

A red dragon with white horns is shown in profile, flying towards the left. The dragon's body is a vibrant red with some darker, almost purple, scales on its wings and tail. It has several white, curved horns of varying lengths. The background is a soft, yellowish-green with a smoky or misty texture. The title 'Dragons Unremembered' is written in a white, serif font at the top of the image.

# Dragons Unremembered

Volume I of the Carandir Saga

David A. Wimsett

# For hundreds of generations, the evil slept

Baras they named him, the dragon who betrayed all. He lay confined under a spell woven eons before by the magical crown of the monarchy of Carandir. In his days of power, he could have swept away the enchanted threads. He commanded armies of sorcerers named the Barasha, the Servants of Baras, along with discontented dragons and demons to vie for control of the world with Ilidel and Jorondel, mother and father of dragons.

Subdued and impotent, he dreamed of what might have been. The dreams filled him with a hatred of all things that walked alive beneath the sun, for he would never know such again. At the same time, he was consumed with rage for all things that died and so departed this world, for that escape was not his to have. Most of all, they filled him with a seething hunger for vengeance against Carandir and all its people.

Endlessly the dreams wove, until a voice came to him; one he should have not heard, for the wizards had told them they were all destroyed. From beyond the fog, a servant called, "Master. The time has come."

# DRAGONS UNREMEMBERED

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Cape Split Press

Nova Scotia, Canada

<http://www.capesplitpress.com>

An imprint of Your Story 2 Video, Ltd.

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ISBN 978-1-7750890-5-6

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For my son, Ronald

**Other works by David A. Wimsett**

Beyond the Shallow Bank  
Something on My Mind

# PROLOGUE

He knew the men hunted him as he watched them pole their boat slowly through the swamp. They wore red robes with hoods drawn over their heads. It made a strange sight in the stiflingly humid heat.

The draping limbs of a willow screened him from view as he raised his head above the side of his own small boat for a better look.

“Get down, Nur,” whispered a young woman crouching behind him. “They’ll spot us.”

“They can’t see me, Willa.” Nur stared at the second boat. “Father of Dragons, they’ve got Tib.”

Willa sat up. “What are we going to do?”

Nur said, “We’ll follow their boat and see where they take him. Then, we’ll pole back and have my father alert the garrison.”

“Were they swamper?”

“Don’t call them that, and no. They were just men. Come on. They’re getting too far ahead.”

“Who do you think they are?” said Willa.

“Probably smugglers. We must have found their secret route.”

“Your father’s going to skin us alive.”

“Stop thinking about yourself for once. Just pray to the dragons that they don’t hurt Tib.”

Nur poled the little boat as quietly as possible. The other craft picked up speed and moved ahead. Soon, it faded into the mist. Willa shook her head. “We’ve lost them.”

They heard wood scrape against rock. Nur poled in the direction of the sound. Slowly, the hazy outline of an island emerged from the mist. An empty boat was beached on its bank.

Willa pulled on Nur’s arm. “Let’s go back for your father.”

“We have to make certain it’s them.”

“Are you mad? They’ll catch us too.”

“I’ll land behind those reeds.”

A square, three story tower appeared out of the haze as they approached. Nur put in at a muddy bank and they crept up to the keep. Willa ran her hands along the stone wall. It was smooth and free of any lichen or moss.

They entered and found no trace of Tib or the men from the boat. The second and third stories were also empty. They climbed to the top and looked all about. The island was deserted.

Willa said, “There must have been a second boat on the other side of the island.”

“Most likely. Let’s get back.”

Nur and his cousins, Willa and her younger brother Tib, had been in the swamp since dawn in search of turtle eggs, a rare delicacy among the rich and powerful in the monarchy of Carandir. A catch of eggs was worth a tidy sum in the capital city of Meth where Willa and Tib lived.

They had traveled for weeks to visit Nur and his family in Rascalla, one of the eighteen baronies of Carandir. It sat at the edge of the eastern swampland at the border of the monarchy.

Two years before, Nur had also lived in Meth when he studied to join an order of men known as the Kyar, scholars who preserved the ancient writings left behind by the now vanished wizards. The monastic life had not appealed to him and he returned home to Rascalla.

The caution Nur and Willa had initially felt evaporated as they walked back down the stairs. Willa said, "Who do you think put this up in the middle of nowhere?"

"It's probably been here since the Dragon Wars. Before they vanished, the wizards used such strongholds to imprison demons."

Willa laughed. "Don't tell me you still believe in dragons and wizards."

"I'm just reciting the histories."

"Ancient lies, you mean."

"Well, a lot of people in the east believe in the dragons. You need to be more careful of what you say out here."

Willa shook her head. "Come on. You've lived in Meth. Do you honestly think there is a Father of Dragons named Jorondel and a Mother of Dragons names Ilidel? You can't believe they formed the world with magic and fought an evil dragon named Baras."

Nur hesitated for a moment. "Well, yes. I do."

"You have to be joking."

"There are powers beyond us. Willa. You can't deny that."

"I'm a city engineer. I can deny anything that can't be proven. Jorondel, Ilidel and Baras are just folklore, symbols of good and evil."

"They are histories. There are uncounted books and scrolls in the Kyar's vaults that chronicle the Dragon Wars and the beginnings of Carandir."

"But, who wrote them, and why?"

"What about Avar the Great? Do you deny that he subdued Baras with the power of his crown before forming Carandir?"

Willa laughed. They had had this argument several times before. "Oh, he founded Carandir all right. That's actual history. But, saying his crown was magical is ridiculous. He was just the first king. The crown is an artifact, not a talisman"

Nur frowned. "You've never been in the palace and stared into the eyes of the dragon crested crown. I have, and there's something about it."

Willa raised her hand. "Shh."

They peered down the stairway to the first floor. A section of wall stood open like a door. A hooded man wearing a crimson robe emerged. He pressed five stones in a pattern. The door closed and he walked out of the keep.

They moved cautiously down the stairs. Willa peered into the swamp. “Whoever he was, I saw him pole his boat away. Let’s get out of here.”

Nur inspected the section of wall that had opened. “I remember reading something about this. There are stones in the wall that act as a key.”

“Why do you want to get in?”

Nur probed the stone with his fingers. “Tib might be locked inside.” He pressed the stones in the same order as he had seen the robed man do.

There was an audible snap and the secret door opened. A roughhewn corridor led steadily down. Burning torches were spaced along its wall that gave off light without heat or smoke. Nur and Willa entered and the door closed behind them.

There was something about the red robed men and the smokeless, heatless torches that left Nur with a vague sense of dread, though he wasn’t certain why.

The tunnel descended steeply. They turned a bend and saw a large cavern below them. Nur held Willa back. A set of steps led down to the cavern floor. Dozens of red robed men stood before braziers where smoky fires burned. One man sat on a throne with a hood pulled over his head.

Tib knelt next to the throne. Two other red robed men held him by the arms. The man on the throne spoke words that were lost in the cavern. Tib shook his head.

Nur pointed back the way they had come. Willa stood still as if paralyzed. Nur shoved her and she backed away a pace, then turned and ran quickly up the steps. Nur followed.

As they rounded a bend, they saw another man coming toward them. He wore the blue and white uniform of a Carandirian naval officer. With relief, Nur recognized him as Lieutenant Petstra. He had spoken with the officer several times at the palace.

“Lieutenant Petstra. Thank the dragons. Someone’s captured my cousin.” It was then that Nur saw three crimson robed men standing behind Petstra.

The officer drew his sword. “Walk back down the stairs.”

Nur and Willa turned and descended to the cavern floor where they were grabbed and forced to kneel beside Tib. Nur looked up at the throne where an emaciated man with pale white skin sat beside a smoking brazier. A sweet, thick stench permeated the air.

Petstra knelt. “Lord Reshna, more intruders.”

Reshna studied them for a moment before pointing to Nur. “I sense wizard magic. Who has sent you to spy on the Barasha?”

Nur now recalled books and scrolls he had read when he studied to become a Kyar. They told of men who wore blood red robes and used sorcery to work minor spells. These sorcerers also knew the secret of binding demons and forcing them to perform true magic in exchange for living souls.

The men had been taught these arts by Baras himself, and so, had taken the name Barasha, Servants of Baras. *But, this is impossible*, Nur thought. Every book and scroll he had ever seen told of how the Barasha were utterly destroyed by the wizards.

Tib gave a whimper. Willa stared up at Reshna.

Nur was sick with fear, but managed to say, “No one sent us. We were only hunting turtle eggs.”

Willa nodded her head, “We won’t betray your secret. Let us go.”

Reshna turned to Petstra. "Were you successful in the palace?"

"Yes, Lord Reshna. I was made privy to many secrets. The Queen has conceived twins, as you foresaw. I spoke the incantation to hide the second child from all examination."

Reshna said, "We have but to wait until the birth for confusion or corruption. I will now call upon our master." He looked to Tib. "That one."

Tib was dragged to the brazier next to Reshna's throne. Two Barasha priests held him while a third slit his throat. Tib gave a gurgling cry as blood splashed the burning coals.

Nur tasted bile as he fought not to vomit. Barasha priests chanted in unison. The smoke of the brazier twisted and congealed to form a round, green body. It was half the size of a person with short clawed hands and no legs. Its head consisted mostly of a mouth with jagged teeth.

The demon said, "Who summons me?"

"I, Reshna, Lord High Priest of the Servants of Baras. I wish to speak with my master."

The smoke wavered and then congealed again. "Your master sleeps behind the spell of the dragon crest. It holds the power of Jorondel and Ilidel."

"You have taken the offering. You cannot refuse."

"I will not approach the spell."

"Others before you have opened his mind to me. Will you suffer the wrath of Baras? He dreams only of hatred. For now, those dreams are consumed with the generations of Avar. Do you wish his attention as well?"

"What care is it to me? He will sleep for eternity."

"No. The crown itself will release him."

"Impossible. Only Avar's heir can remove it from the crystal case."

Reshna poured red powder into his hand and held it up to the demon. "It has begun."

The demon examined the powder. "It will cost two more souls."

Reshna pointed to Nur and Willa.

# BOOK I

*The Barony of Fellant  
Western Carandir  
Five Thousand Two Hundred and Eighth Year of Avar*

# CHAPTER ONE

Dek, Baron of Rascalla, studied the soldiers and courtiers assembled around the large table. He sat in the council chamber of Etera, Baron of Fellant, and gauged each face for signs of who would support The King and Queen if civil war erupted in Carandir.

He sat next to Haram Avar, King of Carandir and descendant of Avar the Great. Dek squirmed in his chair that was uncomfortably small for his muscular frame. His dark beard itched, but he refrained from scratching it.

The room was silent. Dek looked past The King to Vara, Queen of Carandir and daughter of Etera. The fingers of her hand rested on her belly now swollen near to term with pregnancy.

Vara leaned forward. "Father. Do you desire to bring open warfare upon your own grandchild?"

"It is not I who threatens the monarchy, daughter." Etera raised his head slightly so that his long, flat nose reminded Dek of a hatchet ready to fall. "It is not I who threatens to dilute royal blood. This obscene game has played for two generations. I won't have it inherited by a third. The council must be purged." Etera looked directly at Dek. "The King must remove these descendants of traitorous shop keepers, this new nobility."

Dek placed his hand on the hilt of his sword and half rose from his seat. Though Etera spoke the words softly, Dek, and everyone in the room, knew the insult they carried. New nobility. Uncouth. Usurpers.

Etera's line extended back to the formation of Carandir. Dek's lineage ran back just two generations to a time when Haram's grandfather elevated the heads of six powerful merchant families to nobility and created baronies for them.

Dek sat down slowly, the heat of rage still burning his face, as he kept his eyes on Etera.

Haram gave Dek a sideways glance, and then looked across the table. "Baron Etera. You will accompany us to the palace at Meth with no more than twenty-five retainers, there to meet in a council of all eighteen, equal barons."

"Majesty, I am not prepared to travel to Meth or any other city at this time. If there must needs be a council, the twelve true houses may meet here in this chamber."

Vara's voice cut across the room, clear and controlled. "Father. If you do not ride before the morning ends, I will withdraw from this house."

A chill ran down Dek's back at the proclamation. His horror was reflected on the faces of all in the hall, except for Haram.

Etera looked to the Haram, and then to Vara. “Without a house you forsake your own legitimacy, daughter; your own royal status. How can you expect to bear an heir to the throne without parentage yourself?”

“I am Queen. I require no further legitimacy.”

“If you deny your lineage you deny your right to the throne.”

Haram leaned against the arm of his chair as though he were watching a fencing match. Vara held her gaze. “Any questions concerning my child’s legitimacy must be answered by the full council. But, know this, father. Even were I denied the throne, I would rather withdraw and raise my child as a commoner than to see this monarchy torn apart by pettiness and greed.”

Haram stood, clasped his hands together and touched them to his forehead. All assembled came to their feet and touched their foreheads as well, for this was the sign of the covenant with the dragons and showed respect and reverence for Ilidel and Jorondel, Mother and Father of Dragons.

Haram took Vara’s hand. “We will have your answer before brightnail, Lord Baron.”

A trumpet sounded. Captain Yetig, commander of The King’s guard, stood and drew his sword. Dek knew that if there was trouble, Yetig was the one to get them out of it. The Baron found the captain openly ambitious and sometimes arrogant. Still, Yetig was the best officer Dek had ever known. Other commanders were able to hold the desert raiders from Karaken at bay. Only Yetig had driven them back across the southern border and regained territory stolen centuries before.

Captain Yetig led a procession of guards followed by The King and Queen. Behind them walked a man wearing brown robes of coarsely spun material and a woman clothed in emerald green robes. Other than white rope belts around their waists, neither wore any adornment.

To see them for the first time, Dek might have thought they were no more than fifty. Yet, he knew each had lived for well over two centuries. The woman was Mistress Telasec, eldest of an order of women healers called the Daro who tended the sick of both body and heart. The man was Master Orane, chief of the Kyar, the order of scholars that Nur had once studied with at the palace. The Daro and the Kyar kept faith in the dragons alive and held the final vestiges of magic left behind by the wizards who had vanished eons before.

Last to leave was Dek. He bowed formally to Etera who clenched his jaw and narrowed his gaze. Dek smiled and left the chambers.

Outside, he moved quickly down the hall. “Master Orane.”

The Kyar scholar stopped and turned.

Dek looked around to make certain no one else was close. “Did you expect that?”

Orane shook his balding head. “I did not, though I am certain The King did. It can be the only reason The Queen would agree to travel this far from the palace so late in her term.”

Dek had liked Orane from the moment they met. As with most of the eastern families, Dek was deeply religious. Unlike the Kyar and Daro, the majority of those in the western lands paid little more than cursory heed to the dragons and called the stories of them myth and legend, as Willa had. Yet, even without this, Dek found Orane bright and witty, quick to laugh and easy to talk with.

The two men reached the chambers set aside for Dek and his entourage. Guards dressed in the brown and tan uniforms of Rascalla stood at attention. They touched their foreheads with the hilt of their swords. Dek nodded his head, then turned to Orane, “Do you think Etera will answer in time, my friend?”

Orane looked to a south facing window. He placed his thumbs together, stretched his fingers widely apart and aimed them toward the zenith. The sun shone between the second span of fingers from the left.

This was an ancient way of telling time. Starting to the left of the little finger, there were five spans to the morning, five to the afternoon, five to the evening and another five for night. By long tradition, the noon hour was called brightnail. The exact length of a span varied with the seasons as the days lengthened or shortened. More sophisticated sand dials and water clocks had been introduced long before that divided the day and night into twenty equal parts. Yet, the periods they measured were still referred to as spans and many people continued to use the old ways.

Orane lowered his hands. “Baron Etera has two spans to decide. The Queen has certainly placed him in a difficult position. He worked very hard to become grandfather to the heir. It is a prize he won’t relinquish easily.”

The two men said farewell and Dek entered the suite of rooms set aside for him. Seven Rascallans busied themselves within the confined space of the common room. Dek was certain the cramped quarters were an intended insult by Etera.

The Baron’s steward bowed. “Refreshments are prepared, My Lord.”

“Thank you, Kanna. Bring them to the inner chamber along with the dispatches. Then pack everything for travel.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

The refreshments and dispatches were brought to an even smaller room barely large enough for a bed and writing desk. A single, narrow window cast dim light into the space. Dek lit an oil lamp. Kanna set out wine and fruit.

The Baron broke a wax seal on the leather pouch and poured the papers out onto the desk. He muddled through the mundane matters of merchants suing each other and petitions for offices.

One report noted that there was still no news of Nur, the young man who had disappeared in the swamps with his cousins eight months earlier. His father was a prominent merchant and Dek knew the family well.

This turned his thoughts to his wife, Jea, Baroness of Rascalla, and their infant daughter, Mirjel.

As he was about to put the documents away, he found a note written in Jea’s elegant hand.

*Dearest,*

*Trade is brisk. There hasn’t been a single caravan raid since you left. The treaty seems to be holding.*

*I miss you so. Mirjel is starting to pull herself up. She coos and babbles and I think she actually said a word the other day. I wish you were home. Hurry back.*

*Love from both of us,*

Dek ran his fingers slowly over the paper, then folded it and tucked it into his jerkin.

A knock sounded, followed by Kanna's voice. "My Lord. The King bids you attend him."

Dek walked quickly to Haram's chambers accompanied by two guards. He was met at the door by Captain Yetig. "My Lord Baron, The King bids me to escort you into his presence." The words implied that Dek's guards were to remain outside. The Baron nodded his head, handed his own sword to his senior guard and followed Yetig.

Inside, Haram sat in a padded chair with a goblet of wine in his hand. He had removed his doublet and reclined in breeches and a linen shirt whose laces were undone. He motioned to a decanter on a table. "Please. Join me, Dek. That will be all for now, Captain."

Yetig bowed. "As you command, sire."

Dek poured a goblet of wine. Haram stood and walked to a sphere of crystal an arm's length in diameter that rested atop a wooden box carved with the images of flying dragons. On the front panel of the box was a small drawer and above it a keyhole.

Within the sphere was the crown of Carandir. This was a steel cap with four thin bands of gold running vertically, dividing it into quarters. Across the front was a silver crest formed in the shape of a leaping dragon whose body was long and sinuous. The face was round. The wings appeared to be as sheer as lace.

Haram ran his hand over the crystal. "What is the crown, Dek?"

"It is many things, Highness; a symbol of your Majesty's authority, a reminder of your lineage, the central..."

"Yes, yes. I know all the official definitions. But, what is it really? To you?"

Dek looked at the crown, then back to The King. "Carandir itself, My Lord, the breath and life of the monarchy and all who dwell here. It holds at bay the great evil and delivers the prosperity we know."

Haram smiled. "There are some who would call you a fool for expressing such antiquated ideas."

Dek felt his face flush. "Did his Majesty summon me here to do so?"

Haram poured more wine. "Far from it. I asked you to accompany me on this mission because you do know what the crown truly stands for. You are highly respected in the council among both the eastern and the western houses."

Dek noticed that Haram used the polite distinction for the merchant families. "I have no influence with Etera, Majesty."

"Nor does anyone else, except Vara. It was a terrible gamble to bring her here. But, know this. She didn't just agree to this plan, she conceived it and will carry it out to the end."

The King sipped his wine. "There are five souls in Carandir who I trust without question; Queen Vara, Mistress Telasec, Master Orane, Captain Yetig and you."

Dek sank to one knee. "Majesty."

He felt Haram's hand on his shoulder. "Arise, Baron of Rascalla. This is a time to speak frankly. I must have the full support of the eastern houses. Etera holds much sway in the council. With the eastern houses united I can find enough support to quell a rebellion."

Dek saw a terrible weight reflected in The King's face. "Does his Majesty expect civil war?"

Haram gave a half smile that fell into a frown. "We live in a world consumed with gaining wealth and power, my friend. Thoughts of Carandir and the good of its people are lost to many of our merchants and leaders. How many today believe the tales of dragons or wizards or the great plan for harmony for all of humankind? People will do anything when a nation loses its moral bearing. Evil can never be defeated, Dek, only contained. That takes never ending vigilance."

A knock sounded. Haram said, "Enter."

Yetig stepped in. "Majesty. Mistress Telasec requests your presence."

Haram laced up his shirt and threw on his doublet. "See that our men are prepared to ride, Captain."

"As you command, Majesty."

Haram left Dek and Yetig alone in the room. Dek ran his hands across the crystal sphere. "Do you believe in the power of the crown, Captain?"

"I do not understand your question, My Lord."

"Do you believe in the wizards; the dragons; the magic of the crown?"

"I am a soldier, My Lord, not a Kyar. I serve the Crown. Others will have to answer questions of religion."

Dek poured himself more wine. "Yes, you serve the Crown. But, you agree with Etera that there should be only twelve houses in the council."

Yetig held himself at attention, looking neither left nor right. "My loyalties are to The King and Queen, if that's what you're questioning. If you are asking my political views, I have none. A soldier can't afford them."

Dek took a generous sip. "Oh, I don't doubt your loyalty, Captain. Still, everyone has an opinion. Tell me, if you had served The King's grandfather, how would you have handled the merchant uprising? What would you have done when they shut down trade? How would you have answered their marches in the streets?"

Yetig turned his head toward Dek with a slightest play of a smile on his lips. "As I would answer any traitor, with steel and blood, My Lord." Yetig gave a shallow bow and left the room.

Etera stared out the window toward the sun that was quickly approaching brightnail. Yapell, his chief minister, stood behind him. Etera said, "Vara was always headstrong. I should never have indulged her as a child. If only her mother hadn't died so young Vara would have been raised more gentile as fits a young girl."

"You have done well, My Lord. She is The Queen, an equal partner on the throne."

"But, she forgets her duty to her father. I had thought that when she became Queen she would act in the best interest of her family, instead of betraying me. What counsel have you, Yapell?"

"You must travel, My Baron. She does not make idle threats."

"I know that well, but I won't walk blindly into Meth and cede my goal." He paced back and forth. "Many friends owe me favors. The King thinks to outflank me, but he has made many enemies and I hear their whispers. If I organize the true houses behind me I can force his hand. The Carandir army can't stand against all the baronies, the rightful baronies." He stopped and looked to Yapell. "I can do nothing

while I ride and you must ride with me or they will become suspicious. Send word to all my allies before they can be summoned to the palace stating that I need support in the capital to eradicate the new nobility. Tell them to be ready for war.”

Word came that Baron Etera would ride to Meth. He was allowed to take thirty retainers instead of twenty five as a consolation to his pride.

The Queen was tended by Telasec and Mistress Neera, a senior Daro, who joined her in the royal carriage. Haram chose to ride on horseback, as did Dek. Etera rode in an ornate carriage drawn by four horses. The company departed at brightnail.

Whereas the palace at Meth stood next to a bustling center of commerce, Etera’s stronghold was surrounded by league upon league of fields and orchards, the true might of Fellant. The royal procession moved north past small farm houses and grand estates. The road brought them through the city of Pontelara where citizens turned out from slate and thatch roofed houses with streamers and garlands to cheer their King and Queen.

Before long, they left the farmlands behind and entered a thickly wooded forest of oak and ash and birch. Dek breathed in the fresh scent of the forest that was so different from the humidity of the Eastern Rascalla which bordered swampland. Scouts fanned out ahead, behind and to the side. Yetig moved up and down the line. The blue coat and white breeches of his uniform shone brilliantly under a sunny sky.

The march continued forward with the plodding of hooves and the ringing of livery. Dek considered how best to approach the six eastern houses. Though they shared common interests, some still thought of themselves as competing merchants instead of barons.

Baroness Quib would be the most trouble. She was a woman who saw no further than the last caravan and wasn’t above dealing with smugglers. Though Dek had no proof, he suspected Quib of forming an alliance with some of the tribes who inhabited the southern regions of the swamp. Unlike their northern cousins, they were territorial and war like. They had raided the villages of their cousins in the north even before Carandir had settled the lands near the edge of the swamps.

Many people, particularly in the west, referred to them as *swampers* and considered them to be dim witted savages. The name they called themselves was *Sinkaraka*, which meant “people of the root.” Short and thin, with reddish hair, slightly olive skin and hazel eyes, it was uncertain where they originally came from. Some of the Sinkarakans living in the southern swamps were as tall as a person.

Caravans passed unscathed through Quib’s lands while those traveling just outside her borders suffered heavy losses. Quib called the raids bad luck. Still, her troops were never able to capture the raiders once they crossed into her territory.

The procession approached tall foothills whose tops were shrouded in clouds. The party slowly wound its way up a series of switchbacks that led to a pass. The ground at the summit was damp.

Dek looked out across a wide valley. The road continued down the other side and skirted in and out of the forest as it headed north toward the swift flowing Lentar River. He saw a second road leading northeast that was overgrown with trees and brush. He had not noticed it when he rode toward Etera’s stronghold.

As the party descended, the ground became wetter. Dek looked back to the carriage carrying The Queen and hoped the wheels would not get stuck in mud.

An advance scout galloped back to the column. "Highness. The bridge is down."

The King raised his hand for a halt. "Captain Yetig, guard The Queen. Lieutenant, bring two men. Dek. Orane. Ride with us."

The lieutenant and his men led them around a bend to the south bank of the Lentar River. A sturdy bridge had spanned the wide waterway only two days before. Now, all that remained were stone piers on either bank. The water was filled with silt and boulders. Trees along the bank were scarred and broken.

Orane dismounted and inspected the ground. "It appears the bridge was washed out in a storm."

Dek said, "There was no sign of such a deluge at Etera's stronghold."

"The weather can vary dramatically between valleys in Fellant."

"That may be true, but we should have had some sense of a storm this big." Dek looked upstream. "Perhaps the river has become silted and we can cross."

He walked along the bank. The further he got from the bridge piers, the less damage he saw. The river ran swift and deep with nowhere to ford.

As he turned to walk back, something bright caught his eye. It was a swatch of red material snagged on a thorn bush. He examined the cloth, then tossed it aside.

Dek returned to The King and reported his findings.

Haram said, "Master Orane, can we rebuild the bridge?"

"With time, Highness."

"How about rafts?" said Dek.

Orane shook his head. "Rafts can't be trusted on a river this swift."

They rode back and formed a council. Etera said, "The bridge will have to be rebuilt, Highness. We can return to my estates and send engineers."

Dek said, "Highness, I am sure I saw a road going off to the northeast as we descended the hills. Orane, do we have any maps of this region?"

Etera shook his head. "Do not bother, Highness. I know the road Baron Dek speaks of. It has not been used in centuries. In my youth I traveled down it for a while to see what was there."

"Does it cross the river?" said Haram.

"It was overgrown then. It must be impassable now."

Haram turned his gaze directly on Etera. "Does it cross the river?"

Etera bristled slightly at The King's sharp tone. "The trail winds through the forest, Highness, and reaches an abandoned keep on the river's banks. There was an old bridge there. The path bends back and connects to the main road beyond the river."

"Then we shall take this road and see."

"Highness! If this one has been thrown down, what chance is there for the other? Let us be sensible. My engineers can have the bridge rebuilt in a week. It's the only choice." Etera hid his excitement over the good fortune that had just befallen him. There was now plenty of time for the other traditional barons to prepare.

Haram stood silent for a moment. "Let us convene in half a span." He walked away from the council as Dek and Etera continued to argue.

Telasec followed The King. "Highness. It was dangerous to bring The Queen at all. Taking her down an unknown road places her in grave peril. It would be best if she returned to her father's stronghold until the bridge can be rebuilt. You could go on ahead."

"I have weighed this and fear for her welfare as well. But, the birth is weeks away and we must reach Meth quickly. I'm certain Etera is maneuvering in the shadows in preparation to strike. Vara is my greatest strength. Her voice in the council is respected. We must attend the Council of Barons together. If she returns with Baron Etera more blocks will be placed in her way until she gives birth in Fellant. The opposing barons would claim the child and gather strength to topple the monarchy."

Telasec made the sign of the covenant.

Haram returned to the council. "We will take the overgrown path."

The old road was as bad as Etera had said. They cleared brush and cut trees. Yetig and his men were forced to push the wagons forward several times when they got stuck in vegetation and clinging mud.

The third span past brightnail came. Dek knew they should have already been aboard ship and sailing east to Meth. As the sun descended toward the horizon, the cold dampness grew. Dek's horse plodded on, pulling its feet from the mud with long, exhausting steps.

Low fog cut off visibility. Yetig appeared out of the mist. "Highness. My men have reached the river. The bridge still stands, though it must be shored up before any can cross. As Baron Etera said, there is an old keep just off the road."

Haram looked up to the growing twilight. "It is too dark to work tonight. Repairs will have to wait until morning. We will take what shelter we can in this keep."

Dek was only able to see a few paces through the fog as he rode forward. A high stone wall appeared without warning. They reached an arched opening. He saw rusted hinges from a gate that had rotted away. Dek dismounted and walked his horse through. The walls were as thick as four people walking side by side. He rubbed his hands over the weathered rocks which were smooth and free of any lichen or moss.

A courtyard appeared that was enclosed by a wall. Its stones had toppled to ruin in many places. The remains of what might have been barracks or stables stood in one corner. A three story tower of stone rose in the center. Though the top level had fallen into decay, the bottom two appeared to be intact.

Haram dismounted. "Etera and Dek, your troops are under the command of Captain Yetig tonight. Yetig, form what parameter you can on the remaining embankments. Telasec, prepare a place for The Queen inside the keep. Orane, come with us and..." The King stopped in mid-sentence as the sound of singing came from the forest.

*I've toiled long beneath the sun,  
A hard day's work is finally done,  
But one stop first I have to make,  
To find a house this coin to take,  
For vow I've made, e'er sky doth pale,  
I'll drink some good brown country ale,*

*Hey la la dee dee da,  
Hey la ley;*

It was a drinking song heard in taverns and inns across Carandir. The voice drew closer.

A man stepped across a rubble filled gap in the wall. He wore brown breeches and a green jerkin. His dark hair flowed out from beneath a woolen cap. Draped around the back of his neck was a deer's carcass. The man seemed consumed with his own thoughts, for he took no notice of the troops standing in the twilight.

Captain Yetig shouted, "Hold. What is your business here?"

The man dropped the deer, drew a bow and crouched low. "Stand back, thieves. You'll not have my supper tonight."

Yetig stepped in front of The King. "Archers, fire a warning."

Carandir archers let loose a volley in a circle around the intruder. He dropped his weapon and raised his hands. "Can't we talk this over? There's plenty for both of us."

Two soldiers seized the man and dragged him forward. Yetig said, "Who are you?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Answer my questions in the name of The King."

"Of course. I'm certain His Majesty sent you out personally to speak with me this evening."

Haram leaned forward in the saddle. "Let us say it is more of a chance meeting."

The man looked up. His defiant expression changed to one of recognition. He dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "I meant no offense, Highness. I am a poor trapper. I thought you were brigands after my pelts. Please forgive me."

Etera said, "Trapper? Poacher! These are The King's lands, not yours. By what right do you trap his majesties game?"

"Please, Highness. Don't hang me. I catch just enough to make a modest living, no more."

The King said, "We mean you no harm, master trapper. What is your name?"

"Maltey, Highness."

"Then let us feast on our royal deer that you have so conveniently shot for us. Captain, have some men help Maltey with the kill. Orane, speak with us."

Orane followed The King as he eyed the trapper. "Is it safe to trust this man, Majesty?"

"Certainly not. Yetig will keep him in check. I want you to send two messages by terec, one to the Captain of our ship and the other to Narech Waser in Meth. Explain our delay and our expectations to reach the ship tomorrow. Let Waser know that Etera rides with us."

"As you command, My King."

Haram walked away to The Queen's carriage. Orane went to the rear of a wagon whose bed was filled with a wooden box large enough to ride in. Two younger Kyar scholars sat within, They wore the same type of roughly spun robes as Orane.

The chief Kyar motioned to some cages. "Pent, hand me a terec."

The young man retrieved a small gray bird. Orane held the terec before him and stared into the animal's hazel eyes. The bird stared back without blinking. Orane formed The King's message to Narech Waser in his mind.

The rank of narech was held by the supreme commander of the Carandir army and navy. Waser had served as such from the time of Haram's father.

When Orane finished the message, he traced a path in his thoughts for the bird to follow. He imagined the Great River, the body of water to the north where The King's ship lay in anchor. It flowed from an unknown source in the east to the distant ocean in the west. The river was so wide it was impossible to see the far bank.

The land where Carandir sat was known as the south continent. Legend said that if a ship sailed far enough north it would cross the river and so come to the north continent and the lost city of Amblar. None knew for certain, for no Carandirian had attempted that crossing for thousands of years.

Orane's vision flew eastward along the southern bank that was lined with tall cliffs. A break appeared that led to an immense body of water named Lake Hasp that extended deep into the mainland to the south. Within the lake, the hills that formed the backs of the river cliffs quickly tapered into plains. On the western shore of the lake sat Meth, the monarchy's largest city. It boasted a thriving shipping port and was the capital of The Barony of Lanteler.

Orane's mind rode past the docks and wharves. He looked north again to the hills. Standing offshore of the lake, where the cliffs remained tall, was a pinnacle of stone that rose like a rock arm thrust up from the surface of the water. On its tip was the royal palace with its tall towers, white walls and arched bridge that connecting it to a high plain of the mainland.

His vision soared into a window of the south tower, past gardens where grew every kind of tree and flower found in Carandir. He pictured Waser, past seventy, tall and thin with white hair. "To him," thought Orane. "Take the message to this man."

The terec's eyes changed from hazel to green, indicating it had received the instructions. Once released, a terec would travel through wind and rain, day and night, pausing only to feed, until it delivered the message.

Orane released the bird. It darted into the sky and out of the keep. The chief Kyar sat on a stool in the wagon and closed his eyes in exhaustion. He could have simply formed an image of Waser's face and allowed the bird to seek out The Narech. A terec thus impressed was capable of flying anywhere without further direction, even to a place the sender had never been. But, such releases could take months.

He stood up and set about impressing the second bird.

Inside the keep, two soldiers made a bed near the hearth for The Queen. Soldiers brought cushions from Vara's coach and arranged them. Telasec assisted The Queen into the bed. A newly lit fire spread its warmth throughout the room. The haunches of the deer were set to roast and a barrel of ale was tapped. When the meat was cooked, Maltey helped carve. "This is a tender piece," he said to a soldier. "You should give it to The Queen." They all ate a merry meal for the circumstances.

Mistress Neera fluffed pillows. Telasec placed her hand on Vara's forehead. It was warm with a glister of preparation. "How do you feel, My Queen?"

Vara finished her portion of venison. "Strange. I can't say how."

Haram knelt at her side. Though he gave a confident smile, Telasec saw the concern on The King's face.

He took Vara's hand. "It's not the feather bed I promised you tonight."

Vara smiled back. "Just a pleasant adventure." She closed her eyes and took in a sharp breath.

Telasec checked her pulse. "Do you feel any pain. Highness?"

Vara breathed in gasps.

All pretense at joviality dropped from Haram. "I shall not leave your side."

Vara gave a cry.

Haram said. "What is it?"

Telasec wiped sweat from Vara's forehead. "The Queen is in labor, Highness." She was amazed as the birth was not due for nearly a month. She felt the erratic beat of Vara's heart and noted the pale hue of her cheeks. Telasec made the sign of the covenant and softly prayed, "Ilidel, Mother of Dragons, guide her through a safe birthing".

## CHAPTER TWO

Telasec timed Vara's contractions over the next span as they grew more frequent and intense. Haram held Vara's hand. Telasec spoke the words of a healing spell that had been passed down from the wizards millennia before. Color returned to Vara's cheeks.

Telasec said, "Push, Highness. Again."

Vara panted and gave another push. A baby boy emerged. Blood covered the child, soaked the cloak. Vara lay on and splattered Telasec's arms. Mistress Neera cut the umbilical cord and Telasec held the infant aloft.

He gave a cry that resounded throughout the keep. Everyone cheered at the birth of the heir. Telasec felt the infant's life radiating from his soul, pure and untouched.

The Queen gave a raspy groan. Telasec handed the child to Neera and bent down as, to her surprise, a second babe, also a boy, emerged from the womb. Every examination she had conducted showed The Queen carried only one child.

Again, she felt vitality surge through her as she held the second infant. He appeared to be identical to his brother. Then, another feeling came. It was an icy wave that ran down her fingers. She had never experienced such a sensation at a birthing. The prickling vanished to be replaced by the usual warmth from a newborn.

The babes were brought to their mother to suckle. Vara inspected the first born, then his brother. Until she put them to her breast, they were unclaimed and without birthright. In the time before Avar, mothers sometimes rejected children born with missing limbs or bent backs. Such a one would never grow to farm the land or tend the herds and so would be left to die in the wilderness. Avar abolished the practice. But, from long tradition, mothers still checked their babies before allowing them to suckle.

Vara took the infants to her breasts. Even after so many births, Telasec marveled at the scene. Vara smiled wide with tears in her eyes as all sensation of pain seemed to vanish from her memory. "I am so tired, Mother Healer."

"Rest, My Queen. You have done well."

Neera took the heir from Vara and sang a song as she rocked him.

*Sleep my baby,  
Safe and warm,  
You shall never,  
Come to harm"*

*Don't let the Sarte,  
Give you fright,  
For they will not,  
Have you tonight.*

The babes were wrapped in warm cloaks and a blue ribbon was tied securely around the wrist of the firstborn before he was handed to Haram.

The King cradled his son with a wide grin on his face. "He is magnificent." Haram rocked his heir and walked over to the other babe nestled in Vara's arms. "And look here. A second child as a bargain."

Dek thought of how it had been over a month since he had seen his daughter, Mirjel. He asked himself what kind of world they were leaving these children. He wondered if they would be able to watch their own families grow up, or if they would be lost in petty squabbles and the constant threat of conflict.

He gazed across the keep to the crystal sphere holding the crown. One of Yetig's sergeants, pike in hand, stood at attention beside it. The soldier's body tensed and fell to the stone floor, revealing Maltey standing behind with a bloodied knife in his hand. The trapper opened the drawer in the wooden pedestal, reached inside and removed a silver key whose handle was forged in the shape of a leaping dragon.

Dek drew his sword. "Carandir. To the crown."

Yetig formed a phalanx of soldiers in front of The King and Queen before leading his remaining troops across the keep. Orane followed.

Before Maltey could insert the key in the hole, the metal glowed first red then brilliant white. Dek smelled the sickening stench of burning flesh. Maltey screamed and dropped the key. With his injured hand cradled in the other, he ran to the side of the keep and pressed several small stones on the wall. A section swung open. He ran through and the secret door closed before Dek could reach it.

The Baron sheathed his sword and pounded on the wall. Orane ran his hands along the stones. "There is a catch mechanism. We must find and press the keystones in a specific order."

Dek stepped back. The Kyar's hands pushed in on one small stone, then another. "I think I know this sequence." When he pressed three stones simultaneously there was an audible click and the secret door opened again. Dek led the soldiers down a flight of stairs.

At the bottom was a long corridor lined with metal doors. Maltey knelt in front of one. Beside him was a discarded vial and pouch. He now wore crimson robes that were the same color as the swatch of fabric Dek had found next to the river. A leather pouch was secured around Maltey's neck with twine. He winced from the pain of his seared hand as he clutched a squirming rabbit. In his other he held the knife he had killed the soldier with. Two designs were traced on the ground with yellow powder. One resembled a fish, the other a pair of entwined snakes.

Maltey sliced the rabbit's throat. Blood splattered the symbols as the man recited an incantation.

The door rattled. Dek's skin tingled and he had the unnerving sensation of a presence sleeping in the shadows. He heard Orane shout, "Back up the stairs. Quickly."

Fiery pain shot through Dek's head. He cried out and stumbled back as the metal door distorted outward in the form of a clawed hand. In the chill air, Dek saw Maltey hold tightly to the charm around his neck. The cell door burst open and a dark whirlwind emerged into the corridor.

Dek felt the warmth of his body sucked away as the formless creature advanced. The soldiers were in full rout. Dek bounded up the stairs two steps at a time. At the top, he shouted to Neera, "Take the babes. Flee from this place."

The Daro healer scooped the infants up, one in each arm.

Dek knew it was a demon that pursued him. He had read how such places existed in Carandir, remote caves and fortresses where sprits who had followed Baras were imprisoned by the wizards eons before.

The demon burst through the door. Two soldiers attacked. The whirling creature lifted them from the floor, snapped their necks and dropped their bodies to the ground.

Dek heard a crack and dropped to the floor as a large timber sailed overhead and crashed against the far wall. He looked across the room. A soldier held one of the infants in his arms as he ran from the keep. Neera handed the other babe to a second soldier who followed his comrade out into the courtyard. The healer turned to help The Queen stand.

King Haram ran to the crystal sphere and picked up the dragon shaped key. This time, the key didn't glow or grow hot. Only the true and rightful sovereigns of Carandir, king or queen, were able to touch that key without suffering harm.

Haram placed it in the hole and turned it once around. A horizontal line appeared around the middle of the crystal. The top of the sphere hinged open like a box to reveal the crown.

Before Haram could take it, he was seized by the demon. It dragged him into the center of the room and shook him violently as a dog might do to kill its prey. Then it hurled The King aside. Haram struck a wall and fell to the floor.

Near the hearth, Neera supported The Queen as the two women hurried toward the door. The demon turned at their movement and made for them. Soldiers moved to block the monster's path. The whirlwind threw them aside like straw in a storm. When the demon reached the two women it raised them off the ground. Dek heard a wet crack as both of their heads flopped to the side and their bodies went limp.

Dek ran to The King and turned him gently on his side. "Majesty. Can you hear me?" Haram opened his eyes and Dek saw a dazed look on his king's face. A flicker of motion caught Dek's eye. He turned to see Maltey, still in his red robes, making his way toward the open sphere. The King spoke in a near whisper. "Dek. Take the crown. Confine the demon."

"How, Highness?"

Haram started to speak, then fell to the floor.

Dek ran to the crown. As he did, he saw that his own movement had attracted the demon.

Maltey reached the sphere first but Dek was there an instant later. He grabbed Maltey from behind, pinning the man's arms to his sides. Maltey stomped his heel down on Dek's toes. The Baron gritted his teeth but held tight.

The demon moved closer. Dek felt the room grow cold. Maltey said, "I will enjoy seeing your face twist as the demon rips your soul out."

"You'll die too, dog of hell."

"Baras protects his servants."

Dek spied the pouch dangling around Maltey's neck. He seized it and ripped it away while holding it tightly. Maltey's face turned white. He screamed and thrashed. The Baron held tight to the pouch as he pushed Maltey away.

Then, the demon was upon them. Dek prayed to Jorondel more fervently than ever done before. He was never able to say later if it was divine intervention or the magic in the pouch that saved his life. He only knew that the whirling cloud touched him, surrounded him, but did him no harm.

Maltey, however, was raised off the ground. Dek turned away as the demon slowly dismembered Maltey's body. The Baron had never heard such screams. He looked up for a moment to see that his adversary's arms were broken and twisted in dozens of places so that they hung like the entrails of a slaughtered sheep.

Dek dropped the pouch, grasped the crown with both hands and placed it on his head. "Back," he shouted. "Vanish. Be gone."

The whirlwind paused and dropped Maltey's body. Then, it moved slowly toward Dek.

The Baron searched for whatever secret would activate the crown's power. "Jorondel protect me." He reached for his sword, knowing it would not stop the demon. Still, he could think of nothing else to do.

Haram's words from that morning came to him. *What was the crown?* He remembered answering that it was Carandir itself. He wondered if that were the land or the army. No, he told himself. Carandir's strength was in the never ending vigilance of its people and all the ideals set out by Avar and the dragons.

The world around him fell into focus with more clarity than he had ever known. He saw the demon not as a whirlwind but as a nine foot tall, hairless wraith with long talons for fingers and a mottled gray complexion.

It wasn't so much that Dek saw or heard things. He knew them. He knew that The King was badly hurt yet still lived and that The Queen had departed this world and journeyed to the Dragons' Halls.

As well, he now knew how to shut the demon away in a cell beneath the keep. He expected such knowledge to come as instructions. Instead, he was immersed in the memories and experiences of ancient kings and queens. He knew their dreams; their hopes; their fears. To Dek, it seemed that hours had passed. Yet, in human terms, it took less than a heartbeat.

All he had to do was think of the demon walking back down the stairs to the dungeon. The creature hissed and spit and clawed at the air. Still, it went. Orane followed.

Onward Dek drove the demon, past the shattered door where it had been imprisoned and into a new cell. He formed the locking magic in his mind. There was a moment of silence before a deafening roar erupted. The demon slammed itself against the cell door with a resounding bang. Dust fell from between bricks. The door vibrated. The attacks grew weaker as the demon slipped back into limbo, then stopped all together.

Orane carefully inspected the writing on the floor and the empty vial. "This is very disturbing. I have seen these symbols only once, in a scroll that is secreted from all but a few of my order, for it was written by the Barasha. I cannot tell what was in the vial, but I'm certain it is why The Queen went into labor prematurely."

"Maltey said Baras protected his servants The Barasha."

Orane shook his head. "It must have been a wishful boast. Though he obviously found a copy or fragment of a scroll, he cannot be a Barasha priest. The wizards wrote clearly of that foul order's utter destruction." Orane wiped away the symbols in the dust before ascending the stairs.

Yetig commanded his soldiers to bring the wounded to Telasec. The dead were reverently lain in the courtyard and covered with cloaks or bedding. Vara's body was placed in her carriage.

Dek walked slowly to the crystal sphere. He now knew the power of the crown to defeat any army or foe. There was no need to convene a council of barons to settle the dispute between east and west. It was possible to command Etera and Quib to do as he chose. He need not stop with Carandir. No force could stand before him. King Dek. Lord of the World. "Even the dragons will bow before me."

It wasn't so much his own blasphemy that shocked him. It was the realization of how easily the temptation of corruption had come. The crown now sat like a weight upon his head. He was certain Maltey intended to break the holding spell and release Baras. Dek speculated if Maltey would have been able to surrender the crown afterward.

He glanced over to see Haram watching from across the keep. The two men's eyes met. Dek took the key, which didn't burn him while he wore the crown, and dropped it in the drawer which snapped shut. Then, he removed the crown from his head, placed it inside the sphere and closed it. The crystal sealed itself whole once more. The Baron looked back to The King. Haram nodded his head and fell unconscious. Dek made the sign of the covenant.

Etera approached from across the keep. His face was pale and his voice wavered as he spoke. "My daughter is dead."

Dek bowed his head, "I am truly sorry, Etera."

Etera either ignored or didn't hear the condolence. "The King may not survive the day. For the first time in the history of Carandir there is a threat to the succession."

"Has the heir died as well?"

"Both babes live. But, the ribbon that was tied around the heirs wrist fell off in his crib. The Daro healer who handed the babes to the two soldiers was killed and neither of the men knows which child came from which crib."

"Father of Dragons."

Etera summoned Orane and Telasec to join them in council. Orane sat on some rubble and studied a leather-bound manuscript whose pages were yellow with age. "There is no reference in the books I brought as to how we might discern the true heir short of the test of the dragon key. Of course, there are uncounted scrolls and books in the archives, as well as the manuscripts left by the wizards in the deep vaults that have never been translated."

Dek paced the floor. "Let us press a finger of each babe to the key now to see which can suffer its touch. We can surly pull their hands back before they are hurt."

Orane closed the book. "I am afraid that will not work. The heir cannot take the key before The King's death."

Telasec looked to the corner where Haram lay wrapped in a cloak. “That time may come soon, Master Orane. The King took much hurt from the demon. His life drains quickly. I fear I lack the power to keep him from the eternal Dragons’ Halls.”

They all made the sign of the covenant. Orane said, “And even if The King died this moment, there is no way to tell which is the heir before the age of twenty. Until then, it will burn the hand of any who take it.”

“There must be some way around such a dilemma,” said Dek. “What if an heir dies before twenty?”

“The magical birthright passes to the heir’s eldest child. If there is no issue, lineage flows to the eldest niece or nephew. Neither Haram nor Vara have either.”

“Not a brother or sister?”

“No. Jorondel and Ilidel, in their wisdom, made this so to prevent a sibling from taking the crown through assassination.”

Dek looked to the crystal sphere. “I can well see someone driven to murder for such a prize.”

Etera said, “What if the twins and The King die?”

The Kyar shook his head. “I do not know. In all the history of Carandir there has always a living heir. A regent was appointed when an heir was not yet twenty. Still, there was never a question of lineage.”

“There is now,” said Etera. “And I should be that regent. I am their grandfather, their closest kin.”

Dek knew Etera intended to poison the mind of the heir against the eastern houses. “If The King can’t designate a regent, the full council must.”

“The council will debate until we all fly to the Dragons’ Halls. We must decide this now.”

“I remind you that without the full council’s support any proclamation you make will be meaningless. The baronies will split into factions, each claiming one prince or the other.”

Etera stood up. “Then you have no choice but to support me in this, Dek. The alternative is civil war.”

As the company settled into sleep, Telasec kept a vigil with The King. She had worked magic most of her life. Still, seeing the demon and knowing its cold rage had drained her.

The door leading to the courtyard opened and a guard entered. Telasec saw the night sky through the opening. It was coal black with pin points of stars. Inside, the only light came from the banked fire in the hearth that cast enshrouded pools of darkness. The guard woke another soldier who collected his gear and went outside. The first man crawled into his own bedroll and fell instantly asleep.

Telasec found herself slipping into slumber for an instant before dragging herself back again. The exhaustion, the darkness, the glow of the fire, all worked to create a waking dream.

A ball of mist no larger than a pebble appeared in the center of the room. Telasec dismissed it as an aberration of too little sleep. It grew to a disk the size of a person. Someone wearing robes and a hood stepped from the mist. The stranger walked to the cribs and touched the chest of one of the newborns.

Telasec awoke fully and sounded an alarm. Sleeping soldiers jumped to their feet and drew their weapons. The intruder moved both arms in a circular pattern to become enveloped in dense fog. The mist lasted for only a moment. When it cleared, the stranger was gone.

Telasec and Orane ran to the twins. On one of the infant’s chest was a small mark. When examined closely it resembled a leaping dragon. Telasec rubbed her finger over it.

Orane said, "Is it dye, Mistress?"

The Daro healer shook her head. "No. The skin blemish is true. This is magic beyond any that I or any I have ever known possess."

Dek and Etera now stood by the crib. Dek ran his finger over the mark. "What does it mean? Is it the sign of Ilidel and Jorondel or Baras?"

Etera said, "It might be a sign to guide us, or mislead us. What color were the robes?"

"It was too dark to tell," said Telasec.

A moan came from the other side of the keep. All four ran and knelt at The King's side. Haram opened his eyes. His voice was barely audible. "Speak truthfully. What bodes for me?"

Etera began to answer, then stopped. Dek leaned forward. "The Daro can't heal the hurt the demon wrought. You die, My King."

Haram said, "And Vara?"

Dek held back tears, though his voice cracked. "Majesty. She awaits you in the Dragons' Halls."

The King closed his eyes. "I knew, yet I had to hear. You are the Crown's truest servant, Baron Dek, to speak so honestly."

Telasec then told Haram of the confusion in which the twins were mixed up and the mysterious visitor who left the dragon mark.

The King said, "Listen now to the last decree of Haram Avar, Monarch of Carandir. Name the child with the mark Ryckair, for faith, and his brother Craya, for hope. Etera. Dek. We name you co-regents, to hold power over all other barons until one of the twins can take the dragon shaped key and claim the crown."

Haram's voice became a whisper. "Dek. You have been greatly loyal to us."

"I serve the Crown, my liege."

"Yes. We saw you with the crown and know your choice. We owe you a great debt. Name a boon and it is yours."

Dek looked to the others. "My liege, if you so command, I name this. Grant that my daughter, Mirjel, shall take as husband the brother who suffers the touch of the key to become King and make her Queen."

Etera looked up sharply at Dek. "How can you take advantage of his Majesty like this?"

Haram raised his hand. "Dek but obeys our command. Master Orane, let it be recorded that Lady Mirjel Rascalla, daughter of Baron Dek and Baroness Jea, shall wed the next king of Carandir and become queen of the realm. Let this union bind western and eastern houses alike into one council."

"It is done, Majesty."

Etera saw his plans in ruin, but said nothing. He vowed that this would not be the end of his dreams.

Haram's face relaxed. "I have often dreamt of rest, Dek, and have never known it." He closed his eyes and died.

Dek rose slowly and made the sign of the covenant. "Rest at last, Majesty, and may the dragons protect us all."