

Seeker

by P.G. Holyfield

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This is actually the prologue for a future novel. This, along with my other short story 'Roh-kin,' are intended to introduce readers to my writing style and to my setting known as 'The Land of Caern.'

Gareth Beckwin stared out over the hall which was more than half full just two hours past sunrise. Gareth stood on a dais, left hand resting on one of the back posts of Duke Olandis Pell's throne. The grand chair was the only seat in the hall; the many benches of the great room had been removed in order to fit as many people into the chamber as possible. The commoners all had their reasons for attending the seasonal event known as the "Airing of Grievances," and all looked forward to speaking to their liege-lord. Duke Pell had not yet arrived but was expected soon.

Gareth's grip on the throne post tightened as his eyes fell upon Count Aris Hollan. Count Hollan matched his stare; Gareth managed a smile despite his feelings for the man. *I really have to work more on my 'bones' game-face.* Gareth immediately understood the significance of Hollan's presence. Three weeks before Aris Hollan had requested a private meeting to discuss the duke's refusal to allow the building of a temple within the city walls of Kandalar. Gareth had declined on behalf of the duke, noting that the duke was already scheduled to visit Count Hollan in six weeks to discuss this and other matters. Count Hollan's

presence on this day indicated that he was less than satisfied with Gareth's response.

Count Hollan turned to his right and spoke to what appeared to be a dwarf... *no, not a dwarf, but a very small human...* Gareth knew immediately that it had to be Olin Walkow, Hollan's Aarronic Advisor. *Actually former Aarronic Advisor...* Olin Walkow had been stripped of his Advisor's medallions following Hollan's annexation of three towns on the edge of the wilderlands. Forty-seven innocents died in the attacks which were carried out without any attempt at diplomacy. *First openly attacking border towns without even consulting your duke, and now flaunting your presence at Court during the "Airing of Grievances"? What is your game, Hollan?*

Forcing himself to concentrate on something other than Hollan and Walkow, Gareth noted that another unexpected guest had arrived. High Priest Niles Ballinsor of the Priests of Caern stood around ten paces behind Hollan. The commoners for whom the "Airing of Grievances" was meant were clearing the area around the priest, as if some sort of aura surrounded the cleric.

Damn... this is no coincidence. I've got to take control of this situation quickly. Gareth took a moment to give orders to Ellis Crandall, the captain of the Hall Guards. "I have to move some people out of the hall. If I do not return before the duke arrives, you need to handle his procession." He motioned over to Count Hollan. "You'd better call up the second unit from the barracks. They might be needed before this day is done." Ellis nodded, understanding the possible danger.

Gareth Beckwin was the duke's Aarronic Advisor, and had been for nearly eight years. Almost every recognized leader of the three provinces of Caern had at least one Advisor in residence. Part counselor, part diplomat, part military strategist, an Aarronic Advisor was trained in the neutral city of Thorn's Way. An Aarronic Advisor was loyal to the leader he counseled, but more importantly was loyal to the Land of Caern itself. Thorn Twoblade had founded Thorn's Way over 250 years before, and the town had eventually become its own principality, surrounded by the three provinces of Caern yet governed by none.

At the end of the great war known as the "Menokrat" Thorn Twoblade had negotiated a treaty between the three provinces of Caern. Following the war the leaders of Yew, Grozh and Inarra each made a request of Thorn for advisors, impartial observers that might help prevent a war in the future like the Menokrat. Over the next 200 years more and more leaders requested advisors... every duke, count, and burgomaster, even mayors of large cities had an Advisor in their employ. The 'school' at Thorn's Way drew thousands of men each year all hoping to be chosen – just for the *chance* to become a future Aarronic Advisor.

Ellis Crandall responded to Gareth's orders. "Don't worry, sir. We'll be on the lookout for any of Count Hollan's troops." Hollan had not entered with any sort of honor guard, but his men would not be far away. Gareth trusted Ellis Crandall implicitly, and knew he didn't have to worry about security outside the Hall -- although these unexpected guests were another matter.

Before stepping down from the dais Gareth again looked over the growing crowd. There was at least a ten-foot circle around High Priest Ballinsor; it was as if a wall was pushing the people away from the cleric. This was causing quite a stir among the commoners as they pressed against the walls of the hall in an attempt to stay out of the cleric's way. A man was knocked down in the confusion. Gareth was surprised to see Ballinsor walk over to the man and help him up. *A kind act from Ballinsor...is it possible that some of Iberian's teachings are finally sinking in?*

The man had a blue sash tied around his head covering his eyes -- the provincial custom indicating blindness. Ballinsor whispered something into the man's ear and the man had a sudden look of pain on his face. The muscles of his face relaxed once the priest turned and walked away from him. *So much for his kindness... he probably told the man he should stay out of the way.*

Gareth put a hand on the stage and hopped to the ground. *First Hollan, then Ballinsor.* He walked directly to Count Hollan and bowed, showing respect for the position to which Hollan was born. When Gareth straightened he was forced to lower his gaze almost six inches to meet that of Count Hollan. "Lord, it's quite a surprise to see you here."

Hollan smirked. "I note that you did not say 'pleasant surprise,' Seeker."

Seeker. Hollan referred to Gareth Beckwin's ability to truthread, a skill not uncommon among Advisors. The ability was strong within Gareth, and Hollan knew it. When focusing completely, Gareth Beckwin could not only tell the truth from a lie, he could also sense the feelings and emotions of a person. "Seeker" was a less than complimentary name for someone who possessed the skill.

Hollan mistrusted magic, especially magic that could be used against him. Gareth suspected that whatever Hollan said today in his presence had been rehearsed. It humored Gareth to know that Count Hollan had most likely lost sleep preparing for their time together today.

Gareth suppressed a smile. *Pleasant is not the word I was thinking of, no...* "Sir, you know full well that the purpose of "The Airing of Grievances" is to give the common man a chance to bring matters before the duke. I'm sure many men and women are here to speak against nobles such as you. This is why members of nobility, other than Duke Pell of course, are not allowed at its proceedings."

Gareth heard a snort from below but refused to break eye contact with Count Hollan. He knew the sound had come from Olin Walkow. Gareth could feel the anger rising in Count Hollan, but his outward appearance remained unchanged.

Hollan extended his arms towards both sides of the hall. "On the contrary, Lord Advisor, I am here as a representative of the people. I am 'Every Man,' in this regard." His voice rose in volume. "The position of the duke with regards to the religion of his people is a very important matter. I not only speak for the people of my lands but also for the Church itself. For the duke to deny the

right of his people to worship in the royal city contradicts everything he claims to represent—”

Gareth interrupted Count Hollan. “Due respect sir, but Duke Olandis Pell has never denied anyone his or her right to worship. He has only denied the right of the Priests of Caern to build a temple within the interior walls of Kandalor, a practice that has been a matter of law for over three hundred years. You know that this law applies to the worshippers of any Child of Az, not just the followers of Iberian.”

Before Hollan could speak, Gareth raised a hand and used his other to direct the count towards a door along the side wall of the room. “Please, Count Hollan, let us move this discussion to a more appropriate venue. Duke Pell is expected soon, and I assure you he will join us once he arrives.”

Hollan’s planned speech had been interrupted, yet he followed Gareth without delay. Gareth walked beside Count Hollan, wondering if High Priest Ballinsor would follow. Once he confirmed that the priest was not with them, Gareth gave a hand signal to the two guards posted at either side of the anteroom door. The Advisor ushered Count Hollan into the large anteroom that held a long table and several high-backed chairs. Gareth followed through the opening, and the two guards immediately crossed the butt ends of their spears to block the doorway, nearly striking Olin Walkow in the process. Walkow snarled at the two men.

Gareth turned and kneeled at the doorway so he could look Walkow squarely in the face. He even placed a hand on one of the spears that separated the two men. “Walkow, you are not welcome here. I can’t make you leave unless you do something to make me throw you out. Please give me a reason, *Apostae*.” Gareth used the term *Apostae*, an outcast from society. Walkow was not *apostae*, but the name had the desired effect. Walkow bared his teeth and his hand went to a knife at his side. He did not draw the blade, but it was all that Gareth had needed.

“Leffert, escort this gentleman from the hall and ensure that he does not attempt to reenter.”

Olin laughed as Leffert called a guard over to take his place while he escorted the man out of the hall. “Gareth, you’ll go too far one day. You think you’re better than the royalty you serve. Your pride will catch up with you, Seeker.”

Gareth Beckwin felt the anger in Walkow, and noted there was something else welling up inside of him. Gareth tried to focus on the small man in an attempt to discern more. Olin seemed to sense this and immediately began to whistle to himself. The only feelings Gareth could read from Walkow now were of a sexual nature. It was an effective defense against Gareth’s ability; though it would have been humorous if he had forced Olin Walkow to stand in the hall while he used such lurid thoughts to block him... it could have been very embarrassing for the diminutive man, to say the least.

Confident that Walkow would not give Leffert too much trouble, Gareth turned to see Count Hollan already seated at the table, seemingly unaffected that his counselor had been barred from the room. “Count, as I am sure you understand I must now go to speak with the High Priest. I shall return momentarily.”

Aris Hollan didn’t even look towards Gareth as he waved his hand dismissively. Gareth resisted the urge to confront the count and moved back to the main hall.

The two guards removed their spear shafts from the opening of the door on cue as Gareth approached and passed through. Gareth surmised this was all part of Hollan and Ballinsor’s plan; keep the Aarronic Advisor off balance until Duke Pell arrived. He had to move through the wall of people that had formed a wide circle around Ballinsor. Gareth was amazed at how the men and women in the hall were both frightened and transfixed by the priest at the same time. It took much longer than he wanted to reach the priest; he crossed the barrier that the commoners apparently felt without issue. Gareth could see on Ballinsor’s face that he had reached him just in time... just before the ‘spirit’ had taken over. He could feel waves of power emanating from the man as the ‘light’ of Iberian flowed through him. Gareth stood motionless and stared deeply into Ballinsor’s glazed eyes until the cleric blinked and focused on his as well.

Ballinsor smiled. “Our Father Az calls to me, and when I open my eyes to look upon him all I can see is your face. That cannot be good.”

“I’m sorry, your eminence. I know you do not control when Az speaks through you; yet this is not the time nor the place for such an event.” Gareth, even though he did not personally like Ballinsor, had no doubt that the priest was attuned to some higher power. And since he had had personal contact with the power of Iberian during his own life, Gareth had no desire to embarrass the cleric. He indicated the anteroom from which he had just come. “If you would like, we can wait for Duke Pell in comfort. I am sure he will be here within the hour.”

High Priest Ballinsor accompanied Gareth to the anteroom without incident. Gareth scanned the room as he walked, still surprised that Ballinsor had entered the hall alone.

The throng that had surrounded the cleric dispersed once it was obvious a sermon was not to be delivered. It wasn’t that they were so much interested in what Ballinsor had to say; it was just that no one wanted to be remembered for *not* listening to a sermon from the one of the three High Priests of Caern. Gareth noted that the blind man he had seen earlier had made his way along the wall to the same side of the hall as the anteroom. *Probably just looking for a place to sit... sorry old man.*

Gareth felt the spear shafts cross behind him, as if a door had closed them off from the rest of the world. Gareth allowed himself a small smile. *Ten years ago I would be shaking in my boots right about now.*

“High Priest Ballinsor, I welcome you to join us.” Gareth said as he sat in a chair at the opposite end of the table as Count Hollan. By design, to sit at the

table the cleric would have to sit in a place of lesser honor than the chair Gareth had just taken.

Ballinsor smiled, yet Gareth sensed the fire inside the cleric. "No thank you, Advisor Beckwin. I sat through a ten-hour carriage ride just to get here this morning. I will stand until your liege-lord arrives." He walked to the opposite side of the table, attempting to look interested in a portrait of Duke Pell and his three children.

"Seeker, you amuse me." Hollan looked at Gareth over his folded hands.

Gareth raised an eyebrow as he turned his attention back to the Count. "How so, my lord?"

"Look at you. You think you're so special... that you are somehow an equal to me. My blood is the blood of King Desthra Perti, and it is the same blood that flowed through our province's founder, Arrbane Yew. You nothing more than a rude man who thinks more of himself than he should. Besides that, there you sit disrespecting one of the highest-ranking members of the Priests of Caern. You need to learn your place!"

Gareth tried to keep from smiling at Count Hollan's frustration. "That is not true, my lord. I am an Aarronic Advisor, and that is all that I have ever aspired to be. And as such I am the representative of Duke Olandis Pell, and speak in his name when he is not present to do so. I have not done anything today or on any other occasion that would be considered out of the scope of my position."

Ballinsor turned from the painting, eyes blazing. "Isn't it true that you were the one who convinced the Duke to deny the Church's appeal to build a temple inside the city walls? He would have rescinded the law if it wasn't for you!"

The anger emanating from Ballinsor hit him like a wave. Gareth had to keep himself from leaning back in his chair. *Too much anger... and mixed with apprehension... but of what?*

"Whatever recommendations I made were after much consideration and debate between me, the Duke, and his many other advisors. For us to allow a temple to Iberian without allowing the same for the other Children was out of the question. It was not out of malice or disrespect towards you but out of consideration towards all the Children of Az."

"Iberian is the only Child that matters, Advisor."

Gareth ignored the high priest's statement, not wanting to enter into a religious debate. Instead he turned to Count Hollan. "And you sir, should refrain from attacking my position as an Advisor when you still consort with Olin Walkow. I am surprised you are even here after what happened at Lythica, Tyrese and Wattis Glen. The duke has been waiting for the opportunity to speak to you on that." Gareth stopped, trying to focus on what Hollan was thinking. The walls within his mind had lowered, allowing Gareth as much access as he could hope for... but what Gareth found within didn't make any sense. If he had to guess,

Gareth would have to say Hollan was repeating numbers over and over in his mind... multiplication tables to be exact.

"You're a fool, Gareth Beckwin." Ballinsor walked until he reached a point halfway between the table and the door from which they had entered. Gareth nearly lost complete focus as he discovered that all that he could read from the priest was the same counting of numbers... and something beyond anger and apprehension... *Fear*.

Something is very wrong here. Gareth stood up, trying to re-focus on a still-smiling Count Hollan. At that very moment Gareth was surprised by the unmistakable sound of an explosion outside the Hall. It was powerful enough to rattle the walls of the ante-room. Dust rose from the floor and off the walls. He looked over at the door; the guards and their spears were gone, presumably to control the people in the hall. Another blast shook the room, although Gareth could tell that it had originated further away than the first. Ballinsor was trying to keep his feet and Count Hollan sat with hands clenched to the edge of the table, still smiling.

Magic? Walkow had to be behind this! Gareth knew he had to get some guards to "protect" the two men in the ante-room while he took care of the ex-Advisor once and for all. He almost reached the doorway when the blind man stumbled through the opening, seemingly disoriented from the explosions outside. Gareth could see that the hundred or so people in the Hall were making a mad dash for the exits, and that the ten hall guards were attempting to control the situation with little success. He spotted Ellis Crandall pushing his way through the crowd toward the main exit of the Hall. Gareth suspected that the additional guards he had requested had not had time to arrive on the scene.

"Ellis!" Gareth called out even though he knew the Captain of the Hall Guard would not be able to hear him. Hollan and Ballinsor had not moved from their positions, and Gareth could feel them staring at the back of his head. A third blast... it nearly knocked them all off their feet. The only person not able to catch himself was the blind man, who fell into Gareth's arms. Gareth caught him with his hands and held him up. Gareth's right hand caught on the blind man's blue sash, which came away from his face as he pulled his hand down.

It was then that Gareth Beckwin made two important discoveries: first, the man's eyes were clear, blue, and definitely possessed the power of sight; second, the man held a bloody knife in his hand. Gareth's left hand went to his stomach; his shirt was quickly becoming drenched with blood. He held on tightly with his other hand to the sash, which was caught around the assassin's neck.

The assassin thought about stabbing Gareth again, but soon realized his work was done. Gareth grew weaker; he lost hold of the sash and fell to the ground.

Gareth's body was failing, and he let loose his mind in an attempt to communicate directly with Ellis Crandall. It was an ability he did not have much

experience with, and his call fell on deaf ears as Ellis was too busy directing the commoners out of the Hall.

The Duke... the explosions... he may be under attack right now!

Gareth was now on his back and could see both Count Hollan and the assassin; the look on the assassin's face made it clear that he knew Count Hollan. The look changed from acknowledgement to surprise as Hollan took his knife and sliced across the assassin's hand that was extended for an expected handshake... or possibly payment. Gareth had never seen a poison work so fast; the assassin slumped to the ground in even less time than it had taken Gareth, foam pouring out of his open mouth.

My Duke... I have failed you.

Gareth's sight began to blur as the life drained from his body. He could make out the count and the cleric standing over him. He could make out a prayer coming from the High Priest; he didn't know if it was meant for him or for the dead assassin at his feet.

Even though he had no proof of the duke's safety he found the strength to sputter out "You... won't... get... to the Duke."

Hollan leaned in to whisper, "The Duke is fine, don't you worry."

The numbers had stopped. Hollan leaned in, inviting Gareth to look into his mind. "Who do you think arranged all of this, Seeker?"

My Lord? Gareth's vision began to blur even as he began to understand the truth. He suddenly realized that it was no accident that he and Duke Olandis Pell had rarely met during the last two weeks. *He said he was too busy considering written complaints from the commoners in preparation of the "Airing of Grievances" to see me.* Gareth now understood why the duke had suddenly taken an interest in learning the Inarran alphabet. It wasn't his practice to read his lord's emotions, but on the two occasions that he had performed a cursory mind touch – just to see how things were weighing on the mind of his liege – all he could discern in his lord's mind was "arggh, brras, brachh..."

Hollan mimicked Gareth's earlier statement. "'The duke has been waiting for the opportunity to speak to you on that.' Who do you think ordered me to attack those border towns? They have gone for years without taxation, simply because they fall outside of some unseen boundary separating Kandalor from the wilderlands. I am loyal to the Duke, as opposed to you, who always steered him away from expansion. Now you see where that has gotten you." Aris Hollan spit in Gareth's face, stood up, and walked a few paces away with High Priest Ballinsor.

Gareth's last thoughts were for his brother advisors all over the Land. Never before had an Aarronic Advisor been the direct target of assassination. With his dying breath Gareth Beckwin lashed out with his mind, a psychic blast known to the Advisors as the "Death Knell." The blast was a call to his brothers, to let them know what had happened. How far the message could travel and how it was received depended upon the abilities of both the sender and the recipient.

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Only twice in history had an Advisor had enough strength to call upon this power, none in the last hundred years.

Count Aris Hollan felt a tingle throughout his body as Gareth died. His bloodline had an affinity for magic but he had always feared its call. He knew a magical event had just occurred, but nothing more.

High Priest Niles Ballinsor fell to the ground, pain exploding in his head. Being attuned to the power of Iberian saved his life, but it would be weeks before he would have the strength to leave his bed.

Ellis Crandall felt the Gareth death knell in the back of his mind. He had no magical abilities to speak of, but working so closely with Gareth over the last five years had formed a bond that had suddenly and irrevocably been severed. He turned to the anteroom to see Gareth, the High Priest and a third man lying on the ground; Count Hollan stood above them, knife in hand, appearing very confused.

Olin Walkow stood outside, laughing mischievously to himself. The explosions had gone off without a hitch, and he knew that Gareth Beckwin was getting his just desserts inside the Hall. He never anticipated the psychic blast that ripped through him like an axe; he slumped to the ground, dead before his head hit the dirt.

Advisors across Yew and even into Grozh felt the “Knell” in different ways; most could only tell there was something very wrong in their world.

Over two hundred and fifty leagues away in the city of Thorn’s Way a man bolted upright in bed, awakened by the psychic event. Arames Kragen had been Gareth’s best friend in school, and was the former Aarronic Advisor of

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Prince Ren of Yew. Arames immediately knew his friend was dead, and that he had been killed. There was only one thought in his mind, as clear as if Gareth had been standing next to his bed whispering in his ear: *We are no longer safe.*