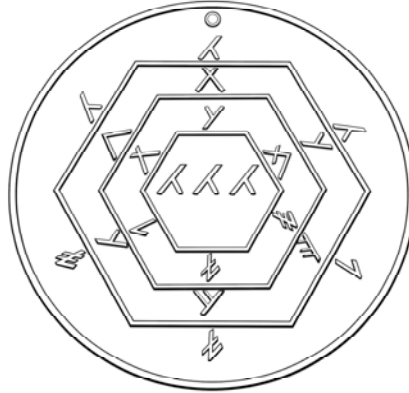


ASULON
The Sword of Fire
Book One
By **William R. McGrath**
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CHAPTER 2
THE TRI-HEX

And it maketh all, the small, and the great, and the rich, and the poor, and the freemen, and the servants, that it may give to them a mark upon their right hand or upon their foreheads, and that no one may be able to buy, or to sell, except he who is having the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

Here is the wisdom! He who is having the understanding, let him count the number of the beast, for the number of a man it is, and its number is six hundred and sixty six.

-The Book of Revelation 13:16-18

Two days later the ship bearing Daniel and Moor came to the stone dock at the river's edge. Perched high upon the black cliffs above them towered the fortress of the Kings of Asulon, *Maôz-Tabera*, 'The Fortress of the Burning'. The main gate faced the river and could be reached only by a long wooden stair beginning at the dock at the water's edge. An honor guard of the King's paladins, clad in polished armor, approached the ship. Moor stood beside Daniel and nodded to the captain.

"All hail, Prince Daniel, son of King Argeus!" called out the captain. The paladins let out a cheer and beat their swords upon their shields.

"My old home was never this loud," Daniel said, grinning.

"Best get used to it," Moor said. "The greater your status, the greater the noise at your comings and goings."

They walked down the gangway toward the cheering paladins, who formed up around Daniel and Moor and led them down the dock. At the stair, one line of men moved forward to precede them, the second followed behind. Daniel and Moor began their trek up the long wooden stair that climbed back and forth along the cliff face to the fortress. Kings of other realms would have ordered a magnificent set of stone stairs built into a cliff such as this, but the kings of Asulon thought as warriors before they thought as kings. A stone staircase, while impressive, in truth endangered a fortress. Stairs made of wood could be burned if an invader came sailing up the river, while stone stairs could not.

Over two hundred years had passed since the defeat of the last army to come close enough to the fortress that the stairs had to be burned. The kings of Asulon had long memories, though. The stairs remained of wood.

Daniel came to a landing halfway up the stair and turned to look out over the water. The mast of the ship that brought him was already far below. Other ships plied the river, carrying the commerce of Asulon.

“Do my parents make this climb every time they wish to leave the fortress?” asked Daniel, who had not been to the fortress of the king since he was a young child and remembered only the long stair.

“This is not the only way in or out of the fortress,” replied Moor. In a low voice, he added, “But that is not what keeps them in the fortress now.”

Daniel wanted to ask what he meant by this, but the Etruscan, never very talkative, turned and continued up the stairs. Instead, Daniel remembered his family home and felt a bit disappointed he would not see it now. He would not have time before his journey to across the sea.

His family’s house sat on a thick finger of land that jutted out into a lake. Nine other homes ringed that lake, each set out into the water on a peninsula of land built for that purpose, each the home of a paladin family who could come to the aid of their neighbors quickly, if need be. The two-story, stone houses each faced a large, square inner courtyard that stayed cool in the summer and protected from the wind in the winter. Only the upper floor of these homes had windows that faced outward, but both floors had windows that faced the inner courtyard.

In Daniel’s home, the lower floor held a large dining hall, kitchen and storage rooms. The upper floor housed bedchambers and a large library, which held his father’s many books and maps. This latter room delighted Daniel in his youth, for many of the books told of far-off places and peoples, and the names on the maps whispered to a young boy of mystery and adventure.

Daniel missed that home. Often, after a day of training, he and his father would walk out the back door of their house, take the few steps to the lake and fish till they were called in for supper. Daniel had hoped to do that again before he left for Logres. Though he looked out over the river now, Daniel doubted he would do any fishing with his father here.

Daniel’s father, Argeus, a seasoned warrior who had served in two wars; was not a violent man. Above all, he enjoyed fishing in the lake with his son and reading good books. After his release from active service, Argeus and the other elder paladins of the freehold would lead the local militia, made up of farmers and craftsmen, in military exercises once a month. That was how the older paladins spent much of their time; training others for wars they hoped would never be fought.

From the age of six until he went off to the war college at Caurus at sixteen, Daniel had spent three hours, six mornings a week, in the library with his father, learning mathematics and the sciences, the history of Asulon and of his family, the House of Asher. Afternoons were spent outside in the courtyard or forest, learning the ways of the sword and the bow. On the first day of the week, Daniel's Freehold would gather together for worship at one of their homes. Each father would take a turn reading aloud from the books of God and then leading the discussions of them. Daniel was always so proud to see the respect shown to Argeus (easily the eldest among the men of their Freehold) when it came his time to read.

Daniel's mother was Isoldé, daughter of Anak the Undying, the last of the warrior angels sent to aid mankind when the world was young, Isoldé inspired awe in common men, for the light of her father's former home in the heavens shone in her eyes. His mother had been his main teacher for the first six years of his life. As was the custom among paladin families, Isoldé had taught her son to read, write and speak fluently in the three languages he would need as a paladin. Westerness, the tongue of Asulon and the Unicorn Kingdoms, Magogian, the language of their enemy the Magog, and Cymru, the ancient tongue of southwestern Logres and spoken now by so few that it was used as a battle language among the paladins.

Daniel did not find it strange to be the son of a warrior and grandson of an angel. For the last thousand years, all the men of his house had wed the daughters of Anak, as would he when he arrived in Logres. This gave them both the right to rule in Asulon and twice the life span of common men.

Daniel and Moor reached the top of the stairs, where a line of servants waited. They cheered when they saw him.

So much for a quiet homecoming, thought Daniel.

"Prince Daniel, welcome home!" came a voice from behind the line. A thin man in his early sixties came forward to bow before Daniel. Lucan, his father's eldest servant no longer wore the homespun linen tunic and trousers Daniel remembered. The old man now dressed in rich robes of fine blue silk that would have cost him a month's pay as the servant of a retired paladin.

Daniel took the old man by the shoulders and returned him to a standing position. "Lucan, save the formalities for the throne room—though when I first saw your robes, I thought you must be the king himself."

"Me, the king!" cried Lucan, aghast. "If you think this bed sheet they have me in is good enough for the king—well, just wait till you see his majesty. But come now, young master, let us enter. Your parents know your ship has arrived and are waiting to see you."

Daniel crossed the drawbridge between the final landing and the fortress. Maôz-Thabera, so gray and imposing from the exterior, was all light and wonder inside. The walls, plastered and whitewashed, were covered in fine tapestries or painted with murals depicting great men and great battles. The brightly painted pillars carved as trees with vines spiraling upwards to the ceiling graced the great hall and throne room. Fine mosaics decorated the floors of the dining halls. Many pieces of colored glass, like living light, depicted famous kings or warriors of Asulon on each window in the fortress (high ones that faced the river and many more facing the protected inner courtyard). Servants bustled to and fro, while important men on important errands moved purposefully through the corridors.

Lucan and their escort brought Daniel and Moor into the throne room and then through it.

“The king commanded that you be brought to his chambers the moment you arrived,” Lucan said. “There will be a grand feast tomorrow, but for now it’s no wonder the king and queen would rather just be your father and mother and sup with you in private.”

Two tall men in the black cloaks and boots of the paladins stood before an oaken door. They snapped to attention as Daniel approached. Moor raised the iron knocker and struck the door twice.

The door opened. A maidservant curtsied and said, “Welcome, Prince Daniel, Master Moor. The King and Queen await you.”

They entered a plainly furnished room with a table and twelve chairs set around it. Maps of various parts of Asulon lined the wall. Daniel guessed it to be a combined meeting room and dining hall for times when the king wished to meet with his councilors less formally. A maidservant brought Daniel to his chair (Moor preferred to stand) and left through a side door. Very soon he heard voices approaching. The door swung open and a very old man in a bright green tunic entered. He struck the floor three times with his staff. “His Majesty, First of Paladins, Lion of Asulon, Defender of the Laws of the Realm, Protector of...”

“Blast it all, man,” came another voice from the hall. “Save your harangue for tomorrow night.”

With that, Argeus, tall and broad shouldered, strode into the room. His silver-gray mane and beard held none of the reddish-brown of his youth, but his voice remained firm and his steps sure. He wore the deep purple and gold robes of kingship.

Just behind Argeus came Queen Isoldé, bright in a dove white dress. She rushed to embrace her son.

“Oh, Daniel, Daniel,” she said. “This one year has felt like one hundred.”

“Come now, Isoldé, let a man look on his son,” Argeus said. Father and son embraced, then Argeus held Daniel at arm’s length, inspecting him.

“Aye, it is like water to a thirsty man to see you again, boy.”

Daniel’s mother and father looked much the same to him. His father’s laugh still said all you needed to know about him, hale and hardy, generous to all around him. His mother’s eyes still shone with the light of her father’s race.

“Master Moor,” the queen said, turning to the Etruscan and taking his right hand in hers. “Thank you for returning our son to us. As always, you do us service worthy of a great friend.”

Moor bowed formally and said. “My queen does me honor.” He turned and saluted the king. “If you will excuse me, your majesty. I have measures I must discuss with the guards concerning tomorrow’s banquet.”

The king nodded. Moor bowed again and left the chamber.

“Your mother prayed for you every night, Daniel,” Argeus said, still grinning over his son. “Look at him, Isoldé,” he said, slapping Daniel solidly on the back. “He’s as fit as a racehorse; you need not have worried.”

Servants entered bearing trays and set a bowl and mug before Daniel. The bowl held a bed of boiled noodles, a poached egg and a link of sausage. Simple food for a king’s home, but typical for paladins, who ate frugally as becomes warriors.

“Duck liver sausage!” cried Daniel in joy. “And milk! Oh, you do not know how long I have pined for a mug of fresh milk.”

“I remember my own time of solitude,” Argeus said. “The old men who trained me said that you dream of the foods of home at two times during your year alone: your first week and your last, when the time of your return draws near.”

“Yes, but how did you know that I had dreamed of this?” asked Daniel.

Isoldé smiled. “This is what I used to feed you and your father when you both returned cold and wet from a winter hunting trip. So I thought it good to feed you now after so long a trip of your own.”

For the next hour parents and son dined and talked and laughed.

As Argeus finished telling the tale of his first night in the fortress, when he got lost trying to find the pantry, he caught Daniel looking at his mother with tears in his eyes.

“What ails you, son?” asked the king, knowing the answer, for he had had a similar homecoming many years ago.

The prince put down his mug and took hold of his parents’ hands.

“I did not miss the good food of my mother’s table the most while I was in the wilderness, nor the comfort of my father’s house. I missed this,” he said, looking at his father and mother. “I missed our laughing and talking the night away so much that my heart nearly broke with the missing of it.”

Isoldé’s eyes shone brightly as she looked upon her son.

“Daniel... we...” began Argeus, knowing that he should change the subject before he too came to tears, “we want you to tell us all of your adventures in the wild, from the first day to the last.”

And the three of them ate and drank and laughed and cried long into the night.

* * * * *

The next day Daniel woke when a shaft of light touched his face. An old king of Asulon tried unsuccessfully to scowl down at him from the stained glass window in the wall, but the multihued sunlight came through the image too brightly for him to look menacing.

“I’m sure, sir, that you look far more fierce from the outside,” said the prince with a yawn. He looked around the room and saw his buckskins set neatly on a dressing table. Daniel vaguely remembered Lucan escorting him back to his bedchamber and helping him off with his clothing. Once his mother had retired for the night, Daniel had stayed up with his father. They had toasted to each other’s hunting tales (with a very good wine, if Daniel remembered right) till the cry of the night watch bade them to bed. Now Daniel also found a new set of clothing laid out near a large copper bathing tub.

A full bath will have to wait, thought Daniel, the king’s fortress is now my father’s house and I must see all of it.

He poured some cool water from a pitcher into a washbasin, washed himself quickly and donned the black cotton trousers, tall black boots and white silk shirt left for him. A black leather belt lay beside the clothes, with a buckle shaped like a round shield and set with a gemstone at its center. Daniel stared thoughtfully at the stone,

brushing its surface with his fingertips. All the men of the House of Asher received such a buckle when they graduated from the war college at Caurus as *paladins*, knight-protectors of the realm. Then, Daniel had been given a buckle of silver, set with black onyx. This buckle was gold, set with a purple amethyst, signifying that he was of the king's own household.

A knock came to the door. "Enter," Daniel called out.

A servant opened the door and Lucan entered. "Good morning, my prince. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Lucan, very well," replied Daniel smiling at the way the old retainer said 'my prince'. "You are enjoying this turn of events, aren't you, Lucan?"

"Oh, yes, young sir. I have gone up immeasurably in my wife's eyes now that I am the prince's own chamberlain. You would think I had been made a general or some such thing."

Daniel bowed with a flourish. "Lucan, I am always pleased to contribute to your wedded bliss. Well, come now, sir general. Show a former wild man of the woods, now turned prince, what this fortress is all about."

The two left the chamber. After a stair, a corridor, and another stair, they came to a long hallway ending in a stout oak door guarded by two paladins. Lucan unlocked the door and Daniel entered what, as a small boy, he had thought must be the largest room in Asulon, the throne room of the king. Tall windows of stained glass lined the south wall. The floor held a mosaic map of Asulon showing its cities, mountain ranges, grasslands, great rivers and many of the animals found in each region. The sky blue, domed ceiling had white clouds and soaring eagles painted upon it. Many spears thrust out from the top of the walls, each holding the banner of a former king of Asulon.

Lucan gestured to the banners as they walked. "There, young sir, on the north wall nearest the throne, hangs, of course, the green banner of Asa our first king, who led the House of Asher across the great ocean and brought peace to Asulon. And next to his banner hangs that of his son, Adom. Now, King Anak himself trained Adom in the art of kingship..."

Daniel saw a great *many* banners hanging from the walls and recalled how Lucan prided himself on his knowledge of Asher family history. He steeled himself for a long lecture on the subject, then remembered his training in tactics and decided to outflank his opponent through diversion.

"Lucan, tell me, do you remember when I was a young boy and played a trick on you with the hunting dogs? I took all the dogs out of their kennels and moved them into the storehouse, leaving the gate open to make it look as if they had all run off."

Lucan's brows knit in a scowl. "Do I remember it? Who was responsible for those dogs and who would lose his position if they had indeed run off? I got on my horse and rode off a' hunting after them."

"You were gone for four hours," remembered Daniel.

"And when I returned, did I not see you yourself smirking in a corner?" Lucan replied.

"Do you know what my father did with me for my little jest?" asked Daniel.

"I did not think it so little a jest at the time, young master," said the old man in mock indignity.

“He took me into his war room and sat me down in his huge black chair. Then, without speaking a word, he tied my wrist to the chair with this thin little bit of sewing thread and just walked away, leaving the chamber door wide open. Now, an infant could have broken that thread, but I did not dare move.”

“Why not?” asked Lucan, a slight smile on his lips.

“If my father had tied me down with a strong rope, perhaps I would have tried to free myself and run off,” replied Daniel. “But tying me down with the thread worried me. It was as if he dared me to break it.”

“And then what happened?” asked Lucan, though he already knew the answer.

“Nothing. I just sat there dreaming up all manner of punishments my father might give me when he returned. The longer I sat there, the worse my punishment became. Do you know how long I sat there?”

“Yes, young master, I do at that,” replied Lucan. “Four hours on the nose. Just as long as I spent hunting those not-missing dogs, and just long enough for your father and me to finish our third game of battle board in the dining room.”

“You knew!” exclaimed the prince.

“Yes, I knew. Your father asked me what worries I had gone through searching for the dogs, and he invited me to join him for the midday meal, while he let you contemplate your crime.” Lucan looked at the throne, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Your father is a wise man, who knows that to get loyalty, you must first give it. He will be a good king, I think.” Just then a bell sounded. “Come, my prince,” Lucan said, “time to break your morning fast.”

They left the throne room and made their way past the open door of a wide dining hall. At many tables and benches, paladins, workmen, and artisans took their places with the sound of clanking pots, clinking crocks and much laughter. Daniel stopped at the doorway, scanning the crowd to find any familiar faces.

“We should not delay, my prince,” Lucan said. “The king and queen will be expecting you.”

Just then a voice called out from a nearby table, “Hey, look what’s come floating back down the river!”

“Too late, I’m caught,” said Daniel with a laugh, as a swarm of young men gathered around him with much backslapping and many questions about his adventure.

“Daniel has returned—Hurrah! Hurrah!” They picked him up on their shoulders and carried him around the room. Soon the rest of the room took up the cry. “Hurrah for Prince Daniel! Hurrah!”

Lucan stood in the doorway a moment and shook his head, but once he turned away from the chamber a grin spread across his face.

* * * * *

“The food,” Daniel said at the end of the meal, “was nearly as good as seeing your ugly old faces again.”

One of the young men grabbed the face of his neighbor in both of his hands, distorting it, and said, “Who are you calling old?” They all laughed.

A boy in the dark green tunic of a squire in training came up to a paladin captain, who then pointed out Daniel. The boy marched up to Daniel with a serious face and bowed. "Prince Daniel."

"Yes, lad?"

"The king wishes your presence in his chambers, your highness."

Daniel had to smile at the boy's manner. "What is your name, lad?"

"Tomkin, your highness," said the boy.

"Well, Tomkin, I am new to the fortress and need the assistance of an experienced man to guide me."

The boy stood a bit taller. "Your highness, I can guide you. I know this old place like I know my mom's own kitchen."

"Well then, Sir Guide, lead on." said Daniel, knowing Tomkin would be the hero at the table of the junior squires that night. Daniel's friends shouted their good-byes as the prince followed the boy out of the dining hall. They made their way back past the throne room and to a large oak door at the end of a hallway. Two paladins stood guard before it, along with a servant in chamberlain's livery.

"Prince Daniel to see the king," said Tomkin, doing his best to deepen his voice.

The chamberlain looked down past his long nose at the boy and cocked an eyebrow.

"If you please, sir," added Tomkin, in a much smaller voice.

The chamberlain rapped three times with the big brass knocker set in the door, opened it and announced, "Prince Daniel to see the king."

Daniel turned to Tomkin and saluted him in the manner of the paladins, right fist over the heart.

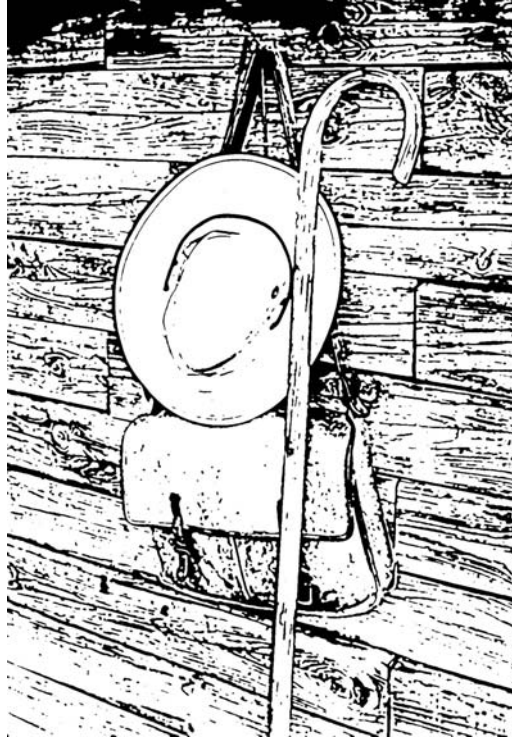
"Thank you, Sir Guide, you have done well. Dismissed." Tomkin snapped to attention and saluted smartly, but could not keep the smile off his face. Daniel turned and entered the room.

Argeus rose from behind a large oak table.

"Well, son, have your friends filled your belly and your ears too full for you to drink and talk with your father and an old friend?"

Hanging from a peg on the wall behind Argeus was a crook-topped shepherd's staff of hickory wood, a brown leather bag and a battered sailcloth pilgrim's hat—wide brimmed, flat topped and bleached nearly white by many years in the sun.

Daniel remembered that hat.



Argeus nodded towards the other side of the room. Daniel spun round and cried out, “Simon!”

An old brown bear of a man stood by the hearth. He wore tunic and trousers the color of ripe wheat, a wide leather belt around his thick waist and well-worn brown boots on his feet. The old man’s round bald head shone above a mostly silver beard, striped here and there with strands of its original golden hue; the skin round his sapphire blue eyes crinkled like old parchment as he smiled.

“Hello, Rock-turner,” replied Simon. “It’s good to see you again.”

Daniel rushed across the room and embraced the old man.

A priest, wise man and wanderer, Simon would rest from his travels at the home of Argeus. He always brought a gift in his bag for Daniel, sweets or a tin flute when Daniel was very young, and, later, maps or books telling of far away places. Though Simon was a priest, he was tied to no formal order.

“I serve the Lord God as He pleases, not as man pleases,” was how Simon explained his calling. Simon had called Daniel “rock-turner” for that was the priest’s first view of him as a boy; turning over rocks to see what was underneath. Daniel spent many an hour walking with Simon, learning the names and habits of the smaller creatures of the forest. Daniel had not seen Simon since his sixteenth summer and his time at War College.

“Tankards and time to drink them!” ordered the king. Servants came, poured ale for the three men and left them.

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“Well now, Simon,” said Argeus, after half their tankards had been drained during the small talk of old friends long parted, “you told me that you had news of great import for Asulon and that Daniel should be here to hear it.”

“I have grave news for you, for your house and for all of Asulon,” Simon began. “Daniel, have you heard of the guild of wealthy men who call themselves ‘The Builders’?”

“Yes,” nodded Daniel, “they are the heads of the wealthiest houses in Asulon and the Unicorn kingdoms.”

“You have spoken truly, but not completely,” replied the priest. “They head many of the wealthiest houses, true, but more importantly, they head the oldest of the houses of wealth. They own of mercantile exchanges and banking houses, they make the apothecary powders that physicians use and many other things. They have become kings in their own way, for their treasuries, though less than their realm’s, are ruled by fewer men. They can focus their wealth to accomplish the things they set out to accomplish. With their wealth, they build up men who agree with their goals and tear down men who would hinder them.

“They have no army, yet many powerful men heed their call. Senators and centurions, magistrates and ministers, priests and patriarchs, many who would rise to high office and, having risen, remain there, come to the Builders Guild seeking favor. And favor is given, but not without a price. Just a hint here, a suggestion there, then a demand and, finally, when the Guild have their victims addicted to their aid, a command: ‘Do as we order or the gold you need to remain where you are shall disappear.’”

“And it has been thus from the founding of the first city upon the earth,” agreed Argeus. “Only the king is not beholden to such men for office, but even the crown feels their power, for the Builders Guild and men like them control many in the High Senate and the Senate controls the treasury of this land.”

“And yet,” replied Simon, “even the High Senate knows it must please the people of Asulon to keep their seats and the keys to that treasury. So they do not do all that the Builders bid them do, at least not openly or quickly. Instead the Senators try to balance pleasing those who elect them and pleasing those who fund that election. Asulon’s freedom has depended on that balance of forces for many years. But now the Builders Guild plans to upset that balance, to lay a subtle snare for the people of this land and, once that snare tightens around their necks, bring them under a cruel enslavement.”

Simon took a deep breath and closed his eyes as if in silent prayer before continuing.

“King Argeus, here, then, lies the danger. The Builders Guild, these uncrowned kings of wealth, may not sit openly upon the throne here in Asulon, but they have other ways to rule. In the Unicorn kingdoms across the sea, when they have not attained the crown outright, they rule from behind the throne as firmly as if they *did* sit upon it. They mean to do the same in Asulon, but first the people must be lulled into a dependency on them. They have begun such a task in Unicornia, starting in Gaul. There, all the people bear a tattoo of their census number. The people of Gaul carry no gold or silver, but, when making a purchase, show the tattoo to the merchant and the amount is taken from the purchaser’s banking house and transferred to that of the seller”.

Argeus's eyebrows knit together as he heard this.

"But how can this work? How can a merchant know the amount in a man's account just from seeing a tattoo?" asked the king. "He cannot send a runner to the banking house for every purchase. The method you describe would be like taking a letter of script from a stranger. No merchant could conduct business that way."

"The Guild has found a way, though not on their own—they had help from dark places," replied Simon. "To answer your question more directly, each merchant has a black box, hexagonal in shape and about half a cubit in diameter, with a round window of red crystal set into the top. Customers place their hands atop this box. Something within the crystal then reads the number of the tattoo, sending the information—as quick as thought itself—to a similar box at both the banking houses of the customer and the merchant, transferring the amount of the purchase from the account of the customer to that of the merchant."

Surprise and more than a little wonder showed upon the king's face.

"These boxes, though strange, seem a boon rather than a cause for alarm," said Argeus. "No cutpurse could take your money unless he wanted to cut off your hand and try to buy something by passing that bloody piece of meat over these boxes."

"The danger is threefold," Simon said, "with each succeeding danger leading to the next.

"The first danger: Though the Guild will claim that they invented the device to make this type of communication possible, these boxes hold nothing but trinkets—a few mirrors and lenses, a small brass bell, some tiles of colored glass: things to fool the simple should a box be broken open. No, the boxes work because of the dark arts of sorcerers in league with the Guild.

"The second danger: The king of Gaul has forbidden the use of gold, silver or copper coin in that realm. Citizens can only buy or sell through the black boxes and the tattoos.

"And the third danger: The Guild knows that many people will not tolerate a mark upon their bodies. So they plan to begin with this."

He laid a thick bronze medallion down on the table.

"The banking houses will use these first, as a test of the black box system. People will wear these medallions and use them in place of the mark on the hand. The men of Builders Guild hope the medallions will prepare them for the eventual use of the tattoos. Look at the medallion: I am told that the three numbers at its center are always the same."

The king picked up the medallion and examined it. A puzzled look came over his face.

"What is it, Father?" asked Daniel.

"Look at this and tell me what you see," replied the king, handing his son the medallion.

Daniel felt its weight in his hand. No small amount of bronze had gone into its manufacture. It appeared about a third larger than a gold sovereign, the largest coin used in Asulon. The medallion had a small hole set near the edge, probably so that the piece could be worn around the neck, though its weight would make it cumbersome. One side of the medallion had a broad gouge running across its face,

obscuring whatever design might be there, so he turned the medallion over. On this side there was a clear imprint and the sight of it caught Daniel's breath in his throat: three hexagons, descending in size, each set within the other. Each hexagon contained six numbers, so that there were three sets of six numbers. At the center of the smallest hexagon three numbers were set apart, written in old northern runes, little used now—perhaps as a way to hide their meaning; six, six and six.

"The Tri-Hex," Daniel said, placing the medallion down on the table and pushing it away from him. "Why would they choose such a symbol?"

"Yes, why indeed," agreed Simon. "Why choose a symbol that, for all those who worship the Lord God through His son Yeshua, symbolizes the greatest evil that will ever walk among men? Why? Because the knowledge that the Builders Guild uses to power these black boxes comes from the servants of that very same evil."

"Who?" Daniel asked.

"Men who call themselves 'The Illuminati'," Simon said. "The name means 'The Enlightened Ones' and it is a name I thought it had died out long before I was born. But I should have known that a name may die, but the idea behind it will live on as long as men wish it to. The Illuminati could rightly be said to have started when man first raised a tower at Babel and shook his fist at the heavens and cried out, 'You have no right to rule over me!'"

"Anywhere and anytime men have gathered to oppose God, or, if they did not believe in Him, oppose the worship of Him by others, there, at that time, are the Illuminati.

"'The Enlightened Ones': an ironic name," continued Simon, "for what we call light, they call darkness, and acts we would call pure evil, they call pure freedom. The Illuminati look upon the Lord God as the Great Tyrant, while the enemy of God and man, who we know as Abaddon the Destroyer, they call Abaddon the Disenslaver. Their power comes from knowledge given to them by Abaddon in exchange for blood sacrifices...and their souls. The Black Boxes are evil, because the makers of these boxes are evil and have built evil into their very design."

"Yes," agreed Argeus, "just as the fruit of a poisoned tree will also be poison. And yet, while no Yeshuan would willingly bear the mark of Abaddon's servant; what of others? What would you say to those who do not believe as we do? Many see this as just a number and not evil."

"The great danger in this system of boxes, medallions and marks threatens even those who do not follow Yeshua," said Simon. "The information taken with these boxes can be given to anyone. One man in particular poses the greatest danger to Asulon's freedom if he acquires such knowledge."

"Who is this man?" demanded Argeus.

"The Builders Guild will offer that information to *you*, o king," replied Simon. "You would then know of every purchase made by every person in the realm. You could then say to any banking house, 'Remove authority to buy or sell from any man I consider an enemy, let not one copper's worth of credit pass to them.' No one, rich or poor, great or small, could buy or sell unless he had the permission of the king. The coin of the realm would be outlawed, as would trade in silver and gold. Anyone the king deemed an enemy would face two choices, submit to the king's will or starve."

Simon watched to see what Argeus would make of this news; his reaction would show the true mettle of the man.

The king sat in silence for a long, thoughtful moment before speaking.

“Even if the use of the Tri-Hex is mere coincidence,” Argeus said at last, “this system places far too much power in the hands of even a good king, and kings are not always good. The more power a king has, the more he comes to believe that he alone deserves that power. The kings of the old world thought that, since the king’s judgment went unquestioned, then all that the king did was right. ‘If I have done it, then it was destined to be done’ became their motto. They began to think of themselves as gods. My forefather Asa once said, ‘The best of governments would be one run by a good king with absolute power and the worst of governments would be one run by a evil king with absolute power.’ Therefore, Asulonian freedom depends on power resting, not solely with the king, but divided equally between the throne, the Senate, the High Court and the people.”

Argeus rose to his feet and paced, something he did, Simon knew, while preparing a plan of battle.

“Safety for the people’s freedom lies not with absolute power in the hands of one man,” said the king, “but in its being thinly spread, among as many men as possible. These black boxes of the Builders Guild concentrate power in the hands of one man, the one who controls the black box. It must not be allowed on these shores.”

Simon bowed his head before Argeus.

“King Argeus, your people do well to call you ‘The Wise’. Now the Builders Guild, through its Asulonian head, Sargon of the House of Stone, wishes to bring this system of commerce to your realm.”

“After what you have told me, do you think I would allow that system here?”

“You may have little choice in the matter,” replied Simon, “for that which has always restrained a king of Asulon from doing as much evil as he wishes, also restrains him from doing as much good as he wishes. Remember, Argeus, you invoked the king’s right of the One Law when you limited the Senator’s terms in office.”

“Father, you have used your One Law already?” asked Daniel in surprise.

“Yes, on the very day after my coronation,” replied Argeus with a chuckle. “I used my One Law to order that each senator may hold no more than two terms in office. Since my law would pertain only to those elected after it was made, the old men of the Senate thought themselves safe from its effects and did not even try to raise the unanimous vote needed to forestall it. After all, has not the defeat of a sitting senator been as rare as hen’s teeth for the last forty years or more?”

“Well then. The elections came three months after my coronation and many new candidates came forward, saying, ‘Vote for me; I am one of you.’

“And so they were, for farmers and small merchants, physicians and teachers now ran for seats that seemed not as sweet a prize to the power hungry and greedy. And the people of Asulon said to themselves, ‘I think Senators Gladhand and Backslap have been at their jobs too long. They may have come to do good, but they stayed to do well and did much too well for their own purses. It is time to let some new blood into the Senate.’ And that is exactly what the people did, but no one

foresaw to what extent they would do so. Well, they voted out better than half of the old Senate.”

The king smiled, as only a man remembering the fall of those who thought themselves invincible may smile.

“Oh, I can tell you, the weeping of eyes and gnashing of teeth was great in the halls of the High Senate when the results of that election were read. Most of these losses came from the Plebeian party- the party that claimed to love the common people, but loved levying taxes upon them even more.

The new Patrician majority, eager to show itself different from the old Plebeian leadership, proposed doing away with all the old tax laws—from the High Senate’s own laws down to those of the smallest village—and making one tax law for all of Asulon, a tax upon the sale of a good or service. This eliminated the most onerous of the old laws, the tax on income, collected before a man got a single copper of his pay. This tax hindered savings, and caused many a normally honest man in Asulon to hide his income, so he could pay a reasonable amount in taxes and still have something left to raise his family.

“So then, the new tax is collected only at the sale of an item or service. The monies collected are evenly divided between the county in which the sale was made, the provincial government above that county and, finally, the realm’s treasury. The new tax is simple, understandable and open and the people of Asulon have prospered for it. The common people save more and the treasury grows even as we speak.”

“But, Father,” said Daniel, “do you regret using your One Law so soon into your reign?”

Argeus shook his head. “I know that most kings have saved their One Law, keeping that supreme weapon in reserve, the only law a king can make that requires a unanimous vote of the High Senate to overturn. Yes, my son, with my One Law spent, I know that if two-thirds of the Senators vote against me, they can block any law I propose. Though this restriction keeps the king weak, it also has kept us a free people.

“And because I have used my greatest weapon early in my reign, when those who might have opposed me remained unsure of my purposes, I may now call upon many new men in the Senate to put the realm’s concerns before their own. Let me speak with them and find a way to defeat this plan of the Builder’s Guild, the sorcerers of the Illuminati and the Evil One they both serve. We require a law that somehow forbids these black boxes without speaking of them directly. For I fear that, if the Guild gets wind of how much we know, any law we give the Senate would be doomed before the first vote.”