Ceshmir closed his son's door behind him, leaving the boy alone with his wounds. *What to do now?* Things were looking well for his plans; more than two centyra were now stationed in Daernholm fortress. A thousand infantry, five hundred archers, two-hundred fifty heavy cavalry, three hundred Lyes'alan pikemen, and even a handful of Strikers. *Two-thousand one-hundred thirty soldiers. A tenth of what Mekam says he needs to take Bar-covern.* Enhiras Mekam had outlined his plan to take the Ossétin city without a siege, and it required infiltrating it with the Strikers, then storming it with over twenty-thousand foot. The cavalry, which would number fifteen-hundred by the end, were included in the operation in the event that the city managed to field its garrison of three-thousand before the Strikers could secure the barbican.

Ceshmir walked through the halls of the royal palace in Delcaerë, capital of his nation. His nation. *Not yet.* As he walked, he ignored bows from servants, tapestries hung on the walls, and even words greeting from other members of the High Advisers. *Thirty-eight years as king, and he hasn't done a thing to curb border encroachment. Almost four decades ruling the most powerful nation of the past millennia and he sits in his rooms and reads his books and asks questions of the stars.* Greetings faltered mid-word as those he passed by saw the storm on Ceshmir's face. *He stands almost in violation of the law and* certainly *in violation of centuries-old tradition!* The king, his older brother, did not seem to care much for the workings of the world. Yes, as a knight of Mourning of the Order of Dawn, he was required to seek and know the truth, but knowledge… *knowledge only goes so far, then it must become action.*

The king also had no ambition, not like the men who were glorified and practically worshiped in Neldoan histories. Men like Hrad'ard Wedar, who had forged Revine from the ashes of a leveled city; men like Maelon the Tall, who had unified Revine and Estra through masterful politicking and warfare; men like Thaddeus Ironsides, the brother of Maelon the Tall, who had been a Battleborn, an unstoppable force of war that could not be struck down. Men like these were who every Neldoan boy fancied themselves to be like.

Ceshmir did not realize where he was walking, absorbed in his thoughts as he was, until he found himself standing in a long courtyard open to the bright summer sky. In the courtyard stood the symbol that flew on the banners of Neldomark; a golden birch tree set in a hill of jade, with leaves of silver and emerald that shone in the noonday sun.

Standing next to the tree was a man Ceshmir had not expected to see. A man of average height, he was young and bursting with ambition. Summer was not yet in full swing, and the man was from the west, so he still wore a full sleeved white doublet. The doublet had a dragon stitched onto it in gold and red, the tail wrapping around his left arm leading his shoulder to where the torso of the beast was on his back, one wing curved around his side near his hip and the other hanging over shoulder onto his chest. It's long neck twirled around his right arm and ended on the cuff next to the palm of his hand.

He smiled, a wide smile that showed too many teeth. "Well, well, well. Imagine finding you here, Ceshmir Gerpen." His voice was a slow, rich tenor that made people want to lean in and listen to his words. Ceshmir thought he was too charismatic for his own good.

"I would say the same to you, Hildor Akaros. I was not expecting you here in the capital for another week." True, nine days was not very long, but a lot could happen in nine days.

Hildor put one hand behind his back and twirled the ends of his waxed brown mustache with the other. "I hear you have a few soldiers in your pocket, in a little place called Daernholm. Some of *my* soldiers, if I am not mistaken?" He flashed his teeth again.

"Keep your voice down," Ceshmir growled, "we're not the only ones about." Indeed, groups of people, mainly minor nobles who wanted a visit with the king or one of the High Advisers, stood bundled in conversation, some quiet and reserved, others loud and animated. Ceshmir motioned for Hildor to follow him, and the two men sat on one of the black marble benches that lined the rectangular courtyard.

"You did station Strikers in Daernholm, didn't you?" Hildor raised an eyebrow and continued to twirl his mustache.

"I did. Enhiras told their purpose, they're needed to," he quieted his voice as a pair of soldiers walked by, "to take Bar-covern."

Hildor nodded, his right hand moving slowly. His middle finger was tucked under his thumb and his hand made a small circle, then his little finger and thumb stuck out—the rest of his fingers making a fist—and his hand twitched twice, and lastly he made a fist then opened his hand facing downwards.

Ceshmir blinked. The man was using Striker hand-talk.

You did so without my permission, was what the signing meant.

"Because I didn't—"

Hildor cut him off by pointing at him with an open hand then pointing behind himself with a thumb, his little finger propped on the knuckle of his third. *Listener behind you.*

Ceshmir slowly turned as if stretching, and sure enough, a man sat on the bench next to them. The man sat with his head tilted toward them, but it seemed like he wasn't paying attention. He was muttering to himself and Ceshmir could hear a pen scratching on paper, not the short, abrupt scratches of writing, but the longer, more purposeful scratches of drawing.

Ceshmir turned back toward Hildor, who was still twirling a mustache. He signed to the man. *Because I didn't know how you would react and I needed them. You're a very unpredictable man.*

Hildor snorted and smirked, replying *Of course I am. Unpredictability is a very useful skill in politics.* To that end, he flourished his hand and—quite suddenly—a knife appeared in it. Not a big knife, the blade being only a few knuckles long, but it was quite similar to the dagger Enhiras had worn during Ceshmir's last meeting with him. As his arm twisted, showing off the finely crafted weapon, the sun caught the gold thread of the dragon entwined on his sleeve. The dragon seemed to ripple, seemed to live in the gilded rays of noon.

"Put the dagger away, boy." Ceshmir thrummed his fingers on his knee, staring at the other man with a face made seemingly of wood.

Hildor's mustache twitched as he grinned. "Really, my lord Gerpen, you *are* a spoilsport." But the knife, as requested, vanished back up his sleeve. He twirled his mustache again. "If this plan of yours is going to work, you'll need support. And not just from your allies." His tone became serious. "Ceshmir, law requires that four of the five regional governors *and* three-quarters of the High Advisers stand for

you, as you're not named as an heir. Your son, of course, will stand for you, as will I, but will Aryis? Or Henric? Support from the High Advisers is not a given either. Yes, the majority of the Delcarom members will stand for you, but I cannot promise that the Advisers my mother appointed will do so. They are very loyal to Maelon and his daughter."

Ceshmir regarded Hildor. *So,* he thought, *the man knows the law and the current political flows. He may be more useful than I thought. Or more dangerous.* "I am well aware of the stances the Endahod Advisers have. However, they are not the issue. The issue is the Advisers from Delmir. Enarë, the boy courting Mírren, is Aryis Kharne's nephew. The man is sure to nominate that boy for the succession, if only to put Dan'bar back on the throne."

"You are sure Aryis Kharne will not nominate himself?" The words were spoken with a raised eyebrow as the drawing man coughed and swore loudly.

"I am sure. When I asked him to provide troops for border duty—which is well within my authority—he declined to do so, saying 'the city of Delmir and I have more important things to be doing than possibly being responsible for a large border dispute.' He did not outright challenge me, but if it came to it I'm sure he would not stand to nominate me."

The other man grunted. "That's not the only problem. Who will be made the Eye of Dan'entor?"

Ceshmir blinked. He hadn't thought of that. His face darkened and he could feel his cheeks reddening. *Of course I didn't think of it. Of all the blasted things not take into account, it had to be that!*

Hildor started as Ceshmir turned his stormy gaze upon the Horns of Dan'dragi. "Lords and ladies, Ceshmir, you could frighten a bear with that face."

Composing himself, mostly, Ceshmir stood. "You have given me something to think on, Hildor. I will look forward to discussing this in more detail in a week. Others will be there, namely Enhiras Mekam." He tilted his head at the still-seated Hildor. "Be there, Akaros." Ceshmir strode off, towards the gates of the palace, towards the city.

"He's quite an aggressive man, isn't he, Bors?" Hildor grinned and looked over to the drawing man, who ignored him.

"Passively so. At least he isn't a flamboyant young idiot that spends almost as much time chasing skirts and gambling as he does scheming." The artist called Bors continued scritch-scratching on his drawing pad as he insulted the young ruler.

Hildor scowled at Bors. *The man's always been too smug for his own good.* "Well, at least I don't spend hours drawing things that have already been drawn a thousand times over."

"Of course not. Who could imagine you taking up an intellectual pursuit?" Bors still calmly sketched.

Throwing his hands up in defeat, Hildor stood and walked over to where Bors sat with his pencil and drawing pad. Looking over Bors' shoulder, he stared at what the man drew. Not a drawing of the Golden Birch, or of the courtyard, or of the palace, or of anything that Hildor had suspected.

It was a caricature of Hildor and Ceshmir. The former was presented as a thin, gaunt man with unkempt mustaches that frizzled out to the sides of his mouth, which drooled as the caricature leered at a passing woman. Ceshmir was not portrayed in a much better light. Arguably, he was portrayed worse.

The governor of Delcarom was drawn as a spider hunched over the other man, the only likeness being his face. Which, of course, had eight eyes.

"I see," Hildor said through clenched teeth, "that you have become quite entranced with the visages of myself and of lord Gerpen."

"Oh yes, the two of you are fascinating subjects." Bors still did not look up from his artistry, which he was now lacquering with slow strokes of a wide brush.

The young lord growled something dark under his breath.

"I'm sure you are growling for a good reason my lord," the artist finished lacquering his page and slipped it into a leather bag next to his booted feet, "but I fear that if you have no questions for me, I must be going." He stood up and ran a hand through erratic red hair, then raised his eyebrows toward Hildor.

He continued to scowl at Bors as he said "I have nothing to ask you. I'm sure it will all be in a report later, yes?"

Bors tilted his head in a fractional bow. "Of course, my lord. But I may forget some things."

Which meant that he would probably forget a single 'and' or 'the' that had been said. Bors was a rude man, but he possessed an implacable memory. "Of course. Now get out of my sight."

The man called Bors walked slowly away, muttering to himself as he did so.

Hildor watched with what now seemed to be a perpetual scowl. He was unconsciously touching his chin, testing for drool.