

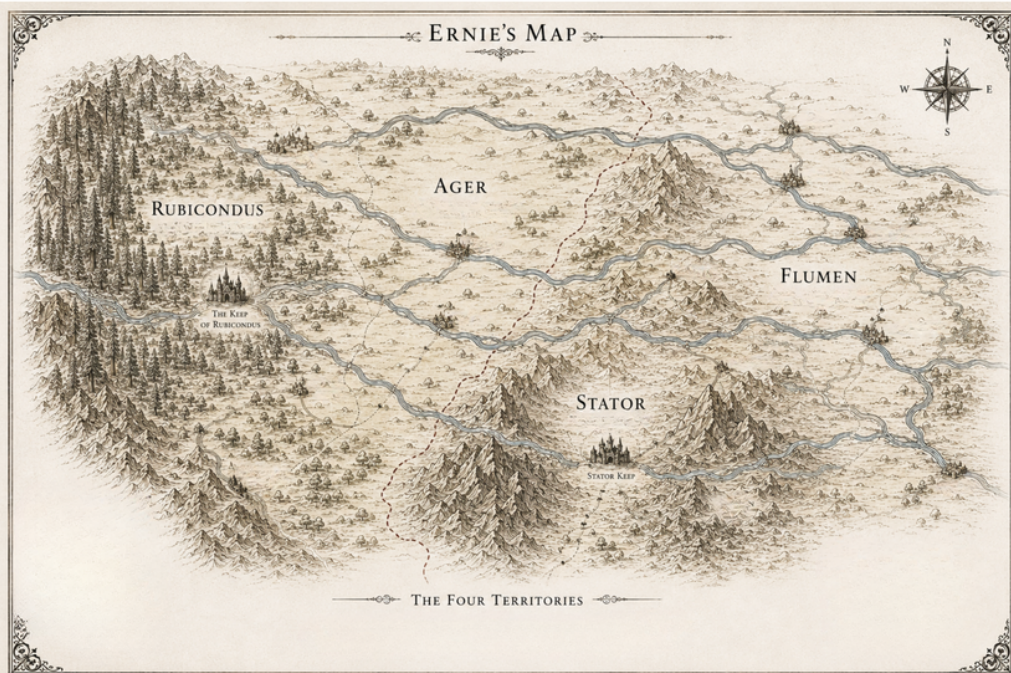
BLOOD & COVENANT
AWARENESS

BOOK 5

Standing



Blood & Covenant



Book Five: Awareness

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Chapter One

“I am not asking, you little sukaza. I said if I saw it one more time, I will hang you from the gallows.” Slamming the jail cart door closed, he shook his head. “By both Kings' decree.”

Hitting the back of the cart, the horses jolted forward and took the remaining wolves caught using black powder into the Keep dungeon. It had been banned and found responsible for bringing the blight to all lands, a shame Stator now carried twice in history, a distinction uniquely their own. Two Stator Covenant Kings had brought about the end of times. Once the Dark King of Stator a thousand years ago, now the Fallen King of Stator.

“Sir.” A guard came up to the Captain with a report book in hand. “There is another problem.”

Hunter scoffed. “No? Again? I should start charging.”

“I understand. How dare they, sir, with no taxes paid?” Laughing, he smiled. “The Sharps missed another round of duty. You told me to tell you when the third time happened. I sent someone to check on them. Haven’t heard back yet.”

“Who did you send?”

“Layla.”

“Good choice.”

“Ayayaya,” a male voice sang out.

All turned. None had sung since the Burn, not even in mourning, though some had tried.

“Make wayayayay,” now three wolves sang.

Hunter looked. Stator soldiers approached, their uniforms torn and their eyes battered. One of the four was being carried by two others. Walking behind him, Hunter narrowed his eyes. It was a Ghost Human. Their tan skin and striking white hair, brighter than snow, made them distinct even among their own kind.

“In the Capital? Unheard of,” the guard said beside Hunter. “A human. I thought all the old songs burned?”

Stator was a song territory where all studied, played instruments, danced, and sang.

“Ayayayayay,” the four voices rang out as one.

“Make way, move swift, stand tall if you can,” one wolf sang. He was the one limping.

“Make way, move fast, as the hero’s command,” another sang louder.

“Ayayayayay,” the third wolf sang again.

“It came from the south, like a battering ram. All held the line, though not all stand. We stood’n tried against Covenant's might. We fought until we-all-lost-siiiiight... ayayayayay.”

It was the Ghost Human, his voice stronger and deeper than the rest. He walked tall, more so than the wolves behind him. A Stator War Hero's honour was to return from battle. To be seen and heard first by the people with your witness behind you.

Hunter studied him.

There was a strange marking on his face, a crescent moon, whether paint or tattoo, he could not tell.

The human's voice was rich. He carried the depth of Stator's ancient Hymn in his movements. Tears first came to Hunter's heart, then to his hand, as he watched the dance of heroes with a grace none had seen before, as though it were an ancient performer stepping from the old texts.

It was then he felt his heart-song return with a single sound.

“Make way.” The children were the first to sing a welcome to their heroes as they followed them, waving and dancing softly.

To Hunter's surprise, several women's voices answered.

“Ayayayayay.” They turned with handkerchiefs of gold, red, or black above their heads, denoting taken, single, or mourning. In doorways and on balconies, the women of the town replied, hips swaying as they turned in greeting and song.

The sound filled the streets, awakening the city to the return of warriors and a new hero among them.

“Ayayayay.”

Several men sang out from around them, stopping, turning, then clapping their hands.

“I stood with the wolves, I stood with the brand. I slaughtered Covenant with my own hands. I fought, I died, as many felllll... many crrriiiied.”

The human sang unto them.

“Against-the-burn, with Stator livesssssss,” the wolves sang toward the highest wall.

“Make wayayayayay,” the men of the city replied, Hunter’s own heart nearly shouting through his rich voice of song and command.

“Ayayayay,” the women and children all sang back.

Hunter raised his hands and began to drum the beat of the Hero’s Fallen as he learned of the front lines. Several of his men joined in, grabbing a lute here and making a sound there.

“Make wayayayayay,” they all sang together, waiting for the hero’s next verse.

Once the final turn had been made, the Ghost Human gracefully circled around his comrades three times to the right, bending and bowing, turning and leaping. It was done with a care Stator had never seen.

“He fought like a wolf, then he fought like a mage. Wasn’t until morning came. We realized he wasn’t Stator. He’s Ghost Human of ancient lore... Ghost Human of an-cient-loooooooooore!”

“Make way Stat-oooooooorrrrrrr!”

“Sire.” A mage burst into Covenant King Lehi’s office, causing him to stand quickly and spill his tea across the parchment. “You wanted to know when the people began singing again.”

Lehi turned into mist and flew from the window to the guard tower overlooking the city, his smoke-like trail following behind him. With ease, he transformed back into a man and watched as the women danced with the children.

“Ayayayayay.” Both guards were singing and stomping their boots.

“He fights like a beast!” the men shouted from roofs, balconies, and streets.

“He is more than a man!” The women swooned and cheered.

“Kan”Tor of Stator’s braa--nnnd,” the returning wolves sang loudly, the final verse they had written to surprise their comrade. The city cheered and welcomed home its heroes.

Lehi’s eyes filled with tears as he heard the voices of his people once more. It had been silent for two weeks. None sang in Stator, not even in mourning. Now they welcomed a human into their hearts as a hero of Stator. It had been decided. As the sound of their voices rose even higher, Lehi knew the Keep could hear them now.

“We made wayayayay.”

Lehi sang the final line with them. His voice carried over the wind as he painted the sky with clouds of white and grey, carrying the song that had been sung. It would travel across all of Stator, showing the Ghost Human’s face above them.

Then he and Blood King Fides pinned a Medal of Citizenship and Heroics upon the Ghost Human with the crescent moon mark.

The people turned to see their saviour and king. Lehi bowed, then sang loudly, finishing the spell of sky art.

“We made way-ay-ay-ay-ay-aaaa-aa-a!”

Clashing clouds filled the sky, showing the moments once more as they rolled past the city. Song began again in the countryside, voices of children singing softly with its coming and going.

“Make way.”