

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. Rain fell in a fine mist. They pulled cloaks and hoods close. The scent of damp ground permeated the air.

No one spoke. The jangle of livery punctuated the sound of wheels as they ran over a dirt road turned to mud. The other survivors of the attack by Womb's militia moved with them as if sleepwalking 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 on in silence.

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

Yearol's foot ached where two of her toes were amputated because of frostbite. She could walk, though her balance was not yet recovered enough to run without stumbling.

She and her brother, Fera, witnessed Baroness Luja's militia murder their mother as they hid behind barrels of wheat.

Deep hatred burned inside Yearol and consumed her with a drive to kill those who slaughtered her friends and family.

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

Umera was relieved to learn her husband, Marawee, 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.

When Keetala's baby, Marshala, was shot by Womb's men, she screamed as she held the limp body of the infant in her arms. Now, she stared ahead without a word. If spoken to, she remained unresponsive.

The child's name was the Huran word for great strength in the equatorial country of Keetala's birth, far to the south. The dark skin of her face held no expression. There were no tears.

Len followed the train of wagons in front of him. The soldiers said camps were under construction in the Barony of Varda, away from the battles of the civil war. In the meantime, they would be housed in tents and fed in Lanteler.

He was certain the refugees who were able would join the royal army to fight the insurrectionist. Hebra certainly would if he were still alive. 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 old term *Pure Carandirian* surfaced.

A mob descended on their house and demanded Keetala leave with her half white, half black daughter. Marshala was called horrific names—abomination, mutant, crime against nature. Len was still shocked by friends and neighbors he knew for a lifetime who turned cruel and heartless.

He thought of Baras hidden in some unknown place. The dragon could awaken fully from his stupor at any time. The rebellious nobles who launched the civil war were blinded by their lust for power and desire to drive out those who were different. It would be for naught if Baras rose. The dragon would take his vengeance on all peoples.

They reached the intersection of the main north/south trade route. It ran along the west side of Lake Hasp.

A Carandir lieutenant rode down the line. "The camp's 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."

They 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'll be three meals a day at sunrise, brightnail and sunset. Wash basins are just outside."

Umera said, "My husband rode ahead to bring word of the rebellion. He spoke with Baron Dek and Narech Herrik. Will he be coming?"

"I'll speak with the captain of the camp. He'll send word to the palace."

After a week, Umera said, "I need to find that sergeant and ask about Marawee again."

Yearol said, "I'll go with you. I want to join the army and return to Shenan."

Len said, "You may be too young."

Yearol stood and clenched her fists. "I'm not too young. I was almost 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 Marawee was still 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. "I'll be along shortly."

When Yearol returned to the tent, Len and Fera weren't there.

Umera looked up.

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. 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’s 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 next to Yearol. “Will you go to Varda?” They were her first spoken words 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 the town of Nekara. Most of the 3,7000 inhabitants produced crafts, 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 fruits, vegetables and fish.

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 said, “Good day. I’d like to buy some writing supplies.”

The man walked to a cabinet. “We’ve plenty. You’re one of the refugees, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please, call me Lanan.”

“Thank you. I’m Yearol Miller.”

“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 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’s 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’ll come back. I promise.

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

She and Keetala ate heartily at supper the next day. Umera remarked how they both looked better.

Yearol got up a span after the others fell 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 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 crossed at a bridge.

The dirt road the soldiers led them down to reach the camp earlier 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 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. It 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'll be just a moment."

Keetala said, "We want to buy two horses."

"Where are 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. “Best to be with those you know in these troubled times. From all accounts, Barta’s 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’ll find any maps here. Hespatar’s a day’s ride south. There’s a bookstore in town. They may be able to help you.”

Reesa brought fish cakes, eggs and milk. 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 and moved eight silver pieces from the heel of her boot to the pouch.

The blacksmith kept several horses for sale. 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.

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. 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 made of wood or stucco. Though many roofs were thatched, the majority were shingled. A man directed them to the bookstore.

It had large glass windows with books and other items 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 taught her to read. She owned many books back in Petala. Those seemed like a small pile as she ran her hand over the spines of several volumes on a shelf and took in a deep breath. The books covered subjects 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 reproduced in the books she owned, these were the first maps Keetala ever saw. She gazed at one unrolled on a table.

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

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

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

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

The woman frowned. "If you plan to travel far, Nemtanka 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 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 hoped Keetala's question wouldn't raise suspicion. She 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 and a mirror above a wash basin. Though there were no lanterns, the innkeeper 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.

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 while and study. 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?”

Yearol wasn't certain how to answer the question. Stop Luja was all she could think of. There was no actual plan. The man who intended to rape her died in the fire she set, but it was an accident. She didn't intend to kill him, just escape. Afterwards, she dropped to her knees and vomited.

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

Keetala walked behind Yearol and put her arms around her friend. “Then we must both purge our rages. 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 and passages from the books.

After a week and a half, 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. There were no signs of Karakien soldiers. Still, they moved with caution and listened to every sound.

The air became cold at night under the trees. They made camp near a stream and ate a cold supper with no fire.

Yearol shivered and pulled her coat close to her body.

Keetala said, "We should sleep close together tonight to share body heat."

They cinched their clothing tight around themselves, then placed one bed roll on the ground, the other on top of it and crawled between them.

Yearol snuggled up to Keetala. "This feels nice." Her arm moved casually to drape over Keetala's belly.

A rustle of leaves came from behind, then in front.

Yearol and Keetala threw the bedroll off and shot to their feet.

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. It'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. She charged another.

Keetala pulled a knife from her cloak and killed the man nearest 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. "Get back." He swung his sword at Yearol.

She used the two knives to parry the blow, a maneuver she 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 sprang 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 grabbed Keetala by the arm. “What’ve 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. We can only hope their forces are concentrated on the east.”

Keetala nodded. “I agree.” She looked down at the bodies. “Let’s get their swords.”

