

A Leaf in the Wind

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The Chronicles of High Gondylar Book One: A Leaf in the Wind

For my father who introduced me to science fiction

For Roger Zelazny who brought me to Amber

And to Ellen, for the thesaurus and the encouragement

Acknowledgments

A Leaf in the Wind was born of a role-playing game. More than two decades ago, I played a character named Nagennif, who later became Tanrif. RPGs don't often make great books, at least not without serious embellishment. A Leaf in the Wind has been altered, edited, altered again and edited again, before I finally rewrote it. Eight rewrites later brought it to where it is today. However, I would be remiss if I didn't mention one man, without which, the first novel of this trilogy could not exist. Harry, wherever you are, thanks for everything.

Prologue - The Grim Decision

"Mommy, why do I have no friends?" asked Cyanne.

Amalga sighed. This was not the first time she had heard the question. "You have friends. Kestryl is your friend. Penthor is your friend."

The child shook her head, black hair falling into her eyes. "Not *those* kind of friends. I mean other children. Don't they like me?"

"I'm certain they would, if they were allowed to meet you, but that's just not possible." Amalga stopped speaking before she went too far. Indeed, how much could a five year old understand?

"Why aren't they?" persisted the child.

"Because there are people who might want to hurt you and that cannot be allowed." "Why would people want to hurt me?"

Cyanne stopped and looked at her mother, violet eyes wide.

Because people are fools. Because you are not entirely of human descent and the Gondylarian nobility hates you for it. Because no one wants to see an Ethrell half-breed on the throne.

"There are a lot of people in this world that are bad. They like to see other people hurt."

"Why?"

"I wish I knew."

Amalga held out her hand and Cyanne took it. They continued down the palace corridor toward the courtyard.

"When I grow up, I hope I won't be bad." Cyanne's expression was so grave, the Duchess had to stifle a smile.

"I'm sure you won't be."

"How do you know?"

"You're too special," said the Duchess.

"Are we going to the gardens?"

"Why do you always ask so many questions?"

Cyanne giggled. "Because I'm a child and that's my job. That's what father says."

"Oh does he?"

"Mmm-hmm. Are we going to the gardens?"

"Yes."

"Good. That's my favorite place in the whole wide world."

Cyanne pulled her hand from her mother's and began to skip ahead. Amalga watched, delighting in her daughter's happiness. If only she could be like this always.

Enjoy it now, my child. Even under the best circumstances the life of the Gondylarian heir is not an easy one. How much harder will it be for you?

Not for the first time, Amalga considered the Gondylarian reaction to Ethrellen. That both shared a common ancestry was well known among educated people of both races, evidenced by the fact they could interbreed. In fact, were it not for her violet eyes, Cyanne would be indistinguishable from a human.

Yet the Gondylarians hated Cyanne even more, if possible, than they hated their own Duchess. Could it be by looking human, Cyanne proved Ethrellen were more closely related to them than most Gondylarians would like to admit?

Cyanne's voice, raised in song, brought Amalga back to the moment. Ahead, an arch of sunlight marked the courtyard entrance. She moved more quickly, well aware Cyanne didn't need much time to work herself into mischief. She paused momentarily beneath the arch, eyeing the garden paths for some sign of the girl.

She was still looking when a man dressed as a priest emerged from behind a wide-boled tree. Cyanne chose that moment to stand. She'd been kneeling behind a rose bush. Even from where she stood, Amalga could see madness in the stranger's eyes. She ran forward, but knew she was too far to interfere. "Cyanne! Run!"

Cyanne looked up, then around. She started toward her mother, but there was no way she could outrun an adult. Sunlight glinted off the dagger in the man's right hand. Amalga screamed. Cyanne stumbled, then fell, causing the first swipe to pass over her. Amalga still wasn't close enough to stop him, but she could clearly make out his words.

"Devil-Child!"

The assassin dove. Amalga reached him only a moment too late. She grabbed his tunic and attempted to pull him up. Only then did she notice the two knives protruding from the man's back.

She dragged him to the side, bent to help Cyanne up and held her until the girl's sobbing began to ease. From nowhere, the Bladesman appeared and moved between the body of the would-be assassin and the royal family. He advanced, kicked the dagger away from the man and checked to make certain he was dead. Only then did he turn to the Duchess.

He bowed briefly. "M'lady, are either of you hurt?"

"Cyanne skinned her knees, an injury hardly worthy of comment."

The Bladesman looked to the sky. "Praise to Sheba. We were lucky."

"Too lucky. How is it you happened to be in a position to come to our aid?"

"I endeavor to always be in that position."

"You've been told before your presence would not be required in the courtyard."

"The safety of the royal family is my responsibility. You didn't want me to interfere with your time with Cyanne. That is understandable. A mother and daughter should have time alone. Still, it wouldn't do to leave you unguarded. I've been keeping watch from a distance. If this hadn't happened, you'd never have known I was there."

"You do this every day?"

"If I am unavailable, I arrange for one of the guards to replace me."

"I see."

At first, Kestryl had accompanied them on their daily stroll, but as Cyanne got older, Amalga had insisted on private time. She'd assured Kestryl the courtyard was safe, in spite of his protests. When it became clear she would not change her mind, the Bladesman had backed down and never brought up the subject again. Were it not for his devotion, her selfishness might have cost Cyanne her life.

"You have done well, my friend. I was wrong to have questioned your judgment."

The Bladesman bowed his head. "You are the Duchess. I have disobeyed your command and will accept whatever penance you demand."

"You just saved my daughter's life. I do not require penance."

"As you wish."

Amalga sighed, exasperated. The man was insufferable. She took Cyanne's hand and guided her from the garden. She would later learn Kestryl had been unable to identify the mad priest. The news did not surprise her.

She was certain of only one thing. This would not be the last attempt on her daughter's life.

The throne room was all but empty. Usually there were more than a dozen people present, but on this bleak night there were only three; the Bladesman, Amalga and Dathan, the Duke of High Gondylar. Amalga and her husband sat upon twin thrones of gray stone. Kestryl knelt before them.

The throne room had never been a festive place, all gray stone and battle tapestries, but that night it contained an unnamed tension, in no way lessened by the silence. Finally, the Duke deigned to speak.

"We have given the matter much thought, Bladesman, and have come to a decision. The palace is too dangerous a place for our daughter. We were lucky today, but luck has a way of turning. Cyanne cannot stay here. Her welfare is of the utmost importance to us. We are placing her into your custody."

"Take her far from here, Bladesman. Find a place where Ethrellen are treated as equals. A place where she can live and grow old."

The Bladesman raised his head. "Then how will she learn the ways of Gondylarian nobility?"

The Duke raised an eyebrow, but it was Amalga who answered. "She is never to return. Penthor is heir to the throne of High Gondylar."

The Bladesman was stunned. Never had an heir been selected in such a manner. The nobility would not stand for it.

"You don't need to do this. We can increase palace security. We can watch Cyanne more closely. We can take extra steps to protect her. She is the heir."

Amalga shook her head. "No, my friend, she is heir no longer. I will not have my daughter growing up as a prisoner, unable to enjoy life. And as much as you may believe you can protect her, I say it is impossible. You know how Gondylarians feel about her mixed ancestry. Can you guarantee me the total loyalty of every servant in the palace? Every guard? Can you say with authority every soul in this castle is completely immune to outside corruption?"

She paused, waiting for her words to penetrate, giving him time to understand. When he didn't reply, she continued.

"I thought not."

Dathan leaned forward. "This was not an easily reached decision, I can assure you. I don't know we will ever be able to live with our decision any better than we can tonight, but there is no other way. Even if you could protect her, when she gained the throne, what Gondylarian noble would not strike out at her? How long would it be before a crossbow bolt, fired from one of the towers or a window, found its mark? I'm sorry Kestryl. You'll never know how sorry I am, but there is nothing for it, but to act accordingly and bear the pain gracefully. The knowledge I am doing the right thing for the blood of my blood must suffice."

The Bladesman stood rigidly, every nerve in his body rebelling against the grim decision. Yet the Duke and Duchess were correct. Cyanne could have no life here. He closed his mind to the pain, as he knew he must. Dathan and Amalga would have to suffer for him.

"I will not fail you."

Dathan nodded, satisfied. "You are to leave tonight. Take whatever you need, but bring my daughter to safety. I don't care how far you have to travel or where your journey takes you. Cyanne must be safe."

The Bladesman raised his head and regarded the Duke. He did not want to leave High Gondylar for any length of time, but honor gave him no alternative. The Duke and Duchess were sending their only child away, never to see her again. Dathan hid the pain admirably, but the Bladesman knew him well enough to see it. Amalga's anguish was more visible.

"Your will be done. I shall not return until Cyanne is safe from harm. You have my word."

If Dathan had a response, he never got the chance to speak it. The door to the throne room opened. Cyanne walked in first, followed a moment later by Penthor. She ran forward.

"Hi, Kestryl. Penthor says you're taking me on a trip. I don't go on many trips."

Kestryl looked back toward the throne. Amalga turned her head, unable to look at her daughter. Dathan stood and walked down the steps to stand beside her.

"I want you to listen to Kestryl. You're to be on your best behavior."

Cyanne nodded solemnly. "Why aren't you coming? Or Mommy?"

"Because, silly girl, we have a country to run. You know how hard your mother and I work, don't you?"

"Uh-huh. Penthor says that some people work too hard and some people don't work hard enough."

"That's true. But it's getting late and you have to go."

Amalga rose slowly and joined the four as they made their way across the chamber. No one spoke until they stood in a cluster by the door. Only Cyanne seemed oblivious to the mood.

Finally, Dathan broke the uncomfortable silence. "It is time."

He knelt and hugged his daughter. "Good-bye, Cyanne. I love you."

He embraced her briefly and pulled away, turning his head so she wouldn't see his tears.

Amalga stepped closer and hugged her. "You take good care of Uncle Kestryl. You know how foolish men can be."

She clasped the girl tightly, until Dathan placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. Then she took a step backward and looked upon her daughter for the last time.

"I love you, my little Duchess."

"I love you too, Mommy. I'll see you soon, okay?"

Amalga, not daring to speak, nodded.

The Bladesman took her hand and led the girl from the throne room. Cyanne waved before the pair turned down the corridor leading to the servant's entrance.

Penthor waited until she was out of sight before easing the doors closed. He didn't look at the Duke and Duchess. He couldn't bear to see the pain in their eyes. Both had had to make many hard decisions during the course of their lives, but none could compare with this. What made matters worse; neither would ever know if they had made the right choice.

Dathan turned to the new heir. "Sound the Horn of Tenithior."

Penthor was surprised. "But that's only for holidays."

"Or when someone dies," corrected the Duke. "Sound the Horn, then make the announcement. Cyanne is dead. Let us give no one reason to suspect otherwise."

Penthor walked to the far wall of the throne room and removed the ancient instrument from the brackets that held it in place. Dathan and Amalga returned to their thrones, each battling their own demons. Neither reacted to the mellow sound borne into the night, filling the chamber with its own brand of despair. Penthor sounded the instrument three times, as was the custom, then returned it to its resting place.

He departed, leaving the rulers of High Gondylar alone with their sorrow.

Chapter One - The Storm

It was as perfect a day as Kestryl could remember. A delightful breeze tempered the ever-present Gondylarian heat. Not a single cloud marred the sky, and Duke Dathan, accompanied by Amalga, was on his way to mend a feud with one of his greatest detractors.

The message had come earlier in the week and the Duke had responded immediately. He would be honored to travel to the House of Therak and meet with its Lord. He agreed with all his heart the time to make peace had long since passed and eagerly awaited the chance to set things right.

The thought of treachery was far from the Bladesman's mind. The house of Therak was respectable and Lord Uryth, a man of his word. With safe passage guaranteed and the chance to strengthen his already powerful position, Dathan was all but ecstatic. Amalga, sensing his mood, was likewise happy. Only Kestryl was unaffected by the combination of climate and tidings.

Not that Kestryl wasn't pleased to see the royal couple happy. In the fifteen years since Cyanne's departure, he had not seen it often enough. Even Amalga's naturally bright spirit had never fully

recovered. Also, the problems of the Gondylarian throne were myriad and continual. In the intervening years, there had been little enough to celebrate. Today was different.

Dathan and Amalga talked and laughed, giving no thought to possible peril, nor should they have to. Keeping the royal family safe was the Bladesman's responsibility. While the Duke and Duchess rode ahead, Kestryl held back, constantly scanning the hills, as if at any moment an attack would present itself. It was not that he suspected foul play, but rather he had no expectations at all. Thus he was the first to notice the change.

It was hard to pinpoint exactly when it began. It was as if the air itself had grown heavier, like an autumn night before a storm. Only moments after the thought reached his consciousness, the first clouds appeared. Before it registered something inexplicable was occurring, the clouds, black with thunder, pushed toward them. By the time Dathan saw it and turned to comment, the first raindrops were already falling.

The wind began to keen, an eerie sound on a morning that was suddenly very different. Thunder, sudden as the rest of the change, filled the sky and the volume of the wind increased.

"Turn back!" shouted the Bladesman. He wasn't certain they could hear him. Briefly he looked for the outriders, the hidden guards he'd brought along to protect the royal family. There were six in all, though at the moment he could only see two of them. Already aware of the disturbance, they had spread out, searching the surrounding countryside for possible threats. He had no idea where the others might be.

Kestryl turned his attention to Amalga. She was trying to talk to Dathan and even though they were separated by only a span of feet, the Duke could not hear her. She leaned forward in the specially made Ethrellen saddle. Her feet, which she used as hands, gripped the crossbar, while she tried to use her upper hands to control her mount. Kestryl galloped forward and took the reins from her, certain Dathan was capable of riding in these conditions.

Thunder again, louder than before, then the sky split open. A finger of lightning, fast and furious, parted the ground to their left.

Kestryl turned toward Gondylar, leading Amalga's horse. A quick glance verified Dathan was already moving in that direction.

Wind and rain obscured vision. Lightning struck too close and too often. The ride seemed to last forever until, vague in the distance, almost invisible through the wall of water, Gondylar came into view.

Like a giant mirage it loomed, the only stillness in a turbulent landscape. Within the boundaries of those great walls lay the promise of safety. The storm, as if sensing the game was almost lost, redoubled its efforts in a sudden fury of lightning. Thunder punctuated each golden streak with such strength, the hills shook from the force. Undaunted, the three riders, wet, weary and fearful, continued onward.

It almost seemed possible they would make it. The very sight of their destination filled them with hope, until Dathan's stallion went down, sending a spray of mud into the air. Kestryl looked back just in time to see the Duke, like the trained warrior he was, roll from under his falling steed. A moment later, he was vertical again, though the stallion did not fare as well. Dathan called out, his voice only barely audible above the howling wind and rain.

"Bladesman, my horse's leg is broken. Get the Duchess to safety. I'll follow on foot."

As if those words were a burden shed, he relaxed his stance. Dathan, the warrior Duke--even through a storm of this magnitude, you could sense his power. It seemed even the gods could not bear to strike him

down...for a moment. Then lightning struck, but there was no thunder.

Amalga, after a second of silent shock, threw back her head and screamed a curse to the heavens, which was all but lost above the din of the storm. Kestryl turned his mount and trotted forward, but there was nothing to be done. Already the ashes that had been the Duke were scattering in the wind.

He turned to look at Amalga who, horror stricken, stared at the place where her husband had stood. Auburn hair, darker from the wet, pushed across her face by the gale, all but blinding her. The rain came down with a force that might have knocked her from her saddle, if she hadn't been able to hold on with both feet and hands.

Kestryl rode forward, again grabbing her reins. This time she stopped him. Dumbly she stared at the ground as if by waiting, Dathan might again be there. Kestryl leaned toward her, his voice hoarse with emotion.

"My Lady. We must ride. It is not safe here."

She opened her mouth as if to protest, but instead nodded and allowed him to take her reins. As her mount came around, she turned in her saddle, continuing to stare at the place where Dathan last stood until it was lost to the distance.

"Open the gates! Open the blasted gates!"

Guards moved to do the Bladesman's bidding. He still held the reins of the Duchess' horse within a clenched fist.

Amalga slumped in the saddle as if she had no life left in her. He dismounted and walked to her horse. She dropped to the ground, then stood motionless until he led her off. The portcullis seemed to move in slow motion. Already the storm was subsiding. He waited until the great gate was just high enough for the Duchess to enter without bending, then ducked under it and led her inside.

Penthor was already hurrying across the entrance hallway to meet them. "What happened? Where's Dathan?"

Kestryl shook his head slowly.

"In the name of Mitra, man, where's the Duke?"

It was Amalga who answered. "Where he belongs...with the gods. With the spirits of the great Dukes who ruled before him."

Penthor knew then the truth of things, but could not accept it. "How? How did it happen?"

"He was taken by the storm," said Kestryl. "Magical assassination."

Penthor shook his head. "But who...?"

"I don't know. But I'm going to find out and blood will flow."

Penthor walked to Amalga and put his arm around her. "Come, M'lady. Let us get you to your chambers. Kestryl, I will meet you at your rooms to discuss this further." "I will come with you." He had suffered the loss of the Duke and was not about to leave the Duchess' side.

Silence dominated the walk through the palace corridors. Many a curious eye turned to watch the grim procession, but no one spoke. Amalga walked listlessly, guided by Penthor. His periodic glances at the

Bladesman were filled with concern, but it was clear they would not speak again until the Duchess was out of earshot.

When the door to her chambers opened, several servants jumped to their feet. Immediately sensing something awry, they crowded around the Duchess, who barely acknowledged their attentions. Penthor watched only for a few moments before speaking.

"If you need anything, anything at all, please send for me. I will handle everything for the time being. Try and get some rest. I know it will be difficult, but the days to come are going to be hard enough without having to deal with exhaustion. I will return later to check on you."

He waited a moment for the Duchess to acknowledge his words. When she didn't, he motioned to Kestryl and the two retired.

"What in the name of the gods happened?"

"The storm came from nowhere and caught us unawares. I tried to lead them back. Sheba knows I tried. The Duke's horse went down and when he rose again, a lightning bolt descended from the sky. There was nothing left to bring back."

Grief suffused the heir's face. "A sword can not stop a storm, Bladesman. I am sure you did your best."

"Then my best was not good enough."

Penthor wanted to reach out, but did not. Instead he turned and motioned for Kestryl to follow. He couldn't imagine what the Bladesman was feeling, but it didn't matter. In the days to come, they would both have much to do. Their first priority would be to consolidate the Duchess' position.

"We must make the transition swiftly. I will send messengers to Dathan's strongest allies. We will need all the support we can muster when the news breaks. I hate to say it, but Amalga, on the throne by herself, is in a very dangerous position."

"No harm will come to her."

"I know you believe you can protect her and yet I wonder how safe she will be, even here in the palace, once news of Dathan's death is revealed."

"What are you saying?"

"I think it would be in her best interest to remarry as soon as possible."

"Are you mad? Did you not see her pain with your own eyes?"

Penthor stopped and turned. "Yes, I saw it. She's devastated. So am I, but High Gondylar will not run itself. I can handle most of what needs to be handled, but I am not the Duke."

"You are the heir."

"That is true. But without a Gondylarian on the throne, or at least a human, we cannot guarantee Amalga's safety. I don't like it any more than you, but what choices have we? Even Dathan's staunchest allies will not sit in support of Amalga were she attempt to rule alone."

"She needs time."

"Time is a luxury she can ill afford."

The Bladesman opened his mouth to answer, but closed it again. As much as he hated to admit it, Penthor was correct. Without another word, he left the heir to the Gondylarian throne and turned toward his quarters.

He would spend many long hours praying to Sheba before he retired.

"I need rest, nothing more. I will be fine." Amalga shooed the last of the servants from her bedchamber. "I'll see you all in the morning."

Their reluctance was a palpable thing, but they obeyed their mistress in spite of whatever misgivings they may have individually held. Amalga waited until the door was shut before allowing her eyes to fill with tears. She cried silently, knowing they would be listening for the slightest excuse to intrude upon her grief.

She walked to the bed and threw herself on it. Dathan was not there; would never be there again. She could almost see him, smirking, hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling as he spoke of whatever intrigue currently possessed him. His brilliant mind always worked faster than his mouth, so his conversation was sometimes difficult to follow, but not for Amalga. More than one member of the Court had noticed the Duke and Duchess seemed to think as one. It was that sharing she would miss most of all.

High Gondylar had lost a Duke, but she had lost much more. From the corner of the room, his nearly finished portrait stared at her. She wanted to turn from it, but could not. In a fit of rage, she threw it over, easel and all. Its very presence mocked the hole in her heart. Then she froze, wondering if the servants had heard. She did not want anyone to see her this way. At length, when the door didn't open, she lifted the portrait but turned it toward the wall. It was too soon to look on it.

Eventually, she lay on the bed and cried until she slept. An hour later, she was awakened by a fit of coughing that plagued her sleep for the rest of the night.

Penthor stared at the five scrolls before him. He was waiting for the ink to dry before rolling and placing them into their containers. They would be sealed, of course, with the official Gondylarian seal. They would be delivered by the fastest horses he could find. The messengers would only have a day's head start before others would be sent to less supportive noble houses. Because there was no body, there would be no funeral. He wondered how many of the Lords would believe Dathan was still alive somewhere. He wondered if their old allies would remain loyal in light of recent events. Amalga, whether she liked it or not, would have to either marry or give up the throne. If she tried to rule High Gondylar alone, she would pay dearly for it.

If she did step down, that would leave him heir. As much as he had prepared for the eventuality, he never truly wanted the job. Penthor couldn't see himself as a ruler. He had to find a way to keep Amalga on the throne. The trick would be to do so without endangering her, while still maintaining the tentative peace that had only recently settled over the Dukedom.

Gondylarian politics were so hopelessly twisted, it was almost impossible to prepare for every possible scenario, yet a Duke had to do just that. And Penthor had learned from the best. Like any strategy game, the loser was the first to make the fatal mistake. Penthor read and reread each letter, while considering various possibilities. He wondered if any of the Lords might consider taking an Ethrell wife if it meant sitting on the throne.

He could not marry her himself, of course. There would be too many whispers if that happened. He even considered briefly marrying her off to Kestryl. That would solve an entire host of problems. Amalga would still rule, since the Bladesman would always defer to her. Most nobles would think twice or even three times before attempting an assassination. And a well known, popular Gondylarian, a legend, would

be sitting on the throne.

There was only one problem with the plan. The Bladesman had no desire to rule, which is part of what made him such a perfect servant. Penthor did not look forward to discussing these ideas with Amalga so soon after Dathan's death.

Unfortunately, there was nothing for it. As soon as he made sure the messages were on their way, he would return to her chambers. It would be hard on her in the months to come, but such was the lot of nobility.

Penthor would do whatever he could to ease that burden, but had no doubt the Duchess would have to bear the brunt of it on her own.

The next morning, Kestryl was already dressed and on his way out when Penthor arrived at his door. The Bladesman had already created a plan of attack for the day. His first order of priority, after checking on the Duchess, was to try to figure out a motive for Dathan's assassination. Without at least that, there would be little chance of finding the Duke's killer.

Very few mages had the power to summon such a violent storm. Men of such power tended to be aloof and apart from world politics, and the council of mages made certain it remained that way. Surely any of the twelve on the council had the power to create such a storm, but it is unlikely any of them would risk the ire of his peers. Who did that leave?

Had Dathan offended a powerful mage? Had he ordered any recent executions or was something more sinister afoot? Kestryl had no idea, but knew he needed to find out.

"Good morning, Bladesman. Did you sleep well?"

"As well as can be expected. You didn't sleep at all, I suppose."

"There was no time for it. I will try to lie down for a bit when things have calmed down."

"You sent your missives?"

"Indeed I have. There is nothing to do, but wait. It shouldn't be long."

The Bladesman left the room and Penthor fell into step beside him. Both noticed the approaching guard at the same moment.

"Sir, there is a servant from Castle Therak with a message for Duke Dathan."

"That was fast," said Kestryl.

"It should be interesting to see what it says, since my message won't reach him until at least tomorrow."

"Indeed."

"Send the messenger to the throne room immediately."

"Yes, M'lord." The guard turned and walked away.

"What about Amalga?" asked Kestryl.

"I have no intention of letting her see anything that might cause her more grief. If it's important, we can always bring it to her attention."

"Perhaps we should ask her first."

"The Duchess will have plenty to handle in the days to come. Let's try to ease her burdens as much as we can."

Kestryl nodded. Though he was uncomfortable with the situation, he would defer to Penthor for the time being.

It wasn't long before they entered the throne room. The messenger arrived a short time later. Penthor and the Bladesman both stood before the throne. The messenger, barely more than a boy, was dressed in the livery of The House of Therak. His hands were empty. It was Penthor who spoke.

"You have a message?"

The boy nodded.

"Let's hear it."

"The message is for the Duke, Sir."

"I am, at the moment, the acting Duke."

Penthor walked to the messenger and whispered a single word into his ear. In theory, such keys were known only to the Duke and Duchess, but Penthor was privy to all Dathan's secrets. At once, the boy straightened and his eyes grew hard. When he next spoke his voice was much deeper and far more agitated. Both men immediately recognized it as the voice of Lord Uryth.

"Dathan, have you lost what's left of your mind? I have no intention of yielding my position. You know damned well how I feel about your marriage and your choice of successor, not to mention the hundreds of intangible differences between our respective philosophies.

"Do you really believe Penthor, a common peasant by birth, is worthy of sitting on the throne of the greatest country in the world? What would your father say? You almost make me embarrassed to be a Gondylarian.

"I sent you no message. I have no idea what game you're playing, but I warn you, the House of Therak is not interested. Leave us out of your intrigues or pay the consequences."

As the last word left his mouth, the messenger's shoulders sagged. Once again, he was only a boy. Penthor and the Bladesman exchanged troubled glances. They listened to the message twice more before Penthor spoke the word to erase it. He sent the messenger back with a vague response, explaining the Duke was indisposed and would reply as soon as he was able.

Kestryl waited until the messenger left the throne room before speaking.

"How much do you plan to tell the Duchess?"

"I'll have to see how she's feeling before I make that decision."

"That would seem the wisest course of action. Shall we check on her now?"

Penthor started toward the door. "Lord Uryth had some strong words for the Duke."

"Indeed."

"I've never actually asked you, but perhaps it is time. What do you think of the Duke's choice of heir?"

"I do not question the will or wisdom of the throne."

"Nor am I asking you to. I was just wondering how you felt about it."

Kestryl paused for a long time in order to phrase his response. "I believe Dathan made the best choice available to him at the time."

Penthor looked at the Bladesman thoughtfully, but spoke no more on the subject.

Amalga was already awake when the Bladesman and Penthor arrived at her rooms. She did not speak much, though she was aware of their growing concern. She simply could not release the images of Dathan's last moments. In time, she knew, they would fade, but that did not help her now.

Penthor prattled on about nonsense. Occasionally, she would start to cough and he would pause and wait for her to catch her breath. By the third time, he moved to her, but it was the Bladesman who spoke.

"I believe it is time to fetch the royal physician."

"Nonsense. I was out in the rain. I developed a chill, nothing more."

Kestryl looked to Penthor for support and the heir was more than happy to provide it.

"I'm afraid I must insist, M'lady. With the Duke gone, we must take all precautions to guard your health."

"I am the Duchess and you will do as I say."

Kestryl dropped his head. "Of course, M'lady."

Penthor grew angry. "I'm sorry, but I will not have this. I do not like the way you look and I will not take no for an answer. You are responsible for High Gondylar and frankly, what you want doesn't make any more difference than what I want. Kestryl, fetch Fern."

The Bladesman turned from Amalga to Penthor and back again. He agreed with Penthor, but could not disobey a direct order from the Duchess. Amalga watched, part of her curious as to how he would respond. She could read the tension in his face; see it in his posture. After only a few seconds, she nodded.

She watched the Bladesman leave before turning to Penthor. "What else is on your mind?"

"M'lady?"

"Come now. I'm sure you have more to tell me."

Penthor bit his lip.

"I am the Duchess. I have a Dukedom to run and can't do so if you're going to withhold information from me."

"You never cease to amaze me, M'lady."

"Don't change the subject."

Penthor sighed. "We received a message from Castle Therak."

"Let me guess. Lord Uryth never invited us."

"How did you know?"

"The storm...it isn't his style. Uryth is far too honorable to resort to that type of trickery."

"But the invitation was delivered in his own voice."

"Penthor, any mage capable of summoning such a storm, is capable of faking that kind of message."

Penthor shook his head. "Of course. I don't know why I didn't see that."

"Because you haven't slept and you have other things on your mind. What else did Lord Uryth have to say, or have I already heard it all before?"

"You've already heard it, M'lady."

She walked to the window and looked out. Below, a pair of guards patrolled the courtyard. "I will see the physician, but I will not rest. I cannot. I have a Dukedom to run."

A coughing fit took her and did not release her for many minutes.

Chapter Two - The Hidden Enemy

The Bladesman studied Fern carefully. The physician did not often visit his spartan quarters. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing more I can do."

For two weeks, Kestryl had watched Amalga's condition deteriorate in spite of Fern's attentions. At first, the cough was a nuisance, but it grew worse as the days passed. The fever and chills started a week after Dathan's death. By the time the physician had confined Amalga to bed, she was too weak to refuse him.

"What are you saying?" asked the Bladesman

"I do not believe the Duchess will survive much longer."

"There must be some cure for this ailment."

"I wish it were true, my friend."

"Have you told Penthor?"

"Yes, but I didn't have to. He knew already."

"I see."

Kestryl rose and paced. He did not meet the physician's eyes. The pain was his alone to bear. His failure. He had not been able to save Dathan and now the Duchess was slipping away as well. And Kestryl was still no closer to finding the responsible party. The investigation had turned up nothing. He'd tried to attack the problem from every angle. He'd consulted dozens of people. Even those who did not support Dathan had been more than happy to cooperate. Could one of the Lords have been behind it? Toward what end? Could Amalga have been the real target of the storm? If so, how could he protect her, should the mage try again? These were the questions that kept him busy, day after day.

He was thankful for the distraction, for night took its toll on him. Each time he closed his eyes, images of Dathan's death filled his mind. And on the rare occasions he was able to find sleep, his dreams continued

the assault, allowing no reprieve. He deserved no less.

The Duke's well-being had been his responsibility and he had failed. Each time he relived those final moments, he tried with all his might to find a flaw in his actions. Something he could have done to alter the outcome. Yet each reiteration led to the same unacceptable, inevitable conclusion. If there had been any way to change it, he would never know. If only he could somehow stop looking.

Finally, Kestryl turned to face the physician. "There must be a way to save her. I can not bear to lose them both."

Fern shook his head. "The Duchess' illness is beyond my ability. Go to her, Kestryl. Say farewell while time remains."

Without another word, he turned and left, sensing the Bladesman's need for solitude.

Amalga, wisps of auburn hair stuck to her sweaty, too pale face, tried in vain to pull herself into a sitting position. She did not know how long she had been there. She did know she was not always entirely lucid.

She remembered both too much and not enough. Dathan was dead. The very thought loomed in her mind, so strong it blocked out almost everything else. It was impossible for her to understand how it could have happened. And as much as she needed him, High Gondylar needed him even more.

Almost single-handedly, Dathan had carved a unified country from a handful of Lords, who would rather be at each other's throats. The only flaw in his power base had been Amalga's lineage.

The Ethrellen were her people, and they were a good people. It was the human's shortsightedness, their inability to deal with anything different that prevented them from honestly evaluating the Ethrellen. No human could conceive a civilized culture without crime, without internal strife, without money.

If the Ethrellen were arrogant, who could blame them? No Ethrell was left to starve, nor would one live well at the expense of his brother. There was no war, no murder, no theft. Her people had the right to feel superior.

Before she'd met Dathan, Amalga had assumed all humans were alike. He had broken her of that misconception. Since that time, she had met many others who were of a higher caliber than the typical, sword-slinging Gondylarian barbarian. She loved Dathan from the moment they met, as much for his handsome countenance as for his wit and charm. Amalga could not stand the thought of so great a man married to a human woman. He *deserved* an Ethrell wife.

Of course, her very presence might have been the reason for his assassination. At the thought, her eyes began to fill, but she shook herself. Think. She had to think. Dathan was dead and there would be time to mourn him, but not now. The only thing she could afford to think about was the future of High Gondylar.

In a way, it was good she was dying. None of the Lords would take her seriously and she did not wish to live without Dathan by her side.

"Soon my love, I will be with you."

She shivered, surprised not only that she had spoken aloud, but also at the weakness in her voice. She was not long for this world.

Penthor would take the throne. There was no one else and more importantly, he was Dathan's choice. She wouldn't change that if she could. Penthor was an immensely intelligent individual, well versed in

Gondylarian custom and history. A thoughtful man, both diplomatic and cautious. On the other hand, he was not nearly as strong as Dathan. Within a few years, he would be overpowered by the strength of the Gondylarian nobility and High Gondylar would backslide into the same situation they were in before Dathan took the throne.

She smiled. When had she become so concerned over the fate of the Gondylarian people? Again, there was Dathan, his very presence in her life having changed her. She now saw the Gondylarians as errant children, rather than the monsters she had first thought them. Her people had no reason to love humans in general and Gondylarians in particular.

Amalga did not have to strain to pull up memories of incidents that showed the depths to which man could sink. Not long ago, soldiers rode through the woods hunting Ethrellen on sight. Times had changed, but how long would those changes endure once Penthor's influence began to weaken? How long before less civilized heads prevailed?

She thought long and hard on the matter. It would certainly happen. Even if Penthor did not yield to the Lords, one of them would find a way to take his life. The Ethrellen needed Dathan on the throne. She strained to sit again. After several minutes, she gave up and, with great effort, rolled onto her side. Absently, she scratched her chin with her left foot. Everything hurt. She wondered how much time she had left.

She felt her eyes closing, was almost asleep, when the idea struck her. She turned on her back and, without realizing it, struggled into a sitting position. She needed to speak with the Bladesman. She fought the pull of sleep, excitement growing in her, in spite of the pain. She could almost see Dathan smiling through the veil that separated the land of the living from the world beyond.

"Soon my love. I just have one final matter to handle and I will join you."

Finally, Amalga, the Duchess of High Gondylar, surrendered to tears.

Penthor paced the roof, trying to collect his thoughts. In only a fortnight, his entire reality had been altered. While he knew he had been Dathan's choice as successor, he had expected the Duke to live a long, healthy life. How much time had the gods given him on Corithim? Forty-four years. Before long, Penthor would be that old.

So much rested on his shoulders. Even though he was not yet Duke, Amalga's illness left her unable to make decisions. The last two weeks had given Penthor a chance to taste the future. To be on the throne of the third largest country in the world. He thought back, trying to recall each ruler who preceded him. What right did he have to think of those people and himself in the same circle? What kind of ruler would he make? How would history remember Penthor, Duke of High Gondylar?

Angrily, Penthor closed out the thought. To think such while Amalga still lived, bordered on treason. And to be truthful, he was not looking forward to her death. He loved both her and Dathan more than he would ever admit and knew he could not begin to fill their shoes. He couldn't even try. It may well turn out that choosing him as successor was Dathan's biggest mistake, worse even than marrying an Ethrell.

Penthor looked at the sky, surprised to find the light retreating. He sighed. So much to do. Soon, whether he wished it or not, he would be crowned. He pictured Dathan and Amalga, sitting side by side on their thrones.

"Mitra, let me do them justice. Help me rule wisely in your name."

He walked toward the stairs but instead of descending, sat on the top step and hung his head. He'd never

felt more alone in his life.

The physician's warning did not prepare Kestryl for the reality of the situation, though he visited the Duchess every day. Perhaps he was only now allowing himself to see her as she was. Amalga was but a dim reflection of the vibrant, intelligent woman he'd come to know. He had no choice but to finally accept the truth.

She turned to look at him. It took more than a minute for her to focus. When recognition finally lit her eyes, he went to her, falling on one knee beside the bed. He reached out to stroke her cheek.

She smiled weakly. "My Bladesman. I am happy you are come."

He tried to keep concern from his face, but the sound of her voice gave ample reason to worry. He smiled, though he could not entirely mask the hopelessness in his eyes--not from her.

"Do not be sad, my friend. Things are as they are. Embrace them." Her eyes were filled with compassion. "Soon I will join Dathan and we will dance the eternal until time itself ends, but for now you and I have much to discuss."

Kestryl fought down his pain. She was the Duchess and he would obey her until the last breath left her body.

"I need you to serve me one final time. The task is not easy, nor am I certain it is possible, but I know if anyone can accomplish it, it is you."

"My Lady, I will not fail you."

"I know. You never have." She continued before he could protest. "Go forth now. Wait not for my death. Find my daughter, Kestryl. She is the rightful heir."

"You mean for me to oppose Penthor then?"

"No. Penthor will take the throne. That was Dathan's wish and I would have it no other way. But you are bound to the blood, not the throne. If you cannot find Cyanne or if she is dead, return here and serve Penthor as you would have me. If you find her, tell her what happened. Tell her all you know of Dathan and myself. Protect and obey her. She is the last of Dathan's blood."

Kestryl nodded, not trusting himself to speak. It was all he could do to hold back tears. He could take any man in single combat, but this dying woman was tearing him apart and there was no defense he could find.

"I will distract Penthor for as long as I am able. I do not doubt his loyalty, but I have little doubt he would want you here to assist in the transition. Trust no one. Tell no one. Leave and make haste."

With that dismissal, Kestryl rose to his feet and bowed. "It is an honor to have served you."

A smile lit Amalga's eyes. "My Kestryl. Always so formal."

She broke into a fit of coughing that lasted so long, he thought she might die. He waited patiently until it was done. At length, the Duchess found her voice.

"Find Penthor. Tell him I have need of him."

As he walked from the bed, Kestryl faintly heard the last words he would ever hear his Duchess speak.

"Sheba watch over you."

Kestryl continued out the door without looking back.

On the streets of Gondylar, people moved about through the humid night air. Darkness was the cue for Gondylarians to come out and play. And play in Gondylar was rough.

The taverns, already crowded, would stay open for most of the night. In dim corners, business deals, both legitimate and those of a shadier nature, were finalized. Courtesans advertised their profession, each more scantily clad than the next. In a pit in a tavern, two naked men with daggers fought for their lives, while those watching bet on the outcome. Drugs were bought and sold. Thieves moved through the crowds looking for an easy target.

Not one of them knew the future of their country was being decided. Most knew about Dathan's death, but not of the Duchess' illness, let alone her imminent passing. None suspected Penthor would soon be sitting on the throne. Had they known, most wouldn't care. Life was hard enough without becoming involved in the affairs of nobles. Like living near a hive, most were content to let the bees have their honey.

While many streets in Gondylar were brightly lit with hanging lanterns, some, like the narrow passage that had come to be known as Stalkers Court, were not illuminated at all. Few came here after dark and those who did, trod cautiously.

From the shadows, featureless faces watched the passage of a man, handsomely attired in leather armor, leading a dark horse. Most weren't even curious. Life had taught them what happened to those who asked questions. A few were interested in spite of themselves, for seldom did anyone of means visit this area. The more violent denizens of Stalkers Court considered whether or not to try and avail themselves of the man's horse. But a second look at the way he carried himself, discouraged even the bravest thief.

There was about him a sense of something inexplicably out of place. The stallion nickered gently and the man, without turning, reached back a hand to soothe him.

"Soon, Shadow, we will be on our way. Gentle now."

He moved like a man with a purpose and perhaps on that particular night, he had more purpose than he'd ever had before. For Kestryl, the Bladesman of High Gondylar, it was the beginning of a long journey. And who knew what might become of the land that had borne him during his absence.

He whispered a prayer to Sheba and moved more quickly. He wanted to be as far from the city as possible by daybreak.

Penthor sat on the bed beside Amalga. He had no doubt she was rambling, but she was still Duchess and he would listen, even if she spoke all night. He knew all of what she said anyway, but if she could derive some small comfort in her last moments by telling him again, he saw no harm in it. Several times her voice dropped so low he had to lean close to hear. Sometimes her words made no sense, but then she would pause and when she continued, she was lucid. Occasionally she would break into horrible fits of coughing that lasted for many minutes, but after recovering, would continue.

Amalga spoke for hour upon hour into the night. She spoke of the Lords and the danger they represented to the peace of the Dukedom, of treaties and laws, of the common man and their relationship to the Ethrellen. And suddenly, there were no more words, just a glazed look and an open mouth.

"Page!" screamed Penthor. "Fetch Fern. Quickly!"

He thought back, trying in vain to remember the last words of the Duchess of High Gondylar.

It did not take Fern long to pronounce the Duchess dead. It took him even less time to swear fealty to Penthor. If the new Duke felt uncomfortable about this occurring over the still warm body of Amalga, he didn't show it. At any other time, he might have said something, but there was too much to be done to be concerned about etiquette.

He needed to arrange a funeral. The royal will would have to be opened. He had to be crowned and, while all that was going on, he had to figure out where each of the Lords stood in the new scheme of things. Who could he count on? Who would betray him?

He sent a page to Kestryl's quarters with the news. He had the proper people awakened to start funeral preparations. Burial in Gondylar, even for a petty lordling, was an ordeal. How much more so for the Duchess herself?

He had to arrange for music, flowers and entertainment. The clergy needed to be informed and represented. The chamberlain had to be notified, as well as all of the Lords. Time would have to be given. If the funeral were held before a Lord showed, it would be a transgression of etiquette beyond forgiveness. And Penthor didn't need any new enemies.

The page returned, informing him the Bladesman had not answered the knock at his door. It was quite late and Penthor was surprised, but not overly so. He sent half a dozen pages out to search.

As each reported in, he became increasingly convinced the Bladesman had not stayed on at all. He sent to the stables and, as he'd guessed, Shadow was not there. Penthor sighed. Tonight, he had no time to worry about such things, but the idea Kestryl might not lend his support did not sit easy with him. He could not afford to worry about that. There were more immediate matters that required attention. It was almost daybreak and he still had much to do.

He sat on a horse on a hill, overlooking the walled city, Gondylar. Dark clouds hovered nearby, as if a premonition of doom. The air was cold and dry. There was no wind. No sound or movement of any kind. It was as if the great city was suspended in time, caught between moment and moment.

Though the lack of movement was characteristic of Gondylar this soon after dawn, to Kestryl it seemed there was something ominous about it. He took one last look at the city, murmured one final farewell to his Duchess and reined his horse north. Behind him, the city was beginning to awaken.

There was no reason for the Bladesman to believe anyone besides Amalga, and possibly Penthor, knew of his flight from the city. Certainly he had taken great care to make it so. It would have come as quite a surprise that other eyes were watching. Eyes that had been following the events at the Gondylarian Palace since before Dathan's death.

A hundred miles south and west of Gondylar lay a vast underground cavern complex known as the Darkdom of Vykon. Its existence was known by few, and believed by only a small percentage of them, largely because that was the way the Dark One wanted it.

Historically, there was nothing special about the caves. They had formed like many similar structures, over time and under pressure, by the forces that shape the world. Only within the last century could one say anything of significance had occurred there, for it was about that long ago the Dark One of Vykon first found them.

It is anyone's guess what drew him there in the first place, but it was exactly the type of location for which he'd been searching. Already a powerful mage, he needed a secluded area to continue his research.

Somewhere away from the curious and the jealous. It is said, by those who claim to know, that at the time he was still sane. Certainly, if he were, it was a condition that had long since passed.

Insanity among the more powerful mages is not entirely uncommon. There is something about the mind of a sorcerer that is a little off to start, perhaps the very thing that allows them to control the powers upon which they draw.

And it is not terribly rare for an adept to overestimate his skill and draw on power beyond his ability to control. It has resulted in the death of more than one mage, who might one day have been great.

Yet in rare cases, a practitioner might draw too much power and still live. Perhaps that was the way it had been with the Dark One, for at some point his brilliant mind ceased to function along what most would call conventional pathways. Power, in all its forms, became an obsession. His experiments continued into areas most mages would never consider, each new success propelling him farther down the path of insanity. The Dark One of Vykon soon came to realize his power was useless. Control of arcane forces no longer satisfied him. He needed flesh. He required subjects. He longed to be worshipped as a god. Desire became obsession. Only the blood and sweat of living beings would suffice.

He scoured the Gondylarian countryside for people with magical abilities and took them, forcibly when necessary, back to the caverns to train. He procured mercenaries to protect what he now saw as his borders. He ruled his realm with fear. None in that vast underground could stand against him. Those most powerful, he kept most fearful. They became his elite. Scarha was one of these.

To look at her, you would not think her a woman of power. She was a thin, short woman, who might have been handsome were it not for the dark circles under her brown eyes or the haunted look in them. Her shoulder-length hair, once brown, was almost completely gray, though no wrinkle marred her face, making it difficult to determine her age. Her lips were thin, her nose small. She moved as if through a dream, and if her mind was not all it had once been, her particular talent had flourished. She was a seer of no small skill and served the Dark One of Vykon with all her heart and soul.

Scarha held a special place in the Darkdom, for she had borne the Dark One's only son, the heir to his throne. She hadn't seen the boy for more than two decades, and even while he was growing hadn't had much contact with him. She often wondered what had become of her son, but was too frightened of her master to ask.

She even wondered, from time to time, if the Dark One had killed him. If so, she was certain he had his reasons, for he loved his son above all else. Still, he did have a temper and there was no telling how far he'd go if he lost it. Perhaps it was better if she never learned her son's fate.

She watched as he paced, the Dark One of Vykon. It had been the only name she'd ever known him by. If he'd ever had another, he'd likely forgotten it himself.

Behind him the chamber loomed so large, much of it was lost to darkness. Nearby, on a stone dais darker than the deepest night, sat a throne made of wood so dark as to be almost black. The sides of that seat teemed with serpents carved so ornately, to stare long enough gave the image of writhing to the etched denizens of its surface. Yet, as awesome as it was, it was the base upon which it rested that drew the eyes of those who found themselves in that room, though whether they stared at it or turned away depended on their individual courage.

Therein lay one of the sources of Vykon's power. The briefest touch of the cursed rock would steal a man's soul, adding its strength to the Dark One's already powerful life force. Even Scarha was not immune to the terror it induced and could not look directly at it for any length of time.

Scarha returned her gaze to the large piece of quartz before her. To most, it was just a natural mineral deposit left in place when the room was constructed, but to those so gifted, it was a tool of farsight; the ability to see distant events as they occurred.

Scarha cleared her mind and gazed into the crystal until the patterns of light trapped beneath its whitish surface began to shift. Images approached and grew clear, as if emerging from the depths of a murky pool. She said nothing. The Dark One made no noise, so as not to distract her. So peaceful was her expression, she might have been sleeping. When she finally spoke, her voice was devoid of emotion, as if she were not conscious of where she was or with whom she conversed.

"Amalga's soul has vacated her body. Funeral arrangements have been made. Penthor rules in High Gondylar."

The grim smile on the Dark One's face was entirely lost on the psychic. "Excellent." Scarha lapsed again into silence. A short while later, her entire body tensed. "The Bladesman did not wait for Amalga's passing. He left Gondylar in pain, as if part of him had died."

The Dark One raised his bushy eyebrows and scowled. "Perhaps he had not the strength to wait for the end."

Even as the words sounded, he knew them to be untrue. The Bladesman was a man of duty. He would not leave his Duchess unless he had been so ordered.

"To where does he ride?"

"North. First to a cave, then to The Mistress and then to Stratus."

"And what does he seek?"

"The heir to the Gondylarian throne."

"Dathan's line is dead. It died with his daughter fifteen years ago."

"Cyanne lives still and the Bladesman seeks her."

"I wonder if he will find her?"

"I can not see the future. Only what is and what was."

The Dark One frowned. He was well aware of Scarha's limitations and had spoken aloud without expectation of receiving an answer. He didn't need her to tell him the future.

He would take steps to make certain the Bladesman would never locate the heir to the Gondylarian throne.

Kestryl pushed his steed as hard as he could. Around him, trees stretched almost to the sky, though the shade did little to dispel the heat. He stopped only when it grew too dark to continue. His sparse meal consisted of what he could gather from the surrounding countryside. It was not the first time he had lived this way. Though he preferred some meat in his diet, he wouldn't waste precious time hunting.

Shortly before darkness fell, he located a clearing. He rubbed down, fed and watered Shadow, before searching the area for the berries and nuts he knew he would find this time of year. Some of those berries were sour, but as they matched his mood, he ate them anyway. When he was not moving, time passed too slowly, but he could not afford to risk his steed by riding at night.

Unable to sleep, he paced the clearing, occasionally glancing south toward the city he had left behind. That Penthor now ruled the Dukedom he had no doubt and again wondered if it weren't for the best.

He turned his gaze northward, though he could see nothing through the wall of trees. He still had hundreds of leagues to travel to reach a sea called The Mistress, so named for the number of women who had lost their husbands to her. Across her dark waters lay The Skyshore Realm. Once there, he had to find a woman he'd left when she was but a child. Would she go by the same name? What would she look like? If he couldn't find her, how long should he wait before returning to serve Penthor?

And then he knew. He would search for as long as he lived, unless he found evidence of her passing. Only when he knelt at the foot of her grave and prayed to Sheba to see her soul safely across the divide, would he return to Gondylar and serve the new Duke.

Kestryl looked up at the stars. He knelt and dropped his head. "Sheba, if she lives let me find her, and serve her better than I did her parents."

He stayed on one knee long into the night, eyes moist with tears. Later, he slept for a few hours before continuing on his way.

The Dark One gazed at the crystal as if by staring hard enough, he too might be able to unravel its mysteries.

"I must know more. The cave. What is in the cave?"

Scarha stared at the crystal, until the ever-present lines in her forehead deepened. At last she spoke, aware of the inadequacy of her answer.

"It is empty."

The Dark One turned and walked away, thinking furiously. When he turned back, his voice was hard.

"Why would Kestryl go out of his way to visit an empty cave?"

"I cannot see."

The Dark One took a step toward her, studying her face with the same fervor he had used on the stone itself. He could see the strain in her eyes and feel it in her soul.

"It is of no consequence. Do you think you could locate this cave?"

The psychic nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Satisfied, the Dark One of Vykon smiled. "Now then. Tell me where I can find the rightful heir to the throne of High Gondylar."

Penthor, unable to sleep, returned to the palace roof and gazed north. Not a man used to anger, he was surprised to find himself pacing. Perhaps it is the way with rulers. Dathan had once assured him the throne would change him. He could only hope it would be for the better.

How strange that Kestryl did not wait for Amalga's death. Penthor knew the Bladesman would have stood vigil all night, unless something more important called him. And what could be more important than the death of the Duchess?

The search for her daughter. It had to be. And Amalga herself must have sent him. He thought back to the long night of rambling he had endured. Had the Duchess been trying to buy Kestryl time to get away?

He almost laughed, it was so ridiculous. What did she think he would have done to stop him? What *could* he have done?

The palace guard was as loyal to the Bladesman as to Penthor and certainly he could not have persuaded the Bladesman to ignore Amalga's last request. Damn them both, I needed him here.

Penthor turned east to watch the first rays of light top the city's great wall.

"Good-bye, Kestryl, and god speed. May you find the object of your search. Somehow, I will make it without your aid."

He shook his head as he made his way back to the stairs, then forced the Bladesman from his mind. He would concentrate on circumstances he could do something about.

As the countryside became familiar, the Bladesman quickened his pace. Though he had not been this way in over twenty years, little had changed.

Kestryl gazed around him, taking in the rolling hills and more distant mountains. Mountains that had once, long ago, been his home. He felt a thrill at the very thought of being reunited with his mentor and good friend, Dauber Uaks. Why had he let so many years go by without once visiting? Was his life so busy, he could ignore the only father he remembered?

A moment of fear passed through him. Would the great mage be angry? Would Dauber Uaks embrace him openly after so much time? For that matter, why had there been no news of him?

Kestryl shook his head. There was no point concerning himself with questions that would be answered soon enough. He kicked Shadow into a trot. Sensing his excitement, the stallion whickered.

As the landscape flew by, it became even more familiar. When he was finally forced to stop for the night, he knew precisely where he was. By tomorrow he would reach the home of Dauber Uaks. He only hoped the mage could help him locate the young Duchess.

As the moon rose over the Darkdom of Vykon, eight mounted men in black armor took to the night. To look at them was to be certain of their nature. Each and every one was a killer.

Had you eyes in that barren landscape, you would have seen three men at arms, followed by five warriors of a different nature. The three wore looks of desperation, as if their very lives depended upon the success of their mission. Each was lost in his own thoughts, as they contemplated the nature of their target. They were to find and kill Kestryl, the Bladesman of High Gondylar.

Had he made his way straight to the north shore, they would have never been able to catch him, but he had detoured and that was his error. If they pushed their mounts hard, they would have enough time to intercept him. Not that they were anxious to do so. Each had heard tales of the Bladesman's exploits. Yet fear of the Dark One propelled them to risk the assault. The Bladesman, skilled as he was, was but a man. The same could scarcely be said of the Dark One.

The second group of riders were not mercenaries. That they were even human might be debated, though at first glance they appeared so, until you looked into their eyes. Soulless, dark eyes, almost unseeing, set in expressionless faces that were a little too pale and a little too gaunt. Faces of men who seldom spoke and never ate. Not the Dark One's elite, like his mercenaries, but darker servants from some forgotten hell. Rarely were such creatures called into existence and only at times of great need.

Their mission was simple. They would search for the heir to the Gondylarian throne. With the information given them by Scarha, they should have no trouble finding her before the Bladesman could. Still, finding

her would be the hard part. Once that was done, it would be no problem at all to kill her.

Afterwards, they could do as they wished with the corpse.

Chapter Three - Departure

Kestryl didn't wait for dawn to resume his journey, though he opted to walk his mount, rather than ride. No sense in risking injury this close to his destination. He stopped only briefly at a nearby stream to allow Shadow a drink before turning toward the mountains. As soon as it was light enough, he mounted and kicked him into a gallop.

He leaned forward in the saddle, exhilarated by the early morning breeze. Later in the day it would be too hot to feel that way no matter how fast he rode. It took him the best part of the day to reach the path into the mountains. Shortly before nightfall, he was forced to tie Shadow to a tree and continue on foot. He was not far now, but the beast could not follow where he was going.

He ran like a man well rested, in spite of the number of hours he'd been in the saddle. After a short time, he turned from the path and approached the base of a cliff. It would have been difficult for anyone but an expert climber, yet Kestryl scaled the rocky surface as if he were walking a flight of stairs.

The hand and foot holds were exactly where they had always been and the way came to him as if he'd made this climb every day of his life. Within minutes, he was pulling himself onto a ledge forty feet above the ground. The cave entrance before him was all but invisible from below. Dauber Uaks liked his privacy.

Kestryl stood at the entrance drinking it in. He knew once he entered and turned the corner, the natural stone structure would give way to a well-furnished suite of caverns. Contained therein were the mage's living quarters, as well as other chambers where he would work, sometimes for days, on some new spell or magical elixir.

Kestryl walked slowly through the entrance cavern. When he made the turn he stopped, first puzzled, then alarmed.

He moved from chamber to chamber, but there was no trace of Dauber Uaks, or any of his possessions. By the time he finished his investigation, the sun had set. He would spend the night and in the morning continue his journey.

It was a troubled Bladesman who lay down to sleep on the hard stone floor of the entrance cave. The greatest mage in High Gondylar had left his home and without him, Kestryl's chances of finding Cyanne were diminished.

He spent a restless night dreaming of the past he'd lost and the future he might never find.

The Dark One of Vykon sat on the snake throne. Beyond the doors of the chamber, two of his servants stood guard with instructions that he not be disturbed. He had much to consider.

A little over two weeks ago, he had sent a message to Duke Dathan at the Gondylarian palace that would draw him away from his center of power. The summoned storm had adequately done its job. Dathan had been removed. Without him, it would not have been long before Amalga was replaced. Not even Dathan's closest allies would have tolerated an Ethrell as sole sovereign. That she had died was an added bonus.

Penthor had taken the throne as planned. Even if Penthor were able to keep the Lords at bay, a questionable happenstance at best, he still was in a far weaker position than had been Dathan. If Penthor kept the throne, Vykon would pick a Lord, corrupt him (ah, there were so many unscrupulous Lords) and back him. With the Dark One behind him and Penthor on the throne, there could be no doubt about the outcome.

Unfortunately, it would have to wait. First there was the matter of the Bladesman and the heir to the Gondylarian throne. The three men he had sent out should be able to take Kestryl, but if they couldn't, it was of little matter. By the time he reached her, the heir to the Gondylarian throne would be dead.

Once she was gone, it wouldn't matter what Kestryl did. Penthor would never welcome him back. He would wander Corithim a lost soul; a warrior without a cause; for Dathan's line would be no more.

There was still the matter of the cave, but that wasn't urgent. In time, the Dark One would understand why Kestryl had stopped there--or he wouldn't. It didn't matter.

The only thing that did, was that the last of Dathan's line would soon be dead.

Kestryl stretched, trying to work the kinks from muscles that had been working too hard. He was not used to spending this much time in the saddle and his body felt it. In the two days since he'd left the empty cave of Dauber Uaks, he'd done much thinking.

He had little to go on. Cyanne, if she still lived, would be twenty years old. Her eyes, once violet, might still be so and her hair was probably still black. She had been left in The Skyshore Realm with a loyal Gondylarian servant and enough money to support her for the remainder of both their lives. For all he knew, the two still lived in Stratus where he'd left them, but it was not certain. Much could happen in fifteen years.

His thoughts turned to Dauber Uaks and what his absence might mean. He could picture the mage clearly, as if they'd only just parted company.

Upon seeing the tall dark-haired Gondylarian for the first time, most people would have thought him to be a warrior or perhaps a soldier of fortune. Nor would they be far off, for Dauber Uaks was as at home with a blade as with a spell.

It was he who taught the Bladesman how to use a sword, though over the intervening years, Kestryl had mastered new techniques that brought him to the place he was now. Even so, Dauber was not a man he would choose as an enemy, magic notwithstanding.

High Gondylar was everything to the mage and Kestryl could think of no circumstance that would drive him from the Dukedom. He could only assume either Dauber Uaks had passed on, an event he seriously doubted, or he had found another place to live, better suited to his purposes than the caves that had served him for so long.

Shadow slowed as he crested the top of a hill. Kestryl took the opportunity to twist in the saddle, trying again to loosen the knot of muscles in his back. In the distance, below and behind him, he could just make out three riders. He had seen them earlier and was not at all happy to see them again. He knew there was no possibility the three riders on dark horses could have anything to do with him, yet the feeling in the pit of his stomach said otherwise.

He looked at the sun and again back at the riders. If he slowed and remained in the vicinity, they would catch him before nightfall. Kestryl dismounted and began to walk Shadow toward the trees in the distance. There he would wait and make his stand. He would know who followed him--and why.

Little would stand out at the Port of Athlana. As High Gondylar's major northern port, Athlana was a city of contrast, especially on the docks. Every color imaginable could be seen, particularly in the sails of the vessels and the attire of the sea folk. In stark contrast were the navy vessels with their gray sails and brown-uniformed crews. The shops lining the pier sported awnings of different colors, as if a law had been passed that none could be used twice. Proprietors of those stores dressed in whatever fashion they chose, as diverse as the nature of the wares they sold. Here soldiers mingled with dancers, and common man and noble walked side by side.

Yet when the Hellspawn arrived, dark warriors in dark armor, conversations came to a halt. People stopped to either stare or turn away. It was hard to say what separated these newcomers from others who walked the docks, but there was no arguing something did. The warriors paid no mind to the reaction, but instead walked the length of the pier considering the boats.

There were a number of ships for hire, as would be at any port. As they approached, captains and sailors busied themselves, silently mouthing prayers the grim warriors would pass them by. And for a time, that happened. Only when they approached the end of the pier, did the leader turn and cross a gangplank.

On deck, a middle aged gray-bearded merchant, clad in baggy blue-green trousers and a matching shirt, swallowed. Wide-eyed, he stared at the armored men. In neighboring vessels, sighs of relief were audible and most turned their attention away from the hapless merchant, certain trouble was afoot.

"I wish to hire your vessel." The words were emotionless, almost soulless; the voice deep and unpleasant.

At first, the merchant was too fearful to speak. At last, he found his voice.

"Actually, the ship needs repairs and won't be ready to sail for some time." The merchant squeezed out the sentence so quickly, there was no time for his voice to quaver.

The dark warrior's hand gripped the merchant's arm with inhuman strength. More pressure might have snapped the bone.

"I said, I would hire this ship. You will leave tomorrow." With those words, he released the merchant and pulled a pouch from his belt. He tossed it. "This should help motivate you."

The merchant caught it. The pouch was heavy with gold. Even before he opened it, he knew. More gold than he could make in a decade.

"Where is it that you wish to go?"

"Stratus. The Skyshore Realm."

The merchant gasped. Many who attempted the rather hazardous four-month journey never returned. The weight of the gold in his hand pulled against his fear. Fear of four months asea with such men. An opportunity that came but once in a lifetime. The merchant nodded once.

"Very well, passage for five. Can leave first thing in the morning. Just show up tomorrow and we'll be off. Have some last minute business to close, but I'm certain I can do it all tonight."

"Good, because until we sail, you will not stray from our sight."

The merchant felt his legs go weak. It was so much money, but four months trapped with these men might well be more than any man could stand. Again the pull of the pouch in his hand caught his attention. He could retire after this trip. He'd probably need to.

"Very well. We'll set off straight away. Will there be anything special you require?"

"Only haste. We have pressing business across The Mistress and would hate to be late."

The smile that appeared on those too thin, too pale lips did nothing to reassure the merchant.

With the sun almost ready to sink behind the mountains, Raffa kicked his mount into a gallop. He wanted to gain as much ground as he could. Tomorrow, they would overtake him.

Behind, he could hear the sound of the others as they too urged their steeds to greater haste. Not that he was anxious to face the Bladesman, but the alternative, failing the Dark One, was far worse.

He knew the others had similar thoughts. They had discussed it the previous night, when they'd stopped to rest for a period of time far less than they or their mounts needed. Raffa shook off the thought and continued riding, until he felt he could go no further. He dismounted and waited for the others. It wasn't long before the three sat in a circle.

"I don't like this, Raffa." The man who spoke was the thinnest and tallest of the three, though his slight build was misleading. Few could match Larn's wiry strength.

The man called Raffa shrugged. The unofficial leader of this expedition, if for no other reason than he was the most experienced, Raffa looked like a mercenary. Large, muscular, with jet black hair and a beard to match, finally showing the beginnings of gray. Only his eyes hinted at his age. The years had been kind to him. Another year or two and he would be too old for this sort of thing.

"Look, I know the tales that are told and the songs that are sung, but facts are facts. When I was a child, stories of Kestryl of High Gondylar were already circulating. He has to be at least sixty, perhaps older. Once he was the greatest swordsman in the Dukedom, but I think at this point any one of us could put him away. Don't let your thoughts run away from you. Control your fear."

Jules was the youngest of the three. He chuckled as he regarded the others through a tangle of red curls. He was clean-shaven.

"Kill the elderly, I always say." He looked at the tall man. "What's the matter, Larn? You worried about being run through by a little old man." The smile on his lips did nothing to detract from the malice in his eyes.

Larn shrugged. "Some people are too young to fear, some are too stupid."

Jules leaned forward, but never uttered his sharp retort. Before he could speak, Larn pitched forward onto his stomach. For a stunned second Jules sat speechless, until he noticed the knife protruding from the tall man's back. He leapt to his feet.

Raffa, already standing, had been quicker. He drew his weapon and turned to face the intruder. Kestryl burst from the woods. From the first swipe, Raffa knew he was no match for the Bladesman. He felt steel pierce his armor and enter his body before Jules could cross the short distance between them. He fought to raise his blade to buy enough time for the red-haired assassin to attack, but his tired body would not respond. His knees buckled. His last thought as he sank the rest of the way to the ground was how odd the blade felt as it slid from his body.

Kestryl turned toward Jules, brown eyes boring into the younger man's blue ones. Neither moved. Jules evaluated his best strategy. The Bladesman waited to see what the young redhead would do. It seemed almost silly--the two of them close enough to go for each other, but choosing instead to stand like statues and wait for the other to move. Jules' nerve broke first. He turned and fled.

After witnessing the melee, Jules didn't think he could take the Bladesman, but thought he might be fast enough to outrun him. He tore into the woods, dodging trees and jumping roots. He dared not turn to look.

Just when he was beginning to believe himself safe, a hand grabbed his unkempt hair. He felt himself jerk backwards, pain shooting through his neck. He turned his head. Behind him, holding his hair, stood the Bladesman. Another yank and Jules fell hard to the ground. He opened and closed his right hand, wondering what had happened to the sword that had been there. Strange, he didn't remember dropping it. He felt a knee press into the small of his back. A moment later, cold steel touched his throat. The game was over.

Many thoughts passed through the young man's mind, but even then, the thought of dying did not occur to him. He'd been in too many scrapes too many times to believe it could finally happen. There had to be a way out. The only thing of which he was certain, he would not betray the Dark One. Even death could not shield him from Vykon's vengeance.

He felt himself gasping, eyes wide. His head, indeed his entire body, was wracked with pain. He heard words, but had trouble understanding them. His vision blurred, then came into focus. He tried to concentrate.

"Who sent you? How did you find me?"

The questions arrived as if called from a distance. He was in shock.

"What?" he asked. He had to think. The image of the Dark One entered his mind and suddenly, it was all clear.

"Who sent you?" The Bladesman's voice was as cold as the steel at the mercenary's throat. The edge in it told Jules, he didn't have much time. "Who do you work for?"

Jules felt consciousness slipping, but fought to get out the words. The questions echoed in his mind. *Who sent you? Don't betray Vykon.* Jules found his voice and spoke, though the effort pained him.

"It was Penthor. Penthor sent me."

He almost smiled, would have if the pain had been less, but the hand holding his hair jerked his head back sharply. "What were your orders? What were they?"

Barely conscious, he replied. "To kill you before you reached the Duchess."

Kestryl released a roar of pure rage. His blade cut across the assassin's neck. Jules tried to scream, but the blood in his throat muffled the sound. Kestryl continued to hold him until his struggles stopped. Penthor had sent them. Penthor the traitor.

The Bladesman looked down and realized he still grasped the hapless assassin's hair. He released it and watched as the body fell the rest of the way to the ground. Before he realized what he was doing, he raised his sword and brought it down. The first blow cleanly severed the head. Each successive blow severed a limb, but it was not Jules the Bladesman struck, but Penthor. Again, a scream of rage built within.

"Penthooooor!"

He started away, only returning and taking the assassin's head as an afterthought.

It was almost dark when the Ethrell woman arrived at the rock wall. If Scarha's description of the place had not been perfect, she'd never have found it. Though she had no clue as to what she was searching for, she knew she had better find something. The Dark One had been certain some clue would exist explaining why the Bladesman had stopped there. And returning to Vykon without at least some idea of what that was, could prove fatal.

It would have been smarter to wait until the next morning to scale the wall, but fear of the Dark One made her desperate. It took almost half an hour to make her way to the top. Several times she almost slipped, and more than once remained frozen for minutes, searching for an irregularity she could use. She was certain most humans would have fallen already.

By the time she pulled her aching, breathless body onto the ledge, the light had dwindled to the point where she could not progress without lighting her lantern.

She searched the caves, working her way deeper and deeper into the side of the mountain. As she moved through each chamber, she silently prayed she might find something to appease her master. When she finished checking the last one, she camped, aware if she didn't find anything the next day, she would pay for her failure. She spent the night tormented by nightmares.

The next morning, on her way out, she found what she was looking for. In the entrance cavern, hidden behind a pile of stones, lay an ordinary metal gauntlet.

It was so old and battered she might have left it there, except for the powerful emanations of magic surrounding it. Not daring to touch so powerful an object, she carefully pulled a sack over it and placed it in her pack. She would bring it back to Vykon and present it to the Dark One. Silently, she prayed to the gods it would satisfy him. She could not afford the consequences if it didn't.

Captain Andres of the Royal Gondylarian Navy sat alone in his cabin. Most men would have found the accommodations lacking, but he was quite fond of them. The room was just too small and the bed just too hard, but they were the standard accouterments of a life at sea, and for that life, Captain Andres would deal with the discomfort.

Andres had loved the sea for as long as he could remember. Even as a child, he had been fascinated by the waves lapping the shore and the distant sails, filled by seaward breezes. He'd always loved boats and everything to do with them, but never imagined he'd be the captain of a large warship like the Sea Serpent. He looked around his quarters at the rather eclectic nature of the souvenirs he'd acquired on his journeys. A necklace purchased in the Islands of Dawn, made from the teeth of some aquatic animal, hung on a nail above a lamp of the type used by Borderlandian miners. Nearby on the table was a dagger, its long thin curved blade expertly etched by the people of the northern wastes. A claw of what he had been told was a dragon, but more likely belonged to some large falcon, rested beside it. As his eyes fell on each piece, he recalled the place it had been found or the shop where he'd purchased it. He often did so when the Sea Serpent was docked.

They were in for repairs and restocking, the last storm they weathered having taken its toll on both the ship and his men. Unlike most of his crew, Andres seldom took shore leave. In fact, he didn't care if he ever set foot on shore again.

His review of artifacts was interrupted by a knock. Without looking, he spoke. "Enter." A single word. A command. He was the captain.

The door swung inward and a sailor stood outside. One of the new recruits. Curlin was his name or something like that. Andres turned his attention back to his artifacts.

"Yes, what is it?"

Curlin cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable. "We've caught a stowaway sir."

Andres turned to study the sailor and stroked his chin. Stowaways on navy vessels were almost unheard of, except for the occasional youth looking for adventure.

"Who is he?"

"He won't say, Sir. Though he did ask for you by name and demanded to be taken to you. We weren't real fond of his attitude and said as much."

No typical stowaway for sure. "And?"

"He said he didn't give a rat's ass what we liked and we could either come and get you or he'd flay us alive."

When the Captain didn't respond, Curlin continued. "Well Captain, there were four of us and just one of him..."

"What happened?"

"Well, there was something hard about him, something I couldn't quite place and mayhap don't want to. He wasn't bluffing. We all looked at each other, then I came to get you."

Andres rose and grabbed his sword belt, buckling it on as he entered the passageway. This didn't sound like a village boy looking for excitement. He quickened his pace, almost happy for the diversion.

He followed Curlin to the deck. The intruder leaned casually against the railing, taking in the other boats, arrogantly ignoring the three armed men behind him. From where he stood, Andres could only see the back of his head, but from his stance and the quality of the blade that hung on his belt, he could tell the man was a warrior.

"You didn't think to disarm him?"

"Like I said, Sir. There was something about him..."

Disgusted, Andres took another step toward the intruder. At that moment, the man turned his head.

"Request permission to come aboard, Captain Andres."

Andres grinned and leaped forward. He embraced the intruder to the astonishment of those watching.

"You are always welcome, dear friend."

The two retreated below, leaving four confused sailors on deck.

A short time later, after Andres had poured them both a glass of red wine, the Bladesman told the tale that began with the death of the Duke and ended with his discovery of Penthor's treachery. Throughout, Andres sat quietly.

"And so," concluded the warrior, "I need your ship."

"And you shall have her, of course. We still need to finish repairs and reprovision. At least another week, possibly two."

"Good enough. One last item. Your crew knows I'm aboard, but not who I am. Let's keep it that way, at least until we're out to sea. I can't take any chance of Penthor finding me."

"I can't believe it. Penthor of all people. I'm not doubting your word, of course, but he was such good friends with Dathan. Are you certain they were his men?"

"You heard the story. Even if the assassin was lying, and I pray to Sheba it's so, who else knew? Who could have predicted my movements or reached me so quickly?"

Andres nodded, his gut telling him part of the story was missing, but his trust in the Bladesman's judgment overriding it. "Perhaps it's true what they say about power. Perhaps all those years in Dathan's shadow changed him."

"That is why I want no part of it."

"Yet you protect it. I will never understand you, Kestryl. You are one of my oldest and dearest friends, but you are a puzzle I fear I shall never solve."

The Bladesman smiled gently. "Someone has to rule. Someone has to stand up to the Dominans and the southern hoards. And Dathan was as fair a man as I'd ever met. Who else to sit on the throne? I just hope we can find Cyanne and get back here, before Penthor really digs in."

"That's a lot to count on. It's two months to get to the Sunset Isles and another two to get to Stratus. And we still have to find Cyanne and get back. A lot can happen in that span of time."

"I know. That's what I'm afraid of. What about heading straight north. It's far more direct. Might take half the time."

"It's far too dangerous. You'll do High Gondylar no good, lying at the bottom of The Mistress."

"I've heard stories of course, but know not the truth of them. Is it really not worth the risk?"

"I will not take my ship directly north. I don't know what you've heard, but I will say this. Very few ships have accomplished that crossing and I'm not going to gamble my command and my crew that I'm going to be one of them."

"I yield to your knowledge of the sea. I'd be a fool not to."

Kestryl downed the rest of his wine and leaned back in the chair. There was nothing to do now, but wait.

Penthor sat in the throne room when the guard came to inform him a messenger had arrived. So much to do. So little time.

"Who's it from?"

"The Bladesman," replied the guard.

"Let's have it."

The messenger entered with a small wooden crate and a scroll. Penthor accepted it. He ignored a dozen curious eyes as he unrolled the scroll and read.

Penthor,

I am returning something that belongs to you. I am certain when you see it, you will recognize it. I must

leave High Gondylar for now, but will return. Enjoy your power while it lasts.

There can be no excuse for what you have done and I will show no mercy. All I can offer is a prayer to Sheba for your soul. Believe me when I tell you, High Gondylar will endure in spite of your efforts. You shall pay for your treachery in blood.

Kestryl

Penthor read the missive three times before looking in the crate. His surprise at the nature of the note was nothing, compared to his astonishment at the contents of the box. Inside, lay the severed head of a red-haired man. His face was already rotting and the odor was enough to sicken the new Duke. The head was mounted on a dagger he immediately recognized as one of the Bladesman's. There could be no question of the note's authenticity. The Bladesman's weapons were all one of a kind. His only problem was, he didn't know to whom the head belonged.

He reread the note again, looking for some clue. According to Kestryl, he should recognize the man, but he did not. Even under ideal conditions, it could be hard to identify a corpse, but after a week or more of decay...

Kestryl must have known that when he sent it. Who was the man and why should Penthor have known him? Of what did Kestryl think him guilty? It was obvious to Penthor there was another player in the game, but who?

Or had the Bladesman, suffering the guilt and pain of the death of his patrons, gone insane? That possibility could not be discounted. In spite of his disgust, he forced himself to look back into the box. He studied the face, until the nausea became too great, then finally turned from it. He was certain he'd never seen the man who'd once owned that head. Why did Kestryl think he had?

Penthor interrogated the messenger, but all he learned from the conversation was the man had been paid generously by a warrior who fit the Bladesman's description.

Penthor had the dagger removed and the head buried. After examining the blade closely, he was certain it was the genuine article, which meant that Kestryl, for whatever reason, had decided to stand against him. A formidable adversary indeed.

He thought long and hard, considering various options. He would dig in and fortify his position as quickly as possible. He had no grudge against the Bladesman, but would not leave High Gondylar leaderless, nor would he give up the throne without a fight. Dathan had placed him there and Penthor had no intention of betraying that trust.

By the time he returned, the Bladesman would need an army to make good his threat.

The Bladesman stood on deck, gazing back at the coastline. He had made it this far, but still had a long way to go. The trip across The Mistress would take four months, barring unforeseen catastrophe. Then he would have to locate a girl...no, a woman he hadn't seen in fifteen years.

What would she be like? Would she be able to fill Dathan's shoes? Would she want to return? So many questions that might never be answered. All Kestryl knew was there could be little doubt that Penthor was responsible for Dathan's death, as well as Amalga's.

"I'll return, Penthor, with or without the Duchess. Then you will pay. For everything."

He stayed on deck, long after the Gondylarian shoreline faded from view.

Chapter Four - Stratus

It was a morning like any other. Outside, people going about their daily business formed a familiar chorus that could almost be ignored, except for the occasional raised voice that brought it back into focus.

Upon awakening, Tanrif opened his eyes, immediately swung his legs over the side of the bed and pushed himself into an upright position. Within a second of reaching consciousness, he was standing. The room came into sharp relief a moment later. He didn't always rise so, but did more often of late. Perhaps he had been dreaming. He could almost remember. He stood alert, ears straining past the normal sounds to pick out anything unusual, but there was nothing. No reason for his sudden awakening.

He poured water from the plain clay pitcher on his bed table into the matching basin, splashed the tepid liquid on his face and dressed quickly. He took a step toward the door, stopped and thought a moment. He walked back across the room and retrieved his sword. Even sheathed, there was no mistaking the quality of the piece. Too long to be a short sword, yet not long enough to be considered a full sword, Tanrif's weapon could be used in tight places. Its double-sided blade was straight, perhaps three inches across at its widest. The pommel, metal wrapped in leather, molded perfectly to his hand. It was a good sword, as much a part of him as his right arm. He regarded it briefly before strapping it on, then turned and left the room.

Downstairs, his father was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. It didn't matter what time Tanrif rose, Varon Imgard was always up first.

"Good morning to you. I thought you were going to sleep all day."

Tanrif grinned. "Not everyone rises with the sun, old man."

His father smiled and turned to look at him. He frowned momentarily when he saw the weapon, but recovered his spirits quickly.

"Thought you might have to kill your own breakfast?"

Tanrif smiled uncomfortably and shrugged. He was not certain why he'd brought the blade. Not knowing disturbed him.

His discomfort was not lost on Varon. "Your restlessness grows every day. I think the time has come."

Tanrif's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. His father continued.

"We've spoken about this before. Your destiny does not lie here, any more than mine did at your age. It's only a matter of time. And I can't teach you anymore. You already know most of what I do. Only experience can take you to the next level."

Varon was referring to the sword. It was the first thing Tanrif had studied, before he'd even learned to read.

Memories of those early lessons would stay with him for the rest of his life, as would the image of his father, too tall and too thin, moving with a speed that belied his age. Varon Imgard was an arms master, which considering his mercenary background was no great surprise.

"You need to hone your skills, Tanrif. You can't do that here. I can see no reason to delay it. You will leave today."

"Today? I'm not ready!"

"If everyone waited until they were ready, nothing would ever get done. Civilization was built by people who weren't ready, but they were ready enough. *You're* ready enough."

Tanrif tried one more time, though he knew from the set of his father's eyes no appeal would be accepted. "The timing's all wrong. I should leave at the end of the summer, when it's cooler. Who wants to travel through this heat?"

"I've spent a good deal of time in High Gondylar, where the heat is far less forgiving. No, today it is. You'll leave right after breakfast." Varon's voice, while kind, was firm, and Tanrif knew there would be no winning this argument.

Breakfast was eaten in silence that morning. He couldn't even remember what he'd had, but shortly after, Tanrif found himself on one of his father's finest horses, riding east toward the great port city Stratus.

The road was typical. There was nothing to set it apart from dozens of other plain dirt tracks that connected one town to another. This particular road was little used, as these days few made the trip from Ularon to Stratus and even fewer traveled in the opposite direction. It was simply a trail worn into the ground as horses and carts moved along it.

The scenery from the road was just as memorable. Small shrubs lined the plain in either direction, broken only by an occasional stunted tree. From the ground at odd intervals, sprung knee-deep grass more brown than green, providing cover to many types of insects and birds. This explained the constant buzzing and chirping that never quite faded. And it was hot, which considering the near proximity of summer, was not much to comment on.

For long periods of time nothing stirred, except the ever-present flies and the occasional bird that attempted to make a snack of them. Then, in the mid afternoon, the sound of hooves shattered the relative stillness.

The approaching rider was a bit of an anomaly, though at first glance you might be hard pressed to tell why. Perhaps the beautiful chestnut mare looked too fine to carry such a young rider. Perhaps the boy astride her was dressed too plainly to be carrying a sword of such obvious quality. Or maybe the look of intensity on that young face might have tickled one's curiosity. It is enough to say that for some reason, on that almost too hot day, the rider and his steed were out of place.

He paced the horse professionally, galloping for a time then slowing to a walk as if he'd worked with such creatures all his life, which in fact he had. Once or twice he dismounted and looked to the sides of the road as some creature caught his attention. He moved confidently, his strut expertly compensating for the weight of his sword, a trait usually found in the most experienced soldiers. There was about him an unnatural stillness seldom seen among men. Most men will pace or fidget nervously or shift their weight about just standing. He was like a rock in the desert, unmovable until he chose to move himself.

His features were sharp, his long brown hair unkempt and his eyes as green as the sea and maybe that deep. Perhaps it was there the mystery originated, for it is hard to picture anyone so young possessing a gaze so powerful. Despite his demeanor, he could not have been far past seventeen.

He turned to his mount and spoke in a voice that was kind, yet strong. "Soon night will come, Fireball. Then you can rest."

The horse snorted and pressed her nose into the young man's back. This brought a smile to his face.

"I know you're tired, but so am I. I didn't expect to be here today either."

He scratched the horse's head and even stopped for a few minutes to let her browse on the brownish grass that now came all the way to the road. He looked at the sun and realized it was later than he thought. He would soon have to camp. He was hotter and less comfortable than he would admit, but that was life. It was hot for everyone.

Tanrif considered riding further, but the thought of another hour mounted did not appeal to him. He looked around again and decided he would sleep here for the night. He took hold of Fireball's reins and crossed the grassy field. After a short search, he found a tree with low enough branches to tie her.

Once certain she was secure, he began to stretch. At length, he drew his blade and slashed the air before him in a single, fluid motion. He sheathed the sword and repeated the action, before moving on to other more challenging moves.

Sweat poured down his face, but he ignored it. The exercise was necessary, especially after a day in the saddle. He continued, starting with the basics and gradually shifting to more complex combinations. His movements were efficient, effortless, almost graceful. By the time he began to wind down the sun had already set. Tanrif continued, easing into the more basic moves again before surrendering to fatigue.

Finally, breathing heavily, he lowered himself to the grass. Perhaps he'd lie down for a bit before eating. Just a few moments. He eased himself backwards, until he was lying flat. Above him, through the fading light, he could barely make out the gnarled branches of the tree. Gradually his breathing slowed, until it fell into the gentle rhythm of sleep.

It was laughter that drew him back. He opened his eyes and almost immediately found his way to his feet. He reached for his blade, but it was not there. The laughter faded.

He was in a corridor of gray stone, both sides of which ended in a stout wooden door. It was cooler than it had been. For that at least, he was thankful.

He had been riding, had made camp and must have fallen asleep. This must be a dream. He tried to will himself awake, to no avail.

He shrugged and walked to one of the doors. He placed his hand on the brass handle, pulled downward, pushed inward. The room beyond was of the same stone as the corridor. Inside, seemingly carved of the same rock, two thrones stood on a platform. Tapestries depicting battles hung on the far wall, the only one he could see clearly. To the right, some sort of musical instrument apparently held a place of honor.

At first, he thought he was alone, then movement caught his eye. He strained to see and for a time did not.

Gradually he became aware of ghost people, vague reflections of reality moving about. If he concentrated, he could see individual features, but recognized no one, until a single figure walked toward the throne. There was something familiar about the ghost; perhaps the way it moved. Tanrif stared as the figure climbed the three steps and turned. It paused before sitting.

Before he could see more, the door slammed shut and he was tossed backwards. He advanced again and tried to push it open, but the door was now locked. Tanrif turned and crossed the corridor quickly to the opposite door. He grabbed the handle and swung it open.

The room beyond was brilliant white and lay claim to a single object; a throne so inlaid with jewels, it was almost painful to regard. He shielded his eyes against the intensity. Again laughter rose like a thousand

tinkling bells, this time from the direction of the throne. He could almost make out a figure sitting there, yet the harder he tried to focus, the less certain he became there was anyone at all. A woman's voice, far away, yet all around him, spoke above the sound of laughter.

"You are mine, Tanrif. You are mine."

Tanrif backed away and the door slammed shut. He continued to retreat, until he stumbled into a pit that had not been there before. He screamed as he fell, while wisps of visions passed by too rapidly for him to glean more than fleeting impressions. He was, he knew, looking at his future. He tried to slow his descent, to capture some hint of what was to come, but could not. The laughter followed him into the pit and stayed with him, until he awoke.

Tanrif opened his eyes and could hear the echo of laughter, until a short time later, when it faded completely. He sat up, disoriented. Nearby, Fireball snorted.

Above him the night was clear. Thousands of stars lit the heavens. Tanrif sighed, stretched and got to his feet.

He ambled to his pack and opened it, clumsily rummaging through its contents until he located a hunk of cheese. He ate a bit, trying in vain to remember the odd dream. Eventually, he gave up. He finished eating, took a swig from his water skin and lay back down. It was many hours before he slept.

By the time Tanrif rose the next morning, the day was already too hot. Cursing, he took a drink of water and splashed some on his face. He paused only to eat a portion of dried fruit before mounting and riding.

Fireball was happy to be moving and at first, he had trouble keeping her back. He had to let her run for a while just to calm her. Fireball, like her rider, enjoyed a good workout. Here the trees dotting the grassland were larger and somewhat closer together.

Tanrif rode straight through the morning and well into the afternoon, when ahead, he noticed an irregularity on the horizon. Though it looked like a rocky outcropping from this great distance, Tanrif knew his goal was in sight. His fatigue vanished. He kicked Fireball into a gallop. The mare, sensing his excitement, flew down the road. It wouldn't be long before they reached the west gate of Stratus.

In the middle of The Mistress, on a merchant vessel called Wind, Hillel stood on deck. The ship was a month out of Athlana, perhaps a quarter of the way to their destination. During that time, the five strange passengers did not eat or speak, at least not in front of his crew. His people were unnerved by the fact and said as much. The last thing Hillel needed was a nervous crew. Scared men made mistakes.

The merchant approached the leader, the one who had hired the ship. In fact, the men looked so similar it was hard to tell them apart. But the leader's sword was of a different type than his men, thus Hillel was able to place him. The warrior stood on deck, looking north as if he couldn't wait to reach their destination. The captain cleared his throat.

Without turning, the warrior spoke. His voice was as cold as the captain remembered it to be.

"Yes, Captain. You wish to speak?"

"My crew is...apprehensive. Your men scare them."

"So?"

"I mean, you don't eat or sleep, you talk with no one. We don't know anything about you, not even why you want to go to Stratus."

The Hellspawn turned toward the captain. The look in his eyes was one the sailor would not soon forget.

"We are going to assassinate the Duchess of High Gondylar."

Hillel drew back and turned away, unable to meet the warrior's intense gaze. Everyone knew the Duchess had already died. Messengers rode into Athlana the day before they'd set sail. The man was either joking or insane. Hillel realized the strange warrior was still staring.

"All right, forget it. I was just trying to make conversation." The merchant turned and walked away without waiting for a reply.

The Dark One of Vykon owned an extensive library. Shelf after shelf of books, many unique, lined the walls. Huge stone columns had been erected to support the high vaulted ceiling as, over time, his collection grew. Several sturdy tables lined one of the walls, filled with the books used most often by the Dark One.

It was here the Dark One retreated, when he needed to think. Now was one of those times.

He had spent so much time following, and subtly manipulating, the Gondylarian political situation, he had ignored until now, the gauntlet. The ancient relic had been bothering him since it had found its way to Vykon. The gauntlet's powerful emanations were indeed so strong, even he dared not try it without first discovering its purpose. He remembered seeing a reference to it in some arcane text, but couldn't remember which.

For three days, he remained sequestered in the library. Three days and no sign of the elusive reference. He was almost ready to give up, when a rough drawing in one of his oldest tomes caught his eye. He studied it, then regarded the gauntlet. He returned his gaze to the book and read the passage under the illustration. There could be no mistake. Through some bizarre twist of fate, one of the most powerful magical relics in the history of Corithim had come into his possession. He lifted it from the table and hesitated only briefly before pulling it over his right hand.

Ages ago, the great wizards had possessed sorcery far more powerful than even his most powerful enchantments. Many of their abilities had long since faded from the world. One had now returned.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. A moment later, he was on his throne. Those present in the chamber were startled by his sudden appearance. The Dark One's eyes blazed. The ancient art of teleportation was his.

The ability was not without risk. Materializing inside a tree or table would kill a man instantly--even one as powerful as the Dark One. His concentration had to be absolute. Still, with this particular ancient power reborn, he would be invincible.

Already a buzz of conversation arose in the dark corners of the chamber. Word of his new power would spread quickly, giving his subjects yet another reason to fear him. His smile was bleak in the darkness.

With the Gauntlet of Teleportation in his possession, nothing could stand in his way.

Tanrif walked the crowded avenue, leading Fireball by her reins. He had stopped to conceal his pouch before entering the city. There would be many thieves about, looking only for an opportunity.

Having made the trip before, Tanrif knew what to expect. Westgate was much as he remembered. It had almost the air of a carnival, but without so many entertainers. There were a few. A juggler and some acrobats performed between dozens of open-air stalls. Proprietors noisily hawked their wares. The smells were of meat roasting on spits, human sweat, alcohol and others not as easily identified. Nearby, a

dog tied to a post barked at passing strangers. Tanrif tightened his grip on Fireball's rein and walked past it.

Westgate was not the main market in Stratus. The merchandise offered here was neither high quality nor inexpensive. Two groups of people patronized the stalls.

The first were those leaving the city, who had forgotten some necessity, yet didn't have time to return to the market proper. The latter, and far more numerous group, were travelers from smaller villages and towns. Awed by the great walls and vast crowds, their purse strings would loosen and they would impulsively buy from the first merchants they encountered. Only later, after visiting the town square, would they realize their error. Few people patronized Westgate a second time.

Tanrif stood for a bit, taking it all in. Though he'd been here before, this was the first time without his father. The strangeness of it set his heart racing as the freedom all but overwhelmed him.

He passed a table selling incense, leather goods and a few cheap daggers. Behind him, a half dozen prostitutes, none particularly attractive, searched the crowd for their mark. His father had once told him to never trust a Westgate prostitute. As he watched, one met his gaze. He turned away quickly and led Fireball deeper into Westgate.

To his left, a flash of movement caught his eye. He turned in time to see a young child dressed in rags, running through the crowd holding an apple. Behind him, a middle-aged merchant chased the boy halfheartedly, calling after him to stop. The child, faster and more agile, easily eluded his pursuer. The merchant called one last time, then cursed. He looked at Tanrif apologetically.

"Ruddy little thieves. Make it so hard to do business."

"I hope Sir, you need never go hungry, before the next time you curse a child for stealing food."

The man glared, but turned away without replying. Tanrif shook his head. The world was full of such people.

Tanrif continued until he left Westgate. The streets were quieter, though he could still hear the muffled commotion from behind. He slowed his pace when he realized he had no idea where he was going. He thought back to previous visits. After a few moments of indecision, he turned south and moved toward the sea. He knew of a nearby stable his father used each time he came to town. He would board Fireball, while he figured out his next move.

By the time the noise of Westgate had faded, Stratus looked much different. There were shops here and there, but of a more permanent nature, some standing alone, others connected in strips. These merchants catered to residents, unlike the market, which was geared toward travelers. In this section Tanrif found the stable.

Boarding his mount was not inexpensive, but Varon would never trust a place that was less than excellent and Tanrif felt Fireball deserved the best. He took what he needed from the saddlebags and made his way to the docks.

Tanrif did not think the sea was far and the hint of salt in the air confirmed his memory. As he continued forward, the shops were replaced by warehouses, low class lodgings and an occasional tavern. A short time later the buildings ended and the rather extensive pier came into view. Tanrif knew it ran for many miles, though this was the only section he could remember visiting.

The docks were a flurry of activity that, if anything, were even more chaotic than Westgate. Workers

loaded and unloaded ships, while sailors worked on repairs or prepared to either make landfall or set out to sea. Spanning the horizon, The Mistress stretched out behind the docks; an enticement to some, a caution to others.

Tanrif walked along the pier enjoying the view, when a voice, slightly hoarse, and very deep, called out.

"You there. Want to lend a hand? There's a meal in it for you and a place to sleep."

Surprised, Tanrif turned. Rapidly approaching was a stout man with uncombed brown hair, a round red face, and the kind of plain brown tunic favored by many longshoremen.

Tanrif smiled at him. "What makes you think I'm looking for work?"

"Well you are, aren't you? First place most of 'em come is 'ere to the docks. Fresh from 'ome, with only what was given 'em by their families. Look lost, most of 'em do. Not you though. So what d'ya say? Sundown's justa nip away and I'm sure you're hungry."

Tanrif hadn't thought about it, but it was true. It would certainly be better to save the gold he had than to squander it, at least until he had some idea of what he wanted to do.

"I'm game. What do I have to do?"

The man smiled, revealing a mouth full of stained teeth. "Name's Daln. I run these piers. Nothing 'appens 'ere, without me knowledge or permission. The King's Ransom."

"Pardon?"

"The ship, the King's Ransom. Just jump up there and the boys'll show ya what to do."

Tanrif turned, following the direction of Daln's outstretched finger. When he turned back, the dockmaster was already hurrying away.

By the time the sun slunk over the horizon, Tanrif was exhausted. He had never worked so hard nor been so tired in his entire life. Afterwards he followed the others to a large, half empty warehouse. Many of the men he'd worked with that day, and others he'd never seen, sat around in small groups, talking. Tanrif chose a place a bit apart from the others. He didn't have long to wait before dinner was served.

The promised meal turned out to be a thick, almost tasteless porridge. A week earlier, Tanrif would have called it barely edible, but after the last two days, it seemed a feast. Tanrif barely looked up, until he had scraped his wooden bowl clean. While one of the men collected the bowls, Tanrif leaned back against a crate and listened to a conversation that had started nearby.

Further away, a small group of men, more rowdy than the rest, spoke and laughed loudly. More than once, one of them turned to look at Tanrif and after a time, one approached.

He was massive and moved with the confidence of a man in his own home. Those in his path scrambled out of the way, as if they would be crushed if they stayed. Tanrif forced himself to relax as he watched the stranger approach. The man stopped just five feet away. He spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear. Apparently Tanrif was to be the night's entertainment.

"I'm called Hammer." The look in his eyes and slight slur of his words led Tanrif to believe he'd been drinking

Tanrif looked up at the larger man and met his eyes, but did not speak.

"I'm talking to you, boy. You lose your tongue?"

"My tongue works just fine, thank you."

"What's your name?"

"Tanrif."

The large man took another step forward and leaned over as if to get a better look. "That's a mighty fine blade you have there. Let me try it out."

"I don't think so. Look, Hammer. I have no problem with you and I've given you no reason to have a problem with me. Why not just let me be and we can keep this peaceful."

The look in Hammer's eyes told Tanrif he'd made a mistake. To add fuel to the flame, a voice called out from one of the others, "He talks like a man, Hammer." This enraged the bully even further.

"Listen to me, you piece of troll shit. I'm the law here. Now give me your sword."

Tanrif, still crouched against the crate, rose slowly.

"No."

A few gasped. Hammer growled and made a fist. From his stance, Tanrif knew he could take him. The man swung. Had that punch connected, it might have caused grave damage, but Tanrif ducked under it. Momentum carried the larger man around and Tanrif's foot shot out, kicking Hammer just behind the knee, causing him to fall in the opposite direction. There were more gasps this time and they were louder. Tanrif stood his ground, waiting to see what the big man would do next. After the first attack, he felt he had little to fear.

Hammer rose painfully and turned to face Tanrif again. "That wasn't smart, boy. I've killed people for less."

"We all must die sometime."

Hammer growled again and moved in. Unlike his first attack, this punch came straight at Tanrif. The young warrior blocked it and returned three short hard jabs to Hammer's exposed face. The large man grunted and backed off.

Hammer wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his left hand. He drew a dagger and approached again.

"That was the last mistake you'll ever make."

Several of the others, even those who had found it entertaining to this point, looked like they thought it had gone too far, but none were willing to intervene and risk Hammer's wrath. All eyes were riveted to the spectacle.

Tanrif almost drew his blade, but decided against it. There wasn't really enough room to swing it and he didn't feel he needed it against so unskilled an opponent, no matter how massive. He waited until the larger man was standing before him.

They regarded each other, then Tanrif moved. Those closest were amazed at the young warrior's speed and agility. He ducked inside Hammer's guard and grabbed his arm, at the same time lashing out with his foot. The sound of Hammer's dagger striking the floor was the first hint to those watching that he'd lost it,

but shortly after, as the large man again went down, a sharp crack broke the stunned silence. Tanrif backed away. Hammer lay on his side, right hand bent at an impossible angle. He pressed his face against the floor, trying in vain to hide his tears.

"I tried to warn you, but you wouldn't listen." He raised his voice to address the rest of the men. "I don't want trouble. However, I can handle it should it come my way. Anyone else want to try me?"

Tanrif had moved away from the crates behind him so he could draw his blade if it became necessary, but no one took up the challenge. Several men dropped their heads.

"Good. By the way, I'm a light sleeper. Don't think that you'll catch me then either. Now, I need some air."

Tanrif strode from the warehouse. He walked confidently, until he turned the corner, where he sagged against the building. He closed his eyes and let out a long sigh. While he'd been trained for such occasions, this was the first time in his life he'd been in real danger. It took him almost an hour to find his calm. He returned to the warehouse later. In the back, men slept on dirty straw pallets. Many, he noticed, were empty.

Tanrif took one, but couldn't sleep. All night long he waited for the sound of approaching footsteps, but his worries were unfounded. Never again did any of them test his ability. The next day, Hammer was gone and Tanrif never saw him again.

Lord Zelaran sat proudly on the back of a fine gelding. Behind him followed his Hound Master, several guards and a number of servants, carrying a large degoran cat, legs bound around a long pole. Zelaran had hunted the large felines before, but never had brought home so impressive a specimen. From the parapet atop his castle, a wave of noise was born, the sound of people cheering. The clamor continued until he had ridden under the portcullis and into the entrance yard.

He dismounted and bowed to the small gathering of lesser nobles waiting to greet him, several of whom were ladies. Each time he left, more and more of the gentler sex were waiting for him to return. Soon, he would have to pick one to marry. However, until that time, he would have his fun with the ones who weren't quite suitable.

Zelaran's seneschal approached and fell in step beside him. "Welcome home, M'lord."

"Hello, Orly. Any news?"

"A messenger awaits you in the throne room."

"Well, let him. I need a proper bath and a nap, first. He waited this long, he'll wait another couple of hours."

"You might want to reconsider, M'lord. This messenger is from Gondylar."

"Penthor? What could he possibly want from me?" Zelaran sighed. "Well, I suppose I shouldn't keep the Duke waiting."

He changed direction at the next intersection, his man following a step behind as protocol demanded. When he entered the throne room, he found a messenger in the livery of the House of Gondylar waiting amidst the usual crowd of servants and minor nobles. As he crossed the room, the seneschal announced his arrival.

"M'lords and ladies. Lord Zelaran of the House of Freyrath."

Everyone stood and bowed, but Zelaran ignored them. He was most anxious to see what the Duke had to say.

When he reached the throne, he turned and sat. Only then did Orly speak. "Messenger from the House of Gondylar, step forward."

The messenger approached the throne and bowed deeply. Orly stepped forward, accepted the leather case from his hand, opened it and proffered its contents to his Lord. Zelaran drew a breath before taking the scroll. He unrolled it and read.

Lord Zelaran

I have thought long and hard before sending this missive. Since the death of the Duchess Amalga, I have spent much time thinking.

As you are no doubt aware, my succession was most unusual. In fact, I may well be the first person not born to one of the Gondylarian noble houses to ascend to the throne. Still, I am Duke of High Gondylar and with that title comes responsibility.

I have been working hard to make certain I fulfill my role in a manner that would do proud the memory of Duke Dathan and yet, there is one matter I have not yet addressed.

The Duke of High Gondylar must have allies. While I have ruled as best I can, I have done precious little to strengthen my position against those who would stand against me.

Traditionally, the house of Freyrath has supported the throne. Of the three greatest noble houses, yours was Dathan's staunchest supporter. I well understand that I am not Dathan and as such, have less to offer for your support. After much consideration, I believe I have come upon an adequate arrangement.

In return for your support and allegiance, I would make you this offer. I will take as my bride a noble woman from the House of Freyrath, so that the heir to the Gondylarian throne will be one of your own. I will have thus fulfilled my obligation to provide an heir, for who could object to a child of Freyrath sitting on the throne when I finally step down?

I understand this is highly irregular, but so is the situation. I have not contacted your competitors yet and will not, until I have your answer. For Dathan's sake, I owe you at least that.

I anxiously await your response.

Penthor

Duke of High Gondylar.

Zelaran lowered the note and stared into space. Penthor was brilliant. This was an offer he could not refuse. Penthor had to know he would only allow one of his own offspring to marry into the house of Gondylar. That meant he would have to marry and sire a daughter. Once that daughter was old enough to wed, she would marry Penthor, but that would be many years down the road.

In effect, Penthor had set up a situation where his own unusual position would directly affect the House of

Freyrath, even though it would be many long years before Zelarar might benefit from the relationship. He could not afford to decline the offer. Any of his competitors would jump at the opportunity. Zelarar looked at the messenger.

"Return to Duke Penthor and tell him to expect my answer within the week."

He might have no choice, but he didn't want to seem eager. Nor would it be easy for him to select a bride. Indeed there were so many young, beautiful women in his court, he would have a hard time choosing one. Not that once he was married, it would stop him from having fun with the others.

He glanced around the chamber. Nobles watched surreptitiously, wondering at the news from Gondylar. Well, let them wonder. He stood, studiously ignored those around him and strode from the room. Orly fell into step behind him.

"Good news, M'lord?"

"You'll find out. Right now, get some servants to draw me a bath and lay out fresh clothes. I'll want to change before dinner."

He waved Orly away, well aware the man was as curious about the message as anyone. He smiled as he climbed the stairs toward his chamber. It was important to remind servants of their role. Orly was important to the smooth operation of his castle and because of that was entitled to special privileges, but knowledge of state matters was not one of them. He could wait to find out the news with the rest of them.

Zelarar was tired but happy when he finally reached his chambers. The guards by the side of the door had straightened to attention when they heard the sounds of his approach. He nodded at them curtly and entered.

It was dark. He crossed the room and went to open the heavy velvet drapes, when a man's voice brought him to a halt.

"Please don't. I prefer the dark."

He whirled and scanned the room, surprised to find a tall, shadowy figure standing where there had been no one moments ago. In the gloom, he could not clearly make out the man's features.

"Who are you and how did you get in here?"

"I am the Dark One of Vykon."

Zelarar turned and walked away from the drapes. "Vykon? Never heard of it."

"Not surprising, since I don't go out of my way to promote its existence." The intruder took a step toward him. "I highly recommend you accept Penthor's gracious offer."

"And how is it that you happen to know about it?"

"I know much that is hidden. And as good as his deal is, mine is even better. Work for me and I'll be kind to you."

"Work for you! Do you know who I am?"

"Indeed I do. But you don't know who I am."

With those words, the Dark One grabbed hold of the noble's arm. A moment later they were standing in the library at Vykon.

"What manner of sorcery is this?" asked Zelaran.

"I have long planned to take possession of the throne of High Gondylar, but I have no desire to sit upon it. That will be your job, if you accept my offer."

"And if I don't?"

"I don't think there's much chance of that."

The Dark One gestured and spoke a few words in the old speech. At once, Zelaran's body was suffused with pain. He fell to his knees, clawing helplessly at his chest and arms.

"This is what you will do. You will accept Penthor's offer with great enthusiasm. You will do everything and anything you can to endear yourself to the man...for now. When the Bladesman left High Gondylar, some of the palace guard deserted. More guards followed shortly after I started the rumor that Kestryl was planning to oppose Penthor's claim to the throne. Replace the missing guards with men of your own. Do it quietly. Find ways to get rid of other guards, until your men outnumber Penthor's. He will be a prisoner in his own palace. They don't have to do anything. It is enough that they will be there."

Through his pain, Zelaran spoke. "You're asking me to commit treason."

"Treason? Come now. You know you haven't a moral worth discussing. Let us not mince words. You want to serve me, don't you?"

The Dark One gestured again and the pain doubled, causing Zelaran to writhe on the floor, screaming at the top of his lungs. The Dark One watched dispassionately, until he was certain he'd made his point. He waved his hand again and the pain diminished.

"I can find you anywhere on Corithim and bring myself to you instantaneously. How will you ever be able to defend yourself? There is no way to keep me out and no way to save your worthless hide should you fail me. Now, I can continue to torture you until you beg to do my bidding, or you can work for me willingly and profit from our relationship. You don't have to answer me now. Think about it. Just don't cross me. Not many survive the attempt. You will. You won't want to, but you will."

On his hands and knees, the great Gondylarian noble looked up at his new master.

"I will do what you require."

After yielding to the Dark One, Lord Zelaran collapsed on the stone floor, unconscious.

"Of course you will. You will own Penthor and I will own you." *And Vykon will rule High Gondylar.*

The Dark One returned Lord Zelaran to his castle, leaving only the memory of pain to remind him of his servitude.

Chapter Five - The First Attempt

During the next four months, Tanrif grew to be a seasoned veteran of the port of Stratus. He knew most of the captains, recognized many of the ships and was generally accepted by most of the workers. He

was treated with a great deal of respect, possibly because he worked as hard as anyone, but more likely because his altercation with Hammer had become wildly exaggerated. However, no matter how little the telling resembled the actual event, the young warrior never bothered to set the record straight.

Tanrif found life on the docks agreed with him. He worked hard each day, exercising his tanned body by lifting and carrying. After dark, he'd watch the lights on the water or have a drink with his fellow workers in one of the numerous ocean-side taverns. Sometimes, after a particularly long day, they would go off in search of women for hire. It may not have been what he had envisioned himself doing, but it was a living.

The only stain on his existence appeared erratically on moonless nights, when the wind whipped off The Mistress. At such times, a mood might settle on him bordering on morbidity. On those nights, he'd stare into the darkness and listen to the sound of the ocean, hoping to drown out the voice within. It never did.

A restlessness would seize him and he would seek out one of the darker alehouses in the neighborhood called Demongate. Even the town guard, rather than risking their own necks, avoided the area, preferring to let the outlaws kill each other.

There was no telling what would happen on such a night, but more often than not, it would end in a brawl of gigantic proportion. On more than one occasion, the next morning found Tanrif lying in an alley, bruised and bleeding. Somehow, he managed to hold on to both his pouch and sword, though *how* was a question he'd never been able to answer.

On one such night, Tanrif found himself at a tavern aptly named The Broken Sword. Certainly it no longer served the purpose for which it was designed. To Tanrif, a tavern should be a second home, a place to enjoy oneself. People went to The Broken Sword for trouble and Tanrif was no exception. In his current mood, he didn't need much of an excuse to pummel someone. Consequently, he was scanning the tables looking for trouble, when he first saw Galith---a man so completely out of place, Tanrif had no choice but to notice him.

The average patron of the pub was surly and intimidating, while Galith was short, neatly dressed and completely non-threatening. The man was too richly appointed to be a regular in Demongate, yet he sat as if he had no modicum of fear. Paradoxically, it was his manner that offered him protection from the other denizens of Demongate. Either he was a mage of great power and therefore not to be trifled with, or completely insane and therefore dangerous.

Tanrif's first impression was one of mild disinterest. He might have remained that way, had the gentleman in question not taken an interest in *him*.

The man's gaze wandered almost too blandly around the room, as if he were searching for someone but didn't want it known. On two such occasions, his eyes fell upon Tanrif. It seemed the man's gaze lingered on him a bit longer than on anyone or anything else, though it took one more repetition before he was certain. The finely garbed stranger was watching him.

Tanrif rose slowly so as not to alarm him. If the man left now, Tanrif would not know why he was being spied on. The young dockworker staggered toward the door as if drunk, taking a path that would bring him within a few feet of the stranger.

His performance was convincing. No one gave him a second glance as he wove his way through the crowd. When he reached the point closest to his target, he moved suddenly, sliding into the seat across from the man. In the same motion, he reached out and grabbed the stranger's wrist.

For the briefest of moments, Tanrif thought he saw hatred in those almost black eyes. The expression vanished so quickly, it might well have been imagination.

"You're watching me. Why?"

The man glanced quickly at his wrist, obviously weighing his chances of escape. He leaned forward.

"Would you mind unhanding me? This is a very expensive tunic." His voice was far deeper than Tanrif had thought it would be.

Tanrif stared at him, then began to chuckle. He let go, but was ready to move. The stranger, however, remained seated.

"You are called Tanrif?", he asked.

"I might be. What's it to you?"

A hint of panic touched the man's eyes, before he brought it under control.

"We must not be seen together. You are in great danger."

"Life is full of danger."

"Meet me at the Hanged Man, tonight at midnight. We'll talk then. And in the name of all that's holy, be careful."

A thousand questions raced through Tanrif's mind. The man rose to leave.

"Who are you? Why can't we talk here?"

"My name is Galith and we've already spent too much time at the same table. I'll tell you everything you need to know later. Until then, good-bye."

The man moved toward the door without looking back. Tanrif continued to sit for a long while after, wondering why he was suddenly so afraid.

Though the official name of the street was Trader's Way, the locals called it Murder Alley. It was one of the few areas of Stratus that was forbidding even during daylight. Just before midnight, with the sounds of the ocean a whisper in the distance, it instilled fear in even the stoutest warriors. In Tanrif's blackest moods, he never came here. How Galith had known about it was yet another mystery.

The Hanged Man was a run down hole of a place that might have been closed for a decade or more. Only the low steady buzz of countless whispered conversations informed passersby it was open for business.

Tanrif entered and walked to the bar without looking around. He kept his hand close to the hilt of his sword, but his confident gait was enough to deter most professionals.

Only after he'd straddled a stool, did Tanrif turn to survey his surroundings. He scanned the room, trying to locate Galith's face through billows of smoke. Even without the extra handicap, the lack of light would have prevented him from recognizing the man. He turned back to the bar and ordered an ale.

Just when he was beginning to think the entire event had been a hoax, he felt a hand gently touch his shoulder. He turned slowly, ready to draw his weapon if need be. When he saw it was a prostitute, he relaxed.

"Hey honey. Wanna buy me a drink?"

Tanrif looked her over critically. She wasn't bad looking. At a different time he might have made use of her, but tonight he had other matters to consider.

"Sorry. I'm waiting for someone."

The woman stepped closer. Tanrif could smell the scent of her, beneath the heavier odor of perfume.

"Is she as pretty as me?"

She leaned even closer, teasing his ear with her lips. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "He's outside, across the way. Be certain you are not followed."

Tanrif grabbed the woman and shook her, but dared not yell. "What is this about?"

Fear replaced confidence in the woman's eyes. Before she could reply, Tanrif shoved her backwards. She tripped over a stool and landed heavily on the ground.

Several people looked in their direction, then just as quickly turned away. Such abuse was common enough to be accepted and ignored. Tanrif, after a moment of tension, released his breath. Without glancing at the woman, he made his way out the door.

The ominous nature of the evening's events made the night seem darker. Slowly, he crossed the avenue, straining to see through the shadows opposite. He moved closer, tension mounting with each step.

"Galith?"

He continued forward. A thing he'd never been able to pinpoint caught his attention. Even as he turned, he knew it was too late. The moon emerged briefly from behind a cloud, just in time to illuminate the short curved blade of Galith's dagger. Tanrif dodged as it swept toward him. The reflex saved his life, at least for the moment. The blade missed its mark, embedding itself deeply into his side. He stood facing Galith, watching his blood drip from the dagger's black blade.

Tanrif grimaced, though he knew when the shock wore off, the pain would be worse. Galith stepped forward, hatred transforming his face into a hideous mask. "Why?" It was all Tanrif could think to say.

"I suppose it would be proper for me to introduce myself before I take what's left of your miserable life. I am Galith, Master Assassin of Sarith. Now and forever, I put an end to the threat."

The smaller man moved in for the kill.

The moonlight faded once again, as if it hadn't the heart to witness the carnage below. Galith approached, but Tanrif saw Varon Imgard instead. He stood across from his father as he had so many times. The moves returned to him as if he'd done them forever. He moved inside the would-be assassin's guard, grabbing his wrist with one hand and slamming his shoulder into Galith's now exposed midsection at the same instant.

Hatred turned to shock as Galith felt his feet leave the ground. He landed hard on his back. Before he could react, Tanrif fell upon him, fists flying in a long rehearsed pattern.

For how long he pummeled his victim, he couldn't say. It wasn't until he heard voices from across the way that he came to his senses. Patrons of The Hanged Man perhaps, calling it a night.

He looked down at Galith's limp form. In the darkness, he couldn't be certain whether or not the assassin was dead. Tanrif looked up and down the street, but could see no one. Suddenly, he was terribly afraid to be caught with a corpse. His wound forgotten, Tanrif rose and fled into the night. A short time later,

the skies opened up and the downpour began.

Tanrif continued his flight, twice falling and regaining his feet. Soon, his strength dwindled. He looked about frantically, trying to find some landmark to inform him of his whereabouts, but recognized nothing. He continued moving again, fighting the rain and wind. Thunder and lightning joined the chorus, further instilling in him a sense of urgency.

Almost spent, he collapsed against a wall and slid down. As he lay there, he looked up and saw the smear of blood above him, wondering how much of it was his. With the last of his strength, he pulled himself along the wall.

The stone beneath his hands became wood. Tanrif found a door. With the last of his strength, he pounded, certain no one would hear him above the storm. Finally his body could no longer take the strain and Tanrif slipped mercifully into unconsciousness.

The coast of The Skyshore Realm was one of the most beautiful sights Captain Hillel had ever seen. Not only did sight of the light blue sand move him, but also the knowledge he would soon be rid of his passengers. The crew seemed to share his enthusiasm.

As he stood on deck watching the port grow closer, the leader of the dark men, as he'd come to think of them, was beside him.

"I wish to purchase your dinghy."

Hillel was so unaccustomed to conversing with his passengers, at first he thought he'd imagined it.

"My dinghy?"

"How much do you want for it?"

Hillel thought for a moment. "Twenty gold selvars."

A ridiculous sum. No one in their right mind would pay half the amount. When the dark man counted out the coins from the sack on his waist, Hillel was dumb struck.

"I trust I can count on your discretion."

Hillel, still looking at the coins, could only nod. Suddenly, the other four were behind their leader. Within minutes, they expertly lowered the craft into the sea, boarded and set off. Hillel watched them depart, feeling more relaxed than he had in many months. His first mate stepped forward to stand beside him, eyes also on the departed craft.

"Odd men. I wonder what they might be about."

Without taking his eyes from the dinghy, Hillel replied. "They are going to assassinate the Duchess of High Gondylar."

The first mate looked at him strangely, but said nothing.

"Nay lad, I don't understand it any better than you, but I think there might be some truth to it, gods save me."

Zelaran stopped to compose himself before passing through the double doors leading to the throne room. This was the first time Penthor had requested a formal audience with him since his arrival several weeks before. Though he was prepared for almost anything, he was still nervous. He had the distinct feeling his

future at the palace would depend upon the results of this interview.

"You wished to see me, Excellency?"

"Yes, Lord Zelarar thanks for coming so quickly."

"I am here to serve."

"So you've said. I have a question to ask you. A few of the guards have mentioned that you've been very hard on them. I understand you've let go quite a few."

"That is true. I can't stand inefficiency. Guards leaving their posts, drinking and gambling on duty. It's unthinkable. I'm certain none of this would be going on if Kestryl were still here."

Penthor bit back a comment. "Perhaps you're right, but did it ever occur to you that by letting all of these guards go, we're making it harder on the ones we have left?"

"May I speak with you alone, M'lord?"

"Of course," said Penthor.

The Duke stood, descended the steps and put his arm around Zelarar's shoulder, guiding him out of the room and down the corridor.

"What's on your mind?"

"Are you aware many of the guard are still loyal to Kestryl? That they speak of his return with great enthusiasm?"

"No, I was not."

"It's true, you know. I listen to them. I've taken the liberty of hiring new guards to replace the one's I've let go. Men who will be loyal to Gondylar, not Kestryl. You shouldn't have to deal with that sort of petty nonsense. You're a busy man. And if Kestryl should return, you'll need loyal men protecting you. Speaking of which, isn't it time you selected another Bladesman?"

"Long past time, but you see, that's a problem. Kestryl had been Bladesman for so long, some people have forgotten it's just a title. If I assign another, my popularity will descend even further. Kestryl is a legend. How can I choose his replacement?"

"If you had a Bladesman, perhaps the palace guard would be in better shape. If you'd like, I can review all the guards, pick the best of them and make him Bladesman. I would get your blessings first, of course."

"Of course."

"If it becomes known that I insisted, your reputation will not be stained."

"And why would you be willing to do this for me?"

Zelarar looked surprised. "To make the palace safer for my daughter. Certainly you understand that. My daughter will be the Duchess of High Gondylar. I will do anything to make certain she is safe."

Penthor remembered Dathan and Amalga's sacrifice and how it pained them. "I'm sure you would." He stopped to think. Zelarar remained silent. "Do it. It's time we put Kestryl behind us."

"Do you really think he'll return?"

Penthor remembered all too vividly the Bladesman's final message. "I'm afraid I do."

"Well then. We best start making arrangements to meet him."

The two continued to talk well into the night.

The corridor looked the same as it had the last time. *The last time? When was that?*

He remembered having been there, but not when, as if he had once dreamed of that place.

He didn't bother with the doors. He knew what lay beyond them. Instead, he concentrated on the pit. His future swirled within, too fast to decipher. He watched the rapidly shifting images, until one rose above the others, spinning in the air before him. A day ago he'd have had no name to associate with that face. Now he did. Galith.

The assassin's face contorted into a mask of loathing frightful to regard, but Tanrif forced himself to meet that gaze. It seemed to spit the words at him. Though he'd heard them before, he was still unable to unravel their meaning.

"I suppose it would be proper for me to introduce myself before I take what's left of your miserable life. I am Galith, Master Assassin of Sarith. Now and forever, I put an end to the threat."

The shape moved, almost faster than the young warrior could follow. One moment it stood there, then it leapt forward, plunging a black curved blade deep into his side. As the assassin faded from view, Tanrif realized he was indeed dreaming. Yet the pain was real. He was caught between worlds, until the dream receded, leaving consciousness in its wake.

Sensation came to him first. His side throbbed as if someone were jumping on it. At first, he was content to lie there, until he recalled the attack and his panicked flight through the storm. He forced his eyes open.

The bed on which he lay was a far cry above the straw pallets he'd grown used to since leaving home. He turned his head slowly, trying to gain from his surroundings some clue as to where he might be.

Though the room was not large, it was well appointed. Silk curtains framed the single window. A sculpture that looked to be made of bronze sat on a wooden shelf opposite the bed. Two walls sported tapestries, one depicting a pastoral setting, the other a battlefield. The basin on the table beside the bed was made of china and the pillow beneath his head was full of feathers. A fine handmade quilt kept him warm.

He tried to sit and immediately regretted it. Pain bit into his side and his head spun. He sank back down on the pillow. At least he seemed to be out of danger.

He thought about Galith and the attack. He could think of no reason for anyone to want him dead. What had the assassin said? *Now and forever, I put an end to the threat.* What could that mean? There were only two possible conclusions.

Either Galith had mistaken him for someone else or the man was a lunatic. Neither alternative was one Tanrif desired to embrace.

The door opened and a woman about his age entered. Her hair was short, straight and very blond. She moved like a dancer as she approached the bed. Her green eyes met his and he saw concern there. From the start, she emanated a certain solidity that appealed to him.

"Good afternoon." Her voice, like her body, was compact and strong. "I see you're awake."

His own voice by contrast was a hoarse whisper. "Where am I?"

"You are a guest of Demendil. This room is just above his shop. My name's Lylea. I work for him."

He tried again to sit and she moved forward quickly.

"I wouldn't attempt that yet at least for a while. The wound may not have been deadly, but it has to be painful."

Tanrif sank back onto the pillows. "I thank you for your kindness."

"You work at the docks, don't you?"

"How do you know? We haven't met before. If we had, I'm sure I'd remember."

"Perhaps you would, had you been sober. You weren't. I was on a ship from Theraynta carrying processed iron. As I walked down the gangplank you told me a woman shouldn't be conducting business there because the docks were dangerous after sunset."

Tanrif blushed.

"Ah," she laughed, "I see you do remember. You were right. The docks are dangerous after dark." She looked pointedly at his wound. "I'll be back soon. I have to tell Demendil you're awake. I'm sure he'll want to see you."

It was the second time in a short span he'd heard the name and it sounded familiar.

"Tell me, Lylea, is there some reason why I should know this Demendil?"

"He made your sword."

Then he remembered. Not just a weaponsmith...*the* weaponsmith. Demendil forged the finest weapons in The Skyshore Realm, if not all Corithim.

"Yes, of course. My father has quite a collection of original Demendil."

"Really? I mean... "

"Just because I unload ships for a living, doesn't mean my father is not a man of considerable means."

"What made you choose the docks?"

"First place I stopped. I suppose you could say the docks chose me. I never had the urge to do anything else."

She looked into his eyes and shook her head. "No. A flame burns in your heart. You could not have stayed for much longer. You weren't at rest."

"What makes you think so?"

"It's a talent of sorts. I can read people sometimes. Not all people and not always clearly, but when I can I'm seldom mistaken. You still haven't told me your name."

"Oh, sorry. I'm Tanrif."

"Well, Tanrif, I have a few things to take care of and you need to get some rest. We can talk more later, if you're up to it."

"I'd like that."

Without another word she left the room, leaving Tanrif alone with his thoughts.

Galith, sporting a bruised and swollen face, stared at the man before him.

"What do you mean his horse is gone?"

The stable hand swallowed. In spite of his size, Galith did not seem a person to be taken lightly.

"Early this morning. He took his mount, paid me and left. He didn't say where he was going."

"It doesn't matter. I know where he's going. Very well. Saddle me up. If I ride hard, perhaps I can overtake him."

"I wouldn't count on it. That horse of his was one in a million. I'd wager she could outrun the wind."

"Spare me the metaphors and fetch my steed if you will."

Galith waited until his horse was saddled. Then he leapt on its back and left the stables at a gallop. Outside, a young man jumped back just in time to avoid getting trampled. He cursed, but the horseman paid him no mind.

The stable hand walked outside and watched until Galith disappeared from sight. He chuckled and returned inside. He pulled the dagger from his belt and studied it.

He never thought he'd own an original Demendil. It was truly a work of art and he was happy to have it. And the price had been right. All he had to do was release the young man's horse and lie to anyone who came asking about it.

He wasn't sure whether the story the blond woman gave him was true and it didn't matter. He could always get a job at another stable. He'd never have a chance at a Demendil blade again. Happily, the lad returned to work, the hint of adventure a welcome distraction from his usual chores.

In the heat of the afternoon, five horses left Westgate at a full gallop. Though the riders were each dressed according to personal taste, they were unified by the grim expressions they wore. Most travelers on the road gave them wide berth, perhaps sensing the urgency of their trip, perhaps the dangerous nature of their identities, for they were all of them, Sarithan Assassins.

In the lead, Galith leaned forward pushing his steed to the limit. He had no doubt Tanrif had run home to his father and Ularon. It would be best if he could catch the boy before then. There would be little chance of witnesses on this forsaken road.

When he'd first received the assignment from the High Priest, he had scoffed at the idea he'd need assistance. He was a Master Assassin. No boy, no matter how dangerous, was beyond his ability. He was no longer certain. He'd underestimated Tanrif. It was a mistake he could not afford to repeat.

He now knew the young longshoreman was too dangerous to let live. His foolhardiness had cost him, if for no other reason then he might now have to take on Varon Imgard as well as the boy. He raised a hand to his face, running his fingers over numerous abrasions. Whatever else happened, Tanrif would be made to pay, even if it was the last act of Galith's life.

Chapter Six - The Attack

When Tanrif next awoke, he was less disoriented. Gently, he touched the bandage covering his wound. Pain stabbed at him and he drew back his hand. He was lucky to be alive.

For a long time he lay there, trying to remember everything he could. He tried again and again to recall Galith's exact words. Search as he might, he could find no clue as to why the man should bear him malice. He was lost in such thoughts, when there came a gentle tapping at the door. Before he could respond, it opened.

A man entered, garbed in an outfit that immediately identified him as well-to-do. He was larger than most, both in height and girth. His brown hair had once perhaps matched his eyes, before gray began to overtake it. In spite of his age, he moved with the silent ease of a fighting man. He approached the bed and smiled.

"How do you feel?"

Tanrif thought about sitting up, but remembered his last attempt. He returned a weak smile of his own.

"Better than I have any right to. You must be Demendil."

"That I am. And you are Tanrif, son of Varon Imgard."

"I'm glad to finally meet the greatest smith on Corithim. Your weapons are art. I would carry none other."

"You do me great honor, but I fear there are others as skilled. Tell me, how is Varon?"

Tanrif had spent his life surrounded by Demendil's creations, but it never occurred to him the smith and his father were acquainted.

"You know him?"

Demendil sighed. "He still does not speak of me. I suspected as much. He's the most stubborn man I've ever met."

"I take it he was more than just a client."

"Your father and I were the closest of friends. When he was younger, we had many adventures together. I even saved his life once."

Tanrif struggled into a sitting position in spite of the pain. "What happened?"

Demendil studied the younger man's face as if contemplating how much to reveal. "Let's just say Varon and I had a disagreement concerning your mother."

"You knew my mother?"

"I was in love with her." The weaponsmith turned away and stared into the past.

"I wish I had known her."

"Aleara was a very strong woman. It took me a long time to come to terms with her death."

"What was she like?"

"She was a fiery little redhead. Fast to laugh, but also quick to lose her temper. She had a love for life that was infectious. And she was devastatingly intelligent. I could never have the last word with her. No one could. Yet somehow, when she won an argument, it wasn't so painful. But now you must satisfy *my* curiosity. What happened to you?"

Reluctantly, for he still wanted to hear more about his mother, he told the weaponsmith about Galith and the events leading up to the attack. When the tale was done, Tanrif was exhausted. He sank back down.

"You're certain he said Master Assassin of Sarith?"

"I'll never forget it."

Demendil stood and walked toward the window. He glanced out, then turned back toward the bed.

"I take it you've never heard of the Sarithan Assassins. They're a religious sect that worships Sarith, the Goddess of War and Cruelty. They are also one of the most powerful organizations on Corithim. They are not like other assassins. They cannot be hired. They receive their targets from the Priesthood. Usually it's someone whose death will strengthen their political agenda or someone they see as a threat."

"I can see how a dockworker would threaten such a powerful brotherhood. After all, with my temper..."

"Tanrif, there's nothing funny about this. Kings toss in their sleep for fear they might have offended the Sarithan Assassins. Even Lord Vekketh pays them tribute."

"I'm no King."

"It doesn't matter. If they have reason to believe you are a threat and this Galith really is of that Brotherhood, he will stop at nothing to see you dead. You are in grave danger."

"It's just not possible. There must be some mistake."

"Do me a favor. Stay here as my guest and give me a chance to find out."

"Do you think you can?"

"Probably. I've developed many connections over the years. One does in my line of work."

"I suppose that's true. Very well. I'll wait here for now. It's not as if I can go back to work anyway, but I'm telling you, they're after the wrong man."

Demendil studied him. "Perhaps."

The way he said it made Tanrif uncomfortable.

With darkness rapidly approaching, Galith decided to camp for the night. He led the Assassins off the road to a copse of trees a hundred yards distant. If anyone passed, Galith would know it.

Bone took first watch, while the others slept. Galith, as leader of the mission, was spared guard duty, but was not tired. He stayed awake staring at the road. After a time, Bone squatted beside him.

"You might want to get some sleep. He is certainly ahead of us."

Galith glanced at him. The younger Assassin was the most competent of the lot and therefore the most

dangerous. Galith was glad he outranked him.

"I cannot sleep. I will not, until I see the boy dead."

"You talk as if we're trailing a professional demonlayer. He's a child."

Galith turned. "Look at my face. Does this look like the work of a child? I tell you there's something unnatural about this one. I've killed larger and far more experienced men. And let us not forget the prophecy."

"Ah, the prophecy. I have a question for you. If this boy is destined to be our undoing, how can we kill him?"

Galith turned his gaze back to the road. "I don't know. My art is killing, not philosophy. If the High Priest tells me to kill a bird, I do it. I am not wise enough to question the wisdom of the Priesthood. Are you?"

"Of course not. If Ezewdra says we kill him, then that is what we must do. I just don't understand how we can change fate."

"You don't need to understand. Just do as you're told."

Bone bowed low. "By your command."

The younger Assassin turned away, not yet ready to challenge Galith's authority, though the day he would was not far away. Bone's attitude had been bordering on disrespectful since Galith's failure. This time he would get the job done, prophecy notwithstanding. It wasn't as if the boy were immortal. Galith had only one question. He drew a deep breath, climbed to his feet and walked to where Bone had retreated

"A better question might be this. What if by killing the boy, we somehow seal our own fate?"

"A fair question for which I have no answer. I don't think anyone does. I know only this. Whatever happens to the Sarithan Assassins, I will survive. I don't know how I know, but I do."

Galith studied Bone's face in the moonlight, then walked away. The young Assassin's words bordered on blasphemy. If he didn't watch himself, he would get into trouble.

Fortunately, Bone's future was not his concern. He sat back on the ground and thought about Tanrif. Finally he stretched out, though true to his word, he remained awake for the rest of the night.

A crowd of men stared at the leader of the Hellspawn. Most were too drunk to feel fear. Others stayed only close enough to hear his words.

"I seek a young woman of perhaps twenty years with black hair and violet eyes. Her name is Cyanne. I am willing to pay handsomely for information on her whereabouts." At this he pulled a heavy pouch of coins from his belt.

The Hellspawn scanned the group. Several shook their heads. A few looked around, as if she might be standing next to them. One or two others thought about trying to find some way to cash in, but a look at the dark warrior and his companions was enough to awaken their wiser selves. No one in their right mind would double-cross such men. "We will be staying at the Crystal Spring Inn. Any help in this matter will be most appreciated."

Without another word, the Hellspawn walked through the crowd and entered the night. He had many more stops to make this evening.

Cyanne was suddenly awake and didn't know why. She lay still for a time, barely breathing. She listened to the buzzing of insects and the shrill cry of night frogs. The world was as it should be. Whatever had disturbed her sleep was gone.

She closed her eyes and allowed her other senses to work; senses borne of her Ethrell ancestry. The air felt heavy, as it did before a great storm. She stood and looked into the night, but the sky above was cloudless. Briefly, she contemplated lying back down, but knew she would not be able to sleep. In spite of the inherent danger of riding at night, she packed up her bedroll, saddled her horse and mounted. She needed to get home as soon as possible.

Two days after Tanrif had regained consciousness, he was out of bed. Lylea tried to keep him there longer, but he was restless and wanted to see the shop. After an hour of artful persuasion, she relented, but assured him he'd be right back to bed at the first sign of weakness.

Tanrif took his time descending the stairs, though he didn't feel it was necessary. Lylea, however, hovered over him, waiting for a manifestation of the slightest pain. He wasn't going to spend another day in bed. From the way he felt, his wound could not have been as serious as he'd first thought.

The shop itself was all he'd hoped for and more. First of all it was huge. Every type of weapon imaginable was present, from longer pole axes and halberds to the thinnest stilettos. Demendil was indeed a master at his craft. Tanrif wasted no time browsing through the countless racks. He picked up a scimitar and took a few practice cuts. Lylea was on him immediately.

"We'll have none of that."

Tanrif drew a breath and let it out slowly. "Listen. I appreciate your concern. I really do. I just don't think the wound was as bad as you think it was."

"It was pretty bad. An inch in almost any direction and you wouldn't be with us today."

"You saw it?"

"Who do you think undressed you and tended it?"

Tanrif stood silently, trying to think of something to say. He could feel color creeping into his cheeks.

Lylea, eyes full of mischief, couldn't let the opportunity pass. "You have nothing to be ashamed about. You're in terrific shape. I mean really well put together."

He turned and carefully examined the sword rack, well aware she continued to watch him. "Well, perhaps you misjudged the severity of the wound, because of the blood. A good part of it may have been Galith's. In any case, I've always healed quickly."

"I'm afraid not. Look Tanrif, I've been about a bit. I've had some pretty wild adventures myself. More than a few ended in injury. Most of the time they weren't mine. The point is, I've treated more than a handful of wounds and to be plain, I'm surprised you're standing."

"It's my body and I say I'm healing quite nicely."

"All right. Let's have another look at it, shall we?"

Tanrif's face turned white. "What? Here?"

"In the back room. The shop's closed. We're alone."

Tanrif had undressed before women, but most of the time, he'd paid them beforehand. This was something quite new.

"I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"You want to look around. That's fine, but before I allow you to start playing with weapons, I've got to satisfy myself you're up to it. I know how stubborn men can be, believe me. We'll step into the back, I'll take a quick peek and, if what you say is true, you can try out anything you want."

Tanrif's modesty competed with his love of weapons. It wasn't much of a contest. "Okay. But just for a moment."

Lylea smiled innocently. Together they walked to the back. A small sitting room doubled as a waiting area, allowing customers to relax while work was being performed. He raised his tunic and pulled it over his head. Then he lowered his breeches, just enough so she could see the wound. He thought she was going to have more fun at his expense, but instead, she drew a breath. Tentatively, she reached out and touched the scar.

"That's impossible."

"I told you. I heal quickly."

"And I'm telling you, I bandaged the puncture two days ago and there is no way it could have healed in that time."

"Unless you misjudged."

"No." She didn't sound very sure.

"What are you suggesting then?" It was Tanrif's turn to be amused.

"I don't know."

Tanrif pulled on his tunic and returned to the shop proper, leaving Lylea alone with her thoughts. Only a few minutes later, there was a knock at the side door. Tanrif looked toward the back room, but Lylea had still not emerged. He almost called her, but decided to answer it himself.

A more cautious man would have asked who it was, but Tanrif didn't believe he was in danger, in spite of recent events. He opened the door and looked out. Standing there, carrying a heavy-looking package, stood a beautiful young woman.

"If you're not going to invite me in, at least take this."

Tanrif shook himself, smiled apologetically and took the bundle from her.

"Sorry. I just wasn't expecting..."

She walked in behind him, closed and locked the door. Tanrif's eyes followed her every move.

"I'm Tanrif."

She met his wide eyes, both flattered and amused. "Cyanne. You can put that anywhere. I'll take it upstairs after. Do you always stare at women?"

"Only the ones who look like you, and let me tell you, there aren't many."

Her reply was cut off by Lylea's entrance. "Cyanne. When did you get here?"

"Only now. I was just introducing myself to Tanrif."

Lylea embraced her. "Tanrif, my sister, Cyanne. Cyanne, this is Varon Imgard's son."

"Really? I must say, you're not how I pictured you."

Tanrif was disturbed she should have tried to picture him at all. What had they heard about him and why was he a topic of conversation? He had a feeling it had to do with the history between Demendil and his father.

"And how did you picture me?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps a bit more...surly."

Tanrif almost choked. "I'm surly!"

Cyanne looked at Lylea and both chuckled. It was Lylea who replied.

"You are many things Tanrif, but if I had to pick a single word description, I'd have to say you were cute."

"Cute! I'm not cute."

"That's what all the cutest men say," said Cyanne.

"What is this, two against one?"

All three laughed. Tanrif could almost see something familiar about Cyanne, as if once he'd met her in a dream, then the feeling was gone. The trio adjourned to the back room, where they continued to talk late into the night.

As Tanrif continued to recover, he spent more time examining racks of weapons. Certainly, it was the finest collection he'd seen anywhere.

Lylea and Cyanne ran the shop, while Demendil forged the weapons. The merchandise was so expensive, Demendil produced them faster than they sold, explaining the large number of fine products available.

There was also a smaller stock of cheaper weapons. Well made, but not up to the caliber of the pieces that drew Tanrif's attention. Though they were far more expensive than comparable quality items he'd seen elsewhere, they still sold regularly. It seemed people were willing to grossly overpay, just to say they had a weapon from the Shop of Demendil.

With Demendil away, Lylea and Cyanne were inundated with work. Tanrif helped out where he could, though he lacked the experience of the two women. Still he was quite knowledgeable about swords and even sold a couple.

In his spare time, he continued to explore the shop, trying to figure out what weapon he could add to his repertoire that would round out his sword. He eventually decided on a Borderland Short Bow. The piece was larger than a standard bow, but still not large enough to encumber him. It was an excellently crafted piece, made from several different types of wood glued together. This rather unique construction, according to Lylea, made for a sturdier weapon. It didn't take him long to purchase it outright, though the transaction cut deeply into his pouch.

He found himself practicing between customers. There was a target area set up in the back, spanning the entire width of the shop, so prospective buyers could try before they bought. He found he had a natural talent for it, though he knew hitting a target during practice didn't necessarily reflect on how well he would do in battle. Still, Lylea was impressed with how quickly he picked it up.

Tanrif was surprised to find himself happy, particularly because he hadn't realized he'd been unhappy. He now knew he would never return to the docks. That was behind him. He could never again lower himself to unloading ships. Whatever else Galith had done, the Assassin had awakened a part of Tanrif that had been asleep for four months. For that he owed the man.

Tanrif continued to work in the shop days and flirt with Cyanne at night. He didn't believe anything would come of it, but there was something about the black-haired woman that called to him. Something that went far deeper than physical attraction. Tanrif could never recall experiencing anything like it and so remained cautious. After all, why would a woman like that want anything to do with him?

It was a question he was unable to answer.

Mora climbed the stairs slowly. In all his years as a guard, he had never met a man that scared him as much as the leader of the Hellspawn. When he reached the third floor, he stopped at the first door and knocked. It opened and he entered.

The room was so dimly lit, it took his eyes a few moments to adjust. Beside the door, stood a man in black armor, broadsword drawn. Mora's eyes widened. He spoke quickly.

"I saw her. I was on duty in Westgate when she entered the city. Black hair, violet eyes, just as you said."

The man in black smiled. "Where is she now?"

"No. Gold first." Mora spoke the words nervously, but greed made him brave.

"Very well." He took a pouch from his belt and tossed it to the guard. "Perhaps you'd like to count it."

The guard weighed the pouch in his hand and it felt heavy. He looked at the warrior and thought it wouldn't be terribly wise to anger him. Whatever nerve he'd possessed evaporated, and suddenly all he wanted was to get out of there. If the sack was full of iron, he'd lost nothing.

"I followed her. She's at the Shop of Demendil. I asked around and found out she works there."

"Where is this...Shop of Demendil?"

"Near the beginning of Merchant Street, where it crosses Eastway."

"You've done well. I trust the payment is sufficient to insure your silence."

Mora nodded.

"Then go."

As he turned to leave, he saw four figures standing quietly in the background. Figures dressed in the same black armor as the man whom he'd first seen at the tavern. He didn't know how he'd missed them. The guard swallowed and left the room.

Whoever she was, he pitied her. He moved as fast as he could without being impolite. Once on the stairs, he moved faster. The gold would do nothing to assuage his conscience, but while he was suffering the guilt, at least he would suffer in style. There was enough gold in that pouch to keep him in booze for a

year. If he hadn't found her, someone else certainly would have.

Out on the street, he shivered at the thought of what they would do to her. Then he tied the pouch to his belt and it didn't matter. He pulled his cloak tighter and hurried away down a narrow alley.

Galith had no trouble locating Varon's ranch. Indeed, it seemed as if the aging mercenary was somewhat of a celebrity. His ranch house was the largest dwelling in the area.

Galith and his men spent the day watching. If Tanrif were there, as Galith assumed, he was bound to show himself sooner or later. Finally, shortly before the sun sank below the horizon, the door opened and Varon Imgard stepped into the hot summer afternoon.

At once, the Assassins were alert, waiting for a second figure to emerge. There was no chance Varon could spot them. They were far too skilled at their trade. Varon was only outside for a short time and no one joined him.

Galith was frustrated, though knew he could not afford impatience. He touched his nose gently. He was still in pain. They would wait until the boy showed and when he did, Galith would exact his revenge.

The last thing Varon Imgard expected to find upon entering the kitchen, was his old friend Demendil sitting at the table. A lifetime of surprises had not prepared him for the moment. The smith looked thoughtful, but said nothing. Varon sat across from him, also reluctant to break the silence.

The two regarded each other, each lost in his own memories. Finally, Varon's curiosity got the better of him.

"I must say, I'm stunned."

"It's been a long time."

And again silence. This time, Demendil spoke first.

"I met Tanrif. He's a fine boy, Varon. Showed up at my shop with a bad wound. Might have been a deadly one."

Varon said nothing.

"He was attacked by a Sarithan Assassin. Now, what can you tell me about that?"

"It has nothing to do with me. Why would you think otherwise?"

"Because they're watching your house. I'd have never spotted them from here, but I entered through the passage. I must say, I wasn't surprised to find it there."

"Of course not. Would I leave myself without a proper exit?"

The aging mercenary smiled, then grew serious. "Demendil, listen. I swear to you, if the Assassins are after Tanrif it is not my doing. I love the boy. I would never do anything to endanger him."

"I figured as much, but had to hear it from your lips. The two of us had a nice conversation."

"How much did you tell him?"

"Not enough. Not nearly enough."

"I thank you for that."

"You don't know how hard it was. Still, nothing would be served by him knowing the truth. There's nothing he could do about it anyway."

"It's over," agreed Varon.

"What are you going to do about the Sarithans?"

Varon rose and walked to the window. He knew he would never see them if they didn't want him to, though he still found himself searching. "That depends. Are you just here to warn me or will you stay for the battle?"

"Damn it, man! What do you think? I know we've had our differences, but I've never hated you. I couldn't stand by and watch you die. Do you think I could live with myself if I did?"

Varon returned to the table. "I'm sorry about what happened. I never did apologize, did I? There were reasons, Demendil. Reasons you know nothing about. I had my duty."

"Which was stronger than your sanity. It doesn't matter. It was almost eighteen years ago. I will never agree with what you did, but perhaps I can finally forgive you." He paused, waiting for his words to be understood. From where he sat, he could see tears form in his friend's eyes. Embarrassed, he changed the subject. "So what's the plan?"

Varon wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "I have an idea, but it involves magic."

"You know how I feel about that."

"So I do, but the Assassins want Tanrif and that's exactly what we'll give them."

Demendil sighed, then smiled. "Very well. Do what you will."

Varon approached and stood before his friend. He had not cast a spell for a long time, but the ability never diminished. While he moved his hands in the timeless ritual gestures, he chanted in the old tongue. Demendil, in spite of his discomfit, watched fascinated. He had not witnessed such a thing since the last spell he'd seen Varon cast, eighteen years before.

He felt nothing. He only knew it was done when Varon nodded approval. He rose and walked into the hallway, seeking the mirror he'd passed on the way to the kitchen. When he found it, he regarded his reflection with wonder. Demendil reached out a hand and touched the image. The face that stared back at him was Tanrif's.

"Amazing, simply amazing."

"No, not really. A fairly simple illusion, in all truth. It won't last forever, but it should remain in effect long enough for our purposes."

Demendil smiled, then started at how strange the expression looked on his new face.

"Come on, let's get this over with."

Without waiting for a response Varon turned and walked toward the front door of the ranch house.

"You might try putting a little more arm into it. It's not a sword," said Cyanne.

She had come upon Tanrif swinging a mace, trying to get a feel for the weapon. He hadn't realized she'd been watching.

"Thanks anyway, but it's not for me. I prefer to employ a bit of style when I fight. Pulping an opponent's head with one strong side arm is not my idea of elegance."

Cyanne laughed. Self-consciously, Tanrif placed the weapon carefully back on the rack and walked to the back of the shop with his bow. Cyanne followed.

"So that's it, is it? Your ego is so fragile that at the first sign of failure, you return to something you know can impress?" She was baiting him, and he knew it.

"Failure? Who said anything about failure? I'm a warrior, not a butcher. Let the amateurs bludgeon people into oblivion, thank you. I'll stick with my sword."

"Why are you being so defensive?"

"I'm not being defensive. I'm just explaining."

"Oh, you're just explaining." She was laughing at him.

Tanrif turned away, knocked an arrow and let it fly. An inch to the left and it would have missed the target completely. He didn't understand how he could let a woman's rambling so affect him.

"Nice shot," said Cyanne.

He shook his head, placed another arrow to the bowstring and let it fly. This one struck closer to home. Not his best shot, but a respectable effort.

Cyanne was about to comment, when the door of the shop flew open and five warriors, clad in black armor, charged in. There could be no mistaking their intentions. The Hellspawn were there to kill.

Lylea reacted first. She had been standing behind the dagger counter and thus was closest to the front of the shop when they entered. She grabbed the loaded crossbow kept ready for just this type of occasion. In one fluid motion, she aimed and pulled the trigger, screaming a battle cry to alert Cyanne and Tanrif.

The bolt struck one of the intruders in the face. He went down, but the others seemed not to notice. Only then did Tanrif realize he was still holding his bow.

He didn't take the time to aim. He didn't have it. He ran several paces forward, until he had a clear shot down one of the aisles. He placed the arrow to the bowstring and let it fly. To his credit, he pierced a pale throat. The warrior took another step forward before joining his companion on the floor.

Then one of them was too close for the bow. He dropped it and drew his sword. Lylea emerged from behind the counter, drawing a weapon off the rack as she passed. Cyanne did likewise, pulling a short scimitar from a nearby display.

The strangest thing about the attack was the silence. The Hellspawn never uttered a sound, even as they went down. Nor did the ones still standing take any notice of their fallen companions. They simply stepped over them or on them and continued their advance, apparently unaware of their mortality.

A glance told Tanrif one had gone for Lylea, another for Cyanne. He wasn't close enough to help either of them.

Cyanne moved quietly among the racks, trying to keep her distance from the intruders, while trying to

work herself closer to Lylea in case her sister needed help.

That brief reflection was all Tanrif had time for before he was forced to defend himself. His opponent charged, no doubt thinking him an easy target. He easily parried the thrust, but was not prepared for the force of it. He had never felt such a blow.

He caught his balance just in time to defend himself from the second swipe. Again he was amazed by the strength behind the attack. He parried and tried an attack of his own, but his blade was turned by his opponent's armor.

Across the room, Lylea fought with a ferocity that had always been characteristic of her style. Few tested her a second time. Immediately on the offensive, she slashed and thrust with barely a pause between attacks. Yet nothing she could summon was able to penetrate the dark armor.

Tanrif tired as the fight progressed. Since his injury, he had not taken the time to practice. It would cost him. He found himself breathing hard and sweating profusely. He tried to put more energy into his attacks, but his opponent took everything he had and kept coming. He backed up, took a moment to wipe the sweat from his forehead and considered his opponent.

Cyanne screamed. He turned to look for just a second, then realized his error. The dark warrior struck. He raised his sword to block, but between his growing weakness and the sweat, he was unable to hold onto his blade. To his horror, the weapon flew from his hand. He didn't have the time to see where it landed.

With no choice left, he charged his opponent, ducking under the confident overhand swing. He grabbed the warrior's wrist and threw his entire weight into the attacker. The black-clad warrior toppled over backwards. Tanrif, never releasing his hold, fell with him.

Tanrif wrestled the warrior, trying to gain control of the sword. Unfortunately, the Hellspawn was much stronger than him. Tanrif found himself thrown over. A moment later his opponent had reversed their position. Tanrif knew his life was about to end.

Lylea had also heard Cyanne scream, but like Tanrif was too tied up to do anything about it. She jumped backwards and risked a look. Cyanne had been disarmed, and was backed into a corner. The attackers obviously had no compunctions against killing an unarmed woman.

Lylea turned to meet a new attack. She took another step, reached for a mace off one of the racks and brought it full force down on her opponent's head. At first she thought the blow had done nothing. Then the warrior fell forward. She moved toward Cyanne, grabbing a helm off the counter as she passed.

"Hey you," she yelled.

The Hellspawn, having nothing to fear from Cyanne, turned to face her. With all her strength, Lylea hurled the helmet. Her aim was near perfect. The dark warrior's helm was split open. Cyanne kicked her assailant in the back, launching it toward Lylea, who finished the job with a single stroke of the mace. The dark warrior collapsed and remained motionless.

When Lylea shouted, the warrior atop Tanrif turned his head long enough for Tanrif to pull a black dagger from the scabbard on his opponent's hip. Tanrif slid the blade across his opponent's neck. The warrior began to bleed, but never stopped fighting.

Tanrif, even weaker than before, grabbed the Hellspawn's wrist and held it away from him. If his strength failed, he would be dead.

The warrior continued to lose blood, but didn't seem to notice. He redoubled his effort, moving the blade of his sword ever closer to Tanrif's throat. Tanrif summoned his last reserves, holding his opponent at bay, until finally, the wound took its toll. The dark warrior collapsed on him, soaking him with blood. Tanrif, weak as he was, took a long time to struggle out from under. Only then was he finally able to wipe the foul liquid from his face. He took a step forward, fell to one knee and vomited on the floor beside the corpse.

Lylea, who had already ascertained Cyanne was unhurt, made no move to help him. While he knelt, recovering, she disappeared in the back and returned with a glass of wine. Only after he'd found his way to his feet, did she walk over and proffer the glass.

He took it gladly, rinsed his mouth and spit. Then he took a healthy swallow. Cyanne came over to make certain he was all right.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You have nothing to apologize for," said Cyanne.

"You're wrong. I have everything to apologize for."

Lylea looked at him as well.

"Don't you see? The Sarithan Assassins have found me. I don't know how, but it doesn't matter. By staying here, I've placed both your lives in danger."

"Danger adds something to life, don't you think, Cyanne?"

Tanrif looked at Lylea. "This isn't a game. Galith was serious. These men were serious. I'm sorry, but I can't stay. Now that the Assassins know where I am, they'll be back, in greater force. I will not put either of you in further jeopardy."

"But you promised Demendil you'd stay until he returned."

"Now that they know where I am, everything's changed. There's no other choice. I must leave tomorrow."

Without another word, sick and weak as he was, Tanrif grabbed the closest body and began dragging it toward the side entrance.

Tanrif moved slowly, looking around the room for what might be the last time. He had already packed what few possessions he owned into his saddlebags. The next morning, as soon as he woke, he would take leave of this place. He tried not to think about it. His days at the Shop of Demendil would not soon be forgotten.

He stretched slowly, trying to relieve the pain in his lower back. Though he had strained it during his fight with the Assassin, it was the cleanup that did him in. It was a horrible job that took many hours of grueling labor. This was the hardest he'd worked since his injury and he was appalled at how tired he felt. A couple of weeks earlier, he would have barely broken a sweat. He desperately needed to get back into shape.

He walked to the window and looked outside. The night was half past and the streets were empty. He studied the shadows, wondering which, if any, might contain an Assassin waiting to take him out. Yesterday, he would have scoffed at the idea. Now it seemed like a very real possibility.

A knock at the door made him jump. He placed his hand on the hilt of his sword and turned.

"It's open."

He tensed, though he knew an Assassin wouldn't have knocked. Cyanne entered and he released his breath. She looked at him and smiled.

She wore a red tunic that almost reached her knees. Its diaphanous material clung to her, as she moved towards him. It took real effort not to stare.

"Hello, Tanrif."

"Hello."

He moved away from the window and said nothing else. The silence was awkward, but neither broke it, until finally, he could stand it no longer.

"What can I do for you?"

"Have you decided where you want to go?"

He shrugged and turned again toward the window so as to avoid staring. Gods, she was beautiful.

"Haven't really thought about it. I suppose I'll just wander. After all, any decision I make might be duplicated. But if I don't know where I'm going, how can anyone find me?"

"I'm not certain how wise that is. It's a dangerous world. There are many places that would be better left off your itinerary. Rather than try to cross the Witchwaters, you might as well stay here and wait for the Assassins to get you. You'd stand a better chance of survival. You could conceivably end up in Domina. If the Emperor's men find you and you have no papers, they'll brand you, lock a collar around your neck and sell you to the highest bidder. Maybe you'll even make it all the way to the southern wastes, where dying is getting off easy. You don't have the experience to roam the world on your own. That's why I'm coming with you."

Tanrif turned to look at her. "I'm afraid not."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Why not?"

"It's too dangerous. They've already tried to kill me twice. I will not drag you into danger."

"Why? Because I'm a woman? If that's the reason, I've got a few words for you."

"It's also too dangerous for me, but I have no choice. And you'd just..." His voice trailed off.

"Be in the way? Is that what you were going to say, Tanrif?"

"You'd just be having to pull me out of trouble all the time. That's what I was going to say." His eyes twinkled.

"Like hell."

She jumped forward and her hands shot out. He tried, ineffectively, to dodge around her. He fell

backwards onto the bed and she straddled him.

"You're ticklish! Take me with you."

He tried to roll out from under her, but couldn't stop laughing long enough to make the attempt. Finally he managed to blurt out, "Enough...enough, you can come."

She stopped and met his gaze. "Do you mean it?"

"With hands like that, how could I stop you?"

He found himself so lost in her violet eyes, he wasn't certain he'd ever make it back. Not that he was really trying.

"These hands are capable of even greater feats." She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his.

Tanrif reached up and pulled her to him, returning her kiss with passion he didn't know he possessed. Nothing in his prior experience prepared him for the rush of emotion that accompanied his growing desire.

Tanrif's need rose until he could wait no longer. He seized her and rolled over, pinning her beneath him. At first she pretended to struggle, but soon her own need rose to where she could barely control it.

She moved beneath him, writhing and squirming. He fought the rising urgency, wanting to make it last forever, but soon found he couldn't hold back.

He bit his lip so he wouldn't cry out at the last moment. It wouldn't have mattered. Cyanne's screams of pleasure would have drowned out any sound he might have made. Completely spent, he melted into her and almost immediately fell asleep.

Cyanne remained awake for a long time, sobbing gently and cradling him in her arms.

Chapter Seven - Turning the Tables

Jalek kept his body low as he moved across open ground. The ranch house of Varon Imgard had been dark since the last light had gone out almost an hour before. There had been no sign of servants. As far as he could tell, the only two people inside were Varon Imgard and Tanrif.

By noting which lights were the last to have been extinguished, the Assassins had been able to determine in which rooms their two targets slept. Jalek reached the side of the house and scaled the wall.

Fortunately, the night was hot enough to ensure the windows would be wide open. He made it to the second story without mishap and slipped inside.

In the darkness, the Assassin couldn't tell whether the figure on the bed was the father or the son. It didn't matter. If he killed the great Varon Imgard, he would be something of a celebrity. If he killed Tanrif, he would be an honored hero. In either case, he'd move up in rank.

He slid across the floor, barely making a sound. He drew his dagger and tried to estimate where he needed to strike to do the most damage. A Sarithan Assassin strove for perfection. There could be no witnesses, no clues left behind and if possible, death should be dealt in a single thrust.

He raised his blade and leaned forward. He never heard the click of the trigger. Never felt the crossbow

bolt enter his back. Never knew Demendil, still wearing Tanrif's likeness, stood in the corner of the room wearing a satisfied smile. Jalek met his fate consumed by visions of glory.

Varon Imgard stood in his room waiting. He knew it was only a matter of time before one of the Assassins would appear. He held his sword ready, ignoring the uncomfortable tension in his arm. He was getting too old for this sort of thing.

He barely dared breathe, when a figure finally pulled itself through the window. The Assassin glanced around the room, but there was no way he could see Varon, a shadow among shadows. The Assassin took two steps before the swordmaster lunged. His thrust was perfectly aimed, but the Assassin must have sensed something at the last moment. As the blade pierced his abdomen, he cried out, alerting the others. Varon cursed, drew his sword back and struck again, but it was too late. The damage had been done.

He wiped the gore from his sword onto the bedclothes. He wouldn't be returning to the ranch anyway. He stepped over the dead Assassin and left the room quickly. It wouldn't be long before the others came to investigate.

Outside the house, Galith waited. There was nothing else he could do. He should have been completely confident in the abilities of his men, yet he could not rid himself of the dry taste in his mouth, which he recognized for what it was...the taste of defeat. He spat twice, but the taste lingered. He remained still, eyes intent on the house. Intuition told him something was wrong.

As if confirming his suspicion, a shout pierced the darkness. There was no way to tell whether it came from one of his men or one of the targets. Nor could he be certain whether it indicated surprise or pain. Though he was anxious to find out, he forced himself to wait five full minutes before approaching.

As he advanced, he threw back his head and hooted three times. Owls were common in this area and the expertly mimicked call blended perfectly with the sound of night insects. Only one trained to listen for it could know it was a signal. Almost immediately the two remaining members of his party responded. The three converged on the east side of the house.

"Something has gone amiss. Elrad, you watch the rear of the house. Bone will take the front. If anyone leaves, I want to know about it. If you get a clear shot, don't waste it. I'm going in."

He looked at Bone. "If I don't come out, you're in charge. Any questions?"

Both Assassins shook their heads and walked into the night. Galith, usually a confident man, wondered if he'd ever see them again. Rather than risk the upper level, the Master Assassin climbed through an open window on the main floor. Once inside, he dropped silently to the ground and waited for his eyes to adjust to the absence of moonlight.

There in the darkness he crouched, listening to his own shallow breathing, for that was the only sound. Finally he rose and moved stealthily toward the stairs. He offered a brief prayer to Sarith before climbing them. As he approached the top step, he drew his dagger.

It took him only moments to piece together the story. Somehow Tanrif and his father had been ready for them. His men had attacked empty beds, not realizing their enemies were elsewhere in the room, concealed by darkness. Even an inexperienced warrior could turn the tables in such a setup. Considering the nature of his targets, he was surprised either of his Brothers had lived long enough to cry out.

Which didn't explain what had become of Tanrif and his father. He moved from room to room, dagger ready, yet the anticipated attack never arrived. After searching the entire house, he returned to the

kitchen. He found and lit a candle. Using it, he searched again with the same unacceptable results. Somehow, Tanrif and Varon Imgard had escaped.

Abandoning caution altogether, he opened the front door and motioned for Bone to join him.

"What happened in there?" asked the younger assassin.

Galith ignored the question. "Get Elrad."

Bone bowed slightly and moved to comply. Galith leaned against the door, eyes closed, trying to come to terms with this new failure. He could not afford to return to Glith with this news. More than his reputation was at stake.

Galith heard his men approach. He opened his eyes and waited until they stood before him. When he spoke, his voice was ice.

"Our brothers have failed and have paid for it. Sarith will not treat their souls with kindness. Of Tanrif and his father, there is no sign, yet they couldn't have left unseen. There must be another exit. Find it. I will not be humiliated again."

Galith did not participate in the search. Instead he sat in the kitchen, trying in vain to guess what had given them away. He was fairly certain neither of the occupants had seen them. How had they known?

There could only be one possibility. Tanrif had returned home and told his father of the attack. His father, a veteran mercenary, would have known the Sarithan Assassins would never give up. Had the intended victims carried out their plan without actually knowing they were being stalked? It seemed farfetched, but wasn't outside the realm of possibility. His thoughts were interrupted when Bone entered.

"I've located a passage."

Galith was immediately on his feet. "Where?"

"In the family room. There were a few discolored floorboards. They were so well concealed I missed them at first. I pried them up and uncovered a lower level."

"You didn't leave it unguarded, did you?" Galith took a step toward him.

"Of course not. Elrad is standing watch."

"Very well, let us tend to our quarry."

He walked quickly from the room, unwilling to wait any longer for vengeance. Bone followed a step behind.

The family room was just across the corridor. The entrance to the cellar had been so ingeniously crafted, Galith was surprised Bone had caught it. He used the candle to light an oil lamp sitting on a nearby table. Behind him, Bone and Elrad watched. Galith drew his blade and descended the stone steps into the darkness below. His men followed.

At the bottom, leading straight from the foot of the stairs, a long, narrow passageway issued forth. The moisture on the interlocking stone walls glistened in the lamplight. As they walked, they scanned for doors or side passages, but there were none. When the corridor finally came to an abrupt end, they were surprised. Until Galith held the lamp higher and noticed a small square door above their heads. Tanrif and his father had walked right under them.

Galith motioned to Bone. "Get down on all fours."

The Assassin glared, but didn't hesitate. Galith had been right. Bone would one day be dangerous. The Master Assassin stepped on his back, holding the lantern higher. He tried pushing, ignoring the grunts from below, but it wouldn't budge. When he looked closer, he noticed a small ring set into it.

He inserted two fingers and tugged. It moved only slightly. He pulled twice more. Still it barely budged. He gave it one final massive tug and the door swung downward. Before any of the three could react, a rain of large stones descended. The lamp fell and was subsequently smashed. It happened so quickly, there was no chance to react. Within seconds, all three were knocked senseless. Soon the only sound remaining was the soft echoes of shifting rocks as they descended the pile.

Galith regained consciousness first and woke the others. Bruises and cuts covered much of their bodies and though none were serious, many were uncomfortable. As he made his way to his feet, Elrad spoke. "Damn clever men."

"I don't like this," said Bone. "They've outthought us every step of the way."

Galith smiled. "And you were so confident, such a short while ago."

Bone frowned but held his tongue.

"Boost me again," said Galith. Bone slowly lowered himself, careful to control his temper. He winced as the smaller Assassin climbed onto his back. It had been uncomfortable enough the first time without the bruises. Galith pulled himself up and looked around.

The smell of manure told him immediately where he was. Varon Imgard had constructed an underground passage to the stable. He found a ladder and lowered it into the tunnel. Bone and Elrad climbed out. At least, there were enough horses left behind to pursue them.

Though he was impatient, Galith chose to wait for dawn, rather than risk losing the trail in the darkness. He had his men saddle up, but it was more than an hour before they rode.

"Lylea didn't look very happy," said Tanrif as he guided Fireball through the streets of Stratus. Just minutes ago, they'd departed the Shop of Demendil.

"You can't really blame her. How would you feel if someone took your sister into unknown danger?"

"I don't have a sister."

"Brothers?"

Tanrif shook his head.

"Okay, how about your father?"

"My father can take care of himself."

Cyanne laughed. "Yes, I suppose that's true. Be that as it may, Lylea doesn't like to see her little sister in over her head."

Actually, Cyanne suspected that was only part of the reason for Lylea's anger. Lylea possessed a lot of skills. She was almost a swordmaster, she could ride horseback as well as anyone Cyanne had ever met and she was great at bartering. Yet when it came to men, she was dumbfounded. Cyanne had sat with her many times and discussed the matter, but nothing changed. For some reason, Lylea could never get

it. Which explained at least part of her ire, for Cyanne could not help noticing her sister liked Tanrif very much.

Cyanne loved Lylea and didn't want to hurt her, but found herself more than just attracted to Tanrif. She felt as if their destinies were somehow intertwined. Lylea would forgive and forget or she wouldn't. What was happening here was too important.

"Okay Mister, start talking."

"About what?"

"Everything. I want to know everything about you."

"There's not much to tell."

"Is that so? Well I think there must be something to tell. I saw the way you took out that Assassin in the shop. Most people couldn't do that."

Tanrif looked uncomfortable.

"So you got sick afterwards, what of it? You'd just killed a man. Did you expect to be immune to those feelings?"

"No. It's just not something I like to dwell on."

"Okay," said Cyanne. "You pick the topic."

Tanrif thought for a second and his face brightened. "Do you know how I first learned to use a sword?"

"Can't imagine."

"I was about five years old when my father handed me my first weapon. It was a short practice sword with a blunted edge. I was thrilled. My very first sword. 'Pick it up and defend yourself.' he said. I tried to wield it, but it was too heavy. I told him so."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He struck me in the face with the flat of his blade. Not to do damage, mind you. Just hard enough to humiliate me."

"That's terrible. Why would he do a thing like that?"

"Because he wanted me to learn. My father always pushed me to my limit and it's a good thing too. Otherwise I'd never have survived recent events."

"Okay, what happened after he struck you?"

"He struck me again. I was so angry, I almost cried. When he moved to strike me the third time, I lifted the sword and blocked it. 'You see,' he said. 'You can do it. I never want to hear the word can't from your lips again.' And even though I was young, I understood."

"That's amazing," said Cyanne.

"Not to me. The only thing that amazes me is you."

"How do you always know the exact right thing to say?"

"Practice. Long years of practice. But now it's your turn. Let's hear a bit about your past."

"Hmmm. Well, I was born in High Gondylar, but I came to Skyshore when I was only a child. My parents are still in High Gondylar. I don't suppose I'll ever see them again."

"Now *that's* terrible," said Tanrif. Growing up without a mother was one thing, being separated from both parents was another entirely.

"I'd really rather not talk about it," said Cyanne. "Tell me something amazing."

"Amazing?"

"You know. Something extraordinary that happened to you. Something mysterious and mystical."

"Well, I can only think of one story that might fit. I can't say it's mystical, but it is sort of strange."

"Go ahead."

"When I was about eleven, I was going through my father's closet and stumbled on a secret compartment. When I opened it, I found a beautiful sword inside, the likes of which I'd never seen. It was a short scimitar with a score of gems set into the hilt. The blade was intricately carved and there were symbols on it I couldn't make out. Worse than that, I couldn't even recognize the language."

"You can't imagine how pretentious that sounds," laughed Cyanne. "I mean, there you are, all of eleven years old, mystified because you couldn't tell what language some glyphs on a sword were in."

"Maybe, but I was already reading three languages and could recognize a half dozen more. My father taught me more than just swordsmanship."

Cyanne spoke in Gondylarian, which she often practiced with Demendil. "You are a very interesting man."

"Thank you," replied Tanrif in the same tongue. "I work hard to keep it so."

Cyanne's eyes widened in surprise. She returned to Talovarian. "I'm impressed. Not even much of an accent."

"As I said, my education was comprehensive."

"Okay, so what happened with the sword?"

"I spent about half an hour practicing with it. In all my years, I had never seen its equal."

"You're sounding pretentious again."

"Am I? By the age of twelve, I could out-spar anyone in the town guard. Soon after, the only man in Ularon that could challenge me, was my father. I may have been young, but I knew swords. I had not only used them, but studied them in books. I'd even spent some time down at the forge, watching them made."

Cyanne held up a hand. "Okay, okay. You don't have to be defensive." She grinned. "What happened next?"

"Later in the day, when my father came home, I asked him about it. He beat me within an inch of my life and told me to forget I ever saw it."

"Now that's a mystery. Did you ever see it again?"

"A few years later, when I finally found the nerve, I checked the compartment again, but it was empty."

"Kind of makes you think."

Tanrif, lost in thought, didn't reply.

Cyanne was likewise pensive. She couldn't help but wonder about a twelve year old who could stand up to any member of the town guard. About a boy who could speak and read three different languages. About a man pursued by Sarithan Assassins who couldn't venture a guess as to why.

There were forces at work here beyond her understanding. Out of all the shops and houses in Stratus, Tanrif had ended up at hers. She could not bring herself to believe it had happened randomly. Someone, or something, was manipulating probability, driving events in a specific direction, though who had that sort of power, or what their ultimate agenda could be, was beyond her. The only thing she was reasonably certain about was Varon Imgard had known all along Tanrif would need certain skills and had trained him with that in mind.

She also knew, beyond all doubt, she had been drawn into a very dangerous game. She had realized it almost immediately. Whatever the reason, she needed to understand what was happening, before something tragic came to pass. She could still sense the storm on the horizon.

Neither spoke again, until long after they had passed through the east gate of Stratus.

Mora moved through Eastgate with the air of a man who owned it. It wasn't hard to own Eastgate. All a man need do was spread a bit of gold around. After his dealings with the Hellspawn, Mora had no shortage of gold. He tried not to think about the violet-eyed girl he had betrayed. She was as good as dead anyway. Or so he thought.

Until she came through Eastgate early that morning, walking as if she hadn't a care in the world. If it weren't for Cyanne, he would have never looked twice at the young warrior leaving the city. He stopped to watch as they led their horses through the gates of Stratus.

That the man was a fighting man, there could be no doubt. Mora could tell from the way he moved. There was something familiar about the approaching figure. As the pair drew closer, he was able to figure out what it was. Upon occasion, Mora had worked down at the docks for extra money. What would a piece like that be doing with a lowlife like Tanrif? And how had she avoided the attentions of the dark warriors?

Mora shrugged. He would probably never learn the answers to his questions, nor did it matter. He had been paid handsomely for his complicity and silence. Still, he was happy to see Cyanne had made it. At least he could enjoy his profits in good conscience.

For more than two hours, Galith and his men pursued their quarry. All three were well familiar with tracking techniques and there were enough visible clues to guide them--until they came to a shallow stream.

Galith reined his horse. The others followed his example. He looked both ways. Once in the water, Tanrif and his father could have followed the stream in either direction. They could have emerged on either side. They could have even separated, though Galith didn't consider it likely.

"All right. We split up. I'll go upstream. Elrad, you go downstream on this side, and Bone, you cross over and head downstream. They'll have to come out sooner or later. I don't have to tell you how dangerous

they are. They've claimed two of our number already. Remember, Tanrif is the primary target. He must be eliminated at all costs. Your death doesn't matter. Tanrif's does. It would be wise to remember that."

He looked significantly at Bone. The younger Assassin turned away.

"Ride for one day. If you don't pick up the trail, return to Glith and report to the temple. Any questions?"

Elrad spoke. "There's only three of us. What if they went the fourth way?"

"Then we're finished. I wouldn't venture to guess what penance might be required of us, but whatever it is won't be pretty. Anything else?"

Both men shook their heads.

"Let's go."

As Galith turned upstream and began to ride, he whispered a prayer.

"Great Sarith, I beg you, let me find Tanrif and his father. Allow me to avenge the deaths of my brothers. If they are ahead of me, I swear I shall show them the meaning of suffering."

As he continued north, the glazed look never left his eyes.

"Why are we stopping?" asked Demendil. They had ridden throughout the entire day, the night that followed and well into the next morning. He did not believe they could make it much further.

"It is time to execute the final part of the plan."

"Varon, I'm hot. I'm tired. Wake me when you're done speaking in riddles."

"Sorry. It's just that we don't have much time. Our pursuer grows closer." With those words, Varon Ingard began to cast a spell.

Demendil watched with mixed emotions. Eighteen years ago, he had witnessed a spell. The results of that casting had haunted him for many years, but enough time had passed for him to tolerate magic again. He didn't like it, but could see the need in the current situation.

Varon's movements were measured and precise. Those gestures, combined with a handful of perfectly intoned syllables would open a door to energy from somewhere else. Another world. At least that was how Varon had explained it what seemed like ages ago. The casting was a key of sorts, unlocking the door between realities. Demendil had thought long and hard about it and still didn't understand, but it didn't matter. As long as Varon knew what he was doing, all would be well.

It was a complex casting. Even Demendil could see that. Few spells had so many syllables or such complex gestures. When it was done, the weaponsmith stared in wonder as their two horses began to shrink. As they grew smaller, they traded their hair for brownish feathers. Their noses withdrew, curved downward and became black beaks. Their tails spread out and shortened and their front legs became wings. When the transformation was done, Demendil was surprised to find himself looking at two birds of prey standing where their horses had been. A flurry of feathers saw the newly created avians take to the heavens.

"That was amazing."

Varon, tired, shrugged. "I suppose it is, though I've lived with the power too long to see it. Your turn."

"What do you mean my turn?"

"You have two choices. You can walk back to Stratus or you can fly back with me."

"Fly back? You're joking."

"Fraid not."

"I hate you. You know that?"

Varon nodded. "So what will it be?"

Demendil tried to sigh, but was unable to hide the beginnings of a smile. "Very well. Work your sorcery, magician."

Demendil watched as the spell was repeated. Varon's concentration was a tangible thing. One misstep could spell disaster.

Even before it was done, the weaponsmith felt his body begin to change. He started to cry out, but his vocal cords changed halfway through and the sound emerged as more of a caw.

He looked down and watched as his legs grew skeletally thin. He watched as his boots started to narrow and split at the toe. A moment later, he was standing on a pair of clawed feet. He turned to look behind him, not surprised to see feathers already growing from his back, and what had been his arms. When the change was complete, Demendil looked at Varon. He tried to speak, but the ability was now beyond him.

"Well, go on. We haven't much time."

Demendil looked at the sky, then back at his friend. He might look like a bird, but still felt like his old self. Varon walked over and knelt beside him. The wizard extended an arm. Unsteadily, Demendil climbed onto it.

"It's easy. All the instructions have been implanted. All you need do is let go."

With those words, Varon pulled back his arm and flung him into the air. Startled, Demendil cried out. He was even more surprised when instinct took over and he began to fly. As he became used to the fact the ability was now his, he flew higher and higher, testing the new body, exhilarating in a feeling most men would never know. Had his new body been designed for it, he would have cried. He let out a scream of triumph and flew south.

Wings were not the only amazing change the spell had wrought. Below, through eyes much sharper than his old ones, he saw Varon preparing to cast the spell one last time. Not a second too late, for rapidly approaching from the south was one of the Sarithan Assassins. He wondered if it was Galith.

Varon completed the spell and joined him in the air. Their horses soared nearby. For a time they circled above the hapless Assassin, until they grew bored of the sport and continued south.

Demendil wondered how the horses knew to follow, but apparently they did, for each time he looked back, they were there.

Lord Zelaran could almost believe his encounter with the Dark One of Vykon had been a hallucination...at least until the second visit. He'd been living in the palace at Gondylar for two months when it happened. Like the first, he had returned to his chambers one night to find the Dark One waiting

for him.

He fell to his knees as soon as the shock passed. The Dark One smiled.

"You've done well thus far, Zelaran."

"Thank you, master."

"It's good of you to remember that. I am the master. I fully expect you to use your authority to make your life more enjoyable, but don't even think about betraying me."

Zelaran remembered the pain. "Yes, master."

"Good. Now that we understand each other, perhaps you can help me with a problem."

Zelaran looked up expectantly.

"An heir to the throne still lives."

Without thinking, Zelaran stood. "What? That's impossible. Dathan only had one child and she died years ago."

"Or so you were led to believe. As a matter of fact, Cyanne is quite alive, in spite of my best efforts."

"Can't you just bring yourself to her and finish it?"

"I'm afraid not. I don't know where she is."

"I see."

"On her deathbed, Amalga charged Kestryl with finding the rightful heir. If successful, he will bring her back to Gondylar."

"Penthor will never stand for it. Do you think he's just going to stand aside and offer her the throne?"

"Can you be certain he won't? You know how loyal he was to Dathan. Will he be any less loyal to Cyanne?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you'd better find out. Whatever happens, Cyanne must not be allowed to reach the palace alive. Do you understand me?"

"Completely."

"Good."

The Dark One turned from him and walked slowly around the room.

"You've done well for yourself, it seems. Remember, that which is given may also be taken away."

He said nothing else, waiting for the significance of the words to register.

"What if I can convince Penthor she's an impostor?"

The Dark One looked up. "Interesting. How do you propose to accomplish this feat?"

"It shouldn't be difficult. Penthor already thinks I have an extensive network of informants. I could arrange for certain events to happen and bring them to his attention beforehand. Once he believes my sources to be credible, I'll tell him I learned the Bladesman is returning with a young lady trained to impersonate the Duke's supposedly deceased daughter. He has never forgotten a powerful mage was responsible for summoning the storm that killed Dathan. Could not such a man also fool Kestryl into believing an imposter is the real thing? It's been at least fifteen years since either the Duke or Bladesman has laid eyes on her. Penthor will have to listen. Yes, I'm sure I can pull it off."

"Then do so. Remember, if Cyanne does somehow manage to regain the throne, any deal you've made with Penthor is worthless."

"I've worked too hard to lose everything now. By the time Kestryl returns, Penthor will be ready to send the entire Gondylarian army against him."

"Excellent. Make certain you get it right. You won't get a second chance."

"It will be done. I swear it."

Lord Zelaran knelt again. When he next looked up, the Dark One was gone.

Almost an hour later, Galith picked up the trail. He smiled, certain it was the same two horses. It seemed Varon Imgard and his son were heading due north. As he followed, the woodlands thinned until trees became scarce. Later the grass became patchy.

They're headed for The Waste. Why would they want to go there? Perhaps he would find the answer when he caught them. He allowed himself no rest. He only stopped when he came to water. Then he let his horse drink and filled his skin before continuing. He could not afford to fail again.

By late afternoon, it was hot and the air was dry and still. Breathing had become a chore and he hadn't yet reached the waste. Nor did he believe he'd find any more water. He'd have turned back if his fear of failure wasn't stronger than his fear of death. He was most relieved when the sun disappeared over the horizon. With the coming of evening, the temperature would drop. Galith continued on into the night, only occasionally dismounting to check the tracks. He was definitely gaining on them. He was tired and hungry, but could not give up. Sarith reserved a special place in Eternity for those who disappointed Her. Soon enough, he would catch them and put an end to it.

He followed the tracks throughout the night and halfway through the next morning. He was no longer certain he could make it back, and his horse was beginning to tire. If he didn't find them soon, he would have no choice but to rest.

He was wondering how much longer he should continue, when the tracks vanished. One clear imprint and then no more, as if Tanrif and Varon Imgard had disappeared off the face of Corithim.

He dismounted and scanned the horizon. There was nothing as far as he could see, except the buzzards circling above, waiting for him to falter. He stared up at them defiantly.

"You can't have me!" he screamed. "Do you hear me? You can't. This isn't over, Tanrif!"

It was a long time before he was able to bring his temper under control. Then, having been left no other option, he started south, hoping he and his horse would survive long enough to make it to water.

Chapter Eight - In Hot Pursuit

Varon, Demendil and their two horses flew all the way to the stream where they'd first lost the Assassins. Varon dove and made a perfect landing on a nearby rock. Demendil's landing wasn't as graceful. Nor was he happy to be back on the ground.

Now that he'd felt the freedom, it might never feel right to walk again. He turned to look behind them and found, true to form, the horses had also settled on the ground, content to patiently watch the mage. Varon broke the spell on all of them at the same time. Demendil was too distracted by his own changing body to watch the others. In less than a minute, two men and two horses stood by the side of the stream.

Once the transformation was complete, the two friends regarded each other. It was Demendil who spoke first.

"What will you do now?"

"I'm not yet sure, but I do have a few things that need to be taken care of before I decide. Yourself?"

"My home is in Stratus. I have a shop to run and two young ladies to look after."

"Of course you do."

Varon looked downstream, then turned back to face his friend. "It was fun, wasn't it?"

Demendil grinned. "Like old times."

"Like old times."

And again there was silence.

For a long time they stood, neither wanting to be the first to say good-bye after so long a separation. They started to talk at almost the same moment and both stopped, each waiting for the other. Varon laughed.

"Look at the two of us. We're acting like schoolboys who have to go home for dinner."

Demendil placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry I waited so long. I don't agree with what you did and never will, but I should have trusted you enough to know you had your reasons. Even if I didn't understand them myself."

"I really had no choice. I wish there was some way to make you believe it. I have my allegiance and it is my life. Nothing can come before it."

"I know that, of course. I knew it back then, but it was such a horrible thing for me to witness. Do you know how many years it took, before the nightmares finally faded?"

"I never meant to put you through that. As I've said, I didn't want to do it, but there was no choice and suffering the loss of your friendship made it even harder. And all those years living with Tanrif, having to look him in the face...you can't imagine what it was like."

"No, I can't. I wouldn't walk a mile in your boots for the world. I'm glad we were able to finally put this behind us, but I fear we've drifted too far to resume our friendship in anything but name."

"One of the things I've always hated about you was your willingness to speak the truth no matter what I wanted to hear. You're right, of course."

"I know. Be well, my friend. I don't know what sort of trouble you're into, but I'm sure it's dangerous. Be careful."

"I will. And if you see Tanrif, give him my love. Farewell, Demendil."

The two men embraced. Neither spoke again. Varon mounted his horse first and rode south. Demendil watched until the diminishing figure vanished into the landscape. Then he mounted and rode through the woods toward home.

It was already late in the afternoon when Demendil reached the west gate of Stratus. At that hour, Westgate was somewhat subdued, as travelers were fewer and merchants were preparing to go home for the evening. He didn't bother dismounting. He rode through the streets at a steady trot. He was anxious to return home.

When he reached the shop, Demendil stabled his horse, walked to the side door and rapped loudly.

Almost immediately, Lylea called out. "Who is it?"

"It's Demendil."

The door opened. He could tell from her face all was not well. "Okay, what happened?"

"Tanrif left. He took Cyanne with him."

"When?"

"Just this morning. I tried to talk them out of it, but..."

Demendil cursed, stepped inside and shut the door. "Why did he leave? I thought we had an understanding."

"So you did. Until the Sarithan Assassins attacked the shop."

"What? Are you sure? Tell me the whole story."

And she did. Lylea went into great detail, leaving out nothing. Demendil listened until she was done.

"Great. And Cyanne's with him? How did that come about?"

Lylea looked at him, but didn't answer. If he couldn't figure it out for himself, what was the point?

"Okay, never mind that. Do you still have the swords the dark warriors used? I'd like to see one."

Lylea motioned for him to follow. As he walked, Demendil replayed in his head the description of the attack on the shop. It was all wrong.

Sarithan Assassins almost never attacked anyone but their target, and they work neatly, methodically, never leaving behind clues or witnesses. The attack on the shop was more of an assault than an assassination attempt. The Sarithan could not have been behind it. Apparently, there were other players in the game.

Lylea led him to the back room. On a table were five swords and helms, all made of black iron. Four of the swords were identical. The last was larger than the others. Demendil raised it and turned it in his hands, examining the workmanship. There was something familiar about the markings, but he couldn't remember where he'd seen them.

"Okay, where did they go?"

"East," said Lylea immediately. "They didn't say it, but it's really their only choice." She had spent much of the day thinking about it.

"How so?"

"Tanrif wouldn't go west and lead the Assassins to Ularon. Nor would he go north and try to cross the Great Desert. South, of course, is The Mistress. I know he wanted to avoid the docks as well. Which leaves east. If they go straight, they'll eventually end up in the Borderlands. Or they'll turn north to Glith."

Demendil cursed again.

"What's the matter?"

"Glith is a city ruled by the Sarithan Assassins. If he goes there, he'll never make it out alive. As it is, I'm afraid they may pass too close. And that's only the first problem."

"There's more?"

"The attack on the shop was not the work of the Sarithan. Whatever he's done, Tanrif has made more than his share of enemies."

"I'll have to go after them. They need to know these things."

"Do you think that's wise?" asked Demendil.

"If you think I'm going to sit here, while Cyanne rides unknowingly into danger, you're very much mistaken. I'll leave first thing in the morning. I should be able to catch them. Just one more thing. If I find out Tanrif has been hiding things from us and has knowingly brought Cyanne into danger, I'm going to give him a sound thrashing."

Demendil smirked. "That might not be as easy as it sounds."

"I don't care. He did something to make so many enemies. When I find him, I'm going to make him tell me what it is."

Demendil looked at her, but didn't respond. There was no way he could dissuade her anyway.

While she went off to prepare for the next day's journey, the weaponsmith returned his attention to the blade. He was certain he'd seen such markings before. Perhaps if he could recall where, another piece of the puzzle would drop into place.

Galith, face burned by the sun, staggered through the gates of Glith. The Black City was smaller than Stratus, though no less impressive. The only way in or out was the iron gate set into the south wall. The Master Assassin was well-known in the city and many turned to look at him, but none approached, nor would they, until he was in a better mood.

He had ridden hard to escape the desert. Unfortunately, the horse didn't fare as well as he. After it collapsed, he killed it quickly and cut chunks from its abdomen. Few things sour the palate as quickly as raw horsemeat, especially if you have nothing but blood to wash it down. At least he had survived.

The Temple of Sarith was located near the center of the city and took up a good portion of the area. The Temple was the most powerful entity in Glith and the administrators of the city paid homage to the Goddess, daily.

Glith was to the Priesthood of Sarith what the island of Torlyn was to the Assassins. It was the place from where Ezewdra the High Priest ruled the world. And it was the last place on Corithim Galith wanted to be.

The Temple was a large, white stone building, topped by spires shaped like ornate daggers. There were few buildings in The Skyshore Realm that could rival it for size or presence. Indeed you couldn't be anywhere in Glith without being aware of the structure.

Galith paused only momentarily before walking up the steps to the Assassin's entrance. There were others about, some of whom he knew well, but none would speak to him. Even Elrad turned away at the sight of him.

Galith increased his pace, until he reached the meditation room. There was always a priest or priestess inside, waiting to hear an Assassin's confession. When he entered, he was surprised to find Bone already there, sitting beside Ezewdra himself.

Galith knelt and dropped his eyes to the floor. He dared not speak until a question was asked.

"Well, well, if it isn't our very own Galith? You look well."

Galith's shame would have been plain on his face, but for the burn. He kept his eyes downcast, wondering how severe his penance would be.

"Stand and report."

Galith rose and told the story, omitting no detail. He started with his initial encounter with Tanrif and finished with losing the trail in the great desert. When he was done, he dropped his head and waited.

"You have failed."

The words burned his soul as badly as the sun had scorched his face.

"While you have never before tasted defeat, your initial overconfidence has cost us. This cannot go unpunished. You are reduced three steps in rank and will remain at that level, until Tanrif is dead. You will be given no mission or promotion until such time. Have you anything to say?"

Galith raised his eyes. "Tanrif will die by my hand. I swear it."

"I hope so, for your sake. You may leave."

Galith, flame in his eyes, turned and strode from the room. Behind him, Bone watched, almost amused. Galith's failure had nothing to do with him. Ezewdra studied the younger Assassin's face.

"You heard the account?"

"Yes."

"The Assassins have unfinished business. Do you know what that business is?"

"Varon Imgard has taken the life of a Brother. Retribution must be paid."

"You are correct. The swordmaster will not be an easy target, but I believe you are up to the task. Find Varon Imgard and kill him. When it is done, return to me."

Bone rose and bowed deeply. "Thy will be done, Great One."

He wasted no time. Without another word, the Assassin left the room.

He ignored the curious stares of the others as he made his way from the building. He had no doubt many of his Brothers and Sisters would want to know what was important enough to prompt the interest of the High Priest himself.

He ran down the stone steps and toward the stable, signaling for his horse to be readied before he even arrived. He doubted Varon Imgard would return to Ularon, but the incident at the ranch had set him thinking.

Bone retrieved his horse from the stable and mounted it. He would start his search in Stratus.

Shortly before dawn, Lylea walked her horse through the nearly empty streets of Stratus. She couldn't wait to leave the city behind. Once on the road, she would ride hard and gain ground on those she pursued. Though they had a day's start on her, if she had correctly guessed their plans, she should be able to catch them by nightfall. Unless they were pushing the pace, which she doubted.

She could picture them walking along, heads close, laughing together. She cursed to herself, then aloud. Why had she waited so long to make her feelings plain?

That last night, as she lay awake in bed trying to build the nerve to approach the young warrior, she had heard footsteps in the corridor. She rose and placed her ear against the door of her room, but hadn't needed to. She knew Cyanne was staking her own claim on Tanrif.

She lay back down and listened, waiting to hear the sound of footsteps as they again passed her door, but after a short time, heard sounds of passion instead.

Long after the sounds of lovemaking faded, Lylea was unable to sleep. Why was she never able to accomplish so simple a feat? At least, Cyanne always made it look simple. They had spent many long hours talking about it. In fact, Cyanne often grew angry at Lylea's inability to act on her desires.

Lylea had rolled on her side and closed her eyes, but was unable to shut out the thought of her sister and Tanrif making love just down the corridor. Damn her anyway. Lylea could have been happy with Tanrif. She'd never met another like him. It was her own fault. If only she had done more to make her feelings known.

The sound of a horse whinnying broke her from her reverie. Before her rose the east gate of Stratus. Once through, she sprang on the back of her mount and kicked him into a gallop. She leaned forward and tried to concentrate on the road, but the idea she had failed would not leave her. Eventually she gave in to tears, which the wind cleared from her eyes as they formed.

Her sadness became anger. She loved her sister, but it didn't matter. She would not relinquish Tanrif without a fight. She would find them and make her feelings known and Tanrif would have to choose. The decision made, she kicked her horse again, though the colt was already running as fast as he could. After a few more minutes, Lylea eased him back into a trot. If she injured her steed, she would never catch them.

She tried, with mixed success, to force the feelings from her mind. Finally, she gave up trying. She spent the rest of the ride, thinking about what she would say when she finally found them.

Daln sat in his office, pouring over ships' manifests and muttering to himself. Actually, office was too generous a word for the ramshackle cabin that housed his paperwork. Just about the only thing he liked about it was its close proximity to the pier.

He lifted a large brass tankard and took a swig of ale. He was too busy. He was always too busy, which was better than the alternative. He had just raised his drink again and was about to take a swallow when the door burst open, blowing a stack of papers off his table.

Daln leapt to his feet. "What the 'ell is wrong with you, Marin?"

The longshoreman was breathing heavily and took a moment to reply. "This couldn't wait."

"What couldn't wait?"

"There's a Gondylarian warship approaching."

Daln threw back his head and laughed. "Whatever you've been drinkin', pick me up a bottle."

"It's true. Guards rode off to get the Chancellor and people are beginning to panic."

Daln might have thought it was a joke, but for the grim look on Marin's face.

"Come. Show me this warship."

He didn't stop to pick up the papers. If the tidings were true, he had more to worry about than a messy office. He rounded his desk and walked from the cabin. The longshoreman followed in his wake.

The first thing Daln noticed was the docks were busier than usual. There were more people, involved in more activity, than he ever remembered seeing at one time. And things were normally rather hectic. He increased his pace, completely forgetting the man behind him.

He saw it before he reached the edge of the pier. Marin had not been mistaken. The approaching vessel was indeed a member of the Gondylarian navy. He stood and watched, a thousand questions running through his mind. All of them, however, were secondary to the only real question. How would the upcoming event affect business?

While he waited, Daln listened to random snatches of conversation, thinking he might perhaps get an idea of what was about to happen. After a few minutes, he gave up. Most people had even less of a clue than he.

All he could really say at this point was that Stratus was not being invaded. The entire Gondylarian fleet would be necessary for that undertaking.

Daln moved toward the longer piers, the only ones that could hold a ship of that size. There weren't usually many people here, but today it was packed. The dockmaster had to fight his way through the crowd. A few moments after he reached his goal, the Chancellor of Stratus appeared and did the same. In spite of the fact they got along, Daln never liked the man.

Still, he would defer to him on this occasion. This was a matter of state and would have to be handled by an official. Unless of course things didn't go his way, in which case Daln would find some way to interject himself into the proceedings.

The ship anchored itself a good distance off shore and lowered a dinghy into the water. As the boat drew closer, Daln could see there were three men aboard. Though he couldn't be certain, he believed he was looking at the Captain, one of the sailors and a third man who could be nothing but a warrior. Every eye was on the approaching craft.

Unfortunately, the boat ended up at a different pier altogether and both Daln and the Chancellor had to

blaze a new path through the crowd to get there. By the time they did, two of the men were standing on the docks, apparently waiting for someone in authority to arrive. The official made it first and bowed.

"Greetings, good Sirs. I am Dogaroth, Chancellor of Stratus."

Daln stepped out of the crowd a moment later, in time to see the man he thought was the captain of the ship turn and address the warrior in Gondylarian. He knew a smattering of it, but not enough to follow the exchange. Apparently the Captain could speak Talovarian, but the leather-clad warrior could not.

When he spoke, the man confirmed Daln's speculations.

"Good day to you. I am Andres, captain of the ship the Sea Serpent. This other is Kestryl, Bladesman to the throne of High Gondylar."

"You are both welcome in Stratus," replied the Chancellor.

"An honor, Sir. Might there be a place that we could discourse more privately?"

Daln stepped forward. "My office is at de end of da pier."

Andres looked at him.

"I'm Daln the dockmaster."

"Good. After we speak with the Chancellor, I can talk to you about berthing my ship."

"Sure thing. Dis way."

The dockmaster turned and started through the crowd. The going was easier this time, as more guardsmen had arrived to help hold the crowd at bay. The four men made it to Daln's office in short order.

Daln held the door for his guests and entered after. The Chancellor looked at the mess of paper on the floor, then back at Daln. The dockmaster shrugged.

"Now, gentlemen," said Dogaroth. "What may I do for you?"

"We are searching for a noblewoman, who moved here many years ago. Her uncle has passed on. As she is the only living relative and the deceased was good friends with the Duke, he sent us to collect her and return her to Gondylar. Unfortunately, we don't know exactly where she is."

"I see," said the Chancellor.

"What's she look like?" asked Daln.

The official glared at him.

"All we really know is that she has black hair and violet eyes. Her name is Cyanne."

At the mention of the name, Daln's eyes narrowed. Cyanne and her sister Lylea had been picking up and delivering packages to him for years. Demendil was always generous.

Though he didn't speak Talovarian, Kestryl noticed the reaction.

"And you believe her to be in Stratus?" asked Dogaroth.

"We're not certain, though her last message was sent from here. All we require is permission to seek her, a few minor repairs, the chance to reprovision and, if possible, to arrange shore leave for my men."

"None of which should represent a problem. We in Stratus are only too happy to help you in any way we can. Tell me, how is Duke Dathan?"

Andres didn't have to check with the Bladesman to answer the question. They had discussed what would and wouldn't be revealed, long before land was sighted.

"He's well or at least was when we left Gondylar."

The Chancellor nodded and smiled, but his mind was already elsewhere. These two men did not pose a threat to the security of Stratus. Though the conversation continued for some time, the interview was essentially over.

Eventually the small talk dwindled and Dogaroth bid the Gondylarians good evening. He bowed and walked out. Only then did Kestryl speak. Again his words were too fast for the dockmaster to follow, but Andres translated them.

"I believe there is something you would like to tell me."

"Like wat?"

"Like where I might find the Lady Cyanne."

The expression on the captain's face left Daln no illusions. These men were serious.

"How much you willin' to pay to find out?"

The Captain repeated the question in Gondylarian.

The warrior smiled. "I've had a long hard journey and am most anxious to complete my task. Offer him what you think is fair and go no higher. If that doesn't work, I will resort to more drastic measures."

Andres shuddered. He turned toward Daln and leaned forward.

"I think you might want to consider telling him what he wants to know. The Bladesman is not a patient man."

Daln sighed, then smiled. He would make up the difference in their berthing toll.

"She works at de Shop of Demendil."

Though he couldn't speak the language, the Bladesman started at the name. He leaned forward and spoke.

"Ask him where we can find Demendil."

Daln didn't wait for the question to be translated. He gave the required directions. When he was done, the two turned to leave. Daln cleared his throat.

"We need ta talk 'bout repair costs and berthing charges."

Andres looked over his shoulder. "Whatever it is, we're good for it."

"I'm sure you are."

Daln smiled as the two men left. It was going to be business as usual.

The Duke of High Gondylar sat in the throne room. Whenever he couldn't sleep, which was rather often of late, he would come here. It was the only time he could enjoy the throne. Without the minor nobles and their mind games, Penthor felt almost relaxed. The only people present were two guards, who didn't affect him one way or another.

When the door opened and Lord Zelaran entered, he sighed. Was there no time he would be allowed peace?

"Yes, Lord Zelaran, what can I do for you?"

"My apologies if I'm disturbing you. I saw you enter and I was wondering if you were feeling all right."

"I'm perfectly fine. A spot of insomnia is all I suffer."

At first he was going to order Zelaran to leave, but then remembered something he'd been meaning to ask for some time.

"As long as you're here, the festival of Elrithus is rapidly approaching. I was wondering if you would do me the honor of sounding the Horn of Tenithior on that occasion."

"My Lord! It would be the greatest of honors."

"I thought you'd feel that way."

Penthor rose, walked to the Horn and raised it from the brackets that held it in place. It was said to be made of human bone and he believed it. Even in times of peace, the Dukedom was not a peaceful place.

"You know the story of the Horn?"

"Indeed I do, my Lord."

"Good. Go ahead. Try it."

Zelaran accepted the instrument and placed it to his lips. No sound emerged, no matter how hard he blew.

"Try harder."

Zelaran shook his head. "Any harder and my insides will be outsides."

"I don't understand. It was never a problem for me."

Zelaran and Penthor both stared each other, then at the Horn.

"Perhaps I'm not the man for the job," said Zelaran, offering it back to the Duke.

"Perhaps not at that."

Lord Zelaran bade Penthor goodnight and hurriedly left the throne room. Both men knew what the failure implied. Penthor cursed, then sighed.

According to legend, the Horn of Tenithior could only be sounded when the rightful ruler was on the throne, though as far as he knew, it had never been tested. Surely Zelaran understood what his failure meant. So would the guards for that matter. "Leave me."

Both men bowed and left, closing the door behind them. Penthor sat on the throne and placed the Horn of Tenithior on his lap.

What did it mean? If he wasn't the rightful ruler, who was? Hadn't Dathan himself chosen Penthor as heir to the throne? Hadn't Amalga supported his decision? Or did she give the Bladesman different instructions that would put them at odds? Was the Bladesman truly bringing Cyanne back to High Gondylar?"

He raised the instrument to his lips and hesitated only momentarily before trying to sound it. The silence that followed was the loudest he'd ever heard. He dropped his hand. The festival of Elrithus would be held without the Horn of Tenithior.

People would ponder his decision, but no one would gainsay it. He wished the guards had not been there. If only he and Zelaran held the secret, he could have hidden the Horn and claimed it stolen. If he did that now, it would raise suspicion. If he ordered the guards not to speak of it, it would guarantee the rumor would spread. All he could do was ignore it and hope for the best.

Of course, just because it made no sound, didn't mean the Bladesman's Duchess was the genuine article either. The quality of Zelaran's intelligence had proved itself to him on any number of occasions. Wherever the real Duchess was, the woman Kestryl was bringing was an impostor. Of that he was sure. The only real question was whether or not Kestryl knew the truth.

Probably not. If the Bladesman was returning to Gondylar with a woman, he believed her to be Cyanne. Which was a pity, because there was no way Penthor would be able to convince him otherwise.

If only Kestryl weren't so infernally competent, he would invite him to the palace with the impostor and let him try the Horn himself. Yet the Bladesman had already accused Penthor of treason, and had threatened his life as well. Penthor was not enough of a fool to believe he could control any situation in which the Bladesman played a part. If Kestryl wanted him dead, he would die, unless he could find a way to stop the Bladesman before he reached the palace.

Of course there was a possibility, however slim, that the Bladesman had managed to locate Cyanne and was bringing her back to rule. The thought disturbed him, but he couldn't allow it to alter his agenda.

Dathan and Amalga had sent her away many years ago. The reasons they had done so were as valid today as they had been back then. And they had named *him* successor. Even if the girl was the genuine article, she was no longer heir. He knew well what the reaction would be, both of the Lords and the common man, if a half-breed ever attempted to sit on the throne.

No, he had no choice but to stop Kestryl, preferably before he reached Gondylar. He sincerely hoped it was not the real Cyanne, for it would hurt him if he had to stand against her, but stand against her he would, for the sake of the Dukedom.

He leaned back on the throne and bowed his head.

Mitra have mercy on us all.

Chapter Nine - Battle in the Dark

"I can't believe you killed a rabbit with a knife," said Tanrif.

Cyanne smiled. "That's why I don't use a bow. By the time you get it ready, the target is usually gone. Throwing blades are just so convenient."

Sometimes, it was difficult for Tanrif to remember she had spent so many years working in a weapons shop. "Well, I'm happy. Dried meat and cheese do not a diet make."

He busied himself building a fire, while Cyanne cleaned and skinned the creature. Thus involved, neither spoke.

They were in no hurry to decide on a destination, though Tanrif suspected they would be traveling for some time yet. He'd never traveled so far from civilization and it felt odd. He didn't think he would ever get used to sleeping on the ground, though his father had done it often enough. It was part of the price one paid for adventure.

He used his tinderbox to start the fire and made a game of positioning small twigs to build it up. Cyanne approached from behind and dropped something heavy beside him. It took him a moment to realize he was staring at a bottle of wine. "Hey, where'd you find this?"

"Brought it from the shop. I was saving it for a special occasion."

He reached down and picked it up. "What, no glasses?"

Cyanne looked at him. He laughed and held up a placating hand. "Okay, okay. Just asking." He used his dagger to remove the cork and took a swallow, before offering it to her. "Hey this is good."

"Demendil doesn't buy cheap wine."

"No, I imagine not. How'd you and Lylea ever end up with him?"

"He was already raising Lylea when I showed up."

"I thought you were sisters."

"We're not blood sisters. We grew up together. Lylea and Demendil, in a very real sense, are the only family I've got. I think of her as my sister and call her that. Her story is no happier than mine. She was orphaned and Demendil, through a set of circumstances I've never quite understood, ended up with her."

"So he never married."

Cyanne shook her head. "He had a lady once, when he was younger, but she died. He never found anyone to replace her."

"That would be my mother."

"Aleara was your mother? I didn't know."

"She died in childbirth."

Cyanne studied him. Were Varon Imgard and the weaponsmith in love with the same woman? Cyanne had gotten the impression on the rare occasions Demendil spoke of her, that Aleara and he had been in love. Where did that leave Tanrif's father? For that matter, where did that leave Tanrif? Could Demendil be his father? If so, how did he end up with Varon? She shook her head. Speculation in the absence of facts was dangerous. Tanrif seemed not to notice her reaction. She took a long pull from the bottle and handed it back to him.

"So how did you end up with Demendil?" asked Tanrif.

"After I arrived in Stratus, I was left with him. You want to know what really bothers me?"

"What?"

"I can only vaguely recall what my parents look like. I remember a couple of Uncles pretty clearly, but my mother and father are just a blur in my memory."

"That's sad."

So she wouldn't cry, she returned to working on the rabbit. When she was done, she tied it to a long thick branch. She picked it up and walked over to Tanrif. "Your turn."

Tanrif sighed, then smiled. He took the spit from her and held it over the fire. Cyanne sat next to him.

"Tonight," said Tanrif, "we're only going to talk about happy things. Tonight is a night of celebration and love."

"And what, exactly, are you celebrating?"

He looked into her eyes. "You."

She leaned forward and kissed him long and hard. Eventually he pulled back. "Hey. Keep that up and I'll drop the rabbit. There'll be time for that after we've eaten."

"All you men ever think about is your stomachs."

"Not true. We think about sex too...just not until after we've eaten."

Cyanne laughed and punched him playfully on the arm, then rested her head on his shoulder. "I'm glad we're here."

"Me too."

Neither spoke again, content to relax and listen to the crackling of the flame and the noises of dusk.

Though darkness was almost upon her, Lylea continued to ride hard. She was tired, but couldn't give up. She couldn't stop thinking about Tanrif.

She had never felt this way about a man before. She had already changed plans a number of times since the morning. For one thing, she didn't dare ask Tanrif to choose between her and Cyanne, because she'd lose. How could she compete with Cyanne on that level?

Still, she had to find some way to win him over, even if it meant losing Cyanne's friendship in the process. She shook herself at the thought. What was happening to her? Why was Tanrif so important?

She thought about it, but could not answer the question. It wasn't just that he was attractive. She had been around attractive men before. Nor was it his swordsmanship, though that might be a part of it. Even the fact he was in danger added to the attraction, but nothing explained it all. Eventually she gave up trying to understand the feelings.

She knew only one thing. She would have Tanrif one way or another, whatever it did to Cyanne. The decision made, she kicked her steed to greater speed. Soon it would be too dark to continue.

It was just about dusk, when Galith arrived at Stratus. A fortnight earlier, he'd entered the city as a

Master Assassin with a team of four brothers at his disposal. He had been in charge.

This time he was alone, bruised, burned and broken down to the level of apprentice, all because he had underestimated his target. He'd spent his life working his way through the ranks. He wouldn't let anyone take that away from him, especially Tanrif.

Originally, he'd planned to ride to Ularon and start his search there, but Tanrif and his father were not stupid men. They would never return to the ranch house.

Stratus was the only place besides Ularon Tanrif had ever called home. And the city was large enough that he might mistakenly think he could lose himself among the masses. That was Galith's only hope. Otherwise, he'd never find him.

Galith took a room near the docks. That was as good a place as any to begin his search. He spent the night going from tavern to tavern. He asked questions and dropped money, but received no information of value. Finally, frustrated by the lack of results, he returned to his room. Tomorrow would be another day.

When the rabbit was almost done, they heard hoof beats approaching. Tanrif didn't react. The clearing they'd chosen wasn't all that far from the road. In fact, he was surprised there hadn't been more traffic.

Cyanne had made a game of kissing him, trying to get him to drop the spit. Tanrif made a game of reprimanding her, though his protests became less and less vocal as the time their mouths remained in contact increased. She had just started again and he was having a demon of a time concentrating, when he found his mind wandering.

At first, he couldn't figure out what caused the distraction. Then he knew. The horse was too close. He pulled back and got to his feet, handing the spit to Cyanne. She looked at him, but said nothing.

He placed his hand on the hilt of his sword and took a step toward the road. A horse and rider broke from the trees.

Tanrif almost drew his blade. Then he recognized the intruder and breathed a sigh of relief. Lylea didn't wait for her horse to come to a full stop before dismounting. Cyanne was on her feet a moment later.

"Hey all. I hope you saved some wine for me."

Tanrif and Cyanne looked at each other. Lylea tied her horse to a tree and turned to face them.

"Lylea, what are you doing here?" asked Cyanne.

"Demendil sent me to warn you. The attack on the shop had nothing to do with the Sarithan Assassins. It's not their style. Also you're to avoid Glith. The city is ruled by the Sarithan. Even now you may be too close."

Cyanne studied her. "Demendil sent you?"

That didn't sound right. Demendil would never send her into danger.

"Hmm-mmm."

Lylea bent down, picked up the bottle of wine and raised it to her lips. "You can't imagine how thirsty I am."

Cyanne glared at her. Tanrif looked from Cyanne to Lylea and back again. It was Cyanne who spoke.

"So you've warned us. Will you be heading back now?"

Lylea stopped drinking and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "And leave the two of you to face the danger alone? I think not. Is dinner ready? Haven't had rabbit in ages."

Tanrif looked at Cyanne and shrugged. While he would have preferred to be alone with Cyanne, certainly Lylea made sense, especially if there were Sarithan in the area. Yet there was an underlying tension he didn't quite understand, and until he did, he wasn't going to say anything. Cyanne, however, had no such compunction.

"We appreciate that you came all this way to warn us. And you're welcome to spend the night, but tomorrow, we'd really rather be on our own. Isn't that right, Tanrif?"

And suddenly, it was all up to him. He thought about the Sarithan Assassins. About Lylea suddenly being there. The blond was staring at him, and he realized his answer would determine whether she stayed or not. He didn't quite understand the expression on her face, but it convinced him that perhaps he shouldn't decide without knowing more.

"We'll talk about it over dinner."

There, a nice neutral answer. Cyanne couldn't possibly be angry with that, or so he thought.

"Fine. Over dinner."

Cyanne turned and stalked into the woods, leaving Lylea and Tanrif alone in the clearing.

Though it was well after business hours, Demendil was still busy. Neither Lylea nor Cyanne was there to help him and he'd been away for several days. If he were lucky, he would accomplish enough by midnight to crawl into bed.

It had been many years since he'd been without help, and he was older now and exhausted from his recent ordeal. Perhaps he would have to hire someone. Perhaps he should have gone with Varon.

Such were his thoughts when there came a tapping at his front door. He stopped and looked at it. Probably some customer who had to have a weapon, even though the shop was closed. He walked to the door, but in light of recent events, did not unbolt it.

"I'm sorry, we're closed."

"I need to speak to Demendil. It is an urgent matter."

Normally, Demendil would have opened the door, but with all that had happened recently and the work he still had left, he found himself reluctant. "How so urgent?" There was a pause. At first he thought that the man had left and there would be no reply. Then a second voice spoke, this time in Gondylarian.

"Demendil. We must talk. It is about the heir to the Gondylarian throne."

It had been many long years since Demendil had heard the voice, but he knew it instantly. He slid the bolt and opened the door. Before him stood two men. The first he'd never seen, but standing just behind him was the Bladesman.

"Kestryl! What are you doing here? I fear the tidings must be grim for you to be so far from home."

The Bladesman nodded and entered, not waiting for an invitation. He didn't need one from this man. Andres followed behind and closed the door. He stood off to the side and said nothing.

"Dathan and Amalga have both passed on. Penthor rules in High Gondylar."

Demendil almost choked. "Penthor? You're joking."

"I wish I were. Unfortunately it's true."

Demendil, as custom demanded, turned and presented himself to the second man. "I am Demendil of the House of Lehan."

"And I am Andres, Captain of the Sea Serpent, a ship in the royal Gondylarian navy. It is an honor to finally meet you."

"The honor is mine."

He turned back to the Bladesman. "If you've come to tell Cyanne, you've missed her. Yesterday morning she rode off. I have only the vaguest notion of where she might be."

"Which is better than I had hoped for. I was not certain I would still find you here."

"Where else would I be? If I could have, I'd have returned to High Gondylar, but that wasn't possible. Not after you placed Cyanne into my custody."

"I was stunned to find you here in the first place, but once I did, I knew Sheba had answered my prayers. Who better than you to trust with the Gondylarian heir?"

Andres stepped forward. "I don't understand."

Demendil explained. "Fifteen years ago or perhaps a little more, when Kestryl left High Gondylar, he had no idea who would take custody of Cyanne. He didn't know I was already in The Skyshore Realm. I would have returned to High Gondylar, but when he found me, I knew I had a more important duty. So I stayed, opened this shop and have been here ever since. And Cyanne was with me up until yesterday."

Andres nodded. "When I first saw your weapons, I knew you were a great smith. Now, I know you to be a great man. Gondylarian history will not forget the name of Demendil."

Demendil laughed. "I would that it were so. However, it is far more likely I will be but a brief footnote when it is all done. Now, what are you doing here? Have you come all the way to Skyshore, to tell Cyanne of the death of her parents? Has she not been hurt enough by her affiliation with the throne?"

At first Kestryl did not answer. He turned away and began to walk among the racks of weapons. Finally he looked back toward Demendil.

"Penthor is a traitor. Before her death, Amalga sent me to bring the rightful heir back to Gondylar."

Demendil was stunned. He stood silent, trying to come to terms with the tidings. When he finally spoke, his voice was tinged with uncertainty.

"Cyanne has not had the training necessary to run the Dukedom. I did all I could, but I was never a member of the court. And she was never to return. You said so yourself. Nor do I imagine Penthor will stand idly by and allow her to usurp his power. He controls the army, does he not?"

The Bladesman walked to Demendil and looked him in the eyes. "I have no answers for you. All I can

say is I am fulfilling the dying request of the Duchess of High Gondylar. For the rest of it, we will have to solve the problems as they arise. I will not fail Amalga this last time."

Demendil dropped his head. "Of course you won't. Forgive me."

He stepped back to include Andres in his gaze. "Come, dine with me. It's too late for you to leave tonight anyway. You can do me the honor of spending the night in my shop and tomorrow, I will give you horses and supplies for your quest."

The Bladesman bowed low. "You are a credit to the House of Lehan."

Demendil's eyes shone. "You do me too much honor. Come. While I prepare dinner, you can tell me the whole tale."

Kestryl and Andres followed Demendil to the kitchen.

Neither of the three spoke. Lylea sat across the fire from them, chewing the last bit of meat from a bone. Cyanne had said little during dinner and Tanrif, unable to guess the cause of the tension, was likewise silent. Finally Cyanne turned to him.

"Would you mind if I spoke with Lylea alone?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea. Do you think it's safe in the woods at night?"

Lylea laughed. "Cyanne and I can take care of ourselves, thank you."

"Is that so? Who's going to protect you from each other?" asked Tanrif, rising.

Two pairs of eyes glared at him.

"All right. I'll walk back toward the trail, but I'll stay in earshot. If you need me, shout and I'm here. You're sure you'll be okay?"

Cyanne nodded. Lylea rolled her eyes. Tanrif walked from the clearing down the path toward the main road. He tried to eavesdrop, but the women were speaking too low for him to hear.

"All right, Lylea, why are you really here?"

"To offer my sword. Do you think I would let you walk into danger alone? Would you do no less for me?"

"There's no other motivation?"

"Such as?"

"Tanrif."

Lylea turned away, so her sister could not see the look in her eyes. "What about him?"

"You know you want him. You should have acted on it when you had the chance."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I have no designs on Tanrif. He's yours. I don't want anything to do with him."

"I don't believe you. Be that as it may, be warned. I will not let Tanrif go without a fight."

Lylea turned back and met her sister's eyes. "No, I don't suppose you would at that."

Both women were contemplating what to say next, when Tanrif charged back into the clearing, a panicked look in his eyes. He stopped when he saw the two sitting there. Lylea was on her feet in an instant. "What's the matter?"

"Didn't you hear them?"

"Hear what?" asked Cyanne.

"Horsemen! Hundreds of them. They were coming from the direction of the Borderlands."

Both women stared at him.

"I didn't hear anything," said Cyanne. "Maybe you had too much wine."

"Do you have any idea how much I can consume before I begin to feel the effect? Come on."

Tanrif started packing up camp and after a few seconds, when Cyanne realized he wouldn't listen to reason, she began to help. While they worked, Lylea lit two lanterns. Within minutes, they were leading their horses through the woods.

"Where are we going?" asked Cyanne.

Tanrif didn't answer. He wasn't sure himself. As he walked, he checked the ground for tracks. There were none.

"I don't understand," said Tanrif, but he kept walking. Concerned, Cyanne and Lylea followed.

"Look," said Lylea, "maybe you just thought you saw them."

"Thought I saw hundreds of horses? I'm not mad."

"No one said you were, but sometimes the moonlight can play tricks."

"You mean like that?"

Tanrif pointed. Through the trees, they could make out dark shapes. All at once, the night grew noisy. The sounds were of horses moving back and forth, of arrows being fired and men's voices calling to each other. Apparently, the horsemen were engaged in some sort of combat.

"I don't understand," said Cyanne. It was as if the sound had only just started that second.

"Neither do I, and I'm tired of it. Assassins attacking me for no reason, the attack on the shop and now this."

He moved closer to the battle, taking it in, trying to make sense of it. From where they now stood, they were too far away to see what the horsemen were attacking, though from their positions, Tanrif assumed it to be either a fixed target, or a much smaller group. He moved even closer, hoping to gain further insight. He was so intent on the point of attack, he didn't see the horseman until it was almost upon him."

Both women shouted at the same time, but Tanrif couldn't make out their words over the sound of hooves. He tried to dodge to the side, but there wasn't enough time. He still wasn't completely over his ordeal at the shop and his tired body was just a hair too slow. He shouldn't have moved so far in to the combat area and he would pay for it. He braced himself, but the impact never occurred. The horse passed through him as if he weren't there. He turned to watch it plunge into the battle before returning to the women. Both were shaken and amazed, but neither more than Tanrif.

"Would someone mind telling me what the hell is going on?"

"Wish I could," said Lylea.

"Maybe they're phantoms," said Cyanne.

"Phantoms?" Tanrif looked back to the battle, but the rider had already disappeared into the melee.

"My mother use to speak of them when I was a little girl, but I never believed the stories. If memory serves, certain events are so significant they cast a reflection down through the ages. Great battles are fought again, love affairs are relived and certain historical events repeated. No one knows for sure whether it's just a reflection, or if the spirits of those involved are doomed to repeat the incidents. What is known is that they occur only on an anniversary of the event, sometimes hundreds of years later.

Tanrif stepped closer to the fray. Lylea and Cyanne moved after him. He walked up to the nearest horse and stared at it for a moment before inserting his hand into its side.

"Incredible."

Lylea walked next to him and tried it herself. "It's as if they're not here."

"They're not," said Cyanne. "In all probability, these men died ages ago. What I find odd is that it's happening now and we're on hand to witness it."

"Why?" asked Tanrif.

"Just sort of strange. Did you ever stop to think about all the coincidences that have led you to this point? The attack by Galith. Showing up at the Shop of Demendil. The dark warrior's raid. Now this. I'm beginning to wonder if something isn't guiding your steps."

"Guiding my steps, huh? I'm a seventeen-year-old dockworker from Ularon. Why would providence be so smitten with me?"

"I was," said Cyanne. "But you have to admit, it's odd."

"I agree," said Lylea.

"You too?"

Cyanne and Lylea shared a knowing glance, but neither said anything. There was certainly more to Tanrif than met the eye, even if he wasn't aware of it himself.

He turned and led his horse literally through the battle. At first, Fireball was nervous, but when she realized there was no danger, she began to relax. Behind him, Cyanne and Lylea led their mounts as well. When he noticed a tree with low enough branches, he tied Fireball to it.

"I'll be right back. I want to see if I can figure out what's going on."

"I'll come with you," said Lylea. She was already tying up her horse. Cyanne sighed, but followed suit.

The three walked through the battle, taking it in from their rather unique perspective. Several times people and arrows passed through them. While at first startling, it rapidly dissolved into a bit of fun. They made a game out of trying to intercept arrows with their bodies. After the earlier tension, it was a much needed release.

At one point, a horse stopped between Tanrif and the women. When it didn't move, Tanrif stuck his head through it, so it looked as if it were growing from the saddle.

"I'd really love to chat," he rasped, "but I'm hoarse."

Cyanne giggled. Lylea shook her head.

Tanrif made several faces in an attempt to get Lylea to laugh, but she controlled herself. Eventually, he allowed himself to fall through. He rolled over twice and ended up at her feet.

She looked down. "You should have quit while you were a head."

He laughed and she helped him up.

A shout from Cyanne drew their attention. "Look!"

They followed her gaze and finally saw the horsemen's objective.

At the fore of the battle, a small group of men and women tried to protect a cave entrance. While the defenders had the superior position, they were so outnumbered, it was only a matter of time before they were defeated. Whatever the stakes, they must have been high. The trio moved closer.

"Silverguard," said Tanrif, pointing. The name was emblazoned on a sign attached to two chains hanging from the roof of the cave. Cyanne could only barely make it out in the distance. How Tanrif had been able to read it was beyond her.

"Sounds like the name of a mine," she said.

Tanrif continued forward, until he stood beside a tall man, holding a bow. Every now and again, the archer would let fly an arrow that always found its mark. Still, the hopelessness of the situation was not lost on him. Tanrif was close enough to see it in his eyes. He had no doubt this man led the defense of Silverguard.

They watched until there were only a handful of defenders left alive. Then the tall man turned and said something to the shadows behind him. At once, a young boy stepped forward, face contorted by fear. The tall man bent over and whispered. The boy nodded.

The leader reached around his neck and removed a necklace.

As he did, an eerie glow transformed the night. The gem that hung from the silver chain was so beautiful it transfixed all who looked at it. Even the man who wore it, seemed mesmerized. The boy took it and moved deeper into the shadows. Tanrif, Cyanne and Lylea moved after him.

The boy entered the mines and started to run. The three struggled to keep up. Captured by the necklace's brilliance, they followed the boy ever deeper into the mines of Silverguard. They ran without seeing where they were going, passed pits and side corridors, slopes and stairways. They followed him for more than an hour, never taking their eyes from the treasure he held.

Until he ran through a door and left them behind in total darkness.

Chapter Ten - Silverguard

The only sound was of their labored breathing. With the spell of the necklace broken, reality returned. Tanrif paused to catch his breath before speaking.

"Is everyone all right?"

From somewhere off to his right, Lylea answered. "I'm okay."

"Cyanne?"

"I'm fine."

"Good. What the hell happened to the light?"

"I think you put your lantern down at the cave entrance. I still have mine, but it seems to have gone out," said Lylea.

"Tell me you have a tinderbox."

"Just a second."

Tanrif waited, listening to the sounds of movement as Lylea unslung her pack and rummaged through it. He was more than a little relieved when the first spark appeared, though it took her several tries to ignite the wick. The lantern flared and he turned from it. Eventually, his eyes adjusted and he was able to look around.

They were in a manmade stone corridor extending in both directions as far as the eye could see. There was a stout wooden door set into the wall next to them. None of the three spoke. Countless years ago, a boy had passed through this very spot, carrying a necklace of untold power. It was entirely likely the assault on Silverguard had been implemented to gain control of the relic. They stared at the door in awe. Could the magic necklace still lay beyond?

Lylea broke the silence. "Well, are we all just going to stand here, or is someone going to see if it's locked?"

Tanrif grinned and stepped forward. It took considerable strength to pull it open after so many years of disuse. The creaking of rusted hinges filled the corridor. If there was anything alive in the vicinity, it now knew company had arrived. Tanrif entered first, followed by Lylea, then Cyanne.

Like the corridor, the room was man-made, empty but for a large, iron chest on the far wall. It was locked with a padlock and bolted to the floor and wall. Someone was taking no chances. Tanrif crossed the room, knelt and examined the rusted lock. Without warning, he drew his sword and smashed the lock open with the hilt.

Pieces flew off in every direction, one of them nearly hitting Lylea as she approached. She raised her arms to ward off flying debris, then stepped forward and grabbed his arm.

"Next time you try something, why don't you let us in on it first, okay?"

"Why don't we check the chest now and yell at each other later?" said Cyanne. The shards hadn't come anywhere near her.

Both Tanrif and Lylea looked at her, then back at the chest. Lylea placed her lantern on the floor, leaned forward and removed the remains of the lock. She pried the latch up with a dagger and pulled up the top of the chest. Inside was a small glowing cylinder and a metal box, also locked.

Tanrif knelt and tentatively touched the cylinder. "It's cool."

"It's Ethrellen flame," said Cyanne. "My mother had several like this one. I'm not sure how it's made or how it got here, but it lasts almost forever. It must have been what the boy had used to light his way."

Only then did Tanrif realize the boy had been holding no lantern.

He turned his attention from the light source and studied the box. It was made of an altogether different metal than the chest. The dark iron of the chest seemed to absorb light. The smaller box gleamed with a radiance of its own. It took him a moment to realize it was reflecting the light of the Ethrellen flame. He had a feeling getting inside of it would be considerably more difficult than opening the chest. He reached down slowly and placed a hand on either side. He lifted it from its resting place. Immediately a hissing sound filled the room.

He jerked his hands backwards, thinking at first a snake had been hiding under it. Then he saw the jet of gas and knew it for what it was.

From the bottom of the chest, blue mist poured into the air. He tried to lower the lid, but it had somehow locked to the wall. He struggled with it briefly, before giving up.

"Run!" he shouted.

Lylea was already on her way to the door; Cyanne just behind them. They ran into the corridor, slammed the door and found themselves, once again, deprived of light.

"Lylea, where's the lantern?"

"I put it down inside. I didn't know we'd have to make such a hasty exit."

"Great. Wonderful. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Good. How about you, Cyanne?"

Silence in the darkness.

"Cyanne?"

Tanrif didn't hesitate. He drew a deep breath and ran back into the room. The mist gave it a dreamy quality, but was not yet thick enough to obscure vision. It wouldn't be long before it did. He found Cyanne's limp form on the floor near the chest, the Ethrellen flame clutched in her left hand. She'd gone back for it.

Had he not been holding his breath, he'd have cursed. He knelt and lifted her. He thought about trying to go for the lantern as well, but couldn't hold his breath much longer. He turned toward the entrance and began to move.

"Tanrif, we've got company!"

As he approached the door, he heard the sound of steel on steel. He did curse then. As he entered the corridor, he tripped, hitting the floor hard in a tangle of limbs. He extricated himself and drew his sword. Only then did he realize just how desperate their situation was.

Three large creatures stood before Lylea. They were not human, though they were humanoid. They had

glowing, red pupil-less eyes, long snouts filled with pointed teeth and each wore different bits of armor taken, no doubt, from previous victims. One of them fought with a rusted sword, another with a large spiked club. The third creature used only its claws, though they looked to be sharp enough to do real damage should they come into contact with exposed flesh.

To her credit, Lylea was doing a good job of holding them off. Tanrif, sword ready, approached, just as she faltered and the point of the rusty sword sliced her arm. Tanrif couldn't tell how bad the injury was, but knew if he didn't do something, they would all be dead. He drew a deep breath, charged forward and grabbed Lylea's sword arm. He yanked her backwards and pushed her behind him. She lost her balance and fell, striking her head on the way down. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to help her. Tanrif moved in on the creatures. He spit on the first, struck the second with the flat of his blade and kicked the third, all in rapid succession. One of the creatures threw back its head and howled in what Tanrif could only assume was rage. Before they could react further, he turned and ran.

The creatures followed. Tanrif drew a breath before running into the room with the chest. The mist was even thicker now. He dove into a corner and squatted. Soon vague shadows, all he could see through the fog, moved through the room searching.

One passed before him and he leapt to his feet, thrusting his blade deep into the creature's side. The thing screamed and swung its club, but Tanrif ducked under it. He twisted the blade and thrust it even further, until the hilt was buried into its mottled flesh. It staggered, almost pulling the sword from Tanrif's grasp. Tanrif withdrew his weapon and kicked. It toppled over and disappeared beneath the mist.

Unfortunately, the other two now had a pretty fair idea of where he was. Both approached from different directions. Tanrif had still not taken a breath and his chest hurt something fierce. He ran between the two, fell to the ground and rolled toward the door, depending on mist to obscure their view.

He managed to make it outside before finally allowing himself to breathe. He closed the door and held it with all his strength. It took the creatures a few seconds to realize what had happened. By then it was too late. Tanrif listened carefully, until he heard two muffled thuds. The gas had done its job. Finally, he released the door, turned and surveyed the situation.

Cyanne lay on the floor, holding in her hand the only source of light. It was bright for so small an object...much brighter, in fact, than a lantern. He moved toward her and knelt.

He placed his hand on her chest and waited. At first, he thought she was dead. Then her chest rose, ever so slightly. He almost cried when he felt it. Would have, if he didn't still have Lylea to worry about.

He rose and went to her. He bound the wound on her arm, which wasn't deep enough to warrant concern. However, she did have a rather nasty lump on her head, probably from when she hit the wall. Tanrif arranged her in a more comfortable position, then returned to Cyanne and did the same for her.

Finally, he gave in to exhaustion. He leaned against the wall opposite the two women. He knew he didn't dare sleep, but at least he could rest. To his credit, he managed to keep watch for some time before finally surrendering consciousness.

Morning could not come fast enough for the Bladesman. He had slept a few hours, but was now awake and would likely remain so for the rest of the day. A sound, not unlike that of warthogs mating, intruded on his thoughts. Andres was snoring again. It had not been a problem on the boat, largely because the ocean had been loud enough to drown it out. The next time they slept, he would make certain they were further apart. He paced, until he could deal with it no longer, then opened the door and walked downstairs to the shop proper.

Demendil was already awake, or perhaps had never slept. Kestryl stepped heavily so the merchant would hear him. Indeed it was so natural for him to move silently, it took conscious effort to make a sound.

Demendil turned and managed a tired smile. The Bladesman continued down the stairs, until he stood beside the weaponsmith.

"Couldn't sleep?" asked Demendil.

"I haven't been able to for a long time."

"Not surprising, a man of your responsibilities."

"Do you know what bothers me the most about what I'm about to do?"

"I know what bothers me about it," said Demendil.

"And what would that be?"

"You're trying to find a young lady, who has had no contact with High Gondylar for many years. She has never been trained for life in the palace. And she's half Ethrellen. Even if she makes it to the throne, how long do you think she'll be able to hold it?"

"Fair questions. Do you think I haven't thought of them? Not a day goes by that I don't consider what I'm about to do. I'm going to take a young lady I once cared for and destroy what life she has, for a dangerous, uncertain future. I'm counting on her to somehow replace the greatest Duke in recent history, without any preparation at all. If she doesn't, Penthor wins, keeps the throne and High Gondylar falls to the wolves. Do you think I'm not aware of what effect my actions are going to have on Cyanne? I assure you, the thought is never far from my mind."

"Forgive me. I had no right to say that."

"You had every right. You are a man trying to protect a child he raised. But Cyanne is a child no longer. If she is Dathan's daughter, she will do what is required, no matter the sacrifice. And if she doesn't, High Gondylar will cease to exist for me. I will return to the Dukedom and take out Penthor. I owe Dathan at least that. Afterward, I'll live a solitary existence until Sheba consumes my soul, for without High Gondylar, I can have no life."

At that instant, the Bladesman was the loneliest man Demendil had ever seen. The weaponsmith turned away and concentrated on his displays. He wasn't sure who he felt more sorry for--Cyanne or Kestryl.

In the days and months to come, providence would see them to their respective futures, but the weaponsmith could think of no circumstance that would work in favor of them both. If Cyanne chose to remain on this side of The Mistress, Kestryl's life would be over. If she returned to High Gondylar, she might manage to make it to the throne, but even then, she would be a hated half-breed, with no chance of living a normal life.

And since Demendil couldn't do anything about either circumstance, he finished arranging the daggers in the display counter. As much as he loved her, Cyanne was a grown woman and would have to live her own life.

Hillel studied the mast work before shaking his head. He turned to his first mate.

"I don't like it. That mast breaks and we have no sails. We'll never get home."

The sailor nodded. "That's about what I thought. But you know how expensive a new mainmast can be."

"I can't say as I care. I can afford it. It won't take more than a couple of days to do the work. So get to it. We were lucky. A bad storm could have snapped it right off." The first mate was going to reply, when he saw a man approaching the vessel. Hillel noticed his gaze and turned to watch. The man, apparently a warrior, approached. The captain walked forward to meet him by the gangplank.

"What can I do for you?"

The stranger answered in Gondylarian. "Good morrow to you. I noticed the markings on your boat and thought it might be your intention to cross The Mistress. I'm looking for passage."

"To anywhere in particular?"

"Anywhere on the north shore will do."

"I see."

After his last passengers, Hillel wasn't sure he wanted to take another. Still, the man standing before him in no way resembled the dark warriors.

"We'll probably be stopping at Athlana, but we're still in the midst of repairs. Take another day or two."

"I'm in no hurry. I've waited this long, another day won't kill me."

They haggled over the price, but that was just a formality. For Varon Imgard, the only thing that mattered was he was going home.

Of the three, it was Lylea who woke first. It took many long minutes before she remembered where she was, and as many after to piece together what had happened.

When she finally felt able, she climbed to her feet. Down the corridor, along the same wall, lay Cyanne, holding in her hand what she had called Ethrellen flame.

Across from her sat Tanrif, head dangling. Apparently he had fallen asleep on watch. Under other circumstances, she'd have been angry, but she was tired and completely ignorant of what he'd gone through while she was out. It was even possible he was injured.

The thought brought to mind her own wound. She stopped and checked her arm. Someone had already bound it. Fortunately, the wound didn't seem to be that deep. She walked to her sister. She knelt slowly and took one of Cyanne's hands. She held her breath, before gathering the nerve to check for a pulse. She didn't exhale until she was certain Cyanne was alive. She looked at Tanrif, then back at her stricken sister. What had she been thinking?

Cyanne had been with her as long as she could remember. They were two of a kind. They did everything together. She'd only known Tanrif a short while. How had he become so important?

That was the worst of it. She had become so obsessed by Tanrif, that even now, she was willing to sacrifice her relationship with Cyanne to have him. Obsessed. She had avoided the word until now, but that was what had happened. And just as likely, Cyanne felt the same way.

She placed Cyanne's hand down gently and rose. She walked to Tanrif and sat beside him. She stared at him for a long time before reaching out and gently stroking his cheek. What was happening to her?

"Cyanne?" Tanrif turned his head.

"Sorry. Wrong sister. Are you okay? What happened?"

His voice slightly slurred, he told her of the tactics he'd employed to defeat the enemy.

"That's brilliant."

"Sorry about your head. Guess I don't know my own strength."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not sure we could've taken them. Yours was the only way."

He smiled and her heart skipped a beat.

"Glad you're not angry. How's Cyanne?"

"She'll be okay, I think. She'll need rest. Unfortunately, we have other problems. We have no supplies, we don't know where we are and we're clearly not alone down here." "Clearly. Maybe the necklace can help us." He reached for the metal box beside him.

Lylea grabbed his arm. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. First of all, you know what effect it had on us in the first place. Second, the box may be trapped and breaking it open might damage the necklace. When we get to a city, we can hire someone to open it. That's how I would handle it."

"Makes sense. So what do we do now?"

"Now? We wake Cyanne and see if we can't find the way out of here."

"Suppose Cyanne doesn't want to get up," said the faint voice from across the corridor.

Tanrif was on his feet before she'd finished speaking. "Are you okay?"

She had managed to pull herself into a sitting position. "I won't be winning any races in the near future, but I think I can move."

Lylea stepped forward and extended a hand. "Come on. Let's see if you can walk." Unsteadily, Cyanne found her feet. Tanrif moved to support her. "Here. Let me help you."

Lylea watched, wondering whether or not her sister was exaggerating her weakness. The more she watched, the more certain she became. Cyanne had not been that badly hurt. She was feigning weakness to draw Tanrif to her. If that was the case, then the rules of the game were about to change--but not yet. First and foremost came survival. "Come on. I think we came from this direction."

"I think you're right," said Tanrif. He placed an arm around Cyanne's shoulder and let her lean on him. Lylea said nothing.

"I don't know how long we can last down here without water," said Cyanne.

At those words all three looked at each other, perhaps realizing for the first time exactly how dire their situation was. They moved off into the darkness with only the Ethrellen flame to light the way.

"I think there's something you should see," said Demendil to Kestryl, shortly before he and Andres departed.

"Yes?"

"Follow me."

The weaponsmith led him to a room in the shop he'd not before entered. There, on a wooden table, lay five swords and five black helms. The Bladesman examined the weapons, while Demendil told of the attack on the shop. Kestryl listened as the story unfolded. He had no idea who Tanrif was, and Demendil didn't offer the information. When the tale was done, the Bladesman spoke.

"I have seen such markings, in the south of Gondylar. Beyond that I can tell you nothing, other than they are superior quality, which I'm sure you already knew." Demendil nodded. "Yes, of course. The south...the caverns...The Darkdom of Vykon. I thought I'd recognized them."

"I have never heard of them."

"A powerful mage took up residence there, a long time ago. He calls himself the Dark One. These are from his forges. We had thought the attack on the shop had been aimed at Tanrif, but it is possible they had a different target in mind."

"Cyanne? Impossible. No one knew she was here but the two of us."

Demendil shrugged. He had no idea what a mage could do, nor how strong the one who lived in Vykon would be, or even if he still lived. "Well it's something to think about."

"That it is."

By unspoken agreement, they discussed the matter no further.

Shortly after dawn, the Bladesman and Andres set out from Stratus. Demendil had been most generous, packing them enough food and supplies for a sizable journey. He also gave them his two best horses. Considering it was Amalga's last request, he felt it was the least he could do.

Once out of the city, the Bladesman and Andres pushed their steeds. They had two days to make up. They could only hope they were going in the right direction. Though it was warm, it was nothing compared to the heat of the Gondylarian summer. Both riders remained comfortable throughout the day.

Neither spoke as they rode, though both thought along similar lines. They had been lucky thus far, but finding Cyanne in the middle of the wilderness would be no easy task. Nor did they know whether she had turned north toward Glith, or continued east, if she had indeed traveled east in the first place. The only thing they could do was ride hard and pray that somehow, they would be able to pick up the trail.

Both men were well aware that any real chance they had of finding her had ended the moment she departed Stratus.

As they shuffled down one rough-hewn stone corridor after another, Cyanne continued to lean on Tanrif. She could have stumbled along on her own, but this was easier for her and a good way to keep Tanrif away from Lylea. Who knew what had transpired while she was out? Her sister, she was sure, was aware of the ruse, but she didn't care. Lylea wouldn't say anything, unless she could prove it.

Whenever Tanrif spoke, Cyanne paid rapt attention, as if his words were the most important in the world. Men always loved that. As they progressed, Lylea became increasingly annoyed, which suited Cyanne just fine. After all, it was Lylea who had intruded in the first place.

They walked for an hour, then two. The corridors through which they passed all looked the same. They didn't even know if they were going in the right direction. A couple of times they encountered dead ends and had to backtrack. Occasionally they heard distant sounds, evidence of other creatures moving through the depths. They met nothing, however, as they continued onward.

They were tired and more than a bit frustrated, when Lylea looked above them and noticed a shaft. She stopped and pointed. Tanrif looked up.

"Okay, so what's your point?"

"We're underground. We have to go up to get to ground level."

"And how do you suppose we do that?"

"You could give me a boost."

"And?"

"I might be able to jump from your shoulders and reach the top. Then I could pull myself up."

"Good. And then you'd be up there and we'd be down here. Cyanne, if I boosted you, do you think you could make it up there?"

"I don't know. It's pretty high."

"Look, we can try," said Lylea. "What do we have to lose? Maybe there's something up there I can lower down."

Tanrif sighed, then nodded. Lylea was correct. Anything was better than wandering around for another hour. He knelt and Lylea climbed onto his shoulders. He held her ankles for support and rose slowly. Cyanne also helped steady her. Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't have been difficult, but he was tired and aching from recent events. He wanted to look up, but couldn't afford to. He concentrated on supporting her weight.

"I'm just shy of it. I'm going for it."

Before he could prepare himself, Lylea jumped from his shoulders, pushing him over backward. He didn't fall hard, but he did turn his ankle on the way down. He looked up, just in time to see Lylea pull herself over the edge.

"Good going, Lylea. You couldn't wait until I'd braced myself?"

"Sorry. Are you okay?"

"My ankle went out. I hope I can walk."

"Listen. I'm really sorry. Now you know how I felt when you shattered the lock." Tanrif sighed. Why were women so good at bringing up the one thing that diffused your argument?

"Yes, I suppose I do. What's up there?"

"I don't know. I can't see much. Why don't you throw me the flame?"

Tanrif looked at Cyanne. "Well?"

"If it drops, we've got problems."

"Did you hear that, Lylea?"

"I heard. It won't drop. Wait a second." She lay flat on the ground extending her arm down as far as it would go. "Okay, toss it."

Cyanne handed the cylinder to Tanrif. He moved under the shaft, favoring his good foot. He wasn't certain how long it would be before he could walk normally again, but suspected it would be a while. He took a step backwards, looked up and tossed it up the shaft. At first he thought it wouldn't make it. Then Lylea reached out and snatched it.

"Good throw."

"Thanks. What do you see?"

"A stone passage."

"Nothing else?"

"Fraid not. Listen, I have an idea."

"Go ahead."

"You wait here and I'll try to find the way out. Both of you will only slow me down anyway. Once I find the entrance, I can get some of our supplies and bring them back." Cyanne cleared her throat. "Excuse me, but if you leave with the flame, Tanrif and I will be without a source of light."

"That's true. But if I don't, we may all die of thirst before we find the way out of here."

Tanrif found himself nodding. What Lylea said was true. Of course, spending a few hours in the dark didn't exactly sound like much of a plan either. He looked at Cyanne. She shook her head. Still, what other option did they have?

"I don't know," he said.

"I'll be back," shouted Lylea. Already the light of the flame was receding.

"Lylea, wait!"

She didn't answer. Cyanne moved toward Tanrif and leaned against him. Both stared at the shaft until the light was all but gone. Tanrif slid down the wall.

"Has she always been that headstrong?"

"As long as I've known her."

It was so dark, they couldn't even see each other.

"Why do you tolerate it?" asked Tanrif.

"I just do. It's not as if I'm without faults of my own."

"Well, when you think of one, let me know. I was beginning to think you were perfect."

Cyanne laughed and somehow found his lips in the darkness.

"You know," she said, pulling back "we do have a couple of hours to kill."

"I thought you were weak."

"I am. But sitting here in the dark waiting for her to get back will be as draining as anything else."

"I suppose it would at that."

Tanrif leaned forward and planted a kiss on the juncture of her neck and shoulder. Cyanne moved even closer. With no visual clues, they had to do everything by touch. It wasn't long before they completely forgot about the darkness.

Soon Galith gave up on the docks and moved toward Eastgate. He had grown increasingly frustrated and needed to try something else, even if there was little chance of success.

The concept was not without merit. Tanrif might not want to return to the same part of town he'd left behind. What better way to avoid detection than move into an area with which he'd had no previous affiliation? Galith spent most of the afternoon going in and out of bars. In each location, he offered money for information. In one of those bars, in the latter part of the afternoon, he happened upon Mora. In fact, the guard approached him.

"I understand you're looking for a man named Tanrif."

Galith smiled. "As a matter of fact, I am. Any information that can help me find him would be," the Assassin jingled his pouch, "greatly appreciated."

"I see. And just how greatly appreciated would that be?"

A week ago, he'd have taken anything offered, but dealing with the Hellspawn had spoiled him.

"Come. Let me show you what it's worth."

Galith exited by the side door and Mora followed a step behind. His new standing made him careless. It never occurred to him he was in danger. Suddenly, Galith turned, placing a dagger against Mora's exposed neck.

"Listen to me. I haven't time for games. You will tell me what you know, or I will begin to remove parts of your body one at a time. You have one second before I start." "I saw him leave through the east gate. He was with a violet-eyed woman named Cyanne. She works at the Shop of Demendil. That's all I know. Please don't kill me." Galith released him and took a step backward. "If I find out you've lied to me..." The man shook his head, eyes displaying unfeigned fear. "I swear it. They left together, the day before last."

Galith released the guard, turned and walked toward the street. Mora ran in the other direction. The only thing the guard took away from that meeting was a lesson.

It would be a long time before he offered to sell information again.

Lylea moved quickly through the underground passageways of the Mines of Silverguard. Without Tanrif and Cyanne to slow her, she made good time. She hated leaving the two of them alone like that, but had little choice. Better this way. At least there was a chance she would be able to save them.

She had been going for some time and had no intention of stopping before she reached the exit. Several times she paused to score the wall with a sharp rock she'd picked up along the way. Hopefully she would be able to follow the markings back to the shaft.

She had also found and climbed a flight of stairs. She didn't remember descending them, but that didn't matter. Under the spell of the necklace, she wouldn't have noticed if they'd jumped down the shaft.

She was beginning to tire, when she felt something she wasn't certain she would ever feel again. From

somewhere up ahead, a slight breeze reached her. As she moved, the fatigue fell away. She broke into a run. As it was still dark, she was outside almost before she realized it. She laughed aloud, but did not allow herself to get swept up in victory. If she didn't get back to Tanrif and Cyanne in time, she would never forgive herself.

When she emerged, she half expected to find the remnants of a battle, yet there was no sign of the evening's festivities. She wondered how many years earlier the battle had taken place. Then she pushed the thought from her mind and concentrated on the matter at hand.

She found the horses exactly where they'd left them. She removed a coil of rope from her saddlebag and pulled it over her shoulder. She loaded her pack with a lantern, extra lamp oil, food and water, before turning back to the entrance. She took a couple of steps, thought better of it and returned to the horses.

She rummaged through her pack, found another water skin and took a long swallow. She wiped her mouth, then did it again. She gave her horse a pat on the nose and untied him. With a great cry, she smacked him on the rump and sent him running. That accomplished, she turned back toward the entrance to the Mines of Silverguard.

Tanrif and Cyanne sat slightly apart. They had tried talking for a while, but as the hours passed they grew more and more restless. They were trapped in the blackness with no food, no water and little hope. If Lylea didn't return soon, they would have to strike off by feel and pray for the best. At least that way, they might find water.

Any one of a number of things could have happened to her on the way out. She could have been attacked by creatures like the ones that had wounded her or been unable to find an exit. Or perhaps she found one and couldn't figure out how to get back to them. Or the horses could have been stolen with all their supplies. The longer they sat, the worse the scenarios their imaginations conjured. Unfortunately, the one thing they had in abundance was time to think.

At length, Tanrif stood and stretched, but his clenched muscles refused to relax. If only he had not thrown the flame to Lylea. If only he had insisted she come back down. If only they hadn't followed the necklace in the first place. What good was having a magic necklace, if you died before you found out what it did? Without light, he couldn't even try to open the box.

He was so lost in thought, he didn't notice the approaching glow until Cyanne called out.

"Tanrif!"

Above them, ever so faintly, the light increased. He could only hope Lylea had found her way back to them. He put a hand on the hilt of his sword, just in case. His eyes had become so used to the blackness that the light above seemed much brighter than it had any right to be. Tanrif held his breath and Cyanne stared upwards, wondering if her prayers had been answered. Then Lylea's head appeared above them. A moment later, a rope fell to the ground.

"Well, what are you waiting for, an invitation? Cyanne, you first. We'll both have to hold the rope for Tanrif."

Cyanne grinned and climbed the rope faster than she would have thought possible. As soon as she was up, she grabbed on, braced herself and called down.

"Okay, we're ready up here."

Tanrif pulled himself up with the strength of his arms alone. He tried to move quickly, because he wasn't

sure how long they would be able to hold him. When he got high enough he used the rim of the shaft to pull himself the rest of the way. He rolled away from the edge and sat up.

Lylea had the pack open and Cyanne was already guzzling water. Tanrif watched and waited.

Lylea looked at him and smiled. "You see. I was right."

He didn't want to admit it. Waiting below was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

"I suppose."

"You suppose! I saved your stinking life. I should've left you down there."

He could see the laughter in her eyes. "Maybe. Hey Cyanne. You are going to save some of that for me, aren't you?"

Cyanne stopped drinking, looked at him and shook her head. He laughed and snatched it from her, careful not to spill any. They weren't out of danger just yet.

They spent most of the next hour eating and talking, but they were only delaying the inevitable. Though they were all tired, as soon as the meal was done, Lylea packed up what was left and led them toward the entrance.

With any luck, she would remember the way back.

Galith could have left that day, but it was already late and his horse was still back on the west side of town. It wasn't as if he were going to catch Tanrif so quickly anyway.

Sarith had given him the trail once. She wouldn't abandon him in the days to come.

As he made his way back to the inn, he thought about Tanrif. To say he was obsessed would have been to understate the matter. He had been reduced in rank to apprentice, all because of Tanrif. Each time he remembered that even the lowest Assassin was now above him, his anger redoubled. And all because of a boy. A seventeen-year-old boy. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became.

He thought about Bone, and wondered what he was up to. He remembered how Bone had sat there, beside Ezewdra, smiling at his misfortune. If he and Bone ever crossed paths again, Galith would teach him to school his emotions around his betters. When Galith was again raised in rank, his first priority would be to make Bone pay for his insults. Until that time, he could do nothing. He was a mere apprentice. There were only two ranks lower.

Tanrif had done this to him, damn the day he was born. He pictured himself killing the boy over and over again, using every weapon he could conjure. He doused the boy in oil and torched him. He drowned him. He snapped his neck, barehanded. Over and over again, Tanrif died in his mind.

The next morning, he would wake early and begin pursuit. It didn't matter how long it took. If need be, he would spend the rest of his life searching, but Tanrif would die by his hand.

As they progressed, Tanrif felt himself slowing. He wasn't certain how much further he could travel. Each step sent a jolt of pain through his ankle. A glance at the women told him they weren't faring much better. If they didn't rest soon, they would collapse. He was about to suggest taking a break, when far down the corridor, he thought he could detect movement. It was just at the edge of the light and he wasn't certain, so he didn't say anything. A minute later, Lylea saw it too.

"What the hell is that?"

Cyanne looked up. Whatever approached was too far away to identify. The three stopped, waiting with more than idle curiosity. As it drew nearer, they could tell three things. It wasn't humanoid, it was larger than they'd originally guessed it to be and it was fast. Tanrif drew his sword. Lylea followed his example.

"Scorpion!" breathed Cyanne.

Tanrif looked at her. He had heard of scorpions from stories his father told, but they'd always been about fist-sized. The creature approaching was longer than a horse, and though flatter, its curved tail hung well above their heads. Even from this distance, they could see the stinger clearly, jutting from a ball at the end of its tail.

Lylea, realizing she was the least injured among them, ran to meet it. Tanrif was too stunned to stop her before she engaged the creature. She moved in and swiped at one of its massive black claws, but her blade glanced harmlessly off its shiny carapace.

Tanrif looked at Cyanne, but she stood frozen in horror. She wasn't going to be much use in this battle. Which meant it was, once again, up to him.

Lylea had taken three cuts at the thing and none of them did a lick of damage. He doubted his own attacks would be any more effective. Think...he had to think. There had to be a way out of this.

The creature reached for her with one huge pincer, but Lylea danced away and returned to attack anew. Tanrif watched with horror as the stinger came to rest above her. It drew back slowly and like a bolt of lightning descended. Tanrif gasped, but Lylea had anticipated the strike and jumped back just in time. Without turning, she spoke. "Are you going to stand there, or might you give me a hand?"

"I'm working on it."

Lylea cursed and charged the creature again.

It would only be a matter of time before she faltered and that poisonous stinger found its mark. Tanrif thought for a second longer, then turned and retreated to Lylea's pack. He only hoped he'd have time.

"Hold it for as long as you can," he called over his shoulder.

"What! Have you lost your mind?"

Cyanne remained immobile, while he took the rope and began to tie it. For once, having worked on the docks was going to come in handy. He turned and began walking even before he finished. When he was done, he called out.

"Okay, Lylea. Get out of there. There's nothing else you can do."

Lylea cursed again, but didn't have to be told twice. She retreated several steps, positioning herself between the scorpion and Cyanne. Only when Tanrif passed in front of her, did she realize he had not drawn his sword.

"What the hell are you doing?"

He didn't look back. "Saving our hides. Someone has to."

She watched, but said nothing else.

Tanrif walked right up to the thing, holding the makeshift noose in his hands. He waited, dodging the giant

claws as they went for him. He ducked out of the way and backed up. The pain in his ankle flared, but he ignored it. He jumped in, whipped the creature with the rope and backed away again. It tried to grab him several times, but he was too fast.

Then it happened. The creature lowered its tail. Tanrif jumped forward and tossed the rope around the appendage, then took a step backward. The scorpion raised its stinger into the air, preparing to strike. As it did, the noose tightened around it. Tanrif yanked with all his strength. The scorpion tried to fight, but had no leverage on the rocky surface. Tanrif continued to pull until the thing was on its back.

He wasted no time. Holding the rope with one hand, he pulled his sword and started hacking at the deadly appendage. When Lylea saw what he was about, she joined him. He didn't wait for her to finish. Instead he leapt on the creature's upturned abdomen and plunged his blade straight down.

Black blood erupted like a geyser, instantly covering him, but he paid it no mind. He pulled his sword out and struck again.

Behind him, Lylea screamed triumphantly, as the tail fell away from the rest of the body. Tanrif raised his sword and drove it down again and again. From her vantage, Lylea could only barely see him through the sea of legs. By the time the thing stopped moving he was covered head to toe in thick black liquid, but for all that, was the most beautiful sight Lylea had ever seen.

Tanrif withdrew his sword, plunged it home one last time just to be certain, before sliding from the creature's abdomen. Just after, he collapsed on the hard stone floor. Lylea walked to him and sat beside him. They rested there, ignoring the stench that now filled the corridor, but they dared not tarry for long. Who knew what kind of creature would be attracted to the vile smell?

Cyanne sat slightly apart from them and didn't speak, though she had clearly come out of her trance. When they made ready to leave, she rose with them.

They moved quickly. Tanrif ignored the pain in his ankle as best he could. A short while later, the corridor widened and soon after, they felt the beginnings of a breeze. There was no stopping them. They practically ran from the place, all but Tanrif, who hobbled quickly behind. When he reached the entrance, he found both Cyanne and Lylea, eyes closed, allowing the breeze to wash over them. It was just past daybreak. They had spent the entire night in the Mines of Silverguard.

Tanrif watched Cyanne's long black hair blow in the wind. He noted Lylea's look of triumph and allowed himself a smile. They had made it.

A few moments later, they started for where they left the horses. Lylea noticed first that one was missing and ran forward to check on it. She cursed loudly.

"My horse must have broken his rein. Now I'll have to walk."

"Don't be silly," said Tanrif, "you can ride behind me."

"I wouldn't want to put you out."

"Put me out? What kind of nonsense is that? There's no reason for you to walk, while Cyanne and I ride."

"Well, if you're sure it's okay."

"Of course it is."

Lylea started packing what was left of their rations into Tanrif's saddlebags, intentionally ignoring Cyanne's glare. In fact, she didn't look at her sister even after they'd mounted and set off.

Tired as they were, they returned to the road and continued east, anxious to leave Silverguard behind them.

Chapter Eleven - Journ

One of the qualities that made the Sarithan Assassins so dangerous was their almost uncanny intuition. Whether or not this was a gift from the Goddess was the subject of some debate. Still, those who denied the divine origins of the power, couldn't gainsay its existence.

Bone found himself walking along the docks, carefully studying the ships as he strolled past. He wasn't certain this line of thinking would lead him to his target, but his instincts had drawn him here, and thus, he was following the only course of action open to him.

The idea had begun to form while searching Varon Imgard's ranch house. A large number of the books had been written in Gondylarian. Some of the mercenary's personal items were also from the great Dukedom. Even the exit tunnel supported his observation. Such passages, while uncommon in The Skyshore Realm, were a standard feature in many Gondylarian lodgings.

It was rumor that brought him to the seaport. Could it be a coincidence that, for the first time in history, a Gondylarian warship had arrived in Stratus?

He wasn't sure. Whatever the case, the presence of a second Gondylarian vessel seemed to push the odds. It was rare any ship attempted the rather dangerous crossing. Yet two had appeared within days of each other, though what they might have to do with Varon Imgard, he couldn't imagine.

The assassin searched for the smaller craft. He had already checked out the larger one and decided to leave it alone. He would rather not have to deal with the trained crew of a warship. If he turned up nothing at the smaller vessel, he could always turn his attention to the Sea Serpent.

He had almost reached the end of the pier, when he spotted it. He couldn't read the name, but he knew enough Gondylarian to recognize the characters painted on its side. If his information was correct, the ship was called Wind. He approached and crossed the gangplank, stepping aboard without invitation. Almost immediately, a middle-aged man approached.

"You require something?" he asked in heavily accented Talovarian. If the man was angry at the breach of protocol, he didn't show it.

"Perhaps. I'd like to speak with the Captain."

"My name is Hillel. I'm in charge."

"Good. I'm looking for a man who I believe may have tried to book passage to High Gondylar."

"Is that right?"

Bone looked directly into the merchant's eyes.

"I have no desire to harm you or your ship, but I need this information. Now, we can do this two ways." Bone reached inside his pouch and removed the silver symbol of Sarith. He played with it absently,

making certain Hillel noticed.

"You can give me the information here and now, or I can take you below decks and torture you exquisitely until you beg to aid me. The choice is yours."

Hillel recognized the symbol immediately. He licked his lips nervously, well aware if this man was a Sarithan, he was in grave danger.

"Okay. Someone did book passage. He was a large man, getting on in his years. Though he never said anything, I thought he might be a retired man at arms."

"That would be him. I would also like to book passage on your boat."

"If you're after this man, why not wait until he arrives and kill him before he boards?" Whatever was afoot, Hillel didn't want to be involved.

"It doesn't fit in with my plans."

He had considered the option and decided against it. If such an attempt failed, Varon would disappear and Bone might never find him again. However if the attack occurred at sea, there would be nowhere to run. One of the two would have to die.

It didn't take the Captain long to decide. After the Hellspawn, he didn't have the stomach for a fight, not that he'd ever tangle with a Sarithan anyway.

"Very well. We should be setting sail the morning after tomorrow. You can come aboard at midnight and hide in my cabin."

Bone nodded. "A wise decision, Captain."

"Only a fool would place himself between a Sarithan and his target. I am no fool."

"Of course you aren't. Midnight tomorrow then."

Bone turned and walked from the boat, confident Hillel was too scared to betray him.

Cyanne concentrated on the road ahead, trying not to think about Lylea and Tanrif together on the same horse only a few feet away. The one time her eyes did stray in their direction, she fought the impulse to lash out at them.

Lylea had made herself at home, encircling Tanrif's chest with her arms and placing her lips near his ear whenever she spoke. On more than one occasion, Tanrif's laughter could be heard clearly above the sound of hoof beats. Cyanne closed her eyes, but couldn't block the image.

Worse yet, she was still ashamed by the way she had reacted back in the mines. They had defeated the scorpion without her help. She owed them her life. She couldn't blame him for turning from her after seeing how weak she really was. Perhaps Lylea and Tanrif were better for each other, after all.

No! It can't be!

Cyanne knew her destiny and Tanrif was a part of it. Her intuition had never been wrong before, nor did she have any reason to doubt it now. There wasn't much she could do at the moment, but she would think of something.

Once they reached Journ, she would do whatever was necessary to defend her place by Tanrif's side.

Journ was a small town, much smaller even than Ularon. The single inn was unimpressive, but clean. Tanrif paid for three rooms. He thought about sharing one with Cyanne, but was no longer sure where he stood with her. She had been unusually silent since the mines, barely even looking in his direction. Perhaps when Lylea retired, he would have a talk with her.

Cyanne didn't say anything about the sleeping arrangements, though she was certain Lylea was thrilled. She wasn't going to force herself on Tanrif, no matter how she felt. Somehow, she would find a way to win him over. Lylea, of course, would have similar ideas.

Though it was only the middle of the afternoon, Silverguard had taken its toll. They crossed the inn and climbed the wooden stairs. At the top, a single corridor led to a number of doors, opening alternately on either side. The three stood in the corridor for a long time, all tired, but none wishing to be the first to leave. There were too many unanswered questions about where they stood with each other.

Finally Tanrif bade the women goodnight and retired to his room, which was small, but more comfortable than those he'd grown used to during his time on the docks. He undressed and slid into bed, certain sleep was not far away.

He was wrong. As he lay there, he kept shifting positions, trying to make himself comfortable. He came to realize it was restlessness, rather than discomfort, that barred him from sleep. He stayed in bed for as long as he could stand it before rising and walking to the window.

It was near dusk. Tension thickened the air, as if the entire town was waiting for some event to occur that had been destined since the dawn of time. Tanrif had never had such a feeling and its intensity disturbed him. He stood watching for as long as he could, before the waiting got to him.

He was about to turn, when a distant sound caught his attention. It was the sound of approaching riders. Though he continued to watch, the window faced the wrong direction for him to see the main road.

Only after the sound stopped did he pull on his clothes and open the door. He stepped into the corridor, not at all surprised to see Cyanne emerge from her room at the same moment. They looked at each other and smiled.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asked.

"With the air so mystery laden? I think not."

She walked past him toward the stairway that led to the bar. He followed a step behind.

Before they reached the bottom, they could see the innkeeper talking with two men. Tanrif could tell immediately one was a fighting man. The other, who was doing the speaking, was harder to pinpoint. The leather-clad warrior turned toward them. Cyanne paused, then continued quickly to the bottom. The man moved to meet her. Tanrif followed as fast as he could. By the time he stood beside her, the warrior was already kneeling at her feet, head bowed. Tanrif opened his mouth and closed it.

"Oh get up, Kestryl. There's no need for this between us." Cyanne spoke in Gondylarian, as did the stranger when he replied.

"Your Highness, I must speak with you alone." Tanrif could see the warrior's eyes had filled with tears.

Tanrif started to speak, but Cyanne held up a hand.

"It's okay. I know him."

"Apparently."

"I'll explain later."

"That would be nice. If you need me I'll be in the bar--*Your Highness*." Cyanne had better have a good explanation for this.

Before she could reply, he turned and walked toward an empty table by the wall. He glanced back only once, in time to see Cyanne and stranger disappear upstairs.

He was seated for only a few moments before he noticed the second stranger approach. Tanrif looked at him and now knew him to be a man of the sea. There was no missing the man's ruddy complexion or the way he stood, as if compensating for the rolling of a boat. He stopped before the table and spoke.

"Come. Let me buy you a drink. I think you're going to need one." Though the man spoke fluent Talovarian, his Gondylarian accent was unmistakable.

Tanrif replied in flawless Gondylarian. "May the sun illuminate you, Sir."

The man's eyebrows rose in surprise. "May it shine on you and your family. I am called Andres."

"Captain Andres?"

"How did you know?" He had foregone his naval uniform for more casual garb, as he had no desire to draw undue attention to himself.

"I've spent enough hours on the docks to recognize a captain when I see one. Can't imagine what a Gondylarian sailor is doing in a small landlocked town half a world away from home. I don't suppose you'd like to enlighten me."

"It's not my place to say, though I suspect you will know before long."

"Fair enough. So, how about that drink."

Andres motioned to a passing barmaid. Tanrif smiled. Whatever else was going on, a couple of ales would go a long way toward putting things into perspective.

Cyanne stared at a man she had thought she would never see again. He returned her gaze, unable to hide his feelings; a mixture of elation and anguish. It didn't take her long to guess why he'd come.

"They're dead, aren't they?"

"I am sorry."

"How did it happen?"

"It was treachery, M'lady. Penthor arranged to have your parents killed, then took the throne as his own."

"Uncle Penthor? I don't believe it."

"I felt that way also at first, but have come to reconsider. Penthor is an evil, evil man."

Cyanne shook her head. It wasn't that she didn't trust the Bladesman, but rather she couldn't imagine her father's best friend betraying High Gondylar. Of course, who knew what had happened during her long

absence.

"Tell me the whole story."

The Bladesman cleared his throat and started speaking. Cyanne didn't interrupt him, though she did raise an eyebrow when he spoke of Penthor's complicity. She had no doubt the Bladesman felt he was telling the truth, yet there were still many questions that remained unanswered.

If Penthor had hired the assassins that had attempted to end the Bladesman's life, how had he known where to find him? If he knew where to find her, as the attack on the shop implied, why would he have waited for her parent's death to have her killed? And why wouldn't he have taken out the Bladesman right there in Gondylar? No. Whatever Kestryl thought, Penthor was innocent. There had to be another explanation. She kept her own counsel. There would be no way for her to convince the Bladesman at this point. She would need a lot more information before trying. By the time his story was done, she found herself holding back tears. The Bladesman stood waiting for her response. Cyanne drew a breath. When she spoke, she was proud her voice remained steady.

"I shall return to Gondylar as soon as possible. The man who killed my parents must pay. We shall set out tomorrow morning. I will know what happened and who is responsible, or die in the attempt."

The Bladesman smiled. "I have had my share of doubts about finding you. I didn't know what you would be like after all these years. I now know I've made the right decision. You are your father's daughter."

He spoke the words so solemnly, once again Cyanne found herself fighting tears. Her parents were dead. She was now the heir to the throne of High Gondylar and with that came grave responsibility. She didn't want to think about Tanrif at that moment, but had no choice.

"The man who was with me downstairs is called Tanrif. Send him to me."

The Bladesman bowed. "Thy will be done, M'lady."

Cyanne held her tears until the Bladesman of High Gondylar, now ~~her~~ Bladesman, turned on his heel and left the room.

In spite of recent events, Tanrif felt better than he had in a long time. Like all bars, this one gave him a feeling of home. His third mug of ale was already halfway done. He and Andres had spent the last half hour swapping raunchy jokes and talking as if they were old friends. Only when he saw Kestryl approach did the feeling of impending doom return. The warrior walked directly to their table and nodded to Andres.

"My Lady Cyanne wishes to see this man."

"Oh she does, does she? Why doesn't she come get me herself?" said Tanrif.

If the Bladesman was surprised he spoke Gondylarian, he didn't show it.

"You should watch your tongue and have respect for those that stand higher in society. Your arrogance is not an asset, I assure you."

Tanrif rose, stared at the Bladesman for another moment, sidestepped him and made for the stairs. He had no quarrel with this man.

He took the steps two at a time, stopping before the door of her room to compose himself. He knocked. "It's open."

He pushed the door inward and stepped inside. Cyanne's eyes were red from crying and at once, he softened. He reminded himself he still had no idea what was going on. Still, he couldn't resist a bit of sarcasm.

"You wanted to see me, *Your Highness*?"

"I have something to tell you. You may not believe it, but it's the truth. I am now the Duchess of High Gondylar."

Tanrif almost choked. He had thought himself ready for anything.

"My mother was Amalga; my father, Dathan. Both have passed on. I am now the only living heir to the Gondylarian throne."

"And you didn't think this was worth mentioning?"

"Please, Tanrif, this is hard enough without you making it harder. I didn't ask for this. I was sent away as a child and if things had gone as planned, I'd have never returned. I had thought High Gondylar a closed chapter in my life...I was wrong. My parents have been murdered. I have no choice but to return to the Dukedom and try to find out who is responsible."

"So you're leaving."

"First thing tomorrow morning."

"I see." He tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the bitterness from his voice.

"Please, Tanrif, don't do this. This is not my fault. Suppose someone came to you and told you your father had been murdered. How far would you travel to see justice done?"

At once, Tanrif relented. He was so consumed by his feelings, he hadn't stopped to consider hers. Her parents had been murdered and she had only just found out. He felt ashamed at his insensitivity.

"I'm sorry. I won't make this any more difficult than it already is." He stepped forward and kissed her cheek. "You have a responsibility. I cannot stand in the way of that. But I want you to know something. I'll never forget you."

"Nor I you."

She stood and took a step toward him, then stopped herself. This was hard enough. "Farewell, Tanrif."

"Good-bye, Cyanne."

He left the room and closed the door quickly, so she wouldn't see his tears.

He returned to his room and collapsed on the bed. Even after he'd stopped crying, sleep was out of the question. He couldn't stop thinking about Cyanne. If only he'd had the spine to ask to go with her. Unfortunately, it couldn't be.

She was royalty and he a commoner. There could never be anything between them. Nor would he want to complicate Cyanne's life. He wondered if she was hurting as badly.

Finally, he rose and paced the small room, trying to think of what the morning would be like. He knew only one thing. He didn't have the heart to say good-bye to her again. Thinking thus, he packed his few possessions into saddlebags and made his way to the stables.

He would continue eastward into the Borderlands and begin life anew. Perhaps at some point, he might even come to understand the forces that had brought him to this place.

More than an hour before dawn, he walked out of Journ, leading Fireball so the sound of his flight would not draw attention.

Once through the gates of Stratus, Galith leaned forward, trying to coerce every last drop of speed from his mount. He knew he couldn't keep the pace up indefinitely, but wanted to get as far as he could before the day's heat made a chore of it.

Somewhere ahead Tanrif and a violet-eyed woman were waiting for him to catch them. It was awfully decent of Tanrif to hook up with such a distinctive companion. In fact, it was exactly the stroke of luck for which Galith had been waiting. Sarith had once again proven she was still looking out for him.

He continued at a full gallop until he could feel his steed's heart pounding against his leg. He pulled back on the reins and allowed the beast a bit of respite. If he pushed it to the grave, he'd never catch them and he could let nothing, not even his own impatience, interfere with his mission.

As he rode, he envisioned Tanrif dead at his feet and smiled. The boy had bested him twice. He would not allow it to happen again.

Early the next morning, the Bladesman informed Cyanne of Tanrif's departure. If he was surprised by her reaction, he did not show it. Apparently he saw nothing wrong with royalty cursing.

Cyanne calmed herself, thanked and dismissed him before dressing. As soon as she was ready, she walked down the hall and stopped before Lylea's door, pausing to prepare herself.

She wasn't certain whether or not she wanted her sister to be there. She would be angry if Lylea had run off with Tanrif. Cyanne didn't like to lose. Also, she couldn't imagine leaving Skyshore without wishing her sister well. She smiled at the contradictory feelings and shook her head.

Of course, if Lylea hadn't left with Tanrif, she would have to explain the situation. Cyanne didn't relish the idea of that conversation, but couldn't leave without saying good-bye.

When she realized she wasn't going to calm down, she took a deep breath and knocked.

"Come in."

Cyanne pushed the door inward and entered. Lylea, already dressed, was running a comb through her hair while looking out the window. She turned, saw Cyanne, and returned her gaze to the outside world. She had been hoping it was Tanrif, Cyanne realized.

"Lylea, I need to speak to you."

"I've already told you, I will not get between you and Tanrif. What else do you want me to say?" She stood defiantly, waiting for Cyanne's retort.

"Tanrif is no longer an issue for me. I'm afraid I have come to discuss a more urgent matter."

Lylea turned from the window, clearly surprised.

"You know I was born in Gondylar. Until last night, I never thought I would return. Now, I must."

A knock on the door interrupted her.

"Come in," called Lylea.

The door opened and a man entered. Lylea had never seen him before, but everything about him screamed warrior. Before he could advance further, she went for her sword, but a sharp word from Cyanne stopped her.

The Bladesman watched with approval. There had been no hesitation. The blond woman had seen a possible threat and reacted. He did not consider many women dangerous, but would keep an eye on this one. He turned his attention to Cyanne. "Your Highness, we should be away soon. Shall I prepare the horses?"

Lylea's eyes went wide, but she said nothing. Cyanne, embarrassed, nodded. "Prepare them. I will not be long."

After a formal bow, the Bladesman departed.

"And I was hoping to break it to you gently." Cyanne laughed, then grew serious. "My parents ruled High Gondylar. They have been murdered. I must return and take the throne. I never dreamed this day would come or I would have told you."

Lylea still said nothing, but her mind raced. She still intended to have Tanrif, one way or another, but now...what could she offer against a Duchess?

She felt guilty then, thinking of a man, instead of being separated from her long time friend. Again the question loomed in her mind. Why was Tanrif so important?

She had no answer, only inexplicable desire. She had seen him first. Cyanne had come along and ruined everything. The press of thoughts was too much for her. If she had been the kind of person to show weakness, she would have cried, but she bit back the emotion before it could possess her.

"I suppose Tanrif will be traveling with you."

Cyanne shook her head, partly to show that was not the case, partly in disbelief. Lylea had been her closest friend for the last fifteen years, yet all she could ask about was Tanrif.

"He is gone."

Lylea had dropped her head, fighting emotions, but at the sound of those words, she raised it and met Cyanne's gaze.

"What do you mean gone?"

"I just found out. If the stable hand is to be believed, he left a couple of hours ago." "He doesn't know enough to go off on his own. Not with the Assassins after him. Not this close to Glith. What a brainless, irresponsible thing to do!"

Lylea's voice continued to grow louder. Cyanne knew better than to interrupt her. The string of expletives that followed were as vile as any she'd ever heard. Lylea, Cyanne had to admit, could curse with the best of them.

She tried to stop herself from smiling. She didn't want Lylea's wrath turned in her direction. Finally, the blond grew silent.

"What will you do now?" asked Cyanne.

"Follow him, of course."

"With what horse?" Cyanne almost smiled at the irony of it.

Lylea opened her mouth to speak and closed it.

"It's okay. You can have mine. I can always ride behind Kestryl."

"I set my horse loose on purpose so I could ride behind him," said Lylea, softly.

"I know. But Tanrif can get into more trouble in less time than anyone I've ever met. He's going to need help. And if I can't have him, I can think of no one more suitable than you."

"You're a good friend, Cyanne."

"I'm a Duchess. I have to start thinking like one."

"One day, I'd like to hear how that came about."

Lylea walked toward the door and Cyanne followed. They descended the stairs in silence and crossed the empty bar to the door. Outside the Bladesman and Andres were already mounted.

"Which way do you think he went?" ask Lylea.

"East."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

Cyanne hugged Lylea briefly.

"Be well, Lylea."

"You too. And take care of yourself. Don't let that crown go to your head."

Cyanne laughed, but there were tears in her eyes.

"I'm not worried about the crown. I'm worried about finding out the truth about how my parents died. I won't rest until those responsible have paid."

They hugged again and there was nothing left to say. Cyanne watched until Lylea walked to the stable and disappeared inside. Then she looked at the Bladesman. "Would it be okay if I rode behind you?"

"Your will is my will."

"I'm not certain I'll ever get used to that."

"It took your mother many years as well."

"Very well. Since I've given away my horse, I will ride behind you."

"By your command."

The Bladesman looked as if he were going to dismount to help her up. That Cyanne couldn't stand. Without waiting, she vaulted up behind him.

"Let's get going."

He walked his steed forward. Cyanne never looked back. If she were going to be a Duchess, she would have to put her old life behind her. If only she could have taken Tanrif along.

She looked to her side. On the second horse, a man who'd been introduced as Captain Andres of the Royal Gondylarian Navy, tipped his cap to her. She wanted to smile, but found it impossible.

In the last day she had lost her parents, her closest friend and her lover. It would be a long time before she would be able to smile again.

They took the road west out of Journ. As soon as the town was behind them, Cyanne leaned her head against the Bladesman's back and cried.

Varon Imgard sank wearily onto his cot. It had been a long week and now, finally, he would be able to rest. There wouldn't be much else for him to do, until Wind pulled into port.

He was happy to be on his way to Gondylar. If it weren't for Tanrif, he'd have returned long ago, though he never regretted the decision to stay. It was a matter of duty and nothing was more important.

He pulled off his boots, stretched and laid back, slowly lowering his head onto the firm, nearly flat pillow. Though it was still early morning, a bit of rest could do him no harm. He closed his eyes, but did not find sleep. Thoughts crowded in, threatening him with insomnia.

He thought of Demendil and their lost friendship. He could not fault the weaponsmith for his reaction. It didn't matter. He'd had no choice. The incident had driven a wedge between them that would remain in place for the rest of their lives.

He had done his duty to the best of his ability and nothing could change that. He raised and trained Tanrif as best he could, pushing him harder than he would have imagined a child could be pushed. Somehow the boy had survived it.

No. He didn't want to think about Tanrif. He had done what he could and the rest was up to providence. It was out of his hands.

The creaking of the ship had an almost hypnotic effect and he began to drift. He never heard the sound of his cabin door opening, nor the Assassin's silent footfalls as they approached the bed.

His mind wandered through realms most mortals would never see, but in the end, it wouldn't make a difference. For though he was powerful, Varon Imgard was still just another mortal, buffeted by events he would never truly understand.

Though Journ was far behind, Tanrif continued on foot. He tried not to think about Cyanne, but found the task impossible. While he had been with a number of women, this was the first time in his life he'd ever been in love. Why? What was it about her that so called to him? Why didn't he ask if he could go with her?

To the last question, at least, he knew the answer. Cyanne was going to be the Duchess of High Gondylar. She would have a hundred suitors, all more worthy than a boy from Ularon. Indeed, what did he have to offer? All he had done thus far was drag her into danger. She was better off without him.

He was so involved in his thoughts he didn't see the man until he was almost upon him. The man stumbled and fell to the ground, as if dead. Almost happy for the distraction, Tanrif moved more quickly. When he reached the man, he knelt and rolled him on his back.

The stench of alcohol was almost overpowering. Tanrif thought about leaving him there, but realized the unfortunate soul might be run over by a careless rider. Tanrif dragged him a few feet into the woods and propped him against a tree.

He looked at the man one last time, smiled sadly and returned to the road. Fireball snorted, as if questioning why he wasn't riding. He stroked the mare's nose, took her reins and again began to walk. It wasn't long before Tanrif completely forgot about the drunk.

Bone, dagger in hand, stared down at Varon Imgard's prone body, smiling grimly. In the dimness, he could clearly see the aging mercenary's face. He inched closer, holding his weapon ready. He was almost disappointed. He had thought Varon Imgard would represent more of a challenge.

He stopped and raised his blade. For the rest of his life, he would never know what warned his intended victim. One second the man was lying on his bed, the next, he rolled to the side. Bone's knife slashed a gash in Varon's thigh. It would have been higher, had he not moved. The Assassin was so stunned, he didn't immediately strike again. It was all the time the mercenary needed.

Varon threw the bedclothes over him and lashed out with his fist. As the Assassin fell to the floorboards, he jumped the bed and entered the narrow corridor outside. Bone extricated himself in a matter of seconds and followed.

Varon climbed the ladder and stepped onto the deck. A glance over his shoulder told him Bone was close behind. He moved aft. Bone emerged from below and stopped to stare at him, then started forward.

Varon shifted his gaze from the blood running down his leg to his assailant. The mercenary smiled and held up his hand, palm outward. Once again Bone stopped. "My death doesn't matter. My task was done the day Tanrif left home. Whatever happens to me, the Sarithan Assassins will be destroyed."

That Varon Imgard knew of the prophecy surprised Bone, but in retrospect, it explained a lot. He took another step forward.

"You speak calmly for a man about to die."

"Death holds no terror for me. Sometimes, I wonder why I've allowed myself to live as long as I have."

He looked down at the pool of blood forming at his feet.

"Laugh while you can, Assassin. You may have succeeded here, but your best efforts will not save your hide in the end."

"My reputation will be greatly enhanced by your passing."

"Then enjoy your fame while you can. And know I would rather take my own life, than give you the satisfaction of the kill."

With those words, Varon Imgard vaulted the railing and leapt into The Mistress. Bone raced forward and leaned over the side, but it was too late. Several large dorsal fins had already converged on the place where Varon had entered the water. Soon, the only evidence the mercenary had ever existed was the slick of blood on the surface that soon faded from sight.

Chapter Twelve - Raszra

Even as far back as Stratus, Lylea couldn't figure out why Tanrif was so important to her. It no longer mattered. With Cyanne out of the picture, she no longer had to question her motives. It wasn't important why her heart raced at the thought of never seeing him again. All that did matter was finding him.

She kicked her mount in the flanks. The mare snorted, not used to such treatment, then moved even faster. Lylea shifted her weight forward and thought of Cyanne. They had grown up in the Shop of Demendil, fought together, laughed together. Had she not been distracted by Tanrif, Lylea would be hurt indeed. In fact, in spite of recent events, she knew as soon as she stopped running, she'd feel the pain of separation. She wasn't looking forward to it.

Ahead of her, in the distance, a man led a horse by the reins. After a few long seconds she recognized Fireball. She had assumed Tanrif would be riding. She restrained her impatience and slowed her steed from a gallop to a trot. Stopping a horse too suddenly could cause it injury.

Though Tanrif must have heard her approach, he didn't bother to turn. She dismounted and hurried to catch up on foot. In a matter of moments, she was walking beside him.

His head hung as if he didn't have the strength to lift it and he barely picked up his feet as he walked. This was not the same man Lylea had fallen in love with. She stopped as soon as the words appeared in her mind. She had been blind. She was in love with Tanrif.

She reached out and grabbed his arm. He turned, looking as if he didn't recognize her. He pulled away and once again began to amble in the direction of the Borderlands. At his current rate of travel, he would die of old age before he made it to the next town. Lylea again grabbed him, this time more forcefully. He offered no resistance. She guided him off the road. The trees here were not dense and it was not difficult to navigate between them. After about fifty feet, she found a relatively clear area with a place to tie the horses. She secured her mount first, then took care of Fireball.

She could tell from his eyes he had been crying, but didn't mention it. She didn't want to embarrass him. She sat cross-legged on the ground and watched him. Tanrif lowered himself to the ground and turned to face her. He looked lost. Lylea met his gaze and spoke.

"Tell me."

There was an irresistible intensity behind the command. Tanrif complied.

"I don't know what to think anymore. Nothing makes sense. A few months ago, I lived at home with my father, on a ranch in Ularon. My life was my studies...languages, history, geography, the sword, unarmed combat, philosophy, even survival skills. "All theory and no practice. It had become a game for me. How much could I learn? How far could I go? My father pushed me--harder than anyone should push a child, but I didn't think anything of it. Not back then. How could I? It was all I'd ever known." "And now?"

He looked sharply at Lylea, as if surprised she were there. "My father knew I would need certain skills. That's what it was all about. Cyanne had suggested so, but I didn't believe her. I do now.

"It's all so bizarre. Even if the attack on the shop hadn't been directed at me, which might be the case, how in the name of the gods had I ended up with the heir to the Gondylarian throne? Why are the Sarithan Assassins after me? What are the odds of us stumbling across a phantom battle? Did you ever have the feeling something was guiding your steps?"

"No. But I have had the feeling something is guiding yours. Any idea who?" "Sometimes at night, I dream

of a woman on a throne. She has something to do with this, but I can't figure out what. This is her game...I don't even know the rules. The problem is, I don't want to play anymore, Lylea."

"I'm not sure you have a choice."

He grew angry. "Are you telling me something I don't know? Of course I haven't a choice. I haven't had a choice since Galith stuck a blade into me. Since I ended up at Demendil's. Since the attack on the shop. And now...now..."

"Yes?"

"She's gone, Lylea. Cyanne is gone. I love her and will never see her again."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"What*can* I do?"

"I don't know. Part of me wants to tell you to go after her, but I can't, even if it would be the right thing to do."

"Why not?"

"Because I care about you, Tanrif. I care about you deeply. Or didn't you realize that?"

He looked stunned. "No, I didn't."

"Of course not. You were blinded by Cyanne. Why would anyone look twice at me with her around?"

"Lylea, stop it. You're a beautiful woman."

"Sure."

"I'm not kidding. You're amazing. Any man in his right mind..."

"I'm not interested in any man...only one."

Tanrif didn't say anything. He didn't want to add to her pain.

"What are you going to do about it? That's the question."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

To his astonishment, she leaned forward and kissed him. Even as he responded, he thought of Cyanne...the woman he loved. His woman no longer, due to circumstances he couldn't understand. Had destiny conspired to unite him with Lylea? Was it so different from Galith's dagger, or the attack on the shop?

He tried to pull away, but Lylea had taken hold of him, clutching him as if her life depended on this. He didn't have the heart to pull away. Cyanne was beyond him now.

He didn't love Lylea, but he hadn't been lying when he said she was beautiful. He responded, his pent up frustration finding an outlet in the kiss that should never have been. He responded with his entire being, as if this kiss was the most important he would ever have. Cyanne was gone from him...forever. Destiny had again made his choice.

Lylea tore at his clothes, trying to strip him. Urgency grew between them, driving them together, two lost souls in a world of lost souls. Nothing else mattered, not now, perhaps not ever.

For Lylea, their first kiss was exactly what she thought it would be...and more. It ignited her in a way she had never believed possible. Much later, when he withdrew, she felt as if a void had opened and there was no way to close it but to reach for him.

Lylea launched herself and he caught her, laughing and crying at the same time. Together they rolled on the ground, unaware of the numerous branches and small stones beneath them. Tanrif and Lylea were all that existed in the universe.

She clutched him tightly and he did not resist. Indeed, his passion was a match for hers. In the heat of the moment, clothes were shed, but no word was uttered. Intensity suffused them, pulled them together. They clung desperately to one another as if the entire universe depended on their union.

Their kisses became more urgent, their writhing more extreme. Passion built until it could be contained no longer. The final moments of lovemaking seemed suspended, as if no force in the world could ever be important again.

Afterwards, the lovers lay in each other's arms, spent and satisfied. Above and around them, the world continued its daily dance, but to Tanrif and Lylea it didn't matter. Their breathing gradually settled into the gentle rhythm of sleep.

For a long time they lay there, the tensions of the last few days completely shed. A figure appeared at the edge of the clearing.

He was tall, thin and moved with barely a sound. He stopped to regard the naked couple and repressed a snicker. He moved toward their horses.

He opened the saddlebags and rummaged through them, looking for anything of value. The only thing that seemed to be worth his time was a small metal box that seemed to shine with its own light. He removed it and was about to walk away, when he noticed Tanrif's sword. He moved slowly closer, certain he could get it without waking the lovers.

He stopped by Tanrif and knelt, reaching for the sword with a stealth that would have done a mouse proud. Thus he was completely surprised when the man bolted upright and grabbed his throat.

Lylea was awake a moment later. Once she saw Tanrif was in control of the situation, she quickly pulled on her clothes.

The would-be thief choked and gasped, but couldn't free himself. Tanrif, still holding him, slowly got to his feet. He looked down and examined the intruder. Recognition lit his eyes.

"I know you. You're the drunkard I pulled off the road."

With that realization, Tanrif looked down at his pile of clothing. It didn't take long to determine his pouch was missing. He turned his attention back to the thief.

"You took my pouch. All this time I had managed to protect it, yet you took it while I was trying to help you. Do you want to know something?"

Agar tried to swallow and couldn't. He gasped a few times until Tanrif released his grip just enough for the thief to talk.

"I'm not sure. Would it be in my best interest?" he croaked.

Tanrif leaned closer. "First, you're going to give me back my pouch. Then we'll talk."

The thief looked at Tanrif, then Lylea. He apparently didn't like the odds, for he reached into a deep pocket and withdrew a brown leather pouch. He handed it to Tanrif.

"If there's anything missing..."

"It's all there. I haven't been close enough to town to spend it."

"Good. And now, I'm going to kill you."

"Are you sure that's absolutely necessary? I was only doing my job."

"Your job? Is that what you call it? That was all the money I had in the world! I could have starved to death."

"Not so. You could have sold your horse."

Tanrif closed his hand around Agar's throat. "Sold my horse! You really do want to die, don't you?"

"Tanrif wait," said Lylea.

Tanrif loosened his grip again, but didn't turn. "Yes?"

"The box from Silverguard."

He was so angry, at first Tanrif had no idea what Lylea was talking about. When he realized, he bent and retrieved his sword, then released the thief.

"What's your name?"

The thief coughed and cleared his throat. "I am Agar. You've heard of me, no?"

"No."

"But I'm the greatest thief in the Kingdom! Everyone's heard of Agar."

"I haven't," said Lylea.

Agar looked at her balefully.

"Tell me," said Tanrif, "are you just a cutpurse, or do you have any...real talent?"

The thief straightened himself proudly. "I am Agar the Great. I can do anything."

"Except steal a sword from a sleeping man."

Agar blushed. "A fluke, I tell you. One in a million. Why I could..."

"Could you say, pick a lock?"

"The lock hasn't been forged that I couldn't seduce."

"I see."

Tanrif walked to Fireball and reached into his pack. After a few moments he returned his attention to Agar.

The thief smiled guiltily and held up the box. "You are perhaps looking for this."

Tanrif glared and took a step closer. Agar spoke quickly.

"I assume from the direction of our conversation that you need this box opened, but fear to damage the contents. As previously stated, I can open any lock. And because you are such a gracious and generous couple, I will perform this small task at a reduced rate."

"That's it, Lylea. I'm going to kill him."

"We're talking about a mere pittance. A few small coins for my trouble, nothing more."

"Okay, here's my offer. Open the box or die. You have three seconds to decide."

"Sir, please be reasonable, why if you..."

Tanrif drew his blade and charged. The thief dropped to his knees.

"Okay, okay, I'll do it!"

Tanrif stopped just shy of hitting him. Lylea grinned. Tanrif, realizing he was still naked, smiled. What a sight he must be.

"Cover him for a second. I want to get dressed."

Lylea drew her own blade and walked to Agar. "Don't even think about running. I'm as fast with a blade as anyone you've ever met."

He thought about it, but in the end, decided not to act. Agar was no coward, but he wasn't a fool either. He waited until Tanrif was dressed before turning his attention to the box.

At once, he assumed the air of a professional. He lifted the box gingerly and examined it from a number of angles before placing it on a nearby, conveniently flat-topped, boulder. He reached into his belt and removed a pair of very thin leather gloves. After donning them, he removed a fine tool from his boot.

Tanrif leaned closer to watch the thief work. More than a minute after he started, a small pin sprang from the lock. Agar smiled and removed it from where it had pricked his glove.

"Coated with some deadly poison, I should think."

He used the tool to remove the needle and continued to work on the mechanism. He seemed frustrated at some points, but never lost concentration. Finally, after what seemed like a very long time, the lock clicked open.

Slowly, the thief raised the lid. He was mesmerized by the shining gem, just as Tanrif had been at the entrance to Silverguard. Even now, it took Tanrif a good amount of will to resist its pull. He reached past Agar and removed the necklace.

Lylea stepped back and looked away. Tanrif was a bit surprised by her reaction, but said nothing. He looked at it and then away, as soon as he felt the gem's power begin to take hold.

Finally he palmed it, so he could think. Lylea took a step closer.

"Well, now what?" she asked.

"Would you like to try it on?"

"Not me. I'd sooner fight the scorpion again. Look Tanrif. You don't have a lot of experience with magic. I don't either really, but I can tell you the one thing I do know. Magic is dangerous. You'd be a fool to toy with it. I say we go to the Borderlands and find a buyer. This sort of thing could bring us enough to live comfortably for the rest of our lives."

"I do believe the lady is correct," said Agar.

Tanrif looked at him. "You are hardly in a position to offer advice. I'm still not certain what I'm going to do with you."

The thief gulped, but said nothing else.

Tanrif opened his hand and stared at it. Lylea opened her mouth and closed it. Agar looked away. Tanrif held the chain in both hands and slowly brought it toward his head.

Lylea licked her lips. Tanrif lowered the chain around his neck until the gem, pulsing with color, lay against his chest.

For a moment he stood there. Lylea breathed a sigh of relief. Agar was more cautious.

"See. That wasn't so bad."

As soon as he spoke the words, Tanrif fell to his knees. He saw Lylea start toward him, but as she approached, the entire world faded to darkness.

Shadow loped in a gentle trot. The Bladesman leaned forward, ever alert for any sign of danger. Andres, somewhat less concerned, was uncomfortable on horseback. He couldn't wait to get the deck of a ship back beneath his feet. Even this short period away from water weighed heavily on him.

Cyanne leaned against the Bladesman's back, arms locked around his chest. She was no longer crying, though she often found herself thinking about Lylea, Tanrif and Demendil. How she would miss them all!

Suddenly, a terrible wind rose around her. She raised her head to investigate. The Bladesman and Andres continued on, apparently unable to feel it. She looked at the branches in the trees, but the wind seemed to spare them as well. She clenched the Bladesman tighter and tried to understand what was happening.

Confusion filled her mind, until slowly, an image began to form. Though the power was strong within her, she'd never had a vision. But her mother had told her about them and thus was she prepared.

She saw Lylea, Tanrif and a tall man standing in a clearing in the woods. Nearby, two horses stood tied to a low branch. Their nostrils flared in panic and they stamped their hooves as if they wanted to be away from the area. Tanrif was kneeling, while Lylea stood over him, concern evident on her face. The tall man waited nearby, but didn't seem worried. Cyanne wondered who he was.

The scene grew larger and clearer, as if she were descending. The feeling of flight exhilarated her. Then she saw it and gasped. Tanrif was wearing the magic necklace. The vision faded. Cyanne felt as if she had awakened from a dream at a crucial moment. Once again she cursed herself for not asking Tanrif to join her. She shook her head.

As a Duchess, she could offer him nothing. They could never marry. They could never have a life together. Whatever her intuition had told her, must have been wrong. The thought bothered her. During her lifetime, she had come to depend heavily on those feelings and until now, they had been infallible. There was so much she didn't understand.

When she again laid her head against the Bladesman's back, she closed her eyes and wondered if she'd made the right choice.

She considered her options. She didn't have to return to Gondylar. She could stay in The Skyshore Realm, find Tanrif and fulfill their destiny together. Impossible, of course. If she didn't return to Gondylar, she would never know who was responsible for her parents' death. No matter the circumstances, no Gondylarian would have chosen differently.

Though it had been many years since she'd spoken to them, Cyanne whispered a prayer to the gods for herself, Lylea and especially Tanrif. Sheba well knew he needed the help.

Tanrif floated in blackness, turning slowly as if roasting on a spit. He could see nothing. No sound intruded upon his solitude.

He tried to move, turn his head, twist himself--to no avail. He looked below and saw himself on his knees in the clearing. Lylea knelt beside him. Her lips were moving, but he could not hear her words. Tanrif floated away, leaving his body behind.

He knew he should be frightened, but wasn't. He floated higher and further, not just away from Corithim, but out of time as well. Somehow, he was being drawn backwards. He watched, intuitively grasping the fact he was no longer in the world as he knew it.

For billions of years, he floated alone. Corithim did not yet exist. Even the gods had not yet made an appearance. He was aware of only the great twins, Lucent and Desolation; the creators of Corithim.

It was Lucent who first began the project, drawing energies from the universe. She gathered force and redirected it. Thus was Corithim born.

Tanrif marveled, as she breathed life into dead rock and was so stricken with joy at what she had done, she cried. Her tears became the great seas; The Mistress and The Vastness.

But her brother Desolation was never far away and her activity drew him like flies to a corpse. Wherever his grim shadow passed, the world twisted, corrupting the very essence of existence.

Terrible storms swept the seas, and horrible creatures populated their depths. Lightning and thunder ripped across the surface of the world, rending and pocking it with the force of their passing.

Lucent was not idle however. She had played this game with her brother before and didn't like to lose. She breathed life into the very stone and soon all manner of creatures and plants covered the surface of the world. Corithim, for the briefest of times, was a garden of untold beauty. But Desolation was not finished playing either.

He took some of the creatures and imbued them with intelligence. He gave them hopes and fears. He filled them with lust. He made them greedy. And he turned his agents loose to destroy the beauty of his sister's creation. Thus was humanity born. Tanrif watched it all, still bodiless, still turning. He watched as Corithim slowly became the world to which he was born. But it wasn't quite the same. It was an older world, at the same time nobler and more tragic. Finally, he knew something of human destiny and how ridiculous it was for anyone to ever think they were in control of their lives.

Lucent, angered by Desolation's audacity, created intelligent beings of her own, noble creatures to counter the evil one's work. For millennia the battle raged, each side working to destroy the other. Finally, Lucent could stand it no longer.

In her final great act, she reached into the core of the world and removed a large blue gem, flawless in

every way. Lucent began to fill the gem with her own life force, knowing well Desolation would soon realize what she was about and do the same. When the task was done, Lucent smiled and placed the gem on the highest mountain.

"Behold, Raszra; the first of the new gods. I give you dominion over my land. As long as you reign, no other may make its mark upon Corithim."

With her words, the great barrier was born, blocking both her and her brother from continued interference. Raszra ruled Corithim. Lucent and Desolation could no longer alter events on the surface. And the world continued in that manner for another millennium.

Raszra ruled justly, but had no concept of good or evil, right or wrong. Raszra, being comprised of life force from both of the siblings, was cold, impartial.

Desolation teased his sister, laughing at her decision. Raszra, in many ways, was no better than he had been.

Lucent grew angry and reached out with her mind. Desolation, knowing he had won, did the same.

The force of their combined efforts splintered the gem god into twelve shards. They fell from their perch on the highest mountain like a magical rain. They fell into the deserts and the oceans, to the forests and the arctic wastes. And once again, Desolation began to ply the world with his twisted and evil works.

"I have been tricked by my brother, but all is not lost."

Lucent recreated the great barrier in such a way it could never again be destroyed. When she was done, she spoke and, for the very last time, her voice was heard across Corithim.

"I bless these Amulets of Dreaming that should they be brought together, Raszra will live again and all will be as it was."

And Desolation smiled and sent his agents among the people to steal and hide the great shards. His sister sent agents of her own to find them. A game played by the most ancient gods. Without this bit of information, no mortal could truly understand the rules of existence.

Tanrif felt himself falling, mind awl with all he had learned.

He opened his eyes. Lylea stood some distance away, head bowed. Agar, strangely enough, tried to console her. Tanrif rose slowly to his feet, viewing the world from a new perspective. He looked down at the necklace and touched it. He felt great awe. Lucent had led him to a Amulet of Dreaming.

He cleared his throat. When he spoke, his voice was deeper and more powerful than it had been only minutes earlier. "Something the matter?"

Lylea turned to look at him, smile frozen as soon as she realized the change. It wasn't something she could easily define, but it was there. Somehow, the necklace had worked some transformation on the man she loved.

"Tanrif...are you okay?"

At first, he didn't answer. When he finally did, his voice was even stronger.

"Yes, I believe I am."

"You have to take off the necklace, it's dangerous."

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid that's not possible."

Lylea took a step toward him, then stopped, but it was Agar who spoke. "You're different. Your voice, your posture, everything about you."

"I can feel it. Everything seems clearer. As if I'd always seen the world through a veil that has been lifted."

"You're talking crazy now," said Lylea.

She walked forward and reached for the necklace. Tanrif grabbed her wrists.

"I'm sorry Lylea, but I can't let you do that. There is still much for me to learn." "Tanrif, you don't know what you're doing."

"I know precisely what I'm doing. More so, perhaps, than ever before. I'm sorry, but I can't stay."

Lylea looked at him.

"I have a destiny I must meet, and I'm late already."

He walked toward Fireball. Lylea followed after him.

"What do you mean? Your destiny is with me!"

Tanrif turned and looked her in the eyes. He took a step forward and raised his hand to stroke her cheek. Lylea shied away, clearly uncertain of his intentions.

"Your reaction, more than anything, should tell you we don't belong together."

He smiled sadly and turned back to Fireball. Then, as an afterthought he looked at Agar.

"If I were you, I would stick close with her. You'll soon have need of each other." "What? How do you know?" asked the thief.

Tanrif never answered. He untied Fireball and mounted. Lylea stared at the ground. Agar looked pensive. Tanrif waved once and kicked Fireball into a gallop. The day was half gone and he had many miles to cover.

Tanrif pushed Fireball harder than he'd ever dared and she thrilled to it. She ran like the wind, leaving a wake of dust as she passed. She ran for hour after hour, hooves rhythmically pounding the ground. He entered Journ and left it behind, but still had far to go. Even after darkness fell, he continued riding. Fireball screamed down the path, a ghost in the darkness.

Several times, Tanrif started drifting and had to shake himself. Amulet notwithstanding, he'd had quite a week and it didn't look as if it were going to get easier. He fought to stay awake, but eventually fatigue won its battle.

For the second time that day, Tanrif left his body.

The throne room was exactly the way he remembered it, though he knew he had only visited this place in his dreams. The white room, the jewel-studded throne and the almost-lady sitting on it. He floated above, remembering it for the first time.

He tried to see the woman, but she was elusive; one moment there, the next gone. Then a second entity appeared.

The newcomer was a cloud of scintillating colors that seemed to form of the air itself. Had he been seeing through eyes, he might have been blinded, but hovering as he was, he could look directly at the apparition. It was the cold voice of the newcomer that broke the silence.

"You have summoned me."

"I have. How may I destroy the Sarithan Assassins?"

"You can not."

"You dare say so. I am Iorana, Goddess of Magic."

"I know who you are, but the task is beyond you. Your sister Sarith protects them." "I know that well. If I can not destroy them, who can?"

"There will be a man. He will be born on the eleventh day, of the eleventh month of the year one thousand one hundred and eleven. He will be born in The Skyshore Realm in a small town called Ularon. He will destroy the Sarithan Assassins. If you can protect him."

Laughter erupted from the throne. "Protect him? Of course I can."

"Do not be so certain. Just as you will look to his safety, so will your sister look to destroy him."

"Which of us will be successful?"

The cloud did not answer immediately. It shifted and shimmered, throwing its color to all corners of the white room. Had he a mouth, Tanrif would have gasped.

"I will not say."

"Will not, or can not?"

"I know all, but speak only what I will. You have no power over me, Goddess."

If the figure on the throne was angry, she did not show it.

"Very well. Then at least let me look upon the face of the man I am to guard, so I will know him when the time comes."

The cloud again shifted. A giant face formed within the mist--Tanrif's face. Iorana's laughter, like the tinkling of bells filled the air.

Tanrif awoke drenched in sweat. He was still mounted, but Fireball had slowed to a walk. He cursed himself for sleeping and again for being born.

The prophecy was the reason the Sarithan Assassins were after him. And the only way he could defend himself was to destroy them. He was one man against an army. Tanrif dismounted and took a drink of water from his skin before leading Fireball into the woods. He would need to get some rest. Tomorrow, if luck were with him, he would be able to complete his journey.

Though Galith was anxious to ride, it was too dark to risk it. Instead, he paced. He wondered what Bone was about. He wondered how far ahead Tanrif was. He wondered if he'd ever be a Master Assassin again.

He sighed and looked at the half moon. On an open plain, it would have been enough to ride by, but in

the woods, it was little help. Sighing again, he sat upon the ground and folded his arms around his knees.

Somewhere out there was the man he had to kill. Not only to satisfy his own pride, but because Tanrif's very existence posed a threat to the Assassins. He swore silently, then began to speak in the high tongue of the Sarithan. It was a long time before he realized he was chanting a death litany. As he chanted, he drew strength from the ancient words, taking comfort from them.

For as long as men had lived in cities, the Assassins had been there lurking in the shadows and no one, certainly not Tanrif, could destroy what they had built.

Thinking thus, he mounted his horse and, ignoring the risk, rode off into the darkness.

Light shining through his eyelids woke him. Tanrif sat up and looked around. He had wanted to be on his way by dawn, but had overslept. He rose slowly, painfully, the cramps in his tired muscles making each movement a chore. He did not look forward to yet another day in the saddle.

The sound of running water informed him a stream was not far off. He untied Fireball and walked toward the source of the sound. Once there, he allowed her to drink her fill and replenished his own supply as well. Somewhat refreshed, he walked her back to the road and climbed into the saddle.

As if understanding the need for haste, once he was mounted, Fireball broke into a gallop. Tanrif, surprised, managed to stay seated. He leaned forward and gave Fireball her rein. He had no choice. He had to reach Stratus by nightfall.

He rode for several hours without resting. It was mid-afternoon, and he had just switched from a gallop to a trot, when a shape seemed to form at the very edge of his vision. Another horseman was approaching.

It was not the first time riders had appeared traveling in the opposite direction, so he couldn't say what put him on guard. He dismounted and readied his bow, but Galith recognized Tanrif first. The Assassin lowered his body, using his horse's head as cover. He kicked the beast into a charge.

By the time Tanrif identified the man and nocked an arrow, the Assassin's position made him all but impossible to hit.

Tanrif cursed softly, not liking what he had to do, but knowing he had no choice. The decision made, Tanrif drew back on the bowstring and released.

His arrow flew straight and hard. Before it struck, Tanrif turned his head. When he again looked up, the horse was already on its way down.

Tanrif couldn't take his eyes from it, anger and sadness weighing equally upon him. Anger that he'd been forced to hurt an innocent creature, and sadness he had succeeded. He had grown up on a ranch and loved horses, almost as much as he loved swords. Still, he did not again turn away.

The horse toppled, sliding forward. It seemed to fade out of existence from the bottom up, as a cloud of dirt rose into the air obscuring its last moments. When the dust finally cleared, the horse was lying on the ground, but Galith was nowhere in sight.

He scanned the woods intently knowing the Sarithan could be anywhere. Tanrif grimaced as he realized how much of an advantage he'd given his opponent.

The Assassin could be hiding behind a tree only a few feet from the path, waiting for an opportunity to throw a blade. Tanrif shuddered, but mounted Fireball and spurred her on down the road.

It was possible Galith had been knocked out by the fall, but he didn't believe it. He urged his steed to even greater speed, eyes everywhere. By the time he did see the Assassin, it was too late to do anything but try to maneuver Fireball away from him. Galith had climbed a tree, and was waiting on a thick bough, overhanging the road. He dropped, landing on Fireball's back, directly behind Tanrif. He would have unhorsed him, had Fireball not turned at the last second. Galith landed hard, but well, and Tanrif took advantage of the moment to elbow him in the face.

The Assassin fell to the side, but in desperation reached out and grabbed Tanrif's leg. Tanrif let out a yell. Fireball whinnied. Holding on with one arm, Galith reached for his dagger.

It was all Tanrif could do to control Fireball. He would not be able to defend himself if Galith managed to pull his blade.

Drawing a deep breath, Tanrif pulled hard on Fireball's reins and forced her into the woods. It was a desperate maneuver, but he could think of nothing else. He rode hard, nearly avoiding collision several times. Fireball navigated between the trees as if she were part unicorn. Galith clung tenaciously to Tanrif's thigh, though he now needed both hands to do so.

It continued like that for longer than should have been possible. Tanrif ducked low, while the mare ran like wildfire through trees too densely packed for such a feat. Yet amazingly, she did not stumble or slow.

Galith refused to give up, waiting only for a chance to unhorse Tanrif and fulfill his mission. For minutes, they continued, each of them refusing to fumble. Then at last, Fireball scraped by a tree and Galith struck the trunk. Unable to retain his hold, the assassin fell to the ground, rolling several feet before he came to rest. Tanrif felt flesh tear from his leg, as it squeezed between the tree and his mount. He gasped in pain. Somewhere behind, Galith watched the suicide run, waiting for the inevitable fall--a fall that never came. When Fireball finally broke from the woods, Galith cursed once and lost consciousness.

Chapter Thirteen - Dusk

Tanrif continued to ride throughout the day and into the night. Fireball ran for so long without rest, Tanrif began to believe proximity to the Amulet of Dreaming had somehow increased her stamina. She seemed inexhaustible, which was good, because his own body was worse for the wear.

His muscles were sore from two days in the saddle and he had sustained a number of scrapes and bruises from the incident with Galith. His left leg, while it wasn't broken, was torn up from his collision with the tree, though the bleeding had stopped hours earlier. That very pain kept him alert and awake. Even after darkness descended, he continued to ride. If he didn't make Stratus soon, it would be too late.

By the time he reached Eastgate, Tanrif was half dead. He could feel the pulse pounding in his temple and knew it would be a long time before he would recover from the events of the past days.

He had been worried the gates would be closed at that late hour, but that turned out not to be the case. In a city the size of Stratus, people came and went at all hours. Caravans might arrive at any time of night depending on their point of origin. Only in times of political unrest did the East Gate close, but Tanrif didn't know that. So he breathed a sigh of relief and rode through.

It was close to midnight when he finally reached the docks. He wasn't certain where he was going, but knew where to find the answers. Realizing he wouldn't be able to walk, he stayed mounted and rode to Daln's office.

He didn't have to go far. He was halfway there, when he saw the dockmaster walking ahead of him. He tried to call out, but his lungs were not up to the task. He kicked Fireball into a gallop. She snorted indignantly, feeling perhaps she'd run enough in the past two days, then moved. Daln heard her coming and turned. He drew a dagger, but sheathed it when he recognized the rider. Tanrif pulled back on the reins, bringing Fireball to a halt only feet away. He was so exhausted he could barely speak. "The Gondylarian ship...did it leave?"

"What in da name of da gods 'appened to you? You look terrible."

Tanrif grimaced, but didn't answer. Indeed, after what he'd been through, he must have looked almost deranged.

"I have spent the last two days pushing my horse beyond her limits. I have missed meals and forfeited sleep. I've survived a rather vicious brawl. All so that I could be on a certain ship when it departed for High Gondylar."

"Ship left fer Gondylar a coupla days ago."

Tanrif bowed his head. He had gambled everything and had lost. He was too tired and in too much pain to realize there was no way Cyanne could have reached Stratus that soon. He cursed to himself, then aloud. When he raised his head again, there were tears in his eyes.

"All is lost."

He said it with such force Daln took a step backwards. He now noticed another change underlying Tanrif's fatigue. The man who once worked for him was stronger somehow...almost imperious.

"I'm sorry."

"Which doesn't change my circumstance. I have to get to High Gondylar."

"Der's still a Gondylarian warship, though I dunno they'd take a passenger."

Tanrif broke into laughter. "You mean there was a second Gondylarian ship? Now there's a first. Might you tell me where to find this warship?"

Daln pointed and Tanrif turned, mouth dropping. Only the depth of his fatigue had allowed him to miss it. It had the words 'Sea Serpent' painted on the ship's side.

Daln spoke again. "Didn't know ya could read Gondylarian."

Tanrif hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud. "There are many things about me you don't know. And I'm sure as the years pass, you will learn still more. Destiny has its eye on me."

Without explaining further, he turned and moved toward the warship. Behind him, Daln watched, certain Tanrif had spoken the truth.

No plank led from the ship to the dock, but a guard paced the deck. He stopped to watch as Tanrif approached. Tanrif hailed him. The sailor turned to look, but did not respond.

Tanrif repeated his greeting, then cursed and tried again in Gondylarian. He knew he was slurring his words, but was too tired to care. The guard's expression changed from suspicion to surprise. He had not expected Tanrif to speak his native tongue. Now that Tanrif had his attention, he spoke.

"When do you sail?"

"Dawn tomorrow, as if it's any of your business."

"I need to speak with Cyanne."

"She is not to be disturbed on the Captain's orders."

"Let me speak to Kestryl then, or Andres."

"Be gone now. Whatever it is you're peddling, we don't want any."

Tanrif suppressed an urge shoot an arrow into the sentry's neck, but before he could say anything, Andres was standing beside the man.

"Since when do you decide who does and doesn't board this vessel?"

The man looked stunned, but replied immediately. "I didn't think you'd want to be disturbed by the likes of him." He wrinkled his nose, as if to indicate what he thought of the visitor.

"Tanrif is an old drinking buddy of mine." His wink went unnoticed by the sailor. "I should have you on galley duty for the entire trip back."

The man's eyes widened, but he said nothing else. He didn't dare.

"I suggest you get a plank down there and invite the man up...NOW!"

The guard moved so fast, Tanrif had to suppress a laugh. Stiffly, he dismounted and led Fireball up the wide wooden walkway and onto the deck. He handed the reins to the sailor.

"Take good care of her. You have no idea what she went through to get me here." Now that he was closer, Andres took a good look at Tanrif. "You look awful. Are you all right?"

Tanrif, tired beyond belief, nodded.

"Come. Let me show you to a cabin. You can rest tonight and speak with Cyanne in the morning."

Tanrif followed Andres below to a small stateroom with a single porthole.

He collapsed upon the bed and was asleep before the captain closed the door.

Tanrif woke many hours later. Sun streamed through the porthole, illuminating a patch of bare floor, though the rest of the room remained shadowed. He was disoriented. It took him a few minutes to remember where he was. When he did, he tried to rise. Pain engulfed him and he sank back down.

Tanrif was more than just sore. His muscles ached, his body was bruised and the wound on his leg burned as if it were on fire. He tried again, more slowly. This time he succeeded. Limping, he opened the cabin door and climbed the ladder at the end of the corridor. Once on deck, he looked about amazed. The Skyshore Realm was no longer in view.

He stared at the expanse of ocean about him, only now realizing he was on his way across The Mistress. He spent a long time staring at the sea. All manner of birds flew through the sky and he stood and watched, as occasionally, one would dive down and, as often as not, return to the sky with a fish in its beak.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Tanrif was so engrossed, he jumped. Beside him stood Captain Andres.

"Now you see what calls to me. There is nothing land can offer that can compare to this."

Tanrif nodded, but had his doubts. While the view was beautiful, he knew he would never be able to enjoy it for any length of time. The restlessness was still with him.

"Is Cyanne awake?"

"Yes she is. In fact, she sent me to check on you. She spent most of yesterday by your side."

"Yesterday!"

Andres grinned. "You must have been very tired. You slept for a day and a half. I was going to bind your leg, but it seemed to have stopped bleeding, so I left it. You lost a lot of blood."

"I hadn't realized."

"A weaker man might have died. Would you do me the honor of sharing your story with me?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to talk to Cyanne first. In the months to come, I'm sure we'll have the time to trade tales."

Andres smiled. "Of course. Follow me."

He led Tanrif around the other side of the ship, where Cyanne sat at a wooden table, enjoying breakfast. Suddenly Tanrif realized how hungry he was. He hadn't eaten in a long time.

Cyanne looked up and gestured for him to sit. Though she was smiling, there seemed to be an underlying sadness behind her eyes. He sat across from her.

"Hello there," she said. "I trust you slept well. How are you feeling?"

"Truth?"

"Truth."

"I feel as if I've been beaten all over with a mallet."

"You look it. What happened?"

"Long story, but the short end of it is this. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life without you, even if I can't have you."

Cyanne leaned forward and looked into his eyes.

"I feel the same way. I would have asked you to come with me, but I was scared. There are things about me you don't know."

"Incidental items I'm certain, like being the heir to the throne of High Gondylar."

"This isn't easy for me, Tanrif."

"Sorry."

"And after you hear what I have to say, you may not want to have anything more to do with me."

"I doubt it."

"Why don't you wait to hear it first?"

"Okay."

Cyanne looked at him, pale-faced, trembling. "I should have told you this sooner, but was afraid of how you'd react. You see, I'm not completely human."

Tanrif studied her and said nothing. He had been so surprised that Cyanne was the Duchess of High Gondylar, he assumed anything else would be fairly easy to accept. Of course, he couldn't possibly have expected anything like this.

"Then what are you?"

"My mother was Ethrellen."

Tanrif laughed. Cyanne was hurt, then angry.

"And what, may I ask, is so funny?"

"Is that all? How could you possibly think so insignificant a detail could turn me away? Besides, I already knew."

"What do you mean, you already knew?"

"I'm not an idiot, Cyanne. Your eyes were the first clue. From the moment we met, I suspected. But once you told me your lineage, I was positive. My father had often told tales of his days in High Gondylar. More than once he had mentioned that Dathan of the House of Gondylar had taken an Ethrell wife, though he never mentioned a child. In fact, he also spoke quite frequently of Kestryl."

Cyanne, once again, marveled at the man who was Tanrif. He not only knew, but accepted. It was time to tell him the rest of the story.

"When I was five, there was an attempt on my life. I was sent north with Kestryl for my own safety. I just want you to know that even though I'm heir to the throne, it is unlikely anyone is going to hand it to me on a platter."

"You mean you may have to fight to take your proper place?"

"That's precisely what I mean."

"Then let me fight for you. I'll be your man. I'm good with a sword, you know that."

"Oh, Tanrif. I can't think of anyone I'd rather have fight for me. I just wish that..." "Go on."

"I just wish there could be something more between us. And I fear it will not be allowed to happen."

He had suspected this as well, though hearing it didn't make it any easier. "It's okay. I didn't come here for that. I knew we could never be together."

"You did?"

"Of course."

"But you came anyway."

"Yes, my Duchess. I came anyway."

Neither spoke for a long time. The love between them was almost a physical presence and it suffused them with a warmth beyond imagining. And the worst of it was, their relative positions would never allow them to express that love again.

Galith, head bowed in respect and defeat, knelt before Ezewdra the High Priest of Sarith. The man before him was the most powerful on the planet; the spiritual leader of the Assassins. This was not the first time Galith had knelt before this man, but this was the first time he was terrified.

Ezewdra paced the room, only occasionally glancing at the kneeling figure. Finally he spoke.

"Thrice have you tried and thrice have you failed."

Galith said nothing, nor would he, unless the High Priest asked him a question. "Such failure can not be tolerated. It grieves me to do what I must now do, but I have my responsibility and betrayal cannot go unpunished.

This was always the way the accusation was phrased. If you couldn't accomplish your objective, you betrayed the Brotherhood. Galith shuddered. This was as close to an apology as he had ever heard Ezewdra utter. His penance would not be an easy one. Finally the High Priest stopped pacing and turned toward him.

"You have served us long and hard. You will continue to serve us. You are to be stripped of all titles and ranks, except the lowest. Indeed, even your name is to be taken from you. From now on, when you are spoken to, you will be called by the name of your position. Do you understand me, slave?"

Galith nodded, without raising his head. His punishment was far worse than he thought it would be.

"With a warder of my choosing, you will be sent to the Islands of Dawn. You will serve the Grand Master in any way he sees fit, until such time as he decides to raise you again, if such a time ever arrives. I wouldn't count on it."

Galith felt as if he'd been deprived of life itself. He kept his eyes downcast, unable to believe what he was hearing. The knock at the door made him jump.

"Ah, that must be your warder now. Enter."

The door opened and Galith heard footsteps approaching. He wanted desperately to see who would hold the other end of his leash, but dared not look up or speak.

"Meet your warder, slave. Serve him well until you reach the Islands of Dawn." The figure spoke and the blood drained from Galith's face.

"Hello, Galith," said Bone. "Or should I say slave? We meet again, it seems."

Galith tried to fight back the fear, but could not. He was about to enter the worst of all possible worlds. He only hoped he would live long enough to see the Islands of Dawn.

For the first time in what seemed like ages, Tanrif felt relaxed. The ocean voyage had been blissfully uneventful. His injuries had almost completely healed and his limp was so slight, it was barely noticeable. There had been no major storms, and though twice sea monsters had been sighted, they were never closer than far in the distance. Tanrif spent much time with Cyanne and the remainder of his time avoiding the Bladesman, who he didn't trust.

There seemed to be no reason for it. His father had spoken highly of the Gondylarian warrior and

Cyanne also had naught but good to say. Yet he could not shake the uneasy feeling that came over him whenever the Bladesman was present.

A month after they were out to sea the inevitable encounter occurred. Tanrif rose early one morning. He passed by Cyanne's cabin, but decided against knocking. It was unlikely she would be awake and he had no wish to disturb her. Instead he climbed the stairway to the deck.

When he first noticed Kestryl kneeling off to the right, he thought about returning below. He reconsidered. The Bladesman did not own the ship and if Tanrif wanted to enjoy the early morning sun, he was certainly entitled. Purposefully he walked out onto the deck. When he saw what the royal bodyguard was doing, he edged closer. Kestryl had one of his swords out and was busy working its edge with a sharpening stone. Beside him on the deck were a rag and a flask of oil. Tanrif watched the Bladesman for a time, assessing his technique. He wasn't even certain his presence was known, until Kestryl spoke.

"You're up early. Couldn't sleep?"

The young warrior shook his head.

The Bladesman never missed a stroke, moving his blade expertly back and forth. He never took his eyes from the weapon.

"Tanrif, why do you avoid me?"

Tanrif searched for an adequate reply. Unfortunately, he had no legitimate reason for his feelings and wasn't sure how to answer. Still, if Kestryl could be honest, so could he.

"I don't trust you."

"Do you trust the Duchess?"

"Implicitly."

"I'm not certain that's true."

"What are you talking about? I trust Cyanne with my life."

"Is that so? To trust a person, you must value their judgment. And you know she trusts me. You also know I'm sworn to protect the Duchess, and would forfeit my own life should that become necessary."

"I too will protect Cyanne." Tanrif stood up taller, uncertain of where this conversation was taking him.

"I know that. Can't two people with the same goals trust one another?"

Tanrif squinted suspiciously. "Why is it so important to you that I trust you?"

The Bladesman sighed, then chuckled.

"You'd have made a good Gondylarian. You have the mindset already." Then he grew serious. "Tanrif, within a matter of months, we're going to be in Gondylarian waters. You already know Cyanne is not likely to be welcomed with open arms. If I am to fight by your side, I have to be able to trust you. It's really that simple. I have to know where you'll stand in battle. Come to think of it, I haven't seen you work out since you've been aboard. Do you exercise?"

"Not enough. At first I couldn't because of my injuries."

"And you never started again. Well, you should. You'd be stunned at how fast your body forgets. And

we need every advantage we can get. That's why I take such good care of my weapons. A bad blade could well be a death sentence. The salt air is really no good for them. Let me see your blade."

Tanrif instinctively placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. "My blade?"

"Just for a minute."

It was the hardest thing anyone had ever asked Tanrif to do. He looked at the Bladesman for a few seconds longer before slowly reaching down and drawing his weapon. He hesitated before holding it out.

Kestryl took it and examined it carefully. Then, with the confident moves of a professional, he began to sharpen it. Tanrif leaned forward to watch and after a few seconds, Kestryl moved aside so he could try it himself.

Tanrif already knew how to sharpen a sword, of course, but the Bladesman's technique was quite different from his own and somewhat more efficient. It reminded Tanrif that as much as he knew, he still had so much to learn. However the most important lesson he learned that morning on The Mistress, was how to trust.

From that moment onward, he spent more time with the Bladesman. A few days later, they started sparring and Tanrif began to see Kestryl in a different light. Perhaps they would never be friends, but a respect grew between them that would last the rest of their lives...however long that would be.

Galith lay on the floor of Bone's cabin, feigning sleep. Sleep was the only way he could escape. Bone had wasted no time in showing Galith how low he could make him feel.

From the first day, his warder had issued command after command, each more degrading than the last. Galith had no option but to obey. If he killed Bone, he would be betraying Ezewdra's orders.

He knew there had to be worse situations than this, but couldn't think of any. He'd even contemplated suicide, but only briefly. If he did take his own life, Sarith would not go easy on his soul. So he lived on, each day a new nightmare.

During his weeks with Bone, he'd been ordered to serve the Assassin's meals, wash his feet and clean his clothes. The one time he had grumbled, Bone made him stand naked all day on the deck of the ship, with no food or water. The resulting sunburn still pained him some, though the incident had occurred many days earlier. Galith resolved to shelve his verbal protests, until he found some way to improve his situation.

He snuck one eye open and looked at the bed. Bone was still asleep. As quietly as possible, he rose and moved toward the door. Just as he reached it, Bone's voice froze him in his tracks.

"Good morning, slave. I hope you were going to fetch my breakfast. I would hate to think you were leaving the cabin without permission."

Bone swung himself up, so he was in a sitting position. "Perhaps the last punishment was not severe enough to insure obedience."

Galith froze, barely daring to breathe. Bone rose and walked toward him. Before Galith could move, Bone kicked out and swept Galith's legs from under him. Galith landed hard, the breath knocked from him, but Bone wasn't through yet. He kicked Galith hard, twice in the side and once in the head.

"When will you learn, slave? You can't win. You can't hide."

Galith, unable to keep his peace any longer, spoke. "Even the Grand Master himself, would not abuse a slave so. When he hears how I've been treated..."

Bone's laughter cut him off. "You are a slave, Galith. Property, nothing more. As long as I deliver you alive, I can do anything I want. You have no rights or protection under the laws of the Assassins. The Grand Master wouldn't lift a finger to help you, even if I beat you in front of him."

He kicked again to emphasize his words. Galith grunted in pain, but said nothing else.

"It is my job to have you docile before we reach the Islands of Dawn. By the time I present you to the Grand Master, you will behave as a slave. "Humble...obedient...respectful..." with each addition to the list, Bone's foot lashed out. The list went on for a long time.

Tanrif struck a defensive posture, waiting for his opponent's attack. Ten feet away, the Bladesman faced him, wielding a sword in each hand. Cyanne, standing off to the side, spoke.

"Let the contest begin."

Nearby, crewmembers without duties watched as the two came together. When they'd first started sparring, Tanrif had managed to surprise the Bladesman upon occasion, but as they worked out together, day after day, it happened less and less. He never caught the Bladesman twice on the same maneuver and now the Bladesman barely broke a sweat, while Tanrif had to strain just to defend himself. He'd never fought a man with two blades before, and found it required a different technique to defend against than anything he had previously encountered.

Still, Tanrif never gave up, and often they fought for several hours a day. The Bladesman had said that muscles forget quickly and that proved to be true. The first few times they fought left Tanrif sore and exhausted, but as time passed, his muscles firmed and the pain lessened. Day by day, his skills improved. By the end of the second month at sea, he was certain even Varon Imgard could not have stood long against the Bladesman.

Just as they came together, a cry went up from the lookout.

"Land! There be land!"

Everyone ran to the bow of the ship and sure enough, the Sunset Isles were visible, gray dashes in the distance. All thoughts of the competition vanished. After two months of staring at the same faces, everyone aboard, with the possible exception of Captain Andres, was looking forward to shore leave. Even as Tanrif thought it, the Bladesman was by his side.

"High Gondylar," Tanrif breathed.

Kestryl placed a hand on his shoulder.

"That would be the Sunset Isles, if I'm not mistaken."

"What? I thought we were heading toward High Gondylar."

"That is our eventual destination, yes."

"But the Sunset Isles are so far out of our way. What are we doing here?"

"Tanrif, while it would be much faster to make a direct trip from Stratus to Athlana, it is far better to skirt The Mistress, than cross it."

"But why?"

"Because most ships attempting to cross The Mistress directly, never make it. There are many theories why, but the combination of storms and sea monsters are a likely explanation. There are legends of other things as well, but I don't know the truth of them. That is why the trip takes so long. A direct crossing would almost cut the time in half, but it is so risky most seamen, including Captain Andres, would not consider it. And I'd certainly not allow the attempt with the Duchess aboard. Anyway, even if we could have crossed directly, I'd have counseled otherwise."

"Why is that?"

"Because we need information. I have already been away for six months and it will be eight before we see the shores of High Gondylar. We have no indication of what has happened during that interval. When I left, the Dukedom was in a state of transition. Penthor hadn't yet had the chance to dig in. I think it unlikely he'll just let us ride up to the palace and take the throne."

"While I've been gone, Penthor could have been assassinated by one of Dathan's detractors or he could have found a way to win their support. We do not know the conditions of High Gondylar, or Penthor's preparations for us, though I have a fair idea he is expecting my return. I would know something of the nature of his defenses before I lay my plans."

"The Sunset Isles are often host to Gondylarian merchants, and as such, it is entirely likely we will be able to obtain some sort of information here. We can only be certain of one thing. Considering the typical Gondylarian reaction to Ethrellen, Cyanne is not going to be welcomed with open arms."

"Would you do me the honor of accompanying me ashore?"

Without turning, Tanrif nodded.

"We're going to lay over for a week, perhaps a little more. During that time, we have to gather as much information as possible about what's been going on back home." Until now, Tanrif had been lulled by the calm of the ocean voyage. Yet the Bladesman was surely correct. It would take a miracle to win the throne. He continued to watch the approaching port long after everyone else had returned to their duties.

The Sea Serpent docked several hours later. As he disembarked, Tanrif smiled. A dock was a dock, all over the world. This could have been the pier in Stratus, except most of the men wore earrings and no shirts. The fishing vessels came back with different fish, of course, but the big ones always seemed to get away, even out here. The language spoken at the port of Dusk was a cross between Gondylarian and Dominan, and though Tanrif didn't speak any of the latter, he was fluent enough in Gondylarian to understand most of what was said. The Bladesman spoke the dialect of the islands so well, Tanrif was convinced he must have spent some time here.

Considering the distance from the Empire, Tanrif was surprised to find a large number of Dominans present. They dressed in long robes and wore tall, thin spiral hats. At least, that was their formal attire. Their battle gear was somewhat more standard, though they tended to carry wide, curved blades.

Most men on the islands went armed, so Tanrif and the Bladesman did not stand out. It was too dangerous for Cyanne to accompany them.

The streets of Dusk were oddly imbalanced. There was a single main strip that contained a variety of businesses, almost half of which were bars. The streets seemed even more crowded than they were in Stratus, though this was perhaps because they were so much narrower.

It was almost as if someone had tried to compress Westgate and the main Gondylarian market into the same small area. If he hadn't been coming off a ship, Tanrif might have felt claustrophobic.

They first stopped at a tavern called The Pit. Tanrif gambled a little. Because the games played here were different than the ones he had grown accustomed to in Stratus, he lost more than he won.

Between casts of the dice, people spoke and he listened. While a lot of the conversations were of no interest, many of the sailors were Gondylarian. During the course of the evening, he was able to piece together some of what had been going on in the great Dukedom.

Penthor had been crowned Duke and for the most part ruled, though as often as not, the name Lord Zelaran was mentioned in the same breath.

Other than that, he learned little of value. He was about to call it a night, when he overheard two men talking at a nearby table.

"The Sarithan are up in arms. No one knows why, but if I had a choice, I wouldn't be anywhere near the Dark Isles.

The man across from him sneered. "The Islands of Dawn," he corrected. "You'd want to avoid the other name. You never know who might be listening."

"See, even you fear them."

"I respect them. So they're not happy. They still have to eat. No matter when I make the trip, I always profit nicely. It's not as if they're angry with *me*."

"No," thought Tanrif, "they're angry with me."

He was so involved in the conversation he was surprised to find the dice had made their way back around to him. He looked down at them, shook his head and passed them on.

He turned his attention back to eavesdropping, but the conversation had already turned to other matters. He rose and left the tavern, eyes searching for shadows of Assassins who weren't there.

Galith did not quickly recover from the beating. It was several days before he could stand unaided, during which time he was still required to perform his assigned tasks. He would have gladly accepted death, but even that release was denied him.

Alone in the cabin, he had already finished the day's chores and was awaiting Bone's return. He stood gazing out the porthole, trying to understand how his life had come to this.

He had been a Master Assassin, a highly respected member of the Brotherhood. What had happened? He thought about Tanrif. There was his answer. He cursed the day the young warrior had been born.

As if reflecting his mood, the sky darkened. The wind picked up too. Above, he heard the captain shouting orders at the crew. A short time later, Bone entered the cabin. He didn't look at Galith. Instead, he made his way to the bed and collapsed onto it. He stared blankly at the ceiling, waiting.

When the storm hit, it hit hard. Giant waves tossed the ship about as if it were a toy. Bone looked so pale, Galith thought he might vomit. In a way, it gave him a strange satisfaction. Galith himself never got seasick.

On the other hand, if Bone threw up, Galith would have to clean it. It would still be worth it, he decided.

He turned his attention back to the porthole. Lightning filled the skies followed by thunder that made it sound like the world was ending.

Several times Galith lost his balance, but each time, as soon as he made his way to his feet, he returned to the porthole.

The storm raged far into the night. Galith silently thanked Sarith for sending it. Since they'd set out, it was the only time both he and Bone were awake that he hadn't been afraid. When it finally started to fade, the captain once again called out orders, most of which Galith could not make out.

Ignoring him, Bone rose unsteadily and left the cabin. When he returned a short time later, he looked relieved.

"It seems that your stay with me has been extended. The storm has pushed us off course. We'll be stopping at the closest port."

Galith bowed his head. "May I ask a question, Master?"

Bone nodded.

"Where will we be docking?"

"As if it could possibly make a difference to the likes of you...The Sunset Isles. The port of Dusk."

The Bladesman moved through the crowded streets, mind racing. This was their third day at Dusk and he had much to think about. For one thing, rumors of Cyanne's return abounded. He had not expected that and could only come up with a single reason for those rumors to exist. Penthor was stacking the deck against them.

Some rumors claimed the half-breed heir still lived, while others insisted the Bladesman was returning with an impostor. In either case, it would be difficult to garner support. Penthor had created the worst possible situation for them, without shedding a single drop of blood. Damn the man! Angry as he was, Kestryl had to admit it was a brilliant strategy.

By the time he reached the docks, the rain was just starting. This came as no surprise. When they weren't talking of the return of the Duchess, they were talking about the approaching storm. He had wanted to set off immediately, but they would have to stay at least until it was over. And every day they delayed gave Penthor another to prepare.

He returned to the Sea Serpent. Once there, he went immediately to Cyanne's cabin and knocked.

"The door's open."

He pushed it in. Cyanne sat on the bed. Tanrif sat off to the side on a wooden chair. He almost knelt, but caught himself. Cyanne had made him promise not to kneel for the rest of the voyage.

"M'lady, I have some bad news."

"So I gather. Tanrif has, I suspect, already given me part of it. Oh Kestryl, what are we to do?"

It was the one question for which he didn't have an answer.

"I would have liked to go straight to Athlana, but that is now out of the question. As I see it, we have two options. The first is making for the frontier. There we can find a mercenary group and hire them. We would have to depend on stealth and luck. We would assault the palace directly. I'm sure I don't have to

tell you that our chances of success would be slim."

"And the other option?"

"We'd still head for the Dominan Border, except we'd bypass the smaller towns and head for Flandor. If we could convince the Lord of your authenticity, you could declare the city the new capital. That would give the officials the motivation they would need to support you. We could build our defenses and mount an all out war."

"I take it you think this is a more solid idea."

"M'lady, there is no easy road to the throne. Penthor has seen to that. I just feel the latter plan holds the most merit."

Cyanne rose and paced the small cabin, no easy task with three people present. At length, she spoke.

"I can't see starting a civil war. An assault on the palace is one thing. Endangering the lives of thousands of Gondylarians is another entirely. I couldn't live with that." Tanrif nodded, though he didn't speak. The Bladesman studied him. He would have to work the young warrior harder in the days to come. They would need every sword at their disposal.

They continued to discuss options far into the night. The rain grew harder. The storm brought with it enough noise to put an end to the planning. They bid each other goodnight and both Tanrif and the Bladesman returned to their cabins.

Cyanne stayed awake, ignoring the ship's turbulent motion. The idea of returning to High Gondylar was crazy. The people didn't want her. Penthor was on the throne and who was to say he couldn't do a better job. Only the thought she might find her parents' killer and avenge their deaths kept her going. She thought about Penthor and fervently prayed he wasn't involved.

"Sheba grant it so."

She did not want to think of what she would do to him if she found out he was a traitor.

At the thought, a clap of thunder shook the ship. Cyanne shuddered and finally sat on the bed. She didn't know where she would find the strength to endure, but knew she had to. Or she would never learn the truth of what had happened to her parents.

Back in his cabin, Tanrif couldn't sleep either. He kept thinking about the Sarithan Assassins and what he'd overheard at the bar. Someone had angered that dangerous and ancient sect and he could only assume it was him.

He fingered the scar on his side and shook his head. They were still searching. He'd sailed for two months and it hadn't mattered. Demendil had been right. There was no place to hide from the Sarithan Assassins. What could he do?

Part of him knew there was only one solution. He would have to take the battle back to them. Plainly impossible, of course. How could one man go against the most powerful religious sect in the world? It was insanity to even consider it.

He drifted off to those thoughts. In his dreams he led Gondylarian armies against armies of Assassins under a yellow sky.

He woke many hours later. Rain still pounded the deck above. He walked to the porthole and gazed out.

Through the cloud cover, he couldn't tell what time it was, though they had made it through the night. He thought about his dream, the Assassins and the prophecy. Something would have to be done sooner or later, but for the time being, all he could do was wait.

The storm lasted all that day and most of the night. By morning, Tanrif had had enough of the ship. Once they sailed, it would be a long time before he again could have a decent drink. He rose early and returned to The Pit.

He bypassed the gaming tables and made his way straight to the bar. As he sat, he half turned on his stool. He didn't expect to see any familiar faces and at first, didn't. Until he noticed a man that looked just like Galith.

He was startled at first, but after the initial shock, realized he must be mistaken. Galith had exuded a certain confidence, whereas this man wore a look of defeat. Obviously a servant, he stood near his master and stared at his feet. Occasionally, the other would send him to the bar for a drink. When he approached, Tanrif was able to study him more closely.

There was no way this beaten remnant of a man could possibly be the Assassin who had almost taken his life, but damn, he looked like Galith.

Apparently the conversation he'd overheard had affected him more than he'd thought. How could Galith be in the Sunset Isles?

The wiser and warier part of his mind told him if he could make the trip, so could the Sarithan, but it seemed unlikely at best.

Tanrif placed a coin on the bar and, without waiting for change, left the establishment. If the man who looked like Galith took any notice of him, he didn't show it. When Tanrif emerged on the street it was raining again. He ran all the way back to the Sea Serpent.

Galith returned from the bar with Bone's drink and stood silently at the table, head bowed. For the briefest of moments, he thought he'd glimpsed Tanrif sitting at the bar, but immediately dismissed it as a hallucination. If you get hit in the head enough, you're bound to have a few. He shrugged it off.

It wasn't until later in the evening, when he overheard a conversation about a Gondylarian warship out of Stratus, that he began to piece it together. Back in Glith, he'd heard the story of how Bone had deduced that Varon Imgard was Gondylarian and how he had followed the aging mercenary onto a Gondylarian ship and taken him out. What Tanrif was doing on a Gondylarian warship, Galith couldn't guess, but the more he thought about it, the more certain he became. The man at the bar had been Tanrif and was on his way to High Gondylar.

Bone had been within a few feet of Tanrif and had let him get away. That would not sit well with the Grand Master.

Once again, Sarith had sent him a sign. She still favored him, even in his current condition. All was not lost.

He would use the information as a bargaining chip. Surely the Grand Master would be grateful to Galith for revealing Tanrif's whereabouts. Galith would be reinstated, perhaps not to his old rank, but it would be a beginning. And he would have his revenge on both Tanrif and his warder.

The future decided, Galith obeyed Bone without hesitation, certain it was only a matter of time before he would no longer have to do so.

Chapter Fourteen - Complications

The Bladesman whirled and slashed. His blade started high, but in a surprise maneuver he shifted his center of gravity and struck downward, aiming for Tanrif's leg. The younger warrior neatly parried the attack and returned one of his own. Kestryl was impressed. No matter how hard he pushed, Tanrif always seemed to fight back. His strength and skill cheered the Bladesman, at a time when everything else weighed heavily upon him.

Cyanne, who during the first part of the voyage had been looking forward to her return, now spent most of her time fretting. She constantly wondered what would happen and spoke of little else. Andres was also nervous, though he swore he would see Cyanne on the throne or die trying. Only Tanrif seemed unaffected by the prospect of the fight to come.

Kestryl parried Tanrif's thrust and tried a more difficult maneuver. Using one sword to hold his opponent's to the side, he swiped with the other. He had intended to pull the swing before it struck, but once again, Tanrif managed to counter the attack.

He was so surprised, he almost didn't have time to prepare himself for Tanrif's next attempt. The match ran for more than an hour, neither man willing to admit defeat. Finally, Cyanne ordered them to stop, fearing they might drop from exhaustion.

Each day, Kestryl was amazed anew at how much the boy had learned. By the time the Gondylarian coast was sighted, Kestryl felt sure that Tanrif was worthy of the title Swordmaster.

The two of them would make an effective core, but they would need more men to accomplish their objective. While both Andres and Cyanne were no stranger to swords, neither had the depth of skill they needed. Nor could Cyanne be allowed to risk herself in a fight.

Now that the mainland was visible, Kestryl spent most of his time on deck, looking south. He loved High Gondylar as a father loves a child. He had, in some odd way, helped to raise the Dukedom. Now that child had gone astray and he was here to set things right. Long after the sunset, he stayed on deck and stared into darkness.

Captain Andres altered the ship's heading, sailing east to parallel the coast. At night he was forced to drop anchor. He couldn't afford to pass his target. Fair winds from the west allowed them to make quite a bit of headway. On the morning of the third day, their destination came into view.

He turned his ship toward the mouth of the river. The Sea Serpent would be unable to navigate the shallow waters, so they would have to continue their journey in one of the launches. He chose a small but sturdy craft, and had his men lower it into the water. There would only be four passengers; the Duchess, Kestryl, Tanrif and himself. Andres took his time giving the crew last minute instructions. When he was done, he hesitated. He realized when he had sworn to protect the Duchess it would mean leaving the sea behind. Now that the moment was approaching, he felt a pang of remorse.

Not that he regretted his decision. He knew his duty and would not shirk it, but the idea of dying on land was one with which he was not comfortable.

Finally, he drew a breath and had one of his men summon the others. While he waited for them to arrive, Andres took a long look at his command. He knew it was very unlikely he would ever make his way back to the Sea Serpent again.

The river had different names, depending on which side of it you called home. The Gondylarians called it the Serpent, for that was how it looked as it wound its way down from the hills. The Dominans called it the Barrier, for that was how they perceived it. It was the only thing that prevented a full-scale invasion of High Gondylar. Whatever you called it, paddling upstream was hard work.

Cyanne did not paddle, of course. Tanrif and Andres took first shift, while the Bladesman stood in the bow, scanning the banks. After a time, the Bladesman relieved Andres, and eventually, Andres took Tanrif's position. It was no surprise to either the Bladesman or Andres that no people were visible on the Gondylarian side of the river. It was quite dangerous this close to the border. Dominan raiding parties would sometimes cross the Serpent and attack unsuspecting travelers.

That night, they beached the craft on the Gondylarian side and all three men took turns standing watch. Though it was theoretically cooler by the water, Tanrif saw no evidence of this. Even the nights were uncomfortably warm.

That first night, the Bladesman found a flat area and pitched a tent. It was a small tent, certainly inadequate for housing all of them, but it was more than sufficient for Cyanne, who it was for.

The men slept in the open on bedrolls. These were flat, hard things, which seemed to do little to mask the existence of the stones beneath them. Several times, Tanrif swept larger rocks out from under his, but it was still about as comfortable as sleeping naked in a quarry. The next morning, they continued following the river southward.

It was two more days before they reached their destination, or at least as close to their destination as they could get by boat. They beached the craft on the western shore, though they didn't bother to conceal it. Whatever happened, they wouldn't be coming back this way.

Tanrif found he was having difficulty adjusting to the heat. The sun was a glaring eye in the sky and its wrath seemed to increase with each passing step. He noticed while he was constantly wiping the sweat from his eyes, the Gondylarians seemed somewhat less affected. He cursed often and struggled to keep up. There were still more than two hours of daylight left when they finally stopped.

When Cyanne started to make camp, Tanrif was relieved, but puzzled. "Why are we stopping?"

"You need to rest. Look at you, you can barely keep up."

"What! You must be joking. I was just warming up."

"Uh-huh."

Tanrif was about to reply, when the Bladesman cut him off. "Would you accompany me, please?" Without waiting for a reply, he turned and strode from camp.

Tanrif couldn't imagine where they were going and didn't care. In spite of his bravado, he was tired. He suppressed a sigh and followed the Bladesman into the surrounding countryside.

The dust was thick in his mouth. The dry scrub was very different from the terrain of Skyshore and Tanrif spent some time trying to distract himself from his discomfort by observing the seemingly endless supply of flies that dogged the path before him. Neither spoke for the duration of the short hike. Tanrif heard the brook long before it came into view.

Finally Kestryl spoke. "It's the last water until we reach the City of Crossed Swords, sometime tomorrow. Cyanne and I thought this might be a good place to camp."

"She was playing with me."

"I would think so."

Shortly after, the water came into view. The Bladesman pulled water skins from his pack and handed a couple to Tanrif, which he filled. Then he crawled to the water's edge and ducked his whole head beneath the surface. He gasped at the welcome coolness, remembering only at the last second to hold his breath. He laughed as he pulled his head out, sending a spray of water high in the air above him. The Bladesman, expressionless, watched until he was finished. On the way back to camp, Tanrif felt better than he had since leaving the ship.

The rations they'd brought were almost gone. They ate sparsely that night, saving the remainder for the next day. By unspoken agreement, each kept to themselves, though Tanrif found himself watching Cyanne.

The silence was uncomfortable, but he was not going to be the one to break it. Immediately after dinner, Tanrif fell into a deep sleep. He woke the next morning, curious as to why no one had awakened him to take a watch, but too happy about the state of affairs to bring it up.

The next day was no better than the last. If anything, the sun was hotter and the pace more hectic. By late afternoon, a large town came into view. The idea of resting in shade was very appealing to Tanrif and he managed to quicken his pace, despite his fatigue. The town was different than any Tanrif had ever seen. It seemed almost temporary. No structure was made from stone, and many of the wooden ones were badly in need of repair. There were people about, though none glanced in their direction. The Bladesman led them to an inn called the Morning Mist.

Tanrif read the sign and smiled. "Do I have something cool to look forward to in the morning?"

The Bladesman shook his head. "There's hardly any rainfall in these parts and I don't know this area has ever seen mist."

"But what about the sign?"

"It's the name of an inn, Tanrif. On the Sunset Isles, you visited a place called the Pit. You didn't have to climb down to enter it, did you?"

"No, but that's different. I wasn't in desperate need of climbing into a pit. A bit of mist would be nice, don't you think?"

Cyanne smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "You'll get used to it." She walked by him and stepped inside.

"She's lying," said Andres, following.

Tanrif looked at the Bladesman.

"You might as well resign yourself to the heat now. It doesn't get much better than this."

He also entered the establishment, leaving Tanrif outside. Tanrif read the sign one more time, cursed and followed the others in.

They booked the last two rooms available. The Bladesman and Cyanne shared one, Tanrif and Andres the other. After they dropped their packs, the Bladesman left Cyanne with Tanrif and took Andres with him. It was information they were after and, as usual, the Bladesman knew where to find it.

After they left, silence descended. Cyanne had not spoken more than a few words to Tanrif since the ship, and he began to wonder if he'd done something wrong. He was considering how to approach the topic, when she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Tanrif. I shouldn't have gotten you into this."

"How did you get me in to this? You took off with Kestryl. I rode out of Journ in the opposite direction, if you recall. It was my choice to ride back to Stratus. My choice to find you and sail with you. And it's my choice to fight for your birthright."

Tears filled Cyanne's eyes. "I should have sent you from the boat. Instead, I dragged you halfway across the world to die in a foreign land. This is not your battle."

Tanrif's eyes grew hard, but he kept his voice low. "I love you, Cyanne. I'm sorry if that doesn't fit into your plans, but I can't separate that out of my life. What was I doing before I met you? Unloading ships? What kind of life is that?"

"It's a life. One in which you live. I don't even know if I'm more scared of failure or success. If we fail, we'll all die, but if we succeed, what then? Have you thought about it? I love you too, the gods know it, but I've seen with my own eyes what happens to rulers who follow their heart.

"My parents went through hell to be together. You can't imagine what it cost them... what it cost me. Now I seem to be faced with a similar decision. If I take you as my consort, an outlander, I will make you, myself, and any children we might have into targets, just as I was once a target. Have you considered that?"

Pain filled Tanrif's eyes, but he met her gaze. "I said I love you, but I'm no fool, Cyanne. I know there can never be anything between a Duchess and a peasant. I'm not doing this because I want to be Duke. I am doing what I feel is right and damn the consequences. I would never jeopardize your position in any way. I would certainly never try to pressure you into a relationship that would endanger you. I will serve you in any way I can and should you marry, I will serve your husband as well. I swear it." She went to him. He held her and smoothed her hair, while sobs wracked her body. For a long time they stayed that way, until she grew quiet.

When she again lifted her head, their eyes met. Slowly they drew together, all promises forgotten. Their lips touched, teasing at first, then more passionately until neither could resist temptation.

They stripped off their clothes as if they'd caught fire, and fell on the bed, moving urgently against each other. Their love was full of desire and need, as they pushed against one another in a dance as ancient as man himself.

Finally, totally spent, they fell asleep and slept soundly until well after dark.

It was late when the Bladesman finally made his way back to The Morning Mist. Andres, grim faced, strode beside him. If rumors had abounded on the Sunset Isles, they flourished in High Gondylar.

Each story was more ridiculous than the next, but for all that, many were believed. The Bladesman had gone over to Domina and was attempting to place a false Duchess on the throne. An evil wizard had replaced the Bladesman with an agent magically made to look like him and the Duchess he was bringing to Gondylar was actually a demon in human form, and others even more outlandish. Finding help would be harder than he thought.

They returned to the Mist and moved quickly up the stairs. When he reached the room, and saw no light,

he thought the pair must be asleep. The Bladesman took the key, and turned it in the lock.

Little light fell into the room from the corridor, but enough for the Bladesman to make out the naked bodies on the bed. He cursed silently at yet another unnecessary complication.

He was too late to do anything about it. Tomorrow, he would talk to Tanrif. He closed the door before Andres could see and gestured down the corridor to the other room. He did not answer the Captain's questioning gaze, but instead unlocked the door and entered. Andres followed. He barred the door behind them and lay down on the bed. Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

Tanrif woke suddenly, the sun through the window shining in his eyes. He was surprised to find himself undressed and even more surprised when he turned and saw Cyanne in the same condition. The events of the evening before came to him, and he cursed himself. What had he been thinking?

As quietly as possible, he rose and began to gather his clothes. He had promised himself he wouldn't yield to temptation. There was too much at stake. What was he going to do now?

He dressed quickly, but carried his boots so he wouldn't disturb Cyanne. She murmured in her sleep and he froze until he was sure she would not awaken. He moved with all the stealth he could muster and departed the room, leaving the woman he loved asleep on the bed. In the hallway, he donned his boots and turned left toward the other room.

The door opened immediately at his first knock and Andres stood there, as if he was just about to leave. He motioned for Tanrif to enter and squeezed his shoulder as he passed. Tanrif didn't understand the gesture, until he stepped inside. The Bladesman glared at him. Stubbornly, Tanrif refused to drop his gaze. One thing was certain. It was he who would take the blame for the previous evening. The Bladesman spoke immediately, his tone matching the set of his eyes.

"Would you mind telling me just what happened?"

Tanrif almost looked down, but caught himself. "What do you mean?"

"I'm no fool, Tanrif. Don't treat me like one. I want to know what happened and I want to know now."

For a long time, Tanrif tried to find a way to phrase his response. Just as he was about to speak, the door swung open. Cyanne entered, eyes full of fire. Tanrif took an involuntary step backwards, but her anger was not directed at him.

"Is this what I think it is?" She looked directly at the Bladesman. "Is there some problem here?"

Kestryl dropped his head, but when he replied there was an edge to his voice.

"It was a stupid thing to do, Cyanne. You should have resisted his advances. You of all people should know better."

He was still looking down, so he didn't notice the dangerous look in her eyes. "Have I been gone so long, that the ancient laws have changed? I had always thought the Duchess was the ruler of High Gondylar, not her *bodyguard*. Last I remember, the Duchess did not need to justify her lovers to a servant. Could it be that you've had so much power for so long, you've forgotten your place? And, as if it were any of your business, Tanrif did not seduce me. I commanded him to my bed. You dare interfere in that area?

"Do not try my patience, Kestryl. If you do, I'll dismiss you from service, and you can return to whatever dismal rock you lived under before my grandfather found you. I will find some other way to the throne."

Tanrif's mouth hung open, unable to believe what he was hearing. One look at Cyanne's face told him he dare not contradict her, though he didn't want her to take responsibility for what had happened. The fault had been his. Still, there was nothing he could do to correct it.

The Bladesman fell to one knee. "I beg forgiveness. I acted inappropriately. I will accept any punishment, but I beg you, allow me to fight for you."

Tanrif thought he had never seen a man in so much pain. Cyanne sat heavily on the bed and sighed, but when she spoke again, there was no evidence of her anger.

"Oh get up, you oaf. It would take more than this for me to dismiss you, but you must remember, I am a child no longer. If you are to accept me as your Duchess, you must learn to trust my judgment. My father chose his mate from love, can you expect me to do less? I am my father's daughter."

The Bladesman looked up to meet her gaze. "Very much so."

"If my decision is to cost me, it's my price to pay. My right as Duchess. And as much as I respect you, I will not allow you to meddle in my personal affairs. Perchance you are right, and what happened last night was a mistake, but if it was, it is not your place to judge. I will not take it lightly if you do so again. Whatever decision I make, I will live with the consequences. Do we understand each other?"

The Bladesman nodded.

"Very well. Now, if it isn't too much trouble, I would like to find out how you made out last night."

The Bladesman was clearly relieved at the change of subject. "There are many rumors. Without going into unnecessary detail, finding legitimate help would be almost impossible. Not only is my loyalty being called into question, but so is your identity. And since Penthor's power is established, only a fool would side with us."

Cyanne studied the Bladesman for a long time before she spoke. "But you have a plan."

"The reason I chose the frontier is that there are two bands of mercenaries in the general area. They have no political allegiance or sympathy for a cause. If you can pay them, they will fight."

"But can they be trusted?" asked Tanrif.

"No self respecting soldier of fortune would break a contract. Mercenaries live on their reputation. If they don't hold to their end of the bargain, they would soon be out of business."

"Of course, we're not exactly swimming in gold at the moment, but if we can reach Gondylar and take the palace, that would no longer present a problem. If we don't make it, that would also solve our problem, I suppose."

An uncomfortable silence filled the room. It was a sobering thought and none of the three spoke again until they had joined Andres downstairs.

The bar was called Renegades and Tanrif felt at home as soon as he entered. It could have been any bar in Stratus, except for the all but intolerable Gondylarian heat.

Half a dozen people sat scattered about at tables. Tanrif wondered which one of them was the mercenary. He eventually decided on one of the two younger men, engaged in an animated conversation against the far wall.

The four approached the counter, but it was Kestryl who did the talking.

"I'm looking for Denworceno."

"Are you now?" replied the tall thin man behind the bar.

"As a matter of fact, I am." The Bladesman placed a piece of silver down.

"Well, that's the funny thing about Denworceno. Some people find him and others don't."

Kestryl laid another piece down next to the first.

"I'm in need of a mercenary. I've been told he's good."

"Good? He's one of the best. Perhaps the best." The man chuckled and scooped up the two coins. He looked past the Bladesman and gestured.

Tanrif followed the direction of the man's extended finger. Sitting alone at a table was a man in his early forties, or perhaps late thirties. He had about him the quiet look of the warrior Tanrif had already learned to recognize. The Bladesman approached. The others followed a step behind.

The man seemed to take no notice of them. He sat immobile, idly pulling on his beer as if waiting for someone. After a time, Tanrif spoke.

"Denworceno?"

The man at the table did not respond. Tanrif shot a puzzled look at Cyanne and tried again.

"Excuse me. Are you Denworceno?"

Again, the man appeared not to hear. Tanrif reached out to shake him, when suddenly, the entire tavern was in motion. Within a second, every denizen of Renegades held a weapon. Even the tall man behind the bar wielded a crossbow. Still, the man before them remained oblivious.

Tanrif kept his hands in plain sight, as did the others. They could not risk injury to Cyanne. Finally, the man at the table looked up at them. He spoke in Gondylarian, but his speech was slurred, as if he were drunk.

"What have we here?"

One of the men closest held a throwing knife in his right hand. He motioned for Tanrif to speak.

"I'm looking for Denworceno."

"And you've found him. How fortunate for you."

The man at the table smiled. He spoke again, almost as if he were talking to himself. "I have no need of you right now."

At once, weapons disappeared and the men around them returned to what they had been doing.

"What was that about? Is this the way you treat all prospective clients?"

A slow smile played across Denworceno's lips. "Don't toy with me, boy. I don't come cheap. You certainly can't afford me."

Tanrif was about to reply, but Cyanne cut him off. "That may be true, but I can. If you meet my requirements."

Tanrif seethed with anger. It had been a long time since anyone had called him boy, but he held his tongue. He would not interrupt Cyanne.

"With all due humility, if I can't meet your requirements, they cannot be met. Tell me what you have in mind. War, abduction, smuggling?"

"War."

The firmness of her words, and the look in her eye, convinced the soldier she was serious. He stopped smiling.

"Target?"

"The Palace at Gondylar."

Denworceno pulled in a deep breath through his teeth, but afterwards his smile returned.

"Now why would someone as pretty as you want to commit suicide? I imagine you have your reasons. Twenty thousand gold, up front."

Tanrif choked on the number. They could outfit an entire army for that price. The man was insane. He was even more astounded, when, a moment later, Cyanne countered the offer.

"I can get you two thousand now. If we succeed, another twenty-five."

"I'm not certain I heard you correctly. It sounded as if you agreed to twenty-seven thousand. What assurance do I have that you have access to that much?"

Cyanne nodded to Kestryl. He stepped forward, removed a leather pouch from his belt and emptied the contents on the table. Denworceno and Tanrif gasped at the same moment. The pouch was filled with jewelry. Even Tanrif, who had no experience with such things, knew there was enough there to pay the entire amount.

Cyanne leaned forward, and spoke in a voice just barely loud enough for Tanrif to hear. "They belonged to my mother. I am the rightful heir to the throne of High Gondylar. I am Dathan's daughter. The man beside me is the Bladesman."

"There have been rumors. You may or may not be Dathan's daughter, but I suppose that is irrelevant. With the Bladesman's support, if you take the throne, you'll be able to pay whether or not you are who you claim to be."

He paused as if considering his options, but his eyes never left the pile of jewels. "I've always wanted to make history. Very well. I need a day or two. I've taken goldleaf, and it takes that long to leave the body. If you're still interested by then, you may return."

Tanrif stepped forward, but a warning look from the Bladesman stopped him. Cyanne spoke. "We will return tomorrow. I will expect you to be ready by then." Without another word, she turned and left, followed closely by the Bladesman. Tanrif and Andres walked just behind.

After they'd left the establishment, Tanrif spoke.

"I don't get it. He's an addict. How reliable can he be?"

It was the Bladesman who answered.

"Goldleaf is not cheap. He has to be damned good to support that kind of habit. Many soldiers in High Gondylar use the leaf. They start taking it to ease the pain of battle wounds, and soon find they can't stop. We will see what the competition has to offer, but I feel this is our man."

If Tanrif had any further objections, he did not voice them.

Galith lay on a straw pallet, suffering the aches of days gone by. Not all of those were physical. The trip from The Sunset Isles had been a hell he would not soon forget. Many people would have repressed the painful memories, but Galith savored them. He ran them through his mind repeatedly. Bone would pay. Tanrif would pay. They would all pay, all who dared stand against him.

He rose and walked to the window, ignoring the fire burning in his legs. He had been made to walk from the ship to the Fortress-Temple, carrying Bone's possessions, while the younger Assassin rode a fine horse. Bone had allowed him no rest; offered him no water. The tropical sun beat down on him, causing him to stagger under the weight of the pack. He glared up at it. He would avenge himself on the sun too.

When they reached the Fortress-Temple, he was sent to the servant's quarters, while Bone had gone on to the Assassin's rooms. He could picture Bone, reclining on a bed with pillows, enjoying the hospitality of the Grand Master. His view was not one of the alley, Galith wagered.

Soon, all that would change. The Grand Master would summon him and learn of the injustice. He would learn how Bone had Tanrif within his grasp and had allowed him to escape. Galith would be raised again to his rightful rank as Master Assassin, and Sarith help anyone who stood in his way.

He was still by the window, lost in dreams of vengeance, when the expected summons arrived. The sharp rap at the door startled him back to the present. The knock came as a surprise. No one ever knocked on the door of a slave's quarters.

"Enter." His voice found the deep confident quality it had possessed what seemed like ages ago.

A young initiate opened the door, a mixture of emotions evident on his face. He had no doubt from the young priest's reaction that his reputation had proceeded him. Even though Galith was now a slave, the priest did not wish to offend. Galith took note of the small kindness. When he was Master Assassin again, he would remember those who were kind to him as well as those who had betrayed. The young priest cleared his throat.

"The Grand Master wishes to see you."

"Let us go then. It would not do to keep his *holiness* waiting."

The priest started at the seeming slur on the Grand Master, but said nothing. The term was reserved for the Priesthood, not the Brotherhood. He turned, looking back once to make sure Galith was following. Galith did not need a guide. He had been to the Grand Master's offices more than once, but it was written in the laws that no slave or servant may enter those chambers without escort. Indeed it was a wise precaution. Many people would like to see the Grand Master dead.

When they reached the chamber, the young priest did not enter himself, but instead motioned Galith to the door. Galith placed a hand on the handle and braced himself, the young priest all but forgotten. The interview ahead was crucial. His future as an Assassin depended on it.

The hall was more brightly lit than the interior of the chamber. The Grand Master had always preferred the dark. Tendrils of smoke twisted through the air, giving the room a dreamy quality. He remembered

the smell of incense before it hit his nostrils and the familiar odor comforted him. He walked forward confidently, head held high. The Grand Master spoke, not addressing Galith, but speaking about him, as if he weren't there.

"I thought you said he'd learned humility." His voice also was as Galith remembered, little more than a low rasp, but for all that, strong.

His eyes had not yet adjusted to the light, but the next voice he heard belonged to Bone. "I don't know what has changed, but he was obedient for the entire voyage. If you want, I can take him and work with him some more."

"That will not be necessary. I am quite capable of breaking my own slaves."

The Grand Master rose and spoke to Galith. "Step forward, slave, where I can see you more clearly."

It rankled Galith that the Grand Master did not use his name, but that was his right. It was even more annoying to him that Bone sat conversing with the most powerful Assassin in the world as if they were old friends.

"You understand why you have been brought to this? Have you anything to say?" Such comment was always rhetorical and the Grand Master expected no answer. He had half turned, when Galith spoke.

"I know only I have served Sarith for most of my life and even in bondage, I continue to do her work."

The Grand Master turned quickly. Like all Assassins, he knew control. His anger was evident only in his eyes, but his face and even his voice were devoid of it.

"You will do my work, whatever I decide that is. You are an Assassin no more, but a slave. The lowest of the low. It may be difficult for me to find anything loathsome enough to fit your punishment. What makes you think Sarith would accept the services of the likes of you?"

Galith braced himself. The moment had arrived. "Sarith herself guided me to knowledge of great importance to the Assassins."

Galith's eyes had finally adjusted and he could see the thoughtful and wary expression on Bone's face, though naturally, it was the Grand Master who replied. "What is this information?"

"I know where to find Tanrif."

Bone rose, but wisely, kept his tongue. Slowly, he sank back down upon the cushions.

"And where might that be?"

"High Gondylar. He sailed from Skyshore on a Gondylarian warship called the Sea Serpent."

"And how did you come by this knowledge?"

"I saw him in the Sunset Isles. Bone had sent me to get a drink in a Tavern called the Pit. Tanrif was sitting at the bar. Bone might have noticed himself, if he hadn't been so distracted by the female entertainment."

Bone drew a sharp breath, but made no other sound.

"You had Tanrif right there and you did nothing...said nothing? Why?"

Galith dropped his head, but his voice was mocking.

"I am an Assassin no longer, but a slave. I was sent to the bar to get a drink. It was not my place to speak."

By the time Galith realized what was happening, it was too late. The Grand Master struck him hard in the face. He felt the muscles in his neck pull and the stinging pain on his cheek was not a shadow of the pain he would feel later. He felt his knees weaken at the force of the blow, but turned towards the Grand Master, no longer concealing the hatred in his eyes. He felt his mouth fill with blood. He spat out a tooth and spoke. "Bone had him and let him go. Is there not a standing order to all Assassins to take the boy's life? If I've betrayed the Brotherhood, so has Bone."

He felt some small satisfaction speaking those words. Whatever happened to him, the Grand Master could not ignore the charge.

The Grand Master, a look of disgust on his face, turned toward Bone. The Assassin waited, not knowing what judgment against him might be, but he forced himself to calmly meet the Grand Master's gaze.

"Have you anything to say?"

"The Pit is large and dark. The bar was more than forty feet away in a smoke-filled room. The people sitting there had their back toward me. I had no reason to suspect Tanrif would be in the Sunset Isles, when he was last seen in Skyshore. Galith saw him and did not bring the fact to my attention."

In the end, there was no contest. Tanrif had not been Bone's target and he had no reason to be searching for Tanrif in Dusk. Also, the Grand Master would not take the word of a slave over the word of an Assassin. For all he knew, Galith's words were a slave's attempt to get even with his master.

"Kill him."

Galith's eyes widened, but he had no time to react. Bone had not been allowed to take weapons into the presence of the Grand Master, but like all Assassins, he didn't need weapons to kill. He leapt forward and grabbed Galith's head in his hands. The smaller Assassin tried to dodge, but was still stunned from the blow. Bone's hands closed around him like a vise.

Galith tried to strike out, but found his muscles wouldn't respond. In the end, his own body betrayed him.

That was his last thought before the sound of breaking bone reached him. He didn't even have time before darkness claimed him, to realize it was the sound of his own neck snapping. A pool of red formed around his head as his body sagged to the floor.

The Grand Master had returned to his seat, and turned just in time to see the deed completed. He did not ask Bone to remove the body. That was a job for slaves.

"I do not know that Galith's information has any truth to it, but if there is a small chance it is accurate, I cannot afford to ignore it. You know what Tanrif looks like. Go to High Gondylar. Find him. Kill him."

Bone knelt before the Grand Master and bowed his head.

"It will be done."

With a slight gesture, the Grand Master dismissed him. Bone stepped over Galith's body on the way out, mouthing a silent thanks to Sarith for this new opportunity.

Tanrif's surprise at Denworceno's condition was nothing compared to his reaction to the competition.

Like Denworceno, Skandl spent much of her time in a tavern. The only difference Tanrif could see between Renegades and The Gold Mine, was the number of people present. Aside from the bartender, Skandl was the only one there.

Skandl was everything Denworceno was not; young, soft-spoken, alert and devastatingly beautiful. Her light brown eyes perfectly matched her sandy brown hair. Her short beige tunic revealed a generous amount of tanned, athletic flesh. Most women would have worn leggings with such an outfit, but Skandl's bare thighs invited more than just a casual glance. Only the Bladesman was not surprised the second mercenary was a woman.

She had been expecting them and summoned them over to the table as soon as they entered. Tanrif found himself staring, a fact Cyanne chose not to overlook. She stepped hard on his toe. He jerked his foot back.

"What was that for?"

"It'll teach you to keep your eyes where they belong."

"Why, Cyanne. I do believe you're jealous."

"Just make sure your eyes are the only part of you that seek her out."

Tanrif chuckled, but another look at Skandl and he understood her insecurity. The mercenary was truly stunning.

The Bladesman sat across from her and spoke. "We're looking to acquire your services."

"What did you have in mind?" The way she said it, sent a shiver down Tanrif's spine.

"A raid on the Palace at Gondylar."

Skandl laughed and slapped her hand on the table.

"Is that all? You can't be serious."

"But I am. Dead serious. Do you know who I am?"

"Should I?"

"I am Kestryl, The Bladesman of High Gondylar."

She studied him closely, then turned to regard Cyanne.

"I see. You must be the heir. Okay. I'm sure we can work something out, but it'll cost you."

"Money is not the issue. Once we win, if we win, we will control more than enough to pay for your services. But I see only you. Surely you don't intend to take on the palace guard by yourself."

"I'm good, but not that good. My men are not far from here. Would you care to see for yourself?"

Kestryl looked at Cyanne and she nodded. Skandl rose.

"Wait here. I'll be back with horses in a few minutes."

The mercenary walked toward the exit, stopping before Tanrif for the briefest of seconds and flashing him a smile he would not soon forget. He hurriedly looked to see if Cyanne was watching, which of

course, she was. He walked over to her and shrugged.

"Don't even think about it. We'll be hiring Denworceno," said the Duchess.

"As you wish, M'lady."

She frowned and he laughed.

"Take it easy," he said. "It was an innocent gesture on her part."

"I'm not certain she has any innocent parts. And now that I have you, I don't intend to lose you."

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

He looked up to make certain both Andres and the Bladesman were out of earshot. "Are you certain what happened last night wasn't a mistake?"

"I don't care. I don't even know that I'll live to see the throne and yet we've placed a wall between us, just in case. We may die in the days to come. Why shouldn't we enjoy our last days together."

"I like the way you think, M'lady," he whispered.

Cyanne closed her eyes. "I like the way I think too. But you'd better stop this right now. Let's take care of business first, okay?"

Tanrif retreated a step. "As you wish, M'lady."

"And stop with the M'lady business. It's beginning to annoy me."

Tanrif was about to reply, when Skandl walked back inside.

"Your Highness, if you'll step this way."

The group followed her outside. Five horses were tethered in front of the Gold Mine. Skandl had already mounted hers and allowed each of the four to select one. In short order, everyone was in a saddle.

"This way." Skandl kicked her horse into a slow trot. The others followed suit.

The ride lasted less than an hour and ended at a large Gondylarian ranch house. Before they approached, Skandl reined her horse and spoke.

"Do not be disturbed if you see men with weapons. They did not expect me to return with company."

She kicked her horse into a trot and rode forward. The place looked deserted until they reached the gate. Then men were everywhere, many with crossbows pointed at the newcomers. Tanrif nodded approval, then looked at Skandl. The expression on her face froze him in the saddle. She wore a malicious sneer that sent a completely different kind of shiver down his spine.

Chapter Fifteen - The Battle for the Throne of High Gondylar

"If any of you brave men should so much as blink, you can kiss your precious Duchess good-bye."

The Bladesman's hand froze midway to his sword. He forced himself to relax, slowly lowering his arm to

his side.

Several of the mercenaries approached and took hold of their reins. Skandl watched, completely confident in the ability of her men.

"I want you all to dismount. Slowly, mind you. Even you're not faster than a crossbow bolt, Bladesman."

Tanrif lowered himself to the ground. A man standing behind him took his sword. It took all the discipline he could muster to remain still. A quick look told him the Bladesman's weapons were also being confiscated.

Tanrif couldn't see Cyanne or Andres from his current position. Once again, Skandl seemed to be looking at him.

"I thought mercenaries were honorable," he said.

Skandl dismounted from her horse and strolled toward him.

"Mercenaries honor their commitments. I never accepted payment from you. There's been a standing contract out on you for some time. I'm going to collect it."

She leaned forward so her face was just inches from his. "And there's not a damned thing you can do to stop me."

She leaned even closer as if she were going to kiss him, then turned away. Tanrif clenched his teeth, but remained silent.

They were not treated roughly as the mercenaries ushered them into the house. That meant, at least for now, they were worth more alive than dead. Inside, it took time for their eyes to adjust to the gloom after the brightness of the Gondylarian afternoon.

They were led through a doorway and down a flight of stairs that entered into a long corridor. At the end, one of the men unlocked an iron door.

With a gesture more appropriate a butler than a soldier, he motioned for them to enter. Once inside, the door clanged shut behind them, leaving them very much in the dark.

Deep in the Darkdom of Vykon, the Dark One sat on his throne. Before him, Scarha gazed into her crystal.

"Where are they now?" asked the Dark One.

"They are riding. There are four of them and Skandl. She's leading them into a trap." "Something fatal I hope."

Scarha did not reply. She watched as images shifted in the crystal. The Dark One closed his eyes and waited for his psychic's next words.

"She has them surrounded. Her men are disarming them."

The Dark One leaned forward, eyes gleaming in the darkness. After a time, he grew impatient. "What's happening?"

"Skandl has instructed her men to imprison them in a cell located beneath the structure."

"Damn her! I paid her to kill them. If she's planning on raising her price, I'll have her soul for dinner. Who are the others?"

"Cyanne is there, the Bladesman, of course. Captain Andres of the Royal Gondylarian navy and another. An outlander, I think."

"You think?"

"I cannot see."

The Dark One rose and moved closer.

"The last time you couldn't see, it was because the Gauntlet of Teleportation was blocking you. Is it possible this outlander has some magical relic on his person?"

"It is."

"I see."

The Dark One returned to his throne and sat. "So, Skandl is planning to double-cross me."

He fingered the Gauntlet of Teleportation, but decided against using it. The ancient art was not without its dangers.

He would send an agent instead. Perhaps even Zelaran could be spared for a time. He would confront Skandl, and make her pay for her treachery. Then the Bladesman, Cyanne and the outlander, whoever he was, would be brought to him to await his pleasure.

Skandl, arms folded across her chest, tried to keep her voice level. "What are you talking about? We have the Duchess. We've fulfilled the contract. It's time for you to pay. That's how it works."

"The Emperor is a man of his word, but we are still not satisfied. What good would it do us to take possession of the hostages, when at any moment Denworceno and his men might descend upon us?"

"Denworceno is not my problem."

"He is if you want to get paid."

And there it was. The Emperor had offered a small fortune to deliver the Duchess of High Gondylar and her Bladesman alive. Enough gold to make the Dark One's contract look like a pittance.

She really had nothing against the aging mercenary, but if she wanted her money, she had little choice. Aside from which, Cyanne had met with Denworceno first. Sooner or later he would wonder why his client had never returned. His investigation would undoubtedly lead back to her. That was one complication Skandl did not need.

"Very well. We'll take out Denworceno, but afterwards, you will pay."

"Agreed," replied the Dominan.

Skandl walked outside and motioned for one of the men to saddle her steed. She would take every able bodied man with her. Once Denworceno was out of the picture, she would hand the hostages over to the Emperor's men. Cyanne would be taken from High Gondylar. She did not know what the Emperor had in mind for her, nor was she anxious to find out.

All that mattered was Cyanne would never return to the great Dukedom. Skandl would wait a while before contacting the Dark One. He would never suspect the truth.

Skandl smiled. It wasn't often she was able to collect twice on the same contract.

The cell was too small to allow much movement. Cyanne and Andres sat against one wall, the Bladesman

by himself opposite the door. Tanrif paced back and forth against the remaining wall, though there wasn't enough room for it.

There was no way to tell how long they'd been there. Only once had food been brought, but it was some time ago and they were hungry. The only light came from a lantern outside that shed thin rays through the crack beneath the door and yet a few more through bars in the small window in the door's center. Tanrif had scrutinized every inch of the cell by that meager light. The only way out was a locked iron door.

"I can't understand what they want with us," repeated Cyanne for the fourth time. "No one would pay my ransom, and my competitors want me dead. Why are we still alive?"

No one had an answer. Silence fell again, heavier now, though no less ominous. The Bladesman shifted into a more comfortable position and tried, once again, to figure out who was behind their incarceration. Who would want Cyanne alive? Certainly not Penthor. If she died, Penthor would have it all. There was another interested party, but who?

Demendil had mentioned the Darkdom of Vykon. Could the Dark One, the self-appointed ruler of Vykon, have hired Skandl? It didn't seem likely. He had, after all, tried to assassinate Cyanne. Why would he suddenly want her alive? Might the situation have changed? Without more information, it was impossible to speculate along those lines. The Bladesman pondered the complexity of the situation, until a series of sounds from outside the cell interrupted him.

The door opened. The ever-present guard ushered two men into the room. The Bladesman's eyes immediately sought Tanrif. He hoped the boy wouldn't try anything foolish. To his chagrin, Tanrif was squatting against the wall, hands clasped before him. A reddish glow seemed to emanate from between his fingers.

The Bladesman couldn't think of what might be causing it. What he did know from the set of Tanrif's body and the expression on his face, was that he was going to try something.

The Bladesman cursed under his breath. His attempts to get Tanrif's attention proved futile. What was the boy doing?

Tanrif waited for the newcomer's eyes to adjust to the cell's dimness. He couldn't understand what they were saying, but he'd heard enough of the language while on the Sunset Isles to identify it. They were speaking Dominan.

He couldn't imagine what the Emperor would want with Cyanne, but it didn't matter. What did matter was, this was their first real opportunity to escape and might be their last.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the Bladesman trying to get his attention. He ignored it and focused on the two men.

They were overconfident fools. They paid no attention to him, but instead concentrated on the Duchess. It was their mistake and they would pay for it.

In his hands, he held the Ethrellen flame. He'd placed it in his pouch and hadn't thought of it for so long he'd forgotten he had it. Fortunately, they had only taken his weapons. He tried to memorize the position of the men before him, knowing that when he released the light, he too would be blinded.

He took a deep breath and tossed the cylinder into the air. The Dominans threw up their hands to shield their eyes. Tanrif launched himself from the wall. He felt the impact as he slammed into the taller of the two. The man doubled over, but Tanrif had no time for him. With speed that would have made a snake

proud, he grabbed the dagger from the sheath at the other man's side, just a second before the man himself could draw it. The shorter man had only a moment to puzzle over his empty scabbard, before his own knife plunged into his stomach.

The other was still doubled over. Tanrif turned toward him, but before he could act, Andres hit him with all his strength on the back of the neck. The taller man crumpled to the floor and did not stir.

The door swung inward and a guard appeared, already raising his crossbow. Tanrif threw the knife at him, but the blade was not balanced for throwing. It struck the man pommel first, barely slowing him. Even as he moved, Tanrif knew he would be too late. There was nothing he could do, except hope the guard was not as good as he feared.

As Tanrif advanced, a bright shape flew past him. He glanced backwards, realizing immediately what had happened.

The Bladesman had retrieved the Ethrellen flame and threw it at the guard. He turned back just in time to see the cylinder impact on the haft of the crossbow. The vial shattered and the glowing liquid splattered into the guard's face.

For a second, Tanrif thought it had no effect. Then the man dropped his weapon and screamed, clutching at his eyes. Tanrif wasted no time.

He jumped forward and struck the man as hard as he could. The impossible angle at which the man's head rested, assured the young warrior he would not be getting up again, but his scream would bring others. Tanrif grabbed the fallen weapon, amazed the bolt had not fired. He pointed it down the corridor and waited, but no one came.

He felt, rather than saw, the Bladesman come up beside him. There was still no movement from down the corridor.

"What do you think?" asked Tanrif, willing to trust the veteran's expertise.

"They should have come running. I can think of three reasons why they haven't. It is possible the cellar is designed so that no sound can be heard from elsewhere in the house. Or perhaps there is no one upstairs to hear us. Finally, there is the possibility they are waiting upstairs with loaded crossbows pointed at the door, until they see who emerges."

Andres and Cyanne had stayed in the cell, but now joined Tanrif and the Bladesman. When nothing further transpired, Tanrif shrugged and dropped the weapon to his side. He would still be able to bring it into play if need be, but to stand there like a statue was harder work than fighting. Already he could feel the ache in his left arm. It was something he would have to work on if they got out of this alive.

He motioned for the others to stay where they were and made his way quietly down the corridor. He paused before he reached the end. If anyone did hear the scream, they'd be waiting at the top of the stairs, aiming downward. He reached the area, took a deep breath, and fell on his side, bringing the crossbow into position, but the door at the top of the stairs was closed. No one was waiting.

He climbed to his feet and smiled in the direction of the cell. With a shrug, he mounted the stairs. When he reached the top, he pushed at the door, but it was locked from the outside. He kicked it open, only at the last moment catching the wooden banister, before he fell back down. He whispered a silent prayer of thanks to whatever gods were listening. Once again, he had survived his stupidity. He readied the crossbow, but could see no one. Silently, he moved into the corridor.

The Bladesman was already standing at the bottom of the stairs, and from the perplexed look on Tanrif's face, deduced it was safe, or at least seemed so.

He motioned for the others to follow, glad to see Andres had picked up the knife and had taken a position in front of Cyanne. In the event of a fight, the captain would protect her if Kestryl were unable.

Tanrif had disappeared from view. The Bladesman climbed the stairs and looked around. Tanrif had already covered a considerable distance towards the exit. Kestryl watched as he stopped and entered a room to his right.

The Bladesman caught up with him as he emerged with his sword.

"Everything they took from us is here. I just wish I knew where everyone's hiding."

The Bladesman remained silent. Cyanne and Andres again caught up to them and the four walked together to the front door. Again, the area was deserted.

"Stranger and stranger yet," said Andres, and then looked startled, as if he were surprised he had spoken. "What do you suppose this means?"

Tanrif shrugged and made his way towards the stables. Even from where he stood, he could see there were horses.

How had they been able to escape so easily? What had happened to Skandl and her men? Were they being set up? If so, to what end?

The only other option they had was to return to the cell, which was out of the question. The stable was deserted too, so they took what they needed, saddled up horses and rode. No one challenged them. It was as if all life on the ranch besides the horses and themselves had ceased to exist.

"Where to?" asked Tanrif.

The Bladesman was already riding.

"To Renegade's!" he called back. "We're about to hire Denworceno."

Following his example, Tanrif kicked his horse into a gallop. Cyanne and Andres followed. Soon, the only sound besides that of hooves striking the dirt road, was Andres' monologue about how uncomfortable riding a horse was and how happy he would be to get back to the sea. The Bladesman smiled. He knew Andres would not leave them until Cyanne was on the throne. If he was entitled to nothing else, he was entitled to grumble.

Denworceno sat at his favorite table, waiting for the unusual party to return. He had been confused by a few inconsistencies, but money was money. He did not understand why the Gondylarian heir, if indeed she was legitimate, had let an outlander talk for her. Even though the boy had spoken perfect Gondylarian, Denworceno was sure he hailed from elsewhere. What sort of hold did the young man have on her?"

The outlander fascinated him. Denworceno could swear the boy was not yet twenty, yet the set of his eyes and his stance proclaimed him to be a competent warrior. What kind of life must he have led to be so proficient so young? And why did even the Bladesman seem to defer to him?

While he was asking questions, who was the sailor with them, and what part did he play in the drama? Certainly he was no mere henchman. He had not said a word, yet Denworceno was sure no detail had

escaped him.

Assignments where he was in the dark about so much, made his job that much more dangerous, but for the amount of money offered he would take the risk. He needed the money desperately. He was almost broke and the Leaf did not come cheap.

So lost in thought was he, he almost didn't notice the large party enter. He looked up, hoping to see the Duchess, but instead, saw a group of men, led by a woman. At first, they approached the bar. Then, between one second and the next, the fighting started.

As he drew his blade and advanced, he knew it was Skandl and her men. The attack caught him off guard. He had not expected trouble from that quarter.

He threw himself into the melee. Most of his men were here and apparently so were most of Skandl's. He had no time to think; he simply reacted, blade everywhere. He made his way toward the stairs, fighting off three men at once. He stayed calm, allowing his body to react. If he faltered, if he thought for one second, he would lose concentration and with it his life.

But Denworceno had fought too many battles, had learned too many lessons the hard way. He fought his way up the stairs, hoping to get a better handle on what was happening. He was momentarily distracted as new figures ran through the door. He did not see who they were, but somehow doubted they were on his side. He redoubled his efforts against the men before him.

One of the men, a southerner by the looks of him, fell to Denworceno's blade, only to be replaced by Skandl herself. Now, the commotion below was so great Denworceno could not help noticing. He risked a glance, fearing it would give Skandl the opportunity she needed to finish him, but she too had spared a second to find out what transpired below.

The Duchess' group had entered and apparently between Tanrif and the Bladesman, the entire course of the battle had turned in his favor. Tanrif, screaming like a madman, seemed to be everywhere. Wherever he moved, enemies fell before his fierce onslaught. If Denworceno had not seen it, he would not have believed it possible. There was no stopping the outlander, as he worked his way towards the stairs and Skandl.

The Bladesman did not dive into the fray, but instead hovered close to the Duchess, always defending, never allowing himself to be drawn out. Cyanne chose her targets carefully; throwing knives hitting a shoulder here, a thigh there, always in time for one of Denworceno's men to finish off an opponent.

Andres himself proved his swordsmanship that night, escaping with only a minor leg wound. Each time an opponent fell, the captain would take a second to tip his cap to them.

Denworceno spent a moment taking in the scene, then turned again to face his opponent. Skandl turned to regard him at the same moment. She raised her blade and attacked.

By the time Tanrif gained the stairway, there was but a single man between him and the dueling mercenaries. The man had superior position, but Tanrif's fury was unstoppable. Like the rest of the men he fought that night, so too did this man fall. Even as Tanrif dispatched his final opponent, he realized he was too late. Denworceno had been disarmed and as he watched, Skandl thrust her blade through the mercenary's midsection. As the combatants realized what happened, the entire battle gradually came to a standstill.

Down in the tavern proper, Denworceno's men, and Skandl's alike, looked on as the aging mercenary fell. Skandl yelled down from the balcony, "Alas, men of Denworceno. Your leader has deserted you."

The reaction below ranged from hopelessness to anger, but with the death of their leader, the fight had gone out of them. Denworceno's men stood stunned. They had watched him cheat death so many times, none had ever envisioned this moment. Tanrif, however, was enraged. He released a howl so bestial in nature it raised the hairs on even the most seasoned veterans. He charged. Two of Skandl's men moved to meet him. Though both were experienced, neither could defend against the outlander. He carved them as if they were a holiday roast. They didn't even slow his advance. Skandl's eyes widened and she leapt from the balcony, landing on her feet.

Suddenly, Denworceno's men began to move. Skandl saw the odds, didn't like them and fled. As soon as they saw that, her men followed. A few of Denworceno's men wanted to take after them, but their leader lay stricken on the balcony and no one would desert him in his last moments of life.

Tanrif ran to the mercenary and cradled him in his arms. The man was pale, but still managed to smile, displaying a mouth full of yellow teeth.

"I'm too old for this sort of thing..." The smile remained on his lips even after he went limp. Tanrif took Denworceno's sword and raised it high above his head.

"For Denworceno!"

Every eye in the room was on him.

"It is the wish of every warrior to die in battle. So too, did Denworceno wish it. But unless we finish what he started, his death has no meaning. Join me. Let us take the lives of those who took your leader's. Let us purge them from the face of Corithim. If need be, we will pursue them through the pit of despair, rather than let this great man's death go unavenged."

There was a profound silence, before an almost universal cheer shook Renegade's, down to its very foundations. Almost as one, they turned and surged toward the door, though once outside, they waited for Tanrif to enter the street and parted before him, so he could lead the way.

Even the injured joined the mob. Their eyes shone with pride and violence as they mounted their horses and kicked them into a gallop. Cyanne, the Bladesman and Andres rode at the back of the party. Like Denworceno's men, they were swept up in the raw emotion of the occasion.

When they reached the ranch house, they met no resistance. Skandl's men had lost the heart to fight. The single sentry was taken out by an arrow before he could sound a warning. The enraged mercenaries descended upon the structure.

Skandl's men were cut down like wheat at harvest time. Even the Bladesman was caught in the battle lust, leaving Andres to protect the Duchess, while he helped to finish off the enemy.

Toward the end of the battle, Tanrif noticed Skandl peering out of a doorway. As soon as she saw him, she fled. He didn't hesitate to pursue.

She disappeared into the next room, just as he entered the first. He followed. As he entered the next room, he expected to see Skandl ahead of him. Only at the last minute did he realize she was standing beside the door, sword ready. He managed to dodge, but was unable to maintain his balance. She was on him before he hit the floor.

She moved like a whirlwind, swinging her weapon with the fury of her own fear. She'd seen what he could do. He rolled, first one way then the other, trying to avoid each downward slash. He desperately needed to regain his feet, but she never gave him the opportunity.

He squirmed and rolled, until she was able to maneuver him into a corner, never slowing her offense. It was all he could do to block her frantic attacks.

Suddenly she lunged forward. She lay across him, unmoving. Tanrif screamed and tried to roll out from under. When he realized her body had gone limp, he stopped struggling and shifted her off him.

Only then, did he see the knife protruding from between her shoulder blades. Without warning, fatigue coursed through his body. He barely had strength to raise his head and look at the door. Cyanne stood there beside Andres, wearing a lopsided smile, as if she didn't have the strength to muster a full one. She was sweating and breathing hard.

Tanrif stumbled to her and they embraced. All he could think about, as he felt his knees buckle, was how easy killing had become. He lapsed mercifully into unconsciousness.

Parth was a blond man, not tall, but massive. He had blue eyes, yellow teeth and a tangle of hair on his chin approaching red from blond. If Denworceno had a second in command, this was the man. Tanrif and the Bladesman sat across from him at a small round table at the ranch. Tanrif needed to rest, but there was too much to do.

Parth's voice, harsh on the ear, was as unpleasant as his appearance.

"We're still for hire, but I need to know more about the job. If it were up to me, I would do it for free, but mercenaries have to eat too."

Tanrif outlined the situation and they spoke for a long time. The Bladesman didn't say a word. Tanrif had won these men over and it was with him they would deal. He listened though, making mental notes as they laid their plans.

Only after Parth went to round up his men, did the Bladesman speak. "It's going to take a miracle, you know."

"I'm beginning to believe in miracles. Somehow, we're going to pull it off." "Sheba make it so. We are less than thirty, against four hundred trained palace guards. Assuming Lord Zelaran hasn't arranged additional surprises for us."

"I've been thinking about him. Is it possible this Zelaran has some sort of power over Penthor? Cyanne swears the Duke could never have betrayed her father." "Cyanne hasn't seen Penthor in over fifteen years. I was there. I will not argue a point I cannot prove. I know only this. Only Penthor could have guessed where I was going and arranged for assassins to take me out. If Zelaran was involved from the beginning, then he was still the Duke's vassal. Perhaps once he gained the throne, Penthor saw no further reason to hide him."

Tanrif shrugged and yawned, his fatigue returning full force.

"It may be as you say. In any event, the question of Penthor's loyalties will not be settled tonight. I'm going to bed."

Tanrif spread out his bedroll on the floor and without further comment lay down on it. He was so exhausted he didn't even have the strength to feel uncomfortable. Moments later, he fell asleep.

Lord Zelaran jerked awake, reaching for the dagger he kept beside the bed. Before he could grab it, a powerful hand closed around his wrist.

"Silence." The Dark One's voice issued from the darkness. In his half awake state, Zelaran could almost believe it was Darkness itself that spoke. "We have much to discuss and little time."

Zelaran sat up and shook the sleep from his eyes. "What's happening?"

"Skandl has betrayed me. She has already forfeited her life, but unfortunately, Cyanne and her supporters are free and on their way to Gondylar."

"How many are we talking about?"

"Perhaps thirty men."

Zelaran chuckled. "Am I supposed to quake in my boots because one of them is the Bladesman? How do they intend to take the palace?"

"I don't know."

"But surely one of your psychics..."

The Dark One cut him off. "They have joined forces with a man that somehow protects them from scrying. I do not know who he is, but it is vitally important I find out."

"Still, what can thirty men do against the entire palace guard?"

"Do not become overconfident, Lord Zelaran. There are powers in the universe far greater than anything you have yet experienced. Even my own vast reserves are minuscule compared to some of the forces out there."

Zelaran shuddered. It was difficult for him to conceive of anything as powerful as the Dark One of Vykon. If there were a sorcerer of even greater power with the Duchess, there would be no stopping her ascension.

As if reading his mind, the Dark One spoke. "I do not know the nature of their ally, but I do know he is a warrior of great prowess. He also may have on him a magical item that somehow magnifies his natural abilities."

"How can I prepare for something with which I'm unfamiliar?"

"You can't. You can prepare for the worst. Convince Penthor to close the gates of the city. Have him triple his guard. Take whatever precautions you can think of, but don't wait. It won't be long before Cyanne and her entourage will be banging on the gates of Gondylar. You'd better be ready for them, because this is your final chance."

"It will be done."

"See that it is. Nor will I be idle while you work on Gondylar's defenses. I have a silent assassin seeking Cyanne even as we speak."

"He will never get past the Bladesman."

"No human assassin could, but this particular creature is small enough to enter their camp unnoticed and deadly enough to do the job. Just make certain you handle your end of things."

With those words, the Dark One vanished from the room, leaving behind a disturbed and pensive servant.

It was a hot night in High Gondylar.

"As if there were another kind," thought Tanrif.

He tossed and turned on his bedroll, unable to sleep. It had been two nights since the massacre at the ranch, but many questions still remained unanswered.

Though Cyanne's return to Gondylar was rumored, Skandl had been waiting for them on the Gondylarian frontier. How had she known they'd be there? Who else knew? None of Skandl's men had survived long enough to answer questions. That had been an oversight on his part; one he was not likely to repeat. Too late now.

Had Penthor really gone over or was he just a pawn in someone else's game? If so, it would have to be someone with great influence. Who in High Gondylar wielded that kind of power?

Gradually, he became aware of eyes in the night. Slowly, almost casually, he rolled onto his side. Only a few feet away, it sat coiled as serpents do. They had snakes in Ularon, but only a couple of feet long, nothing like the six-foot specimen at which he stared. Its head was small, but sported a large hood that extended on either side of its neck. Tanrif felt almost hypnotized as he followed its swaying motion. Its eyes, he realized, were not on the head, but on the hood.

It opened its mouth, revealing curved white fangs that gleamed in the moonlight. Its forked tongue flashed, a flicker of movement in the still night air.

Slowly, his right hand groped for his sword. He did not dare take his eyes from the creature. He might not have been able to look away, even if he tried. As he grasped the hilt, he knew it was too late. Both he and the creature froze, gazing into each others' eyes like long lost lovers. Tanrif was never able to explain what he felt that day, but it was as if he felt kinship to the creature.

A voice brought him back to his senses; Cyanne's voice. She spoke casually, totally unaware of the intruder. He wanted to warn her, but found himself mute. It was easy to believe for that second nothing on the face of Corithim moved.

Then, the serpent struck at her ankle. Tanrif's hand shot out, blocking the snake's mouth with his wrist. He stiffened as sharp fangs sunk into his flesh. Somewhere, he heard Cyanne scream and wondered why it should sound so far away.

For the second time that evening he met the serpent's gaze, only this time he saw sorrow in its cold reptilian eyes. It disengaged its fangs from his hand and slithered away. Tanrif climbed unsteadily to his feet as the Bladesman arrived, throwing knife already in hand. He pulled back his arm to cast the blade, but Tanrif, acting on instinct, hit the Bladesman's wrist, deflecting the throw. Before anyone else could draw a weapon, the creature disappeared into the tall grass.

There were voices in the night, but Tanrif heard them as if they were calling from a far off hill.

The Bladesman, furious his shot had been blocked. Cyanne, screaming Tanrif had been bitten. Andres trying to calm everyone down and treat Tanrif's wound at the same time.

Tanrif fell to his knees, gasping for breath. His vision went out of focus, but for a few moments, his head cleared enough to hear the Bladesman say, "It was a fire viper. There's nothing we can do."

Tanrif was plunged into a world of total insanity. He saw demons and gods fighting never-ending battles on planes of fire, while beings hideous beyond imagination, cheered them on. The fire surrounded him and he screamed in an agony far beyond anything he'd ever felt. He screamed until the dream ended at which time he sank silently into the darkness.

It was dawn and all was silent, except for the sobbing of the Duchess. She knelt by Tanrif and cried. She prayed to every god she had ever heard of, even ones in which she did not believe, pledging her unending loyalty if only her love might be returned to her. It was hopeless. The one love of her life was gone, taking with him their chances of success.

Denworceno's men followed him and no other. What made it worse, he died saving her life. A cause worth dying for. Cyanne tried to gain control, but found time and again, the tears would not stop.

"Your Highness," said the Bladesman softly, kneeling beside her. "We can't stay here. It's not what he would have wanted."

She raised her eyes, defiance overshadowing her grief. "He still breathes. He may live yet."

The Bladesman shook his head sadly. "He was a brave warrior. And he died preserving your life. But as brave as he was, and as skillfully as he swung a sword, there can be no question of the outcome. No human has ever survived such a bite." "Maybe it wasn't a fire viper."

She looked again at the stricken man. His face was peaceful, as if nothing would ever disturb that sleep. And then, a miracle. Words emerged from his lips. Softly spoken, impossible words.

"I do not think I shall die today." His green eyes opened and slowly, he turned his head, trying to focus. "It is not yet my time."

"But it was a fire viper," insisted the Bladesman. "It's impossible."

Slowly, with great effort, Tanrif propped himself up on one arm. He looked at the Bladesman, a slight smile playing across his lips.

"You don't have to be so happy."

Andres frowned. "It could be you are not Tanrif at all, but one of our enemies possessing his dead body." He didn't want to say it, but agreed with the Bladesman. Surviving such a bite was not within the realm of possibility.

"Could it not also be that the magic necklace protects him?" asked Cyanne. "Are not such amulets known in High Gondylar?"

Cyanne was at once relieved and worried. Inside, she knew Tanrif should not be talking right now, yet found it impossible to believe that another could possess her lover's body without her sensing it.

"I am tired," said Tanrif, lowering himself back to the ground. "You argue it out, and when you decide who I am, let me know, okay?"

He closed his eyes and drifted back into blackness.

She was the most magnificent woman he'd ever seen. So beautiful it was almost painful to look at her. She stood beside him in the clearing, somehow visible in spite of the surrounding darkness.

The blue silk gown she wore only barely veiled her perfectly proportioned body. Her eyes were black and contained within them all of space and time. When he later tried to picture her, he would not remember whether she was blond, brunette or redhead. Her voice, when she at last spoke, was the wind and rain. She called him by name and though he heard her, he could not bring himself to speak or even think. Cyanne did not enter his mind, a fact for which he would later feel guilty.

"You think you are dreaming, but this is real. More real than anything you have ever experienced."

In spite of her magnificence, he found his voice. "Who are you?"

"I am Iorana, the Goddess of Magic. I trust you find my form pleasing."

He could only nod.

"I find your form pleasing as well. It is fitting you should be my agent."

His mind reeled, unable to form the questions he knew he needed to ask. He shook his head to clear it, but was unable to connect any two words that made sense. The Goddess was still speaking, and hearing her words were far more important than any idea he might have had.

"Long ago, my favorite High Priest was killed by a Sarithan Assassin. My anger knew no bounds."

Tanrif was surprised at the sound of his own voice. "You did not strike him dead, great Goddess?"

"I could not. There is a pact between the gods. We do not directly interfere with the mundane world. Instead, we work through agents. This agreement between gods is necessary. If Sarith herself killed my man, then I would have to avenge myself on her. A war amongst the gods is far more devastating than the tiny battles that occur on Corithim. The very reflections of our battles would lay waste to your entire world for eons. The price is too high. So while I would wish harm to Sarith, I may only strike at her servants and only through servants of my own. This is our way."

Her eyes met his and he worshipped her. There was no path for him, but to do her bidding, no matter how difficult or dangerous.

"What must I do?" he asked hoarsely.

The blackness returned and engulfed him. He was asleep, yet still, part of his mind touched the plane of the gods. Iorana's voice danced around him like a spring breeze on a autumn day.

"You must destroy the Sarithan Assassins."

He woke with a start, almost surprised to find himself alive. The strange dream, if it was a dream, stayed with him in vivid detail.

It was still dark and most of his companions were asleep. Standing to the side, Tanrif thought he could make out the shape of two of Denworceno's men...no, Parth's men, keeping watch. Beside him, Cyanne lay asleep on a bedroll. It touched him she had forsaken her tent to be near him.

Quietly, Tanrif stood and stretched, feeling better than he thought he had any right to feel. He moved to the edge of the camp and gazed into the surrounding darkness. Images of the days past ran through his mind. Images that might be painful to examine, but he forced himself just the same.

He thought about Galith and how he almost died in Stratus, and wondered if it was an accident he had found the Shop of Demendil in his delirium. Had it only been months ago?

He thought about the Mines of Silverguard and how improbable it was that his encounter with phantoms had led him to a Amulet of Dreaming. He thought about the events of the last week, and how his anger had driven him to kill more men than he could count. He tried to find a thread of guilt and was angry he could not dredge up the emotion.

He had been manipulated by the Goddess of Magic. His life was hers, down to the training he'd received

as a boy. She pulled the strings and he danced for her--and around him, people died. He sighed, almost, but not quite wishing he was back on his father's ranch, or even still working on the docks. Life had once been simpler.

He scanned the darkness, not knowing what he was looking for, perhaps only to allow himself a moment's distraction.

Somewhere out there, the most powerful brotherhood on Corithim was trying to kill him. Nor would they stop as long as they remained alive. His smile beneath the moonlight was grim. He would not, could not rest, until every last Sarithan Assassin lay dead.

If anyone had doubts as to Tanrif's identity, they did not voice them. Cyanne was sure the man who rode beside her was indeed the man she loved. Parth and his men never faltered in their acceptance.

For another week they rode, day by day getting closer to the great walled city. Now and again they met travelers on the road. News from the city was not good. The gates of Gondylar had been closed to travelers. To get in, you had to send a message to the palace first. Apparently, Penthor was ready for them.

On a moonless night, more than two weeks after departing the City of Crossed Swords, the walls of Gondylar were first sighted. As they drew closer, Tanrif became more impressed. He'd never seen such a structure. Stratus was a small town compared to the fortress-city.

At the sight of the fifty-foot high stone walls, his hopes of victory sank. He had been picturing the Chancellor's mansion in Stratus, not an impenetrable stone barrier.

Still they continued onward, each of them wondering the same thing. How would they get inside without alerting the palace?

Several hours later, the Bladesman approached the wall and placed his right hand flat on its hard surface. He let his mind drift. It was good to be home.

The Bladesman led them away from the city's main gate. They walked for more than a league, before he stopped and turned to face them.

"Here we enter the city. Stay together and try to move as a single unit. If we are discovered before we reach the palace, we are done."

With those words, he turned to the wall and began to push against it. When Tanrif saw what he was doing, he added his strength to the Bladesman's, and slowly, a section began to recede.

Until that moment, the true immensity of the structure had eluded Tanrif. The wall was more than ten feet thick. The large stone block left just enough space for the party to squeeze through one at a time, into a hidden corridor that ran within the wall itself. Lanterns were lit, but no one spoke. The Bladesman waited until everyone was inside before sliding the entrance closed. His voice was a whisper, but the echoes made it seem loud.

"This entrance to Gondylar is long forgotten. I believe even Penthor is unaware of it. This passage will gain us access to the city. I can guide you down streets that are seldom patrolled, but I have been gone a long time and things may have changed. Anyone who sees us must be silenced. If the palace is forewarned, we will never take it." With those words, he turned and began to walk.

It was ten minutes before the Bladesman stopped. He seemed to be searching for some mark and nodded with satisfaction when he found it. The Bladesman pushed against the inner wall and part of it

moved outward, allowing them entrance to the city. He motioned for the others to wait and slipped into the Gondylarian night.

Tanrif looked at Cyanne, one shadow among many, standing just off to his left. "There is a good chance we will all die tonight. I just want you to know I love you, my Duchess. I will always love you."

He could not read her expression in the gloom, but when she spoke, her voice caught in her throat. "Perhaps some will die tonight, my love, but not you. You are indestructible."

Tanrif laughed softly and took her hand. "We will soon see just how indestructible." He took a step closer as if to embrace her, but instead knelt.

"I shall live to see you on the throne and the death of your parents avenged. So do I swear before all the gods and their minions."

Tears formed in Cyanne's eyes, though she shook them away. It should have surprised her that Tanrif knew the ancient Gondylarian ceremony, but it did not. Too often, the youth from across The Mistress had exceeded her expectations. The Bladesman returned. Tanrif rose.

"Move as quickly and quietly as possible."

He turned without waiting for a response and reentered the city. Tanrif followed him out. The mercenaries behind them moved like thieves as they wound their way down deserted streets towards the palace.

Not a soul stirred about them and in fact, the avenues were so empty the Bladesman suspected a curfew had been ordered. It made their task that much easier. He paused often, motioning for the others to wait, while he scouted ahead.

Only once did he spy an armed party, but they were moving away. He waited until they were well out of earshot before he signaled the others. They reached the palace undiscovered. Now came the tricky part. Again, he signaled for them to stop, while he approached the main gate. Hopefully, he would know the guard on duty.

He approached cautiously, waiting to be stopped. He made it all the way to the bars before he was noticed.

"Who's there?"

The Bladesman moved his head closer to the lantern. He recognized the guard's voice before he was close enough to see him. The man's name was Torsus.

"Remember me?"

The guard gasped. When he spoke again, it was in a whisper. "You shouldn't be here. Word is you're a traitor."

"And you believe that?"

"No."

The Bladesman smiled and motioned the man closer. "I have served the throne faithfully for more years than anyone. I would never do anything to hurt Dathan. And now, I approach the castle by myself, to hear these words from your lips." He hung his head as if in pain.

The guard stepped closer. "Most of the guards don't believe it, but what can we do? It's Zelaran. He's the only one Penthor listens to. I wish the Duke were still alive." "Dangerous words," said the Bladesman. "Listen..."

The Bladesman's hand shot between the bars and grabbed Torsus by the neck. The knife in his other hand went to the guard's throat.

"I am no traitor. Penthor is. I have the rightful heir to the throne with me, Dathan's daughter Cyanne. Open the gate and I'll let you live. I have no quarrel with you, but I must get inside. I can allow nothing to stop me."

The Bladesman waited a moment, prepared to use the knife if he must. At a single nod from the guard, he released him.

"Just unlock the gate."

The guard massaged his throat, while a thousand conflicting thoughts raced through his mind.

"I'm not asking you to open the main gate. I am alone. If you want, I will pass you my weapons through the bars first and enter unarmed. All I ask is that you let me in."

In the end, it was Tarsus' inability to see the Bladesman as a traitor that made the difference. He looked around, then removed the key from his belt. He unlocked the door and pushed it open just enough for the Bladesman to enter.

Once inside, Kestryl bowed. "You will be rewarded for this."

The Bladesman's hand shot out and hit the guard, knocking him unconscious. "At some point."

He stepped outside again and motioned for the others to join him. He waited impatiently for them to arrive.

It had been easy so far, but gaining entrance to the castle was not taking the throne. The night was still young. Originally, he had planned to gain access through the servants' quarters, but just as he began to move, they were spotted. One of the guards on his rounds saw them and started to shout. The guard turned and ran, continuing as he went to make noise.

Tanrif pulled the short bow from his shoulder and in one swift movement took him out, but the damage had been done. Stealth was no longer an issue.

The Bladesman ran forward, Tanrif beside him, the others following as they entered. It was imperative they reach the main entrance before one of the guards could drop the portcullis. They ran along the west wall of the castle and turned north at the end. The gate was still open, but there was a flurry of activity within. None of the guards had projectile weapons, which was indeed fortunate. A good archer could have single-handedly put them out of commission.

Guards were collecting in the main hall, though the portcullis had not yet been lowered. The first thing you do if the outer perimeter is breached is to drop the palace gate. Why they had yet to do so was a mystery to him. He made a mental note to rectify the deficiency, as soon as Cyanne regained the throne.

He was almost at the entrance, only a step ahead of Tanrif, when the great iron gate began to fall.

He didn't have time to think through the consequences. He dove forward and rolled under the portcullis, just as it slammed closed. When he rose, to his surprise, Tanrif was standing beside him.

Cyanne, Andres and the mercenaries were locked out. It was the two of them against the entire palace guard. The Bladesman took off at a dead run across the main hall, Tanrif on his heels. The guards, surprised any of the intruders had made it through, only now began to move. Even as they approached, the Bladesman's goal became obvious to Tanrif.

Across the hall, a narrow stairway led upwards. A single man might be able to hold a great number of adversaries, if he could gain those stairs. Tanrif raced forward, gaining his objective a step ahead of the Bladesman.

"Up the stairs," shouted the Gondylarian, "down the narrow corridor to the right. Raise the gate, I'll hold them."

Tanrif needed no further urging.

The guards tried to take the stairs, but many were new and the Bladesman's experience and superior position carried the battle, for a while at least. Still, it would not be long before someone fetched a bow and the Bladesman would have to retreat. For now, he did whatever he could to buy Tanrif time.

Tanrif, sword drawn, gained the second level. Two guards approached, weapons drawn, but he could tell from the way they held themselves they would pose little problem. He made short work of them, barely even waiting for them to fall, before searching for the corridor the Bladesman had described. Only one such passageway fit the description.

He ran down its length, until he reached a door at the end. He kicked it in, not bothering to see if it was locked. The mechanism to raise the gates was simply a rope wound around a crank. It looked heavy, and the length of the crank handle told Tanrif it had been designed for more than one operator.

Still the Bladesman was depending on him. He sheathed his weapon and placed both hands on the wooden handle. He strained against the weight of it, but slowly pulled the crank a full revolution. Then another. He could hear the cheers from outside as the gate rose, first a few inches, then a foot. He strained against its weight for as long as he could, but eventually it became too heavy and he was forced to release it.

To his surprise, the crank stayed where he left it. Apparently, there was some mechanism that kept the gate aloft.

His intention was to run back down to aid the Bladesman, but the Gondylarian met him at the top of the steps. The sounds of battle from below told Tanrif the others had made it through.

The Bladesman yelled over the din. "This way."

Tanrif again drew his sword and followed, never looking back.

They ran through palace corridors. Passing servants, the only people they encountered, dove out of the way. Within minutes, they reached the throne room entrance. To the Bladesman's surprise, the doors were wide open. Perhaps the news from below had not yet reached this far.

Penthor sat on the throne, surrounded by a dozen guards, no doubt the best the palace had to offer. The span of time had changed the Duke. His eyes held a smoldering fire the Bladesman had never before seen. Tanrif rounded the corner and like the Bladesman stopped.

Penthor rose and spoke, his voice echoing throughout the chamber. "You dare to bring weapons into the presence of the Duke of High Gondylar?"

For an answer, the Bladesman drew both of his blades. "Have you sounded the Horn?"

Fear crept into Penthor's eyes, but he didn't back down. "I am the Duke of High Gondylar. You are a rebel and traitor. I will watch you die." With those words he sat upon his throne and the palace guard attacked.

The Bladesman advanced, using both swords. Tanrif, screaming in Talovarian, charged into the fray. Clearly they had expected more trouble from the Bladesman than a young outlander, so at first Tanrif had an easier time of it.

From the throne, Penthor observed the melee. The young man's reckless style pointedly contrasted with the Bladesman more defensive posture, but for all that, guards fell.

Penthor did not believe two men could beat his best dozen guards, but it seemed, for a time, they would. Then, the outlander became engaged in a duel with one of Penthor's best, while another moved in behind him.

Tanrif searched for an opening, sweat dripping from his forehead. He could sense the man behind, though there was nothing he could do about it. If he turned his attention from his opponent for even a moment, he would be dead.

"Bladesman," he yelled, though he knew there was nothing the more experienced warrior could do to help him.

Kestryl glanced in Tanrif's direction and immediately grasped the situation. Without a moment's hesitation, he jumped away from his opponents and threw one of his swords. The blade entered the guard's back and emerged from his chest. The man behind Tanrif fell, his blade clattering to the stone floor.

Without his second sword, the Bladesman didn't fare as well. Two guards pressed him backwards. Another three still stood between him and the throne.

For another minute, the battle wore on, then it happened. The Bladesman's sword was knocked from his grasp. On the throne, Penthor smiled triumphantly. It would not be long now.

The Bladesman took another step backward and felt the stone wall behind him. "It's almost over, Outlander!"

He had never called Tanrif that before. Rage filled the young warrior. It couldn't be over. Not after all they'd come through. Not when they were so close.

In a fit of fury, Tanrif knocked his opponent's blade aside and jumped past him, dodging wildly as Penthor's rear guard swung at him. Tanrif kicked the man away, and with one great leap, gained the stairs to the throne. He placed the point of his blade to the Duke's neck. The battle for the throne of High Gondylar was over.

Chapter Sixteen - A Treasure Long Hidden

Cyanne ran through palace corridors, followed by Parth and his men. Andres was somewhere behind, but she'd lost track of him in the confusion. She prayed she was not too late. Images of Tanrif lying dead filled her thoughts until she wanted to scream. How could they have been so stupid? What had they been

thinking? They were only two men against the entire palace guard.

She reached the third floor and turned toward the throne room, ignoring the sudden pain in her side. As she approached, she listened for sounds of battle. When she heard none, her fears grew like a cancer in her stomach. She stumbled, but caught herself. Whatever awaited, she must continue. If anything happened to Tanrif or the Bladesman, Penthor would pay.

She rounded the corner. The throne room doors stood open. In spite of her fatigue, she increased her speed. She entered and stopped, stunned at the scene before her. Penthor and the guards that still lived sat disarmed against the west wall of the throne room. Ironically, Penthor sat beneath the Horn of Tenithior. She would soon have to deal with him. The thought gave her no comfort. The Bladesman stood before them, while Tanrif stood further back, bow held ready.

She heard the others come up behind her. They also stopped to stare. Tanrif smiled as he gestured to the throne. "I believe this belongs to you."

He did not attempt to disguise the tears in his eyes.

Cyanne stared at the thrones, gray stone on a gray pedestals. They were not magnificent, nor were the steps leading up to them. It was a throne that should never have been hers, would never have been hers, were it not for the Bladesman and Tanrif. She could dimly remember her father sitting there. Now the seat was hers and with it, the responsibility of ruling the Dukedom. She had never really believed this moment would come. Now that it was here, she didn't know what to do first.

She made a conscious effort not to look at Penthor. She walked toward the throne, feeling the weight of leadership increase with each step. It seemed like it took her forever to climb the three steps cut into the stone base. When she reached the top, she stood, looking down at it.

She hesitated briefly before she turned and sat, keeping her face expressionless. It was not comfortable. It would never be comfortable. It should never have been hers. Silence filled the room. At the Bladesman's prompting, the prisoners rose. All eyes were on her...on *her*, expecting the Duchess to know what to say. She scanned the room, hoping she looked regal.

"Penthor, stand before me."

Penthor stepped away from the wall and stood, defiantly meeting her gaze. The years had indeed changed him.

The Bladesman moved to stand behind him. "Kneel in the presence of your Duchess."

When Penthor made no effort to comply, the Bladesman kicked the back of his knee. Penthor fell forward, landing hard on his hands. He started to rise again, but the Bladesman held him in position. Penthor knew better than to struggle.

"You stand accused of treason and have been accused of arranging the murder of Dathan and Amalga of High Gondylar. What speak you?"

Kestryl allowed him to rise. The color drained from his face at the sound of Dathan's name. When he spoke, there was no evidence of his earlier attitude.

"Young lady, I confess I did try to prevent you from taking the throne, but I did not, could not, have done anything to harm the Duke and Duchess. If you are who you say you are, you know that. As for trying to stop you, I was given the throne by Dathan himself and Amalga never gave any indication she disagreed with that decision. I have been crowned Duke of High Gondylar. How can I be accused of treason?"

More to the point, how can I believe you are who you say you are?"

There were gasps from many present. Cyanne looked thoughtful. "How indeed? What would satisfy you? Anything I say could have been taught me by Kestryl. I am who I claim to be."

"Then prove it."

"How?"

"The Horn of Tenithior. If it sounds, I will accept your identity."

"Bladesman, fetch the Horn of Tenithior."

The Bladesman crossed to the wall and carefully removed the ancient relic. It was the first time he'd ever held it. It was heavier than he thought it would be. The silence was complete as he turned and approached the throne.

"Give it to Penthor," she commanded, eyes growing hard.

Penthor took it and stared as if he'd never seen it before. All eyes were on him as he raised a trembling hand. He blew into the Horn. A rich, mellow sound filled the room. Tears formed in his eyes, but he forced himself to continue blowing until he had no breath left. When he stopped, the Bladesman took the Horn from him. He fell to his knees.

"Your Highness. I did not know...I thought..." The rest of his words could not be heard above the sound of his sobs. The gods had spoken. The rightful ruler was once again on the throne. His own conclusions, as certain as he'd been, were incorrect, for no man could question the will of the gods.

Cyanne spoke. "I do not, and never have believed you to be a traitor. If you are guilty of anything, it is bad judgment. Hardly a crime against the throne. All charges against you are dropped."

The Bladesman moved forward as if to protest, but a single glare from the Duchess froze him in his tracks. He stepped back, and dropped his head. Penthor might be pardoned, but that wouldn't stop the Bladesman from watching him.

"Tanrif, stand before me."

Tanrif walked before the throne as Penthor had done, but knelt on one knee by his own choice. He bowed his head and stared at his foot. The Bladesman nodded approval.

"Were it not for your valor, I would never have reached the throne. I am forever indebted to you. For your loyal service, I, Cyanne, the Duchess of High Gondylar, knight you. Arise, Sir Tanrif, Knight of High Gondylar."

He didn't bother to hide his astonishment. At least he didn't cry. He met her gaze and she smiled at him.

"A celebration shall be held tomorrow at noon. Penthor will handle the preparations. In addition to knighthood, for your service, devotion and love, I name you consort to the throne. A wedding feast will be called for one week hence. Penthor, you will arrange that as well."

Many of those present gasped. It was unheard of for royalty to marry anyone not of noble birth. And Tanrif wasn't just a commoner, but an outlander as well. They couldn't have been more astonished if she had chosen a goat as her consort. Cyanne smiled at the expected response. She was Duchess now and things in High Gondylar were going to change.

"Bladesman, stand before me."

The Bladesman knelt.

"For your continuing service, I admit I am at a loss. I do not know how to reward you. Therefore, you may make a request, and if it is in my power, I will grant it."

The Bladesman rose slowly, looking at Cyanne as if no one else were present. "I wish only I serve you better than I served your parents. And only I may grant that."

It was Tanrif's turn to nod.

Cyanne sighed. She had expected such an answer and could think of nothing he needed anyway. So...

"Very well, Bladesman. But should you require something, do not hesitate to ask for it."

He turned from the throne, even as Andres was called to kneel.

"Captain Andres, for your service and loyalty, I knight you Sir Andres, Knight of High Gondylar, and offer you a barony."

Andres stood and regarded Cyanne frankly. "If I may make a small request, Your Highness?"

Cyanne nodded.

"I have no desire for land. My love is the sea. I wish only to return and serve Your Highness as a Captain in the Gondylarian navy."

Cyanne nodded once, aware of the growing murmur from those present. They had already seen much they had never seen before. Now, a man had turned down a barony. "Very well, Captain Andres, but it would please me much if you would at least stay for the wedding."

Andres smiled and winked at Tanrif. "Your Highness, I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Parth, stand before me."

The mercenary stepped forward and bowed. He did not kneel, though no one said anything.

"As the new leader of Denworceno's men, you have a choice before you. You will be well paid for your service. Then you may return to the frontier, or if you wish, you and your men may remain in Gondylar as my elite guard."

"My Lady. We will need time to discuss it."

"And you shall have it. Until such time as you are decided, you may stay in the palace as my personal guests."

He smiled at her and stepped back to his men.

"Those of you who fought against me have a choice as well. Swear fealty to me now, remain in my service or leave the palace as free men. I will not punish you for following orders."

Many of the guards rose at once, but Penthor was the first to swear fealty that night. He was far from the last. News of the magnanimous gesture spread throughout the castle and soon the room was filled with those who wished to remain in the service of the Duchess. As each swore loyalty, Cyanne graciously

appointed each to their previous posts. When it was all over, Cyanne dismissed everyone, except for Penthor, the Bladesman and Tanrif.

Cyanne waited until the throne room doors were closed before she spoke.

"Okay, Kestryl. Tell your tale to Penthor. Everything that happened since my mother's death."

Penthor listened with growing astonishment as the Bladesman spoke. When he mentioned the assassins, Penthor interrupted. "I sent no assassins. I never would lower myself to associate with such filth. You of all people should have known that."

"Then why, when I questioned him, did the assassin name you?"

Penthor didn't have an answer. Cyanne did.

"Because someone was trying to turn the two of you against each other. Perhaps the same person who paid Skandl to take us. High Gondylar has a hidden enemy. That same enemy sent the storm that killed my father. Penthor, why did you start all of those rumors?"

"My man Zelaran has an extensive intelligence network. I've seen the proof of its accuracy on more than one occasion. After Kestryl sent me that assassin's head, I began to suspect Amalga's death had driven him over the edge. Lord Zelaran's reports supported the conclusion. I did what was necessary to secure the throne."

"The House of Freyrath doesn't have such resources," said the Bladesman. "At least it didn't when I left."

"Which means," said Tanrif, "he developed them after the fact. Someone placed him here. Our hidden enemy."

"Where is Lord Zelaran now?" asked Cyanne.

"In his room would be my guess."

Penthor had already turned toward the door. The others followed him from the throne room.

Lord Zelaran's room turned up empty and most of his personal possessions were gone. Cyanne sent a page to check the stable. While they waited, they searched, though they learned nothing from what he'd left behind. The page returned shortly. Lord Zelaran's horse was gone.

"Damn," said Tanrif. "If only we'd known sooner. It's hard to fight an enemy you can't see."

"Right," said Penthor. "We need to think. Who is powerful enough to summon a storm with motive enough to want Dathan dead?"

Kestryl, who had been pacing, turned toward the others. "The Darkdom of Vykon."

"What?" asked Cyanne.

"The Dark One."

His comment was rewarded by three blank stares.

"When I was in Stratus, Demendil showed me the swords used in the attack against his shop. Tanrif thought it was the work of the Sarithan, but he was wrong. I examined the weapons. Demendil told me a mage had taken up residence in a cavern complex called Vykon. He calls himself the Dark One. Those blades bore his mark. If he's lived this long, who knows what power he might possess."

"Would this Dark One be capable of summoning a storm, such as the one that killed my father?"

"I'm not sure, but it's not out of the realm of possibility."

"If he has that kind of power," said Penthor, "he might have been the one to send the assassins after you as well. He obviously knew where to find Cyanne."

The Bladesman was stunned. The idea had never occurred to him.

"And when I questioned the last assassin, he knew just what to say to throw me off track." He looked at Penthor. "I may well owe you an apology when this is all done." Penthor shook his head. "It is I who should apologize. I was blind to have listened to Zelaran. Now what else can you tell us about this Dark character?"

"Not enough. And the only man who might know has abandoned High Gondylar." He thought about the empty caves of Dauber Uaks and wondered if the Dark One had had something to do with the mage's disappearance. "I believe it is with Vykon and the Dark One we must deal."

"After the wedding," said Cyanne.

Tanrif closed his eyes allowing the feather bed to carry him away from consciousness. For the first time in months, he was able to relax. Cyanne was on the throne and he was to marry her. For now, at least, there were no battles to fight. It was good to be free, if for only a short time.

It was to those thoughts he drifted off and in sleep she came to him. He recognized the Goddess of Magic from his last dream. This time, she did not speak. He rose and followed her into the hall. Outside they passed a guard, who paid them no mind. Tanrif had to remind himself it was a dream. For a long time they walked, until he was completely disoriented. He tried to speak with her, but Iorana remained silent. Finally, just as he felt he was on the verge of some important discovery...

Rapping on his door called him from sleep. Part of him fought the rise to consciousness, but in the end he was called back, his dream all but forgotten. "What...who is it?"

"Penthor."

Outside, the Gondylarian sun beamed through the windows, promising yet another warm day.

"What do you want?" *Go away. I want to sleep.*

"Breakfast will be served shortly, after which your training begins."

Tanrif sighed and sat up, muscles protesting the movement.

"I just helped take over a Dukedom. Don't I get a day to recover?"

"I think not."

Tanrif rose, ignoring the pain in his legs, and donned his clothes. He walked to the door and opened it.

"Training? What training?"

"As royal consort, you have certain obligations to meet. You have to learn proper court etiquette."

"I see. Give me a minute."

He walked to the basin and filled it from the pitcher sitting next to it. While he washed up, Penthor kept a running monologue on what the day would hold for him, but Tanrif wasn't listening.

He had been in the middle of a dream. Something about Iorana and the Gondylarian palace. He could almost remember, but each time he thought he had it, Penthor would say something requiring a response and it was lost again.

Finally, with a sigh of resignation, he followed Penthor from the room and gave up on the dream completely.

It was a busy day for Tanrif. Penthor led him around, never once stopping to rest his tongue. Tanrif ignored most of what he said. He was tired and annoyed.

In the morning, he was fitted for armor, but until it was made, they had to find something that fit him for the ceremony. They eventually located a suit of plate, though it was heavy and uncomfortable even before the day's heat kicked in.

He spent a long time learning to move in it and vowed he would never own such armor. He didn't see how anyone could fight wearing anything that bulky.

Penthor also rehearsed the knighting ceremony with him. Certain responses were required. By the end of the morning, he had them memorized.

The midday meal was a welcome break. It was the first time since morning that Penthor left him in peace. The respite was too brief however, and in short order the older man was back, filling his ears with yet more inane drivel.

It wasn't that Tanrif didn't want to learn Gondylarian customs, he just thought that after the long march to Gondylar and subsequent battle, he'd have been able to relax for a day or two.

He didn't see any of the others until just before the ceremony, when he ran into the Bladesman. Penthor had gone to check on last minute details, giving Tanrif a much needed break. He greeted the Bladesman enthusiastically.

"Am I glad to see you."

The Bladesman smiled briefly, then unsmiled, as if he thought better of it. "How is it going? Are you ready?"

A look of exasperation crossed Tanrif's face. "Ready? With Penthor dogging my every step, how could I not be? Even bees don't buzz *all* the time."

The Bladesman's smile returned. He put a comforting hand on Tanrif's shoulder.

"Just think. After today's ceremony, it's only a week until the wedding. My guess is you're going to be seeing a lot of Penthor."

"She should have had him executed."

At that moment, Penthor returned. Still smiling, the Bladesman strolled away. The last thing he heard was Penthor's voice.

"Now remember, when the trumpet is sounded..."

Cyanne, the Duchess of High Gondylar, sat on her throne. She still had trouble thinking of herself as

Duchess. She had a number of chores that had to be handled as soon as possible and didn't know how to go about any of them. Perhaps she should have left Penthor on the throne.

Before her, members of the court sat impatiently, waiting for the knighting ceremony to begin. She recognized several from the day before, but couldn't remember any of their names. Among these were nobles of houses known to be loyal to Dathan. At least those who had already been at the palace, which was not many. They would spread the word amongst the others and the power plays would begin. She did not look forward to it.

The ceremony would be small, but it was all Penthor could manage on short notice. It didn't matter. If all it did was give Tanrif a title, it would be enough.

The sound of a trumpet called her attention back to the moment. At the end of the throne room, guards opened the double doors and Tanrif strode down the aisle in full plate. She had to suppress a smile.

Tanrif moved with exaggerated caution that made him look almost pompous. She was certain the cause for his sloth was the armor, which, according to Penthor, he'd been complaining about all day.

As Tanrif made his way down the aisle, nobles craned their necks to get a look at him. This was almost silly, as no part of his body was visible. Most of them would have to wait until the wedding to get their first look at the new Duke. When he reached a place about ten paces before the throne, he knelt.

Cyanne rose, signaling the guests to do likewise. She began the ceremony. Tanrif did not completely understand the words. Ancient Gondylarian was quite different than the modern language with which he was familiar. It had something to do with loyalty and honor though. Those words, at least, had remained the same.

He tried to look at her, but found he was having difficulty focusing through the slit in his visor. Blasted helmet. He felt as if he was in an oven and the fact he had to stay on one knee throughout the entire ceremony didn't help.

Cyanne had reached the point in her speech where he was required to respond. He remembered the ancient Gondylarian words. Penthor had made sure of it. He felt uncomfortable with the language, but performed admirably. In spite of his irritating nature, Penthor was a good teacher.

Tanrif made it through the ceremony flawlessly. When it was at last over, he rose, slowly so he wouldn't topple and immediately turned to exit.

Penthor warned him that if he stayed long, he would find himself surrounded by curious Gondylarian nobles. Tanrif had no wish to be interrogated, so after the guards closed the doors behind him, he returned as quickly as he could to his room. The sooner he could rid himself of the plate mail, the happier he would be.

Unfortunately, he found he could not remove it without help. He did manage to remove the gauntlets and the helm, but that was it. He waited for what seemed like eternity, until finally there was a knock on the door.

"Come in."

To his surprise, it wasn't Penthor, but Cyanne. When she saw him, she burst out laughing.

"Do you like it so much?"

"Like it? I'm trying to figure out how to get it off."

Cyanne moved towards him. "Here," she said, only barely containing her mirth, "let me help."

She deftly began undoing the ties and buckles. "All you had to do was summon a servant. That's what they're here for."

Tanrif glared at her. "One might have said so in the first place."

That night, Tanrif had the same dream, and again the night after. Each night Iorana came to him and guided him through countless palace corridors. This time, he remembered the dream upon waking, but Penthor and his training left Tanrif little time to explore. Still, he used what time he did have to his advantage.

As Penthor led him through the castle from place to place, Tanrif continually looked for the corridor of his dreams. He was certain he would recognize it if he saw it...if it even existed.

Each day, Penthor would wake him early. Within minutes, the lessons would begin. For the most part, Penthor spoke of the customs of the Dukedom and what would be expected of him as Duke, but there was more. History lessons, legends and how to deal with the rest of the nobility also found their way into the day's teachings.

Yet Tanrif found he had trouble concentrating. Each day, he became more and more obsessed with finding the corridor. He thought about little else.

Penthor became increasingly exasperated with Tanrif's lack of concentration. It eventually became so bad, he requested an audience with the Duchess.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this? He's hardly what I would call royalty."

Cyanne sighed. She had seen the conversation coming, although she didn't think it would happen so soon.

"Perhaps not in the kingly sense, yet must I remind you he proved more loyal than you."

Penthor bit back a response. He would not be distracted from his purpose.

"Your Highness, surely you understand what I mean. He has no regard for proper etiquette and is not only a foreigner, but a commoner."

"He is a Knight of High Gondylar, Penthor. You weren't born to royalty either, yet you sat on the throne for almost a year."

"That is true, but I was trained for it. He does not wish to accept any formal training and, believe me, I have tried. All he does is walk around as if in a daze."

Cyanne chuckled. "Perhaps he's never been in a palace before."

"I find nothing entertaining about this situation."

Cyanne turned away and walked a few steps to the window. When she again looked in his direction, she looked anything but amused.

"It is true he is not the portrait of nobility a Gondylarian might paint, yet he is strong and noble, intelligent and sensitive. He will make a good husband and sire strong children. And I love him, Penthor. What else should you need to know?"

"My Lady, though you are young, you are now the Duchess of a mighty nation. You have many responsibilities. Love is not a prerequisite for marriage, as I'm sure you're aware. You could, for example, marry a Dominan noble and bring peace between our two lands."

"Peace with Domina? Never! My father would turn in his grave if he ever heard those words, especially from your lips."

"Dathan was a great man, Penthor, perhaps one of the greatest that ever sat on the throne. Yet he married the woman he loved, even though she was Ethrellen. Is there some reason why I should not follow my father's example? If not, this conversation is over. I will marry Tanrif as scheduled and there is nothing you can do to deter me. Speaking of the wedding, how are the plans coming?"

Penthor didn't get a chance to answer, for at that moment, Tanrif burst into the room. He was sweating profusely and his breath came in ragged gasps.

"Penthor...Cyanne."

Penthor winced at the informality.

"Cyanne, may I speak to you alone?"

Penthor opened his mouth as if to protest, but the Duchess spoke firmly.

"Certainly. Penthor was just leaving. Weren't you, Penthor?"

The older man nodded and bowed before turning to exit. Cyanne saw him shaking his head before the door closed.

"I think he likes me," said Tanrif. "Is there any way I can see a set of plans for the palace?"

"I'm sure there is, but why?"

"There's another Amulet of Dreaming here."

"Are you certain?"

"Absolutely. I've found the general area, but can't get close to it. I'm hoping the plans will give me some clue."

Cyanne yelled for a page and a young boy approached.

"Is there a royal architect?"

"I'm not sure, Your Highness."

"Well, find out. If there is, bring him too me."

The boy moved to comply.

The plans, when they finally arrived more than an hour later, showed little. The area in which Tanrif sensed the Amulet appeared to be solid rock. There was no entrance from any side.

They searched the entire perimeter, but the palace walls yielded no clue. The situation maddened Tanrif, for he knew the Amulet was there, but had no way to reach it. After many hours of pursuing false leads, Tanrif collapsed against the corridor wall, tired and frustrated.

"If only I weren't so sure."

Cyanne embraced him, but there was nothing she could do.

Crow, the royal architect, was a good enough craftsman to read between the lines, but no matter which way his thoughts traveled, they soon found themselves at a dead-end. Only his natural Gondylarian obstinacy prevented him from giving up.

He continued to pour over the drawings, while Tanrif and the Duchess spoke in hushed whispers. The idea struck him like lightning. At the sound of his shout, both the Duchess and the outlander turned to look at him.

He seemed embarrassed by his outburst, but was too excited to apologize.

"There is a room directly above this supposedly solid area. Perhaps there is a way to gain access from there."

Before he'd even finished his sentence, Tanrif was already on the move with Cyanne only a step behind. Crow had to stop to gather the plans, and so they were forced to wait for him, once they'd topped the stairs.

The architect led them down the corridor and around a corner to a second corridor that drew immediate response from Tanrif.

"I know this place. I saw it in my dreams."

They were gripped by excitement as Tanrif opened a door at the corridor's end. The room beyond was indistinguishable from dozens of others in the palace. It was a sitting room. A number of large comfortable chairs were scattered about, each with its own table beside it. A large ornate weave covered the floor and handsome tapestries adorned two walls.

Tanrif began to move the furniture into the hallway outside. Through the stone at his feet, he could sense the Amulet directly below. There had to be a way down!

The floor turned out to be solid. No door marred its surface. They had removed every piece of furniture and the entire weave, before Tanrif finally gave up and slumped against the wall. He had been so sure.

The architect watched the progress with great interest. The young outlander's enthusiasm and confidence had not been lost on him. He dropped to his hands and knees and crawled around the floor, tapping with a small mallet as he went.

He did not expect to find anything and so was surprised when the sound changed. He tapped again to make sure, but there was no mistake. The floor near the center of the room was not as solid as the rest of it. Tanrif and Cyanne were already approaching. They had heard the difference too.

Tanrif motioned them back and unsheathed his dagger. Turning it backwards, he struck with all his strength. He watched with satisfaction as a section of the floor fell into the darkness below.

"Bring light," he said, without taking his gaze from the opening.

Cyanne removed a lamp from a wall bracket and walked over, but even when she held it close to the hole, the rays from the lantern did not penetrate the blackness. Tanrif went so far as to lower the lantern into the opening.

To his amazement, the dark area ate the lantern's light. He continued to lower the lantern until his entire hand entered the opening. It was lost to darkness as soon as it passed through the floor. Tanrif turned toward Crow.

"Get rope. I'm going down."

In another room, far away, the Dark One fretted. Thus far, all his plans had come to nothing. His brilliant assassination of the Duke and Duchess had led nowhere. Cyanne, who was as powerful as her father, perhaps in some ways more powerful, sat on the throne. The Bladesman stood beside her, further strengthening her position. And there was the matter of the outlander, who remained an unknown quantity.

What little the Dark One was able to learn about him, came from rumors and informants. He did not like what he was hearing, though there were only two facts he considered reliable.

First, this young foreigner had been instrumental in the defeat of Skandl. Already stories of the fall of Denworceno had immortalized the young warrior. If half of what he'd heard could be believed, the outlander was indeed formidable.

The only other fact the Dark One had come by, was that he wore a magic gem on a chain around his neck. One of his more knowledgeable informants had seen it and suggested it might be a Amulet of Dreaming. The odds were against it, but only a fool would completely dismiss the possibility. Didn't he himself hold the fabled Gauntlet of Teleportation?

Which also puzzled the Dark One. How could such a powerful relic have sat unprotected in a cave for so long? Why hadn't the Bladesman found it? If that wasn't what he was looking for, why had he gone so far out of his way?

The possibility it had been placed there for him to find had crossed his mind, though for the life of him, he couldn't think of who would do so. Even Scarha had been unable to answer these questions.

Just as the cave had been protected from scrying by the gauntlet, so must the outlander be protected by the necklace. Magic too strong for the psychic to penetrate. He had to act. By now, they may well have some idea as to the identity of their hidden enemy. He could not afford the luxury of assuming himself safe. He would not underestimate them again. He would have to hit strong and fast. It was the only way he could maintain an advantage.

As he paced the room, a daring plan began to form. A strike so bold and unexpected it might just succeed. In the darkness, he smiled. The next time he faced them, would be in *his* domain.

While Tanrif tied the rope around his waist, Cyanne paced the floor.

"You're sure you know what you're doing?"

It was not the first time she'd asked since he announced his decision to descend into the darkness.

Tanrif checked the knot and shrugged. "When you're dealing with the unknown, who can say? All you can do is take as many precautions as possible. Three guards will lower me down. The rope is tied about my waist, so my hands will be free. In one hand I'll have a dagger, in the other a lantern. What else would you suggest?"

"I don't know. Just be careful, okay? Four days before the wedding, we don't need you injuring yourself." *Or worse.* "Just take a look and come back up. Don't touch anything, okay?"

"Okay, but stop worrying. I'll be fine."

He kissed her and nodded to the guards who held the end of the rope. He sat by the edge of the hole and swung his feet over. It looked as if his legs ended just below the knee. He took a breath, as one does before diving into a pool and entered the area of darkness. Cyanne forced herself to watch as his body slowly disappeared into the opening.

In spite of his reassurances, he held his breath as he descended. Once his head entered the area of blackness, it was as if he had no eyes. He had never conceived of such total darkness and found the experience both interesting and unnerving.

He continued to descend, though his inability to see made it impossible to judge how far he'd come. A short time later, his sight returned. He released his breath and called up.

"Cyanne?"

There was no response. Perhaps the area of darkness absorbed sound as well as light. The very concept made him dizzy.

The room below was a small bare chamber. The only objects breaking the gray monotony were the four-foot tall white pedestal that stood in its center and the beautiful gold necklace resting upon it.

As the guards above continued to feed rope, the pedestal grew closer and closer. He could clearly see the gem set into the necklace and found he could not take his eyes from it. Once again, Tanrif was captivated by an Amulet of Dreaming.

The dagger fell from his hand. The clatter of it hitting the floor didn't even register. All thoughts of caution forgotten, he reached out and grabbed the gold chain, unable to remove his eyes from the scintillating colors. Almost without thinking, he tugged on the rope. His descent stopped. He continued to stare at the necklace, oblivious to the passage of time.

A level above him, Cyanne looked intently at the opening.

"He tugged once and that was it," said one of the guards.

Cyanne walked to the edge of the opening and shouted, "Tanrif! Can you hear me? Tanrif...Tanrif!"

She waited only a short time before she turned to the guards. "Bring him up." The guards pulled on the rope slowly but steadily, until Tanrif, necklace in hand, emerged from the darkness. Consumed as he was, Tanrif only barely realized he was moving. The effect of the gem on the guards was so strong they almost dropped him. Cyanne was seized by the simultaneous urge to hug and kick him. As soon as she felt the pull of its power, she turned from it, so she would not be affected. Only after Tanrif was back on solid ground again, did she risk a closer look.

"It's the necklace of Elenol the Fair!"

"The what?" asked Tanrif. He looked around as if puzzled as to how he'd gotten there.

"Elenol the Fair was the fourth Duchess of High Gondylar. Legend says she had a wonderful magic necklace. When she died, there was a great search for it. Many claimed it was hidden in the palace. Most of the educated assumed it was a myth, but I don't think anyone knew it was a Amulet of Dreaming. Perhaps not even Elenol herself."

"We must be careful."

Now that he was free from its spell, he made sure not to look directly at it. "Unlike other magic artifacts, the Amulets of Dreaming affect different people differently. This necklace might prevent a person from aging, or might kill them immediately. There is no way to know beforehand. I was extremely lucky when I put on the first one." "Perhaps we can consult a psychic, or have a mage do an augury, before we chance it."

Tanrif held out the necklace. Cyanne took it, and they embraced.

The guards looked at each other and left the room. It seemed they were no longer needed.

Chapter Seventeen - The Wedding

As the nuptials drew nearer, Tanrif found he had precious little time for himself. He was measured for formal attire and trained in the complex ceremony which, to make things tougher, was written completely in ancient Gondylarian. He was also taught the intricate and beautiful wedding dance.

Penthor coached him on every aspect of public behavior. This Tanrif hated most, because it meant constantly having to be conscious of what he was doing and with whom. Things had never been this difficult in The Skyshore Realm.

It seemed everyone in High Gondylar had a certain status and that status dictated each and every one of their actions. Tanrif felt there was no reason for him to act like someone he wasn't, certainly not to impress a group of nobles he had nothing in common with anyway.

Penthor would have none of that however, and by the eve of the wedding, Tanrif was behaving like a Gondylarian noble, albeit grudgingly.

Penthor was pleased with himself. He'd taken an outlander who was little more than a barbarian and taught him passable manners in record time. The boy was still somewhat unpolished, but was at least presentable. Penthor's feat wouldn't be found in the history books, but often it was the little things history overlooked that made all the difference.

Nor was training the young outlander the only demand on his time. Besides that thankless task, he also had to arrange a royal wedding in the small amount of time he'd been given.

He had interviewed a myriad of entertainers and selected a small percentage of them to perform. He'd prepared the menu and ordered the supplies from the market. He issued invitations to the nobles he thought would be most likely to attend--at least the ones he thought to be loyal--and still his work was not done. Fortunately, he only had one more day to go. Then he would finally be able to relax.

Well, not really relax. With Cyanne so new to her throne, his advice would be sought constantly. Unfortunately that meant spending more time with Tanrif. Penthor sighed, then laughed.

If Tanrif were the worst punishment he would suffer for his stupidity, he had done well.

When Cyanne opened her eyes, the first sight that greeted her was sunlight filtering through the twin wisps of blue silk bordering her bedroom window. She stretched lazily, watching the play of color as the breeze gently shifted them about. Then she realized what day it was. Within hours, she would be married.

She thought about her decision to marry Tanrif. Penthor was against the union, as was the Bladesman. Certainly most of the nobles wouldn't be happy either. Was it possible she was making a mistake?

Many of the castle guards had taken to calling him Outlander, though in this instance the slur contained an element of respect bordering on awe. Tanrif's exploits grew with each telling.

Even without embellishment they were impressive. He had earned the respect of the guards, but what of the nobles? It was bad enough she was half Ethrellen. They might have tolerated that, but how would they react to an outlander on the throne?

The support of the nobles was necessary. Without that support, the crown could easily become a dangerous accessory to her wardrobe. History had played out that hand often enough for her to know it as true. If enough of the highborn were against you, you could not long hold the throne.

She rose and donned her robe, tying it at the waist. She walked to the portrait of her parents that hung on the wall over the fireplace.

Am I doing the right thing? Is this the man with whom I wish to spend the rest of my life? She allowed images to fill her mind. She pictured Tanrif fighting, eating, laughing, sleeping. There was something about him that seemed to defy logic, as if what he looked like, and what he truly was, were at odds with each other. What would her father have thought of him? Would her mother approve of her marrying an outlander? She laughed. Her mother, being Ethrellen, had been held in even lower esteem. And *she* had married a lowly Gondylarian. At least, that's the way her parents had seen it. She thought of something her father used to say. That it should come to her after so many years, bordered on unbelievable. She could almost picture him sitting on the throne, pipe in hand, talking to a young knight or noble.

"The only sure man is a dead man. The rest of us have to take our chances."

She knew then she'd never be sure and it didn't matter. Tanrif had proved both his love and loyalty repeatedly. He had risked his life in her defense any number of times. Could she do any less for him? Over the course of time, she might regret her decision, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

Nothing, at least, but to prepare herself for the big day. She called a servant to draw a bath for her. She was going to be married in a few short hours and had much to do.

"How do you expect me to move in this?" asked Tanrif for the third time.

Penthor sighed. "Look, this is a wedding ceremony, not a battle. You'll be fine." "Easy words for you. You're used to this blasted heat. I feel like I'm being roasted." Penthor smiled at the image. "Just relax. It will be over before you know it."

He watched Tanrif as he laced up his shoes and tied them. When he looked up at Penthor, his face held something the older man had not yet seen there, an expression akin to uncertainty. In spite of his dislike for the young outlander, Penthor felt a pang of sympathy. Tanrif was almost certainly entering a situation for which he was totally unprepared.

"I guess this is it. I mean, I'm really getting married. I can't believe it."

"Neither can I," agreed Penthor, under his breath.

"What was that?"

"I said, everything will be fine."

"I wish I had your confidence."

"So do I," replied the elder, "so do I."

The light buzz of conversation permeated the air of the chapel. Many of the highborn were present including barons and baronesses, high knights, viceroys and much of the clergy. The chapel was packed to capacity.

Snatches of conversation rose up from the buzz only to be lost again. Most of the court had not yet seen Tanrif, but it was well known he was born a commoner.

In sharp contrast to this deplorable fact, stories of his heroic exploits in the name of the Duchess were already well on their way to legend.

A single note from the harpsichord brought the room to silence. Not a person stirred. Even the colors formed by the sun shining through the stained glass seemed to crystallize. Penthor himself played the instrument. Once he had everyone's attention, he began the ancient Gondylarian wedding march.

Notes, powerful yet subtle, floated over the guests, who turned in their seats, craning their necks to view the bridal party. Several young ladies and men of the House of Gondylar led the way, but the crowd barely noticed them. They were waiting to see what the new Duke and Duchess looked like.

The collective gasp was probably more directed at the Amulet of Dreaming than at Tanrif himself. He had not been sure he was going to wear it, but was happy he did. The guests, of course, had never seen anything like it and many were already reforming their opinions of the young foreigner.

He walked slowly, even regally, up the aisle, every eye following his progress. Halfway to the altar, he stopped and knelt.

Cyanne entered, followed by her bridesmaids. It had been sixteen years since most of the court had seen her and some never had. The quiet undercurrent of countless whispered conversations informed Penthor the assembly was suitably impressed. The new Duchess was indeed beautiful.

There had been rumors, of course, but even the most vivid description did not do Cyanne justice. Her light blue dress was simple, yet elegant. She wore her black hair high, like a crown. She flowed smoothly to where Tanrif knelt. If any had doubted her lineage before, they would be hard pressed to question it now. Clad as she was, it seemed as if she were the epitome of royalty.

She knelt beside Tanrif and extended her hand, which he took. They rose as one and proceeded the rest of the way to the altar.

All eyes fell upon the curtain that separated the chapel proper from the temple of the initiates. For a long moment, nothing happened. Then the curtain moved, and a tall woman emerged.

Pythiana was the High Priestess of Sheba for all High Gondylar. On her tunic she wore the wolf's head, the symbol of the Goddess. She spoke above the music in a clear, strong voice.

"Today, we have convened to witness a miracle. For whenever two souls are bound for eternity, it is a miracle. Nor are the two people kneeling here in any way average. They are blessed with royalty and nobility. There can be no doubt this union was dreamt by the Goddess, long before they themselves were aware of it. I have heard of their adventures, and can see the signs. Being called upon to join two souls so destined is the highest privilege that may be awarded a priestess."

She turned to them and spoke. "Cyanne look at Tanrif. Tanrif look at Cyanne. Drink of each other and allow your truest selves to touch."

Tanrif and Cyanne both turned and as their eyes met, the nervousness they had been feeling began to dissolve. So lost were they in that gaze, they didn't hear the rest of the ceremony. Not that either of them spoke enough of the ancient tongue to understand what the priestess was saying anyway.

The music stopped and returned them to the moment. They leaned forward, lips touching in a kiss that was far more than just physical. They could almost feel the forces that wove their souls together. They rose as one to the cheers of the assembled, turned and began the slow walk down the aisle. The guests stood and followed immediately behind.

Again, the harpsichord sounded. If any of the guests were surprised a battle march accompanied the royal couple back down the aisle, they didn't show it. After all, the new Duke was a warrior. What more fitting way to welcome him to his throne?

Only Penthor stared in puzzlement at his own hands, wondering why he played what he had, instead of the more traditional piece he'd intended.

Tanrif stared at the misshapen lump before him. "Are you sure it's edible?"

Cyanne leaned closer and laughed. "Of course it is. Try it. If you're curious, I'll tell you what it is."

"What I don't know, won't hurt me." He picked it up and took a bite, smiling as he chewed. "Very tasty."

"I told you you'd like it." Cyanne smiled at him.

It seemed as if it were impossible not to smile. The wedding feast was in full swing. Penthor had done a tremendous job. The food was excellent, as was the music. For the most part, they played traditional Gondylarian folk tunes, though at one point, they tried their hand at some music from north of The Mistress as well. While Tanrif was glad for the thought, he wished they'd stuck to what they knew.

After the meal was finished, Cyanne rose.

"Let the entertainment begin."

She was tired and wished the celebration was over, but she would not deprive Tanrif of the full experience of a royal Gondylarian wedding.

Wearily, she eyed the line of entertainers, immediately identifying which were jesters, which were acrobats. There was even a magician and a juggler in line. She almost sighed, until she turned toward Tanrif, who sat watching the dancers with almost childlike delight. Just for the expression on his face, it was all worth it.

The serving girl was young and blond. Perhaps she would have been pretty, had anyone taken the time to run a comb through her hair or wipe the grime from her face. All day long, all she could think about was the royal wedding and how beautiful the Duchess must look, and how handsome the Duke. If only she could get to see them. Unfortunately, she had many duties in the kitchen and Thelanna, the mistress of the kitchens would beat her if she were to leave them undone. Not that Thelanna was mean, but Se-gen was only a servant and lived by the good will of those above her.

As the day drew on, she became more and more obsessed with the wedding. Perhaps if she hurried, she could catch a glimpse of the celebration and get back before anyone noticed.

She had to wait until Thelanna left the kitchen before she set out. She tried to act casual, but attended her chores halfheartedly. Finally, just when she thought the mistress would remain all day, Thelanna rose, looked sternly about and strode from the room.

At last! Cautiously, Se-gen approached the kitchen door and, holding her breath, peered down the corridor. She looked both ways. There was no one in sight. She returned her gaze to the kitchen.

The other servants, intent on their own duties, ignored her. She didn't know how much time she had, but knew if she were caught, a beating would be getting off easy. Still, if she could see the Duchess or even the Duke, it would be worth it.

She felt a thrill as she left the kitchen at a run, trying as she went to figure out the fastest way to the courtyard where the wedding feast was being held.

Soon, she could hear the laughter of the guests. As she ran, she tried to picture the object of their mirth. Perhaps she would even see acrobats.

She had almost reached her goal when she heard footsteps behind her.

"Se-gen, where are you?"

Thelanna's voice rang out clearly through the halls. She looked around for somewhere to hide, but there was nowhere, except for one side corridor she'd seen before, but had never entered.

"Se-gen, if I catch you, I'll flay you good, you silly girl."

Panicking, she fled down the corridor. The first door she came to was, much to her dismay, locked. The footsteps drew closer.

She continued further, trying doors, until finally, one of them creaked open. She glanced over her shoulder, then turned to enter the room. She took a single step forward and screamed.

She was still screaming when Thelanna finally reached her.

Penthor watched with satisfaction. This celebration had been one of his better efforts and he was pleased. The acrobats were absolutely outstanding, and the dancers had also outdone themselves. Now a Jester held the stage and there was much laughter at his antics.

He was not so involved with the performance, however, that he failed to notice the palace guard break from the castle at a dead run. The guard slowed and looked around. Moving quickly, but fast enough to avoid attracting attention, Penthor made his way toward the entrance. The guard saw him approaching and waited.

The man started to speak, but Penthor motioned him inside first. He didn't want anything to ruin the celebration. Whatever the guard had to tell him, he could deal with himself.

Behind him another wave of laughter erupted as if to lend contrast to the grim expression on the guard's face.

Though Tanrif and Cyanne had been unaware of Penthor's departure, nothing escaped the Bladesman's watchful gaze. He was curious as to the nature of the disturbance. Certainly it would have to be something important to draw Penthor from the celebration.

He cast his gaze about, making certain all was as should be. Penthor's departure had increased his vigilance tenfold. He had failed to protect Cyanne's father, nor could he save her mother. He would not allow himself to fail again.

Once he ascertained everything seemed to be in order, he moved from where he'd been standing, to an

area between the royal couple and the courtyard entrance. If any trouble came from that direction, the Bladesman would be ready for it.

Penthor raced down the corridor, following the guard the short distance to the storage rooms. One of the serving girls was there, as well as Thelanna. He walked to the open door and looked inside. His face grew pale.

"What happened here?"

The girl looked up at him, eyes red from crying. "All I wanted to do was see the Duchess in her wedding dress. Honest."

Penthor knelt down by her side. "The body was hanging like that when you found it?"

The girl nodded.

"Do you know him, Sir?" asked the guard.

Penthor forced himself to stare at the corpse. The cause of death was obvious. The metal chain still circled his neck. His face was red and swollen, his eyes looked as if they were trying to escape his head. His tongue, blue and thick, hung limply from his dead mouth.

Even if he had known him, how could anyone recognize a face so distorted by death? Still, he had seen the man before. Recently even. He let his mind drift back through the past week, then suddenly, he realized who it was. He cursed and spun. "By the wrath of Sheba!" He turned towards the guard, "Keep these two here."

He ran back toward the courtyard faster than he'd ever run before.

Eventually, even Tanrif began to grow weary. The entertainment was excellent, but the combination of the Gondylarian heat and the week's pressures were finally getting to him. Though he was enjoying the show, yawns emerged from his mouth more and more frequently. The juggler had started at the far end of the courtyard, but he approached as he performed, until Tanrif could clearly see the five knives he kept in the air.

"He's quite talented," he said, stifling another yawn.

Penthor broke into the courtyard at a run. Already he could see he was too late. The Bladesman saw Penthor, followed the direction of his stare and understood. Knives were knives and a juggler's would kill as permanently as an assassin's.

It happened very fast. Tanrif felt the danger before he recognized from whence it came. He knocked Cyanne's chair over backwards and threw himself to the ground in the same motion. The knife was already flying, not at Cyanne, but at him. He grabbed the table leg and pulled it up and towards him, just managing to interpose its wooden surface between himself and the blade. He felt it strike the table and heard its solid thunk, even though he couldn't see it. He ducked lower.

The assassin had shifted positions and was trying to get a clear shot at the new Duke when the Bladesman slammed into him. The juggler turned, bringing the knife to bear on the Gondylarian. From his stance, the Bladesman knew he faced an expert.

Guests panicked. Many rose and tried to back away from the spectacle. The Bladesman hit the assassin hard in the midriff, while grabbing his wrist at the same time. Penthor tried to move closer to the melee, but found himself blocked by fleeing guests.

The would-be assassin twisted free and turned again towards the Duke, but to his surprise, Tanrif was only a few feet away.

He pulled back his arm to throw, but the Bladesman swept his legs from under him and the blade went wide. Tanrif was on him then.

The speed with which the new Duke struck, bore out the stories of his abilities. He hit the assassin several times, until the Bladesman grabbed his arm. He looked down, ready to strike again, but there was no need. His assailant was only barely conscious. The festivities were at an end. Guests were escorted from the courtyard under guard until it could be determined if one of them had anything to do with the attempt on Tanrif's life. The Bladesman, Penthor and two guards watched the prisoner closely. Cyanne was fine, if a bit shaken. Apparently, she was more upset by the rip in her gown than by the attempt itself. With that worry off his mind, Tanrif could concentrate on the assassin.

"Who are you?"

The man smiled as if he didn't have a care in the world. "My name is Bone. I am a Master Assassin in the order of Sarith."

Cyanne had joined them in time to hear his answer. She opened her mouth to speak, but Tanrif cut her off.

"I have to admit, I'm tired of this game."

Bone looked around. There were too many for now. He would have to make his escape later.

"Assassination is no game."

"No, I suppose it isn't. Did it ever occur to anyone in your order that had Galith not attacked me in the first place, I might never have even heard of you?"

"I am an Assassin. I follow the orders of the Priesthood."

"I see. You realize by stalking me, you've put me in a position where I have to defend myself. I'd really rather not have to bother. I'll tell you what. Tell your priests if they leave me alone, I'll return the favor."

"You can't release him," said the Bladesman.

"Why not? If they accept the offer, I won't have to worry about them any more. Isn't that right, Bone?"

Bone nodded. The Bladesman looked at Cyanne, then back to Tanrif. The three moved off to the side to talk. Bone watched, amused. If he could convince the Duke to release him, it would save him the trouble of escaping. However, he was certain the boy was wasting his time.

For one thing, the Priesthood would never be able to trust him and sooner or later, would want the potential threat removed. For another, Tanrif still had to pay for the Assassin he'd killed back at the ranch house in Ularon. Varon Imgard had already been taken care of. Tanrif's time would come.

"What do you think?" asked Tanrif.

Cyanne looked past him at the Assassin. "I'm not sure. Do you think it wise to let him go?"

"It doesn't matter. He's only one Assassin. If we kill him, there'll be another. And another after that. Face it. There are only two ways out of my current predicament. I can either convince the Assassins I am no threat or I can go after them and try to eradicate them from the face of Corithim. Which do you think

would be easier?"

The Bladesman shook his head. "I'm not sure either is possible. I've never heard of anyone convincing the Assassins of anything. On the other hand, they are not an organization that can be easily dismissed."

"So I gathered. I say we send him back to the Priesthood with a couple of guards and a message. If they believe me, I'll be safe. If they don't, I've lost nothing."

They continued to talk for a time, but in the end, there was really no choice. Bone was escorted under guard to one of the cells in the palace dungeon. Tanrif and Cyanne turned to leave, when Penthor cleared his throat. They looked at him.

"There is another matter I wish to discuss, though it is considerably less important than what has transpired here."

Changing the subject might take the royal couple's mind off a problem that couldn't be readily resolved. Penthor had always been good at such diversions. Cyanne looked at him puzzled.

"The serving girl. The one who discovered the juggler's body. Should she not be rewarded? She did save the Duke's life."

Wearily Cyanne nodded. "Yes, of course. Bring her to the throne room in fifteen minutes."

Penthor turned in time to see the Bladesman's nod of approval before he left.

Tanrif and Cyanne walked to the throne room, followed by a gaggle of guards. With Bone still in the palace, the Bladesman was taking every precaution. Once inside, Cyanne crossed the room and climbed the steps. She turned and sat on the throne. Tanrif had stopped several feet shy of the platform.

"Well, come on," said Cyanne.

He looked at the throne as if it might bite him. "I don't know..."

"What's not to know? You're the Duke. The throne is yours."

He took another step forward and stopped. "But I'm not royalty..."

"I'm afraid you are, by marriage if nothing else. And don't forget, Sir Tanrif, you are titled as well."

He climbed the steps slowly, but paused again before he sat.

"My mother felt the same way, you know. She didn't often sit on the throne, because she was Ethrellen and many of the Lords wouldn't stand for it. I don't want that to happen to you. As long as we remain married, you are the Duke of High Gondylar." Until that moment, he hadn't grasped the reality of his situation. Tanrif was partly responsible for the third largest nation in the world. If the Sarithan Assassins had been scared of him before...

"But I don't know how to run a Dukedom."

"And I do? We'll learn, Tanrif. But for now, you have to compose yourself. Your first audience is about to commence."

"What?" He half rose out of the seat.

"The girl, Tanrif."

"Oh, yeah."

Cyanne turned toward the entrance just as the double doors opened. Thelanna entered and walked down the aisle, followed by a young blond girl. Penthor entered too, but remained in the back of the room.

Thelanna knelt, rose, then hurried from the chamber. As soon as she was gone, Penthor signaled the guards to close the doors. Only then did he approach the royal couple.

The girl trembled as she knelt before them.

"Arise, child," said Cyanne, softly.

The girl stood and licked her lips nervously. "Honestly, Your Highness, I didn't mean any harm. I just wanted to see you in your wedding dress, that's all." The girl was on the verge of tears.

"Do you know why you're here?" asked Cyanne.

The young girl nodded. "I'm to be punished for leaving my station."

Cyanne repressed a smile. "No. You are not here to be punished. By leaving your station, you saved the Duke's life. Did you know that?"

The girl shook her head. Cyanne looked at Tanrif, and he took over. "I am forever in your debt. What reward may I offer you? Name it. If it is in my power, I shall grant it." The girl didn't know what to say. She began to speak, and broke down crying. Tanrif stood up and went to her, going to one knee. "What is your name, child?"

"Se-gen," she replied, through stifled sobs.

Tanrif put an arm around her. He could clearly see Cyanne's expression of approval over the girl's head.

"It's okay. No one is going to punish you. Would you like a pretty dress to wear, like the Duchess has?"

Astonished, Se-gen could only nod.

"Very well. You shall have one."

"How old are you, Se-gen?" asked Cyanne.

"Eleven."

"Penthor, could it possibly be arranged that Se-gen be moved out of the kitchen, and made a personal servant of mine?"

"Of course, Your Highness. It will be done."

Se-gen's eyes widened with astonishment. The personal servants of the Duchess got to take baths and attend plays and wear dresses. She cried again, and threw her arms around Tanrif, who was still beside her. He picked her up and exchanged smiles with Cyanne.

"Go now," said Cyanne, "and get your things. Penthor, show Se-gen to her new quarters."

"With pleasure," replied Penthor. He turned and exited with the girl, leaving the Duke and Duchess alone and smiling.

Tanrif read the letter for the fifth time. Penthor, who stood beside him, had helped him draft it.

To the Grand Master of the Sarithan Assassins,

I have been aware for some time of a prophecy that names me as the executioner of your Brotherhood. I have had a number of attempts on my life since then. If these attempts continue, I will have no choice but to work toward your undoing.

At this point, I have nothing against you. Let us keep it that way.

I have been assured by those with knowledge in such matters that not every prophecy comes to pass.

Yours could be one of them. All I ask is that you leave me in peace. If you do, I will offer you the same courtesy.

I urge you to consider these words for both our benefits.

Sir Tanrif, Duke of High Gondylar

"Do you think it will work?" asked Tanrif.

Penthor shook his head. "No, I don't. But at very least, it will buy you some time while they consider it."

"And then what?"

"Then you're going to have some very tough decisions to make."

Two days later, Bone was placed in the custody of two guards and released with the task of bringing the Duke's message to the Islands of Dawn. He was glad to leave the Gondylarian palace behind.

Part of him wanted to dispatch the guards and double back for another crack at Tanrif, but there was a more important task to attend. He had to get word to the Sarithan Assassins that Tanrif was the Duke of High Gondylar and as such, more dangerous than ever.

Had he been able to, he'd have passed the message to the Priesthood or even a Brother, but having no real knowledge of the Gondylarian hierarchy, he didn't know whom he could trust with such important tidings, or even where to find them.

He would wait until they reached the coast before making his escape. Then he would decide what to do. He was only certain of one thing.

The Grand Master would never trust Tanrif.

Chapter Eighteen - The Darkdom of Vykon

For the next two months, both Tanrif and Cyanne learned what it meant to rule the third largest nation on Corithim. With Penthor and the Bladesman to guide them, their introduction into Gondylarian politics was eased considerably, however, there was still plenty to come to terms with.

One of the big surprises of those early days was the support offered by many of the Gondylarian noble houses. The royal couple had expected far more resistance. In retrospect, they should have expected Cyanne's birthright to be welcomed, after almost a year of a commoner sitting on the throne. Many might have protested Cyanne's mixed ancestry, but at least she was born of noble blood. Penthor's reign had angered many Gondylarian nobles.

Of course the Dark One of Vykon remained a problem. The Bladesman gathered what intelligence he could, though it was slow going. The Bladesman had to look far and wide for information, though he eventually learned at least some of what he needed to know. The one invaluable bit of information he received, came from Penthor, who found an old map in the palace library. The map showed quite clearly the location of the Caverns of Vykon, though the feature was absent on subsequent maps. Kestryl wondered if the Dark One had arranged the omission.

Tanrif eventually began to practice with the palace guard. Though he ruled the Dukedom, he was determined to stay in shape. For one thing, the Sarithan were still out there. He doubted very much they would leave him be. Sooner or later, that would have to be handled. Of course, the problem of Vykon might also require his skills, though he wasn't as certain what his blade could do against a sorcerer. Still, if you didn't know what to expect, you prepared for a worst-case scenario.

Within a couple of weeks, his skills returned to an acceptable level, though of course sparring with Kestryl had produced better results. At least he managed to stay in shape, which would have been important, even if he didn't have such powerful adversaries. And so it went, one day running into the next, each day a learning experience for the new Duke and Duchess, and on the whole, life was grand. Kestryl cautioned repeatedly against complacency, but after all they had been through, it felt good to relax for a while.

As soon as the royal couple appeared, the guard snapped to attention. Tanrif slowed when he recognized him. Cyanne entered the royal suite, leaving the door ajar.

"Good evening, Kellering. You fought well today."

"High praise from you, Outlander. Your sword is the envy of the entire guard."

"A kind exaggeration, but a welcome one. Believe me, I'm glad I have someone to practice with. I used to spar with Kestryl, but since we released Bone, he's been positively paranoid."

"With good reason. Bone is, after all, a Sarithan Assassin."

"Yes I know. I've had my problems with them on more than one occasion."

Periodically, Tanrif would bring up his past experiences with the Sarithan, if for no other reason than to add to his growing reputation. He hoped tales of his strength and skill would help win over some of the Lords.

High Gondylar was a country that respected warriors, evidenced by the fact Sheba--the Goddess of Honor, Combat and the Hunt--was its patron deity. He half suspected Penthor's worship of Mitra might have led to some of his problems securing alliances. Not that the Goddess of Wisdom wasn't respected in the great Dukedom, but worship of Sheba clearly dominated the landscape.

He was just about to launch into a telling of his battles with Galith, when a scream from inside the bedroom cut him off.

Tanrif flung open the door and entered. A man in a dark cloak stood behind Cyanne, his gauntleted hand covering her mouth, his other arm wrapped around her waist.

Cyanne, in a frenzy, managed to draw the man's weapon, but it clattered harmlessly to the floor before she could use it.

Kellering stepped into the room, as Tanrif drew his blade. Then, as both men charged, the intruder and the Duchess disappeared from sight.

Tanrif raced forward. "Get the Bladesman." He started to look around and realized the guard was still standing in the doorway. "Move dammit!"

Kellerling hurried from the room.

Tanrif searched, but found nothing, except for the dagger. He examined it closely, though it provided little information. He paced until the Bladesman arrived a few minutes later.

"What happened?"

Tanrif described the scene, then offered the dagger. The Bladesman turned it over and after a few seconds nodded, as if it confirmed his suspicion.

"What is it?"

He held the blade out and pointed to an engraving near the base. "See that small symbol? It's the mark of Vykon."

"Damn his eyes. The Dark One!"

"Precisely."

"But what does he have to gain by taking Cyanne?" asked Tanrif. "Why not just kill her? He certainly had the opportunity."

"Why indeed? Perhaps he wants you and me out of the way as well."

"He thinks we'll go after her."

"Won't we?" asked the Bladesman.

"No, you will not!" The voice came from the doorway. Both turned, surprised to find Penthor standing there.

"You can't afford to do anything that will endanger the life of the Duchess. If she's been taken, there will be demands. All we can do is wait for them."

Tanrif shook his head. "Even if we did everything Vykon asked, there would be no guarantee against treachery. We must go to Vykon and rescue Cyanne. It is the only course open to us."

Penthor looked aghast. "You would risk her life on such a hopeless attempt?" He turned towards the Bladesman for support. "Surely *you* can reason with him."

"It is not my job to reason with him. In Cyanne's absence, he is the ruler of High Gondylar. I do not council, Penthor, but obey."

Tanrif studied the Bladesman. "Then obey me. Tell me what you think we should do."

The Bladesman walked to the window and looked out. If there was a moon that night, he couldn't see it from his current vantage and little of the city could be seen beyond the palace walls. He turned back toward Tanrif.

"I don't believe it would be profitable to bargain with the Dark One. I have no doubt any deal he accepts will be our undoing. We can wait to hear his demands and then, armed with what clues we can glean from that, decide what course is best. It will give us time to prepare."

Penthor and Tanrif both nodded agreement. It was the only sensible course of action.

"I'll go get things started," said Penthor. "Whatever we decide, it can't hurt to plan ahead." He bowed. "Your Highness. Bladesman." He departed without waiting for a dismissal.

The Bladesman stared at the door long after Penthor had left.

"You still don't trust him," said Tanrif.

"Should I? My first impulse is to go after the Duchess immediately. Every moment we lose might cost Cyanne her life, but we can't leave tonight. Let us rest now, while we can. We have many long days before us."

"You lied to Penthor."

"I did no such thing. You asked me what the best course of action was and I answered. I never said it was what I would do. I do not question the Duchess' judgment, but you must admit there is reason for caution. Penthor was, at the very least, completely taken in by Lord Zelaran. Even if he meant well, and I am still not certain that was the case, he was still incompetent. Therefore, I choose not to confide in him. He will realize where we've gone soon enough, but hopefully not too soon. Now, if I may be excused, I have some preparations of my own to be about."

Tanrif nodded curtly. He followed the Bladesman to the door and closed it behind him. A wave of fatigue swept over him, but he ignored it. There was too much to do. What could he and the Bladesman alone, do against a man that could summon storms and instantly transport himself back to his subterranean lair? What hope did they really have? Was there some sort of strategy that might work against such overwhelming odds?

He walked to the chest of drawers and pulled open the one on the bottom. He had seen Cyanne access the hidden compartment, but spent a few minutes fiddling before he was able to manage it himself. Had he not known it was there, he'd never have found it.

They would need every advantage they could muster. The second Amulet of Dreaming was an item he could no longer ignore.

He reached in and removed the necklace of Elenol the Fair. He knew what he was about to do was dangerous, but at the same time, necessary. Iorana had guided his life to this moment. She had given him one Amulet already. She would not abandon him now.

He walked to the looking glass and studied his reflection. Perhaps it was just a moment's fancy, but it seemed to him as if he'd aged ten years since the last time he'd seen himself. He sighed. No eighteen-year old should look so weathered.

He was wearing the first Amulet already, which seemed to be glowing brighter than usual, unless it was his imagination. He stared at the necklace before slowly lowering it over his head.

As the Amulets approached each other, they seemed to react, pulsing as if alive. When the new Amulet touched his chest, the two gems began to shimmer. Tanrif watched as they drifted toward each other. The Amulets mesmerized him. He could not stop what was happening, any more than he could tear his eyes away from the spectacle.

As they drew closer, the stones became almost fluid. The first gem parted and flowed around the second, incorporating the new mass into itself.

When will was once again his own, he studied the image in the mirror. The gem hanging from the single chain around his neck didn't look any larger than it had before, though its intensity seemed to have increased. He waited to feel some sort of effect, but aside from the fact he was no longer tired, there was no change. Disappointed, he turned from the mirror and prepared to retire.

He took his time undressing and slid into bed. He didn't think he'd be able to rest without Cyanne beside him, but had to try. He was asleep just moments after his head touched the pillow. It was still dark when he woke.

He lay for a time, thinking. Not long ago, he unloaded ships for a living. Less than a year later he was the Duke of High Gondylar. It did not take a sage to realize there was more at work here than mere chance. Both Cyanne and Lylea have said as much. Someone was pulling strings and he was the puppet. He sat up and stretched, anger beginning to build. He made the decision. He would no longer dance for anyone.

Part of him wondered at his building rage. He had never felt this way before. Certainly not about Iorana. He returned to the mirror and studied his reflection. Could the second Amulet have something to do with his newfound emotion? Or was it the fact his wife had been pulled into the games of the Goddess? He wondered if he would ever know.

He rose, dressed quickly and went to wake the Bladesman. He wasn't certain when he'd made the decision, but before he left for Vykron, he would visit the temple of Iorana. If there were any answers, that would be the place to find them.

The streets of Gondylar were still dark when the guard closed the gate behind him. A welcome chill belied the coming heat of the approaching Gondylarian day. No matter how many years he'd spend here, Tanrif would never grow accustomed to the heat.

He walked quickly, boots clattering over cobblestones. The streets were silent. It gave him a chance to think.

He thought of all the circumstances that had brought him to this place called the present. It had been less than a year since he rode out from his father's ranch in Ularon. What extraordinary forces came to bear on his existence that left him the sole sovereign of the third most powerful country in the world.

A prophecy, a chance encounter in the Shop of Demendil, the assassination of Dathan and Amalga, the Amulet of Dreaming and now, Cyanne's kidnapping. Somehow, it didn't seem very different from the other events.

Events beyond his control swept him one way or the other like a leaf in the wind. There was some insane plan afoot that he could almost grasp, but not quite. Even his childhood had worked to carve a warrior from the raw substance of his being. Could the control over his destiny have begun even then? In that case, Varon Imgard had been part of it too.

Only Iorana could control destiny to such a degree. That any being, even the Goddess of Magic, could manipulate his life so blatantly, made him furious. Yet what payment had he already received? Would he have ever met Cyanne had Iorana not intervened in his life?

He shivered in the cool predawn air, knowing he'd never know for sure and it really didn't matter. Whatever the price, in the end, he would have to pay it.

By the time he reached the temple, the eastern sky was beginning to brighten. He walked up the seven steps to the great iron doors. He thought about knocking, but instead, pushed the door open and entered uninvited. If anyone had a right to be there, it was he.

As he entered, a priest standing by the entrance motioned to the sword on his belt. Even in The Skyshore Realm, entering a temple with a weapon was considered ill mannered. With a shrug, he unbelted his sword, and handed it over. Then he strode down the aisle.

On either side behind him, empty rows of benches filled the room. In the front, kneeling behind the altar, a priestess was in the midst of prayer. He did not wish to disturb her, so he stood silently, waiting.

Marble columns ran along the sides of the room supporting the vaulted ceiling. Murals of magical creatures and great wizards were painted all about the place, and sculptures of such beings inhabited strategically placed niches. There was an opulence here he had never seen in the temples of Skyshore, though his experience with temples had been sorely lacking.

Tanrif knew a lot about taverns, but next to nothing about houses of worship. His recent deductions left him wondering if his father had kept him away from such structures intentionally. He was uncomfortable with the thought.

At last she rose and looked at him, the picture of composure. He was certain he didn't look as calm.

"I am Tanrif," he said, when he realized she wouldn't speak first.

"I know."

"I came for advice."

A slight smile creased the priestess' lips. "Are you the type of man to take advice?" "Not normally, but the circumstances are exceptional. If you know who I am, you know why I'm here."

He waited for the slight inclination of her head to indicate agreement before continuing. "I need to find my wife. Nothing else matters. I need to know if what I'm about to do is a mistake."

"Whatever decision you make will be the right one. No one can guide one who is destined. Your decision is correct by definition. The only advice I can give you is this. Take the Horn of Tenithior with you. Sound it at the moment of greatest need and aid will arrive."

He stared at her, trying to absorb what she had said.

"I didn't ask for this."

"No mortal chooses his destiny. Be glad yours has brought so much to you. Many go through their entire existence, never having had experienced even a small portion of what you have. They lead blind lives, not realizing how big the world is, or how exciting. I'm not saying it comes without a price, but it is a small price. One day, you will understand this."

Tanrif dropped his head. "I think I already do. I ask only for your blessing. Then I will be off. We must leave at daybreak."

"May your quest be successful in the name of my mistress, Iorana."

He raised his head to look at her, but before their eyes could meet, she turned and disappeared behind the curtain in back of the altar.

Tanrif turned to leave and just caught a glimpse of a figure leaving through the main doors. Quickly he made his way down the aisle. The priest who had taken his blade was still there.

"I require my sword."

The priest extended his hands presenting Tanrif with a scimitar.

"I said *mysword*," said Tanrif, not bothering to hide the edge in his voice.

"With all due respect, Your Highness, *thisisyour sword*."

"It is not the one I gave you."

"It is as you say, but this is yours."

Tanrif took the weapon from the priest. He felt anger begin to swell inside him, but as soon as he touched it, something about it tugged at his memory. In spite of the taboo, he drew the blade. His heart skipped a beat when he looked at it.

"Where did you get this?"

"The gentleman who just left gave it to me."

Tanrif ran out onto the street, but there wasn't a soul in sight. He didn't reenter the temple, but instead, ran all the way back to the castle as if pursued by demons. Perhaps that wasn't far from the truth, for his new blade was the very same weapon he had found in Varon Imgard's closet when he was a boy.

The Bladesman paced the royal chambers while the younger man told him of his visit to the temple of Iorana. Afterwards, he asked to see the sword. A few practice cuts later, he admitted he had never seen its equal. He examined the blade before handing it back. The markings on the sword were in the old tongue with which he had passing familiarity.

"It is called Lordsblade."

"Lordsblade," repeated Tanrif. "Do you suppose it's magical?"

"Well let's see. You were given it in the temple of the Goddess of Magic, were you not?"

"I have something else to tell you. This is not the first time I've seen it. When I was growing up, I found this very same sword in a hidden compartment of my father's closet."

"This one? You're certain?"

"If you found this weapon, wouldn't you recognize it ten years later?"

"Point taken. But how did it get here?"

"I wish I knew."

Tanrif stared at the blade and shuddered. If the sword did nothing else, it proved something. His father had been in on the conspiracy since the beginning. If he ever saw Varon Imgard again, Tanrif would have some questions for him.

"There's one other thing I forgot to tell you," said Tanrif. "We're supposed to bring the Horn of Tenithior with us."

The Bladesman drew a sharp breath.

"If blown at a time of need, we will receive aid. At least, that's what the priestess of Iorana told me."

"We'd better get it now and be gone before anyone goes to the throne room."

"Right, I'll get the Horn and meet you by the stables." Tanrif turned to leave.

"I'll see you in a few minutes. Oh and Outlander..."

Tanrif stopped.

"Whatever you do, try not to be seen."

Tanrif chuckled and continued from the room, well aware even the Duke might have a hard time explaining what he was doing absconding with an ancient Gondylarian relic.

A short time later, they were on the road. Since both Fireball and Shadow were still back on the Sea Serpent, they had to select new mounts. The Bladesman, true to form, chose a solid black beast that was strong, though not particularly large. Tanrif picked a spirited white stallion.

They wasted no time saddling up, in spite of the stable hand's protest that it would be his pleasure to serve them. They wanted to be gone as soon as possible. It wouldn't be long before Penthor found them missing. Hopefully, he wouldn't guess where they'd gone, until later when they didn't turn up.

They rode steadily throughout the morning and most of the afternoon, beneath the harsh Gondylarian sun. They stopped that evening in the small town of Wathren where they ate a hot meal and paid for a room. Neither spoke much. There wasn't anything to say. The Bladesman slept well that night, but Tanrif's rest was riddled with nightmares.

For three days, they traveled south. On the morning of the fourth day, prairie slowly gave way to hills. As they approached their destination, the grass vanished altogether, as did occasional shrubs that had been a regular feature until then. It was as if no living thing could tolerate the negative energy generated by Vykon.

The desolation was complete. The only life forms that seemed to be able to survive this close to the cavern complex were flies, which were plentiful.

Tanrif had never seen so many in one place, except perhaps on a day old corpse. They were small, black and apparently hungry. Five minutes did not pass without one of them alighting on Tanrif and biting into him. Each successive bite brought a louder exclamation of annoyance to his lips. The Bladesman rode in silence, as if immune to the ravenous insects.

Tanrif hoped they would reach the caverns before nightfall. He didn't look forward to spending a night in those bleak surroundings.

However, when the entrance appeared before them, he was anything but relieved. It was as if Corithim had sprouted a mouth with which to swallow them. A mouth that had sucked the surrounding area dry of all animal and plant life. Perhaps the flies were drawn to the stench of death.

Tanrif tried to advance, but his stallion refused to move. A quick glance told him the Bladesman seemed to be experiencing the same difficulty. For a time they struggled with their steeds, but soon realized it was futile. They took what they needed from their saddlebags and, as there was nowhere to tie the horses, walked slowly toward the entrance. Neither relished walking back through the barrenness through which they had just passed, but there was no choice.

The Bladesman knelt and lit a lantern. They approached cautiously, though they could clearly see nothing awaited them in the entranceway. Still, the atmosphere of the place was enough to put even the bravest warrior on his guard. Both drew their blades, as they crossed the threshold and entered the Darkdom of Vykon.

Cyanne sat in a cell, far beneath the surface of Corithim. She had not been harmed since her abduction, though she didn't understand why. The little information she'd gleaned by eavesdropping seemed to indicate she was only there as bait. The Dark One of Vykon was obsessed with Tanrif.

Every question he'd asked her led back to the young warrior from across The Mistress. Even she, the Duchess of High Gondylar, was not as interesting to the Dark One as the young outlander who had fought to put her on the throne.

Waiting was the hardest part. That Tanrif would come after her, she had no doubt. Hopefully he was smart enough to know he was walking into a trap. How that knowledge would help him, she couldn't begin to imagine.

She was so lost in thought, she didn't hear the lock in the cell door click, but she could not miss the Dark One, as he stepped inside.

"They have arrived," he announced as if he were her butler.

She looked at him expectantly. He didn't come down to her cell just to tell her that. When she didn't react, he continued.

"If you wish, you may join me in the throne room. I assume you are curious as to how I intend to trap them. We can follow their progress together."

The words throne room had been stressed, as if to imply she was now in his realm. Cyanne grew angry.

Before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "What entitles you to a throne?"

She knew, even as she said it, it had been a mistake, but there was no taking it back.

The Dark One smiled. It was not a pretty sight.

"What entitles anyone to a throne? The ability to take and hold it, nothing more. Tell me, are you entitled to the throne? Was your father?"

"My father was a great Duke."

"Ah yes, the great Dathan. You'd be too young to remember the earlier years of his reign."

"Obviously."

"He was quite a noble man your father. Attractive. Intelligent. Powerful. And he returned from a trip to the South with an Ethrell wife. Those were hard years, as I'm sure you can appreciate."

He paused and Cyanne licked her lips nervously. She had no idea where the Dark One was going with this, but was relatively sure she didn't want to hear it.

The Dark One continued. "There were many assassination attempts on Amalga. Some which were foiled and some which never came to pass. And the Duke would do anything to protect the love of his life.

"All before your time, of course. He was just a young man. He didn't have a lot of support in those early years and your mother's presence didn't help. But he loved her. He loved her enough to kill for her, did you know that?"

Cyanne leapt to her feet. "No!"

"Oh, so innocent you are. So many men, slaughtered for the merest slight against your mother. These were not assassins. These were Gondylarians. Loyal Gondylarians. People that would rather have seen their beloved Duke married to a human. Dozens were put to death before people learned to speak less freely. Innocent people, who wanted nothing more than what was best for the Dukedom."

"I don't believe it."

"It doesn't matter what you believe. It's a matter of public record. Penthor could tell you all about it, I'm sure. Perhaps you'll ask your precious Bladesman when you see him. It must hurt for you to think of the noble Duke Dathan as a murderer."

"He was not!"

"He murdered my son, who was guilty of nothing but talk!"

Cyanne's eyes grew wide. She did not speak again.

"He was a smart boy. Strong too. He wasn't interested in magic though. And he was Gondylarian through and through. More than once, he followed your father into battle, against my wishes, I might add. His crime was grumbling about your father's choice in women. A crime he paid for with his life. Now ask me again what entitles me to the Gondylarian throne. Nothing can bring him back. Even I'm not powerful enough to do that, though I continue to search for a way. I can't bring him back, but I can avenge his passing. And I sure as hell can make sure those responsible never have that kind of power again."

Could the charges against her father be true? She didn't think it likely, yet wouldn't her father have done anything to protect her mother? How many people had Tanrif killed to protect her?

Cyanne dropped her head, but would not cry. If her father did it, he was wrong, but it didn't matter. It still didn't justify the existence of Vykon.

The wide corridor narrowed considerably, until there was just barely room to walk abreast. Tanrif's new sword shone in the lamplight. Occasionally, he took a practice cut with it. If he blanked his mind, he could almost feel the power emanating from it.

The Bladesman's eyes were everywhere. Not a pebble rolled across the ground without him taking note. They continued on.

The caverns were a maze of crisscrossing corridors, occasionally opening into larger chambers. Every now and then, a corridor sloped sharply downward. Descending such passages were tricky. On more than one occasion, Tanrif had to turn sideways and half slide, half walk to the bottom.

Often they heard sounds in the distance, though they saw nothing alive. Even the flies shunned this place. Sometimes they stopped to eat, but neither brought up the topic of sleeping.

As they progressed, they realized it was less and less likely they would be able to find their way out. With a shiver, Tanrif recalled the first time he had been lost in the underworld. Next to Vykon, the atmosphere in the Mines of Silverguard had been positively cheerful.

Cyanne stood in the Dark One's throne room. She had been offered a seat, but had enough of Dathan's blood in her to observe proper etiquette, even as the prisoner of an enemy.

A few feet away, Scarha gazed into a huge piece of quartz. Though the room was filled with people, Cyanne's focus was on the psychic and the stone before her. Scarha was following her rescuer's progress and reporting what she saw to the Dark One. What neither Scarha nor the Dark One knew was Cyanne could also see the shapes that moved within the surface of the crystal. It was as if the stone magnified her

already existing psychic energy, allowing it to reach new heights. She didn't say anything. Any hidden knowledge she possessed, might be used against her captor.

The Dark One waited until Scarha finished describing the scene before addressing the Duchess.

"Yes, my dear. Your brave and noble husband has come for you, as I knew he would. However, before you start entertaining fantasies of rescue, let me show you what I have in store for Tanrif and his companion. You are interested, no?"

Cyanne turned to look at him, but bit back a response. He would not get another rise out of her.

"No matter. Allow me to demonstrate the peculiar powers of the snake throne. Guards, bring in the prisoner."

A commotion from the doorway drew her attention. She turned and watched, as a man was dragged fighting and kicking before the Dark One. She could sympathize with the poor wretch, though she didn't know what to expect. Strangely enough, when the guards released him, he stopped struggling.

"I believe you know our friend here...if nothing else by reputation. Allow me to introduce my former servant. Stand straight, Lord Zelar. You are in the presence of the Duchess of High Gondylar."

Cyanne took a step forward and stopped. There was nothing she could do to him the Dark One could not top. She smiled and spoke.

"So you're the one who convinced Penthor to stand against me."

"With a little help from the Bladesman and his note, yes." Zelar spoke hesitantly, unsure where this interview was going.

"I found him trying to skip out on me, after your men stormed the castle. I should have known he was a spineless coward."

Both Cyanne and Zelar turned to the Dark One. It was his show.

"My dear Zelar, here in Vykon, we have ways to reward failure. Have you anything to say in your defense?"

"Would you listen if I did?"

"Of course not. But it might prove entertaining."

Zelar raised his head. "I am a Lord of the House of Freyrath. I will not beg for mercy. Nor will I say anything to entertain you. If I am to die, let's get to it."

"Bravely spoken. Very well, I have, as they say, other matters to attend."

With those words, the Dark One closed his eyes and traced a symbol of power in the air. The ancient art was all but lost and Cyanne watched with interest.

When it was done, the Dark One sat on this throne and directed his expressionless gaze toward Zelar. At first nothing happened.

Then the hapless Lord stumbled forward and fell to his knees. His eyes bulged with fear. He seemed to be fighting some invisible force, which drew him closer and closer to the throne.

Cyanne watched the battle. He struggled to his feet, but there was no way the traitor could stand against the ancient art. Still she found herself holding her breath as inch by inch, Zelaran moved closer.

Several members of the court smiled in anticipation, while others turned away. Cyanne, fascinated, forced herself to watch.

Lord Zelaran's face contorted, as strain painted new lines on it each second. Sweat began to form on his forehead, but try as he might, he could not resist the force that pulled at him. Finally, he stood just before the throne, but the force did not relent. Still pulled forward, he fell again to his knees, then slowly, was drawn downward, as if he were being forced to perform obeisance to the Dark One.

His face drew closer and closer to the snake throne's black pedestal. He fought with all his will, but the Dark One's strength was far beyond him.

His forehead touched the black stone. Instantly, Zelaran's body vanished as if it had never been there.

Cyanne shook herself. "What happened to him?"

"I've stolen his soul. Not that it was worth very much, mind you, but failure can't be tolerated. As a ruler yourself, I'm sure you understand."

Cyanne turned from the pedestal, fighting her rising panic. Was such a thing possible?

The Dark One was still speaking and she hurried to concentrate on his words. Anything to distract herself from the image of Lord Zelaran's last moments.

"His life force is now mine to do with as I please. Would you care to guess what I have in mind?"

Cyanne shook her head.

"Then attend."

The Dark One took a staff from where it rested beside the throne. Holding it before him, he began to chant. His face took on a look of intense concentration. Once again, Cyanne found she could not turn from the spectacle.

As he spoke the final syllable of the incantation, a dark shape slid from the pedestal beneath the snake throne. Had she not already been watching for something, it would have been almost impossible to see.

Though he'd stopped chanting, a second figure joined it, then a third. It was as if someone had peeled a shadow off a wall and given it the ability to walk in the light. The Dark One smiled.

"A welcoming committee of sorts."

Another shadow emerged from the blackness.

"I'm certain Tanrif and the Bladesman will have their hands full. Did I mention that they have no weapon that will harm my dark servants? No? It should be interesting, don't you think? Oh, one more thing. Each time one of these little darlings touches your would-be rescuers, they will draw from them their precious life force, until both Tanrif and the Bladesman become like them. Dark reflections of the living world under my command."

Cyanne watched as yet another of the creatures stepped from the stone. She looked again at the crystal, and the woman standing before it. Tanrif and Kestryl were still walking, though from the looks of things, they were tiring.

She closed her eyes, strength momentarily deserting her, for how could even Tanrif fight creatures such as these?

The darkness did nothing to block out the Dark One's voice. "Go forth, my darlings and return with a prize. Bring me the Duke of High Gondylar and his companion." Cyanne whispered a silent prayer to Sheba, but she did not think it would make a difference. She was in the Dark One's realm and was not even certain the Goddess' influence could be felt in this place.

The caverns seemed to go on forever. Man-made artifacts became more common as they progressed deeper into Vykon. Sometimes they would come upon markers of stone or signs hanging on the walls, though neither could interpret the glyphs marking the way. Occasionally, they would pass a door set into a natural stone wall, though none of the ones they had passed thus far seemed to serve any purpose, except separating one group of caves from another. Perhaps, in an emergency, they could be locked, sealing off certain areas from the main caverns.

Progress was slower as they became more fatigued. Still, neither Tanrif nor the Bladesman considered camping. The very atmosphere of the place made sleep impossible.

They were walking through a corridor that looked like every other, when Tanrif stopped. The Bladesman noticed immediately and stepped in front of him. Tanrif was the Duke. If there was anything out there, it would have to get through him first.

Tanrif peered intently into the darkness. The air grew colder. His eyes were everywhere, trying to find a reason for his growing fear...but he saw nothing.

Ahead, the corridor opened into a large cavern. Inside, he could make out stalactites and stalagmites, some so old they touched, forming natural stone columns. If the Dark One were going to ambush them, this would be the place for it.

Cautiously they continued, the Bladesman walking just a step before him, when Tanrif caught sight of something moving off to the right. He whirled, sword flashing in the light of the lantern, but nothing was there. The Bladesman jumped in front of him. He hadn't seen anything himself, but had learned to trust the young Duke's instincts. "What did you see?"

"I don't know. Something moved in the shadows, but it vanished so quickly it might have been my imagination."

As soon as he spoke the words, the first shadow appeared. It looked like nothing more than a wisp of darkness in the shape of a small humanoid. Only its smaller size and clawed hands set it apart from Tanrif's own flickering shadow.

The Bladesman was faster than Tanrif and his sword sliced an arc in front of the younger warrior. The blade passed harmlessly through the figure, as if it weren't there. Again he took a cut and again his sword passed through, unchecked.

A single clawed hand reached for him. As it passed through his right arm, his sword clattered to the ground. It felt as if he'd been stabbed with an icicle. The numbness spread quickly and the Bladesman retreated a step. How could he protect the Duke, if his weapons could not touch their attackers? His mind raced, but he could think of no way to defend Tanrif.

There were more of them now, darting in and out of the shadows. Tanrif leapt forward, swinging Lordblade sidearm. As soon as the blade touched one of the shadowy shapes, blue flame raced along its curved edge.

A high pitched scream emanated from the thing as it was banished back to its own realm, but the other shadows, still bound by the Dark One's will, drew closer and surrounded him.

Outside the circle, the Bladesman leaned against a pillar. His right arm hung at his side. His blade was powerless against their opponents. He could do nothing to aid the Duke. Fearfully, he watched the battle, knowing if Tanrif lost, he would never be able to forgive himself.

But Tanrif, it seemed, had no intention of losing. He had seen what had happened to the Bladesman, and was careful not to allow the hell-spawned things to touch him. Tanrif danced among them, between them, and as he moved the creatures fell back in fear.

Tanrif slashed again. Another unnatural shriek pierced the darkness and another shadow faded. The next cry came from Tanrif. One of the shapes had leapt forward and passed a clawed hand through Tanrif's left arm. The warrior howled in pain, but did not pause in his motion. Another scream filled the air, just as the echoes of Tanrif's were fading.

The Duke continued to dodge amongst them, though more slowly now, whether by design or from fatigue the Bladesman could not say.

The shadows, seeing him slow, gained confidence. Helplessly, the Bladesman watched. With one mighty swipe, Tanrif's flame engulfed sword passed through two of them, banishing them to the sound of their screams.

There was only a single shadow left. Tanrif faced it and moved Lordsblade into position. The creature, having seen what the weapon could do, faded back a step. Then, without warning, it jumped right through Tanrif's body. The Duke froze, as if all the strength to move had deserted him. The Bladesman raced forward. If he could take the sword from Tanrif's hand, he could finish the battle.

Tanrif stood like a statue. Kestryl moved swiftly between Tanrif and the shadow, which was only now turning.

He reached out for Lordsblade. He felt the surge of magic, before he actually touched it. Blue flame shot from the sword, forming a sphere of energy around the Duke. The Bladesman was lifted from the ground and thrown backward. Several stalagmites were shattered by the force of the explosion. The entire cavern shook from it. Fortunately, there was enough support remaining that the ceiling did not collapse. As Kestryl struck the wall, the echoes of the dying shadow's screams washed over him. For several moments, he lay prone, breathing heavily, the pain tremendous. Though he was badly hurt, he couldn't lie there. Tanrif might already be dead.

The Bladesman rolled over on his side, supporting his weight on his right arm. He looked down at it. Only a short time ago, it had been dangling uselessly at his side, but now, though it hurt, it was useable.

He had heard of the chilling touch of certain magical creatures and had been sure only the most powerful priest or mage could heal such an affliction. Why then was his arm working?

His eyes scanned the room and fell upon the Duke. Tanrif lay on the ground curled into a ball, Lordsblade still in his hand. He was completely motionless.

The Bladesman rose painfully, still feeling the remnants of the chill in his arm. He had tried to grab the sword and it had protected itself. The flame must have burned the chill from him, just as it had destroyed the creatures themselves, but at what cost to Tanrif?

Weak from the touch and the flame, the Bladesman found he could not support his own weight. He sank

to his knees and doubled over. He remained that way for many minutes.

Cyanne gazed at the crystal, barely able to restrain her tears. She could not take her eyes from the battle, though she could see no way for her husband to survive it. *My husband. How easily the title comes.*

Even if she were able, she knew she would not turn from the image. She was Gondylarian. If any harm befell Tanrif, the Dark One would pay. That she was his prisoner would not deter her. She would find some way to avenge her husband's death.

She watched with growing amazement at what should have been a slaughter. She jumped in surprise, when Tanrif's blade burst into blue flames. It was only then she realized his sword was one she'd never seen before. Where did he get it?

As the battle unfolded, it seemed like he might escape unharmed. When she saw him fall, the tears came. He could not die. Not Tanrif. Not now.

She was crying so hard when the explosion came it did not hurt her eyes. Scarha, of course, had been keeping the Dark One informed of the happenings. When she told of the explosion, he came off the throne.

"Damn it! I wanted him alive!"

Cyanne ignored him. She watched as the Bladesman was thrown to the edge of the chamber. She watched him try to stand and saw him fall. She waited with him through the long minutes. She tried to concentrate on Tanrif to see if he was breathing, but he was too far away.

The Bladesman, when he finally moved, did not attempt to regain his feet. Instead he crawled toward the motionless form of the Duke.

Cyanne found it strange, seeing the Bladesman so tentative and vulnerable. He moved slowly on his hands and knees, confusion and fear blatant on his face. She felt almost like a voyeur. She held her breath when he finally placed an ear to Tanrif's chest.

The look of relief on the Bladesman's face told her her husband was still alive, but there was no telling how long it would be before he regained consciousness or how severe the damage.

For many hours the image in the crystal remained virtually unchanged. Cyanne wondered why the Dark One didn't take them while he had the chance. Perhaps he was not through toying with them, or maybe he wished to see what would happen if he waited. The man was, if nothing else, patient.

The Bladesman sat motionless, cross-legged next to the Duke, who still lay with his knees clutched to his chest. Cyanne waited with them, barely daring to take her eyes from the scene.

Finally, Tanrif turned over onto his back. His voice was weak but clear, a few minutes later when he spoke.

"It's too dark to be heaven and too cold to be hell. I must still be alive."

Cyanne's eyes filled with tears. Somehow, she knew, Tanrif would find some way to save her.

Though Tanrif had regained consciousness, he was not in any condition to travel. Kestryl stood watch while the Duke rested, though he found himself unable to sleep. He didn't remember much of the battle and was amazed when the Bladesman told him the tale. He had still not sheathed Lordsblade. He studied the sword, wondering what other surprises it might hold.

It wasn't long before the sound of footsteps reached them. Though he was in no condition to fight, Tanrif forced himself to his feet. Kestryl, arm still in pain, drew his weapon as well. The trouble was, neither would be able to handle another battle.

Still they stood their ground, staring into the darkness. It wasn't long before the first of the guards came into view.

The Bladesman was relieved the newcomers were human, though as they continued to arrive, he grew concerned. There were too many of them.

Tanrif walked up to stand beside him, Lordsblade held loosely at his side. Under normal circumstances, the young warrior would have fallen into any of the numerous guard positions he'd spent a lifetime learning. The fact he didn't, indicated the extent of his injuries.

The soldiers walked until they were a few feet away, then charged. Tanrif, for all his fatigue, made a good accounting of himself in that battle. Likewise, the Bladesman took his share of the enemy out.

Yet there was no way they could beat the overwhelming odds against them. Tanrif slashed as fast and as hard as his tired body permitted, but in the end, he was hit from behind with a stout club. Shortly after, the Bladesman joined him.

The guards bound them and carried them into the depths of Vykon.

Consciousness did not come at once. Instead, pieces of conversation floated in the ether around him. The sea of pain hindered comprehension. He was about to drift off again, when a single voice penetrated the fog.

It was a cruel trick for his mind to play. Tears stung his eyes when he heard it, though he couldn't make out the individual words. The voice spoke again and he struggled to understand.

"Cyanne," he said, whether aloud or to himself he couldn't be sure.

With tremendous effort, Tanrif fought the rest of the way to consciousness. He opened his eyes and sat up, ignoring the pain that suffused him. His eyes searched wildly, passing over warriors, a small haunted-looking woman, a large man on a throne and finally his wife.

With great effort, he found his feet, though he didn't know if he could remain standing for long. Instinctively, he placed his hand to his chest, surprised to find the Amulet of Dreaming still there. He almost took a step toward her, when he heard the groan.

He looked down to his left. On the ground beside him, lay the Bladesman. If the condition of the Bladesman's face was any indication of his own, he was a sorry sight indeed.

He looked at Cyanne again and realized his mind was not functioning properly. He should be running to her, embracing her, but he felt sluggish and weak. He smiled as confidently as he could, but the frown she returned told him she wasn't convinced as to the extent of his well-being.

The tall man on the throne stood and walked down the steps toward Tanrif. Without thinking, Tanrif reached for his sword. The tall man laughed.

"Is this what you were looking for?" He held Lordsblade before him. "Quite a toy you have here. Of course, now that you've arrived, you won't be needing it."

His victorious smile chilled Tanrif to the bone.

The Bladesman was on his feet now, but like the Duke, he had been disarmed. "Who are you?" asked Tanrif.

"Forgive my poor manners. I am your host, the Dark One of Vykon. I would so like to thank you for joining us."

Tanrif scowled, more at the fact the man was holding his sword, than at what he was saying.

"Well, you worded the invitation so nicely, I didn't think I could refuse. It's a pity we can't stay. Come on, Cyanne. We're going home."

The Dark One's eyes grew hard. "I don't know what kind of people you are used to dealing with, but you're in *my* realm now. I decide who stays and who goes."

Tanrif's smile seemed almost genuine. He circled the Dark One as he spoke, until he stood between the man and his throne. Against the wall, he noticed their possessions laid out on a wooden table. If he could make it just a little closer, he might be able to get one of the Bladesman's swords. He needed to buy time. "You know, it was a brilliant plan. You only made one small miscalculation."

Tanrif had brought himself dangerously close to the throne. Cyanne eyed the pedestal nervously. She wanted to warn Tanrif, but didn't see how she could.

"You took my wife. You took my sword. I'm afraid you're going to have to pay for your actions."

Echoes of the Dark One's laughter filled the chamber. "And who is going to make me pay? You? Look at yourself. You can barely stand. Bravery is a noble gesture, but idle boasting is quite another matter and not becoming of the Duke of High Gondylar. You do amuse me though. I think, after I'm through with you, I may have you stuffed. Of course, first I'll let you watch me take your woman. That too should prove entertaining."

The only warning the Dark One had was the low growl. The young warrior uttered a single word in the old tongue. Blue flame raced along Lordsblade's curved edge until it engulfed the entire sword, including the hilt. The Dark One gasped in pain before the scimitar clattered to the ground. Tanrif took a step toward him.

The Dark One became enraged. He said a word of his own, followed by a gesture and his staff flew from its place by the throne. He caught it easily in his right hand. With a malicious smile, partly to cover his pain, the Dark One spoke.

"Your time has come, Outlander."

And Cyanne understood. The Dark One had wanted Tanrif alive only to steal his soul. He must have sensed something different about Tanrif. Different enough to desire the Duke's power.

Tanrif stepped forward, as if he were going to take the Dark One barehanded. Cyanne shouted a warning and the Bladesman advanced a step before the Dark One raised his staff and drew a symbol in the air.

Tanrif's forward momentum slowed. He felt his body start to turn against his will. "Good-bye, Outlander," said the Dark One.

Tanrif fought the force that suddenly gripped him, but found himself drawn inexorably backwards. Cyanne was screaming, but he couldn't allow himself to be distracted. All his concentration was focused on pulling away from the black stone that sat beneath the Dark One's throne.

The Bladesman sprang forward in an attempt to distract the Dark One, but struck an invisible wall that proved impenetrable.

Tanrif was almost touching the base. Despite his best efforts, he could not fight the force controlling him. Even as he watched, his forehead approached the shiny black surface.

The stone was cool against his head when he touched it. Cyanne stopped screaming. Several moments passed. Finally the force that held him faded. Tanrif rose and turned. Many of Vykon's minions gasped. Cyanne looked as if she were going to faint. The Dark One's eyes widened in fear as Tanrif moved toward him. He raised a single gauntleted hand and vanished as if he'd never been there.

Tanrif bent to retrieve his sword and the Bladesman snatched his from the table as he ran by it. As an afterthought, he returned to the table and took the Horn of Tenithior as well. If Iorana's priestess had spoken the truth, they might soon need it. Cyanne grabbed a lantern from a hook on the wall and moved to stand beside them.

The minions of Vykon were clearly confused. Without the Dark One, they had no direction. Certainly none of them would attempt to take on a power from which their own Lord had fled.

"Come on," shouted Tanrif. He grabbed Cyanne's hand and ran from the cavern into the closest passage. The Bladesman followed a step behind. As far as he could tell, no one pursued.

For a long time they ran through twisting tunnels. The Bladesman was able to block the pain from his injuries. Tanrif had a harder time of things, but focused on his newfound rage. Ioranna was behind it all, and she was asking too much. Without the anger, he would certainly not have been able to make it much further.

They had no idea of where they were or how much time had passed. If they didn't soon locate something to eat, starvation would put a rather horrible end to their surprise victory.

They walked until they were ready to drop, always pushing themselves around the next corner. If they stopped, they might not have the strength to continue.

For many hours they staggered forward until finally, rounding a bend in the corridor, they saw a slender shape jutting from the wall. It looked like nothing so much as a petrified snake, ready to strike. Cautiously, they approached.

It wasn't until they were just a few yards away that Cyanne was able to put a name to the shape. A glint of hope entered her eyes. She was, she realized, looking at the arm of the Dark One, sticking out from the stone of the caverns themselves. In his haste to escape Tanrif, he had placed himself inside solid rock. On his hand, the magic gauntlet reflected the lamplight back at them.

Cyanne pointed to the armored glove without touching it.

"This is what allowed him to transport himself instantly to the palace and back here again."

She carefully removed it from the outstretched arm, wondering if somehow, he was still alive within the stone.

"This is our only way out," she said.

They stared at the protruding human arm. Tanrif spoke first.

"Apparently, it is not without its dangers, but it seems we have no choice."

Even after he turned away, he could not erase the sight from his memory. Cyanne handed him the gauntlet and he donned it, not knowing why he should be the one responsible for their fate.

The Bladesman and Cyanne huddled close to him. He didn't know how to work it, but he tried. He closed his eyes and thought about the palace in Gondylar. He tried to picture it as vividly as possible. When he looked again, they were still in Vykon. He tried twice more to no avail. Then an idea occurred to him.

"Okay Iorana. I get it. You're the Goddess of Magic. Your will controls the Gauntlet, not mine. I can't do anything against the Sarithan Assassins if I starve to death in Vykon. Do what you will with us."

As soon as he spoke the words, he felt a sharp pain in his head. His stomach lurched and everything went black.

Chapter Nineteen - The Final Battle

The glare of the sun was all but intolerable after the dark passages of Vykon. The air, however, was sweet and they took it in deep breaths, while waiting for their eyes to adjust.

Tanrif forced himself to look at the sun through spread fingers. As soon as he could see, he turned a complete circle, searching for some landmark that would reveal their whereabouts. If the growth of lush vegetation was any indication, it was nowhere near Vykon.

They stood in a large, almost perfectly circular clearing. The grass was knee high. The trees surrounding them were not familiar, but looked tropical. The only man-made artifact in sight was a statue on a pedestal standing in the clearing's center.

Even before he was close enough to see the statue's features, Tanrif knew it was Iorana. He sighed and walked forward, determination growing with each step. One way or another, the manipulation would end.

The Bladesman was the first to see the figure emerge from the woods. He placed a hand on the hilt of his blade, but Tanrif continued on, either unaware of the intrusion or not worried by it.

Cyanne hesitated, then followed her husband. She sensed Tanrif's mood, but didn't understand the cause of it. They had escaped the Darkdom of Vykon. The Dark One, their enemy, was dead and her parents' deaths had been avenged. If they suddenly found themselves in a strange place, it certainly couldn't be any worse than the one they'd left behind. Unless he knew something she didn't. She quickened her pace to catch up with him.

As they advanced, so did the stranger. The figure wore a hooded cloak and carried a staff, but there was nothing about its approach that bespoke danger.

To Cyanne's surprise, as soon as the figure came within range of Tanrif, it bowed low, touching its head to the ground. From the look on the Bladesman's face, he was as surprised as she.

Tanrif took it in stride, though the expression on his face darkened. "Get up."

The figure complied.

"Where is this?"

For a second the newcomer didn't answer, as if confused by the question.

"You are on Fandar, in the Islands of Dawn. We've been awaiting your arrival."

If Tanrif was surprised it was a woman's voice that answered, he didn't show it. "For how long?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He walked past the woman and approached the statue. Iorana seemed to smile down at him, which enraged him even more.

Cyanne wasn't sure which confused her more; the fact that they had been expected or that her husband seemed to know that would be the case. Tanrif spoke again, making no attempt to mask his anger.

"I want to talk to the High Priestess."

The woman bowed her head and turned. Tanrif followed immediately. Cyanne and the Bladesman exchanged puzzled glances before falling in behind.

The great hall was crowded with the chosen. The Grand Master of the Sarithan Assassins looked over his people with undisguised pride. It was rare for so many of both the Brotherhood and the Priesthood to be assembled in one place, but plans needed to be made. With Tanrif still in High Gondylar, this might be their last chance to meet safely. The course of action decided during the days to come would see the Sarithan Assassins through the next century.

Several months ago, the most powerful members of the Brotherhood had all started to converge on the Islands of Dawn.

Even Ezewdra made the trip for the first time in his life. Fortunately, it didn't take him long at all. Apparently, there had been some arrangement between Sarith and Xenia, the Goddess of the Seas, for the high priest had completed the voyage in record time.

At first, the Grand Master didn't understand the purpose for the gathering, but one of the priests told him Sarith had instructed them to go to the Islands of Dawn in their dreams. They'd been arriving for weeks, until the capacity of the Temple-Fortress was beginning to feel the strain.

It wasn't until Bone returned from High Gondylar that the reason for the gathering became apparent. It was the news Tanrif had become Duke that sparked the meeting. With his newfound power, he was more of a danger than ever. Somehow, they would have to stop him.

He nodded to the priests he recognized, somewhat saddened by the fact he didn't know more of them. He wasn't surprised. Many were from territories with which he had minimal contact. He couldn't expect to know them all.

He waited until the assembly had been seated, before he rose and walked toward the pulpit. Ezewdra stood there already. In the religious hierarchy of Sarith, the High Priest was the only man considered to be on an equal level with the Grand Master. That was how it had been since time's beginning.

The Assassins and the Priesthood had an equal place in the eyes of the Goddess and each carried out Her plans. The Priesthood chose the targets and the Brotherhood performed the art.

Though the congregation consisted largely of Assassins, a healthy percentage of the ruling Priesthood was represented as well. The time had come for unity. Tanrif was the worst threat they had ever faced, but somehow, they would triumph, as they always did.

He nodded to Ezewdra. The High Priest motioned the audience to silence. He waited before speaking,

allowing the suspense to build. Most of them had only the vaguest idea why Sarith had guided them here. Some had been waiting months to find out. With any luck, he would be able to relate to them just how bleak the situation was. "Over the centuries, the Sarithan Assassins have grown in power. Even the mightiest of men fear our wrath. Kings bow and knights kneel before us, rather than risk our ire."

Every eye was on him. Even those who didn't know the agenda of the meeting, were aware such gatherings occurred only once or twice in a century.

"It has been many years since the Brotherhood has faced a crisis of this magnitude. You have all heard the prophecy of Tanrif the destroyer, who walks Corithim at this very moment.

"Every attempt to defeat him has turned against us. Already he is directly responsible for the death of two Assassins and indirectly responsible for the death of a Master Assassin."

A low murmur rose from the congregation. He continued without pausing.

"That by itself would not have prompted this meeting, but there is more. Since then, he has gone on to marry the Duchess of High Gondylar. This means he now has many powerful allies and an army at his disposal."

He did pause then, to let it sink in. They had to be made aware of just how much was at stake.

"He has forever changed the shape of the Gondylarian frontier by destroying the mercenary Skandl, who had been useful to us upon occasion. Attempt after attempt to stop him has failed and now we learn he has in his possession an Amulet of Dreaming."

Less murmurs this time. Apparently not everyone was familiar with the artifact. He pressed on.

"Now is the time to strike. We will plan a massive frontal assault, the likes of which the world has never seen. We will bring the battle to High Gondylar and Tanrif will be destroyed. We must make it so or he will destroy us."

The statement had the desired effect. The murmur rose to a loud buzz. He let them talk. The seed was planted.

Now that each of them understood the intensity of the threat, they would lay their plans. Let Tanrif take on the entirety of Sarith's force on Corithim. Even one so prophesied couldn't stand against that.

The woman led them down a wide path through the trees. The sun was even hotter here than in Gondylar, but after Vykon, it was welcome nonetheless.

It wasn't long before a few houses appeared in the distance. A short time later the woods fell away, revealing a small town. Most of the houses were small, single-story dwellings. One structure stood above the rest; the Temple of Iorana.

It wasn't large, but it was so beautifully designed there could be little doubt magic had been involved in its construction. The doors were made of iron and were carved so ornately it might take hours to see every detail. That the Temple was the only stonework in the village, made it seem larger than it really was.

The woman walked to the doors and pushed one open. She motioned for them to enter. The inside was also well appointed, though none of the opulence he'd seen in High Gondylar was present. Instead, the entire place was like a work of art, with no surface uncovered by mural, no niche without a statue. However the statues here were made of stone, rather than gold.

Inside, a priestess waited. She led them to a back room that seemed to be an office of some sort. There, behind a desk, sat a middle-aged woman, who would have looked more at home serving in a tavern than here in the Temple.

She was about fortyish with streaks of gray in her short brown hair. She was slightly overweight. In contrast to her ordinary appearance, her eyes sparkled with life and intelligence. She smiled as they entered, but it seemed a sad smile. She rose and nodded her head to Tanrif, then sat again and picked up a quill.

"I'll be right with you."

She wrote another few sentences, while the three stood, uncomfortably. At last, she looked up.

Tanrif was not fooled by her appearance. He knew he was looking at one of the most powerful people on Corithim. Still, he would not bow to her. The sacrifice required of him exempted him from having to show respect to those who held his leash. He would do their work, but he would not do it smiling. Let them at least be aware he knew the price of their machinations. His voice was hard as steel.

"I'm here. Let's get this over with."

If the woman was offended, she did not show it. The only sign she heard him at all, was a slight raising of her eyebrows. She did not lose her smile.

"Welcome, warrior. I see you know why you're here?"

He nodded once.

"A boat waits in the harbor. The Sarithan even now meet to discuss how to dispose of you. If you leave today, you can make it to their fortress by dawn tomorrow. They still believe you're in High Gondylar."

"And if I succeed?"

"Then you're free."

"Just like that. You take my life, mold me into what you need to accomplish your goals...will I truly ever be free? Will I ever find it harder to take a life? Will I ever stop looking over my shoulder, or walk down a street without seeing figures lurking in the shadows? I will do what I must, but don't lie to me. I will never be free and you know it."

Compassion filled the woman's eyes, but she did not address his statement. "I will have someone escort you to the boat. Iorana be with you."

Contempt filled Tanrif's eyes. "I don't need your blessing for that, priestess."

He whirled and stalked past an astonished Cyanne.

Tarlak stood on the pier waiting. Those had been his instructions and as they came from the High Priestess herself, he would continue to wait.

He watched the road that led to the pier. Tarlak was in a unique position. He was one of the few men trusted by the priesthood of Iorana. He had worked long and hard to become so and the Sarithan Assassins paid him well to stay that way. He would wait all year if that were what was required. If his years in the service of the Assassins had taught him nothing else, they had taught him patience.

He watched with interest as a small party approached. The private pier allowed the priesthood of Iorana

to come and go undetected. Almost every island had one and Tarlak knew them all.

His keen eyes missed no detail. It was a party of five. Two he recognized as priests. Two, from the look in their eyes and the way they walked, were soldiers. The last was a noblewoman, though it was her carriage, rather than her dress, that convinced him of the fact. No peasant held her head that high.

He waited until they were close, then bowed low. He stayed in that position until one of the warriors told him to get up. That surprised him. He had expected the Lady to say it.

"Iorana be with you," he said to the priests.

"May She guide your vessel," replied the priests in unison.

The warrior who had told him to rise, stepped forward. It was obvious he was in charge. Even the priests seemed to defer to him.

"Your ship is fast?"

Tarlak nodded.

"We leave immediately."

"Our destination?"

Tanrif did not know the name of the island the Assassins called home, but he was sure this man did.

"What is your name?"

"Tarlak, my Lord."

"Well, Captain Tarlak, I have some unfinished business with the Sarithan Assassins. I need to reach their fortress as soon as possible."

Tarlak's eyebrows went up, but he kept his face passive. "They know you are coming?"

"No. But they'll certainly know when I get there."

The tone of his voice told Tarlak all he needed to know.

The Grand Master and Ezewdra were alone in the empty chamber. The meeting had gone much as expected.

"You were always a good speaker," said the Grand Master. "The meeting went well, yes?"

Ezewdra sat down heavily on a chair. Lately, he had been feeling his years. It would not be long before Sarith called him home.

"Perhaps, but I am still worried. Every attempt to terminate him has failed and each has left him in a stronger position. There is too much about him we don't know. Where did he get a Amulet of Dreaming? How did he manage his vanishing act in the desert? Is he an unwilling pawn? Perhaps we go about this the wrong way. Perhaps we should have accepted his deal."

The Grand Master made no attempt to hide his anger. "Haven't we already been through this? Tanrif killed one of my men. He is responsible for the death of two more. Only his demise will satisfy the code."

To his surprise, fury showed in Ezewdra's eyes. "Do you understand nothing? The prophecy protects

him. If we send the entire Brotherhood to take him out, he will triumph still. No force we possess can destroy him. Which is more important, your code or the survival of the Brotherhood?"

"Without honor, the Brotherhood cannot survive."

Ezewdra continued in a gentler voice. "It is too late for us, old friend. Our time on Corithim is at an end. We will go through the motions, but we cannot possibly succeed."

The silence between them was a palpable thing that lasted too long, but neither was willing to break it. Finally, the Grand Master spoke, his voice a clenched fist.

"Perhaps you have lived too long and seen too much. Perhaps age has addled your wits. We are the Sarithan Assassins. We are talking about one man, barely more than a boy. Where is your faith in the Goddess?"

"Just a boy. In less than one year he has left home, killed one Assassin and destroyed another, gotten rid of Skandl and her men, obtained a Amulet of Dreaming and married the Duchess of High Gondylar. A fairly impressive feat for one so young, wouldn't you say? When was the last time you accomplished as much in a decade? Or I for that matter? Galith had used almost those very words to describe Tanrif and look at what happened to him. Call me a fool, but I believe the prophecy is a true one and that nothing we do can change it. I can only pray I am wrong."

"Then by all means, pray. The rest of us prefer action."

The Grand Master turned and walked from the room.

Cyanne stared off the starboard bow, watching the sunset glint off the water. Tanrif had become a man of few words, none of which had been conducive to conversation. Something had changed in him and she needed desperately to figure out what it was and how to remedy the situation. As things stood now, she wasn't able to talk to him. More than anything else, she wanted Tanrif back the way he was. And she wasn't sure that could ever happen.

She was so lost in thought, she didn't notice Tarlak approach. When she finally looked in his direction, he bowed.

"My Lady."

Cyanne motioned for him to rise and returned her gaze to the ocean.

"It is not right so pretty a woman should carry such sadness in her heart."

"I hadn't realized it was so obvious."

"It is not, but I have made an art of, shall we say, observation. It is the young man, is it not?"

"He is my husband."

"He is lucky. I do not wish to pry. If I am sailing into dangerous waters, please let me know. It's just that my constant travel often leaves me yearning for conversation." "You're not disturbing me. I am happy to talk. I am in the mood to...my companions are not."

"Then, I am fortunate indeed. Tell me. The young man, he is quite special to you, no?"

Cyanne turned to look at the captain, carefully. There were too many things she didn't know, and only a few of which she felt certain. The captain was not one of them. "I love him. I always will. Tanrif is a good

man, but the trials of the last year are beginning to catch up to him."

At the sound of the name, Tarlak's heart raced. Tanrif of the prophecy? Could it be the same man? Even with all his training, he could just barely keep his face passive. He didn't dare deposit Tanrif on Torlyn. He would have to take care of the problem before they arrived.

When he looked at her again, the woman was looking at him with a mixture of suspicion and concern. He leaned heavily against the rail.

"Forgive me, My Lady. I am recovering from an illness and sometimes I take on too much."

She turned away just in time to watch the last ray of light disappear below the horizon, but she did not speak again. The captain made his apologies and, like the sun, disappeared from sight.

Penthor paced the throne room. It had been too long since Cyanne had been abducted. Too long since Tanrif and the Bladesman had ridden off to rescue her. He was still upset they had left without a word. He had warned the Duke not to go.

Soon, he would have to make a decision, whether he wished to or not. There had been no word from Vykon and that bothered him most of all. What had become of the Duchess?

He stopped to look at the place where the Horn of Tenithior used to hang. What had happened to it? Who had taken it and why?

There were those who suspected he hid it so when he again took the throne, there would be no way to disprove his claim. Had Vykon taken it for some unknown reason, or did Tanrif and the Bladesman take it with them?

The most frustrating thing about the situation was there was nothing he could do but wait, and pray Cyanne would somehow make it back to Gondylar unharmed.

He walked toward the thrones, but sat on the steps instead. He would not sit in the seat of power, until he was sure Cyanne was gone for good.

An hour after Cyanne went below deck, Tanrif emerged. He didn't want to see her. He needed his anger. He had not seen the Bladesman since the beginning of the trip and did not see him now. That didn't bother him either.

Tarlak approached and he sighed. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He turned and stared into the darkness, hoping the man would take the hint.

"Good evening, My Lord," said the captain pleasantly.

Tanrif did not reply, but studied the reflection of the crescent moon on the water.

"Tanrif, look out!"

The Bladesman's warning arrived just short of too late. He whirled and jumped backwards. The captain held a dagger in his right hand. Even in the darkness, Tanrif knew the blood dripping from it was his. He reached for his blade, before remembering he had left it below deck. He did not see a reason to wear it on the ship.

He tried to block, but the initial wound slowed him and Tarlak was quicker than he expected. The captain ducked inside Tanrif's guard. This time, Tanrif felt the blade as it entered.

He gasped in pain. He saw the Bladesman race forward as he sank to his knees. Tarlak turned, but the Bladesman's sword sliced into him. Tarlak's body spun around, hit the rail and flipped overboard.

Tanrif clutched his stomach. He could feel the warmth running over the back of his hands. It was over. Iorana could touch him no more.

The Bladesman yelled something Tanrif couldn't understand. He didn't know how much time had passed before he heard Cyanne's voice. He tried to open his eyes, but couldn't tell if he succeeded. Cyanne was whispering to him, but the world of words was already beyond him. He was dying. The Sarithan Assassins had won after all. As breath left his body, the last sound he heard was the voice of his wife, finally clear above the roaring in his ears.

"I will avenge you, my love."

Tanrif, the Duke of High Gondylar, was claimed by sweet blackness.

Many hours later, Cyanne was finally asleep. The Bladesman stood nearby trying to come to terms with his latest failure. It was Dathan all over again.

He had been too late to save Tanrif. At least he had avenged his death. As soon as Tarlak went overboard, before he even hit the water, Kestryl had dropped his sword and tried to stop the bleeding. Cyanne appeared to see what was going on, no doubt disturbed by his shout.

In the end, there was nothing he could do. He took the Amulet of Dreaming, said some ancient Gondylarian words, all he could remember from the prayers, and lowered Tanrif's body into the sea. It was the best he could do under the circumstances. He grieved it could not be more.

It seemed amazing to him Tanrif's life had been taken so easily. The young Duke had clearly not expected trouble from one of Iorana's own. He had been completely unprepared for the attack and no doubt distracted by his upcoming confrontation with the Sarithan. It was easy to forget that any life could be claimed by the lucky thrust of a dagger...even Tanrif's.

Cyanne's reaction changed from grief to anger every few minutes. The loss of her husband was more than she could take. Kestryl didn't know what to do. He was a soldier.

He tried to comfort her, but had no experience to guide him. More often than not, his words led to another outburst of grief. Finally, after a period of hours, she had grown calm. Then she spoke. As her words unfolded, he felt a burning sensation begin in his stomach.

"We must go on," she had said. "There is no way to bring him back, but at least we can avenge him. Death to the Sarithan Assassins!"

The gleam in her eye told him she could not be dissuaded. Still, he had to try. Even with an army, an assault on the Assassins in their own stronghold would be foolhardy. The two of them didn't stand a chance.

"His death is avenged. Tarlak is dead by my hand."

"No! Tarlak was only the instrument of his destruction. It was the Assassin's collective hand that wielded him. All of them. We will wipe them from the face of Corithim."

"It's suicide. It is not what he would have wanted. Of that I am sure."

"So sure, Kestryl, always so sure. Maybe you don't know as much as you think you do. Things are not

always as they seem."

The edge in her voice made the Bladesman uncomfortable. It was not the first time he'd heard it. Still, he pressed on.

"Tanrif spent his life protecting you. He would not want you to die avenging his death."

"It doesn't matter what he wants--he's dead! It will never matter what he wants again. Only what I want is important and I can't have it. I want him back, Kestryl. I want him to see his child grow up. I never told him, Kestryl. Can't you understand that? I never told him!"

The Bladesman's stomach burned as if he'd taken the blade himself. He hoped she didn't mean what he thought she did.

"What are you saying, Cyanne?" It had been a long time since he'd called her by name.

"I bear his child," she said softly. "And I never told him."

There was nothing left for him to say. He sat helplessly beside her, overwhelmed by emotion. Cyanne cried for many hours, until finally, she slept.

The Bladesman kept his lonely vigil throughout the night, a man haunted.

Without the captain, the crew was reluctant to continue, but a few well-chosen words by the Bladesman convinced them doing so would be in their best interest. The next morning, the ship reached its destination.

Torlyn was nothing like they thought it would be. The island that housed the Fortress-Temple of the Sarithan Assassins should have been somewhat more foreboding. Instead, Torlyn was home to a thriving seaport, the largest in the Islands of Dawn.

Goldport was like any other city, complete with merchants, soldiers, prostitutes, beggars and thieves.

Cyanne, had she been alone, would have been a prime target for the latter, but one look at the grim face of the Bladesman was enough to put off even the most hardened criminal. At least they would have no trouble staying hidden in the throngs.

They rented a room in a cheap inn and spent some time in the tavern next door. Information was not hard to come by. The Temple of Sarith was the center of most of the island's gossip.

Assassins and priests alike had been arriving in droves for months, more every day. Rumors said a great meeting was to be held to deal with some kind of problem, though none could say what the problem was.

The Bladesman was certain it had something to do with Tanrif. Of course, the Assassins had no way of knowing their problem was already solved. They certainly didn't need hundreds of Assassins to deal with Cyanne and himself.

It wasn't long before he formed a plan. Cyanne and he could pose as priests, enter the temple, do what damage they could without being discovered and try to sneak away in the confusion. A suicide mission still, but better than a direct assault. He tried again to talk her out of it, to no avail. The Duchess had her heart set on vengeance. The Bladesman faced a double problem. On one hand, he was bound to obey Cyanne, on the other he was sworn to protect her. Worse still, she carried the unborn heir to the Gondylarian throne in her womb. It was not a single person he had to protect, but two.

Cyanne's eyes gleamed as Kestryl laid out his plan. He was no longer certain of her sanity, but he would obey her, regardless.

He needed the garb of two priests, one male, one female. There were so many of Sarith's servants on the island, finding what he needed wouldn't be difficult. The only problem he might have was finding a place he could strike without witnesses. He left the Duchess alone in the room and set out into the city.

He walked through the crowds, looking for targets. He needed to find a priest about his size and follow him until the opportunity to take him out presented itself.

The problem was, he seldom found a priest traveling alone and didn't want to have to tackle a group of them. Not that he had any compunction about killing the servants of the Goddess of War and Cruelty, but such a commotion would draw eyes and he wished to remain anonymous.

At last he found his target; a priest of Sarith just slightly larger than him, walking alone along the edge of the street. The Bladesman got ahead of him and ducked into an alley the man would soon pass. He forced himself to stillness. He could afford no mistakes.

Fortunately the alley was empty. He did not use his blade. He didn't want to get blood on the priest's robes. It would not be the first time he had to kill barehanded. He half-crouched in the shadows, watching and waiting like a bird of prey. The sound of a footfall reached his ears. He leaned forward.

As the priest appeared, he reached out. He placed one hand over the priest's mouth, the other on the back of his head. With a sharp jerk, he pulled his victim into the alley. Still holding the priest's head, he twisted it with all his considerable strength. He hoped the loud crack would not draw attention. He waited, barely daring to breathe, but nothing happened.

He dragged the corpse deeper between the buildings and lowered him to the ground. He stripped the figure and cut his throat, attempting to disguise the incident as a robbery. He threw the priest's robes over his own attire and entered the street. His next target was going to be a woman.

Alone in the dark, Cyanne lay on the bed. The fact she would never have considered staying in a place like this before never occurred to her. She could only think of one thing...revenge.

She placed a hand on her belly. Though she knew a child grew inside, it did not show yet. Like all Ethrellen, she knew from the moment it was conceived. It would be a boy, if she survived what was to come. And she would survive...somehow.

She sat up and stared into the gloom. It did not occur to her to light the room's single candle. How could there be light without Tanrif? She stood and walked to the table in the corner. Two physical possessions were all that was left of her husband. The Amulet and the sword.

She studied them both, but didn't reach out. For them to be here, away from their master, was like a crime. Who could do these items justice now that Tanrif was gone? "Cyanne." The whispered voice came from somewhere in front of her.

"Hello?" She looked around, but there was no one. "What do you want?"

The impression of motion caught her eye. She turned her attention to the table. At first, she saw nothing.

Then the scimitar seemed to shimmer, as if she were viewing it through water. She reached out to touch it, forgetting what had happened to the Bladesman when he'd tried to take it from Tanrif's hand. She placed her palm tentatively on the cool, curved surface of the blade.

"Cyanne..."

She stiffened slightly, but did not remove her hand.

"What...who are you?"

"I am Lordsblade."

"You're a sword. You cannot speak."

"Then perhaps you traverse the road to madness."

She almost pulled back, but forced herself to remain. She had to know what was going on.

"What do you want?"

"I sense and share your grief, but you must keep the faith. You cannot turn back now. Do not let Kestryl sway you. You must destroy the Sarithan Assassins."

"Without Tanrif, there is no hope."

"There is always hope. They took him from you, Cyanne. Raise me up."

She grasped the sword's hilt, gasping as she felt the weapon's power surge through her. Blue flame engulfed the blade. Her hatred for the Assassins grew tenfold. Her hand tightened around the hilt until the flow of blood to her fingers stopped completely. Her breath became labored and her teeth clenched in fury.

When she again opened her mouth, a growl emerged that would have sent many a brave knight fleeing. She raised the sword above her head. She trembled with the effort of containing her rage. The longer she stood thus, the brighter the blade grew until it was too painful to look at, but she would not, could not, turn away. The growl in her throat became a scream so terrible, any who heard it would bolt in terror. Anyone that is, but the Bladesman.

The door to the room opened and he entered, shielding his eyes against the brightness. He wore a priest's robe and held another in his arms. Cyanne looked through him as if he didn't exist. He tried to move forward, but found himself unable to advance or even speak.

He waited, crouching in the doorway, until the blue light faded. The spell was broken.

"Put it down, Cyanne."

She did not understand the urgency in his voice, but complied anyway. He closed the door behind him and moved toward her. The sword's blue flame still danced in her eyes.

"Are you all right?"

She looked puzzled for a second, as if she didn't understand the question. Why shouldn't she be? It took her time to answer, as if she'd forgotten how to communicate with words. When she finally did, her voice was hoarse and much deeper than it had been.

"Never better."

He didn't understand what had happened, though he had to assume it was more of Iorana's doings. He was helpless against the power of the gods. He approached, holding the robe before him.

"Here," he said. "Tonight, we hunt Assassins."

The Fortress-Temple was a large, imposing structure made entirely of black stone. It could have almost been a shadow of the Gondylarian palace. The Temple was the dominant structure on Torlyn. Even from Goldport it could be seen, though it was quite a distance away.

The moon was already high in the sky by the time they arrived. Priests and Priestesses came and went freely. Here on their own island, the Assassins did not fear attack. It was easy for Cyanne and the Bladesman to gain entrance to the Temple. That there were so many foreign clergy on the island made infiltration that much easier. They made their way into the Temple proper, weapons concealed beneath the loose robes. Cyanne insisted on taking Lordsblade and while she didn't don the shard, she had it on her person. The Bladesman carried his own weapons, and, as an afterthought, took the Horn of Tenithior as well. He wore the Gauntlet of Teleportation on his right hand.

They moved slowly and confidently among those assembled, until they chanced upon a largely deserted passage. After making certain no one was looking, they ducked inside. If they were going to be hunting, they needed to get away from the herd.

They had no idea where they were, or where they were heading. At first, it didn't seem likely they would find anyone. Then a priestess appeared further down the corridor. As she approached, the Bladesman moved forward to meet her. When possible, he would try to keep himself between the Duchess and danger.

When the priestess was beside him, he drew a dagger and slit her throat. He made certain to push the body away from him, so the blood wouldn't stain his robes. Cyanne never stopped walking. He hurried to catch up to her.

A priest turned the corner right in front of her. Cyanne slashed, decapitating him with a single stroke. When Kestryl reached her side, he studied her. Luckily, she had struck her opponent with sufficient force to knock him backwards. Otherwise, her robes would have been stained with blood, which would put their next victim immediately on guard.

He watched as she stepped over the body and kept walking. Though the blue fire had faded from her eyes several hours ago, she was not the same woman he had encountered a year ago in Journ. Whether the change had been caused by Tanrif's death or her experience with Lordsblade, he could not say.

They continued that way for some time. He took out two and Cyanne another three, before the distant sound of alarm bells filled the hallways. One of the bodies must have been discovered. It would no longer be easy.

Still, they killed three more priests between the two of them before they came upon a party of Assassins.

Even Cyanne, single-minded as she was, knew they couldn't win such an engagement. They turned and fled.

The Bladesman would have felt far more confident if they knew where they were going. Twice, they opened doors and ran through them and once they descended a flight of stairs. There the maze of corridors was even more complex. They ran as fast as they could, but the sound of pursuit never diminished. Soon, they found themselves traveling down a long corridor. The Bladesman prayed it wasn't a dead end.

The straight section allowed them to increase their speed, but it made no difference. They could not seem to gain any ground. The corridor ended at a stout wooden door. Cyanne pushed it open and stopped, staring.

It was a storeroom full of barrels, shelves of food and bags of grain. There was no other exit. Behind them, the sound of approaching Assassins rose in volume until they could hear nothing else.

The Grand Master sat in his study. While he had been disappointed with Ezewdra's attitude, he did not dwell on it. The man was still the High Priest and should have been beyond reproach. His own reaction was far more troublesome than Ezewdra's.

He busied himself reading the reports brought to him by the Assassins of the Dominan borderlands. Reports he almost never received. There was nothing unexpected in them, but it was good to stay in touch with what was happening in the world.

The sound of alarm bells brought him quickly to his feet. Already, there was pounding on his door. That the Assassin opened it without awaiting a reply, indicated the gravity of the situation.

"What's going on?"

"Some sort of invasion, sir. We don't know who is attacking or how many there are, but they have already accounted for a number of deaths."

The Grand Master scowled. An invasion? Who would be fool enough to attack them here? As he raced down the corridor, he caught sight of the High Priest, surrounded by lesser members of the clergy.

Ezewdra remained calm, instructing those around him. Apparently he had not lost his edge. When the last priest had left, Ezewdra turned to him.

"So it begins. Who would dare such an attack?"

"You can't be suggesting what I think you are."

"I suggest nothing. Can you recall a time when this Temple has been assaulted? I can't, and I'm somewhat older than you. We will fight, but we cannot win. Our only consolation, if you could call it that, is maybe we can take Tanrif with us."

Without another word, the High Priest turned and walked away. The Grand Master watched until he was out of sight.

The Bladesman leaned against the wall, feeling the weight of defeat. They would die in the Fortress-Temple of Sarith. Though they had cost the Assassins, they had not cost them enough. Not nearly enough.

Having nowhere else to go, they had entered the storeroom. Fortunately, there was a bar on the door, and they had enough time to drop it in place before their pursuers arrived. Not that it would help. The end result would be the same.

The Assassins would wait outside, while one of their number went off in search of an ax. However long it took, trapped as they were, there was nothing they could do.

Kestryl even tried using the Gauntlet of Teleportation. He stared at his hand and tried to picture the palace at Gondylar. He prayed to Sheba. When that failed he prayed to Iorana for the first time in his life. He was startled when Cyanne spoke.

"It won't work. Iorana controls the gauntlet. If she can purchase the lives of a few more Assassins with our deaths, she will."

He studied her. The anger was still there. He had no doubt when the door finally did fall inward, she would take at least one of them with her. It was not the worst way to die.

Rhythmic thumping against the door told them one of the Assassins had returned with an ax. Soon it

would be all over. Perhaps, it was for the best.

He felt something under him and was almost too tired to feel for what it was. He would have ignored it, had it been causing him less discomfort. He reached down and wrapped his hand around the Horn of Tenithior. What had Tanrif told him? If the Horn was blown at the time of greatest need, help would arrive. It seemed unlikely, but there was nothing else to do.

He placed his lips to the Horn. The last time they'd heard it was the night Cyanne took the throne. The sound that emerged this time was completely different. For all that it was a single note, it sounded as if he were playing a charge.

From beyond the door resounded the roar of thunder. Outside, the sound of chopping stopped only to be replaced by sounds of battle. Metal rang on metal and every so often a shout or grunt was heard.

For the first time in a long time, the Bladesman began to feel hope. He looked at Cyanne. She was already on her feet, Lordsblade held ready.

He stood too, though he held his blade limply at his side, allowing his arm to rest before the coming battle. It was hard to judge how long they stood there. There was a momentary silence...then the sound of the ax on the door resumed.

Each successive thump brought him closer to the edge. He saw Cyanne lean forward expectantly, the fanatical gleam in her eyes making her seem almost possessed. Perhaps that was the truth of it. The ax blade peeked through the door. It would not be long now.

When the door did give way, it shattered completely, sending pieces of wooden plank flying in every direction. He ducked until the shower stopped, then raised his blade. Cyanne was already running forward, apparently oblivious to the fact she had received more than a fair number of cuts from flying debris. He watched as she lowered her sword. He had to look twice before he could believe his eyes.

The corridor outside was strewn with dead Assassins. In their midst, stood a blood soaked Tanrif. Behind him were more than a dozen warriors in ceremonial Gondylarian chain mail. Each held a Gondylarian battle-ax in his hand.

Cyanne moved toward the door, but wasn't looking at Tanrif.

"Sheba's Soul!"

She took a halting step and stopped again. The Bladesman followed her gaze.

The warriors parted and Dathan approached. He looked exactly as he had the day the storm claimed him. He smiled at the Bladesman.

"Well met, my friend."

The Bladesman looked at him, then Cyanne, but her lapse was over. The fire had returned to her eyes. Kestryl knelt.

"Get up, man. I am Duke no longer."

The Bladesman rose. Tanrif spoke.

"The warrior-dukes of High Gondylar are here to fight. It occurs to me only now I'm one of them." He smiled, then thought better of it. "We'd better get a move on. We don't have much time."

Cyanne nodded to her father and strode past him. Even Tanrif was no longer important. All she cared about was vengeance. Yet now that Tanrif was back, there was nothing to avenge. Cyanne should have been ecstatic, but wasn't. Kestryl believed he knew why.

Iorana guided them still. It was she who controlled Lordsblade and it was Lordsblade that controlled Cyanne. As long as that situation existed, there was nothing he could do but ride the tide of events. As he left the storage room, the Bladesman paused before Tanrif.

"After this is all over, you must tell me what it's like to be dead."
Tanrif smiled, grimly. "Before this is over, you may find out for yourself."

He walked to the front of the group, then turned to address them.

"We have not been called from death for our own benefit, but that of Iorana. As we have risen, so must we fall before this is over."

Cyanne stared at him, but didn't reply. Kestryl could tell she was itching for battle.

"The final battle is upon us. Let us fight to the last man. Let no Assassin survive." With those words, Tanrif turned and strode down the corridor. Cyanne, the Bladesman and the warrior-dukes followed. Dathan began an ancient Gondylarian battle chant and soon the others picked it up. Even Tanrif and Cyanne joined in.

One thing was certain. If the Assassins wanted to find them, they didn't have to look very far. As they chanted, the invaders moved faster. They destroyed everyone and everything in their path.

They entered a large area, open except for a dozen or so evenly spaced wooden supports. Suddenly, there were Assassin's everywhere.

The Bladesman, realizing Cyanne no longer needed his protection, darted amongst the enemy, leaving a trail of dead as he passed. Tanrif was a whirlwind, and nothing could stand against his onslaught as his ax fell again and again. Cyanne used Lordsblade as if she'd been born to the job and Assassins went down before her.

The Dukes chanted battle cries and screamed like banshees. The Assassins fought well, occasionally taking out one of the enemy, though Tanrif, Cyanne and the Bladesman seemed invincible.

More Assassins poured into the room, led by a man Tanrif instinctively knew was their leader...the Grand Master himself. He smiled and pointed his ax. The Assassin charged, teeth bared. Tanrif swung his weapon with all of his strength. The Grand Master ducked under it and the ax struck one of the support beams. The blade bit deeply into it. Tanrif pulled it out and dodged to the side. The Grand Master's blade swept past him.

"This one's mine," screamed the Grand Master and those approaching, backed off. Tanrif's next miss completely destroyed the beam. He looked up at the ceiling and knew.

He glanced at the Bladesman, but Kestryl must have already realized what he was going to do. The Bladesman fought his way closer to Cyanne. It would be up to the Gondylarian to get her out of there. The Grand Master and Tanrif fought for many minutes, neither able to gain a clear advantage. When the opportunity presented itself, Tanrif struck out at his real target.

"Forget the intruders," yelled the Grand Master. Guard the beams!"

Assassins scrambled to interpose their bodies between Tanrif and the wooden columns supporting the ceiling. Yet none of them went for him. The Grand Master had made it clear Tanrif was his, and none present dared risk his wrath.

The remaining warrior Dukes saw the way to victory. Each attacked one of the beams, while Tanrif and the Grand Master dueled. They made no effort to defend themselves. Several did significant damage, before Sarithans took them out.

The Assassins who had survived to this point, stopped fighting to watch that final confrontation. The Bladesman tried to pull Cyanne toward the stairs, but she'd have none of it. Then, the unthinkable happened. The Grand Master struck and Tanrif's weapon was torn from his grasp. Several of the Assassins cheered.

"Tanrif!" shouted Cyanne. He didn't have to turn to know what she had in mind.

"Now!" At the sound of her voice, he whirled and caught Lordsblade. He turned back to the Grand Master and smiled.

"It ends, Kestryl. Get her out of here."

The Bladesman grabbed Cyanne's arm. She jerked it away.

The Grand Master swung his sword and Tanrif brought Lordsblade to meet it. As the blades came together, a sphere of blue flame was born. The ground shook from the force of it. Walls shifted and stone fell.

"Now Kestryl!"

Tanrif's voice was all but lost above the sound of falling rock. He said more quietly, "You owe me this, Iorana."

At Tanrif's words, the Bladesman, still wearing the Gauntlet of Teleportation, wrapped his arms tightly around Cyanne. A moment later, they vanished. Tanrif turned to make certain they were gone. The Grand Master saw his opportunity.

He plunged his sword into Tanrif's stomach. Lordsblade clattered to the ground and Tanrif sank to one knee. The Assassin smiled grimly. He twisted the blade, sending a shock of pain through his victim.

"Victory is mine!"

Tanrif returned his smile. "I think not."

With those words, he slid to the floor. He reached blindly for Lordsblade and just managed to grasp its hilt with his right hand. He spoke a single word in the old tongue. Once again, blue flame erupted from the weapon.

The Grand Master caught fire and screamed, but the surviving Assassins had no time to react to this new threat, for at that moment, the ceiling buckled, taking most of the temple with it.

From the outside, it looked as if the Fortress-Temple had sunk into the ground. Those caught inside had little time to react. Unlike the Grand Master, Ezewdra wasn't even surprised when the ancient structure began to collapse around him. Outside, it was almost time for the sun to rise, but most of the Assassins would never see that sight again.

A handful may have survived, but it wouldn't make much difference. The leaders of the Brotherhood and the Priesthood had been destroyed.

The Cloud's prophecy had been fulfilled.

Epilogue

As the sun appeared on the horizon, Bone looked back to the Islands of Dawn. He had just barely made it up the stairs and out the entrance before the entire structure collapsed. With most of the central hierarchy gone, the same would happen with the Brotherhood. He laughed as he rowed from the island.

"Here lie the Sarithan Assassins," he said softly.

In the distance, large birds of prey circled what was once the Fortress-Temple. He laughed again, aware a note of hysteria had crept into the sound. It had all been for nothing.

He had created his entire life around the Brotherhood and now it was gone. There was nothing left. He had been an Assassin for so long, he didn't have any other concept for living. He knew only one thing. From now on, he would kill for his own purposes. He would answer to no one, especially Sarith.

The only small note of satisfaction left him was that Tanrif had purchased the destruction of the Brotherhood with his own life. It wasn't enough, but it was all he had.

He continued to row until the island faded from view. It would be much longer before the image would fade from his memory.

Penthor stood before the Darkdom of Vykon. Behind him, the Gondylarian army filled the barren area. Vykon had cost them too much. It was a disease in the body of High Gondylar and needed to be dealt with--before it managed to destroy the Dukedom.

It had been weeks since Cyanne's kidnapping. A long time since Tanrif and the Bladesman had set off to rescue her. They had never returned. Penthor once again sat on the Gondylarian throne. It was a responsibility he no longer wanted, but it was his and he would not shirk it.

The army was just a precaution. In fact, his own presence was completely unnecessary. His invitation to witness the destruction of Vykon had been a courtesy, nothing more.

The Council of Mages had decided the Dark One had broken one of their rules. He had gone too far. No mage was allowed to directly interfere with the running of nations. It had been that way for so long, few could remember a time when it was otherwise. There was good reason for the rule.

In the old days, when mages had been involved in the affairs of nobles, entire kingdoms had been destroyed. High Gondylar was the sole remnant of a much larger kingdom.

The involvement of mages in politics and war had cost far too much. To this day, the area to the south of the Great Dukedom was all but uninhabitable. That lesson lingered on through the centuries. The mages had rules and there were reasons for them. The Dark One of Vykon had broken them.

He turned his attention to the twelve men who stood at the cavern's entrance. They were Corithim's most powerful mages, led by Dauber Uaks himself. Together, they would be powerful enough to do what was necessary.

He watched as they moved and spoke. He had seen mages cast spells before, but had never seen such a large number work in concert. There was something hypnotic about it.

They finished the incantation. A sound like thunder magnified filled the air. He covered his ears with his hands. Around him, soldiers did the same.

Later, he learned the echoes of that sound were heard all the way back in Gondylar. In spite of the roaring in his head, he forced himself to watch as the cavern entrance collapsed in a cloud of dust that took the best part of an hour to dissipate.

When the air finally cleared, the Darkdom of Vykon was sealed, leaving no mark it had ever existed. He felt a pang of worry. What if Cyanne was still alive in there or even Tanrif? Impossible, of course. They had risked it all and lost. So had High Gondylar.

He turned his horse and began the long ride back. There were still things to do. Domina was still there. There were treaties to be signed and territories to defend. He had once wanted to be Duke, but that had been long ago, in a different world. He would do his duty, but knew the throne could never really be his.

When he returned to the city, he would proclaim this day a holiday. In some small way, perhaps, that would commemorate Cyanne, Tanrif and even the Bladesman. One day out of the year to honor them for their sacrifice. It was pitifully insignificant, but it was all he could do.

Penthor, the Duke of High Gondylar, started back toward the capital. The time for mourning was over. He had a Dukedom to run.

As the sun appeared on the horizon, the only sound was Cyanne's sobs. The Bladesman frowned so he wouldn't cry. The Sarithan Assassins had been destroyed, but at what price to High Gondylar. Losing Tanrif the first time had been hard enough on her.

At least, they were home. He recognized the area. They were back in High Gondylar, not far from the suite of caverns once occupied by his friend and mentor Dauber Uaks. He looked back at Cyanne and for the first time saw her as something more than the Duchess...and something less.

"I'm sorry, Cyanne."

She stopped crying and looked at him. "I'm sure you are. That's what happens, isn't it? Bad things happen and suddenly everyone is sorry. Sorry doesn't mean anything. How could you?"

"How could I what?"

"How could you take me away from Tanrif?"

Kestryl was stunned. "M'lady...Cyanne, there was no choice."

"There is always a choice."

"But the ceiling was going to collapse!"

"We could have saved him, Kestryl. Instead we deserted him. I'll never forgive you for that. Never."

She spoke the word with such finality it struck the Bladesman as almost a physical blow.

"I'll just have to wait for him."

"Wait for him?"

"Of course. What else would I do?"

"Cyanne, Tanrif is dead."

"How do you know?"

Kestryl opened his mouth and closed it again. He was certain the Duke lay buried beneath the ruins of the Fortress-Temple of the Sarithan, but how could he prove it?

"I'm sorry, but nobody, not even Tanrif, could survive against such odds."

"You said the same thing when the fire viper bit him. You asked me to desert him then too."

The Bladesman sighed. It was an argument he knew he would never win.

"Very well. Then at least let us start toward Gondylar. On foot, it'll take us forever to get there."

"We're not going to Gondylar."

"What?"

"It's over, Kestryl. I'm not Duchess material. I'm certainly never going to sit on the throne again. Let Penthor have it. I'm sure he'll do fine."

"But you're the rightful heir!"

"Yes I am. And I'm giving you a direct order. I never want to hear about the Gondylarian throne again. At least, not until Tanrif returns. Are you clear on this?" "Yes, M'lady."

"Good. As long as we understand each other."

The Bladesman shifted his gaze to Cyanne's stomach. Inside grew the seed that was the last of Dathan's line. Cyanne would never again sit on the Gondylarian throne, nor would he mention it in her presence, but as long as the line continued there was still hope.

The Bladesman knelt, bowed his head and whispered a prayer to Sheba.

"Let me live long enough to see Cyanne's child on the throne of High Gondylar. If you grant me that one wish, I will never ask anything of you again."

When he looked up, Cyanne was smiling, no doubt thinking of the day when Tanrif would return to her.

Here ends Book One of the Chronicles of High Gondylar. The story continues with *Consigned to Darkness* and concludes with *The Price of Freedom*.