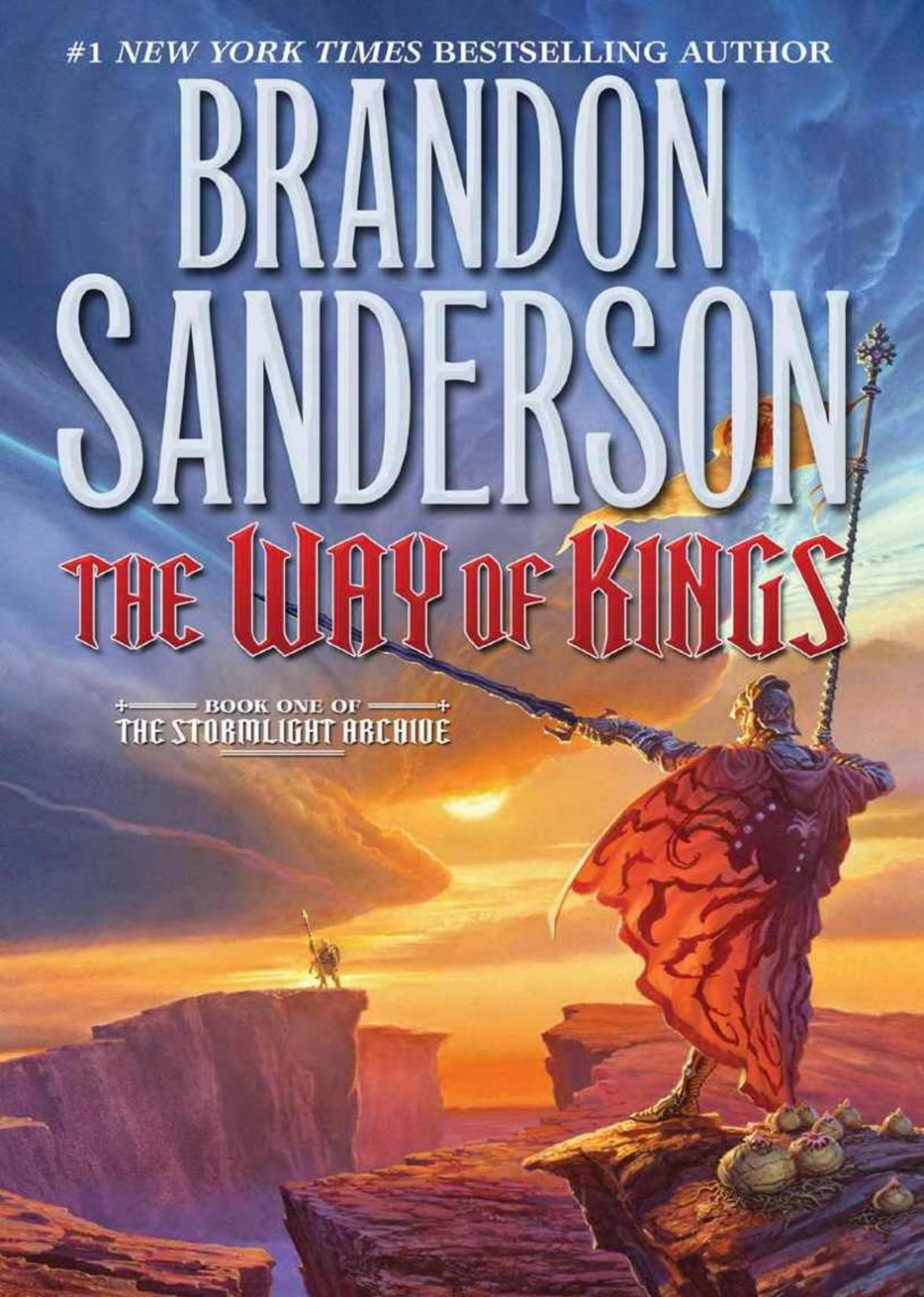


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRANDON SANDERSON

THE WAY OF KINGS

+ BOOK ONE OF +
THE STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE



THE WAY OF KINGS

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BRANDON SANDERSON

THE WAY OF KINGS

**Book One of
THE STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE**



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For Emily,
Who is too patient
Too kindly
And too wonderful
For words.
But I try anyway.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I finished the first draft of *The Way of Kings* in 2003, but I started working on pieces of the book back in the late '90s. Threads of this novel go back even further in my brain. No book of mine has spent longer simmering; I've spent more than a decade building this novel. And so it should be no surprise that a lot of people have helped me with it. It's going to be impossible to mention them all; my memory simply isn't that good. However, there are some major players that I would like to thank most deeply.

First comes my wife, Emily, to whom this book is dedicated. She gave greatly of herself to see the novel come to pass. That included not only reading and giving advice on the manuscript, but giving up her husband during long stretches of writing time. If you readers get a chance to meet her, some thanks might be in order. (She likes chocolate.)

As always, my excellent editor and agent—Moshe Feder and Joshua Bilmes—worked quite hard on this novel. Moshe, by special note, doesn't get paid more when his authors turn in 400k-word monstrosities. But he edited the novel without a word of complaint; his help was invaluable in turning it into the novel you now hold. He also got F. Paul Wilson to check over the medical scenes, to their great benefit.

Special thanks also go to Harriet McDougal, one of the greatest editors of our time, who gave us a read and line edit on this novel out of the goodness of her heart. Wheel of Time fans will know her as the person who discovered, edited, and then married Robert Jordan. She doesn't do much editing these days outside of the Wheel of Time, and so I feel very honored and humbled to have her input and help here. Alan Romanczuk, working with her, should also be thanked for facilitating this edit.

At Tor Books, Paul Stevens has been a huge help. He's been our in-house liaison for my books, and he's done an amazing job. Moshe and I are lucky to have his aid. Likewise, Irene Gallo—the art director—has been wonderfully helpful and patient in dealing with an intrusive author who wanted to do some crazy things with the artwork in his book. Many thanks to Irene, Justin Golenbock, Greg Collins, Karl Gold, Nathan Weaver, Heather Saunders, Meryl Gross, and the entire team at Tor Books. Dot Lin, who was my publicist up until this book's release (and who is now working to put a few extra letters after her name), was a wonderful help not just in publicity, but in giving me advice and a cheering section over in New York. Thank you all.

And speaking of artwork, you may notice that the interior art for this book is far more extensive than what you normally find in an epic fantasy. This is due to the extraordinary efforts of Greg Call, Isaac Stewart, and Ben McSweeney. They worked hard, drafting artwork numerous times to get things right. Ben's work on Shallan's sketchbook pages is simply beautiful, a melding of my best imaginings and his artistic interpretations. Isaac, who also did the interior artwork for the Mistborn novels, went far above and beyond what should reasonably have been expected of him. Late nights and demanding deadlines were the norm for this novel. He is to be commended. (The chapter icons, maps, colored endpages, and Navani notebook pages came from him, if

you are wondering.)

As always, my writing group has been an amazing help. The members of it are joined by a few alpha and beta readers. In no particular order, these are: Karen Ahlstrom, Geoff and Rachel Biesinger, Ethan Skarstedt, Nathan Hatfield, Dan Wells, Kaylynn ZoBell, Alan and Jeanette Layton, Janci Olds, Kristina Kugler, Steve Diamond, Brian Delambre, Jason Denzel, Mi'chelle Trammel, Josh Walker, Chris King, Austin and Adam Hussey, Brian T. Hill, and that Ben guy whose name I can't spell right. I'm sure I'm forgetting some of you. You are all wonderful people, and I'd give you Shardblades if I could.

Whew. This is turning into an epic acknowledgments. But there are still a few more people that need notice. The writing of these words is happening right around the one year anniversary of me hiring the Inevitable Peter Ahlstrom as my personal assistant, editorial aid, and extra brain. If you go through previous acknowledgments pages, you'll always find him there. He's been a dear friend of mine, and an advocate of my work, for years. I'm lucky to now have him working for me full time. He got up at three a.m. today to get the last proofread of the book done. When you next see him at a convention, buy him a block of cheese.

I would also be remiss if I didn't thank Tom Doherty for letting me get away with writing this book. It's because of Tom's belief in this project that we were able to get away with the novel being so long, and a personal call from Tom was what managed to get Michael Whelan to do the cover. Tom has given me more here than I probably deserve; this novel (at the length it boasts, with the number of illustrations and artwork it contains) is the type that would make many publishers run away at full speed. This man is the reason Tor consistently releases such awesome books.

Finally, a moment on Michael Whelan's wonderful cover. For those who haven't heard the story, I started reading fantasy novels (indeed, I became a reader in the first place) back as a teenager because of a beautiful Michael Whelan cover painting. He has a unique ability to capture the true soul of a book in a painting—I always knew I could trust a novel with one of his covers. I've dreamed of someday having a painting of his on one of my books. It seemed something I was unlikely ever to receive.

To finally have it happen—and on the novel of my heart that I've been working on for so long—is an amazing honor.

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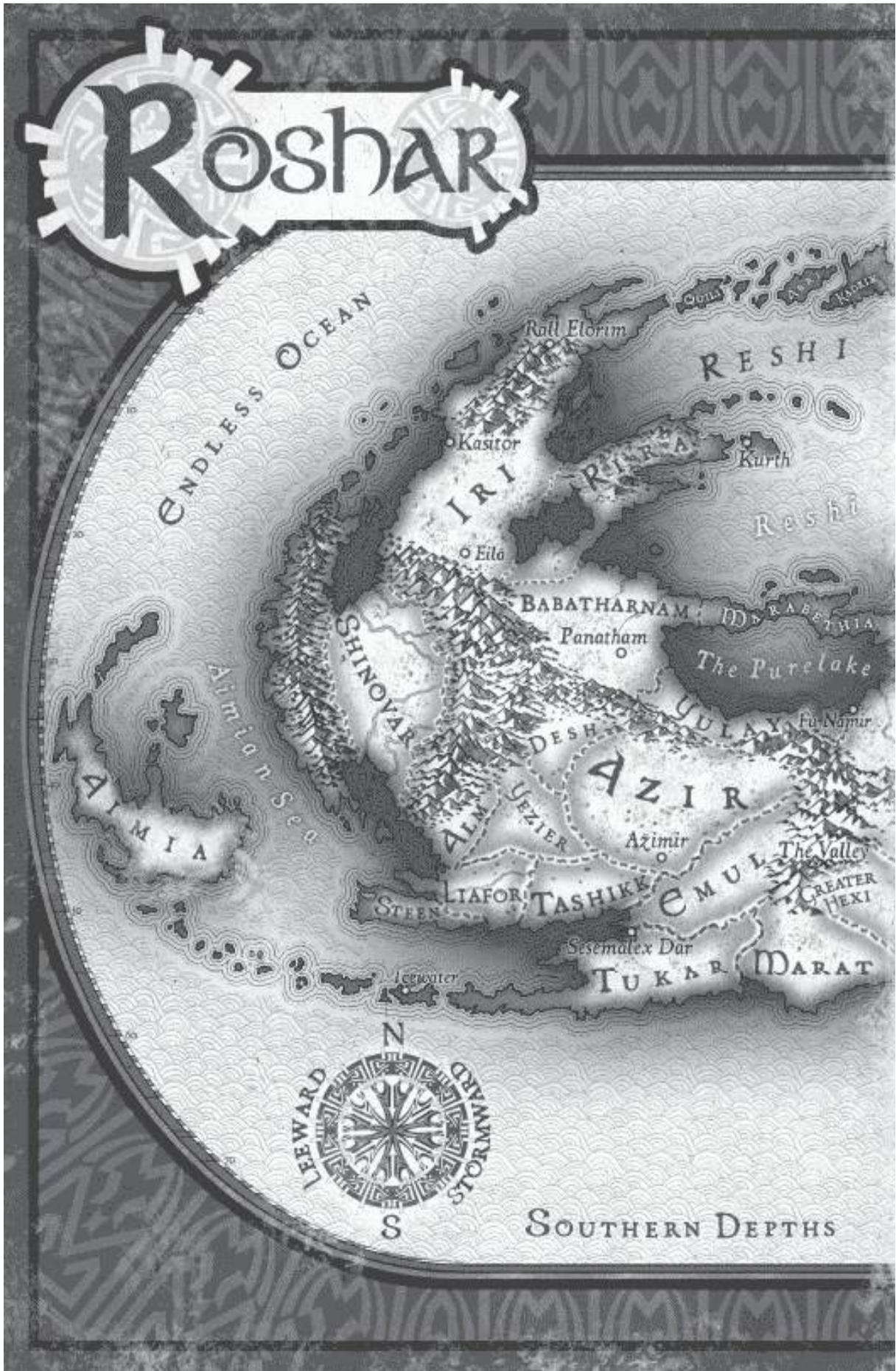
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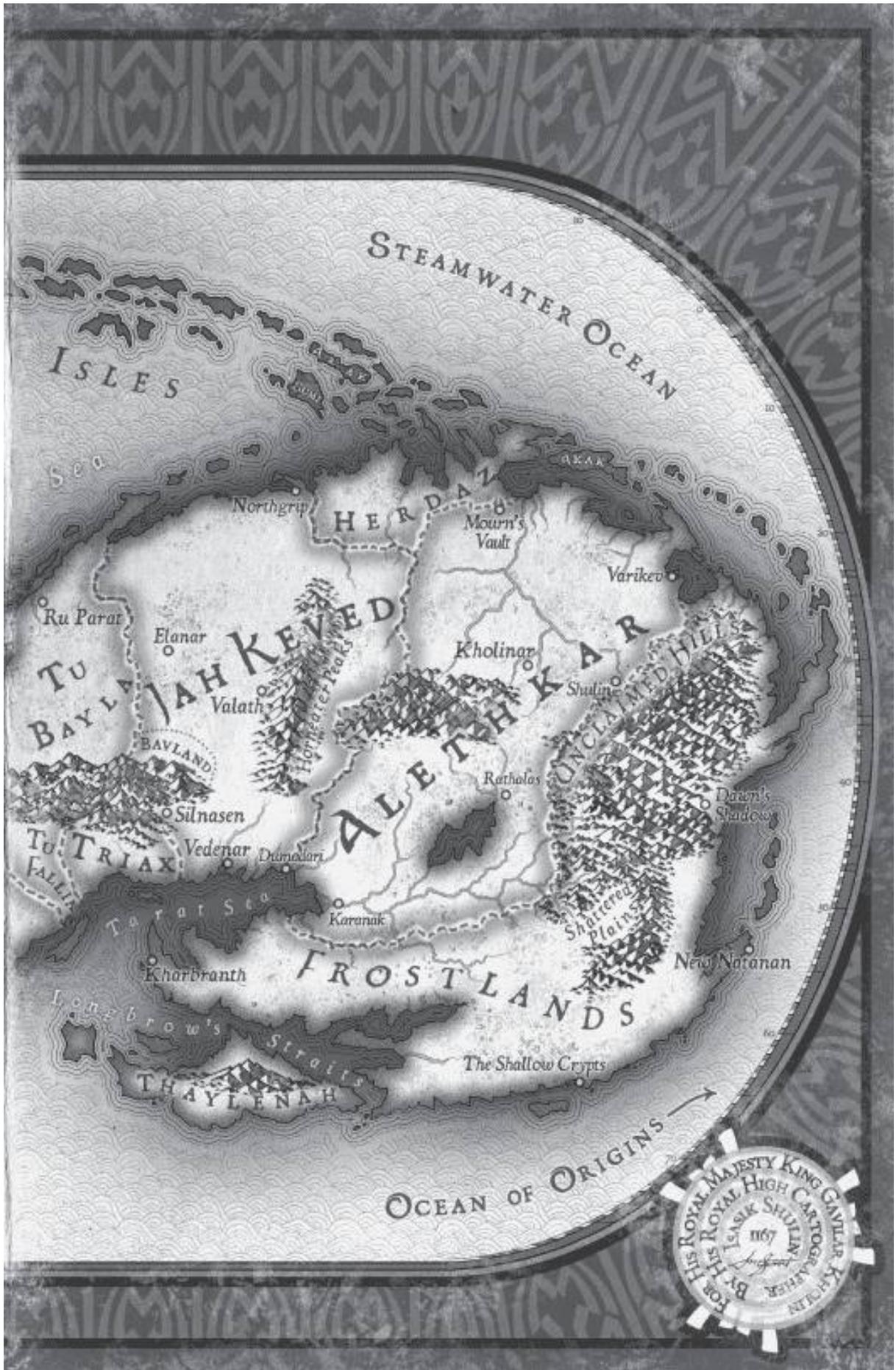
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THE WAY OF KINGS





PRELUDE TO
THE STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE

Kalak rounded a rocky stone ridge and stumbled to a stop before the body of a dying thunderclast. The enormous stone beast lay on its side, riblike protrusions from its chest broken and cracked. The monstrosity was vaguely skeletal in shape, with unnaturally long limbs that sprouted from granite shoulders. The eyes were deep red spots on the arrowhead face, as if created by a fire burning deep within the stone. They faded.

Even after all these centuries, seeing a thunderclast up close made Kalak shiver. The beast's hand was as long as a man was tall. He'd been killed by hands like those before, and it hadn't been pleasant.

Of course, dying rarely was.

He rounded the creature, picking his way more carefully across the battlefield. The plain was a place of misshapen rock and stone, natural pillars rising around him, bodies littering the ground. Few plants lived here.

The stone ridges and mounds bore numerous scars. Some were shattered, blasted-out sections where Surgebinders had fought. Less frequently, he passed cracked, oddly shaped hollows where thunderclasts had ripped themselves free of the stone to join the fray.

Many of the bodies around him were human; many were not. Blood mixed. Red. Orange. Violet. Though none of the bodies around him stirred, an indistinct haze of sounds hung in the air. Moans of pain, cries of grief. They did not seem like the sounds of victory. Smoke curled from the occasional patches of growth or heaps of burning corpses. Even some sections of rock smoldered. The Dustbringers had done their work well.

But I survived, Kalak thought, hand to breast as he hastened to the meeting place. *I actually survived this time.*

That was dangerous. When he died, he was sent back, no choice. When he survived the Desolation, he was supposed to go back as well. Back to that place that he dreaded. Back to that place of pain and fire. What if he just decided...not to go?

Perilous thoughts, perhaps traitorous thoughts. He hastened on his way.

The place of meeting was in the shadow of a large rock formation, a spire rising into the sky. As always, the ten of them had decided upon it before the battle. The survivors would make their way here. Oddly, only one of the others was waiting for him. Jezrien. Had the other eight all died? It was possible. The battle had been so furious this time, one of the worst. The enemy was growing increasingly tenacious.

But no. Kalak frowned as he stepped up to the base of the spire. Seven magnificent swords stood proudly here, driven point-first into the stone ground. Each was a masterly work of art, flowing in design, inscribed with glyphs and patterns. He

recognized each one. If their masters had died, the Blades would have vanished.

These Blades were weapons of power beyond even Shardblades. These were unique. Precious. Jezrien stood outside the ring of swords, looking eastward.

“Jezrien?”

The figure in white and blue glanced toward him. Even after all these centuries, Jezrien looked young, like a man barely into his thirtieth year. His short black beard was neatly trimmed, though his once-fine clothing was scorched and stained with blood. He folded his arms behind his back as he turned to Kalak.

“What is this, Jezrien?” Kalak asked. “Where are the others?”

“Departed.” Jezrien’s voice was calm, deep, regal. Though he hadn’t worn a crown in centuries, his royal manner lingered. He always seemed to know what to do. “You might call it a miracle. Only one of us died this time.”

“Talenel,” Kalak said. His was the only Blade unaccounted for.

“Yes. He died holding that passage by the northern waterway.”

Kalak nodded. Taln had a tendency to choose seemingly hopeless fights and win them. He also had a tendency to die in the process. He would be back now, in the place where they went between Desolations. The place of nightmares.

Kalak found himself shaking. When had he become so weak? “Jezrien, I can’t return this time.” Kalak whispered the words, stepping up and gripping the other man’s arm. “I *can’t*.”

Kalak felt something within him break at the admission. How long had it been? Centuries, perhaps millennia, of torture. It was so hard to keep track. Those fires, those hooks, digging into his flesh anew each day. Searing the skin off his arm, then burning the fat, then driving to the bone. He could smell it. Almighty, he could *smell* it!

“Leave your sword,” Jezrien said.

“What?”

Jezrien nodded to the ring of weapons. “I was chosen to wait for you. We weren’t certain if you had survived. A...a decision has been made. It is time for the Oathpact to end.”

Kalak felt a sharp stab of horror. “What will that do?”

“Ishar believes that so long as there is one of us still bound to the Oathpact, it may be enough. There is a chance we might end the cycle of Desolations.”

Kalak looked into the immortal king’s eyes. Black smoke rose from a small patch to their left. Groans of the dying haunted them from behind. There, in Jezrien’s eyes, Kalak saw anguish and grief. Perhaps even cowardice. This was a man hanging from a cliff by a thread.

Almighty above, Kalak thought. *You’re broken too, aren’t you?* They all were.

Kalak turned and walked to the side, where a low ridge overlooked part of the battlefield.

There were so many corpses, and among them walked the living. Men in primitive wraps, carrying spears topped by bronze heads. Juxtaposed between them were others in gleaming plate armor. One group walked past, four men in their ragged tanned skins or shoddy leather joining a powerful figure in beautiful silver plate, amazingly intricate. Such a contrast.

Jezrien stepped up beside him.

“They see us as divinities,” Kalak whispered. “They rely upon us, Jezrien. We’re

all that they have.”

“They have the Radiants. That will be enough.”

Kalak shook his head. “He will not remain bound by this. The enemy. He will find a way around it. You know he will.”

“Perhaps.” The king of Heralds offered no further explanation.

“And Taln?” Kalak asked. *The flesh burning. The fires. The pain over and over and over...*

“Better that one man should suffer than ten,” Jezrien whispered. He seemed so cold. Like a shadow caused by heat and light falling on someone honorable and true, casting this black imitation behind.

Jezrien walked back to the ring of swords. His own Blade formed in his hands, appearing from mist, wet with condensation. “It has been decided, Kalak. We will go our ways, and we will not seek out one another. Our Blades must be left. The Oathpact ends now.” He lifted his sword and rammed it into the stone with the other seven.

Jezrien hesitated, looking at the sword, then bowed his head and turned away. As if ashamed. “We chose this burden willingly. Well, we can choose to drop it if we wish.”

“What do we tell the people, Jezrien?” Kalak asked. “What will they say of this day?”

“It’s simple,” Jezrien said, walking away. “We tell them that they finally won. It’s an easy enough lie. Who knows? Maybe it will turn out to be true.”

Kalak watched Jezrien depart across the burned landscape. Finally, he summoned his own Blade and slammed it into the stone beside the other eight. He turned and walked in the direction opposite from Jezrien.

And yet, he could not help glancing back at the ring of swords and the single open spot. The place where the tenth sword should have gone.

The one of them who was lost. The one they had abandoned.

Forgive us, Kalak thought, then left.

BOOK

ONE

THE WAY OF KINGS

4,500 Years Later