

“The Killing God”

Book Three

The Great God’s War

Prologue

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Prologue: Other Intentions

Somewhere between life and death, or perhaps between wakefulness and slumber, Elgart floated. If time passed, he did not know it. If he had ever drawn breath, he could not remember it. But he did not feel the lack. The scraps of consciousness that remained to him discerned only a lassitude that felt like relief, an escape from something unendurable. He had no desire to remember what it might have been. In this oblivious drifting, nothing could reach him. He would not be troubled by agony, or by the memory of suffering, or by the fear that pain may have drawn his secrets from him.

As he was, he did not have to choose his fate.

Nevertheless choices were made that changed his circumstances. They gathered the shreds of his mind. Fragments of memory emerged. At first, he felt nothing more than a vague sense that he did not want to sink lower. Somewhere below him lurked an excruciation that destroyed whatever it touched.

He wanted to rise. How else could he escape?

Perhaps he *was* rising. Gaining distance. But the experience was not pleasant. As he drifted farther from the source of his agony, he remembered more of it. By increments, his tattered wits coalesced into a terrible shape.

Moving from agony to dismay, he recalled Archpriest Makh.

Yes, that was it: the source, the helplessness, the ordeal. The possibility that he had betrayed King Bifalt and Belleger.

Archpriest Makh.

Despite his swaddled drifting, Elgart felt a new pain. His memory of Makh had teeth. They bit like the jaws of wolves. Involuntarily, he remembered that he had brought his ruin on himself.

Like a fool, a man who trusted himself too much, he had gone alone to the Church of the Great God Rile. There he had sat with the Archpriest and had tried to outwit his enemy. He had imagined that he could surprise or trick Makh into revealing the secrets of the Church. But he had been wrong.

The Archpriest wanted *his* secrets.

Makh’s hands were like shovels, like cudgels. With impossible ease, he had made King Bifalt’s spy helpless, unable to move any muscle that might have saved him. Then he had extended his power into Elgart’s mind. Eagerly, he had commanded agony.

Obedient to the Archpriest’s will, Elgart had felt exactly what his captor told him to feel, for as long as he was told to feel it. He remembered screaming.

The Archpriest had demanded Elgart’s secrets. All of them. Any of them. But in particular, he had wanted locations. Warehouses. Hidden cellars. Abandoned storerooms.

Bullets.

It was probably a mistake that Belleger’s kegs of gunpowder, dozens of them, were kept with the ammunition for the realm’s many rifles. Crates of bullets by the scores would be destroyed if any of those kegs caught fire. Any single explosion among them would reduce an acre of the Open Hand to rubble and splinters. But where else could the gunpowder be kept? In Belleger’s Fist? King Bifalt feared a blast among the old keep’s foundations. More than the Fist

would be destroyed. The realm's accumulated rifles were there. Belleger could survive the loss of a warehouse or two. The loss of its rifles would deprive it of its best weapon.

The Archpriest wanted to know where those kegs and crates were held. If the men and women he had seduced by sorcery could get at the bullets and gunpowder, Belleger would be crippled in the coming war.

As crippled as Makh had made Elgart.

But had Elgart given up that secret? Any of his secrets? He did not know. He remembered screaming. Oh, he remembered *that*. But he did not remember speaking. While he fought the impulse to confess himself, the horrors that Makh instructed him to feel had become his whole world.

Until—

—something.

Had the Archpriest been interrupted? Had there been sounds of violence? Elgart did not know. His head had been lifted. He had been given a drink of some kind, a rich wine like a kiss of sweetness. The taste had lingered in his mouth. It was still with him.

That taste should have been familiar. It had made his lassitude delicious. He wanted to remember his first taste of it.

Now he could recall every hurt that Makh had inflicted on him. Each detail was etched with acid. But the more distant past—Elgart's former life—had become as vague as mist. In pain, he had forgotten himself.

Still, choices he had no made continued to affect him. Slowly, he began to awaken.

As the hours or moments passed, he became aware of his body, his breathing, his appalling weakness. One muscle at a time, he realized that he was no longer sprawling on the Archpriest's table in the Church of the Great God Rile. He was not held flat, vulnerable, ready for torture and sacrifice. Rather, he seemed to sit half upright, propped on a hard surface that may have been stone. There was warmth on his face and brightness beyond his closed eyes. It made him think of sunlight.

He was not in the Church. Someone had moved him.

And while he pondered that mystery, he noticed that he could hear voices.

At first, they sounded as far off as his past life. When he concentrated on them, however, they became more distinct. Like the strange taste in his mouth, cloying and sweet, he should have been able to remember them.

One of them was crisp, authoritative: the voice of a woman accustomed to making decisions and acting on them. It said, "We must."

Another voice objected, "But we do not know his secret." It was softer. More seductive. "If we do not know how he does what he does, we cannot end it."

The first woman responded, "His death will end it."

"It will end *him*," countered the second. "It will not end what he can do. It will not prevent some other priest from wielding the same power. If we do not learn how his sorcery is exerted, we cannot protect ourselves. We cannot protect *anyone*."

"I understand you," snapped the first. "But we have no *time*. Pulling that cart costs days. It exhausts the horses. It may cost *many* days. I have hundreds of leagues to go. You must cross almost as many. Every day is precious."

Hells! thought Elgart. He *knew* that voice. If he could just remember—

The softer woman relented. "Then rouse him." She sounded frightened. "We must hope that he can be lured or coerced to betray himself."

Those women were as reckless as Elgart himself. Choosing to prod the hornet's nest—

But he had always been that way. Surely they knew better?

Then a different voice said, "There is no need." A man's voice. Sleep or drugs blunted its edges. But something in it suggested a trickle of melting ice: a trickle that might become a torrent. "I will answer."

"Will you?" demanded the harsher woman.

Like a sigh, the man said, "It is why I have come so far. To answer."

Elgart made a subtle effort to open his eyes. Their lids were crusted with immeasurable hours or days of sleep. He managed only the thinnest slit. Through it, his sight was no more than a dull smear as if his eyes forgotten how to focus.

Like the women's, the man's voice was familiar. Elgart had heard it more recently than theirs. He feared to recognize it.

"Then speak," said the crisp voice. "Tell us why you have come to Belleger. Tell us what your Great God wants here."

Here? wondered Elgart. Was he still in Belleger? The notion gave him an obscure comfort. It was a foundation of sorts, a cornerstone of familiarity. It might help him remember.

Was the taste in his mouth a drug? A drug he had taken on some other occasion?

"I will," promised the man. The trickle of his voice was growing stronger. Its resemblance to flowing water increased. "If you will let me have my cross."

"Your cross?" asked the softer woman. "You surprise me. How can you need it now? It is only an object. It is not your mind."

"You do not understand." The man's tone suggested a shake of his head. "You took it from me, but you have it with you. I feel its nearness. It is not my mind. It is my knowledge of the Great God. Without it, my mind is empty."

That was the hint Elgart needed. He remembered the cross in the Church, the cross with the statue of a man behind it. He remembered sitting across a table from the Archpriest while Makh clutched like an old habit at his chest.

The cross—

"Explain," demanded the harsh woman.

"I will," promised the man again. "Only let me hold my cross. Only let me *see* it, if you will not give it to me. It will restore what you want."

The other woman said sadly, "Forgive our reluctance. You have given us cause to hesitate. Help us to understand. Then we may be able to choose wisely. What part does your cross play in your knowledge of the Great God?"

With the sun on his face, Elgart felt air moving across his cheeks, a low breeze. He smelled grasses lush from the autumn rains, wild grasses mingled with the faint scents of meadow rue and mustard. Through the slits of his eyes, he recognized Makh on his right, no more than a pace away.

Repulsed by the sight—the memory—Elgart almost betrayed himself. He wanted to scramble away despite his weakness. For Belleger's sake, he remained still, feigning sleep.

The Archpriest sat as Elgart did, leaning on a boulder jutting from the grasses. Apparently, the old man had not been treated gently. His black robe hung open, exposing the bulk of a bare chest matted with hair and grime. His long hair and beard were a tangled mess, dirty where they had once been pure white. There was a look of confusion in his wide-set eyes. A deep bruise marred his cheek. His thick lips drooped. Still, the jut of his nose promised certainty. His hands looked strong enough to fell an ox.

For a moment, he seemed to consider the sky overhead, asking it what he should say. Then he looked at the women.

With his eyes all but closed, Elgart could barely see them. One of them wore a robe as white as new silk. The other wore a brown cloak over leather riding breeches. Something in his past made his heart beat faster.

Makh's voice held a note of turbulence as he answered. "The world you do not know is wide. It is full of strange sorceries. One of them allows the Great God Rile to store his thoughts and desires in an object like my cross. To store and express them. While I hold it, its contents are mine. When it is taken from me, they are gone. I cannot speak of them.

"If you will allow me to gaze at my cross, I can guess at its secrets. If you will allow me to hold it, I can answer you with assurance. Whatever you wish to know, I can tell you as if the Great God himself were speaking."

Instinctively, Elgart thought, No. Do not. Do *not*. He is too strong.

He will torture me again.

"Very well," said the woman in white. "We will permit you to look at it."

Her companion seemed to question her. The harsher woman shook her head. While the brown-clad woman retreated to a saddlebag and opened it, the woman wearing white told Makh severely, "Do not imagine that we will put it in your hands. We suspect you of too much harm. We have no wish to hear your Great God speak. We will be content with your guesses."

"So be it," rumbled Makh. "I will attempt to satisfy you."

He sounded content.

Elgart knew what was coming. As he had done so often, he jumped to conclusions, and acted on them. Using every scrap of mind and determination that remained to him, he forced himself to stay still: a man too deeply asleep to move. But within his clothes, he began to tense his muscles and relax them, tense and relax them—one arm, the other, his chest, his abdomen—urging them to remember movement.

To remember specific movements.

The truest thing he knew about Makh was the way the old man rubbed at his chest as if he needed that touch to help him think. Or as if he needed to touch whatever his robe kept hidden.

From the saddlebag, the softer woman took out a wrapped bundle. Her manner betrayed her uncertainty as she handed it to her companion. In contrast, the woman in white did not hesitate. Discarding the wrapping, she held up the object it had concealed.

As she raised her arm, Elgart glimpsed a sheath strapped to her forearm. A throwing dagger.

Makh's cross was a smaller replica of the cross Elgart had seen in the Church. Smaller, but not small: it was as large as his hand with the fingers outstretched. It may have been made of bronze. In the sunlight, it shone like gold. And at its back, as in the Church, was a carving of a naked man with his arms draped over the crosspiece. Like the statue in the Church, the carving's eyes were rubies. They glittered redly at the Archpriest, promising power.

Trying to believe that he was ready, Elgart let the fingers of his right hand drift to his belt.

Makh sat forward. As cheerful as a rippling brook, he said, "I thank you. My Great God thanks you. I will answer you now.

"Give me my cross."

The woman in white tightened her grip on the metal. "I will not. A demand is not an answer."

In her tone, Elgart heard something he had never heard from any devotee of Spirit: a subtle tremor of strain.

“You will, Daughter,” replied Makh. “You are the Great God’s, as I am. You will obey his command. You cannot refuse.

“*Give me my cross.*”

When the Archpriest reached out his hand, the devotee of Spirit took a step toward him. Tension showed in the knuckles of her grip. Her arm trembled.

“*I will not,*” she repeated.

Grinning, Makh chuckled as if he had already beaten her. His hand looked strong enough to wrest the cross from a clasp of iron.

“Amandis,” murmured the brown-clad woman. “Do not.”

Elgart heard fright in her voice. Nevertheless he felt a rush of excitement. Amandis. Amandis.

“I.” The devotee moved another step closer. “Will.” The determination in her eyes resembled fear. A rictus of effort stretched her lips back from her teeth. “Not.”

“Fear nothing, Daughter,” said the Archpriest gleefully. “One more step, and it will be done. Every question of your life will be answered.

“Give me my cross.”

Elgart wanted to laugh himself. Suddenly, he was ready; sure of what he could do. He was no stronger than he had been while he slept. He felt stretched thin, as if he had gone too long without food—and far longer without water. Nevertheless he recognized Amandis and Flamora, the devotee of Spirit and the devotee of Flesh. He knew that they had saved him. He still had his last secret. And he had a debt to repay.

He was not going to fail. Not again.

“Amandis!” Flamora’s voice rose. It hinted at panic. “Please!”

The devotee of Spirit’s whole body was trembling. Elgart could imagine that she had never been beaten before; that her force of will had never cracked. As if she were quailing, she took one more step.

In triumph, the Archpriest stretched out his arm to snatch the cross from her—
—and Elgart struck.

In one motion, he whipped out the garrote from his belt, lashed it at Makh’s grasp. Wire was as thin and strong as an artist of iron and the Decimate of fire could make it. It wrapped itself around the Archpriest’s wrist; snagged there. When Elgart heaved with his whole body, his garrote ripped through Makh’s flesh, through bone. It severed the old man’s wrist.

Makh screamed. Blood spouted from the stump of his forearm. In red spray, his hand and his cross fell to the grass.

Elgart tried to move again. He meant to grab up the cross and batter it against the boulder, damage it on stone until it broke. If he accomplished nothing else, he meant to shatter the rubies. But he was too weak to rise.

Amandis was fast enough. While Elgart floundered on the grass, she hammered one of her daggers straight through the Archpriest’s forehead into his brain. The Great God’s servant was dead before his heart stopped beating.

“Destroy it,” croaked Elgart. “Break the gems.”

He wanted to say, It is the instrument of his sorcery. But Amandis did not hesitate. At once, she snatched up the cross and smashed its rubies against the boulder. Pain haunted the burnt amber of her eyes. Makh had taught her to doubt herself.

A heartbeat later, Flamora sprang at Elgart, flung her arms around his neck. They sprawled together on the grass while she kissed him. Her mouth lingered on his like the taste of drugged wine.

He gazed up at the clear sky, the brilliant sunshine. His eyes were too dry for tears. He understood nothing that had happened since he had confronted the Archpriest. But he was alive. That was enough.