

## Chapter 4

### A Covert Meeting

It was a sunny day, but the curtains of Philon IV's great hall in the palace at Grenvere were closed. Most of the lords in New Lacinea were gathered for a secret counsel. For three straight hours Lord Hellel had been laying out a series of facts that would shape the future of Lacinea. If you read the first book of our story, you are familiar with the facts Lord Hellel provided. He told them of the horrors of Dachmon. Most of the lords were well aware that Terephon the Wise was in negotiation with Dachmon. The more informed, like Lord Bennel, even knew that he was on the verge of surrendering the empire to them. Lord Hellel had painted a picture of what would happen if Lacinea fell under Dachmonian rule, and sought to convince the lords to oppose this at all costs.

King Tiagon and Philon IV let Hellel speak without interruption. The lords agreed that life under Dachmon sounded bad, but asked how it could be opposed if the mighty Huerin army could not defeat it. It was here that Lord Hellel told them of the luminary from the house of Pharen who had been his ward for nineteen season changes. Lord Hellel was well known as a man of his word, but the lords still had a very hard time believing this tale. However, as the time had come, Philon IV confirmed the existence of his niece, whose name was Hope. Hellel gave them the ancient history of Lacinea, and the part that the luminaries had played in the ancient war with Dachmon. He then told them that the ancient power of the luminaries was present in Hope, and he himself had seen it. As a climax for his monologue, he told them a brief account of their journey through the Kuragin Hills, in flight from Dachmon. Both Philon and Tiagon were able to confirm that a Dachmonian ambassador had been in Lacinea. Hellel told the lords of a great warrior called Alva, who had given their journey success, and, with the help of Hope, had killed one of the Dachmonim. Finally, he gave them a fact that for most was unbelievable. This Alva was the last son of Al-Salah XXVI, born immediately after the Huerin-Lacinean war and raised by his father in the northern hills. The name "Alva" was known to many of the lords. They had employed a man of this name for carrying messages and occasional bodyguard work. Their remembrances of him certainly did not match the figure of a great lord and warrior.

As the lords silently pondered this incredible claim, Hellel motioned to Jagrok, one of his bodyguards, who silently left the room, then slipped in a few moments later. With this Hellel seized the attention of the lords again. "My Lords!" he announced, "I give you Lord Alva Danae, the son and heir of Al-Salah Danae XXVI." As he said this, Jagrok flung open the large double doors and a medium sized man with brown hair and brown eyes entered. He was wearing the traditional uniform of the Danae house. The pants and shirt were sky blue, and the sleeves of the shirt were white. On the left shoulder was the letter D, in fancy calligraphy. On his right side was a short old man with gray hair, a gray beard and massive arms. On his left was a gigantic man with red hair, a red beard and bright green eyes. Both of these men also wore the Danae uniform. His escort had a lopsided look that was almost comical, and the lords were decidedly unimpressed with his appearance.

Some of the lords recognized him as the Alva that had carried messages for them in the past. He looked quite a bit different now, but they recognized his face. In truth, he looked younger. Though still short, his hair was longer than it used to be, and was combed in a neat style that kept it out of his face. His fiancé had been given the right to do what she liked with his hair, and this was one of the simple pleasures of her life. His hair also had no visible gray now. Whether this was because his hair was longer or because the time he had spent in Hope's presence had a negating effect on the aging process would be difficult to say for sure. As he walked in there was a low murmur.

Many of the lords recognized the gigantic man who came in behind Alva as Priar the Mighty, the famous wrestler whose matches many of them had seen. Some had also hired him on mercenary jobs of one sort or another. Two of the older Lacinean lords also recognized Pinsor, who had been a young captain during the Huerin-Lacinean War. His valor had won him special favor with Al-Salah Danae XXVI. The fact that this grizzled old man was with Alva lent some credibility to Hellel's story in the minds of these men, but they kept silent for the present.

Whenever Alva entered a room he quickly observed every person who was visible. He recognized many of the lords as former employers. He held his head high. The days of secret identity were passed and it was now time for him to live as the son of Al-Salah Danae, and thus do his father the honor he deserved. As he stood observing the lords, one among them stepped out. Alva had noticed him the moment he walked in, and now got an even better look. He was a very large man. He was tall and had a great frame, obviously once muscular. Now he was fat, but there was muscle beneath his fat that made it very easy for him to carry himself. He had light gray hair, with remnants of light brown, and blue eyes. He was clean shaven and had very handsome features. At one time the man's appearance would have filled Alva with hostility, but now they gave him a feeling of respect. The large man approached him as though with a purpose, but Alva was the first to speak.

"My Lord," he said, "it is an honor! Your son does you great credit."

"How is it that you are acquainted with my son?" Lord Bennel asked him.

Alva looked at him with surprise. That this was Lord Bonson's father there could be no doubt. How Bonson's father was unaware of their association mystified him. Before Alva could reply to Lord Bennel's question, Bennel addressed the lords.

"I do not doubt that Lord Hellel has been *told* this man is the son of Al-Salah Danae," he said, "but what evidence do we have to support the truth of such a claim?"

"Lord Alva mentioned your son," Hellel replied. "Ask him if this man is who he claims to be."

Alva had not yet seen Lord Bonson. He had been seated behind the lords, listening to the proceedings but taking no part. "Bonson," Lord Bennel called out. His son stood. He and Alva's eyes met and both gave a nod of greeting.

"He's who Lord Hellel says he is," Bonson said stiffly.

“You’ve seen documented evidence to prove that?” Bennel pursued.

“No.”

“Then how could you possibly know that, son?” Bennel asked.

“I haven’t seen documents,” Bonson said, “but I’ve seen his credentials. He is the greatest warrior in the kingdom. He claims to be the son of Al-Salah Danae and I believe him. The man on his right fought for Al-Salah Danae, and he can also verify it.” Bonson said all this with a tone of sulky hostility. Some of the lords wondered whether he was being sarcastic.

“He is a greater warrior than Bonson the Undefeatable?” asked a lord who had been at the Grand Championship.

Bonson looked Alva in the eye and said, “I did not say he is the greatest *swordsman* in the kingdom. That has yet to be proved.”

Alva nodded in acquiesce.

Then Bonson looked at the lord who asked the question. “There is more to being a warrior than just being the best sword. I’ve seen Alva Danae stand when any other living man would flee or fall.” As he said this, Bonson’s tone bordered on disgust.

“This is confusing,” the lord replied. “You pay this man compliments yet you sound like you hate him. Are you mocking him?”

Bonson smiled ironically. “I have no use for lies,” he said. “Alva Danae is the greatest warrior that I have ever met, and I cannot stand him.” When Bonson said this, it struck Alva that it was perfectly true. There was much to criticize about Bonson. Unless he was in battle he acted like a spoiled, whiny child. However, Alva had never heard him lie. Even when the truth brought him shame, he told it without blinking.

“My father always said, ‘An honest enemy is better than a dishonest friend,’” Alva said. “He’ll stab you in the heart, but he won’t stab you in the back.”

Bonson nodded with a smile that was almost respectful at this comment. Philon fidgeted uncomfortably, but no one save Alva noticed this.

“Let us come to the point,” Lord Bennel said. “Why exactly is this Alva here?”

“Because I believe Lacinea will fall if he does not defend it,” Hellel said.

“He can personally defeat an army that the mighty Huerin Empire cannot?” Bennel asked.

“Our hope is in the power of the Lacinae,” Hellel said. “With Alva’s skill and Hope behind him, I believe we have a chance. A small one, but a chance.”

“And what does the Lord Bonson say?” asked the same lord that had questioned him before. “Can this man really protect us?”

“Our hope certainly hangs on Alva Danae,” Bonson said in a tone of disgust. The contradiction between his statements and his manner continued to confuse the lords. It still seemed like he might be mocking Alva.

“I thought Lord Hellel said our hope hangs on the girl he mentioned,” the lord replied.

“You misunderstand me,” Bonson responded. “The girl *is* our hope, and *she* hangs on Alva Danae. She hangs on his every word, every movement of his eyes, every twitch of his mouth.” Suddenly Lord Bennel gained a look of understanding. He believed he knew the source of his son’s hostility to this Alva.

“How will romance help in war?” the lord pursued.

“The question is a fair one,” Hellel responded, “but a demonstration might help you understand. I think the time has come for you lords to meet the Lady Hope. Alva, would you please stand behind one of the pillars when your fiancé enters, then come out when I tell you?” Alva nodded and walked behind a pillar. In a moment Jagrok opened the doors again and Hope entered the hall with Neera by her side. As she entered all the lords felt a surge of joy like they had never felt before. Everyone stared at her in awe except Lord Bonson, who looked at the ground. His father was the only man in the room who noticed this, because all other eyes were fixed on Hope.

Hope had not seen Alva all day, and had understood that he was to be in this meeting. She felt very nervous about being brought before the lords, but knew she would feel comfortable if Alva was there. As she entered, she curtsied before the lords and scanned the room. She saw some faces she knew - Hellel, Priar, Pinsor and Bonson. But where was Alva? She began to look uneasy when suddenly Hellel said “Alva.” As he stepped out from behind the pillar, Hope’s countenance became a radiant glow. The lords felt warmth and joy. It gave them hope and courage, and with no explanation they understood Hellel’s point. In the presence of this lady’s glow, a man could face anything. And it was clear that Alva brought on her glow.

Like all the others, Lord Bennel was captivated, but he was master of himself. He was uncomfortable with where this meeting seemed to be going, and felt he must redirect the minds of the lords before they agreed to anything foolish on a whim.

“I see that the girl glows in the dark,” he said. “She is very pretty and it is quite a trick, but we must not let such a trick get us carried away on superstition.”

Alva and Bonson both immediately jerked their heads toward Lord Bennel when he said this. Both had steel in their eyes. Bennel realized he was on dangerous ground. “I mean no offense,” he said, “but let us speak frankly. We are talking about war here. Lord Hellel brings us ancient legends and strangers to go with them, and asks us to oppose Dachmon, even if it means opposing Huerin, which incidentally, means that we are also talking about treason.” Tiagon looked very thoughtful when he said this.

“This Alva claims to be a great warrior,” Bennel continued, “but his looks are quite unimpressive. Are we to merely take his word for it?”

“Alva himself has made no claim,” Hellel replied.

“Fair enough,” Bennel continued, “but claims have been made about him. Might we ask for a demonstration?” Bennel had observed everything that had happened in the last few minutes very carefully. He had made a note of his son’s statement, “That has yet to be proved.” For the first time, he saw a way his son could be useful to him. “Perhaps he can give us a display of his skills against Bonson the Undefeatable. If he can match my son in swordplay, perhaps these claims can be validated.”

“You mean a *friendly* contest of course,” Hellel said.

“Of course,” Bennel replied, “dull blades. Just a tournament style match to show us what this Alva is made of.”

For the first time in years, Bonson looked at his father with gratitude. He had hoped for a chance to duel with Alva since the day Alva had defeated Glandaer. He had practiced his sword religiously for this chance. He had not realized this was why, but it was the deep-seated reason.

“Alva?” Hellel asked with a look. There was great risk here. Alva would be at a disadvantage - he was used to fighting for his life rather than for sport. Lacinean dueling swords were much more suited to Bonson’s frame, and Bonson was not called “Undefeatable” for nothing.

Alva nodded with a smile. Philon called for his unsharpened set of dueling swords, and padded armor for both men.

## Chapter 5

### The Honor

As men fetched the swords and armor, Bonson was in high spirits. This had potential to be the best day of his life. He had no wish to kill Alva at this point. He just wanted to defeat him. It was the only match he cared about. By a wonderful chance, Hope would be present to see it. Of course, Bonson knew that Hope would never choose him over Alva, but if she could see once that he was Alva's superior, it would give him something that might make the rest of his life bearable.

Like Hellel, Alva knew he was taking a great chance here. He had heard of Bonson's recent tournament, in detail, from Hellel. Always formidable, Bonson had greatly improved in the last months. Also, Alva knew he could probably win the match with a trick, much as he had done with Glandaer. But he knew that would not be the kind of victory he needed. If the lords would follow his military leadership, it would be an important turning point. He must win with classical skill rather than trickery. In his duel with Glandaer a simple victory served his purpose, but now he must win with lordly style. Bonson must not only be outsmarted, he must be outmatched.

The great hall had more than sufficient room for a duel. It was determined that the duel would follow the rules of broadsword fighting in a traditional tournament. A clean hit to the head or torso would end the duel. Hope felt nervous for Alva. Not because she cared whether Bonson could defeat him, but because she knew Alva's victory would be important for the Lacinean cause. Alva was a great swordsman, but this kind of match was Bonson's element, and she too had heard about his recent exploits. Even Alva's victory would make her sad in one sense. Bonson was a broken man, and losing would surely break him even further. It seemed like something bad would come of this duel either way, and she wondered whether that was a harbinger of bad things to come.

The armor was not made of metal, but of thick padding which covered the torso to prevent excessive bruising or broken bones. Arms and legs were left unpadded for better mobility because a man could not generally be killed with a blow from a blunt blade to the arm or leg. There were also padded helmets, but both Alva and Bonson preferred not to wear them. Better visibility was worth the chance of a blow to the head.

The lords gathered in a wide circle in the great hall as Alva and Bonson walked into the middle to face one another at last. The floor of the hall was white polished stone. Both men knew that such a surface was slippery in a sword fight, but both were very sure footed. The two warriors faced one another, and Alva said, "Thank you for the honor, Lord Bonson."

Bonson replied, "Lord Alva, for once the honor will be all mine."

Alva smiled. "We shall see," he said.

The two men simultaneously touched the sword hilts to their hearts, then held the blades at full extension and touched the tips together like a pyramid. As in Alva's last duel, the pyramid was off center because his opponent was so much taller.

"Finally, Lord Bonson gets his wish," Hellel thought. "I'm sure Al-Salah Danae would say, 'Be careful what you wish for.'"

Having given the traditional sign of respect, the men took their guard. Their eyes were fixed on one another with intense focus. Whatever might happen, neither man underestimated the other. The match had no referee. The lords figured that these men knew enough to work out their own beginning, and the end would certainly be clear to all.

The two men nodded simultaneously as if to say, "Begin," and Bonson immediately attacked as he had done with Sverian. Alva took two steps back, blocking two blows. It looked like he would be driven back further but he sidestepped, and as Bonson lunged forward he attacked from a side angle. Now Bonson looked to be in trouble, but he was quick and agile and defended the attack. Bonson's defenses had not been breached by a dueling opponent since he was fourteen. At that age, he had become able to defeat all his instructors, and in the tournaments, a breach of defenses meant a loss. Bonson had never lost.

Being much smaller, Alva looked to be outmatched. But he knew how to fight men of every size. When Bonson attacked, he would move to the side rather than backwards, and he always blocked Bonson's strokes at an angle, causing his blade to glance away rather than receiving the full force of his blows. Bonson was amazed at Alva's speed on his feet. Wherever his blows came down, Alva was not there. Alva in turn was amazed at Bonson's speed. He had never seen anything like it in a man this size. Whenever Alva would sidestep his attacks and maneuver into an attack of his own, Bonson's quick footwork would alter his own position to be able to defend himself and rework himself into an attack position. The match was a portrait of technical perfection. Every time Alva seemed to be in trouble, he would change his position. Sometimes Bonson's blade would miss him by a hair. Every time Alva attacked, Bonson's perfect defenses kept him from being hit.

The lords were thoroughly enjoying the show. It was doubtful whether such a match had ever occurred in Lacinea, in the Huerin Empire, or even in the world. Periodically the men would go still in an on-guard position, then the fight would continue, circling and maneuvering all around the giant ring, with perfect footwork, perfect attacks and perfect defenses. When the fight had gone on for twenty minutes, neither man seemed to be the least bit tired. It was somewhat stuffy in the hall with the windows closed, and both were sweating, but neither was breathing hard. Both were in pristine physical condition, and both were having the time of their lives. Alva had not fought a man with this kind of skill since his father passed away. Winning with swords had never been difficult. He usually fought against multiple attackers, but they had never presented a challenge like this.

Bonson had never fought a match that lasted more than two minutes. On this day he experienced a new thrill. There were only three things in the world that this young lord really

loved: Hope, his horse, and sword play. This competition was like nothing he had ever imagined, and the thrill of it was pumping through his veins. This was indeed the best day of his life.

As each man adapted his style, the other would counter adapt. The men could read one another perfectly, and some of the lords began to wonder if victory was possible for either man. After thirty minutes passed, the match finally came to a climactic finish. Alva had never lost his footing in a fight, but during one of Bonson's mighty attacks his left heel came down on a puddle of sweat as he stepped back with his right foot. Bonson knew this was no feint. As Alva's left foot slid forward, his torso fell back and Bonson swung his blade downward at a diagonal angle, right at Alva's torso. But Alva was a master of his body. As his left foot slid forward, he bent his right knee downward, almost touching the ground. As he did this, he bent his body backward as Bonson's sword glided over his nose, missing it by a hair. Pushing off his right toes, he then jerked his body forward and, moving to Bonson's right side, swung his blade directly into the center of the larger man's torso. Bonson let out a short "ooh!" from the force of the blade hitting his thick padding. Then both men stood erect, touched the hilts to their hearts again and touched the tip of their blades together. The duel was over. Alva had won.

For some time, Alva and Bonson continued to stare into one another's eyes. Bonson looked as though he wanted to speak, and Alva wanted to let him speak first if he so wished. "Never before..." Bonson began, but his voice trailed off as though he did not know how he wished to finish this sentence. After a moment, he began again, "What I said before was correct, the honor was truly all mine."

"I'm afraid you'll have to share," Alva replied, dropping the sword and extending his hand. "The only man I've ever known who could fight like you was Al-Salah Danae." Bonson dropped his sword as well and shook Alva's hand. The room broke forth in a loud cheer. Hellel, Pinsor and Priar took particular satisfaction in this conclusion, knowing these men's history as they did. Hope glowed so brightly that the lords forgot about Alva and Bonson as they stared at her.

While most of the lords stared at Hope, one of them drew their attention back to the two men. He stepped into the circle and shook hands with Bonson. "I congratulate you my lord," he said, "never have I seen such a match." He then turned toward Alva. It struck the lords, seeing them face one another, that these men had a similar appearance. This lord had black hair and blue eyes, whereas Alva's hair and eyes were brown, but they were the same height and had similar facial features. "Lord Alva," he said with a bow, "I was hesitant to believe that Al-Salah Danae truly had a lost son, but now it is undeniable. I am Dearon, son of Bachnon, son of Bearon. We share a grandfather. Your mother was my father's sister. To meet you is an honor beyond words." Tears formed in Alva's eyes. He had never met one of his kinsmen. He bowed in return and the two men embraced. Again, the lords cheered. Dearon's face was the final validation Alva's identity. It was well-known that his aunt had been the wife of Al-Salah Danae, and now it made sense why Alva did not look like his father.

Lord Bennel could see that he had made an error. It had seemed impossible to him that this older, smaller man could defeat his son. However, he was a master tactician, and he was

not defeated yet. “A very impressive demonstration indeed,” he said, “but what does fighting have to do with this meeting?”

“It was you who suggested the match,” Hellel replied.

“I did,” Bennel responded, “as a way for Lord Danae to validate his claims. However, this only brings us to more questions. Setting aside the fact that Al-Salah was stripped of lordship and considered to be a man of unnecessary violence, his son seems to have come to start a war with Dachmon. One man cannot win a war, however great a warrior he may be. And we are all under an oath of loyalty to Huerin. Are we seriously considering treason because we happen to disagree with one decision our leader makes?”

“I am loyal to Huerin, not Dachmon,” one of the Huerin lords said, “and I say that if our Emperor willingly surrenders the land of his fathers to Dachmon, then he has committed treason against us!”

Bennel turned to Tiagon and said, “You see where this madness is leading? That man could be hung for treason this very moment.” Tiagon did not move or give any change in expression whatever. He was listening and was not yet ready to speak.

“Now that you have seen me fight at your own request,” Alva said with authority, “you will hear me speak. I have encountered the power of Dachmon on a very personal level, and yes, I will protect Lacinea from its evil. I recognize that there are difficult questions of loyalty at play.” Here he looked at Tiagon and Philon. “But this is a question of light and darkness. Specifically: will we surrender the Light Kingdom to the Kingdom of Darkness? I personally believe that this would be a greater crime for any of us than opposing the wishes of the Huerin Emperor, who only does what he does because he believes he has no choice.”

Bonson’s eyes became fixed on Alva as he spoke.

“Our Emperor is called ‘Terephon the Wise,’” Bennel replied. “Perhaps we should consider his wisdom. If all the might of Huerin cannot oppose Dachmon, what makes us think we can do so with far less resources? I mean no disrespect, but we have one little girl who glows in the dark. They have hundreds of Dachmonim, and thousands upon thousands of soldiers with the combined force of Huerin and Dachmon. I understand that we will lose much under Dachmonian rule. My Emperor realizes this as well. But victory is impossible. We must be realistic and preserve what good we may of the Twin Kingdoms.”

“I favor the ethics of Divon the Great over the wisdom of Terephon, great though that wisdom may be,” Alva responded. “For me, the only question is one of right and wrong. Dachmon is evil, and I will protect the land of my fathers from its evil.”

“I suppose My Lord Danae considers himself to be the arbiter of right and wrong,” Bennel said, braving some sarcasm.

Neera, usually so impassive, fixed her gray eyes on Bennel. Her eyes were smoldering with rage.

“The lady who accompanies my ward is called ‘Neera,’” Hellel said. “She is the daughter of the last king of Ngan, which fell under Dachmonian rule many years ago. I believe she has something to say.”

“Any questions of good and evil will be settled very quickly under Dachmonian rule,” Neera began. Her voice was even, but had a razor’s edge of anger in it. “If you think that you will be treated better because of your nobility, you will soon find otherwise. Dachmon will take your sons and daughters for any reason they wish and do anything with them that they wish. There will be torture chambers, slave markets and games of death. Whatever cruel delights the Dachmonians may devise will be carried out without hesitation on the noble and common people alike.”

“As I understand it,” Bennel said, “Ngan fought a futile fight against Dachmon. Perhaps we would be treated less roughly than the lady’s people if we do not resist them.”

“So you are saying,” Alva responded with sarcasm, “that we should willingly submit our kingdom to evil rulers who deal in slave markets and torture chambers in the hope that they might be a little nicer to us than other conquered kingdoms.”

“You are twisting my words,” Bennel replied.

“That was not my intention,” Alva said. “I beg you to explain what part of your point I misrepresented.”

“You are clever Lord Alva,” Bennel said. “It is not what I said that you misrepresented, but the light you put it in. My desire is not to subject the people to evil, but to protect them from worse evil.”

“I understand you full well, Lord Bennel,” Alva responded, “and I beg you to understand that the only thing that can protect our people from the evil of Dachmon is Hope. Surely Lord Hellel has already told you that a dark warrior with two hundred men was sent to assassinate her because they understood this very point. With Lady Hope behind us we can at least fight. My father left the Lacinean court in disgrace because his king believed it was the best thing for the people, but Huerin was not Dachmon. I have spent my life in obscurity, hiding my identity and hoping for nothing more than to live my life in peace until it ended. Hope pulled me out of this. Without intending to, she forced me to be who I really am. I am the Son of Al-Salah Danae XXVI, and the descendent of Al-Salah I. I come to you to offer my services in defending the people of Lacinea because I believe in Hope! In Hope dwells the light. She represents all that is good in this world and the power within her can save us. Without making a stand, nothing about Lacinea can be saved. Our existence will become a living death.”

Neera nodded as Alva finished this statement. Bonson’s eyes were fixed intently on Alva. He only blinked when it was absolutely necessary.

At this moment Hope suddenly addressed Tiagon, “Your Majesty, may I speak?”

“By all means,” the king responded.

“I have lived a very sheltered life,” Hope began. “Lord Hellel had to keep me hidden for my protection, so I know very little of the world. They speak of me as though I was the hope of Lacinea and all men, but I don’t think this is really true.” At this statement Lord Bennel seemed to find some encouragement. “It is true that flowers and animals love me, and it is true that I glow sometimes. Lord Bennel would call this a trick and he may be right, though I don’t do it on purpose. But I *have* seen the power of light. Over the last year Alva has showed me what the real power of light consists of: truth, justice, honor, courage, compassion and love.” Here her face assumed her glowing blush, charming everyone in the room. “When my friends stood against the dark warrior at the Dry Lake, I did not run back to save Lacinea, I ran back for selfish reasons. Alva had told me he loved me, and I could not bear to lose him. I was not afraid because the power of the Dachmonim has no effect on me. Alva and my other friends were terrified, however, and they stood anyway. They stood with everything to lose and nothing to gain, just to buy me some time to get away. Their selfless love and sacrifice showed me what the light really is, and I will fight for that light with my last breath.

“Dachmon murdered my parents and all my relatives on my mother’s side. I do not want revenge. Alva’s father taught him that revenge was wrong. Alva taught me this and I believe it. But I want to protect other children from losing their parents. I believe the real light of Lacinea shines most clearly in Alva Danae. He is our real hope and I will follow him until he falls. And if he does fall, I will keep fighting so that his light does not stop shining. Truth, justice, honor, courage, compassion and love!”

When she had finished, all were silent for some time, watching her beautiful face as it radiated with love and passion. After a time, one of the lords asked how it was that she came there safely when less than a year before the Dachmonim has sought her life.

“I found what I needed in Lacicrestin,” she answered. “Let them come after me now.” When she said this, for an instant she both looked and sounded like Alva, bringing a smile to the faces of Hellel, Neera, Pinsor and Priar.

Lord Bennel was not mastered, however. “I assure you we are all touched by your romance,” he said, “but let us maintain a semblance of reason. Love stories cannot win wars.”

“Why not?” Hellel asked.

“I beg your pardon.”

“You said, ‘Love stories cannot win wars.’ I was wondering on what basis you make this assertion.”

“Lord Hellel, we have been friends for many season changes,” Bennel said, “but your question is madness.”

“Madness or not,” Hellel replied, “I believe that before all is done, we may see that a love story truly can win a war.”

“Even if we deemed that it was somehow justifiable to commit treason,” Bennel responded, trying to bring things back to his strong points in the argument, “we cannot win against impossible odds.”

“Then we must alter the odds,” Alva responded.

“You speak nonsense,” Bennel said in frustration.

Suddenly Pinsor broke his silence. “What is nonsense when another man says it makes perfect sense when a Danae says it.”

“I’m glad to see this council has become a free for all,” Bennel said. “Who is this old man that sees fit to address this assembly at will? Is he a lord?”

“He has no title,” Alva said, “but he is as much of a lord as any man in this room, and anyone who wishes to challenge me on that point had better do so with a sword in his hand.”

“My King!” Bennel said imploringly to Tiagon. “Surely *you* see this is madness.”

“Lord Alva,” Tiagon said, “please refrain from making challenges in my assembly.”

Everything in Alva wanted to justify his conduct. Tiagon was a Huerin king. Why should he bow to his wishes? Why should he not make challenges if his friend were insulted? What could Tiagon really do when he had Pinsor and Prair at his side? Hellel knew their mission was sitting on the edge of a knife at this moment. So did Hope. She gave Alva a distressed look. Her eyes said, “Please!”

“I ask your forgiveness, Your Majesty,” Alva said.

“Granted,” Tiagon said, then he addressed the council. “I do not doubt anything Lord Hellel has said. I have some personal experience with the evils of Dachmon. A Dachmonian ambassador entered Lacinea without permission and visited Lord Philon without my knowledge. Then he visited me. He had a Dachmonim bodyguard with him, and I could feel the evil and terror he wielded. He had a power over me that was difficult to resist and treated me like a child rather than a king. He made clear that Dachmon meant to have its way with Lacinea and any who opposed them would suffer greatly. He had the opposite effect of what he wished for. I am a son of Diaphon the Conqueror. I am not eager to surrender my kingdom without a fight. However, Lord Bennel’s point is also well taken. I have taken an oath of loyalty to my brother, Terephon the Wise. This creates a difficult ethical dilemma with which I have been struggling for some time with no resolution. At present I make these pronouncements: Lord Alva, I honor you and welcome you into New Lacinea. Lady Hope, you are a treasure beyond imagination, and I promise that whatever may happen, you will not be surrendered to Dachmon. Lady Neera, I welcome you as the rightful queen of Ngan and decree that you will always be treated as a queen in this kingdom.”

Neera was shocked at being addressed, but she curtsied gracefully and said, “I have always been treated as a queen in your kingdom, Your Majesty. To be allowed to care for Hope is to be treated as a queen.”

Tiagon nodded, then said, “As for the issue we face in this assembly, I will take one more night to consider the right course of action. We will meet again in this hall at dawn tomorrow. Then I will give my answer.”