

*Ashes of
Our Joy*

*THE EPIC OF KAROLAN
THE SECOND BOOK AMONG FOUR*

Ari Heinze

SOLI DEO GLORIA

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About the Author:

Homeschooled from first through twelfth grade, Ari Heinze holds astronomy degrees from Caltech (B.S. 2001) and the University of Arizona (Ph.D. 2007). He's passionately interested in astronomy, but equally so in storytelling. Even in early childhood he entertained his two younger brothers with stories, and now, besides writing with obsessive delight, he invents stories for his own children: Petra, Eleazar, and baby Brogal, born in January 2010. He and his beloved wife Jane live in Houston at present, but plan to move to a more starry and adventurous locale when they have opportunity.

Favorite Books of the Author:

Fiction: *Cry, the Beloved Country*, by Alan Paton

Green Dolphin Street, by Elizabeth Goudge

The Jacobite Trilogy, by Dorothy K. Broster

Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Bronte

The Lord of the Rings, by J. R. R. Tolkien

The Napoleon of Notting Hill, by G. K. Chesterton

Northanger Abbey, by Jane Austen

The Space Trilogy, by C. S. Lewis

Till We Have Faces, by C. S. Lewis

Nonfiction: *Confessions*, by St. Augustine

Desiring God, by John Piper

The Reason for God, by Tim Keller

Jeremiah, by the Prophet Jeremiah

Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, by St. Paul

CONTEXT WITHIN THE EPIC OF KAROLAN

This is the second book in *The Epic of Karolan*. It describes how Ilohan and Jonathan acquitted themselves in the Norkath War and its aftermath.

The first book, **Bright Against the Storm**, told of the adventures of Jonathan the blacksmith and Sir Ilohan during the time preceding the great war between Karolan and Norkath, and of the love that was between Jonathan and Naomi the shepherdess, whom he left behind in Glen Carrah.

The third book, **Rain, Wind, and Fire**, tells what Naomi did during the Norkath War, and what was the end of Jonathan's search for her. It tells also how a great and unexpected danger arose to threaten Karolan, and what was done to guard against it.

The fourth and final book, **Darkness Gathers Round**, describes how the danger came upon Karolan, and how it was resisted with great heroism. It concludes the story of Ilohan, Jonathan, and Naomi, and others, no less significant, who were caught up in their adventures. For at the last, though darkness gathered round, their stories did not end in darkness.

To explore Karolan further, or learn when books three and four will be available, visit <http://www.hopewriter.com/Karolan.html>.

Acknowledgements

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If I start naming those who shared with me the adventures I have drawn on to write my epic, this page will never be enough – but thanks to those who stood with me on icy mountains, hiked to hidden valleys, ventured into baked but splendid deserts, and dared enough heat and cold, hunger, thirst, and danger that my portrayals of these things have some taste of the reality.

Thanks to those whose love helped me dream of Ceramir, and whose courage and faithfulness helped me dream of heroes.

CEMBAR

KAROLAN

NORKATH

The far North is forested and unpeopled

Forest

Farmland

Britheldore

Aaronkal

Guldorak

Niida

Idranak

Metherka

Dilgare

Tremilin

Valley of Petrag

Felir

Kiuhern

Byrinkal

Glen Carrah

Vykadrak

Dilfandokir

Cliffs of Doom

The Great Mountains

Ceramir

Kyrta

Desert Gap

Harevan

Desert Church

Drantar

Church of Joyful Prayer

Luciyr

Drantar's Gap

The great Desert extends beyond the edge of knowledge to the extreme South, from whence, it is said, the Jarnith once came.

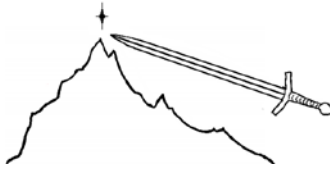
The Desert

Many other castles, churches, rivers, and other features exist which are not shown.

The borders cannot be traced with certainty where they meet the Desert and the Mountains.

*To my brothers and friends,
Companions in great adventures past and future:
Ky and Dar Heinze, Paul Greenham,
John Williams, Joel Saylor, and Ryan Wilkinson.
I trust you as Ilohan did Jonathan,
And at your need I would attempt a rescue,
Even in the prisons of tyrants and traitors.
It is my hope that instead, we will work
together in the healing of the broken world,
And see evil rolled back by the power of Christ in us.*

Chapter 1



The Eagle's Return

EVEN WHILE HE WAS STILL ASLEEP HE WAS AWARE OF JOY, of singing, of brightness pouring down on him. The singing seemed to reach a crescendo and then abruptly stop as he came fully awake. King Thomas of Karolan opened his eyes and looked around. In the bright sunlight of early morning he saw the scrap of parchment, and remembered the reason for his joy. He had thought that Prince Ilohan was dead, so long was he delayed. But at last, yesterday, the eagle had come. The king took up the parchment and read again the message it had carried.

All is well; he is safe and true and crowned.

He starts by way of Cembar in two days,
if you approve our choice.

Beware of a traitor; someone knew his errand and his path.

Hope and pray.

Eleanor.

It was not a mere happy dream, it was true. Eleanor had not had space on the eagle-carried scrap to say what had delayed the prince, and the threat of the traitor was there, but the great

fact remained. Ilohan lived, was proven true, and was returning. The great plan was reaching its fulfillment.

The king strode to the window and looked out. The autumn earth glowed beneath the freshness of the morning sky. Birds skimmed the harvest fields and wheeled around the tower wall, all singing. He knew his body was old. His heart, too, had been old for many years – but now he felt it was young again, as it sang for joy with the singing of the birds. He turned around, almost expecting to see his beloved Sarah standing by the bed to share the joy of Ilohan’s success. She was not there.

“I had forgotten,” he said aloud in the empty room. “She is with you, my Lord. And yet I pray that she indeed shares my joy, and sees her own faithful work here on earth reaching its goal.”

He ate his breakfast with the appetite of a younger man. Servants brought him his royal robes and his newly-polished crown. He took a deep breath, feeling even the air fresher and sweeter on this morning, and went out through the great gate to the sound of trumpets.

The crowd saw the king come forth. The sun made his crimson robes glow, and sent flashes of dazzling light from his crown. He advanced toward a raised platform or pulpit that extended out from the steps before the gate, draped with hangings of cloth-of-gold, with the royal standard snapping above it in a brisk wind. Excited whispers in the crowd said that this platform, which looked grand enough to last forever, had been built only for the day and would be dismantled on the morrow. The king walked slowly, but his step was as firm and regal as it had ever been. Wave after wave of cheering echoed back from the great stone walls of Aaronkal.

Thomas stood silent for a moment at the edge of the platform, waiting for the cheering to cease. He could feel the

love his people bore him, but also the desperation that had brought them here in such great numbers. They were afraid and confused, wondering about the threat of Norkath and the old rumors surrounding Prince Kindrach's death. Their desperation drained his strength, for they looked to him for salvation, not fully understanding that it cannot come from mortal kings.

"People of Karolan!" he cried, loud enough to be heard to the farthest reaches of the crowd. "Twenty years ago Kindrach your prince and his wife and son were captured at Lake Luciyr by the soldiers of Fingar. The prince was told to betray you, to pledge his crown to Fingar – or else be killed with his wife and child." Dead silence fell as Thomas paused. He could feel the crowd waiting, breathlessly.

"Prince Kindrach was faithful! He escaped and rescued the Princess Eleanor and the young Prince Niran. He died defending their retreat. Your princess escaped, and was brought here in secret, badly hurt. She went away to a distant place where she could be healed and hidden, and she left her son here that he might not share her sorrow. He lived." Again there was a total silence of strained attention.

"You never knew that Eleanor and the young prince survived. I and Queen Sarah had concealed them, and we let all assume that they were dead. We gave Prince Niran a new name, and hid his lineage even from himself. By doing this we thought to protect him from his father's fate, and to raise him in humility to understand and serve people of every rank. He lived at Aaronkal as a foundling, a ward of the throne, without royal privilege or honor. From child to page, from page to squire, and from squire to Knight of Karolan, he grew up in all ways as we hoped. Now at length the time has come to reveal his name. Fingar is a coward, a liar, and a knave. Sir Ilohan of

Aaronkal is my rightful heir, the crown prince, your future king!”

The thousands of Karolan roared their hope to the morning sky, until the castle and surrounding forests rang with it. The king could feel their exultation, their certainty that they were saved. It seemed to drain away his very life.

“Prince Ilohan is faithful and true. He will never betray your trust, never fail you as I did in my youth, before I understood... before I learned – as I failed you long ago, and years were wasted and evil sown before I won your trust again. Ilohan is as true and noble as was Kindrach his father, and he will bless you and govern well!”

Even as cheers again erupted from the crowd, King Thomas felt a terrible pain burn through him. He thought a dagger had stabbed through his heart. As his legs began to buckle beneath him, he turned to see who his assassin was. There was no one there. He looked down at his chest. There was no blood. He knew then that he was not wounded, yet he was sinking to the floor as if mortally hurt. He gathered the utmost strength of his will, and stood up straight again to face the crowd. He must not fall. He must not let them see. Yet now he must not say what he had come to say.

“Prince Ilohan has gone...” he paused to gasp for breath, yet resumed too quickly, he hoped, for any to notice something amiss, “...far away to Princess Eleanor. He will return very soon to lead you against Fingar, who... in lying greed would claim his crown. You will... be victorious! Love Ilohan well, for well he will love you!” The crowd roared once again, but then the cheers died in their throats.

King Thomas felt another searing pain lance through his chest. The bright world spun before his eyes, his body did not heed his will’s command, and he crumpled down upon the

platform. He lay flat for a moment, and then, gasping for breath, raised himself on one trembling hand. His vision darkened; the world continued to spin, but he still had his voice. "Steward!" he cried. "Muster the Army of all Karolan!" He gasped again, clutching at his chest. "Muster it at once, with all speed!"

A vast collective groan sounded from the crowd at the fall of the king, and then the murmur of anxious voices rose like the sound of a rising wind stirring the leaves of a forest. Two knights ran out on the platform, lifted the king between them, and carried him into Aaronkal. The steward followed. Messengers ran to and fro. Grooms brought ten fast horses from the king's stables, and heralds with trumpets came out the great gate of Aaronkal to mount them. The steward briefly reappeared to give some last instructions to the heralds. With a blast of trumpets they rushed away, carrying to every part of the realm the urgent call for the Army of All Karolan to muster at Aaronkal.

After a long, anxious interval the steward came out again and took the king's place on the platform. "People of Karolan!" he cried. "Today is a day of sorrow for us all. The king has fallen. I have spoken with the royal physician attending him..." The steward bowed his head, seemingly too grieved to speak further. At last he looked up and continued, "The royal physician says the malady is of the heart, and must bring death by sunset. Yet you are not without a leader, for I, his trusted servant, must take his place with grief until the prince returns. In keeping with the laws of Karolan, I will act for him, with all of his authority. This is my word to you: we will fight Fingar, and defeat him!"

"Even now the king's messengers ride to gather the great army – the army in which many of you will fight. The prince is

far away, across the mountains. There is no possibility that he will return in time to lead you against Norkath, for Fingar's army will attack within seven days. Because of this, I will lead you. I will lead you as I led you twenty years ago when we saved King Thomas from certain doom. I will lead you, and you will be victorious! Then, after we have saved the kingdom, the prince will come, and he will rule you well. He is good, faithful, and true, as King Thomas has said. He will heal you of the hurt that Kindrach's death brought upon you, and he will bring the blessings Kindrach would have brought had Fingar been less vile.

The crowd cheered, but only halfheartedly. The people felt as though they had leaned in total trust on a staff, and it had broken beneath them. They had come to hear good King Thomas tell them what was wrong and why all would be well; to have him console their worry with his strength. Now the strong man to whom they had looked for help had fallen and was dying. The hope of which he had told them would come too late. They would face the wrath of Fingar's army, and his ruthless greed, with no royal leader of their own. True, the steward had once before raised an army and led it prudently, but that army had never had to fight. Tulbur did not have the king's bright courage and fire-tested sureness of fidelity. Could there be any hope of victory for an army with only him to lead it?

Gradually the cheers gathered strength, and washed against the castle wall in tentative, trembling approval. The people felt that the steward was their last hope, however insufficient, and it would not do to offer him no sign of approval or of trust. Their king had fallen, and their prince was far away, but their faithful steward stood by them. They would stand by him also.

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Britheldore stood at the door of the king's tower bedchamber. The sunshine was bright on the foot of his bed, and the reflected light suffused the entire room with a warm glow. The king lay still upon the bed, and his face looked more like weathered gray stone than like the visage of a living man. Yet he still breathed. The court physician knelt beside the bed, while Metherka and Idranak stood near. The physician looked up at them. "He will not speak again," he said. "Before the middle of the afternoon we shall lose him."

The room was very still and silent. The sounds of tears falling on the rich carpet could be heard as Idranak and Metherka wept. Britheldore knew their thoughts: they were mourning the king who had led them so long at such cost to himself, whose iron will had fought through his weakness so well that few had seen how hard the battle was, and who had never uttered a whisper of complaint. Britheldore's own sorrow was so great that the dead weight of it seemed to stifle even his tears. He had known the king's weakness – and his strength. If that body had held together for ten days more, the spirit in it could have led the Army of all Karolan to victory. As he himself had guessed, it never would.

A shadow briefly dimmed the light that was pouring through the window, and something large sailed into the chamber. The knights started, and the physician cried out in pain as huge talons gripped his shoulder. The eerie scream of a great golden eagle split the sunlit silence of the room. King Thomas opened his eyes. The old look of stern control crept across his face, and yet to Britheldore it seemed mingled with a

depth of joy that he had not seen in that countenance for many years.

"Leave us," whispered the king, "all but Britheldore alone."

Idranak and Metherka obeyed immediately. Britheldore saw that the physician wanted to remain, but he shook his head. The physician moved to depart, and the eagle released his bleeding shoulder and lighted with a great sweep of wings on the back of the king's chair. Britheldore closed the door behind the physician, and turned to meet the king's eyes – which all had thought would not open again except in death.

"Sir," whispered the king faintly to Britheldore, "take parchment and quill. Quickly. Write."

Britheldore took them from the king's table, and looked quickly back for instructions. Life was already sinking from his sovereign's eyes.

"I die. Today. Come at once. Fingar, a score and ten thousands, six days. We fall. No hope. Thomas."

Britheldore wrote down the message, and then looked back at the king to hear further commands. The old man's eyes were closing, and his gray lips looked as though they could scarcely move. The old knight bent close over the king's face to catch the breathed words. "Twine. Talon. Send. Now."

Britheldore saw the twine on the table. He tied the message securely to the eagle's talon, beside the other that was already there. Not knowing what else to do, he lifted the eagle bodily in his arms and pushed it toward the window. Skykag gave a scream of protest, flapped his mighty wings in Britheldore's face, and was gone like the wind, soaring out over the bright autumn land.

The old knight turned back to the king. His head had turned to look at something on the wall above the table, but his eyes saw nothing now, and never would again. The faithful king,

who had borne the load of Karolan alone for far too long, was dead. "So be it," said Britheldore. "Now he rests, and shares in Sarah's joy."

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The men, women and children of Karolan were weeping as they left the field in front of Aaronkal. Britheldore had told them that their king was dead, and they knew what they had lost. Thomas had ruled them for so long that most could not remember a time before his reign. They could hardly understand that his stern hand no longer held the scepter, and that his stony courage would never again lead them into a hard-fought battle.

He had been a faithful king. He had borne all the sorrow the throne had brought him, without wavering in his determination to serve and bless his people. If he had failed them once, when he was a wild young man, he never had again. He had been more faithful for the memory of that one crime. Few even in that vast crowd were stoical or indifferent enough to depart with cheerful faces, or with eyes not cast down toward the dead grass at their feet.

Britheldore turned away from the sad processions that were leaving Aaronkal for the various towns from which they had come. He made his way with slow steps back to the castle. Metherka met him on the stairs. The young knight's grief was evident and strong, but a fire shone in his eyes, and Britheldore knew that he was hearing the thunder of the messengers who were galloping to every part of Karolan to muster the army he would lead.

Britheldore put a hand upon the young knight's shoulder. "You will lead the army," he said. "You must. Tulbur will try,

but you must do it." They walked together through the great gate and into the castle.

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Ilohan and Veril walked beneath the mighty trees of Ceramir while a cool wind from the mountains stirred the branches high above them. The sky was a cloudless blue, and afternoon sunlight shafted in the mist that rose gently off the lake. Eleanor stood beside the water and watched them, as she had said she would, but there was no sorrow in her gaze.

They talked of many things: of Aaronkal and Ceramir, of the great desert and the stars that shone above it, and of the mountains meant for angels alone. They said nothing about love, or about the future, or about the fact that Ilohan was the prince. They talked of the times they remembered. Veril told Ilohan of the children she loved, and of her own childhood. She told him that as she looked back, it seemed to her that every sorrow that had touched her then had been as fleeting as a flying vulture's shadow on the desert sand, and that her joy had shone brightly, untroubled by any fear that it might ever fade. Now that she was grown, she told him, she saw more clearly, and sadness touched her soul – yet with her deepened, opened life came hope of more glorious joy, and faith to see beyond the shadows of the world into the joy of Paradise.

Ilohan thought of Thomas, of the growing weariness that had fallen upon him as the years after Sarah's death wore on. It seemed to him that Veril had never seen or imagined a weariness like that – one that could sap the joy and strength from a man's life. She had spoken of sorrows that burned like fire or wounded like nails, but not of those that seemed to drain life itself away. He wondered if anything could drain her

life, and he felt he would pay any price to see that nothing ever did. He thought of Sarah, and wondered if even in her death her life had dimmed. He did not think it had.

He looked at Veril, beautiful in the streaming autumn sunshine and the awakening wind from the great mountains. He told her of his own childhood, of his stern training as a page and squire, balanced by the love of Sarah and the kindness of Thomas. He told her of the joy he had felt when first he set his lance in rest and galloped across the great field in front of Aaronkal. He confessed the terror he felt whenever another knight leveled a lance at his shield, and he told her that he had never thought himself worthy of knighthood.

Then suddenly he was telling her of the creeping weariness that had come over the king, and asking her for comfort concerning it, and it did not seem strange to him that he should ask such a thing of her.

"It must have been hard to see that," she said. "And you fear it for yourself, or others for whom you care. It comes to me that he is weary only because he has lost Sarah, that while she was with him she could bring him strength. I think that if all had gone well, another could have helped him carry on, not taking her place, but only comforting and strengthening him in his loss. I cannot be sure of this."

She stood still a moment, looking up at the sunlight that streamed through the sparse autumn foliage of the trees, and then she continued, "Even if I am wrong, if this weariness was unavoidable because of the evil of the world, it is still only a small thing to the joy that shall come after. We must be true to God – that is what matters. It does not matter what happens to us. I do not even care what will happen to me, but I hope my life will bless someone. It does not seem to at present. I mean, if my life does bless anyone, I am not aware of it."

"You have great faith, and courage beyond my own," said Ilohan. "I am afraid of pain, as well as other things. But should you not also trust God that he will make you a blessing, whether you see it or not? Would not this ease your sorrow?"

"You have been faithful to the king," she said. "You have been given great tasks and fulfilled them. As for me, I am only Veril."

"What does that mean, Veril?" asked Ilohan. "Shall I say, 'Sarah was only Sarah,' when we both believe she sustained a king as long as she lived?"

"But Veril is a weak child," said Veril. "She loves, but she is needed for nothing, and she does no one any good."

"I have no wisdom," said Ilohan, "and I do not know what to say to comfort you. Yet it comes to me that God needs no one. We cannot give to him, but must simply acknowledge our need and delight in his generosity."

"I know that, and yet perhaps I do not know it," said Veril. "Indeed, none of us has anything we have not been given. Even if in service to God I lose my life and pour out all my blood, yet at my beginning he gave me every drop, and still I have given him nothing and owe him all. Existence itself, every loving word, every sunrise, every blossom, every star – and beyond and before all, the blood of Christ that sets me free from the fear of Hell to enjoy all – all these are from him. I can only praise and thank him, never repay him."

"Veril, do you know what we have been saying to one another?"

She looked up at him and laughter washed across her face. "Half winged with wisdom not our own, half stumbling to speak in words we do not understand," she said. "So it always is, while we walk beneath the sun." Her laughter broke forth

clear and bright. "Thank God he holds us though we stumble and we do not understand."

Ilohan smiled at her, hoping she took that for assent, but he was speechless from the beauty that he saw: her laughter, the strengthening wind, and the red sunset rays kindling the barren treetops against the deep blue sky. The wind caressed her red hair, which seemed to glow despite the deep shade cast by the mountain walls. She was beautiful, and his heart was singing. Her words had been full of wisdom and comfort, and her sorrow flowed only from her shocking blindness to the blessings she brought.

In his desire to bring her joy he said, "Veril, you must always remember that you are far from useless. If you cannot see the good you bring, then you are very blind. Do not forget the words of those who see more clearly."

She bowed her head. "I only half believe them, yet at your bidding I shall try to remember them and to hope they are true. Will you climb the sheet of vines with me?"

"Willingly, my Lady."

Most of the leaves had fallen as the cooling autumn days went past, and the sheet of vines had gone from green to yellow and from yellow to bare brown and gray. They climbed it easily. Ilohan was grateful that much of his strength had returned so soon after his recovery from the plague. He could see that Veril was happy as she climbed beside him, and he delighted in her joy. When they reached the top, blue twilight was rising, darkening the sky over the eastward desert, while to the west lovely pastel shades faded into one another above the sinking sun.

They sat together on the sheet of vines and looked out over the Cloth of Joy, and the great expanse of desert beyond it. The vines swayed and flexed beneath them in the strong wind.

Ilohan turned to look at the awesome mountains, from which that wind was blowing. The edges of their peaks caught the red-gold sunset light, while behind them was the vast, cold twilight, pure and deep. His soul leaped up with exultation in their majesty. Suddenly, all that he had ever feared concerning Veril seemed utter foolishness in his mind. Why should he not be so blessed as to love deeply the first young woman who loved him? He turned toward her with a smile, searching for words to tell her what was in his heart. He did not find them.

A terrible cry lashed their ears, and Ilohan started up in terror, with Veril beside him. The cry had seemed to come from above them, borne on the cold wind. Ilohan scanned the sky in the direction of the mountains, and saw a great eagle soaring there. It passed over them, and after giving another fearful cry, it swept down toward the stone house with dizzying speed. "Skykag!" cried Ilohan, starting down the vines at once. "It is Skykag, and I fear his news is dire!"

Veril followed him. She knew he had been about to speak, but the words he would have said were lost forever, along with the perfect moment the eagle's cry had shattered. Her eyes filled with tears. Then she feared he would look back, so she wiped them quickly and wept no more. He was a prince, and if he forgot her she must bear it. She must let him go where he had need to go. Just as they reached the foot of the vines, Jonathan came running up. Even before she heard him speak, Veril knew from his face that Ilohan had been right about the eagle's news.

"Skykag flew straight to the house and lighted near where Princess Eleanor was standing," said Jonathan, breathless from his speed. "She asks you both to come at once. The king is dead."

Veril fell back against the vines, realizing again that everything had changed in a moment. She felt almost as if Ilohan had died too. The young man who had seemed so near to her that afternoon was gone now, cut off from her by both royalty and grief. She saw him stand stunned for a long moment, taking no notice of her, and then he and Jonathan together began running down toward the house.

She followed as fast as she could, but Ilohan and Jonathan left her behind. They vanished into the house while she was still many paces away. She reached the door at last, grasped the frame for support for a moment, and then, still panting hard, followed them into the council room. She wanted to run into Imranie's arms for comfort, but she knew her private sorrow had no importance now. She took her own seat as tranquilly as she could, and, gazing at the floor, tried to fix her mind on catching her breath. When she looked up again, she saw that both her parents were trying to comfort Eleanor and Ilohan, and she was instantly ashamed that all her own sorrow had been for herself.