

Chapter One: The Mystery of Keelia and Devon's Sacrifice

“This is...An-Men Ten-Ar. The next stop is...An-Men gate historical monument” flashed the indicator signs all over and across the light rail cars following an almost invisible monorail along the streets of the capitol city of Hejing. On the outside of the twelve light rail cars making up this particular train flashed the train line indicator, “An-Men Xi Fang.” As the light rail slowed to its stop called An-Men Ten-Ar, a well-dressed House Ten-Ar professional wearing a blue doublet over a green kirtle and trousers emerged from the fourth car, along with a few dozen other commuters, the emblem of Beinarian healers embroidered on his doublet. As the gentleman stepped off the light rail train car he was on, his grey eyes scanned the over 5000 yen-ar old streets for the familiar street markers that indicated his position. After a few seconds, the gentleman, Lord Healer Devon of House Ten-Ar, found his bearings and began to walk 0.578 li 里 west and 0.687 li 里 south of the light rail station. After a few xiao-shir, he reached his destination, a tall, gleaming pale blue granite-like building complex marked “An-Men Ten-Ar Healing center.”

Looking at his watch, Lord Devon hastened into the building and checked with the front information desk located 0.0127 li 里 from the entrance. At the desk sat a blue and green gowned clerk, “Welcome to An-Men Ten-Ar. How may I help you, Lord Healer?”

“Lord Healer Devon of House Ten-Ar...I'm looking for my wife, Lady Healer Keelia of House Ten-Ar...” requested Lord Devon.

The clerk typed in the information provided quickly, “Of course. You are assigned to Central Nan-li in Nan-li Xi-Nan Fang, aren't you?”

“Yes...I am,” he replied, distracted and worried.

The clerk smiled, “Lady Healer Keelia is in chamber 438, second floor.”

“Thank you,” hastened Devon, heading down the hall at a fast pace.

“Keelia...are you okay?” cried Devon as he rushed into chamber 438; his wife's healing center room. Lady Keelia lay in bed, her belly swollen.

A small crib stood a 16.29 cun 寸 from her bed. Propping herself up, she looked at her husband, and then picked up the newborn in the crib. The child began to wail as she picked him up. “Hush. Hush. Don't cry little one,” soothed Lady Keelia as she held the child to her bosom.

Her delivery of the tiny infant had been eased by her waiting until the age of 120 to give birth to her son three shir-ors ago, but he was starting out life as a fussy baby.

“I left the healing center as soon as I could...” explained Devon, suddenly tongue-tied at the sight of his son.

Keelia looked up at him, “I know...Lady Abbess Cara sent me word as soon as the healing center notified her you were on your way back to Dong-Bei. I was worried you might not make it back. The news reports have indicated the situation down there is...tenuous.”

“Very...tenuous,” he replied, his eyes mostly on his son. Smiling, Keelia passed the infant to his father. Devon held his son to his chest and bounced gently, trying to sooth him, “There, there, my little one...you’re okay. Everything is fine now,” Slowly, the baby calmed, resting his head against his father, “See...that was not so hard. You’re a perfect nobleman already.”

“You have a way with babies, my love,” smiled Keelia.

“As many of them as I see at Central Nan-li, you would hope I would be good with children. Oh, Darling...the suffering I saw this beinor.”

“Where were you assigned this beinor, Devon?”

“Emergency...for the twelfth beinor in a row. I find it hard to believe that in a society that claims to be so civilized and so superior compared to the worlds we trade with that we would still be so capable of the brutality of our ancestors. I fear things will continue to get worse unless we resolve these differences of wealth and power across the houses,” answered Devon.

“How bad is the violence now? The news said it’s been escalating for the last twenty beinors?” asked Keelia.

“The violence has worsened with each beinor and each yen-ar in the larger cities of Xi-Nan Fang, including Nan-li. If I did not know better, I would say the ancient feuds between houses were re-opened down there. I cannot believe the blood and mutilations I’m seeing as I try to help people at that healing center,” Lord Devon began to shake as memories of his last shift filled his mind.

“Can’t the healing center give you any leave to help now that we have little Elendir? You know it could be several beinors before I’m fully recovered from the delivery.”

Devon shook his head in frustration, “I want to, sweetheart...but I just cannot see them giving me any time off. I know I could choose to help at any healing center or clinic on

Beinan...but Xi-Nan Fang is where the need for a skilled healer is greatest. They are really suffering down there. They are angry, frustrated, and feel abandoned by our government. Many of them are house Ana, house Croften, and even house Slabi. I feel their hearts...their grievances are valid. The genetic degeneration from thousands of yen-ars of mining argun to create argene has taken its toll.”

“I’ve seen patients who worked ten, maybe thirty yen-ars in the mines...I cannot imagine someone working longer there. The cost to their longevity and overall health is too great,” added Keelia. “You’ve seen how long the brown eye effect lasts, how the only way for these poor people to regain most of their sight is to leave Beinan forever; the upper atmosphere changes our color spectrum too much. You simply cannot see with only tri-chromatic vision.”

“And yet we are willing as a society to tolerate such obvious dangers...in the name of ‘progress.’ Progress, they say. If we continue on this path, I fear something even more horrible than the disabling side effects of mining on the residents of Xi-Nan Fang will sweep our society,” warned Devon.

“Let us pray to the goddesses that such terror never comes,” affirmed Lady Keelia.

“Elendir...come here, Elendir,” called Lady Keelia as she walked into the living room of their spacious, middle-class apartment on the twenty-fifth floor of their thirty story apartment building in the Beinarian capital of Hejing, 5.3489 li 里 west of the palace. As Elendir ambled up to his mother’s side, Keelia sat into a nearby loveseat to give Elendir a better view of the small bundle she held, wrapped in a blue-lavender blanket. Crawling onto the narrow couch, Elendir peered into the bundle to see his three beinor-old baby sister, Althea. As Elendir eyed the infant with both fear and curiosity, Althea yawned widely with a coo. Keelia smiled, “Elendir...this is your little sister, Althea. Isn’t she pretty?” As she smiled encouragingly at Elendir, the soreness of her delivery sent a pang of pain through her body. She tensed with pain. Maybe she should have stayed a little longer in the healing center to recover rather than discharging early.

“Momma?” asked Elendir.

“I’m okay, Elendir. Don’t worry. Just a little sore right now. Everything is okay. Don’t worry, my little Elendir. Daddy will be home from the healing center soon.”

Exhausted from her delivery of little Althea, Keelia put down both Elendir and Althea into their respective beds for a nap, then laid down herself for some badly needed recovery sleep for a shir-or. At shir-or 9.50, her planetary broadcasting receiver turned on as programmed, “And now breaking news from the city of Nan-li in Xi-Nan Fang. There has been an explosion at Central Nan-li healing center, the charity healing center founded by a co-operation between houses Ana and Miyoo. Repeat, there has been an explosion at Central Nan-li Healing Center in Nan-li Xi-Nan Fang. House Ana security is not releasing exact numbers of dead or injured, but we have been told that there were two bombs detonated, one in the emergency ward and the other in the surgical recovery wing of the healing center. As we receive more information, we will release it to you, live, here on the Beinarian Central Broadcasting Network.” As the journalist reported the disaster, both her face and voice conveyed her utter shock at the bombing.

Keelia, however, exhausted by her need to recover from child birth, did not stir during the broadcast. She slept another 730 xiao-shirs before waking and hearing the news broadcast, “And now, more information on the continuing tragedy in Nan-li in Xi-Nan Fang. Authorities are reporting over 2700 healers and patients dead at the healing center with some emergency responders telling us that as many as 6000 out of the 9000 total occupants in the healing center – patients, healers, support personal, even maintenance staff are likely dead or wounded. We will, of course, report more exact numbers of dead and injured as we receive more information. We can, at this xiao-shir confirm one casualty: Lord Healer Devon of house Ten-Ar, we are told, was the healer in chief of the emergency ward. He was nearest to the bomb that has destroyed the emergency ward where he was, reportedly, tending a patient at the time of the explosion. Lord Healer Devon is survived by his wife, Lady Healer Keelia, and their two children.” As the journalist reported about Devon, a holo-image of the healer flashed on the screen next to the journalist. Keelia’s face turned white as she realized the journalist was talking about none other than HER Devon, HER husband—not someone else. As she began to process the news, tears flooded her face.

Elendir, a mere three yen-ars twenty-one beinors old, managed to climb over the protective wall on his bed in the children’s room. Suddenly afraid, he ran up to his mother. Keelia scolded her son gently, “Elendir. How did you get out of there?”

“Mamma, make daddy come home.”

Keelia’s eyes widened as she realized that Elendir had heard and understood the planet-wide news broadcast about the bombing, “Momma wants to Elendir. Momma wants daddy home too.”

“Where’s daddy, Momma?”

“He’s now on a long journey to a new family in a new place, little one.” answered Keelia, her tears uncontrollable despite her best efforts to look strong for her son.

Despite her best efforts, Lady Keelia struggled as a widow and mother. Eight beinors after the blasts that killed her husband, she journeyed with her children to the Ten-Ar monastery and headquarters to all House Ten-Ar located several shir-ors away from Hejing. Upon arrival, she headed to the main audience hall, carrying Althea and holding little Elendir’s hand as they walked together. Upon entering the massive, stain-glassed chamber they found Lady Abbess Cara, a matrilineal descendant of the same Lady Healer Cara who had treated Lord Prince Corann in the palace healing center in BE 6326. There was more than four hundred yen-ars between her foremother and herself, yet she looked remarkably similar to the portraits of her foremother kept by each successive generation of her family. She was as fair and as beautiful as the Lady Cara Lord Prince Corann had known. As Keelia reached the front of the hall, she knelt respectively to her mentor, “Good health and prosperity to you, Abbess of Ten-Ar.”

“Good health and prosperity to you, Lady Keelia, Healer of Ten-Ar,” answered Lady Cara, motioning Lady Keelia to rise. “We have been worried about you, fearing you were among the un-named lost in Nan-li. I am relieved to see you still of this realm of existence, Lady Keelia...but I grieve for your loss and for the burden placed upon by it. How old is your baby now?”

“Twenty-nine beinors, my lady.”

“And your son?”

“Three yen-ars, fifty beinors. He seems to be ahead of the developmental curve a bit, if you do not mind my medical opinion.”

“Medical opinions are exactly what we are trained to provide, Lady Keelia...why would I mind it now?” queried Lady Cara.

“I find myself unable to think most of the time, if I may be so honest. Althea needs so much and so does Elendir...I find myself at a loss to care properly for both of them without my husband. I am...not handling the loss as well as I have seen others do,” disclosed Keelia.

“The loss of so many of our numbers is more than I think anyone can cope with effectively. If I did not know better, I would think that they were killed in some...act of terrorism against our house in particular. Whoever it was knew that house Ten-Ar preferentially sends healers to charity healing centers like Central Nan-li Healing Center to serve—which is why most of the healers and healers-in-training who perished in the blasts were house Ten-Ar. No other single house lost so many. The patients were from houses Cashmarie, Ana, Slabi, Croften, Skeinera, Plover, Balister, even a few from house Miyoo.

“But of the healers and healing center staff, our house was the most devastated in the blasts; healers of Miyoo, Gurun, Slabi, and Xing-li mostly sustained variously levels of injury, few of them life-threatening. By contrast, more than half of the healers and healers-in-training killed at Central Nan-li Healing Center were house Ten-Ar...over five hundred Ten-Arian healing professionals,” updated Lady Cara.

“But WHY? Why would our house be targeted? Why kill Beinan’s best healers?” trembled Lady Keelia.

“If I had to offer a guess, Lady Keelia, I would estimate that we healers are far more vulnerable to such terrorism than our knightly brothers and sisters, making we healers the best choice for one wishing to harm our house. Our knights are great and powerful defenders of justice...more than capable of not only handling such an emergency, but swiftly neutralizing those behind it. We healers have no such defenses. We go and serve, helping whoever needs our knowledge. We are the other side to house Ten-Ar which gives it strength and balance.”

“Yes...of course. But why target house Ten-Ar at all? To my knowledge we have not done anything to any of the other houses since the old feuds on original home world. The creation of the Great Council put an end to those...so why?” worried Lady Keelia.

“It is possible we...offended another house without knowing it...but in those cases, tradition dictates that any grievances between houses be brought to the Great Council for arbitration. If this is about houses and political, then whoever it is works outside of our traditional system or is working, somehow, to undermine that system by ignoring it.”

Keelia shook her head in disbelief, “Never in two hundred yen-ars would I believe I would somehow be caught up in this, affected by the events of a distant continent, a distant people’s problem—unless I volunteered to go to the front lines of those problems. But the problem has come home...my husband is dead and I do not have the means to take care of my children.”

“You did well to bring them here, Lady Keelia. We, as a house, are prepared to nurture them, educate them, help them grow in whatever paths they choose. I will give you the choice right now whether to have the healers nurture your son...or the knights. He will learn self-defense if he were to begin his education even at this early yen-ar.”

Keelia looked at Elendir and straightened his tunic. The boy was mentally gifted and strong in health—just like his father. Yet even for a Beinarian, Elendir was proving to be unusually bright and innovative, perhaps some sort of prodigy even, “If I give him to the knights now, will I still have my parental rights to him? Will he know me as his mother?”

Lady Cara smiled gently, “We would not have it any other way. You *are* his mother, Keelia. The knights are merely educators and extended family to him. When he reaches the age of decision, he may elect to stay with the knights and become a squire...or choose a different life for himself. We are all family here and as a family, we will stay together—no matter what the politics of our world says.”

“Then let him be fostered by the knights. Let them encourage his talents and help him in ways neither of us can foresee right now. Let him grow strong in mind, soul, and body. Let him choose the path that he desires...unhindered by the choices of others,” evoked Lady Keelia.

“So mote it be, Lady Keelia. Now go, rest. I will contact the healing center in Hejing where you work and inform them of your temporary leave of absence while we get you settled...and while you decide what is best for your daughter as well.”

“Blessed be, Lady Cara...and thank you,” bowed Lady Keelia.

“Elendir, son of Devon and Keelia of the Healers of Ten-Ar, for many yen-ars have you studied and suffered, enduring the trials set before you of mind, body, heart, and spirit. Now the journey’s end has come and a choice lies before you. Do you choose to join the brotherhood of Knights of Ten-Ar...or leave for another path?”

Now sixty yen-ars old, Elendir was crimson robed in the ceremonial robes that had become customary over the last four hundred yen-ars. Sumptuary laws regarding what was appropriate to wear at one's elevation to knighthood had changed over the past four hundred yen-ars since Squire Corann's elevation to the knighthood in BE 6326. Now the crimson tunic was considered insufficient in favor of wearing either a crimson or white tunic or doublet and white trousers for men. Lady squires were expected to wear white kirtles underneath crimson bliauts made of konyn wool. Men and women both overlain their choices with heavy crimson cloaks made of a deep piled, lustrous fabric embroidered with the Ten-Ar sword at the center back.

From his neck, Elendir suspended a pendant set with a Ten-Arian star ruby such as those worn in the circlets of healers of Ten-Ar at their elevation...a small remembrance of his mother and her great love in sending him to the knights for training when perhaps ego would have mandated he apprentice with the healers. Unlike many of his sword brothers at their elevation, Elendir chose to wear a simple white tunic for his elevation, a choice that made the star ruby in his pendant shine all the brighter.

As Elendir knelt, his mentor, Lord Knight Malvyn, placed his strong hands on Elendir's crown. But instead of focusing on the ceremony in progress, Elendir thought about his mother, Lady Keelia, with both sadness and thankfulness. He was barely ten yen-ars when Lord Knight Malvyn quietly informed him of his mother's death, the victim of another healing center bombing, this one in the coastal city of Bira Hecen in Dong-Bei, 10,000 li 里 from Hejing. As with the bombing that killed his father when he was three yen-ars old, no one took responsibility for this act of terrorism. The bombing that took the life of his father killed a far larger number of Healers of Ten-Ar without injury to healers from other houses. This bombing was different—or appeared to be different. This bombing killed one hundred fifteen healers of Ten-Ar, two hundred twenty Healers of Gurun, and fifty-eight Advocates of Slabi—not nearly the precisely-driven attack on house Ten-Ar that cost his father his life.

Still, right now, Elendir wished with all his heart that his parents could witness this elevation. Instead, the only close family left to him was his younger sister, Althea, who was, wisely, brought into formal training with the Healers of Ten-Ar when she was five yen-ars old. Lady Keelia had originally stayed at the monastery to teach medicine and to raise Althea.

Ironically enough, it took more riots against the monarchy to draw Keelia out into the world again...and straight to her death.

As much as Elendir sorrowed now for his parents, he was comforted by his sister, standing 26.83 cun † away from him. Smiling at Lady Althea, Elendir grasped Lord Knight Malvyn's wrists ceremoniously, "Master, hear me now before these witnesses. I choose as I have always chosen all my life: to dedicate my mind, body, heart, and soul to this house and this place. If the brotherhood will have me, I vow myself to be, now and for forevermore, sword brother and peer, a lord knight of Ten-Ar."

Lord Malvyn removed his hands from Elendir's head and anointed the center of his brow with fragrant sacred oil, "Then in the name of the Knights of Ten-Ar and as your master, I confer on you the rank of Knight and Lord of Ten-Ar." With a nod, one of the squires knelt nearby, bearing the Ten-Ar great sword in a gold and silver scabbard on a strong leather belt in the bright green used for knighthood elevation. Kneeling, Lord Malvyn girt it about Lord Elendir's waist. Taking his sister's hand, Lord Knight Elendir rose, his elevation complete. He hugged his blue-lavender-clad sister before offering Lord Knight Malvyn his hands in a gesture of respect.

As he rose, a knight at last, he looked at his sister. Lady Healer Althea had grown up...at fifty-seven yen-ars, she was a vision of beauty. Her gossamer bliaut hugged her graceful, petite frame. Long blond hair flowed in waves down to her mid back. Silver eyes sparkled from her fair complexion. Blond hair was rare among Beinarians, but it suited Lady Althea well. Like most Beinarian women, her breasts were high on her body and small, well-balanced on her fine-boned frame. Her blue-lavender bliaut framed her breasts and thin figure. Flowing bell sleeves glided across her arms. Her A-line bliaut was soft, yet substantial enough for the skirt to not cling to her body as she moved. Instead, it flowed in an elegant semi-circle from her hips as she walked.

Elendir could barely believe this vision of Beinarian beauty was his own sister. As the customary reception commenced, he surveyed the other women in the room. His gaze immediately fell on Princess Cathryn, daughter of Queen Darla and Prince Consort Torr and twin sister to his closest friend, Prince Kendric. She was 55.3 cun † tall, unusual for a Beinarian woman, with blue-grey eyes, very dark brown hair that appeared black to races with tri-

chromatic and tetra-chromatic eyes. Princess Cathryn approached him, two finely wrought chalices in her hands, “All hail Lord Knight Elendir. Congratulations, my lord.”

Elendir bowed his head respectfully, taking the chalice of fragrant wine offered to him by the princess, “Great is house Gurun for sending here such a gracious and beautiful heiress to the throne.”

“I am no heiress; the Great Council never changed that ancient law rooted in the blood feuds of original home world which caused so much controversy for our mutual ancestors. No, alas, my brother stands as the sole heir to the throne...leaving me free to pursue my own designs for my life. But I have no doubt you were long aware of that,” flirted Princess Cathryn.

Elendir smiled, noticing the way Cathryn used her gown and her body beneath it, to subtly seduce, “I know many things, Your Highness...in particular how you, like our foremother, Queen Wehe, are particularly good at using your beauty for political purposes. The question now, it would seem, is why you would care to attempt to seduce me, even a little, right now....”

Princess Cathryn took a sip from her glass, “You are even more astute than your reputation at court, Lord Knight.”

Elendir flirted back at her with his eyes, “I have a reputation at court?”

“Do you seriously think that none of us in house Gurun would have monitored your progress over these yen-ars since first your father, then your mother were murdered in the service of our people? Few healers possessed greater skill or compassion for those who need help more than either of your parents. They were role models for our people, even if they never knew it themselves. You know of the strong tie our Houses have, both in blood and on the Council, how few healers across houses have greater camaraderie than between those from houses Ten-Ar and Gurun. We are more one house than two. It would, of course, be logical for my parents to choose a noble, strong, and handsome knight like you to be my...consort.” As Cathryn uttered the last sentence she found her breath taken away by Elendir whose strong, well-muscled frame suited her to a degree she had not noticed in her previous political flirtations. Here was a man she would truly not mind being matched to, who would no doubt suit her as a lover and companion. Suddenly, the princess realized she desired him very much.

Elendir met her eyes, “You want me to come to your bed...don’t you?”

“Yes, Elendir...I do.”

“How many others have there been, Your Highness? Do you take all your political interests to your chamber?”

“I have been...far too politically astute to take a man to my chamber. But you...Elendir, I think I would like to...if you will have me.”

“You are one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen...next to my sister, of course. If you are asking me now...I shall not deny you, Your Highness,” offered Elendir, anticipation starting to fill his voice.

Princess Cathryn whispered in his ear, “I command it.”

In reply, Elendir raised her hand to his lips and kissed it, then, bowing to all around him as he navigated the crowd around him, lead the princess out of the reception...and to his chamber.

Excerpt from Chapter Eight: Kendric's Lament

"Kendric's Lament" is one of the chapters featuring music. The included song, "Here Lays My Father and My Lord" can be heard performed by author Laurel A. Rockefeller on the book trailer. Note: at the time of the book trailer's creation in February, 2013, the expected release date was June 1st, 2013. Ghosts of the Past was finished early and published in March 17th, 2013.

“And so, on BE 5897, beinor 12 King Lyr III’s son, Ingram, was crowned King Ingram I after his father was found dead, pierced with five crossbow quarrels, in the throne room alcove that now bears his name,” recited Princess Constance confidently in front of her tutor, Lord Priest Argul of house Miyoo, the same Argul assigned to accompany Lord Knight Elendir to Bira Hecen with the soil samples he collected at Central Nan-li Healing Center, seventy seven yen-ars before.

“Very good, milady. And who was the son of King Ingram?” quizzed Argul.

“Prince Ejen who became King Ejen on BE 6160, beinor 56, along with his new bride, High Priestess Wehe who, it is said, seduced Prince Ejen into marrying her,” smiled Princess Constance.

“And what do you think about Queen Wehe?”

“I think she was politically astute, a woman who recognized that she could better serve our people through the bed chamber of the king than she could simply as the head of our faith,” assessed Constance.

“Do you think it is appropriate for a woman to do so?” asked Argul.

“Why not? Men seek power through marriages to powerful noble women...why should not women do the same? Everything I have read about Wehe indicates she was vastly more educated and intelligent than her husband. Should not the wisest of our people hold such influence?”

“And should a man come whose education and intellect are greater than yours...would you accept him in your bed so that he could rule through you?” quizzed Argul.

Constance laughed, “Well that, my lord tutor, is what you are here to prevent...are you not? And...well...I suppose it also would depend on how well he served our people’s interests in my bed chamber. Perhaps I would not care if he were more educated or more intelligent if he pleased me well in private.” Spinning around playfully she added, “After all, if my husband is to do a husband’s duty upon me and give me children to ascend the throne after me, he had better please me well,” Argul rolled his eyes at the young princess, triggering more laughter from Constance.

Suddenly Princess Constance's political droid and lady in waiting, RM7 flew into the palace classroom where Argul tutored Constance, "My Lady. My Lady. You must come."

Sobered by the sudden appearance of her droid, Constance's face whitened unexpectedly, "RM7? What's wrong?"

"Come, you must come, Your Highness. Something terrible has happened," shrieked RM7.

Princess Constance bowed politely towards Lord Priest Argul, "Forgive me, milord. May I please..."

Argul, understanding, shooed her, "...please, please, Your Highness. You were crown princess long before you were my pupil. Attend to the business at hand."

"Thank you, my lord tutor," acknowledged Constance, following RM7 out of the classroom and through the palace.

RM7 led Princess Constance to the throne room and towards the memorial alcoves built to honor notable kings and queens of Beinan. She stopped in front of King Lyr III's memorial. There, on the floor, lay her father, King Kendric, surrounded by a pool of greenish-yellow blood, his favorite schlager sword enveloped by his blood. Five crossbow quarrels pierced his chest. Constance's eyes widened, "Just like Lyr III." As comprehension slowly reached into her mind who the man on the floor was, tears began to swell in Constance's eyes. Her father was dead. Her father was dead? By the same means as her forefather? How could this be? Why here? Why now? Why in the throne room? Why with a crossbow when Beinan possessed dozens of more effective and more silent weapons over the last twenty thousand yen-ars? Regular crossbows were more for parades and heritage lessons than for real use in war. Why? Why kill him this way?

Constance looked at the sword at her feet and picked it up, soaking the sleeves of her sapphire blue kirtle in blood. No blood clung to the blade itself, only its hand guard and hilt. Memories flashed before her of watching her father duel with Lord Elendir for fun. Her father taught laser épée at the Ten-Arian monastery she remembered suddenly. He knew how to handle a blade, both heritage and laser versions. Killing him by blade would be almost as difficult as killing a knight of Ten-Ar or knight of Gurun with a sword. Understanding filtered through the shock that still filled Constance's mind and body.

Tears fell from the princess's eyes. Looking up and wiping tears off her face, her eyes caught more of the scene around her. Kendric was not the only casualty. Following the path of blood on the floor she found twelve heavily cloaked palace guards sprawled on the floor. Some were pierced with laser spears still stuck through their bodies. Others were slashed by some sort of sword from the looks of the wounds she could see. With so many protectors in the throne room, how could her father fall to any weapon short of a

bow or crossbow, weapons used across Beinarian history, even on original home world, to kill the strongest of Beinarian leaders?

Finally, Constance gaze fell upon the single woman among the dead. Kneeling, she turned the body over and gazed into the lifeless eyes of her mentor and friend, Lady Healer Fëawen. Fëawen dead? How? Looking carefully Constance noticed bruises on Fëawen's neck – finger shaped bruises. Had she fallen intercepting whoever killed them? Beside Fëawen lay Lord Knight Lytsar, King Kendric's knight-protector and champion, his body pierced with crossbow quarrels like her father. Constance gasped. Lytsar was a good man, one of the king's most faithful servants and her father's favorite dueling partner.

Not knowing what else to do, Constance raised her voice in song, her notes cracking at first from grief, then growing stronger with courage and regal resistance,

“He was a strong and noble lord with piercing eyes of grey.
He sat upon his noble throne shining like the dawn.
His sword flashed like the brightest star.
He led our people well.
Yet here and now he lays in blood pierced with arrows.

He was the friend of many knights.
He loved the warrior games.
His heart was won by a lady fair for marriage they did wait.
A kindly prince, his duty carried him to another's bed.
And on her death true love returned, finally they wed.

He felt the grief of children lost to murder and to pain.
I was the youngest of his blood.
I'll never be the same.
Here lays my father and my lord.
I know not what to say.
Except my father and my lord was slain here on this day.
Here lays my father and my lord.
I know not what to say.
Except my father and my lord was slain here on this day....”

As the last note faded from her voice, Princess Constance looked up. Twelve courtiers stood four zhang 张 from her, drawn by the sound of her voice. Constance looked into their eyes. The gathering knelt respectfully. Her father's head court herald stepped forward, “All hail Constance, Queen of Beinan.”

“I am not yet come of age, my lord. How can I be queen?” asked Constance fearfully.

“Queen you must be, my liege – or the Great Council will choose someone else, someone who craves power, not service to our people,” cried one of the courtiers, his jet black hair and metallic blue eyes twinkling from among the crowd.

“Summon High Priestess Aina and Lord Knight Elendir. We will perform the coronation ceremony as soon as they arrive. RM7, summon healers of Gurun to bring our honored dead out of this place. Let High Priestess Aina perform their funerals as soon as I am crowned. Prepare no reception. This beinor is dark and my heart is filled with sorrow. Let all of Beinan mourn with me, even as I accept the Gurun throne,” commanded Queen Constance.