

# ABLERON'S TALE 1

*Larane 26, 730 TR*

I was born Ableron of Soursi, the eldest son of Carlon and Pela, and grandson of our clanhead Raeli of Soursi, near Ewen Keep in the year before the death of good queen Mirelael of Kanday. Our family lands were located off the road to Imesen Manor: the old house where my grandfather "held court", and we all gathered about him: my parents and younger brother, my widowed uncle Yaemon with his five beautiful daughters. Our small holding: some three hundred acres of good arable land, and the old tower, fallen somewhat into disuse at the time, which dated well back into the days of the Theocracy. As my grandfather never tired of telling us, this was a meager allotment indeed for a family which had known greatness in its time: one hundred years squatting on a dunghill, he would say, spitting into the fire, and instruct my brother Stavron and me through long winter evenings in how our clan, for so many years Kings of Ewen, were reduced and beggared by the perfidy of the Laranian knights who seized the keep in the year 624, deposing and slaying his own grandfather, Raeli the King, and the grasping avarice of that Cassean, the first Earl of Heroth under clan Kand's new-found dynasty. But my grandfather always saved the best of his venom for the man who advised the first Earl against Soursi interests in the early days of the Kingdom of Kanday: "Sir Theron Palliser" was a hated and reviled name upon my grandfather's lips in the years of my youth. My grandfather always insisted that *his* father, also named Carlon of

Soursi, heir to King Raeli, might have been named Baron of Ewen in the early days of Cassean's Earldom, had it not been for the poisoned words whispered into the Earl's ear by, Theron, your thrice-great grandfather. We were taught, my brother and I, to hate the Pallisers, root and branch.

But the years passed, and so many events overtook us in our shrunken little corner of land south of the Thard, with the old Republic always a loathed and menacing presence to our north. My grandfather was a bitter, imperious, vindictive old man who ruled our small, reduced clan with an iron will, and though I was born very soon, it was said, after my parents marriage, and lacked the Soursi red coloring and the moody passionate rages of the other men in my family, I was schooled upon my grandfather's knee and he would brook no word spoken against me, although my younger brother always took delight in teasing me about my dark hair and quieter countenance when we were boys. My father, Carlon, I remember for his brooding and violent temper, and he was perhaps harder on me than on Stavron when we erred or created mischief together, as boys always will. My mother, Pela, was kind and sad, with beautiful brown eyes to match her lustrous hair, and she suffered much, I think, at my father's hand. My uncle Yaemon, tall and red like my father and my grandfather, doted upon his five sweet daughters and grieved all of his days for his own wife, taken from us in the birthing of her youngest. I do remember my aunt as carefree, laughing and generous, and

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she always treated me, when a small boy, perhaps as the son that she never had. We all missed her when she was gone.

My parents died when I was twelve in a wagon accident on the property, the horses spooked somehow and the wagon cruelly overturned, and it was at this point that my grandfather Raeli took myself and Stavron in hand, and insisted that we receive training at arms from an older, local knight bachelor, Sir Halton of Crayle, a distant relative of the Soursi family who lived nearby. My grandfather, you see, never gave up on his dream of the clan regaining one day our rightful place, and avenging the wrong done to us by the Palliser family, and he saw that my brother and I were well groomed for what he considered our destiny. But the years were hard upon my grandfather, and he suffered increasingly from a series of fits which reduced his body terribly: he slowly surrendered the ability to walk, the gods taking from him command of his limbs, and he had to be cared for by my cousins, Yaemon's girls. But still his mind was strong, and none of us ever questioned his right to rule the family as clanhead, for he remained always the caustic, domineering old man even after his body had reduced him to the daily care of the girls, as if he were a man trapped in a child's body.

When Rethem to the northwest was seized by Arren of Melderyn, who gathered his legions and brought war upon the Thardic Republic and Kanday, I was new-turned seventeen, and my uncle and I entered military service under the

Earl of Heroth to fight for Andasin IV's crown. Stavron, who at fifteen could perhaps have gone to war as well, remained at home at my grandfather's side, an able-bodied young man to look after the family property and see to the well-being of our cousins while their father Yaemon and I were away. From what I later came to learn, I believe my brother had other reasons for wishing to remain behind, but to speak of that would take me ahead of my tale.

I need not tell you of that bitter irony for my grandfather, seeing his son and grandson depart to fight under the banner of a Cassean of Heroth. The following three years of war I will not describe in great detail; all know of how Andasin IV lost his kingdom to the second son of King Chunel of Melderyn, who styled himself Arren I, King of Rethem. Our forces spent the better part of the war near, and later south, of Heroth castle, and we experienced two interminable campaign seasons fighting desperate skirmishes in our long, grinding southward retreat. We tried in vain to hold the center of Andasin's long, over-extended front against those Arrenic legions, who were demonic in their skill and tenacity as they harried and crushed our efforts to drive them back and regain the green leagues of our homeland. Shortly after my uncle and I left Ewen, we heard tell of the XII Legion crossing the Thard and taking the keep from its small garrison, and I remember wondering at the fortunes of my family, helpless then to do ought but worry and fret for their safety.

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In the summer of 723, Arren himself led the VII Legion against us at the Battle of Ravinath, where Melderyn seized Heroth castle after Prince Anaflas was forced to flee. My uncle Yaemon fell in that battle, although I only heard of his death some days after the horrendous chaos of Kanday's disaster in the forests of Noreashire. A miserable winter in the field followed, and spring brought more interminable skirmishing along the road to Kuseme. Our forces always gave ground to the VII Legion, although that summer in 724 proved to be strangely quiet, like a calm before the tempest. We wintered near Quivum Keep, where I heard an interesting account of the former sheriff of Norea and bishop of Perinore, Tamys Bakyth, dead two summers previous, which became a song I was to write some years later.

Spring of 725 was another long, driving retreat, this time all the way to the river Eryn, northwest of Dyrisa, where King Andasin was to lose his final real battle. I remember how demoralized our troops were in hearing news of the young Earl of Selvos' defeat to the west at the hands of the Earl of Techen; the Checkered Shield had finally forsaken clan Kand, and somehow it was this which truly brought our doom home to us. You can imagine my mixed feelings at this, as it had been the Laranians who had killed my twice-great grandsire, and supported clan Kand at the beginning of it all.

*[Sir Auram: Indeed, the ability of His Majesty to undermine the will to fight of the Laranians was the key to victory. His*

*genius was to offer them something they had always wanted – freedom to proselytize throughout Rethem and Tharda. His price – to cease warring against him. The Laranians hesitated over this plum long enough to allow King Arren I to secure his victory.]*

Those of us left alive after King Andasin and his father the Earl of Sarkum went into hiding could no longer be considered an army, but I remained attached as a light foot soldier to one of the many scattered companies which were the remnants of Andasin IV's forces until the events at Norea Plain took place that winter. I was not present to witness the duel between King Arren and Andasin, but word of it spread through the countryside like wildfire. Upon hearing of the events of that bloody day, I of course was eager to return north to Ewen, to rejoin my family and take my place at my grandfather's right hand to see what would become of our land and our heritage. What I returned to, instead, was a thing of horror which even the miseries of war could not prepare me for.

The Soursi family home I found deserted on the day of my return, save for three of the four servants of the family. These three older ladies who had remained, of course, at home in the household service during wartime, whom I had known throughout my childhood, I found recently murdered, their throats slit and the muscles, which you by now know so well, Bevan, carved upon their bodies. But those muscles meant something to me even then, for the symbols were of old

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significance only to my brother Stavron and me, as they were a remnant of our childhood together. You see, as boys by brother and I spent countless hours in the shadow of that old family tower, located in a now-disused part of the remaining ancestral holdings, at the edge of our present property. Three long, lozenge-shaped shot windows in the tower, viewed from below, take on the curious image of the three mascles, and it was that cryptic symbol which dominated the imaginative play of my brother and I, as we wiled away hour after hour at our games of chivalry and daring during our boyhoods. Now, I had returned from war to find this symbol transformed into something inexplicable, but terrible. With growing dread, I knew that I must go to the tower.

What I found there on that evening will haunt my dreams forever. Five shallow graves, which I reluctantly unearthed to find the corpses of my poor cousins: no mascles this time, just the broken, shattered bodies of five beautiful young girls. Later that evening, back at the house, I found the fourth, missing servant hiding, traumatized, concealed in a small earthen crevice off the root cellar beneath the house, crazed with fright and grief and starving near unto death. Our poor elderly steward, Harrell of Dunat, was able to tell me what he witnessed, what my brother Stavron had done, before dying in my arms. And returning to search the tower the next day, I eventually discovered the place, deep beneath the tower's foundation, where my grandfather had been entombed.

Stavron, you see, had made use of the two-year absence of my uncle and me to pursue a growing passion for our eldest cousin Luveta, fifteen years of age at her death, in the absence of her father Yaemon's oversight. We all had loved Luveta in our own way, I suppose; you couldn't help but lose your heart to the girl, so vibrantly alive and carefree like her mother had been, but my brother's unnatural desire for her must have grown and festered, a twisted forbidden thing, during those fearful, isolated years when war swept through our homeland. Our grandfather Raeli, Harrell told me, had continued to deteriorate physically during the years of warfare and had become entirely immobile, although he retained to the end his irascible, commanding personality and sharp, inflexible will. Gradually forced to incrementally surrender much of the day to day management of the lands and household to his young grandson, he nevertheless retained sufficient influence to vehemently oppose Stavron's plans toward Luveta. My cousin, in turn, evidently remained loyal to her grandfather's prohibition against the match, while all of the household could read her growing apprehension at Stavron's increasingly evident intention to marry her prior to the return of her father. The violent arguments between my brother and grandfather, combined with Luveta's fear of my increasingly obsessed brother, produced months of tense emotional standoff within the home. Alarming news arriving at Ewen of Arren of Melderyn's troops carrying the day in the final battles down south against us

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only increased the urgency of Stavron's attempts to pressure the old man to agree to the match. Old Harrell bore witness to the confrontation between Stavron and our grandfather which brought this long battle of wills to its climax.

On the evening of the horror, the two men quarreled violently for hours, and the words they spoke were bitter and vicious indeed. Our three female servants withdrew to the kitchen in despair, but poor impotent Harrell, as elderly as our grandfather and hardly more hale, saw all that happened in the house, and later at the tower, although he dared not reveal himself for fear of my brother's ungovernable rage. The awful dispute culminated in Stavron assaulting my grandfather viciously, manhandling him from the family home, and dragging him to the old tower on the edge of the property, planting him there beneath the tall tower's windows. Returning to the family hall, Stavron gathered together his five female cousins and marched them at sword point to the tower and then up the steep circular steps to the chamber at the very top. Trapping the girls within the room with him, he dragged each of them in turn to the brink of the large, topmost window and demanded that our grandfather agree at once to his marriage to Luveta. Denied each time by the stubborn old man, Stavron cast each in turn from the window to their deaths at the feet of their grandfather. Harrell could hear Luveta, in a frenzy of desperation, attempting bravely to save her sisters, and could hear her screams also as she was beaten and thrashed by her cousin into a

cowering, sobbing heap while her young sisters, crying and pleading for mercy, were flung one by one to their destruction. Each time, Stavron demanded that the old man agree to the marriage, and each time he was denied. Finally, Stavron hauled Luveta herself to the brink of that abyss, demanding absolute capitulation from Raeli, and upon being cursed by our wretched grandfather and refused one final time, he threw her, also, to her doom.

*[Sir Auram: It need not be said that the Crown has no knowledge of this terrible crime. Royal justice would see this miscreant brought to answer for his atrocities.]*

Harrell of Dunat never witnessed my grandfather's fate, as he fled to that hiding place off the root cellar. Indeed, at one point later he believed hearing Stavron searching for him, but my brother must have thought Harrell had escaped to another village, and left him unfound. Telling me his heartbreaking tale robbed, I think, the very life from him, for he must have loved the girls as if they were his own grandchildren. In the telling of his story that night, he only used Stavron's name once, perhaps twice. The rest of the time he referred to my brother simply as the Defenestrator, as if my younger brother had indeed become something monstrous to him, inhuman, demonic. I suppose I have fallen from time to time into that habit of thought as well; it is hard for me to think of the boy I knew in my childhood as someone capable of what he did.

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What happened next can be briefly told. While the new Kingdom of Tharda coalesced around me, I could think of nothing but how I was to go on with life after the slaughter of my family. In time, I realized that I could not retain the family lands and still embark upon what was to consume my new life. Whatever my grandfather Raeli might have wished, it was no longer possible to retain even the paltry physical remnants of our family's pride. So I made arrangements for the sale of the property to a local clan, changed my name, chosen to honor the ancestral Soursi legacy, and left to begin anew in Coranan. I brought with me the funds from the sale of the holding, and my grandfather's fine old broadsword, which I found hidden among his belongings, neglected by my brother who had fled after butchering the family. From that point onward, my existence was to have two great projects: to honor my grandfather's spirit as best I could, making amends to him for my selling of the property, by seeking out and destroying, however possible, the very Pallisers whom he hated so much. And to find my brother Stavron somehow, and kill him.

So that is where I began, Bevan, to learn all that I could about your family, and I bided my time well and to good profit. For I had no concept as to where my brother might have fled, no clues to lead me on to accomplishing my great purpose of exacting vengeance upon him, to look him in the eyes one day and to slay him. As well, I knew in my heart that I cared not whether I myself died in the attempt;

my own life meant little to me after what had happened. So I decided that I would do what damage I could to the great Palliser family first, so long as I could be sure of preserving myself for the murder, when the time came, of my brother. I spend time in Heroth when not in Coranan, and learned the news and gossip of your father's household, and a little of your cousin's mercantile interests. I began to make my plans in earnest when I learned about Theron Palliser's new granddaughter, and the mysterious father of the child who visited on two occasions, and the mother who was whispered as traveling much abroad the land, but who was certain, I thought, to return to her father's house and to the child she had left there.

In the meantime, in Nuzyael of this year, four long years after the defenestration, after the murder of the Soursi family, I believe I caught my first and only sighting of my brother Stavron. It was across Kotros Square, amidst the crowds gathered to witness the historic visit of the Duke of Alagon to his grandson, King Arren II. He was too far away for me to be certain, and yet my mind was sure in the instant that I saw him that this was my brother, seven years since I had last set eyes upon him as a boy. He appeared to be in conversation with two men, one of whom appeared tall and severe, garbed in gray, standing beside Stavron. The second, animated and gesturing insistently, addressing the other two men, was shorter, stout and bearded. His face I was to remember with certainty some months later. You can perhaps imagine

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the state of my mind as I thrust my way through the crowd, hand gripped upon the pommel of my sword, and my cruel disappointment as well when I arrived at the spot to find the trio dispersed, vanished into the huge throng, as if the very sight of them had been an apparition. You can well believe I canvassed the inns and taverns for the next week or two, searching everywhere I could conceive, but the city had been too crowded during the days of the visit, and I never learned of or saw my brother or his companions again that month.

So I returned to my plan, waited and bided my time, and contrived a scheme to assure that I would become a traveling companion of the intriguing Bevan Palliser, when finally we met. So I penned a song which I felt couldn't fail to catch her interest, and kept my contacts at the Crossroads Inn in Heroth, and found myself in great good fortune when Bevan Palliser and her small group of Palliser relations and friends returned to Heroth on the 8<sup>th</sup> of Nulus. I followed you, Bevan, from Heroth to Coranan the next morning, and it was simplicity itself to arrange with Anders to play my song in the common room of the Tabard and Hearth later that evening. And so I told you the tale of my being hired by a red-haired harper, because I thought perhaps much could be gained by combining my two projects: my story would ensure that you and your friends would unwittingly assist in finding my brother, should it come to that, by giving you his description to look out for. I included the mascles too, so you would know of that.

Perhaps I thought that I would have time to pursue my plans against your family to completion; I felt certain that Stavron had not seen me in that crowd during the Duke's visit, and assumed perhaps that he knew nothing of my presence in Coranan, nothing of my new identity as Ewen of Ravinargh, the harper. I had supposed that he, like so many others on that day, had been a visitor to Coranan on that occasion; after all, I had dwelled in the city for some four years and knew the town well, but had never heard of or seen a man fitting my brother's description. Perhaps all of my reasoning was correct, as far as it went.

*[Sir Auram at this point stands and paces the room.]*

But the murder of Pelisa of Thoff changed that. You can imagine, perhaps, the chill of dread that struck to the very core of my soul when I heard those words from Colm of Kells at the Harper's guild: that Pelisa had been slaughtered, raped and mutilated, carved up in a way which I knew could only be a message meant for me. My brother knew I was here, who I was, and had left his symbol for me to consider – that symbol of what he had done to our family years ago. Pelisa had been a friend of sorts, close at times, a fellow competitor in the guild for the choicest jobs and venues, and we had kept up a friendly rivalry over the years. I had been aware in the past that certain tongues had wagged that perhaps there was something more between us, but it was never so. Nevertheless, my brother had seen fit to issue his challenge to me in

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violating and butchering this poor girl, although what he intended toward me was unclear. I am well aware that the man who committed the crimes he had, the man who dispatched, I think likely, the guard in Pelisa's building and slaughtered Pelisa herself, was well-skilled enough to have found any number of ways of taking my own life; why he has not, apparently, attempted it is still beyond me.

*[Sir Auram: This murder remains unsolved, although we do have a suspect. Pray, Ewen, Ableron? continue ...]*

If the murder of Pelisa first destroyed my notion that I would have the leisure to pursue my plans against you, Bevan, then Golotha changed everything. When first I set eyes upon Sir Felkar Uldseth in the common room of the Bridgetower Inn, I recognized him at once as the shorter of the two men I had seen speaking to my brother in Coranan. In the early morning of Larane 11<sup>th</sup>, past midnight, after Arva and I had returned from the performance at the brothel, and had been set upon by the half-dozen thugs in the street and driven them off, I was too awake and agitated to sleep. Downstairs, in the darkened common room, I helped myself to a drink from behind Orsa's bar and sat in the blackness at a corner table, alone with my thoughts about the Baron of Quсте's right-hand man, and what his connection to my brother might be. And it seemed like the hand of some malevolent fate was upon me when, to my unbelieving eyes, Sir Felkar himself crept down the stairs, burdened with some object beneath his cloak, and went out

into the street, unseeing me in the shadows. So I followed him, out into Nemiran Street as he headed north, toward the Square.

It was dark that night, so that when I saw two indistinct figures emerge from the alleyway to assail him, I was unable to discern the third, who was so short, the midget Mogger. I only learned he was there later, when you did, Bevan. Even when it was over in an instant, and the figures left Felkar unconscious on the cobblestones and vanished into the night with the bundle he had carried, I still had no conception of what I was, in a few short moments, to do. I waited briefly, and then approached his body, and I saw no one about me, although I scanned the streets and the alleyway well. I never saw the cutpurse Merky up the alley, and never saw Lenesque either, although we later learned that he had been the lookout, and might have seen what I did next as well. Sir Felkar was alive, breathing still, and I dragged him out of the street into the mouth of the alleyway, and searched his person. And then I decided, in an instant, what I would do. I would requite my brother's murder of poor Pelisa, and send him a message in kind, if he was able to read it. I took Felkar's fine dagger, cut his throat with it, and drawing open the laces of his shirt, I carved three mascles upon his body, as I had found them carved upon our poor household servants so many years ago. And thinking of Pelisa, I drew a coin from my purse and shoved it down his throat. And then I left, shaking, with Felkar's purse, a ring from his finger, and two small handwritten

notes I had found upon his body. I returned to the Bridgetower thinking myself unseen in the deed that I had done. And spent a sleepless night alone in my room there, brooding over the meaning of the notes I had found upon Felkar Uldseth, and wondering, in truth, what sort of creature I was to become in my quest to avenge my family.

*[Sir Auram: It is indeed ironic that Lenesque – an enemy of the Crown – became involved in this strange series of events.]*

You will want to hear, Bevan, what Felkar's notes said. You will be pleased to know that you were correct in your shrewd guesses later; you somehow deduced the nature of the plot which these letters spelled out for me that night. I must say, my opinion of you enlarged greatly at that. Here is what I read by the candlelight:

*The moment has come. The present Lion has come to Golotha to render his tribute to Morgath. The Khidamur has doubled the amount to atone for the Lion's treachery two years past demanding £22 in silver. We are to deliver it the night of the 12th, but I propose to leave it in your care before that. We shall split it evenly, and you shall give me refuge. The Khidamur will see the Lion dead despite his rank, and with the others now out of the way, I shall be the new Lion. But I must live through the Morgathian rage, and there your help will be critical. In return, you shall have £11 and the friendship and voice of a baron at court as you seek your due. Lion-in-waiting.*

And the second, on a smaller piece of foolscap, in a different handwriting:

*Received your letter. Meet me at the well in Nemiran Square after Midnight on the 11th of Larane.*

I thought for a time to retain those letters, thinking they might prove useful, but the next evening I burned them both in my room, having disposed of Sir Felkar's ring in the canals earlier in the day. Perhaps it was the interview with Merky in the alleyway, a harrowing experience, I must say, when I found myself actually interrogating with you a person who witnessed, quite distinctly, what I had done in the alleyway, although the darkness, which had caused me to miss her, had shielded me from her as well: she did not recognize me. But I knew I was playing the game too close to the ledge, and decided that I must destroy any evidence of my crime. I even burned, too, a £5 usurer's note found on his body, concerned it might be traced through the person who had issued it back to Felkar himself. A sad waste, I remember thinking at the time.

If my impulse in murdering Sir Felkar and placing my brother's symbols upon his body was to provoke some response from Stavron, to take an active role where before I had been passive, to catalyze the situation, then perhaps I succeeded beyond my wildest imaginings when the Baron of Quste was killed and the mascler carved upon him. Was Rahel of Aerth, or whoever killed the Baron after she abducted him, simply copying my crime, itself an imitation of my brother's

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methods? Or is Rahel somehow affiliated with my brother? What of the intruder who stabbed Slakka after visiting Jelesa's room? And how do the mysteries of my own paternity relate to these matters? I have yet to answer these questions, Bevan, although I thought much upon them during our barge trip up the Thard to Coranan.

Why, you ask, have I chosen to put my story before you, and why embark on the madness of confessing my crime before the Inquisitor General of Tharda?

*[Sir Auram lets out an audible laugh.]*

I knew that Sir Auram would read you, Bevan, when you made your report to him, and ample reflection as we made our way upriver led me to conclude it inevitable that Sir Auram would insist upon interviewing me as well. Too many suspicions raised in your own mind from Golotha would compel his interest, and I saw little way, in truth, of avoiding his scrutiny. So I determined to face the inevitable without flinching, and offer myself up in his chamber, for he would surely insist upon reading me, no matter how I chose to handle it. I would reveal my tale, and my deeds, for Sir Auram, and for you Bevan, to reflect upon, and pass judgment as you will.

For it is clear to me now, after Golotha, that the pursuit of my brother has drawn me into something larger and far more complex than I had ever anticipated. Prosecuting my grandfather's vendetta against the Pallisers can only serve to

distract me from whatever dangerous game my brother has lured me into. And I only risk unthinkable failure by trying to see the pursuit of him through alone, without the knowledge of others. I understand that now. At the same time, it is difficult perhaps to feed and sustain such a vendetta in the face of an actual person; one who, in truth, bears no responsibility or even awareness of the wrong done so many generations ago. And so I came to my decision upon the barge, to renounce this vendetta against the Palliser family, and lay my tale before you. But I should be plain: I harbor no regrets for the course of action I have chosen to this moment, and ask for no absolution. I alone bear responsibility for avenging the wrong committed upon my family by my brother, and I tell you now: I will see it through to completion, if it lies within my power. The Pallisers have nothing to fear from me, but Stavron of Soursi must needs tremble before my vengeance. I hope you will aid me in the execution of justice.