

A tall man leaned on a railed balcony overlooking a city. Spread out before and beneath him, the city of Delcarom stretched almost a mile to the south, east, and north. To the east stood a mountain range that reached into the clouds, knife-like peaks stretching into and above the gray clouds of a late-come spring in north-western Neldomark. The city the man looked down upon was over a thousand years old, a city that had stood long before he was born and, he hoped, would stand long after he died. From his vantage point, the governors palace that was built into the side of a mountain, he could see the entire city. The original center had been... *there*. Down in the center of ten enormous marble domes stood a statue some seventy arms high. Worn by the winds and snows and rains of centuries past, the visage of the man who had founded the city stood on a pedestal. The statue depicted him holding a rolled parchment in his right hand and a chisel in the other, while stuck into his belt was a hammer. He stood leaning forward, his left foot atop a large stone and the hand that held the chisel propped on his knee. His face, though worn by time, showed him in thought; as if he regarded the planning of the great city that spread beneath his stony gaze.

Delcarom was, and still is, a massive city. It was not a fortress, like Amondë or Endahod, nor was it a trade city, like Delmir or Atomós. Delcarom was a little of both. Far from a hostile border, there was little need of high, thick granite walls and spiked portcullises, but it was not undefended. Less far from other cities and close to an enormous marble quarry, there *was* need of roads. So the city was surrounded by walls some forty arms high and had numerous roads leading into it. There were no steel portcullises, nor was there a moat or any drawbridges. Instead, thick spruce doors, braced with steel, could close shut the city when need called for it. The city would have gone without even that, but the scars of war had dictated the rebuilding of the city after it was burned to the ground a second time.

Inside the city were many buildings, some of stone but most of stout wood, with peaked roofs that stayed strong under the heavy winter snows. The last of those snows had melted away a month or so gone, and the great Plains of Revine had begun to turn green once more, the titanic stretch of grass and soft hills rolling away into the horizon, with small copses of trees scattered across the lowlands. The River Parat split the plains as it slowly wound south, then, far past the horizon, turned west towards Delmir.

But none of that caught the man's eyes. He gazed to the east, far, far to the east where lay Delcaerë, the capital city of Neldomark. *Why can't he see it? Why must he be blind to nothing but the threat the lies right on our borders?* The man snorted a short laugh. *Brother, you are an intelligent man, but a fool. For all your spies and informants, you know nothing of history.* Neldomark had a long history of war with other countries. Sometimes just, other times not, war was something the armies of Neldomark had been very good at doing. It's first war, some three-hundred seventy years ago, had been short and brutal; starting with the assassination of two governors and fought in lightning-quick skirmishes along the border with Bæryvun, it had lasted less than a year. But Neldomark's second war? Fought against Ossétia, that war had happened some fifteen years after the first and lasted for over twenty years. Fought not on borders with small forces, this war had spanned and defined a generation. Battles were fought not by dozens or hundreds of soldiers, but by the thousands. Battles that spanned a

week were fought by armies seventy-thousand strong and more, with the culmination of the war happening at the Mei'aran massacre.

*A king should not be a fool, the man thought, for fools die a weeping death. I must... I must do something. War is the natural state of Man, and we have been without one for too long. The hammer will fall soon, and I would not like to fall upon us.* And so, a decision was made.

Straightening from the railing, the man adjusted the signet ring on his right forefinger and turned around.

His son stood there, tall and quiet in a black velvet coat. "I'll be leaving soon, father."

"Leaving? What for? You've only been back for two days, Marstýs."

Marstýs rolled his shoulders in a shrug. "Maelon asked me to command the Maerin."

Ceshmir blinked. "*What?*" That was preposterous! He *knew* the man who commanded the king's personal guard, they had been friends for almost thirty years!

His son's mouth perked in an almost-smile as he slowly shook his head. "I'm not relieving Lyson. The command is for an escort that's accompanying a diplomatic envoy to Bæryvun. Enarë will be my second."

The older man rubbed his brow. "Kharne's nephew? The boy who's courting Mírren?"

Marstýs raised his eyebrows. "He's hardly a boy, father. He's almost two years older than me. Besides, he's an excellent swordsman. The youngest Bladesinger alive."

"Which Form does he practice?"

Marstýs's face pulled into a frown. "Dancing Tiger, I believe. I dueled him once, you know. He got the better of me in less than ten seconds."

"I've seen him fight. Moves like a snake."

"That he does."

Ceshmir regarded his son. *Commanding Maerin. That's a thing every soldier hopes for.* Out loud, he said "You've done well to pick up that command. I'm proud of you, son."

Marstýs smiled. "I know."

"When will you be leaving?"

"Very soon. I want to cover as much ground as I can."

Ceshmir nodded. "I assume you'll be passing south, through Delmir."

"Delmir? Why?"

"To get to Bæryvun. Unless you're taking a different route?" He had, the few times visiting the small nation, gone that way. South and west, following the River Parat until it reached Delmir. Then south again, this time following the Dawnwalker Mountains until he reached Vunara.

"I have to stop in Delcaerë. Mírren will be representing her father along with a few others. Enarë and I, as I said, will have the command of the squadron of Maerin that go along with. He wanted to bring some Hrad'meizhin, but we won't be encountering anything that will need heavy cavalry." He tucked his thumbs behind the wide, gray leather belt that wrapped around his coat.

"Let's sit." Ceshmir motioned to the sitting room just inside the balcony. The sitting room was one of the larger in the palace, an oval some fifty arms wide at the largest point with a marble fireplace at one end and a sizable table at the other. Two heavy spruce doors, the handles wolf heads cast in

bronze, sealed the door from the misting skies of morning. Four pillars supported a tall ceiling decorated with gold leaf and hung with two candelabras.

The younger Gerpen followed his father in, but did not take any of the seats by the fireplace. "Father, I would stay and talk, but I must be leaving. It's a long ride to the capital from here."

Ceshmir sighed. Of course, what his son said was true, but he had been gone often of late. "If you die, son," he said with a smile, "I'll come and strangle you."

Marstýs chuckled and pulled his earlobe. "Well then, I'll make sure no one sticks a spear in me."

The older man pulled his son into an embrace. "Stay safe, don't take unnecessary risks, and don't bloody throw your horse's shoe."

Marstýs barked a short laugh. "That was exactly *once*, and Ironfoot hasn't thrown a shoe since."

They pulled out of the embrace, smiling. "Still," Ceshmir said, wagging a finger, "it's bad for the horse."

"I know, I know." He glanced at the pendulum clock standing next to the fireplace, then back at his father. "I need to be on my way."

*The boy's grown up. Oh, how I hope there's less of me in him and more of his mother. His mother. Elayne...* She had died when Marstýs was young, not more than three. "Be strong, and have mercy on the lesser." He thumped his chest with a fist and bowed slightly. "*Tar'alan, Estra.*" True heart of Estra.

His son repeated the motion, but said "*Tar'alan, Revine.*"

True heart of Revine. Then Marstýs straightened and, with an about as smooth as a soldier of twenty years, walked from the room.

Ceshmir watched him go, then thumped down into a gilded armchair that was padded with red velvet. He thought of the decision he had made just before his son had walked onto the balcony. *I need to find Lyson and get in contact with Hildor Akaros.* He looked at the silver-tasseled rug in front of the fireplace. It was a deep ocean-blue.

That had been Elayne's favorite color.

*But first I need some brandy.*