

Kalen's men stood and removed his mask and cloak leaving him clad only in golden yellow breeches. His blonde hair cascaded to his bare shoulders and accentuated his bronzed skin. Kalen's parents stood and his mother hugged him tightly before returning to her seat. His father unsheathed a golden sword and handed it to him silently. Kalen took the sword and bowed. His father clasped him on the shoulders and their eyes met briefly before the older man turned and took his seat.

Kalen lifted the sword and held it in ready position. His muscles rippled across his golden form as he braced himself against two shadows that had begun to materialize before him. The courtyard was silent and filled with an almost palpable tension. Margaret looked to the far corner and felt a quiet discomfort as Catherine squirmed blindfolded in her seat.

The shadows began to solidify and within moments two men stood opposing Kalen, holding jeweled swords at the ready. There were quiet murmurs and a few nervous giggles from those seated around the square. The men wore black breeches and only a vest partially covered their bare chests. One man had very dark hair and eyes and the other, brown hair and lighter brown eyes. Their skin was a pasty white as if they had never been out in the sunlight.

Dara laid her hand gently on Margaret's arm and leaned in closer to her. Margaret was startled by the icy feel, which seemed out of place in the rising heat of the early summer morning. "These are the Olc Feadhnan," Dara whispered to her. "They are of the Daergarutte, the minions of Oraq, the Dark One. Do you remember the story of the Great Shattering?"

Margaret whispered, "Yes," as she tried to keep part of her attention on the middle of the courtyard where the two men had begun to circle warily about Kalen.

"The Olc Feadhnan are one of the races on Daergehena, the world that was created in parallel to Tare during the Great Shattering. They are the most like us except that their hearts are empty and corrupt."

Margaret nodded, her eyes still fixed upon the combatants as they struck at Kalen simultaneously. One of the blades nicked his upper arm as he lunged himself past his closest opponent to break out of the deadly circle. He murmured something quickly and a shimmering field appeared before him. One of the men grinned and with a negligent wave of his hand the shield disappeared. Kalen seized that moment to attack his nearest opponent by drawing his weapon across his chest, but the cut was superficial and only a slight trickle of blood indicated that he had done any damage at all.

Dara's grip strengthened on her arm while at the same time Dorey shifted into a rigidly erect position in his seat. Margaret felt a tightening in her chest and her hands clenched unconsciously in response to her fear.

"These men..." she began in a whisper to Dara.

"Are very dangerous," Dara finished for her. "Not only to Kalen, but to all of us. There are many safeguards in place, but should they win and break free, they will have the ability to open the conduit from Daergehena to Tare. This is why Oraq allows them to be summoned here. It is his hope that during the Transition one of the Daergarutte can win and thereby open the gateway to Tare."

"Why do you take the chance then?" Margaret asked.

This time the answer came from her right, "Because it is the only way to ensure the safety of the Kingdoms." Margaret turned to regard the young man seated stiffly

beside her within the many folds of his hooded robe. He seemed to continue to stare forward as he whispered emotionlessly as though commenting upon the weather. This, more than anything before, chilled her blood. "A weak Lord would inevitably provide the means for the Daerga and his followers to cross into Tare. Only then, we would not know when to expect it nor would we be as prepared. If it is to occur, let it happen in full view of those most able to repel it."

Margaret shuddered involuntarily and turned her attention to the center where Kalen's opponents came together and stood shoulder to shoulder as he considered his next move. Again the attack was sudden. They came at him as one. Kalen raised his sword to parry the repeated blows as the two men drove him back. His body glistened with the sweat as he met each thrust with his blade. His timing slipped for a moment and he received a nick on his forearm resulting in several gasps from those assembled.

Margaret looked at Catherine, who sagged in her chair, her hands clenched together in mute prayer. She wondered for a moment if her dearest friend had known what to expect or if she was hearing the clang of the weapons without any idea of what was taking place before her.

The men drew apart and came at Kalen from either side, forcing him to turn quickly from one to the other in his defense. He seemed to be tiring and sweat dripped from his heaving chest. They pressed their advantage, moving in with repeated strikes and slashes, which Kalen barely deflected. The courtyard echoed with the frenzied clash of steel on steel as their swords met in the air before them. Margaret held her hands to her mouth as Kalen suffered another cut, this one upon his thigh. The men pressed in and Kalen bled from yet another wound. He was bleeding in several places on his arms and legs, while his opponents were, for the most part, unscathed.

Her stomach knotted as she watched the battle rage before her. Kalen's movement's seemed to be off. He lunged at one opponent and slipped upon the courtyard stones. There was a loud crack as his elbow slammed into the ground. Margaret winced in sympathy and then cried aloud as the other man raised his weapon to strike. The other of the pair seemed to be backing away slowly and Margaret watched in horror as he inched his way toward Catherine. Everyone else's attention seemed to be on Kalen. He groaned loudly as he rolled over his wounded arm to avoid the downward slash of his opponent's blade, which struck the paving with a clang. Kalen raised his sword with his good arm and parried another slash that was aimed at his chest. Meanwhile the other man crept slowly and purposefully toward Catherine.

Margaret launched to her feet, surprising those around her. Dara and Dorey grabbed her arms and she stiffened in response. Dorey rose to his feet beside her as the man in the center moved to a position behind Kalen's head. It seemed as though he would easily defeat the young man when Kalen lurched in an unexpected turn and drove the point of his sword into the man's side and up through his rib cage. The man shuddered and fell forward, driving the point in deeper. Kalen pushed hard and the man fell backward upon the stones where he lay without moving. The young man closed his eyes in pain as he fought to catch his breath.

The other man froze. He looked to the woman sitting helplessly in the far corner and then back to his opponent who seemed nearly spent. Several of the young men in the audience came to their feet and stood at the ready. Kalen slowly opened his eyes just as his opponent appeared to have decided a course of action and began to once again inch

toward Catherine. Margaret cried out as Kalen fought to right himself. He pulled himself slowly and painfully into an upright position. Her eyes on her dearest friend, she did not see Kalen move the fingers of his good hand nor see his lips moving. A strong gust of wind appeared seemingly from nowhere, pushing Catherine forward in her chair and hitting the man full in his chest, sending him sprawling on the courtyard stones. His head hit with a resounding smack and he was momentarily rendered unconscious.

Kalen used his good arm to push himself to his knees as all within the courtyard held their breath. Time seemed to slow and the air felt warm and oppressive. Margaret remained rooted in place as Catherine righted herself in her seat. The other man opened his eyes and began to walk deliberately, as if dulled by the blow to his head. Both combatants moved as though caught in a thick gel. Beside her, Dorey moved forward to stand with his legs touching the chair before him, as though to reach out himself and grab the Olc Feadhna with his bare hands.

Kalen crawled upon his knees toward the fallen man and reached out to retrieve his sword while his remaining opponent tried to regain his feet. He gripped the handle of his sword and pulled. The weapon yielded and came free with a sickly grating noise of steel against bone while his opponent lurched on his feet in an awkward attempt to come within fighting distance. Kalen turned about and rose on one knee to face his opponent with sword raised. His wounded arm hung limply by his side and sweat poured from his brow as he grimaced in pain. The other man took a step and swayed in a stupor as a trickle of blood began to run from the back of his head and down his shoulder. Kalen drew the sword back and threw it with the last of his strength. Margaret held her breath as the weapon flew end over end to land with deadly accuracy and embed itself in the man's chest. His mouth gaped open as his weapon clattered uselessly to the ground and his hands clawed at the blade that protruded from his chest. He collapsed to his knees, emitting a last gurgling breath mingled with blood, and teetered there for a moment before falling backwards to sprawl in a contorted heap.

Kalen settled back to sit, his sagging shoulders heaving with each breath. For a moment no one moved. Then suddenly everyone jumped to their feet and the courtyard rang out with a chorus of cheers and applause.

Men from the North moved forward to kneel beside Kalen. They eased him to the ground and Margaret watched in fascination as they began to murmur and wave their hands over his many wounds. She was amazed at the speed in which the bleeding stopped and the lesions mended as though they were never really there. They turned their attention to his wounded arm which was discolored and grossly misshapen. Before her eyes, the color returned to normal and gradually the swelling reduced until his arm appeared normal once again. Kalen did not get up immediately. Instead, he lay upon the floor gathering his breath until the color of his face also became a healthier shade.

Margaret squinted as the sun cleared the height of the eastern building bathing the courtyard in bright light and stinging her eyes. She raised her hand to shield them as Kalen pulled himself to his feet. This action was met again by thunderous applause by all the onlookers, who still had not taken their seats. The men of the North, aided by servants, removed the corpses from the courtyard as Kalen's men hurried forward with his hooded robe.