

Chapter One

Weeks before the blood moon, and all the violence that followed it, a remarkable gathering took place at the Imperial Palace. It was remarkable because of the entwined fates of those who assembled there, who did not know each other, or suspect any part of what the stars had planned for them.

The young Emperor donned golden robes and a crown of wheat, and proclaimed that the planting should begin. He washed his hands in the waters of the five rivers. He drew his own blood and let it mingle with the blood of the ox as it burned, so that Quelestel would be pleased.

On the same day, though their planting had long been finished, the farmers of the plains sacrificed and prayed. In the forests and

mountains of the north and across the vast prairie all the way to the steppes, the citizens of the Empire prayed that this year would bring a bountiful harvest. The last two years had been hard. The feasting was meager and many outside the city offered their best to old Harvest God, even though the day now belonged to Quelestel.

In Merendir, the mild winter was half a cycle gone. The guests of the Emperor took their goblets to the boats and lounged in the lake, or to the red-shingled roofs of the guest houses to watch glimmering arteries spread out from the palace as the Lamplighters worked in the dusky streets. Many stood with the Emperor and his knights, watching as the Emperor's sister smiled shyly at a pair of strangers-- a man and a woman from the Wandering Tribes, brought to the palace for a scant weight of silver. The woman had come to entertain the nobles with her cards and visions of the future. The man had come because it was impossible for him to leave the woman's side. He stood silent and stern, with a thin bare blade between his sash and his breeches, and drew hushed, excited, murmurs from the nobles who knew the fierceness of the Tuga tribe.

The woman of the Wandering Tribes knelt on the cobblestones before the Princess Celani. The Emperor's sister had been taught

well, and did not fear the Tuga, but unlike most of the crowd, she believed in the woman's art. She feared her future, and so she hardly breathed as the woman dealt the cards. The Tuga woman dressed as a man, in breeches and a tunic, tied with the sash bearing the colors of her tribe. She was hard from work and war, but she was a woman, and Celani felt like a little girl, soft and small and timid, in a perfectly tailored silk gown and perfectly brushed hair.

When the Tuga woman looked from the cards to the princess, her dark eyes reflected the calm expanse of the prairie.

"You seek eyes within storms," she said, serenely, "One true storm, one storm that engulfs the world, and one storm within yourself. Keep your own eyes open, or you will be swept away."

There were scattered guffaws and some throat clearing in the crowd. Celani's uncle, the Elder General Dilluther, gangly and glowering in dark finery, appeared beside her and took her by the arm. His grip was gentle and absolutely unbreakable. As they walked away, Celani saw unmistakable sympathy in the wandering woman's eyes-- for what, she feared to wonder.

She would have liked to stay for the music and dancing, but she did not belong at these events. Jealous eyes saw her as the probable

Empress, and in uncertain times it was her lot to be kept indoors. That, and she still had the occasional episode. She would watch from her window and pretend that she could distinguish one figure from another.

The knights Arman and Ersaphis stood guard at the gate to the first ring of the palace. Celani could watch herself approach in the high sheen of their polished armor. The knights stood at attention now, as always. She stood on her toes, and her uncle Dilluther stooped a little, and she kissed him on the cheek. Dilluther had a narrow, stern face, and his cheek was hard and stubbly, but he softened at her touch.

"Good night, Uncle."

"Good night, Celani. Sleep well."

Celani took a last look at the torchlit square behind her, and went in to the first ring, to spend another night alone with her thoughts and her mother's slippered footsteps scuffing endlessly through the halls.

The Candle had watched the ceremony that afternoon with mild consternation. The Emperor had directed his prayers to Quelestel, but

the old rituals belonged to the Harvest God. It was thinly disguised heresy-- the sort that the Most Holy Confessor would undoubtedly want the Candle to speak out against. It would be impolitic for the Candle to question the Emperor about his holy days, and besides, all but the most rigid of Quelestel's followers had become inured to such adaptations.

The Candle sat now by a small stage, ostensibly listening to some reknowned singer from the mountains. The singer was tiresome, and the whining strings that accompanied him aggravated the headache that the Candle had been nursing all day. The Candle considered himself a musical man. Under his leadership, the choir at the Basilica had been transformed from a collection of tone deaf scribes and monks to the group that it was today. This mountain music, with its quavering melodies and guttural murmurings, was a trend that he did not understand. The nobility's fascination with it would pass-- hopefully soon-- and these peasants would return to their dung fires and fermented mare's milk. The only reason he continued to feign attention was to discourage anybody from trying to talk to him.

The sun was gone, though dusk lingered. Five minutes more and he would go. He thrust his hand into his pocket, fearing once again

that he had dropped the letter he carried. It was still there. He struggled slightly getting out of his chair. He had been prone to sweating even in his youth, before he had acquired his current bulk, and the night was warm. He dabbed his head with a handkerchief, then checked his pocket again to make sure that the letter had not fallen out. He began to amble slowly, and assumed an expression of deep thought, hoping that nobody would intrude on his meditations.

Night came steadily on, and the Candle walked close to the walls, where the lights from the torches did not touch him. Beyond the wall, there was a tumult of horses and armor. The Candle jumped, but the guards on the wall gave no notice. There was no army in the world that could touch the Empire, let alone make its way to the second ring of the Imperial palace in Merendir.

He did not like uncertainty, and he was bound for a mysterious meeting. He wondered, as he had a thousand times in the past three days, who would be waiting at the boathouse. Would it be somebody that he knew, or a stranger? The palace was full of visiting lords and their travelling parties. There were only a handful of commoners here, aside from servants, and they were Merendir's most elite citizens.

The letter had spelled out, in unfortunate detail, an extensive list of recent infidelities on the part of the Lord Commander. The Candle did not doubt the accuracy of the account. Among the leaders of the Church, the Lord Commander's proclivities were well-known. They were tolerated because the Lord Commander was, or had been, a great warrior and leader of men. With far-flung reports of degeneracy and indiscretion on the part of rank-and-file knights, though, this was a time when the reputation of the Lord Commander could not afford to be tarnished. Apparently, the letter's sender was aware of this, and eager to take advantage of the circumstance. To what end, the Candle had no notion.

Ahead of him, he saw the old boat house. Candle-lit boats were gliding across the lake, and laughter drifted toward him through the trees. He looked over his shoulder, but nobody was there, aside from the silhouette of a guard slowly walking the walls. The Candle checked his pocket again for the letter, and turned into the trees, vanishing from the view of the guard, who had in fact been watching him intently.

The Candle cut a figure that was easy to recognize, with his

voluminous robes and considerable bulk. The guard wondered why the he was skulking through the woods, but soon dismissed these thoughts in favor of his prior preoccupations. When he was relieved of his duty on the wall, he would have to go quickly to the broker on Cooper's Square. There he could pay eighty weight silver in scrip from the salary that he just received, plus eight weight coin in interest, to redeem his pendant. In his estimation, it was worth at least two weight gold. Gayle, his broker on the Street of Fools, would pay two weight gold, minus a ten weight silver commission, for the pendant. Gayle had Imperial accounts that came due in scrip, so he would change scrip to coin with no fee.

If he went to the Street of Fools by way of the Foreman's Court, he would pass the tavern where Lighthall's couriers wasted away the evening hours. He could stop and remind the ugly one with red hair of his outstanding debt of forty weight silver. The man would not be able to pay, but having the man indebted would prove useful eventually. Then there should be time to head back up the hill to the Swan Feather Inn before Andrios closed, but after most of the wealthy guests had retired for the night. Andrios would dip into the Blue Forest shag for him, and he would tip Andrios well, and take the shag

to smoke with the tobacconist in the morning. This would ensure further discounts on his considerable purchases there, an impassioned rant about how difficult Blue Forest shag was to find-- thanks to rich Siltians buying it all up to send across the Sea of Mist to the even-richer men of the Far East-- and occasionally an unintentional insight into the conversations of some of the ranking members of the Poorman's Union who congregated there.

He remembered also that it had been too long since he had visited Vance at Lantern Under the Arch, another drinking establishment frequented by Union members. The strange old barkeep took a lot of grief from his clients for his bizarre political ideas and his resemblance to a goat. He loved to talk, the guard was one of the only people who would listen, and they were both insomniacs. About an hour after sunrise, when the last of the customers staggered home and Vance was closing up, the guard would have his morning tea there.

He was no longer welcome at the Horn and Cup, where the Lighthall's bruisers drank and whored, but Zarea kept the bar there, and she had been hanging around the Union Hall a lot recently in the afternoons. He could ask her for an update on the goings on there

when he went to pay his dues tomorrow. Even the most tight lipped Union members were happy to share information about Lighthall's men, who tended to be an aggressive and unstable lot and posed a greater threat to the Poorman's Union than the city guard.

Union dues would be fifteen weight silver-- coin only. Rent would be a quarter weight of gold, plus ten weight silver to keep his name off the books. He would try to pay Marta, who knew everything that happened between the Street of Fools and the harbor and a good deal about everything that happened elsewhere, thirty silver weight up front for the entire month, saving a few silver weight off her weekly payments. He owed the bookkeeper at the Blue Door forty silver and, although the terms included only a modest interest rate, it would be best not to advertise his poverty. If he got a good deal from the tobacconist, he could conceivably spend under twenty weight silver on tobacco this month. He brushed his thumb across the stack of thinly stamped coins in his pocket-- eighteen weight of silver. By the time he tipped Andrios, bought tea at the Swan Feather and at the Lantern Under the Arch, and kept Zarea's considerable thirst satisfied while questioning her, that would be gone.

What all of this came down to was that he would need to do

another job to get through the month, which was unfortunate. He was not afraid of getting caught, he was too good for that, but to do a job right took a week of research. He had better things to when he was not on duty than pretending to sell walnuts outside the shop of some petty merchant and taking notes on when he came and went.

Darkness had fallen entirely, and the century of soldiers returning to their barracks from the field were little more than a dark milling mass. A pair of eyes gleamed below, drawn to the light of the guard's torch. The guard wondered at the differences in the lives that people lead, and tried to imagine himself living in barracks; riding for days across the plains and spending months, or even years, with the same hundred men; always jumping back and forth between strict discipline and wild carousing. He could not imagine any such thing. Far away, a bell began to toll, and soon it was joined by others, near and far. It was officially nightfall. Soon he would be relieved of duty. He took a cigarette from his case and lit it from the torch.

The soldier watched the torch dwindle high above him on the wall, as the guard walked away. All around him, his comrades moved in

and out of the barracks, unloading their bags and heading out into the city. If they shared his restlessness, they did not show it.

Most likely, he had just finished his last stint in the field, putting down an insurrection in a dusty farming town in the western highlands. In a month, his three years would be finished, and he would ride back to his home town. The people there would remember him and accept him, and he would try to forget that he had imagined their faces on the men and women hanging from gibbets. The two towns were not all that different, the people basically the same-- farmers, reserved but friendly, pious but not zealous, inclined toward contentment but angry when their children were hungry.

The battle had been swift. He had drawn his sword and little else. He had not even seen anyone killed. The reprisal had been moderate, by most estimations. A dozen leaders of insurrection had been executed, the fighters for the most part had been pardoned. The leaders had been young-- men and women who thought that action could solve any problem. Had it been his home town, he was certain his brother would have been among them.

Now, if his comrades felt anything, they went to drink it away on the Street of Fools. The soldier went to his cot in the barracks--

a long room with insufficient light-- and dropped his bag. The barracks smelled like stale exertion. He stripped quickly and got into bed and did not fall asleep for a long time.

Inside the second ring, the Emperor's guests headed in throngs to the south square, where the cellarer was draining a third cask into a marble tureen as large as a wagon. The Candle huffed against the crowd, hurrying toward the gate. Two men ceased their conversation as he approached and looked at him without much interest. They were traders, by the look of them, and one of them was an Islander.

At the boat house, a young man had called to him and given him a letter, claiming to have received the letter, along with ten weight of silver, from a Rider. The boy was just the brat of some minor lord, and knew nothing. The man who had given the message to the boy had probably not even been a true Rider. The letter had demanded that the Candle release a certain prisoner of the Church. The name had meant nothing to the Candle. The Church held few prisoners these days. Its historical enemies were gone, or impotent, and Merendir was rarely vexed by sorcerers.

The Lash liked to work at night, and every passing hour made it less likely that the prisoner would be alive, and sound enough in mind and body for release. The Candle's carriage waited in the third ring. He was gasping for breath by the time he climbed in and drew the curtains, but he managed to convey to the driver that he should be taken to the penitentiary as quickly as possible. The carriage bounced and clattered against the cobblestones, and the Candle was jostled through the cushions. He hoped he was not too late.

The two traders had wandered well away from the festivities. They watched quietly as the Candle huffed past them, and then the Islander sighed expansively and stroked his mustache. He was far shorter than the other man, and quite round. Both men wore well-cut tunics and breeches without the embroidery or ruffles that that many of the nobles, oblivious to taste, still wore. The Southerner's accent was distinct, but his speech was perfect.

"My friend, how can these trifles come between us? You are like a son to me, Endrev. For no other man would I even consider a silver weight above thirty percent, and you ask me for fifty. You break an old man's heart."

"You're a rogue, Gandro, and you know it. It's my ship, it's my navigator, and it's my map that will let him run the reefs. Now, what do you really want to talk about?"

"Ah, my friend, you are clever. Fifty percent of this, thirty percent of that, it is nothing at all. You see, I only try to keep you sharp. Now you tell me, whether you think I speak the truth."

The older man looked around them. They stood in the center of the square near the gate. If they were seen together, it was no uncommon sight. They would look to all the world as two old friends saying goodbye to one another. What was important was that they not be heard, and here Gandro could see that there was nobody to hear them.

"Well, speak then."

Paya Gandro hated speaking quietly. It was as if half the words in his language were gone.

"I have met an interesting man, my friend, with interesting ideas."

Gandro could feel his heart. It went too fast, and his breath was short. He dabbed his brow with a kerchief, and his old friend gave him an odd look.

"It is true that this man thinks that he is more clever than I," he continued, and began to pace back and forth with short, quick, strides.

"Ah, but how he strokes my vanity." Gandro stopped and looked up at the other man. Endrev looked back at him, wondering what could have Gandro so agitated.

"I assure you," Gandro laughed loudly, and looked around them again, "that Paya Gandro's vanity is not insignificant."

"I'm familiar with Paya Gandro's vanity. What proposal did this man give you?"

"Ahh, why do I hesitate?" Gandro could not meet the other man's eyes. "You must understand, that this is the type of matter that makes you look closely at even your closest friends."

"Well, look then." There was a touch of hurt in Endrev's voice. Gandro stopped pacing and turned to him, with tears in his eyes.

"Ah, my friend, my son, I can never doubt you. Not for all the gold in the world would Endrev Berekker betray Paya Gandro. It is only that, to even speak such ideas as I have can make powerful enemies."

Endrev Berekker said nothing.

"This man that I met, he is a priest in the north. Like myself, he has... nationalist tendencies. I confess that I am not moved to sympathy by the plight of the Northern Province, but neither do I believe that his heart stirs for the Isles of Mahagenia."

Endrev Berekker frowned. Paya Gandro had always been a loquacious man, but his speech now was unnatural, as if he could not bring himself to come to the point. He had not met Berekker's eyes in some time. Although Gandro was prone to many emotions, fear was not typically among them.

"What merchant makes Paya Gandro afraid?" Berekker mused aloud.

"No, friend, no. There is no merchant that I fear, nor does any corsair or brigand dare to cross swords with my men."

"What is this business, then?"

When Gandro spoke, it was in a whisper.

"You know, my friend, that the Emperor has no heir..."

The hairs on Berekker's neck stood up. He looked at his friend and mentor with pursed lips. Paya Gandro mopped his brow and cleared his throat again.

"...and you know, my friend, that my business is mostly in the Isles and in Silt, and I do not know people in Merendir like you do."

"What would you have me do?" Berekker asked as quietly as he could.

"Become our man in Merendir, otherwise I do not know. The man I know, he wishes for the Emperor to die without an heir. But I have other thoughts. They are small thoughts now, I do not know what to make of them, but I think we have found the first step."

"The first step?" Berekker coughed a humorless laugh.

"It is no small task, my friend, that I ask of you. The risks are clear."

"And the rewards?"

"Freedom for my people in the Mahagenia."

"And?"

"Exclusive shipping rights, into and out of Merendir..."

Paya Gandro gave Berekker a sly smile that faded quickly.

"...and that is only the beginning."

For a long time, no words were spoken. When Berekker spoke, his voice trembled a bit.

"I must consider this."

"Of course, my friend, of course. Was it not Paya Gandro who taught you to weigh all matters of business carefully?" Gandro began

to stroll back toward the celebration, glancing occasionally at his silent companion. He turned and threw his arms wide, "Ah, but my friend, what is that we were speaking of? There is still the matter of how my pepper will get to Silt. You think that Paya Gandro's wits have become dull with age. I will give you thirty five percent, but I tell you that my heart aches that an old friend would rob me so."

The two merchants were not the only ones in the palace who whispered about the Emperor that night. In his seventeenth year, he was still unwed, and every guest had a notion about how this should be remedied. The only person with nothing to say about the matter was the man whose opinion mattered.

"It isn't easy to be the Seer these days, is it?"

Ashir Corvyne turned to see who had just clapped him on the back. Kendel Marron, Lord of Saessen, a minor holding in the west plains. Corvyne scanned his surroundings for a means of escape. None was apparent.

"There are more difficult occupations," Corvyne said.

Marron had expected commiseration, and was put off for a moment, but could not be deterred.

"I saw Lady Pryena latch onto you. Shameless, that's what she is. I hope she wasn't too much of a bother, badgering you about betrothals and all."

Marron stopped, hoping that this would inspire Corvyne to tell him something. Corvyne shook his head. Another hour, and he could dutifully excuse himself from the celebration and go home to a book and a glass of wine.

"...because, hrm... of course her ambitions are fanciful."

Corvyne made a noncommittal noise. He did not want to be rude, but he also did not want to talk to Marron, especially about who the Emperor would marry. It was the Seer's duty to choose a match, and the whole Empire was restless for his decision.

"I was unaware of her ambitions."

Marron cleared his throat.

"Well, they're clear to everybody else. She hopes to put one of... you know... one of them on the throne."

"One of who?" Corvyne asked, pushing his spectacles higher on his face.

Marron shifted his feet. He was a large man, jowly and broad shouldered, and he spoke with pursed lips into his mustache.

"An Islander."

"Does she, now?"

Marron frowned. He suspected that the Seer was playing games with him.

"Well, good. I knew there was no truth to it," Marron mumbled, then added ominously, "because, of course, there are many lords who would not stand for it."

With that, Marron turned and strode boldly away, letting the full weight of his words fall on Corvyne.

"Hmm." Corvyne said to himself, and thought about dinner. He had some business to attend to first. There was a Rider here tonight, by Corvyne's invitation, and Corvyne had not yet found him. The Seer headed toward the south square, where he heard music and laughter, and there he found the man that he sought. The Rider Tarkan was making a sensation of himself at the very center of the festivities. The dancing had stopped, so that everybody could watch the young Rider and Derra Weylann. Derra would have drawn plenty of eyes herself-- Corvyne had noticed the Emperor watching her before, and saw that he watched her now, standing at the edge of the festivities, flanked by the knights Stennan and Gresser.

Corvyne passed close to a pair of ladies, probably older than Tarkan's mother, speculating about whether he was a man yet, and arguing about which of them would be better suited to make him one. Corvyne greeted them politely as he passed, with raised eyebrows, and they dissolved into drunken laughter.

Tarkan was very young, especially for a Rider. Long, dark curls fell to his shoulders, with one or two always straying in front of his eyes. Though his features were fine, and even a little feminine, they were still strong, and indeed everything about him bespoke his strength. He moved with confidence, precision, and grace. Derra, who had never felt herself to be a particularly accomplished dancer, felt that she could do anything in his arms. They whirled and leapt and glided together and every eye was on them, until he bowed to her, averting his eyes as was proper for a man of his station, and she walked, breathless and flushing, back to the Lord and Lady Weylann.

Once their dance was done, a few people in the crowd muttered about the impropriety of a common boy dancing with a girl of noble birth, but most had been so enchanted that they had not even noticed.

"Rider!" Corvyne called.

The orchestra began to play again, and people began to pair off

and dance, although many waited to see what the Seer would say to the boy.

"My Lord." The Rider went to one knee in front of Corvyne.

"Rise, Rider. I would have a word with you."

"Yes, My Lord."

"Come." Corvyne led him away from the crowd. "The Shepherd speaks very highly of you."

"Thank you, My Lord."

"You are the second of your line to take the spurs," Corvyne said.

"Yes, my lord. My father was also a Rider in the Shepherd's service."

Corvyne examined the young rider, and liked what he saw. He touched three fingers to his chest, and Tarkan returned the gesture, looking around in spite of himself to see who might be watching.

"You must travel to Imiatt." Corvyne told the Rider.

"Of course, my Lord," Tarkan said, as if it were a small request, "I will be there within a fortnight."

"Ask the curator of the library there what names are written in the book."

"Yes, my lord," the Rider said.

"Rest well tonight, Rider," Ashir Corvyne said, "Tomorrow at first light, the Shepherd will have his own reasons to send you to Imiatt."

"Yes, my lord."

Corvyne had brought Tarkan to the attention of the Shepherd a few days earlier, pointed out his merits, and convinced the Shepherd that Tarkan should be tested. If Tarkan could make Imiatt in a fortnight, as he had boasted, then he was among the very best of the Shepherd's men. To get to the Fellnian city, one had to cross twelve hundred miles of plains, a portion of the Addenines which, while short, was inhospitable even in summer, and then another two hundred miles along the front in the perpetual war between Northern and Southern Fellnia. If he could make it back again in another fortnight, as he would be instructed to do once he delivered his message, then the boy was unmatched.

The Seer and the Rider turned their attention back to the Emperor and the Tuga woman, who knelt before him, turning over cards. The crowd surrounding them was giddy, and drunk.

"Ask the cards who will be the Empress!" somebody yelled.

"She turned over the Eunuch!" called another voice.

This was met with such merriment, that almost nobody noticed the look that came over the face of the Tuga woman as she dealt the final card. Her eyes widened, and she looked up at the Emperor. Corvyne saw it, and he wove his way through the crowd, until he stood close to the Emperor.

"The guiding stars of gods, and man, and nature, are all rising, and shall come together in the Nameless House," the wandering woman said quietly, looking at Corvyne, then added, "It is not a stable confluence." Some people in the audience started to mutter. The woman did not speak sense. This is not what she had been hired for.

The Tuga woman looked away from Corvyne, and into the Emperor's eyes. "Be cautious, my Emperor, and strong. The planets of our mothers grow dim."

The Tuga woman pressed her head to the ground before the Emperor and then stood. The Emperor seemed puzzled by her words, and scratched his chin. Behind him, the Seer stared into her, and his eyes narrowed. She paused to look at him. Her partner put a hand on her shoulder, and she turned to go.