

BOOK 1

KITRELE

CHAPTER 1

THE STREET was dimly lit by the torches of passing wagons and the lanterns by each shop's doorway, there to advertise its wares. The sun had been down for an hour. The streets would soon cough up the undesirables that only seemed to live in the secret dark hours of the night.

A man eased into the shadows of a doorway as another cart passed. He was a tall man and even in the dark one could tell he was a man of power. Two strides took him to the door of the Trail Tavern, so named because of its lack of regular patrons. These pubs seemed to only interest those whose destination lay beyond, and whose needs were of the immediate.

The man stepped through the door, closed it, and carefully examined the inhabitants. The tavern master, obviously used to this type of behavior, spoke in a loud voice, "Welcome to you, Sire. Be at peace. 'Tis a family of friends you see before you." He began to continue but, catching a glimpse of the stranger's stare, swallowed his greeting and went back to wiping a table near the hearth.

The large room was quiet, as was the entire city of Kitrele. This quiet was unlike weeks before, during the Festival at Queen's Field, a competition of strength and skill held in the city each year during the Season of the Pearl. While the Festival was underway, the tavern's large room would have been filled to overflowing with celebrants, but now, the low voices from the shadows made it seem even larger. The tavern master, determined to speak, asked the stranger, "What

would you like to drink. We have an excellent collection of ales. May I suggest..."

"Water," spoke the stranger.

"Yes, I understand you have probably been traveling a long time and the roads are dry, but let me suggest our special ale..."

He was interrupted again. "Just water."

"Yes, sire. Water." The little man scampered off, dodging the tables as he went.

Several of the men in the room directed their attention toward the stranger as the tavern master brought him the mug of water.

"That will be a silver," he said as the stranger reached for the container.

Instantly the big man stood and placed his hand on the sword at his side. The small round waiter did not step back.

"And when did a mug of water cost a silver?"

"It's not for the water, but for the use of the mug," said the small man as he stared up into the cold hard eyes of the stranger.

The beginnings of a smile began to twinkle on the face of the big man. He chuckled. "It is my opinion, Sir, that you are a man of much sand, and the owner of this establishment could have done no better in hiring the tender of the ale."

The tavern master, with a sigh of relief, stepped back.

"And here is your silver, although I do hope a refill might not bring such a heavy toll." The stranger thrust the coin into the palm of the much-relieved waiter's hand and shook it.

The small man nodded, turned to one side, and began to wipe the tables once more.

By this time the stranger's presence in the room was acknowledged by all and several conversations had ended to watch the encounter. The stranger noticed particularly three men who stood by the window. Each would look at him, then away as their conversation led. Finally the room returned to normal and the inhabitants ceased to pay him further attention. This pleased him as he leaned back in the shadows of the firelight.

The night had become a low murmur of voices that droned into oblivion as the stranger leaned on the wall, resting his mind from the constant alertness that had become his lifestyle.

Suddenly a chair scraped the floor and his mind was alerted to a man who sat down at his table. Without moving, the stranger spoke in a deep voice. "A greedy man has no limit; as for myself, I claim only what is within the reach of my sword."

“Be at peace, kind Sir. I mean you no harm. Please pardon my trespass, I seek but for information.”

“What makes you think I would have information to give?”

“In truth, I seek the acquaintance of a certain man. He is known by the name Sterling.”

The stranger opened his eyes and glanced around the room. Before him sat a young man who was dressed as a traveler.

The stranger spoke, “What do you know of this man Sterling?”

“He is said to be tall, strong, and has a less-than-pleasant attitude.”

The stranger leaned forward, pressing his hat back on his head, allowing the firelight to illuminate his steel blue eyes as he stared at the young man.

The young man continued, “He is also known for the silver bracelet worn on his left wrist.”

The stranger shifted slowly in his seat as he slid the cuff over his hand. “If, in truth, this man’s attitude be so poor, would he not be displeased at being sought? And should you be unfortunate enough to realize your quest, might it not end in the losing of an ear?”

“Be the possibility great, the quest remains.”

“What do you wish from this man Sterling?”

“I wish to bring him great wealth.”

“Your attire does not become a man of great wealth.”

“The wealth is in the knowing.”

“The knowing? Ha! Knowing the contents of a governor’s purse will not buy a mug of ale.” The stranger chuckled as he placed both hands back on the table.

“Ah, but with the wealth of which I know, one could buy the purse and the governor, too.”

“If this be true, dear Sir, you had best guard your secret well, and choose your comrades with care; or you may lose more than the knowing.”

“That is why I seek this man Sterling. He is most of all known for his honor.”

“To gamble honor against gold—humph! Those are high stakes when you ante with your life.” Shifting in his seat, the stranger settled back.

“No matter the danger...”

“...the quest remains.” The stranger finished the young man’s sentence then sat up. “How might this man Sterling serve you in your quest?”

The dark stranger’s question and interest sparked excitement in the young man. He leaned forward and began his tale. “In a distant land is a

lake. In the middle of the lake is an island on which stands a large castle with six towers. One tower holds the key to the Treasure of Vitar."

"Humph!" the stranger said as he waved his gloved hand. "I've heard of the Treasure of Vitar—a fool's dream." The big man sat for a moment; a mist seemed to move over his face as he remembered a friend and a time. It was Danton who forsook all, throwing his life away in the mad search. Finally in the end, to die in the stranger's arms with these strange last words, "It is there, truly; it awaits you."

The stranger snapped his head to the side. "The Treasure of Vitar, the tale of a dreamer. If this is your knowing, you know very little; and if you seek Sterling for this purpose, your life is worth as much."

The young man raised his voice in anger. "I know these facts to be true and the lands to the north have more interest to you than even the Treasure of Vitar, Lord Sterling."

This declaration was heard around the room and drew some glares from many of the inhabitants. A large right hand grabbed the intruder's collar and forced it to the table.

"What is your name?" growled the stranger.

"My name is Phillip," stammered the young man. He tried to lift his head, but the strong fist held it fast. Then he quickly added, "James, Phillip...James, why?"

"I want to know whose shirt I will ruin if we should ever meet again." With this the stranger thrust the man to one side, and quickly strolled out the door, pausing only to notice the three men by the window were there no more.

Outside the shop, he took a deep breath. The air was full of the odor of humankind, but still it was open and felt more natural to him. A lifetime of traveling, learning to live in the wild, had taught him to appreciate the world outside of the human habitat. His wild nature went unnoticed as he eased down the street. He was just a tall, dark, moving form, dressed in black from his knee boots to his wide-brimmed hat. The red sash he always wore tied around his waist was the only color visible. The night was cool so he pulled his cape close around himself.

Suddenly, from a break in the buildings, he was attacked. There was no warning. He was knocked to the ground. With the cape wrapped tightly around him he could not draw his breath, much less his sword. A large fist hit him in the side of the head. His face was pressed against the stones in the street. He struggled, but a boot in his ribs made him gasp for air.

"The 'Great Lord Sterling'!" said the man with his knee between Sterling's shoulders. "He doesn't look so great now, does he?"

Another gruff voice whispered, "Forget Vitar. Your death awaits you there!" His tone was threatening as he pressed his weight on Sterling's now struggling form.

The statement landed on Sterling harder than the attacker's fist. Though he struggled, the question loomed *What does he know about Vitar?*

Suddenly one of the attackers screamed and fell across Sterling's legs. A dull thud and the sound of cracking bone sent another staggering back against the building. Sterling was on his feet in a flash. Sword drawn and motionless, he stood now hearing only the sound of the third attacker's footsteps running away in the darkness.

From out of the shadows stepped a small man holding a brass rod, one end supporting a knob, the other end a blade. He was wearing an apron. "You did not finish your water."

"And this debt is worth more than a silver," said Sterling as he lowered his sword. "Let us go back inside and I will buy you your most valued beverage."

"As you wish, Lord Sterling," said the waiter.

Pausing at the door of the tavern, Sterling turned to the man. "Might I have the honor of knowing my rescuer's name?"

"Dutch, Sire, at your service." The little man gave a quick half bow and Sterling motioned him ahead through the side door of the tavern.

Across the room, the young intruder still sat with his head slumped between his shoulders. Sterling returned to the same chair he had left only moments before. The young man was startled, sat back, and stared at the hard face of Lord Sterling.

"You almost got me killed just now with your loose tongue," Sterling spoke as he nodded toward the front door.

"What happened?" asked the young man as Dutch sat down at the table with them.

"Never mind. I will listen to your fool's dream. Tell me more." The young man, with a troubled look on his face, nodded toward Dutch.

"Don't worry about Dutch. He is an old and trusted friend." Sterling smiled and slapped Dutch on the back nearly spilling the drink in the crystal glass that the small man held to his lips. "What's that you're drinking, my friend?"

Dutch smiled. "It is the imported White Almond Tea you're buying me at twenty silver a glass."

"Twenty silver!" Sterling gasped. "A lesson learned about my loose tongue!" They all laughed.

“You remind me of someone, Dutch, someone, somewhere,” Sterling pondered out loud as he stared at Dutch’s face.

“My brother was Samuel Dutch. He fought with you at the stone crossing in the Valley Thane. You saved his life.”

“Yes, but the once. How many times, Sam had done the same for me. He died three days later at Watergate, and took twenty-one of the enemy with him. Your brother was the bravest bowman with whom I ever shared leather. I saw him shoot a bear once. The beast charged, full run, at ole Sam. He put four arrows in its neck before it finally fell in front of him, not six feet from where he was kneeling.”

Dutch pulled a leather lanyard from around his neck and held it up. “And I still carry a claw,” he said with a smile.

Sterling thrust out his right hand and clasped Dutch’s free hand. “It is an honor to know you, Sir, and more honor to be at your service.”

Sterling then, moving his arm to the young man’s shoulder, said, “Dutch, I would like to introduce you to a gentleman who says he can make us both rich.”