

1: Tragedy

Queen Shaelara smiled patiently at her glowering husband, captivating dimples forming in her beautiful face. Though over thirty, both her small, slender size, and her young-looking face gave her the look of someone not yet twenty. One might think that the cooing babe in her lap, reaching a tiny hand to her face, giggling as he grabbed at her nose, couldn't possibly belong to one so young. But Queen Shaelara was not only older than she looked, but steeped in wisdom and power beyond years.

"You'd think that the general population would celebrate the creation of the Elected Council, instead of supporting the rebels who seek to thwart the move." he declared

"Don't let it rile you so, Darion. Just speak to the people. They'll follow you."

The huge, greying terrog, seated at their feet in the enclosed coach, growled in a rumbling tone.

"It's okay, old friend," Darion said soothingly, scratching the mountain wolf's neck. "There's no danger. I'm just angry." As their eyes met, they fixed on each other, as though trading thoughts.

Oblivious to his father's mood, the infant Prince Landorlas shot out a chubby hand, giggling as he was able to snatch a quick grip on his father's nose.

"Think you're fast?" Darion asked his baby son. With the speed of a striking cobra, his hand shot forward, catching the baby's nose between his first two fingers. Landorlas let out a shriek of laughter that

ended in a spree of giggles, and grinned with glee at his father. "I suppose I'll have to start blocking your attacks soon," his father joked. "Then you'll be wanting your own sword for your first birthday."

"As advanced as he seems for six months," Shaelara said, "I think that might be a bit much. Oh, there he goes again." Her smile faded, her brow furrowed into a thoughtful expression as the infant became still, as if focusing attentively on something that only he could see or hear. "I wish I knew what he was doing."

Darion shook his head. "I've tried to penetrate his thoughts, but he stops whatever he's doing the moment I try, almost blocking me out at times. He certainly has taken his inheritance from both you and I, and begun making the most of it at an impossibly young age, at least with his mental abilities."

Shaelara nodded. "So, how do you think we'll fare in Oathron?"

Darion shrugged. "If they're staunch enough to overcome the fear Baron Trellmar's been secretly promoting, we should make progress. I've made it plain that I'll tolerate no nonsense from the barons in this. I told Trellmar I'd strip him of his titles if he interfered further. I may have to kick a few officers and non-coms out of the warforce, too," he continued. "Too many of Elontar's old cronies are trying to make waves in secret, thinking that I don't know who they are."

"What about Klerandia?" the queen asked.

"Much smoother than Palendar," he replied. "King Narell and Queen Leeann started the concept, then abdicated in favor of Kendar and Narayla. The councils were in place before Kendar took the throne, but the people accept the changes more readily under their popular young king, especially now that I've given Klerandia full autonomy. Of course, now that Palendar is no longer the "High Kingdom" over Klerandia, that just upsets some of our barons even more."

“They’re too obsessed with their own power and prestige, with no concern for the people,” Shaelara commented.

“Exactly,” Darion agreed.

“Excuse me, Your Majesties,” a voice intruded from outside the window of the couch. It was Captain Nelron of the King’s Guard. “We’re approaching Oathron, and there’s a gathering along the road ahead. It may take a moment to clear the way so that we can proceed.”

“Relax, Nelron,” Darion said with a smile. “This is why we’re here. The King and the Royal Family aren’t some elite entity to be kept under guard in the palace of Palendar. We are the property of the people. If I’m to get the people to understand what I want to do with this Elected Council, I have to go among them and explain. And I have to put down the fear some of the barons have instilled in them.

“So, now that we’ve slowed down enough for the dust to settle, let’s get these windows opened, so that our people can see us, and we can see them. We’ll proceed slowly, and give them a chance to approach the coach, and speak.”

“Sire, with all due respect, that’s a security nightmare.”

“Nelron...”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Why are the King’s Guard chosen to guard the Royal Family?”

“We’re all vad-Taelens, your majesty,” Nelron answered, looking puzzled at the question.

“And, with the possible exception of King Kendar of Klerandia, who is the highest ranking vad-Taelen?”

Nelron’s face became almost indignant. “You are, sire, and there are *no* possible exceptions.”

“So, Nelron, perhaps you might be willing to concede that I can protect myself and my family without your help, if I have to, and without resorting to

wizardry?”

The captain looked chagrined. “Yes, Sire,” he admitted, grinning. “And, without even resorting to wizardry.”

“Very good,” Darion added with a smile. “Now that you’ve forced me to boast, perhaps you can relax a bit. If we feel threatened, I’m sure that the Queen will be able to fry the offender on the spot, should she feel the prince is in danger.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Captain Nelron acquiesced with a sheepish smile.

“Captain,” Shaelara called sweetly from the other side of Darion.

“Yes, My Queen.”

“We’re very proud of your loyalty, your concerns, and your phenomenal skills. I can’t imagine a better Captain of the King’s Guard. You’ve held a place in my heart since that day at Mount Trender, when you drew your sword against Elontar.”

Nelron blushed, the muscles of his rugged jaw flexing as he sat more erect on his horned-one, attempting to appear dignified and expressionless.

“But my husband has spent most of his life as a self-sufficient adventurer, warrior, and wizard. He’s not used to all of this official protocol and fuss. He truly feels that he is just one of the people, and it is important to him that his people feel the same way about him.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he replied.

Within moments, the crowd was pressing in about the coach, cheering and calling out to the king and his family. He could have just smiled and waved from the coach, greeting them from the window, but he was Darion, son of Landon. So, just as his father would have, he got out of the coach, and went among his people. They crowded about so closely that there was no way he could see them all, or hear what they were

saying. Nelron was clearly almost frantic.

Darion leaped nimbly to the carriage roof. Many whooped and cheered exuberantly at the impromptu display of agility.

“Friends,” he called to them, resulting in louder cheers. “Citizens of Oathron, and other Palendarians who may have journeyed here: Please forgive me if I ask the Queen to remain in the shade of the coach, keeping Prince Landorlas out of the sun. I’m sure you understand.”

He had to raise his hands several times to quiet them.

“Please,” he said. “I don’t want to shout at you, or make a speech. I merely wish to speak to you as one of you, one of the many citizens of Palendar. That’s what this Council I’m trying to create is about. I want you to be able to speak to me about your ideas and your concerns without fear of addressing a king or baron. This is your country. We seek a way for your voices to be heard. Why should you suffer over this unpaved road to Palendar, just because your baron’s representative prefers to ride his horse cross country from the baron’s estates to collect your taxes? He doesn’t care about your road, but the road between the baron’s estate and Palendar is well-paved for his carriage. Your representative can tell us that your road needs paving. And if someone else’s road is good enough, they can vote that their taxes not be wasted on making a smoother road just because some sheltered noble is fussing over a bruise on his backside!”

The pandemonium that ensued bordered upon chaos.

In the midst of the crowd, a young man, burdened by a heavy pack, eased his way forward. As he neared the side of the coach, he slid the straps of his pack from his shoulders, relieved to be rid of the weight for a while. Smiling, he applauded the king loudly, whistling shrilly in excitement. While his clothing was worn and dusty,

the fingers that went to his teeth to aid in the whistle seemed unusually clean for one so travel-weary. The town's folk were focused on the king and his words, and most of the Guard were spread out to the front and rear of the coach.

He jumped up and down with great enthusiasm, shouting his approval of Darion's every sentence. Three times, he kicked his pack, causing it to skid closer to the coach. During his last leap and shout, he almost kicked it under the coach.

When he was only a few feet from the coach, a deadly Taelen sword appeared, extended across in front of his chest, barring further forward progress. "Please step back," the lieutenant said curtly.

"Isn't it great!" the young man cried out. "My father thought King Landon was a jewel, but our King Darion is a miracle. Earth Mother bless him!" There were hints of tears in the young man's eyes.

"Yes," Lieutenant Lendron agreed. "He's a wonderful king. I'm proud to protect him. But you'll have to stay back from the coach."

The young man backed through the crowd, across the ditch and intervening grassy strip, until he was at the rear, up against a wall that enclosed a farmer's field. Standing on the wall, he continued to cheer Darion's call for the town to elect a representative.

Once he'd been there long enough that none were paying him further attention, he eased a tube-like object out of a holder on his belt and aimed it at his pack, still part way under the royal coach.

A beam of energy suddenly shot from the tube into the pack. The ~~explosion of the~~ pack was massive. Cheers of joy became shrieks of pain and fear, then cries of horror and groans of agony.

Lieutenant Garon lay in the dirt, his ears ringing.

With a groan of pain, he pulled himself into the ditch, rolling into muddy water from rain the previous day. For several minutes he lay in the water, its cooling influence easing the pain of his terrible burns. He struggled onto his back and drew in the cleansing breath of Taelen meditation, before changing to the power-breathing exercise designed to center his calmness and block out pain. He fought to ignore the excruciating agony as he struggle to his feet. A few townsfolk, far enough from the blast to be relatively uninjured, helped steady him, gingerly examining his extensive burns.

“Oh, Earth Mother!” a woman screamed in horror. “Even the baby!” She shrieked hysterically, pointing at where the carriage had been. There was nothing but scattered, crackling patches of flame. A crater marked the center of the explosion. There were no solid pieces of the carriage to recognize. Even the horses were gone. Someone found a charred portion of a horse’s lower leg with a recognizable hoof nearly a hundred feet from the blast. Nothing and no one within fifty feet of the coach had survived. Nothing within ten feet of the coach even existed as recognizable remains.

Garon staggering to the site of the devastation and searched hopelessly for the remains of his king. He knew there was no hope for even traces of the the queen or the infant prince. Beyond reason, he refused to let go of the hope that his beloved king might be alive, knocked away from the center of the blast by the force of the explosion. After all, he was a great wizard – the son of Lord Landon of the Silver Flame. He could easily have ignited his aura in time to protect himself. He might be as much as a hundred feet away, injured, but still alive through the protection of his vast powers.

“You,” he ordered a soldier who’d just rode out from the town. He’d drawn his Taelen blade, aiming it at the soldier to get his attention. “Ride to Palendar and alert

the warlord.” He pointed his blade in the direction of Palendar in a gesture of urgency. Immediately, the warrior raced off toward the capitol.

The lieutenant had third degree burns covering thirty percent of his body. He was badly bruised, and had two broken ribs. It’s doubtful that anyone less than an advanced Taelen master would have been able to even sit up with such injuries. For fully an hour, he scoured the area, ordering locals to spread out and assist.

By the time he heard the hoof beats of approaching horned-ones, he was exhausted. He fell to his knees, sobbing in grief. It was thus that the warlord found him.

2: The Investigation

Lieutenant Garon,” Warlord Krellas blurted. Flipping a leg over the neck of his horned-one, he slid unceremoniously to the ground. Taking in the officers grievous injuries, he bellowed, “Lord Lenthorlan, over here!”

The wizard was already approaching the injured man. Igniting a glow of earthpower in his eyes, he gently brought his right hand toward Garon’s back, where some of the worst burns and bleeding were.

“Save your energy,” Garon groaned. “Find the king. He was atop the carriage, speaking to the crowd. The coach was obliterated. The Queen and Crown-Prince are gone – not a trace. But I can’t believe the king didn’t survive somehow. He must have ignited an aura. No one on the planet was faster. But,” he fought to keep his shaking voice from deteriorating into a sob, “I can’t find a trace of him anywhere.”

Krellas felt the colour drain from his face.

“Lord Deloron,” Lenthorlan called to a younger wizard who’d accompanied him. “Do what you can with the lieutenant’s injuries. Close the major cuts and tears. The burns can be numbed, and the tissue sealed by local energy shield to prevent further fluid loss. You’ll also find some Elyndian salve in my saddle bag. That’ll help once the burns are stabilized. Oh, Earth Mother – you’re a healer, Deloron, you know what to do!

“Warlord,” he continued, turning to Krellas, “Have your men clear the villagers away from the site. It’ll be easier for me to feel lingering traces if there’s less

interference.”

Krellas nodded, gesturing to Lieutenant Shendar, senior lieutenant of the Guard, who appeared somewhat ill. The latter immediately made a few subtle hand signals, mostly finger gestures, which sent eight warriors off to clear and isolate the crime scene.

“Pull it together, Garon,” the warlord admonished in a low tone, squatting next to the injured lieutenant. Garon had drifted into the silence of shock and depression. “I’m going to need you. You may be my best witness.”

When Garon nodded absently, the warlord arose, and approached the site of the explosion. He knew better than to ask Lord Lenthorlan for information.

At first glance, the only intact remains were those of members of the King’s Guard and citizens who’d been close to the carriage. The largest piece of the carriage was a chunk of charred wood that fit in the palm of Krellas’s hand. Some distance away – he estimated eighty feet – he found the large leaf springs of the vehicle, partially melted and deformed. He tried to picture the size of explosion that would create such heat and such force.

“Sir,” a warrior from the Guard interrupted his thoughts. “Several people in the crowd noticed a young man who took off a heavy pack near the carriage. One young girl says that a Guard made him move back, and that he didn’t take the pack when he did so.”

“Description?” Krellas asked.

“Vague, sir – twenties, maybe thirty, average height, slight build. Nothing special about his clothes. He seemed to fit right in with the crowd. His hands were uncharacteristically clean.”

Krellas shot the warrior a curious look. “How so, Borlan?”

The warrior shrugged. “The little girl said –” His eyes seemed to focus into space, as if replaying a

memory – “he must have had a strict mommy to make him wash his hands so hard.’ She had fairly clean hands, herself, Warlord, but insists that his hands were cleaner than hers. She seems to be a bright, very observant child.”

Krellas nodded. He had a daughter of his own. “Little girls often have a way of picking up details that a boy might ignore. My wife fusses about my boots, even after I’ve had them polished.

“So,” he went on, “we’re looking for a young noble who doesn’t like the idea of taking power from the nobles and giving it to the people.”

Borlan looked puzzled. “That’s a leap in logic for me, sir.”

“If you want to make sergeant, son, you’ll learn to make such leaps,” the warlord advised. “He was slight of build. That means he wasn’t a labourer. No matter how skinny you start out, hard work builds some type of muscle. This is a fishing town. Notice that the child didn’t say he smelled like a fisherman. Any little girl who notices that a boy’s hands are well-washed will notice if he reeks of fish. She didn’t know who he was. That means he’s not from around here. So, we have a stranger, wandering the countryside, with unusually clean hands. How does he eat? How does he do odd jobs for food, and keep his hands so unusually clean? The answer, Borlan, is that he already has money. Who would want to kill the king while he was labouring to give the people a larger voice in the workings of government? One of the common people? No. Someone who stands to lose power. I’m not saying that it’s that brainless brat of Baron Trellmar’s. Who knows, it might be one of his staff – a secretary, son of his majordomo, that useless nephew of his – but it’s someone he, or one of our other, more truculent favoured sons, has in his employ.”

As he continued his tour of the site, he called attention to two more injured members of the guard,

both barely clinging to life. The bodies of at least three members of the Guard were missing, including Captain Nelron's.

Raised voices caught his attention. Glancing toward the wall, saw Lieutenant Shendar arguing with a local. Events were sinking in to the point that Krellas was beginning to think of this lean, muscular vad-Taelen as the new Captain of the King's Guard. As he walked over to the wall where the lieutenant was standing, he took in the details of the man's handsome features, his classic dark hair, cool blue-grey eyes, muscles like twisted rope standing out under the skin of his arms. He was clearly a man of great strength and power, but one who had trained for speed, not brawn. He was a lean man, of average height, whose training had expanded the musculature of his chest, making him look larger than he really was. But there was an arrogance to him that always bothered Krellas. The warlord had pulled him from sick leave to come with him, and he felt that the lieutenant wasn't as sick as he wanted to appear.

"What's the problem, Shendar?"

"Sir, this man, here, says he saw something, but the details are inconsistent. He insists of telling you. I don't think he's worth listening to."

"Just give me the details, Lieutenant, and let me decide," Krellas commanded in an irritated tone.

Shendar looked annoyed. "He *claims* he saw a young man on the wall, pointing his hand at the carriage just as it exploded."

"A thin man, looking like he was a stranger to hard work, with unusually clean hands," Krellas muttered to himself.

"That's him!" the local exclaimed.

Krellas smiled. "Borlan interviewed a little girl with an eye for details," he explained. "So, our young man came to the wall when he was ordered away from the

carriage?”

Shendar shrugged, then gestured to the man next to him. “Tell the warlord what you told me, Dellon.”

The man was in his fifties, balding, and, from the smell, clearly a fisherman. “Well, Your Honour,” he began, crunching a floppy hat in his heavily calloused hands, “He was a young’n, maybe younger than my boy – I’d say about twenty-five or so. Looked like he’d never seen a day of hard work. I took him for a lazy loafer, or a noble’s servant, recently turned out of his job. But he was a wizard in disguise!”

Krellas’s eyes snapped a sharp look at the fisherman. “Are you a sensitive, Mr. Dellon?” Krellas asked.

“Somewhat, sir. It’s in the family, so to speak.”

“Did you feel earthpower in him?”

The fisherman seemed crestfallen. “No, sir, but he shot a burst of power at the carriage.”

Krellas’s brow furrowed. “You saw this?”

“Yes, Your Honour. I saw it out of the corner of my eye. There was a beam of power, then he dropped behind the wall at the same time, I think.”

“What do you mean, *you think*?”

“Well, Sir,” the fisherman went on, “I got blown back by the force of the blast. I was standing on the wall, just a few yards away. I got knocked back into the pasture, there. I was lucky that there were no rocks, and the grass was tall enough to act like a cushion. But, I’m sure that I had a glimpse of him huddled behind the wall. I was dazed. It took several minutes for me to get my wits, and get to my feet again. My ears were ringing so bad I couldn’t hear a thing. I was dizzy, and felt a bit sick. But, when I was able to look around, he was gone. If he’d stayed on the wall like me, he wouldn’t have been able to get away that fast. Skinny as he was, he’d have been dazed worse than me, and knocked further, unless he had the wall to shield him.”

Lieutenant Shendar raised an eyebrow, giving Krellas a look that spoke of little respect for the

fisherman's logic or intelligence.

"You're an intelligent man, Mr. Dellon," the warlord complimented him. Shendar rolled his eyes.

"Well, sir," the man admitted in a bashful tone, "most of my mother's folk have worked in the palace for generations, and are well-read. My mother made me learn to read, and I've kept at it. As for figuring things out, sir, well, my father's people have always been boat-builders. I love the fishing, but I'm always looking for ways to make my sails and rig work better. That gets you to thinking about how things work, and how forces affect things."

Krellas smiled. "Tell the lieutenant who your relatives are at the palace and he can pass on your regards. They'd be proud of the help you've been today."

"Oh, sir," the man moaned suddenly. "If the whole royal family's been killed, we're right back where we were with that madman of a wizard."

Krellas's face saddened, then his eyes took on a steely grimness. "And if I find those who are behind this, Earth Mother have mercy on them, because I won't. I'll bring the wrath of the *Warriors of Darkness* down upon them!"

Warlord Krellas sat sadly on the wall, drinking hot coffee. A warrior had been sent to a tavern in Oathron, and the innkeeper had been pleased to send hot coffee and sandwiches out to the investigation party.

Lord Lenthorlan sighed as he took a seat on the wall, accepting coffee and a sandwich from a server from the inn.

"So, what have you got?" Krellas asked.

Lenthorlan looked pensive. "It's such a terrible event that it's hard to be objective," he confessed. "King Kendar will be devastated, as will Their Highnesses,

Narell and Leeann. Lord Darion was a massive power, a great warrior, and a man of vast vision – wise far beyond his years.”

Krellas nodded. He felt a weariness that went too deep for words.

“This backpack they’re describing had to have been filled with liquid fuel,” the wizard went on. “It’s hard to obtain in its liquid form, because it’s so volatile. Centuries ago we learned to make a jelly of it, so that it would burn safely and slowly, with almost no impurities. The liquid vaporizes from the heat, making it prone to explosion. It looks like someone had a large container of the liquid in a pack, and fired an energy weapon at it. Since the Aralyntae came south with Lord Landon, during the Second Sorcerer’s War, there have been enough of the devices about.”

Krellas nodded. “We have a supply of them for the King’s Guard and the warforce to use, should we ever face such a threat again, but they’re kept locked up. Only a few elite members of the Guard carry them when they accompany the Klerandian Royal Family and security is questionable, but Landon and Darion never saw the need for them, and wouldn’t allow them. They’re outlawed among the general public. Until today, I wouldn’t have believed that anyone could pose a real threat to King Darion. Are you sure it wasn’t earthpower?”

Lenthorlan nodded. “There’s an echo of the shot that ignited the liquid fuel bomb, but there’s no residual energy that we associate with the use of earthpower. This is just an educated projection, but I’d say that an energy weapon was fired at a container of fuel – about a five-gallon load.”

“That’s a lot of fuel,” the warlord mused.

Lenthorlan nodded. “The container was thin metal. I’ve found minute traces of it as vapour in the air, and where melted traces solidified in the soil at the epicenter. The heat of the day would have put the fuel

under great pressure. The beam would melt through the container, but the first breach would start a chain reaction. The pressure of the expanding fluid, made even hotter by the beam, would cause the container to burst. Between that sudden release of pressure and the increased heat from the beam, the fuel would be vaporizing and trying to burn at the same time. The more it burns, the more it vaporizes. The more it vaporizes, the faster it burns. It sounds like I'm describing something that takes place over time, but we're talking about a fraction of a second from start to finish. The result is a massive explosion." He gestured with his hand. "That's a thirty-foot crater over there."

Krellas nodded. "I noticed," he said.

"If I'd been in the midst of battle, I might have had the reflex to ignite my aura in time. Of course, the trick to that is having your aura partially formed when you know you're threatened. Darion, of course, had the reflexes of a vad-Taelen, and should have been able to do so easily."

He sighed. "Alas, Lord Darion was not in battle – at least he didn't know he was. According to all reports, he was speaking to an enthusiastic crowd. His attention would be so focused on such a positive event that he'd be blind to the danger, unless there was some hint or clue for him to see."

The wizard hung his head. His brow, however, furrowed in concentration as he stared at the site of the attack. He abandoned his coffee and made his way over to the crater. His eyes flashed with power as he stared at the ground, his every sense open, taking in facts that only a senior wizard could see, smell, or sense by any means. Still he looked puzzled.

"What is it?" Krellas asked, squatting down next to the wizard.

"There's not enough remains," he said simply.

Krellas's head jerked in a perplexed reaction, his

entire face reflecting how odd he considered the statement to be. “Come on, man, look at that hole in the ground!”

“I see the crater, Krellas,” he said quietly. “Do you see those carriage springs? They’re bent and deformed, and they were partially melted. But they’re here, and they are, more or less, in one piece. They were closest to the blast, after the wheels on that side. We have parts of the wheels. But we have nothing of the top, sides, and seats of the coach – not a splinter of wood or a fragment of leather. We haven’t a trace of Lord Darion’s clothing, and not so much as a drop of Captain Nelron’s blood.”

Krellas pondered the problem. “Maybe there was a secondary bomb in the coach,” he suggested. “Could someone have hidden some containers of that black powder Lord Pellias was experimenting with? I heard he stumbled onto something even more dangerous – something involving nitrogen and a sugar compound. That way, they’d only need to get an explosive near enough to the coach for it to set off the material in the coach.”

“There’s sense in your theory, of course,” Lenthorlan admitted, “But I still feel there should be more traces. I’ve worked with Lord Pellias in some of his experiments. We can make a container seem to disappear from an explosion, but we can’t make it cease to exist.”

“I don’t understand,” Krellas interjected.

“Is fairly simple,” Lenthorlan explained. “The stronger the explosion, the smaller the pieces. The smaller the pieces, the further they fly before they hit the ground. But, if you search the area, and find all the splinters, no matter how small, you will still have almost all of the original container. I’m just not feeling traces of the splinters we should be finding. I just can’t ...”

Tears were forming in the wizard’s eyes. “He was

brilliant, just like his father ...” Words failed him.

“Earth Mother!” he blurted. “This is — ” He tried again. “It’s not just the loss of the King, it’s the entire Royal Family. We have no heir. And the Order of the Earthpowered has lost its Overlord – all in one terrible, cowardly act!”

Always the one to force his emotions aside, Krellas forced himself to focus.

“Narell!” he snapped suddenly. “He’s the closest blood. He’s Landon’s first cousin, son of King Brelan’s sister. He was also Baron of Shirdon, before emigrating to Klerandia. The barons will recognize that. After him, Kendar is closest, but Klerandia needs Kendar.”

“But King Narell was King of Klerandia. The noble’s might create an uproar.” Lenthorlan sounded worried and uncertain.

“Let them,” Krellas snarled. “When this is over, Palendar might be minus one or two of them! If I can prove that Trellmar or anyone else was involved in this, I’ll take a sword to them myself! And, so what if Kendar already has a kingdom. He can reunite the kingdoms as one, or take the throne long enough to either appoint an heir, or push Darion’s plan into existence. But Narell can do all of that, and the Palendarians will be more likely to rally to their old warlord.”

Lenthorlan nodded. “I’ll make mental contact with Lord Relnorlas,” he agreed. “He’s in Klerandia.”

“What about the others?” Krellas asked.

“Others? Oh, yes,” he acknowledged, catching the warlord’s gesture toward bodies that were being removed from the side of the road. “Many of the injured were hurried away by family members almost immediately. Some of the dead were as well. We’ll need to talk to more people over the next few days to get an accurate picture, but, so far, it looks like three Guard members were killed, seven injured. Captain

Nelron, Lieutenant Lendras, and warrior Kendron are unaccounted for. We have remains that Garon thinks might be Kendron's, based on where the body was found. We have other partial remains, with a melted sword which might be Nelron, or might be Lendras, but we can't account for both of them, other than the fact that no one has seen either since the explosion, so they're assumed dead. Of the seven injured, two may not live. Here, Garon wrote down the names, and marked the two critical cases.

"Of the villagers, there are seventeen either dead." He shook his head sadly. "Five of those were mothers with babies in their arms. We know of six more injured, and others are being reported as we talk to people. Oh, and Garon thinks that Lendras's wife and child were going to be here. It's truly an outrage, Krellas. Whoever was willing to do this, just to remove Darion and his policies, is inhuman."

"We'll find him," the warlord promised in a cold, angry tone. "No matter how long it takes, we'll find him – or them."

3: The Wolf

In an abandoned fishing shack in Farenport, a dilapidated, ramshackle edifice that had been severely damaged by a tropical storm, an injured man eased his burdens gently to the floor. He was build like a warrior, his smooth, rippling muscles readily visible through the light weight tunic he wore. Its style marked him as a fisherman, and his muscles showed evidence of years of hard work, though he seemed built more for speed and endurance than sheer brute power.

The larger of the bundles stirred, groaning with pain at the effort. He was also built like a warrior. He used his uninjured arm to slide more erect against the wall so that he could watch his rescuer.

The latter seemed like he was fighting to cling to consciousness. Soon, though, he recovered enough energy to continue. He seemed anxious – impatient even.

Forcing to his feet, he turned his attention to the smaller bundle, hesitating, as if he feared the object might be too fragile to touch. Tears formed in his eyes. He moved his hands over it, as if in a caress, though his hands never quite touched. The tears increased, but a hopeful smile form on the grimy, burn-scarred face.

He tried to move a fallen beam out of the way. It resisted. His body spun a 180 degree arc, the rear leg lashing round, its booted foot slamming into the beam with enough force to break it. The move was almost a blur. The two parts of the beam no longer resisted his efforts to move them. Continuing past them, he grabbed the remains of a padded armchair, pulled it

closer, and placed the tiny bundle on it. As he eased away the cloth wrappings, it became clear that the bundle was a baby – a male infant old enough to have hair and several teeth. The child’s eyes focused on the man, displaying a level of seriousness and intelligence that seemed impossible in one so young. The child had been burned on one arm and part of its back, but the bandages were clean, and his ‘nurse’ had applied Elyndian healing gel.

The man lit an oil lamp, its chimney and mantle cracked, yet surprisingly intact for the state of ruin around it. As the he ministered to the infant, the lamp must have been guttered continuously by a breeze through the shanty, for there was a constant flickering a light in the room. The colour also shifted a lot from warm, amber to bright silvery-white. He cleaned the burns with water from a canteen, treated the burns with more gel, then gently retied the bandages.

He turned his attention to the man watching him. Once again, he moved his hands over the body, not quite touching it. And, once again, the lamp must have guttered, for the illumination and colour of light in the room went through the same flickering and throbbing. He carefully checked the right leg and left arm; both were splinted for broken bones, and bandaged for burns. As with the child, he cleaned the burns, reapplied the healing jelly, and rebandaged.

“That’s the best I can for for the moment,” he muttered, then collapsed to the floor, barely able to settle himself into a more comfortable position before passing out.

Soon after, the watcher also fell asleep. When he consciousness, he had no idea of the passing of time. He was in a lot of pain himself, and he felt disoriented. The lamp had burned out, but there was a strong glow of light entering the shack from a low angle. Songbirds in trees about the shack were singing cheerfully, and he heard the distant scream of gulls out over the water.

His rescuer stirred, then struggled to his feet. Going first to the child, he removed the soiled diaper, working gently, conscious of the infant's injuries, tossing the diaper into a corner and replacing it with a new piece of soft cloth from his pack. He removed a small container of food, spoon feeding the child for a moment before the laughing infant seized the spoon in a chubby fist, and began trying to feed himself.

"You're stubborn," the man laughed. "Just like your mother – and your father." As he added the latter, his warm smile became steely cold, a look of fierce determination replacing the gentle look that had lit his eyes just a moment before.

"We need to find an old friend," he told the infant. "We need somewhere you can stay while I take care of some business. They're good people and will keep you safe. You'll enjoy a life near the sea that I only saw occasionally as a child. Now, let's see how our other friend is doing."

His brow furrowed in concern as he re-examined the arm and leg. "They're broken," he said. "The bone ends fit easily back together and seem to be mending, though it will take weeks. The burns are also responding well to the unguent." He cleaned the burns again, reapplying more of the gel.

"Keep your arm and leg still. No one will care that we're using this wreck of a place, but we don't need to attract attention to ourselves. At this point we don't really know who our friends are."

The patient was about to speak but his rescuer cut him off. "From now on, I'm *The Wolf*. Think of a name for yourself while I look for food, water, and some clothes."

"What about..."

Again, The Wolf cut him off. "She's gone. The only thing that saved the child from the blast was how she was holding him, shielding him with her body. I took

her to the best healers I know, but they're not sure what they can do. The trash who did this killed many innocent people. Their only thought is power. They think the people are nothing more than a crop for them to harvest and use as it suits them. Their king wanted better for them. He wanted them to have a voice in their own lives and the running of their nation. It's the other trash, sitting in their stone castles, who couldn't see past the fear that they might have a bit less power in the new world the king wanted to create.

"I buried a dear friend four days ago," his voice was a snarl, "one I played with as a child, and worked with as an adult. He was the smartest hunter and the bravest fighter I knew, and a loyal friend. Now he's gone. And now, this child's mother lies in a coma, burned, torn, and broken. They didn't think she'd make it through the night. I should have stayed, but I just couldn't stand to see ..."

He clenched his teeth and turning abruptly, leaving the hovel.

The other warrior eased his head back and closed his eyes. He'd really known his rescuer for less than two years, though he'd spent some time with him off and on during his youth. But he knew the man's fierce sense of honour and loyalty to his friends, his country, and his ideals. Now he owed this man his life.

His every instinct told him that this man was about to lead him off on a crusade of hate and vengeance, in memory of innocent town's people and a royal family who'd been senselessly murdered by an act that could only be attributed to greed. He sighed, thinking, *Were it not for his quick actions, I would have been buried, along with his dear friend.* How long ago had that been? It seemed like it should have been yesterday, but he knew by the change in how his arm and leg felt that several days must have passed. There was a vague memory of others checking his injuries, but he didn't trust the memory. *Maybe avenging the Royal Family is*

my new duty assignment, he thought.

He glanced at the baby. The child looked at him with a fixed gaze, then smiled. *It's as if the child can read my mind*, he thought. *All this Wolf can think about is how someone else will be burying your mother. Well, if I no longer have a king to serve, I will serve the revenge of this rebel. Earth Mother, he'll be going after nobles – people I've sworn to serve.*

No, he corrected himself, *I swore to serve the throne of a Palendar. The nobles he hates, though we've yet to identify them for certain, were willing to disrupt that throne and kill the entire royal family.*

“Earth Mother!” he blurted aloud. “They weren’t just trying to retain their power, they’re hoping to take the throne!”

