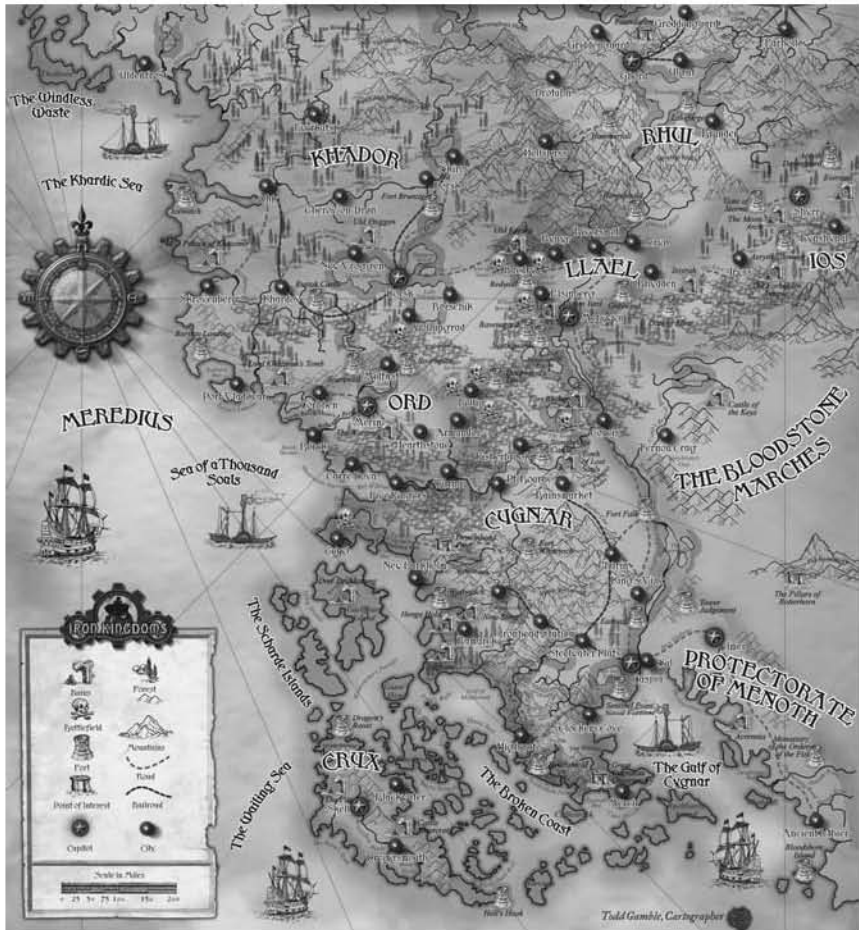


IN THUNDER
FORGED





IN THUNDER FORGED

THE FALL OF LLAEL: BOOK ONE

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*For George, mostly because she hasn't had one in a while;
and for Colin, for saving me a metric buttload
(equal to 0.85 of an Imperial buttload) of research.*

FIRST REPORT



Glaceus 4th, 605 AR
Leryn, Llael

The casual observer might never even have known the nation was at war. The sun had fallen off the world's edge more than an hour ago, and still the streets were, if not bustling, certainly a far cry from abandoned. Men and women scurried about their business, wrapped in gaudy coats and vibrant gowns against winter's insidious caress. Most were human, but the occasional fabric-swaddled figure, too short for the Ryn ethnic majority but too broad of shoulder for errant children, suggested a late-night dwarf. They tromped across a carpet of fresh snow, their finery gleaming in the radiance of wrought iron streetlamps. Some of those flickered with gas-fed flame, others with an alchemical luminescence far steadier yet somehow less comforting.

Each citizen nodded, curtsied, waved, or exchanged brief witticisms with the next, all dependent on the passerby's social status—or at least, the social status implied by the quality and cleanliness of his attire. Voices swirled overhead, blown by the winds, kicked into flurries almost choral in their harmonies. One might have overheard discussion of the Lord Regent Glabryn's latest scandals, the squabbling amongst the Council of Nobles, the winner of last week's derby, or the recent performance of Oswinne Muir's newest opus, *An Orgoth Goes a'Courtin'g*.

One would *not* have heard mention of the expanding western front, of the shadow of Khador slowly darkening the face of Llael. One would have seen nobody acknowledge the brittle edge to jests, the tremor in the laughter, or the occasional reverberating *clang* from beyond the outer walls, the ponderous step of a patrolling warjack.

IN THUNDER FORGED

No one spoke of the war. No one acknowledged their fears.

It would have been gauche.

One particular couple, elbows intertwined, shuffled quickly, seemingly eager to catch the misty plumes they exhaled with every breath. He was regal, buttoned up tight in high-collared greatcoat atop an emerald vest, his iron-gray hair swept back in a style that not only *acknowledged* the receding hair-line, but haughtily dared anyone to comment on it.

She was wrapped in brilliant scarlet and gleaming gold, a beacon as radiant as any of the streetlamps. A fox-fur stole was her only concession to the nighttime chill. Hair the hue of a lion's pelt fell in perfectly curled ringlets around a face that was *just* too round to be called classically "patrician."

She was also, at best, half the gentleman's age. That, along with the fact that she gazed at him adoringly with eyes like dark-brewed ale when she wasn't busy laughing at his witticisms, might have gone a long way toward explaining his obvious fervor to reach their destination.

They drifted past several structures, each boasting a magnificent façade of stately columns and arched windows—all deliberate modern echoes of the architecture of centuries past. And then they arrived, ducking through one deep doorway to stand in a hall of lush carpeting and glowing chandeliers. Some herbal treatment of the fixtures—or, perhaps, of the pipes, or the gas itself?—imbued the burning fumes with a vaguely floral aroma.

The gentleman beamed, even puffing his chest out, at the dazzled coo wafting from his companion's lips. "This is just a taste," he offered. "The actual amenities are even more impressive. My suite occupies a full half of the fifth floor."

"I can hardly wait to see it," she said in a breathy tone. His own breath caught in his throat, as he wondered if her offhand comment might suggest what he hoped it did. Placing his free hand on the slender arm resting in the crook of his elbow, he led her toward, and then up, the sweeping stairs.

"Goodman Tolamos," she began right around the third floor.

"Please, please. 'Lyrran,' dear Garland, by all means."

"Lyrran," she corrected, paying for his given name with another heart-stopping smile. "I don't think I quite understand . . . This place is marvelous,

but why keep an apartment? Surely a man of your success and your means could afford a home—an estate!—of your own?”

“I could,” Lyrran admitted. They’d reached the fourth floor, now, and he struggled to hold up his end of the conversation *and* continue walking without sucking in ragged gasps between. *Not as young as you used to be, old fool.*

Then, with another glance at Garland’s upturned face, *And you’re going to need your strength . . .*

“I could,” he repeated after what he hoped was a discreet wheeze. “But I often spend late nights in my workshop, and I’m no great admirer of the dormitories the Crucible makes available. I decided that living within a few minutes’ walk of Thunderhead was worth the inconvenience of dwelling in a building I don’t own.”

Of course, had I known then that the only deluxe suite available was on the fifth bloody floor . . . !

They stepped from the landing, Lyrran again leading, and stopped at a massive door of hardwood, intricately inlaid with abstract leaf patterns.

“Just a moment, my dear.”

Lyrran tugged a small chain, setting off the faintest tinkling beyond. The butler—a tall, thin, dark-haired fellow who more or less resembled every other butler the world over—had barely opened the door before his master was whispering instructions. The manservant glanced over at the woman, back at his employer. Then, with neither expression nor gesture, he squeezed past them and headed, at a stately saunter, toward the staircase.

“He keeps a small private chamber on an upper floor,” Lyrran explained. “And my other servants rarely work this late. We should be able to converse undisturbed.”

“Oh, my. Goodman Tolamos, do you feel that’s entirely proper?”

“I . . . Ah, I . . .”

“Your man is discreet, at least?”

“Of course!” Lyrran hoped he didn’t sound as relieved as he felt.

“Well, that’s all right then, isn’t it?” Garland breezed past him with a faint giggle. “Wine?” she asked.

“My dear, please! I’m your host, you should allow me to—”

IN THUNDER FORGED

“Nonsense! Sit, rest. I’ll be just a moment.” Then, her voice slightly more distant, “Um, perhaps two moments, then. My, this is a big place . . .”

Lyrran briefly wondered if the entire magical evening had been a setup so he might be robbed—then shrugged, shut the door, and lowered himself carefully into an old leather chair. He was in no position to stop her if she *were* a thief, too tired to chase her, and though he carried a double-barreled holdout in his vest, he couldn’t *imagine* shooting the woman . . .

Still, he breathed a silent lungful of relief what she reappeared, a wine goblet in each hand. “No trouble finding anything?” he asked, half-amused, half-chiding.

“Oh, no! Your home is laid out so sensibly, I felt like I knew where to look for everything!”

Lyrran smiled and accepted the libation. “To Llael,” he offered, raising his goblet—the closest he meant to come, tonight, to acknowledging the war.

“To Llael.”

Hmm. The gentleman suppressed a scowl as the wine washed over his tongue. *She may have found everything, but she doesn’t remotely know how to choose a proper vintage! This has almost gone bad . . .*

“But then,” Garland was saying as she daintily wiped at her own lips with a kerchief, “I suppose you’d *have* to be meticulously organized, working with all those awful tinctures and powders and whatnot. I don’t imagine you’d want to grab the wrong one of *those!*”

“No,” Lyrran agreed with a chuckle. “You *really* wouldn’t.”

“For instance,” Garland continued, “can you imagine if I’d chosen the wrong powder to mix in your wine? Or just dropped in a pinch too many? Why, you could be dying right now, instead of just growing sleepy. That would be a tragedy, wouldn’t it?”

“I . . . What?” Why was his tongue suddenly so thick, as though it wore its own winter coat? He blinked, and now not only were there two Garlands, but they—and the room around them—ran like a wet watercolor.

“Now, then,” Garland said, “we haven’t a great deal of time, have we?” Hiking up her skirts so she could sit, she settled in Lyrran’s lap. The old alchemist knew he should be excited by that—would have been, only a few moments before—but he was having trouble remembering *why*.

FIRST REPORT

“So,” she continued, tapping a finger almost playfully against his lips and peering into his blinking, unfocused eyes. “Before you’re off on your little snooze and forget that this entire evening ever happened, let’s discuss Thunderhead Fortress. And the Golden Crucible.

“And, if you happen to have made the fellow’s acquaintance, a gentleman by the name of Idran di Meryse . . .”

This time, Garland stepped alone into the light flurries, her stole wrapped tight about her chest and shoulders. She’d never have admitted it aloud, but she was grateful that the morrecaine salts had proven so efficacious. A small minority of people proved resistant to the stuff, and Lyrran Tolamos was a nice enough man. She’d have found it unpleasant to extract his knowledge the hard way.

All was well, though, or at least as well as could be hoped. The alchemist lay at home, bound and snoring rather than whimpering and bleeding, and Garland was out in the cold, prepared to break into the single most fortified structure in this heavily fortified city.

Again she smiled or waved or nodded to those she passed, though it had grown late enough that pedestrians were scarce. The night drifted in silence, save for those same mechanical footsteps occasionally ringing in the distance, or the crack of small ice floes along the banks of the Oldwick.

Garland checked the sky, even though she knew she’d find no guidance there. Between the bulk of Mount Borgio, blocking out a broad slice of the heavens, and the lowering clouds obscuring the rest, she was more likely to spot a lurking ghost than any star.

She knew her way; no hesitation showed in her stride. Still, for all she’d studied Leryn’s streets, she *was* a newcomer here. She’d have preferred the stars to confirm her course.

Then the gusting breeze thickened, not merely with the stinging cold, but the biting, eye-watering stink of the Rynyr Red and the sharp tang of spent blasting powder. Garland couldn’t help but smirk. *Where even the stars and the heavens fail, trust in the absolute worst stench you can imagine.*

IN THUNDER FORGED

Garland rounded a final corner and stared into what might almost have been another world.

The bulk of Leryn—indeed, much of Llael entire—was designed for form as devoutly as function. Sharp spires, magnificent archways and flying buttresses, columns of marble and walls of rounded brick, festooned with wreaths and snapping banners, all meant to draw the eye as much as to repel the weather. Llaeese architecture was, for the most part, not merely a science but an art.

Then there was Thunderhead Fortress.

A fat, drab toad, the citadel squatted in the center of the rock garden that was Leryn. Blockish, ugly, short, heavy, and standing out like a troll in an elven finishing school, Thunderhead boasted a façade that not even an architect could love.

It was also the heart of Leryn's military power and, quite arguably, of scientific advancement throughout all of Western Immoren.

And would be guarded accordingly.

Nearer the fortress, the snow darkened from off-white to ugly gray, painted, polluted, and plagued by the thick fumes of the installation's many smokestacks. The faint crunching under Garland's feet transformed into a discomfiting squelch. Steadily, casually, she strode past Thunderhead Fortress, waving cheerfully to soldiers marching atop the wall or standing post in the recessed gateways.

A few nodded back. Most made no reply at all. But all watched with professional vigilance until she'd passed them by.

As she'd heard, then. The Crucible Guard were not to be taken lightly.

Officially, these men and women were a security force loyal to the Golden Crucible, protecting the alchemists and their works, at home or abroad. *Unofficially*, albeit quite openly, they were Leryn's private army. When Khador had advanced beyond Llael's borders, when their hidden operatives assassinated most of the local mages—including a few of the nation's already scarce warcasters—the Crucible Guard became one of the final hopes of the nation entire.

On the one hand, then, she needn't deal with very many of them; not when the bulk of their forces were deployed across the city or at the front, their explosive elixirs and expertly engineered firearms scattering the enemy

like toys, their alchemical tinctures bringing relief to the wounded. On the other, those who *did* remain, standing sentinel for the heart of the Golden Crucible, were far more formidable than the average watchman.

She saw rifles and other long guns above, heavy armor and seemingly heavier pistols below; and those were only the *visible* accoutrements. Morrow alone knew how many hidden blades they might have stashed, or what sorts of herbs and elixirs might keep them swift and alert after long hours of vigil. No, these Crucible Guard were prepared to repel a small army, let alone a single intruder.

Then again, armies are a bit rubbish at sneaking, aren't they?

Several streets from the fortress, Garland ducked into a narrow throughway. In defiance of the cold, she unlaced her bodice and stepped out of her gown. The flimsy silken blouse thus exposed was to be expected; the trousers of lightweight, rust-brown canvas rather less so.

Next she delved into the heap of fabric that had, a moment before, been the skirts of her gown. From one of several large pockets sewn within, she drew tunic, gloves, and soft boots of that same canvas, and slipped them on. From a second, she removed two tiny ceramic vials. Finally, she wadded the skirt into a rough bundle and turned the fox-fur stole inside out to reveal a coarse woven backing. After checking to make certain she knew which vial was which—wouldn't do at all to get *those* confused!—she settled down, hunched in the shadows of the alley.

Now it was just a matter of waiting. Hopefully not for *too* long; it was bloody *freezing* out here!

Caje hated the midnight delivery.

Yeah, yeah, he understood *why* it was necessary. Thunderhead was the greatest producer of blasting powder in Western Immoren, and now Llael was at war, that portion of the operation ran day and night. At any hour of the clock, wagons of refined powder trundled out, other wagons of red powder, black powder, and various components clattered in. All absolutely necessary.

IN THUNDER FORGED

He understood all that. He really did.

But why the hell am I always the guy stuck making it?

The frosty conditions and long hours must have weighed on the young driver even worse than usual tonight. He'd halted, briefly, to let Dondy and Nosli catch their breath, shake the snow from their manes and tails and dappled coats—and had fallen asleep, Morrow help him!

It had only been for a few minutes—he could tell by the powdery accumulation on the seat beside him, and on the canvas tarp covering the wagon-load of unprocessed Rynyr Red powder—but that was a few minutes too long. He could lose his position if the Crucible found out; hell, he might even face charges! The malodorous mineral, once refined, was a vital component of blasting powder—which technically made every delivery, no matter how routine and mundane, a military matter. If anyone had caught him, if the backstreets weren't so empty this late at night . . .

"Yah!" A quick snap of the reins, followed by two longsuffering equine snorts from Dondy and Nosli, and the wagon resumed rattling and clumping over snow-dusted pavers.

At the portcullis of alchemically-hardened iron, he was met by two men in ornate armor and armed with locharns—brutal pole-arms with a long slashing blade at one end, a heavy bludgeon on the other. The armor's gothic inlays, and the brightly-dyed fabric that concealed the mail at the joints, might have fooled some into believing it—and the guards—purely ceremonial.

Ceremonial. Right. Cajé knew a *whole* lot better.

"Factory delivery," he announced, hoping they'd take the heaviness in his words for boredom rather than lingering traces of sleep. As always, the guards studied him unflinchingly from broad-visored helms and demanded a sequence of pass-phrases, all of which he dutifully offered.

"Cargo?" This from the leftmost sentinel, casually stepping forward.

"Rynyr Red, unprocessed."

The guardsman flipped back the canvas to expose the coarse grit, shifting heaps of powder, and unbroken crystalline chunks. Cajé felt his eyes begin to water and his stomach churn with the rotten odor; the damn stuff made more traditional red powders positively *appetizing!*

The armsman grunted something that might or might not have been related to an actual word, let the tarp fall, and waved at his partner. The second soldier, in turn, called to someone beyond the gate.

A hiss of steam, the clatter of well-oiled chain, and the heavy bars retracted into the stone above.

Caje drove through the heavy shadow of the barbican. A few quick turns along pebbled pathways, another exchanged pass phrase or two, and he finally halted his vehicle inside a large open structure, part stable and part warehouse.

Dondy and Nosli he dealt with immediately, unhitching the roans from their traces and rubbing them down with a gentle yet efficient touch. Then, lips pressed together in bitter distaste, he glared at the wagon full of red powder, the small wooden compartment into which he was supposed to empty that powder, and the heavy spades that he had gradually come to despise as tools of Thamar, the Dark Twin, herself.

“Bugger this!” he declared emphatically—presumably to the horses, since the guards outside certainly weren’t likely to hear him. “I’m getting me something to drink first.” And with a final poisonous sneer at the shovels, he stomped from the storehouse to do precisely that.

The heap of unprocessed powder shifted beneath the tarp, bulging in tiny dunes. Garland crawled, gasping and gagging, from beneath the canvas. She lowered herself to the floor—that is, tumbled headfirst from the back of the wagon, much to the puzzlement of two tired horses—and barely had the strength to drag herself of sight behind the wheels. She yanked a hood of fox fur from her head, and then bent every iota of strength and training toward *not* choking out her lungs or vomiting everything she’d eaten in the past week.

Her tools had done their jobs admirably enough. The canvas bodysuit kept the astringent grit from irritating her skin; the tiny puff of sleeping gas had put the driver out long enough for her to bury herself in his cargo; and the thick reagent with which she’d drenched the inside of her stole, before pulling it over her head, had served well enough as a filter that she’d been able to breathe.

IN THUNDER FORGED

Sort of.

She was lucky, *damn* lucky, that the driver had wandered off before unloading. Her plan had been to knock him out again if he'd discovered her, but in her current state, she wasn't certain that she could best an irate gopher two falls out of three.

Finally, once she'd wrangled her rebellious stomach and lungs back under control, she slid from underneath the wagon, reached back into the powder, and extracted the bundle that had once been a fancy gown. Again she ducked under the cart and unrolled her prize. The fabric was damaged beyond repair, but it had done what it had to: It had protected the goodies still stashed throughout several internal pockets.

Garland took a moment, thanking Morrow that full, layered skirts were the current fashion. One could practically fit an entire household in the bloody things, if one had the skill to attach the inner pockets and didn't mind walking a little funny.

From within she produced more tightly folded cloth, this time in drab brown. A simple smock and leggings, it was just the sort of thing one might see on any menial servant. She peeled the canvas from her body, careful not to smear any of the clinging powder on herself, and slithered into her third outfit of the evening. Lastly, she withdrew a pouch, which she clipped to her waist, and a pair of leather bracers—each loaded with a few useful surprises—that slid on beneath her sleeves.

The ruined canvas and savaged skirts found their final resting place a few inches beneath the dirt floor, where the constant passage of wagons had turned up enough earth that nobody would notice signs of a shallow excavation. Finally, Garland was just another servant, running some late-night errand through the grounds of Thunderhead.

It took only a moment to orient herself, thanks to the knowledge she'd gleaned from her drugged alchemist admirer. The central keep, a ponderous block of stone, made for an effective polestar. She wished briefly that her objective actually lay within that primary structure—the military museum occupying much of the lower levels was supposed to be among the most complete in all five Iron Kingdoms.

Ah, well. *Stick to business, love.*

Within the outer ramparts was a campus of additional buildings, huddling like nervous children around the skirts of the inner keep. Most were, like the fortress itself, squat, ugly things: stone constructions of little aesthetic value, rarely more than two stories in height.

Made sense, she supposed. While some were mere warehouses, or dormitories for the use of on-site apprentices and those alchemists involved in late-running experiments, others contained personal laboratories and workstations, along with umpteen storage chambers for all manner of volatile powders and sensitive reagents.

When almost any accident, then, could lead to fire, explosion, or fiery explosion, buildings of any real height—and thus vulnerable to collapse—would prove an unwise choice indeed.

The pebble-paved walkways between those buildings, which had been built at need and not according to any preplanned design, were as twisted and random as any maze. And while the buildings weren't *identical*, they were not only remarkably similar in overall build, but unlabeled to boot. A stranger could, unguided, spend *days* wandering aimlessly without stumbling across the precise structure she wanted.

As it was, thanks to Lyrran's slurred directions, it only took about two hours.

She encountered a smattering of other servants and laborers on her way, most fully intent on their own errands. She passed by wandering guards as well, half of whom ignored her, half of whom demanded pass phrases proving her right to be there. Fortunately, while they'd never have gotten her through the main gate, Lyrran's codes held up within the walls. By the time she reached her destination—tired, shivering, reeking of the chemical smoke drifting constantly across the campus—she'd regained her full confidence that she could pull this off.

Through the heavy door (locked—but thanks to a few quick prods with the tools she kept in her pouch, not for long); along a hallway of drably institutional beige and gray, lined with nigh identical chambers; up a single flight of stairs; and there it was. Third door on the left.

IN THUNDER FORGED

The personal workroom of senior alchemist and vile betrayer, one Idran di Meryse.

This door, too, was firmly locked. It was also, Garland realized as her first lockpick was snapped in half by something that chimed within the casing, mechanically warded against tampering.

With a soft sigh—she'd hoped to leave no hard evidence of her presence—she produced another ceramic vial from her pouch. Twisting her face away until her neck protested with a loud pop, she poured the contents over the lock.

Then, once the potent acid had done its job and there *was* no lock anymore, she pushed the door open and slipped inside.

If she'd been asked to sketch her idea of an alchemist's laboratory, she'd have produced a close rendition of what lay before her now. A forge sat in the far corner of the lengthy chamber, ready to melt metals, burn herbs, and what have you. Between it and her huddled several slab-like tables. Some held beakers and alembics, some racks of tubes and jars of colorful powders, some a wide array of tools whose uses Garland could only begin to guess. Quills and paper lay scattered all over, for the jotting down of notes no matter where they might manifest; a variety of burns and stains across every available surface suggested that some reagents had not reacted as anticipated.

The obvious spots—drawers, cabinets, the stacks of notes, even the books on a small shelf along the leftmost wall—she searched almost unwillingly. No chance di Meryse would actually keep her prize anywhere so obvious, but she had to be thorough, had to be certain.

That done, she scoured the room for more creative hiding places. She looked under the tables, between the cushions and the frames of various stools, even under the charcoal in the forge. Finally, built into the rear of the bookcase, a sliding panel revealed a hidden compartment.

But not what she'd hoped to find within.

A single envelope, wax-sealed and addressed only with a large G, sat within the hollow. Teeth grinding, she removed it and cracked it open.

Lady Garland,

Really, what do you take me for? After our discussions took such an unpleasant turn, why would you believe that I would leave the formulae anywhere you might think to look? I do hope you did not unduly harm anyone while effecting your illegal entry.

Rest assured, the documentation is quite safe—from harm, from discovery, and from you. It is not on me, and I shall be going nowhere near it, so even if we should cross paths, do not think to follow me.

You know my price, and you can imagine how eager certain other parties would be to acquire such a prize. May I humbly suggest, then, that you cease wasting time you do not have, and instead set about gathering some funds?

Sincerely yours,

I.

PS: I have made arrangements, if anything should happen to me, to send the documents to the aforementioned other parties. Just in case you were contemplating expressing your displeasure upon my person.

PPS: Whatever bargain we eventually make, you owe me an additional one-hundred-and-twenty goldbeads for the lock.

Garland whiled away several long minutes swearing in a manner not merely unladylike, but terribly unprofessional. All the work, the risk, the sheer misery of infiltrating Thunderhead . . . Just so the bastard could taunt her. *Again.*

It had been wise of the alchemist, she admitted grudgingly, to safeguard himself against retaliation. Had the option remained open, she very well *might* have arranged for a suitably painful “accident.”

Garland cracked open the door, making certain the hallway remained empty, and ventured out. It was a struggle, holding herself to a casual pace; she needed to be outside the fortress walls before anyone noticed the melted lock. With every step, new profanities resounded in her head, even if she now refrained from giving them voice.

She had a *lot* of thinking to do—but it required no thought at all to recog-

IN THUNDER FORGED

nize that she, the mission, and quite possibly her country were in very serious trouble.

Even *more* trouble, she learned some short while later, than she'd initially thought.

Exiting Thunderhead had proved far simpler than entering. The Crucible Guard weren't particularly concerned with people *leaving* the installation, and while sending a servant outside the walls at this time of night was abnormal, it wasn't unheard of. After a perfunctory exchange, the portcullis had slid upward and she'd been ushered on her way.

Nor had anyone questioned her presence among the suites and apartments of the rich and powerful, despite her new lower-class garb, considering how many servants said rich and powerful employed.

No, it was only as she returned to the fifth floor and neared Tolamos's door that she discovered her night wasn't done going wrong.

Although it had been pulled to, the door hung loose in its frame. Splinters bristled in a starburst pattern where the bolts had been kicked free of the wood. Mangled as the latch was, Garland saw enough fresh scratches in the brass to suggest that the intruders, whoever they were, had tried to pick the thing before resorting to more direct methods.

A quick flick of both wrists, and the springs in her leather bracers replied with a joyful *snap*. A razor-edged blade now jutted several inches past her right fist, and the fingers of her left hand clenched the smooth handle of a dusky, snub-nosed pistol.

Silent as a snake on silk, she swept from room to room, alert for even the slightest hint of an *intention* of movement.

She found none. Whoever they were, they'd come and gone, leaving a wake of devastation that might have been the envy of a twelve-pound cannonball. Drawers and cabinets hung open, their contents tumbling in miniature avalanches across heavily trampled carpet. Furniture had been smashed apart, paintings torn from walls, shelves tipped over. Wines, inks, and colognes

formed abstract patterns, their combined odors a miasma that might have been stomach-turning had Garland not recently experienced far worse.

The more portable valuables she'd noted her first time here—gold furnishings, jewelry, some fancy clothes—were conspicuously absent. All in all, it looked very much like a burglary.

To Garland, it looked *too much* like a burglary.

The damage was a touch too deliberate, too extensive. Beyond even that, the idea that some random crime would occur in *just* this suite on *just* this night was too ludicrous to seriously consider.

No burglary, this, but something costumed as one.

Garland crossed back across the suite, bits of wood and glass crunching beneath her. Only now, certain that no enemy lurked in wait, did she slide her weapons back into their sheaths and look in on the old alchemist.

“Oh, damn . . .”

Lyrran Tolamos hadn't enjoyed a pleasant end. Deep bruises and shallow gashes mottled his flesh. Dried blood traced a rough map from the corners of his lips, his slack jaw displayed multiple missing teeth, and even a cursory examination revealed a variety of broken bones.

Again, a beating that *could* have occurred in the course of a robbery—but hadn't. Garland could only hope that the lingering effects of her drug had dulled the pain and the fear of his last moments.

She hadn't particularly known the man; hell, she'd been prepared to force some information out of him herself, if need be! Still, she couldn't quite suppress a swell of guilt.

“If I brought this on you,” she whispered to the broken body, “I'm so sorry.”

What had they wanted from him? Information on the Golden Crucible? On Garland's own activities? Had they gotten what they were after? How long had they been watching him—or *her*? How badly might her mission, her identity, have been compromised?

The only question Garland *didn't* ask herself was “Who?” Of *that* answer, she had a disturbingly good idea. Swift, brutal, and impossibly well-informed . . .

Khadoran intelligence. Leryn's been infiltrated by Khadoran bloody intelligence!

IN THUNDER FORGED

Section Three, most probably; this seemed a bit far from the Khadoran border to fall under the purview of the more domestically-focused Prizak Chancellery. No, she couldn't be positive, but it seemed probable—and it was certainly the worst-case scenario. If Section Three *were* onto her, if they had even the slightest inkling of her mission, she couldn't put it off any longer. Garland had really wanted to complete the assignment on her own. But now?

Now it was time to scream for help and, for the sake of king and country, pray to Morrow that she hadn't left it too late.