do."

Tear-bright eyes met his. "I know that, my son. I know."

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It was but an hour until the evening meal when Danae finally found a few, blessed minutes of solitude. She hurried to the private inner courtyard of Vartan and Aelwyd's quarters. There, even in the chill of winter, a green- and tan-striated, marmora fountain in the form of one of Gadiel's many palm-like desert trees flowed, filling the air with the soothing sound of water.

She took a seat near the small, iron brazier filled with fire hot coals, pulling her cloak to cover her simple woolen gown. The brazier's heat soon warmed and calmed her. If she closed her eyes, blocked out the unsettling events of the day, Danae could almost imagine life went on as it always had since she had first come to Astara—and been taken into the Crown Prince's household.

As the youngest child of one of Feodras' cavalry generals and possessed of many talents—among them the skilled use of the curved Hylean lyra and the gift of a hauntingly lovely voice—she had grown up in frequent contact with the royal court. In time, Danae had caught the eye of the king's second wife, a young, exceptionally beautiful woman from the neighboring district of Pyramus. Calandra had eventually offered Danae a position as one of her lady's maids and, for a long while, the two girls—Calandra at the time having barely left girlhood herself—were inseparable. Then, one day, a handsome young Gadielean prince named Hovan Karayan arrived for an extended stay.

Danae had watched them fall in love. With what she now knew had been misplaced loyalty, she held her tongue, never revealing Calandra's infidelity to her husband. Danae had refused, however, to run away with her mistress and her lover, when Hovan's time at court finally came to an end. Unfortunately, Calandra was even more determined *not* to be parted from her friend and favorite lady's maid. By the time Danae awoke from the sleeping potion Hovan had slipped into her food, they were far out on the Great Sea, sailing for Gadiel.

She sighed, leaned forward, and extended her hands to warm them over the glowing coals. As ashamed as she was to admit it, the betrayal still festered in her heart. Though Danae had never been one to stand up for herself or demand an equal measure of consideration and respect, their relationship had never been the same. She would never again serve Calandra.

Calandra's tearful pleas soon turned to threats. Threats progressed to beatings until, one day, Vartan ventured upon Hovan preparing to punish Danae yet again.

The two brothers nearly came to blows over her, before Vartan at last agreed to Hovan's offer to buy the recalcitrant, seventeen-year-old Hylean girl. And though his wife, Aelwyd, was initially less than pleased, she, too, soon formed a fast friendship with Danae. A friendship that endured, despite the Elf woman's gradual but apparently inexorable descent into madness, to this day.

Aelwyd's illness notwithstanding, Danae had eventually found peace and contentment in the Karayan household. She had nursed her friend through a difficult first pregnancy, stood by her at Korien's birth, and had become all but a second mother to the beautiful baby who had now grown into an energetic toddler. She had also, over the years of frequent contact with Vartan Karayan, come to know, respect, and finally fall in love with him.

“He fills your thoughts more than ever, doesn't he?” a voice softly intruded on Danae's pensive musings. “But indeed, he fills all our thoughts, today, this most tragic of days.”

Hot blood flooding her cheeks, Danae jerked around to find Vartan's younger sister, Zagiri, standing beside the fountain. The water's soft music, she realized, must have muted the sound of the other woman's approach. Danae rose to her feet.

“I-I don't know what you're talking about,” she stammered out a response she knew instantly sounded stupid and false. Still, it took a moment under Zagiri's steady, compassionate gaze before she finally relented. “Well, aye, I suppose I *am* thinking of Vartan. It's just so cruel, so unfair...”

Her eyes began to sting, and Danae flushed all the more. “I'm sorry,” she mumbled, glancing down to hide the tears. “It's just that...just that he's always been so good to me...”

“I know. I understand...more than you might realize.”

Slender and of medium height like Danae, thirty-year-old Zagiri had a pleasant face, smooth, pink cheeks, and a gentle mouth. She wore her wavy, dark brown hair cut short and was always garbed, despite her regal status, in a rather shapeless, hooded, long brown robe. Considered cursed with a strange sort of madness—she mouthed prophecies that never made sense—the middle child of the royal siblings had always treated Danae kindly, in time even becoming her spiritual mentor.

She gestured to the bench Danae had just vacated. “Let's sit. We've things to speak of. Important things, like how only you can now aid my brother.”

Danae all but fell back onto the bench. “Aid Vartan? How?”

Zagiri walked over and took a seat beside her. “How else,” she asked, her voice low and melodious, “but to teach him of Athan and His precious Son, Eisa? Then, though Vartan may die, he'll live.”

Of course, Danae thought. To accept the All-Knowing, the Creator, into one's heart was to gain immortality in the Afterlife. And, according to Zagiri, Vartan was not and never had been one of the Faithful.

“I would do that, and gladly,” she said, “but what could I say, as unschooled as I still am in the ways of Athan, when all your efforts have failed? Especially now, when there's so little time left?”

“We're all instruments in Athan's hands. Some He uses for one task, and some are meant for others. You're called to aid my brother in the hard times to come. I must mouth prophecies no one of House Karayan or the city of Astara believes.”

“Well, I believe them!”

Zagiri smiled. “But then, you aren't of House Karayan or of Astara, are you?”

Danae grinned. “Nay, I'm not.”

“Yet, since you do believe, I've one last prophecy to share with you.” She paused, closed her eyes for a moment, then turned the full force of her striking sea blue gaze—eyes Danae had long ago noted were the same shade as her oldest brother's—on her. “It's not of my making, mind you, but it's past time you know of whom this prophecy speaks.”

“And what exactly is this prophecy?”

“Listen closely, dear friend,” Zagiri said, drawing even nearer and dropping her voice. “I dare not utter it too loudly in these troubled times, for fear some unholy creature might overhear and seek to put an end to it before it can be fulfilled.”

“Is that possible?” Danae asked, frowning in puzzlement. “To prevent some divinely inspired, future event?”

“Unfortunately, aye, if the instruments are unwilling or choose the wrong path.” She smiled sadly. “It's the one variable in the Divine plan. Our right—one of Athan's greatest and most loving gifts—to refuse Him.”

Zagiri took Danae's hand. “Now, listen...and hear with the ears of your heart.”

“Desperate times,” she intoned,
“death and destruction.
The Guardian returns,
Blind to his destiny.

Evil breaks free,
A land lost in shadows.
The Guardian returns,
From ruin to rebirth.

All praise to the Son
Whose marks he now carries.
The Guardian returns,
His hands filled with roses.”

“It comes from the *Song of the Ancients*,” Vartan's sister, after a brief pause, explained. “This Prophecy of prophecies.”

Along with *the Covenant of Athan*, the *Song of the Ancients* was one of the Faithfuls' two most sacred books. Danae's mouth quirked. “It must be well into that holy tome then, for I've yet to study it. But what do those verses mean? What are the marks this Guardian carries? And what does this person hope to do with but a handful of roses?”

“I’ve yet to discern the true significance of the marks,” Zagiri replied, “though I have my suspicions. The Guardian, however, is meant to save Gadiel. And the blue rose has always been the sacred flower of the land, symbolic of truth, unity, and a pure, loving heart. Those who go in peace must always carry blue roses. But, over the centuries as the old Alliance fell by the wayside, and distrust and feuding grew more and more prevalent in the land, so the blue rose of Gadiel began to disappear. Now, there are few to be found anywhere.”

She had seen the blue flower encircled by a golden crown emblazoned on the white silk banners flying from various positions around the city, but had never thought to ask about its significance. Now, Danae knew, understood. It was the flag of Gadiel, and the royal city of Astarā had the singular honor, above all cities, to display it. There was yet one unanswered question, though.

“Why do you tell me this? Why now, when most likely I’ll be rejoined with my father and people on the morrow? What will it matter, when I’ll soon put Astarā and Gadiel far behind me and return to my former life?”

“Will you, Danae? Return to your former life, I mean?” Zagiri averted her gaze, a faraway look in her eyes. “What if Athan asks you to do differently? Will you, too, refuse Him?”

“After all you’ve taught me of Athan, and how I’ve come to love Him and His Son, you know I couldn’t.” Even the consideration made her heart ache. “But what could He possibly want from me, leastwise in regards to Astarā and Gadiel? I’m no hero, and certainly not the one of whom the Prophecy speaks.”

A sudden thought assailed her, and with it came a rising sense of presentiment. “Who *does* the Prophecy speak of, Zagiri? The one who brings the roses, who saves the land?”

A soft, enigmatic smile touched the other woman’s lips. “The giver of roses.”

“The giver of roses?”

“Aye. Vartan, of course. Didn’t you know? In the ancient tongue, his name means ‘giver of roses.’”

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