

Covenant With the Dragons

Volume III of the Carandir Saga

A multicultural world of gender equality

David A. Wimsett

The Conclusion of The Carandir Saga

The evil dragon is on the verge of waking as civil war rips the monarchy apart. A princess is tempered to face the evil.

Praise for The Carandir Saga

“...strong writing that helps illustrate the vastness of the fictional world and depth of the novel’s lore. The plotting of the political drama is carefully plotted with reveals that are timed satisfactorily. The book unapologetically embraces fantasy staples and tropes... a captivating read within an immersive world that is clearly established as its own universe... the motivations of the characters are complex and variable. Readers will easily be hooked into the exciting blend of mobilized armies and political intrigue.”

— *Publishers Weekly’s Booklife Prize*

“...well written fantasy adventure in a well flushed out world. The characters are in depth and cross all genders with strong female protagonist in important roles in the world.”

— *Verified American Purchaser*

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“Reminiscent of Tolkien in terms of depth & complexity.”

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“Definitely worth a read.”

— *Net Galley*

Covenant With The Dragons

Volume III of The Carandir Saga

DAVID A. WIMSETT

Covenant With the Dragons
A Cape Split Press Book



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For Jeff

**Fellow adventurer
on many campaigns**

Other Books by David A. Wimsett

Dragons Unremembered: Volume I of the Carandir Saga

Half Awakened Dreams: Volume II of the Carandir Saga

Beyond the Shallow Bank

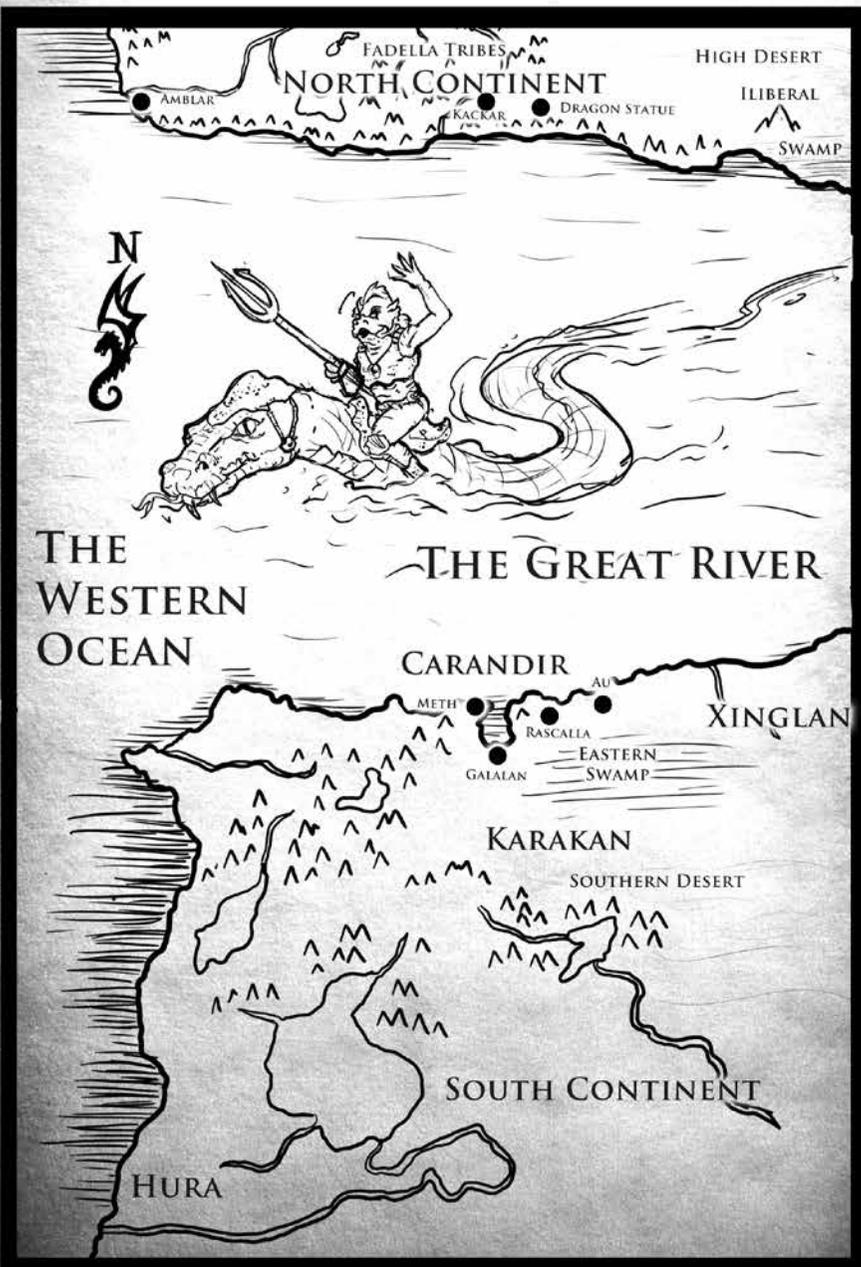
Beyond the Shallow Bank: Illustrated Edition

Something on My Mind

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David A. Wimsett
Nova Scotia
July 2022



BOOK X

One day after the defeat of the Dharam

CHAPTER ONE

A column of Carandirian soldiers escorted the refugees who were driven out of the Barony of Petala by Baron Womb. Len guided the wagon, while Umera, Keetala, Yearol and Fera sat in its bed. Misty rain had fallen all day. They pulled cloaks and hoods close. The scent of damp ground permeated the air.

No one spoke. The jangle of livery rang over the sound of wheels as they ran over a dirt road that had become a slurry of mud. The other survivors of the attack by Womb's militia moved with them at a somnambulant pace toward the Barony of Lanteler. Some rode in other wagons. A few were on horseback. The majority lifted one boot, then the other as they trudged down the road silently.

Daro healers embedded within the troops used their magic to tend the wounds of the injured. Over a dozen men, women and children had been killed when the rain of arrows pummeled the defenseless refugees. The women healers, who had been taught their skills by the wizards, worked without rest to mend broken bodies. Even with their efforts, several died on the road.

Yearol's foot ached where two of her toes had been amputated because of frostbite. She could still walk, though her balance had not fully recovered enough for her to run without stumbling.

She and her brother, Fera, had witnessed Baroness Luja's militia murder their mother as they hid behind barrels of wheat. She flashed on the farmer who wanted to rape her and the fire she had accidentally started that killed him and his accomplice wife.

After she had convinced Fera to ride ahead for help, she mainly slept and barely remembered when Marawee rescued her. All she could recall was Fera's face, so filled with worry, when she woke in the refugee caravan.

A deep hatred now churned inside her that filled with the desire to return to Shenan and kill those who had slaughtered her friends and family.

Fera often crawled into Umera's lap. When he whimpered, she rocked the young boy, his light skin in such contrast to her black arms, and gently stroked his hair while she hummed softly.

Umera had felt great relief when the lieutenant told her that her husband, Marawee, had reached the palace and reported the rebellion to Baron Dek and Narech Herrik. She looked across the bed to Keetala and searched for a way to comfort her daughter.

Keetala felt numb in mind and body. Since the moment her baby, Marshala, had been shot by Womb's men, she had not spoken a word after she screamed as she held the limp body of the infant in her arms. The child's name was the Huran word for great strength in the country of her birth, far to the south. The dark skin of her face held no expression. There were no tears.

Len often looked back from the road to the wagon bed. The soldiers said there were camps under construction in

Lanteler, away from the battles of the civil war. They would be housed in tents and fed.

He was certain the refugees who were able would join the royal army to fight the insurrectionist. Hebra certainly would have if he had lived. Len closed his eyes at the thoughts of his son's body on a riverbank and his granddaughter, Marshala, with an arrow through her small body.

Keetala and Hebra's marriage was the first in Petala between different races. People openly accepted it, yet, when Womb stirred hatred for those whose ancestors had not been born in Carandir, repressed prejudice and the term "Pure Carandirians" surfaced. A mob had descended on their house with demands that Keetala leave with her half white, half black daughter. Marshala was called horrific names—abomination, mutant, crime against nature. Len was still shocked that friends and neighbors he had known for a lifetime had turned cruel and heartless.

He thought of Baras, who could fully awaken from his stupor in some hidden place at any time. The rebellious nobles were too blinded in their lust for power, and their desire to drive out those who were different, to realize that once the dragon rose, he would take his vengeance on all peoples.

The rain was now a fine mist. They reached the intersection of the main north/south trade route that ran along the west side of Lake Hasp.

A Carandir lieutenant rode down the line. "The camp is only three spans ahead."

The soldiers turned the column north. Farmlands and woods bordered the road between settlements. A farmer's field on the shores of Lake Hasp was covered in tents. Hundreds of people, wagons and horses stood there.

The lieutenant rode up to Len. "The third tent in this row is for you and your family. A sergeant will come with

the location of latrines and wash areas.”

They all clasped their hands together and touched their foreheads in the sign of the covenant with the dragons, except for Keetala who continued to stare into space.

The square tent was a dozen paces across. A sergeant appeared and directed them to a larger tent with tables and benches. “This commissary is for you and several others. There will be three meals a day at sunrise, brightnail and sunset. Wash basins are just outside. This is temporary. A permanent camp is being constructed across Lake Hasp in Varda. It will be as far away from the war as possible.”

Umera said, “My husband rode ahead to bring word of the rebellion. Will he be coming?”

“I’ll speak with the captain of the camp. He’ll send word.”

After three weeks, Umera said, “I need to find that sergeant and ask about Marawee again.”

Keetala stood next to the table. Yearol and Fera sat together on a cot.

Yearol said, “When you go to ask about Marawee again, I want to come along.”

Umera smiled. “Of course.”

“I want to join the army and return to Shenan.”

Len said, “You may be too young.”

Yearol stood and clenched her fists. “I am not too young. I was nearly killed and had to kill. I can do it again. My mother’s death must be avenged. I’ll slit Luja’s throat myself.”

Len took a step back and raised his palms. “I apologize. I don’t doubt you can fight.”

Fera said, “I’ll go too.”

Yearol looked at her brother, then put her hands over her face. “I’m sorry.”

Len wrapped his arms around the young woman. “We understand. When we find Marawee, I’m sure he’ll speak up for you. Come.”

The sergeant told them that Marawee was in conference with Narech Herrik and promised to send another message.

Umera and Len turned to leave. Yearol said, “Please, sergeant. Can I speak with you?”

“Of course.”

Yearol looked at the others. “Go on back to the tent. I’ll be along shortly.”

When Yearol returned to the tent, Len and Fera were not there. Umera was reading. Keetala stood by one of the chairs with a blank stare. Yearol sat on a cot.

Umera came over to her. “What did the sergeant say?”

Yearol hung her head. “He told me I couldn’t join the army, that I’m too young. Even if I was older, I wouldn’t be able to march with missing toes. I couldn’t keep up. Baron Dek was there. He said I could contribute to the war effort in other ways.”

Umera sat on the cot. “Perhaps it’s for the best. You and your brother are welcome to stay with us. The camp in Varda is almost ready. Len wants to come with us.”

Yearol continued to look down at her feet. “Fera needs a home.”

“Good. We’ll leave in a few weeks.” Umera walked out of the tent.

Keetala came over to the cot and sat down next to Yearol. “Will you go to Varda?”

They were the first words she had spoken since the death of her daughter. Yearol stared at Keetala for a moment, then turned her head aside and rubbed her arm with her hand. “I’m going back to Shenan. I’ll leave tomorrow night at

darknail.”

Keetala said, “Will you kill militiamen?”

Yearol turned her head and met Keetala’s eyes. “Yes.”

The two young women stared at each other in silence.

Keetala said, “I’m coming with you.”

The camp was located just outside of the town of Nekara, whose 1,700 inhabitants worked the fields or fished the waters of Lake Hasp. The buildings were all single-story structures with thatched roofs and stucco walls painted bright colors. There were several shops—a butcher, a cloth merchant, a baker, an inn that served food to travelers and stalls with fresh food. A school sat on the outskirts of town. Children played games as they waited for class to begin.

Yearol entered the double doors of the school room. Tall windows filled the space with light. There were a dozen tables and benches whose broad sides faced the front where a man with white hair sat behind a desk and read papers. He looked up and smiled. “Good day. Can I help you?”

The young woman nodded. “Good day. I’d like to buy some writing supplies.”

The man stood. “We have plenty. You’re one of the refugees, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please, call me Lanan.”

“Thank you. I’m Yearol Miller.”

He walked to a cabinet. “Are you settled in?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He took out a pen, an ink well and sheets of paper. “I hope I’m not imposing by asking where you came from.”

“Shenan. My brother and I escaped just after Luja seized control.” The memory caused Yearol’s hands to shake.

The man put the writing supplies on a table. “I’m sorry

if I upset you.”

Yearol said, “I’m all right. What do I owe you?” She opened the pouch she carried and inspected the copper pieces within. The silver coins were still concealed in the heel of her boot, where she placed her family’s savings after her mother was killed by Luja’s militia.

Lanan laughed. “There’s no charge. I’m happy to help.”

“Thank you. You’re very kind. Could I stay for a moment and use one of the desks to write a letter?”

“Class doesn’t start for another tespan. Please, help yourself. I’ll just step outside for a moment and watch the children.”

Yearol sat down, dipped the nib of the pen into the ink and began to write.

My dear friends,

I can never thank you enough or repay you for saving Fera and me, but I must go. Keetala is coming with me. Please don’t try to follow us. We have things we must do. Take care of Fera. I know he won’t understand.

She stopped and wiped her nose.

Tell him I love him so much. I wish I could stay and go to Varda with you. I wish I could forget everything that’s happened and live in peace. I can’t. Keetala can’t either. Take care. We will come back. I promise we will come back.

She signed the letter and left without the ink and pen.

She and Keetala ate heartily at supper the next day. Umera remarked that they both looked better. Yearol got up a span after the others had fallen asleep and went to

Keetala's cot. The black woman's eyes were open. They walked out of the tent together.

The other refugees were still asleep. A few soldiers stood next to fires with cloaks pulled over their shoulders to drive away the damp chill of an early spring evening. Keetala wore a cape with a hood. Yearol had donned the coat she left Shenan in. It was now soiled and ripped in two places.

They reached the paved road and started south. Mist hid the stars of a moonless night. The two women left the road after what Yearol thought to be darknail and continued through a forest just to the west of the highway. When they came to a river, they returned to the road and cross at a bridge.

The dirt road the soldiers had led them down to reach the camp appeared. They looked left and right to make certain no one else was in sight, then crossed and disappeared into the forest again.

False dawn brought a glow to the land. They walked around trees and past shrubbery. At sunrise, they spied travelers on horseback and in carriages.

When a group passed, Keetala stepped out of the forest. "There's a town or village up ahead. I can see buildings."

Yearol joined her. "We need horses. Do you know where we are?"

Keetala shook her head. "I've had never been out of Petala."

"We need to find some maps. I should have asked at the school back in Nekara."

"There may be a school here."

"I hope so."

They came to a marker that read, "Village of Temen." At the northern edge sat a building. A sign hung on it with the image of a cow whose mouth was open wide. Underneath were the words, "Inn of the Singing Cow."

It was a two-story stucco structure with narrow windows

and a wooden door. People walked in and out.

Yearol fingered the pouch. "Are you as hungry as I am?"

"I'm certain I am."

Inside, they were greeted by a short, stout man. His close cropped hair was speckled with gray. A towel hung over one shoulder. "Good day. Have a seat anywhere."

Keetala looked around. There were two dozen patrons who ate and talked. She motioned to an unoccupied table.

The man came over with a smile. "Good morning to you, fair travelers. Namar Reesa at your service. I'm the proprietor. Can I get you some breakfast?"

Yearol said, "Yes."

Reesa winked. "It will be just a moment."

Keetala said, "We need to buy two horses. Mine broke a leg down the road. My friend's horse went lame."

"Bad luck. Where were you traveling to?"

Yearol pulled the name of a barony out of her head. "Barta. We're visiting my relatives."

The man wiped the table with the towel. "It's best to be with those you know in these troubled times. From all accounts, Barta is still safe."

"We've never traveled this far south before. Is there anywhere we can purchase some maps?"

"Maps, huh? I can direct you to a blacksmith who has horses and gear. I don't think you will find any maps here. Hespatar is a day's ride south. There's a bookstore in town. They may be able to help you."

Reesa brought fish cakes, greens and ale. The women ate in silence while they eyed each patron who entered the building. A soldier came in. He paid them no attention.

When they were done, Yearol lifted her foot to her knee in a nonchalant manner. She moved eight silver pieces from the heel of her boot to the pouch.

The blacksmith had several horses in a stable. They

selected two and purchased saddles, saddle bags, reigns and tack. Yearol knew the value of a horse and negotiated the price. The blacksmith accepted seven silver pieces and returned thirty-one copper coins in change.

Now mounted, they started south toward Hespatar after the purchase of more provisions at a local stall. The mist burned off before brightnail. The temperature turned warmer, as an early spring day should in the southern part of the monarchy. They kept to the road and mingled with other travelers.

Hespatar was a good size town with several side streets and many buildings, some of brick and others of wood or stucco. Though many roofs were thatched, the majority were shingled. A man directed them to the bookstore located on a narrow side street.

It had large glass windows with books and other items prominently displayed. A bell tinkled when they entered. A woman with gray hair came out from behind a shelf. “Good morning. How may I help you?” She wore scholar’s robes of black. Atop her head was a skull cap embroidered with the images of birds.

Keetala was amazed by the collection of bound books. Marawee had taught her to read. She owned many books back in Petala. They seemed like a small pile in her mind now as she ran her hand over the spines of several volumes on a shelf and took in a deep breath. They covered subjects that ranged from cooking to medicine, farming, sailing and road building. There were many volumes of poetry, music and stories.

Yearol said, “Do you carry maps?”

The shopkeeper pointed to the back of the store. “Yes. Let me show you.”

She guided the women to a cabinet with dozens of scrolls, each a map of a different part of Carandir. The woman said, “What were you looking for?”

Except for some that were reproduced in the books she owned, Keetala had never seen a map before. She gazed at one that was unrolled on a table.

The shopkeeper said, "This is of Nemptanka." She pointed to a spot. "You're here, just inside the northern border."

Keetala said, "We are new to the area. This map would be very helpful. Is it for sale?"

"Everything in the shop is for sale. This one is two coppers."

Yearol said, "We would like maps of all the southern baronies in Carandir."

The woman frowned. "If you plan to travel far, Nemptanka and Barta are still open. You'll find the roads into Ulata and Arana blocked by Carandir troops. No one can go west or east."

Keetala ran her hands over the map. "I'm just fascinated with these. I'd also like to get some books."

"Yes," said Yearol. "We want to study history. My friend is a student of ancient battles."

Keetala nodded, "That's right. I'm interested in strategy and warfare."

The shopkeeper said, "You may see more warfare than you like if the Karakiens decide to invade Barta from the south. Word has it that their armies haven't moved out of the eastern baronies and are just at the edge of Arna. The dragons only know what they'll do next."

Yearol and Keetala hoped their inquiries had not raised suspicion. They didn't want to speak with any soldiers stationed nearby who might send them back to the refugee camp.

The shopkeeper smiled. "Well, it's good to meet fellow scholars, even in these troubled times. I think I have some things that will interest you."

They rented a room in the second story of an inn. It was small, with two beds, one chair, a table, a chest with a mirror

above it and a wash basin. Though there were no lanterns, the innkeeper had supplied many candles. One window looked out in the street below.

After a meal in the tavern downstairs, they settled in and studied the maps of Nemtanka and Barta to the south along with those of Ulata, Shenan and Luser to the west. Yearol had never traveled far from her home before she and Fera fled Luja's troops.

The books contained a wealth of information on military tactics, improvised weapons, concealment and many other subjects.

Keetala said, "We should stay here for a week or so and read. We may want to go back to the bookstore."

"I agree. We also need to find knives and swords."

"Knives will be no problem. An attempt to buy swords will bring unwanted attention, if we can even find any with the war so close."

Yearol closed the book she was reading. "We have to have weapons."

"I know." Keetala sat down on a bed. "What will we do when we reach Shenan?"

It was a question Yearol had not completely thought out. Stop Luja was all she could think of. She now realized that she had no actual plans. The fire that killed the man who intended to rape her had been accidental. She remembered how she vomited into the snow after she escaped the flames of the burning house when she realized what she had done.

Keetala said, "Can you stick a sword or a knife in someone's flesh?"

Yearol remembered the sight of her mother's body on the mill floor as blood seeped from the wound in her belly while Luja's militiamen laughed. "I have to. Luja and the others must be stopped." She looked to Keetala. "Can you?"

Keetala looked across the room. "I don't know. When

Hebra drowned, I was so filled with hate I only thought of killing those who drove us out. My father told me that we can't hate because one day we all have to live together again. After they killed Marshala... I don't know now."

The silence returned. Yearol went to the window and looked down at the street. People came and went out of shops. Many smiled, some laughed, as if there was no war and the world was right and just.

They had never seen their family and neighbors forced into military service or killed because they defied a tyrant. "Your father told me that if you fight out of hatred your enemy can manipulate you. You have to fight for a higher purpose. I told him that I'd fight for my friends and my mother who died to protect Fera and me. I want to believe that. I'm just so filled with rage."

Keetala walked behind Yearol and put her arms around her friend. "Then we must both purge that rage. My father is right. It's a trap. There's more at stake here than just our revenge. We can do things no army can. We can travel where no troops can go. We have to plan what we can do, how we can harass the enemy to support Carandir in the war. You can never forget your mother nor I, my husband and daughter. We must always think of Carandir and the people we fight to free."

Yearol turned around and embraced Keetala.

They bought long knives, short knives, butcher's knives and cleavers, along with whetstones and straps of leather. They also purchased hammers, picks and shovels. They read the books on military strategy and tactics well into the night, until eye strain from the candlelight made the words blurry. Keetala cut out key areas and routes from maps. They also cut out passages from the books.

They stayed into late spring before they packed the

weapons and supplies into saddle bags. The remaining books and maps were taken into the woods outside town and buried.

Many roads led west. There were reports of battles along the edge of Barta, just across the border from Ulata. They took a southerly road for a day, then moved even farther south, into a forested area near the border with the Kingdom of Karaken. No signs of a Karakien attack on Barta had been seen. Still, they moved with caution and listened intently to every sound.

The sections of map they carried showed a set of high hills ahead. They walked toward them over the next three days to get a better look over the land. The women encountered no one else in the woods. When they reached the hills, smoke rose at the crest of a peak.

Yearol said, "It could be Carandirians or traitors."

"I don't like it. We should go around. The map says the hills grow shorter to the south."

Yearol nodded. "I think you're right. I'd have liked to climb that hill so we could get our bearings. We can't take the chance."

They made camp near a stream and ate a cold supper with no fire. Yearol wanted to light a candle and read. Keetala cautioned her not to make any light. "Someone might see us from the hilltop."

A rustle of leaves came from behind, then in front. Four men in the uniforms of the Shenan militia charged into the women's camp with drawn swords.

One of them wore sergeant's stripes. He was the oldest of the group. The others seemed hardly out of their teens. The sergeant grabbed Keetala by the arm. "What's this? A black foreigner?"

Keetala struggled to break free. One of the other soldiers slapped her. "Be still."

Yearol kept her hands to her sides. “What do you want?”

The sergeant gave a snort. “Why are you in these woods?”

“We’re on our way home. We were out gathering berries.”

He looked to Keetala. “Who’s this, your servant?”

Yearol looked to her friend. “Yes.”

One of the militiamen grunted. “Dark-skinned foreigners. That’s about all they’re good for.”

“No brains, that’s for certain,” said another.

“How about a little sport, sergeant?” said the fourth. “She’s probably good for that. Her mistress too.”

The men laughed.

In one smooth movement, Yearol drew a long knife from within her coat and rammed it into the sergeant’s gut. He cried out and slumped to the ground. Yearol charged another.

Keetala pulled a knife from her cloak and killed the man nearest to her.

The fourth stepped back, then ran. The two women took off in pursuit and quickly caught up to him.

The soldier stopped and turned. His hand shook as he held his sword. “Get back.”

Keetala said, “Drop the weapon.”

Yearol took out a second knife. “On your knees.”

The militiaman shouted and swung his sword at Yearol. She used the two knives to parry the blow, a maneuver she had read about in one of the books. The man stepped back and waved the sword with erratic swipes. “Get back, I tell you.”

Keetala threw her knife. The man deflected the blade with the sword. She took out two more knives. The man dropped his sword and ran. Keetala sprung forward and overtook him. She knocked him face down on the ground. With a hard strike, she jabbed a knife blade into his back.

The young man screamed and clawed the ground. “No. Please no. Mother!”

Keetala drew the knife out and plunged it in again. The man grunted, then lay still.

Yearol ran up and grabbed Keetala by the arm. “What have you done? He was down. You didn’t have to kill him.”

Keetala shook herself free and stood. “Yes, I did. He could have alerted others to our presence. This is war.”

Yearol put her hands on her temple and shook her head, then sat down on the ground. “Oh, Ilidel.” She relived the memory of ramming a knife into the sergeant. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I just didn’t know what it would feel like.”

Keetala sat next to her. “I didn’t either.”

They sat in silence for a long time. The stars wheeled overhead. Neither moved.

Yearol stood. “We’ll encounter more patrols.”

“Do you want to go back?”

“No.” Yearol looked to the south. “We’ll have to cross into Karaken and travel west. Hopefully, all of their forces are concentrated on the east.”

Keetala nodded. “We should rest here today and set out tomorrow night.”

CHAPTER TWO

In the desert camp of the defeated Dharam on the North Continent, Neshra stood next to Sif and Tarawee while they watched Mirjel and Ryckair lead the column of Carandir soldiers into the west, on their way to Kackar.

Hundreds of people captured by the Dharam milled about, many of them just released from a spell that robbed them of their identities and will. She faced east. “First, we have to send these people home, then we hunt Baras.”

Tarawee shook his head. “The eminence isn’t gonna like this.”

Sif said, “You agreed Ryckair had to return to stop the civil war.”

“Begrudgingly. If Baras wakes before Ryckair gets back... well, I don’t want to think about what the eminence will do to us.”

Neshra said, “The sooner we send these people on their way, the sooner we can start the hunt.”

Tarawee said, “You’re going home too. We’ll handle this.”

Neshra placed her hands on her hips. “I pledged to lead

Ryckair to the dragon. If I return before Baras is found I will be dishonored.”

Sif laughed. “You should have learned by now not to argue with her.”

The monarchs had left five-hundred soldiers to round up the defeated Dharam troops, along with the brigands recruited by Masalta, who had not been killed in the battle. These were confined in a guarded area outside of camp. Neshra had no concern for them. Her charges were those people the Dharam had enslaved.

Sif and Tarawee argued over how to find Baras.

“Can’t you smell him, Taree?”

“All I can smell is your stink.”

“You should talk. I wish Eminence Levalat hadn’t given me a nose when he made us human.”

“Oh, and you wouldn’t draw attention without a nose.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Neshra sighed at the thought that the Zerites would bicker all the way across the desert.

The Carandir captain in charge of the Dharam prisoners rode up. “We are about to escort the captives back to Kackar for judgment. Can we assist you in any way before we ride?”

Neshra said, “Just leave us horses and wagons. I need to return to my tribe and get a peretan to continue our hunt in the desert. I sent mine back.”

As if called by his mention, Ento gave a bellow and strolled into camp on his six legs. Neshra ran to the large lizard and put her arms around the scales of his thick neck. “Oh, Ento, I told you to go home to Verka.”

The peretan gave a mournful coo in reply.

Neshra was crying. “Oh, but I’m glad you didn’t. I missed you, you silly.”

The Carandir officer looked at the six-legged beast with

wide eyes. “I’ve heard that such creatures roam the southern desert. I never believed they really existed.”

Neshra stroked Ento’s nose. “Come on, you two. We need to retrieve the sinthra. Then we’ll return here, load the provisions and hunt for Baras.”

Tarawee rolled his eyes to the sky. “You humans are so stubborn. Can’t you understand? We don’t have time to wait for everyone to recover enough to travel. You promised Ryckair you would take care of them. Sif and I must go now. You have to leave the hunt to us. Besides, it’ll take too long if we ride the peretan. We’ll have to root jump.”

“You took me to root jump before.”

Sif said, “And it slowed us down. When we bring a human along it uses a lot of magic. Have you forgotten what I told you about us being forbidden to use it? The eminence may have missed the other times. Taree and I might not be noticed. If we drag you around the desert it can’t be easily masked.”

“I promised to lead Ryckair to the dragon. Commitments are sacred to my people.”

Tarawee said, “You also committed to see these people safely to their homes.”

Neshra opened her mouth, then exhaled. “I want to go with you.”

“We would like to bring you,” said Sif. “I, for one, have grown very fond of people now that I’ve met them, especially you and Ryckair. It just can’t work. These survivors need you as much as Carandir needs the monarchs and their crown.”

A hot breeze blew from the east. Ento made a mournful sound. Neshra pressed her cheek against his. “Go. I’ll see that everyone returns to their homes.” She looked back to the two Zerites. “Keep Baras from waking. If you do care about people, don’t let him rise.”

There was a tear in Sif’s eye. He took Neshra’s hands in

his. “We promise.”

He and Tarawee turned and walked to the oasis to find a root to jump into.

It took weeks for the monarchs to lead the army across the North Continent to the gates of Kackar. After a feast, they took Batu and Amar to a secluded room.

Mirjel sat in a wooden chair and smoothed the fabric of her dress. “None of the troops here know that Lek sits on the throne with my semblance. If I return suddenly from away, people will realize that the woman they thought was the queen is an impostor. This would shake confidence at a time when all Carandirians must be united.”

Batu said, “Everyone who rode against the Dharam knows you are here, as do the Dharam prisoners who will arrive soon. Even if you sneak into the palace, they will tell of your exploits. How can people unknow a thing?”

“With the power of the crown, my friend,” said Ryckair. “The queen and I have discussed this on the ride back.”

Mirjel held her hands over her belly now swollen in pregnancy after the power of the crown had magically transferred the infant from the womb of the woman killed by Ryckair’s son into her own. “When the troops we left behind arrive in Kackar with the Dharam prisoners, we will use the crown to change the memory of everyone, except for you and Colonel Amar. All will believe that the colonel led the troops into battle to defeat a Dharam force that threatened to invade Carandir—even the riders sent ahead to Amblar. Everyone will forget the king’s illegitimate son and my magical pregnancy.”

Amar shook his head. “The troops deserve to know the truth, Majesty. Such a deception violates the principles of the plan of the dragons.”

Batu said, “How will you hide yourselves on the ships?”

There are tens of thousands of troops. Someone will see you.”

Ryckair said, “We will not travel by ship. The queen and I will remain hidden outside of Kackar and ride to Amblar after the army leaves. We will use the crown to enter the wizard tower, where we will cross the bridges at their tops and come to the tower in Barta. Though the towers are separated by vast distances on the ground, it takes less than a tespan to cross the magical links that connect them.”

“We will make our way to the palace,” said Mirjel. “Lek will withdraw. It will be announced that after the return of the king, the magic of the crown has given me a child. Hopefully, Orane and Telasec can change Lek’s features back to their original form. If not, she will have to hide until the spell wears off.”

Ryckair clasped Batu on the arm. “I know you despise Shara.”

“If I may speak candidly, Majesty, I would have rather left her in the desert to rot.”

“I understand your feeling. She is no longer the person she was. The demon that killed Dhamar blanked her memory.”

“It could be an act, Sire. I can never trust her.”

“It is no deception. I saw through the crown what has happened. She is a child again. Whatever she had done before is no longer a part of her. I want you to escort Shara to the Daro.”

Batu sat silently for a moment. “Majesty, please find another for this task.”

“Aside from Mirjel, I trust you more than anyone.”

Batu stared at Ryckair, then bowed his head. “I will do as you command, my king.”

Mirjel said, “Take the troops to Amblar at the rise of the sun, colonel. May the dragons protect you.”

They each made the sign of the covenant.



Amar led the army across the North Continent to the gates of Amblar. The army marched into the city and down long, wide boulevards. They passed shops where merchants stared and parks whose fountains had been rebuilt.

The column reached the west wall, where the wizard tower stood. It was difficult to judge its exact height. In different light and weather, it seemed taller and shorter to the eye. Steps led to a threshold with a stone wall where a door should have been. No windows could be seen.

Batu climbed the wall to the tower. He extended his arms to the assembled troops. “The Dharam are defeated and our eastern borders secured here in the north. We now sail to Carandir to confront the traitors and push the Karakien army back across our southern borders.”

Five oceangoing sailing ships were moored at the stone docks. Dozens more lay in anchor offshore. Each had multiple gangplanks where soldiers boarded. When a ship filled, its captain weighed anchor and moved out to allow another to dock.

The sun had nearly set when the last of the army boarded. Amar and Batu came onboard the flag ship *Vigilance*, with Captain Efra as its master. Commander Watoola served as his first mate, as she had on the *Star Fire* that was sunk by the Sarte.

Batu said, “Take us up the river to Meth, Captain.”

Efra saluted. “Aye, First Minister. Commander Watoola, take the fleet out and make ready for attack by enemy ships.”

The Great River was a body of water so wide the other bank could not be seen, even after many weeks under sail. Carandir sat along the south bank that was called the South Continent. Until only a few decades before, no Carandirian had made that crossing for millennia. At that time, none

had known exactly how wide the river was and the North Continent was only a name in legend.

Had he been able to send a telepathic message by terec, Batu would have coordinated with Narech Herrik in a plan to land troops along the banks of the Great River, in a coordinated pincer movement to recapture Fellant and Lena.

A Kyar named Velatar, who had been driven mad by a demon, cast a spell on the small birds. No terec could now fly.

Baroness Luja of Shenan had convinced Velatar the Barasha were using the birds to attack Carandir. She told him she, Barons Womb of Petala and Gilyon of Eel fought the sorcerers. Velatar had no idea that these three were the power behind the civil war against the Crown.

Without the telepathic terecs to relay military intelligence, Batu didn't know where the rebels were or what their strength was. Narech Herrik did not even know of their coming. The fleet would have to return to Meth first, where strategies could be planned.

Most of the military vessels were armed with catapults, fore and aft. They tacked up the Great River for several weeks. Eddies of currents made navigation difficult. Each captain had to keep constant vigil.

A cry came from a sailor in the crow's nest of the *Vigilance*. "Ship ahoy. Rowing galley flying the flag of Petala."

The galley turned about back toward the south bank of the river. Efra said, "Bosun, signal the *Defender* and *Regent* to pursue and capture that vessel."

The two sailing ships moved away from the fleet. With its oars, the galley was not slowed by tacking maneuvers and pulled ahead.

The captain of the *Defender* said, "Load catapults. Fire a warning shot."

A group of sailors at the forecastle turned a wheel to

bring tension to the mounted weapon. When the bowl was at deck level, a large rock was loaded and the catapult aimed. An ensign shouted, "Fire."

The catapult threw a stone in an arc that landed next to the galley. The smaller craft did not slow. Another stone was loaded and fired in the galley's path. The smaller craft picked up speed. Hot chains that had been soaked in boiling oil flew from a catapult in the galley's stern and struck a sail of the *Regent* that set it ablaze. Sailors climbed rigging to extinguish the fire with buckets of sand.

The two Carandirian ships came alongside. Boarding parties charged onto the galley. Seven outnumbered rebels drew swords to repel the Carandirian sailors. After a short battle, the crew of the galley surrendered.

The rowers were chained in their seats and pleaded to be released. Carandirian sailors broke the shackles with battle axes. The rowers were taken on board the *Defender*. Those who had tried to defend the galley were secured in the hull of the *Regent*.

Once the *Defender* and *Regent* rejoined the fleet, the voyage continued to Meth.

One of the enemy sailors had a deep gash in his left leg. Another man's fingers had been cut off his right hand. One man's belly was slashed. He died while a Daro healer tried to stop the bleeding. The others were unhurt.

Captain Efra and Batu took a launch to the *Regent* and descended below deck to the brig. Batu pointed to one of the prisoners who had suffered no hurt. "Take him to an aft compartment." The man's hands and feet were bound. A hood was secured over his head before he was carried out.

Carandirian sailors placed him in a chair and tied rope around him before they removed the hood.

Efra studied the man, whose skin was light, as was that of all Carandirians who descended from the first settlers

from The North continent millennia before.

The captain said, "Where did you put out from?"

The man stared straight ahead and remained silent.

Batu said, "You have committed acts of treason against the Crown. Tell us what we want to know and your sentence will go easier."

The man spit in Batu's brown face, then looked to Efra. "It is you and your monarchs who allowed the easterners to become the new nobility and foreign scum with black skin from the south and brown faces from the deserts to live here. They tried to steal Carandir. We will crush the Crown. All of you will hang." He glared at Batu. "The color of your skin is a sign of your inferiority. You should never have crawled out of the desert to think you could stand among your betters."

Batu raised his hand while he stared into the man's eyes.

"Go on," said the prisoner. "I am a pure Carandirian and the only patriot here."

Batu slowly lowered his arm.

Efra said, "Take him back to the brig. Bring me the one with the wounded leg."

The second man was brought in. The Daro healer had cast a spell and bandaged the wound. The man was tied to the chair and the hood removed. Tears poured down his face. "Please. I had to. Oh, Jorondel, I had to. They would have killed my wife and children."

Efra said, "Where do you come from?"

"Shenan. Luja's militia rounded up all the men and threatened to murder our families if we deserted. Oh, please, please, don't kill me. I don't want to die. I want to see my wife and children again." He broke down into sobs.

Batu said, "Where did the ship sail from?"

"The Fellant port."

"How many soldiers are in Fellant?"

“They’ll kill my family if I tell you.”

Efra spoke in a soft voice. “No one in Fellant knows you were captured. The others from your ship will be imprisoned in Meth. None will ever know what you say.”

The prisoner’s voice was barely audible through sobs. “We were marched from Shenan, through Petala and into Fellant. They made me kill people. Women. Children. I watched them run screaming. When I didn’t pursue, I was beaten. Oh, Jorondel. I’m damned for eternity. My soul will wander the nether world and never be allowed into the Dragons’ Halls.”

Batu cupped his hand gently over the man’s arm. “What is your name?”

“Darateen. Darateen Minser.”

“What are the names of your wife and children?”

“Cela. My wife’s name is Cela. We have two girls, Gena and Lousella.”

“Darateen, I hold faith with the dragons as strongly as you. I know that you will not be damned. If you tell us what we need to know, it will help the Crown defeat the traitors. That is the only way to save Cela, Gena and Lousella.”

Darateen stopped crying, though he sniffled, and began to report what he had seen and heard since being conscripted into Luja’s militia. A sailor wrote down every word while Efra and Batu questioned the frightened man.

When Darateen’s report concluded, Efra said, “Take him to a cabin on the *Defender* and post a guard. If he is sent back to the brig, the other men will kill him.”

The royal standard was raised on the flagship *Vigilance* when the fleet rounded the point into Lake Hasp, in sight of the catapult emplacements on shore just northeast of the palace. The battalion raised coded flags. Efra ordered the proper response to be flown. The fleet headed for the

docks at Meth. When they reached them, only the *Vigilance* put in.

Batu saw Narech Herrik and Baron Dek onshore. He and Amar descended the gang plank. Amar saluted. Dek wrapped Batu in a great hug. “Thank the dragons our message got through.”

Batu said, “We captured a galley out of Fellant. The rowers were slaves chained to their seats by Womb’s forces. One of the crew told us what he knew.”

Dek said, “Why have the monarchs not come on the flagship?”

Batu gave the baron a quizzical look. “Aren’t they here?”

“No. How could they be?”

“They intended to enter the wizard tower at Amblar and cross to the one in Barta.”

Herrik looked to Dek, then Batu. “Their majesties have not appeared. The wizard tower fell behind enemy lines three months ago.”

Batu’s mouth fell slack. “Were they captured?”

Dek said, “We have no word to that effect. Had the enemy seized the crown, they would have used it. The monarchs may be trapped inside the tower. It is possible that the magic of the crown will not work within it.”

Herrik said, “Let us adjourn to the palace.”

The narech met with her senior staff, along with Dek and Batu. Baron Enesta and Baroness Edawee who had escaped from Fellant also sat at the table.

A captain said, “Narech, the intelligence Darateen Minser revealed gives us much needed information about the traitors’ strength and positions. We should concentrate the fresh troops from Amblar on the attacks from the west. It would be a swift campaign to squash them and turn our full attention on Karaken.”

A colonel, who had seen action at the Karakien border, said, “We should mount a full invasion of Karaken. They cannot be allowed to raid Carandir again.”

Another officer said, “Ma’am, the rebellion in the west stems from deep-rooted prejudice. Military action alone will not quell it. A campaign there will be long and bloody.”

The discussion continued with points and counterpoints.

The room quieted. Herrik turned to Dek. “What say you, Lord Baron?”

Dek stroked his dark beard that was now flecked with gray. “These are all good concerns. It is true that hatred still seethes among many in the west for the eastern houses and people from other lands. Carandir has become two nations at war, both by force and ideology. The plan of the dragons has been forgotten by many. Yet, Karaken has waited for an opportunity like this for too long. Whatever comes of the war with them, we cannot concentrate on one or the other.”

The front in the west extended along the borders of Lanteler, Nemtanka and Barta. Karakien troops occupied southern portions of Mentaro and Respa, into the eastern edge of Arna. The Carandir military and the militia of the loyal baronies fought as one force. Militia from the city-states of Au and Rahala to the east of the swamplands had sailed to the Port of Rascalla to aid the war against Karaken. Baroness Quib of Mentaro and Baroness Jea of Rascalla held the Karakien army at the Kar River and away from the iron mines in the mountains, yet Herrik knew they would not be able to hold out much longer.

She weighed the arguments. “We will send the fleet with one third of our forces directly to Gelalan to keep the Karakien army from advancing farther. The rest of the troops will disembark in Meth. Half will march west to confront the rebels. The rest will be held in reserve. When

the western front is stabilized, a flotilla with the remaining forces from Amblar will attack Fellant.”

Baron Estray said, “The baroness and I must sail with that fleet. We alone know the location of the catacomb where our troops shelter.”

Herrick said, “Of course, My Lord.”

Batu tapped his fingers on the table. “It is unlikely Luja’s forces have captured the monarchs, or they would have used the crown against us. I do not think they hide in the tower because they could have used the crown’s power to overthrow any resistance.”

Baroness Edawee said, “Might they have emerged from another tower or found the way blocked after the death of the last wizard, Jarat?”

Dek said, “The ways of the wizards are filled with mystery. The monarchs may have discovered some other matter that they had to address. Even if we held the territory around the tower, none of us has the power to enter and find them. We must proceed with the acceptance that they may not return.”

Shara was absorbed in the pictures she drew with chalk on paper on the voyage. She barely acknowledged anyone else. A Daro healer brought her meals and sat with her. Crew members who interacted with the former Dharam princess found it strange to see a middle-age woman act and speak as if she were a four year old.

Batu escorted her to the palace in a carriage. She looked out the window and pointed. “Horses. Look at the horses. They are so pretty. I would like to pet them.” Her speech had become flatter than that of the Dharam, who held the vowels long and pronounced the letter *r* with a strong trill.

They reached the palace. Batu held her hand. He walked

and Shara skipped down a corridor, to the halls where the Daro healers taught their magical arts to women who joined their order and where many of them resided.

Mistress Telasec, the head of the order, and another Daro healer greeted them at the door. Telasec said, "Hello, Shara. I understand you like to make pictures."

Shara looked around and hummed to herself.

Telasec formed a kindly look on her face. "Well, Neesa will show you to a nice room. I'll come see you in a tespan."

Shara took Neesa's hand and followed the healer into the halls.

Telasec said, "I am not certain what can be done. She has the body of a woman in her forties, yet her mind is that of a four-year-old. I sense no malice. Whatever happened erased who she once was. The best we may be able to do is make her comfortable."

Batu gazed after Shara with a hardened look. "I saw through her the moment we met, even though Ryckair became ensnared in her schemes. I promised the king I would bring her to you. I still don't trust that evil side. Beware."

CHAPTER THREE

The monarchs rode from Kackar two days after the army left. They traveled at a slow pace, so as not to overtake the forces. Some small towns had sprung up along the road since Carandir reclaimed the north from the Dharam. They avoided these and camped among trees and behind rocks.

They reached the outskirts of Amblar at sunset several week later. Travelers on horseback and merchant wagons raised dust as they moved into the city. Ryckair pulled the hood of his cloak over his face, so his eyes were barely revealed. A scarf covered Mirjel's features. She rode side-saddle to ease her pregnancy.

Lanterns were lit along the wide boulevards of Amblar. The monarchs guided their horses to the west wall and the foot of the steps to the wizard tower.

Ryckair dismounted first and helped Mirjel down from her saddle.

She stroked the cheek of her mount. "Thank you for a safe journey. The town guard will be by soon. They will find you a good home."

Ryckair undid a sack that was attached to his saddle bags

and opened it to inspect the dragon-crested crown that was secreted within. He climbed the steps. Mirjel followed.

They reached the archway on the tower where a door should have been. It appeared to be a stone wall. Ryckair placed the crown on his head and took Mirjel's hand. "This will seem a little odd." They walked through the seemingly solid stone wall into the wizard tower.

Mirjel saw that the door was made of oak, not stone. The round room they stood in was three times the perceived diameter of the tower from the outside. Soft light emanated from an unseen source. A staircase followed the curve of the tower and rose past the ceiling. She said, "This is amazing."

Ryckair smiled. "It took me by surprise too. The climb is long. We'll pass several doors outlined in glowing colors that imprison demons. There are also some windows. You're in for some more surprises."

When they rose above the round room, the steps formed a staircase with walls on either side. Mirjel felt a sense of disgust when they passed one of the doors.

Around the inner wall of the tower, the stairs continued until they came to a window on the right. She stared with wide eyes at the scene of an ocean whose waves crashed against the base of the tower several stories below, even though the tower did not sit next to the ocean and she had not seen any windows from the outside.

They passed the window where desert sand extended up to the sill so that they could have stepped out onto it. Bright sunlight shone in a cloudless sky, even though they had entered the tower at night. A city stood on the horizon.

Mirjel said, "Do you think we could walk over to it?"

Ryckair said, "I imagine so. Jarat told me that the towers intersect many worlds. I've often thought of that city and wished I had been able to explore whatever is there." He

paused and studied the scene. “That’s odd. There were several towers and a tall spire. I don’t see them.”

Just ahead was a landing and a door outlined in red. Mirjel felt malevolence behind it. The door rattled. A roar pierced her mind. She instinctively clasped their hands over their ears.

The door burst open. A dark form jumped onto the landing. It was as tall as a human with an over-sized, bald head from which spikes protruded. The creature snarled with sharp, jagged teeth.

Ryckair saw images in his mind from the memories stored in the crown. He faced a minor demon that the wizard Lo had imprisoned millennia before. A spell formed in his mind that would push the creature back into the cell and lock the door once more.

The demon charged. Ryckair cast the spell. A blue fist shot through the air. It struck the demon in its chest and knocked it back into the cell, whereupon the door shut and locked itself. The king sighed in relief.

The magical fist struck a wall just past the door and shot back towards the monarchs.

They ducked. The fist passed harmlessly overhead. Mirjel watched it fly down the stairs, hit another wall then, angle back. It struck them with a flash of blue light. The force knocked them through the window.

Ryckair got to his knees and brushed sand from his face. “Are you hurt?”

Mirjel lay on her side. “I don’t think so.” She remembered the child she had lost in the fall decades before. Her hands went to her belly. The baby kicked. Mirjel gave a sigh, stood and turned around. “Ryckair, look.”

The tower and the window they had fallen through were nowhere to be seen. There was only a vast horizon of sand dunes.

Ryckair searched the memories of the crown for references to the wizard towers and the windows. He could no longer perceive any memories or spells. The vast experiences of every monarch who had ever worn the crown back to Avar the Great had vanished. “Father of dragons. I can’t sense anything.” He removed the crown and handed it to Mirjel. “What can you detect?”

Mirjel put the crown on her head. No images or insights came. “Dear Ilidel.”

Ryckair reached out and waved his arms where the tower window should have been in case it was invisible. His hands passed through empty air. “We’re trapped.”

Mirjel pointed to the city. “Perhaps we will find an answer there.”

They set off across the sand dunes. The sun shone brightly overhead. Soon, sweat soaked their heavy clothing. Ryckair undid his jerkin. The crown on Mirjel’s head offered no relief from the heat of the sun.

As they approached, the city appeared deserted. Ryckair saw the ruins of the tall spire he had spotted years before. It lay toppled and broken on the sand. The buildings, too, had fallen to ruin. Streets were filled with sand. There were no bodies, human or animal, not even bones.

Ryckair shook his head. “It would have taken centuries for the city to decay like this, yet I saw it intact only two decades ago.”

They came around a corner and jumped back. Baras stood directly in front of them, The dragon looked through rubble with his wings folded.

Ryckair whispered, “This explains how the city was destroyed.”

Mirjel removed the crown from her head. “The spell.”

They placed their hands on the crown and stepped back around the side of the building. Baras turned his head at

their approach.

The monarchs recited the words of the spell in unison. “There is no conflict, only peace. Find now peace and rest until the world is unmade.”

These were the words they had spoken when Baras held them in his claws two decades before. The dragon had confused the rest of the spell in their minds and escaped. Now, with clarity, they completed the incantation to send Baras back to the void. “Be at peace. Withdraw from this world.”

The dragon raised an eyebrow and squinted, then spoke in a deep voice. “What are you doing?”

Ryckair said, “Yield, Baras.”

The dragon looked around. “Baras? What do you mean by betrayer?”

Mirjel pointed a finger. “Play no games with us. Sleep now for eternity, Baras.”

The dragon tilted his head. “Did you address me?”

Ryckair said, “As well you know.”

The dragon looked to the sky. “It’s the sun. You’ve been out too long. For that matter, why are you here? For another matter, how did you get here?”

Panic flooded the monarchs. The crown not only blocked memories of past rulers, it had lost all magical abilities.

Ryckair said, “We came through a window of the wizard tower. How did you get here, evil one?”

“Evil one? Wizard tower? You need to get into the shade. What is a wizard and why are you dressed in clothes suited for the cold? You are in great danger of overheating.”

Mirjel said, “Do not threaten us. You see the dragon-crested crown. Where are the people of this city? Have you eaten them?”

“Why would I do that? No one’s lived here for hundreds of years. Who would I eat?”

Mirjel placed her hand over her swollen belly. “You are the betrayer. You taught magic to the Barasha. You broke

from the Great Plan. We will not listen to your lies, Baras.”

“My name is Magadel. I never taught magic to anyone. The Great Plan has not been disrupted. Why do you say these things?” He paused for a moment, then lifted a fore claw. The crown flew out of the monarchs’ hands and into the dragon’s. Magadel inspected it. “I see the handiwork of Jorondel in this crest. To my knowledge, he has never made such a thing. Where did you get it?”

Ryckair said, “Do not play games with us.”

Magadel lowered the crown. “This does not belong here.” He looked at the monarchs. “You do not belong here. You are out of phase with this place. I sense great confusion and surprise. You know of me, yet you do not know who I am.”

Ryckair felt odd, as if he did not walk wholly on the ground. “A wizard told me that their towers touched many lands and many worlds. How did you travel here?”

“Wizard? I don’t know what they are.”

A cramp seized Mirjel. She winced.

Ryckair said, “What is it?”

“I’m in labor. Oh, Ilidel.”

Magadel transformed into human form before their eyes. He now appeared as a middle-aged man with pale skin and red hair. He wore white pants and a blue coat. The transformed dragon said, “Do not fear. I will help.”

A canopy formed over their heads. A bed appeared. With a start, Mirjel found herself prone upon it. Magadel smiled. “All is well.”

Mirjel felt her muscles push only once before the baby emerged. There was no pain, as she had been certain there would be. Nor was there fear. Before she had time to think, Magadel placed the infant in her arms, a baby girl. Her skin had a tint of brown that reflected the mixed lineage of Ryckair’s son and the desert woman who had conceived the child. Mirjel undid her shift. The child began to suckle at her breast.

Ryckair came to her side and gently brushed a finger across the newborn's cheek.

Magadel stepped back. "Congratulations. It is a fine girl you hold this day. There is a mystery here. For now, rest."

A room appeared around them. Within was a table laden with fruits and nuts and bread, along with water. Exhaustion came to Ryckair. He sat on a chair next to Mirjel's bed and held her hand. The baby stopped suckling and nestled into the queen's arms. The three of them fell asleep.

The dragon inspected the crest of the crown in minute detail. It was certainly the crafts-work of Jorondel, yet, the Father of Dragons had never spoken of it. Magadel would have to take it to the council as soon as possible. First, he had to understand where these humans came from.

He probed their minds while they slept. Their thoughts were chaotic. There were wars, treachery and deceit in their past. This shocked him, for these things had never come to his world. He spoke aloud to himself, "By the great egg, is it possible?"

He waited until Mirjel and Ryckair woke, then entered the room with the crown. "I see now how confused you are, not of your own doing, and how you thought me your enemy. By means I do not understand, you have come into what is an alternate reality to you from a different world, where your Magadel rebelled against the Great Plan and became Baras, the betrayer."

He sat in a chair and stared at the crown. "In this world, I once petitioned the council to teach simple magic. Ilidel showed me the wisdom of her mind. I realized that such power would corrupt some who would use magic against others. I abandoned my petition.

"Though I did not teach magic to humans, I feel guilt at your story, for I too was filled with rage when my petition was denied. I can understand how your Magadel felt."

He looked up. "You spoke of a wizard tower."

To his surprise, Ryckair no longer felt fear or anger toward this dragon. He was filled with the kind of trust he had experienced when he first met the wizard Jarat. "A demon escaped captivity in the tower. We were knocked through a window into this desert. I had passed that window once before many years ago. The city had tall spires and towers then."

Magadel shook his head. "I never thought this possible. In your world, these wizards discovered how to connect worlds and draw magic from each to confront demons. You are now in one of those worlds where the Great Plan was not subverted and harmony remains."

"How do we get back?"

"I don't know. The council will have to ponder this. I will take this crown and crest to them for examination."

Mirjel sat up in bed. "We must get back. Baras will wake soon. This crown is the only thing that can place him back into eternal sleep. Civil war rages in my land. Many have already been killed. The crown must return."

Magadel said, "There is an anomaly between our worlds. You saw the city at a time when it thrived. That was two and a half centuries ago. The people tired of the desert and moved to a lush island. It seems that for every year that passes here, only a month passes in your world. We have time to solve this riddle and hopefully return you before my counterpart wakes and your monarchy falls."

Ryckair said, "How long must we wait?"

Magadel said, "It's impossible to tell. In the meantime, I will take you to the place where the people of this city resettled. You can rest there until the council finds an answer."

Magadel stepped outside. The room shook. They looked through a window and saw that Magadel had once more taken the shape of a dragon. He carried the house across

desert dunes.

They came to an ocean and watched waves roll beneath them. Soon, they spied a shore with wide, sandy beaches behind which vegetation grew. There were mountains in the background.

A village came into view. There were no walls around it. The streets were laid out in what seemed to be a random pattern. People gathered and looked up. Many waved.

Magadel sat the house down on the outskirts, then hovered overhead. “My dear friends. Here are three people from far away, Ryckair, Mirjel and their newborn infant. Please, help them until I return.” He flew off.

Ryckair stepped out of the house. Mirjel followed with the baby in her arms. A young man bowed. “Greetings. I am Kenalan, your neighbor. Welcome.”

Mirjel smiled. “Thank you.”

An older woman came up to Mirjel. “Such a lovely child.” The infant woke and smiled. The woman laughed. “And so friendly. I am Darmon. I live just over there. Welcome.”

“Thank you,” said Ryckair. “We have had a rather strange journey. Where can we find the mayor?”

Darmon said, “Mayor? What is that?”

“The leader of the village.”

Kenalan raised an eyebrow. “I don’t understand. Leader?”

“The person who sets the rules that you live by.”

“The dragons established The Great Plan. We follow that. We elect an administrator every two years to coordinate trade between communities and organize festivals. Why would we need someone to make more rules? Are there such people where you come from?”

Mirjel said, “We also follow the dragon’s plan. Our speech is different. My husband misunderstood.”

The tension she had sensed evaporated. Kenalan said, “You must come from far away. I propose a party to celebrate

your arrival. Who wants to come?"

Everyone said they would and promised to bring food for the celebration.

A young woman said, "I will play my harp"

A man said, "I will sing."

A boy in his teens said, "We can dance. I like dancing."

Others offered food and drink.

In moments, the party was set. The people left to make preparations. Ryckair said, "There appears to be no sense of government here."

Mirjel rocked the baby "There seems to be no need of it."

At dusk, people began to arrive. Some brought lanterns they hung from trees. There was food and wine. They sang and danced while stars appeared overhead. Just the right amount of food appeared without prompting. The newborn fell asleep in Mirjel's arms. Slowly, people left until only Kenalan remained.

He bowed again. "Come over tomorrow. I'll show you where food is gathered. Good night now."

Ryckair stood on the threshold of the house. "There is a sense of peace in this place such as I have never known." He smiled at the baby. "I guess we should give her a name."

"Yes. I will name her Enada."

It was an ancient name. In the dragon tongue, *Ena* meant soul and *da* to heal, as with the name Daro, women who bring healing.

Ryckair smiled. "Yes. That's perfect."