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## **Consigned To Darkness**

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**Consigned To Darkness**  
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For Parke Godwin, who gave me an Arthur I could believe in

For dana, who helped me to believe in myself

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Author's Introduction (Including A Synopsis Of A Leaf In The Wind)**

Back in the late 70s, the Dungeons and Dragons craze started. I fell in love with the idea of role-playing games and spent many hours with my friends exploring worlds that didn't exist—worlds like Corithim.

The first book of the series, *A Leaf in the Wind*, is loosely based on a D&D game I played in high school. *Consigned to Darkness* is a new construct. Still, I couldn't have written it without that long ago game.

I wrote the first draft of *A Leaf in the Wind* more than twenty-five years ago. That novel, written in longhand, filled three spiral-bound notebooks, which are currently sitting in storage somewhere in Illinois. *Consigned to Darkness* was written a short time later. I rewrote *Darkness* completely in 1996 and started a new rewrite in 2004. By February 2005, I was satisfied. I spent a lot of time on it, because I've lived with this story for so long it had to live up to my vastly overblown expectations.

For those who need a reminder of what happened in the first book, or those who haven't read it, I've included a synopsis of *A Leaf in the Wind*. While the synopsis will give you the background information, I highly recommend you read the first volume of the *Chronicles of High Gondylar*. I'm not just saying that because I wrote it.

A synopsis can tell you everything that transpired in a book, but it can't bring the characters to life. Characters like Tanrif, Cyanne, Kestryl and Andres are more than just words on paper. They live and breathe and feel. You won't get that from the synopsis.

Even if you remember *Leaf* well, I highly recommend reading the synopsis. There are a couple of seemingly insignificant events that become important in the final two volumes of the trilogy.

## **A Leaf in the Wind: Synopsis**

Dathan and Amalga are the Duke and Duchess of High Gondylar. Dathan is human; Amalga is Ethrellen—two related species that can interbreed but don't often. After an assassination attempt on their daughter Cyanne, the five-year-old heir to the throne, Dathan and Amalga agree to send her away for her protection. She is never to return to High Gondylar.

Kestryl the Bladesman, a servant of the throne, takes her far away and leaves her with a loyal Gondylarian, then returns to the palace. The story is spread that Cyanne has died. Few people know the truth.

Fifteen years later, Dathan is killed by magical assassination, and Amalga dies a short time after. On her deathbed, the Duchess charges Kestryl with finding her daughter and telling her what has happened. Penthor, the chosen heir, takes the throne after Amalga's death.

A hundred miles south of Gondylar, the Dark One of Vykon, the powerful mage responsible for Dathan's death, watches the events in the palace. He plans on corrupting a Lord and placing him on the throne. When he learns Cyanne is still alive, he takes steps to kill her and the Bladesman, who searches for her.

The Bladesman defeats the assassins sent by the Dark One, but before the last of them dies, he tells Kestryl he is working for Penthor, thus setting the stage for a rivalry between two loyal Gondylarians, neither of whom knows of their common, hidden enemy.

The Bladesman cuts off the assassin's head and has it delivered to Penthor with a threatening note. So the misunderstanding escalates.

Across the great sea called The Mistress, in a city called Stratus, a young man named Tanrif gets a job on the docks. His father, the famous adventurer Varon Imgard, had trained Tanrif as a warrior, but Tanrif is just a young man trying to make his way in the world. He doesn't search for greatness but allows life to dictate what happens to him.

Galith, a Sarithan Assassin, tries to kill Tanrif. Injured, Tanrif flees through the streets of Stratus. He ends up at the shop of Demendil, a great weapon smith. There he meets Lylea and Cyanne who, he is told, are sisters. Demendil had taken both girls in when they were small and raised them as his own.

After Tanrif arrives at the shop and shares his story, Demendil seeks out Varon Imgard, whom he has known for a long time. It is clear there is history between them, though what is never revealed, but it probably has something to do with magic, as Varon Imgard turns out to be quite the spell caster. If you are curious as to what is between them, I'm afraid you'll have to wait for Iorana's Ransom (book three of the trilogy), but it will be explained (along with a few other "loose ends").

The Sarithan Assassins, having failed to kill Tanrif the first time, ride to Varon's ranch where two are killed, and the rest, including Bone, Galith's second-in-command, are fooled. Unfortunately, Varon Imgard had cast a spell making Demendil look like Tanrif, hoping to use that bait to draw the Assassin's after them. Thus Galith and Bone believe Tanrif to be responsible for an Assassin's death. Varon and Demendil escape, though there is too much water under the bridge for them to remain friends. They part ways.

In the meantime, the assassins sent by the Dark One of Vykon reach Stratus and learn that Cyanne works at the Shop of Demendil. The assassins attack and are killed by Lylea, Cyanne and Tanrif. Tanrif mistakenly assumes the assassins sent by Vykon are Sarithans. Now that they know where to find him, Tanrif feels he has no choice but to leave. Cyanne, who is drawn to him, won't allow him to go off alone.

Cyanne seduces Tanrif, which upsets Lylea who also likes him. She can't blame Cyanne, though. Lylea had never acted on her feelings. Cyanne and Tanrif leave the Shop of Demendil to put some distance between themselves and the Assassins.

Demendil returns home and learns that Cyanne and Tanrif had fled. Lylea goes after them, ostensibly to warn them of danger but really to try to win Tanrif's heart. Shortly after she leaves, the Bladesman and Captain Andres of the Royal Gondylarian Navy arrive, searching for Cyanne. Kestryl knows she was being raised by Demendil and heads straight for the shop. He is frustrated to learn that she could be anywhere, though Demendil has a pretty good idea of which direction they were heading, at least if Lylea's speculations were correct.

Galith returns to the city of Glith to report his failure to the High Priest of the Sarithan Assassins. He is demoted in rank and told he will not be raised again until Tanrif is dead. He travels to Stratus to start his search and learns from one of the town guard that Tanrif was seen leaving Stratus with a beautiful young woman—a distinctive one at that.

What results is a line of people riding east across The Skyshore Realm: Tanrif and Cyanne, followed by Lylea, followed by Andres and Kestryl, followed by Galith. This would seem to support the premise that providence has a sense of humor.

Back in Glith, Bone is given a mission. He is to find and kill Varon Imgard for taking an Assassin's life. Eventually he corners Varon on a ship heading for High Gondylar. He mortally wounds the great mercenary, who throws himself overboard into shark-infested waters rather than suffer death at the hands of the Assassin.

Lylea catches up with Tanrif and Cyanne. Cyanne doesn't trust her sister's motives, but Lylea is there, and she can do nothing about it. The three witness a bizarre phantom battle and end up following a phantom carrying a magic necklace deep into the Mines of Silverguard. They find the box the necklace had been placed in but can't open it. They take the box and end up lost in the mines. Eventually, after overcoming several obstacles (and a horrible creature or two), they find their way out.

In the town of Journ, Kestryl and Andres catch up with Cyanne and company. Tanrif and Lylea learn of Cyanne's birthright. Cyanne rides off with Kestryl and Andres, determined to return to Gondylar and avenge her parent's death.

Tanrif, crushed by perceived abandonment, goes off alone. Lylea tracks him down. After Tanrif bares his soul to her, the two make desperate love. Later, while they're asleep in the woods, Agar the thief shows up. Tanrif catches him trying to steal his sword and makes him open the box they'd taken from the Mines of Silverguard.

Tanrif puts on the magic necklace and has a vision. He finds out the necklace is an Amulet of Dreaming, a piece of the Gem-God Razsra. He is changed by the necklace and realizes that his true destiny lies with Cyanne. He leaves Agar and Lylea together, claiming they would soon have need of each other, and rides toward Stratus.

During his ride he has a second vision, where he learns of a prophecy that names him the destroyer of the Sarithan Assassins. Behind the prophecy, and cheering it on, is Iorana, the Goddess of Magic. Finally, he knows why the Sarithan Assassins are after him.

On the way back to Stratus, he runs into Galith, whom he again eludes, if only barely. He arrives in Stratus just before Captain Andres' ship sails for High Gondylar. He agrees to go back to the Great Dukedom with Cyanne and help her fight for her birthright.



Galith, having failed again, is made a slave of the Sarithans, and is given to Bone, who was once beneath him in the hierarchy. Bone beats Galith mercilessly, determined to break the slave before delivering him to the Grand Master of the Assassins in the Islands of Dawn.

Due to severe weather, both Tanrif's and Galith's ships end up at a port city called Dusk in the Sunset Isles. Galith sees Tanrif but refuses to believe he's there. When he realizes he wasn't hallucinating, Galith is able to figure out where Tanrif is heading and decides to use the information to purchase his freedom when the time is right.

Tanrif, Andres, Kestryl and Cyanne sail to the Gondylarian frontier, well aware no one is going to support her claim to the throne. They are betrayed and captured by the mercenary Skandl. They manage to escape and follow Skandl to an encounter with Denworceno, another mercenary Skandl considers a threat. Skandl kills Denworceno. Tanrif leads Denworceno's men back to Skandl's ranch house. He avenges the mercenary's death. Denworceno's men agree to help Cyanne win the throne.

On the way to Gondylar, Tanrif is bitten by a deadly fire viper sent by the Dark One (remember him?) to assassinate Cyanne. The bite is invariably fatal but, somehow, Tanrif survives. There is some speculation that the Amulet of Dreaming protects him, but that would be a mistaken assumption, even though readers of the first book wouldn't know that until reading this sentence.

Bone and Galith reach the Islands of Dawn, where Galith tries to bargain for his freedom. Bone kills him but not before learning that Tanrif is on his way to High Gondylar. The Grand Master assigns Bone the task of finding Tanrif and killing him.

Tanrif, Andres, Kestryl and Cyanne make their way to the capital city Gondylar, where they sneak into the city through an old forgotten passage in the wall, originally designed as an escape route. They fall on the palace and take the throne when Tanrif manages to put his blade to Penthor's neck.

Cyanne, unable to believe Penthor a traitor, pardons him, much to Kestryl's dismay. She knights Andres and Tanrif, and announces that Tanrif is to be her consort. She instructs Penthor to plan the wedding.

During his training in Gondylarian etiquette, Tanrif senses an Amulet of Dreaming hidden in the palace. He finds it in spite of the care someone had taken to keep it hidden. It turns out to be the lost Necklace of Elonel the Fair.

Bone shows up in Gondylar in time to attempt an assassination during the wedding reception. He is captured and disarmed, but Tanrif doesn't want to execute him. Instead, he sends Bone off with a note for the Grand Master, suggesting that they leave each other alone.

The Dark One of Vykon, thwarted every step of the way, uses the fabled Gauntlet of Teleportation to enter the palace at Gondylar and kidnap Cyanne, in an attempt to draw Tanrif, who fascinates him, to the Darkdom of Vykon.

Tanrif, thinking he needs all the help he can get, puts on the Necklace of Elonel the Fair. As he watches, the two Amulets of Dreaming fuse into one. Tanrif's personality changes after that. He becomes angrier, stronger, darker.

Before Tanrif and Kestryl set out to rescue Cyanne, Tanrif goes to the temple of Iorana, the Goddess of Magic, well aware she has been manipulating the situation all along. He is told by the High Priestess to take with them the Horn of Tenithior, a relic used in the palace during holy days. On his way out of the temple, he finds the sword he'd left for safekeeping (you cannot bring weapons into a house of worship) has been replaced by a sword he'd found hidden in his father's closet when he was still a child. He runs out onto the street, but whoever had left it for him is gone. How that sword reached High Gondylar so

many years later, and who left it for him, is a mystery that won't be solved until Iorana's Ransom. I'd apologize if I thought it would help.

Tanrif and Kestryl set out for the Darkdom of Vykon. When they get there, they are captured by the Dark One. A fight ensues. The Dark One flees when he realizes his soul-stealing magic doesn't work on Tanrif. He uses the Gauntlet of Teleportation and vanishes.

Tanrif, Cyanne, and Kestryl try to escape the caverns but get hopelessly lost, until they find the Dark One's arm protruding from a wall. In his haste, he'd inadvertently teleported inside solid rock. They remove the Gauntlet of Teleportation and use it to escape. Unfortunately, they have no control over where it takes them and end up in the Islands of Dawn, at the same time the Sarithans are gathering to decide what to do about Tanrif.

To make a long story even longer (I told you you should have read the book), before Cyanne can tell him she's pregnant, Tanrif is killed by an agent of the Assassins. Her need for vengeance becomes even greater when she is somehow possessed by Tanrif's magic sword.

She and Kestryl sneak into the Sarithan Fortress-Temple and go on a killing spree, until they are discovered. They flee and end up in a dead-end storage room, where Kestryl sounds the Horn of Tenithior at their most desperate hour.

The Warrior Dukes of High Gondylar, including Tanrif, are resurrected, just in time for the final battle.

Tanrif is instrumental in the destruction of the Fortress-Temple, taking most of the powerful Sarithan Assassins with it. Just before the structure collapses, Kestryl uses the Gauntlet of Teleportation to transport himself and Cyanne to safety. They were unable to save Tanrif.

Watching her husband die a second time is more than Cyanne can take; her mind is never quite right afterwards. She believes Tanrif, who had already risen from the dead once, will one day return to her.

## Prologue—The Amulet

Kestryl squinted against the glare of the afternoon sun, ready to do battle. He raised two swords in salute and advanced. Tanrif, his opponent, showed no sign of fear. Like the Bladesman, he held a sword in each hand. For a short time they circled. Then Kestryl attacked fiercely.

Tanrif deflected the blows and returned an attack of his own. The hills surrounding the conflict echoed the efforts of the confrontation. Neither man could find an opening. Soon, Kestryl stepped back and lowered his swords.

"You've improved."

"Are you scared, old man?"

The Bladesman raised an eyebrow in response and thrust suddenly. As with the rest of his attacks that morning his blade was turned, though this time he came closer to scoring.

"Youth is not necessarily an advantage in combat," said the Bladesman. "Experience is on my side."

He held up a hand to signal a rest. Tanrif lowered his weapons, and Kestryl turned to face the woman watching. He bowed.

"M'lady."

"Don't stop," said Cyanne, smiling. "I came to watch."

The Bladesman again bowed then attacked. Tanrif redoubled his efforts in a furious onslaught Kestryl knew he could not maintain—at least he hoped that was the case. The Bladesman fell back further, parrying and retreating, drawing his opponent out. But Tanrif showed little sign of tiring.

When the onslaught finally slowed, the Bladesman pressed an attack of his own, no less skillful than that of the younger man but somewhat more focused.

Tanrif retreated until he saw an opening. He moved in, but the Bladesman shifted his attack and one of Tanrif's swords took flight. Both men watched until it landed in a patch of tall grass several yards away.

The younger man looked surprised and continued his attack with the remaining blade. The Bladesman pressed the advantage. Tanrif was forced to concentrate on defending himself. A short time later, when both men were bathed in sweat, Tanrif lost hold of his second sword. He bowed then grinned.

"You're sweating, old man."

The Bladesman saluted him with his weapons before sheathing them.

"As I said, you've improved."

The younger man didn't respond. He turned toward Cyanne and moved in her direction. Her eyes shone with pride.

"Did you see that, mother?"

Cyanne opened her arms, and he embraced her. "You were marvelous, Tanrif. You're the image of your father. When he returns he's going to be so proud."

Tanrif opened his mouth to speak, but a reproachful glance from Kestryl silenced him.

Kestryl knew it was hard on the boy, but he couldn't do anything about it. Nothing either of them could say would break Cyanne of her delusions.

It had been eighteen years since the final battle with the Sarithan Assassins, and Cyanne still awaited the return of her husband. Over the years, Kestryl had tried talking to her. The conversations often led to an argument.

He tried everything he could to convince her Tanrif was dead and would not be returning; but Cyanne had seen her husband come back from the dead once, and hadn't seen him die the second time. Still, no one could have survived the collapse of the Fortress-Temple.

She would not listen to reason. Kestryl learned long ago that he could do little more than nod and smile. From a very young age, he'd taught the boy to do the same.

At first, Tanrif played along, but times had changed and he grew less and less satisfied with his lot in life. Kestryl couldn't blame him. They lived in the middle of nowhere; Tanrif had no friends, no women, nothing but training and duty. Tanrif was a good lad. He deserved better.

There was nothing more Kestryl could do for them here. He'd already taught Tanrif what he could—how to read and write, the history of High Gondylar, court etiquette and more. Tanrif was uniquely prepared to sit on the Gondylarian throne, an event for which Kestryl had waited a long time.

Cyanne was already heading back to the cottage. He listened for a bit as he followed, but she'd launched into a story about her husband's exploits, and he'd heard them all before. The way she told them, Tanrif had done it all on his own. Kestryl's contribution was left largely unmentioned. It would have been amusing were it not so tragic.

Like the dutiful son he was, Tanrif forced a smile and feigned interest. Kestryl watched, feeling sorry for the boy. It had to be hard on him. He could put it off no longer. It was time for Tanrif to take his place on the throne.

Kestryl had one detail to attend to before he brought the rightful heir to Gondylar.

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, while Cyanne slept, the Bladesman and Tanrif sat outside the cottage. Both were tired from the workout and neither spoke, content instead to listen to the night sounds. It was Tanrif who broke the silence.

"Something troubles you."

"Is it that obvious?"

Tanrif shrugged and considered the moon. He did not speak again.

"I am going on a journey, Tanrif."

"You're not just riding into town for supplies, are you?"

"No, I'm not. I could be gone for quite some time."

Kestryl watched the boy but couldn't read his expression in the darkness.

"You will be coming back ... won't you?"

"If Sheba wills it."

"You're not going to tell me about it, are you?"

The Bladesman leaned closer and studied him. No longer a boy but a man, and a perceptive one at that.

"No, I'm not going to tell you. Take care of your mother, Tanrif."

"You know I will."

"Yes, I do. It's the only thing that makes this trip possible. But it is something that must be done."

Tanrif placed a hand on Kestryl's shoulder. "I don't know what this is about, but I wish you luck whatever it is."

Not for the first time, Kestryl was amazed at how much Tanrif looked like his father. He smiled sadly, tousled Tanrif's brown hair and walked away.

He didn't look back as he made his way to the small stable he'd built behind the single-story cottage. A short time later, when he rode into the Gondylarian night, Tanrif was nowhere in sight.

\* \* \* \*

Tanrif walked through the silent house feeling lonely. His mother still slept, and he was loath to disturb her. He loved Cyanne, yet she was part of his problem. How could she still believe, after all these years, that his father was alive?

How he wanted to scream at her, to make her see the truth, yet Kestryl was correct. Nothing would ever convince her. He knew he could either accept it or leave. Neither option appealed to him.

How he would love to see a city—any city. He longed to walk through its streets, to smell the aroma of its cookeries, to browse through the different shops, to see someone, anyone, besides Kestryl and his mother. It had been far too long since his last trip into town and now, with the Bladesman gone, it would be even longer.

He sighed and lowered himself onto the bed. Perhaps he would be able to sleep. When the Bladesman returned, they could have a talk. Tanrif might even find the strength to say that he could stay no longer and needed to make his own way in the world. Maybe chickens would fall out of the sky.

How easy it had been for his father, who had never had any real constraints. He did what he wanted, when he wanted. By the time his father had been his age, he was already sitting on the Gondylarian throne—perhaps he'd already died. How ironic that his progeny had yet to live.

He closed his eyes and tried to relax but sleep would not come. Then he heard the calling. It was not the first time. A voice, distant yet near. Madness. There was no other explanation.

A woman's whisper. Seductive. Elusive. Whispering promises of power and glory. Had it been like that for his father? Was it the Goddess of Magic who spoke to him? He laughed then. He was no great warrior. There was no prophecy that governed his life. How could a man rule a Dukedom when he didn't yet know how to rule himself?

The voice was stronger than it had ever been. An ache began to form within. He found himself sitting, then standing. Slowly, he moved across the room, out into the hallway and then to his mother's bedroom. Cyanne turned onto her side, but he ignored her. The voice was not hers.

He found himself kneeling by a locked chest. He'd never opened it before, though he'd sometimes been curious as to what was inside. Both his mother and Kestryl had been evasive. He moved to the table in the corner of the room and picked up an old wooden box. He opened it and looked. There was nothing inside; there had never been anything inside.

The voice whispered, and he obeyed. He pushed on the bottom. Nothing happened. He pressed slowly across each inch until one side dipped. The opposite side rose slightly, forming a gap too small for him to place a finger in. He tried to move it further to no avail. He tipped the box to the side and a key slid out. He looked at it then turned his eyes to the chest. His mother hadn't stirred.

He wouldn't have stopped if she had.

He left the box open on the table and returned to the chest. Whatever was inside called to him—there was no other explanation. He inserted the key and turned it. The lock fell open. He removed it from the clasp and opened the lid.

There was yet another box inside, but he knew this one was neither locked, nor trapped. Not physically anyway. There was a spell on it, but he knew the spell could not harm him. He opened it and stared, for the first time in his life, at the Necklace of Elonel the Fair. He felt no fear, displayed no caution, as he reached in and removed it from its resting place.

The Amulet hung from its silver chain, shining in the dimness. From the moment he saw it, Tanrif could not turn away. The gem hovered before him, colors shifting on and beneath its surface, making it seem as if it had no definite shape. As he gazed into its crystalline depths, strange ideas began to form. He knew the Amulet wouldn't hurt him. It hadn't harmed his father. Kestryl simply didn't want him to have the power. If he put it on, he would be like a god.

He raised it higher, eyes reflecting the gem's brilliance. A film of sweat formed on his forehead and his eyes gleamed as if he were possessed. Part of him, a small part, fought the temptation to place the chain around his neck, but nothing in his training had prepared him for that type of contest.

Had he not been under the Amulet's influence, he would have looked around guiltily before pulling it over his head. He hesitated when the cold silver touched the back of his neck, then continued to lower the gem until it rested on his chest. The world lurched. He screamed as if a flaming spear had pierced his heart. The memory of that momentary pain would never leave him.

Cyanne sat up, awakened by the scream.

"Tanrif?"

He turned toward the bed.

"Yes, mother. I'm here."

"What are you wearing?" She looked first at him then to the open chest. "What have you done?"

"Done, mother?" He sat down beside her on the bed. "I've done nothing at all. I am only taking what is mine."

"That amulet does not belong to you. It belongs to..."

"My father?" He reached out and grabbed her hair. "Is that who it belongs to?"

Cyanne bit her lip. "Yes."

"My father is dead. He's buried halfway around the world. He is never coming back."

Cyanne tried to talk, but the words wouldn't come. Tanrif laughed and jerked her head back. Cyanne fought for control.

"Tanrif, you have to take it off. Take off the amulet."

"Why, mother? Why should I? So I can spend the rest of my days here, planning my life around your delusions. I think not."

"Let go. You're hurting me!"

"Not as badly as you've hurt me. Do you know what you've done to me? To Kestryl? Do you realize what you've become?"

"Please, let me go."

She tried to slap him, but he gripped her hair harder and pulled her head back until it touched the bed. Then he leaned down and kissed her neck.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm accepting payment. No virgin should sit on the throne of High Gondylar."

"Kestryl!"

"Oh yes, mother, cry for your precious Bladesman. He can't hear you. He's gone."

Panic lit her eyes, and she tried to pull away, but Tanrif was too strong.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to know pain as I have known pain."

He moved on top of her and forced her legs apart.

"I'm your mother!"

He laughed. "You're my curse."

She screamed when he entered her and continued to scream for a long time after. She screamed until his lust and rage were spent, then remained motionless as he rose and dressed.

"You'll be relieved to know I'm not going to kill you. Leaving you alive will be far more painful."

She didn't move, didn't look at him, didn't say a word. She didn't seem to notice him leaving, nor did she emerge from her room as he gathered his few possessions and packed them into saddlebags.

Tanrif intended to be long gone by the time the Bladesman returned.

## Chapter One—The Seed Is Planted

Parth sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The floor was cold on his bare feet, but he didn't pay it any mind. A sigh from behind reminded him he wasn't alone. He turned to look at her, and for once she was as good looking as he remembered.

It wasn't the first time he'd awakened with a strange woman in his bed and hopefully wouldn't be the last. She was awake and watching. Though he tried, he was unable to recall her name. At least he didn't have a hangover.

He reached for his breeches and quickly pulled them on, all the while waiting for her to say something. The words never came. He dressed quickly, placed a silver coin on the table by the bed and left the house.

The early morning sun found him walking quickly down Merchantman Boulevard. He walked with his head down, so as to keep the sun from his eyes. Parth was well-known in Gondylar. Many noticed his passage, but no one spoke to him. It was just as well. He was overdue at the palace.

The guard at the main gate allowed him entrance. He returned the guard's cheerful greeting with something approximating a low growl. The guard's chuckle followed him down the walkway.

Parth allowed himself a smile, remembering the first time he'd come this way almost twenty years earlier. He and his men had followed a man called Tanrif into a battle they shouldn't have won. That they'd accomplished their goal, securing the throne for the rightful ruler of High Gondylar, had been amazing. Casualties had been remarkably light considering the odds against them.

As he passed beneath the portcullis, images of that long ago battle tickled his memory. He'd been a different man back then—younger and less jaded. Once upon a time, he had believed in humanity. How far away those days seemed now.

When he reached the throne room, he paused to straighten his attire before reporting to the Duke. Not that it was necessary. He'd become a fixture at the palace and none of the Dukes who had succeeded Penthor had been able to displace him. Without his support, the Duke's position would be, at the very least, more tenuous.

Still, he tried to make it appear as if he had a modicum of respect. If he weren't already late, he'd have stopped back at his room, changed his clothes and combed his hair. Time did not permit such amenities. He drew a deep breath and entered.

Theraint was pacing back and forth.

"There you are. If you weren't the bladesman, I'd have your hide. Do you realize what time it is?"

Parth eyed the Duke, giving only the slightest of bows before replying. "Of course I do."

"Then you'd better have good reason to keep me waiting."

"I was busy most of last night checking into rumors of an assassination attempt. Groundless rumors, as it turned out."

The Duke grunted then climbed the three steps to his throne and sat heavily. Theraint was not a good-looking man. He was overweight, undertall and a pair of green eyes bulged from his head as if



trying to escape. His long black hair oozed grease and, unless he was entertaining guests, remained uncombed. Parth wondered why he'd bothered adjusting his garb.

When he realized he was staring, Parth turned his head and found himself looking at the barren wall where the Horn of Tenithior had once resided. It had been stolen shortly after the Duchess Cyanne had been kidnapped. Had it really been eighteen years? It was hard to believe.

The Duke had been speaking, and Parth tried to look attentive though his mind was elsewhere. Theraint was complaining again about the Lords and how they didn't pay their taxes—one of his favorite topics. The Duke, predictably, began ranting about who he was going to visit just to remind them who was in charge. Parth was certain no such visits would occur.

Theraint was a coward and would never leave the relative safety of the palace. As it was unlikely that any of his competitors would be able to harm him, Theraint would continue to hold the throne as he had for the past year—until the others grew weary of waiting. Sooner or later, someone would find a way through his defenses, and Theraint would join a select group of recently assassinated Dukes.

If he weren't duty-bound to protect the throne, Parth would be tempted to do the job himself. For better or worse, someone else would have to claim that honor. He resigned himself to listening as the Duke grew more and more agitated.

It was going to be another long day.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl dismounted and allowed his horse to walk. He'd been pushing her hard for too many days. He wanted to get to Gondylar as fast as possible, yet as he approached he found himself slowing down. He needed to think. The future of High Gondylar would be written in the days to come, and he could afford no misstep.

Since Penthor's departure from the throne, the Dukedom had suffered a steady downslide. The only way that he could think to stop it was to place Tanrif on the throne. After all, the boy was the rightful heir—and High Gondylar needed him.

He thought about Cyanne and how she'd wanted no part of her birthright. It was entirely possible she wouldn't want to go to Gondylar. He'd have to convince her somehow. Tanrif had a lot to learn about politics, but Cyanne and he would be there to offer advice and support.

It was a perfect plan with a single flaw. There already was a Duke on the throne, though the thought of the slovenly Theraint sitting in Dathan's chair turned the Bladesman's stomach.

In the past, Kestryl had been loath to leave Cyanne alone, but his last sparring match with Tanrif had changed things. He knew the boy could protect his mother. It was time to put his plan into motion.

Almost without thinking, Kestryl vaulted onto the mare's back and kicked her into a gallop. He was closing in on Gondylar and a future he could almost taste.

\* \* \* \*

Bone walked down the long corridor, carrying a tray expertly balanced on his left palm. He looked quite attractive in his servant's garb. Many of the ladies of the House of Saren had already sought his company, and once or twice he'd sampled their pleasures, but he was not being paid to satisfy highborn whores.

He'd finally reached the point where he was trusted enough to serve the reclusive master of the house. It had taken a long time, but if his years with the Sarithan Assassins had taught him anything, it was

patience.

So for the first time, he moved toward Lord Traydon's study, his feet barely making any noise at all. At the end of the corridor he reached a solid oak door. A woman's voice called out in response to his single knock.

"It's open."

He entered. He had been hoping to find Traydon alone. The Lord, both older and larger than Bone recalled, motioned him to place the tray on the dresser. He allowed the woman to search him for weapons before he turned again.

Traydon smiled unpleasantly. "Just place it on the desk."

Bone couldn't help but notice that Traydon's voice was too thin for his bulk. He placed the tray before the Lord. With his left hand he removed the cover, with the right he pulled the dagger from the plate and expertly slit Traydon's throat. Before the girl could scream, he whirled and threw the blade at her. It sunk deeply into her neck, cutting off her ability to make noise moments before it ended her life. He paused only to retrieve the blade before leaving the premises.

He would miss the attention of the highborn whores, but that couldn't be helped. It was time to collect his money.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl, garbed as a servant, walked swiftly down the streets of Gondylar. It had been many years since he'd been to the capital, and he was sure he wouldn't be recognized. As he walked, he caught snatches of conversation in passing. He always listened for such mutterings. If what he heard on the street was any indication of the situation, things were not going well in the Great Dukedom.

The endless succession of Dukes did not help. It seemed none of the rulers were at all concerned with the common man. There was good reason for this state of affairs. The first years of a new Duke's reign dealt almost solely with consolidating his position, and none had lasted long enough to get beyond that. Crime was at the highest it had ever been, at least in Kestryl's lifetime. Even the better neighborhoods seemed run down, and the warehouse district was almost a war zone.

Twice, cutpurses had approached him. On both occasions he'd sent them off with a cut on each cheek—a lesson they would not soon forget, but that mattered little. Even if both retired as a result of the encounter, there would be no shortage of thieves in Gondylar.

Kestryl made his way to the palace, where he found that even the official district had not been maintained. Sadness tugged at him, but he steeled himself and continued. He had a job to do and, unpleasant as it was, it could wait no longer. High Gondylar had to survive.

He entered the palace grounds through the delivery gate. He knew that the guards were less likely to stop him if he looked like he knew where he was going, so he kept his head up and even nodded to the guard on duty. The same approach got him inside the palace proper. No one challenged him. If security had been this lax when he was bladesman, heads would have rolled.

Parth had a lot to answer for and before long, would have to do just that. He scowled as he passed two guards gambling in the hallway, but turned away before they could see the disdain on his face.

When Kestryl reached the throne room, he found the doors open and unguarded. The lack of security exasperated him, though it made his job easier. Still, he'd have preferred a battle to cold-blooded

murder.

The Duke was alone when he entered. Kestryl looked surprised at the sight of him. There was no way he could reconcile the wretched man before him with the boy he'd once let touch his sword. He moved so quietly he was halfway to the throne by the time the Duke noticed.

"Yes, what is it?"

The Duke's voice was filled with boredom and annoyance at the same time. The Bladesman continued his silent approach.

"What do you want?"

He was wondrous thick, Theraint. Even now, he was unable to discern the imminent danger.

"Well?"

Annoyance was the only emotion evident now. The Bladesman stopped and looked up at him.

"Greetings, Theraint." He bowed low. There was an irresistible irony in the gesture. The Duke's eyes widened as recognition lit them. "Good. It seems I am remembered."

"You're dead," said Theraint, panic evident from the high pitch of his voice.

"Not dead, merely forgotten. Where are your guards? Don't you think it might be unsafe to be here alone?"

The Duke swallowed, but managed a weak smile. "What may I do for you, Blades ... uh, Kestryl?"

"The parade of Dukes has been little more than a circus, but you have gone too far."

"What do you mean?"

"You've encouraged unprovoked attacks on the Ethrellen."

Theraint laughed. "You've returned from the dead to tell me that?"

Kestryl felt his control slipping. "You stain the memory of the Duchess Amalga. I'm glad Dathan does not live to see what has become of his throne. I have come to set things right. Stand and defend yourself."

"You're mad. I'm not going to fight you."

"I thought that might be the case, but it doesn't matter. I will kill you in cold blood if I must."

"You'll kill me anyway." Theraint stood. "What about it, Kestryl. I thought you were a man of honor. Surely, you wouldn't attack an unarmed man."

"Don't count on it."

Kestryl leapt forward. Theraint had no time to react before Kestryl caught him by the throat.

"Your honor..." croaked Theraint.

"There is no honor in killing you, but there is less in letting you live, Sheba forgive me."

Kestryl tightened his grip and jerked the Duke to his feet. Theraint struggled but was no match for the

Bladesman. He dropped to one knee then sank the rest of the way to the floor. Kestryl kept squeezing until he was sure Theraint was dead.

While the buzzards on the Council fought over the throne, the Bladesman would bring Tanrif to Gondylar. Soon the rightful ruler would reign once more. With Tanrif on the throne and a real bladesman at his side, things could be put right. He turned to leave, when two guards entered, one carrying a tray of food.

At the sight of the Duke sprawled on the floor, the guard dropped the tray and drew his weapon. The Bladesman advanced, drawing both blades. The second guard looked as if he might run but instead pulled his sword. Both had short, thin blades—stylish, but not much use in any real contest. These were not palace guards, the Bladesman realized, but armed servants. He shook his head at the totality of the deterioration.

Kestryl easily parried the first clumsy attack. Without wasting a single movement, he beat the guard's sword aside and thrust a blade into his stomach. The other moved to attack, but the Bladesman interposed the body of the first guard, still on his blade. The second cried out as he ran his companion through.

The Bladesman withdrew his weapon from the first victim, neatly blocked the panicked attack that followed and quickly put an end to the opposition. He fled then, not wishing to take another life if he could avoid it. He retraced his steps, hoping to be long gone by the time the bodies were discovered.

\* \* \* \*

Parth walked down the corridor, a spiced cake in his hand. He often visited the kitchen during the day to annoy Thelanna, who ruled the area as if she were duchess. Her constant threats entertained him, and he disregarded every command she gave. He suspected she enjoyed the game as much as he but never took the time to confirm the theory.

Parth turned a corner and froze. He dropped the cake and freed his blade from its scabbard.

The too familiar shape approached, fresh blood dripping from two short swords. He slowed then stopped, a mixture of emotions battling on his face.

"Greetings, Bladesman," said Parth, feeling foolish for using a title that had been his for so long. Still, he found it difficult to think of Kestryl as anything else.

"Parth."

They stood, regarding each other.

"What are you doing here?" Parth asked when he realized the Bladesman would offer no information.

"I have come to set things straight. I had a score to settle."

"And Theraint?"

"Dead by my hand."

To Kestryl's surprise, Parth stepped to the side, gesturing him on. The Bladesman continued down the corridor.

He hesitated before leaving. "This place is a disaster. How could you have let it come to this?"

Parth shrugged. "There was a time when the throne was worth defending. Ten years ago, would you

have believed me if I told you you'd be assassinating the Duke? I'd lay my life on the line for a Duke or Duchess who cared for High Gondylar, but you've seen what we've had on the throne. What's the point?"

"I'd have left. I would not be able to stand by and watch it all come apart."

"I just keep hoping someone who can make a difference will finally occupy the throne."

"And if I told you that the rightful ruler would soon return ... would you support him?"

Parth's eyes widened, though he held his tongue. He had no idea what the Bladesman was talking about, but certainly he couldn't mean Tanrif. Still, if the Bladesman was alive, perhaps the Duke was too. He gave an abrupt nod and Kestryl, without uttering another word, continued on his way.

Parth stood motionless for a long time, gazing down the corridor, the forgotten spiced cake at his feet.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl was no stranger to the Temple of Sheba. During the course of his long life he had spent much time there, though it had been many years since his last visit. While the trappings of the Goddess usually comforted him, that was not the case at the moment.

Stopping only to hand his swords over to an acolyte for safe-keeping, he entered the interior. In a very real sense the Temple of Sheba was his true home, for his devotion to the royal blood of Gondylar was exceeded only by his love for the Goddess. There were few people about at that hour of day, though to his surprise, Pythiana, the High Priestess, was one of them. She stood behind the altar and watched his approach. He did not address her but instead veered off to one of the prayer niches and closed his eyes.

Sheba, hear my plea. I know what I did was wrong, but it was necessary. Theraint stained the name of the Gondylarian throne and his continued existence threatened the Ethrellen, who are guiltless. Dathan, who loved you also, took an Ethrellen wife, and her memory is precious to me. I know the murder of Theraint was not an act of honor, but my rage drove me to it. Forgive me, great Goddess. Exact what penance you will and allow me to serve you still.

"The Goddess does forgive you, Kestryl."

He rose and whirled, surprised to find Pythiana standing behind him. He started to kneel in respect, but she caught his arm and lifted him to his feet. Her eyes found his and held them.

"Your penance will be severe, but know too, in your pain you continue to serve the Goddess. You will hurt as you have never hurt before and that pain will not ease for many long years. This is a test of faith. Never doubt that your pain serves a higher purpose, though all might seem lost. You will be driven to the depths of madness, but the fire of your rage will one day purge the stain on your soul.

"Sheba loves you, Kestryl. You have served long and well, but still you must be cleansed and the process will hurt like nothing you have experienced before. No matter what you go through, it is Her will. Never forget that."

Kestryl wanted to speak but could not. He knew he deserved whatever happened. He continued to stare at Pythiana's face, even as the transformation began. Her black hair shortened and silvered, her face stretched into a snout filled with large, sharp teeth. It took only seconds to complete the process.

Had he been able to turn from the sight, he'd have realized that the two of them were alone in the temple. The High Priestess' body remained unchanged, but a wolf's head had replaced her ageless face. When she spoke again, he was no longer being addressed by Pythiana but by the Goddess herself. The

compassion in her eyes wasn't enough to offset his pain. Kestryl wanted to drop to his knees but found himself unable to do so.

The movement was sudden and fierce, but the physical pain was not nearly as bad as his anguish at disappointing the Goddess. She sank her teeth deeply into his right shoulder. In spite of himself, he screamed. The pain was gone almost as soon as it began. A moment later Pythiana stood before him once more.

"You have been marked, Bladesman. The stain of your sin will remain until your soul has been purged of the evil of this day."

She turned and walked away.

Heart heavy, Kestryl walked back toward the entrance to retrieve his weapons. When he passed a mirror, he turned and examined his reflection. He pulled his tunic aside, revealing a terrible scar, as if long ago he'd been bitten by a wolf. He touched it lightly, whispered a prayer of thanks and continued on.

He did not doubt his penance would be awesome indeed.

\* \* \* \*

Tanrif could feel the late afternoon sun on his neck as he rode east. Already exhausted, he forced himself to keep riding. He didn't know how long he had before Kestryl returned. Nor did he care, as long as he was far away by then.

It hadn't taken Tanrif long to decide where to go. He had traveled very little in his life, only as far as Diamt, the nearest town. He was certain of only one thing; if Kestryl caught him, he wouldn't live long enough to see the world.

Part of him knew he should feel guilt over what he'd done, but that part no longer had any control over his actions. Not anymore. He pushed his horse to the limit, often looking over his shoulder, half expecting to see the Bladesman in pursuit, but the road lay bare behind him. He continued riding and thinking. He needed a place to hide—a place where he could build a following. And he knew where to find it—the very city his father had gone to when he first arrived in High Gondylar.

He'd been told stories about the Gondylarian frontier, specifically about the City of Crossed Swords—the place from which Denworceno's men had followed his father to a victory that had kept the bards busy since. It was appropriate that his own journey to the throne should begin there as well. He too would build an army and lay siege to the throne.

Absently, he brought his hand to the Amulet of Dreaming. Strength flowed through him and once again he felt the hand of destiny guiding him. He had never been more certain.

One day, the Gondylarian throne would be his.

\* \* \* \*

The Bladesman rarely stopped on the way back to the cottage. Since his encounter at the Temple of Sheba, fear gripped him. Once again he pushed his horse too hard, but he gave it little thought. All he could think about was getting back to Cyanne as soon as he could.

The days blended into each other as he rode through rain and later heat, until finally, familiar landmarks appeared. Only then did he slow and make some effort to compose himself.

He was surprised when he approached the cottage and no one emerged to greet him. He rode straight to the door, dismounted and drew his sword. He did not call out. Even without Pythiana's warning, he'd

have known something was terribly wrong.

He glanced at the kitchen door, then crossed the hallway to Cyanne's room. He'd trusted his intuition for too long to question it now. He opened the door. She lay on the bed unmoving, unblinking, her torn nightgown beside her. In the corner of the room, the box that had contained the Amulet of Dreaming was open and empty.

He approached the bed and reached out a hand to feel for a pulse. The moment he touched her, she whimpered and drew away. He could still see what was left of the bruises on her thighs, forearms and face. Though they were well on their way to healing, Cyanne had done nothing to wash the telltale blood from her body or the linen.

"By Sheba, what have I done?"

Kestryl knelt and lowered his head until it touched Cyanne's naked flesh.

"I'm sorry, M'lady. I'm so sorry."

He rose suddenly, sword once again ready.

"Tanrif?"

He waited for an answer.

"Tanrif!"

He left the room and searched the cottage. Tanrif was gone, as were some of his possessions. He returned again to Cyanne's room and covered her.

"What happened here?"

Cyanne did not respond.

"M'lady. Please. I need to know what happened. Speak to me."

But Cyanne gave no sign of having heard. Eyes wide, she stared into a pain Kestryl would never be able to touch.

## Chapter Two—Strange Reunions

Bone sat at a table in a tavern once called Renegades. Long ago, it had been renamed Denworceno's Den in honor of the famous mercenary who'd died there.

Denworceno's reputation impressed Bone, so he chose the establishment as a base of operations—an appropriate place for Bone to meet with perspective clients, which he did frequently.

The pervasive dissension of recent years had made Bone a wealthy man. Most of the larger noble houses were busily positioning themselves in the event that the Gondylarian throne should suddenly find itself empty. Most Gondylarian nobles were not beneath stooping to assassination, and Bone was the best, not to mention the most expensive.

Hiring Bone was more than just a guarantee the job would be done. It illustrated an affluence that appealed to the wealthier Lords, who took pleasure in flaunting their assets. Bone's signature style made him a commodity and he was able to name his price.

Between jobs, when Bone returned to the Crossed Swords, he liked to show himself, if for no other reason than it would allow others to see he was available once again for work. So he found himself at Denworceno's Den when the stranger entered.

As soon as he saw the man, Bone sat bolt upright and almost stood. He masked his reaction and looked around to see if the lapse had been noticed, but everyone seemed involved in their own conversations. His eyes returned again to the newcomer.

He appeared to be younger than twenty years of age, with shoulder-length reddish brown hair almost never seen in High Gondylar. He stood somewhat under the six-foot mark. His compact frame bespoke an underlying strength Bone would not have been anxious to test, even if he didn't know the man. Bone realized he'd been staring and turned away. It couldn't be Tanrif. Not here. Not now. Yet as much as he'd like to deny the evidence of his eyes, a single glance at the Amulet of Dreaming convinced him he was looking at a man he'd long assumed dead.

The years had been good to his old nemesis, too good in fact. Could the magic necklace protect him against aging? Bone watched as Tanrif crossed the room to the bar. Even his confident stride seemed largely unchanged.

How had Tanrif escaped the Fortress-Temple of the Sarithans before its collapse? It didn't seem possible. Still, Bone had never been one to doubt the evidence of his own eyes. Quietly, he vacated his table and made his way to the shadows from where he could watch without being seen.

Tanrif had been missing for close to twenty years. Why show up here? Why now? Could he be here to take revenge on the assassin who'd tried to kill him? Had he somehow found out that Bone was responsible for Varon Imgard's death? He didn't have any of the answers but knew he'd better find them in a hurry.

Tanrif walked up to the bar and ordered an ale. Bone waited patiently until the young warrior finished the drink and placed a coin on the counter. When he walked toward the exit, Bone receded further into the shadows, though it seemed the extra caution was unnecessary. Tanrif strode directly out of Denworceno's Den without so much as a sideward glance. Bone hesitated before following him onto the street.



He used all of his considerable skill to escape detection. Bone was good at this game and seldom lost a quarry. Thus, after turning a corner, he was most surprised to find Tanrif was nowhere to be seen.

He scanned the area carefully, but there was nowhere Tanrif could have hidden. He walked forward as if in a daze. Even had he been running, Tanrif couldn't have made it to the closest door before Bone turned the corner.

When the attack came it was from behind, and Bone was not ready for it. Even without turning, he knew who it would be, though how Tanrif pulled it off was beyond him. The assassin didn't even have time to draw a weapon.

That wouldn't have bothered him had it been anyone but Tanrif. Bone was more than capable of defending himself bare-handed. Still, he hadn't made it this far in life by allowing fear to rule him.

He moved to grab the warrior's extended arm, and couldn't believe it when his hand closed on empty air. His surprise was elevated to astonishment when Tanrif stepped inside his guard and neatly swept his legs from under him. Before he could recover, Tanrif pressed a dagger against his throat.

"You're following me ... why?"

Bone waited for the recognition that never came. "Do you pretend to not know me?"

Tanrif studied the face carefully. "What is your name?"

Bone masked his astonishment with bravado. "I take a great deal of pride in what I do. I'd think you would remember the man who tried to kill you at your own wedding."

"Bone."

"None other."

Tanrif kept his face expressionless. He seemed involved in some kind of internal debate. Finally, he sheathed his dagger and took a step backward.

"Why have you released me?"

"One would think you'd be grateful."

"The only time an enemy does you a favor is if the favor works against you. I would know why first, before I show gratitude."

"Fair enough. I'm not who you think I am."

"Are you not Tanrif?"

Tanrif's laughter bordered on hysteria. "So, it wasn't just one of my mother's delusions. I'm Cyanne's son. My father died before I was born. Mother always went on about how much I looked like him, though until now I never truly believed it."

"Believe it. The resemblance is frightening. Still, if you are Tanrif's son, why let me live?"

Tanrif extended a hand and helped the assassin to his feet. "I can use a man like you."

"Now why would you need an assassin?"

"Maybe I have someone I want killed. But tell me ... my father destroyed the Sarithans. How do I know you won't take that out on me?"

"That was a long time ago. I've moved on."

"Very commendable. Have you no loyalty to your order?"

Bone's eyes grew hard. He knew the young warrior was leading somewhere, and his inability to see that final destination irked him.

"I am loyal to myself. I kill for my own reasons."

"You may well be a man I can use. What if I told you I was after the Gondylarian throne? I am after all, the rightful heir."

Bone turned the idea over. If this were indeed Tanrif's son, and he had no reason to believe otherwise, it was possible he could take the throne. Tanrif had done so when Gondylar's defenses had been much stronger. As things now stood, it would be much less of a challenge.

Being allied with the Duke of High Gondylar wouldn't hurt his position. And it had been a long time since he'd had a challenge.

"I don't work cheaply."

Tanrif shrugged. "A pity. I have little to offer at present. I suppose one of your competitors might be interested."

He started to turn away.

"Wait. I spoke hastily. I think I can help you."

"For what price?"

"In return for future considerations."

Tanrif laughed. "How ... specific."

"I don't quite remember your father being so sarcastic. Do you want my help or not?"

"If we do this, you obey me. The slightest hint of treachery and I will show you just what I'm capable of."

"Believe me, my liege, there are few places I'd rather have a friend than on the Gondylarian throne."

\* \* \* \*

The Bladesman wasted no time. He had to go after Tanrif but couldn't leave Cyanne alone. Once he realized she wouldn't respond, he hitched his horse to a cart and carried her outside. He hoped the fresh air and sun would help bring her out of her stupor, but after he placed her onto the seat, she sat immobile, staring forward. Kestryl couldn't guess from what spell she suffered but knew someone who could. Once he'd taken her to safety, he would try to figure out how to find Tanrif.

Whether Tanrif had been taken or had left of his own volition, it was impossible to say. While he knew Tanrif had grown restless, he refused to believe the boy would run off and leave his mother undefended.

More likely, someone of power had passed close, sensed the Amulet, and forced Cyanne to show him how to open the chest, or had divined the secret through sorcery. Whoever was responsible could have

taken Tanrif as a deterrent to prevent the Bladesman from following. If that were the case, the thief had to be someone who knew something of their situation. Not many did.

On the other hand, Kestryl could remember all too clearly that the Dark Duke of Vykon had once been able to spy on the Gondylarian palace, so it was possible some other sorcerer had been keeping watch, waiting only for the Bladesman to absent himself before going after the gem.

Another possibility was that Tanrif had pursued the thief in an attempt to reclaim the amulet, or perhaps he'd ridden off to get help for his mother. He looked again at the stricken woman. Cyanne knew the truth but hadn't uttered a word since his return. He had never been more worried about her.

Kestryl concentrated on driving, sparing her only an occasional glance. Periodically, he tried to initiate a conversation, but after several failures, gave up. Finally, in an attempt to reach her, he started to sing. Cyanne had always liked his voice and he thought that if she heard some of her favorite songs, it might rouse her, but nothing he tried worked.

Without thinking, he urged his horse to move faster. Unused to draft duty, the mare snorted rebelliously before complying.

"I'm sorry, Midnight, but we must make haste. Dauber Uaks will know what to do—at least I hope so."

But the horse was done talking to him. He didn't blame her.

It was all his fault—his payment for killing Theraint in cold blood. Had not Pythiana told him he would pay?

Yet why Cyanne? She was guiltless in this. How could Sheba have taken her wrath out on an innocent woman? Kestryl dug his fingers into his palm. It was not his place to question the gods. He had committed the murder. He was responsible.

Somehow Dauber would find a way to help her. Thank Sheba he'd returned to High Gondylar after his long absence. Kestryl had been stunned that long ago day when Dauber had appeared to him. The mage had been evasive as to his whereabouts but that didn't matter to the Bladesman now. All that mattered was that the mage's return gave him some small hope for Cyanne. Once she was healed, he would turn his attention to other matters.

"I will find whoever did this and blood will flow. I swear it."

Kestryl was so focused on revenge he failed to notice the single tear slide down Cyanne's cheek.

\* \* \* \*

On a clear day, the dark rock of Asoan's castle was visible for quite some distance, but today, Thulrak could not see it. He rode a large warhorse and wore full plate armor. The slight drizzle did not bother him, nor did the voices of the men behind him, raised in a song so off key as to be unrecognizable. He allowed himself a grim smile. It was not every day he got to see the Emperor.

It took an hour to reach the palace. The guards at the gate expected him and did not keep him waiting. He and his men were ushered into the courtyard and the gate closed behind them. One of the servants approached and offered to take his horse. As he dismounted, a second servant stepped forward and asked him to follow. His men remained in the court yard under the watchful eyes of the Emperor's guards.

As he followed the servant, he could not help but notice that the inside was as severe as the outside. No tapestry defaced the austerity of the solid stone walls. No shade of color could be seen save that dark

gray. It was not the first time he'd been here, but still he found the effect disconcerting. He had no doubt that was how the Emperor had planned it.

The servant ushered him into a room so large that the far end of it was lost to the distance—the throne room of the Emperor of Domina. Asoan had filled that role for a long time—too long, some whispered. Many expected him to step down soon in favor of one of his sons.

Thulrak followed the servant across the huge chamber until he could make out the Emperor in the distance. He had never been summoned before, though he had met the Emperor twice at gatherings at his father's castle. This was hardly the same thing.

When he reached the edge of the narrow purple carpet that led to the throne, he stopped and fell prostrate on the floor. For a time he lay there, barely daring to breathe. After what seemed like a very long time, the Emperor spoke.

"You may stand."

It was said that the gentleness of Asoan's voice existed only to counterpoint the hardness of his soul. Thulrak climbed to his feet and met the Emperor's eyes, careful to keep all emotion from his own.

"Do you know why I have brought you here?"

"No, Great One."

The Emperor had many soldiers from which to choose. Why Thulrak had been selected, he did not know.

"You have been chosen for a special mission, partly for your skill in combat, partly for the keenness of your mind, but mostly for your flawless Gondylarian. I want you to go to High Gondylar. It is important you let no one know from where you hail. I need information about High Gondylar's defenses. It will not, I think, be long before the throne of the Great Dukedom comes under my power."

Thulrak bowed but did not speak. No question had been asked of him.

"You are to take no more than five men. You may trust no one. You will find me a spy ... use gold, threats, manipulation, whatever is necessary. If High Gondylar is as weak as she appears, we will march and take her."

Ambition gleamed in Thulrak's eyes.

"Oh great Emperor, it shall be done."

The Emperor turned from him.

At that dismissal Thulrak retreated, humming a Dominan battle march. High Gondylar would fall, and he was the instrument chosen to bring about its destruction.

\* \* \* \*

"I think you'd better sit down." Dauber's face was unreadable.

Kestryl lowered himself into a chair.

It had taken two full days to reach the cavern complex Dauber Uaks called home. During that time, Cyanne didn't speak at all, nor did she eat, though she did allow Kestryl to give her water.

After their arrival, the Bladesman's despair continued to grow. He'd prayed to Sheba almost constantly, though he knew this was part of his penance. More and more, he found himself focusing on his anger. Someone would pay. He would see to it.

"She'll be all right, won't she?"

"That remains to be seen. There are ... complications."

"What happened to her?"

For a long time Dauber said nothing. Kestryl sensed the mage's pain and tried to remain patient. He had supreme confidence in Dauber's abilities.

"Cyanne was violently raped."

Kestryl had suspected as much, but hearing the news inflamed him.

"Who did this? Tell me, magician."

Dauber didn't answer. For a panicked second, Kestryl thought the mage would withhold the information. He didn't normally plead, but he would to get the name of the guilty party. His rage needed direction.

"You have to tell me."

"It was Tanrif," Dauber whispered.

"What!"

"He put on the Amulet of Dreaming."

Kestryl stood and started to pace. "Impossible. He didn't know how to get to the Amulet, and Cyanne wouldn't have told him."

"Nevertheless, Bladesman, that is what happened. When he raped Cyanne, Tanrif was wearing the Necklace of Elonel the Fair. The Amulet has warped his mind. It is not his fault."

"Not his fault," echoed Kestryl.

"No, it's not."

"And what would you suggest I do? Let him get away with this? Doesn't he have to pay for his crime?"

"I can't answer that. That would be for you to decide. More immediately, a decision must be made about Cyanne."

"Surely you can help her."

Dauber sighed. "I wish it were that easy. Cyanne's trauma is severe. If this were a broken arm or a flesh wound, I would have little problem healing it, but this is something on a different order. This is a problem of the mind."

Kestryl shrugged. "You have spells that affect the mind. I've seen some of them in action."

"Kestryl, there are spells that affect the human mind with great precision. And other spells that work perfectly on Ethrellen minds. But Cyanne is a little of both, and there is very little written on that subject. Her kind is very rare."

"So what are you saying ... you can't help her?"

"I'm saying that whatever I do is not without risk."

And there it was. Kestryl stopped pacing. What kind of life could Cyanne have knowing she'd been raped by her own son? What could he do to help her? When, if ever, would she recover on her own?

"What do you recommend?"

"Of all the spells I know, there is only one I would attempt, but again, I cannot guarantee an outcome."

Kestryl studied the mage. "What does it do?"

"It returns the mind of the subject to a time before some great trauma. It's meant to work on humans. I do not know how well it would work on Ethrellen, but it might."

"And if it doesn't?"

"There is no telling the result. It is possible that if it doesn't work it will simply not work, and that will be that. Perhaps it will work imperfectly. There is no way to tell. If I thought she were capable of making this choice I'd ask her, but she is not. That burden must rest on you."

Kestryl did not hesitate. He knew he was the reason for Cyanne's pain and could not bear to see her that way.

"A lifetime ago, Dathan and Amalga sent me to take Cyanne away. They said she could have no life in Gondylar and they were right. I finally understand why they sent her away. Cyanne can have no peace after what has happened. Perhaps she would be better off dead."

"There is very little chance she will die, my friend."

Kestryl nodded. There was no decision to make. When he'd brought Cyanne here, he had known Dauber was his best hope.

"Cast your spell, mage."

Dauber bowed briefly. "I will prepare and let you know when I am ready."

Kestryl didn't even notice Dauber Uaks leave the room.

\* \* \* \*

Parth stared at the madness around him. It was not his first meeting of the Council of Lords, but it was certainly the most chaotic. When he'd first become bladesman, there had been no Council. That changed during Penthor's final year on the throne.

The more powerful title holders and land owners formed a body that would act as an advisor to the Duke, lest the interests of the nobility be forgotten. They would look at the current political and social trends to see which might be harmful to their own holdings, and advise accordingly.

It was a way to put pressure on a Duke who too often failed to take into account the most important people. It had seemed to many of the Lords that Penthor was more interested in the common man than those who mattered. Penthor, unwilling to be pressured by the Council, was eventually forced to abdicate. Dathan had often warned Penthor it would be impossible to rule High Gondylar without the support of the nobility; Penthor hadn't believed it. He had learned differently.

When the Council had dared to consider open rebellion, Penthor had had to choose between using the army on his own subjects or stepping down. Parth was still not certain he'd made the right choice.

With Penthor gone, there had been nothing to stand in the Council's way. They'd selected one of their own to rule the Dukedom—Virno of the house of Therak. Duke Virno had shown his appreciation by giving the Council of Lords legal status, granting it many powers, including the ability to select a new Duke should the need arise.

Which is why Parth knew it was unlikely that even a single Lord mourned Theraint's passing. They were no doubt all delighted that Theraint had named no successor, nor had he sired an heir. The Gondylarian throne stood vacant, hence the ensuing chaos. Each faction had its own interests in mind, and more than half wanted the throne for themselves.

Parth watched while they argued, certain no one was listening to anyone else. Only Teryl of the House of Charnath remained silent, watching and waiting. Often, it was Teryl who brought some sort of order to the assembly, though officially the Council had no leader.

At last, when enough time had been wasted, Teryl stood and cleared his throat. A few of the Lords continued to argue, but soon even they fell silent.

The House of Charnath was one of the three most powerful houses in High Gondylar, so Teryl's opinion carried much weight. Every eye was on him, but he did not rush. Instead, he slowly looked around the room, making sure to meet each gaze. He did not speak until the long, slow pan was completed.

"My friends, this bickering will get us nowhere. I have listened to as much of it as I can take. You fight over the throne like a pack of dogs fighting for a scrap of meat and in doing so weaken the Dukedom. Tell me, do you think Domina is sitting still while our country deteriorates around us? What kind of men are we that we would think only of ourselves at the expense of our homeland? I love High Gondylar and would save her. To that end, I will sit on the throne as regent until a Duke can be selected."

The silence was complete. If Teryl desired the throne for himself, none of the other houses had the power to stop him. Before any objections could be voiced, he continued.

"As I have said before, I have no ambition. I am satisfied to be Lord of my holdings and certainly have no desire to sit on the throne longer than necessary. But until a Duke can be selected, High Gondylar must have direction. Consequently, I will absent myself from this Council. When you have made a decision, I will gladly step down."

Without another word, he walked slowly from the room, followed by his advisor. The ensuing madness was worse than it had been before he'd spoken.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl sat silently, watching Dauber Uaks cast his spell. Cyanne lay in Dauber's bed, the largest and most comfortable in the caverns. She was naked, but covered with a linen sheet. Beneath, she was well restrained. While this was not usually a part of the process, Dauber thought it prudent to see the effects of the spell before allowing Cyanne her freedom.

Kestryl watched as the mage chanted and gestured. He didn't understand the language, though he'd heard it many times before. The old speech was difficult to learn, and he had never taken the time. The Bladesman depended on steel and honor to handle life's injustices. Which is why when he couldn't solve his problems by sword, he returned to the caves of Dauber Uaks.

For a long time the mage droned on, almost lulling the Bladesman to sleep. When he stopped, Kestryl

turned his attention to the bed. For several seconds, Cyanne lay still, then she opened her eyes. When she spoke, her voice was stronger than it had been in a long time.

"Kestryl? Where am I? What is the meaning of this? Who is this man?"

Beneath the sheet, she struggled against the restraints. Kestryl hurried to her.

"Are you all right, M'lady?"

"How did we get here? Where's Tanrif?"

"You are in the caves of Dauber Uaks."

"The mage?"

"None other."

"And what has become of my husband?"

Kestryl's heart skipped a beat. He had been prepared to explain her son's absence. This was something he had not counted on.

"Your Highness, what is the last thing you remember?" asked Dauber.

"We were in the Temple of the Sarithan Assassins. Now we're here. Someone had better tell me what's going on."

"The Fortress collapsed, M'lady," said Kestryl. "I used the gauntlet to teleport us out, but couldn't reach Tanrif in time. The roof was going to give."

"You left him there?"

"M'lady believe me, there was no way to save him. We'd all be dead if I'd tried."

Cyanne tried to sit up, and Dauber moved to unbind her.

"Better I should have died, than abandon the man I loved."

"No, M'lady, it is not better. Tanrif would not have wanted that. He commanded me to bring you to safety. It was an order, and I was honor bound to obey."

Cyanne had started crying and Kestryl could not make out her words for some time. He reached out a hand to comfort her, but she slapped it away. Afterwards, he stood silently, reliving a nightmare he thought long behind him. Finally, when the tears subsided and Cyanne had been freed, she sat on the bed, the cover wrapped around her pale, shaking body.

For a long time, no one spoke. Then Cyanne looked at the Bladesman.

"I never had the chance to tell him, Kestryl."

"Tell him?"

Cyanne's eyes hardened. "Surely you remember I am with child."

Dauber stepped in before he could answer. "Your Highness, please rest now. I must talk with your bladesman, but I shall return him to you shortly."



She looked from one man to the other before answering. "Very well."

She lay back and closed her eyes, but it was clear she was not sleeping. Dauber gestured for Kestryl to follow.

Once the door had closed behind them, Kestryl grabbed the mage by the arms.

"What the hell happened?"

"The spell was successful."

"Are you insane? It's taken her back eighteen years."

Dauber sighed and pulled away.

"Kestryl, the spell takes a person back to before a major trauma. It is clear that Cyanne's feeling that she had abandoned Tanrif was never resolved. That trauma defined the rest of her life. The spell was successful. She doesn't remember anything that happened after, and if you take my advice, you won't tell her. Pretend you have only recently returned from the Islands of Dawn."

"Won't she notice how much older I am? Won't it be a shock for her the first time she sees her reflection?"

"I took the liberty of modifying her perceptions while in her mind. She will see herself, and you, as she always has. There is no way she will be able to know how much time has passed."

"But she thinks she's pregnant."

"She is."

Kestryl wanted to strike the mage but held his anger. "You didn't think that a fact worth mentioning?"

"I didn't know until I cast the spell and sensed the new life within her. Then she regained consciousness. I'm sorry."

"But it's her son's child. You can't let her carry it."

"She doesn't know, Kestryl. And if you don't tell her, she never will. If you do tell her, you risk the return of the memories, and her previous condition."

Kestryl walked away. When the High Priestess of Sheba had told him he would pay, he'd never envisioned anything like this. The rage within faded. For the first time ever, he would have to lie to his Duchess. He would stay with her and protect her, and watch her pregnancy progress. His pain would grow within, an imperfect reflection of the child's development.

For a long time Kestryl wandered the caverns, lost in a maze of despair from which he feared he would never emerge.

\* \* \* \*

Cyanne couldn't hear what was being said behind the door, though she was well aware there was something she wasn't being told. The Gauntlet of Teleportation had taken her, Tanrif and Kestryl from the Darkdom of Vykon to Fandar in the Islands of Dawn. There had been no loss of consciousness at that time. The mage had asked her to tell him the last thing she remembered. Was there something wrong with her mind? She thought back.

The sounds of battle, the thrill of the fight. She had been using Lordsblade, and it had taken hold of her mind with her blessing. Tanrif had died, and without him she didn't care what happened to her.

But then, a miracle. The Bladesman had blown the Horn of Tenithior, and the warrior Dukes of High Gondylar had risen from the dead. Even Dathan, her father, had been resurrected, but strangely that hadn't made much of an impression. She had not grown up knowing her father and, though she would have been interested in speaking with him, his return would hardly have made a difference in her adult life.

But Tanrif had come back. Even Lordsblade's control could not overpower the love she held for her husband.

The Dukes had gone for the support pillars, and Tanrif had been in trouble. She'd thrown him Lordsblade. She remembered the explosion and waking up here, wherever here was. But she had been clothed then and was naked now. And she hadn't been tied to a bed.

She knew then part of her memory was missing. It was clear Kestryl did not want her to know, so she would not ask him. She would keep the realization to herself and look to solve the mystery.

She was the daughter of Dathan and Amalga, and no one would keep the truth from her—not even her Bladesman.

\* \* \* \*

It was not rare to see the town square of the City of Crossed Swords full, so to the casual observer it made little impression. Even those at the center of the disturbance didn't suspect what was about to happen would become part of history.

Bone stood in the center of the makeshift wooden platform, surveying the surrounding crowd. Behind him and to the left stood the heir to the Gondylarian throne. Bone had selected Tanrif's garb—a brown v-neck tunic to draw attention to the Amulet of Dreaming, a matching leather jerkin, breeches and boots. Dressed that way he looked remarkably like his father. Bone raised a hand, and gradually the buzz of conversation faded until silence replaced it.

Bone's deep voice carried easily over the gathering.

"Citizens of the Crossed Swords, I bring news that could change your lives."

The worldly crowd did not react. It was not the first time they had heard such.

"Many of you know me to be a man of secrecy, though I have long lived among you. I am a mercenary and like many of you, I have found life in High Gondylar has recently grown more complex."

Several of the crowd nodded agreement, though they couldn't know where he was leading.

"All of our current problems can trace their way back to the palace at Gondylar. We have gone so long without a leader, sometimes it becomes hard to remember that we are Gondylarians."

More nods from the crowd.

"More and more, we are seeing Dominan soldiers this side of the Serpent, and more often than not it is our blood that is spilled. When was the last time any of you have felt secure riding out from the city?"

He paused, letting the question sink in. In truth, it had never been safe in that area of Gondylar, but it had been safer. Once, the river called the Serpent had been enough of a barrier to deter Dominan troops from an excess of activity in Gondylarian lands, but lately it had been less so. And the people surrounding

him knew it.

"What of it?" shouted a man in the front. "We all know that these are hard times. How is it you can help us, and what do you stand to gain?"

Bone looked directly at the man and smiled. It was the exact question for which he'd waited.

"If we had a strong Duke on the throne, Domina would think twice about such raids, don't you think?"

Half the crowd wore looks of confusion, while the other half leaned forward expectantly.

"The man behind me is the rightful heir to the throne of High Gondylar. His name is Tanrif. He was Duke before Penthor."

"Tanrif?" shouted a tall man from the crowd. "The one who avenged Denworceno's death?"

"None other," replied Bone, smiling.

The crowd began to murmur. It was a long time before it grew quiet enough for the assassin to continue. The tall man made his way through the throng until he stood just before the stage.

"How do we know that it's really him?" asked a red-faced woman.

Bone had anticipated the question, but before he could answer another man spoke up.

"It is him. I can swear to it."

All eyes turned toward the speaker, who was also making his way to the stage. The man who had first spoken seemed short compared to the new arrival, who was a good deal heavier and a decade or two older as well. Bone's eyes widened in surprise. He had not often been lucky in his life, having always to rely on his skill. Luck such as this was unprecedented.

"Come up, Lord Letheren. Let everyone see and hear you."

The man stepped up onto the stage. If the City of Crossed Swords had a ruler, Lord Letheren was it. If he accepted Tanrif as the heir, no one in the Crossed Swords would doubt the legitimacy of his claim to the throne.

"You all know me. I have lived my entire life in the Crossed Swords and owned Denworceno's Den when it was still called Renegades. Twenty years ago, I used to tend my own bar. Denworceno worked out of there. Shortly before his death, a man came to me, asking me if I knew where Denworceno was to be found. This man—" He swung a meaty arm around to point at Tanrif. "A few days later, I was witness to the battle where Skandl ruthlessly took Denworceno's life. This man was there that day. He rode at the time with Kestryl the Bladesman and the Duchess Cyanne, whom he later married. He killed Skandl, thus avenging my friend's death. I, for one, am his man."

With those words, he knelt before Tanrif and bowed his head. It only took Tanrif a moment to overcome his surprise.

"Arise, Lord Letheren. I am proud to acknowledge your allegiance."

Bone turned his gaze upon the crowd. "Who else will swear allegiance to the rightful heir?"

The crowd surged forward as one, each eager to swear to the throne. They had grown tired of the raids and the doubt. It did not matter who led them, as long as they were led, and in these parts Tanrif was all

but legend. It would not have been a hard tale to peddle, even without Lord Letheren's intervention.

It took a long time for each person to kneel. Just before the last of it was done, a man on horseback, bearing the official seal of the palace at Gondylar, rode toward them. Bone's eyes narrowed, and the people who had not yet sworn allegiance faded back into the crowd, waiting to see what news the messenger bore before taking their oaths.

"Lord Letheren!" called the messenger. "Lord Letheren!"

"Up here."

The royal messenger rode to the stage ignoring the crowd, who quickly scattered out of his way. Letheren stepped down, but gave Tanrif a glance before reaching for the paper. He read it quickly, ignoring the fact that he had become the center of attention. After a short time, he looked up. His voice, while not as deep as Bone's, carried just the same.

"Duke Theraint is dead. He has been murdered."

The crowd surged forward, reaching for the stage with an almost fanatic frenzy. In the back of the crowd, a man's voice called out: "Long live Duke Tanrif."

It wasn't long before the entire assemblage picked up the chant.

In the center, Tanrif looked around at the press of bodies and, seizing the opportunity, spoke.

"I need men to follow me. We will march from city to city and, when I have been accepted, we will take the throne."

The cry that went up from the crowd was like nothing the city had ever heard. People emerged from buildings to see what was happening and more still looked on from windows. It was not long before the square was more packed than it had ever been. Bone stared at the throng in amazement.

Tanrif's father had had the luck of the gods, and it seemed as if his son had inherited it, along with his looks. The sea of people took up the chant until nothing else could be heard.

"Tanrif! Tanrif! Tanrif!"

Bone joined the chant himself. It was, he noted, almost a religious experience.

\* \* \* \*

Thulrak stared at the man on the stage and the people surrounding it. Was it possible he was looking at the lost Duke of High Gondylar? If so, the Emperor's invasion plans might come to naught.

Tanrif's exploits were well-known even in Domina. During his brief reign, the young Duke had managed many feats that, had the actual events not been verified by sources beyond reproach, would not have been believed. If that man wanted the throne, he would take it, and Domina's chances for conquering the Dukedom would be jeopardized. Though he hadn't planned on sending a report this soon, he felt this was information the Emperor must have.

He ran swiftly to the inn where he and his team had taken rooms. He opened the door to his and, ignoring Timor's questioning stare, walked to the pack on the floor. He reached inside, removed a stoneware jug and placed it gently on the table. He took a small square piece of paper from his pouch and, using the quill and ink already on the table, began to write.

Should the message be intercepted, it would reveal little. The code he used was a complex one, consisting of various dots, crosses and arrows. He kept the message brief. After he finished writing, he placed the quill down on the table, and turned his attention to the jug.

Carefully, he worked the cork free and placed a drinking glass over the opening. In less than a minute, a two-inch long beetle crawled from the container into the glass. The insect walked up the inside surface easily. When it reached the top, Thulrak lifted the glass and placed it down on the table's surface, so the insect could not escape. He replaced the stopper.

Thulrak had used such beetles before, though only the richest nobles in Domina could afford them. Their discovery more than fifty years ago was one of the Empire's best-kept secrets—for good reason. It was the one resource that gave Dominan intelligence a distinct advantage over that of other countries. The sangreth was not in anyway conspicuous, no different from many other species. It was a heavy-bodied black beetle with short furry antennae. Its six stunted legs were somewhat ineffective; however, the sangreth was one of the strongest fliers in the world, and certainly the fastest.

He rolled the message carefully, took the creature from the glass and grasped it firmly. If allowed, it would fly away. Holding it down with his left hand, he lifted its right wing and carefully slipped the rolled paper into the narrow pouch attached to the body. The pouch was a natural feature of the sangreth's anatomy. Thulrak didn't understand its significance. It did, however, hold a small paper nicely in place.

Years of practice had made him an expert at handling sangreth. He brought it to the room's single window. The sky was just now beginning to darken, but he knew that night would not interfere with the creature's return. No matter how far a sangreth was removed from its nest, it always, somehow, found its way back, faster than most people would believe.

This one's nest was completely enclosed by glass in a garden at the Emperor's palace. When it arrived, a handler would catch it, remove the message and place it back into the nest, where it would breed. It would only take a day or so to get there, while Thulrak and his party had taken several. He watched the beetle until it disappeared from sight, then placed the jug back in the pack with care. Such creatures were expensive and he was responsible for them. Timor watched but did not speak, as was proper, considering his lower rank. If Thulrak did not address him, he would maintain his silence.

"Alert the others. We leave by first light. I want to be in Gondylar by week's end."

Timor bowed before backing from the room. "As you wish, Commander."

Thulrak watched him go. He desperately hoped that the man standing on stage was not Tanrif. He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes, but the image of the scene at the town square would not leave him.

\* \* \* \*

Several days later, Cyanne was no closer to learning what had happened after they'd teleported away from the Fortress-Temple. Kestryl had been unusually silent during that time, and while the mage had been cordial, it was clear he would not be telling Cyanne anything. The silence gave her a lot of time to think.

Dauber Uaks had given her free run of the caverns, and she spent a lot of time exploring. Unlike the Darkdom of Vykon, Dauber's home was brightly furnished, resembling more a country house than the lair of a great mage. Sitting before a fire in a comfortable chair, staring at the paintings that adorned the walls, it was easy to forget she was in a cave.

Cyanne discovered one room filled with sculptures and tapestries. It quickly became her favorite. Dauber, apparently, was a serious collector. It must have cost him a good amount of gold to set this

place up. The room was comfortably furnished, and she spent much time sitting in an overstuffed chair that gave her a good view of a sculpture of Iorana. Not far away, a bust of Delran, her father's father, occupied an ornate shelf on the wall.

At first, she could think about little but her husband. The first time she'd watched him die was on a boat, sailing between two of the Islands of Dawn. She watched the blood ooze from a pair of wounds that marked the beginning of the end. The assassin had paid for his crime, but it wasn't enough.

Cyanne had held him until he'd passed beyond the veil, then fell apart completely. She remembered the long night of anger and despair. Her biggest regret was not having told Tanrif she was pregnant. He went to his death never knowing about his son.

When Kestryl later blew the Horn of Tenithior and summoned the warrior Dukes of High Gondylar from beyond the grave, Tanrif had appeared with them. Her father was there too but, possessed by Lordsblade, Cyanne could only think of one thing—killing more Assassins.

During the battle there had been no time to talk, but Cyanne was thrilled that she'd finally be able to inform her husband of her pregnancy. Fate had given her a second chance. How unfair that Tanrif should twice be denied that knowledge.

The Bladesman had assured her Tanrif was dead, but did she know that? Had he not cheated death once? Yet something inside told her he was gone and that he wouldn't be coming back. It was more than intuition and she didn't understand it. The certainty was more than it should have been given the situation.

And there was another detail that bothered her.

Ethrellen women not only know they're pregnant, but also know beyond all doubt whether the child will be a boy or girl. Cyanne had been pregnant with a boy. She had already decided to name him Tanrif, after his father. It was the least she could do, considering the circumstances of his birth.

Yet now, she was certain she was carrying a girl. It made no sense at all. She had never heard of an Ethrellen wrongly determining her child's gender. If such things did happen, no one had told her.

She didn't mention the anomaly to either the Bladesman or Dauber Uaks. While it was possible the mage might have some understanding in this matter, it was also true that both men were keeping something from her.

Better they didn't know of her suspicions until she had time to work them out for herself.

\* \* \* \*

The Bladesman's anger grew by the day. The High Priestess of Sheba had warned him this would happen, but that didn't prepare him for the press of feelings. Feelings such as he'd never experienced before. It wasn't only anger.

For eighteen years, he'd not only accepted Cyanne's delusions, but had insisted her son do the same. During those years, he served her as if she were still Duchess. She didn't need him as bladesman. What Cyanne needed was a man. On that count, he had failed.

Finally, he understood he was in love with her. After all the years of service it had never occurred to him. His love for Cyanne wasn't the love of a servant for a ruler, as had been his feelings toward Dathan and Amalga, but was something deeper and more intimate. Only his years of training, and perhaps too the age difference between them, had prevented him from realizing it.

But the feelings arrived too late. He couldn't tell her now. She didn't remember the last eighteen years. In

her mind, Tanrif was only recently dead and any attempt to replace him at this point was doomed.

Also, she blamed Kestryl for making her abandon Tanrif. It was unfair, but there was nothing he could say in his defense—nothing more than had already been said and rejected. Cyanne, whom he loved, would never forgive him.

Each day he spent with her ate away at his sanity. He could have saved her and didn't, for he waited too long to recognize his feelings. This fueled his anger to the point where he could barely look at her, let alone talk to her. So he played the part of bladesman, all the time the cancer growing inside until he felt it would consume him.

It came to him one morning in a flash. Kestryl knew what had to be done to put this behind him. He would have to find and kill Cyanne's son. He would have to avenge the atrocity that had destroyed the woman he loved. But there was no way he could do it if he stayed with Cyanne.

Yet how could he leave her? Now, at her age, pregnant again, she would be the most vulnerable she'd ever been. Could he abandon her at a time like this?

It didn't matter. He was no good to her this way anyway. It would only be a matter of time before he broke down and told her everything, and that he couldn't bear. The pain of leaving her would tear him apart, but the pain of lying to her every day was killing him. For the first time in his life, he had no choice but to run.

But first, he would have to provide for her protection. He owed her that much. Where could he leave her? Dauber Uaks would not want her on a permanent basis, nor could he return her to Gondylar. After much consideration, he could only come up with a single idea.

He would bring her back to the Shop of Demendil. Demendil, as far as he knew, still owned the shop in Stratus and would not shirk his duty, even if he was older. Of course, Demendil might have closed the shop by now, or even returned to High Gondylar. There was no way to find out without taking the trip.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he became. Demendil was his only hope. He prayed to Sheba that the weapon smith was still in Stratus.

For there was no way he could stay with Cyanne and remain sane.

\* \* \* \*

"M'lady it is time for us to go."

Cyanne was surprised by the announcement. She had thought he'd brought her to the caves of Dauber Uaks to keep her safe until the pregnancy had run its course.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you back to the Shop of Demendil."

Cyanne's eyes widened as if the idea had never occurred to her. Still, she sensed the decision involved more than reuniting her with Demendil and Lylea.

"Why? Shouldn't we wait here until my daughter is born?"

She could almost feel Kestryl wince and wondered again why he reacted so every time she brought up the child.

Kestryl had an answer ready for her. "M'lady, since you are no longer interested in the throne, there is no reason for you to stay here. Your eye color immediately identifies your lineage and thus makes High Gondylar more dangerous for you. In Stratus, many have never heard of Ethrellen. You will be safe there. Unless you would like to return to Gondylar and sit on the throne."

"We've already discussed that. I would be in no less danger there. Let Penthor rule High Gondylar. He was my father's choice anyway. I'm sure he's better at it. I came to see my parent's death avenged and have done so."

"Precisely. So there is no reason to stay and every reason to go. Once you are safe in the Shop, I can return to High Gondylar and help secure it."

Cyanne could not mask her surprise. "Oh, of course."

She had thought Kestryl would remain with her. Foolishness. His place was with the Duke. He was a warrior, not a midwife.

The decision made, neither brought it up again, though Cyanne lived in dread of the day Kestryl would no longer be by her side.

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The next morning, Kestryl lowered Cyanne down the cliff face by rope and climbed down after. He navigated the wall effortlessly, while Cyanne watched amazed. When he reached the bottom, they started toward the cart.

"I never knew you could climb like that."

"I can't. But I grew up in these caves, raised by Dauber. It is a climb I have made hundreds, if not thousands of times."

"I didn't know. Actually, I don't know much about your past before you met my grandfather."

Kestryl smiled at the memory then grew serious. "I wasn't living before I became a servant of the throne."

"Surely that's not true, Kestryl. You weren't born the day you knelt to Delran."

"You're right. I was born a year earlier."

Cyanne looked to see if he was joking. He smiled and moved more quickly.

Cyanne spent the next several hours trying to find out more about the Bladesman's past, but apparently he felt he'd said enough.

It was only a distraction. The secrets she was most interested in were far more recent and considerably more important.

\* \* \* \*

It took three days to reach the north coast of High Gondylar. During that time they spoke, though never about anything of consequence. It was as if they were casual acquaintances. Strangely enough that might not have been far from the truth.

While the Bladesman had known Cyanne for close to twenty years, Cyanne's altered memory only placed them together for about six months, during which time she had been largely preoccupied by Tanrif.



Kestryl didn't speak much for fear of giving something away. Cyanne was still in mourning over Tanrif's death and didn't often feel like talking anyway. So the Bladesman spent much of the time concentrating on their surroundings.

Athlana was nothing like the Bladesman remembered. The city had grown so large, it took him twice as long to reach the docks from the city's outskirts as it had the last time he'd come this way. A whole new section had been added.

The old city, where the port was located, was more run down than he remembered. The condition of the buildings reminded him of his recent visit to Gondylar. He hoped that the entire country did not suffer so.

Ships for hire were abundant, but finding one willing to cross The Mistress proved more difficult than he had guessed. It was easier, he found, to buy passage on a ship going to the Sunset Isles. Hopefully, at the port of Dusk, he would find a ship bound for Stratus.

He eventually decided on a mid-sized merchant vessel called Sea Stalker. It was, he felt, nicely inconspicuous. Kestryl didn't believe anyone was looking for them, but a lifetime of caution was hard to overcome. He booked passage for himself and Cyanne, but gave the names Tharik and Charona to the captain.

It would be two days before Sea Stalker set sail, which gave them time to explore. They took a room in one of the more pleasant inns located in the newer section of the city and spent the remaining time walking around the streets, occasionally stopping in shops to make small purchases.

The irony of the situation was not lost on the Bladesman. If he had made his feelings known when he had the chance, or even recognized them himself, he could have been happy with Cyanne. Instead, the days spent in Athlana were bleak parodies of what might have been.

Cyanne buried herself in exploring the town, not wanting to think. Sometimes, she was able to distract herself from all that had happened, and during those moments she felt truly at peace. Then her gaze would shift to the Bladesman and the moment would be lost.

She could feel his pain. At first she thought he missed Tanrif, but she rejected that. While Tanrif's death had hurt him, she felt also an underlying unrelated anger. She didn't understand the reason for this, and it hurt her that she could not help him. The Bladesman remained closed to her. If he would not reveal the source of his pain, there was nothing she could do about it.

She spent time thinking about her missing memories. This gave her a bit of distraction from her grief, though she made no further progress on the matter.

Perhaps when they were aboard the ship, there would be less distraction and she would be able to interrogate the Bladesman more forcefully. She was still the Duchess of High Gondylar, and if he continued his silence, she would command him to tell her the truth.

\* \* \* \*

The day Sea Stalker set sail was as fine a day as one could wish for. The sky was blue and clear, the relentless tropical sun was softened by a strong breeze from the west and the docks were like a painting by an artist who overused colors.

The brown wood of the pier was set off by the pastels of the shops that lined its length, the vivid sails of the fishing vessels and the unlikely combinations of colors worn by many of the sailors. It seemed to Cyanne that the only requirement to a seafarer's garb was an unlikely combination of shades.

Cyanne watched as the pier diminished into the distance before disappearing completely. She sensed someone watching and turned. She was not surprised to find the Bladesman staring. He schooled his expression quickly, but she still caught a hint of what it had been. Anger again. Was he angry with her?

She turned back to the ocean and leaned on the rail. It had been on a ship like this that Tanrif had died. He had been stabbed by the captain of the ship, who had in turn been dispatched by the Bladesman. How long had it been? A week? Two? A month?

She thought of him then, Tanrif. She could picture him, sword in each hand, sparring with the Bladesman. How skillful he was! She had been so proud.

She shook her head. No, Tanrif didn't fight with two swords; he fought with one. She toyed with the memory and it seemed real. He was sparring with the Bladesman on a grassy plain, surrounded by hills. Had she dreamt it? She didn't think so.

She decided to test the memory. When she looked again, Kestryl was looking out to sea.

"I still miss him," she said.

"I know you do."

"He admired you, you know. You taught him much."

Kestryl turned to study her face, apparently concerned. She ignored the expression and swept on.

"I loved watching the two of you spar. Two men with four swords; one wouldn't think you could move so fast. I could watch the two of you spar forever. I remember how long Tanrif stood against you. It surprised me."

She felt him tense and knew the truth of it, no matter what he answered.

"M'lady, your husband fought with but a single blade."

"How silly of me to have forgotten."

Cyanne turned back to the sea. Kestryl leaned on the rail beside her, but spoke no more. She thought furiously. If the memory was real, what did that mean?

It meant Kestryl and Tanrif had sparred at some point after the final battle. Tanrif had survived. Why didn't Kestryl want her to know that? Had something again happened to her husband? Did he leave her? No, Tanrif would never do that.

Then she thought about how his personality had changed. It had been a different man who had come to claim her from the Darkdom of Vykon. Harder—more distant. Had the manipulations of the Goddess of Magic hurt him so badly? If only she knew the truth.

Still, the idea Tanrif was still alive filled her with hope.

\* \* \* \*

Parth stood before the Regent of High Gondylar, waiting to be recognized. In the two weeks since Teryl had taken over, he'd been more of a Duke than the throne had seen since Penthor had abdicated fifteen years earlier. It was a shame he didn't want the position.

Teryl was speaking with a Lord of the House of Freyrath, a family almost as influential as the House of Charnath, Teryl's lineage. The only other house nearly as influential was Therak. The three houses,

Therak, Freyrath and Charnath were the richest and most powerful political forces in the Dukedom. If two agreed on a Duke, it would be done. With Teryl absent from the Council, only two had a voice. Years of competition made it unlikely they would agree on anything, much less who would sit on the throne.

"Surely you can do better than that," said the Regent. "I will do my duty, but I have my own holdings to attend to, and I'm anxious to return to my family."

"My Lord, we are doing the best we can, but you have attended your share of Council meetings. Each time a hopeful gains momentum, someone else tries to shift the balance against them. Several people, notably those who have no shot at the throne, are trying to convince the rest of us that we should crown you."

"I don't want to be Duke. I have enough trouble running my own properties."

The Lord didn't speak, but it was obvious from the look on his face that he agreed with those of the Council who wanted to crown the Regent. Teryl sighed.

"Very well. See what you can do to accelerate things."

With the barest of bows the Lord left the throne room. The Regent turned his attention to the bladesman. Until now they had said little to each other, since there had been nothing of consequence to say. That had changed this morning. Teryl stifled a yawn, though whether it was born of fatigue or boredom Parth couldn't tell.

"So, bladesman, what news do you bring me?"

Parth cleared his throat. He was not sure how his tidings would be received. "One of my informants just rode in from the frontier with some rather startling news. It would seem there is a man in the City of Crossed Swords who says that he is Duke Tanrif and apparently, he is accepted as such, at least there. He has, it is said, an eye on the throne."

Teryl shrugged and yawned again. "Is that it then?"

Parth, surprised, controlled his anger. "Is it not enough?"

Teryl spoke slowly, as if speaking to a child. "It is not uncommon that some rabble-rouser will claim lineage to the throne, even during peaceful times. How much more likely is it now?"

"There is more," said Parth quietly. "I am not certain he is a pretender. There is much evidence that supports the fact that he may be who he claims."

The Regent's eyebrows rose. "I do not, cannot, believe that Tanrif lives after all these years. You say the evidence is compelling?"

"Eyewitnesses, many quite reliable, swear he is the same man who defeated the mercenary Skandl." Not to mention Kestryl's words about the rightful heir.

"It has been almost twenty years since the Duke's disappearance. Honestly, bladesman, if that is all there is to substantiate the claim, I would not much heed it."

"Were that all the evidence, I would not have called it compelling. The man who claims to be Duke also wears an Amulet of Dreaming around his neck. What are the odds of that?"

"Are you certain? Could it be a fake?"

"My man doesn't think so. The pretender, if that's what he is, already has quite a number of followers. As if that were not enough, he and a small army have left the city traveling south, to where, I cannot say. If I had to guess I would say Wildor might be his destination. Especially if he searches for men."

Teryl nodded. Clearly he was thinking along the same lines. Parth waited while the Regent turned the situation over in his mind.

"Well then," said the Regent finally, "I think we should ready the army, just in case it comes down to that."

"You mean to fight him then, M'lord?"

"I mean to find out whether he is who he says he is. If it turns out that he is Tanrif, the throne belongs to him, and maybe, just maybe, his reputation will keep the jackals at bay. If he is an impostor, he must be stopped. It is important that none of the Council finds out about this. It would not do to have the rightful ruler assassinated on the whim of a cretin with ambition. Let's keep this between us until we know more, although I'm sure that it won't be long before the rumors catch up to us."

Teryl stopped speaking and looked thoughtful. Parth waited patiently for him to continue.

"You knew Tanrif personally, didn't you?"

"Yes, M'lord."

"Good. I want you to go and seek out this pretender. If he is who he claims to be, guard him and bring him to Gondylar. If he's not, kill him."

Parth smiled, and bowed lower than he had in many years.

"It will be a pleasure, M'lord."

\* \* \* \*

The Bladesman stood at the fore of the Sea Stalker, watching shore approach. They had made it to the Sunset Isles in just under seven weeks.

The islands were nothing like he remembered. When last he saw it, Dusk had been no larger than a small town. Now it was a good-sized city, almost as large as Stratus and somewhat larger than Athlana. Its streets, never having been widened, were too narrow for the flow of traffic and, as a result, getting from one place to another took much longer than it should have.

The Sunset Isles had become a trade center and had apparently prospered in the last two decades. The vast market offered goods from the Skyshore Realm, Gondylar, Domina—even the Borderlands. This last was something new and displayed the fact that even the Borderlands had prospered during his years of seclusion.

He and Cyanne made their way through the crowded marketplace. They needed to purchase supplies before attempting to find a northbound ship. True to his cautious nature, Kestryl continued to use his alias.

Cyanne looked about her, wonder clearly displayed on her face. This was one of the finest markets she'd ever seen. The quality of merchandise was excellent, as were the prices. If buying in quantity, this would be the place to go.

Cyanne stopped frequently to look at clothes and accessories, while Kestryl waited patiently. Twice she purchased looser outfits, since the dresses she owned were already tight on her, and there were still five months to go before she gave birth. Left with no choice, Kestryl dealt with the situation as best he could, reserving the bulk of his anger for the child's father.

He grimaced when the thought struck him and again swore he would see Tanrif dead. He was so lost in thought, he didn't notice the older man approach. The man studied him closely before launching himself. Before Kestryl could react, he was caught in a bear hug of immense proportions.

"Kestryl, I thought you were dead!"

Many eyes turned towards them. Then the Bladesman got his first clear look at the man holding him.

"I'm afraid you must have mistaken me for another," he said coldly. He hoped the man would take the hint.

Cyanne didn't immediately recognize him, though she thought she should. He was an older man, with weathered skin and a broad smile. He spoke Gondylarian with no hint of an accent. It was the sound of his voice that brought it back to her, along with a stunning revelation.

"Don't you recognize him, Kestryl. It's Sir Andres. It's been a long time, apparently."

Kestryl returned the embrace then. When his mouth was right next to Andres' ear, he whispered.

"All is not as it seems. Don't say anything." The Bladesman pulled back. "Well met, my friend. Is there anywhere we can talk privately?"

"Follow me."

Without waiting for a reply, Andres turned and began to weave his way through the throng with the skill of one long used to it. Several times he had to turn and wait for them to catch up. He led them to the docks. Once there, he pointed to a beautiful yacht. On its side, painted in red flowing Gondylarian script, were the words *The Duchess*. Cyanne smiled in delight when she realized that the ship belonged to Andres and he'd named it in her honor.

Andres gestured. The Bladesman and Cyanne walked across the gangway. Only when they were safely aboard and below deck did the three embrace.

Andres asked question after question. The Bladesman answered as quickly as he could, with Cyanne breaking in often to embellish his words. Andres' eyebrows rose often, as the story of the Duchess' abduction and the battle with the Sarithan Assassins unfolded. He was astounded at Tanrif's amazing return from the dead.

Kestryl told the last part about the final battle with the Sarithans and how they'd teleported away to safety. It was the moment Cyanne had been waiting for.

"And what happened then, Kestryl?"

Andres looked from one to the other, not understanding the sudden tension between them.

### Chapter Three—Momentum

Wildor was as the City of Crossed Swords had once been, but while the latter over the last years had attained some level of respectability, Wildor remained lawless. It was difficult to tell who was in charge, because that person often changed with the month.

It was important to establish the right contact, since dealing with certain people precluded dealing with others. Tanrif still had not made a decision when Vyanda showed up.

It was approaching evening when Bone ushered her into his presence.

"Your Highness, may I present the Lady Vyanda. She comes alone, unarmed and at her own peril. I warned her that she might not enjoy the consequences."

Tanrif raised an eyebrow.

She bowed formally. When she rose, he could see she was almost his height, but her bearing made her seem taller. Her straight black hair fell loosely upon her shoulders, and she shook her head to remove loose strands from her eyes. Her body was slender and athletic, though the loose fitting riding breeches and tunic didn't try to accentuate it. It was easy for Tanrif to deduce that though she was attractive, Vyanda was not vain. If she weren't one of Wildor's most influential people, he might have enjoyed her pleasures, but he thought that business and pleasure would not mix, especially in her case.

"The city of Wildor welcomes you, Tanrif."

She was one of the few people who didn't address him by title. He looked her over for a time before replying. If he'd been trying to make her nervous, he would have been disappointed. She met his gaze, seemingly content to remain silent until he spoke.

"I didn't realize you were the voice of this city."

She smiled briefly. "Many of Wildor's inhabitants are equally ignorant. No surprise, since that is how I have arranged matters."

Anger flashed in Tanrif's eyes. "I have killed people for saying less."

"I don't think that you will kill me before you hear what I have to say. Afterwards, I think you will find me too profitable to kill. Certainly, I am willing to risk it."

Tanrif kept the surprise from his face. "I'm listening."

Vyanda pulled up a chair and sat. "You need men, I have them. Not raw recruits, but trained mercenaries. Should your ascension to the throne be anything but peaceful, they will come in handy."

"Should I decide to deal with you," cut in Tanrif. "So far, you've not offered me anything that your competitors can't match or improve upon."

"But how many of them will ask for nothing up front? I will receive no payment unless you take the throne."

"And if I do?"

"I want a barony, this city only. I will make sure to collect taxes, of which you will get your share. I cut

out the competition, you make a profit. It costs you nothing, as no Duke since Dathan has managed to get any income out of Wildor at all."

"Why should I trust you? What guarantee do I have that your well-trained men don't have other orders?"

"What would be the profit to me? As of now, there are five powers in Wildor, each with its own territory. I have done well even in that circumstance, but it has become harder to expand. Each time I take something I lose something else. If the throne backed my authority, who could stand against me?"

"How would you handle your competition should I grant you a barony?"

"I would allow them to do as they do now. The only difference is I would take a percentage. This way I profit, even from the competitor's successes."

Her eyes had not left his, and he found them compelling.

"You believe I will attain the throne."

"If you are who you say you are there can be little doubt. I know what time can do to a legend, but twenty years is not enough to so greatly exaggerate a tale as to make it unrecognizable. If you have accomplished half of what they say you have, then you will be successful. Part of winning is choosing the right side when the power shifts. I'm betting on you."

He'd already made the decision while she was speaking, but her calm irked him.

"Very well. I have heard your offer and have decided to kill you anyway."

For a moment almost too brief to notice, fear touched her eyes. She rose slowly.

"I will not beg for mercy or change the terms of my offer."

Tanrif looked toward Bone, but Vyanda's voice drew him back.

"No. If you are going to kill me, do it yourself. Give me that much respect."

With those words, she leaned forward and placed her head on the table. She did not flinch when Tanrif drew his sword, though he thought she did when the cold steel touched the nape of her neck. Bone leaned forward expectantly.

Tanrif removed the scimitar from her neck, raised it high and burst out laughing.

At first, Vyanda was angry but soon began to laugh. "So, do we have a deal?"

Laughing too hard to reply, Tanrif nodded. He motioned to one of his men, who broke out a bottle of wine to toast the alliance.

\* \* \* \*

Parth located Tanrif easily. He had little doubt the man he sought was the lost Duke. The Bladesman himself had implied Tanrif was still alive. Obviously, he couldn't tell Teryl how he had known that the pretender was legitimate. It would not do to implicate the Bladesman in Theraint's assassination. Tanrif needed all the help he could get.

He rode into Wildor late in the afternoon, and immediately headed for the inn that Tanrif had practically taken over. He didn't know how hard it would be to gain an audience but was sure Tanrif would see him. It would be good to see Tanrif again too.

The inn was called the Silver Saddle, and he'd seen better. Of course, one had to make do with what accommodations one could find this far from respectable civilization.

Parth relinquished his horse to the stable hand and entered the common room. It looked as if the proprietor couldn't decide how to decorate and so had chosen bits of everything. Stuffed animal heads hung near weapons on one wall, while another was given over to paintings and tapestries, save the collection of daggers hanging in their midst. Half a dozen tables of unfinished wood were scattered among their more polished brethren. If any two chairs matched, Parth could not find them. There were several small clusters of people scattered about the room and, if possible, they were even more diverse than the furnishings.

It was as if High Gondylar had decided to hold a gathering from across the country, and each community had sent representatives. A southern woman in a revealing skirt and tight top spoke with a man in a fur cloak. Two tables away, a small group of dirt-encrusted miners played cards with a pair of sailors, though what these latter were doing so far from a port was not clear. In one corner, a woman in a long formal dress watched two men talk. One of the men was Tanrif.

Parth smiled and walked toward the trio, approaching slowly, waiting to be recognized. Tanrif was the first to look up. As the bladesman approached, he became more and more astounded at Tanrif's appearance. Twenty years had passed, yet the Duke had not changed at all. It was as if he were looking back through time.

"Well?" asked the man who would be Duke.

"Tanrif? It's me. It's Parth."

The bladesman searched for some sign of recognition but found none.

He had aged in the last two decades, but surely not so much that Tanrif wouldn't know him. As much as the man before him looked like the lost Duke, Parth was already suspicious. Then the pretender's demeanor changed.

"By all the gods, I didn't think you'd turn up here. Last I saw you was..." Tanrif allowed the words to trail off.

"The palace at Gondylar ... before Cyanne's abduction. Where have you been for all these years?"

"Ah yes," said Tanrif. "I remember now. It has been almost twenty years, and I have been through much since then. After I entered Vykon and defeated the Dark One, I traveled to the Islands of Dawn. It was there that we took on the Sarithan Assassins. I was all but killed in that struggle and, as far as I know, the Bladesman and Cyanne were as well."

Parth didn't say anything. There was still too much he didn't know. So far, it was possible that the man was the genuine article. It was just as possible he was an impostor.

"During that final battle, I received a blow to the head that caused me to forget much of my life. For years, I wandered the Islands of Dawn, not knowing who I was or how I had gotten there.

"About a year later, the dreams began. They haunted me for I could not name them and I needed to. Eventually, pieces of memory began to return, yet there are still periods of my life that are missing entirely. The strongest memories seem to involve Cyanne, though I only have a very sketchy idea of what happened before her."

"Then you do remember me," said Parth.



Part of him wanted to believe the explanation, but if Kestryl knew Tanrif had survived, how was it Tanrif didn't know the Bladesman was still alive? No matter how badly he wanted to believe the man before him was indeed Duke Tanrif, he hadn't maintained his position all these years by being foolish. Tanrif would understand Parth's actions if he had to explain them.

"I was thinking that you had forgotten. I know it was quite hectic when you first brought Cyanne to the palace and that you weren't there for that long. It wouldn't surprise me if you'd forgotten a lowly palace guard."

"I would not remember all the guards, but I could not forget you."

Seemingly satisfied, Parth nodded. "I didn't think you would. Listen, I'm going to be in town for a time. Is it true you're going to try for the throne?"

"I am indeed. I would welcome your blade, if you offer it."

"I am your man," replied Parth. He bowed low so Tanrif wouldn't see the doubt in his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

The Bladesman looked from Cyanne to Andres and back again. He had dreaded this moment more than any other. So far he'd been able to get away without lying to Cyanne. Now, he had no choice.

"Cyanne, there are some things you need to know, but I'm not sure how to tell you."

"Just tell me Kestryl. From looking at Andres I can tell that more than a few years of my memory are gone. Dauber Uaks' handiwork I would assume?"

"The mage was only trying to help you."

"I see. How long has it been since the Islands of Dawn?"

"Eighteen years, M'lady."

"By wrath of Sheba. Eighteen years of my life ... gone."

Cyanne's face paled. She never took her eyes from him.

"I'm afraid so."

"What happened to my son?"

This was the first time Andres had heard mention of Cyanne's son. He attempted and failed to mask his surprise.

"He died in childbirth, M'lady. That triggered the whole thing I'm afraid."

"I don't understand."

"When you became pregnant again, it took you back to your first pregnancy. You withdrew. You hardly spoke or ate. I was worried about you. Then one day, you started talking about Tanrif as if he were still alive."

"Neither of us saw him die, Kestryl. The possibility exists that he is."

"He is buried, Cyanne. Buried in the ruins of the Fortress-Temple. No one, not even Tanrif, could have

survived."

"You once said the same thing when the fire viper bit him."

Kestryl shrugged. This was a conversation he'd had often in the distant past. It was not one he wished to repeat.

"I grew concerned for your health and took you to Dauber."

"Why him?"

"Because I trust him. He's one of the few people who knows who you really are. If anyone had to poke around in your mind, he was the logical choice."

Cyanne nodded and looked thoughtful.

"He cast a spell to help you deal with the trauma. You dealt with it by returning to before it happened. Your memories were gone."

"Kestryl..." She paused for a long time as if she weren't sure she wanted to hear the answer to the next question.

"Yes, M'lady?"

"If Tanrif is gone, whose child do I carry?"

Kestryl dropped his head so neither she nor Andres could see his eyes. It was the one question he feared, yet he had no choice but to answer it.

"The child is mine, Cyanne."

Cyanne's jaw dropped and even Andres looked stunned.

"Is it so surprising? The two of us, living together for so many years, away from civilization. Did you not think we would fall in love?"

There was a long silence before Cyanne rose.

"I'm sorry, I need to think."

She walked from the room and out onto the deck. The Bladesman moved to follow, but Andres grabbed his wrist.

"Leave her. She's perfectly safe on the ship."

Kestryl nodded and sank back into the chair. Unconsciously he brought his hand to the scar on his shoulder. How much more payment would Sheba exact from him before his sins were paid for?

\* \* \* \*

Cyanne stared out at the waters of The Mistress. The cold night air sobered her, but that wasn't the cause of her shaking. Cyanne had lived through much in the past years, but nothing could have possibly prepared her for what she had learned this night. She had trusted Kestryl completely and she could no longer do so, for he had lied to her.

Though she was only half Ethrellen, she had inherited her intuition from Amalga. It had always been

flawless. Just as she knew she had been pregnant the first time, just as she knew she carried a girl, she knew also that it was Tanrif's blood, not the Bladesman's, that flowed in her unborn daughter's veins.

Tanrif was still alive, and for some reason the Bladesman didn't want her to know. Was he protecting her? Was he jealous of Tanrif? Had he done away with him?

Even now, she could not believe that of him. What then?

She thought long and hard on the matter. Wracked her brain, until it hurt. She tried to remember anything that might give her a clue, but she could not. She was completely dependent on Kestryl for information, though what he'd told her so far had not been accurate. What could she depend on then?

It seemed likely he had told the truth about how much time had passed. Andres hadn't aged that much in a few months. What else was true? Were Dauber's motives pure? Did he do something to her? What and why? If Kestryl wouldn't tell her the truth, what could she do?

It was like a game. The best way to be about it was to let Kestryl believe she accepted his story. He might let his guard down, and reveal something.

Yet Kestryl was not only a cautious man, but a disciplined one as well. She would have to find a way to unbalance him. She needed to get him off guard. She thought hard until she settled on a course of action.

She would do nothing until they set out for the Skyshore Realm. Once they were at sea, she would take action.

Kestryl wasn't the only one who could play games.

\* \* \* \*

Sir Andres, once of the Royal Gondylarian navy, didn't sleep well that night. He'd rigged a hammock on the deck for himself, while vacating his quarters for Cyanne and the Bladesman. It was the least he could do.

He was delighted that Kestryl and Cyanne had survived their ordeal, both in the Darkdom of Vykon and the Fortress-Temple of the Sarithans. Cyanne's loss of memory, however, disturbed him greatly. Also, according to her, Tanrif might still live. Was it possible?

It didn't seem likely. Kestryl had said as much, though once he had claimed Penthor was a traitor and that had turned out not to be true. Could Kestryl be mistaken? If so, where was Tanrif now?

Andres felt his stomach churning. It was a familiar sensation that he didn't at all enjoy. After Penthor's abdication, when High Gondylar began its long, slow backslide, Andres had resigned his post with the Navy. He'd had enough to retire but couldn't stay in Gondylar. He could not bear to watch the deterioration of his homeland.

Andres had taken a trip to the Sunset Isles and decided that he liked it. He'd found himself a boat, paid for it with most of his savings, and earned a meager living as a passenger ship captain, running people from island to island. He lived aboard the ship and didn't need much. For Andres it was an idyllic existence.

But High Gondylar had found him again, and the old restlessness had returned. He had been happy, why couldn't he stay that way?

Finally, he gave up and got out of bed. Tomorrow he would help arrange passage to Stratus for his old friends. And when they left, he would get back to the business of being retired.

If only he could shake the feeling that this seemingly random encounter with the Bladesman and Cyanne had changed everything.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl stood on the deck of the Rake, taking in the salt air while allowing his mind to wander. It was good to be back at sea again. He hadn't liked lying to Andres, but that was nothing compared to lying to the woman he loved.

Controlling his anger had become more and more difficult. He found himself snapping at Cyanne for transgressions that would not have bothered him six months earlier. He suspected Cyanne was aware there was more he wasn't telling her, but there was nothing either of them could do about it.

Fortunately, he only had to maintain the charade for a couple of months. Then, with any luck, Cyanne would be staying at the Shop of Demendil, and he would be free to return to High Gondylar and exact his revenge on Tanrif.

He thought back to the day they'd spent on Andres' boat. If it had been a vessel capable of such a voyage, he would have asked Andres to take them. However, Andres told them of a friend, a Captain Yaren, whose ship, made regular runs to the Skyshore Realm. Andres had arranged passage for Cyanne and the Bladesman.

Kestryl had stayed up late the night before they departed, talking with his old friend while Cyanne slept. Many times during the evening he'd started to reveal the truth about what had happened, but in the end he could not bring himself to do so.

Andres had grown tired of the Gondylarian situation and had removed himself from it. He'd served the throne for long enough, and Cyanne was no longer Duchess. There was nothing Andres could do to help the situation, so why make him to suffer it? Surely it wasn't wrong to deceive a friend to save him worry.

If only all the situations life handed him were as clear-cut as combat. In a battle, you knew who you fought and how to fight them. It was never the enemy that caused Kestryl problems, only those he loved. Those were the battles he had never been able to win.

On his next foray into reality, Cyanne stood beside him. He forced a smile, though from the expression on her face, he could tell she saw through it. He shrugged and turned back to the sea.

"It's enough, Kestryl. Now, are you going to sulk for the rest of the trip or do you want to talk about it?"

The Bladesman didn't turn to face her, but continued to watch the waves. In the distance, large fish leapt from the sea, only to return to it after gliding for a time on outstretched wings. Once he had known their name but couldn't recall it now.

"There is nothing wrong, Cyanne." He tried to keep the edge from his voice but was not certain how successful he was.

Cyanne sighed and, like Kestryl, leaned against the rail to watch the fish fly.

"For so many years, you've served me. My father and mother depended on you. I depended on you and you were there. What's changed, Kestryl? I know you're not telling me the truth. Why is that? Don't you trust me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then show me. Tell me the rest of the story."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He walked away. Cyanne followed him below deck. His cabin was barely large enough to hold the hard mat and the chest bolted at its foot to prevent it from shifting in rough weather.

Kestryl turned to look at her. She stared at him defiantly then started to undress. He blushed and turned away.

"M'lady, what are you doing?"

"Oh come on, Kestryl. Come show me how much you love me."

"You're pregnant."

"Yes, with your child. You haven't exactly lavished much affection on me recently. I'm a woman, Kestryl, carrying your child." She was completely naked now. "Come and hold me, my love."

She approached, but he kept his eyes averted. "Please, Cyanne..."

"It's not yours, is it?"

Kestryl lifted the blanket from the bed and threw it over her shoulders.

"Please. Get dressed."

Cyanne shook her head. "Tell me the truth. I know you're trying to protect me, but you can't protect me anymore."

"M'lady, I'm sorry, but I've sworn to Sheba I will not reveal to you what has happened. Surely, you do not expect me to go back on my oath."

"No, I don't. But don't lie to me again either. I'm going to figure it out, Kestryl. My memories are returning a little at a time. Sooner or later, I'm going to know what happened. It might as well be sooner."

Kestryl cursed.

"M'lady, if you trust me, if you have ever trusted me, I implore you to forget everything you know. Forget what has happened. For your own sake walk away from this."

She embraced him and held him close. "For my sake. Everything you do is for my sake. What about your own sake, Kestryl? When are you going to do something for you?"

For a long time they held each other but didn't speak again.

That night she lay beside him and he held her. Eventually Cyanne slept, but the Bladesman did not. All night long he lay there, totally conscious of her body next to his. She was all he had wanted, yet he could not have her.

For no matter what, he would never be able to accept the child of the man who'd raped her.

\* \* \* \*

Parth sat alone in his room, contemplating his meeting with Tanrif. The man's story of losing his memory didn't explain everything. Why hadn't he aged in all this time? And why did he think the Bladesman had died? Why had he lied about remembering Parth?

The situation was disorienting, but it was important for Parth to understand what was going on. Was the man legitimate or some type of clever impostor? He had to find out before the pretender gained so much momentum that stopping him would be impossible. Already, he had more forces at his disposal than Parth would have believed possible.

Part of Parth wondered if it mattered whether or not this upstart was who he claimed to be. If he wasn't Tanrif, but could take the throne and do the job, did it matter? Could he be a Dominan agent? Parth fell back on the bed and dropped an arm over his eyes. Considering the possibilities had given him a headache.

Well, he had wanted change. It would have been nice to ease into it, instead of having his entire life torn apart, but time was a luxury he didn't have. Perhaps after some sleep his mind would be clear enough to piece together a plan. If not, he would try to get more information. In the end, he would have to support the pretender or attempt assassination. There was no margin for error. Whatever conclusions he finally drew, he would have to act soon. Teryl was preparing the army, and the future of the Dukedom depended on the information Parth was collecting. High Gondylar could not afford any mistakes.

When he finally slept, his dreams were no help at all.

He was in the palace at Gondylar. Tanrif sat on the throne and Parth knelt before him. The Duke was talking about battles, assassinations, taxes and weapons. At last, when he stopped, Parth spoke.

"Who are you really?"

The man on the throne laughed deeply, and stood. He placed a hand on either side of his head and removed the mask he had been wearing. Parth gaped at the Duke's revealed features. Even after the mask was removed, Tanrif's face remained unchanged.

\* \* \* \*

It was late and most of the men were asleep. Only Bone and Tanrif remained awake, laying their plans. Tanrif rose and stretched, trying to work the kinks from his back. Leading a revolt was hard work.

Bone looked bleary eyed. At least they had decided on a course of action. Bone would ride ahead to Gondylar and start causing as much dissension as he could among the populace of the city. The benefits would be twofold—it would weaken the cities defenses and would also distract the palace from what was going on elsewhere. He'd leave at first light taking with him a handful of men. It was all he needed. They would be in Gondylar by week's end.

Tanrif would take his time, traveling south and east, going from city to city, building support. Away from the Dominan border, cities were less well defended. It would surprise Bone if any of them offered even marginal resistance. In each city, Tanrif would swell his forces. He would stop at several large estates and procure the support of the nobles or kill them. By the time he reached the capital, Bone did not believe Gondylar would be able to defend itself against such a force. Tanrif would lose men, but the battle would be won.

Of course, any number of unknowns could affect the outcome, no matter how solid a plan they'd formed.

Bone yawned. "If I want to get any sleep before I leave, I'd better go."

"Good luck. Remember, make haste. I won't be all that far behind you. Maybe as little as a month."

"I'll do my part. Just remember, don't trust anyone."

With those words Bone turned and walked upstairs. Tanrif walked behind the bar and poured himself a

drink. He was so lost in thought he didn't hear Parth enter the room.

"Good evening, Your Highness, you're up late."

Startled, Tanrif turned to stare at the newcomer. He had to be more careful. Parth had surprised him too easily. He must be on guard at all times.

"I'm surprised you're awake, Parth. I thought you'd be tired from your travels."

"Bad dreams. Seems like the only kind I have lately. The man I passed on the stairs, who is he?"

"A soldier like yourself. Why?"

"I don't know. He looked somehow familiar, though for the life of me, I can't remember where I've seen him."

Tanrif took his drink to the table and pulled up a chair. "Tell me about yourself, Parth."

Parth walked the rest of the way and sat across from the Duke. "Just who are you, anyway?"

Tanrif met Parth's stare. "I am Tanrif."

"Like hell you are. Look, I'm all for change. Sheba knows this country needs it, but I won't follow you blindly if you lie to me. Tell me who you are, or at least why I shouldn't reveal your deception."

"Very well, though I want you to understand, this conversation goes no further. If you tell anyone else, I'll deny it and have your head. Is that clear?" At Parth's single nod, he continued. "I am the son of Tanrif and Cyanne. I was raised by Cyanne and the Bladesman."

"If they were alive, why did they not return to Gondylar?"

"After my father's death at the hands of the Sarithan Assassins, my mother's mind snapped. Kestryl said she wasn't fit to take the throne, but one day, I would be. He's been paving the way for me since childhood."

"That would explain why he killed Duke Theraint."

Tanrif almost looked surprised, but managed to hide it by taking a pull from his mug. So that was where the Bladesman had gone. He had no illusions about procuring the Bladesman's help now. Any potential support that he might have received from Kestryl died the day he'd raped Cyanne.

Kestryl's presence in the equation disturbed Tanrif greatly, particularly because of his high visibility. If the Bladesman wanted a shot at him, he wouldn't have to look far. Tanrif would have to deal with that situation as soon as possible.

Parth looked thoughtful. "That explains a great deal. You still look eighteen because that's your age. You inherited your father's Amulet of Dreaming as well as his looks. When Kestryl mentioned the rightful heir I thought I knew what he meant. Of course, I didn't know of your existence. One question ... why the charade?"

"Let me ask you a question. How many Lords would acknowledge a new heir? How many would claim I was a fraud? People have seen Tanrif. His reputation will help to get me to the throne with a minimum of bloodshed. In war, some casualties are necessary, but we can try to minimize that loss. If I can take the throne without spilling a single drop of blood, then that's the way I'll do it. If that means compromising my personal integrity, so be it. If it saves one life, isn't it worth it?"

"You have your father's heart. I pray you have his skill as well. Nevertheless, I am your man. I'll see you on the throne or die trying."

Tanrif placed a hand on Parth's shoulder. "Believe me when I say, I hope it won't come to that."

\* \* \* \*

At the sound of the slamming door, Timor jumped to his feet. He reached for a weapon, but it was Thulrak, back from yet another unsuccessful sojourn.

"It is amazing," he shouted, "that anything ever gets done in this country. This pile of dragon dung is so disorganized that no one knows anything. This Teryl is either a genius or a total fool. The lords are completely in the dark. Even the ones who might be persuaded to talk have nothing of value to say. The average Gondylarian noble is an egotistical, irresponsible fool who cares more about his own holdings than the welfare of his nation. They are a score of eminently corruptible souls, and not one of them has any idea of what's going on. How the hell can I penetrate a country's defenses when those in charge don't know what they are? I tell you, this is unfair."

Timor spoke quietly but firmly.

"You are quite correct, my Lord, but I think it might be best if you were to modulate the level of your voice. The enemy may have ears anywhere."

Thulrak's eyes bulged. Timor's face was ashen, but he did not flinch. Thulrak knew it was Timor's duty as his second to alert him to anything that might endanger the mission, even if it meant risking his wrath. After a long moment, Thulrak sat heavily on the wooden chair by the room's desk.

"You are quite correct. I must learn to control my frustration. We must have a course of action. We have been here for a week, and I have learned nothing of value. It's amazing the nobility can find the palace. Much more than that seems beyond them."

The imminent danger having passed, Timor sat back down. "Your Lordship, perhaps we are going about this the wrong way."

Thulrak placed his right hand on the back of his neck, attempting to massage away the tension of failure. Failure he could not afford.

"I'm listening."

"We have made surreptitious contact with any number of nobles and none of them seem to know anything, yet someone must be running the country. If you can't obtain information second hand, why not get it yourself?"

Thulrak often had trouble following Timor's thoughts. He was not sure if it was his own deficiency or Timor's, but it didn't matter. At this point, he would have taken advice from a lunatic.

"What are you about?" asked Thulrak.

"Infiltrate the palace. Let me pose as a servant. I will find a way in and do my spying from the inside. I will find a way to get messages out to you."

"And if you are discovered?"

Timor looked Thulrak in the eye. "Then I become a casualty. I will die before I betray the Emperor."



"Make certain it happens that way. If anyone even suspects your affiliation with Domina you are to take your own life."

"I would have it no other way, my Lord."

\* \* \* \*

Parth stared at the paper before him. Several times he tried to write but the words would not come. He was aware he had to give some report to Lord Teryl. He needed to word it in such a way that Teryl would understand the text but anyone else reading it would not. It would also be nice if he could compose it so that it contained no lie, though that was less important. He had never been good with words, and so the paper stayed blank long after it should have been filled.

When he finally put quill to paper, it was as if a dam had burst and the words poured from him. He looked it over while waiting for the ink to dry.

My Lord Teryl,

It is with great pleasure that I have been reacquainted with my old friend. I hadn't had word of him in so long that I thought he had passed beyond this world, but happily, I was mistaken. He tells me he will soon make the journey to Gondylar and I have decided to travel with him. It is my hope that you will soon meet, as my friend is quite remarkable. I am certain you will approve of him.

Your obedient bladesman

He smiled after he finished rereading it. It was not a work of genius, but it was effectively worded. He would have a messenger carry the news to the palace as soon as he found one he could trust. In the meanwhile, he had other duties to perform.

He placed the letter in his pack and left the room. Soon, he would meet with Tanrif, and they would discuss travel arrangements. By the next morning, they would leave the city.

\* \* \* \*

Dawn the next day saw Timor on his way to the palace. His week in Gondylar had not been spent idly. He'd kept his eyes and ears open and learned much.

For example, twice during the week, fresh food was delivered to the palace kitchen. The cart, pushed by men, entered through the servants' gate, which was wide enough to accept deliveries and less well guarded than either of the two main gates. Servants often came and went. The guards here were less likely to stop a person garbed as such.

On a busy thoroughfare, Timor waited for the cart to appear. It would be laden with fresh fruits and vegetables from the market, the best to be had.

He waited patiently. The sun was not yet high enough or hot enough to make the day uncomfortable. Timor looked around casually, his careful gaze taking in everything from the nondescript building against which he leaned to the mix of faces in the crowd. It was amazing to him how casual the Gondylarians acted this close to the palace, even spitting or cursing on the streets. In Domina such disrespect would not be long tolerated, which is why High Gondylar was a weaker country and would eventually fall under Dominan rule.

The lack of discipline was apparent in every aspect of Gondylarian life, from the way the commoners spoke of the nobility to the way the guards didn't seem to care whether or not they were actually preventing anyone from entering the palace. At least, when the Emperor ruled here, people would take

pride in themselves and perform their duties adequately. It was hard for him to imagine how the Dukedom had survived for so long. Perhaps it had not always been this way.

The sound of wheels creaking brought him back to the present. Down the street rumbled the cart. As always, two men pulled it by handles on either side, while one man pulled it with ropes attached to the front. Timor strolled casually toward it, not fast enough to make his destination obvious. He resisted the temptation to look around. Such actions would draw attention, and he didn't wish to be noticed.

He waited as if he were going to cross the street after the cart went by. When it passed, he moved behind it, ducking his head so that the men pushing couldn't see him. At the same time, he placed his hands on the wooden support in the rear of the cart and pushed against it. To the guards, it would look like he was one of the servants from the market. Heads down, the other workers would be unable to see him until after he had gained entrance.

To Timor's disgust, the single guard at the gate barely looked up as the cart rolled by. If they had to take the castle by force, they could put an armed party in such a contrivance and cover them with vegetables, and the bards would sing of the salad initiative for many long years after. He would never suggest such a dishonorable ploy, but there was no reason why it wouldn't work, sad to say for High Gondylar.

He continued pushing the cart, until they came to the palace's delivery entrance. The men pushing slowed then stopped. Of the two guards there, only one seemed to be paying any attention. Timor nodded to him as he passed, and the guard nodded back. He was holding a piece of paper in his hands and actually seemed to be marginally interested in what the delivery contained. After a few moments, the other guard spoke to him, and he waved the workers on. With a creaking sigh, the cart began to move again.

The Gondylarian palace was as different from the Emperor's as possible. Even in the servant's section and kitchens, tables with vases brightened the stonework with flowers. An occasional painting hung on the wall, as did a few cheap tapestries. Why such amenities should be given to servants, Timor had no idea.

He could tell from the smell they were nearing the kitchens. That was good. Kitchens meant storerooms. He needed to be alone for a few minutes.

It wasn't long before he found what he was after—a room filled with crates and barrels. He risked a quick look around and, when he saw no one was looking, ducked inside. The smell of apples permeated the air, mixed with fainter odors he could not readily identify.

He hid behind the barrels and swiftly removed his worker's garb. Looking around, he found the perfect place to hide it—a barrel of potatoes that had seen better years. If it hadn't been emptied by now, it would be a long time before anyone got to it. Potatoes didn't have a strong smell, not even spoiled ones, but this many in one place was not easy on the nose. Soon, his old outfit was buried under the aging tubers. If anyone discovered it, they might assume it had grown there.

He looked down at his outfit and quickly dusted himself off. From his boot, he removed a thin leather tube, the type used by Gondylarian scholars and nobles to protect paper. Inside was a letter from a Lord Kerihan to Duke Theraint, penned by Timor himself. One of the things that made infiltrating Gondylarian society easy was that anyone with land or money could hold a title and no one, not even the Duke could keep track of all of them. Lord Kerihan existed for the sole purpose of getting Timor into the palace. The letter had been one of the best ideas he'd ever had. Just thinking about it brought a smile to his lips.

It wouldn't be long before he was firmly entrenched in the palace.

\* \* \* \*

Se-gen examined the shipment of vegetables and fruits. It was her job to make sure it was all there and fit for consumption. Anything that got by her that did not fit the exacting standards of Thelanna, would get her scolded or worse. On the other hand, Thelanna did not approve of waste. It was a narrow path she had learned to walk carefully over the years.

Once, Se-gen had been taken from the kitchen to serve the Duchess. Those had been the happiest days of her life. She'd had her own dresses and had been able to see all the nobles.

Even after the Duchess' abduction, Penthor kept her on as a servant of his own. It was only after his abdication that she had been sent back to the kitchen, much to her dismay and Thelanna's delight. Thelanna never wasted a chance to embarrass her, not even after all these years. Se-gen often thought her life would have been better if she had stayed in the kitchen the entire time.

Se-gen had just turned twenty-nine, though she felt much older. She stretched slowly, trying to work the kinks from her back, ignoring the appreciative stare of a passing guard. One way her life had changed since she had been Cyanne's servant was that she had learned to take pride in her appearance.

She knew she was attractive from the reaction men gave her, as well as the obvious jealousy of the other kitchen servants. It wasn't her fault and besides, many of them would have been nice looking too, if only they would drag a brush through their tangled hair and wash the grime from their faces. She realized the guard had stopped to watch her. Her icy gaze sent him on his way. With a sigh, she returned her attention to the task at hand.

A movement further down the corridor caught her eye. A man wearing the garb of a messenger emerged from one of the storerooms. He held a scroll case in his hands and looked around as if confused. Embracing the opportunity to put off the tedious chore, she hurried down the corridor.

As she moved toward him, she wondered what business a messenger had in a storeroom. It brought to mind another storeroom, where long ago she'd found a man's corpse hanging from a metal chain. She suppressed a shudder. It was a memory she could have done without. The messenger saw her, stopped and waited for her to approach.

"Can I help you?" she asked, trying to size him up.

He looked at her a little blankly before answering. "I have a message for the Duke."

"And you thought, perhaps, that you might find him in the pantry."

Though he looked the part, there was something about him she didn't trust. She always had good intuition and was certain this man was not what he seemed. Not that it was any of her business.

The man smiled sheepishly. "I lost my way. The palace is so big and when I smelled the apples, I just couldn't help myself. The man held up his right hand, revealing a half eaten apple. A look of fear crept into his eyes.

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" The man seemed to be on the verge of tears.

For a confused second, Se-gen regarded him, insight battling her observations. Certainly, there was no way to see this man as anything but a weak-minded fool, whatever her gut told her. She shrugged then smiled, if not as warmly as she could have.

"If you want to find the Duke, you're traveling in the wrong direction. Turn around and make your next left. If you follow the hallway straight down, you will see a stairway to the right. Two flights up, and you will find yourself on the right level." She stopped and suppressed a giggle as she watched the man look at

his hands.

"Left," he mumbled to himself. "This way is left."

He lifted his left hand and looked at it. "The one with the stain on the cuff. All right, now after the left, where do I go?"

With a sigh of resignation, Se-gen moved forward and took the man's arm.

"Come on. I'll show you the way."

Before she left, she gave a hurried glance around to make sure Thelanna was nowhere in sight.

\* \* \* \*

Tanrif surveyed his troops with pride. He had done well. Even without Vyanda's men, he had developed quite a following, more than his father ever had. There were hundreds of men before him, ready to follow him into battle if that is where his path led. To his right stood Parth, the bladesman of High Gondylar. Originally, he was going to make Bone his bladesman, but perhaps he would invent a new position for the assassin when the throne was his.

It was difficult to suppress a smile as rank after rank of men cheered him. If Kestryl were here, he would say that the power was going to Tanrif's head, but what did he know? The fool could have had the throne himself if he weren't such a servant. What was Kestryl but a glorified butler, bowing and scraping before the crown as if he had no worth himself?

Tanrif's smile changed briefly to a sneer before he realized that a few of the people near him looked uncomfortable. He smiled reassuringly at them, making a mental note to keep a tighter rein on his emotions. The fools smiled back, no doubt convinced his expression had been their imagination. He turned away. Until he was on the throne, he needed them.

Once the entire force had assembled, he mounted his horse, aware as he did that hundreds of eyes followed him. He shouted a single word.

"Onward!"

He reined his horse to a walk. Behind him, the cry was repeated.

"Onward! Long live Duke Tanrif!"

By the time Parth fell in beside him, his smile had vanished. It was a long way to Gondylar and they had many stops to make.

\* \* \* \*

Warthon sat in his study, smoking a pipe. He leaned back and watched the smoke rise toward the ceiling. This was the only place he felt relaxed. Whenever the tensions of life arose, he would spend some time here and lose himself amidst the books.

He had not read all of them, not by far. His library was one of the most extensive in the Dukedom, if not as well-known as some of the others. Many of the tomes surrounding him had belonged to his father and his father's father, but he had added greatly to the collection himself.

Sometimes he didn't read at all. It was enough just to be surrounded by the wall of words. This was one such time. He had just returned from Gondylar and no Duke had been chosen. Teryl still sat on the throne, and perhaps it would be best if he stayed there. Warthon didn't really believe the Regent wanted

to be free of rulership.

The Council of Lords had been maddening. In the end, even Warthon had been shouting, and that was not his nature. It seemed every house but his vied for the throne, even those who had no chance of gaining it. With Teryl out of consideration, the ruler would have to come from either Therak or Freyrath. No other house had the power to hold the throne.

The knock at the door pulled him from his thoughts. He glared at the study door. Warthon had told the servants he was not to be disturbed for anything less than an emergency. He sat upright and allowed a note of annoyance to slip into his voice.

"Enter."

The steward tentatively stepped inside. Clearly, the man was uncomfortable disturbing him in the library and Warthon, when he spoke, modulated his voice to show as little irritation as possible. Galen was a good man and would not disobey unless something out of the ordinary had occurred.

"What do you want?"

Galen took his time answering, as if he were searching for the correct words.

"There is a man here to see you. He claims he is Duke Tanrif."

"Tell him I'm out. Get rid of him. Surely you could have handled it without disturbing me."

Galen bowed, but did not leave. "I would have done just that if he were here alone, but I did not know how the large force of fighting men might have reacted to being taken so lightly."

Warthon was on his feet before his servant finished the sentence.

"Fighting men? How many? How well are they armed? Could they be brigands?"

Before Galen could answer, Warthon ran past him, leaving the servant behind to consider the questions.

\* \* \* \*

Tanrif regarded the structure before him. Too large to be called a house, but not quite large enough to be termed a mansion. Parth had told him what he needed to know about Lord Warthon en route, and Tanrif was relaxed. Running into Parth had been an unexpected stroke of luck. The man seemed to have in-depth knowledge of each of the noble houses, and often insight into the Lords themselves. The house of Lehan would cause him no problem.

He watched as the door opened and a portly man emerged. Parth, standing beside Tanrif, leaned toward him and whispered, "That's Lord Warthon. Remember, he may appear a buffoon, but his mind is sharp enough."

Tanrif nodded curtly. He did not like people repeating things to him, but Parth had proved so useful he let it slide. When Warthon was five feet away, he stopped, attempting to catch his breath. Tanrif waited.

"Parth," said Warthon, at last, "what is this?"

Before Parth could answer, Tanrif stepped forward. "Is it proper to address retainers before nobility? Or are you not familiar with court etiquette, Lord Warthon?"

Warthon's gaze came around slowly and settled on Tanrif. He made no attempt to conceal his annoyance.

"Sir, were I to address you directly, it would be proof that I saw you as nobility. Whether or not you are remains to be seen."

Parth interjected before Tanrif could show his annoyance.

"He is Duke Tanrif, Warthon. You know me a dozen years. I have served fourteen rulers of High Gondylar. This man was the first."

Warthon drew a deep breath. How could the man be who he claimed to be? Did it matter? If Parth accepted him as such, would anyone have the strength to stand against his claim?

"Does Lord Teryl know of this development?"

Parth smiled. "If he did not receive my report yet, then he will soon. He was the one who sent me to verify the rumors."

"Damn him," swore Warthon. "This is a subject that should have been brought before the Council. Who the hell does he think he is?"

"He is," replied Parth, unable to keep the ire from his voice, "the Regent to the throne of High Gondylar. Were you in his shoes, what would you have done? The Council is a band of irresponsible fools, whose own search for power has blinded them to the needs of their country. Think man. How many of them would have hired a man to take out a perceived threat to their succession? Five I can name off hand."

Warthon's expression changed. At first, he was angry he should be so spoken to, but as Parth's words unfolded, he ended up nodding a grudging confirmation. He turned his attention back to Tanrif.

"What proof do you have to offer?"

"What proof do you need?" asked Tanrif. "The bladesman of High Gondylar has identified me. What else would you accept?"

Warthon thought for a moment. He recalled every scrap of knowledge he had heard about Tanrif. He could think of nothing he had heard or read that a potential impostor might not also know. Tanrif had become almost a mythological figure. His prowess was well known and apparently confirmed. Perhaps not the best test and yet...

"Tanrif has been accounted by some as the finest swordsman Gondylar has ever seen. I propose a contest. My best against you in a sparring match. A fight until first blood is drawn. No sense in anyone dying needlessly."

Tanrif's eyes narrowed. He did not doubt he had the ability to beat anyone except Kestryl in single combat, but the idea of the challenge annoyed him. Still, if it would win over the support of a Lord...

"If I win, you will send a small group of your men to travel with me to show your support. This way, I can claim you among my backers."

Warthon smiled and bowed. He knew his guard captain's skill with a blade. The charade would not last much longer.

"It will be as you say," he said, smirking.

\* \* \* \*

Cyanne bolted upright, and Kestryl sat up beside her a moment later. Indeed he was so in tune with her,

he almost always woke when she did.

"Another dream, M'lady?"

Cyanne nodded and tried to remember. She had been talking to Tanrif, but he was different somehow. Their relationship had changed. Cyanne still cared about him, and he about her, but in her dream she'd felt nothing of the old fire. Tanrif had survived, but their relationship had not. The thought brought her to the brink of tears.

Kestryl placed an arm around her and pulled her close. She snuggled up to him, well aware of the price he was paying for this closeness. She knew now the truth of things. The Bladesman was in love with her. But she didn't feel that way about him, and there was nothing to be done about it.

She could have slept in her own cabin, but she couldn't deal with being alone, especially after the disturbing dreams had increased in frequency. If only she could remember, but she could not. Nor would she ask Kestryl again. His oath to Sheba was something she would never ask him to break. She would have to piece it together herself, and slowly she was doing just that.

She was certain now that Tanrif had survived the final battle with the Sarithan Assassins. She also believed he had found them. Her dreams were clear on that count at least. But she couldn't remember most of the conversations when she woke, and the ones she could remember made no sense. Certainly she felt a fondness for Tanrif, but it was nothing to the love she had once borne him.

What had happened? She hadn't been in love with the Bladesman—that much she knew from yet other dreams she'd had. The frustration was beginning to get to her, and the man with the answers was not sharing. It made her angry, despite his vow.

"Leave me."

Without a word, Kestryl rose and, as he was already dressed, left her alone in the cabin.

\* \* \* \*

Teryl sat on the throne of High Gondylar and read, for the third time, the message in his hand. It could only mean one thing. Somehow Duke Tanrif had managed to survive and was now coming to claim his throne. If so, Teryl would gladly relinquish it to him. If only half of what he'd read was true, Tanrif was exactly what the Dukedom needed.

He was lost in thought when he noticed a guard enter the throne room.

"M'lord, there is a messenger here to see you."

Teryl nodded absently, and the guard held the door open. A man entered and looked around the throne room as if he'd never seen one before. Teryl clucked impatiently, and the messenger jumped and hurried forward, performing a bow that was deep if not smooth. He looked like he might pass out. Teryl smiled and held out his hand. The messenger walked quickly up to the throne and handed him a scroll case. Teryl waved him away, and he ran back the way he had come. It was the second unexpected message he had received that day.

Duke Theraint,

As per our correspondence, I will join you at the palace in Gondylar as soon as I can. I have several stops to make along the way. I regret I cannot come at once. I have sent my man to you. He is dependable, if somewhat slow-witted, but his family has served my family well for three generations and I am loath to be rid of him. If you want, you may put him to use until I arrive.

I remain, your humble servant, and look forward to seeing you again. We will discuss more of your plans at that time.

humbly Lord Kerihan

Teryl reread the letter and sighed. Apparently, this Lord Kerihan was not aware of.

Duke Theraint's assassination. Teryl had never heard of Lord Kerihan, but that wasn't unusual. There were many Lords in the outer territories who were not known well in Gondylar, although apparently Theraint had known this one.

He looked at the servant, who was involved in playing with the end of his bootlace. Teryl cleared his throat, and the man jumped up, startled.

"What is your name?"

"I am Orwyn, your Highness."

"You will stay here until your master arrives."

The guard at the end of the hall looked at Teryl questioningly.

"Take him to the kitchens. Tell Thelanna she can put him to work, but he is a fool and will be treated fairly. He must be returned to his master in good condition."

The guard nodded and motioned to the man. Before he left, Orwyn bowed so low, he almost toppled. Teryl had to suppress a smile. He didn't care how loyal a family had been to him, that was one servant he would have made do without. He sighed and turned his attention to Parth's message. By the time he read it again, all thoughts of Orwyn and his master had vanished.

\* \* \* \*

Warthon's best, as it turned out, was somewhat better than Tanrif expected. Coula was worthy of the title Sword Master. From the moment Tanrif laid eyes on him, he knew it. The way he walked, the speed with which he drew his blade, which was longer and more curved than Tanrif's, the confident gleam in his eye, all marked him for what he was. Yet, he was still not Tanrif.

For a time they circled, feinting, testing, each trying to draw the other out. To look at them, it would be hard to know the skill with which they worked dueled. Neither gave an opening to his opponent, nor showed weakness.

Tanrif worked his blade confidently, performing a thrust here, a swipe there, always resulting in the sound of metal on metal as his attack was parried. From the corner of his eye, he could see Warthon smiling, supremely confident in his man's skill—but Tanrif had yet to strike.

In a flurry of movement, Tanrif advanced, his blade moving too fast to follow. Each blow met steel and slowly, Tanrif began to develop a grudging respect for his adversary. It was Coula's turn to attack, but Tanrif beat aside his furious slashes as if they were no bother at all, the confident smile never leaving his face. Coula's eyes began to sparkle with newfound admiration as each of his swipes was turned.

The battle continued this way for some time, until both men were bathed in sweat. Tanrif felt that soon he would be too tired to defend himself. He hoped his opponent felt the same. From the look of him, he could not be that far behind.

Coula's sudden furious onslaught came as a surprise, and Tanrif immediately withdrew into a defensive



posture. It didn't look good for the Duke-to-be.

Then, Tanrif felt a cold tingle against his chest. If he had to describe the feeling, he would have said that it felt as if he were stabbed in the heart with an icicle. For the briefest of moments he glanced down, wondering what had caused the feeling, though it was somehow familiar.

He looked up again, certain that Coula would be on him. Instead, he found the warrior moving toward him in slow motion. He ducked inside Coula's guard before the larger man could react and, grabbing his sword arm, flung him to the ground. Surprise lit the warrior's face. Tanrif placed the point of his blade to Coula's throat.

The chill in his body had already begun to fade. Coula dropped his blade and smiled as if he were looking at a long lost lover. Tanrif understood. It had been a long time since anyone had given him such a workout. Smiling, he sheathed his blade and extended his hand. Gladly, Coula took it. Tanrif pulled him to his feet.

Warthon seemed surprised when the two men embraced, but even more so when Coula knelt before Tanrif and spoke.

"My life is yours. I will serve no other."

Tanrif turned toward Warthon. "A valiant effort. It has been a long time since I have wielded a blade, and I found the exercise exhilarating. Now, about those men..."

With only a brief hesitation, Warthon too knelt. Only a fool would oppose Tanrif, and Warthon, whatever his faults, was no fool.

## Chapter Four—All That Is Left

For Cyanne, pulling into the port at Stratus was like coming home. Though it had been nearly twenty years since she had seen the Shop of Demendil, to her it was only little over a year. During that year she had often thought about Demendil. He had raised her as his own, and she hadn't even said good-bye.

Often she found herself wondering why she hadn't stopped at the Shop of Demendil on the way to High Gondylar. Perhaps her grief over finding out her parents were dead, and the subsequent good-byes to Tanrif and Lylea hadn't left room in her heart for yet another. If she'd had to look Demendil in the eye, she might have stayed—and she knew she couldn't. Not with two murders to avenge.

That she had, with Tanrif's help, avenged those murders did nothing to calm her now. She wondered if Demendil were still there after all these years, or if Lylea had made it back to Stratus. She wondered what they would do if the shop had closed.

When the port at Stratus was close enough to see clearly, memories rushed at her faster than she could handle. For a startled moment she thought she might faint. There was too much history, too many threads of her life cut instead of tied. It didn't help that the docks looked exactly as they had twenty years before.

The faces were different, though she found herself looking for familiar ones. The illusion of having just left yesterday was a tempting one to embrace. She had to keep reminding herself that time had passed, even if she couldn't remember it. She was certain once she was ashore she'd start noticing differences. Twenty years was a long time.

Though it was late when the boat docked, Cyanne insisted they disembark immediately. It had already been too long and, now that she'd arrived, she was unwilling to wait. Even the Bladesman had trouble matching her hurried pace as she navigated through streets that were at once familiar and foreign. The landmarks she did know were often subtly changed, if nothing else just by the passage of years. New sights were plentiful as well.

The feel of the streets was different too, tighter, as if expectation hung in the air. She slowed to look at Kestryl, and from his posture she could tell he too felt the tension. Whether he'd picked it up from the air or her emotions, she could not tell.

In spite of the differences, it did not take her long to find the shop. When she arrived she stopped, looking for clues as to what changes time had wrought. The outside of the shop was still well kept. The sign was new—the red letters contrasting sharply with the blue ones in her memory. The curtains hanging in the second story windows were also different. While she stood watching, the shop door opened and a man stepped out.

It was well after closing time, unless that too had changed, so it was likely the man was employed there. Something about him tugged at her memory, though she doubted she'd ever seen him before.

He was tall yet slight, with just a touch of gray at the temples of his too long face. He squinted as he paused to light his pipe. He did not look in her direction. It was impossible to see the man as a mere employee, and for a panicked second, she thought perhaps Demendil had sold the shop and retired.

Before she could react, the man turned back toward the open door and spoke a few words lost to the early evening air. A woman emerged and joined him on the doorstep.

Cyanne's breath caught in her throat. Though her hair was longer than she remembered, she knew she

was looking at an older version of the only woman she had ever called sister. She gave a strangled cry and moved toward them. At first the couple remained oblivious, then the man pointed.

Lylea stared at Cyanne, her expression running the gamut from confusion to surprise and back again, until finally it settled into a grin. She ran to meet the Gondylarian, flinging her arms around her. The men, eyes smiling, approached more slowly, as if unwilling to disturb the reunion.

"By all the gods, it's been so long. I thought you were dead. The rumors out of High Gondylar were all I had to go on."

"I'm sorry, Lylea. I should have found some way to send you a message. I can't tell you how badly I've missed you."

"Come inside. I wasn't prepared for company but I think there's enough food for everybody." She shifted her gaze from Cyanne to the Bladesman. "Come, join us for dinner."

Though Kestryl had not spoken Talovarian during his first trip to the Skyshore, he had learned much from Cyanne over the years. She had insisted her son learn his father's native tongue and Kestryl had picked up much of it from listening to those lessons. His Gondylarian accent made the words sound almost foreign.

"We would be honored."

Cyanne looked stunned. She had no way of knowing that the Bladesman had learned Talovarian. It was a small but important detail that she should have remembered but didn't. She wondered what other surprises were in store for her.

Lylea, oblivious to Cyanne's reaction, smiled and led them inside.

Cyanne looked around the shop with interest. It was much the way she remembered, but again there were more differences than similarities, not just in layout but in the mix and quality of merchandise.

By unspoken agreement, all serious conversation was set aside until the tall man opened a bottle of wine and poured four glasses.

Even then there was a pause before anyone started speaking. There was so much to tell, no one knew where to begin. Before anyone could start, the sound of running reached them. Kestryl almost went for his sword, but the tall man, seeing the concern on his face, held up a hand. The Bladesman relaxed but remained vigilant.

A small figure emerged from the back room, running and shouting.

"Mommy, Erith is playing with the dagger again."

The boy, on seeing company, stopped and looked around uncertainly. Cursing, then looking apologetic for doing so, the tall man left the room.

Lylea smiled and motioned to the boy. Without taking his eyes from the strangers, he went to her and leaned his head against her arm.

"One of my two sons. Alnar, I would like you to meet my good friend Cyanne and..." There was an embarrassed silence when she realized neither she nor Cyanne had introduced their companions.

"Kestryl," said Cyanne, looking more than a little chagrined herself. "You remember. He was the one

who came to Journ to find me."

At that moment, the tall man returned holding a boy in his arms. The child squirmed as if trying to get away, until he saw the visitors. Then he stopped and put his thumb in his mouth. The tall man set him on the floor and he, like his brother, moved quickly to his mother's side, staring at the strangers.

Lylea took the man's hand in hers. "This is my husband, Agar."

Cyanne studied him. He was not the type of man she'd pictured her friend ending up with and again, she felt that she had seen him before.

"A pleasure," she said. "Have we met?"

Agar shook his head. "I don't think so. By the time I met Lylea, you were already on your way to Stratus. Your shipped sailed long before we made it back."

"You were there when Tanrif put on the Amulet of Dreaming."

Agar's eyebrows rose in surprise. Lylea looked puzzled.

"When Tanrif put it on, I had a vision. I saw the three of you, Tanrif kneeling, the two of you standing off to the side, watching. I felt the release of power when he placed it around his neck."

She shivered with pleasure, happy the intervening years had not diminished the memory of that feeling.

Again, silence settled over them. After a time, Cyanne spoke.

"How is Demendil? Has he retired?"

Cyanne knew from the exchange of glances that the news was not going to be good.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you." Lylea paused, allowing Cyanne to brace herself. "Demendil died four years ago. He had been sick for a long time. It started not long after you left. In the end, he went off on his own. He couldn't bear to see me watch him wither away."

Lylea's voice caught in her throat, a reflection of the grief on Cyanne's face.

"He was a credit to the house of Lehan," said the Bladesman. If any of the others were surprised he knew Demendil, they didn't show it.

"I never got to say good-bye," said Cyanne.

Kestryl watched her closely.

Cyanne recognized his concern and forced a sad smile. "I will always remember him fondly. He was like a father to me."

Lylea nodded. "I know he was, but he wouldn't want this reunion to be anything less than joyous. Tell me your story. I want to know everything."

"You mean you don't?" asked Agar, eyes wide. "I'm stunned."

Lylea elbowed him and laughed.

The mood restored, Cyanne began the tale of what had transpired since they'd separated, including her capture by Skandl, the battle for the throne of High Gondylar, her subsequent abduction, and her rescue

from Vykon. Finally, she told of the battle against the Sarithan Assassins.

Both Lylea and Agar were completely caught up in the tale, and the oldest boy seemed interested as well. Cyanne had to stop frequently to answer questions, and every now and again Kestryl would add a detail she'd overlooked. Lylea started to cry when she heard of Tanrif's passing and was amazed at his return from the dead. She managed to hold her tears when he died the second time, though it was clear she was affected by the news.

When the telling was done, Cyanne took a long drink of wine.

"So Lylea, what about you?"

"After a story like that, mine will be dull."

"I find that hard to believe."

She smiled fondly at her husband. "Tanrif and I caught Agar trying to rob us and afterwards forced him to open the box we found in Silverguard. That's when Tanrif put on the necklace. I have no idea what happened, but I knew he'd changed. When he left, I was devastated. I only found out he went after you much later, and that hurt too, but I can't complain.

"Shortly after you left, High King Geryth died. He had no heir, so the throne was up for grabs, and everyone wanted it. The Old Kingdom claimed it had the rights to keep it, as Geryth was from there. The South Alliance wasn't going to sit back and let that happen, and the Northern Realm, which had the weakest position I think, also claimed their rights. Of course, if you asked someone who lived in the Northern Realm, they might have another take on it.

"War broke out before we made it back to Stratus. Agar had no desire to enlist in the army, and we were traveling without papers, so we left the kingdom. We weren't all that far from the Borderlands at the time and weren't the only refugees."

"Fleeing a war together sounds like a romantic beginning to a relationship."

Lylea laughed. "Sure it does—if you don't mind missed meals, marauding thieves, or being a foreigner on strange soil. Even the nicest folks had no use for us, but we made our way into the north, where there were less refugees and Agar was able to keep us fed. I never liked his choice of profession but couldn't much complain while it kept me from going hungry."

Agar looked uncomfortable, and Lylea hurried to finish the story.

"In the end, the war was over and we returned to Stratus and a much-relieved Demendil. He was already ill by then and had been hoping one of us would return to take over the shop."

Lylea stopped speaking. She seemed as if she might start crying again but managed to maintain control and continued.

"We were his family, Cy. He wanted us to have the shop. He took an immediate liking to Agar. He even tried to teach him some smithing, but Agar was appalling. Demendil used to get so mad."

She laughed again, and Cyanne joined her.

Agar looked at the Bladesman. "You see, this is the problem with women getting together. No matter what they talk about, it always makes you look bad."

"I don't need much help for that," said Kestryl.

Lylea and Agar laughed, but Cyanne, who knew too well he meant what he said, didn't join them. When Lylea realized, she pressed on.

"Agar, as it turned out, has quite a head for business. When Demendil realized he'd never be a smith, he taught Agar as much about the trade as he could. He was wasting away though, Cy. He didn't have long enough. We married when we did so Demendil could share it with us."

"He was a great man," said Agar. "I only wish I had gotten to know him better."

Lylea reached out and placed her hand on her husband's arm.

"Agar did everything he could to make Demendil's life comfortable while he was here. Of course, the nature of the business had to change. Demendil couldn't forge anything new, but Agar is so good at buying and selling that we still manage to turn a tidy profit. We have no financial woes. The reputation of the shop doesn't hurt, that's for sure. Anyway, two children later and here we are."

By the time the tale was done, it was getting late. Agar went to prepare a room for the guests and Lylea left to check on dinner, a thick meat stew she'd left cooking.

"Kestryl?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"For?"

"Bringing me here. It was the right thing to do ... but you knew that didn't you?"

"I had hoped. I know things haven't been easy on you, Cyanne. For whatever part I had in that, I apologize. Please believe me when I tell you I never wanted anything but your happiness."

Cyanne smiled. "I have always known that. Even when you tried to convince me that I was carrying your child, I knew."

"Was it so impossible?"

Cyanne placed a hand over his. "Kestryl, you will always be dear to me. And I can never repay you for your loyalty, courage and support. But you were always Uncle Kestryl growing up. Then you were my bladesman. I don't know any way to change that. I would if I could."

"I love you, Cyanne."

"I know you do, but you have other responsibilities. I understand that now. Do what you have to do, Kestryl. Whatever it is, I'll be fine. I'm home now."

Kestryl withdrew his hand and turned away. He didn't need or want her permission to carry out his plans. He was spared the need to reply when Lylea returned.

\* \* \* \*

Several days later, Kestryl and Lylea were alone in the shop. Cyanne was still asleep upstairs, and Agar had gone down to the docks to inspect a shipment.

Lylea was busy preparing for a day of business. Kestryl was examining a rack of swords. She was about to unlock the door, when he spoke.

"I think there is something you should know."

Lylea looked at him expectantly, her face passive. She had sensed something was troubling the Gondylarian but didn't want to interfere in Cyanne's business. She would hear the man out, she decided, then tell him that she couldn't get involved.

"It's about Cyanne's unborn child."

"I see."

"It is not Cyanne's first."

"She told me she lost one in childbirth. It is very hard to lose a child."

"She didn't lose the child. He lives still."

"I don't understand."

"When Cyanne's son was eighteen he put on the Amulet of Dreaming and, like his father, was changed. The magic of the amulet warped his mind. He raped Cyanne. It is his child she carries."

Lylea had thought herself ready for anything, but as the Bladesman's words emerged she felt her legs go weak. She had to support her weight on the counter so she wouldn't collapse.

"By the gods! How horrible!"

"She does not know, and I will not tell her. When I found her, she was only barely alive and not at all sane. I took her to a great mage, and he cast a spell on her. It was supposed to make her forget, but she forgot too much. Cyanne remembers nothing after Tanrif's second death. She knows eighteen years have passed, but that's all. I wasn't sure I was going to tell you, but if the responsibility for Cyanne's well-being is in your hands, then this is something you must know. Cyanne is hell-bent on regaining her memory. I have done all I can to see that she does not. That task must now fall to you. I only hope what I have told you will remain between the two of us."

Lylea was silent, pondering the implications of what she had just heard. When finally she spoke, her voice was a hoarse whisper.

"I will not tell her."

The Bladesman breathed a sigh of relief.

"I must return to High Gondylar and set things straight. I do not know you and grieve I have brought you this problem, but I did not know where else to turn. I wanted Cyanne to be safe."

Lylea could never imagine a man like Kestryl pleading, yet that was what she saw in his eyes. She knew her duty, though she was loath to do it. For years, she had prayed for her friend's safe return, but this wasn't what she had in mind. Yet what could she do? For better or worse, the problem was now hers.

"I will care for her, have no fear. Do what you must."

She could not reveal to Cyanne what had happened, nor could she abandon her. If Cyanne ever needed her, now was the time.

To her surprise, the Bladesman bowed low. "I am forever indebted to you. If there is some service I might provide in return, you only need name it."

Lylea smiled sadly. "I do not think anything you do will ease the burden you have brought me. Be about your business. Cyanne will be safe here."

If the Bladesman had any response, Lylea never heard it.

"Kestryl, are you down there?"

Lylea started at the sound of her friend's voice. Kestryl whirled as if responding to a royal summons, and went to be with his Duchess. Holding back tears, Lylea watched him climb the stairs. She couldn't imagine the pain Kestryl had endured during the past months—a pain that was now hers.

Agar entered through the side door.

"Were you planning on opening sometime today?"

She looked at him and forced a smile. This was her problem, not his. She would deal with it on her own.

"I suppose you're going to tell me there's a mob of people waiting to get in."

Agar chuckled. "Just a chap who wants to exchange a set of throwing knives he bought last week. He says they're not balanced right."

Lylea looked at the door then at her husband.

"Would you deal with it? I can't right now."

Without waiting for an answer, she fled up the stairs, leaving Agar to deal with the shop and worry about what was wrong with his wife.

\* \* \* \*

Cyanne cried the day the Bladesman left. Without him, she was truly alone. She had already lost her husband, and now Kestryl was gone as well. While she had not been able to return his love, his devotion was a thing she'd come to depend on, not just for ten months, but for eighteen years, even if she couldn't remember them.

Kestryl's departure wasn't all that troubled her. Now that he was gone, it seemed even less likely that she would learn what had happened during the missing years of her life.

On the night the Bladesman sailed, she had another dream. She'd been having them regularly, but this was something different. She had been watching a boy spar with the Bladesman. Each held two swords.

At first she thought it was Tanrif, but he was obviously too young to be her husband. When the fight was done, he ran to her and she smiled at him and tousled his hair. Not her husband—her son. Living with Lylea's children must have triggered the memory.

She woke in tears, certain this was a true piece of her past, yet she could remember nothing more. Kestryl had lied to her. Her son had not died in childbirth.

But if he didn't die, where was he now? Did he live still? Had he met some horrible accident? Was his death somehow her fault? That would be one reason Kestryl would have kept it secret. Perhaps it was even what had sent her over the edge.



She considered the idea, but it didn't feel right. She needed more information and the only one who had it was on his way to High Gondylar.

She spent hours concentrating, trying to glean even a single additional detail. She repeated the dream, or at least as much as she could remember, over and over again in her mind. Even after her head started throbbing, she didn't stop, but it was useless.

The weeks that followed were full of dreams and failure. Elusive almost-memories flitted about the corners of her mind. Yet the harder she tried to look at them, the more unsure she was that they were real at all. She wondered if she were going mad.

She never mentioned her dreams to Lylea, not wishing to burden her. Indeed she felt something was deeply troubling her old friend, but she wouldn't intrude unless Lylea sought her advice. After all, it had been a very long time for Lylea, even if it didn't seem that way to Cyanne. Perhaps Lylea needed more time before she could trust Cyanne enough to confide in her again. Cyanne would wait. Time was one commodity they finally had.

As the weeks passed, the frequency and length of the dreams increased, though they told her precious little. It was like watching scattered scenes from different plays with the same characters. Even after a month, she had learned little except for one small detail. She had named the child for his father.

As time passed, she grudgingly had to admit Dauber Uaks had known his craft. Whatever memory he wished to hide from her would remain hidden.

\* \* \* \*

The ship that carried Kestryl made its way west and south toward the Sunset Isles. It was the third time in his life that he had made the round trip across The Mistress. The first time he had brought Cyanne from High Gondylar and returned without her. The second time, he'd arrived alone and brought her back. This time, he was alone once more and somehow knew he'd never make the crossing again.

With Stratus a month behind him, the pain had faded to a dull throb. Time did that. Without Cyanne around, there was no one to talk to except Sheba, who knew his heart anyway. It didn't matter. There was nothing to say. There was no way he could escape the fact that what had happened was his fault.

He should have given the amulet to Dauber for safekeeping. He should have told Cyanne that Tanrif would never return, and that he loved her and they could have something together. Eighteen years wasted. His unshed tears became more fuel for his rage. Tanrif would pay. If he could do nothing else, he could do that.

After which, whatever happened he would accept. If it were death, he'd welcome it.

For he would never be able to return to Cyanne after killing her son—and without her, his life was over.

\* \* \* \*

Cyanne, preoccupied with her dreams and missing memory, didn't speak much during the last months of her pregnancy. If Lylea noticed, she never commented on it. Each passing day emphasized the difference between the new Lylea and the girl Cyanne had grown up with. Not surprising after all those years.

Cyanne might have been able to understand it better had she changed as well, but she hadn't. At least she didn't think she had. She was still twenty years old in her mind—a single woman, twice widowed by the same man. Lylea was a responsible married woman with a husband and two children. She could not expect her relationship with Lylea to be what it once had been.

Cyanne spent more time with the children than with either Lylea or Agar, perhaps because they reminded her of her son.

The boys were precocious and well ... boys. Sometimes they would do or say something that would tickle a memory. As the final month of her pregnancy approached, she remembered more from Tanrif's childhood. She cherished each of these memories, but wished she knew the whole story. She found herself resenting the Bladesman, who had known but hadn't told her. Oath or no oath, it was a betrayal. Yet she was sure he thought he was doing the right thing.

Again and again she thought about the caves of Dauber Uaks and everything that had happened there. Then she tried to go back further. She knew a single image from that time period might jar her memory, but she could remember nothing.

She was halfway through her eighth month when the pains started. She had experienced much discomfort already, but this was different. It was frustrating for her, having been through it before but not being able to remember. She didn't know whether or not the pain was normal.

She resolved to ask Lylea about it, but first she needed to lie down. She barely made it to her bed. She lowered herself slowly and lay back, clutching her swollen belly.

Part of her wanted to cry out, but she couldn't, not even when her water broke. Then, as she lay there, something shifted in her mind. Pain suffused her, but it was nothing compared to the agony of betrayal. Despair tore at her as memory of the rape returned. No one would ever hear her silent crippled screams of shame.

\* \* \* \*

Lylea stared at the fireplace sifting through pieces of the past. Like any puzzle, it was hard to find the sense of it.

She had been born in the South Alliance and had lived there her whole life. When she was young, she'd been orphaned and, through a set of circumstances too amazing to be called coincidence, she had ended up in the Shop of Demendil. Demendil had been like a father to her and Cyanne, who already lived there, was like a sister. They fought with each other and just as often laughed together, but there was an undeniable love between them despite their competitive natures.

When Tanrif showed up, they'd both desired him, and though Lylea had made love to him once, nearly twenty years before, he ended up married to Cyanne.

Ironically, two months after the wedding, Tanrif was slain, leaving Cyanne behind, a pregnant grieving widow.

Until the Bladesman had brought her back, Lylea had never expected to see Cyanne again. Under most circumstances, she'd have been thrilled to see her old friend again, but not like this. Better to remember her friend as a young, vital woman than the victim she had become, even if she didn't know it.

Cyanne didn't realize the child she bore was her son's, and Lylea had promised the Bladesman not to tell her. The promise ate at her heart, but she would keep it and cry inside each time she looked at her.

She thought about Kestryl, and how it must have hurt him to carry that secret alone for as long as he did. He must truly love Cyanne to make such a sacrifice. And she knew in her heart of hearts that he wasn't coming back. That was the saddest thought of all. Together, Cyanne and Kestryl could have had some kind of life, if only he hadn't been so scared and she hadn't been so unstable. Still, that was in the past and there was nothing to be done about it now.

Lylea thought about the pressures on Cyanne that had driven her over the edge. Would she have been in any better shape? How would she react if she thought Agar had died and, shortly after he was restored to her, she had to witness his death all over again? She shuddered. Considering what Cyanne had been through, it was amazing she had made it this far.

She was so lost in thought, she didn't hear Agar enter the room and when he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, she yelped and spun, reaching for the dagger she hadn't worn for over ten years.

"Easy, lass, I was just making sure you were alright."

She almost smiled despite being caught off guard, but bit it back and scowled instead. It was more fun that way.

"What do you mean by sneaking up on me, thief. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were practicing your old art again."

Agar released a long sigh, more for her benefit than because he felt it. "Now, you know better than that. I would sooner lose my arm than violate my parole. You know I would never do anything to make you think less of me."

She snorted and was about to reply when a scream pierced the air. She ran past Agar before he could react. He followed immediately behind. Heart pounding, she ran to Cyanne's room and flung open the door. She took one look inside and turned toward her husband.

"Run. Get the midwife. It is time."

"It's too soon," said Agar, who stood unmoving.

"Of course it is. Now get out of here!"

She didn't wait to see if he complied but entered the room and ran to her friend.

Cyanne was already bathed in sweat, though even with a fire burning it wasn't all that hot. She lay on the bed, panting and weak. Lylea smoothed her hair back and tried to smile, but it was not easy. Cyanne's head was hot, and she was too pale, too frail. When she spoke, her voice was weak.

"I am not going to make it."

Lylea shook her head. "Rest. I've sent for the midwife."

"She cannot help me. No one can help me now. I will go to the lands beyond and join my husband." Lylea tried to quiet her, but Cyanne continued. "I know, Lylea. I remember. I was raped by my son. And now the gods make me pay for it."

"It wasn't your fault," protested Lylea, tears forming in her eyes. "It's not fair you should have to pay."

Cyanne didn't answer for the contractions started in earnest. The baby should not have been born for another month, but Lylea, who had been through it twice, knew such things did not always run on schedule. Erith had been born two weeks early. She cursed and looked around as if the midwife would suddenly appear, but it didn't happen. She knew it would be up to her.

In the distance, she heard her sons yelling at each other but blocked it out. She could do nothing right now but be with Cyanne. The Gondylarian was strong for all her weakness, and remained aware of her surroundings. She even tried to comfort Lylea, though her face was covered with perspiration, and her

breathing was irregular and faint. Lylea's eyes burned from dripping sweat, but she forced herself to concentrate. Cyanne strained, trying to push the baby out. It was as if she knew she would not make it but thought she might save the child.

It was impossible for Lylea to tell how much time had passed. Then the baby's feet appeared.

"By the gods," Lylea whispered.

She had heard of breech births but didn't know how to handle them. She tried as best she could to help bring the baby out. Cyanne must have known something was wrong, for she tensed and pushed. The child came into the world to the sound of her mother's screams.

Lylea knew the child was too small, but she had heard tales of such children surviving. Cyanne was screaming in Gondylarian now and, from the tone of her voice, Lylea was glad she didn't speak the language.

Just as the newborn's head finally came free, the door swung open, and Agar entered. He paled at the sight but did not turn away.

"I couldn't find her."

A statement of failure. Lylea looked at him, part of her wanting to go to him, part of her needing to stay with her friend.

"Heat a knife," she told him. She heard the sounds of him moving to comply.

Lylea, holding the infant, knelt beside Cyanne, who was gasping for breath but still conscious. Cyanne started speaking in Gondylarian, caught herself and switched languages.

"She lives?"

Lylea nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"Good," replied Cyanne. "If you ever see Kestryl again, tell him I forgive him. It wasn't his fault."

She coughed and shut her eyes.

Agar had returned with the knife and at Lylea's request cut the cord. Lylea felt for Cyanne's pulse, but knew from the amount of blood on the sheets that she wouldn't feel anything. Perhaps she would never feel anything again.

She reached out and closed Cyanne's eyes, tears falling. Agar took the child from her, all that was left of her friend.

Distantly, Lylea became aware that Erith had entered the room and was watching. She didn't want him to see her this way but couldn't bring herself to speak. Agar, sensing her thoughts, asked the boy to go to his room. Erith turned and ran. Lylea walked away from the body. It was so unfair.

She looked at Agar, the pain on his face a reflection of her grief. She went to him, and he held her, Cyanne's newborn child between them. Apparently, their embrace caused the child some discomfort for she started crying. She took the baby in her arms and rocked her gently, though it made no difference. She looked at Agar, biting back tears.

"We will name her Cyanne."

"Are you sure? Won't the name be a constant reminder of this?"

Lylea started to answer and stopped. If Cyanne had picked a name, she had never shared it. How would she feel, having to say that name over and over each day? After what Cyanne had been through in the last months, having the name around didn't seem such a big deal.

"It won't bother me. And it's the right thing to do."

"Well then, Cyanne it is."

Lylea pressed the baby to her, tears falling freely. It was a small way to commemorate her friend, who had been through so much and been taken away so suddenly.

A shiver ran through her, and she was surprised to find she was no longer hot. She took one last look at her friend and, with the child and her husband, left the room. The image of Cyanne lying there was one she would carry to the grave. Later, she would have Agar remove the body and bury it. He would do it for her.

If only it would be as easy to remove the scene from her mind.

## Chapter Five—The Taking Of The Throne

Tanrif stood on a hill overlooking Castle Therak. A month had passed since Warthon had sworn fealty. Since then, four other lords, all from minor houses, had also joined him. In order for him to take and keep the throne, he needed the backing of one of the three larger houses. The House of Therak would be the first he approached.

Parth's information had proved invaluable again. It was his advice that had brought him here, well south of Gondylar. The house of Freyrath would have been less out of the way, but Parth thought it would be harder to forge an alliance with them.

The lesser nobles of High Gondylar's hierarchy had put up little resistance, not that they'd had a choice. One look at Tanrif's followers ensured their cooperation. Castle Therak, on the other hand, was a well-established house with its own elite guard—many of whom were palace-trained. If it came to a battle, the cost in men, and more importantly status, would set his plans back indefinitely. He would have to give now as well as take, and was prepared to do so.

At Parth's suggestion, Tanrif had left most of his men conveniently far away, keeping a contingent of about a hundred with him, including many of the mercenaries he'd acquired at Wildor. Tanrif could tell by watching the approaching horsemen that they were well trained. He sat casually, displaying a confidence he wasn't sure he felt. It would not do to look intimidated.

When they were close enough to converse without screaming, the riders stopped and parted. A single man rode through. Parth leaned toward Tanrif.

"He's not the Lord of the house, but one of his minions. If you negotiate with this one, it will lower your status."

Tanrif nodded.

"My Lord gives greetings. My name is Marl. If you are here in peace, you are welcome to pass. If you are here with hostile intentions, be forewarned that you are not the first to have tried Therak's defenses."

He tilted his head to regard Tanrif.

Tanrif smiled. "I am not used to dealing with vassals. Tell Lord Valere that if he does not wish to meet with me, that's fine. When I sit on the Gondylarian throne it will be remembered. I do not need him."

Anger filled Marl's eyes. Obviously, his orders did not include attack at will. Tanrif watched the man battle for self-control.

"No one talks to my Lord that way."

"Not even the rightful heir to the Gondylarian throne? You listen to me. If Lord Valere is not in my presence within two hours, I will take my men and leave. He can deal with the consequences later. Or, if you think you're up to it, you and your men can try me right now. I have no patience for servants. A good day to you."

Parth's eyebrows rose in surprise. Clearly, he didn't approve of the way Tanrif had addressed Lord Valere's emissary. He placed a hand on his blade but relaxed when the riders retreated. Tanrif stared at Marl's back and smiled. Parth walked his mount closer to Tanrif, speaking so that only the Gondylarian heir could hear.

"I don't know what to make of your words."

"Neither will Valere. From your description the man is no fool. In his place, what would you do?"

"I would ride out here within the two hours, as close to the time limit as possible. Let you sweat without risking anything."

"As would I. Let us hope Valere is as smart as you say he is."

Parth looked uncomfortable. Tanrif sensed the man's mood and his reluctance to talk about it.

"You have something to say?"

"Maybe I should go and check on our forces, just in case. Valere might attempt an offensive against them."

Tanrif stared into the distance, turning the idea over in his mind. If Valere did take his men, it would leave Tanrif in a much weaker position.

"Go. I'll handle Valere. You can return later if all is well."

Parth bowed. Tanrif watched until the bladesman departed before again looking off in the direction Marl had gone. Two hours and he would have his answer.

\* \* \* \*

Se-gen lay in bed, head on her lover's shoulder. Orwyn was not her first lover, though he was the best. She gazed at him as he slept; he was amazing to behold. Nothing like the role he played before others. Orwyn was in top physical and mental condition. Only his extraordinary mind allowed him to remain undetected. And he was teaching her things she would never have known.

He had not told her at first that he was a spy. Rather, it had been the ever-widening gulf between her perceptions of the man and his actions that had made her suspicious. She couldn't believe he was the fool everyone believed him to be.

He'd always seemed to do the stupidest things when the most important people were around. Whenever a noble peeked into the kitchen, even if Orwyn hadn't been doing anything out of the ordinary, he would start. Why would that be, unless he was trying to create an impression?

Finally, she'd decided to see for herself. One day, when the two of them had been alone in the kitchen, she'd walked over to where he was sitting.

"Hello, Orwyn."

He smiled up at her with that blank smile and met her gaze expectantly. He looked to her then like a small puppy awaiting his master's command. Perhaps she had been wrong. Still, if she were, she had nothing to lose by testing him.

"You know," she said, "you're not fooling me. I don't believe you're as simple as you pretend."

He stared at her blankly. She was about to give up when suddenly, he transformed. He rose slowly to his feet. His confident smirk sent a chill down her spine.

"What would I be then?" he asked.

"I have often wondered. You tell me."

"Let me ask you something. If I am attempting to remain hidden, and you have seen me for what I am, what makes you think I will not take your life to protect my secret?"

Only then did she realize that he stood between her and the only exit. She smiled, trying not to let her fear show.

"Because I can be useful. I can help you. I know far more about the palace than you do and have access to areas you do not."

For a minute or more, he said nothing. Se-gen began to think that he might follow up on his threat. Perhaps she should have maintained her silence. He took a step toward her.

"Why would you help me?"

Se-gen shrugged. "Because I can. Is anything I do appreciated here? Thelanna gets all the credit, and I do much of the work. No one even knows I exist, except for her ... and now you. I want more than this, Orwyn ... a lot more."

He hesitated as if considering his options. She remained silent, fascinated by the change she'd witnessed.

"Know this then. If you betray me ... if I even begin to suspect you are about to betray me, nothing will stop me from killing you."

To emphasize the threat, he closed his hands around her throat. He squeezed lightly then harder, never relinquishing his hold on her eyes. Se-gen started to gasp but forced herself not to struggle. He maintained the pressure for a time then released her. She sagged to her knees before him.

Orwyn reached down, grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to her feet. By the time she realized what was happening his lips were already pressed against hers. After a moment's surprise, she responded.

She smiled at the memory. That had been a month ago. During that time, he had given her small assignments to help him out. She had done well so far. Orwyn had been proud of her.

Soon he would be leaving and would take her with him. He was a Lord in his country and she would be his lady. He would dress her in the finest silks, and she would never have to work again. He'd even promised to buy her Thelanna as a wedding gift. It was fate that had brought them together. She closed her eyes. Whatever it took, she would help him. Never again would she have to serve others.

As she drifted off to sleep, the smile never left her face.

\* \* \* \*

Thulrak reread the coded message that would soon be on its way to the Emperor. He wasn't sure he believed it himself. It seemed reasonably certain the man who claimed to be Tanrif was the genuine article, though where he'd been for the last two decades, no one could say.

That meant that Domina had to move before Tanrif arrived in High Gondylar. It would be far harder for him to take the throne during a war, and if he somehow managed it, he wouldn't have any time at all to organize his defenses. An invasion now could work to the Emperor's advantage in more ways than one, since Lord Teryl would have to fight invasions on two fronts.

Tanrif's desire for the throne wasn't the only thing on Thulrak's mind. Parth, the bladesman of High Gondylar had disappeared, and though no one knew where he was, no one seemed to be looking for him. That smacked of a mission, though Thulrak couldn't imagine what it might be.



Also, a number of fanatics in Gondylar had begun predicting the return of Duke Tanrif. At first no one listened to them, but lately the zealots had been gaining followers. It was said that they were all led by one man, though no one seemed to know who. One thing was certain. If the palace attacked Tanrif, there would be rioting in the streets. He shook his head. The Gondylarian mind was incomprehensible.

With a sigh, he removed a sangreth from the jug and, with the skill of one long practiced, mounted his message and set the creature free. All he could do now was wait.

\* \* \* \*

Lord Valere was both smaller and older than Tanrif thought he'd be. For all that, he rode his horse as if he were born in the saddle. He smiled frequently, but the mirth seemed to die short of his almost gray eyes. Tanrif would have to keep a close watch on Lord Valere after he took the throne.

"I am not saying you are not who you say you are. I am saying I am not certain. Indeed, what reason do I have to believe you? Because you say so? Because they believe you?" He gestured expansively at the men behind Tanrif. "You will have to do better than that."

With the question of proof hanging in the air, Tanrif was at his most vulnerable. Indeed, what evidence could he offer?

"It's not about proof, Valere and you know it."

The lack of formality made the Lord bristle with indignation, but Tanrif continued as if he hadn't notice.

"How do you prove who you are to someone who has never seen you? The question is this. When I take the throne, and I will, will you be on the winning side or the other? If you do not support me, I will certainly not support you. Isn't that in line with the finest long-standing traditions between Gondylarian noble houses? I came to you because I believe you to be the strongest, but only by a hair. How much stronger is Therak than the house of Charnath?"

"Teryl will never support you," replied Valere, though he looked thoughtful. "Still there is some value to your words. Let me sleep on it. Tomorrow at dawn I will give you my answer."

Tanrif nodded and watched the armed party retreat. He knew Valere had no choice, and Valere knew it as well, so there was no harm in waiting a day. In fact, after his long ride across the country, it would be a welcome rest. A day of rest before the real work began, for once Lord Valere swore allegiance, Tanrif would have all he needed to descend on Gondylar.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl didn't have to push his way through the crowded streets of Dusk. One look at the expression on his face sent most people scurrying. He paid no notice. He had been on the island for two days and had been unable to locate Captain Andres. It was as if The Mistress had risen up and swallowed him.

He thought back to their last conversations. Andres had been happy in his retirement and had indicated he was done with High Gondylar. So where could he be?

Kestryl had hoped to spend some time with the Captain before returning home. He had looked forward to setting aside his burden, if only briefly. It was not to be. Andres was gone, and no one knew where to find him.

The Captain's absence added to the Bladesman's list of worries, though he wasn't sure why. He wasn't responsible for Andres and had quite enough to worry about without this additional circumstance.

Yet even that was not as troubling as what was to come. On his second day in Dusk, he heard the first of

many rumors about the return of Duke Tanrif from the supposed dead. The rumors were wild, but could not be ignored. Particularly after one of the stories detailed quite clearly the Amulet of Dreaming.

As Duke Tanrif had passed beyond Corithim, this could only be his son. Kestryl's rage grew with each telling of the story. The boy had raped his mother and was now trying for the throne. If he attained it, it would be yet another stain on a thing the Bladesman loved dearly. Kestryl's anger, already great, took on a life of its own. He was certain he could no longer be counted among the sane and didn't care.

Kestryl, the true bladesman of High Gondylar, had only one thing on his mind. He would avenge the rape of his Duchess. And if somehow Tanrif did manage to take the throne, Sheba save his soul.

He'd already killed one Duke and regretted the necessity of the act. This time it would be different. Unlike Theraint, Tanrif wouldn't go down without a fight.

Kestryl smiled for the first time in days. Those who witnessed the event were even quicker to move from his path.

\* \* \* \*

After Parth reported all was well, Tanrif kept him up late. This nightly ritual had gone on for some time. Parth was a veritable treasure trove of information and Tanrif, having never been exposed to Gondylarian politics, needed to learn all he could absorb. These conversations often lasted for hours, leaving both men tired the next day, but the payoff was worth it. Tanrif's knowledge of the Gondylarian noble houses and Gondylarian protocol had already proved invaluable. He would do without sleep.

Parth had been explaining how recent political events had affected even the strongest houses. Tanrif sat quietly, only occasionally stopping to interrupt with a question or request for clarification. Parth noticed the sounds first. One moment he was speaking, the next he was on his feet, sword drawn. Tanrif leapt up and drew his blade. They were scanning the night when the first shout came. It was cut off prematurely, no doubt by an enemy blade.

Within seconds the entire camp was in an uproar. Enemy soldiers poured from the surrounding darkness, as if appearing by magic. Tanrif's men met them.

Tanrif spun. To his left, Parth had just run a man through and was fighting two others. To his right, Coula had taken down two opponents and was searching out more. Tanrif called to him.

"Coula. There are too many. Get to the horses. Spread the word."

"There is no honor in flight," called back the warrior.

"I'm not fleeing. We need to regroup and choose our ground."

Coula nodded, pausing only to slay another man before following his Lord's instructions.

Tanrif turned back toward Parth, who had dispatched an opponent with a well-aimed thrust. Covered as he was with blood, Tanrif almost couldn't recognize him.

Against such numbers, their only chance was to reach the main camp. A figure emerged from the night, and Tanrif, almost without thinking, ran him through, but everywhere he looked there were more.

"We'll never make it," he shouted to Parth.

"The men are too far. I should have had them camp closer."

Two more attackers jumped at him, and Parth retreated. The night swallowed him in a matter of seconds. Tanrif ran between the tents. Everywhere he looked his followers lay on blood-soaked soil or remained standing, valiantly facing the overwhelming odds.

Twice he stopped to help one of his own, but the enemy was endless. He should have brought the entire force with him. He would never make that mistake again, assuming there would be another again, which didn't seem likely.

The sounds of battle began to lessen as his men died. Tanrif became a target and knew it would not be long before he fell. Sword in hand, he ran into a group of the enemy, intending to take as many of them with him as he could before death took him. He shouted in fury. He had been so close. He could have had the throne. Now he was just another pretender put down by the nobility. The thought that history would name him such made him angrier.

"It's him," shouted a voice.

Tanrif turned toward the speaker. It was Marl. Tanrif charged. A host of attackers converged on him. Soon, it would be over.

Tanrif felt the first blow and possibly the second before his knees buckled. The last thing he remembered as the world went away was Marl's victorious smile.

\* \* \* \*

The sensation of water trickling over his lips brought Tanrif to his senses. He attempted to do a mental inventory of injuries. It was difficult for him to separate what hurt from what was broken or missing. At last, he gave up and opened his eyes.

He didn't know what he expected to find, but Parth and Coula leaning over him looking concerned would not have been high on the list. They had both seen better mornings. So had he if their appearance was any indication of his. He made a feeble attempt to rise, but his muscles wouldn't respond. All he could muster was a low moan.

Parth bathed his head with a cool rag, while Tanrif tried to find his voice. His first attempt at speech failed and the second was not much better. Eventually, he was able to croak out a question.

"What happened?"

Parth shrugged, glanced at an uncomfortable-looking Coula, then answered.

"We were beaten. Completely encircled, totally outnumbered and too far from our forces to reach them, even if there had been an opening."

Tanrif nodded. He remembered that much.

"How is it that we live?"

He grimaced. Stringing that many words together hurt his throat.

"A man approached the camp and alerted them to the imminent attack. They were already on the way when Valere's men struck. If not for that man, we'd all be dead."

Tanrif again attempted to sit up, and sensing his desire, Parth helped him. Pain raced through him, but he fought it and remained sitting. He gestured to the water skin nearby, and Parth helped him with that as well.

"Where is this man now?"

"He vanished. Most of the men claim he did not ride with them."

"I want him found," said Tanrif.

That was all he had strength for. Slowly, he lowered himself to the ground. He was asleep before anyone could answer.

\* \* \* \*

Lord Valere paced the polished wooden floor of the Great Hall. The reports were mixed. He had known of Tanrif's encampment to the west and south, but it had been too far to interfere. Of that he had been certain. His own men outnumbered Tanrif's smaller force five to one. He had no doubt they had been surprised. How reinforcements had made it to the battle on time he did not know and probably never would. He also didn't know whether Tanrif had survived, though he was sure he'd soon find out.

While he'd kept some forces in reserve, his main strength was gone, and his inability to see how it had happened frustrated him. Perhaps he should have supported the pretender, but that was impossible now. He could only ride the tide of events and allow fate to lead him where it would.

Tired of pacing, he sat in a chair overlooking the approach to Castle Therak. When the armed party approached, he watched. Tanrif led the party, with a familiar blond man. It took Valere a while to recognize that man as Parth. Why would the Gondylarian bladesman march with this pretender? The last he had heard, Parth served Teryl. What could be the connection?

He had given instruction for the party to be brought to him. The dozen or so men already present had disarmed. There was no sense in needless bloodshed. His men could not stand against Tanrif's, and even if his own life were forfeit, at least his children would have their inheritance intact. The wait for the party's arrival seemed interminable, but he resisted the urge to pace again. When Tanrif finally reached him, Valere would look composed.

As if on cue, the victors arrived. Valere sat quietly, surveying the grim faces of the men before him. He had not been certain the man with Tanrif was Parth; he was now. It was to Parth that he addressed his question.

"You of all people ... how could you do this? You've been a servant of the throne for fifteen years..."

He allowed the words to trail off, the disgust in his voice more eloquent than anything he might say.

Parth waited for Tanrif's nod before answering.

"I still serve the throne. In the last twenty years, I have served a number of Dukes. Tanrif was the first of them."

Valere's eyes went wide. "You cannot mean to tell me this man is who he claims to be." He still addressed Parth, rather than the pretender.

"The man before you is Tanrif, the rightful heir to the throne of High Gondylar."

Valere looked as if he would faint.

"I had no idea. I couldn't possibly." He turned to address Tanrif. "I'm afraid I've made a grave error. I understand I must pay for it. I ask only that you allow me to say farewell to my family."

Tanrif inclined his head, and a servant went to fetch them. Once the servant had gone, Tanrif looked at the Lord and smiled.

"It is a pity you chose not to trust me. I'm afraid I now cannot trust you. Surely you understand that."

Valere, pain in his eyes, did not reply.

"I'm sure if you had to do it again you would choose differently, but I will not allow you that chance." As he spoke Tanrif began to unlace his tunic. "You see, you came closer than you think."

Tanrif pulled the tunic over his head, revealing a long raw wound that ran from left shoulder to right waist.

"Any deeper and we would not be having this conversation. It burns me even as I speak. I want you to fully understand the reason for my displeasure."

Valere tried to keep the fear from his face but knew he was not entirely successful. He stared at the wound. He wished Tanrif would put his tunic back on, but he handed it to Parth instead.

"It would have been wiser to take my offer. I have a new offer now. One you will find most intriguing."

In spite of himself, Valere felt a sliver of hope. Perhaps there was a way out of this.

"What does my Lord have in mind?"

Before Tanrif could answer, Valere's family entered. His wife, a handsome woman of about fifty years was followed by two daughters, one about nineteen, the other several years younger. Following them was Cordan, Lord Valere's son and heir to his title. He was in his early twenties. Shame and rage battled on the young man's face.

Tanrif gestured for the Lord to go to them, and Valere wasted no time. He hurried to his wife and hugged her then clasped his son's hand. The two girls he embraced as one, kissing them both, unable to keep the tears from his eyes. At last, he turned back to Tanrif. He stood waiting, eyes downcast, hands at his sides.

Tanrif approached.

"This is a very touching scene, and I am not insensitive. I would not deprive a family of their father." He stopped right before Valere. "I give you back your life."

Relief flooded Lord Valere's face. He was both grateful and confused. Would he have been as magnanimous in Tanrif's place? He didn't think so. Valere was about to thank him for his kindness, when Tanrif moved, too quickly to stop.

To the astonishment of all, Tanrif drew a dagger and slit Cordan's throat. As Lord Valere's son went down, blood sprayed over the sisters, one of whom screamed. Valere's wife ran to the boy but kept her composure.

Parth tensed and placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. He didn't understand why Tanrif had done what he had but knew after such a display that anything could happen. Several of Valere's men stepped forward, unconcealed rage on their faces. Many looked toward their Lord, trying to gauge how they should react. Valere stood silently, a look of abject horror on his face. The dangerous moment passed. Most of the men relaxed when they realized no order would be forthcoming, though their expressions did not soften.

"I want you to understand. I did not slay the boy, Valere ... you did."

The Lord's bowed head indicated he'd already realized the fact. He remained mute.

"The boy was angry. He would have harbored me ill for all the days of his life, especially if I had killed you. I will not tolerate dissension. I will let no enemy live. Those who stand with me I will protect with my life. Those who oppose me will be crushed."

Tanrif looked around the room. The demonstration had been effective. Parth, stunned as anyone else in the room, made his way towards Tanrif. He kept his voice low, so only Tanrif could hear.

"Are you insane? Do you think there will be no reprisal for this?"

Tanrif smiled and the bladesman took a step backward, as if frightened.

"To seal our alliance," continued Tanrif, "I will take your youngest daughter to Gondylar with me as proof of your support."

If possible, Valere's shoulders slumped even further. His wife, however, had had enough. She glared at Tanrif.

"You will not take my daughter."

"I do not like to kill. I do not want to kill again. Don't make it necessary."

Again, Valere's men tensed, but Tanrif turned away from the woman and back to her husband.

"Are these terms acceptable to you?"

It was a long time before Lord Valere's reply came, and when it did, it was in the voice of a man defeated.

"It will be as you say."

Tanrif held his smile. A short time later, he left the castle with his men and Lord Valere's youngest daughter. He would not harm her as long as Valere continued to support him. As they departed, Tanrif noticed Parth kept looking at him. Perhaps the man was not as strong as he thought. It didn't matter. Parth was needed only until they took the throne. Tanrif could make adjustments afterward. For now, he had accomplished what he'd set out to do. When word of what happened here spread to the other Lords, there would be no further resistance.

\* \* \* \*

The tropical sun beat down on the surface of The Mistress. Each day brought Kestryl closer to his goal. The ship was named Storm, an appropriate name for the vessel returning him to High Gondylar. Duke Dathan's life had been claimed by a storm; now another storm carried the Bladesman to the logical conclusion of his rage. He would find Tanrif and blood would flow—only then would Kestryl be free. He practiced each day with his blade so when he finally found Tanrif he would be up to the task.

He leaned on the ship's railing, facing south. He strained his eyes to see but knew the ship was still too far out—at least two weeks from the Gondylarian coast. Two long weeks.

When the sun finally began its slow descent, he returned below deck and prepared to sleep. Perhaps he would not suffer the dreams. Perhaps he would be able to spend one peaceful night. Perhaps.

Yet when he finally slept, as they had every night for what seemed like ages, the dreams returned...

The house is empty. Bodiless, he floats from room to room. There is never a sound until voices emerge from Cyanne's bedroom. The door is closed, but he passes through it. Tanrif is there, naked save for the necklace of Elonel the Fair. Cyanne lies on the bed, equally naked, watching her son approach. Fear is evident in her eyes, but she says nothing, not even after he mounts her.

As he watches, Kestryl grows angrier, reaching for a sword that isn't there, a sword he wouldn't be able to wield if it were, for he is not there—and he should have been. He cannot turn away from the image of Tanrif and Cyanne for he is elsewhere—assassinating Theraint. He knows it was an utterly dishonorable act; Sheba reminds him so nightly.

When he awoke, he knew with the certainty of the damned that the Duke's death and Cyanne's rape had taken place at the same moment.

"I am coming, Tanrif. You will pay for what we have done."

Though he was alone, he whispered the words, a desperate plea that Tanrif's blood would somehow absolve him.

\* \* \* \*

With Lord Valere behind him, there was nothing to prevent Tanrif from marching directly to Gondylar. The Lord's daughter, Ulnira, was a pretty young thing—dark hair, dark eyes, bright smile. Once she overcame her initial fear, she often dined with Tanrif and Parth. Tanrif went out of his way to assure her no harm would come to her.

On one such occasion, they dined together on a meal of dried meat and fresh bread. There was also wine. Tanrif kept looking at Ulnira as they ate, and Parth thought he knew why.

The girl was an enigma. She displayed no ill feelings over her brother's death, nor did she seem to harbor any resentment over her father's defeat. The question that had to be on Tanrif's mind was whether she legitimately did not care, or whether she was one hell of an actress.

Little was said, until after dinner when the three sat around with their wine.

"So, how are you taking your brother's death?" asked Tanrif.

Ulnira shrugged and drank from her glass. "He wasn't my brother."

"Wasn't he Valere's son?"

She smiled, obviously enjoying the questions she knew she was raising.

"He was, but from his first marriage. Though I am certain you have hurt my father, you have endeared yourself to my mother. She always felt Cordan was too full of himself and that my sister would have made a more fitting heir to Valere's fortune."

Parth thought back to the incident. He'd certainly expected more of a reaction from Lady Valere. Now he understood why.

"So you're not angry with me?" asked Tanrif.

"I am indebted to you. Frankly, I hope you take the throne. There has been nothing but problems in High Gondylar of late."

She hid a smile by taking a healthy swallow from her glass, while continuing to watch Tanrif. Parth had

seen women look that way at a man before, and it was never good news.

Tanrif seemed to notice also. "I think you have had enough wine for the evening. Off to bed with you."

She smiled again and rose, no doubt attempting to be seductive, in spite of the fact that she was too young for such ideas. Parth noticed Ulnira made sure to brush against Tanrif on the way out. Tanrif's reaction put Parth on edge. Still, the boy would be Duke and could do as he pleased.

Once Ulnira had gone, Tanrif kept Parth up late again, asking questions about the political situation in Gondylar.

\* \* \* \*

When he returned to The Silver Blade, the guards were waiting for him. Bone had chosen the establishment as much for its name as its location. The sign above the front door bore a picture of a weapon much like the ones he preferred. It was the type of place he liked—inconspicuous and near the action. Well-bred men went there to mingle with those of more dangerous callings. Even the prostitutes were discreet, but for all that, he couldn't mistake their profession.

As soon as Bone entered the common room, they approached. Palace guards were seldom seen in The Silver Blade. Bone considered fleeing, but felt two guards didn't represent a threat. Anyway, it would be important to know what had brought them here.

The first guard, obviously the leader, stepped forward.

"Lord Teryl would like a word with you, Bone."

The assassin kept his face expressionless. The guard was sure of his identity, which didn't seem possible. Had he underestimated Teryl? He would not do so again. Bone couldn't imagine how the Gondylarian Regent had located him, never mind what he wanted. The only thing he knew for sure was that he wasn't in danger. If Teryl had wanted to take him out, he wouldn't be sending fully uniformed guards in broad daylight.

"I will come."

Without another word, the guards walked outside. Bone followed. He had expected them to flank him, ready to draw weapons should he try to flee. Instead they walked ahead, only occasionally glancing back to make sure he kept up. He was to be a visitor then, not a prisoner. All the more curious.

Had Teryl somehow associated him with the men he'd hired to sow dissension? Could he know about Bone's mission? It didn't seem possible. Even so, if that were the case, why wasn't he under arrest?

He would know soon enough, for they approached the main entrance.

Bone had been inside the Gondylarian palace before. He'd tried to assassinate Tanrif during the royal wedding feast. What irony placed him here twenty years later supporting the claim of that same Duke's son, he could not say.

He had never been to the throne room before, though that was where he was taken now. Teryl, an imposing figure of a man, sat in the seat of power. Bone bowed low, trying not to give away anything with his expression.

"Arise."

Bone straightened and met Teryl's gaze, but didn't speak. It wasn't his move.



Teryl studied him for a long time before he spoke. "You've been starting rumors. Why?"

Bone knew it would be useless to deny the truth. "I am not starting rumors. I am speaking my mind."

"What makes you believe Duke Tanrif is going to return?"

"Because I saw him. He told me to come here and spread the word of his coming. I wouldn't be surprised if he were on his way here at this moment."

Let Teryl think him a madman.

"He is on his way, perhaps even closer than you think. And I have no doubt he sent you. Do you know what will be waiting for him when he arrives?"

Bone shook his head, too surprised to speak. Teryl stood and moved aside, gesturing to the throne.

"I want to send an emissary to offer him the Gondylarian throne. I only want what's best for High Gondylar and think Tanrif is it. The only way Tanrif will trust the offer is if you are part of the delegation. I would avoid bloodshed if at all possible."

Bone again bowed low. "I am certain the Duke would appreciate your sentiments."

\* \* \* \*

With Gondylar only days away, all Tanrif thought about was what he would do once he got there.

He had received no message from Bone, though that meant little. Bone might not have known where to reach him. Tanrif thought it likely that Bone had been in place for some time and had been working according to plan, though how that would help him, Tanrif was no longer certain. Parth seemed to think taking the throne would be as easy as marching up to the city's walls and announcing the intention. Tanrif had no such illusions.

Thousands of variations ran through his mind. It was like playing chess, but Tanrif didn't know how each piece was allowed to move. He was so lost in thought Parth had to call his name twice. Tanrif looked down the road. A large procession of mostly unarmed men approached, led by Bone. Tanrif reined in his steed and waited.

Parth stood high in the saddle, hand on his sword's hilt. Many of the others in Tanrif's personal guard followed the example.

When they were twenty-five feet away, Bone stopped. At his signal, so did his companions.

"Greetings, Your Highness," called the assassin.

Tanrif motioned for him to ride forward, and he did so alone.

"What's going on?"

"The city awaits the return of the rightful heir."

Tanrif studied him. He had no real reason to trust the man, yet he did. Such trust was not in his nature and made him uncomfortable.

"I'm just going to ride on in and take over, is that right?"

"According to Lord Teryl, that is essentially the situation."

"I see."

But Tanrif did not see. He had prepared himself for a battle, and now that one was not forthcoming, he felt cheated. Still, he could not deny he was fortunate.

"And just how did this set of circumstances come about?"

"Some would call it fate. Some fortune."

"What would you call it?"

Bone thought for a moment. "I would call it the devil's own luck."

Tanrif nudged his horse forward and motioned his men to follow. Bone rode back to the escort and led the new Duke to the city gates and beyond. True to Teryl's word, no weapon was raised against them and no blood was spilled.

So it was, on a hot Gondylarian afternoon, Tanrif and his men marched through the gates of the city. It is said that more than half the city's inhabitants were on hand to greet the new Duke.

Many men were observed leaving Gondylar a short time later. Those men were the eyes and ears of the Lords, waiting only for news that they could bring to their patrons for silver or gold. This kind of news brought gold.

Cheers followed Tanrif all the way from west gate, through the crowded streets, past the market square, to the wide avenue leading to the palace. There was no doubt the people of High Gondylar had finally had enough. Tanrif maintained his smile until he was inside the gates. When he reached the throne room, Teryl knelt before him to swear fealty. At his example, others followed. Tanrif took the oaths throughout the night and called a celebration for the following evening.

The day Tanrif was crowned would long be remembered. The return of the missing Duke, a man already shrouded in legend, was celebrated not only in the palace, but in every tavern, every shop, every corner of Gondylar. Long into the night people could be heard shouting: "The Duke has returned. Long live Duke Tanrif."

Thulrak listened to the din of celebration and prepared another report for the Emperor.

## Chapter Six—The Count Of Astriana

When Storm docked at Athlana, the ship's single passenger disembarked. Even Cyanne might have had trouble recognizing that man as the Bladesman. He had grown thinner during the four-month crossing and had not shaved in all that time. His eyes, once alert and full of life, were frozen in a perpetual feverish glare. He walked with single-minded determination, and all before him moved quickly from his path.

He had little money and didn't care. Like all fanatics, his goal consumed him and, when finally carried out, it would leave only a shell of the man he had once been. He walked toward the outskirts of town and continued past the city's edge, where the dwellings were further apart. Most of these were cottages but there were a few good-sized farmhouses as well. From one he liberated a horse, the urgency of his rage propelling him to theft for the first time in his life.

He mounted and rode south even though dusk approached. It did not matter to him that riding after dark would be dangerous to the horse. It did not bother him that once it would have mattered.

A night breeze refreshed him as he journeyed onward. Fortunately, his mount did not stumble in the darkness, and by daybreak she was thoroughly exhausted. Heedless, he pressed on. At the end of the day, the mare keeled over. He left the carcass behind and continued on foot.

As he walked, he surveyed the area. It took him a long time to realize where he was and, when he finally did, he was embarrassed it should have taken so long. He was not far from the caves of Dauber Uaks. In his delirium, he had unconsciously sought the only place he could still think of as home.

The sound of a nearby stream reminded him that he'd had nothing to drink or eat since Athlana. He made his way to the stream and drank his fill, then stood and walked east toward the mountains.

Dauber Uaks was the only person he trusted on all of Corithim.

\* \* \* \*

The great mage was reading when he felt a pulling in his mind. It was not often anyone intruded into his domain. He had wanted to spend a relaxing evening and had not planned on company. He contemplated creating the illusion that the caverns were empty, something he did during his infrequent travels, but decided to see who it was instead.

He spoke a few words in the old speech, and the cave entrance appeared in his mind. At first, he didn't recognize the intruder, but as he watched the shadowy figure began to look familiar. Curiosity overcame fatigue. He stood, grabbed his staff and walked through a number of caverns to the main entrance, where he found the man waiting.

"Why have you come?" he boomed in his most intimidating voice.

"Dauber ... it's me."

It was hard for him to believe his ears. He struck his staff twice on the ground and a bright glow emerged from its head.

"By Iorana, it *is* you."

He ran forward, placing a protective arm around Kestryl's shoulder.

"Come in. You look as if you've wasted away."

Kestryl straightened up as best he could and shrugged away the mage's hand. He would walk on his own, or not at all.

"Cyanne, she is all right?"

Kestryl nodded.

"Then what ails you, my friend. Tell me."

Kestryl started to laugh and didn't stop for a long time.

\* \* \* \*

An emergency meeting of the Council of Lords had been called. Once again, Teryl was back in his old seat, watching with sharp eyes all that transpired. The only conspicuous absence was that of Lord Valere, though everyone knew why it was so. That circumstance was part of the debate.

In the end, it could only go one way. With Teryl, and therefore the House of Charnath, safely at his side, and the House of Therak safely in his pouch, the others had no choice but to support the new Duke unconditionally.

Many were angry that they had not been told of Tanrif's appearance beforehand, but they would gripe about it for a time and get over it. Tanrif was too popular, and Domina was kicking up its heels again. Word had already reached them of increased Dominan activity on the frontier. Everyone there knew the Empire would have to be stopped before it decided to wage a full-scale war.

Teryl ignored the debate, as he often did when he knew the Lords were venting. He was content knowing that by his actions, he'd secured a high position in the new Duke's hierarchy for the House of Charnath. Everyone else knew it too. And after learning what had befallen Valere, none of them would have the stomach to directly confront Tanrif.

Soon Tanrif would meet with the Council, addressing them officially for the first time. It would be, Teryl knew, a contest to see which house could best ingratiate itself. He didn't think Tanrif would take well to such tactics.

Teryl allowed the arguing to go on until he felt enough time had passed. When he rose, as had happened before on numerous occasions, silence fell. He looked around the room, smiling. Not having seen Teryl wear such an expression before was enough to cause confusion in some and consternation in others.

While Teryl recognized most of the men, a few were new to him. Dareth was one of the newcomers, a young man representing the House of Saren. He must have replaced his father after his untimely death. Others were simply new retainers, or members of noble families who had successfully maneuvered so that they could attend Council meetings. Being able to say you attended such a meeting was a sign of status among minor nobles.

"As you seem to know," began Teryl, "we have a new Duke."

Teryl waited for the few who shouted comments to come to order before continuing.

"Tanrif is heir to the throne, and there he will stay. He has my support and that of the House of Therak."

"We heard how he won that," yelled out Lord Brone. "What I want to know is who will be next?"

"Valere had agreed to talk to him and tried to take him out in the middle of the night. What would you have done? Is there anyone here who would have left Valere alive?"

Dareth spoke up. Not surprisingly, the others paid rapt attention. It was important to know where any new Lord stood. This may have been the first time he had spoken in Council.

"I wouldn't have taken his daughter. That was repulsive."

A number of shouted assents showed support for the new Lord. Teryl spoke over them.

"I've spoken to the girl. She is insurance, nothing more. She has not been abused in any way, and Tanrif treats her as if she were a visiting dignitary. Back to the issue at hand, in a short time Tanrif will be joining us..."

"Sooner than you think," said a voice from the back of the room. Three dozen heads turned as one. It was the first time most of the Lords had seen Tanrif, and he was an impressive figure, made even more so by the Amulet of Dreaming. He strode to the front of the room followed by Bone. Lord Teryl started to kneel, but Tanrif caught him and raised him up into an embrace. Shock painted many of the faces at the table, but no one was more surprised than Teryl. Tanrif released him.

"My dear Teryl. I wanted to take this opportunity to personally thank you for your service to High Gondylar. I want you to know it will not be forgotten."

The idea for the speech had been Parth's, and from the looks of it, it had the desired effect. Many of the Lords looked uncomfortable. Teryl mumbled something and sat down. Tanrif had their undivided attention.

"I wish I had time to get to know each of you individually. I promise, if you support me, you can expect my gratitude in return. If you oppose me, well, you all know what happened at Castle Therak."

He waited for the low murmur to subside before continuing.

"Times in High Gondylar are not good. Domina is absolutely delighted with the mess you've made of Gondylarian politics. I'm certain many of you are aware of that fact."

A few indignant grumbles floated up from the table, but the perpetrators of these, seeing they did not have the support of those next to them, silenced themselves immediately.

"What do you want from us?"

That from Dareth. The boy warranted scrutiny thought Teryl.

"Men and financial support. I don't care if you tax your holdings to poverty. If Domina marches, we don't have the power to defend ourselves. I have some ideas about shoring up our defenses, but that will take time. In the meanwhile gentleman, I would suggest that you abandon your petty agendas. Until Domina's taken care of, I don't give a damn about the price of wool, or boundary squabbles, or who's nailing whose wife. You got that? If you can't talk war with me, don't talk to me at all."

He turned toward Teryl. "As far as I'm concerned, I don't have time for all these Lords. You've just been elected spokesman. Find out what they want to say, and say it to me."

Several shouts of protest went up. Tanrif silenced them with a stare.

"I don't know what kind of men you are used to dealing with. When I make a statement, that statement is law. Contradicting it is treason. At least until High Gondylar is secure again. Do I make myself clear?"

Without waiting for an answer, Tanrif left the room, followed by Bone. Pandemonium erupted even

before the door closed behind him.

While the Lords fought amongst themselves, Teryl went over what had happened. With Tanrif on the throne, maybe, just maybe, High Gondylar would have a fighting chance against Domina.

\* \* \* \*

Dauber listened to Kestryl's account of his trip across The Mistress and subsequent meeting with Lylea and Agar. Afterward, the Bladesman continued to talk, mostly about Tanrif and how he would exact his revenge. Dauber, usually the more talkative of the two, didn't say much.

There were several reasons for his relative silence. The once robust Bladesman was now a man haunted. The hollows in his eyes bespoke sleepless nights. The fire that burned in him was that of a fanatic. Ironically, the one thing that might bring him to sanity was the one thing he could not afford to have.

Kestryl required Tanrif's death and would not rest until it was accomplished. Yet Tanrif was the only thing holding High Gondylar together. Domina was preparing for war, and the Dukedom needed a strong presence on the throne. There was no one else for the task. The only question Dauber had was how he could convince Kestryl to stay his hand, at least for the present. He didn't think it would be easy.

"Kestryl, we need to talk."

The tone of his voice caught the Bladesman's attention and briefly, Dauber could see the old gaze underlying the newer one. It gave him some small hope.

"Tanrif is the Duke of High Gondylar."

Kestryl started to speak, but the mage held up his hand.

"And I'm not certain it isn't for the best." He continued quickly, before the rage that suddenly appeared could be loosed on him. "High Gondylar is in terrible shape. She needs a strong leader, and he is a man the country can rally behind."

"A man they can rally behind. A man who raped his own mother."

"They don't know he's Tanrif's son. They think he's the original. If I didn't know better, I'd have believed it myself. He really does look like his father. Wearing the Amulet of Dreaming, anyone might be convinced. Even before he took the throne, Domina was preparing a large fighting force. An invasion force, Kestryl."

The Bladesman didn't ask where Dauber got his information. If the mage said it was so, then it was. Kestryl sat silently, a thousand ideas battling inside his mind. *This must be what madness tastes like.*

"Imagine it, Kestryl. At the time of our nation's greatest need, a figure out of legend steps in to restore order to High Gondylar. It is the only way the Dukedom can survive."

"Then perhaps it is time for High Gondylar to die. I cannot allow Tanrif to live."

"Once, you loved High Gondylar so much you would lay down your life for her. No personal vendetta would have swayed your loyalty. How has this happened to you?"

Kestryl blinked. How indeed had this happened?

"I don't know. I didn't choose this path ... it chose me. There was no way I could have prepared for it, and once set in motion, nothing I could do to turn from it. I don't even know who I am anymore. I only

know that if I give up this hate, this driving force, I will lose what little is left of me. My anger is all I have. And you want to take it away."

Dauber shook his head. "I understand your anger, but it is important to see the larger picture. High Gondylar has to come first. Could you live with yourself if you killed Tanrif and everything you ever fought for died with him? What kind of victory would that be? What would Dathan say if he were alive today? What would Cyanne say? Could you ever face me again? Could you ever face yourself?"

And there it was. The one thing he needed to do was the one thing duty denied him. He felt the rage build as he sat there. Despair seeped into his soul until even the anger seemed faint by comparison.

"I can't sit around and do nothing."

"I don't expect you to. There is another path you may follow. You can help him."

"Help him! The only way I would help him is off the top of a cliff. I think the fumes from your potions have finally dissolved part of your brain. What makes you think he would even accept my help?"

Dauber sighed and stood. He began to rearrange the items scattered on the shelf behind him, a nervous habit he'd never been able to break.

"Long ago, when I first started experimenting with animal souls, I was not only younger, but more emotional. That was when I created you."

"I know the story."

"Perhaps you don't remember as clearly as you think. I am the first mage, and perhaps the only one, to place an animal soul into a human body. You were my first success. I'll never forget what you looked like before I transferred your soul. I had seen hawks in my day. Anyone living in the mountains has seen dozens, but you were the largest, fiercest bird of prey I'd ever laid eyes on.

"I befriended you and trained you. You were the essence of loyalty. I waited patiently for the right body to come along, and when I found it, I took it with Duke Delran's blessing. The resulting warrior was you. When Delran died, and passed the burden of leadership to Dathan, you were there. You have defended the throne of High Gondylar for all your human life. I know you, Kestryl, better than you know yourself. You could no more betray your country than cut off your arm. You couldn't back then, and I don't believe you can do it now. Whatever harm he's done, Tanrif *is* the rightful heir."

Kestryl sat, hands gripping the wooden arms of the chair, face pale and breathing heavy. Madness gripped his eyes.

"What do you advise?"

"Go to him, Kestryl. Help him win the battle against Domina. After that, when things are settled, if you still wish to take your revenge, at least you will do it without endangering everything you have ever stood for."

"He'll never trust me."

"He won't know you. I can change your appearance. Make you look like anyone. You can get in touch with Parth and explain to him who you really are."

The Bladesman sat rigidly, battling his rage.

"Do it for Cyanne. Do it for Dathan. Hell, do it for me."

For a long time the inner struggle continued. Finally, the Bladesman released his death hold on the chair.

"Very well. I will need to know everything you can tell me. I will also need to work out a new identity. But after Domina is defeated, I *will* have my revenge."

Dauber Uaks breathed a sigh of relief.

"Very well, but not tonight. You need food and sleep."

Kestryl nodded, but his mind was already on the next move. First Domina then Tanrif. Perhaps his existence still served some purpose after all.

\* \* \* \*

Thulrak had no doubt the man standing before him was indeed a Lord of one of the Gondylarian noble houses. That jibed with the information given to him by Timor. But something didn't make sense.

"Two weeks ago when I first approached you, you wouldn't even deign to see me. Now you offer your assistance. Why?"

"I have my reasons."

"That's not good enough."

"Let's say I have a personal vendetta against Tanrif, though I only learned of it recently."

"And what do you want in return for your complicity?"

"There is only one thing I require. Once Tanrif is beaten, I want to be the one to take his life."

"And if he dies in battle?"

The Lord shrugged. "Then I will have to be satisfied with that, but I want to look him in the eye and show him what it is to earn the wrath of a Gondylarian Lord. I want to see him suffer as no one has ever suffered."

"If he lives, he is yours. Now, tell me about the last meeting of the Council of Lords."

\* \* \* \*

Timor watched Se-gen from the corner of his eye. She was quite good. It was a pity he would have to dispose of her, but not yet. She could still be of use to him.

During his stay in the palace, he had gathered a lot of information. It was amazing what people will say in front of you, if they think you feeble-minded. Much of what he'd learned was totally useless, but that is the way of intelligence. It is not unlike prospecting for gold—one useful piece of information, for a thousand pieces of misinformation and ten thousand of rubbish. He waited until she came to bed before speaking.

"You've done well so far." She blushed at the compliment. "I think you are ready for the next step."

Delighted, she rolled on her side to face him.

"Tell me."



"You know you are very beautiful. A good spy uses all her assets, and that is one of your best."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Since Tanrif took the throne, there's a whole new influence in the palace. One of his inner circle has a weakness. A weakness you are perfectly positioned to exploit."

For a moment, Timor thought she might balk.

"Who is it?"

"The bladesman. From what I understand, Parth is quite the lady's man."

"Parth has never looked twice at me."

It was the truth, and he was often enough in the kitchen.

"That was before. You've honed your skills now. I do not believe there's a man alive who can resist your charms. But, if you don't think you're up to it..."

Se-gen knew Orwyn was trying to manipulate her, yet Parth was a good-looking man, and he had always been beyond her.

"Is it so important?"

"My mission is to gather information. We have no source close to Tanrif. Parth is one of the few from whom we might be able to glean some real information. If it were not vital, I would keep you to myself. Don't think it will be easy for me to watch the two of you together. I will have to control myself for the sake of the mission."

Se-gen embraced him. "Don't worry, my love. There is no one for me but you."

\* \* \* \*

Dauber Uaks told Kestryl he needed several days to prepare the spell, but it wasn't true. Kestryl needed the rest, and Dauber was going to make sure he got it. If he were to survive what was to come, he would need to be at his best.

Finally, when Dauber was satisfied with the Bladesman's condition, he announced he was ready. Kestryl followed him through the cavern complex to an inner chamber that served as one of Dauber's laboratories. He had never been here before, and Dauber was happy to see that he took it in with interest.

Kestryl spent a long time examining the row of glass beakers on the table and the notes before each. Dauber didn't need any of those potions for what he was about to do.

"Remove your clothing. All of it."

Kestryl wore only a borrowed gray robe, as he often did when visiting. He had no use for his leather in the caves. He opened the robe and let it fall to the floor. Dauber gestured to a plain wooden stool, and he sat on it.

Almost immediately, Dauber started to chant.

The Bladesman closed his eyes, listening to the sorcerer's incantation. Had his eyes been open, he would have seen the mage waving his hands rhythmically in patterns known to few men alive. The correct

combination of movement and sound would somehow activate a powerful force that only a small percentage of mages would be able to control.

The spell took more than an hour to cast. By the time it was finished, Kestryl had drifted off, though whether he was sleeping or simply daydreaming, he couldn't say. Gradually he became aware of the silence. He listened carefully but heard nothing. He opened his eyes.

The room was as he last saw it, except for the absence of the mage. He returned the way he had come. In a nearby room he remembered seeing a mirror. He found it and approached. He didn't know what he expected to see, but it was certainly not what greeted him. He looked as if he were in his mid-fifties. His face was clean-shaven, his thinning hair completely white. He looked thinner than he used to be and perhaps a drop shorter. He still bore the mark of Sheba however, as he knew he would. He suspected he would carry it until Tanrif was dead. A voice from behind him made him spin.

"You don't even have to shave."

Dauber Uaks stood behind him, holding a crystal goblet in each hand. He offered one to Kestryl. The Bladesman downed the contents and turned back to the mirror.

"It's remarkable. You have no idea."

He stopped again at the sound of his own voice, which was deeper and more gravelly than it had once been.

Dauber smiled. "Actually, I do. I designed the spell myself and was the first to try it. It is an odd feeling, isn't it?"

Kestryl placed a hand on his face, feeling for his old, sharper nose.

"This isn't an illusion, is it?"

"No. Illusions are too easy to detect, even accidentally. This is how you now look. If you don't return here, this is how you will look till the day you die."

Kestryl nodded. "Certainly, Tanrif will not recognize me."

"You will be known as the Count of Astriana. No one can gainsay that claim. Once they see you in action, they will accept your expertise. I will give you enough gold to make you wealthy. Don't be afraid to spend it. Develop the character and no one will ever suspect."

"I'm glad I let you talk me into this. Once High Gondylar is out of danger, I will deal with Tanrif."

Kestryl's new face broke into a grim smile that made Dauber glad he wasn't the Duke of High Gondylar.

\* \* \* \*

Parth was happy to be back in Gondylar. He had been gone for too long. Tanrif was on the throne, and he was still bladesman. The only thing that disturbed him was his first meeting with Bone. He thought Bone looked familiar, but he couldn't remember where he'd seen the man. He knew it was long ago but couldn't say when.

Parth made his way to the kitchen. He was hungry, and it would be too long before dinner. Also, he hadn't annoyed Thelanna for a long time and was overdue.

When he reached his destination, the mistress of the kitchens was nowhere in sight. He walked toward

one of the counters where several muffins sat on a tray, no doubt left over from breakfast. He glanced around surreptitiously, even though he knew no one would try to stop him. He so did miss Thelanna.

"The yellow ones are fresher," said a voice from behind. He spun and stopped. Before him was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen. She seemed somehow familiar. It took him a few seconds to work out that he'd seen in the kitchen before, but she'd never looked like this.

Her neatly combed blonde hair perfectly framed her face. Her blue eyes sparkled with amusement, her lips were full and red.

"Er ... thanks."

She stepped past him and took one of the muffins she'd recommended.

"Here. I baked them myself."

She held it out to him, never losing the amused expression in her eyes.

"What is your name?" he asked before taking a bite.

"I am Se-gen. And you are Parth, the bladesman of High Gondylar." She looked him up and down as if he were apiece of meat she was considering purchasing. "I have heard much about you."

"Is that so? Was any of it good?"

He watched her, intrigued.

"At least there was nothing dull. I've had enough of boring men. You're not boring, are you, M'lord?"

Parth shook his head, the muffin in his hand forgotten.

"After my chores are done, perhaps you'd like to walk with me. I have some shopping to do and I know no cutpurse would come near me were you by my side. That is if you're free."

Parth suspected that there was something he had to do, but one of his better qualities had always been forgetting chores when more enjoyable matters arose.

"I think I can see my way clear."

"Good," said Se-gen. "I'll meet you by the servant's gate at about two."

She moved closer as if to kiss him but turned away at the last moment and bounded out the door.

Parth stared thoughtfully after her.

\* \* \* \*

Now that he'd taken the throne, it was hard for Tanrif to find a free moment. There was so much to learn in far too short a time. Though he had told the Lords his war effort was all he would speak of, he found many smaller matters involved immediate attention, not the least of which was the abysmal palace security.

He wondered when Kestryl would show up. Tanrif had no doubt he would, sooner or later. If the Bladesman could assassinate Theraint as easily as he apparently had, Tanrif desperately needed to improve security. During his first two days on the throne, he fired half a dozen guards, which sobered the rest of them up. It was a start, but more would have to be done before he felt even remotely secure.

Then, he had to learn who was on his side and who was just saying so. It was politics as usual, but to Tanrif it was all new. He thought about all he'd learned so far and how much more there was that he needed to know. He had advisors, but Parth was the only one on his staff he trusted. Where the hell was he? The new Duke didn't like to be kept waiting.

"What's your next move?"

The voice made Tanrif jump. Bone had an annoying way of walking without making the slightest sound.

"I think we need to march on the frontier. I will ask Parth what he advises and intend to hear your thoughts on the matter also. You know the frontier as well as anyone. If you were the Emperor of Domina, what would you be doing?"

"Exactly what he seems to be doing ... testing our strength. The only reason he needs to do so is that Gondylarian politics are so screwed up, his spies can't see clearly how vulnerable we are."

"He has spies?" Tanrif looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Bone laughed. "Undoubtedly. Gathering intelligence is one of the most important jobs of any ruler. How are you supposed to make effective decisions if you don't have accurate information?"

"Do most rulers have a man responsible for such intelligence?"

"Most good rulers have huge networks of informants. An entire hierarchy of spies. You can bet the Emperor does. And you can bet just as certainly that some of them are in Gondylar, perhaps even in the palace."

"Congratulations. You are now the head of intelligence. I need to know as much as I can about Domina's tactics. Use whatever resources are necessary, just get me results."

"Yes, my Liege."

"And while you're at it, keep an eye on the guards. I know that's traditionally the bladesman's purview, but I don't like what I see, and Parth has been bladesman for a long time."

"I don't know that Parth will like that state of affairs."

"I don't care what he likes or doesn't like. He doesn't rule High Gondylar. If he doesn't like it, tell him to take it up with me. Anything else?"

"No, my Liege."

"You're dismissed. I'll expect reports frequently in the days to come."

"By your command."

Bone walked from the throne room, well happy with what had transpired. When he'd agreed to assist Tanrif, he had no idea how much he would enjoy his new authority. The assassination business had been getting dull, and he needed a new challenge to keep his life interesting.

And what could possibly be more interesting than a game of chess with the Emperor of Domina?

\* \* \* \*

Parth enjoyed Se-gen's company. It surprised him that it should be so. The women he was accustomed to dealing with usually couldn't hold an intelligent conversation, which was fine by him. To Parth, nothing

was more attractive than a woman who knew what he wanted and accommodated him. Yet with Se-gen, it was different. For a kitchen servant, she was remarkably articulate. He thought it an odd quality for a kitchen servant to have and decided to broach the subject.

"You speak well."

"Thank you, M'lord."

"I'm not sure it was a compliment."

"M'lord?"

"I have spoken to servants for many years now, and have seldom found one as intelligent as you. You are most uncommon."

"I didn't always work in the kitchens, M'lord."

"You didn't?"

She didn't answer, leading him to believe he should know what she was talking about. It took him several minutes to track down the memory, during which neither spoke.

"Wait a minute. You're the girl who saved Tanrif's life. Cyanne made you her personal servant."

Se-gen's smile seemed to lose some of its brilliance. "She did, and it was the happiest time of my life. All two weeks of it."

Parth nodded. Cyanne had been abducted shortly after the wedding. He wanted to pursue the matter but wanted the old smile back more.

"You know, I bet the Duke would be happy to get you out of the kitchens, if that's what you wanted."

"I'm sure he wouldn't remember me at all."

Parth wasn't sure of any such thing, or wouldn't have been had the Duke actually been who he claimed to be. Of course, Tanrif, son of Tanrif couldn't have recognized her, though he might know her by name. Perhaps he'd mention it to the Duke when time permitted.

Parth remembered the wedding vividly, particularly the assassination attempt. It had been a close and scary thing, but he'd been too far away to interfere. Had he been closer, he wouldn't have hesitated to protect the man who had avenged Denworceno's death. The assassin was damn lucky he hadn't been closer, or he'd never have walked out of the palace alive. That was something Parth didn't understand, and no one had explained to him. There had been no reason for anyone to explain it. He was no longer in the employ of the Duchess and had been merely enjoying her hospitality.

The assassin! Suddenly it all came together. Bone had tried to kill Tanrif but had been released instead of killed. He hadn't thought about it in years. Now Bone had become Tanrif's closest companion. How was that possible? How could the Duke trust the man who had very nearly killed his father? It didn't make sense.

Se-gen saw the look in Parth's eyes and realized something had changed.

"What's the matter? Did I say something?"

Parth smiled, absently. "No. But I think I should be getting back."

Se-gen was going to say something else, but Parth had already started toward the castle, lost in thought. She considered some kind of subtle interrogation, but rejected the idea. It was too soon. Orwyn had taught her a good spy must be patient.

She had to run a couple of steps to catch up with him. Neither spoke again until they were back at the palace.

\* \* \* \*

The feel of a horse galloping had always been one of Kestryl's favorite sensations. He could feel the mare's power beneath, propelling him forward. The wind on his face refreshed him, especially after so many days in the caves. It was good to be on the road again.

He named her Fortune and hoped that was what she would bring him. As he galloped, he thought about his new identity. Using Astriana was brilliant.

Long ago, the House of Astriana had been one of the strongest in High Gondylar, but after Dathan's death and the subsequent events, those who ruled the house decided High Gondylar had become too petty. The family had long been known for their warriors, and many of High Gondylar's greatest generals had come from that bloodline. Lord Manreth had sold his holdings, and the entire family moved *en masse* to the Islands of Dawn.

The more educated Gondylarian nobles would no doubt remember the house. There would be no way for any of the Lords to verify his identity, and Kestryl was strategically sound enough to play the role. He just hoped he wasn't coming on to the scene too late.

He rode until darkness forced him to stop and found a place to camp off the road. He made sure Fortune was fed and rubbed her down before retiring. When he slept, he dreamt of leading the forces of Gondylar against the forces of Domina, though when he woke, he couldn't remember which side had won.

\* \* \* \*

Only when they passed through the palace gate did Parth finally remember he was supposed to meet with Tanrif. He cursed and increased his pace, Se-gen all but forgotten. He didn't even say good-bye, which earned him a frown he never saw.

Tanrif and Bone were both in the throne room when he arrived.

"Sounds like you were the right man for the job," Tanrif was saying as he entered.

Bone shrugged. "I already had quite an extensive network of informants, and having the Gondylarian treasury at my disposal doesn't hurt either."

Both men stopped speaking as Parth approached the throne. He bowed low.

"You're late."

Parth rose and looked Tanrif in the eyes. "Apologies, your Highness. I was detained."

"Well I can see where the palace guards get their bad habits from. Parth, you are the bladesman of High Gondylar. You need to set an example for your people. What kind of example do you think you're setting?"

Parth didn't answer at first, but he never looked away. When he finally spoke, he kept his voice level.

"Your Highness, I have been the bladesman for a very long time, almost since you set out to rescue Cyanne." He didn't know whether or not Bone knew the truth of things and wouldn't risk revealing Tanrif's secret in front of him.

"Your point?"

Parth drew a breath then released it. "I apologize. I'll do better."

"See that you do. Do you know why I asked you here?"

"No, your Highness."

"We need to plan a strategy against Domina, and I was hoping for your input. I'd meant to handle it right away, but something has always come up. It's time to act. I fear we may have already waited too long."

Parth nodded, realizing for the first time how dire their situation was.

"Not much can be done until my scouts return," said Bone.

"Scouts?"

It was the first Parth had heard of it.

"Yes, Bone is working on gathering intelligence. There appears to be increased Dominan activity all along the frontier, though the nature of that activity is not clear."

"So we're just going to wait?"

"What do you suggest? What can we do in the absence of information?"

"We're too far from the border for that sort of information to reach us in time. We need to establish an outpost between here and there. It will increase the speed of our response, as long as you trust the man in charge of the outpost." Parth's gaze lingered on Bone for perhaps a bit too long. Tanrif spoke quickly to break the tension.

"This makes sense to me. Bone?"

"I could stay with one of the Lords. There are several who have holdings nearby. Warthon's estate would be perfect."

"We don't have many troops to spare yet, but you can have a few men."

"A few men might not be good enough."

Bone looked to Parth for support, but the bladesman didn't answer immediately. His conflict was simple. He knew Bone needed men but after his recent revelation, he was loath to trust him. Still, there was no choice.

"I'm not sure we can afford to hold men back at this point."

Tanrif nodded. "Then we'll have to put pressure on the Council. We need men, and they have them."

"That would seem prudent," agreed Parth.

"Anything else we can do?"

Parth looked at the assassin then the Duke, but it was Bone who answered.

"You can't play a game until you know the rules. I have a strong feeling it won't be long before we find out just what we're up against."

"I know," said the Duke. "That's what worries me. If neither of you gentlemen have anything to add, I'll draft a note to Warthon, and you can be on your way."

"I'll leave at first light."

Both Tanrif and Parth wished him luck, though the bladesman couldn't keep the doubt from his eyes. He turned away, so Bone wouldn't pick up on it.

"I'll be making my rounds now, your Highness. I want to make sure the guards are used to the new schedule."

Tanrif dismissed him. Neither he nor Bone spoke until the throne room doors had closed behind Parth.

"He seemed agitated," said Bone.

"Why wouldn't he be? I just blasted him. You'd be agitated too."

Bone agreed though he was far from certain that was the reason.

\* \* \* \*

Thulrak watched as the beetle disappeared from sight. He had wasted a lot of paper before he finally found the words he needed. If what the Gondylarian Lord had told him was true, the time was at hand. The new Duke himself had said that the Gondylarian defenses were not enough to overcome an invasion, and that they would soon be sending some of their already inadequate forces to the frontier. While those forces were putting out fires, a Dominan force could march around them to the south and take the capital. At least that was the course of action Thulrak had recommended in his dispatch.

Though the sangreth was long lost to the night air, Thulrak continued to stare at the sky. It was too cloudy to see stars, but that didn't matter. The future of Domina was clear to him. When the Emperor received his missive, the future of Corithim would be determined.

He turned away from the window and looked at the small room that had become his center of operation. It was hard to believe that the fall of the great Dukedom had been engineered from such modest quarters.

Imperial bards would sing of the fall of Gondylar for a thousand years.

\* \* \* \*

Andres watched the palace carefully as he'd done each night for a week. Though he circled it often, he spent most of his time at the servant's entrance. That was the most likely place a spy would exit.

Shortly after Kestryl had left to take Cyanne to Stratus, the first rumor of Tanrif's return reached Dusk. After the amazing reappearance of both Kestryl and Cyanne from the dead, Andres didn't doubt the rumors. Cyanne had said they didn't see him die, and Tanrif had survived many dangerous encounters in the short time Andres had known him.

High Gondylar had always been Andres' home. He'd left because he couldn't bear to see how far it had fallen. With Tanrif *en route* to the throne, High Gondylar finally had a fighting chance to get back on her feet.



Andres was not a religious man, but after his encounter with the Bladesman and Cyanne, he realized destiny was not yet done with him. He sold The Duchess and booked passage on a ship to the Gondylarian frontier. He had planned to find Tanrif and offer his services. He would see Tanrif again before he died, and witness High Gondylar's resurrection.

It wasn't difficult for Andres to follow Tanrif's trail. That he had so many followers made it easy. That was when an idea began to form.

Many years ago, after Cyanne's abduction, Andres hadn't returned to the Sea Serpent. He had stayed in Gondylar to support Penthor during his early days on the throne. Penthor's position was tenuous, and Andres knew he couldn't walk away until the new Duke's power was consolidated.

He missed the sea horribly, but duty didn't permit him to return. That's when he learned he enjoyed palace intrigue almost as much as the Mistress. He learned to keep his eyes and ears open, and became one of Penthor's most trusted advisors, though it wasn't common knowledge.

Due to his unassuming nature, Andres was welcomed just about everywhere. A noble without a holding was no threat to any of the houses. He made great use of the fact. For the duration of Penthor's reign, Andres had been a spy of no small skill, and his efforts had been rewarded not only with gold, but by the knowledge he was doing his duty as a knight of High Gondylar.

Tanrif had plenty of fighting men, but how much intelligence could he possibly have? At his age, Andres was no longer fast with a sword, but his mind was still sharp enough, and he knew well the rules of the game. Before he offered his blade, he would return to his old life long enough to learn who would be sleeping with whom. Once he was publicly seen with Tanrif, it would be more difficult to obtain that information.

He had placed himself perfectly to observe Castle Therak the night Lord Valere had sent his men against Tanrif. He had seen them sneaking from the castle and immediately knew their goal.

Having already reconnoitered the area, he knew where Tanrif was camped and where he'd left the bulk of his men. A long hard ride in the dark brought him to the place where Tanrif's men had set up camp. They couldn't afford to ignore his warning. Andres vanished into the ensuing confusion and followed Tanrif at a distance all the way to Gondylar.

Movement from just inside the gate brought him back to the present. The guard on duty opened the gate. He seemed to know the man he was letting out. While they stood together, Andres was able to get a good look at the man, but all he could see from his distant vantage, was that he was garbed as a servant. Servants wouldn't be allowed out at night, yet their pleasantries were exchanged in voices too loud to be attempting stealth, even though Andres couldn't make out their words.

When he left the palace, Andres followed. Once out of the guard's sight, the man's gait changed. Where he had been casually strolling, he was now moving stealthily through shadows, stopping often to listen. Who the hell was he?

Andres followed him to a nearby inn and, after the man entered, moved around to the back of the building, waiting to see if a light appeared in any of the rooms. He walked to the front, and looked there as well. When he was certain that no new light would appear, he looked to see how many lights were already lit. Only one lit window was on the first floor. He moved carefully, certain that being discovered would be tantamount to a death sentence.

By the time he was close enough to hear, he'd missed the beginning of the conversation, but it didn't matter. He wasn't even certain it was the right conversation. He strained to listen. He could make out two

voices, one deeper, the other hoarser, as if the man who owned it spoke in a harsh whisper. The deeper voice was speaking.

"I don't know how long we have, but I would think that within the month you should plan to pull out."

"There is still much to be learned. I know Bone has been sent out on a mission, though no one seems to know what it is. Parth is worried about something, but he won't tell anyone about it, not even the girl. She's working on him, though. She really is quite good."

"Don't get any ideas. She dies before you go."

The raspy voice sounded offended. "Absolutely. Would you believe otherwise of me?"

"If there's nothing else, you should return. With everything going on, you should cut down your visits unless you have something specific to report."

"As you command."

There were no more words. Andres heard a door close. He hurried into the shadows where he waited, then followed the figure back, all the while trying to make sense of what he'd learned. Soon, he would break his silence and go to Tanrif, but not yet.

As the man approached the palace, he resumed his carefree stroll, weaving as if he were drunk. Andres watched as the guard let him in. This time, he was able to hear them bidding each other good morrow. From the guard's demeanor, Andres guessed he was a fool rather than a conspirator. He walked toward his rented room, turning over what he'd learned. A bit more information and he would request an audience.

\* \* \* \*

Parth found himself spending most of his free time with Se-gen. In addition to being someone he could talk to, she was good between the sheets. They almost never argued, though she tended to become petulant when duty called him away. He found himself making long explanations as to why he had to go, so she wouldn't be angry with him.

He often accompanied her to the market. He relished those times away from the palace when he didn't have to sneak around. Not that he actually had to, but there was a certain image that came with being the bladesman that was not aided by sleeping with kitchen servants.

So on a warm afternoon, he and Se-gen made their way toward the market square. Se-gen hadn't spoken much on the way, a very odd circumstance.

"Something bothering you?"

"Nice of you to notice."

He sighed. "Want to talk about it?"

"Thelanna tore into me again today. I swear she treats me worse than anyone else, and I'm her best worker. You know that."

He nodded, even though he knew no such thing. Keeping track of who the best kitchen servant was wasn't his responsibility, not that he'd be admitting it to Se-gen.

"She always finds something to pick on me for. She's never forgiven me for becoming Cyanne's servant. I

wish you'd talk to her."

"And say what? I wish you wouldn't yell at Se-gen so much, she's just not the same in bed? You know I don't want anyone to know about us."

"Well you should do something. You're the bladesman of High Gondylar ... doesn't that give you some authority?"

"Sure it does, but that authority isn't supposed to be ... wait a second."

Se-gen followed Parth's line of sight. Nearby, a slender middle-aged man with thinning white hair stared at them. He was dressed richly enough to make him stand out, even this close to the palace. Parth was used to eyes following him, usually surreptitiously—quite unlike the blatant stare he found himself enduring.

He motioned for Se-gen to stay where she was. Under normal circumstances he would have been calm, but he was already feeling annoyed he had been unable to help his lover, and this man was going to receive the brunt of it.

"You have a problem?"

"You are the bladesman, yes?"

The gently spoken words were flavored with an accent Parth could not immediately place.

"Who are you?"

The man bowed low as if Parth were royalty himself.

"I am the Count of Astriana. I have traveled far to speak with the Duke."

The man moved closer, and Parth placed a hand on his sword hilt.

"The next step you take will be your last."

"You would not speak so to me if you knew who I was. We have met before, though garbed as I am now, you do not remember."

Parth allowed his disbelief to show. He had a good memory for faces, even if he couldn't always associate a name with them. He studied the man until he was certain.

"I have never laid eyes on you."

"The last time we spoke was in the palace at Gondylar. I had just finished a job that I found distasteful but felt had to be done. You were walking down the corridor from the kitchen. We had some words and spoke of the rightful heir's return. You do remember, don't you?"

Parth's eyes widened. He turned back to Se-gen.

"Go back to the palace. I'll join you as soon as I can."

Se-gen put on her best petulant face. Parth didn't even pause.

"I said now, Se-gen!"

She kept the surprise from her face. He had never spoken that way to her before. Still, she was only a

servant, and he was the bladesman of High Gondylar. She curtsied and hurried away as if upset, but she wasn't. She was angry. No one, not even Parth, could speak to her that way.

Kestryl waited until she'd disappeared into the crowds before continuing the conversation.

"The same Se-gen who saved Tanrif's life?"

Parth looked again at the stranger. How could he be Kestryl? Not only was he an older man, but he was smaller. Parth took a step closer to the impostor and lowered his voice.

"If you are who you say you are, then you know all about the Duke."

Kestryl couldn't be sure Tanrif had told Parth the truth about his lineage. The wrong answer could have dire consequences. Could the boy have fooled Parth? He thought it unlikely. In any event, he had to answer quickly. The longer he waited, the more time Parth's suspicion had to grow.

"He is not who he seems," said Kestryl.

"Indeed, he is not. If you are who you say you are, you know his true origins."

"He is the son of Cyanne and Tanrif. He was born after his father's death and named for him. He is the rightful heir to the throne as promised."

"And where, exactly, have you been while he made his grab for the throne?"

"We had a falling out. The boy needs my help, Parth. High Gondylar needs my help. Domina is preparing an invasion force, and if we don't stop them, we won't get a second chance. There is no time. You have to convince Tanrif to allow me to lead High Gondylar's forces."

Parth smiled. No one but Kestryl would ask for anything so impossible so casually.

"What reason does he have to trust you?"

"Introduce me as the Count of Astriana of the House of Astriana. Tell him you know me, and I have often in the past proved my worth as a strategist. Tell him I have won battles. Tell him I'm sent by Sheba. I don't care what you do, but somehow you've got to convince him, or all will be lost."

Parth sighed. "Every time I run into you, life gets more complicated."

"As I recall, you were the one who was growing bored with things as they were. You, of all people, should welcome the change."

Parth nodded. "He's not his father."

"That is true, but he is all we have."

Parth mistook the fire in Kestryl's eyes for fervor.

\* \* \* \*

The library was empty when Parth arrived, which was not unusual for the hour. That Tanrif was there reading reports showed his drive. The Duke looked up as soon as he entered.

"Your Highness, we need to talk."

"I'm listening."

"There is someone you need to meet."

"I don't have time for social niceties, Parth."

"Believe me, your Highness, this is necessary. You are about to enter battle with the largest country on Corithim. The only way to defeat them is by outthinking them, for we don't have the numbers to beat them in a straight fight."

"Parth, you'd better start making some sense."

"There is a man I know, called the Count of Astriana. Never has there been a military mind like his. He has come to Gondylar at my request to offer his guidance."

"And you trust him?"

"With my life, your Highness."

"Why is it I've never heard of this man?"

"Because his family has been gone from High Gondylar for years, and he has only returned recently."

"I see. If he has been gone so long, how do you know he can still be trusted?"

"Don't take my word for it. Don't take anyone's. Talk to him, and see what he has to say."

"Very well. I will meet with this strategist of yours. Bring him to me."

"As you wish, Highness."

Parth bowed and backed out of the room. Tanrif started to pace. He rolled the name around in his mind—The Count of Astriana. He was certain he'd never heard it before. Why would Parth be so insistent on a meeting? If only Bone were around. He valued the assassin's advice more than anyone's. It was dangerous to start confiding in people he didn't know. This latecomer could even be a Dominan spy. Yet Parth trusted him. Could he trust Parth? Could he afford not to?

Parth entered, followed by an older man Tanrif had never seen before. The man stopped and bowed low.

Tanrif had no time for etiquette. "You may rise."

"Thank you, your Highness. I am the Count of Astriana."

"So I've heard. Parth had some very nice things to say about you."

"They are all lies, but I thank him for them. I won't waste your time. I have come to help you win your war against Domina."

"That's quite an undertaking."

"You are correct. It would be a miracle for High Gondylar to stand against The Empire. It's a good thing I believe in miracles."

"That's very comforting. Tell me, Count, how do you plan to help me? Can you raise troops? Can you give money?"

"Money is no problem, but I have no troops of my own. However, I have some ideas about how you

might best deploy yours."

"You're making a lot of assumptions. For one thing, we are not yet at war with Domina."

"That is quite irrelevant, your Highness. Domina is at war with you. If you think Asoan is going to sit around and wait for you to build a power base, you are almost certainly incorrect."

"Then what is he doing?"

"He's going to test your strength. Sooner than you think, there will be an attack on one of the frontier cities."

"And you know this how?"

"It is the safest course of action, and Asoan is a careful man. You will receive word of this attack soon enough."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I am wrong, and you've lost nothing by hearing me out. But I'm not wrong, your Highness. The forces of Domina are moving. Your response is crucial. I ask only that you let me help defend High Gondylar."

"In any event, I shall send troops to the frontier. That much seems prudent."

"That, your Highness, is something you must not do."

"Why?"

"Because the Emperor wants you to."

"I see. I shall consider your offer of help. For the present, you will stay here at the palace."

"I would be honored."

"It's no honor. Until I'm sure about you, I'm going to keep an eye on you."

"It is good to know where I stand."

"That, at least, you will always know."

A guard entered the library leading a man dressed in leather.

Tanrif stood. "What is the meaning of this?"

"He bears a message, your Highness," said the guard.

"Let's have it."

The messenger had the look about him of a man who hadn't slept in some time. He walked to the Duke and handed him a leather case. Everyone watched as Tanrif opened it and removed a single sheet.

After reading the missive, he handed it to Parth. The Count looked at him quizzically.

"It has begun," said the bladesman.

Kestryl offered a silent prayer to Sheba.

## Chapter Seven—Death Of A Noble

Parth read Bone's dispatch before handing it to the Count. Even before he glanced at it, Kestryl could tell from the grim look on Parth's face that the news was not good. Still, when he read it, the muscles in his body tensed. There had been raids before, but Domina had not attacked a Gondylarian city in hundreds of years. He read it again, before handing it back to the Duke.

Duke Tanrif,

It is with much sorrow that I report the following event. A Dominan force attacked the city of Wildor and much of it is destroyed. There can be no question that we need to deploy forces to the frontier or that their next target will be the City of Crossed Swords.

The need for troops and supplies is desperate. I am attempting to build a small force of men from those who escaped Wildor, but it is pitifully inadequate to the task at hand. We need men and weapons if we are to check the Dominan advance.

I am your servant.

Bone

Tanrif crumpled the paper. "Do you still believe we should not send forces to the frontier?" He stared directly at the Count.

"Put yourself into the Emperor's place. What is the strategic advantage to attacking Wildor?"

Tanrif thought for a second. "None. It would only expand his territory."

"You can bet they haven't even left a garrison. All Asoan wants is to draw you out. Once your forces are there, what's to stop him from marching around them and assaulting another city, even Gondylar herself? With your power spread thin, what defense could you offer? Unless you have far more troops at your disposal than is immediately apparent."

Tanrif sighed. "We're going to lose territory on this, aren't we?"

Parth answered before the Count could. "Many games of strategy involve intentionally sacrificing a piece to procure a victory. All wars are fought that way."

The Count of Astriana nodded. "Let us hope we don't lose so much territory, that the sacrifice becomes meaningless."

"Let us hope so," said Tanrif. "It is time to call a meeting of the Council of Lords."

\* \* \* \*

During the two days it took to gather the Lords for a Council meeting, Tanrif, Parth and the Count remained sequestered in the library drawing up plans, and contingencies in case those plans didn't reach fruition.

By the end of the first day, Tanrif was convinced the Count of Astriana was a much-needed ally. Bone had told him often enough how lucky he was. For whatever reasons, the gods seemed to favor him. Tanrif would not insult them by declining their gift.

By the time the Council meeting was set to begin, they had some semblance of a strategy. There was



more work to do, but it was a start.

"It's time," said Parth yawning. None of the three had slept much in the past two days.

Tanrif rose, and stretched. "You'll accompany us to the meeting, Count."

"As you wish, your Highness. Perhaps I should return to my quarters and change first?"

"Why? As far as I'm concerned the Lords can see us as we are, because I certainly see them for what they are. And I don't like what I see."

Parth laughed, though the Count seemed taken aback by the Duke's attitude.

"Your Highness, you must work with these men. Proper respect should be shown."

Tanrif nodded. "You're quite correct. And when they start acting like men, they will see that respect—not before. Let's get going."

The chamber in which the Council met wasn't far from the library. The trio entered through the rear door. As soon as the Lords noticed Tanrif's presence, silence fell. It was the first time many of them had had to deal with a man who had never been numbered among them, and they didn't know how to handle the situation. Tanrif was a stranger with his own agenda, and none of them were powerful or foolish enough to challenge it, though the disrespect he displayed for the Council's authority had put off many of the Lords.

Tanrif walked to the front of the room. He did not regard the Lords as he passed, except for Teryl, who received a brief nod. His hard eyes scanned the room, and it was obvious which of the Lords his gaze fell upon by the look of discomfort on the man's face.

The Count played his role to the maximum. Though Kestryl could name half the people at that table, no recognition lit his eyes. He looked around distastefully as if he were trying to find the most appetizing dish on a cheap buffet table.

"As you all remember, the last time I addressed you I said we needed men and money. I have seen nothing as of yet, and I am here today to accelerate your efforts."

"It is not as easy as you think, your Highness," shouted one of them. Many nodded in agreement.

"Look, I don't care how easy it is. You're supposed to be Lords, not cringing maggots. Do you rule your holdings? Do you care about them? While you fools have been procrastinating, Domina attacked and destroyed Wildor. Which of you will be the next to fall to Dominan forces? If any of you is not man enough to build an army on your own turf, let me know now, and I'll replace you with someone who can."

He paused, enjoying the look of shock on the faces of those present.

One of them Tanrif didn't recognize, stood. "Your Highness. You have no right to talk to us in this fashion. We are Lords. Nobles. Each of us a ruler in his own right."

Tanrif smiled.

"If you told me you were a god that would not alter the way I speak to you. And you are not gods. You are worms. For fifteen years, you've crawled on your bellies, plotting like thieves, trying to gain some small advantage over your fellow Gondylarians. Why do you think Domina is attacking now and not fifty

years ago?" He paused and raised his voice. "It is because this is the weakest the Dukedom of High Gondylar has ever been. You aren't a country. You are a group of petty lordlings who care only for yourselves. That stops now. Anyone who objects to the nature of my words is free to leave before I arrest them and try them for treason."

The Lord sat back down. No one else moved so much as a muscle.

"I see none of you object. Good. I need from each of you a statement ... how much money you have collected, and how many men. I will also need to know the percentage of men who have seen battle. Don't hold back. The little bit you save will be lost if the Emperor's men march over your property. A city, a Gondylarian city has fallen. Next will probably be the City of Crossed Swords. It is time to pay for the privilege of being a Lord. Pay, or lose all you have spent a lifetime building."

There was no thought of protest now.

"Your lists will be given to Lord Teryl before we meet next, which is tomorrow afternoon. Any list I do not receive I will view as a default. I'll personally seize the property of that Lord and throw him into a cell. Am I clear?"

There were several nods and no complaints. Tanrif looked over at Teryl and thought he saw approval in the man's eyes.

"The man beside me is the Count of Astriana. He has come all the way from the Islands of Dawn to help us in our time of need. Treat him with the same respect you treat me."

A few of the Lords looked surprised, others thoughtful. The House of Astriana had been so far removed from Gondylarian politics that many thought it gone for good. That it had appeared again so suddenly was bad enough; that it had gained such a high position in such a short time was unthinkable.

It was clear to each of them what they would have to do. In the new order, a Lord would have to ingratiate himself to Tanrif. Each would give what men and money they could in an attempt to increase their position. As soon as Tanrif left the assembly, the Lords began to write furiously. Most looked around desperately. One Lord finished his pledge and left the room.

He walked as quickly as he could without attracting attention. A short time later found him at the servant's entrance. He did not think anyone saw him leaving. The walk to the inn where Thulrak stayed was not a long one. After he gave his report, he would return to the palace and await tomorrow's meeting. One thing was certain—whatever plans Tanrif laid would find their way into Dominan hands before he could execute them.

The Lord smiled sadly. It was not that he didn't love High Gondylar, but he couldn't tolerate Tanrif sitting on her throne. He increased his pace. He wanted to be back inside the palace before nightfall.

\* \* \* \*

Se-gen had been so busy spying on Parth, she had relatively little time to spend with Orwyn. She told him about the incident at the market. She was still angry, and Orwyn seemed disturbed as well. When she was done with her report, she moved toward him, anxious to feel his touch. He held her at arm's length.

"I'm sorry, my love, but I'm quite tired."

"I want to be with you tonight."

"It would not do for Parth to find us together. What if he comes looking for you?"

"I haven't seen him since he ordered me away. He's been busy with work, and I'm tired of sleeping alone."

"I am sure that is true. But Parth may come for you at any time, and you must be ready. Something is going on, and we need to know what it is."

Se-gen walked proudly from the room despite her hurt. Orwyn had never rejected her before. Still, she wouldn't display any weakness. He had taught her well.

As she walked away, she thought about her lover's behavior. It was not that he didn't want her, of that she was certain. Nor did she think there was another woman. Orwyn had risked much by confiding in her; he wasn't likely to open up to anyone else. That meant he had something else to do and didn't want her to know it.

The idea wouldn't leave her alone. She stopped where she was and waited, close enough to his quarters to hear the door open. She was certain one of two things would happen—either someone would visit the spy, or he would leave the room to attend some secret meeting. In either case, she would wait. She would know who or what was more important than his feelings for her.

A short time later, Orwyn left his room, walking in his carefree way down the corridor. Se-gen glided noiselessly behind, trying to figure out his destination. Soon she realized he was heading toward the servant's entrance. She made sure to leave enough distance between her and her mentor, refusing to think about what he would do if he caught her. She was most surprised when, after a short conversation, the guard opened the gate for him. She wanted to follow but didn't know how. Surely the man on duty wouldn't let her out. Se-gen approached the guardhouse slowly, determined to follow Orwyn no matter the price.

She recognized the guard but didn't know his name. He was still watching Orwyn's clumsy passage into the night and didn't hear her approach. When she reached him, she noticed his helmet on the chair inside the guardhouse.

It didn't surprise her to find it there. High Gondylar was a hot country and, while palace guards were supposed to wear headgear at all times, few ever did, even at night. Making sure his attention was still on Orwyn, she picked up the helm. It was heavier than she thought it would be.

When the guard started to turn from the gate, she swung the helm overhand, bringing it down with no small force on his head. He crumpled to the ground. She dragged him inside the guardhouse, straining against his weight, though fear provided the strength she needed. She turned the key in the gate, pushed it open enough to let her through and closed it behind her. She set off in the direction Orwyn had taken, hoping to pick up his trail.

That was when she saw the other, moving carefully in and out of the shadows. Not far ahead of him, Orwyn, unaware he was being watched, started to move more naturally, with some attempt at stealth.

Intrigued, Se-gen followed the man following Orwyn. It was not long before they reached their destination. Se-gen had passed this inn often on her way to the market but had never thought about it before. After Orwyn entered the building, she followed the older man around the back, where he took up a position under one of the windows. He was eavesdropping on Orwyn's conversation.

It was not hard for Se-gen to deduce that Orwyn was reporting to his superior. That meant the other man must work for Tanrif. She ducked back into the shadows, as he turned and scanned the area. She held her breath when his gaze passed over her. She didn't think she'd been seen.

As soon as the man's attention was back on the inn, she retraced her steps. She kept thinking one of them would catch her. She wasn't certain if she was more scared of Tanrif's man or Orwyn. Neither would hesitate to kill her if it served their purpose. She practically ran back to the palace.

Fortunately, the gate was still unlocked. She let herself in but didn't lock it—Orwyn had to get back inside. The guard was unconscious but breathing, for which she was grateful. It was one thing to knock out a palace guard; killing him was another altogether. She made her way back to her room, only to find Parth waiting. She managed to mask her surprise and went to him. In the dim lighting of the servant's quarters, she could only barely make out the tension in his face.

She followed him back to his quarters, neither saying a word. Her mind was filled with what she had done. Only after they had entered and he'd lit a lamp did he speak.

"Where were you tonight?"

"I was outside, walking in the gardens."

The suspicion in his eyes gave way to anger.

"Alone."

"I see," he said.

"I was upset. The last time you spoke to me, you ordered me away. That was days ago. I've hardly slept in all that time. You haven't spoken to me since."

"I am the bladesman of High Gondylar. I have responsibilities."

"But you didn't have to send me away like that. It's as if you don't trust me."

Parth sighed. "It's not that I don't trust you, but there are times when what I do is dangerous. I don't need you exposed to such danger."

Se-gen went to him. "Please be careful. I don't want you to get hurt."

As he held her, she felt the last of his anger fade as if it had never been there. When he didn't speak, she pressed what little advantage she thought she had.

"That man in the market. He didn't look so dangerous."

Parth took her by the shoulders and held her at arms length.

"Listen to me. That man is one of the most dangerous men alive. I want you to stay away from him and from me when he's around. There is no reason for him to find out about us. It's bad enough he saw us in the market together."

Se-gen allowed fear to show in her eyes but felt excited. She did so like dangerous men. "But who is he?"

"He calls himself the Count of Astriana. At one time, he was the greatest swordsman in all High Gondylar, if not the world."

"I must have heard of him then."

Se-gen leaned forward. Finding out the Count's identity would be quite a feather in her cap.

"He has certainly heard of you," said Parth, under his breath.

No doubt he thought he was speaking too quietly for her to hear, but she had good ears. Not that she understood the implication of his words.

For much of the evening, she tried to wheedle information from him, to no avail. Later, after they lay together, she stayed awake, thinking. What great warrior could possibly have heard of her? Tanrif, of course. Perhaps Kestryl, but he was long dead—or was he?

If the Duke was still alive, why not his bladesman? Three times she was certain the man in the market was Kestrel and each time she dismissed the idea. Why bother to hide his identity if he was who she thought he might be? It didn't make any sense.

When she slept, she dreamt of Orwyn, the man following him, and the guard she'd knocked out. Her sleep was interrupted by a pounding on the door.

Parth was out of bed before she had her eyes open.

He opened the door a crack. She heard him curse loudly.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Go back to sleep. I have to get to work."

He didn't say anything else. He dressed quickly and left the room, leaving Se-gen alone with her thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

Tanrif sat in the library, going over the names of Lords and their respective pledges of support. He had not anticipated such generous estimates, though both Parth and the Count had told him to expect such. He would hold each Lord to their word.

Parth and the Count had joined him early and were engaged in a whispered conversation so as not to distract him. He appreciated both men, his only security during a very insecure time. If anyone could figure out a way to turn back the Empire, it was the Count. It would be ironic if, months after he'd finally achieved his birthright, he were to lose it because of a war he'd had nothing to do with. The Count had brought some small hope of victory, though Tanrif was aware the odds were still heavily against them. For some reason Tanrif trusted the man, though he knew nothing about him. The thought made him uncomfortable.

"You know, Count, I've been thinking, Parth never mentioned your name."

"Mostly everyone just calls me the Count."

"I see this. Still, if we're to be allies, I think I should know who you are."

The Count nodded. "Very well. I was named Falkayne, after a great swordsman in a story my father's father used to tell him in childhood."

"Falkayne is a good name for a warrior. Why don't you use it?"

"The warrior in the story suffered an ignoble fate. I do not wish to follow in his footsteps."

"I see. Well, it's a good to know anyway."

Tanrif returned to his work. The next time he looked up, a palace guard was speaking with Parth. Tanrif

had been so involved he hadn't heard the man enter. Parth gave a slight bow to Falkayne and a larger one in the Duke's general direction before following the guard from the room. Tanrif was curious about the exchange, but the gait of the bladesman had not been energetic enough for the news to be any kind of threat. With a sigh, he returned to work, poring over the papers before him. Parth had well prepared him for the politics of the situation, but no one had mentioned the paperwork.

\* \* \* \*

Parth followed the guard down the hallway toward the servant's entrance. Things were getting strange. First Tanrif reappears—only it turns out to be his son. Then the Bladesman shows up wearing, of all things, another body and calling himself the Count of Astriana. A few hours earlier, a guard at the servant's entrance had been knocked unconscious for no apparent reason, and now, an old man at that same entrance, claimed to be Sir Andres of the Royal Gondylarian Navy. Parth could only hope the Captain had arrived in his own body.

The man waiting for him at the gate looked like an older version of Captain Andres, but it wasn't until he spoke that Parth was sure.

"Well, well, if it isn't the bladesman of High Gondylar. How are you, Parth?"

Parth clasped the Captain's hand. "Sir Andres. It is an honor and a privilege."

"Just Andres. We both know there was no reason for Cyanne to knight me."

Parth and Andres had argued this point many years ago. Parth felt the Captain had been too modest about his role in placing Cyanne on the throne, but Andres had stubbornly stuck to his viewpoint. Parth was not about to get into it again.

"Whatever the case, I feel I shouldn't be surprised by your arrival."

"I'm certain you were more surprised by Tanrif's."

Parth began walking, and Andres fell into step beside him.

"Was I ever. This whole thing gets crazier and crazier."

Parth suspected Andres knew Tanrif's real identity, but he wouldn't mention it. He had been bladesman long enough to know the value of keeping secrets.

As they turned the corner, Andres glimpsed an attractive blonde woman, just before she ducked inside a doorway. As they passed by, he glanced inside. It was the kitchen, and it was empty. There was no sign of the girl he'd seen, though there were plenty of places out of his direct line of sight. He wondered who she was, and why she'd vanished so quickly. There might have been a logical explanation, but Andres had long ago learned that true coincidences were rarer than an honest merchant. So many players—so many secrets. He looked back to Parth, who was still talking. What do you know that I don't?

That was the essence of the intelligence game, and Andres, though he was out of practice, was happy to be playing again.

\* \* \* \*

Se-gen huddled behind the counter, breathing hard.

The night before she had knocked out a guard and left the palace without leave. It bothered her that she had not been the only one following Orwyn last night, but that was nothing compared to her current state of agitation, for the man with Parth had been the one she'd followed. That he should show up now

terrified her.

She needed to speak with Orwyn, but hadn't seen him all day. It was his incompetence that had placed her in this mess. It had been a stroke of luck that she had decided to follow him last night, or she'd never have known how close they were to being exposed. Now, at least she could do something about it, though what she didn't know.

She tried to slow her breathing. She squeezed her eyes shut and fought down the rising panic. She had to think. That was the one of the first things Orwyn had taught her. Fear makes any situation more dangerous. Fear causes people to make mistakes and that she couldn't afford. With a great effort of will, she forced her fear down and considered the situation.

Who could identify Orwyn? The man who entered, the guard at the gate, perhaps others, but those were the two she knew of. Only one question remained—what was she going to do about it?

If the man could identify Orwyn, and she had no reason to believe he couldn't, then her role in all this was about to come out. She considered what it might be like to spend the rest of her life in the dungeon, then thought about the various methods of execution employed in the Dukedom. The longer she thought about it, the more she realized she had no choice.

She was about to commit her first murder.

\* \* \* \*

The Count of Astriana had found a tome he remembered from the old days, and was happily in the process of reacquainting himself with it, when Parth and Andres entered the library. He had not been certain Andres would show up, but it had been a possibility. He needed to find some time to take Andres aside and speak with him. There was too much at stake. Too much his old friend did not know. Hopefully, it would not be any harder to convince Andres of his identity than it had been to convince Parth.

"You remember Andres, don't you, your Highness?"

The words were spoken for Tanrif's benefit. Parth wasn't certain the Duke had met the Captain before.

Tanrif stood to greet him, and Andres was stunned. In almost twenty years, Tanrif hadn't aged at all. Perhaps it had something to do with the magic necklace. Andres only hesitated a second before embracing his friend.

"Hello, Tanrif. It has been a long time."

"Too long," replied the Duke.

"I have some information for you that could wait no longer. I need to tell you alone."

"What you have to say can be said here. These men are trustworthy."

Andres nodded, remembering in the past Tanrif had been surrounded with such men.

"There is a spy in the palace."

Tanrif's quick glance toward the Count didn't escape the Captain's notice. Apparently, he didn't trust as deeply as he claimed. Andres went on to describe the man, but neither Tanrif nor Parth could think of anyone who matched the description.

"How do you know this?" asked Tanrif.

"I've been keeping watch on the palace. In fact, I've been following you since just after you left Wildor. It was I who warned your men about Lord Valere's attack."

Tanrif nodded. "That explains a lot. Why did you hide?"

Andres blushed. "I am too old to fight pitched battles. I felt I could be of more value to you out of sight than as another sword. I did as much for Penthor during his last years on the throne."

"Your initiative is much appreciated. You saved my life."

"For that I am glad."

"Please continue."

"It was reasonable to assume there would be spies in the palace. I took to watching the gates at night, particularly the servant's entrance, which was the least heavily guarded."

Parth cursed. "One of the guards was knocked out last night. The spy must have struck him and escaped."

Andres shook his head. "I saw him and the guard talking. The guard let him out. I believe they knew each other."

Tanrif looked at Parth.

"I'm on it," said the bladesman, already on his way out the door.

Parth moved through the palace corridors determined to find out what was going on. He was responsible for palace security. If Pira was in on it, he'd find out. If not an accomplice, he was incompetent. Either way, a knock on the head had just become the least of Pira's problems.

Another guard had found him by chance, just as he was regaining consciousness. Pira had had a horrible headache and Parth, after questioning him briefly, had confined him to quarters. The man had needed rest; he'd taken quite a blow.

Many thoughts raced through Parth's mind as he rounded the last corner and entered the guards quarters. Why had Andres shown up when he did? Why did the Bladesman need to come to the palace disguised? Who was the spy, and for whom was he working? It would take a very long time for any message sent from here to reach the Emperor.

He turned into the open doorway and stopped. Before him, sprawled across the bed, lay Pira in a pool of blood. He moved toward the man, careful not to slip in the gore. Pira's throat had been neatly cut. That meant, not only was there a spy in the palace, but he was close enough to the center of action know what was going on as it happened. Who could it be?

Certainly not the Count, or was it? Perhaps the reason why the Bladesman had come to the palace was to stop Tanrif. No, that couldn't be right, or why would he have taken out Theraint?

Parth placed a hand on the back of his neck. His head hurt. Could the spy even be one of the Lords, most of whom had stayed at the palace last night? It had been a quick swipe. There was no sign of a struggle. That meant what? Another guard? A Lord who'd compromised Pira and was trying to protect his identity? The number of possibilities was endless.



The only certainty he had was that a palace guard had been murdered, and the perpetrator was, most likely, still around. Parth examined the crime scene in detail but turned up nothing to give him any indication of what had happened.

On his way back to the library, Parth stopped briefly by the kitchen to make sure that Se-gen was all right.

\* \* \* \*

Se-gen, still recovering from her morning's activity, hadn't been at all happy to see Parth. Fortunately, she'd grown used to schooling her emotions around him and so was able to convince him all was well. If only she could convince herself.

After Parth left, she thought about what she had done.

She found the guard she'd knocked out lying on his cot, resting. Three other cots lay empty, as the others who shared the room were no doubt on duty. It made her job easier. His face brightened at the sight of her. Her hand, hidden in an apron pocket, clenched the handle of a sharp kitchen knife. Her heart pounded so loudly, she was certain he could hear it, but he only smiled and awaited her approach.

That was the worst of it. He was so trusting. Taking his life was much easier than she thought it would be. She made a quick single cut and backed away so blood wouldn't spatter on her. She didn't stay to watch him die; the little she saw reminded her of times when the market delivered live chickens she'd had to kill. She paused only to wipe the bloody blade on a neatly folded blanket before returning to the kitchen.

What bothered her most was that killing had been so easy. She should have been horrified. Instead she was fascinated. The lack of reaction disturbed her, but not enough to stay her hand.

Now that she knew she could do it, the older man wouldn't present much of a problem.

\* \* \* \*

After the Council meeting, Andres was shown to a room. It was not as large as the one he'd been given the last time he'd stayed at the palace, but with most of the Lords in residence it was the best that could be done. Not that he cared either way.

He was tired from his long vigilant hours but didn't sleep. Instead, he lay down on his bed and thought about everything he'd learned. He kept looking at the door, waiting for another knock. He'd received visits from four of the Lords so far, each of them trying to see where he stood. He'd answered all of their questions politely, without revealing much. He didn't know all that much to reveal.

When the next knock came, he didn't even ask who it was. He was growing tired of the constant intrusions. He walked to the door and opened it

In the corridor stood a beautiful blonde woman. He thought he'd seen her before but didn't recall where. She slid into the room, closed the door and knelt before him.

"Welcome, my Lord."

Blushing, he grabbed her by the arm. "Stand up. I'm not your Lord." His eyes never left her, as she rose.

"Do you not recognize me?" she asked.

He looked at her and let his mind drift back. "You work in the kitchen."

She nodded. "I am Se-gen. I was the one who saved Tanrif's life at his wedding to Cyanne."

Andres recalled the incident and did a double take. She'd been but a child when he'd retired from palace life. That was no longer the case. He cleared his throat.

"Umm ... what can I do for you?"

"Long have I fantasized about you."

"About me?"

Andres was no stranger to women, but it had been quite some time for him. And he could see no reason why someone as young and attractive as Se-gen would come to his room.

"Who put you up to this?"

Se-gen's mind worked quickly. She had expected him to immediately accept her proposal. She had grown used to Parth, who was more easily manipulated. She had not thought past this moment.

"I am a gift."

"From who?"

Andres was clearly not prepared to accept her on those terms, no matter what she said.

"It is the Duke's wish that I serve you tonight."

Andres chuckled. "That old devil. That would be just like him. Well, young lady, I hate to disappoint you but this old sailor is tired and has no need for your services."

"At least grant me the favor of a single kiss."

The girl leaned close to him. He stared at her, fascinated. It had been a long time since he'd had a woman that young and attractive. Part of him considered making use of her, but he quickly rejected the thought. After all, he only had the girl's word on who had sent her. Tomorrow, he would check her story out personally. Still, a single kiss couldn't hurt.

She placed her lips to his, pressing gently at first, then more urgently. When the knife entered his back, she pushed against his mouth to prevent him from making any noise. He struggled briefly then sagged. As they were standing in front of the bed, it was no problem for her to push him onto it. She removed the knife from his back, cleaned it on the bed sheet, and listened carefully at the door for anyone walking in the hallway.

The lifeless body of Sir Andres stared accusingly until the door closed behind her.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl was tired but still had much to do, not the least of which was to talk with Andres. He had put it off thus far but could wait no longer. Taking care no one saw him, he made his way towards Andres' room. When he got there, he looked up and down the corridor before knocking.

When he received no answer, he tried the door. Normally, he'd have come back, but this was no time for etiquette. For one thing, Andres might have enough knowledge of the House of Astriana to call Kestrel's identity into question. Also, Andres needed to know the truth about Tanrif. Had the Bladesman known he'd show up, he would have told him everything when they'd met at the port of Dusk.

He stepped inside and eased the door closed. It took a few moments for his mind to put together what he was seeing. He knew, even before he felt for a pulse, that he was too late. The killer had struck again.

He started searching the room for some clue as to what had happened, when there came knock at the door. He froze, hoping whoever it was would go away. He placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. This was one situation it would be difficult to talk his way out of.

He waited. He didn't hear any footsteps departing, so he knew the visitor was still there. The knock came again, louder than before. Again he waited, tension mounting.

He freed his blade from its scabbard. He could hear his own breathing as the door moved inexorably inward. Then the sound of a boot on stone, and he slammed the door hard.

There came from the other side a loud exclamation, whether of pain or surprise, Kestryl couldn't tell. The door burst open. The intruder, sword drawn, jumped into the room. Kestryl slammed it shut with a bang.

"I believe," said Parth, "that you have some explaining to do."

## Chapter Eight—What Comes Before

"What we have here," said Kestryl, "is a misleading situation. I had no idea you were on the other side of that door."

Parth nodded toward the lifeless body of Captain Andres.

"And him? What did he do to earn your wrath?"

Kestryl shook his head. "This is not my doing. I came here to speak with him, just as you did. I found him as you see him. When I heard someone at the door, I hoped they would go away. When I realized that wasn't going to happen ... well, what would you have done?"

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because, if I wanted to, I could take you out right now. Since I haven't done so already, you can assume I am not planning on it."

He watched Parth's face. Without warning, Parth lunged, his sword point heading straight for Kestryl's chest.

Kestryl beat the thrust aside and responded with an attack of his own. Parth side-stepped and swiped but, to his surprise, the Count was not in place when the blow landed.

The Count grabbed his wrist and pulled. Parth moved with it, trying desperately to stay on his feet but, already off balance, he fell forward onto one knee. The point of his opponent's blade found his neck—a tiny rivulet of blood slowly oozed down. He placed his sword on the ground and slowly raised his hands. The Count removed the point from his neck and replaced his weapon in its scabbard.

"This isn't about us," said Kestryl. "There is a killer on the loose, and we have to find him."

Parth nodded and stood up, sheathing his sword as he did so.

"Indeed we must."

If Kestryl were the murderer, he'd have killed Parth.

"I am sorry, Kestryl, but I needed to know."

"And now you do. There is no need to be sorry. I would have done the same in your place."

The two men clasped hands.

"I will not doubt you again," said Parth.

\* \* \* \*

The day, as it wore on, became no easier for Tanrif. Knowing there was a spy in the palace combined with the pressure of dealing with the Council of Lords left him feeling drained. He had to figure out who he could trust. It was not easy. Even Parth was capable of betraying him if his sensibilities became too offended, though Tanrif didn't believe it had reached that point.

There were too many people with too many motives, no doubt many more than he knew. How can you find a traitor, when you haven't identified your friends? He let his eyes close and his mind drift. Perhaps if

he stopped thinking about it, something would come to him.

There was no one in the library, which was good, because he didn't want to talk to anyone. He needed some time to order his thoughts. He hadn't even realized he'd fallen asleep until a footfall woke him.

"I am sorry to disturb your rest, Highness, but I must speak with you."

Tanrif opened his eyes and saw Parth standing before him, the Count of Astriana at his side.

"There has been another murder."

Tanrif stood, shaking his head, as much in disbelief as to clear the sleep.

"Who this time?"

Parth paused before answering. "Sir Andres."

He waited for the Duke's response. When none came, he added, "I was with the Count. We went to talk to him, but he did not respond to the knock. The door opened a little the next time I knocked, so I pushed it inward. He had been stabbed in the back."

Still, Tanrif said nothing and, for a time, there was an uncomfortable silence. When he finally spoke, his voice was cold and harsh.

"I wish I had time to spend on trying to find the killer, but I don't. I have a war to fight. I will see you both tomorrow at the Council."

With those words, Tanrif moved toward the door. He did not look at them as he passed. Their eyes followed him until he left the room.

"He's not his father," said Parth. He well understood the anger in Kestryl's eyes.

"He is definitely not."

\* \* \* \*

As he walked through palace corridors, Tanrif realized his reaction had nothing to do with Andres' death. In truth, he liked what little he had seen of the man. Also, Andres had saved his life. But he found it odd that both the Count and his bladesman had found the body together. After all, hadn't Parth been the one to recommend the Count of Astriana? What if they were responsible for the murders? He found himself wishing Bone was still here. He was so lost in thought, he didn't notice the figure who followed until she spoke.

"Your Highness is troubled."

He stopped and looked back at her, wondering what she was doing up at that hour. "Yes, Ulnira."

He continued walking, hoping the girl would leave, however she fell into step beside him. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, not especially. I want to forget it."

They reached the door to his room. The guards who stood waiting straightened but made no attempt to hide their smirks. Tanrif was barely aware of their presence.

Ulnira smiled seductively. "I bet I can help you forget."

She leaned toward him, and he found her tempting.

"I really don't have the time to..." his words were cut off by her lips on his. He could taste the wine on her breath.

"You've been drinking," he said when finally able to speak.

The girl shrugged. "I do a lot of things I'm not supposed to."

She giggled and pushed open the door, though she checked to see his reaction before entering, convincing him that she was not as tipsy as she pretended. For an incongruous moment he thought she might be the killer, but he dismissed the idea immediately. Not that he didn't think her capable, but it didn't feel right.

He entered the antechamber, not certain why he hadn't sent her back to her room. She was much younger than he. Still, she was probably more experienced. Cyanne the first and only woman he'd been with, and that had been for revenge.

Perhaps it was time to start tasting some of life's pleasures. Surely no one would blame him for wanting a reprieve from responsibility. By the time he'd closed and bolted the door, Ulnira was already naked. He took a step toward her, and they embraced.

She kissed him deeply and pressed her small body to his, rubbing against his hardness. How could he be the Duke of High Gondylar and not take what he wanted?

He could no longer deny he wanted Ulnira.

Without thought to anything but his pleasure, he pushed her down on the stone floor and lay on her. He could see the lust in her eyes, could feel the rise and fall of her chest, could smell the scent of her desire.

When he entered her, she was ready for him. She moved against him urgently, giving herself to the desire she'd had since the moment she saw him. His need was a match for hers, and he met each of her thrusts with his own. The intensity built until he could hold back no longer. His final pleasure was accompanied by a scream so loud, it drew the attention of the guards, who attempted to enter but found the door locked.

Ulnira burst into laughter. Tanrif was too tired to laugh.

"I'm fine. Don't you have something better to do?"

"Sorry, your Highness."

"You'll be a good deal sorrier if you do that again."

Ulnira giggled. "They're just trying to protect you."

"From you? I hardly see the need."

"I can be most dangerous, M'lord. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I do. Fortunately, I like a bit of danger. However, I could deal with that danger a lot better on a softer surface. Would you care to join me in bed?"

Ulnira's eyes sparkled. "I thought you'd never ask."

That night, true to her word, Ulnira helped Tanrif forget.

\* \* \* \*

Events were proceeding faster than Parth thought possible. After the meeting, the Lords, were sent back to their respective holdings to gather the men and support they'd pledged. Tanrif had already spoken to a few of them, those closest to the frontier. They were to assemble their men and prepare them for action. It took only a short time to decide who would lead the new force; Parth was needed in Gondylar, which left only the Count of Astriana.

Plans were left necessarily vague. Nothing could be decided until the Count spoke with Bone, the first stop on his journey. Tanrif suggested he take a small party of palace guards, but he declined, explaining that Gondylar shouldn't lose any defenders. Several of the Lords, notably those with estates near the City of Crossed Swords, would ride with him. With their entourages, he should be quite safe. Only the Dominan army could threaten so large a party and, if they met with that force, what good would a few guards be?

The Lords were given the remainder of the day to put their affairs in order. They were to leave at first light.

Kestryl spent the day in preparation for the journey, much of which was used to study the most updated maps of the region. The city of Crossed Swords would be their next target. He was sure of it. He and the other Lords discussed possible strategies, though it was obvious that what interested them the most was how to get the Dominans to avoid their properties. Kestryl didn't think it was possible to change how the Empire advanced, nor did he care much about individual Lords. He had a war to win, and Sheba help anyone who stood in his way.

\* \* \* \*

Timor paced his room in the palace. Strange events had occurred, and he was at a loss to explain them. That bothered him.

When he'd last returned from reporting to Thulrak, the gate had been left unlocked and the guard knocked unconscious. He'd briefly considered killing the man and returning to the inn, for security would certainly be increased when the assault was discovered; however Se-gen would have remained a problem. Her anger at his desertion might have caused her to come forward. It was important those in charge didn't know they'd had a spy in their midst, even if they had suspected the possibility.

He'd immediately searched for Se-gen. She was no longer of use to him, and the attack on the guard had increased his risk greatly. It was just his luck that the night he'd finally decided to kill her, Parth had other ideas. The problem of Se-gen would have to be taken care of later.

The next day, both Pira and Captain Andres had been murdered. He was clueless as to why anyone would want either man dead. Well, anyone except him.

Pira had been useful. Timor had convinced him that Lord Vier had a gold leaf problem he didn't want anyone to know about—particularly the new Duke. A couple of gold coins had done the trick. After all, where would a fool like Orwyn get that kind of money? Pira had never suspected he'd been aiding the fall of his country, and obviously had been unwilling to say anything that would make an enemy of a Lord, even a relatively minor noble like Vier. Pira had been another loose end Timor would have had to take care of before he'd left. Whoever had murdered the guard had saved Timor the trouble, though he'd have preferred to do it in his own time.

Orwyn's usefulness in the palace was over. He had only one task to finish before he left this place forever. The only Gondylarian who had a clue Orwyn wasn't the dimwitted servant he appeared to be

was Se-gen. He didn't look forward to taking her life. In many ways, they were two of a kind. Still, he didn't know when the opportunity to escape would come, and he had to do it before then. Fortuitously, the two murders worked in his favor. This single death would look like part of a much larger plot. In death, Se-gen would come under suspicion, which would draw attention from him.

Timor hid a blade in his boot, and went in search of his lover. Because Parth was perpetually busy with the murder investigations, it was unlikely he'd be in place to interfere.

\* \* \* \*

Se-gen was in the kitchen when Orwyn entered. He exchanged a few words with some of the servants. Though she could not overhear what was said, she saw them snicker behind Orwyn's back. She almost smiled at the thought that it was they who were dim not him, but hiding her reactions had become second nature.

Orwyn walked over to her.

"Parth wishes you to attend him."

Se-gen looked surprised. He had spoken loudly enough for the other servants to hear. It disturbed her that many of the servants didn't seem surprised by the summons, and a few exchanged knowing glances. She thought furiously about the implications and knew one thing for sure. If Orwyn was calling attention to her relationship with Parth, it must be time to leave. Her heart raced as a number of emotions fought for control. She liked Parth, though there could never be anything between them. And Orwyn offered her the world, even if it wasn't her world. She froze. Those watching must have thought her embarrassed by the revelation of her relationship. She stood taller and, holding her head high, allowed Orwyn to lead her from the room.

She followed him to the seldom-used storerooms by the courtyard, the very place that, when she was eleven, she had found a man hanging. The image was still clear in her mind, even after all these years. The room he led her to was further down the corridor. He started to pick the lock. Se-gen fought to clear her mind. Why was Orwyn taking her here?

Then she knew the answer. The image of the bloated corpse hanging from the chain came back to her, as it often had in her dreams. Orwyn had never meant to take her with him. She studied him closely as he worked the lock. It would be weeks before anyone found her. She looked him up and down until she found what she was after. She reached out and deftly drew the dagger from his boot, just as the lock clicked opened. When he turned to look at her, she was smiling.

"What are you doing with my dagger?" asked Orwyn, trying, unsuccessfully to keep the surprise from his voice.

"The question is what were you planning on doing with it?" Her smile fell short of her eyes. "This wasn't for me, was it?"

Orwyn, feigning sadness, started to shake his head. Then he was on her. Only the fact that she had been ready for something allowed her to remain standing. He hit her hard in the midriff, knocking her backwards down the corridor. He advanced, trying to take advantage of her surprise, but she recovered more quickly than he expected. Her foot shot out and caught the Dominan on the chin. He fell backwards, rolled and regained his feet almost immediately.

Se-gen threw the dagger. It sailed harmlessly over his head. He smiled. She stood in a dead end corridor and had just thrown her only weapon out of reach. He turned and started toward it, confident that the encounter was over.



He did not feel the blade draw a line across his calf until he was lying face down on the stone floor. When she placed a knee on his spine and put a knife to his throat, he realized he'd underestimated her. She leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

"You used me, Orwyn. You're just like the others. I killed for you. Captain Andres followed you to your secret rendezvous with your superior. He listened in on your conversations. He knew, Orwyn, so I had to silence him.

"Once the Duke was informed, they would have questioned the guard at the gate, and you'd have been exposed. You were careless, Orwyn, but I covered for you. I see now the payment I was to receive."

She kissed his ear gently, never taking the blade from his neck. "I will see you in hell, but you'll have to wait for me."

Slowly, savoring each second, she drew the blade across his throat. Still stunned from the kick he tried to struggle. She held him until he was still. Then she dragged him into the room he'd opened and hid him as best she could, just in case someone should come this way sooner than she expected.

She waited an hour before returning to the kitchen. The smirks on the faces of the other servants told her they misinterpreted the new rip in her dress. She met their amused smiles with a shy one of her own. People were so easy to manipulate, once you knew how. Still smiling, she returned to work. Today, even Thelanna couldn't bother her.

\* \* \* \*

The grim-faced party rode forth from Gondylar without fanfare. They left before dawn so as not to attract unwanted attention. Half a dozen lords and their retinues rode with the Count of Astriana. If any of the travelers thought to question the Count's authority, Tanrif had put that to rest before they'd left. He spoke in a loud, clear voice that no one would likely forget.

"The Count of Astriana is my choice to lead this force. For all intents and purposes, he is in charge of, not just you, but the entire war effort. A hand raised against him is treason against the throne of High Gondylar, and will be tried as such, I swear it. I believe if any man can lead us to victory, it is he. I have spoken with the Count at great length. His knowledge of battles and strategy is extensive. You will offer him your full cooperation."

There was much murmuring amongst the Lords, but Tanrif had already shown them what would happen to those who stood against him.

By the time the sun had risen, the Lords were vying for a position close to the Count, though he seemed oblivious of their efforts to impress.

\* \* \* \*

Tanrif and Parth sat in the antechamber of Tanrif's suite. When they'd entered, they found a very naked Ulnira reading in one of the chairs. Her slow retreat from the room left Parth staring in amazement.

"A ruler must have some recreation, yes?" asked Tanrif, clearly enjoying the bladesman's reaction.

"It is as you say."

Parth looked at the door Ulnira had left through, before shaking his head, and looking back towards the Duke. "I suppose there is little we can do now but wait."

Tanrif nodded. "And perhaps, by way of distraction, we can try to figure out who committed those murders. You haven't said much about them."

"There hasn't been much to say. The killer is a professional, of that there can be little doubt. Both Pira and Andres were killed because they saw the spy and could identify him. With no eye witnesses, he can continue his work."

"Or her work," added Tanrif.

Parth nodded absently. "What bothers me is this. Who would have a spy in the palace? The Emperor is so far away that by the time a report reached him, the information would be useless, or nearly so."

"What do you think that implies?"

Parth stood and began to pace.

"Some other authority figure right here in Gondylar. That is assuming that the spy is Dominan, though who else might be interested in what goes on in the palace, I couldn't say. No, it has to be Domina. The problem is it could be anyone. One of the guards, one of the Lords, even a servant."

"Who do you think ... what did you just say? A servant?" asked Tanrif

"Yes, why not? Servants have eyes and ears, though we often ignore them."

"Yet palace servants are watched carefully. There is always someone keeping tabs on them. Servants don't have the freedom to come and go as they please. And most of the servants have been here all their lives. Except for that Orwyn character. Where did he come from?"

Parth stopped and turned toward the Duke. "The fool? He was sent by a Lord from the frontier. The Lord was supposedly on his way ... yes, of course. He never showed because he doesn't exist. It's brilliant. Who would suspect a fool?"

Tanrif stood up. "Find this Orwyn and bring him to me, immediately."

Parth was out the door before the Duke finished his sentence.

\* \* \* \*

Parth's search turned up nothing. Soon he had everyone looking for Orwyn. Parth doubled the guard at the gates and started a room by room search, but somehow, the spy had anticipated them. He was willing to bet that the Dominan was no longer in the palace.

Se-gen was amused by the search and decided it would be fun if she were the one to find the body. She didn't have a problem acting upset. All she had to do was summon the past. She'd been eleven when she discovered the body—grotesque, bloated, and flyblown.

The guards responded to her screams almost immediately and soon after, when Parth arrived, she was sobbing and shaking.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, M'lord."

He examined the servant's body. "Throat cut, just like the others. The Duke isn't going to like this. I thought when we found Orwyn we'd have some answers, not more questions."

None of the guards responded, not that Parth expected them to. He returned his attention to Se-gen.

"I don't think you should be alone. I'm going to have a word with the Duke."

"M'lord."

"I'm sure Thelanna can spare you from the kitchens."

"She won't like it, M'lord."

"It doesn't matter." Parth remembered all too clearly Ulnira's naked body in Tanrif's quarters. It reminded him of how long he'd been alone. Surely, no one would object to the bladesman of High Gondylar taking a lover. At least, not to his face. "There is no reason to keep this relationship secret any longer."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, M'lord."

She was in his arms so fast she almost bowled him over. He held her tight and laughed at her delight. Only then was he forced to admit it. For the first time in years, Parth was in love. He had never thought to experience that feeling again.

\* \* \* \*

It was the toughest ride most of the Lords had ever endured. The Count set a breakneck pace and stopped rarely for rest breaks. Most meals were eaten in the saddle. Though one or two grumbled, they still had Tanrif's admonitions fresh in their minds, and so kept their own counsel.

By the end of the second day, two Lords and their retainers had turned north toward their holdings. The Count kept away from the bickering and numerous attempts to impress him. He had no time for trivialities.

Of all the Lords, the only one with a modicum of common sense was Dareth of the House of Saren. From the information Kestryl could glean, Dareth was a new Lord, having only recently come into his inheritance. Perhaps when he'd been exposed to enough Council meetings, his intellect would fade, but Kestryl hoped not. He was the kind of man who deserved to be a Lord.

He stood up for his principles, even when outnumbered, and never complained or hesitated to obey one of Kestryl's orders.

After the second day, Dareth rode beside the Count, much to the dismay of those who had sat on the Council for longer.

Shortly before dusk on the third day, they reached the abandoned fort where Bone had taken up residence.

\* \* \* \*

Bone had done well for so short a period of time. Not only had he recruited a number of men fleeing from Wildor, but many from the surrounding countryside as well.

At the Fort, the last four Lords and their men departed to rally support. Bone waited until they were gone to speak his mind.

"So, you're the Count of Astriana."

"I am."

"You picked an interesting time to show your face."

"I did."

"I have more than a passing familiarity with the House of Astriana. Did you know that?"

"How could I?"

"There is no Count of Astriana."

"There wasn't when my family left High Gondylar, that's true. What happened after, you can't possibly know."

"Do not play with me. Tanrif might not see through you, but I do. I don't know why you're here, but I don't trust you."

"You don't have to. The Duke trusts me. That should be enough."

"The Duke is not here—I am."

"I was sent to take charge of the Gondylarian forces. Do you plan to stand in my way?"

"I'm not sure yet. But I want some answers."

"The House of Astriana is loyal to the throne and always has been so. We couldn't bear to see what was happening to the Dukedom, so we left. I returned as soon as I heard rumors of Tanrif's amazing reappearance. Is that so difficult for you to understand?"

Bone studied the Count for a long time before answering.

"You're either a clever liar, or a true patriot. I'll bet you can guess which of those two exist in greater numbers."

"Tanrif believes me. Parth has vouched for me. What else do you require?"

"I'm not sure. Keep in mind, I'll be watching you. If you give me any reason at all, I'll slit your throat."

"Trust me, assassin, you don't have what it takes. Now, I'm here for a report. Will you give it to me, or do I need to find my own information?"

Bone smiled and remained silent.

"If you love your country, don't do this. I can't win a war without the best information I can get. Do you choose to withhold that from me? Are you willing to gamble your country's future on your suspicions? Tell me now, and I will leave this place."

Bone made a show of studying a blank area of wall. There were ways to test his theory, but all of them involved sharing the information he'd collected. The Count didn't have to know that, however. He sighed as if resigning himself to the inevitable.

"After Wildor was destroyed, the Dominan forces headed into the hills ... hard to track that way. We assumed their next target would be the City of Crossed Swords. They won't want to leave a base of men like that behind them if they can help it. I've concentrated a lot of men in that area, but there have been no sightings. The Dominan army has vanished."

"Do you know how many Dominans participated in the attack on Wildor?"

"It's hard to say, but as a guess, ten thousand."

"That many? I assume they did not suffer heavy losses."

"How could they? Wildor was completely unprepared. If the Dominans had wanted to, they could have razed the entire town."

"Why didn't they? Did your men scout out the town? Maybe that's where they're hiding."

Bone shook his head. "The first thing I considered. A few refugees still live there, trying to make some kind of sense out of what happened."

The Count stared off into the distance. Bone said nothing. He had seen other men with that faraway look in their eyes. Most of the time they were men of vision. The Count of Astriana sat for a time, lost in his own thoughts. Bone waited to hear what he would say next.

"Their next target will not be the Crossed Swords. If they had a force in the hills, you would have found some sign of them by now. You can't hide thousands of men, even if you're good at it, and stealth isn't usually a Dominan trait."

"Perhaps that was once true, but the Dominan general, a man named Larzenth, is not your typical charge in and take over type. His attack showed a great deal of thought and subtlety. I have long studied Dominan tactics. The attack on Wildor was unlike any Dominan campaign I have heard of."

"I was thinking the same thing myself. We have been fooled. While we gather our strength, they will attack Flandor. We must get messengers to all the Lords. We will join our forces to the north of the city on the hill called Hell's Garden—less than a day from Flandor. It is unlikely that the Dominans have gone that way."

"Why is that?" asked Bone.

"Because the hill is not found on any map."

"You know what they say about Hell's Garden..."

"I know all the stories, but I've been there ... more than once. Whatever magic once existed atop the great plateau is long lost to history. Yet that reputation is what I count on. Few dare to trespass on that sacred ground. We will strike out in the morning. I'll draft a note, you gather the messengers. I believe we will need five. Only five of the Lords will be close enough to help."

Bone had come to the same conclusion about Larzenth's next move. If the Count worked for Domina, he would have pushed the Crossed Swords as the prospective target. That he hadn't made him easier to trust. The speed with which the Count had redirected his thoughts was impressive. Bone was beginning to understand why Tanrif trusted him.

"If you're wrong, we're going to be in a world of trouble," said the assassin.

The Count nodded. "If the City of Crossed Swords is not their target, there could be none other than Flandor."

"You'll have your messengers."

But the Count of Astriana didn't hear. He was already busy penning his missives.

\* \* \* \*

Larzenth eyed his men critically. He had left the Gondylarian frontier behind as quickly as possible. Better to worry about the frontier later, when it was sandwiched between Domina and New Domina. They probably could take the frontier with minimal bloodshed. Once Gondylar fell, any city west of it would

have little choice but to surrender.

He looked at the sky. With an hour of light left, he did not want to halt. He drove his men further than any other general would have dared, but the risk was worth the reward. His massive force would fall upon the relatively unprepared city of Flandor, cutting off central High Gondylar from the frontier. It was a daring strike, but he had planned it well and had little doubt of success. He only hoped casualties could be kept to a minimum. He had done well in Wildor, but that was a city without a wall. Flandor was another situation entirely.

Larzenth, to most of his men, was only a step below godhood. He was aware of their respect, and understood the reasons for it. In single combat he was undefeated, no matter the weapon or opponent. He'd spent his life looking for the one man worthy enough to test his skill in battle. If such a man existed, Larzenth had yet to meet him. Sometimes, in his dreams, he would meet a man who could match him blow for blow. If only it could be more than just a dream. That was what separated a warrior from a soldier—the desire to test himself against someone better. That was the problem with being the best. Where was he to go from here?

Still, overconfidence was a problem that had cost more than one warrior his life. Larzenth never made such foolish mistakes. He always assumed his enemy was as well prepared as he, and as skillful. Perhaps, one day, it would be so, though he doubted it would happen in High Gondylar.

Once, the Gondylarians had been fierce warriors, but they had long since wilted into the backdrop of history. Of course, there were all sorts of stories circulating about the return of Duke Tanrif. If there had been a Gondylarian hero in recent times, Tanrif was it. However, even Larzenth would be unable to construct an adequate defense with the resources available to High Gondylar. Tanrif would not be able to either. High Gondylar did not inspire loyalty from its nobility, nor did she teach them discipline. That would change when the Emperor took over.

He allowed himself a brief smile as he pictured what Flandor would look like when Domina rebuilt it. How he longed to be there, to show these foolish Gondylarians how men lived. When he next looked up, the sun was about to set. He reined his horse and signaled for the others to do the same.

In short order, guards were posted and preparations for the evening were made. During that time, Larzenth stayed in the saddle and watched as order unfolded from chaos. His men were good men—strong, capable, and disciplined.

The Gondylarians were less so and it would cost them, but Larzenth felt no sympathy. Those who could live up to the Empire's standards would be better off than they were now, and those who couldn't, well, there was always a need for more work slaves.

\* \* \* \*

Before the Count retired for the night, he sent one last message to the palace at Gondylar, informing Tanrif of his plans. Most men would have stayed awake, but Kestryl knew the importance of resting before a battle and could always sleep at such times.

Around him, the camp went about its business. When he woke, the preparations to move were almost complete. The messengers left at first light, riding the fastest horses available. Kestryl watched them go. Then he knelt and offered a silent prayer to Sheba that they would reach Flandor on time.

By the time the camp was ready to move, the sun was visible in the eastern sky. Kestryl set a pace that was too fast, and that, he knew, was dangerous. But he also knew that if Larzenth reached Flandor before he did, the city would not last long. As he rode, he continued his prayers and hoped against hope that they did not fall on deaf ears.

\* \* \* \*

Thulrak stared at the Lord who was a traitor to his country. He did not understand the man. There was no reward great enough that it would tempt him to betray the Empire. Thulrak had already learned everything the young Lord could tell him, but there was enough he didn't understand. There were, in Gondylarian politics, a number of subtle nuances that were lost on the Dominan, and it was during waiting periods such as this that he tried to make some sense of them. Most of what the Gondylarian Lord told him was incomprehensible. It was as if he had tried to ask an ant what being an ant was like. Where there is no common experience, there are few understandable words. And understanding was something he needed to attain.

The Dominan had left Gondylar shortly after the Lords. He hadn't wanted to leave the city without learning Timor's fate, but he'd had no choice. The only way to keep in touch with his Gondylarian informant had been to travel to the man's holdings. He'd stay at the Lord's manor house while waiting to see what happened next. While he waited, he tried to learn.

He was still trying to grasp what gave one house a better position than others. He had already been over the information more than once, but so much of it didn't make sense. How could a man be a Lord when he was but a child? How could a lady rule her own lands? These were the matters with which Thulrak was unable to come to terms. Further thought on the matter was interrupted by the arrival of a messenger.

He was a young man, not well dressed, and clearly exhausted from riding. He handed a paper to the Gondylarian and waited.

"That will be all," said the Lord.

The messenger looked uncomfortable. "I beg pardon, my Lord, but my instructions were quite clear. I was to return with a confirmation that you would be there."

Quickly, the Lord scanned the paper.

"I'll be there. With all my men. With the Count of Astriana to lead us, how can we lose?"

The messenger bowed and left, anxious to get back as soon as possible. When he was gone, the Lord handed the paper to Thulrak.

Esteemed Lord of High Gondylar

It is urgent that you reply to this message. I no longer believe the next target of the Dominan vanguard will be the City of Crossed Swords. It is far more likely they will strike south and attempt to take Flandor. I know this city well, and believe it too weak to stand without our help.

To this end, we will meet three days hence on a hill called Hell's Garden. If you are not familiar with it, any of the elders on your holdings should know it well. Bring as many men as you can gather, but do not arrive late, even if it means you'll be leaving without a full contingent. Speed and surprise are our only allies now, and we can't have the second without the first.

I implore you to move with all haste and as much caution as that haste allows. It will not be long after you arrive that we will see battle. After that, it will be in the hands of Sheba.

I trust you will be prompt.

The Count of Astriana

Thulrak read the note twice before handing it back.

"Well, my Lord, it seems you are about to earn your salary."

Face pale, the Lord nodded. "What do I have to do?"

"Gather your men and go to the aid of your country. If you don't, the Count of Astriana won't trust you. And stay alive. I believe you may yet be of more use to me."

The Lord turned. He did not like the Dominan, but that didn't matter. Thulrak was the one man who could help him exact revenge on Tanrif, and no price, not even his own honor, was too high a price to pay.



## Chapter Nine—A Traitor Amongst Us

Bone wiped the sweat from his eyes. Not far away, the Count of Astriana was busy turning a group of individuals into a fighting force. That he could do so while driving them toward their destination was nothing short of amazing. The more he saw, the more the Count impressed him, a thing not easily done.

Bone felt the effects of the forced march all too clearly, and he was one of the lucky few on horseback. How the rest of the men endured it he couldn't say, though he was sure the Count's strength of will drove them on.

When Hell's Garden finally came into view, a cheer went up that echoed through the hills. So much for stealth. Bone had never seen the great plateau before, and it was impressive. He wondered at the wisdom of choosing such a visible landmark as a base of operations, but this was the Count's show and would remain so until Bone saw reason to take charge. He had to admit it was defensible. Three sides were too steep to climb easily, thus only the west slope would have to be defended. The tree line stopped two thirds of the way up, making a surprise attack impossible. Not that it mattered. With any luck, the Dominans had no idea where they were. The only way they could, was if one of the Lords meeting there was a traitor, or perhaps the threat was closer to home. If the Count betrayed them, he would pay in blood.

Still, the Count had gotten them there in one piece, faster than Bone would have thought possible. Despite being furthest from the meeting place, they had arrived first. It was a minor miracle. A major miracle would be needed if they were to turn back the Empire's forces.

The final stage of their journey, marching to the top of the plateau, sapped the rest of Bone's strength. As it turned out, the west slope wasn't as steep as it had looked from the distance; even the horses could be led up.

Once on top, he realized why it was called Hell's Garden. The almost flat surface was littered with hundreds of ochre boulders, some large enough to hide the horses as they moved between; there wasn't a hint of green. A more desolate site he couldn't imagine. Whoever had chosen the name Hell's Garden had known what he was about.

An hour after the last of them had reached the top, one of the lookouts cried out. Several of the men, including Bone and the Count, ran to see what had elicited the reaction. In the distance, a column approached. Everyone tensed, wondering if Domina had somehow discovered the plan. Then the marching men unfurled a banner displaying High Gondylar's Tree and Sword. Bone ignored the back-slapping and hand clasping festival. He wouldn't relax until he saw the Lord leading them. Anyone could procure a flag.

A short time later, he recognized Lord Keril and allowed himself a brief smile. More than that was premature. They didn't have nearly enough men to stand against a Dominan invasion force. Hopefully, more would come.

Keril's six hundred men climbed the west face of Hell's Garden to the cheers of those watching. That brought the total to over a thousand, with more likely to show the next day. Throughout the night, the Count moved among the men, telling each what was expected of them and why it was necessary. More than once, Bone stopped to listen to his well-chosen words.

After the Count left each group, they cheered. Bone smiled grimly. The day before a battle was one thing, the day after, another entirely. Bone hoped they'd still have something to cheer about in two days

time.

\* \* \* \*

The next day saw the arrival of three more Lords, bringing their number to over two thousand. The top of the plateau had grown crowded and would become more so as others arrived. Just before nightfall another group was sighted.

It would be a race for them to reach the top before sundown. Climbing the slope after nightfall would be dangerous. They plowed on in an effort to join their fellow soldiers. Many atop the plateau whispered prayers to gods they hadn't spoken to in ages. After the high spirits of the day before, the tension seemed odd.

That was when the attack began. Later, when Kestryl recalled that night, he couldn't figure out how the Dominans had pulled it off.

Suddenly, they were everywhere, climbing over the northern edge of the plateau. Men were there to meet them, but not enough. Most had been watching the drama unfold on the western slope.

Kestryl moved into action, shouting orders over the clash of blades. It was already growing dark, and the moon, newly risen, wasn't quite bright enough to fight by. A Dominan soldier leapt from behind one of the boulders. Kestryl dispatched him with a well-aimed thrust. The man turned as he fell away from the blade, leaving a smear of blood on the stone behind him. Why it should draw the Bladesman's eye, he had no idea. Then moonlight struck the blood and released the magic.

All at once, the boulders began to glow red, casting an eerie sheen over the battle. As Kestryl moved between them, they started to hum, a sound unlike any he'd ever heard. Several more soldiers fell to his sword, and as their blood fed the ancient stones, they glowed brighter.

After a slow start, the Gondylarians began to come together, defending against the attack that should never have happened. Everywhere Kestryl looked, men fought each other. Often it was difficult to tell friend from foe. The glowing boulders, something the enemy couldn't possibly have known about, worked in the Gondylarians' favor. Hell's Garden was awash with shadow and reddish-light that gave the battle a nightmarish feel, made more so by the unnatural hum that rose in volume until the sounds of combat could barely be heard above it.

Between the boulders, in a light not seen for hundreds of years, accompanied by a magical symphony no living man could name, the battle raged.

Bone wove in and out of a dozen skirmishes, choosing his targets and taking them out. Kestryl accounted for a large number of the enemy that night too, giving rise to what would become a legend.

Many a valiant Gondylarian fell that night, but in the end, the Dominan forces broke, and ultimately were slaughtered. Most who escaped didn't survive the descent into the darkness.

Much of the night was spent removing corpses from the plateau, and throwing them over the side. It was an unpleasant task that had to be done. And all the while, Kestryl stood and stared at a sea of blood-red boulders pulsing with ancient power. There could no longer be any doubt. One of the Lords was a traitor.

\* \* \* \*

Usually Eryl liked riding, but this time it gave her no pleasure. She was considered one of the finest horsemen on High Gondylar's northern coastline, which was why she had been chosen to bring the message to the palace at Gondylar. It was a good thing that she was also one of the finest archers and

swordsmen, or she'd have needed an escort, which would have slowed her.

That Eryl's appearance and skill were at odds with each other delighted her no end. Standing just over five feet, she was pretty though not beautiful, with a fine muscular figure and short blonde hair. Every so often, someone would ask if she were a dancer. She loved to watch their reaction when she told them she was a warrior. Most would laugh and turn away, as if not sure of her seriousness or sanity. She let them laugh—there wasn't a man on the north shore who could best her, a theory she'd often had the opportunity to test.

She smiled briefly at that single happy thought before sadder memories invaded. She had lived her whole life in Athlana and loved the city. She loved the ocean and boats, the sailors and fishermen. She loved walking to the market to get fresh fruit from farmers who grew them just to the south. Most of all, she loved to watch the men unload ships, their tanned muscular bodies covered with a fine sheen of sweat. That was where she had been when the Dominan warship was sighted.

The news spread quickly, and soon the docks were filled with people, most of them armed and ready to defend their homes. She looked about at the sea of determined faces. Those were the people she loved. As they watched, two warships followed the first. Then, three more appeared, forming a wedge of unbelievable strength. The determination on the faces around her faded into disbelief, fear or resignation.

The people of Athlana had grown up with the possibility of a Dominan invasion, but no one expected to see one. It had been three hundred years since such an attempt and, though things were not the best they had ever been, High Gondylar was surely strong enough to repel the invaders. When four more ships sailed into view, there were gasps. High Gondylar may be strong enough to defend itself, but the small number of ballistae and catapults, being dragged through the crowds to the pier would be incapable of withstanding an invasion of this magnitude.

As she looked around, more and more faces began to take on hopeless expressions. Then her eyes fell on Ragorath.

Ragorath was the Lord of Athlana, though no one ever thought of him that way. For most of his life he had led the city, though he lived much like anyone else. No one addressed him by his official title, and many probably forgot he was a Lord altogether, though everyone knew he was their leader.

He was the fairest man Eryl had ever known and, like most of the female population of Athlana, she wished he would get married, preferably to her. That was pure fantasy. Ragorath never looked at her that way.

She waited for him once she saw she was the object of his attention. He pushed through the crowd, patting a shoulder here, speaking a reassuring word there, never taking his eyes off her. She held her breath until he stood before her.

"Eryl, I need your help."

"Whatever I can do for you, you know I will."

"Good girl." He ignored her flinch at the reference. "I need you to carry a message for me to the palace at Gondylar." He waited for the words to sink in. "Lord Teryl must know what has happened here."

"But what about them?" She pointed to the incoming ships. "I'm the best warrior you've got. You know that."

He had to understand. She would stay and do battle. Let someone else carry his message.

Ragorath shook his head. "It has to be you. The message must get through. If Athlana falls, and Gondylar doesn't get word, the whole damn country won't be far behind. I know how good you are with a blade, but look at them. How much difference do you think anyone would make? How much difference when their flaming ballista missiles start raining down on us? Will your blade put out the fires? Will it heal the wounded? Suppose I send a less competent messenger, and he falls to brigands while on the way? You may well be High Gondylar's last chance.

"I know that you love Athlana, as do I, but it is not a good thing to love your city more than your country. High Gondylar allows cities like Athlana to exist. Do you have any idea of what Athlana will become if the Empire takes over?"

He paused to let her digest his words. He could see from the expression on her face that he was reaching her.

"I have been to a Dominan port city. It is a far cry from this." He gestured expansively to the rows of colorful ships that dotted the harbor. "We are out of time. I need your answer."

Eryl had never cried in front of a man before and was not about to start, as much as she wanted to. Nevertheless, her voice was husky with emotion when she finally replied.

"I will carry your message. But I want everyone to know I would rather have stayed and fought by their sides."

Ragorath placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"I am certain that everyone here already knows."

She had ridden from Athlana shortly after that exchange, on the fastest horse they could find. That had been many hours ago. By now, the fighting would have started. As she rode, she tried, not always successfully, to avoid picturing her city burned to the ground. It was hard enough to concentrate on the road without the distraction.

It would soon grow dark, and she had to find a place to camp. She knew the way to Gondylar from maps, though she had never traveled that far. The woods through which she traveled blocked much of the late afternoon light. She was looking for a place to stop when five men emerged from the trees on either side of the road. From the look of them, they could only be bandits. They must have heard her horse approaching and hid. They no doubt thought a single girl on horseback would be an easy target. One approached, blocking the road. She slowed her horse to a walk.

"That's a fine beast you've got there, lady," he grinned, displaying as many gaps as teeth. "Where could you be heading in such a hurry?"

Eryl had never dealt with this kind of man before, though she had heard stories from those who had. No matter what she said, she would not live if she could not best them.

"I think that my business is none of yours. Stand clear, or I will ride you down."

The others snickered. The man who'd spoken bared his ugly teeth, though who that was supposed to intimidate, Eryl had no idea.

"Get off the horse."

Eryl urged her horse to a gallop. The hapless brigand jumped to the side, still unaware she had drawn her sword. Her momentum, strength, and skill left her would-be tormentor headless. Under normal

circumstances she'd have kept riding, but it was almost dark and she couldn't camp with the likes of these men around. She turned her horse and rode back the way she'd come. One of them, apparently braver than his companions, drew a cutlass. Eryl charged. When he sidestepped, she blocked his cut and drove her sword into his neck. He was dead before he hit the ground.

The other three seemed torn between scattering and avenging their downed friends. Eryl realized that if they fled, she wouldn't be able to take them all out, and therefore wouldn't be able to sleep. She allowed herself to fall from the horse as if she'd fainted, releasing the sword on the way to the ground. She kept her eyes closed and ears open. She heard nothing save the snorting of her horse.

She waited so long she thought they might have fled. Then she heard a nearby footfall. It was all she could do to remain motionless. The next sound was closer. It was important to time it just right. If she jumped up too soon, they would scatter, and she would be spending the night awake. If she waited too long, she would be dead. Just one more second, one more second...

She leapt up, reaching for the sword that lay not far from her hand. The first bandit didn't have time to react before she ran him through. The second attempted to slash at her with a short blade. Eryl struck him with the flat of hers, hard enough to stun him. The last turned to flee. Before he could get away, she cut the back of his leg. He pitched forward, slamming his head on the ground.

The stunned man was in the process of finding his feet. Her thrust pierced his back, just missing the spinal cord. He continued to try to escape, running in place on the end of her blade. She had never seen that happen before, and it startled her. She watched the horrid struggle for several long seconds before he finally slid off.

She looked to the left in time to see the wounded man crawling toward her, dagger in hand. She finished him quickly, then did a quick check of the others to make sure they were dead. She didn't enjoy killing, but her mission was too important to jeopardize.

It was almost dark, and the day sounds would soon be replaced by the shrill chirp of crickets, the raucous complaints of frogs, and an occasional owl hoot. Eryl sighed, and started walking her horse. She would walk for another half an hour before picking a spot to camp.

She whispered a prayer to Sheba for the souls of the men she'd killed, though they probably didn't deserve it. There was no honor in attacking five on one. Still, they were dead by her hand; the prayer was more for her benefit than theirs. As good as she was with a sword, she never enjoyed the aftermath of killing.

That night, she dreamt of dead brigands in various states of decay. She was tired when she woke at dawn to a duet of songbirds and cicadas. She ate some berries from a nearby bush, took a swig from her flask, and mounted. She still had a long ride ahead of her.

\* \* \* \*

Life in the palace was anything but idle during the two weeks after the Count of Astriana's departure. Tanrif sent messengers to the Lords, urging them to hasten their assembling of troops, and instructing them to bring those troops to Gondylar as soon as possible. The deadline had been set for two days hence.

Parth continued to investigate Orwyn's death. What did his murder mean? Had someone been angered that Andres had learned the spy's identity? Had they taken him out because of it? If so that meant a second spy, but it may not have happened that way. Orwyn might have been killed trying to commit another murder. If that were the case, why didn't the responsible party come forward? It seemed that there were more questions after Orwyn's death than before. It was even possible that Orwyn had

murdered the guard and Captain Andres, only to meet his own untimely demise a short time later. Parth shook his head as he contemplated the too-numerous possibilities. The only thing that seemed to be going his way was that the murders had stopped at three, but whether or not that meant that the killer had left the palace, Parth couldn't say.

Only two things took Parth's mind off his investigation—sex with Se-gen and sparring with Coula. The warrior was as good with a blade as anyone Parth had faced. He wondered if even Kestryl could beat Coula.

But after those too brief distractions, almost before he stopped panting, Parth's mind would return to the unsolved murders. In the end there was no respite. He was responsible for palace security and didn't have a clue about what had happened, or any of the events that had led up to it.

\* \* \* \*

Teryl lived in the palace these days, unable to return to his family for even a brief visit. Like Tanrif, Teryl spent a lot of his time in the library, thus Tanrif knew where to find him when the message arrived.

The letter detailed the Count's preparation for battle, and included a list of Lords to whom he had sent notes. Further, all five of those Lords had shown up at Hell's Garden, which meant none of the messages had been intercepted. It meant that one of five Lords was a traitor. Tanrif looked over the note again. The Count had changed plans only after talking to Bone. Surely Bone wasn't a traitor ... what could Domina offer him that High Gondylar hadn't already provided. That left five Lords, or one of their trusted minions. Who could it be?

Tanrif wasn't familiar with all the Lords on the list, which is why he sought Teryl's advice. Surely the leader of the Council of Lords could offer some insight.

Teryl was reading when Tanrif walked in and sat, politely waiting for him to finish reading.

"Good book?" asked Tanrif, when Teryl looked up. It was important that he keep his cool. Others would follow his example.

"A History of Gondylarian wars," replied the Lord. "Not very vivid, but informative. I am not certain that the eastward movement is the extent of the Dominan attack."

Tanrif nodded. "The Count said as much before he left, but until the new forces show up here, there is relatively little that we can do about it."

"It is as you say," said Teryl. "You wanted to speak to me?"

Tanrif passed him the paper, and watched his face while he read it. Several times, Teryl shook his head.

"I know all these men, some not as well as others. It would be hard for me to picture any of them as a Dominan agent. Even Dareth, the most recent addition to the Council, has no reason to sell us out. In fact, he might stand to lose more than anyone. Of the others, Onar of the House of Lehan is loyal, as is the House of Dafron. That leaves the House of Cyryth, which means Lord Jeren, or Lord Palor of the House of Iother. I don't believe either of those men capable of betraying High Gondylar."

"Well," said Tanrif wryly, "it is almost definitely one of them. If you had to pick one, which would it be?"

Teryl stared at the page. "If I had to pick, and I do so under protest, I would have to say Jeren of the House of Cyryth. But I don't see it as a realistic possibility. Any one of those men would lose more under Dominan rule than they would gain, and all of them are smart enough to know that."

Tanrif studied Teryl. The man believed he was speaking the truth. That could only mean there was something he didn't know. One of these men had to be the traitor. Tanrif rose.

"Thank you for your input. I trust you understand that this conversation never happened."

"I would prefer it that way."

Teryl stood out of respect and watched Tanrif until the door closed after him. Then he sat back down and wrote the names of the suspects on a piece of paper. After a time of staring at the list, he shook his head, then returned to the book he was reading.

\* \* \* \*

Later that evening, over dinner, Tanrif filled Parth in on the latest development. Coula was there too. With the Count and Bone both away, he needed whatever guidance he could get. Tanrif trusted Coula implicitly. The large warrior would die for him. Tanrif hoped that it wouldn't come to that.

After the servants had departed, Parth read the message aloud. Like Teryl, he couldn't believe any of the Lords on the list had sold out, but if he had to pick one, it would be Onar, though he couldn't say why. They ate the remainder of the meal in silence, each lost in thought. Toward the end of that meal, a servant knocked and, at Tanrif's command, entered.

"There is a young lady at the gate with a message for Duke Tanrif or Lord Teryl." The man's voice was shaking. Clearly, he was not comfortable talking to the Duke.

"From where?" asked Tanrif, taking another bite of stew.

"She rode from Athlana, Highness, and from the way she smells, I would say she wasted no time."

Tanrif's mind found its way back to the conversation he'd had earlier with Teryl.

"Bring her to me, immediately," said Tanrif rising.

Parth looked at the Duke, surprised at the urgency in his voice. Only Coula appeared relaxed. The servant ran to do the Duke's bidding, while Tanrif, clearly agitated, paced back and forth. Parth drained his goblet so he wouldn't have to say anything. He had a feeling that he would soon need to refill it. It wasn't long before the servant returned.

The young woman knelt before the Duke but did not wait for permission to rise before doing so. Coula gave her a disapproving scowl, but no one else noticed the infraction. She waited for the Duke to speak before delivering her message. After her encounter with the brigands, she had memorized it and burned the paper.

"Duke Tanrif, Lord Teryl, or whoever holds the Gondylarian throne. It is just this hour that we have learned of a large fleet of Dominan warships sailing toward Athlana. Considering their numbers, there is little to prevent them from an easy victory. By the time you read this, our fate will already have been decided.

"I believe their next target will be Theremen. From there, it's straight south to Gondylar. I cannot tell you how I grieve to think of this fine country lost. I will buy as much time as I can with my life and the lives of my people. Eryl, the woman who bears this message, is one of the finest warriors I know. I am certain she will prove useful in future battles. Do not squander her abilities because of an accident of birth. I wish you god speed. Though you be too late to save Athlana, there may still be time for Theremen should you leave immediately.

"I remain a humble servant to the throne ... Lord Ragorath of Athlana."

The stunned silence lasted for several minutes, while they absorbed the news of another fallen city. When Tanrif spoke, his voice left no room for dissension.

"Tomorrow is the deadline for the Lords to send men and supplies. Any that have not arrived by sunset tomorrow will be heavily fined, perhaps I will even execute them when I find the time to do so. The morning after, we take all we have and march."

"Not all we have," Parth shook his head. "We must keep a force here to defend Gondylar. We will take what we can spare. Also, I do not think it wise that you go. You are the Duke of High Gondylar and belong in the capital. If you fall, let it be in defense of this city."

"Damn it, man," roared Tanrif, "I am a warrior. I will not sit still while my country dissolves around me. I will march on the Dominans, and if I go down I will take as many of them with me as I can."

Coula nodded approval. To Tanrif's surprise, the messenger spoke.

"I beg my Lord's pardon, but I would speak if it is so allowed."

Tanrif inclined his head.

"You are the icon for the entire country to rally behind. Your value as a warrior must certainly pale beside your value as a leader. I understand your rage. I felt much the same way three days ago when I set out. I too wanted to stay and defend my home. I was told by Lord Ragorath that my city was best served by my role as messenger. My best course of action was to serve High Gondylar. I have no doubt you are a warrior, but you are now a ruler as well. If one of those must come first, which will it be?"

No one spoke. Very few people had ever spoken so directly to Tanrif. Parth agreed with the girl, but that wouldn't save her head if the Duke took offense at her words. To his relief, the Duke smiled.

"You speak wisely. You will be useful as your Lord has said. I will stay here and defend Gondylar, should it become necessary. So I need someone to lead the force to Theremen." He looked at Parth. "I think you should stay here. You know more about the Lords than anyone but Teryl. That leaves you, Coula. You will lead the force to Theremen." He looked at the messenger. "You will accompany him. Remember, if the battle goes badly, retreat and regroup here. I can't afford to lose all of you."

Coula nodded, as did Eryl. Parth was still standing, trying to make sense of what had happened. Finally, he spoke.

"Tonight, we should study maps of the area, and try to come up with a strategy. Just Coula, me, Teryl and you." He looked at Tanrif, who nodded.

"If I may, I am familiar with the area," said Eryl.

"You may join us if you feel up to it, but before that time ... take a bath and have something to eat ... in that order."

"As my Lord wishes," said Eryl, grinning.

The servant escorted her out. Parth noticed Coula's eyes follow the girl until the door closed.



## Chapter Ten—War

The Count of Astriana sat alone in the dark. The boulder-light had long since faded, though he could still make out the last remnant of that most unnatural sound—or perhaps his ears still rang with it. Most of the men, exhausted from the battle, slept, but there would be no sleep for him.

He heard someone approach and knew who it had to be. He remembered all too well the assassin's threat. If Bone thought the Count had betrayed High Gondylar, he would accept nothing less than payment in blood. The Count didn't reach for his weapon. If the assassin had meant him harm, he would have made more of an attempt at stealth.

"You have something to say?" asked the Count.

"Almost always."

"Then say it."

Bone passed him and sat in the darkness. "We suffered a lot of casualties. The only reason we won was our position. The next time, we won't be that lucky."

"I agree."

"So what are your plans?"

"I am surprised you still trust me after today."

Bone pursed his lips. "I saw how you fought. Had you not been who you are, we'd never have beaten them back. So I ask again, what are your plans?"

"Unchanged. We will march to Flandor and offer support."

"I didn't know you had a death wish."

"I don't. I can see no scenario where we can lose Flandor and win the war."

Bone remained silent for a long time. If the Count hadn't been able to see him, he would have thought the assassin had left.

"I assume you know the odds of winning at Flandor are minimal," said the assassin.

"They are fifty-fifty."

"How do you figure?"

"Either a thing happens or it doesn't. We win or lose."

"That's a very black and white way of looking at things."

The Count smiled. "It is also a truth. Every day events occur that defy the odds. Tanrif's miraculous return from the dead defies the odds. Did you really think we would be able to win this war without doing the same?"

"No, I didn't."

"Tomorrow, we march for Flandor. I only hope we are in time."

"As you say, we either will be or won't. Fifty-fifty."

Bone stood and walked away, leaving Kestryl alone with the ghosts of the men he'd lost in a battle they should never have had to fight.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, the Count sent a message ahead to Lord Brun of Flandor, then gathered the survivors for the march. The descent from Hell's Garden took far longer than it should have, since many of the men were injured and had to move slowly. On the way, grisly remains of Gondylarian soldiers forced over the edge during the battle, reminded them of the price they had paid only hours earlier.

The march to the city was strained. The Count said little on the way. He wouldn't lie to the survivors. They wouldn't respect him if he did. He wouldn't put a bright face on what had happened, because it wasn't a victory. The attack against them had done exactly what it was supposed to, and everyone knew it.

Lord Brun, a large man with long black hair, cleft chin and a prideful demeanor, was on hand to greet them. He seemed surprised at the condition of the force that had come to save the city. He said nothing while Kestryl recounted the story of betrayal and the eerily-lit battle atop Hell's Garden. When the telling was done, Brun spoke.

"I don't mean to seem ungrateful, but I don't see how the force you've brought can much help the outcome of a battle. You are too few in number and many are injured."

The Count was about to answer, but Bone spoke first.

"This is the Count of Astriana. If anyone can save your city, this is the man. Do not be fooled by our lack of resources. In order to beat the forces of the Dominan Empire, we must beat them strategically, for if we engage in a war of numbers we will certainly lose."

Brun looked thoughtful, but didn't speak right away. The Count decided to follow up the advantage Bone had given them.

"It is my recommendation that you evacuate the city near the walls. Move as many people as you can to the center of Flandor."

"We don't even know this is where they'll attack," said Brun. "My scouts have seen no sign of an enemy."

Again Bone cut in. "Then where did the men who attacked us at Hell's Garden come from? If you'll take my advice, Brun, you should consider getting some new scouts. The old ones are not working out."

"I don't need to listen to this," said Brun. He started to turn. The Count caught his arm.

"You do need to listen to this, because I'm not going to say it again. Either you cooperate, or I'll have you locked in irons and brought before Tanrif on charges of treason. I know you don't think there is any threat, but believe me, Flandor is in danger and you ignore that danger at great risk, not only to your holdings but to all High Gondylar."

Lord Brun face turned red, and his cheeks puffed out. He looked like he'd swallowed a hog. Clearly, he was not used to being addressed that way. Before he could respond, Bone spoke again.

"Deal with it, Lord Brun, or suffer the consequences. I'm sure more than one of the Lords would be

interested in our past business dealings."

The Count of Astriana had never seen a man pale so fast.

"I will have the outer city evacuated, but you'd better be right."

"Pray we are not," said Kestryl, shaking his head. "Because no matter what preparations I make, the odds of us winning are not good."

Kestryl walked away before the Lord could say anything to further annoy him.

\* \* \* \*

More men filed into Flandor later that day. They had been summoned by their Lords but couldn't make it to Hell's Garden before the deadline. As they arrived, they were brought to the Count, who had the awesome responsibility of preparing the city's defenses.

Ceramic pots filled with oil were taken to the roofs of buildings near each of the gates. These could be lit and hurled at attackers on the ground below. Kestryl didn't like fighting with fire, particularly within the confines of a Gondylarian city, but the sheer numbers against them demanded drastic measures be taken. A number of ambushes and traps were set. He'd have preferred open battle, but again, it couldn't be helped.

As dusk approached, Kestryl kept watch from the west wall. That was when the Dominans had struck his encampment. Sometimes a General will repeat a successful maneuver. When the attack didn't come, he returned to the task of securing the city. He was sure they didn't have long before the Dominans struck. He was wrong.

Several days came and went peacefully. Soon, even Kestryl began to think he had been mistaken, though what else Larzenth might have in mind, he couldn't imagine. He tried not to think about Lord Brun's gloating face, and went about the business of keeping everyone ready for combat.

Each night, before he slept, he offered to Sheba a prayer that he had positioned himself correctly. He didn't pray for victory. He would have to earn that himself.

He wondered how high the price would be if he were wrong about the Dominan general's strategy.

\* \* \* \*

Thick forest surrounded Flandor. At night, the insects were so loud nothing else could be heard. Only during thunderstorms did they quieten. So it was on the fourth day of Kestryl's vigil. To attack a walled city on such a night would be insanity of the highest measure.

Rain pelted the surface of Corithim. Lightning and thunder filled the sky. The guards on the walls watched the sky instead of the woods. When lightning struck they could have seen the forest, but they never looked in that direction. Echoes of thunder reverberated through the surrounding hills.

Flash. A force of men moved from tree cover towards Flandor.

Flash. A number of ropes tied to grapples were thrown in the air. Many fell back to the ground, only to be recast. As each caught, silent figures climbed the walls. Above, perimeter guards paced.

Flash. The first intruders climbed onto the battlements and dropped down other ropes they'd carried up, slung over their shoulders.

Flash. More men ran to the walls from the trees.

Flandor remained unaware.

Many a wall guard became aware of the danger just in time to fall to a Dominan blade. Soon the wall swarmed with the Emperor's soldiers. The few defenders who survived tried to flee. By the time an alarm finally sounded, the Dominans already controlled the west gate.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl woke at the first peal of bells. He pulled leather armor over the clothes he'd slept in, pausing only to retrieve his two short swords from their resting place by his bed. He listened to the alarm. Two bells meant the attack came from the west. He plunged into the night, wielding a sword in each hand.

There were already Dominans on the street, though the downpour made it hard to tell friend from foe. Larzenth was either brilliant or insane to attack during a storm—perhaps both. Kestryl killed two enemy soldiers before he'd gone five paces. Others, seeing this, moved away from him.

The rain never stopped falling. Kestryl moved from opponent to opponent as if performing a slow motion dance. Sporadic lightning added to the effect. He didn't know how long the attack would last or who would win. After it was over, he only remembered one thing with any clarity—his battle with the Dominan general.

\* \* \* \*

Larzenth had been one of the first Dominans on the wall. He tore through the guards, and led the force that took the gate. Once that gate was opened, Dominans swarmed through.

Larzenth had received detailed information about the city's defenses from the spies he'd sent in beforehand. Thus he was most surprised to find the area near the gate largely deserted. Several of his men ran ahead, hoping to get to Lord Brun's mansion. Then it rained fire.

"The roofs. Check the roofs," he shouted, but no one heard him over the sounds of the storm—and the screams of his men. Naturally, Dominan soldiers were well trained and could easily adapt to a street fight. Keeping an eye on the rooftops, he ran down the street, but there were no Gondylarians to attack.

He ran deeper into the city, keeping an eye out for enemies. As he ran, he passed burning corpses, remnants of Dominan soldiers who hadn't been careful enough. It was the kind of reception he'd have planned, but it would come to naught in the end. He had too many troops, and they had already breeched the wall, Flandor's main line of defense. He'd lose men, but that was inevitable. In a way he envied those men. To die in the name of the Emperor was a great honor—an honor he would never know, for he would not fall in the battle of Flandor nor in any battle in High Gondylar. The gods protected him, for they saw in him some of their greatness. They would never let that be destroyed.

Larzenth heard the sounds of melee and rushed toward them. Finally, he would have a chance to swing his blade. When he saw the fighting he screamed a Dominan war cry and joined the battle, leaving a trail of dead in his wake. No opponent could stand against him for more than a few seconds, as he knew would be the case. Then his eyes fell on the Count of Astriana.

He immediately identified the Gondylarian as a master swordsman, perhaps skillful enough to enjoy the honor of dying by a Dominan general's blade. He approached, even as the warrior turned and noticed him. A Gondylarian ran in front of him and a single, casual cut felled him like a tree. Larzenth didn't even glance down. He only had eyes for the Count.

When they came together, the play of blades could be heard over the rain, which had weakened to a drizzle. Later, some said the gods had wanted to see the battle for themselves without interference. For minutes Larzenth and the Count tested each other. Neither attempted anything but basic cuts and parries.

By the end of that introduction, a grudging respect started to form on both sides.

Finally, they came together in a furious onslaught, too fast to follow. After a time, both drew back to contemplate some new strategy that might give them an advantage. Their duel took them around a corner onto one of the main avenues, where the fighting was heavier. This made their encounter even more dangerous for they had to guard against stray blades, while still concentrating on each other.

As they neared the market square, lightning struck. A tree burst into flames and started to fall. Larzenth jumped backwards. At the sound of the tree crashing down, the fighting paused briefly. Larzenth moved around the flaming barrier but was unable to find his target in the turmoil. He continued to search in vain until he realized the Dominans were being beaten back. He'd been distracted for too long. There was no way the undisciplined Gondylarians could have repelled his troops—but they had.

Then he realized it wasn't just warriors fighting. While he'd been engaged in combat, the men and women of Flandor had taken to the streets, some with nothing more than gardening implements and kitchen knives. His soldiers had vastly outnumbered the armed forces of the enemy but they didn't outnumber Flandor's population.

All the intelligence he'd gathered spoke of the disrespect the common folk held for those in charge. He hadn't expected them to stand in defense of their city. It was too late to do anything but retreat.

Larzenth stretched his aching muscles, which brought to mind the duel he'd so recently fought. That such a conquest had been denied him was all but unbearable. He shifted his attention to the burning tree then scanned the area one last time for any sign of his opponent.

"I'll have you, Gondylarian. One way, or another, I'll have you."

Thunder punctuated the sentence with such force that Larzenth knew the gods had heard his pledge.

\* \* \* \*

The sun, when it finally rose, shone upon a grisly spectacle. The bloody streets of Flandor glistened red in the early morning light. Most of the bodies that had fallen during the night still lay on the ground. From the window of his room, Kestryl watched the exhausted men and women of Flandor going about the horrible business of cleaning up. Corpses had to be moved, repairs made, injuries treated. It would be a long time before the scars of battle faded.

Flandor had won the battle, but at a price it could ill afford. His own force had been decimated and could do little good. He would take the remaining men—those who weren't too badly injured to travel—and head back to Gondylar where, hopefully, he would find some way to replenish his forces. If High Gondylar continued to win battles like this one, there would be no one left alive to stand against the next invasion.

Later, as he walked through the oddly quiet streets, he tried to imagine how hard it would be on the citizens of Flandor, who had fought for their freedom and had lost friends and loved ones. Several times he stopped to help bind a wound, or give a word of support. Then something caught his eye—a cart being loaded with bodies of the enemy. As he approached, he realized not all of them were human. He lifted one from the cart to study it more closely, but he knew beforehand what he would find. As he examined the body, a tear slid down his cheek.

Somehow, the Emperor had recruited Ethrellen warriors. Kestryl finally understood how the Dominans had surprised them atop Hell's Garden. With Ethrellen to carry up lead rope it wouldn't have been difficult to solve the riddle of the northern slope.

He tried not to think about Amalga or Cyanne as he walked away. As badly as he wanted to win the war, Kestryl didn't want to fight Ethrellen. He didn't have to wrack his brain to figure out why they had turned on the Dukedom. As far back as he could remember humans treated their tree-dwelling kin abysmally. Some Lords hunted them down like animals.

Now it looked as if the Gondylarians would pay the price for their cruelty and shortsightedness. For if the Ethrellen had joined forces with the Emperor, The Dukedom of High Gondylar was doomed.

\* \* \* \*

By nightfall, every Lord had sent the men he'd promised, most exceeding their quota, a few just shy of it. Tanrif had four thousand men available to march to Theremen's aid. It was more than Tanrif had hoped for.

Two questions remained unanswered—how many Dominans had landed at Athlana, and how many had died in the battle there? Without those answers, he might well be sending four thousand men to their death.

Considering the situation, morale was high. Part of that was due to Tanrif, who was not only a legend, but also the first popular leader High Gondylar had seen since his disappearance twenty years ago. Then there was Coula, who'd already developed a rapport with most of the men, a skill Tanrif hadn't suspected he possessed.

The planning session of the evening before hadn't come to much. There was little they could do until they saw the situation. There was no guarantee that they would even reach Theremen on time.

The next morning, Tanrif addressed the gathered troops.

"I won't lie to you. Some of you will not return to Gondylar. Some of you will never see your families again. Some of you will die."

It was not the speech anyone expected, and all eyes were on him.

"But if the Dominan Empire wins, you won't have a home to return to. Everything you've spent a lifetime building will be meaningless. Under Dominan rule, your land will be confiscated, your fortunes seized, your daughters and wives taken from you on a Dominan noble's whim. What freedom you now possess will be gone. Dying is a horrible thing, but living as a slave is worse.

"I wish I were going with you. I wanted to go. I wanted to lend my sword to the ranks of the men who will die so bravely in the days to come, but I've been told I can do more good here, so here I will stay. But I am with each and every one of you. You have my blessing. Go from this place and make them pay for what they have done to us ... what they will do should we fail. This is your chance to make history. Let's show the Emperor what it means to be Gondylarian."

A roar went up from the men, but Tanrif was not yet done. He held up a hand and silence ensued.

"Coula will be leading you. You could not ask for better. Follow him to victory and return to me in honor. Return to a Gondylar free from invading Dominans. We can make this happen if we keep heart. Let us send a message to Asoan that he'll hear all the way in Ballador."

This time the cheer went up and didn't stop, and when the troops left the city, the men and women of Gondylar lined the streets to cheer them. Four thousand men marched to an uncertain fate, but from the expression on their faces it was impossible to tell. Tanrif, not easily humbled, felt pride for his country as he had never felt it before. Watching them marching so confidently, it was almost possible to believe they

had a chance to win; that he wasn't sending thousands of men to an untimely death.

He thought about the Count and what might have happened since the assault on Hell's Garden. He didn't know whether the first force he'd assembled had survived, and here he was sending off a second. He'd held nothing back. He'd sent every able-bodied man at his disposal.

Now Tanrif had to amass a force of defenders from the streets of Gondylar herself. Hopefully, when Domina came knocking, he would have a force large enough to answer them.

If he didn't, High Gondylar would fall, and no one, not Coula, not Parth, not even the Count of Astriana would be able to save the great Dukedom from the jaws of her enemy.

\* \* \* \*

Bone and the Count of Astriana led what was left of the troops back to Gondylar, about one quarter of their original number. It wasn't enough, but it was all they had. How they'd managed to win was something Kestryl was never clear on. It was enough that they had.

As they moved toward Gondylar, Kestryl had an idea. He guided his horse closer to Bone.

"I'd like you to lead the men back to the city."

"Me? Where will you be?"

"I have something to take care of."

Bone stared at him.

"I know you have your suspicions, but they are unfounded. I have Gondylar's best interests at heart."

"It's not that. I've seen how many Dominans fell to your blade, but I don't like not knowing what's going on."

"I understand, but it would take too long to explain. Take the troops back to Gondylar. Hopefully, I'll be there before you."

"If not?"

"Then I'll be dead, and you'll have to fight the war without me."

Bone shook his head. "Why are warriors always so pig-headed?"

"Because we have a clear idea of what's right and what's wrong."

"Fair enough. Only one more question."

"Yes?"

"When we met, you called me assassin. How did you know?"

The Count of Astriana smiled. "Did you think you were the only one with sources?"

Without another word, he pulled on his reins and galloped off to the east.

He rode for two hours. The road gradually narrowed until it was nothing more than a dirt track through the forest. He continued another hour, deep into the wood. There he stopped and dismounted.

"Greetings," he shouted.

He waited. The birds stopped singing to hear what he had to say and continued when they realized the sound wouldn't be repeated.

"I come in peace."

Again nothing.

"I'm disarming."

He removed his weapons, laid them on the ground, and backed away.

"Please ... I only wish to talk."

"Then talk."

The softly spoken words came from behind him. He turned slowly so as not to appear threatening.

It was easy to understand why Kestryl had not detected Ethrellen among the human soldiers during the long night in Flandor. Only a pair of bare, grasping feet identified the creature before him as an Ethrellen. Like most older males, he had a full head of solid white hair. He stood about five feet, taller than most of his kind.

"I would like to speak to the council."

The Ethrellen laughed, an odd sound, more like a parrot trying to mimic a human than anything else.

"What do you know about the council, human?"

"You call it Veloracht. It consists of seven elders, all of equal importance. The Veloracht speaks with one voice."

"You know much, human."

"I am called the Count of Astriana."

"Why are you here?"

"Recently, in the city of Flandor, Ethrellen fought alongside men. I was hoping you would know something about it."

"I do not, but your news is troubling. You will wait."

The Ethrellen, with the great agility of his people, leapt up to one of the low branches above him and swung into the tree. Kestryl watched as he climbed higher and higher, moving through the branches as easily as Kestryl walked across the ground.

He had but one chance to save High Gondylar, and it was probably the longest shot of his life. Still, if he didn't try, Domina would triumph and all would be lost.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl waited for over an hour before the Ethrellen returned.

"The Veloracht will see you."



Kestryl inclined his head. He followed the Ethrellen on the ground between the trees. Soon, he could no longer see the path. After a time, he began to see quaint dwellings suspended in the forest canopy. He knew they were made from a single type of wood, a parasitic tree the Ethrellen had no compunction about cutting down. The largest of the dwellings spanned many trees.

Kestryl expected a long hard climb. He was most surprised when a rope ladder descended directly before him.

"Thanks."

"We do not like to keep the Veloracht waiting."

Kestryl smiled. He should have realized they weren't thinking of his convenience. Perhaps it would have been different had he arrived in his original body.

He climbed to the Velorachtum, the open platform on which the council met. Happily, he enjoyed heights. For many it would have been a frightening prospect.

When he arrived, six of the seven were present, seated at a semicircular table, reclining in Ethrellen chairs made more for comfort than style. The one who'd guided him took the seventh seat. While that surprised him, it was the eldest member of the council who drew Kestryl's attention.

"Grithlen! I had no idea you lived still."

Several of the others looked surprised, but Grithlen, the oldest Veloracht member, did not.

"It has been a long time. You are much changed, Kestryl."

"You know me?"

The elder chuckled. "How could I not? Though your face is beyond recognition, your soul is unchanged but for a stain that mars its beauty. The years have not been kind to you, hawk-soul."

"Whatever I have endured, I have brought upon myself. If Sheba wills I suffer, then I am happy to do so. It is her will I serve."

Kestryl could see sympathy in Grithlen's withered face and wondered how old he was. He had been on the Veloracht when Amalga had left the woods to marry Dathan. Even back then he had been old. When the elder again spoke, Kestryl listened to the tone of his voice and heard the weakness in it. Grithlen would soon depart Corithim and the world would be poorer for his passing.

"Stain or no, you remain a good man. Tell us what you have come to discuss."

"I've recently come from the defense of a Gondylarian city. Ethrellen fought with the Dominans against my people."

"Surprising."

"I thought so."

"What do you wish of us?"

"I do not wish to fight Ethrellen. I need your help. Many Ethrellen will die without it."

"They are not from my clan, and I have no sway with them. They come from Domina."

"There are Ethrellen in Domina?" This was the first Kestryl had ever heard of it.

"There are Ethrellen in many places besides what you call High Gondylar. We are an old and honorable race."

"I apologize."

"We are not offended."

"I had not expected to find you here, Grithlen. But now that I have, I would ask your aid."

"How so?"

"I would ask your people to stand with us against the Dominans."

There was much laughter. A female, who had remained silent till now, spoke.

"You have a delightful sense of humor. What reason could we possibly have to side with you?"

"For many years, Gondylarians have hunted your people."

"This is true."

"With Tanrif on the throne, I can stop it."

"How?" asked the one who had guided him.

"You have me at a disadvantage. I do not know your name."

"I am Pralit. I felt your presence and moved to investigate. Your power precedes you. But how will that power benefit my people?"

"High Gondylar will sign a treaty with the Ethrellen. Your land will be yours again. It will be taken from whichever Lord thinks he owns it."

"You can promise me this?"

"I don't have the authority to make that promise, but I know Tanrif. He will abide by any agreement I make, if you support our forces."

"An interesting proposition. We shall deliberate. You will descend to the ground to await our decision."

"I thank you for the honor of this meeting."

"The honor of this meeting is all the benefit you may get from it."

"Then it will have to suffice."

Kestryl bowed, and descended the ladder to the forest floor. He'd have given a lot to know what they were saying in the treetop.

\* \* \* \*

Coula and Eryl rode side by side. For much of the day they galloped, though they slowed to rest the horses from time to time. That their entire force was mounted would be a big advantage during their encounter, assuming the horses were fit.

Shortly before nightfall, they found a field big enough to accommodate their large numbers. Coula posted sentries around the perimeter, and had each man care for his steed before eating. In battle, a healthy horse is as important as any sword. Coula cared for his own steed as if he were a mere soldier and was pleased to see Eryl did the same.

At dinner they sat together. Coula could see the pain in Eryl's eyes. It hurt him that he had no answer for it. When she noticed him watching, she forced a smile.

"I hope we're in time to save Theremen."

"As do I."

"If we're not, then I have failed. I should have stayed in Athlana and fought. It was my right. Others died while I live. All so that Duke Tanrif might be warned ... but if the warning doesn't help..."

As quickly as it had formed, her smile vanished.

Coula looked at the cooking fire to avoid intruding on her pain.

"You acted with honor. When you are judged, the gods will see this. You didn't run from fear. You accepted your duty and performed to the best of your ability. No matter what happens, you did what you had to do. That is all that matters."

"Have you ever run from a fight?"

"No ... and neither have you."

She smiled again, but it was a pale thing compared to what it might have been. Still it was something. Coula grabbed her hands and held them.

"Strong hands. Warrior's hands. These hands would never run from a battle. I know this."

"All from touching my hand? You are very sure of yourself warrior."

"No. I am very sure of you."

He released her and returned his attention to the fire. For her sake as much as anything, their mission had to be successful.

\* \* \* \*

"We cannot do this thing," said Grithlen. "If we do, we would be forced to face our own people."

"Do you believe he can do what he says he can?" asked Pralit.

"I know he can. Kestryl does not lie."

"Then how can we turn down his offer? Are we not tired of being hunted?"

Several of the others nodded, but Grithlen was adamant.

"You cannot purchase security with violence. Suppose the Dominans win. What then would happen to our people?"

"We would have to make sure that doesn't happen."

Grithlen smiled. "It is good to be young. To believe you can dictate fate to the universe."

The female who had spoken before jumped in. "Do you know who will win the conflict?"

Grithlen smiled. "No such conflict is ever won. It is the fallacy of war. Tell me, Pralit, would you take my life?"

"Never, Grithlen!"

"Then how can you take the life of another Ethrellen? How can you put yourself in a position where you might have to?"

There was a long silence around the table.

"I will decline the Gondylarian's offer," said Pralit.

"It is the right thing."

"I do not know, but it is done."

Pralit stood and swung down off the edge of the platform.

Above him, several voices continued to talk, but the decision was made. For all that they were a council of equals, four of the seven would never go against Grithlen.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl sat on the ground, eyes closed, listening to the wind and something else. A thing he hadn't heard in a long time. He listened to Corithim whisper her secrets. Once, long ago, he had been a part of that world, until Dauber Uaks had wrenched him out of it.

It had taken him a very long time to get over the sense of loss. Once, the sky had been his. No more. All that was left was a need to soar again, and only by serving could he attain that. This was his last chance to fly.

A footfall brought him to the present. He stood and waited. There was no way he'd have heard an Ethrellen who didn't want to be heard. Pralit touched his shoulder.

"The Veloracht has reached a decision."

"Yes?"

"We will not aid you in your war. It is not our way."

"I had expected you to take longer to decide."

"The Veloracht, as you said, speaks with one voice. I am sorry but it is not to be."

"I honor your decision, though it may be the end of all I have worked for."

Pralit smiled. "What we achieve in our lifetime lives forever, no matter what happens, for it is the doing that is important."

"I wish I could believe that."

"Whether or not you believe a statement does not affect its truth. I wish you well, hawk-soul."

"Thank you, Pralit. May your clan grow ever wiser."

If Pralit was surprised the Gondylarian knew the proper response, he didn't show it.

\* \* \* \*

The night passed uneventfully. The next day, Coula sent a scout on ahead. He kept the pace slow to wait for the scout's report. At their current rate of progress, they should be at the gates of Theremen by early afternoon.

The day was warm, and sunny, but since a good portion of their riding was through forest trails, they rode in some comfort, under the shade of large conifers. Shortly before noon, the scout returned, reporting that everything was peaceful. It was all Coula needed to hear.

He pushed the company into a gallop, glad he'd taken the time to rest the horses along the way.

They reached the city about two hours later—at the same time as the Dominans.

\* \* \* \*

The Count of Astrianna rejoined Bone shortly before the troops reached Gondylar. Bone didn't ask where he'd been, and the Count didn't tell him; however, it was obvious to the assassin that whatever he'd been about had not worked out the way he'd hoped. Still, it was good to have him back. The Count had been as much a part of the Flandor victory as anyone and deserved the heroes' welcome they were going to receive.

Bone had sent a messenger ahead to the palace with the news of their victory, so he was not surprised by the reception waiting for them when they reached the city. The Count of Astrianna was stunned.

From the gate all the way to the palace, the streets were thronged with those who wished only to get a look at the men who'd saved Flandor. There was much singing and shouting. A few fights broke out, but overall it was a moment of much needed relief for both the troops and the city. If they could beat Domina with a force that had already taken heavy casualties, what could they do when they were at full strength?

When the procession reached the palace, the royal court was waiting.

As soon as the Count dismounted, Tanrif embraced him like an old friend.

Parth watched the heroes ride into the city, but his happiness at the message was hindered by his surprise at how few were left to fight. Still, he smiled proudly. These men had done battle, and deserved at least that from him.

Tanrif called a feast to honor those who had fought so bravely. The soldiers had earned it, though Parth, Tanrif and the Count dined privately. The Duke wanted to hear the details of the battle without the distraction of hundreds of drunken soldiers. He also needed to tell them about Athlana's fate and Theremen's danger. Bone didn't dine with them. He'd been away for a long time and had many reports to collect from his contacts. He'd agreed to meet with Tanrif later, after he'd caught up.

The Count was dismayed at the fall of Athlana, claiming that he'd spent some time there, years ago. They discussed plans to increase their numbers, and to trap the traitor, but in the end, little had been decided.

The only firm decisions were that the Count and Parth would leave the palace, and try to build some kind of force from those who lived in the capital. The thought that it should have come to this was terrifying, but there was nothing to be done. The Dominan Empire had declared war, and High Gondylar would do whatever was necessary to survive. Only time would tell whether the Dukedom's defenders could oust the invaders.

After dinner, Tanrif sent out messengers to inform the Lords that the next meeting of the Council was

scheduled for four days hence. There were many things that still needed to be done, not the least of which was to find the traitor. So much depended on the encounter to the north. He could only hope Coula would find a way to triumph.

\* \* \* \*

Coula divided his forces into two groups, placing one under Eryl's command. A few men were unwilling to be led by a woman until Coula reminded them of the penalty for treason. His group would ride east around the city's wall, while Eryl's group would ride west, hopefully sandwiching the Dominans between them.

Eryl rode swiftly, often having to slow to wait for the others, bow out so she could take a few shots before closing. She didn't know how quickly Coula would be at the Dominan's other flank, but once the enemy were in sight she wasn't going to wait. These were the men responsible for the destruction of her home, and she hadn't been allowed to fight in its defense. She would make as many of them pay as she could. Such were her thoughts when she sighted the enemy.

"By Sheba's sword," she whispered.

She hadn't expected so many, nor had she thought they would all be mounted. They must have had the holds of the ships filled with horses. She managed to loose a few arrows, one of them taking down a horse, the other a man. Then she was forced to draw her blade.

Fighting on horseback is different than fighting on the ground. Riders have to hold themselves in place with their leg muscles, while striking at opponents. Those who can't hold on go down. Few survive once dismounted. Immediately Eryl noticed that the Dominans had another advantage.

While her men had to hold themselves in the saddle by strength, the Dominan force had some kind of contraption they stuck their feet through, holding them in place. That device would cost High Gondylar its victory.

Many of her horsemen were unseated during the first pass, while just about all of the Dominans stayed mounted. The men on foot were run down by the normal tides of battle. If Coula hadn't attacked from behind when he did, her force would have been decimated.

The Dominans were forced to split their men, and they began to lose ground. Not for long. It soon became clear that the Dominans' superior numbers and armament would triumph. Eryl screamed a battle cry and redoubled her efforts, but the Dominan force seemed unstoppable. They had made a dent, but not one big enough to truly hinder a Dominan victory. All they could hope for was to weaken the invaders enough to make it impossible for them to take Theremen.

When it seemed certain that Coula had no choice but to sound a retreat, the sound of a battle trumpet blared from the north. Heads turned expectantly to see who joined the battle. Eryl charged, attacking any Dominan within spitting distance. The new force, for the most part, was not mounted, but a few were, and Eryl recognized their leader immediately. Lord Ragorath, somehow, had managed to preserve enough of a force to attack the Dominan rear.

With the arrival of Gondylarian reinforcements, the Dominans finally broke formation. The battle lasted for hours, neither side gaining a clear advantage. As night fell, both the Dominans and Gondylarians drew back to regroup.

Ragorath wasted no time seeking out Eryl. "Well met, warrior."

She smiled and embraced him. "I never thought to see you again."

"Or I you. When it was obvious we couldn't win, I sounded the retreat. I thought, perhaps, we could take our vengeance on another occasion."

"You couldn't have timed it better."

"I'm glad. But I don't understand what Keal is doing. Why didn't he send troops to join us? This is his city we're defending, after all."

"Most of his men are already with us. He sent all he could spare to Gondylar, as Athlana would have if you ever bothered to attend Council meetings."

"Have you ever been to one? It's about as much fun as sex with a bee hive. There's a lot of buzzing, quite a bit of stinging, yet nothing is accomplished. I gave up on the Council a long time ago."

"Well, I'm guessing Lord Keal doesn't have the resources to spare. What men he's kept behind he'll need for defense if we fail."

"Eryl, if the Dominans win here, if they breach the wall, whatever men he has in reserve won't be enough. We have to win, or Theremen will fall."

Eryl's eyes lit up. "And we will. We will avenge the fall of Athlana together, and the gods help any Dominan who stands against us."

\* \* \* \*

Coula surveyed his remaining troops. The damage had been done.

Not only were more than half his four thousand men lying dead, but another five hundred were too injured to fight. He did not know for certain how many Dominans were still able to fight, but he needed to. Eryl walked beside him on his rounds. Many had seen her fight that day, and no one, not even the most prejudiced, would object again to following her into battle when the sun rose.

Ragorath's men added another five hundred to the forces already under Coula's command. They would follow Coula to battle, if that were the course he chose. Coula shuddered. So much rested on his shoulders.

Once the rounds were done, he spoke to Eryl.

"We need to send out a scout. We need to know their strength."

Eryl grinned. "I was thinking that same thing. I won't be gone long."

Before he could protest, she ducked into the woods. He whispered harshly after her, but she had already been swallowed by the night.

\* \* \* \*

Eryl moved quickly but quietly through the woods. Between the frogs and the crickets, it would be hard to pick out a human moving through the underbrush, though she was as cautious as she could be without slowing her progress.

It didn't take long for her to locate the Dominans. After climbing a hill, the cooking fires of their camp were visible in the distance. She started down the far side, perspiring in the hot Gondylarian night.

As she approached, she looked for sentries. There had to be some, but she couldn't see any. She scanned the trees and the ground but nothing moved. She couldn't hear anything over the sounds of night.

When she reached the bottom of the hill, she began crawling through the brush. Insects and small reptiles scattered out of her way, or jumped on her. She ignored them. She couldn't allow herself to be distracted for even a moment. It was the sound of a voice speaking a language that she could only guess to be Dominan that froze her in her tracks.

Two men, approached. Low as she was, she couldn't see them, nor could she tell how far away they were. The night was like a prison. She dared not move in case they were looking in her direction. She had to remind herself that fighting untrained brigands was one thing, but these men were soldiers and would be harder to kill.

She waited, the sound of voices neither advancing nor receding. Then she heard movement, and the voices drew closer. She crouched lower in the tall grass, turned her head, and froze.

Moonlight reflected off the red-jeweled scales of a fire viper. She had seen them before, though never this close. She had been told that they were the most poisonous snakes in the world, though some said Tanrif had once survived such a bite. Fiction, no doubt. A man like Tanrif had all sorts of legends grow around his life. In any event, she was not likely to survive such a bite.

The voices drew yet closer. The snake regarded her through elliptical pupils. She dared not move, even if the Dominans hadn't been there. The soldiers passed. She held her breath. For a long time the snake watched her. Then it slithered away and disappeared into the grass.

Eryl remained motionless. Moments later she heard a scream, and what must have been a curse. She heard the sound of a blade coming free of its scabbard and the sound of it hacking at the brush, followed by receding footsteps accompanied by hysterical screams. She didn't move again for some time. Though she hated the Dominans, she felt sorry for the one that the serpent had bitten. Still, it had been a stroke of luck.

After a time, she resumed her advance, listening for voices and watching for serpents. She had never been scared of snakes before but was not sure how she would react the next time she saw one. It had been so close. Finally, she forced the encounter out of her mind and concentrated on her mission.

She was able to get close enough to the camp to see about how many men collected around each fire. Knowing the Dominans' penchant for order, they probably had exactly the same number around each. Once on the hilltop, she would count the fires and multiply the result. It was not the most accurate way of assessing the Dominan strength, but she'd already had as much adventure as she could handle.

It didn't take long for her to make it back to camp. She was immediately accosted by a much-worried Coula.

He grabbed her into a huge embrace.

"Don't you ever do that to me again."

"Do what?" she asked innocently.

"I have a mind to..."

"To what?"

He stared at her for a moment then planted his lips firmly on hers. It was a long time before he drew back. Several nearby soldiers made a show of studying the stars.

Eryl grinned. "Don't you want to hear what I've learned?"



"I thought you'd never ask.

\* \* \* \*

Coula, Eryl, and Lord Ragorath, sat on the ground, talking. From Eryl's information, they estimated there were between two and three thousand mounted Dominans left, maybe more—far too many for comfort. They discussed the strange apparatus the Dominans used on their horses, and knew they couldn't fashion them quickly enough to use in this battle.

In the end, they decided to stay. Eryl couldn't bear to abandon Theremen to the fate Athlana had suffered. Once the course was decided, they tried to sleep, hoping to get some rest before the morning's 'festivities'.

Shortly before sunrise, they broke camp and headed once more toward Theremen. They waited for the Dominan force to arrive. By noon, it did not look like the Dominans would be showing.

Eryl went on another scouting mission, this time in broad daylight, but the Dominan camp was empty, and all the soldiers gone. She tried to follow the tracks out of there, but it looked to her skilled eye as if the Dominan army had scattered in every direction. She returned to Coula, who was still waiting in front of the city. They waited all that day and through the night, but the Dominans did not return.

Perhaps the Dominans felt that they had already lost too many men to risk an attack, and had started back to their ships. It didn't matter—the city of Theremen had been saved. The next day, when they broke camp, they would begin the trip back to Gondylar with the news of their victory.

But Eryl couldn't help wondering what fate had befallen the Dominan invaders.

\* \* \* \*

Tanrif and Parth met in the library to discuss progress. Tanrif had hoped Bone would be there, but he was busy training the new troops.

"We have five thousand men ready to follow you into hell if it becomes necessary."

"That's fantastic!"

"You're popular. Even in the domains of the other Lords you're popular, but here in Gondylar? You're beyond reproach. It doesn't hurt that both you and the war have the support of the temples of Sheba and Iorana."

"I suppose it wouldn't. Still it's not all that much ... five thousand men."

"Plus the men who survived the battle of Flandor and those who will return with Coula."

"If they return. We can't count on them."

"No, I suppose we can't."

A little over six thousand men to defend against whatever invasion force Domina could muster. Neither man would speak of it, but both were thinking the same thing. It would take a miracle to save High Gondylar.

\* \* \* \*

Larzenth studied his forces. He knew he should have headed back to Domina for reinforcements and new instructions after his defeat, but since Flandor everything had changed. The opponent he'd spent his life dreaming about had been there, and fate had cruelly cheated him out of the opportunity to prove

himself. He had been so close to fulfilling his destiny, and now he was a man lost.

Over and over in his mind, he fought the battle with the Gondylarian soldier, looking for some way to penetrate the man's awesome defense. Battling such a foe was like drinking the elixir of the gods. It was ecstasy beyond description. The only thing lacking in the experience was its resolution.

He had slipped back into Flandor and, after dropping some gold, learned that the man was called the Count of Astriana. It was a fitting name for a great warrior, but there could be only one true warrior. He had always thought the title was his, but now he wasn't sure. The only thing he was sure about was that he would meet the Count again, and when he did, the battle would not end until one of them was dead.

Larzenth broke from his reverie. His men stood before him, awaiting his orders. If any were disappointed that they were not returning home, none showed it. He knew they were all asking themselves the same questions. What was Larzenth planning? Is he acting under orders? Is Larzenth still sane enough to lead us?

Larzenth smiled. He wondered the same things himself.

\* \* \* \*

With Coula and Eryl once again in the lead, two thousand men rode back toward the city of Gondylar. It was more than they had hoped for, and less. It would have been better if the victory had been clear-cut. Yet they had accomplished their objective; Theremen was safe. Even if the Dominans returned, with the city on alert, they had little chance to take it. But what it had cost them couldn't be explained in words. Not a single soldier who'd fought in that battle felt he'd won a victory.

They rode at a more casual pace than they had on the way north. On the second day, in the middle of the afternoon, the Dominan force struck.

A battle was the last thing they had been ready for, especially in the woods. Suddenly, there were soldiers everywhere, and survival was the name of the game. There was no chance to form a line, no chance to plan a strategy. Coula fought like a man possessed, until the enemy ran from him on sight. Likewise, Eryl made a good showing, taking the lives of many of their attackers. Ragorath did well in the beginning, but soon after, received a wound to his sword arm. He tried to fight anyway but went down swinging.

Eryl tried to fight her way toward him, but the press of bodies swept them apart. The Gondylarians and Dominans both fought well. Images of that battle would stay in Eryl's mind for the rest of her life, but none of them summed it up as much as the Dominan soldier lying dead on the body of the Gondylarian he had just slain.

Within an hour, the Dominans withdrew, but the damage had been done. There were less than eight hundred soldiers left to return to the city. Coula looked around at the tattered remains of his army, tears in his eyes. The Dominans were animals. There was no strategic sense in attacking his force—it had been done for vengeance. His exclamation was something between a curse and a growl. He ordered his men to abandon the bodies of those fallen. They would march to Gondylar, and Coula would pray for their souls for the duration. He hated that it had to be so, but what else could they do. It would take days to dispose of twelve-hundred corpses. Days they didn't have.

Eryl rode beside him, but neither said a word until they were safe within the walls of Gondylar.

## **Chapter Eleven—The Battle Of Gondylar**

With the Dominan advance forces defeated (the invasion force that had come through Wildor was severely disabled, and the one that had destroyed Athlana had been virtually eliminated), it was unlikely the Emperor would try again any time soon. The threat wasn't over, but the immediate danger had passed. They were lucky Asoan had only thought to test High Gondylar instead of investing his resources in an all out war. High Gondylar couldn't have handled that under any circumstance.

Tanrif called a meeting of the Council. As usual, he entered through the back door. He didn't know what he expected to find, but there was less bickering and more camaraderie than usual. Tanrif watched for a while. The Lords were far happier than they should have been. If they thought Domina had played its last card, they were bigger fools than he'd suspected.

Tanrif walked to the head of the table, followed by Bone and Parth. Teryl, as usual, was already seated there. He smiled and nodded to Tanrif. Unlike most of the Lords, Teryl remained aloof. He was too experienced to believe that they had seen the last of the Emperor's men.

Tanrif waited at the head of the table until all conversation came to a halt, after which, he maintained his silence for some time. When he spoke, his voice was like thunder.

"I'm so happy to see you celebrating our victory over the forces of Domina."

His tone told even the densest of them that he was not pleased.

"Perhaps you didn't realize it, but in defending ourselves against this tiny threat, we lost more than half of our forces."

He paused to let that sink in.

"But they've been defeated," said Lord Brun.

Tanrif's derisive laugh filled the room.

"Do you see the Emperor kneeling before you in chains? What have they lost? A few men? All we have succeeded in doing is annoying the ruler of the largest country in the world. Do you think that he's sitting in Ballador right now, crying over his lost troops? Do you think this minor inconvenience will convince him to turn his gaze from our border? You're an idiot. Asoan is old. He's going to step down soon, passing down the rod of rulership to one of his sons, but you can bet that he wants history to record him as the conqueror of High Gondylar. I'm certain we will see more troops, possibly sooner than expected. The only questions are, where will they come from, and how many will march?"

As if those words were a cue, the door to the room opened. Coula walked in, leading a messenger. Tanrif watched, tightlipped, while the pair crossed the room. The Lords were silent, waiting to see what had occurred.

At the front of the room, Tanrif looked at Coula angrily. He modulated his voice so that only Coula and perhaps Parth could hear.

"This couldn't wait?"

Coula, embarrassed, shook his head.

"I do not believe so."

"Well?"

Tanrif glared at the messenger so hard that the man almost fainted. Wide-eyed, he handed a piece of paper to the Duke. Tanrif could feel the Lords' eyes on him as he read. When he finished, his hand lowered slowly, until it rested on the table.

"Perhaps, much sooner than you think," he said, but his voice was so low only those closest to him heard his words. He stood still for a time, eyes distant. When he spoke again, his voice started low until it rose to a crescendo.

"As I was saying, the Emperor would not let us be, but the depth of his brilliance has eluded me. While we were busy fighting what was, no doubt, a diversionary force, the real threat crept up on us. He didn't attack us from the north or west. He attacked from the south. Nor did he risk his own men. He has made an alliance with the barbarians. While we sat defending our borders, his allies, in numbers we never suspected they possessed, swept northward. Both Caratha and Balrenge have been destroyed. If we are to preserve the Dukedom, we must send every man we can muster south to face this new threat."

"What about Gondylar?" asked Lord Dareth, standing up. "If we send everyone, who will protect the city?"

Tanrif looked thoughtful for a time. Parth leaned forward and spoke in Tanrif's ear. Tanrif nodded.

"That might work," he said to Parth before again addressing the Lords.

"We will take as many civilians as we can, and give them armor and weapons. We will have them patrol the walls in large numbers. If Domina is waiting for us to look weak, it will not happen. These "guards" will work the walls until such time as our troops return."

Dareth laughed. "It will never work. It takes three weeks to get to the border and three weeks to get back. If there are two weeks of battles that means that we have to deceive Domina for two months. The Emperor is no fool."

"True. But in order to mount an invasion, he needs a full month. His troops could not be in Gondylar before that. By the time he realizes we are defenseless, our troops will be on their way back, or defeated, in which case, it's academic. We must break the barbarian invasion fast enough to return and defend Gondylar against the Dominans. And I know just the man to do it."

Tanrif regarded Coula.

"Find the Count of Astriana. Tell him, I have need of his services."

\* \* \* \*

For those in charge, the next two days in Gondylar were a whirlwind of activity. Parth and Coula went out to recruit potential civilian guards. Tanrif and the Count of Astriana planned strategy, and tried to bring some semblance of order to the troops. Bone rode far and wide, collecting as much information as he could, from both his informants and general gossip, the latter of which had to be examined with the utmost care. Eryl helped by giving combat classes to the new recruits. Even though they were decoys, they still had to know how to wear armor and how to hold a sword. There was no time to waste.

With Parth constantly busy, Se-gen found herself with a lot of free time. She especially enjoyed visiting the kitchen, now that Thelanna had no authority over her. She knew her presence was an annoyance to the mistress of the kitchens, so she spent as much time there as she could. All in all, life was definitely on

the upswing.

Of course, the palace wasn't the only place that had been affected by the new circumstances. Immediately after the Council meeting, the traitor left the castle and, after making sure no one was following, headed toward the inn where Thulrak, once again, had taken up residence. At first, he had found the Dominan intimidating, but proximity had dulled the sensation. Even Thulrak was aware how beholden Domina was to the Gondylarian Lord. How much more so after he delivered this new report.

Thulrak was sitting at his desk when the traitor entered. He appeared to be deep in thought though, as the report unfolded, his eyes took on a predatory gleam. The Lord barely paused, as he outlined High Gondylar's new set of problems. When he was done, he explained Tanrif's logic, and the nature of Gondylar's deception. When he finished, he waited quietly, while Thulrak considered his words.

The first thing that occurred to the Dominan was that it was some kind of trap, which would be easy enough to check. He would send his men out immediately to confirm the verifiable parts of the story. Then, he would send a message to the Emperor, giving him the signal to attack in force. Even if he didn't send his report for three or four days, the Emperor could have an army at the gates by the month's end. He smiled at the image of a Dominan host marching through a burning Gondylar.

Finally, he broke from his reverie.

"You will be rewarded, if the information is accurate."

The Lord bowed. "You have my word on it."

\* \* \* \*

While preparation for war continued, new reports began to come in. The situation in Gondylar's south was so dire, Bone thought that it might be necessary to sacrifice the whole south of the country to preserve the rest, but Tanrif would have none of it. He felt he had lost too much already, and no amount of argument from Bone was going to sway him.

At last, three days after the first report, the army was ready to leave. The Count was to lead the first group southwards, while Coula and Eryl would wait for the Lords to send what else they could. There would be no dodging now. Each of the Lords knew what would happen if High Gondylar came under Dominan rule, and none would risk it. Consequently, the second force that left Gondylar only three days after the first was just a large.

Thulrak checked out the story, and even had one of his men follow the first group for two days, to make sure that they were heading south, which they were, at a breakneck pace. This was the opportunity for which Domina had been waiting. No longer doubtful, he composed a full report to the Emperor and, with the last rays of the sun, watched the sangreth as it flew from sight. He could barely contain his excitement. The only thing that caused him some distress was his inability to contact Timor, or even find out what fate had befallen him. If he were alive, Timor would have found a way to reach him. He sincerely hoped his friend had died without betraying his country.

Much later, after the Lord had left to return to the palace, Thulrak reclined on the room's only bed. It was soft like everything else in High Gondylar. He wondered what the mattress was filled with. He would welcome a good night's sleep on his warrior's mat when he returned to Domina. A warrior could never get too relaxed, at least not one who wanted to survive. The bed, like everything in Gondylar, was a kind of trap. It was too easy to become complacent living in such comfort. In spite of the realization, he closed his eyes.

His task was done. He would wait to see what events his work had wrought. Now that the wheels were

in motion, he could do little else. It was to those thoughts that he drifted off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The Count of Astriana drove his men hard. Each day, from just before sunrise to just about dusk they marched, allowing little time for rest or food. Even the most seasoned warriors were exhausted by the end of the day, but after a week of it, the rhythm began to kick in.

Three days behind him followed Coula and his men. If anything, the warrior drove his people even harder. He would be of little use to the Count, if he didn't show up in time to relieve his forces, or replace those lost. The Count needed him. High Gondylar needed him. His duty drove him to heights he had never dreamed he'd reach, and he dared not fail. He looked beside him. If he failed, he could never ask Eryl to marry him. He would not expect her to assent. He needed no more motivation than that.

Like the Count's forces, after a few days of hard exercise, Coula's troops grew accustomed to the pace. There was little time to train the men or motivate them, but that was hardly necessary. They all knew what was at stake.

It was hard to believe, but likely true, that the future of High Gondylar rested on Coula's broad shoulders.

\* \* \* \*

The Emperor's advisors said nothing—not that it mattered. Revealing your thoughts to the Emperor after he had already made up his mind was a good way to end up with your head on a pike. Consequently, when Asoan laid out his plans, his advisors agreed with every word.

It took the Emperor less than one week to assemble a force of fifteen thousand men, almost three thousand of them on horse. By the time the Gondylarian host returned home, assuming enough of them survived to make a difference, the capital city Gondylar would be in Dominan hands.

\* \* \* \*

Coula did not expect to meet any troops before entering the southernmost part of the Dukedom so when his scouts returned and reported an oncoming army, Coula prepared his men for the worst. He divided his men into their combat squads, and prepared them to square off to do battle. When the preparations were completed, he knelt and prayed to Sheba, a habit he had picked up from the Count. Overhead, the sun stood high in the sky, an impartial witness to the tide of events.

Nearby Eryl watched Coula, a mixture of emotions evident on her face. She would try to make the best impression she could on the warrior. Perhaps, if she displayed enough prowess, he would consider her a worthy bride.

By the time the army was upon them, they were ready for battle.

\* \* \* \*

Tanrif made regular rounds of Gondylar correcting where he could the behavior of his decoys. So much was riding on this final initiative, and so much could go wrong. As he walked through the streets, the people who recognized him drew back, but they were the minority. Most Gondylarians had never seen the Duke.

At the west gate, the one most likely to be assaulted by Domina, he was satisfied that it looked as if Gondylar had a full compliment of guards. There was little he could do now but wait. In the end, he would not be the one to decide the fate of the Dukedom. That thought weighed on him so heavily even Ulnira could not dispel his dark mood.

That night, as he lay in bed, his dreams were plagued with nightmares.

\* \* \* \*

The Dominan host was the largest enemy force in hundreds of years to set foot on Gondylarian soil. Farmers and travelers who caught sight of them hid until the columns of armed men passed. The Dominans marched as quickly as possible, not even taking the time to burn a house or loot a town. Speed was the key to their success.

At the rate they traveled, they would be at Gondylar by the time the Gondylarian army reached the country's south border.

\* \* \* \*

Larzenth had been leading his men around the Gondylarian countryside for some time. He gave no excuse for his wanderings, though even his staunchest supporters began to doubt he had any kind of plan. Still, he was the commander, and Dominan soldiers were disciplined, if nothing else.

It was only by chance that he came upon the Dominan host sent by the Emperor. The commander of that force recognized him immediately, and after a short conversation relinquished command to a man who was far more experienced in the field. Larzenth, in fact, was as much a legend in Domina as Tanrif was in High Gondylar. The speed with which the commander was willing to step down illustrated to all present his faith in and respect for Larzenth.

Larzenth studied the invasion force carefully, asking many questions of the officers and squad leaders. His luck had held. It would be he who brought High Gondylar to its knees, not another. And when that was done, he would have time to search out the Count of Astriana and finally put him to the test. Larzenth was not certain which of the goals drove him harder, but it didn't matter. With the Gondylarian army a month to the south, taking Gondylar would be no harder than slaying a penned beast for dinner.

As he rode, he smiled, looking around the countryside. It would be a fine addition to the Emperor's domain.

When the walls of Gondylar finally came into view, Larzenth called a halt. For a long time he stared at the city, unable to reconcile the powerful structure with such a poor excuse for a country. Then again, Gondylar had been built hundreds of years ago. The people who'd constructed that fifty-foot high, ten-foot thick barrier were lost to history, along with most of the Great Kingdom. High Gondylar, the only part of the Kingdom that had survived the wars, was a shadow of what she had once been.

Larzenth considered camping where they'd stopped and marching on the city the next morning, but rejected the idea immediately. It would be better to camp at the city's west gate, giving Tanrif a chance to think about surrendering—not that he had much choice. If Larzenth could procure a surrender and present the Emperor with the city intact, it would be quite an achievement.

The Dominan army reached the walls of Gondylar two hours before sunset. The guards on the wall were clearly unprepared to deal with such a large force. Most stood, gaping. When Larzenth called up to them, in heavily accented Gondylarian, it took him several tries to find the man in charge. Eventually, he grew frustrated and asked that someone fetch the Duke. This seemed to be all they needed to hear. There was a flurry of activity, and when it was done, not one guard was visible atop the great walls of Gondylar.

Larzenth sighed. How could Tanrif have possibly thought that men such as these would fool them? He sat and stared at the wall. Soon Duke Tanrif would appear, and from the exchange that followed, the future of Gondylar would be decided.

\* \* \* \*

Bone sat in the library, talking with Tanrif. He didn't bring up the campaign to the south, or the war. Bone

realized Tanrif was close to the edge and didn't want to put any more pressure on him. For all his talent, the Duke was still very young. He had little experience with leadership, and providence had thrown him in at the deep end. So far, he'd handled the situation admirably, but everyone had their breaking point.

Since the troops had left, things had been quiet in Gondylar, though each day the tension grew. When one of the guards from the west gate entered the room, Bone knew the news would not be good. The guard bowed low. For a time Tanrif said nothing. When he finally spoke, his voice was hoarse with fear.

"What news do you bring me?"

The guard shifted from foot to foot.

"There is a large Dominan army at the West Gate, your Highness. They wish to speak with you."

Tanrif didn't say a word. He rose and walked out the door. Concerned, Bone followed. The Duke walked through the palace corridors, looking more than a little lost. Bone had expected him to go to the stables, but instead he left the palace through the main entrance.

Bone didn't think it was a good idea for the Duke to be wandering the streets without a bodyguard but said nothing. In Parth's absence, Bone made the Duke's safety his responsibility. He needn't have worried. Most people still didn't recognize the Duke, and those who did loved him.

Bone remained a few paces back all the way to the west gate. There, the Duke paused before the guard tower and looked up to the sky as if praying. Then he entered the tower and climbed the staircase to the top. Bone was behind him the whole way.

Once atop the wall, Tanrif looked out at the army that had come to take his city. It was a far larger force than Bone had anticipated. The Dominans had built a number of large fires, which considering how hot it was, they didn't need. Tanrif waited for the leader of the Dominan army to address him. He didn't have long to wait.

"Duke Tanrif. We know that you are virtually defenseless. There is no need for us to destroy your city. Open the gates and your people will live."

To Bone's surprise, Tanrif smiled back at the man.

"What is your name, outlander?"

Many of the guards on the wall gasped. The term outlander was what Gondylarians called foreigners. It was considered ill mannered. Tanrif's father had once been so named, and even now, Tanrif was called the outlander Duke by some, though in his case it was a term of affection. The implication seemed lost on the Dominan.

"I am called Larzenth. I lead this army."

"Is that what you call it? Is this supposed to intimidate me?"

Bone raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Perhaps Tanrif had a death wish. If that were the case, it would not bode well for the Dukedom.

Larzenth smiled. "Come now. This is going to get you nowhere. I know where your army is, and I know that the men you have here could not clear a battlefield if it were populated with naught but sheep. It is over. The only question is, will you surrender, or will you suffer a solid defeat at the hands of the Emperor's best."



"I do not know how things are done in Domina, but I will need time to confer with my Council of Lords. If I could give you my answer on the morrow, would that be satisfactory?"

Larzenth laughed. "Very well. I will give you that much time. Throughout the night we will keep these fires burning. Each time you think you have options, you can come and despair at our numbers. I am sure that in the hours to come you will see the futility of your position."

Tanrif walked away from the wall, as if in a dream. He'd bought them some time, but to what end? Bone followed him back to the castle. He didn't speak. There was nothing to say. Tanrif had to know he had no choice but to surrender.

Later that night, Tanrif surprised Bone by returning to the wall. Bone accompanied him again. Tanrif hadn't said a word since he'd spoken to Larzenth. Now he stood atop the wall, looking out over the besieging army. Bone followed his gaze. The mass of soldiers stretched as far as the eye could see—a truly remarkable force. Tanrif stood for a long time and watched in silence.

Bone would have prayed, but there were no gods he was on speaking terms with at the moment.

\* \* \* \*

The Dominan soldier glared at the fire. He did not see why such a beacon had been necessary, nor did he understand why he needed to keep watch. It was clear there would be no attack, or it would have happened before now. Still, an order was an order, so he stared into the empty night, waiting to be relieved.

Perhaps, if he had thought there was danger, he would have been more alert. As it was, he was quite surprised when a figure rose out of the tall grass and slit his throat. When the attack came, there was no one to warn the Dominans. A strike force rose out of the grass to the south, and the Dominans, unready for battle, began to fall.

Larzenth ran to the area, trying to figure out what was going on. He did not know who the attackers were, until he saw a familiar figure standing in their midst—the Count of Astriana.

Screaming rage, he drew his blade and charged into the attack. Several times he paused his advance to dispatch an opponent. When he looked up again, the man had vanished. Again he screamed, this time in frustration. His sword swirled around him, cutting down men as if they were wheat, but the one man he wanted had vanished into the night.

Only later did he learn that soon after he ran south to deal with the assault, another large force hit them from the north. This new threat, coming as it did on the heels of the first surprise, further confused the Dominan host. Coula was among them, swinging his great sword with a proficiency none of the opposition could match. Many brave soldiers fell that night at the hands of the large Gondylarian.

The Emperor's army found itself sandwiched between two large, completely unexpected forces. With attackers on both flanks, they had trouble forming a cohesive defense. The mounted troops had no time to get to their horses. Men died in numbers too great for any bard to accurately portray. It might have gone either way, both sides equally matched, until a third force, not as large as the other two, but well rested, hit the Dominan host from the rear, trapping them against the walls of the city that they had come to conquer.

Atop the walls, Tanrif watched grimly, waiting to see which side would prevail. The large fires provided enough illumination to clearly see the tides of the battle, though it wasn't always possible to tell which side was which. Tanrif glanced at Bone, and smiled at the astonishment on the assassin's face.

The crimson-stained grass gave increasing evidence to the numbers that fell that night. Only toward the end of the battle could Tanrif pick out individuals from the melee. He could clearly make out Coula and Eryl. Then he spied the Count, fighting with a sword in each hand. No Dominan who came within range was spared. He moved like a god among men, his feet barely touching the ground. As Tanrif watched, a sinking feeling began to grow in his stomach. He knew that style. He fought that way himself. The only other person who could wield two swords with such dexterity was the Bladesman. He watched more closely until he could no longer believe any other explanation. He did not know how it had been done, but somehow, Kestryl had changed his appearance.

Obviously, Kestryl had seen the threat to High Gondylar and, knowing that Tanrif would never trust him, somehow took on the role of the Count of Astriana. The plan that had led to tonight's battle had been his idea. But what would Kestryl do after the threat had passed? Tanrif shuddered at the range of possibilities.

He turned his attention back to the battle. Larzenth, he noticed, was as proficient with a blade as anyone he had ever seen. Perhaps, if Kestryl and Larzenth came together, the Dominan commander could solve his problem for him. If only he could be sure that the Dominan could actually triumph. Spellbound he watched as the number of soldiers dwindled, leaving alive only a few of the best.

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl moved through the corpses, eyes everywhere. Twice he had seen the Dominan commander, and twice they had been pulled apart. Now, with so many dead, it was not likely to happen again. He heard the shout off to his left. Before he turned he knew what he would see.

Across the eerily illuminated landscape, strewn with corpses and covered with blood, the Dominan commander approached. Kestryl watched, preparing to fight this last climactic battle. It seemed odd to the Bladesman that after fate had delayed the match twice, it would finally relent and he would get to meet his opponent. He was exhausted from the days of marching and the night's exertion, but the threat to High Gondylar was over, and whatever came of this match made no difference. Even his anger at Tanrif seemed controllable now that the Dukedom was safe.

Then, for the third time, Kestryl was robbed of his destiny. While he watched, out of nowhere, Coula appeared, jumping before the Dominan. Larzenth took a quick swipe at the newcomer, determined that this time, he would finally face the Count of Astriana.

To his surprise, the Gondylarian dodged under his swipe and came up inside his guard, flinging him over backwards as if he were a child's toy. Larzenth rolled and came up on his feet. He advanced on his new opponent, performing a series of cuts and thrusts that would have left most men bleeding and broken.

The large warrior parried the attack, and responded with one of his own, no less devastating. Larzenth blocked but gave ground to do so. Suddenly, he felt the fatigue of the long battle.

For a time, the two circled warily, while the Count watched, clearly understanding the difference between a duel and a battle. The battle had ended, and only this contest was left. Coula attempted a few thrusts, but always found his blade deflected. Not since he fought Tanrif had he faced so worthy an opponent.

Larzenth dug in and, after faking a swipe, turned it into a thrust from the opposite side. Coula realized he'd been had too late, and the end of Larzenth's blade entered his shoulder. Coula yelled, though whether the sound was born of defiance or pain, Kestryl could not tell.

A number of survivors gathered around the spectacle, though all followed Kestryl's example and did not interfere. Again Larzenth performed the same maneuver, but from the other side. Coula, though he recognized the attack, did not do so fast enough, and the Dominan's blade cut him, this time on his sword

arm. Larzenth smiled as blood ran down his opponent's bicep, and dripped from his elbow. Coula's eyes sported a feverish gleam. Larzenth had seen that look before. It was almost over.

Still, Coula's resilience surprised him, as he fought off the shock, and charged forward performing a series of maneuvers that should have been long beyond him. Once again, Larzenth was forced to retreat.

Both men were aware that as Coula lost blood, the Dominan gained the advantage. Larzenth did not wish it said that he waited until his opponent had bled to death. Once again, he performed the maneuver that had twice before cut his foe. This time he went for the heart.

At the last minute, Coula beat the incoming blade aside and extended into a thrust. It would have been a contest to tell which of the men was more shocked as his curved blade entered Larzenth's stomach. Coula grunted as he drove his sword through the Dominan's body up to the hilt. Even as he did so, he fell to one knee.

Larzenth, feeling the end was near, made one final attack. To his credit, his blade struck true, sinking deep into the side of the larger warrior. For a moment they stayed thus, as if supported on each other's blades. They fell over as one.

A scream rose from the crowd, and Eryl ran to them, falling to her knees by Coula's side. Kestryl approached and guided her gently to her feet. Her eyes were wide with fear. He knelt beside Coula and placed his ear to the man's chest. Expectant eyes watched until he looked up and nodded.

"He lives," said Kestryl, loudly, so that all could hear. Then, he turned to Eryl, and added, "We can only pray it remains so."

Eryl looked again at the only man she knew she could ever love and in her desperation, she did pray. Around her, men moved to clean up the remains of battle.

The day was won. High Gondylar had been saved.

## Chapter Twelve—Aftermath

Tanrif watched until Coula fell, then made his way back to the palace, Bone followed, though he didn't say anything. Tanrif knew the assassin was trying to work out what had happened. That was fine by him. He needed the time to think.

He had to figure out some way to rid himself of the Count without making anyone suspicious. It wouldn't be easy. When Kestryl once again entered the city, it would be with a host of men who had followed him into combat. The Count of Astriana had saved High Gondylar.

Once inside the throne room, Bone broke the long night's silence.

"You knew they would be there. How?"

Before Tanrif could speak, a smiling Parth entered and answered the question.

"It was the Count's idea. We didn't know who the traitor was, so we brought everyone together who could have been, and fed them a tall tale. There never was a barbarian invasion. Our forces marched off south for two weeks then returned."

Parth chuckled, not noticing that Tanrif didn't share his mirth.

"There's something I don't understand," said the Duke. "The last force that appeared ... that wasn't part of the plan. Who were they?"

"I have no idea," replied Parth, not at all bothered by the event. "The important thing is we're free. Asoan will think twice before sending forces against us again."

Parth stopped talking when he noticed the expression on Tanrif's face. For an uncomfortable moment, no one said anything. Then Tanrif sighed and sat down on the throne.

"It should be over by now. Find the Count, and bring him here."

Parth bowed and left without speaking. Tanrif said nothing.

"All right," said Bone, after Parth left. "I don't have a clue. Why aren't you ecstatic?"

"The Count of Astriana is Kestryl, the ex-bladesman of High Gondylar. When we parted it was not on the best of terms."

Tanrif paused, waiting for Bone to understand the meaning of those words.

"You believe he means you ill?"

Tanrif nodded. "I don't think he will do anything immediately, but once things have stabilized, he's going to try to take me out."

Bone sighed. He liked the Count, but that wouldn't stop him from protecting his best interests.

"I think it is time to formulate a strategy," he said.

Tanrif nodded. "I couldn't agree more."

\* \* \* \*

Kestryl knelt on the blood-stained grass offering a prayer to Sheba, for the souls of those who had died and another for the well-being of the hundreds, if not thousands, who were maimed. Many who hadn't died in the fighting would die soon of infection. It would be a long time before the Battle of Gondylar had claimed its last victim.

He remained on his knees until he sensed someone watching. He was most surprised to find Pralit standing before him.

"I thought the Veloracht had voted not to support our troops."

"It did."

"But you're here."

"Yes, the Veloracht speaks with one voice, but sometimes that voice changes."

Kestryl bowed his head. "May Sheba guide your soul, Grithlen."

"I am not certain Sheba has anything to do with the souls of Ethrellen, but I'm sure he would have appreciated the sentiment."

"What happened?"

"Not long after you left, Grithlen took ill. I was with him when he crossed the great divide. We spoke about ... things. I told him I would honor his wishes in this matter. He told me the wishes of the dead should not influence the living. That the only way I could respect him was to follow my conscience."

"I appreciate what you have done."

"Make no mistake, hawk-soul. I did not do this for you, or for High Gondylar. I did this for the freedom and security of my people."

"I understand."

"I will go now. We will speak more when you are rested."

"Be well, Pralit. I'll see you in Gondylar."

"Yes, you will."

\* \* \* \*

The victory feast was one that would not soon be forgotten. Even as the blood dried on the grass around the west gate of Gondylar, a hundred men and women, consisting of squad leaders, Lords and their ladies, Tanrif and his personal staff celebrated. For once, soldiers and Lords dined together at the same table, and not a single Lord objected.

There was only one topic of conversation and it lasted for many hours. Most of the war stories told that night ended with the Dominans fleeing like rabbits. Eryl was the center of much attention, the only female soldier most of them had ever seen.

"You should have seen the expression on Coula's face," she was saying, face red from too much drink. "He thought we were about to engage a Dominan force. He almost had a coronary when he found out it was the Count's men coming back."

She laughed so hard she started to choke. The few who knew her best, understood and did not join in.

Since the battle, Coula had not regained consciousness, though Eryl stubbornly insisted that he would. That's why she drank too much, and laughed too loud. She would continue to drink until she passed out, for the servants walked about refilling goblets as soon as they were empty.

The Count also told his tale, though there was little humor in his version. The last battle between Coula and Larzenth held each person breathless. Kestryl had no doubt many songs would be written about it, and that with each telling Coula's prowess would increase, but he couldn't deny the warrior deserved it.

Kestryl had visited Coula earlier in the day, but the man showed no sign of reviving—a bitter end to sweet victory. Then there was the situation with Tanrif. He had told Dauber Uaks that he would help the Duke until High Gondylar was out of danger, but in truth, now that Tanrif was beginning to pull things together, what could he do? Taking out Tanrif at this point would probably be as detrimental as before the battle. Yet he only had to think of Cyanne, and the old rage returned as if he had just learned of the betrayal yesterday. He took another pull of ale from his goblet. He pushed the thought from his mind. Tomorrow would be time enough to decide what he would do.

Se-gen was there also, but not as a servant. She sat at the table beside Parth, laughing and sighing with the others, as she listened to the tales of war. If it bothered her that at one time she had been aiding the enemy, she did not show it.

Ulnira sat at Tanrif's left, their relationship no longer a secret. Most of the Lords thought the relationship was part of some brilliant strategic move, either on the part of the Duke, or Lord Valere, but in truth Tanrif liked her. Frequently during the celebration, he would turn and whisper something in her ear, and she would throw her head back and laugh. Most who observed those exchanges did not think it would be long before the Duke announced their betrothal. Many of the Lords, particularly those with eligible daughters, made disparaging remarks about the girl's lineage or her suitability to such a role, but those around them, especially those without eligible daughters, laughed all the harder and turned their attentions back to the festivities.

Bone sat at Ulnira's left. If he was angry that the woman usurped his usual position, he did not show it. However, unlike the others, he wasn't paying attention to the stories. He had heard most of them, anyway. He was busy examining the Lords, trying to figure out which of them was the traitor. That it was one of the Lords, he had no doubt, in spite of Teryl's opinion. He was missing a vital piece of information. Otherwise, there was no reason for any Lord to betray Tanrif.

Parth sat on Tanrif's right, and it was only by chance that he mentioned the House of Saren. At the sound of that name, Bone sat bolt upright. It had been there all along. Who was the Lord of the House of Saren? He scanned the Lords until his eyes settled on Dareth. He reached past Ulnira to tap Tanrif.

The Duke, eyes bleary from both sleeplessness and alcohol, looked at him.

"We need to talk," said Bone.

"Don't tell me we have a problem. I'm relaxing for the first time in months. Tell me this is something that can wait."

"Yes, Highness. It can wait"

"Good. Have some more wine."

Tanrif turned away and didn't look in Bone's direction again.

During the course of the celebration, Bone would occasionally look over at Dareth, and on more than

one of those occasions he found the man glaring in his direction, though he looked away whenever Bone sought him out. Bone had found the traitor.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, Bone sought Tanrif in his chambers. The Duke was still asleep when he pounded on the door, but he kept pounding until there was an answer. When Tanrif, red-eyed, finally came to the door, he flashed a scathing look to the two guards standing at either side. One of them shrugged, the other looked more uncomfortable, but neither had tried to stop Bone, given his reputation and the look of intensity on his face. It was that look that convinced Tanrif to allow the trespass and open the door. Bone walked in and closed it quickly.

"I know who the traitor is."

Tanrif looked at him, waiting for an explanation. He did not attempt to disguise his exhaustion. He had been up late, and Ulnira had kept him up later still.

"It is Dareth of the House of Saren."

Tanrif turned the idea over. "Why? What reason would he have for betraying High Gondylar?"

Bone looked uncomfortable. "His vendetta was against you, not High Gondylar, though I am afraid it is my doing."

Tanrif said nothing.

"Shortly before we met, I was working freelance, and business had been good. The last job I did was to take out the Lord of the House of Saren. Traydon was a recluse. He saw no one. He barely ever emerged from his room. I infiltrated the house as a servant and worked there long enough to be trusted to bring the Lord his meal. He ate a blade for lunch that day. No doubt his son recognized me and thought I must have been working for you."

Tanrif sat down heavily on a chair.

"A misunderstanding. A hell-sent misunderstanding." He looked at Bone. "Not a word of this to anyone, you understand. This could be a stroke of fortune."

Confused, Bone nodded.

"Where is he now?"

"He left the palace last night. He must have realized I was on to him."

"Prepare a couple of horses. We will ride to the House of Saren."

Bone bowed low. "By your command."

He left the room, relieved Tanrif had not blamed him for not thinking of it sooner.

\* \* \* \*

Four days later, Dareth sat in the study of the manor house, angry and bitter. He had betrayed his country, and still Tanrif sat on the throne. If only he hadn't been drinking last night, Bone would have never caught him staring. His secret was out, and it would not be long before the Duke arrived. He opened his hand and looked at the bottle before him. His father had shown it to him once and told him of the lethal nature of its contents. He opened it and spilled a handful of rough pills onto his palm. They

didn't look like much. Brownish, roughly oval, they resembled a medicine his grandmother used to make. One swallow and the pain would be over.

He didn't know how long it would take to die. He hoped it would be soon. Perhaps, if he were lucky, he would be gone before Tanrif arrived to remind him of what a failure he was. No matter what, his exposure would certainly cost him his land and his life. Why wait for others to take it when he could do so himself, a good deal less painfully? With that thought, he swallowed the pills.

He could almost feel them sitting in his stomach. He knew it was his imagination, but it didn't matter. He could feel himself dying a little at a time. Not that he deserved better. He had betrayed his country.

The sound of hooves seemed odd, coming through the haze of his emotional state, but he knew who it would be. He would at least confront Tanrif before he joined his father. The thought gave him no comfort. Lord Traydon would not approve of the way he had handled things.

He heard someone enter the house, probably Tanrif and Bone. They threw open doors as they went. For a moment, he was confused by their easy entrance until he remembered sending away the servants in a fit of depression. Bone knew the house; it would not be long before they found him. He willed the pills to work faster. It would be so much easier if he were dead when they arrived. Clumsily, he pulled a chair to the middle of the room and sat in it, staring at the door. The sounds from the hallway seemed distorted.

After a period of time he couldn't guess, the door opened and Bone entered.

"In here, Highness."

The sound of boots running echoed strangely in his mind. Funny, he had never heard that echo before.

Tanrif strode into the room, fire in his eyes. "I did not order your father's execution, Dareth."

Dareth would have stood but hadn't the strength. Think. He had to be lying.

"Bone only started working with me after that. Your father's execution was paid for by Jeren. He hired Bone to murder your father. Bone was just doing his job."

A look of horror spread over Dareth's face. He had not only betrayed his country, he had done so in error.

"As such, I do not believe I can blame you for your actions. I have decided to give you a full pardon. No one else need know."

Dareth tried to stand but fell to one knee instead. Tanrif thought he was kneeling in appreciation until he keeled over. Bone and Tanrif moved forward together, so that both could hear Dareth's last words.

"I am sorry. I have taken gorathweed. It is no less than I deserve. Good-bye, M'lord."

Though he didn't die immediately, he spoke no more.

Bone and Tanrif waited until Lord Dareth breathed no more and left him there. They didn't speak much on the four-day ride back to Gondylar.

\* \* \* \*

Parth moved down the corridor toward the kitchen. Bothering Thelanna had been a regular habit that he was going to resume. He enjoyed it too much not to. When he reached the kitchen, the elderly mistress was yelling at someone. Many of the servants thought her cruel, but Parth knew better. Whatever was



prepared in the kitchens was a reflection on her ability. When a noble was served and the food was not up to his expectations, it was Thelanna who took the blame, when in truth it was probably not her fault. Still, she was responsible; hence the sternness with which she ran her domain.

When Parth entered she walked to him, smiling over tired eyes.

"You didn't have to go and steal my Se-gen. She was one of the best I had. Not that I didn't know it was coming."

Parth looked surprised. "How did you know it was coming?"

Certainly he had done nothing to call attention to their relationship, and he was certain Se-gen would never have told.

"Come on, Bladesman. I am no fool. I was aware of the relationship even before you sent for her. I would think that after sending a servant to fetch her, you would expect everyone to know. Servants live for gossip, you know."

Parth looked even more surprised. "I never sent for her. We only met late at night, in my rooms. Occasionally, I visited the market with her, but that was it."

Thelanna smiled. "You're getting old, Bladesman. What about the day that you sent Orwyn for her?"

She looked at Parth's face for sign of remembrance, but it never arrived. What she saw instead was puzzlement, followed by understanding and resolve.

"When was that?" he asked. "It seems to have slipped my mind."

"A couple of days before they found him dead," replied Thelanna.

Parth thanked her and left the kitchen. Se-gen had some questions to answer.

\* \* \* \*

Se-gen was alone in his rooms when he caught up with her. She started to approach then saw the expression on his face. She sat down and stared submissively up at him.

God, but she's good at that.

By sitting, she had made herself look smaller and more vulnerable. She gazed at him with those large eyes that were ready to tear at a moment's notice. This time he wouldn't allow himself to be manipulated.

"You want to tell me about it?"

His voice was hard, and she knew that it would be difficult to talk her way out of wherever it was that she found herself.

"About what?" she asked, cautiously.

"The day that Orwyn came to the kitchen and summoned you. What happened?"

Se-gen started to cry. "You're not going to report me, are you? I had to kill him. He was going to kill me."

Parth grabbed her and pulled her to a standing position.

"Stop it! Tell me. From the beginning."

Se-gen fought for composure. If it were an act, she was certainly good at it.

"Well, you know, I worked in the kitchens, which is where Orwyn spent most of his time. I didn't believe he was the fool he pretended to be, but I didn't think anything of it. It wasn't my business.

"I knew about his excursions at night, but since it was the guard who let him out, I thought he might be working for you or Bone. I never thought he was a spy. It wasn't until the guard was killed that I realized the truth, but I was too scared to say anything. I thought he would find out and kill me. Somehow, he found out anyway.

"After I heard about Captain Andres, I knew I could wait no longer. I was going to tell you, I swear it. When he came and summoned me into your presence, I thought I would have the opportunity, but he took me to that store room and started to pick the lock. I knew then he was on to me."

She paused to catch her breath. Parth thought she might cry again, but she fought it off.

"While he worked on the lock, I managed to grab hold of his knife, and somehow, managed to kill him; I still don't know how. After that, I hid the body in the room, and fled back to the kitchen, pretending I had actually seen you. I was scared, Parth. I thought that they would hang me for murder or throw me in a dungeon."

Parth smiled, gently. "You know I would never allow that."

Se-gen shook her head. "Would you have believed me, if I told you that I wasn't involved with the man? Later, I thought if the body was discovered, the search would be called off and I would be safe. I didn't want to kill him. I was so scared of what you'd do to me when you found out."

She burst into tears again, and Parth embraced her.

"It's okay. We can keep this our little secret."

He continued to hold her and stroke her hair until she stopped crying. Then, she raised her lips to his, and they kissed. She moved against him urgently, and all thoughts of her transgression were forgotten.

After all, she really hadn't done anything wrong.

\* \* \* \*

After he'd returned from the House of Saren, Tanrif ordered a day of prayer for the souls of those departed. It was a solemn occasion, during which little was said or done at the palace.

At sunset, after a full day of reflection, Tanrif and his party, including Bone, the Count of Astriana and several guards, walked from the palace to the Temple of Sheba, not only to pray for the dead, but to thank the Goddess for victory.

The temple was large and beautiful, surrounded by carved stone wolf heads that watched the night for enemies. Tanrif entered first and checked his sword, followed by the Count, then Bone. Each of the six guards checked their weapons as they entered.

Pythiana, the High Priestess, led the service. Since most of the prayers were in ancient Gondylarian, Tanrif couldn't understand them. He looked around at the faces of the others. Introspective faces. Sad faces. Soon, it would be over, and life at the palace could return to normal.

At the end of the ceremony, they were asked to rise to receive Pythiana's blessing. Tanrif stood. The High Priestess moved toward him, the slightest of smiles on her ageless face. In one swift movement, he lifted his cloak and pulled a short sword from beneath it. At this signal, the palace guards did the same. Bone was the last to join them.

Kestryl looked around him. "So, it is to be like this, is it?"

Pythiana drew herself up to her full height. "What outrage is this? This is a house of worship. Weapons may not be brought here."

Tanrif raised a hand as if that might mollify her.

"Your holiness, I know this is not allowed, but sometimes, the good of the nation must come first. And I am the good of the nation."

With one quick movement, he ran Pythiana through. He turned his attention to the Count.

"A pity. You should never have come here. You should never have come to Gondylar at all."

"I should have killed you when I had the chance. This is not over. Sheba will never forgive what you did here today."

Tanrif clucked his tongue. "What I did here? What you did here. Bone, you saw him go insane and kill the priestess. Just imagine, the traitor has been right under our noses all along." Tanrif produced a set of shackles from beneath his cloak. He tossed it to one of the guards.

"Confine him."

Kestryl offered no resistance while a guard placed the metal cuffs around his wrists, and a similar pair around his ankles. The chains that connected those cuffs would sufficiently restrict his movement to make escape impossible. Still, attempting to fight against such odds would have been pointless. Even he could not take eight armed men without a weapon. Certainly not if one of them he had trained himself.

"Much better," said Tanrif, when the guard stepped back. "Now, I could execute you, but I'm not going to. Partly to show how magnanimous I am, but mostly so that you can contemplate for the rest of your miserable life, what it is you did wrong. I am going to lock you in the deepest darkest cell the palace has to offer. There, consigned to darkness, you can waste away the remainder of your meaningless life, while I rule High Gondylar as I was destined to." He paused and walked toward the Count, stopping just a foot before him. "By the way, Cyanne wasn't even that good."

With a snarl, Kestryl leapt forward, ignoring the shackles that confined him. Tanrif stepped back, and the Bladesman crashed to the hard stone floor. Tanrif nodded, and the beating began. Bone joined the Duke, while the guards repeatedly hit the Count with their fists and the flats of their blades. The beating continued long after he had lost consciousness.

"Take him," said Tanrif.

He walked from the temple, Bone beside him, followed by a group of soldiers, holding between them the last of the threats against him. Tanrif smiled in the failing light.

It was good to be Duke in High Gondylar.

## **Epilogue—What Comes After**

The day after the Count of Astriana was locked in the dungeons of Gondylar, Coula came out of his long unconsciousness. Eryl had not given up hope and so was present when it happened.

Coula was not told about the Count until he was much better. When he finally heard about his incarceration, he grieved much but could not deny that a man who killed a priestess of Sheba deserved no less.

Coula grew stronger by the day, but it was many weeks before he was up and around. Even then, he didn't start practicing with his blade right away. Eryl would not hear of it.

The two were married later that year, and they moved out of Gondylar, back to the city Athlana, which was in the process of being rebuilt. Tanrif gave them control of the new city and funneled some extra gold toward its construction. The people of New Athlana received the gift with much gratitude, but Tanrif had other motivations for his actions. It was strategically and economically important for him to rebuild the port. If New Athlana had more traffic, he could tax them more, and he needed to have eyes toward the sea if Domina invaded again. In all, the investment was worth it.

Parth never believed the story about the Count's treachery, but there was nothing he could do about it. At first, he visited Kestryl in the dungeons, sneaking him food or distractions, but on each trip Kestryl seemed less and less sane. Parth went more infrequently as time went on until he stopped going altogether. He could no longer bear to look at the man who'd saved them all. He felt guilty but was a realist. Perhaps trying to keep Kestryl sane was, in its own way, as cruel as his imprisonment.

Parth remained faithful to Se-gen, and she continued to live in his rooms. No one, not even Parth ever suspected that she had murdered Pira and Captain Andres.

Bone expanded his intelligence network and, with the help of Tanrif and Parth, managed to repair what had been wrong with Gondylar's defenses before beginning to work on the defenses of the Dukedom as a whole. When he was done, it would be much harder, if not impossible, for Domina to take High Gondylar. He even strengthened the defenses of the south, lest the barbarians get any ideas, but it turned out to be unnecessary. The barbarian clans couldn't stay at peace with each other long enough to unite.

Thulrak returned to Domina and was executed for failure. His family's reputation and status fell after that, and many generations would pass before they became powerful again. Asoan stepped down in favor of his son Onar, and retired to a castle in the countryside. He lived many long years, but never again raised a hand against High Gondylar.

Across The Mistress, life in the Shop of Demendil continued. Lylea raised three children now, and was happy that Cyanne's had been a girl. She didn't think that she could take another boy. Cyanne was amazing, the smartest child Lylea had ever seen. She and Agar continued to live and love together, and the Shop of Demendil maintained its reputation.

Only twice a year did she become depressed—each fall, when she lit a candle in memory of Demendil, and each spring when she did so for Cyanne.

She never did find out what had happened to the Bladesman, though she often wondered. But months turned to years and eventually all thought of Gondylarian politics were forgotten.

Deep under the palace at Gondylar, Kestryl paced his cell. It was twelve steps by nine. He had followed

the route so many times, he was able to walk it with his eyes closed. He slept on the floor, shunning the bed of straw in one corner of the room, and relieved himself in a small hole made for that purpose.

In the dark, he did not know how much time had passed. The only things that sustained him were his rage against Tanrif and his anger at himself. How could he have been taken so easily? Why had he listened to Dauber Uaks and not killed Tanrif when he had the chance? How could this have happened to him?

In the beginning, Parth used to visit him, but he hadn't come in a long time, and there was nothing to distract him from his thoughts. Sometimes, he would have long conversations with himself, which he knew was a sign of insanity, but he didn't care. Who would mind if he lost his sanity down here? Sometimes he thought he'd be better off dead, but if he were, he would never get a chance to exact revenge on Tanrif.

His revenge depended on his condition. At first, he exercised often, but then the fevers started, probably caused by drinking dirty water. During the months or years of his imprisonment, he became sick often, though after each bout with illness, he always resumed exercising. Eventually, after a period of time he couldn't measure, the fevers came less frequently, and one day, perhaps years later, he no longer suffered from them.

He tried to imagine what he must have looked like. Did his new body show the signs of wear common to other prisoners? Dauber had told him he wouldn't grow a beard. Did that mean his appearance was unchangeable? He fingered the indentation of the mark left by Sheba's teeth. That, at least, would remain until his sins were purged. Pythiana had told him so.

The thought brought with it rage and grief, his sole companions in the darkness. Tanrif had raped Cyanne then killed Pythiana. What he'd done to the Bladesman didn't matter at all, but his other crimes demanded vengeance. A vengeance it seemed Kestryl would never taste.

Each day blended into the next until he no longer remembered what the outside world looked like. He did not want to die without seeing the sun once more, but he didn't think he had a choice. This is where his life would end, later if not sooner.

As time passed, he thought about suicide more and more often, though he couldn't bring himself to do it. Only if he somehow learned that Tanrif had died would he be able to take his meaningless life. Until then, he would live and dream.

And far above him, in the palace, life went on.

*Here ends Book Two of the Chronicles of High Gondylar. The story concludes with Iorana's Ransom.*

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