

# I

## *A Gathering of Warriors*

The long wooden oars slipped silently into the murky black water, each working in conjunction with the other to swiftly propel the small boat forward. The passengers of the craft sat almost motionless as they stared into the swirling fog bank directly in front of them. It was mesmerizing, almost mystical in and of itself. Yet as the gray clouds continued to dance across the surface of the water, the boat continued into the unknown, for it sailed with great purpose.

As the fog completely engulfed the boat, Alexander Stone suddenly shifted his view from in front of the vessel to gaze upon his comrade who sat right beside him. “If Madi were here, he would surely be protesting quite vehemently right now,” he said, the loss of his friend still affecting him dearly.

Davin Pellier smiled as the memories of his superstitious companion washed over him like a torrential downpour. He looked at Stone and replied, “I can almost hear him now. It would be just like him to undoubtedly grab the oars and turn the boat around.”

Stone laughed slightly and then turned his eyes back onto the fog. “You’re probably right. I don’t think that he would have understood the significance of what we are doing here.”

Pellier glanced at the whirling fog all around him and answered, “To be honest, I’m not sure that I do either, but I am at least willing to give my faith in the matter a chance.”

Stone grinned, the words of his friend giving him comfort. “That’s what it is going to take if we are to be at all successful. This is only the first step, my friend.”

“And what a first step it is,” replied Pellier as he shook his head slowly. “I can’t believe that I have never heard of this place.”

“Neither can I,” answered Stone, “but I am sure that it is here. Despite this treacherous fog, I have no reason to doubt anything that Arick says.”

Pellier nodded silently as the boat persisted through the gray expanse. Then, almost as if something had reached down and parted it by hand, the fog gave way in the distance as a large stone peak could be seen stretching into the colorless sky. It was absolutely enormous and it was enough to hold Stone and Pellier both in complete awe.

The peak itself was just the tip of a large stone mountain known obscurely as Shalzonze. Obscure because the mountain rested in the center of a mysterious lake just North of Central Purthia and it knew very few travelers that had chanced an encounter with it. Because of this, it was the subject of many legends. And in many people’s minds, that was enough to steer completely clear of Shalzonze.

Stories of sorcery and witchcraft abounded about the mountain, but the Masters of the Brotherhood knew to put very little stock in such tales. Besides, when Arick the Just had assured them that the Amulet of Fortune had led them to this spot, that was all they needed to hear. Just as saving the land was their destiny, so too was it their destiny to establish their headquarters in Mount Shalzonze itself.

As the large stone monolith continued to come into view, Pellier turned to the rear of his boat and lifted a small whistle that was fastened around his neck. He brought the small metallic device to his lips and as he exhaled deeply, the air was suddenly filled with the shrill sounds of the whistle.

He dropped the device back onto his chest and as he did, his boat came to a standstill. For a few brief moments, he stared into nothing as the fog dominated his vision. But then, his eyes were met with a dazzling array of objects as numerous boats literally sprang forth from the fog. Finally, the rest of his comrades had joined him and they could land at the foot of Shalzonze together.

The boats slowly came together as they eased gently toward the gigantic stone mountain. With the passing of each moment, it grew larger and larger in size until finally, it nearly dominated the entire sky. The warriors in the various boats were held transfixed as it towered over them, the fog at last giving away completely. For many of them, Stone and Pellier included, it was perhaps the most impressive sight that they had ever seen.