

Chapter 1

Metrox, captain of the Delmarthian Guard awoke from a restless sleep. He opened his eyes, breathing heavily. A vivid memory of wild men, their bloodshot eyes blazing with hate, their long braids flying behind them, raced their warhorses down the mountain to Delmarath. They charged across the vacant market-place and salted black powder on the massive stone wall that protected the city. Rock evaporated into air. 'Black death' drifted into the city, coating everything it touched with a fine powder: It slipped into houses through cracks in windows and doors. It buried streets and gardens in a coat of black dust and piled around houses keeping the people prisoners. Some suffocated as they attempted to clean the powder out of their homes. Others starved unable to leave the city for the black death poisoned their skin while other victims breathed their last breath as the powder destroyed their lungs. His beloved city, desolate, devoid of life.

The horror that invaded his dream faded. "Just a nightmare," Metrox reassured himself. "It won't happen that way. The black death must have fire to work. It's not a poison; somehow it tears things apart."

The cot in the small room off the Hall of Justice was less comfortable than the bed in his private quarters, but he often slept there in the absence of Lord Betren, the rightful defender of Delmarath. The bedroom door to the hall remained open in a vain hope that the one source of heat, a huge stone fireplace in the larger room would provide some warmth.

Closing his eyes, Metrox pulled his coarse wool blankets over his head. Barbarians! Wild, undisciplined scoundrels! Like to execute them all. He rolled on his side hoping to find a more comfortable position. One particular barbarian intruded into his restlessness. Curse Reig, that insolent prairie storyteller with his perfect rendition of our sacred historical ballad. How dare he recite Dana's rise from quarreling cities to a united country ruled by a high king. That story ruined Maris; caused my son to abandon his station just so he could fetch his lute. What magical charm did that barbarian use to compel Maris to forget that he was a guardsman on duty? Lousy barbarian forced me to execute my youngest boy.

The captain sat up suddenly, his top blanket slipping to the stone floor. "Get off it, Metrox," he muttered in disgust. "I'm reasoning like a child caught in the marketplace stealing an apple. Can't blame Reig for Maris' behavior. Truth is Maris spent three years wrecking havoc in the guard. I was too blind to see it. Running after his lute was the spark that led to his demise. Our law demanded my son's death. I, Captain of the Delmarthian Guard had no choice but to carry out his punishment."

He rubbed his arm across his eyes as he reclined on his pillow. "Hate to admit the storyteller's right. Hurts to lose a son. It is as it is. Can't dwell on the past. Must concentrate on the present disaster."

He groaned. *Reig. Can't force that man from my thoughts: He did alert me to that inaccurate map depicting the route from Delmarath to Megara. Written on Danian parchment, but filled with pictorial symbols so stupid prairie-men can understand it. Prairie-men don't use parchment; completely ignorant; neither read nor write. Their hands are much too large to draw anything as small as the directions on that map. Some corrupt Danian lord behind this treason. The question is who? What motive could there be? Some insignificant lord's desire for revenge against the House of Bartran? Bromwell and Bart could have made a few enemies in Megara. Or is the real target Megara and the throne? One of the great lords would be involved if that's the case.*

Metrox buried his head in his pillow. "Got to sleep," he yawned. He closed his eyes, but events of the last few days swarmed into his head, conquering his sensible intentions. *Lance and Sylvia— two more barbarians, conveying that hideous bag of black powder from Kans, our lovely neighbors on the other side of the mountains.*

"Barbarians armed with 'gunpowder.'" Metrox sat up and positioned the pillow hoping that it would smooth his troubled mind when he flopped back on it. "Gun? What's a gun? Doesn't matter. Enough to know that black powder can destroy our walls. It's a black death, that's what it is. Curse those men of Kans who intend an invasion in spring."

He rolled over on his side, rearranged the pillow and sighed. *Just to complicate my life, our respected Lord Betren decides that he and that walking disaster Lance, start out on a secret suicidal mission to Megara, not to mention Lance's dear little sister, Sylvia, and her homicidal refusal to go home. All these events create excruciating pain in my aging body.*

"Think of something agreeable," he murmured, "erase all this turmoil from my mind; need to relax." He yawned, deeper than before. "Greylen, that teller of tales whom Lord Bromwell sent me. That's encouraging." He added the blanket that had slipped on the floor to his coverings and turned on his side. *Greylen's good. Not as talented as Maris of course, but no one can play an instrument like my boy. Still, this teller of tales pleases me. He'll keep my men sane during the long winter ahead.* Metrox's eyelids grew heavy; he drifted into gratifying sleep which ended abruptly when a door to the Hall of Justice creaked open and then closed with a bang.

Metrox snapped to consciousness; every muscle readied for action. *What fool would risk his life sneaking into the Hall of Justice? Must pass five guardrooms on the way up; always post men on duty at night.*

Hesitant footsteps stumbled up the last flight of dark stairs into the Hall of Justice.

Metrox snatched his knife from under his pillow. He reached for his belt, which hung next to his bed and fastened it around his waist over his woolen tunic that served as night clothes. He leaned back on his pillow and waited. *Assailant? Does some treacherous plot exist among my captains?*

Moonlight streaming through the window above his head revealed a giant advancing toward the little room.

Metrox tensed. *Easy, moonlight plays havoc with shadows.*

The footsteps quickened, then stopped; a large figure hesitated searching for his victim.

Metrox leaped to his feet, his weapon swinging into attack position. Two quick steps brought him out of the room, his weapon poised above his shoulder.

"Metrox, it's me."

Only one person in all of Delmarath, in all of Dana for that matter, spoke his language with a faint barbarian accent. "Sylvia, what in the name of all the gods are you doing in the Hall of Justice?" he roared. He flipped his knife across the room missing the girl's head by inches.

"Don't hurt me," she yelled. "I'm sorry. I had a bad dream."

Metrox noted the fear in her voice. "A dream? You dare disturb my sleep for a dream?"

"Sylvia, don't wake Metrox," Captain Evander, Metrox's ne-phew and second in command hissed loudly as he quietly closed the small unobtrusive door at the foot of the stairs.

"Something amiss, sir?" The guard in front of the main door to the hall inquired. "Sounded like a commotion up there."

"No, guardsman. Everything's under control." Evander's flickering candle lit his progress up the stairs, and framed his tan face surrounded by disheveled shoulder-length black hair.

"You're too late, Evander," Metrox snapped. "I thought you capable of keeping this young lady in your quarters. What's wrong? Too slow on your feet to manage that task because you occupy the apartment directly below us? Maybe I should relocate your family to the first floor of this building. Six flights of stairs would allow you ample time to apprehend this girl and keep her out of trouble."

Evander withheld his answer until he reached Sylvia's side. His flickering candle illuminated the girl's distraught pale face.

"Well?" Metrox stood in the shadows outside the range of the candle.

"Sylvia screamed and woke me, and Lavine, and the baby, and the two older boys. Took me a moment to calm things down and that permitted Sylvia the opportunity to rush up here before I could detain her. I apologize, sir." Evander's voice, always controlled, always reasonable, no matter what the circumstance, had a smoothing effect on the participants of this unexpected late-night meeting.

"Expect more from my high-ranking officers. Perhaps you'd like to wake up as a sub-captain tomorrow." Metrox grunted. "As long as you're here, Evander, make good use of that candle; light a couple of torches and build up the fire. Excuse me while I change into more comfortable clothing."

"Yes, sir." Evander handed the candle to Sylvia. "Light the torches. It's dark; it's cold, and I await an explanation." He shuffled to the woodbox near the head of the stairs and chose two logs, which he set on the smoldering coals.

"Fire needs some small stuff," Sylvia ventured.

"Pile on your left," Evander answered. "Go ahead, build it up."

By the time Metrox rejoined them, fully dressed in his Delmarthian Guard uniform, the fire blazed, warming his snug fitting pants and black tunic decorated with an embroidered flying eagle. Sylvia huddled on the bench, hidden under a gray blanket. Evander propped against the stone fireplace, his rabbit fur-lined robe wrapped around his slender frame. At the sight of his uncle, he snapped to attention.

"So, you woke up Evander's entire family for a mere dream and now make us suffer your hysterics," Metrox said, retrieving his knife and then sitting opposite the girl. "Fortunately these walls are thick otherwise Lavine's temper would have roused everyone in the building."

"I think she screamed louder than me," Sylvia said. "I'm sorry." She straightened on the bench letting the blanket slip to her shoulders revealing a tangle of blond hair concealing her face.

Metrox stiffened. *Surrounded by barbarians. And this barbarian girl is always prying into matters that don't concern her. Doesn't know her place in life. Danian women keep their dreams private. An outspoken busybody, that's what she is. She's not normal, not Danian. Never did approve of yellow hair. Black's the true color for a woman. She's much too tall. Requires me to look up to her when I speak. Why didn't she stay in the mountains?*

"Metrox?" Sylvia pushed her hair over her shoulder and regarded him with a pair of beseeching blue eyes. "Please, don't stay angry. This dream surpassed all of my dreams with eerie accuracies or least I thought them real."

Metrox glanced at his nephew. "Oh, sit down, Evander. We'll be here till morning." He focused on Sylvia recalling the first time he saw her, a little girl with golden curls bouncing around her face as she ran to him. She startled him by grasping his hand, babbling meaningless words in a foreign language and tugged him to the barn to see a new born foal. What amazed Metrox was his pleased reaction to the child's behavior. Danian children, even his two sons, maintained a respectful attitude toward adults.

She's the same child I cared about all these years. Just grew up a bit. It's been five years since her troubles began. Must be about fourteen now. Old enough to be married. Unfortunately she's on the wrong side of our wall. If she were sitting by the fire in her cabin, I'd see nothing unusual with her light skin or her knee length tunic over a pair of pants. It's not her fault she's a barbarian. His voice became sympathetic. "Now, Sylvia, tell us about this terrifying dream."

"It was more than a dream," Sylvia started, her voice unsteady.

"Why?" Metrox felt all desire for sleep drain from his body. He leaned forward his eyes focused on the barbarian girl.

"The vividness. It left me with a feeling of— terror. Something horrible happened. Lance screamed, his horse screamed." Sylvia stared into the fire.

"Has this happened?" Metrox prompted. "Or is it about to happen? Can it be prevented?"

"I don't know. But Bet— Bet—"

“What about Lord Betren?”

“He wasn’t there. Not at first. Then Bet’s voice came to me. It was so clear. He told me to wake up, warn you that he and Lance need us now; we must ride to Megara.” Sylvia looked from Metrox to Evander. “Please,” she pleaded. “We must save them.”

“Fine, just fine,” Metrox said. “Relax, Sylvia. I need a moment.” *Lord Betren commanded me to act on this foolish girl’s notions. Said she would know if something happened to Lance or Betren. Evander’s aware of this— was on duty when I received those orders. Question is, did Sylvia actually have a vision or is she inventing it in an effort to join her brother? She has a mild case of the sight, sometimes gets a warning, but she’s also an expert at manipulating us more innocent people.*

Evander glanced at Metrox. “Permission to question our visitor?”

Metrox nodded.

Evander smiled at the girl. “Lady, did you see Lance and Betren, or is this only a fear of disaster because you love both your brother and our Lord Betren?”

“Both, I think. A dire feeling of doom overwhelmed me like when my brothers died on the wall.” Sylvia shook her head. “I never had a vision before. I actually saw Lance tumbling down a bank. I heard Betren’s voice as if he stood next to me.” She rubbed her forehead. “That’s the strange part. I’ve had feelings about people, that they were in difficulty, or would be in danger soon, but I never saw any details, never heard any voices.”

“Surely, Lance’s cloak would have caught on something and slowed his fall,” Evander suggested.

Sylvia shook her head. “Lance wore one of Val’s jackets. He left his cloak home.”

Evander frowned. “It’s a dream, Sylvia. Lance wore a Danian cloak when he left Delmarath.”

Metrox lurched to his feet. He snatched an iron poker and rearranged one of the logs. “Lance ditched that cloak on the trail beyond the first lean-to on the other side of our outpost thereby lessening the chances of a successful mission.’ That’s a direct quote.”

Evander almost smiled.

“My long-winded son, Captain Menes, wrote a two-page dispatch, stating that he tracked our fugitives a little beyond the Delmarthian border after he settled his men into the outpost barracks.”

“Another direct quote, sir?” Evander’s face seemed to grow youthful and compelling, as he asked.

“Your levity is unappreciated, Nephew. Although my dear son might have condensed his whole report into a single sentence, the fact remains.” Metrox nodded at the girl. “She had no knowledge of what her brother wore.”

“So Lance destroyed the mission and doomed them both,” Evander stated quietly.

“Surely we can save them,” Sylvia cried.

"Sylvia, your idiot brother insists on acting like a ten-year-old," Metrox barked. His voice softened at the sight of tears in Sylvia's eyes. "Easy, girl. Thanks to your father's books, Prince Conder's illegal abuse of our law, and your brother's exasperating attitude, you're caught up into a complicated mess."