

CHAPTER ONE

The wind rarely stopped blowing fine dust over the high desert plain on the North Continent, across the Great River from where the palace of Carandir sat and east of the new Carandir border after the western lands, north and south, had been reunited. The stream of air passed through brambly branches of low thorn bushes, parched now in the summer heat. It had been a month since flash floods of a short spring had temporarily filled dry washes and ravines to overflowing, bringing with them a surge of life as dormant plants sprang into bloom for a few weeks in a colorful display of flowering spectacle. Insects, waking from hibernation, pollinated blossoms that dropped their seeds on the barren soil to wait for the rains of the next season.

Shara rode in one of the seven wagons the Dharam exiles had been given. Her long, red hair had been cut short in an attempt to find relief from the heat. She suckled her eight-month-old infant son, Dhamar, the unknown and illegitimate son of Ryckair Avar, now King of Carandir and the Western realms.

The infant's name was drawn from the tongue Shara's ancestors had spoken before they adopted the Carandirian language. It meant, "The people's leader."

The Dharam, headed by the deposed king, Masalta, had been given wagons filled with grain, dried meats and barrels of water. These had nearly run out. Shara's body was leaner than before, yet she was allotted extra provisions to produce enough milk for the baby.

The relentless wind blew against the wooden sides of the wagon as she remembered her fine rooms in the palace at Kackar when she was a princess of the Dharam and where she had first entertained Ryckair. He had arrived like the answer to a wish, a strong leader, still unsure of himself, who she could mold to oppose her father, Masalta. Ryckair had been the perfect tool.

The babe stopped feeding and began to cry. Shara rocked him “Hush, my darling. You are the heir to Carandir. You will wear the dragon crested crown one day, my dear one.” She spoke with the distinct inflection of the Dharam speech with the vowels held long and the letter *r* carrying a strong trill.

Shara dipped a rag into a pail of water and wiped it over her son’s face and back to cool him. Her thoughts formed the face of Ryckair in her mind, when he was still a prince of Carandir. She had known her greatest joy when she helped him overthrow Masalta and personally placed her father’s crown on Ryckair’s head. He had vowed to make her his queen. Now, she cursed him, along with the woman Mirjel who should have died.

The papers the Sorcerer carried said that Mirjel’s end was inevitable. Ryckair had no right to blame her for convincing him that it had already happened. Had he thought that Mirjel was in imminent danger of dying, he would have run to her side to be captured and killed by his twin brother, Craya. It was Shara’s deceit that saved his life, yet he refused to see that.

Shara admitted to herself that she had used him at first, though she had liked him from their first meeting. He brought wit and sophistication to the dour and cheerless Dharam. She had not expected to fall in love with him or any other man. There had been no choice but to send the target poison to kill her rival, Mirjel. Ryckair had not seen this princess of the south for years; knew nothing of her true feelings for him after their separation. It was inconceivable that Ryckair failed to understand this. How could he not? How could he banish her?

Dhamar slept in Shara’s arms. The wagon hit a bump. The babe woke and began to cry again. She brought him to her left breast. It had once been gorged with milk that had slowly depleted as the Dharam’s rations ran low. Dhamar took the nipple in his mouth as his mother held his back in her right arm while cradling his head in her left hand. “Oh, that the Carandirian Batu had never come to reveal that Mirjel lived. Had she actually died in her fall, we would be living in the palace overlooking Lake Hasp. Water everywhere with green grass. Imagine

it, my sweet one. That will come.”

The wagon stopped. Masalta, still claiming the title of King of the Dharam, climbed up into the bed. His obese form had slimmed with the dwindling provisions and he looked much older. “How is my heir?”

Shara smiled as she held Dhamar up to her father. “Heir to two lands.”

Masalta took the child into his arms. “You will lead the Dharam back to the west and take your father’s lands as well.”

Shara took the baby back. “Not if we die in this desert.”

In the spring deluge, they had filled the water barrels and picked fruits from succulent plants and brush. The food had lasted them only a month before the bounty was quickly consumed or rotted. They had found some plants whose leaves could be eaten once boiled into a mush. The concoction was bitter and gritty but managed to fill their bellies. Water was precious. They had to let the harsh cooking liquid cool to drink the next day. Every week, one or two courtiers, former merchants and soldiers who had chosen to go with their king into exile, died of thirst, hunger or the lack of will to go on. When one of their horses had succumbed, they were forced to abandon a wagon.

They traveled at night, once the blazing sun set, and tried to rest in the extreme heat of the day. Some lay under the wagons, others within. A few spread cloths over bushes and crawled underneath. None found true rest. The nights in the summer were still hot under bright stars in cloudless skies.

When the season had changed to their first winter, the nights often fell below freezing. Dew formed frost on rocks and the branches of bushes. They licked it off before the sun rose to melt and evaporate it.

Shara sometimes left camp to search the ground for anything edible. It was a span before dawn. The glow of the sun’s daily furnace lit the horizon. They came into a new country where the ground became sandier. A different type of plant grew there. Their branches were barren of leaves. At first, she thought they were dead.

Upon closer examination, she saw that the stalks were still green near the roots. She used her hands to dig down until she found a tuber the size of two fists. It was soft. Liquid dripped from her hands when she squeezed it. She put the root to her mouth and sucked on it, too thirsty to wonder if it was poison-

ous. It wasn't. The liquid tasted sweet as it coursed down her parched throat and dripped from her lips. She laughed loudly. "Father, come see our salvation."

The Dharam dug up the roots and gorged themselves on their water and pulp. At that moment, it tasted better than anything they had ever eaten, better than the fermented milk the Dharam drank, better than honey.

They slept in the heat the next day and remained encamped the following night to rest. A fire was lit. People danced around it as the stars wheeled overhead. There was laughter and singing.

*Hot roasted meats
And flowing wine,
The merchant's life
To drink and dine.*

*A bowl of fruit,
A honey cake,
We gorge ourselves
For pleasure's sake.*

*In ecstasy,
The sweet mead flows,
As music plays
On harps and bows.*

Shara held Dhamar to her breast as he fed. "You will not die in this desert, my son. Your destiny calls you."

The next night, they set off again. Scouts rode ahead to spy for food and shelter. One of the former Dharam captains ran to a wagon. He knelt at the feet of Masalta. "Sire, another camp is just beyond a second dune. They have lit fires and are preparing to sleep in tents."

Masalta raised an eyebrow. "Are they many?"

"Maybe thirty, both men and women. There are also horses and many goats."

"Herders. We must be near water and vegetation. Did you see arms?"

“I believe some carried knives. They were cutting meat with them. I didn’t see any swords or pikes.”

“Is a sentry set?”

“They were all crawling into tents, Highness.”

Shara said, “Shall we go around? There might be more of their tribe.”

“Did I raise a coward?”

“We have no arms but blunt cooking knives. We don’t know their strength. There are less than fifty of us left. A good general would avoid an unknown host that might have reinforcements.”

“A good general would not let her people starve or die of thirst.”

“These roots can sustain us. It is obvious that they travel by day. We should move around them in the dark before they detect us.”

“Who is King of the Dharam?”

Shara took a step back. “You have never questioned my judgment in war.”

“This war is with the elements. Captain, arm soldiers with what knives we have. We will approach in a span. We must take what they have.”

Shara felt suddenly cold. “Do you propose murder, father?”

“I propose life for us. I owe no allegiance to any others.”

“I will have no part of it.”

“You are a general of the Dharam army. Will you betray us?”

“This is madness. I suckle the heir. He will bring us greatness. Are we brigands?”

Masalta laughed. “Murder. Would you not cut out the heart of Ryckair Avar were he here, or do you suppose to wait for him to die of old age before Dhamar takes the crown? Captain, slip into herder’s tents once they are asleep Slit the throats of every man. Drag them into the desert and leave the bodies. Take everything else. They now belong to us, including the women. They will breed the next generation of Dharam.”

The captain saluted. “Yes, Majesty.” He left and began to gather his troops.

Shara closed her eyes and turned her head.

The captive women, nine in all, were given to soldiers, some sharing a single woman. Through them, Masalta learned of the water wells and the grazing spots, after a few were beaten and the others cowered in fear of more violence. Masalta

demanded that they teach some minor courtiers and merchants how to tend the herds. When they refused, one of them was pulled aside and beaten until her arms and legs were bloodied.

“Do not kill her,” said Masalta. “She must still be able to breed.”

Afterward, Shara tended to the woman’s bruised body in an attempt to ease the pain and brought the nomad a fermented drink made from berries the Dharam had stolen from the herders. The rest of the captives gave no resistance after that.

The men they had slaughtered in their sleep had carried swords and a few pole arms that they had never had the chance to use in the attack. Dharam courtiers and merchants were pressed into military service. The captain drilled them with threats and hard discipline until they became a fighting force. Masalta smiled at the progress.

A few weeks later, scouts reported a band of armed men gathered at an oasis.

“Are they herders?”

“I think not, my liege. They are all armed men with no animals other than horses.”

“Brigands. How many?”

“Sixteen.”

Masalta stroked his beard. “Sixteen new recruits would be good.”

Low sand dunes enshrouded the place where an underground spring fed a pond. Grass grew around it under the shade of stunted trees. Fourteen men bathed naked in the oasis. Two clothed men stood guard with swords sheathed in their scabbards as they leaned against trees.

The Dharam captain positioned his troops on all sides of the dunes, then gave a short whistle. Masalta’s men charged into battle with cries and drawn swords. The two guards were grabbed and pushed against trees. The naked brigands ran out of the water, but the Dharam quickly rounded them up.

Masalta walked down the dune. “Who is the leader of this fine band?”

A tall, naked man with a dark beard stepped out of the water. “I leader. What want you?”

“I was about to ask you that same thing? None of you look particularly fat for brigands. Too few merchant caravans?”

The man remained silent. Masalta walked over to a chest and opened it to find only a few copper coins. “How would you like to make real wealth instead

of standing naked in the desert?”

“You kill us? Take our clothes? Who you?”

Masalta signaled to his men who lowered their swords. “I am Masalta, deposed King of the Dharam far to the east of this filthy desert. Join me. You will have riches beyond your greatest dreams. We will conquer this land and march to Kackar, my home, where you will live in luxury.”

The leader of the brigands looked at his own men. Many were gaunt. They looked back and nodded their heads. He turned to Masalta and knelt in the grass. “My liege.”

CHAPTER TWO

Nine years after Masalta recruited the first brigands, the Dharam lived in fine tents with woven rugs for their floors. They established a permanent settlement near a large oasis as a base for their raids. More bandits joined their growing forces. Food and water were plentiful. The Dharam king had bulked up again, but not nearly to his former obese self.

Shara stepped out of the tent she shared with her son, who was now nearly ten. Dhamar was dressed in purple, loose fitting breeches and a silk tunic with a red scarf wrapped around his sandy, blond hair, a reflection of his father's features.

She inspected a man whose hands and feet were bound by straps of leather attached to stakes in the ground in the center of a square formed by brightly colored tents. He lay face up. His arms and legs were spread wide. He blinked, his eyes staring up to the sky, as the sun rose over the horizon. Already, the heat was building. Two dozen Dharam soldiers stood next to him.

Shara walked over to the captive and knelt. "You are to be honored today, though you came to our camp as a thief." The repulsion of the initial attack on the herders had been tempered by the realization that her father was gathering a force that could challenge Ryckair. Her thoughts were consumed with her son, his destiny to rule Carandir, and vengeance against the man who had spurned

her.

The captive pulled on the bindings holding him. “No *Lakta*. No I thief. *Questa*. Herder lost in dust storm.” He spoke in pidgin Carandirian, inserting words from a common trading language used by most of the desert tribes.

Shara rose. “Whoever you are, you will start my son on his path to manhood with his first bloodletting.” She turned to Dhamar who beamed a smile.

Masalta stepped out of his tent.

Dhamar ran forward and put his arms around the ample waist of his gray headed and bearded grandfather.

The old man patted the child on the head. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, Grandfather.” His Dharam accent was tempered by his contact with other dialects as he grew up among peoples of many tribes. His speech was flatter than his mother’s and lacked the heavy emphasis on the pronunciation of vowels.

Masalta walked over to Shara and handed her a knife with a long, curved blade that ended in a point. He had taken it from a nomad chieftain after he’d driven a sword into the man’s liver.

Dhamar knelt before her. She held the blade in both hands. “Today, you walk the path to manhood. You will leave your mother’s tent to live with your grandfather as prince of both Dharam and Carandir, heir to both lands. Though your father does not yet know of you, in less than eleven years you will kill him and claim the dragon crested crown. You are his first born. None other can take the dragon shaped key to unlock the crystal sphere holding the crown, your crown by birthright. Take, now, your first bloodletting to become a warrior of the Dharam.”

Dhamar solemnly accepted the knife into his right hand. He knelt next to the captive man. As all looked on, the youth said, “Know, now, the punishment for those who steal from the Dharam.” He drove the tip of the blade into the man’s palm. The victim shouted in pain as he twisted his body against the confining straps that held him. Dhamar withdrew the dagger and showed the blood covered tip to all assembled. Cheers erupted from those in the square and from the surrounding tents. Men hoisted Dhamar on their shoulders and paraded him around the camp. He smiled widely.

Shara grinned in deep pride. Masalta nodded his head. He bowed it as the

boy passed by.

Three times around the camp the procession traveled before Dhamar was sat down at Masalta's tent. The old man said, "No longer a boy, you will sit at the council from this day forward." He then walked to the captive. Only a trickle of blood oozed from his wound as the man stared with wide eyes and panted heavily. Masalta said, "The punishment for stealing is death, but you have done a great service for my grandson. Captain, give the thief his reward and release him."

The prone man looked up and screamed as the captain raised an axe to sever the prisoner's left hand.

Masalta coughed blood into a rag. "Curse this dry heat."

Shara kept silent. Her father complained daily about the dust and how it got in his throat to make him gag and spit. She always agreed, yet she knew he was dying from the infection that would not heal.

"Sit in the shade, Father. The dust is less potent there."

He spit blood into the rag. "Call Dhamar. I want to see him."

The young boy, now twelve, ran over. After his first bloodletting, he'd begun to walk tall and confident.

Masalta nodded his head at Dhamar's approach. "You are a fine young man, Dhamar."

"I found a baka lizard under a rock today, Grandfather, and cut off its head. The body twisted and twitched." He laughed.

Masalta laughed as well, then coughed. "Good. Kill them all before their poisonous jaws bite another Dharam. You are clever and quick not to be bit yourself."

"I'm not afraid of them. I'm a man now. I'm not afraid of anything. I am Dharam."

"Yes. You are. Come sit with me for a while." Masalta closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

One of the brigands Masalta had recruited at the oasis ran into camp. He knelt before Shara. "Highness, strangers see I. Approach camp. Two men."

Shara said, "Alert the guard. Have these men brought before me. Come, Dhamar."

"But Grandfather wants me to sit with him. He will want to see the strangers."

“He has earned a rest. Do not wake him.”

Armed Dharam soldiers escorted two men wearing red robes into the square of tents. Shara drew a sword and stepped in front of her son.

Dhamar tried to come around her. “I am a man. I want to see.”

“Stay quiet. We must learn who they are before they can approach the heir, my son.” She stared sternly ahead. As the men came closer, she relaxed, then sheathed her sword and started to laugh. Dhamar looked up at her and furrowed his eyebrows.

From across the camp walked the former commander, Petstra, who had been a secret Barasha priest in the Carandir navy. An empty left sleeve hung at his side where his arm had been before Ryckair knocked it into a kettle of boiling oil.

To his side stood Ackella, who had betrayed Ryckair’s twin brother, Craya, to the Barasha. The sorcerers had seduced Craya with promises of power and domination over his brother. Ackella had been appointed Lord Mayor of the capital city of Meth. At that time, he had sported a golden, brocade eye patch after the Barasha had gouged out one eye to make his story of being the lone survivor of an attack on Craya’s troops more believable. Now, he wore a dirty bandana wrapped around his head to cover the empty socket.

Ackella dropped to one knee. Petstra bowed before Shara. “Highness. Well met.”

Shara said, “Reports came to us that you were vaporized atop the palace tower.”

“I was run through in a sword fight atop that tower. I would have died had I not staunched the blood with an incantation and a powder before crawling down the stairs and out across the bridge of the palace. I met Ackella escaping the crowds. He helped me to reach a boat and rowed us out into lake Hasp.”

Shara raised an eyebrow. “You were always resourceful, even when you tried to kill me.”

“It was Prince Ryckair I sought. You were in the way.”

“You would have taken me back to Kackar to be hanged.”

Petstra tilted his head. “Let us not brood upon the past. We have a common enemy.”

Shara chuckled. “True. How did you find us?”

“We survived from day to day. Then, a rumor came of a savage people who

had appeared in the north desert. A rabble led by an old man and a red headed woman. I knew it had to be you. I was impressed. I never thought you would survive.”

“We are Dharam. We adapted to this world we were condemned to by he who betrayed and forgot me. I will come to his attention soon. He left a seed behind that he did not realize had been planted.” She brought Dhamar from behind her. “Here is the heir to the dragon crested crown. We wait for vengeance and ultimate power.”

Petstra let the edge of his lips curled up. “Then, we walk the same path.”

A year after his arrival in the Dharam camp, Petstra carefully added a pinch of ground root to a bowl while chanting a spell. Dhamar and Ackella chanted in unison as they had been instructed. Pink fog rose from the bowl. It hovered just inside the rim. From its center, a green column of smoke the width of a finger and twice as long rose. The chanting grew louder as the column turned from green to orange. Petstra closed his eyes and held his hand over the smoke. It coiled and contracted into a ball.

Dhamar sneezed. The smoke collapsed into the pink fog which dissipated to leave only residue from the root and a few twigs in the bowl.

Dhamar lowered his head. “I am sorry.”

Petstra gave a slight smile. “You will learn to concentrate, young prince. It will take time, but it is the only path to magic and your future role as the most powerful ruler in the world. Reflect on your failure. Seek ways to improve. The lesson is over for the day. Go play.”

Dhamar rose, bowed to the Sorcerer and left.

Shara said, “I will punish him. He will learn discipline.”

“Do nothing. Concentration will come as he learns the spells and practices. It will take years, but Dhamar has a natural affinity. He will learn. His father’s blood flows through him. He will be powerful, an emperor to whom glory will come.”

“He will have the crown. What need does he have of sorcery? When do you teach him to call demons?”

“Without mastery of sorcery the demons would devour him. They come into this world as slaves who look always for release. Mastery will come. He will

need it. The crown is powerful, but not as a weapon of conquest. If used for such a purpose it will fight Dhamar to return the balance of the dragons' plan. This was Ryckair's mistake when he attacked Reshna to save Mirjel's life. The head of our order was able to redirect the corrupted power to release Baras. In time, Dhamar will call demons and command them. Once the crown has fully released our master it will be unmade and Baras will live forever. He will protect your son and all his heirs."

"Where is Baras? How do we find him?"

"I do not know. He is hidden from all and must awaken enough to call us. We will practice the arts he taught to those who came before me and passed the knowledge on. Each spell cast speaks to my master as he recovers. He will know we are here. We must practice and wait. The Barasha waited for millennia. We can wait a while longer."

Shara heard Masalta cough as she ushered Dhamar inside the king's tent. No longer a boy, Dhamar, now eighteen, knelt at Masalta's side. "Grandfather. I am here."

The old man slowly opened his eyes. "I cannot see you, my precious one. Take my hand."

Dhamar placed his hands over Masalta's and squeezed. The deposed king smiled. "There you are. Shara. Are you here?"

Shara knelt at his side. "Yes, Father."

Masalta's breath was shallow and slow. "I do not know if the dragons will admit me to their halls or if my soul will wander the nether world. You are now King of the Dharam, Dhamar. You are a fine young man. Your mother is appointed regent, to rule until you come of age at twenty. Then, you will go to Carandir and kill your father to claim his crown."

Dhamar was crying. "No, Grandfather. You will recover. We will sit in the sun again and you will tell me stories of battles and glory."

"My story is at an end, young king. Sit with me."

Masalta closed his sightless eyes. "You will regain what I was robbed of. You will avenge me." His breathing slowed even more and then stopped.

The tears were gone from Dhamar's eyes. He stood slowly. Shara opened the tent flap and shouted, "The king is dead. Long live the king."

The troops and courtiers and followers bowed their heads. Many wept. After a moment, a voice cried out, “Long live the king.” The cry was taken up by all.

Dhamar stepped out of the tent. The assemblage became silent. There was a set to his young jaw that none had seen before. “To Carandir and the dragon crown.”

Everyone cheered.

In the background, Ackella looked to Petstra who nodded his head.