

The book cover features a young man with short, light-colored hair, wearing a dark green, patterned tunic with a red collar and black arm warmers. He is holding a long, silver sword and looking up at a large, brown and green dragon flying in the sky. The dragon has its mouth open, showing its teeth. In the background, there is a castle on a hill and a flock of birds flying in the sky. The overall scene is set against a hazy, sunset-like background.

# Dragons Unremembered

Volume I of the Carandir Saga

David A. Wimsett



## **For a hundred generations the evil slept**

Baras they named him, the dragon who betrayed all. Subdued, he lay under a spell woven eons before by the magical crown of the monarchy of Carandir. Once, he could have swept aside the enchanted threads when he vied for control of the world with an army of sorcerers named the Barasha, the servants of Baras, along with discontented dragons and demons.

In his sleep, Baras dreams of what might have been. The visions fill him with hatred of all things that walk alive beneath the sun, for he will never know such again. At the same time, rage consumes him for all things that die and so depart this world, for that escape is not his to have. Most of all, they fill him with a seething hunger for vengeance against Carandir and all its people.

Endlessly the dreams weave, until a voice comes to him; one he should not be able to hear, for the wizards said they were all destroyed. From beyond the fog, a servant calls, "Master. The time has come."

As the Barasha secretly plot to release Baras, rival baronies, unaware of a threat that would consume them all, threaten civil war. Among those drawn into these webs are twin brothers Prince Ryckair and Prince Craya, one of whom is heir to the crown, though which will not be known until the brothers reach the age of twenty, and Mirjel, daughter of a powerful baron who is bound by decree to marry the brother who becomes king.

*Dragons Unremembered* is the first volume of *The Carandir Saga*, a tale filled with magic, dragons, wizards, sorcerers, fantastic beasts, battles and political intrigue. Set in an immersive world peopled with characters of different genders, colors and ethnicities, there are unique cultures, lost legends, forgotten lands, poetry and music.



# **Dragons Unremembered**

Volume I of The Carandir Saga

**DAVID A. WIMSETT**

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**For my son, Ronald**

**Other Books by David A. Wimsett**

Half Awakened Dreams: Volume II of the Carandir Saga

Covenant With the Dragons: Volume III of the Carandir Saga

Beyond the Shallow Bank

Beyond the Shallow Bank: Illustrated Edition

Something on My Mind



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David A. Wimssett  
Nova Scotia  
September 2022

# Monarchy of Carandir

↑  
TO THE  
NORTH CONTINENT  
(DISTANCE UNKNOWN)

←  
TO THE WESTERN OCEAN

→  
TO XINGLAN



## THE GREAT RIVER



## PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are they swampers?”

Nur frowned at Willa. “Don’t call the swamp people that. Besides, everyone in the boat was human. Come on. They’re getting too far ahead.”

“Who do you think they are?”

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

“Your father’s gonna skin us alive.”

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

Nur poled the boat as quietly as possible. The other craft picked up speed

and moved ahead. Soon, it faded into mist.

Willa said. "We've lost them."

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

Willa pulled on Nur's arm. "Let's go back for your father."

"We have to make certain it's them."

"Are you mad? They'll catch us too."

"I'll land behind those reeds."

A square, three-story tower appeared out of the haze as they approached. Nur put in at a muddy bank and they crept up to the keep.

Willa ran her hands along the stone wall. It was smooth and free of any lichen or moss.

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

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

"Most likely. Let's get back."

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

The cousins were visiting Nur and his family in Rascalla, one of the eighteen baronies of Carandir. It sat at the edge of the eastern swampland on the border of the monarchy.

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

The caution Nur and Willa initially felt evaporated as they walked back down the stairs.

Willa removed her wide brimmed hat and wiped her forehead. "Who do you think put this up in the middle of nowhere?"

"It's probably been here since the Dragon Wars. Before they vanished, the

wizards used such strongholds to imprison demons.”

Willa scoffed. “Don’t tell me you still believe in dragons and wizards.”

“I’m just reciting the histories.”

“Ancient lies, you mean.”

“Well, a lot of people in the east hold faith with the dragons. You need to be more careful of what you say out here.”

“Come on. You’ve lived in Meth. Do you honestly believe in dragons?”

Nur hesitated for a moment. “Well, yes. I do. I may have left my studies with the Kyar, but my faith in Ilidel and Jorondel as the mother and father of dragons has never wavered.”

Willa laughed. “You have to be joking. No one believes that myth of how the world was shaped by dragons and the evil, spooky dragon Baras rebelled against them.”

“There’re powers beyond us, Willa. You can’t deny that.”

“I’m a city engineer. I’ll deny anything unless there’s proof. Ilidel, Jorondel and Baras are folklore, symbols of good and evil.”

“The stories are histories. The Kyar’s vaults are filled with uncounted books and scrolls chronicling the Dragon Wars and the beginnings of Carandir.”

“But who wrote them?”

Nur said, “What about Avar the Great? Do you deny he subdued Baras with the power of his crown before he founded Carandir?”

“Oh, he established Carandir all right. That’s actual history. Saying his crown was magical is ridiculous. He was just the first king. The crown is an artifact, not a talisman.”

Nur frowned. “You’ve never stared into the eyes of the dragon-crested crown. I have. There’s something about it.”

Willa raised her hand. “Shh.”

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

Nur and Willa moved down the stairs with caution.

She peered into the swamp. “Whoever he was, he poled his boat away. Let’s get out of here.”

Nur inspected the wall. "I remember reading something about this. A pattern of stones act as a key."

"You want to open it? Those men could be inside. Let the Militia handle this."

Nur probed the stones with his fingers. "Tib might be locked inside."

He pressed the stones in the same order as he saw the robed man do.

With an audible snap, the secret door opened. A rough-hewn corridor led down. Torches were spaced along its wall. Each gave off light without heat or smoke.

Nur and Willa entered.

The door closed behind them.

Nur remembered reading about red-robed men and torches that gave off neither heat nor smoke. He felt a vague sense of dread.

The tunnel descended. They rounded a bend. Below was a large cavern. Dozens of men in red robes stood before braziers where smoke rose from fires.

One man sat on a throne with a hood pulled over his head.

Tib knelt next to the throne.

Two other men held him by the arms.

The man on the throne spoke words that were lost in the cavern.

Tib moved his head from side to side.

Nur pointed back the way they came.

Willa stood still as if paralyzed.

Nur shoved her.

She backed away a pace, then turned and ran up the steps.

Nur followed.

Another man came toward them. He wore a blue and white Carandirian naval uniform.

With relief, Nur recognized Lieutenant Petstra, an officer who was stationed at the palace.

Nur breathed in short gasps. "Lieutenant Petstra. Thank the dragons. Someone's captured my cousin."

He looked behind Petstra.

Three crimson-robed men stood on the steps.

The officer drew his sword. "Walk back down the stairs."

Nur and Willa descended to the cavern floor where they were grabbed and forced to kneel beside Tib.

Nur looked up at the throne where an emaciated man with pale skin sat beside a brazier. A sweet, thick stench permeated the air.

Petstra knelt. "Lord Reshna, more intruders."

Reshna pointed to Nur. "I sense wizard magic. Who sent you to spy on the Barasha?"

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

The men were taught these arts by Baras himself, and so, took the name Barasha, Servants of Baras.

*This is impossible*, he thought. Every book and scroll he ever read told how the Barasha were destroyed by the wizards.

Tib gave a whimper.

Willa stared up at Reshna.

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

Willa shook "We won't betray your secret. Let us go."

Reshna addressed Petstra. "Were you successful in the palace?"

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

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

He looked to Tib. "That one."

Tib was dragged to the brazier next to Reshna's throne.

Two Barasha priests held him.

One slit the young man's throat.

The other cast yellow powder into the victim's face.

Tib gave a gurgling cry as blood splashed the burning coals.

Nur tasted bile as he fought not to vomit.

Barasha priests chanted in unison.

The smoke of the brazier twisted and congealed to form a round, green body. It was half the size of a person with short, clawed hands and no legs.

Its head consisted of a just mouth with jagged teeth.

The demon said, "Who summons me?"

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

The smoke wavered, then congealed again. "He sleeps behind the spell of the dragon crest fashioned by Jorondel into which Ilidel breathed the will of creation. None can stand before it."

"You took the offering. You cannot refuse."

"I will not approach the spell."

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

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

"No. The crown itself will release him."

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

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

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

Reshna pointed to Nur and Willa.







# **BOOK I**

*The Barony of Fellant*

*Western Carandir*

*Five Thousand Two Hundred and Eighth Year of Avar*



## CHAPTER ONE

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

Next to him sat Haram Avar, King of Carandir and descendant of Avar the Great.

Dek squirmed uncomfortably in a chair too small for his muscular frame. His dark beard itched. He refrained from scratching it.

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

Vara leaned forward. “Father. Do you desire to bring civil war to threaten your own grandchild who I carry?”

“It’s not I who threatens the monarchy, daughter.” Etera raised his chin slightly. His long, flat nose reminded Dek of a hatchet ready to fall. “This obscene game has played for two generations. I won’t have it inherited by a third. The council must be purged.” Etera looked directly at Dek. “The king must remove these descendants of traitorous shop keepers, this *New Nobility*.”

Dek half rose from his seat. Though Etera spoke the words softly, everyone in the room knew the insult they carried. *New Nobility*. Uncouth. Usurpers.

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

The heat of rage burned on Dek's face as he returned to his seat with his eyes riveted on Etera.

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

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

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

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

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

"I am queen. I require no further legitimacy."

"If you deny your lineage, you deny your right to the throne."

Haram leaned against the arm of his chair as though he watched a fencing match.

Vara held her gaze on her father. "Any questions concerning my child's legitimacy must be answered by the full council. But, know this, father. Even were I denied the throne, I would rather withdraw and raise my child as a commoner than see this monarchy torn apart by pettiness and greed."

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

Haram took Vara's hand. "We will have your answer before brightnail, lord baron."

A trumpet sounded. Captain Yetig, commander of the king's guard, drew

his sword and held it upright. If there was trouble, Yetig was the one to get them out of it. Dek found the captain openly ambitious and sometimes arrogant. Still, Yetig was the best officer Dek ever knew. Other commanders held back the desert raiders from Karaken in the south. Only Yetig drove them back across the border and regained territory stolen centuries before.

Captain Yetig led a procession of guards followed by the king and queen.

Behind them walked a man wearing brown robes of coarsely spun material and a woman clothed in emerald green robes. Other than white rope belts around their waists, neither wore any adornment.

To see them for the first time, Dek might have thought they were no more than fifty. Yet, he knew each had lived for well over two centuries.

The woman was Mistress Telasec, eldest of an order of women healers called the Daro who tended the sick of both body and heart.

The man was Master Orane, chief of the Kyar, an order of scholars who studied the scrolls and books left behind by the now vanished wizards.

The Daro and Kyar kept faith in the dragons alive and held the final vestiges of magic left behind by the wizards who vanished eons before.

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

Outside, he moved quickly down the hall. "Master Orane."

The Kyar scholar stopped.

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

Orane shook his balding head. "I didn't, though I'm certain the king did. It can be the only reason the queen would agree to travel this far from the palace so late in her term."

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

The two men reached the chambers set aside for Dek and his entourage. Guards dressed in the brown and tan uniforms of Rascalla stood at attention.

Dek said, "Do you think Etera will answer in time, my friend?"

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

This was an ancient way of telling time. Starting to the left of the little finger, there were five spans to the morning, five to the afternoon, five to the evening and another five for night. By long tradition, mid-day was called brightnail and the midpoint of night darknail.

The exact length of a span varied with the seasons as the days lengthened or shortened. More sophisticated sand dials and water clocks were introduced long before that divided the day and night into twenty equal parts. Yet, the periods they measured were still referred to as spans and many people continued to use the old ways.

Orane lowered his hands. "Baron Etera has two spans to decide. The queen has placed him in a difficult position. He worked very hard to become grandfather to the heir. It's a prize he won't relinquish easily."

The two men said farewell. Dek entered the suite of rooms set aside for him. Seven Rascallans busied themselves within the confined space of the common room.

Dek was certain the cramped quarters were an intended insult by Etera.

The baron's steward bowed. "Refreshments are prepared, my lord."

"Thank you, Penta. Bring them to the inner chamber along with the dispatches. Then pack everything for travel."

"Yes, my lord."

The refreshments and dispatches were brought to an even smaller room barely large enough for a bed and desk. A single, narrow window cast dim light into the space.

Dek lit an oil lamp.

Penta set out wine and fruit.

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

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



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

He was about to put the documents away when he found a note written in Jea's elegant hand.

*Dearest,*

*Trade is brisk. There hasn't been a single caravan raid since you left. The treaty with the Sinkarakans seems to be holding. I miss you so. Mirjel pulled herself up last week. She coos and babbles. I think she actually said a word. I wish you were home. Hurry back.*

*Love from both of us,*

*Je*

Dek ran his fingers over the paper, then folded it and tucked it into his jerkin. A knock sounded. From the other side of the door Penta said, "My lord. The king bids you attend him."

Dek walked to Haram's chambers, accompanied by two guards.

He was met at the door by Captain Yetig. "My lord baron, the king bids me to escort you into his presence." The words implied Dek's guards were to remain outside.

Inside, Haram sat in a padded chair with a goblet of wine in his hand. He had removed his doublet and reclined in breeches and a linen shirt whose laces were undone.

He motioned to a decanter on a table. "Please, have some wine, Baron Dek. That will be all for now, Captain."

Yetig bowed. "As you command, sire."

Dek poured a goblet of wine.

Haram walked to a sphere of crystal an arm's length in diameter. It rested atop a wooden box carved with the images of dragons. On the front panel of the box was a small drawer and above it a keyhole. Within the sphere was the crown

of Carandir, which always accompanied the monarchs, even on procession. This was a steel cap with a gold band around its base and four vertical bands of gold to divide it into quarters. Across the front was a silver crest formed in the shape of a dragon as it leapt not the air. The body was long and sinuous. The wings appeared to be as sheer as lace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nor does anyone else, except the queen. It was a terrible gamble for Her Majesty to travel so late of term, but know this. Queen Vara conceived and will carry out the threat to withdraw from the house of Rascalla."

The king sipped his wine. "There are five souls in Carandir we trust without question; Vara, Telasec, Orane, Yetig and you."

Dek sank to one knee. "Majesty."

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

Dek saw a terrible weight reflected in the king's face. "Does His Majesty expect civil war?"

Haram gave a half-smile that fell into a frown. "Carandir has become a nation consumed with greed for wealth and power. Thoughts of the monarchy

and the good of its citizens are lost to many. People will do anything when a nation loses its moral bearing. Evil can never be defeated, Dek, only contained. That takes never ending vigilance. The strength of Carandir is in the faith we all hold within ourselves. That faith is being tested in our time.”

A knock sounded.

Haram said, “Enter.”

Yetig saluted. “Majesty, Mistress Telasec requests your presence.”

Haram laced up the shirt and threw on his doublet. “Make ready to ride, Captain.”

“As you command, Majesty.”

Haram left Dek and Yetig alone in the room.

Dek ran his hands across the crystal sphere. “Do you believe in the power of the crown, Captain?”

“I don’t understand your question, my lord.”

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

“I’m a soldier, my lord, not a Kyar. I serve the Crown. Others will have to answer questions of religion.”

Dek poured himself more wine. “Yes, you serve the Crown, but you agree with Etera when he says there should be only twelve houses in the council.”

Yetig held himself at attention, looking neither left nor right. “My loyalties are to the king and queen if that’s what you are questioning. If you’re asking my political views, I have none. A soldier can’t afford them.”

Dek took a generous sip. “Oh, I don’t doubt your loyalty, Captain. Still, everyone has an opinion. Tell me, if you’d served the king’s grandfather, how would you’ve handled the merchant uprising when they shut down trade and marched in the streets?”

Yetig faced Dek with the right edge of his lip turned up. “As I would answer any traitor, with steel and blood, my lord.” Yetig gave a shallow bow and left the room.

Etera stared out the window toward the sun as it approached brightnail. His chief minister, Yapell, stood behind him.

Etera said, “Vara was always headstrong. I should never have indulged her as a child. If only her mother hadn’t died so young, Vara would have been

raised more gentile as befits a young girl.”

“You’ve done well, my lord. She’s queen, an equal partner on the throne.”

“She forgets her duty to her father. I thought when she took the throne she’d act in the best interest of her family, instead of betraying me. What counsel have you, Yapell?”

“You must travel. She doesn’t make idle threats.”

“I know this well. Still, I won’t walk blindly into Meth and cede my goal.”

He paced back and forth. “Many friends owe me favors. The king thinks to outflank me but he’s made enemies. I hear their whispers. If I organize the true houses behind me, I can force his hand to nullify the New Nobility and expel the foreigners who infests our nation. The royal army can’t stand against all the rightful baronies of pure Carandirians.”

He stopped and looked to Yapell. “I can do nothing while I ride. Send word to all my allies before they can be summoned to the palace. I need support in the capital to eradicate the New Nobility. Tell them to be ready for war.”

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

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

Whereas the palace at Meth stood next to a bustling center of commerce, Etera’s stronghold was surrounded by league upon league of fields and orchards, the true might of Fellant.

The royal procession moved north past grand estates and small farmhouses. They reached the city of Pontelara where citizens turned out from slate and thatch roofed houses with streamers and garlands to cheer the monarchs.

They left the farmlands behind and entered a thickly wooded forest of oak, ash and birch. Dek breathed in the fresh scent of the forest air, so different from the humidity of Rascalla, which bordered on the Eastern swamp-land.

Scouts fanned out ahead, behind and to the side. Yetig moved up and down the line. The blue coat and white breeches of his uniform shone brilliantly under a clear sky.

The march continued forward as the horses livery rang and jangled. Dek considered how best to approach the six Eastern houses. Though they shared common interests, some still thought of themselves as competing merchants instead of nobles.

Quib, Baroness of Mentaro, would be the most trouble. She was a woman who saw no farther than the last caravan and was not above dealing with smugglers. Dek suspected Quib of forming alliances with some of the tribes who inhabited the southern regions of the swamp.

These conducted raids on Carandir soil. They were war like and territorial. Even before Carandirians settled the lands near the edge of the swamps, the southern tribes raided the villages of their peaceful northern cousins.

Many people, particularly in the west, referred to them as swampers and considered them to be dim witted savages.

The name they called themselves was Sinkaraka, which meant, “people of the root.” Short and thin, with reddish hair, slightly olive skin and hazel eyes, it was uncertain where they originally came from. A small number of Sinkarakans were nearly as tall as many Carandirian.

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

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

Dek l looked out across a wide valley. The road continued down the other side to skirt in and out of the forest as it headed north toward the swift flowing Lentar River. Northeast, he saw an overgrown road obscured by trees and brush. He hadn’t noticed it when he rode toward Etera’s stronghold.

The ground became wetter.

Dek looked back to Queen Vara’s carriage and hoped the wheels wouldn’t get stuck in mud.

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

The king raised his hand for a halt. “Captain Yetig, guard Her Majesty.

Lieutenant, bring two men. Dek. Orane. Ride with us.”

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

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

Dek said, “There was no sign of such a deluge at Etera’s stronghold.”

“The weather can vary dramatically between valleys in Fellant.”

“We should have had some sense of a storm this big.” Dek looked upstream. “Perhaps the river’s become silted and we can ford.”

He walked along the bank. The farther he got from the bridge piers, the less damage he saw. The river ran swift and deep.

Something bright caught his eye. It was a swatch of red material snagged on a thorn bush. He examined the cloth, then tossed it aside.

Dek returned to the king and reported his findings.

Haram said, “Master Orane, can we rebuild the bridge?”

“With time, Highness.”

They rode back and formed a council.

Etera said, “The bridge will have to be rebuilt, Highness. We can return to my estates and send engineers.”

Yetig said, “Majesty, It would take a month or more to reconstruct this bridge. We will have pass overland.”

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

Etera chuckled. “Don’t bother, Highness. I know the road Baron Dek speaks of. It’s not been used in centuries. In my youth I traveled down it for a while to see what was there.”

Haram said, “Does it cross the river?”

“It was overgrown then. It must be impassable now.”

“Does it cross the river?”

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

the river.”

“Then we shall take that road and see.”

“Highness! If this bridge is thrown down by some force, what chance is there for the other? Let us be sensible. Captain Yetig’s estimates wrong. My engineers can have the bridge rebuilt in a week. It’s the only choice.”

Haram said, “Let us convene in half a span.” He walked away from the council as Dek and Etera continued to argue.

Telasec followed the king. “Highness. It was dangerous to bring the queen at all. Taking her down an unknown road places her in grave peril. If we follow Captains Yetig’s advice she could give birth before reaching the palace. It would be best if she returned to her father’s stronghold until the bridge can be rebuilt. You could go on ahead.”

“I have weighed this and fear for her welfare as well. We must reach Meth quickly. I am certain Etera maneuvers in the shadows in preparation to strike. Vara is my greatest strength. Her voice in the council is respected. We must attend the council of baronies together. If she returns with Baron Etera, more blocks will be placed in her way until she gives birth in Fellant. The opposing baronies would claim the child and gather strength to topple the monarchy.”

Telasec made the sign of the covenant.

Haram returned to the council. “We will take the overgrown path.”

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

The third span past brightnail came. As the sun descended toward the horizon, cold dampness grew. Low fog cut off visibility.

Dek’s horse plodded on as it pulled one foot from the mud, then the other.

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

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

Dek was only able to see a few paces through the fog as he rode forward.

A high stone wall appeared without warning. They reached an arched opening. He saw rusted hinges from a gate that rotted away. The baron dismounted and walked his horse through. The walls were as thick as three people walking side by side. He rubbed his hands over the weathered rocks, which were smooth and free of any lichen or moss.

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

Haram dismounted. “Etera and Dek, your troops are under the command of Captain Yetig tonight. Yetig, form what parameter you can on whatever embankments remain. Telasec, prepare a place for the queen inside the keep. Orane, come with us and...” the king stopped in mid-sentence as a voice sang in the forest.

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

It was a drinking song heard in taverns and inns across Carandir.

A man stepped between rubble of a gap in the wall. He wore brown breeches and a green jerkin. His dark hair flowed out from beneath a woolen cap. Draped around the back of his neck was a deer's carcass.

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

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

Yetig stepped in front of the king. “Archers, fire a warning.”

Carandirian archers let loose a volley in a circle around the intruder who dropped his weapon and raised his hands. “Can't we talk this over? There's plenty



for all of us.”

Two soldiers seized the man and dragged him forward.

Yetig said, “Who are you?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Answer my questions in the name of the king.”

“Of course. I’m certain His Majesty sent you out personally to speak with me this evening.”

Haram leaned forward in his saddle. “Let us say it is more of a chance meeting.”

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

Etera said, “Trapper? Poacher! These are the king’s lands. By what right do you trap his majesties game?”

“Please, Highness. I catch just enough to make a modest living, no more.”

The king said, “We mean you no harm, master trapper. What is your name?”

“Tanant Maltey, Highness.”

“Then let us feast on our royal deer you have so conveniently shot for us. Captain, have some men help Master Tanant with the kill. Orane, speak with us.”

Orane said, “Is it safe to trust this man, Majesty?”

“Certainly not. Yetig will keep him in check. Send two messages by terec, one to the captain of our ship and the other to Narech Waser in the palace. Explain our delay and our expectations to reach the port. Let Waser know Etera rides with us.”

“As you command, Sire.”

Haram walked away to the queen’s carriage.

Orane went to the rear of a wagon whose bed was filled with a wooden box large enough to ride in. Two younger Kyar scholars sat within. They wore the same type of roughly spun robes as Orane.

The chief Kyar motioned to some cages. “Leesad, hand me a terec.”

The young man retrieved a small gray bird.

Orane held the terec before him and stared into the animal’s hazel eyes. The bird stared back without blinking. Orane formed the king’s message to Narech Waser in his mind.

The rank of narech was held by the supreme commander of the Carandir

army and navy. Waser served as such from the time of Haram's father.

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

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

Orane's vision flew eastward along the tall cliffs of the southern bank. A break appeared. It led to an immense body of water named Lake Hasp. This extended deep into the mainland to the south.

Within the lake, the cliffs tapered into plains. On the western shore of the lake sat Meth, the monarchy's largest city. It boasted a busy shipping port and was the capital of the Barony of Lanteler.

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

The palace grounds were the size of a small village with a perimeter wall running around the edge and many buildings inside. There were residents for scribes and bureaucrats, stables, barracks, storehouses and two tall, flat roofed towers, between which sat the great audience hall.

His vision soared into a window of the south tower, past gardens where grew every kind of tree and flower found in Carandir.

He pictured Waser, past seventy, tall and thin with white hair. "To him," thought Orane, "Take the message to this man."

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

The terec darted into the sky.

The chief Kyar sat on a stool in the wagon and closed his eyes in exhaustion.

He could have formed an image of Waser's face and allowed the bird to seek out the narech. A terec thus impressed was able to fly anywhere without further direction, even to a place the sender had never been. Such releases without detailed directions could take months.

He stood up and set about impressing the second bird.

Inside the keep, two soldiers made a bed for the queen near the hearth. Nera brought cushions from Vara's coach and arranged them. A fire was lit. Warmth spread throughout the room.

The haunches of the deer were set to roast and a barrel of ale tapped. When the meat was cooked, Maltey helped carve. "This is a tender piece," he said to a soldier. "You should give it to the queen."

They all ate a merry meal for the circumstances.

Mistress Seben fluffed a pillow while the queen ate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vara breathed in gasps.

All pretense at joviality dropped from Haram. "I won't leave your side."

Vara gave a cry.

Haram said, "What is it?"

Telasec wiped sweat from Vara's forehead. "The queen's in labor, Highness." She was amazed as the birth was not due for weeks.

Telasec made the sign of the covenant and said, "Ilidel, Mother of Dragons, guide our sovereign through a safe birthing."



## CHAPTER TWO

**T**elasec spoke the words of a spell passed down from the wizards millennia before. She timed Vara's contractions as they grew more frequent and intense.

Haram held Vara's hand.

Telasec said, "Push again, Highness."

Vara panted and gave another push. A baby boy emerged. Blood covered the child, soaked the cloak Vara lay on and splattered Telasec's arms.

Mistress Seben cut the umbilical cord.

The infant's cries resounded throughout the keep.

Everyone cheered at the birth of the heir.

Telasec felt the infant's life radiate from his soul, pure and untouched.

The queen gasped.

Telasec handed the child to Seben as, to her surprise, a second babe, also a boy, emerged from the womb. Every examination she conducted showed only one child.

Again, she felt vitality surge through her as she held the second infant. He appeared to be identical to his brother.

Then, another sensation came, an icy wave that ran down her fingers as she'd never experienced at a birthing.

The babes were brought to their mother to suckle. Vara inspected the first born, then his brother. Until she put them to her breast, they were unclaimed and

without birthright.

In the time before Avar, mothers sometimes rejected children born with missing limbs or bent backs. Such a one would never grow to farm the land or tend the herds and so would be left to die in the wilderness.

Avar abolished the practice, but from long tradition, mothers still checked their babies before they allowed them to suckle.

Vara took the infants to her breast. "I am so tired, Mother Healer."

"Rest, My Queen," said Telasec.

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

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

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

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

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

Dek thought of how it was over a month since last saw his daughter, Mirjel. He asked himself what kind of world they might leave these children. Would they be able to watch their own families grow up or be lost in petty squabbles and the constant threat of conflict?

The baron looked to the crystal sphere holding the crown. One of Yetig's sergeants, pike in hand, stood at attention beside it.

The soldier's body tensed and fell to the stone floor.

Maltey stood behind with a bloodied knife in his hand. The trapper opened the drawer in the wooden pedestal, reached inside and removed a silver key whose

handle was forged in the shape of a dragon.

Dek drew his sword. “Carandir, to the crown.”

Yetig formed a phalanx of soldiers in front of the king and queen, then led his remaining troops across the room.

Orane followed.

Before Maltey could insert the key in the hole, the metal glowed first red then brilliant white.

Dek smelled the stench of burning flesh.

Maltey screamed and dropped the key. With his injured hand cradled in the other, he ran to a wall and pressed several small stones on its surface. A section swung open. He entered the secret door. It closed behind him.

Baron Dek reached the wall and pounded on it.

Orane ran his hands along the stones. “There’s a catch mechanism.”

The Kyar’s fingers pushed in on one small stone, then another. When he pressed three stones simultaneously, there was an audible click. The secret door sprang opened.

Dek charged down a flight of stairs.

Yetig and his soldiers followed.

At the bottom was a long corridor lined with metal doors. Maltey knelt in front of one. Beside him was a discarded vial and pouch. He now wore crimson robes that were the same color as the swatch of fabric Dek found next to the river. A leather pouch was secured around Maltey’s neck with twine. He winced as he clutched a rabbit with the burned hand. In his other he held a knife. Two geometric designs were traced on the ground with yellow powder.

Maltey sliced the rabbit’s throat.

Blood splattered the symbols as the he recited an incantation.

The door rattled.

Dek’s skin tingled.

Orane shouted, “Back up the stairs. Quickly.”

Fiery pain shot through Dek’s head. He cried out and stumbled back as the metal door distorted outward in the form of a clawed hand. In the chill air, Dek saw Maltey hold tightly to the charm around his neck.

The cell door burst open. A dark whirlwind emerged into the corridor.

Dek felt the warmth of his body sucked away as the formless creature

advanced. He bounded up the stairs two steps at a time.

At the top, he pointed to Seben, "Take the babes. Flee this place."

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

Dek knew he was pursued by a demon. He'd read how such places existed in Carandir, remote caves and fortresses where spirits who followed Baras were imprisoned by the wizards eons before.

The demon burst through the door.

Two soldiers attacked.

The whirling creature lifted them from the floor, snapped their necks and dropped their bodies.

Dek heard a crack and dropped to the floor as a large timber sailed overhead and crashed against the far wall.

He regained his footing and saw a soldier, with one of the infants in his arms, flee the keep.

Seben handed the other babe to a second soldier who followed his comrade. The healer helped the queen stand.

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

He inserted the key and turned it.

A horizontal line appeared around the middle of the crystal. The top of the sphere hinged open like a box.

Before Haram could take the crown, he was seized by the demon.

It dragged him into the center of the room and shook him as a dog might do to kill its prey. Then it hurled the king aside.

Haram struck a wall and fell to the floor.

Near the hearth, Seben supported the queen as the two women hurried toward the door.

The demon made for them.

Soldiers blocked the monster's path.

The whirlwind threw them aside like straw in a storm. When the demon reached the two women, it raised them off the ground.

Dek heard a wet crack as both their heads flopped to the side and their bodies went limp.



Dek ran to the king. "Majesty, can you hear me?"

Haram opened his eyes.

Dek saw a dazed look on his king's face. A flicker of motion caught Dek's eye. Maltey, still in his red robes, made for the open sphere.

The king spoke in a near whisper. "Dek, take the crown. Confine the demon."

"How, Highness?"

Haram started to speak, then fell to the floor.

Dek ran to the crown and saw his movement now attracted the demon.

Maltey reached the sphere first.

Dek was there an instant later. He grabbed Maltey from behind and pinned the man's arms to his sides.

Maltey stomped his heel on Dek's toes.

The baron gritted his teeth as he held tight.

The demon moved closer.

Dek felt the room grow cold.

Maltey said, "I'll enjoy seeing your face twist as the demon rips your soul out."

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

"Baras protects his servants."

Dek spied the pouch dangling around Maltey's neck. He seized it and ripped it away.

Maltey's face became white. He screamed and thrashed.

The baron held tight to the pouch as he pushed Maltey away.

The demon reached the crystal sphere.

Dek prayed to Jorondel.

He was never able to say later if it was divine intervention or the magic in the pouch that saved his life. He only knew the whirling cloud touched him, surrounded him and did him no harm.

Maltey was raised off the ground.

Dek turned away as the demon dismembered Maltey's body. He looked up for a moment to see that his adversary's arms broken and twisted in dozens of places. They hung like the entrails of a slaughtered sheep.

Dek dropped the pouch, grasped the crown with both hands and placed it on his head. His voice boomed within the keep "Back. Vanish. Be gone."

The whirlwind dropped Maltey's body, then moved toward Dek.

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

Haram's words from that morning came to him. What was the crown? He remembered answering it was Carandir itself. Was the land or the army? No, Carandir's strength was in the never-ending faith of its people and all the ideals set out by Avar and the dragons.

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

Dek didn't so much hear or see things. He knew them. He knew the king was badly hurt yet still lived, and the queen had departed this world and journeyed to the Dragons' Halls.

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

His mind, he saw the demon walk back down the stairs to the dungeon.

The creature hissed and spit and clawed at the air. Still, it went.

Orane followed.

Onward Dek drove the demon, past the shattered door into a new cell. He formed the locking magic in his mind.

The demon slammed itself against the cell door with a resounding bang. Dust fell from between bricks. The door vibrated. The attacks grew weaker as the demon slipped back into limbo, then stopped all together.

Orane inspected the empty vial and the writing on the floor. "This is very disturbing. I've seen these symbols only once, in a scroll held secret from all but a few of my order. It was written by the Barasha in the demon tongue. I can't tell what was in the vial. I'm certain its contents induced the queen's labor prematurely."

"Maltey said Baras protects his servants, the Barasha."

"It must have been a wishful boast. Though he obviously found a copy or fragment of a scroll, he can't be a Barasha priest. The wizards wrote clearly of the foul order's utter destruction."

Orane wiped away the symbols in the dust before he led Dek up the stairs.

The wounded were brought to Telasec. The dead were reverently lain in the courtyard and covered with cloaks. Vara's body was placed in her carriage.

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

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

He glanced over to Haram. The two men's eyes met. Dek took the key, which didn't burn him while he wore the crown, and dropped it in the drawer which snapped shut. Then, he removed the crown, placed it inside the sphere and closed it. The crystal sealed itself whole once more.

The baron looked back to King Haram who nodded and fell unconscious.

Dek made the sign of the covenant.

Etera approached. His voice wavered as he spoke. "My daughter is dead."

Dek bowed, "I'm sorry, Etera."

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

"Has the heir died as well?"

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

"Father of Dragons."

Etera summoned Orane and Telasec to join them in council.

Orane studied a leather-bound manuscript whose pages were yellow with age. "There's no reference in the books I brought that reveals a method to discern the true heir short of the test of the dragon key. Of course, there're voluminous scrolls and books in the upper archives, as well as untranslated manuscripts left

by the wizards in the deep vaults.”

Dek paced the floor. “Let’s press a finger of each babe to the key now to see which can suffer its touch. We can surely pull their hands back before they’re hurt.”

Orane closed the book. “I’m afraid that won’t work. The heir can’t take the key before the king’s death.”

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

They all made the sign of the covenant.

Orane said, “And even if the king died this moment, there’s no way to tell which is the heir before the age of twenty. Until then, it’ll burn the hand of any who take it.”

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

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

“Not a brother or sister?”

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

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

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

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

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

Dek said, “You’d poison the minds of the brothers against the Eastern houses. If the king can’t designate a regent, the full council must.”

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

“Without the full council’s support any proclamation you make will be

meaningless. The baronies will split into factions, each claiming one prince or the other.”

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

The company settled into sleep. Telasec kept a vigil with the king. She’d worked magic most of her life. Still, the demon’s cold rage drained her.

The door to the courtyard opened.

A guard entered.

Telasec saw the night sky through the opening. It was coal black with pinpoints of stars.

Inside, the only light came from the banked fire in the hearth. It cast enshrouded pools of darkness.

The guard woke another soldier who collected her gear and went outside.

The first man crawled into his own bedroll and fell asleep.

Telasec slipped into slumber for an instant. The exhaustion, the darkness, the glow of the fire, all worked to create a waking dream.

A ball of mist no larger than a pebble appeared in the center of the room.

Telasec dismissed it as an aberration of too little sleep.

It grew to a disk the size of a person.

Someone wearing robes and a hood stepped from the mist. The stranger walked to the cribs and touched the chest of one of the newborns.

Telasec awoke and sounded an alarm.

Sleeping soldiers jumped to their feet and drew their weapons.

The intruder moved both arms in a circular pattern to become enveloped in dense fog. The mist lasted for only a moment. When it cleared, the stranger was gone.

Telasec and Orane ran to the twins. On one of the infant’s chest was a small mark. When examined closely it resembled the dragon image on the key’s handle.

Telasec rubbed her finger over it.

Orane said, “Is it dye, Mistress?”

The Daro healer shook her head. “No. The skin blemish is true. This is magic beyond any I know.”

Dek and Etera stood by the crib.

Dek ran his finger over the mark. “What does it mean? Is it the sign of Ilidel and Jorondel or Baras?”

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

“It was too dark to tell,” said Telasec.

A moan came from the other side of the keep.

All four ran and knelt at the king’s side.

Haram opened his eyes. His voice was weak. “Speak truthfully. What bodes for me?”

Etera began to answer, then stopped.

Dek leaned forward. “The Daro can’t heal the hurt the demon wrought. You die, My King.”

Haram said, “And Vara?”

Dek held back tears, though his voice cracked. “She awaits you in the Dragons’ Halls.”

The king closed his eyes. “I knew, yet I had to hear. You are the Crown’s truest servant, Baron Dek, to speak so honestly.”

Telasec told Haram of the confusion in which the twins could not be distinguished, and the mysterious visitor who left the dragon mark.

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

Haram’s voice became a whisper. “Dek, you have been greatly loyal to us.”

“I serve the Crown, my liege.”

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

Dek looked to the others. “My liege, if you so command, I request my infant daughter, Mirjel, take as husband the brother who suffers the touch of the key to become king, and so make her queen.”

Etera said, “How can you take advantage of His Majesty like this?”

Haram raised his hand. “Dek but obeys our command. Master Orane, let it be recorded that Lady Mirjel Rascalla, daughter of Baron Dek and Baroness

Jea, shall wed the next king of Carandir and become queen of the realm. Let this union bind Western and Eastern houses alike into one council.”

“It is done, Majesty.”

Etera’s body shook slightly as he clenched his jaw.

Haram’s face relaxed. “I have often dreamed of rest, Dek, and have never known it.” He closed his eyes and died.

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





# **BOOK II**

*The Palace at Meth*

*Eighteen Years Later*



## CHAPTER ONE

Prince Ryckair Avar knelt at the edge of the fencing ring. Heavily quilted pads covered his arms, legs and chest. He wore a helmet and visor. In his hand was a blunted practice saber.

He watched his brother, Prince Craya, kneel at the other side of the ring. The dragon mark on Ryckair's chest began to burn and itch again. He gritted his teeth. *Father of Dragons*, he thought. *Not now.*

Yetig said, "Fence." Ryckair pushed himself up. Craya was on top of him before he was able to stand. Ryckair just managed to raise his blade and deflect his brother's blow. He fought to concentrate as the burn of the mark intensified.

Ryckair had never won a match against Craya. It was clear his brother inherited their father's skill with the sword, not he, and Craya seized every opportunity to taunt his brother over it.

A trickle of sweat slid down Ryckair's forehead and into one eye. He blinked to drive away the sting.

More than anything, he wanted to win once to stop the taunts. He wasn't a poor swordsman. Craya was so much better, and not just at fencing.

Though Telasec thought them identical twins at birth, each boy grew to become distinct.

Craya's dark, handsome features drew attention from ladies of the court who vied to dance with him at balls and banquets.

This was not so for Ryckair. He was ordinary to look at with sandy blond hair.

This alone caused him to be eclipsed by his brother.

Ryckair also carried the dragon mark. Some considered it to be a sign of good, others of evil. None wished to be too close to it.

Ryckair parried a blow and searched for an opening to riposte. He found none. Craya lunged.

Ryckair only just deflected the attack.

The itch on his chest struck again. It began the previous year as a gentle tingle. When he told Orane about it, the chief Kyar said it was nothing to be concerned about, though he offered no explanation. The tingle intensified to an incessant itch and finally to the wretched burning he now felt.

He tried to force his mind among the buzz of conversation from the young officers who urged the match on. The uniformed men and women formed a circle around the two princes.

Most were light skinned, an inheritance from their forbearers who came from the North Continent thousands of years before with Avar the Great to establish Carandir.

The features of some were dark with densely curled hair. These were immigrants and descendants of immigrant from Hura, a tropical nation to the south on the shores of the Western Ocean.

Others whose ancestors once lived in the far eastern country of Xinglan, had pale skin, flat facial features and mono-lidded eyes with epicanthal folds.

A few had the light brown skin of people who inhabited the low desert regions to the southeast.

Some of the officers showed characteristics of all four groups.

It was apparent Craya could win at any time. That no longer amused him. The new sport was to see how hard he could make his brother work before the final touch.

Ryckair spied Yetig. He watched the brothers from the sidelines with the practiced eye of a master.

At nearly fifty, he moved with the grace and agility of a man half his age. His jet-black beard showed no sign of gray. There was always a sense of excitement and impending danger about him.

Over the years, he rose in rank from captain of the king's guard to narech, replacing Waser who died six years after the twins' birth.

Craya lunged and landed off center.

Ryckair saw an opening. He arched his blade around Craya's defenses toward a

touch. Ryckair thrilled at the look of surprise in his brother's eyes.

Craya beat his brother's sword aside with a desperate slash, then dropped and rolled into Ryckair's legs. The blow knocked Ryckair to the ground. Craya was up in an instant, his blade within inches of Ryckair's throat. "Yield, brother. Call me sword master to all present."

Ryckair struggled to no effect.

Craya laughed. "You spend too much time in the Kyar's vaults and lack the practice a king requires. Now you must do penitence. Lick my boot, brother dear." Craya put his foot in Ryckair's face.

Ryckair grabbed it and shoved Craya to the ground. He jumped up and raised his saber. Craya gave a howl of rage and got to his feet.

Narech Yetig's voice cut across the combat. "Hold."

On command, Ryckair pulled back.

Craya pushed forward.

Ryckair barely raised his blade in time to parry a strike to his head.

Yetig grabbed Craya by the wrist. "I said hold. In this yard I rule."

Craya shook himself free. "It doesn't matter. I still won."

"No, Highness. I award this match to Prince Ryckair."

At first, Ryckair thought he misheard. Then, a wave of excitement washed over him.

Craya confronted Yetig. "I had him beat. In a real battle he'd be dead."

Yetig collected the fencing sabers from the brothers. "You committed one fatal error, Prince Craya. Instead of finishing your enemy while he lay on the ground, you taunted him. A soldier has no such luxury in, as you say, a real battle. Any hesitation allows your foe time to form a plan, as Prince Ryckair did when he grabbed your boot."

The thrill of victory ebbed as Ryckair saw the humiliation on Craya's face. He hadn't wanted to win a match as much as put an end to the taunts. "I didn't have a plan, Narech Yetig. I simply acted in desperation."

"Desperation is sometimes the best plan in battle, Prince Ryckair. Remember that, both of you. The lesson is ended."

Yetig left the field.

Ryckair called after him, "Craya really won."

Craya said, "I don't need you to defend me." He stomped away.

A sour pit formed in Ryckair's stomach as he remembered a time when they played together as boys and shared secrets.

He returned to his chambers in the north tower where servants helped him bathe and change into white breeches and a blue doublet. His steward handed him a simple silver circlet unadorned with neither jewel nor image. Ryckair placed it upon his head.

Two guards accompanied Ryckair down the tapestry-lined corridor. This connected the north tower, where the living quarters were, to the south tower the administration of the monarchy was housed.

Between the north and south towers, just off the corridor, was the royal audience hall. Ryckair paused at its rear entrance for a moment, then entered.

Light streamed through a vaulted ceiling made of crystal.

Ryckair stood on a raised dais where the two thrones of Carandir stood. Ahead of him, down the north and south walls of the hall, were eighteen wooden boxes, one for each of the noble houses. They were separated from one another by waist high walls. Ryckair always thought of them as miniature fortresses.

At the foot of the thrones, encased inside the crystal sphere, was the crown.

He walked down the steps and stared into the eyes of the dragon crest. They terrified him. Craya was better suited to rule Carandir. Still, he feared the key might chose him. This was a thought Ryckair hid from everyone, even Orane, to whom he confided his greatest secrets.

The prince thought about Baron Dek's daughter. Her people came from Au centuries before. It was one of the walled city-states east of the swamps. They followed strict codes of ethics that included customs suitors were required to obey for arranged marriages.

The twins hadn't met her and were not even allowed to see her or images of her until she was presented in court with a chaperone after the boys reached the age of twenty. Although practices of her family became tempered after they settled in Rascalla, they still maintained more conservative views than the majority of Carandirians.

Ryckair's grandfather met Mirjel when she was a young girl. Out of respect for Dek's traditions, he gave no report.

In the corridor across from the audience hall was a staircase next to set of metal doors decorated with the reliefs of dragons in flight.

The stairs led to the halls of the Daro located between the two towers where the healing women taught their arts and magic, and where many resided.

The door was the entrance to the vaults of the Kyar deep within the pinnacle of rock.

Ryckair gave the doors a push and walked through.

His guards took up position outside.

The walls were constructed from large blocks of stone. Each fitted perfectly, even after thousands of years.

Crystal globes supported by silver brackets lined the corridors. Their soft light generated no heat. Orane once told Ryckair they were one of the last relics left by the wizards before they vanished. None were able to explain how they worked or create them again.

He reached a door and knocked.

Orane's voice said, "Enter."

The chief Kyar looked up from a set of papers. The flicker of a fire in the hearth shone off his balding pate.

He laid the papers on his lap and smiled. "Highness, what a pleasant surprise. Come in. Have some kan."

Kan was a spicy, invigorating drink brewed from ground herikan root. Orane grated some into two mugs and added water from a kettle that hung by a hook of the hearth.

Ryckair took a sip. "Thank you, Master Orane. I thought I might be able to work on that passage from the *Kura Kar* before supper."

"Epic poems before meals? I'm not sure how that will affect your digestion. Besides, why spend time on that old sonnet? It's been a part of popular folklore since Avar's time."

"I've been working with several Kyar to translate a newly discovered version I found in a small book hidden inside a cut out cavity of a larger volume. It gives a very different account of a meeting in a north continent forest between King Gotenag and his enemies."

Ryckair and Orane enjoyed their kan and talked of the day's events. The prince described the duel he won and how he hoped it would end Craya's taunts.

"He would have won in a real fight," said Ryckair. "He's better than me. I felt guilty, like I'd taken something away from him. He wasn't just angry, he was hurt. I could tell. You probably think that sounds foolish."

"Not at all, Highness."

Ryckair gazed into the fire. "We used to be close, Master. We always wanted to

go everywhere together.”

“I recall.”

“Do you remember when Baron Dek brought us little statues of mounted riders?”

“They were made of silver, weren’t they?”

“Yes. My horse had a ruby on its forehead and Craya’s had a sapphire. We were just nine. I polished my statue every night and imagined riding off in search of adventures.

“I had an archery lesson one day. Craya got both statues out. He dropped mine and knocked the rider’s head off. When I came back, he said, ‘Ryckair, if I did something terrible, something really awful, would you still love me?’

“I answered, ‘Of course.’

“He said, ‘Forever?’

“I said, ‘Yes, forever and ever.’

“Then he held up the headless statue.

“All I wanted to do was hit him. I remember how I clenched my fist. He waited for me to strike. His eyes showed fear, as if he thought he’d lost my love. My hands shook. I couldn’t hurt him.

“I said it didn’t matter and went outside. No one was in the stables. I pounded my fist against a hay bale and shouted.”

Ryckair smiled. “It scared the horses.”

“And did the win today ease the anger?”

“I hate it when he humiliates me in front of the officers. I really wanted to win. It felt empty when he looked at me with such hatred in his eyes, like I didn’t have a brother anymore.”

“Are you certain it’s hate and not avarice for the crown?”

The fire hissed and popped. Ryckair closed his eyes and leaned back into the chair. “Never a crown can split apart, to sit upon two heads. The victor needs hide a smile. The other tears not shed.”

“So, you read Feena after all.”

“The poem always seemed like nonsense before. Now it’s too clear.”

“What of you, Highness? Don’t you desire the crown?”

Ryckair stood and stared into the flames. “I’ve been afraid to speak of this, Master. It’s eating at me. Craya’s more suited to be king. He’s a better soldier and commander. I don’t deserve to wear the crown.”



He expected Orane to lecture him on duty and the foolishness of his fears. Instead, the Kyar poured more kan. “The crown is a terrible weight, yet the key will choose who’s fit to rule. Nothing can change that.”

The prince sat back down. “This may sound cruel. I never missed my parents when I was young. Mistress Telasec was like a mother and you a father. Now, it’s as though something’s gone. I think about my parents at night, especially my father. It’s like I have a hole in me, right in my chest. Craya’s the only family I have left. Now, I’m losing him.”

Craya sat at a desk within his private audience hall in the north tower. It overlooked a parade ground below. His anger had cooled enough for him to think of revenge.

He called out, “Ackella.”

A tall, blond officer entered the room and bowed.

Craya said, “Sit down, Lieutenant. Take some refreshment.”

Ackella reclined on a divan and filled a golden goblet with wine. “How may I serve Your Highness?”

“Where’s my brother?”

Ackella wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “With Orane, Highness.”

“The Kyar.”

Craya picked up a lesson book, slapped it rhythmically against his palm, then threw it across the room. “Books are for fools, Ackella. Remember that. What about Yetig?”

“He examines reports of attacks in the swamplands.”

Craya clasped his hands behind his back. “How could he humiliate me in front of the officers like that?” For years, the prince studied Yetig’s drills, read his papers, even emulated his commanding walk.

He said, “Ackella, who do you serve, Yetig or me?”

“I serve you, Highness. The narech I placate.”

The prince said, “As I’ve known well over the last year. You’re my eyes and ears in this palace. Ryckair’s stepped too far. I want you to watch his movements. Report everything, he does, everywhere he goes, everyone he talks to.”

Ackella said, “I am your servant, Highness.”



Baron Etera's suite of rooms in the north tower of the palace overlooked Lake Hasp. The floor was covered with rugs. Tapestries filled with scenes from the hunt hung from walls. A window overlooked Lake Hasp.

Five other nobles sat in chairs; Barons Gilyon Eel, Refran Ulata, Keysta Tesar, Womb Petala and Baroness Luja Shenan, all from original houses.

Etera said, "In two more years we'll know who's king."

"If Prince Craya takes the throne," said Womb. "It would only take a little flattery to turn him to our cause of a land for pure Carandirians free of the New Nobility and foreigners."

Gilyon smiled. "Vanity and pride have always been his weaknesses."

Keysta said, "What of Baron Dek's daughter? She'll try to influence her future husband to keep the New Nobility. She'll share his bed."

Etera raised a wine glass from a table. "I met her as a girl. She's more interested in clothes and horses. It won't be difficult to distract and control her."

Refran stroked his beard. "I agree we could influence Prince Craya. What if the key accepts Prince Ryckair?"

Gilyon laughed. "Does anyone here still believe that legend?"

Etera said, "It's not a legend. I've seen it. Only the first born will be able to hold the key."

A hot breeze blew in through the window.

Luja said, "How do we turn Ryckair to our cause? What does he want?"

Gilyon poured more wine for himself. "To be a Kyar, it would seem. The boy has no confidence. He denied his win today. Could we offer him a monastic life if he abdicates in favor of Craya?"

Refran took a long breath and exhaled. "It would be risky. Once he tastes power, he might like it. As well, he's dedicated to tradition and could see it as his duty to rule. He spends an excessive amount of time with Dek and is sympathetic to the New Nobility."

A knock came.

Etera said, "Enter."

Yapell, opened the door. "My lord, Narech Yetig requests your presence at a meeting with Baron Dek over the raids in the east."

"I'll attend him shortly."

Yapell bowed and left.

Etera said, "Any more thoughts?"

Keysta looked around. "We could kill Ryckair and let the succession move forward."

Etera dashed across the chamber floor and shoved Keysta against a wall. "You will never entertain such again. He's my grandson. No matter what plays out, he'll not be harmed. Is that clear?" He looked around the room. "Is that clear to all of you?"

He left.

Keysta rubbed his shoulder. "I'm only thinking of Carandir."

Luja said, "As we all are. The usurpers must be removed before the royal bloodline is tainted. If the Rascallan becomes queen it matters little whether Craya or Ryckair is king. Baron Etera thinks for his family. Bold actions are required before either prince is wed."

Several weeks later, Dek and Etera crouched together behind brush on a outcrop above the swamplands in Dek's barony of Rascalla. It was a span before dawn when they saw a line of torches move out of the swamp.

Dek said, "There, do you see them, Etera?"

Etera yawned. "Yes, Dek, I see them. What does it prove? They might be poachers."

"There's nothing to poach in this part of Rascalla. Captain, send two scouts to follow them at a distance. I want to know where they go and who they contact."

"Yes, my lord."

Dek said, "The wealth of Carandir disappears across the swamps and goods come in without paying duty because there're not enough troops to stop it. The smuggling is nothing compared to the caravan raids."

"Caravans are private ventures. They need to pay for their own protection."

"They hire guards. It's not enough. We need more garrisons and troops here."

Etera yawned again. "The treasury is not endless. There are many demands upon it."

Dek looked up to the sky. "Father of Dragons. Money is spent on new baths in Nemtanka, repairs for roads to hunting lodges in Shenan and changes to the color of drapes in Tesar, all Western baronies."

"These expenditures were approved by the council."

"It's time the council approved some expenditures in the east. The garrisons will be built if you make public your intention to support them. How long do you think I can keep this alliance together if you ignore the smuggling and the raids?"

Etera gave a sigh. "How much?"

“Thirty thousand gold crowns.”

“You’re joking.”

“That’s what it will take.”

“I can’t convince the western houses to approve that kind of money. I don’t see how I can get ten.”

“We need at least three new outposts and two garrisons. If we can provide more bases where caravans can find sanctuary, they’ll have protection clear through.”

“What’s wrong with the troops the Crown already placed here?”

“There’s nothing wrong with the troops other than the fact they are spread too thin.”

“Then we’ll send soldiers into the swamp to hunt down the raiders; burn some villages; teach them a lesson.”

“No army can hope to hunt them down in their swamp. A battle there would be suicide. Besides, many Carandirians profit from the raids and smuggled goods, not the least of whom is Baroness Quib, even though no proof can be found.”

“I find it hard to understand how near savages with stone axes and crude bows can threaten a modern army. Jorondel’s blood, they’re just swampers.”

Etera’s use of the derogatory term grated on Dek’s ears. He was born in Rascalla and lived near the Sinkarakans all his life.

He said, “Most of them are peaceful. They gather those turtle eggs you’re so fond of. Only a few from the south take part in the raids and it’s obvious they’re supplied with modern weapons by someone else.”

“Who?”

“No one knows. That’s what I need the troops for.”

“Perhaps I can convince the western houses to support fifteen.”

“You might as well not bother. It’ll take twenty-five at the least.”

“Eighteen.”

“Twenty-three.”

“Twenty. That’s as much support as I can support.”

“Very well. Twenty.” It was the figure Dek decided on before he approached Etera.

False dawn grew. Mists rose from the wetlands that stretched eastward to the horizon. Carandir only laid claim to lands bordering the swamps and recognized the authority of the Sinkarakan tribal leaders. Still, some Carandirians expanded into

tribal territory. This prompted raids on caravans.

Etera said, “We’ve seen all we can here. Let’s find some breakfast and a hot bath.”

They reached one of the few royal garrisons along the eastern border just as the sun broke. The fortress stood on a flat plain near the walled city of Desan. The city’s gates were still closed against night raids. There were two caravans camped outside the garrison walls. They arrived too late to enter the city..

The Carandir army was always focused south on the Kingdom of Karaken, a nation that conducted constant skirmishes across a border whose boundaries were in dispute for centuries. The problems in the swamplands were considered an eastern matter.

The fortress gates opened. A Carandir officer led twelve soldiers out. He saluted. “Captain Amar at your service, my lord regents.”

Etera dismounted. “Why is Colonel Herrik not here to greet us?”

“The Colonel was called away to a raid, Baron Etera. She assigned me to attend you.”

Rascalla held a tenuous relationship with the royal garrisons, as did all the Eastern houses. The company in the fortresses consisted of Carandirian regulars. Their orders were to protect the interests of the baronies, yet those baronies had no direct control over them.

Dek said, “What raid is this, Captain?”

“A farmhouse, lord, a quarter span’s ride to the north. A report came of an attack last night by Sinkarakans.”

Dek found the news difficult to believe. Sinkarakan raids always involved caravans. They never attacked settlements. “Take us to this farm.”

Etera said, “We’ve been lying in dirt without food for over a span. Captain, have a full breakfast prepared and a hot bath drawn.”

“Get back on your horse, Etera. We both need to see this.”

“I’m not going any farther than this garrison.”

“Ride, Etera!”

Etera took a step back, looked at Dek, then mounted his horse again. “This had better be something quite horrendous.”

“Pray to Jorondel it’s not.”



After a short ride, they stood before eight burned out houses arranged around a central well. Dead livestock lay strewn about the yard. Broken fences marked the edge of the farm. Grain waved in the humid breeze.

Colonel Herrik, a tall woman with short cropped hair, said, "This is an unexpected honor, my lord regents." She pointed to white sticks driven into the ground. "All the bodies were removed for burial. We marked where each one was found. The stakes are numbered. This report has detailed descriptions."

Dek took the scroll. "Are there any more copies of this?"

"I'm afraid not, my lord. We have few scribes here and little time to write the original reports, let alone copy them."

Dek referenced each spot as they toured the farm and examined where the victims were found. The nauseous smell of rotting livestock threatened to overwhelm him in the damp heat.

They made their way across the common yard to a ring of stones. In the center of the circle was a white stake. The stones were blackened as though scorched by a hot blaze.

Dek pointed to the scroll. "The report says a burned body was found in the pit."

"Yes, my lord."

He rolled the scroll up. "Everything here's odd. This pit's the oddest. The Sinkarakans don't mutilate bodies in any attack."

From a broken fence post Captain Amar called, "Sir, there's something here."

Caught on a picket's splintered surface was a scrap of crimson material.

Dek's mind flashed back eighteen years to the demon's attack at the keep in the Fellant forest. He felt chill in the summer heat. "Father of Dragons."

Etera said, "Will you make sense?"

Dek ran his fingers over the red cloth. It was the same weight as the robes Maltey had worn. "Several of Master Orane's books reference men who wore crimson robes and performed rites of human sacrifice to call demons. Those men were Barasha priests."

"What did you say?"

"I said Barasha, Etera, like Maltey."

Etera spread his hands and looked up at the sky. "In the name of all the dragons and wizards, you drag me out here without breakfast and start spouting nonsense about long vanished sorcerers. Orane told you they were destroyed by the wizards. The sun's addled your brain."

“You saw the demon, Etera. If you’d stood next to Maltey while it pulled him apart, you’d know I’m right. Before he died, he said, ‘Baras protects his servants.’ The Barasha.”

Etera said, “Chase shadows if you wish. I’m returning to the garrison.” He stomped off across a field of waist high wheat.

Five paces out he jumped back with a shriek.

Dek ran through the stalks of grain, followed by Colonel Herrik and Captain Amar.

They stared at what was once a human being. The body lay face down. The head was twisted around backwards. The arms and legs were bent at the elbows and knees. Flies swarmed over exposed flesh.

Dek said, “I’ve seen that look before. It was on Maltey’s face as the demon tore him apart.”

Etera panted. “Colonel Herrik, No one is to know of this. Burn the corpse personally. Speak of this to no one.”

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