



Y. S. Hassan

One Land, One King

Copyright © Y. S. Hassan, 2010. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.



Bedside Books

An imprint of American Book Publishing

5442 So. 900 East, #146

Salt Lake City, UT 84117-7204

www.american-book.com

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

One Land, One King

Designed by 8 | a | Hf'6i Wfcj, design@american-book.com

Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN-13: 978-1-58982-595-6

ISBN-10: 1-58982-595-0

Hassan, Y. S., One Land, One King

Special Sales

These books are available at special discounts for bulk purchases. Special editions, including personalized covers, excerpts of existing books, and corporate imprints, can be created in large quantities for special needs. For more information e-mail info@american-book.com.

ONE LAND, ONE KING
Y. S. Hassan

BOOK I

THE LAND

The Birth

Who might have imagined that the fate of a world could be decided by a few? A king and his five knights, standing with their steeds on one side of a battlefield scarred by countless wars of unimaginable violence, facing another king and his five knights, as though reflecting them. These were the champions that rose above all others by their strength of will, mind, and body. Each of these knights was the lord of a wide region and at the service of their respective ruler. Although both kingdoms were prosperous, the land would never be at rest until only one king remained. It was a simple concept that everybody understood and accepted perfectly well: the land would only recognize one king, and this ruler alone would be granted the fate of the land and of its people.

After many millennia of battles and wars, after many knights had fallen, kings raised and dethroned, the time had finally come. The land was divided into two: two kings, ten knights, and armies of hundreds of thousands. As one might have guessed, these knights and their kings were no ordinary men. To be a knight, one had not only to show exceptional

One Land, One King

skill in the art of war but also one's spirit had to be attuned to the land itself. Indeed, a knight could sense all living beings on his land at all times. The knight was the personification of all that was good and bad on his territory and its inhabitants. The strength of his people and his land was his to use as he saw fit. A sole knight was known to be able to vanquish hundreds of enemies with a single strike of his will before even having to reach for his sword—a thousand arrows could not disturb his mental shield.

A king, on the other hand, was chosen by the land itself. Not a soul knew what was needed to be king, but all knew that once the land had made its choice, the king was the mightiest of them all. No one, not even the knights themselves, could or would challenge his rule. Only another king had this privilege, and would do so until only one remained. The battle which was about to take place was just such a campaign. A war of kings; the last of the war of kings.

* * *

“’Tis a good place to battle,” said the ruler of Osaria to his knights. “The land will not pick a side on this ground; our fate will be decided by our hands.”

King Jirgar and his champions were at the eastern border of his realm, a wide plain ahead of them and their beloved mountains at their backs. It was common practice for valorous kings to choose to duel on neutral grounds where their respective influences would cancel each other out. For the battle at hand, they had agreed to meet at midday on the deserted plains of Urman, a region which laid on the frontiers of both kingdoms, where no man could find rest for both the kings' wills were forever in a battle for dominion.

The kings had chosen a vast, grassy plain, free from trees and bearing almost no sign of wildlife. The skies were covered with thick, dark clouds embroiled in an eternal struggle for supremacy. Cold winds blew ceaselessly and thunder resonated across the steppe, while the blinding brightness of lightning flashed high across the skies. No grounds were more fitting for the battle to come; no other place better reflected the turmoil the land was in.

“This is the time we all have been waiting and fighting for, my knights,” said King Jirgar, unable to hide his excitement.

“We shall make you proud, my king,” replied Knight Anaria, her tone both kind and strong. She was a tall and beautiful woman with silky, brown, shoulder-length hair. Her dark eyes were filled with untold mysteries, and to look into them would mean perdition for the untrained mind.

“You always have, Anaria—as have you all, my knights,” the king replied steadily. He was an old man with a silvery beard; his face, full of stony determination, betrayed his many years. King or not, he would always be a man of the mountains. In an instant, the king’s face became serious and unmoving, the air around them cold and empty; the knights knew the time had come.

“Have they arrived, my king?” asked Knight Yanas, oblivious to the intensity of the moment. “Has the time we’ve waited so long for finally come?” His voice was innocent like that of a child.

The king’s face changed and he smiled. “Yes, Yanas, the time has finally come. They have arrived; they are on the other side of the plain, making their way to us.”

“Aahhh,” sighed Yanas, relieved. “Play time at last!” His smile, so peculiar to him, always made the people around him uneasy, including his fellow knights. It was filled with candor,

and yet it was simultaneously merciless. It expressed life and death intertwined in an eternal dance. Only the king would greet his smile with a warm heart; only he understood its true meaning.

“Death is not a laughing matter; only a fool would greet it so carelessly!” Knight Mikus could not refrain himself from shouting. He had simply never understood Yanas and had stopped trying a long time ago. Mikus was of medium height and build, with short blond hair and small blue eyes that always hid his intentions. He was a good ruler and he cherished life more than anything else—at times, even more than his duties.

“Watch your tongue, Mikus, or the battle might start early,” Knight Soran replied coldly, without hesitation. A deathly silence took hold of the knights. Soran was of great build, and power emanated from every single part of his body.

Mikus thought carefully before saying anything else, for he knew that Soran never spoke lightly. He steadied himself and calculated his next move. Few seconds had passed since Soran spoke, but they felt like hours to Mikus. When he was finally ready to speak back to Soran, he was stopped by a voice in his head that he had not known was there.

You are wrong, Mikus. I am the one you should be scared of.

Mikus was silenced before he could utter a word. A feeling of despair was slowly creeping into his heart. Questions about the origin of this new voice and the potential threat it represented flooded his mind with incredible speed. He tried to keep his composure by erecting mental barriers all around the breach that the voice had created in his psyche. Slowly, the integrity of his mind was restored and Mikus returned to

his normal state. Only the king had ever been able to break through his defenses, but this new voice was not the king's.

Mikus wondered if any of the knights were aware of what had just happened, and, more importantly, if any of them were responsible for it. The matter would have to wait for another time, for now a war was taking place and he couldn't lose focus. He swallowed his pride and remained silent.

"Such is the law of the land," said Yanas, as if closing a chapter. While the knights assumed Yanas' statement to be in response to Mikus' outburst, their lord knew better, as he always did.

With a grave look, the king replied, "As always, you are right, Yanas." He sighed and added, "The time has come, my champions. Gather your strength and march on." While the knights proudly advanced toward their destiny, the king knew that the fate of his knights had already been decided.

* * *

He was of medium build with blond hair and a heavy beard, and one couldn't help but see grandeur in his brown eyes. His name was Daraghas, king of Luthecia. "We are almost there, my boys! I hope you are ready to embrace your destiny!" he exclaimed, his voice full of life.

"Aye, my lord!" the five knights shouted in unison.

"Those Osarian knights will feel my might!" added Thoras, holding his massive battle hammer high up in the air. Thoras was six feet, five inches tall, a native of the land of Glacia in the northern region of the kingdom of Luthecia, where he had wrestled bears with his bare hands from the tender age of ten.

One Land, One King

“Don’t take all the fun away now! You better leave some for me, you big oaf!” Arius shouted in reply, a short but puissant bearded knight, whose favorite place was the heart of the deepest of all volcanoes in his realm. Arius loved to tease Thoras, not only because of his huge size but also because he considered Thoras the only one worthy of challenging him.

“Will the two of you ever grow up?” Knight Genielle said in exasperation. She was a tall and feminine middle-aged woman with long, toned limbs and very fine traits. Her whole life, she had had to prove to her fellow knights that she was not only their equal but was in fact their superior. With time, her sole hobby was to torture aspiring men to remind them, and herself, of her supremacy. “We have a serious matter ahead of us, and your childish ways will not get in the way of fulfilling my destiny!” she thundered at Arius and Thoras, who shot each other incredulous looks, before bursting into laughter.

“Oh please, my lady, we are kind enough to have you ride along with us!” shouted back Arius, to which Thoras roared with laughter. Genielle’s face reddened with anger until she too suddenly began to laugh. The mood was very jovial, but the feeling wasn’t shared by all.

“While I can only rejoice at your high spirits, I must remind you that we are about to fight a king and his knights. Such a matter should not be taken so lightly, for I can assure you that they have earned their titles as much as we have.” Knight Mazroth’s tone was friendly but cold. His companions immediately understood the truth to his words.

“These are not the first king and knights we have had to vanquish—,” Thoras began.

“But they are the last, and they are all that remain. Respect your opponents and do not underestimate them, for they will show you no mercy.” Mazroth was tall and sturdy, and although good-looking, he was also very wise. Alone amongst his comrades, Mazroth had a deep respect for courtly manners and protocol, and while he had the most cunning intellect among them, his words were never chosen lightly, for fear that he might offend his king.

“Bah! You may speak the truth, but you are nonetheless a fool, Mazroth!” Arius shouted at him.

Mazroth glared at Arius, and glanced to his king for permission before speaking. “That I am . . . for keeping friends of your kind!” he shouted back. All the knights laughed.

King Daraghaz gazed proudly at his knights. “The enemy is not far, my friends. Let us meet our fortune!”

* * *

“Push! Push harder!” screamed Margaret.

“I am pushing!” Elizabeth cried.

“Stop arguing and focus on pushing! Push!” Margaret screamed back, holding Elizabeth’s legs on her shoulders. Elizabeth had just gone into labor after nine long months of morning sickness and shouting at her beloved husband Sarius.

Elizabeth and Sarius were ordinary folk, born and raised in a small village named Yvania, in the region of the Darklight Mountains, so called because they were forever shrouded in darkness. The thick layer of clouds that hung around the mountaintops was impervious to sunlight. While the region

appeared to be inhospitable, the truth was quite the opposite, having abundant waters and forests filled with wildlife.

“Push! Don’t you want to get this baby out? Push!” screamed Margaret. Long skilled in the art of midwifery, Margaret was stern and businesslike, with no time for niceties.

The pain was horrible and overwhelming; it took all of Elizabeth’s strength to focus enough to even hear what Margaret was saying, and yet, she couldn’t stop thinking about her lord, Knight Yanas. Such was the case for all the inhabitants of the Darklight Mountains. Indeed, they all knew about the battle that was about to take place, and they could all feel their lord’s strength coursing through them. Yanas was forever present in his people, as they were in him. Their strength and their will were his, and he was their voice, their champion.

“I am pushing, you old hag! Sarius, where are you?” Elizabeth cried. “Get in here, you good-for-nothing husband!”

“Get in here, Sarius! And you, push!” screamed Margaret, holding Elizabeth’s legs tighter against her shoulders.

Sarius, already startled by the sound of his wife howling for him, became frightened by the strain in Margaret’s voice. He raced toward the small room where his wife lay, giving birth. Hoping that nothing was wrong and that the baby was still fine, he burst through the door, and although she was obviously in pain, he was relieved to find that nothing else was wrong. He approached his wife, who looked ready to kill him, and felt fear like he had never felt before.

He managed a weak smile. “I’m here, sweetheart.”

“Come here and hold my hand! Do you see what I am enduring for you?” she screamed, unleashing all of her agony.

Sarius took her hand and instantly felt his bones being crushed. "You're hurting me," he complained, not thinking.

"Don't you dare speak of pain to me, you swine!" she raged.

"Push!" Margaret intervened. "The baby is upside down! This is going to take time; you have to be strong, Elizabeth! Keep pushing!"

Though fear was visible on Sarius' face, he knew he had to be strong for his wife. Elizabeth started to cry, but he knew that she would hold it together; she had to for their baby. Elizabeth pushed as hard as she could, and pain seared through Sarius' hand. This time, however, he did not care.

* * *

"Halt! We have arrived," exclaimed King Jirgar. The ruler of Luthecia was a hundred yards ahead of him. Jirgar focused his gaze and sent the other king a telepathic message: *Welcome pretender, does this place suit you?*

To which King Daraghias replied, *Aye! This battlefield will do. Send in your first knight; let us be done with this matter once and for all.*

It is sad that we cannot resolve this matter without sacrificing some of our champions, but such is the way of the land.

Aye, one land, one king, and five knights, Daraghias concluded, sounding bored.

"Soran, be ruthless," Jirgar heavily intoned.

"As always, my king." Soran urged his horse forward, advancing toward the enemy.

Meanwhile, across the battlefield, Daraghias' knights were preparing for the first engagement. "He is mine!" shouted Genielle. Daraghias nodded his consent.

Genielle had heard of Soran's incredible strength, and she could see no better opponent to prove, once and for all, her superiority in the knighthood and over men. She rode solemnly into the field, eager to begin the battle.

They were no more than twenty yards apart when Soran said derisively, "Is it because of your inability to find a husband that you are on this battlefield today?" Soran had never been renowned for his sensitivity, instead opting for frankness with everyone. He was no brute, but he definitely lacked tact.

Genielle, barely able to contain her anger, shot him a hate-filled look. "No, it is because of my inability to find adequate opponents that I am here today."

Soran smiled condescendingly. "Your move, little girl."

The air crackled around Genielle, the ground shook and split, and a wide fissure raced toward Soran. Although Soran could have easily dodged the attack, he held his ground.

A dark barrier erupted in front of him, deflecting the coming attack. Genielle smiled and said, "I thought so. I guess I will have to draw my sword." She reached for a hilt on her belt and drew forth a long sharp rapier. As she held it high in the air, the blade began to glow. Heavy clouds gathered overhead, and a bolt of lightning struck the sword, which she then redirected at Soran. The lightning was precise and severe; it went straight for his heart.

Just then, there was a loud explosion that showered the ground with sparks and choked the air with dense black smoke. Genielle thrust her blade heavenward once more, her face livid. The rapier emitted a blinding white light.

"You will not resist me this time!" She scowled at Soran, realizing her attack had failed.

Soran was unmoved and had already recovered his composure from the ferocity of her last attack, which he had stopped with his right palm. His gauntlet was pierced and his hand lightly burned; never had this happened before and one could almost see the shadow of a surprised look cross Soran's face.

"It's my turn next, little girl, don't miss." He had barely finished his sentence when he heard the voice of his king in his head: *Didn't I tell you to be ruthless? It wasn't open for discussion!*

Genielle, still preparing her next strike, was hit full front by an incredible wave of dark force.

Forgive me, my king, Soran thought back.

The darkness of the earth started to invade Genielle's body and mind; her soul was being pulled from below and she knew there was nothing she could do. She increased the strength of the piercing white light to try to make the gloom disappear, but to no use—it was in her and it was there to stay. In a last-ditch effort, she aimed her attack toward Soran. It had the intensity of a small sun. Soran deflected the attack with a single mind-strike that sent it hurtling for the sky, causing more chaos to the already troubled climate. The clouds grew thicker; heavy rain started to fall, accompanied by roaring thunder.

In a fit of despair, Genielle fell off her horse, landing face down on the ground. Out of nowhere, Soran appeared next to her, his bastard sword in his hands. Without a second's hesitation, he plunged it deep into her heart, rotating it to confirm the kill. He withdrew his blade and slashed off the head of her horse, before returning on his mount as fast as he had come.

Her inanimate body lay on the ground for all to see. She was nothing more than an empty shell, to the deep regret of

her companions and her people. She had been the lord of the land of Cartagia, in the kingdom of Luthecia. In the instant that she drew her last breath, a part of the souls of her people died along with her. They all anguished at the emptiness of the darkness that overtook her. Her voice faded away from their hearts and minds in an instant, leaving them feeling doomed and astray, as if they had lost all purpose in life.

Just when they were all ready to give in to death, a new, stronger voice emerged from the emptiness. It was the voice of their new lord, the voice of a knight of the One Land. It was Soran's voice that pulled them out of this doom, and his strength that filled their souls with a new purpose. They were all reborn under the rule of their new lord, Knight Soran.

"I am a knight of the One Land!" exclaimed the champion with his newfound strength and power. Indeed, as the people of Cartagia gained a new voice and a new purpose, so did Soran. He rode his horse a fair distance from the battlefield so he could watch the remaining battles. His role in this war was over; the land had accepted him as one of the five knights.

Thoras let out a roar of rage that echoed all over the battlefield and in the minds of the people of Glacia. The earth shook with the ferocity of his anger, and the rain and clouds dissipated from over the battleground only to be replaced by strong cold winds and a clear blue sky. "My turn!" he howled, marching forward.

Keep your head on your shoulders! The voice of his king rushed loudly into his mind.

I will, my king, Thoras replied, regaining control of the raw force of his thoughts. King Daraghias was surprised at how easily Soran had defeated Genielle and did not want to see the same thing happen to Thoras.

“I shall get rid of this noisy ox.” Mikus advanced onto the battlefield. “The bigger they are, the harder they fall,” he added, ensuring Soran could hear him. Mikus was still bitter about his previous encounter with Soran and wanted to make sure he understood that, despite his newly acquired position, Mikus would not back down. He charged on to meet Thoras. They were at fighting range: Thoras boiling with rage, Mikus smirking and overly confident. Both knights were on foot, having sent away their cumbersome mounts.

“Your move! Ladies first,” Mikus taunted Thoras.

“Do not take me lightly,” Thoras replied, focusing all of his anger into his arms. He extended them along the line of his shoulders in order to allow them to increase in size. When all of his muscles were pumped to the point of bursting, he opened his fists and slammed his hands together directly in front of him. A deafening blast shook the ground, and the air burst into flames, transforming the solid earth to magma. Suddenly, the fire disappeared, as if sucked into a vacuum.

“Nice fireworks . . . Can we start now?” Mikus said sarcastically.

Thoras glared at Mikus coldly. “Fool.”

Mikus heard a crackling sound in his ear and suddenly realized his mistake. Everything around him turned into a blazing inferno. Thoras’ bolt of energy had reappeared inside Mikus’ barrier and everything within its boundaries was destroyed. His body was engulfed in flames and burned from the inside out. His armor, which was made of the finest steel, shattered into a thousand pieces. Thoras gripped his hammer in front of his body, feeling nauseated by the smell of Mikus’ burning flesh. Mikus had survived—his body was torn apart, his armor scattered over the battleground, but his spirit was strong.

One Land, One King

As soon as Mikus had realized his mistake, he had immediately summoned the healing power of the earth, regenerating his body even while it burned. He stood up and reached for his sword which had resisted the blast. He plunged it in the ground, and diamond-sharp spikes burst from the earth beneath his enemy. Thoras barely had time to react; he started spinning on the spot, his hammer in his hands, breaking all of the spikes as they rushed toward him—all but one. It sliced through Thoras' armor and ripped into his right leg with the ease of cutting through a sheet of paper. The spike was razor sharp, and any movement only widened the wound and intensified the pain.

Thoras looked deep into Mikus' eyes and began to laugh. "Angering me further is not a good idea," he warned. He flexed his leg muscle with such force that the spike shattered into hundreds of tiny bits. The air around him crackled with a sudden, concentrated heat, melting what shards were left inside his flesh, closing the wound.

Thoras jumped high into the air, his hammer over his head, and Mikus trained in his sights. His weapon came down with the speed and power of a meteorite. He smashed the ground with such force that both kings erected barriers at the same time in order to protect themselves and their knights from the blast. The entire battlefield imploded from within, leaving behind sulfurous fumes and a thick plume of ash.

When the smoke cleared, Thoras was shocked to realize that Mikus was no longer in front of him; he was behind him. *An illusion*, he thought to himself. Mikus reached out and placed a hand on Thoras' back, causing him to lose all will to fight. He had replaced Thoras' anger with a profound feeling of mingled love and fear.

Thoras dropped his hammer and fell to his knees, holding his face in his hands. A soft voice manifested inside his head and told him: *Your anger has been misplaced; your life misled.* So much love was in this voice that he could not fight it. *Come to the light; I will guide you to your next life,* it said.

Thoras was about to let go, and be taken by the incredible energy that was flowing through him, when he heard his king's voice: *Lies, all lies, my friend,* King Daragh said. *Look through the light and you will see the lies.*

Thoras gathered all of his strength and pierced through the spell to see the face of deceit, the face of Mikus wishing his death. His blood rushed through his body and his fury broke the illusion. Behind him stood Mikus, poised to strike with his sword. Thoras jumped forward and, in a flash, he had grabbed his hammer and assumed a defensive stance. Mikus' strike was so violent that it took all of Thoras' will to block the attack. He focused all of his strength in his legs and pushed back Mikus so hard that the latter went flying in the air, letting his sword slip. Before Mikus could regain his balance, Thoras was on him, his hammer above his head.

The subsequent blow left Mikus without an unbroken bone in his body. Mikus knew that death was near; as a last resort, he tried to direct all of his remaining energy to the healing of his body. As he came crashing to the ground, he concentrated on reviving his vital organs. Thoras couldn't be fooled twice—as Mikus healed himself, Thoras incinerated him with a single strike of his will. "It's over!" he screamed.

Mikus couldn't accept his death; he just couldn't leave it all behind. He used his last breath to search his people for a recipient in whom he could send all of his conscience, his memories, and everything that defined him as an individual, so that he could live on. It all happened in the blink of an eye;

One Land, One King

he looked everywhere on his land until he finally found someone. A child, not more than ten years old, was his last hope. Mikus was dying, but he knew he had found his way out. The child's life was about to vanish so Mikus could live on, when he was abruptly stopped.

I'm afraid I cannot let you do that, said a voice that drifted into his head. It was that same voice that had earlier breached his defenses. *Your love of life made you forget the rules of the land. Soran was never your enemy; you were, old friend,* the voice added, suddenly recognizable. "Yanas!" Mikus exclaimed, and issued his last breath before fading into darkness.

As had happened with Genielle, the people under Mikus' rule felt a part of their souls go into the abyss; that energy that gave them purpose in life had disappeared as quickly as it had come. A new strength was ushered in; it was that of Thoras, knight of the One Land.

A knight for a new era! Thoras called to all of his people, old and new, as his thoughts filled with power and rebirth. The people of Glacia and Sunia rose and shouted in a single voice, *Aye!* The death of their lord not only meant a new ruler but also a new way of life. It was as if the spirit of their lord were engraved in their soul, guiding them. Once this lord died, a new one would take over and guide them into a new life. Such was the way of the land.

* * *

"Push! You're almost there! I can see his arm!"

"I am pushing!" she replied, not letting go of her grip on Sarius' hand.

"She is pushing!" yelled Sarius, reacting to the excruciating pain that flew up his arm, hoping that she would soon release

her grip. Elizabeth was so surprised by the sudden support from her husband that she did indeed let go.

With relief, Sarius added, "You are doing an incredible job, keep going." Elizabeth sent him a terrifying gaze and renewed her crushing grasp.

"Keep pushing!" he yelled again, pain shooting through his fingers once more.

"Yes, push!" Margaret added.

* * *

"Another big ox for a knight of the land." Anaria sighed, as she glanced over at Soran. She always liked to tease the overly muscular men. "It's time a woman stepped up to show those ruffians the true meaning of power," she added, moving forward.

Don't be too mean. It wouldn't suit your grace, Soran mentally replied.

Ab! And what do you know of grace? I shall teach you its real value, she shot back affectionately.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the field, Mazroth was preparing for his confrontation with Anaria. "She shall step down from knighthood and be mine, or she shall die," he said, and he set off toward Anaria. He was terribly fond of beautiful women, especially when they showed character.

"Don't be deceived by her beauty, Mazroth, it might be the end of you," warned Daraghas.

"There exist only two kinds of good death: on the battlefield or in the arms of a beautiful woman—I might get both today!" He laughed. Mazroth had only heard tales of Anaria's beauty and skill on the battlefield. Marching to meet her, he realized that the tales of her beauty did not do her

justice. She was a true work of art, a masterpiece. She had an aura of peace and serenity all around her; her face was that of an angel, and her body, divine. As he neared fighting range, he noticed that a mist had appeared as if out of nowhere. He knew that the weather had changed during the two previous battles, but he hadn't noticed any mist.

"I hope you don't mind, but the earth was in pain after the last battle, so I had to heal it a bit. It wouldn't be suitable for us to fight on such devastated land, wouldn't you agree?"

Mazroth was amazed; the land was indeed starting to heal, and the cracks were slowly disappearing. In their place, vivid greenery sprang up, bringing with it the scent of fresh grass. *Beauty and grace*, he thought to himself, *what a woman*.

"Please continue. I must say that by doing so you are also healing my heart. Rarely have I seen such magnificence in a woman," Mazroth replied, most charmingly. "What do you say we stop this nonsense and you become mine? It would pain me deeply to see tears on such a beautiful face," he added, meaning every word.

Anaria gazed at him gently and deeply. "Your heart is pure, good knight, and you are right, I will shed tears for you." Her voice was sweet and sincere but not without a hint of defiance.

"You are—" But before Mazroth could finish his sentence, Anaria flicked her hand ever so slightly, and a strong wind started to blow. Mazroth had to lower his head and hold himself tightly to stay on his horse.

"Let us start. It pains me enough to have to fight you," Anaria said abruptly, annoyed by the turn of events. One of her many gifts was the ability to see through false visions and truly gaze at the soul of any human being. While Mazroth was her enemy, his heart and intentions were pure. He was a true

believer of the way of the land, and even when he disagreed with what had to be done, he would never question it. She knew that deep down he didn't want to fight her but that he would with all his heart.

As the wind gathered strength and opaque black clouds once more encroached upon the skies, Mazroth succumbed to the futility of the situation; the fight had already begun. He focused and, with a single mental command, a wall of earth erupted in front of him, blocking the wind. Anaria, surprised by the speed at which he had done this, gave another wave of her hand, and the wind swirled into a tornado and began to move directly for the wall.

Thunder was again heard in the background.

The cyclone was wreaking havoc on the wall when Mazroth, having sent his horse to safety, approached it and placed his hand on its surface. The wall started to shake, and the tornado dissipated. As the cyclone scattered, the wall vibrated with even more force, until it broke into pieces that flew straight at Anaria. She responded by willing a new twister to materialize out of the atmosphere, which surged up all around her, shooting the bits of earth and debris high into the sky, leaving Anaria utterly untouched.

"Earth is your element, I see," she said gently, with a hint of admiration.

"And air yours," he replied with esteem.

She liked Mazroth. He was kind and pure, and yet, he held his ground with no doubt or hesitation. "Serve me, and I might grant you your wish," she offered.

"I must serve the way of the land, I'm afraid."

The clouds above them grew thicker, and light rain once more began to fall.

"You love the land more than you could ever love me."

“Indeed, you are right,” he replied, fatalistically, “for such is my way of the land.”

The rain fell heavier.

Spikes rose from the ground beneath Anaria, who flew into the air, leaving her horse behind. Mazroth looked up to see Anaria gazing fiercely at him. Lightning struck down on Mazroth’s position. He leapt to the side in an attempt to dodge it, but the force from the explosion threw him to the ground. He lay still, stunned, shielded by a giant hand made of solid rock. However, in the next instant, another bolt of lightning struck, and the hand was blown away by the hit.

Mazroth willed from the earth a second hand, which rose from the ground and caught Anaria. A thunderous blast obliterated the hand, and the graceful knight rose out of the remains. She started to spin in midair, causing a gale force wind to blow from all directions. Mazroth braced his body, becoming heavy, as though he had become a part of the ground itself, and the gusts of wind had no effect on him.

Anaria drew her long, thin blade and thrust it toward the sky. Mazroth didn’t have to think twice; he drew his claymore and pointed it in the direction of the other knight, swinging it with ease despite his slight build. Anaria slowly lowered her sword, aiming it at Mazroth. The wind picked up speed and strength, growing bitterly cold. Mazroth assumed a defensive stance to ward off the gusts, and the ground started to shake as he summoned walls all around himself, but to no avail. The wind was too cold; the earth had frozen.

The driving rain turned to sleet, and then started to form long, thin, needle-sharp spikes in the air. Mazroth tried harder to will the land to defend him, but the response was too slow. A sudden wind gust turned every icy dagger in the direction of Mazroth. His last defenses were breached, and his armor

destroyed. Mazroth lay on the ground at the mercy of Anaria. She flew toward him like a thunderbird, her blade still in her hand. The sword came to rest on Mazroth's throat, as she stopped and stood beside him.

"Bow before me, accept me as your lord, and you will be spared," she said.

A small drop of blood beaded on Mazroth's skin at the tip of her blade.

"The land would never agree to it," he replied. Anaria knew the truth in these words, and tears flowed down her face.

"I'm sorry I made you cry," he added.

Anaria raised her sword and plunged it without hesitation into his heart. As she did so, she felt all of her defenses crumble for the first time. Despair took over her, and her soul wept in agony.

Mazroth's realm, the land of Feroria, was easily the most prosperous in either kingdom. Its grounds were fertile, the animals varied and abundant. Its inhabitants were proud, hard-working people. When Mazroth died, the land, the animals, and its people felt a terrible chill. As Anaria cried, all of the people of Feroria cried with her, their hearts empty, as though they had died suddenly. A light had vanished, and they were taken by darkness; a part of their souls had disappeared. After they had lost all hope, and despair had become their companion, a new voice emerged, and it was kind and reassuring. A new light appeared, and it brought with it new hope. It was Anaria, their new lord and knight of the One Land.

Anaria swept away her tears and projected to all of her people: *I, Anaria, knight of the One Land, shall usher you into a new era of peace and prosperity. Honor the memory of all that have fallen by*

embracing the path of the One Land. While she was happy and proud to have fulfilled her destiny, her heart was heavy with sorrow, and she found she could say no more. She took a last look at Mazroth's corpse and walked back to Soran and Thoras, who greeted her with the respect due to a knight of the One Land.

"I see that you have lost your horse," said Soran, with great compassion.

Anaria looked at him, incredulous. Soran frowned at her, demanding her reply. Anaria's laughter shone through her tears. "I have lost much more, dear friend."

Soran stepped down from his horse and took her in his arms. She whispered in his ear, "He had a pure soul."

"Such purity that he could not have handled the burden of your death, beautiful one," Thoras couldn't help but say.

"The land was harsh to have put those two on a colliding path," Yanas said to his king, with a note of detachment. "I shall be next, my lord," and he marched forward eagerly.

"No, Yanas, you shall be last! Such is my command!" Jirgar's voice was harsh, his decision final.

"Then I shall be next, my king," said Knight Khazar. He was of medium build, wearing black, full-plate armor. He had long black hair and piercing black eyes, and everything about him was mysterious. He was a man of few words, and when he spoke, it was always with specific intent and meaning.

"Be swift, Khazar." The king motioned him to the battleground.

Khazar set off toward the middle of the battlefield to meet Arius, one of Daraghas' knights. "'Tis a sad day! Let us be done with it!" Arius shouted, as Khazar approached.

"Be careful, Arius," Daraghas said.

"I'll leave the caring for others, my king!" he replied.

As the knights reached fighting range, the weather changed drastically. The skies grew darker and the winds came to a complete halt. Day and night had become one. Arius wasted no time, and launched himself from his horse directly toward his enemy, with a roar which echoed all over the plain. When Arius reached Khazar, all he found was dark, thick smoke all around him. Arius tried to look around, but to no avail; he felt as if the weight of the world were on his shoulders. An immense force was pushing him down with such power that he wasn't able to move.

Khazar's silhouette materialized above him, holding a lethal double-edged sword, poised to strike. Arius summoned the strength of the earth to break free from the position he was locked into. The ground trembled and cracked, and Arius was free. He quickly drew his battle axe and assumed a defensive posture, but once again, Khazar vanished into smoke. Arius stood still, waiting, until he felt something pass by his right side, slashing him from behind, nearly cutting him in half. His armor was of no use against Khazar's might. As the darkness around him started to dissipate, he saw Khazar standing right in front of him. Arius' strength failed him, and he fell to the ground where he met his death.

The land of Mineria was given its name because its inhabitants were mostly miners. They were a short and muscular people, with an iron will. When Arius died, as with the deaths of the other knights, the subjects of his realm felt a piece of their souls die along with him. They sank into gloom, but instead of a new light replacing the old, the darkness simply remained. While at first it brought dread and terror, they soon realized the darkness had changed somehow. It contained no fear, despair, nor any other ill emotion. It was a peaceful darkness, a calming dusk that erased all chaotic

One Land, One King

emotions and installed a new purpose: order. While they could not clearly sense their new lord, they knew he was there, somewhere, keeping this peaceful state. His voice was not ordering them or overwhelming them like the old one but quietly whispering to them the path to salvation.

I am Khazar, knight of the One Land, he said, with strength and will. He briefly appeared out of the shadows next to Soran, and then vanished once more. The knights of the One Land knew he was near but could not feel his presence; it was a feeling Soran and Anaria had gotten used to a long time ago.

* * *

“I can see his head! By the lords, this baby is all crooked!” Margaret exclaimed. “He is surely your baby, Sarius!” she added, exuding warmth that was quite unusual for her.

Elizabeth couldn’t help herself and laughed. “He sure is! Let’s hope he won’t be a good-for-nothing like his father,” she said, scowling at Sarius, but not without a twinkle in her eye. Everything about her showed tenderness, even in pain.

Sarius smiled lovingly at his wife. “This is no time for jokes, you man-eaters! Push!”

* * *

“It is my time, my king. There are no others left.”

“Listen to me carefully, Yanas. The knight you are about to fight must be destroyed, both body and soul.” Jirgar’s face was grave and lined with worry.

“Do you wish for me to reveal what is hidden?”

“Yes.”

Fiction/Fantasy

“This story tantalizes the imagination with its vivid rendering of a world not quite like ours. Escape into the pages and expect to emerge from them days after the fact. . . . This is a book that redefines the fantasy genre in a unique and compelling way, revisiting the classical dichotomy of good and evil but with a distinctiveness that can only be Hassan.”

—Robert Baer, author of *New York Times* bestsellers *See No Evil* and *Sleeping with the Devil*

After their grisly battle for supremacy over the One Land, the king and his five knights anticipate peaceful times ahead of them. Then, almost before they can rest their bloody swords on the ground, angels and demons—masquerading as humans—begin to carouse the Earth, vying for human souls before their very eyes, powerless to stop it.

While the king and his knights are without equal on the battlefield, this war is different from all the others they have had to face. It takes place in the heart of their cities and of their people. A secret war of influence has started with the rise of the One King, and the outcome, the doom or salvation of their world, is to be determined by Yan, a boy with unimaginable powers chosen to be the scale on which the actions of men shall be weighed.

