

Half Awakened Dreams

Volume II of the Carandir Saga



David A. Wimsett

Return to Carandir

Princess Shara of Dharam, the lover Prince Ryckair of Carandir took when she convinced him his true love, Mirjel, was dead, helps him defeat her father, King Masalta, to reclaim land stolen from Carandir by the Dharam. Shara sends a magical poison to actually kill Mirjel and seal her hold over the prince.

Ryckair's companion, Batu, escapes the Barasha sorcerers and warns Ryckair of Shara's plot. Ryckair banishes her, along with Masalta, to the high desert east of Carandir on the North Continent, unaware she carried his child.

Prince Ryckair returns to the place and kills his twin brother Craya who joined the Barasha. Ryckair claims the magical crown whose power confines the evil dragon Baras.

The Barasha threaten to kill Mirjel. Ryckair attacks them with the crown to protect her life. Because this act was for selfish gain and not in service to Carandir, the magic is corrupted and the Barasha refocus the power to release Baras before they are destroyed. Wounded, the dragon flies off to the east.

Ryckair and Mirjel marry to become king and queen.

Now, as equals, the monarchs must find Baras and subdue him again. They are consumed with the search and forget what should be remembered.

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For Rod Collins

Now singing in the Dragons' Halls

Other Books by David A. Wimsett

Dragons Unremembered: Volume I 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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is said a novel is a long piece of writing with mistakes. This second edition corrects mistakes found in the first edition. The book has also been extensively restructured to make the prose more dynamic and align them with the rest of the series. Sections have been added, removed and reorganized to improve the flow and meaning. I thank my editor, Denise Pysarchuk, for helping me improve the novel.

I thank my long time friends Jeff and Randie for their support and suggestions, and my good friend, Ed, who suffered through early drafts of the novel as a first reader to give encouragement, suggestions and a much needed sanity check.

David A. Wimsett
Nova Scotia
September 2022

Western Baronies

THE GREAT RIVER

↑
TO THE
NORTH CONTINENT



LUSAR

KINGDOM
OF KARAKEN



Eastern Baronies





BOOK V

Fifteen months after the escape of Baras

CHAPTER ONE

Shara cut her red hair short in an attempt to find relief from the heat of the eastern desert on the North Continent. She rode in one of the wagons of the exiled Dharam. Her father, Masalta, still claimed the title King of Dharam, though his subjects now numbered less than one hundred former officers, ministers, courtiers and supporters.

Shara suckled her eight-month-old infant son, Dhamar, the unknown and illegitimate son of Ryckair Avar, now King of Carandir.

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

Her body was leaner than before, yet she was allotted extra food to produce enough milk for the baby.

Wind blew fine dust through bramble filled branches of low thorn bushes, parched now in the summer heat. It battered the wooden sides of the wagon as she remembered her fine rooms in the palace at Kackar, when she was a princess of the Dharam, where she first entertained Ryckair.

He arrived like the answer to a wish, a strong leader, still unsure of himself, whom she could mold to oppose her father, Masalta. Ryckair was the perfect tool.

The babe began to cry. Shara rocked him "Hush, my darling. You are the heir to Carandir, both the north and south continents now. You will wear

the dragon-crested crown one day, my dear one.” She spoke with the distinct inflection of the Dharam speech with the vowels held long, emphasis on the first syllable and the letter *r* pronounced with a strong trill.

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

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

She admitted to herself she initially used him, though she liked him from their first meeting. He brought wit and sophistication to the dour and cheerless Dharam. She never expected to fall in love with him.

There was no choice other than to send the target poison to kill her rival. How could he fail to understand her fear of losing him? How could he banish her?

The babe cried again.

She brought him to her breast. They were once gorged with milk, before the provisions they were sent into exile with ran out.

Dhamar took the nipple in his mouth as his mother held his back in her right arm as she cradled his head in her left hand. “Oh, that the Carandirian Batu had never come to reveal Mirjel lived. Had she died in her fall, we would be in the palace on the lush South Continent. Water everywhere with green grass. Imagine it, my sweet one. The time will come.”

The wagon stopped.

Masalta climbed into the bed, his once obese form slimmed by the dwindling provisions. “How is my heir?”

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

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

Shara said, "Not if we die in this desert."

When the spring deluge came, the Dharam filled water barrels and picked fruits from succulent plants and brush. The food lasted them a month before the bounty was consumed or rotted. They found some plants whose leaves could be eaten once boiled into a mush. Thought the concoction was bitter and gritty, it filled their bellies. Water was precious. They let the harsh cooking liquid cool to drink the next day.

Every week, one or two courtiers, former merchants or soldiers who chose to go into exile with their king died of thirst, hunger or the lack of will to go on. When one of their horses succumbed, they were forced to abandon a wagon.

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

In their first winter, the nights on the high desert often fell below freezing. Dew formed frost on rocks and the branches of bushes. They licked it off before the sun rose to evaporate it away.

They came into a new country where the ground became sandier. A different type of plant grew there. It's branches were barren of leaves.

Shara sometimes left camp to search for anything edible. It was just before dawn. The glow of the sun's daily furnace lit the horizon.

She walked past some of the new vegetation. At first, she thought it was dead. Upon closer examination, she saw the stalks were still green near the roots.

She used her hands to dig down until she found a tuber the size of two fists. It was soft. Liquid dripped from her hands when she squeezed it. She put the root to her mouth and sucked on it, too thirsty to wonder if it was poisonous. It wasn't. The liquid tasted sweet as it coursed down her dry throat and dripped from her lips.

She laughed. "Father, come see our salvation."

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

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

was laughter and singing.

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

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

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

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

The next night, they set off again. Scouts rode ahead to search for food and shelter.

Masalta's captain ran to the deposed king's wagon and knelt. "Sire, another camp is just beyond a second dune. They have lit fires and prepare to sleep in tents."

Masalta raised an eyebrow. "Are they many?"

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

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

"I believe some carried knives. They were cutting meat with them. I didn't see any swords or pikes."

"Is a sentry set?"

"I saw none, Highness."

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

"Did I raise a coward?"

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

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

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

“Who is King of the Dharam?”

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

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

Shara felt cold. “Do you propose to slaughter them, father?”

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

“I will have no part of it.”

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

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

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

The captain saluted. “Yes, Majesty.”

Shara closed her eyes and turned her head.

The women, nine in all, were given to soldiers. Through the captives, Masalta learned of water wells and grazing spots, after a few were beaten and the others cowered in fear of more violence. Masalta demanded they teach some minor courtiers and merchants how to tend the herds. When they refused, one of them was pulled aside, thrown to the ground and kicked until she fell unconscious.

“Don’t kill her,” said Masalta. “She must still be able to breed.”

Shara tended the woman’s bruised body in an attempt to ease the pain. She brought the nomad a fermented drink made from berries the Dharam stole from

the herders. The rest of the captives gave no resistance.

The men the Dharam soldiers killed carried swords and a few pole arms. Dharam courtiers and merchants were pressed into military service. The captain drilled them with threats and hard discipline until they became a fighting force. Masalta smiled at the progress.

A few weeks later, scouts reported a band of armed men gathered at an oasis. Masalta said, "Are they herders?"

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

"Brigands. How many?"

"Sixteen."

Masalta stroked his beard. "Sixteen new recruits would be good."

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

The Dharam captain positioned his troops on all sides of the dunes, then gave a short whistle.

Masalta's men charged into battle with cries and drawn swords.

The two guards were grabbed and pushed to the ground.

The naked brigands ran out of the water,

The Dharam rounded them up.

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

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

"I was about to ask you the same thing? None of you look very fat for brigands. Too few merchant caravans?"

The man remained silent.

Masalta walked to a chest and opened it to find only a few copper coins. "How would you like to make real wealth, or would you rather stand here naked in the desert?"

"You kill us? Take our clothes? Who you?"

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

The leader of the brigands looked at his own men. Many were gaunt. He knelt before Masalta. “My liege.”

CHAPTER TWO

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

Shara stepped out of the tent she shared with her son, who was now ten.

Dhamar was dressed in purple, loose fitting breeches and a silk tunic with a red scarf wrapped around his sandy, blond hair, a reflection of his father's features.

She inspected a man whose hands and feet were bound by straps of leather attached to stakes in the ground.

He lay in the center of a square formed by tents of many bright colors. His arms and legs were spread wide. He blinked, as he stared up at the morning sun. Already, heat was building.

Two dozen Dharam soldiers stood next to the prone man.

Shara knelt beside the captive. "You are to be honored today, though you came to our camp as a thief."

The repulsion of the initial attack on the herders became tempered by the realization her father would soon gather a force able to challenge Ryckair.

Her thoughts were consumed with her son, his destiny to rule Carandir, and vengeance against the man who spurned her.

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

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

Masalta stepped out of his tent.

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

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

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

Masalta handed Shara a knife with a long, curved blade he took from a nomad chieftain after he drove a sword into the man’s liver.

Dhamar knelt before her.

She held the blade in both hands. “Today, you walk the path to manhood. You will leave your mother’s tent to live with your grandfather as prince of Dharam and Carandir, heir to both lands. Though your father does not yet know of you, in ten years you will kill him and claim his throne. You are his first born. None other can hold the magical key and unlock the crystal sphere to take the dragon-crested crown, your crown by birthright. Realize, now, your first bloodletting. Become a warrior of the Dharam.”

Dhamar’s features were solemn as he accepted the knife. He knelt next to the captive man.

As all looked on, the youth said, “Know, now, the punishment for those who steal from the Dharam.”

He drove the tip of the blade into the man’s palm.

The victim shouted in pain as he twisted his body against the confining straps.

Dhamar withdrew the dagger and showed the blood covered knife to all assembled. Cheers erupted from those in the square and from the surrounding

tents. Men hoisted Dhamar on their shoulders and paraded him around the camp.

He smiled with a wide grin.

Shara stood tall in deep pride.

Masalta bowed as the boy passed.

The procession traversed the camp three times before Dhamar was sat down at Masalta's tent.

The old man said, "No longer a boy, you will sit at the council from this day forward."

He walked to the captive. A trickle of blood oozed from his wound as the man stared with wide eyes and panted.

Masalta said, "The punishment for stealing is death, however you have done a great service for my grandson. Captain, give the thief his reward and release him."

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

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

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

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

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

The young boy, now twelve, ran over. After his first bloodletting, he walked tall and confident.

Masalta smiled at grandson's approach. "You are a fine young man, Dhamar."

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

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

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

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

One of the brigands Masalta recruited at the oasis ran into camp.

He knelt before Shara. “Highness, strangers see I. Approach camp. Two men.”

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

“Grandfather told me to sit with him. He’ll want to see the strangers.”

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

Armed Dharam soldiers escorted two red robed men into the square of tents.

Shara drew a sword and stepped in front of her son.

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

“Stay quiet. We must learn who they are before they can approach the heir, my son.”

As the men came closer, she relaxed, then sheathed her sword and started to laugh.

Dhamar looked up at her and furrowed his eyebrows.

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

To his side stood Ackella, who betrayed Ryckair’s twin brother, Craya, to the Barasha. The sorcerers seduced Craya with promises of power and domination over his brother. Ackella was appointed Lord Mayor of the capital city of Meth.

He once sported a golden, brocade eye patch after the Barasha gouged out one eye to make his story of being the lone survivor of an attack on Craya’s troops more believable. Now, he wore a dirty bandana wrapped around his head to cover the empty socket.

Ackella dropped to one knee.

Petstra bowed before Shara. “Highness. Well met.”

Shara said, “We heard reports the Barasha were destroyed at the same time Baras awoke.”

“Ackella and I are the last of the order. I was run through in a sword fight atop the north tower and would have died had I not staunched the blood with an incantation and powder. I saw the great dragon fly into the east, then crawled down the stairs and out across the bridge of the palace in the confusion.

“Ackella escaped from the crowds in Meth who would have killed him. He

helped me reach an abandoned fishing boat and sailed it across lake Hasp.”

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

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

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

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

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

“We crossed the Great River and survived from day to day. Years passed, until a rumor came of a savage people who appeared in the north desert around the time Baras escaped. People said the rabble was led by an old man and a red headed woman. I knew it had to be you. I’m impressed. I never thought you’d survive.”

“We are Dharam. We adapted to this world we were condemned to by he who betrayed and forgot me. I will come to his attention soon. He left a seed behind he does not realize was planted.”

She brought Dhamar from behind her. “Here is the son of Ryckair Avar, the heir to the dragon-crested crown.”

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

A year after his arrival in the Dharam camp, Petstra added a pinch of ground root to a bowl while Dhamar and Ackella chanted in unison. Pink fog hovered just inside the rim.

From its center, a green column of smoke the width of a finger and twice as long rose.

The chanting grew louder as the column turned from green to orange.

Petstra closed his eyes and held his hand over the smoke.

It coiled and contracted into a ball.

Dhamar sneezed.

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

Dhamar lowered his head. “I’m sorry.”

Petstra gave a slight smile. “You will learn to concentrate, young prince. It requires time. There is no other path to magic and your future role as the most

powerful ruler in the world. Reflect on your failure. Seek ways to improve. The lesson is over for the day. Go play.”

Dhamar rose, bowed to the sorcerer and left.

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

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

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

“Without mastery of sorcery, the demons would devour him. They come into this world as slaves who look always for release. Mastery will come. He’ll need it. Though the crown is powerful, it’s a weapon of defense, not conquest. If used so it’ll fight Dhamar to return the balance of the dragons’ plan.

“This was Ryckair’s mistake when he attacked Reshna to save Mirjel’s life. The head of our order was able to redirect the corrupted power to release Baras. In time, Dhamar will call demons and command them. Once the crown has unbound our master, he will destroy it. Baras will protect your son and all his heirs.”

“Where is Baras? How do we find him?”

“I don’t know. He’s hidden from all and must awaken enough to call us. We will practice the arts he taught to those who came before me and passed the knowledge on. Each spell cast speaks to my master as he recovers. He’ll know we are here. We must be patient. The Barasha waited for millennia. We can wait a while longer.”

Shara heard Masalta cough as she ushered Dhamar inside the king’s tent.

No longer a boy, Dhamar, now eighteen, knelt at Masalta’s side. “Grandfather, I’m here.”

The old man opened his eye lids. “I cannot see you, my precious one. Take my hand.”

Dhamar placed his hands over Masalta’s and squeezed.

The deposed king smiled. “There you are. Shara. Are you here?”

Shara knelt at his side. “Yes, Father.”

Masalta’s breath was shallow and slow. “I do not know if the dragons will

admit me to their halls or if my soul will wander the nether world. You are now King of the Dharam, Dhamar. You are a fine young man. Your mother is appointed regent, to rule until you come of age at twenty. Then, you will go to Carandir and kill your father to claim his crown.”

Dhamar’s eyes were filled with tears. “No, Grandfather. You’ll recover. You’ll tell me stories of battles and glory again.”

“My story is at an end, young king. Sit with me.” Masalta closed his sightless eyes. “You will regain what I was robbed of. You will avenge me.” His breath slowed, then stopped.

The tears were gone from Dhamar’s eyes.

Shara opened the tent flap and shouted, “The king is dead. Long live the king.”

The troops, courtiers and followers lowered their heads. Many wept.

After a moment, a voice cried out, “Long live the king.” The cry was taken up by all.

Dhamar stepped out of the tent.

The assemblage became silent.

There was a set to his young jaw none had seen before.

He raised an arm to the south. “To Carandir and the dragon crown.”

Everyone cheered.

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

BOOK VI

*The Palace at Meth
One Year Later*

CHAPTER ONE

The Inn of the Singing Cow, within the small village of Temen, sat in the Barony of Nemtanka on a main trade route between the Barony of Lanteler to the north, where the royal palace stood atop the rock pinnacle just offshore of Lake Hasp, to the southern Barony of Arana, on the border with the Kingdom of Karaken, a nation which continued to stage skirmishes with Carandir over land claims.

The outside of the building was yellow stucco with an oak door and tall, narrow windows.

The tavern owner, Namar Reesa, a short, squat whose close cropped hair was speckled with gray, had one rule; patrons were allowed to discuss anything except politics or romance, because both subjects could bring brawls and brake furniture.

He couldn't stop the whispers of the merchants, travelers and local people concerning the queen.

Three patrons sat at a table; a woman with long, dark hair she constantly brushed away from her left eye, a silk merchant who came through three times a year and an old man with deep crevices in his face and two missing teeth.

The silk merchant offered a toast. "To the queen's birthday. I plan to be in Meth for the celebration. The local taverns always bring out the best brew."

“Forty-one,” said the old man under his breath.

“And still no heir,” whispered the woman. She leaned into the table as her hair brushed the surface.

The merchant squinted as he looked around the room. “Those are dangerous words. They’ll get us tossed onto the road at least.”

The old man chuckled. “If everyone who spoke of the barren queen were shown the door, there would be no customers in this inn.”

The merchant flinched, then gave a tepid smile. “Still, the celebration will be good for business. The queen herself wears a pair of silk slippers I brought her two years ago. Everyone wants to emulate her.”

“Everyone did,” said the woman. “Now, everyone wonders if there will be a monarchy when the king and queen fly to the Dragons’ Halls.”

Reesa came over to the table as he wiped his hands on a towel. “Another round? How about some stew to hearten you for the road?”

“You keep a quiet establishment,” said the woman.

“It’s the way I like it,” said the inn keeper. “Peaceful. A comfortable place to welcome travelers.”

The old man looked down at the table. “How peaceful will it be when no one wears the crown?”

The merchant almost choked on his drink.

Reesa said, “Do you want me to throw you out?”

The woman pushed her chair back. “You’d have to throw us all out.”

The silk merchant cleared his throat. “I’d like some stew.”

The old man said, “You’ve heard the talk as well as anyone here, as well as anyone across Carandir.”

“And I don’t want to hear it in my inn.”

The woman brushed back hair from her face. “Forty-one, barren and the king won’t divorce her, won’t even take a consort.”

Reesa clenched his fists around the towel. “That’s not the way of Carandir.”

The old man said, “Maybe ways need to change.”

The inn keeper pointed to the door. “Out. The lot of you.”

The merchant cradled his mug in both hands. “The stew sounds good.”

“Out.”

The three stood, the silk merchant last.

The woman raised her voice well above a whisper. “You think you can stop the worry, the fear for the future? What will happen to Carandir? What will happen to the children? We’ll go. The problem remains. Staying silent won’t help. We need an heir. The queen will never bear a child after her fall. Her womb is dried up. Soon our homeland will be too.”

The old man and the woman walked out.

The silk merchant stayed behind. “It has been a long time since I ate.”

Reesa stared at the door, then back to the merchant. “Oh, shut up and eat some stew, you coward.”

The whispers were loudest in many of the western baronies. Sometimes, they were spoken openly by members of royal houses and common people in the towns, villages and countryside. The quiet discussions would come on garden walks or horse rides away from other ears.

The traitorous barons and baronesses who aligned themselves with the Barasha in the war were killed or fled, yet some in the west still held animosity toward the eastern houses and foreigners whom the traitors sought to destroy.

In the hearts of more than a few, those feelings festered. The eastern houses were given royal status only after staging a merchant uprising three generations before, while the western houses were founded at the beginning of Carandir. The derogatory slur, *New Nobility*, was heard again.

The queen was born in the east. Some even named her usurper.

Voices who once cheered at the defeat of the Barasha and praised a united Carandir began to speak of the purity of the west again. They mouthed the old claim only true Carandirians belonged, not the New Nobility or the foreign soldiers who fought against the Barasha and were given lands in the monarchy for their services.

These comments were the loudest among some servants of the deposed, former noble leaders. Tyra was one, a minor advisor to Luja, the previous baroness of Shenan, a barony along the border of Karaken to its south. After the defeat of the Barasha, to whom she swore allegiance, she fled her stronghold as did other nobles to avoid capture and imprisonment.

Tyra loved her, worshiped her, yet knew she would never return his affection. When she vanished, he felt angry because she didn’t taken him with her and

cursed her name.

With the words, he fell on his knees in shame of his betrayal to her memory.

Tyra remained at her stronghold because he knew nowhere else to go. He pledged fealty to both Kinar, a distant cousin of Luja who was appointed the new baroness by the Crown, and her husband Talmat, who took the title of sir, not baron.

Tyra's smile was pleasant, yet he wished nothing more than to spit into their faces. He served them with respect in the open and sometimes put dust in their soup.

He was often sent into the forest to chop firewood and would be gone several days with a small cart, a pack of food and a bedroll. He didn't mind the hard work. It allowed him to escape the stronghold for a while and think about Luja and how he wished she had taken him with her.

One such trip brought him into Mountains at the western border between Shenan and the barony of Luser. He finished chopping down an old, rotted tree and lit a fire. His feet stretched out near the flames as it burned down to coals. In the morning, He would return to the stronghold to smile once again.

A twig snapped, followed by the rustle of leaves.

Tyra reached for the axe at his side and stood with it ready in his hand.

A woman's voice spoke in a husky timber. "Come, Tyra. Do you think I would hurt you?"

Tyra took in a sharp breath as Luja stepped out from around the trunk of a tree. Behind her were the former barons Gilyon of Eel and Womb of Petala.

Tyra fell to his knees. "Forgive me, my lady. Forgive your obedient servant. I think of you constantly, yet am forced to serve those who stole your title, cowards who defile your home and eat with your cutlery."

Luja walked to the fire.

Gilyon and Womb remained at the edge of camp.

She threw a log onto the embers and covered them with some dried leaves. The flames erupted. "Do you still pledge your allegiance to me, Tyra?"

"For eternity, my lady."

"The three of us have lived beyond the mountains for years, far from our rightful homes. Is the usurper queen still barren?"

"She has not conceived an heir. Rumors fuel discontent among many, even

in the eastern houses of the New Nobility.”

Womb stepped nearer to the fire. “Then the strain’s still pure.”

Tyra touched his head to the ground. “I pledge myself to your cause, Mistress. Command me.”

The baroness said, “There’s much to be done. We require a place to plan.”

“The hunting lodge in the next valley is empty, Mistress. None go there.”

Gilyon said, “We need your eyes and ears, Tyra.”

“I’ll serve faithfully.”

Luja smiled as she patted Tyra’s head.

He took in a long breath.

Mirjel lay in Ryckair’s arms in their bed after they, once more, attempted to conceive a child. The act lacked passion, reduced to a mechanical exercise. She was left with a sense of cold distance between her and her husband.

It was now a ritual. They undressed and embraced with no more emotion than if they ate dinner.

Neither spoke before, during or after.

He always held her close in the end. Still, the intensity they once shared was no more.

She conceived once, after Ryckair’s twin brother, Craya, brutally took her virginity.

She remembered the pain in body and soul when Craya slapped her while she stood on a set of stairs in the palace. When she tumble down the steps, the child died in her womb. Mirjel nearly succumbed as well. She never became pregnant again.

The memory of the past receded.

Mirjel pulled away from Ryckair. “I’ll never bear an heir. We both know it. I can’t go on with this. It would have been better if I’d died on those stairs. Then you would have married a whole woman.”

Ryckair held himself taut. “Don’t say such a thing. My mother conceived late. It will happen.”

She put her hands over her face. “It can’t happen. We try and try. I’ll never give birth.” Mirjel felt tears form in her eyes. “What has happened to us? How did we become this?”

Ryckair felt cold bile in his stomach. “I don’t know.” He reached his hand out to her.

She didn’t take it. “Divorce me. It’s the only way to keep the succession. I’m withered inside. Carandir will fall because of me.”

He took her hand in his. “How could I lose you after all we fought through? Baras can’t be contained unless we complete the spell together.”

“We can complete the spell whether I’m queen or not. Choose another woman, a young woman in full blossom, to have your child. Take her as queen or call her your consort, I don’t care which. Act before the monarchy’s pulled apart. Can’t you hear the people? The whispers are now common conversation. They hate me and would prefer me dead.”

“Idle talk. The people still remember how you confronted the Barasha for them.”

“The past means nothing when the future’s threatened. Why can’t you accept the truth? I’m thinking of the monarchy; the people; their future. Do you doubt I was willing to die for Carandir? This wouldn’t even be a sacrifice. It would be a relief.”

Ryckair’s face contorted. “I don’t know you anymore. What happened to the love we felt? What’ve I done for you hurt me so?”

She turned away from him and sobbed. “Now who’s cruel? If you think I never loved you divorce me now. End this farce.”

Marriages between private citizens required only one person to initiate a divorce.

For royalty, it was more difficult. Both parties needed to agree. The Council of Baronies’ approval was required. The lives of monarchs belonged to the nation and the people. Personal considerations meant nothing.

Ryckair turned on his back and stared at the canopy over their bed. “Why are we fighting like this?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I need to move into other chambers for a while and think. I don’t even know what I’m saying anymore.”

She got out of bed and wrapped herself in a silken robe. “The audience in less than a span.” She walked into another room.

Ryckair felt nauseous. He fought to understand how things had come to this.

When he was trapped in the mines of the Sarte, he thought of little but her. Even marching to Kackar after Shara took him and his band prisoner, Mirjel’s face

was in the corner of his mind, her name on the edge of his lips.

When he returned to the palace and defeated the Barasha, he knew beyond all doubt he loved Mirjel and they were destined to rule together. Things were so clear.

The clarity was hidden behind a fog. For the first time, he questioned if he loved her now and if she ever loved him.

Batu Kazmere stood behind King Ryckair and Queen in the audience hall. After his coronation, Ryckair appointed Batu Chief Minister and Keeper of the Palace Keys.

Light streamed in through the crystal ceiling overhead. The eighteen partitions set aside for the barons and baronesses were empty. The wooden box decorated with reliefs of dragons as they leapt into the sky stood before the dais. It supported the impregnable, crystal sphere within which rested the dragon-crested crown Avar the Great used to subdue Baras.

A drawer set in the box contained the silver key whose handle was in the shape of a dragon rising. Only the true monarchs, or their first born after the age of twenty, could touch the key, for when any other took it, the metal turned as hot as molten steel and burned the interloper's hand before it could be used to open the sphere.

The monarchs sat in regal majesty, as if the argument a short while ago never happened. For the sake of Carandir, the people needed to see them as united.

A group of farmers, two women and three men, stood before the twin thrones. They used selective breeding to produce a new type of wheat, which allowed two harvests in one season.

Mirjel said, "Your ingenuity feeds many. We are honored by your presence today."

One of the men said, "It's we who are honored, Majesty. We were inspired by your bravery when you defied the Barasha and risked your life to feed the people."

Ryckair held his features placid. "The queen is a most remarkable woman. You are all remarkable planters." He motioned to Batu who stepped in front of the thrones.

The monarchs rose, took each other's hands, and descended the dais.

Batu held a velvet pillow on which five strands of gold lay, each shaped to resemble stalks of wheat.

Mirjel handed one to each of the farmers. “Accept these golden stalks of grain and a gold coin each as tokens of our appreciation for your accomplishments.”

The awards bestowed, the farmers were escorted from the audience hall.

A woman in a Carandir military uniform entered the audience hall. Her name was Amesala Herrik. She held the rank of narech, chief commander of Carandir’s army and navy.

During the war against the Barasha, she was been a colonel and fought with Mirjel’s father, Baron Dek, to command the remains of the Carandirian forces in guerilla campaigns against the sorcerers.

She approached the thrones and bowed. “Majesties, a report just came in from the North Continent. An old man stumbled into the garrison at Kackar in an emaciated state. He said he was from a nomadic people called the Osto in the eastern desert. The man claims he saw a dragon fly erratically in the sky two decades ago.”

Batu said, “Did he give a location?”

Herrik said, “The man died before he could tell the soldiers anything more. The Kyar have no record of a group called Oosta or where they might roam.”

The North Continent was once a legend. It lay across the Great River, a body of water so wide the far shore couldn’t be seen, even after almost two months under sail.

Until Ryckair was banished there when the Barasha seized power, no Carandirian had traveled those waters for millennia.

Since Ryckair’s defeat of the Dharam and reunification the two lands, Carandirians lived on both sides of the river. Avar’s former capital city, Amblar, once in ruin, was the center of power and commerce for the monarchy in the north. Messages were often sent north and south by terecs, small birds able to fly anywhere to any person and telepathically deliver a dispatch.

Ryckair said, “Narech Herrik, prepare an expedition. The queen and I must travel to Kackar and cross the eastern border to find these people.”

Batu said, “Highness, I advise otherwise. If this is indeed a sighting of Baras, we don’t want to alert him to our coming until we discover his hiding place. Besides, nomads like these will be suspicious of any force, no matter how small.

Allow me to travel alone to find this tribe.”

Both monarchs hesitated.

Batu said, “Majesties, I was born in the deserts of Taquan and know the thinking of nomadic people.”

Taquan was a desert nation east of Karaken. Batu was once a smuggler who traded gems and food between Carandir and Karaken, even though trade between the two nations was forbidden by royal decree.

Ryckair said, “The first minister of Carandir wouldn’t go noticed.”

Batu said, “I’ll leave Amblar in secret and play the part of a disgraced officer in search of anyone who’ll hire me. There’re still many former Dharam doing so.”

Mirjel said, “You don’t look or sound like a Dharam.”

“My story will be I was caught stealing items from military stores to sell. I’ve some experience in such.”

Mirjel and Ryckair could not suppress smiles.

Batu said, “Narech Herrik, you can issue orders to have a soldier assigned to the garrison in Amblar. I’ll travel there, be reported as a thief and make my way from the city in disgrace. I believe Ichary can help me in this. No one will question my movements. If the man came to Kackar, he must have entered through the archway of the dragon statue on the eastern border. Many tribes roam the desert beyond. One of them must know of the Osto.”

Batu arrived in Amblar after many weeks travel on the Great River. He kept to himself. There was no official greeting. A light fog gave Batu a reason to hide his face under a hood.

It was his first trip to Amblar since Ryckair’s army of former Fadella gathered twenty years earlier to make war on the Barasha.

He was amazed at the sight before his eyes. When he and Ryckair first entered the city after they escaped from the ape-like Oola, it lay in ruin.

Now, the rubble was replaced with wide boulevards. They crisscrossed a metropolis with commerce, culture and life. Buildings, merchant’s stalls and homes lined the thoroughfares. Parks and fountains dotted the scene. The sound and bustle of people filled the air. Music and laughter were everywhere.

Batu felt the excitement of the people who once wandered the wilderness for

generations and finally returned to their roots.

He followed directions to a pottery shop.

The owner said, "How may I help you today, fine sir?"

"I'm a beekeeper and need some small jars for honey."

"I had an aunt who kept bees. She was only stung once."

"I had a sting on the back of my hand when I started. It was the last time."

The owner indicated a curtain at the back of the shop. Inside, Ichary waited for him. The former Fadella chief and friend to Ryckair was now a city council member with a wife and two children.

He greeted Batu with a hug. "Your terec message was most cryptic."

"The Crown thanks you for your discretion. None can know I'm here. I can tell you little of my mission."

Ichary motioned to a table. "How can I serve?"

"Narech Herrik appointed me to a post here with the name Lieutenant Sintoola. I won't report for duty. Inform the commander of the garrison you discovered a plot by this Lieutenant Sintoola to steel items from military stores and sell them. Say he escaped capture and fled the city before he could be captured."

"To what purpose? You'll be drummed out of the army in disgrace."

Batu grinned. "Exactly."

CHAPTER TWO

Each year, the monarchs made an official procession among different baronies to solidify ties and hold open court, during which time they heard petitions from their subjects in matters trivial and important.

Why is the grain tax so high this year?

Can the road to market be fixed?

My younger sibling wishes a commission in the navy.

Orane and Telasec often accompanied them on these excursions.

Mistress Telasec was the head of an order of women known as the Daro who healed the sick of body and mind with potions, salves and magic passed down from the wizards.

Master Orane was head of an order of men named the Kyar who preserved and studied the ancient writings and spells left by the now vanished wizards.

Beyond the power of the dragon-crested crown, the Kyar and Daro held the last vestiges of magic in the world, though their practice was like child's play compared to what the wizards had been capable of.

Three baronies were visited each year. The previous two years, the monarchs traveled to western lands. This year, they would visit Rascalla, Kar and Mentaro, all eastern houses whose lands sat next to an immense swampland on Carandir's border.

This was an area which extended from the Great River in the north to Karaken in the south. It was inhabited by a race of beings called Sinkaraka, which meant people of the root in their language. Short and thin, with reddish hair, olive skin and hazel eyes, it was uncertain where they came from. Some of the Sinkarakans living in the southern swamps were as tall as a person.

The eastern border became a concern to Narech Herrik over the past decade. The lands beyond the swamps consisted of city-states like Au and multiple settlements gathered together in towns and villages. There were a few territories of vassal settlements where rulers offered protection from bandits and assured order was maintained between subjects.

With the arrival of the Barasha, many of these authorities lost control. Marauding thieves and slavers roamed territories and extracted tribute. Commerce was often hampered by raids from competing factions. Slavery was a wide spread problem with adults and children taken from communities and sold on the block.

The Swampland served as a barrier, yet baronies bordering it were sometimes forced to repel intrusions by smugglers and slavers.

Baroness Quib of Mentaro, who once treated with smugglers and thieves for her own profit, was well versed in their tactics.

In the war, she was forced to ride with Dek and Herrik in their campaign against the Barasha after she fled the sorcerers. She continued to plot against the interest of the Crown in an attempt to profit from the situation.

Then, Quib met Jarat, the last wizard.

The procession sat out by royal galley from the capital city of Meth on an early spring day, accompanied by Narech Herrik and two war galleys.

Colonel Amar, who was a captain when he accompanied Baroness Jea of Rascalla to Au in search of support to fight the Barasha, now commanded the royal guard.

The party rowed across Lake Hasp into the Great River. The royal pennant flew from the mast of the monarchs' galley. Both Telasec and Orane accompanied them.

The first call was the port of Rascalla on the south bank of the Great River to visit Baron Dek and Baroness Jea, Mirjel's parents.

The procession would proceed south to Kar and finally Mentaro, on the border with Karaken, to confer with Baroness Quib.

The reception in Rascalla was filled with pomp and ceremony.

As was the custom, the monarchs heard petitions from the people.

Mirjel's mind wandered between the ceremony and the fight with Ryckair.

She now occupied chambers higher up the north tower of the palace along with Lek, her one-time lady-in-waiting, now her First Lady of the Bedchamber.

A feast was held in the grand hall of Rascalla that evening with roasted wild boar as the centerpiece. The wine was from vineyards in the western barony of Petala. These were considered by many as the best in all the monarchy. The vintners in Petala considered it the best in the world.

After the feast, Dek, Jea, Mirjel and Ryckair, retired to private chambers. Ryckair and Dek undid the lacings of their formal jerkins.

Jea embraced her daughter. "It's so good to see you. How long has it been?"

"Not since last fealty day, Mother."

Ryckair took poured himself some kan. This was a slightly spicy, invigorating hot beverage brewed from ground herikan root whisked into boiling water. "I'm sorry it's been so long since we visited Rascalla. There's still much healing to do in the west."

Mirjel said, "How's support here in the east, Father?"

"Strong. Some houses still compete like merchants. Baroness Quib keeps them in line."

Ryckair said, "Really? Quib?"

Jea said, "The baroness is a new woman since she encountered the wizard in Amblar. She now speaks of the dragons and the need to follow the Great Plan. She still mourns Jarat's death."

Dek sat his mug of kan on a table. "Quib shed most of her bulk and walks with confidence, though she's still a big woman."

Jea said, "She drove out the raiders and smugglers from her lands and came to terms with the Sinkaraka in the southern swamp. I'm not certain if it's because they respect or fear her."

Ryckair leaned forward and told Dek and Jea about Batu's mission.

Dek said, "This is encouraging, yet the observation was made two decades ago."

The king said, "It may be a fruitless hunt. Still it's the first such report. Batu will discover what truth there is in the story, if any."

The next day was cold and drizzly.

Mirjel sat in the gardens of her ancestral home. She felt a sense of calm

and was delighted to see old friends from her past. Still, she felt an ache with the knowledge of how many were slaughtered when the Barasha once laid claim to Rascalla.

Jea approached with servants who carried trays.

The baroness said, “Kan, dear?”

Mirjel said, “Thank you.”

Penta, steward to the house of Rascalla since Mirjel was a little girl, filled a mug and handed it to the queen. “Your Highness.”

“Thank you, Penta.”

The steward’s hair was now white and his face craggy. Baroness Luja imprisoned him when she was awarded control over Rascalla by the Barasha during the war. Penta carried scars from the lash.

The drizzle intensified around them. Jea dismissed Penta, who hurried the servants away.

The baroness said, “You’re worried.”

Mirjel gave a small laugh. “I’m fine.”

“You can’t hide your feeling from me, Mirjel.”

The queen put her mug down. “I think of Carandir every day, Mother. I think of its future.” She closed her eyes. “Ryckair must divorce me and take another as queen. I’m barren. The Daro have searched for a cure all this time. If even the healer’s magic can’t produce a child within me, there’s no hope.”

She smoothed the fabric of her skirt as she was wont to do when nervous. In halting words, she spoke of the argument after the last time she slept with Ryckair.

Jea wrapped her arms around her daughter. “Don’t despair. The Barasha are defeated. The great plan of the dragons moves forward. The people no longer doubt the existence of them. The names of Ilidel and Jorondel are once more revered. The mother and father of dragons won’t allow Carandir to wither.”

“Can the dragons place a child in my womb?”

The drizzle turned to light rain. Still, the two women sat.

Jea’s voice became serious. “The new alliances are still tenuous. A divorce could break the monarchy apart.”

Mirjel picked up her mug. “I always kept faith Ryckair would return. When I carried Craya’s child I dreamed it was his. Dreams have to stop. I can no longer

be queen. Ilidel, guide me.”

Jea took the mug from Mirjel’s hand and rocked her daughter as she had when she was a little girl. The rain came in hard, driving pelts. Still the two women sat in the garden.

The procession left Rascalla the next morning. Narech Herrik accompanied them, though it was Colonel Amar who commanded the monarch’s guard of fifty mounted troops. Telasec and Orane rode together in a carriage.

The Daro healer said, “What will happen if the king and queen to die with no heir?”

The chief Kyar sighed. “I don’t know. The crown may be locked in the sphere for eternity, yet without it, Baras will rise. He may sleep for a hundred years or ten. Even Jarat didn’t know as she lay dying. There would be only one certainty. Anarchy.”

Telasec said, “Baras on one side, ambitious nobles on another and the people worried for the future.”

Orane said, “Time grows short.”

“The quest to find Baras is more urgent. Can an heir wait?”

“The monarchy could be pulled apart first.”

“The king refuses to grant a divorce or take a consort.”

Orane stared across the carriage. “You have the power to remove his seed and implant it in a woman who would bear an heir. Many would be willing.”

“I can’t act without his consent. It would corrupt the magic passed to my order. You know he would never agree. It would be insurrection to force him.”

“Would it be a lesser sin to let the monarchy fall? If reason can’t bring him to a decision, don’t we commit treason against the Crown in refusing to act?”

The weather turned pleasant. The humidity found near the swamps in summer hadn’t yet arrived. The company passed through towns and villages where they stopped to hold court.

After three and a half weeks travel, they crossed the Kar River over a wide bridge. A city spread out on either side of the water. Barges filled with iron ore from the Kar mountains were docked at warehouses and foundries along the north bank.

People turned out to greet the monarchs with cheers.

Mirjel and Ryckair waved and smiled as they rode on horseback just behind a phalanx of soldiers. Colonel Amar made certain the carriages and riders moved forward, though he didn't hurry or push people back.

They held court at the stronghold of Kar.

Ryckair found it hard to concentrate. He watched Mirjel in his peripheral vision.

She sat stoic as she looked straight ahead.

He wanted to reach over and take her hand. The memory of the anger in her voice held him back. *There has to be a way out of this*, he told himself. He hadn't spoken of this to anyone, even Orane, with whom he confided in as a youth.

Three weeks later, they approached Baroness Quib's stronghold of Mentaro. She rode out with an honor guard to greet them.

Quib was unable to travel to the last fealty day. Ryckair hadn't seen her in four years. She was now more muscle than fat. Streaks of gray could be seen in her hair.

She dismounted and knelt. "Welcome, Majesties. Welcome to Mentaro. We are honored by your visit and wish you both good health and long life."

Mirjel said, "Rise, Baroness Quib. It is good to see you."

They rode back to the stronghold where a feast greeted them. Quib raised a chalice. "To Their Majesties. May you both reign long."

Ryckair held his own chalice before him. "Thank you, Baroness Quib, for your hospitality."

"It's little in return for Your Majesties' strength and courage in confronting Baras. The sorcerers are gone forever. Soon, Baras will be found and subdued for eternity."

She set her chalice down. "In former days, I thought of myself as a merchant instead of a noble. My goal was to look for ways to turn events to my advantage. If not for the faith your father held in me, my queen, I would have continued down that path. As I watched him fight the great evil, I came to know there's more to life than wealth, though I don't decry it."

Everyone laughed.

More toasts were proposed. Merry entertainment followed with music, jugglers,

acrobats and dancers.

A harpist sat on a stool and began a song.

*The wine that is sweet
In the warm days of spring,
Embraces the tongue
And in passion we sing,
Drink the wine,
Drink the sweet flowing wine.*

*The fine summer days
Grow both hotter and long,
We seek then a taste
That is brimming with song.
Drink the wine,
Let the flavor stay long.*

*With autumn, we find
That we seek now a wine,
To warm us inside
With a flavor more fine.
Drink the wine,
Let us savor the wine.*

*Now winter is here,
Oh the months they are past,
The wine in our cups
Through the seasons did last.
Drink the wine,
For the bouquet is vast.*

Ryckair and Mirjel sat apart.

He turned.

She looked back at him.

Neither smiled.

Baroness Quib led a royal column from the stronghold over low hills to a plot of land where grass had been mowed with scythes to prepare a picnic for the monarchs.

Colonel Amar commanded the guards while Narech Herrik rode on horseback beside Orane and Telasec. The procession came over a low ridge. Pavilions were set among the grass. Musicians played lively tunes.

Herrik took in the aroma of food in preparation for the feast. With Amar in command of the troops, she allowed herself to relax.

She had been a soldier most of her life. Her father was a sergeant in the Carandir army when he was killed in a skirmish along the Karaken border. She joined the forces before she was twenty and was posted across the monarchy. She saw action in Karaken border skirmishes as a lieutenant. When her comrades fled an attack, she stood her ground and drove the raiders south. This earned her a field commission as a captain.

She moved through the ranks to become the youngest colonel in history. Her troops followed wherever she led and took great pride in being a part of her command. With the death of Yetig, the former narech, Ryckair asked her to take the rank.

Today, she told herself, all that will be laid aside to enjoy a pleasant outing as just Amesala Herrik, to drink wine, eat food and listen to music. It would be a rare treat and she knew she deserved it.

Mirjel sat beneath a canopy and watched entertainment provided by the baroness.

Ryckair sat at her side.

She cast a quick glance toward him.

He was enthralled by a fire eater.

Her hands brushed across the fabric of her dress. She had to leave. The Sinkaraka would hide her. She wondered if the swamp people could be convinced to report she died with the hope Ryckair would take another wife, one who could produce a child.

Quib rose from a stool. “And now, Your Highnesses, a rare treat. You have heard musicians and seen jugglers and dancers this day. You have watched acrobats

and fire eaters. Yet, one more entertainment awaits. From the far east, beyond the lands of Xinglan, I present Bota, the mind reader.”

A tall, thin man in silk robes stepped from behind a curtain and bowed. His hair was brilliant white, his face long and thin. He held his eyes half closed.

A woman young enough to be his granddaughter accompanied him.

Bota raised his hands. “Majesties. I have been given a gift to know the minds of people. It was taught to me on a far hilltop by an ancient practitioner steeped in mysteries. My assistant, Hanay, will blindfold me and go among you. She will ask you to show her an object. By divination, I will tell you what it is.”

Hanay tied a silk scarf around Bota’s head to hide his eyes. He turned his back on the audience.

Ryckair smiled and leaned forward.

Mirjel sat in silence.

Hanay approached a courtier. “Will you hand me an object with significance to you?”

The courtier, a young man, took a brooch from a pouch. He blushed with a tepid smile on his face as he handed it to Hanay.

She said, “In my right hand, I hold an object of great importance to someone in the crowd, Master Bota. What is it?”

The older man rocked forward and backward. “It is a brooch. The design is a series of ropes intertwined with each other. It belongs to a young man. He intends to give it to his sweetheart.”

Hanay held the brooch high so all around her could see it was indeed as Bota described.

The courtier’s face went red. “How did he know?”

“Master Bota knows all.”

Hanay walked among the throng as she asked for objects, which Bota was able to describe.

She approached the queen. In a soft voice she said, “Would Your Majesty care to share an object?”

The crowd turned to Mirjel.

She wanted to hide.

Quib said, “Go ahead, Highness.”

Mirjel hesitated for a moment, then undid a ribbon tied in her hair. Her hands

shook as she handed it to the mind reader's assistant.

Hanay said aloud, "The object I hold is often thought of as common, though this one isn't. It's soft to the touch. What do I now hold aloft in the fingers of my right hand?"

Bota took in a deep breath. "It is a blue ribbon belonging to a woman of great importance who now faces a difficult choice."

The crowd cheered.

Mirjel sat back in her chair. Anger grew inside her for this charlatan who exposed her to her people.

A deep boom sounded as a crack appeared beneath the chair Ryckair sat on.

The fissure widened.

Mirjel reached for her husband.

Before her hands could cross the gap, the opening swallowed Ryckair.

Thank for taking the time
to read the opening of
Half Awakened Dreams

You can continue with the
story by visiting your favorite
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