

PATH OF PERIL

BY

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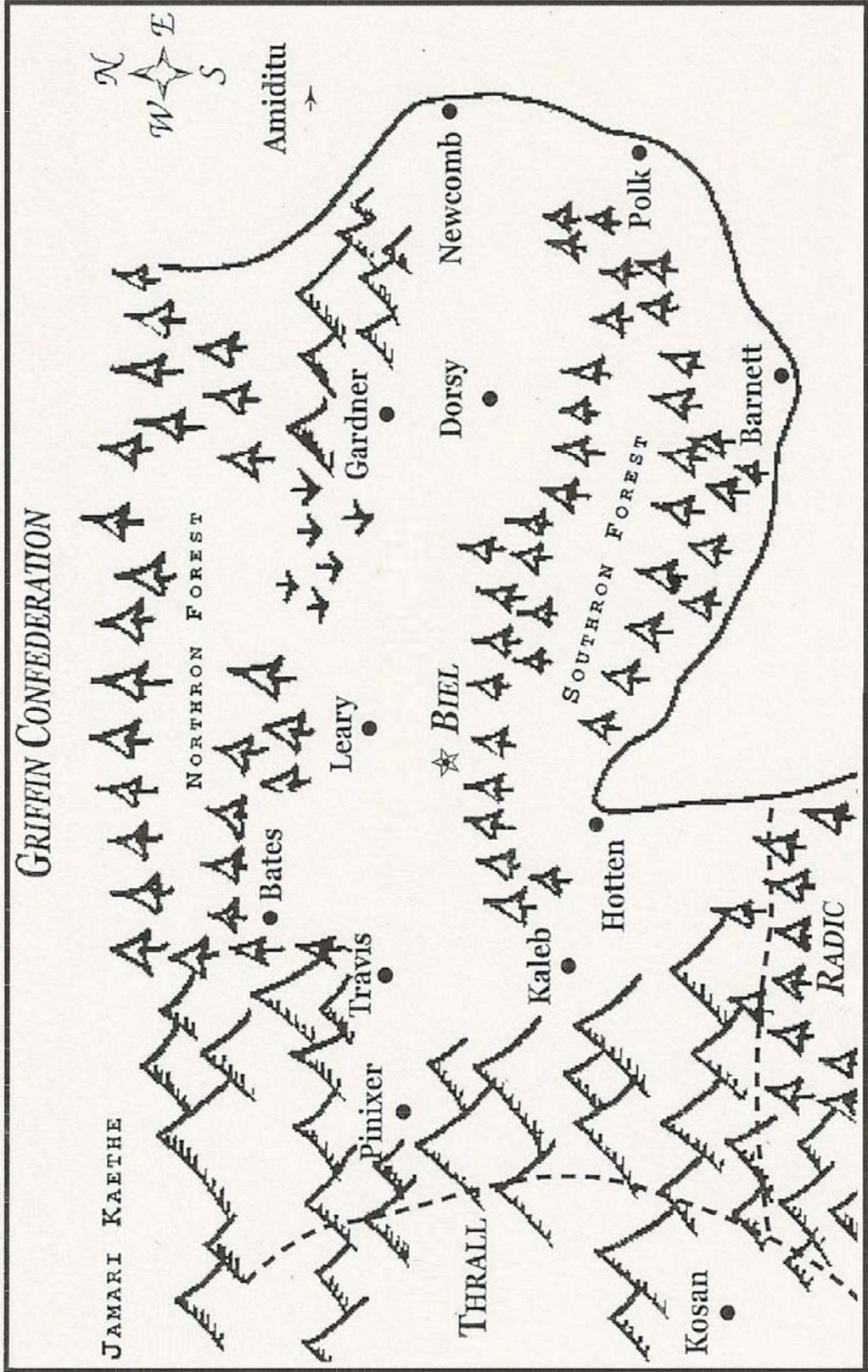
**To my spouse Mary Beth,
who encourages my flights of fancy.**

**To Bryan, Jim & Anthony,
who lived in this world with me before it was a story.**

And most of all to

Alex,

**who gave birth to the world,
and every step of the way
made everything better.**



Prologue

The wizard hunched over the balcony rail and retched. He coughed long and hard, his body shuddering, and spit the last of the blood into the raging river below.

His apprentice inched out onto the balcony. The wizard would be in a foul mood after yet another failure. His mood was often foul even when things went well.

The wizard wiped a small rag over his lips and tossed it over the railing. It fluttered on the night winds and disappeared into the foggy mist that covered the river like a thick blanket. Far below, the current rippled against the rocks and then cascaded in a dull roar over the falls.

“Wine!” the wizard demanded. He snatched the proffered flask from the apprentice’s trembling hands and took a draught, swishing it around his mouth and spitting it out over the railing. He clenched the railing with his thin, skeletal hands and stared out at the shadowy mountains jutting upwards towards the moon, like the teeth of some feral animal.

“I feel them out there,” the wizard muttered, his bloodshot eyes turning down into the impenetrable mist below. “They are close.”

The apprentice shuddered and glanced toward the top of the tower. An almost imperceptible bluish glow emanated from the tin-shingled roof. A matching hue tinged the rail of balcony. The warding spells still held. He allowed himself a silent sigh of relief.

“Master Romandiran asks for more tincture,” the apprentice reported. “He says there is not much time.”

The skin of his master’s face stretched tightly over his cheek bones like a pitched tent. Thin lips, still red with wine, sneered. “Do you not think I know that? What am I to do? The enchantment does not work! More mistakes like the last and we will all be dead! Our prisoner misleads us, hoping to help *them*.” The wizard waved his wrinkled hand at the darkness outside.

The apprentice, eyes downcast, stepped aside as the wizard pushed past into the tower. He knew better than to voice his opinion that the prisoner was now too weak to remember the spell properly.

He scurried after the wizard down the winding stairway. At the entrance hall a pair of massive wooden doors was faintly lit by the same blue wards. Their enemies might be just outside. Certainly the river would not stop them.

They continued down the stairwell and into the bedrock, passing the sleeping quarters of the other guild members. Behind closed doors he could hear heated arguments taking place. The wizard ignored them and continued down to the conjuring room at the base of the tower.

The circular, windowless chamber was brightly lit with torches burning in wall sconces. A stone pedestal in the center of the room was charred black and badly cracked, shards of chipped stone lying scattered around its base. Upon it lay a single steel blade. One side of the steel was tempered into a sharp edge and decorated with ornate designs. The opposite side was thick and straight, as if the whole of the blade had been split perfectly along its length. But this dagger had been intentionally forged in its current form, and it was nearly ready to be joined with

its counterpart. Completion of the weapon would mean an end to the guild's exile. They could finally rebuild all they had lost.

The apprentice closed the heavy iron door at the foot of the stairs. On the far side of the chamber the wizard unlatched a smaller door and pulled it open. A blast of warm air gusted out of the cell beyond. Inside, a raging fire burned in a small iron stove. On a nearby pallet a figure wrapped in blankets lay huddled and shaking. The wizard stepped inside.

"Get up, Romandiran!"

The figure on the pallet rolled over and a wan face peered out from the blankets. Bright green eyes stared out beneath a tangled mass of unkempt moss-green hair interwoven with tiny silver trinkets. "More tincture!" the figure croaked.

The wizard lifted a small vial strapped around his neck and swung it gently, taunting his captive. "Not until this spell is finished, Jamari. This last conjure is critical. Without it to hold the other enchantments in check, the Blade cannot be safely wielded!"

"Like as not you pronounced it wrong, fool," the figure said. He rubbed his eyes with thin, mottled brown fingers, like the bark of a tree. "Give me tincture or I will tell you nothing more."

"Then you will die!"

"Gladly," the figure responded. He rolled back to face the stone wall, shivering.

The wizard's lips parted in a forced, knowing smile. "Romandiran, I now know a focusing word is required to complete the spell. You will tell it to me."

The prisoner defiantly met the wizard's gaze, but there was a glimmer of surrender in his eyes. "Tincture first!" the huddled figure demanded stubbornly. His master had guessed correctly. Remarkably, the Jamari had held back the final incantation from them.

Cursing, the wizard snatched up a mug from the floor. He uncorked the vial around his neck and poured out a small amount of the milky fluid. Romandiran seized the mug with trembling hands and greedily sucked down every drop.

"Tell me how to complete the conjure," the wizard demanded. His master surely wished he could simply torture the information from their prisoner, but no further amount of pain would make Romandiran speak. Only the promise of more tincture loosened his tongue.

Romandiran rolled back towards the wall. "How much century root remains?"

"Precious little," the wizard replied. "It could take months to acquire more. And as you know we do not have the luxury of time."

"The Conclave has discovered my involvement. They will come for me. And for you."

"Why does your Conclave care about this Blade?" the wizard asked. "It has nothing to do with your people. Lord Oraz would use the dagger to bring peace."

The Jamari croaked out a laugh. "As if you humans ever desire peace. The Conclave does not trust you. They believe you will use this weapon to unite against us and kill what few of us remain."

"And yet you came to help us," the wizard said. "Without your aid, neither guild could have created such an item."

"And now you've poisoned me," the prisoner exclaimed.

"Yes," the wizard agreed. "But you brought the poison on yourself by trying to escape with the dagger. Why? No one forced your hand before. You willingly taught us your craft. Why try to steal the weapon from us now?"

The Jamari closed his eyes and said, "My reasons are my own."

“I regret that those reasons changed, but we must complete this enchantment,” the wizard said. “Your Conclave friends followed you here. Watchers have been spotted outside our walls already.”

Alarmed, Romandiran asked, “So soon? What sort of watchers?”

“Shadows. With baleful red eyes.”

Romandiran closed his eyes and held his hands out towards the stove. “Pity. Bring more wood for my fire. Your wards will not protect you long against Vigilants.”

“You had better hope they do,” the wizard threatened coldly. “When this dagger is completed you will receive the antidote I promised. You have experienced the agony of the poison. You will suffer a very long time before it kills you. Let us finish this and we can be gone from here!”

The Jamari grabbed his stomach, his features suffused with the excruciating pain that racked his body. “Another spasm is coming. Give me more tincture!” The apprentice looked away from the suffering, his eyes returning only when the Jamari finally spoke again.

“I will help you,” the prisoner sighed. He bit his lip as another spasm took hold, and blood trickled down his cheek. The wizard poured a small amount of tincture into the mug and dribbled it into Romandiran’s mouth. The prisoner relaxed slightly and said, “Here is what you must do. After the tenth recitation, one final conjure is necessary. *Orlifitheram*.”

“What does it mean?” the wizard asked. “I am not familiar with that word.”

“It is crucial,” Romandiran murmured. “It completes the spell.”

The wizard studied the prisoner for long moments, searching for signs of duplicity. He leaned forward to stare into his prisoner’s face. “You realize that this will be the last time I can attempt the spell? If it fails you will die very slowly and painfully. Do you speak true?”

The Jamari nodded, sweat running down his face, his green eyes filled with hate.

The apprentice looked away again. Even if the prisoner was telling the truth, the wizard was not. There was no antidote to counter-act the poison. The tincture which had lessened the prisoner’s pain was almost gone. The Jamari was destined to die a torturous death unless the wizard killed him quickly out of mercy.

The wizard took a deep breath, as if the warm air alone might strengthen his weakened frame. “I will try again immediately.” To the apprentice, he commanded, “Summon the others while I prepare the room again.”

The apprentice darted out of the cell, glad to be away from the suffering prisoner. He rushed over to the stairs and pulled a long velvet cord that hung from the ceiling. Bells rang loudly in the chambers above, and a short time later a line of frail, elderly men began to enter the room, their gait forced and shaky. Their gaunt faces were pale, with ashen pockets under their eyes. They had been supporting the warding spells for too long. It was not wise to attempt the spell again with their strength fading, but they could not afford to postpone the enchantment.

The wizard stood at the pedestal and carefully sprinkled the last of the century root dust over the steel. Ground from the root of a mature rashbury tree, Romandiran had taught them how its powerful nature aided their conjures.

The wizard leaned on the pedestal for support, his white-haired head hung low as he waited for his followers to take their positions. He was nothing if not determined. Their guild of wizards had been banished and forced to hide in the old ruins of this ancient tower, outlawed by the priests and nobles who had declared magic-practice unnatural and wrong, fearful of any powers they did not understand and could not control. Out in the wilderness few apprentices could be found to add to the guild, and just when the guild had almost disbanded in despair,

Romandiran had come and offered to teach them how to forge a dagger with tremendous powers. With it they could buy their way back into favor with one of the warring human warlords. It had taken years of work and unprecedented coordination with a rival guild, but now they were so close . . .

The other mages slowly spread out in a circle around the pedestal while the apprentice locked the door and took his place in the back of the room. The wizard stood at the pedestal, eyes closed, his breathing slow and thoughtful. He held his thin hands over the steel and the guild began a slow chant, their discordant voices growing as they focused their sight and thoughts on their master's outstretched hands.

As the power grew in the room, the drone of the voices grew in volume. The air sizzled in the chamber and each breath of air tasted heavy and burnt. The wizard whispered the words taught to him by the prisoner. Slowly, the half dagger began to levitate off the pedestal, the dust of the century root swirling around it wildly. The steel began to emanate a golden glow that illuminated the wizard's exhausted face. His lips moved quickly, reciting the incantation over and over again. Showers of blue sparks leapt off the blade and crackled as they struck the stone pedestal.

The apprentice held his breath – this was as far as they had ever come before the spell failed. Finally, the wizard spoke the phrase for the tenth time. His eyes fixated on the hypnotic scene below his hands, he hesitated for a moment before calling out in a powerful voice, “*Orlifitheram!*”

A thundering detonation rocked the tower. The tornado of century root dust exploded outward. The wizard shrieked in agony as the swirling dust sliced through his hands and arms, flaying the skin and splattering blood and flesh over his shocked followers. For a brief instant, his eyes reflected the horrified realization of Romandiran's treachery, and then the mangled remains of his body tumbled to the floor.

The guild members stared in shocked silence at the pile of bloody rags that had been their master. The dust continued its wild path around the pedestal as the steel blade hovered in the air at its center. One elderly mage nudged his iron staff into the swirling globe. Sparks flew and the end of the staff snapped off. The wizards glanced uncertainly at one another.

Suddenly, a shaking voice called out. “The warding spells! Can anyone feel them?”

The others glanced around wildly. “No!” another cried. “They are gone!”

Above them in the tower they heard a crash. And then another. The outer doors had been breached. The old men stood frozen, gawking at each other with pale, sweaty faces.

The apprentice sprinted towards the prisoner's cell. He opened the locks with numbed fingers and ran inside. The prisoner lay on his bed in a fetal ball. His eyes were closed, but his thin mouth was frozen in a fowl grin.

“What have you done?” the apprentice cried.

“I have won,” Romandiran said calmly, never opening his eyes.

Another crash rumbled in the tower above them. The voices of the mages rose in a clamor as they realized that there was no escape.

“Tell us how to fight them!” the apprentice begged. “I will give you the antidote!”

The Jamari opened his eyes, but his expression remained disturbingly calm. “There *is* no antidote,” he said. “And you cannot defeat the Vigilants. There is nothing left for us to do but die.” A thunderous pounding on the iron door rocked the chamber.

The apprentice cursed and rushed back to join his comrades. The feeble mages had formed up in a semi-circle around the great iron door and were attempting to set a new ward.

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The door began to glow with a light bluish tint but then exploded in thousands of metal shards that impaled the screaming sorcerers. The apprentice was knocked flat, the shredded corpse of an elder mage lying dead atop him.

Unmoving, the apprentice gaped as two tall, dark soldiers stepped into the room. Their long limbs were covered in glimmering gray chain-mail that shimmered in the glow of the torches. Finely crafted helms concealed their faces, but red eyes glared balefully out from slits in the metal. They gripped gleaming long swords inscribed with runes up and down the blades.

Moans escaped the injured men lying around him as the two creatures wordlessly thrust their blades into each of the wounded victims, cutting off their agony. The apprentice closed his eyes, paralyzed with fear, and prayed that the attackers would mistake him as dead beneath the corpse. He heard another mage begin to mumble the words to a flame spell, but the man's voice was quickly cut off with a gurgle.

The heavy, mailed step of one the creatures approached the prisoner's cell. A harsh voice grated out a wicked form of the Jamari language, "The Conclave awaits!"

"I am dead anyway," the Jamari prisoner smiled wanly. "But at the least the Dagger is protected from them now!"

Suddenly, the shredded body was lifted off him. The apprentice instinctively opened his eyes and stared blankly at the shiny, armored foot beside his head. In its smooth, curved surface he could see the reflection of the creature raising its gleaming sword above him.

He closed his eyes tightly as the blade descended.

Chapter One

A horn sounded, low and forlorn, echoing through the clustered wooden hovels in the tiny village of Orvet like the mournful cry of a wounded animal. Bria gazed out the open doorway of Muddleby's Tavern and Inn, surprised to hear a lord's call so far from any stronghold.

"What was that?" asked her Uncle Jezer, frowning.

Muddleby the innkeeper, a short, lean man with wiry arms and a nervous tick in his cheek, mopped his sweaty brow with a soiled rag and grunted, "A herald from Lord Dorsy rode into town just before you came down from your room. That's him summoning the townsfolk to hear him out. Judging from his manner, he bears ill news." He slid a steaming bowl of stew in front of Bria and glanced at her, his expression as soft as his weathered features could allow. "Sorry to hear about your father's passing," he said. "He was a fair man and people hereabouts will miss him. At least he and your mother can be together now after all these years."

Bria didn't trust herself to speak, simply nodding in thanks for the kind words. She and her father had usually traveled through Orvet at least twice a year, and she had fond memories of the tough but kindly innkeeper. He had taught her how to play Foursies in dice as a child, and had often slipped her muffins crammed with fruit before the caravan left for the next destination. Although her father usually couldn't afford to stay at the inn, if a room were open Muddleby would often give it to them and refuse payment with a shake of his calloused hands. Even now, she could see her bowl of stew brimmed with far more vegetables than those he had placed in front of Vantry and her Uncle Jezer.

"It's not much, but the carrots are fresh," Muddleby promised. "My wife will bring out warm bread in a bit." He shuffled away and tossed another thick log into the massive fireplace. Flaming cinders exploded out into the room, flitting upwards towards the ancient rough-hewn timbers of the smoke-blackened ceiling like spinning fireflies.

Bria turned to her uncle. "Why would a herald summon the townspeople after nightfall?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Uncle Jezer shrugged. He grabbed a rough wooden spoon with a thick hand and leaned over his bowl, slurping up the watery stew with gusto. Bria's nose wrinkled at the stale odor of wine he exuded. Stew dribbled down his blubbery lips, and without slowing pace he wiped at his jowls with the sleeve of his robe.

Vantry scowled into his bowl, the lines on his high brow furrowed, thin lips pressed together tightly in a perpetual frown. "Wilted vegetables soaking in greasy water," he complained as he stirred the stew.

"It's tastier than it looks," Jezer said with a belch, almost done with his bowl. His close-set eyes, pressed into his puffy reddened cheeks, greedily sized up Bria's portion. Her rumbling stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten since an early breakfast. Muddleby's wife bustled out from the kitchen and placed a long loaf of dark rye and a crock of butter in front of them, but her eyes were troubled and she did not even look up to greet them. She moved away as the horn

outside sounded again, somber and troubling. Bria pushed her bowl to Jezer, who grunted in gratitude.

Soon townsfolk began to arrive, their worn shawls and ragged cloaks wrapped tightly against the damp mist coiling around the village. Bria recognized a few from her arrival earlier that day. They had seemed friendly enough then, but tonight their expressions were hostile and cold, suspiciously eying Bria and her companions as if they had interrupted their peace. The nervous townsfolk crowded up close to the smoky warmth of the cobblestone fireplace and spoke in whispers.

Over fifty people packed the stifling room when the herald finally entered. He carried a lord's horn, with a lute strapped overtop the breastplate that swallowed his boyish frame. The instruments looked far more natural on the youth than the sword hanging awkwardly at his side. His surcoat was tucked into his belt to keep the edges from dragging underfoot, and even the listing helm capping his curls seemed made for another. Bria quickly glanced away when he caught her eyes upon him.

"Good people of Orvet," he greeted them somberly, his voice strong and resolute. Blond fuzz stood on end along the herald's lip. "Loyal folk and bountiful providers to the Confederation, I bring you grim tidings. A fortnight past, High Lord Hinrik Biel was killed."

There was a collective gasp, and curses were spat out from the men at the back of the room. A grizzled man wearing an eye-patch standing near Bria grunted, "How? Speak up lad!"

The herald bristled and tried to stand tall beneath his heavy armor. "All I can tell you is that the dishonorable Thrall assassinated our High Lord in the sleeping hours. Lord Commander Aidan Biel has assumed the High Lordship and returned from the army to rule in his brother's place."

Bria's uncle slurred out, "Damn the Thrall! Cowards to the last. Just like at Pinixer!" A number of people sitting near him echoed his sentiment. Bria glanced around at the wrinkled and weathered faces of the villagers, their lips pursed in angry lines like gashes across the dirty faces. The man standing across from Bria clenched and unclenched his rough hands, as if readying himself to throttle the Thrall assassin.

The herald raised his hand to silence the crowd, "By the order of our Lord Dorsy, in light of the assassination of the High Lord and the threat to the Confederation, the village of Orvet is commanded to offer up an additional levy of ten men for the army, of able bodies and mental capability for military training."

"Is there news of the war?" the grizzled elder asked. "Do the Thrall march on Travis?"

The herald wiped beads of sweat from his brow with an oversized sleeve. "No. The Thrall do not dare face the Golden Tide on the plain. Our army holds firm."

"Yet still another ten men!" another man groaned. "This harsh news saddens us all, but we have already sent over forty men in levies this year. We gladly do we all we can to support the war, but we can barely manage the harvest with those who remain."

There were murmurs of agreement, but another voice objected, "We'll make due, Horas!" and "If it takes Orvet men to beat back the damned Thrall, let's all go!"

The young herald slipped the lute from off his shoulder. He cleared his throat and walked toward Bria's table. With a sly smile he plucked at the strings and said, "Those who wonder if they should fight, remember who you leave to protect."

He began to sing in a clear, strong voice and Bria felt the room's eyes fall upon her. The herald stepped away and began a rousing rendition of the "Pillage of Pinixer," recounting how the Thrall had stolen the mountain castle of Pinixer in the dead of night just six months earlier,

slaughtering the Griffin troops they had captured. Everyone had heard some version of the tale, but never so expertly performed.

Five young men, laborers by their dusty clothes and deeply-tanned faces, quickly rose and marched to the front of the room, beaming broadly and congratulating one another on their bravery. Several other older men shuffled forward as well, resolution on their grimy faces even as their wives shed quiet tears. Seeing no more volunteers and needing two more men, the herald glanced around the room. Only greybeards and a group of boys younger than the herald remained. Two of the boys, eyes bright and excited, began to stand up, but a couple older men pushed them down and took their place at the front of the room, resignation in their eyes.

The room erupted with cheers, but to Bria their voices were filled with tense desperation. The herald sang a verse vowing that High Lord Biel's men, riding on the backs of fierce flying griffins, would retake the castle from the hated Thrall. The crowd roared, though all knew no griffins would come. None had been seen in generations, much less ridden into battle.

Under the table a hand squeezed her thigh. Vantry! Without looking at him, she smacked his hand away. It immediately returned, creeping quickly up her leg, his thumb rubbing against her skin. He stared at her with his oddly emotionless eyes, a thin smile plastered on his pale face. Smiling never worked for Vantry, it made him look ill.

"Stop it!" she hissed.

She glanced at her Uncle Jezer. Grease from the stew glistened on his lips and chin, and wine stains streaked down the front of his robe. He was of little enough help even when he was sober. She reached under the table and pinched down hard on Vantry's wrist, cutting his skin between her fingernails. With a curse, he snatched his hand away. He licked at the trickle of blood as his thin lips curved up in that ugly smile again.

Bria shuddered and pushed away from the table as the herald finished his song. The townsfolk clustered around the ten volunteers, patting shoulders, wishing them luck, and promising to keep their fields and homes in order until they returned.

Uncle Jezer clutched at Bria's arm, breathing strong fumes of wine into her face as he called out over the din, "How lucky we are! What a voice that boy has!" With a belch, he added, "That reminds me, I should catch the innkeep. With this crowd about he'll likely overpay for a few extra barrels of watered wine to replace his stock."

"I will be in our room," Bria said, in no mood to witness his swindling.

"As will I," Vantry said as he stood up. A young barmaid came to collect their empty mugs and Vantry grabbed her waist playfully. "Bria," he said. "Our serving girl here has such long, dark curly hair – much like yours was before you cut it so short in that boyish style. You should grow it long again and shape it with pins like she does. It would set off those gorgeous blue eyes." Vantry nuzzled the barmaid's neck and tickled her. The barmaid giggled as Bria stood up.

"Stop it!" Bria snapped. "I like my hair like this."

Vantry's hands moved further up the woman's waist. "You should ask her to sew a more womanly robe for you as well. Like this little tart you've a nice shape to you, but those oversize men's shirts don't do you justice. You and I both know you could be far more beautiful than any of these farm wenches. You could be the envy of every man in the room . . ."

The serving girl elbowed him hard in the ribs and glared at Bria as she walked away. How was this her fault? She had no interest in drawing men's envy, least of all Vantry's. His unwanted attentions had caused her to cut her hair short and choose these bulky clothes.

“How can you even think such things when we have just heard that the High Lord has been assassinated?”

Vantry shrugged, “Another will take his place.” He nodded to the volunteers, who drank a toast to the new High Lord. “Regardless, those poor fools will suffer the worse for it.”

Her uncle called for Vantry to join him, and Vantry reluctantly stalked off to help corner the innkeep. Fearing that Vantry might slip away from her uncle and catch her alone in the room, Bria followed the crowd outside to catch a breath of the cool night air. She stood on the creaky dilapidated porch, her breath steaming out in a cloud of mist that mixed with the late evening fog. The villagers called out farewells to one another and disappeared down the muddy roads Bria knew so well. The two main roads crossing the Confederation met here in Orvet, near the center of the lands. All her life, and up until her father’s death early this year, she had traveled these routes with him, selling their wares at small farming villages like this one.

The heavy scent of manure and hay hung in the heavy, damp air. Through the haze she could just make out the burning braziers illuminating the temple of Belanus not fifty yards distant in the center of the village. Hearing Vantry’s forced laugh inside, she hugged herself against the night chill. His interest in her had definitely increased. Her uncle’s only redeeming quality was that, whenever possible, he preferred to have them stay at inns. However, he paid only for a single room for the three of them, and although she waited until the lantern was extinguished to prepare for bed, Vantry’s leering eyes always sought out her naked silhouette. It did no good to complain to her uncle about his assistant’s advances – he loved Vantry like a son. Two nights ago Jezer had even suggested that she should consider Vantry a suitor! She shivered again.

Bria stepped carefully down the muddy street toward the burning braziers. Perhaps she could say a prayer for her father at the temple. He would have called her to his side to help negotiate the price with the innkeep. Jezer ignored her presence entirely. But that was the way things had been since Jezer had taken over her father’s routes.

As she approached the temple doors, painted yellow to mimic the solid golden ones of the city temples, a horrid rancid scent, unmistakably out of place, wafted around her. It was not a civilized smell. Not a human smell.

A horse whinnied in the fog behind her. She heard a clink of metal and spun around. The dark looming shape of a horse and rider materialized through the fog, along with another figure on foot beside them. Bria stumbled backwards, her foot slipping in a puddle. She fell to the ground as a spear thunked into the temple door behind her, the shaft shuddering back and forth above her. The rider glowered over her, his shaven pate gleaming in the light of the braziers, cold eyes focused on her as if she were an insect for him to swat. He pointed at her with a metal rod of some sort and yelled out in a cruel, guttural voice. He spurred his horse off into the mist as Bria scrambled to her feet. The other figure jumped forward, shouted out in same harsh language and waved a gleaming short sword. Bria reached for the hidden sheath strapped to her calf and withdrew a thin dagger in her trembling hand. She backed up against the door as her assailant stepped into the light. At five feet tall it was eye to eye with her, but the similarities ended there. Rough pieces of leather were tied haphazardly over its furred body to serve as armor. A pair of tusks jutted out from either side of a mouth full of jagged, misshapen teeth, and the ferocious face was covered with coarse fur like a wild boar. Her eyes widened. A tuskar? Here?

There was a crash of glass as the temple windows shattered, and a second later a clap of thunder rocked the structure. Heat and flame blew open the temple doors from within and sent Bria sprawling to the ground again.

The tuskar leapt forward. She tried to jab at him, but the creature smacked her wrist with flat of its sword. Her blade flew from her grasp and pain flared up her arm. Cries, shouts, and the clashing of metal erupted from all around the village. The tuskar fell on top of her, pinning her down beneath his knees. Bria nearly gagged at the stench of raw spoiled meat and acrid sweat. The dark fur concealed any recognizable expression, but Bria could see the eyes, red-rimmed and filled with animal hatred. A tattoo was branded onto the tuskar's face, a circle of some sort, like a third eye on its forehead.

"You die now," the creature growled at her, spraying spittle into her face. She struggled under the beast, screaming for help. Its eyes gleamed; mouth twisted in a feral grin, a stream of drool suspended from one of its sharp, yellowed tusks.

The tuskar choked off her cries with one hand and lifted its sword for the killing stroke. Suddenly it grunted in surprise as a glistening arrowhead sprouted from the middle of its chest. Its sword dropped from a lifeless hand and the creature fell into the mud beside her. Bria sobbed in relief and kicked the heavy corpse away from her. She scrambled through the rutted street and retrieved her dagger. She could not lose her father's blade.

Her mind raced in a panicked frenzy. What were tuskars doing in the middle of the Confederation? Tuskars lived in the forests like wild animals. A handful might raid farmers on the edges of the realm and steal cows or sheep from the herds, but they didn't attack whole villages. And no rumors claimed that they could talk!

She choked back her tears and looked back toward the inn. Shadowy figures raced through the fiery streets, the shouts of tuskars and men intermixed with indistinguishable cries of pain. Three tuskars chased an old man out of a burning building across from the temple. They slashed at the man's head and arms, toppling him. He lay helpless on the ground as one of the tuskars leapt upon him, gashing his neck with its sharp tusks.

The tuskar stood over the old man and shouted out a victorious cry, but its bellow ended in a gurgle. An arrow sliced through its neck, and two more shafts skewered its companions. They were rapid, precise shots. Bria spotted the bowman on the deck of the inn surrounded by several cloaked figures fighting back against a swarm of tuskars. She stood and stumbled through the mud towards the inn, waving her arms and crying for him not to shoot.

By the time she reached the porch the tuskars around the cloaked figures were dead. She stepped gingerly around the bodies and then heard a chorus of vicious barks behind her. The small figure with the bow cried out in an odd, lilting voice, "Too many! Inside!" Bria rushed into the tavern with the bowman and his companions close behind her. They slammed the door shut as snarls of anger erupted outside.

The bowman flipped down the hood of his mottled brown and green cloak. Bria gasped. His features were narrow, his face dark tan, eyes bright green with no hint of pupils. A thin patch of fine hair the color of forest moss covered his head. Jamari? They rarely came to the human settlements, and she had never seen one herself. Staring at the three others readying their weapons, she suddenly realized that all of them with her were Jamari. First tuskars and now Jamari? What by the gods was going on here?

One of the Jamari, who carried a narrow, curved blade, hissed out an order and Bria shrank back against the wall in terror. Though they had been fighting tuskars, these creatures were no less foreign to her than the monsters outside.

Boots pounded down the hallway from the sleeping rooms and the young herald ran out clutching his sword. His eyes went wide with shock as he saw the Jamari. He raised his sword as if to charge.

“Not them!” Bria cried to the herald. She pointed at the door. “Tuskars! Outside!”

A moment later the wall shook as the marauders threw their bodies against the door and splintered it down the center. Bria stood frozen. Dark furry hands yanked the broken door from its hinges. One of the Jamari stepped between her and the doorway. “*Ovirean elsiras*,” he hissed, crouching in a fighting stance.

With a ragged shout, several tuskars burst through the fractured doorway. The first pair fell dead before their second step, clutching at Jamari arrows protruding from their chests. Others rushed in. A tuskar charged the young herald, swinging a short sword with incredible swiftness. The youth awkwardly countered the tuskar’s blow with his own steel, but the momentum of the creature’s charge sent them both crashing to the floor in front of Bria. Unable to wield his sword with the tuskar on top of him, the herald grappled desperately for control of the tuskar’s shorter blade. The monster grasped the young soldier’s forehead with one of its hairy paws and slammed his head against the wooden floor until his eyes glazed over and his body went limp. With barely a pause, the tuskar plunged its sword into the youth’s chest. Dark blood fountained up into the tuskar’s face as it roared out in triumph.

Bria turned to flee down the hall as more tuskars poured into the inn. One of the Jamari called out in a strange, sing-song language, and a flash of white light filled the room. Magic! A clatter of weapons and bodies hit the floor. Bria glanced back and saw five tuskars lying prone at the door of the tavern. The priests vilified the Jamari for using unnatural magic power, but she had never thought it real. She gaped as two of the Jamari slid their blades across each fallen tuskar’s throat, coating the floor with black, spreading blood.

Bria knelt next to the twitching body of the dying young herald at her feet, his terrified eyes wide, mouth gasping as blood bubbles caught on the fuzz on his upper lip. His life leaked out around the edges of the steel jutting up from his chest as his hands clawed weakly at the pommel, unable to grasp it. The twitching abruptly stopped as his head tipped over to the side, his eyes losing their focus and staring through her as if he saw the door to the afterlife opening behind her.

Finished with their grisly task, the Jamari ran through the shattered doorway to join the battle outside. The scent of burning homes drifted into the tavern as the fires spread outside. Trembling, Bria stared at the carnage around her. The deep throat slashes on the sprawled tuskars looked like wide, wet smiles. Dark streams of blood ran and collected in the uneven gaps between the floor planks. Outside she heard a man shout, “They run! After them!” Terrified to be alone with the dead, Bria ran down the corridor and up the stairs. Nie and Poral, her uncle’s two caravan guards, stood nervously outside the door of her uncle’s room, swords in hand.

“What are you doing here?” she screamed at them. “Tuskars are killing people outside!”

“Your uncle said to guard the door,” Poral stammered as sweat ran down the sides of his bulbous, shaved head. Both guards were large men, but most of their bulk consisted of her uncle’s wine and bread. They licked dry lips as they glanced behind her down the darkened stairway.

“Bria?” The door opened a crack and Jezer’s fat face peeked out. Bria stumbled through the door into the room. He and Vantry were dragging a heavy table over to block the door. “Gods, I was terrified for you!” Jezer panted as he slammed the door behind her. “Did I see true? Tuskars?”

“Yes,” Bria sobbed. “One almost killed me – I was saved by a Jamari!” Tears flowed unbidden down Bria’s cheeks, “Lord Dorsy’s herald was killed right in front of me – stabbed in the chest! His eyes...” Bria collapsed on the edge of her bed, her body trembling uncontrollably. She closed her eyes, but couldn’t blot out the image of the dying eyes of the boyish herald, his head lying in the glistening pool of his own blood.

The strange tuskar shouts continued outside the inn. Bria cried out as an arrow slammed into the wooden shutter over their window. Gradually, the clashing of steel and cries of pain gave way to the voices of villagers shouting out for aid. Poral banged on the door and called out, “The innkeep says the attackers have run off!”

“Thank the gods for that,” Uncle Jezer gasped, mopping at his forehead with a rag. “Vantry, perhaps you and I should see what is happening.”

Vantry and Jezer pushed the table aside and ventured out the door without a glance in her direction. Prodding Nie and Poral ahead of them, they cautiously moved toward the stairs. Bria rose from the bed, her fear whipped into rage. Her uncle had saved himself, and now he wanted the townspeople to see him out with his guards. No doubt they would find a dead tuskar to bloody their blades.

Bria took two steps across the room and threw the door shut, the slam punctuating the quiet that had suddenly settled over the ruined village.

Chapter Two

Vance Marhoust pulled off his right gauntlet and tightened the strap on his shield. His fingers were already numb to the cold wind whipping across the plain. Beneath him Broadback stamped and snorted in excitement. The powerful white stallion, like the knight riding him, was layered with sheets of protective armor, the cold grey steel glistening with droplets of swirling snow. The single black star-shaped mark on Broadback's nose identified him as one of Biel's best stock, bred for battle. He could sense the difference between the practice horns and a summons to true combat. Marhoust let the horse dance in a circle, impatient for the bloodshed to begin.

Marhoust tucked his helmet under his muscled arm and studied the battlefield. A barren plain stretched several leagues to the wooded foothills of the Sauris Mountains. The night before storm clouds had escaped the grasp of the mountains and dusted the fields with light, drifting snow. Flocks of black crows picked away at tufts of corn jutting up from the drifts in the fallow fields. Cut from vast forests generations ago, the smallfolk of Castle Travis had abandoned these fields when the Thrall had captured Pinixer Castle and constructed a lower camp only a few leagues away.

The blowing white haze obscured the lower Thrall camp and Pinixer Pass, but on a clearer day one could see the highest tower of that conquered keep jutting up between two rounded hills in the mountains. The audacity of establishing a camp within sight of Castle Travis impressed even Marhoust, but since Pinixer had fallen the Griffin Confederation had given Thrall little to fear. Outside of the elite knights of the Golden Tide, there had been no Confederation army in place when the Thrall so quickly and unexpectedly attacked Pinixer. Marhoust glanced to the ragged tent camp behind Travis, where the levies of untrained and untried troops from the Confederation lords had made camp. Only the threat of the Tide had kept the Thrall from advancing further into the Confederation. All summer he and his fellow knights had chafed under the restrictive orders, which limited them to patrols and inconclusive skirmishes with small units of Thrall at the edge of the pass while they awaited an army of sufficient numbers to move against the enemy. Just as their army had approached readiness, High Lord Hinrik had been assassinated and Lord Commander Aidan had departed to assume the throne.

Marhoust replaced the helmet on his freshly shaved head, adjusted the strap under his jutting chin and locked the visor open. Other knights of the Golden Tide continued to stream out of Castle Travis and take their places in the formation. The armored stallion of Gabrel Ophas cantered toward him. Ophas was Third on the List and the senior knight from the contingent of Lord Dorsy, the second most-powerful lord in the Confederation behind the High Lord in Biel. Marhoust envied Ophas' extravagant armor, tinged orange with gold-leaf designs of griffins engraved on the breastplate and shield. A knight's armor was a statement of his lord's wealth. Marhoust's own plain mail was dented, mended many times, and lacked engraving. "Marhoust," Ophas called out in a deep, gravelly voice. "Lord Commander Connall asked for you to join us

in the command circle.”

Marhoust’s heart leapt. He was finally to be given his due!

“With your victory over Knight Woral yesterday you rose to Sixth on the List,” Ophas said. “You will command the lancers on one flank.” He pulled his horse to a halt next to Marhoust and studied the younger knight with a long, appraising glance. “I hear Woral almost unhorsed you?”

“The victory was nearly his,” Marhoust admitted. “My lance splintered on the first pass. That had me seeing stars, but on the next pass I caught his lance in my flail and pulled him off his horse. I barely stayed on myself.”

“No doubt he saw the same stars as you,” Ophas chuckled. “With this unexpected call to battle, you have earned what would have been his command assignment. He is not pleased.”

“He was at least the best challenge yet,” Marhoust said.

The two knights glanced across the plain, but as of yet could not see enemy troops making their way through the wafting snow. Ophas said, “Surprising that the Thrall would assemble in this weather after hiding behind their walls all this time.”

“Let them come,” Marhoust declared. “I’m just pleased that they are fool enough to give us a fight. Better here than up that cursed pass where their archers can hide amongst the boulders. I had feared that we wouldn’t get a chance at them until the spring.”

“I shared that fear. It’s been so damned hard sitting down here chewing on the bone while those bastards hold Pinixer.” He was silent for several moments. “Woral was your twentieth straight challenge and victory. An impressive streak, although the wisdom of pursuing challenges so impatiently could be questioned.”

“I am seldom accused of wisdom,” Marhoust grinned, white teeth flashing. “But I am well acquainted with impatience. I aim to become First on the List, and eventually Lord Commander. If Tide laws allowed me to make another challenge sooner than the next turn of the moon I would do so.”

“Becoming First on the List does not automatically lead to the Lord Commander’s post. If it did, Mor Dragis would have been chosen when Aidan left to take the High Lord’s seat,” Ophas pointed out. He scratched at a jagged scar that ran along his stubbly chin. The old wound marred an otherwise handsome face, with intelligent brown eyes well-balanced over a square jaw. “Marhoust, the High Lord can choose the Lord Commander from any of the top knights of the Tide. There are many considerations for such a high post. The loyalties of the Tide not least among them, and some among the Tide begrudge your sprint up the List.”

“I care not that they begrudge being bested.”

“You must also consider your family.”

Marhoust’s face reddened. “What has my family to do with it?”

Ophas smiled, his dark eyes sharp and knowing. “You hail from Lord Bates’ lands. Bates has the smallest number of smallfolk among all the lords. Dragis served under Lord Pinixer. With Pinixer fallen, how many more trained men could have been pledged had Dragis been elevated to Lord Commander?”

“None! But Dragis still should have received the honor. He has been First on the List for two years.”

“True, but Connall was a fierce knight in his day. And have you not heard of the messages from Lord Barnett pledging more men now that Connall has been chosen as Lord Commander?” Ophas glanced around. The other horsed warriors crowded together in small knots, talking and joking amongst themselves, their breath puffing out in misty clouds. Ranks of

spearmen and archers came trudging out of the castle, weapons balanced on their shoulders as they hurried to take their places.

"I fear Connall's age shows now," Marhoust said. "Will he lead our charge as Aidan or Dragis would? The Thrall must pay. Stealing Pinixer in the dead of night. Assassinating our High Lord. They have chosen to fight today, but it should have been us pressing them. Aidan had to wait while the army formed, but we were nearly ready when he was called back to Biel. What is Connall's excuse for waiting this past month?"

Ophas shifted about in his saddle, obviously uncomfortable with Marhoust's blunt appraisal of their commander. "The Lord Commander will bait the Thrall," he said. "Lull them into a false sense of security over the winter."

"Or they us," Marhoust said. "They are the ones with a conquered castle under their control and the mines enriching their King! Connall thinks defensively, but I believe that the Thrall already possess what they want."

"Their advance in strength this morning disputes your point. Either way, Connall was chosen by the High Lord and we must be patient and do our duty."

"Hmph!" snorted Marhoust. "Perhaps if we were a bit more impatient we could accomplish something for the heralds to sing of. I have grown tired of that bloody song of Thrall taking Pinixer. The smallfolk may believe the Thrall resorted to cowardly trickery, but we all know our enemy accomplished a magnificent victory – sending two dozen men to scale Pinixer's walls and open the gates for their army that night? That took more mettle than anything I have seen from our side. We need a glorious tale of taking back Pinixer for the heralds to sing about!"

Ophas was silent for a few moments. Marhoust turned his head side to side, cracking the bones in his neck. "Perhaps you are right," Ophas sighed. "But it makes no difference."

Marhoust shook his head. "To my thinking it is very simple. When I vanquish all those of my rank and higher in personal combat, I will have proven myself the most competent warrior and should be declared Lord Commander of the Golden Tide."

Ophas laughed, his eyebrows raised. "You will have to get past me first. And no man has bested Dragis."

"You are both mighty opponents, but just because no one has bested Dragis yet does not mean it cannot be done."

"If you get past me you can think on how to accomplish that task," Ophas smiled.

Marhoust spotted Lord Commander Connall's bay steed coming through the castle gate. "In all honesty, Ophas, why did Aidan choose Connall? You knew Aidan well, did you not?"

"I did, but I cannot say for certain. He was distraught when he heard of Hinrik's assassination."

Marhoust frowned, "But he is now High Lord, ruling the Confederation. He has realized the dream of every nobleman."

Ophas shook his head in disagreement. "Aidan already had his dream - the honor of leading the Golden Tide against Thrall. He had earned his place here. He had no interest in ruling Biel and dealing with the other bickering lords of the Confederation. When the Thrall took Pinixer, he wanted nothing more than to lead the Tide in recapturing it. You did not see his frustration this summer, waiting for the army to form up. But the politics of succession and the rules of the Confederation do not allow the High Lord to be Lord Commander as well."

"I care little for the politics of the Griffin lords," Marhoust said as he spit off to the side. "Aidan would have been a far better Lord Commander than Connall, and in war the best man

should lead.”

Seeing the approach of the Lord Commander, Ophas said, “I tire of explaining politics to you, and you appear unwilling to listen. We should make our way to the command circle. The others are ready.” He turned his horse and galloped ahead.

They pulled up to the Lord Commander and the other heavily ornamented senior knights. They sat astride their mounts at the edge of the battle plain. Nearby, the foot commanders lined up their ragged charges with shouts and threats. The lancers drew up to the right of the foot, their mounts stamping impatiently in the chill air. The knights of the Tide, wearing their golden capes lined with a red fringe, gathered in rows to the left, jesting and keeping watch for their enemy across the plain.

Connall’s head was shaved like most of the other knights, but thick gray eyebrows grew together over his deeply lined eyes. A closely trimmed graying beard failed to hide long scars running down his leathery cheeks. The scars were almost in perfect symmetry, though by all accounts Connall had received them in battles nearly a dozen years apart. Many stories were told of the Commander’s prowess and daring, but Marhoust had seen no sign of such a warrior. To him, Connall simply looked like a tired old man.

Mor Dragis, the Captain of the Tide, rode beside Connall. Dragis was a huge man even by Tide standards, a towering seven-foot tall giant with arms the size of tree trunks. He did not shave his head in the manner of other knights. Curly dark hair tangled down to his shoulders and covered most of the rest of his body like a heavy wool shirt. More than one knight had speculated that his lineage was something other than fully human, but such jests were never made within earshot of Dragis.

Marhoust made eye contact with the enormous knight and recognized the glowering bloodshot eyes of a man who had been deep in his cups when the horns sounded. The Captain’s expression was sour, and as Marhoust and Ophas approached, Dragis’ huge stallion reared up, kicking at the air. With a curse, Dragis regained control over his mount, but he swayed unsteadily in the saddle.

“Knight Marhoust,” Connall greeted him. The biting wind gusted across the plain and Connall shuddered. The lack of control sent a wave of distaste through Marhoust. What if the foot saw their commander trembling?

“Lord Commander.”

“You have worked your way up the List impressively. You will command one squadron of lancers on the right flank. Choose a knight to assist you. Kalin and Herul, you will command the other two squadrons on the left. Ophas and Frankis will have the foot in the center. Dragis will lead the Tide with Woral as Second. You will all await my signal.”

“Shall my squadron advance in line or follow the Tide in the charge,” Marhoust asked.

“There will be no charge or advance unless I order it,” Connall said.

“Lord Commander?”

“The Thrall have chosen this battle,” Connall responded, an edge of irritation rising in his aristocratic voice. “We will wait and see what they have in mind.”

“You intend to let them advance to the edge of Travis?” Marhoust questioned.

Connall replied icily, “I am unsure of their plan, but forcing their foot to wear themselves out crossing the length of the plain cannot aid it.”

“Will it not alarm the townsfolk and Lord Travis to see the enemy so close?” Marhoust pressed. The other knights exchanged uneasy glances. He knew he might be questioning the Lord Commander too much, but there were still many hundreds of folk in the shacks and tents

outside the town walls who might panic if the battle raged nearby. Or die if the Tide were pressed back.

Connell's chapped lips pursed tightly. "Lord Travis does not command this force – that responsibility is mine. And your responsibility is to follow my orders, which I have given. You will command the lancers of the right flank and await the advance of the Thrall host. You will not advance unless by my order. Now see to your troops."

Marhoust held his tongue and flipped Broadback's reigns sharply. He led his horse over to where the knights of the Tide were drawing up in formation. Seeing the familiar blue slashed-line crest of his friend, he yelled, "Cayl! You will second my command of the right lancers!"

Cayl Stremel, Marhoust's only true friend in the Tide, eagerly put his stirrups to his horse and together they galloped toward the left end of the line. They passed the rows of foot soldiers preparing for battle. Some were withdrawn and stood motionless staring across the plain, others busied themselves tightening their leather vests and arm guards, and still others boisterously yelled encouragement to those around them. Marhoust smiled widely, absorbing their anticipation, until he spotted a group of boys waiting behind the archers. They carried spears and pieces of armor covered their outsized Griffin uniforms, but all looked ready to bolt just at the sight of Marhoust riding toward them.

"Is it my imagination or are those recruits the poorest you have ever seen?" Marhoust asked Cayl, nodding to the skittish troop.

"They are just the reserves," Cayl said. "Most are younger than we would usually accept. I heard Dragis in the tavern last night claiming that Lord Newcomb sent them here last week. Claimed that waves of tuskar attacks along the merchant routes require him to keep his best men at home, so orphans and runaways are what we get."

Marhoust scowled, "Tuskar attacks? Here we face an organized army from the largest Empire on the continent, and they worry about tuskars? How can we ever take back Pinixer from the Thrall host with the likes of these men? The first flight of arrows from the Blackbear archers and any that are not skewered will likely take flight."

"I know," Cayl said. "But truly, what do you expect us to do? These boys will have to learn to fight sometime. We lost many experienced men with Pinixer. Thrall has near our number of men on the field, even more at Pinixer, and they are hardened warriors. Even if we were to break the host in front of us and advance on and besiege Pinixer, it would be difficult to prevail without every sword we have."

They reached the troop of lancers and found Truwas, Marhoust's least favorite weapons master, astride a black stallion at their head. Every recruit deemed worthy of a riding a steed into battle spent some time training from horseback under Truwas' tutelage. His charges learned mainly through threats and lashings, the latter applied with great enthusiasm if a horse was ever endangered. Marhoust had risen quickly from the lancers to the Golden Tide and never suffered the humiliation of Truwas' whip, but he still thought the man a churlish taskmaster with maladroitness skills.

"What is this?" Truwas called out dryly as they approached. "The students as masters?"

Marhoust and Cayl pulled up, and Marhoust critically scanned over the assembled lancer troops. They were young, of course, and for most this was likely their first real battle. Many sat stiffly in the saddle, white knuckles on their reins and spears. "We are to command the right wing," Marhoust said simply.

"How long until the advance?" Truwas asked as he shielded his eyes against the glare from the snow and attempted to see their gathering enemy on the far side of the plain.

“The Lord Commander has decreed that there is to be no advance,” Marhoust said. “He wants to let our enemy advance across the plain.”

“To the castle?” Cayl asked, surprised.

“I believe the Lord Commander hopes for a false alarm,” Marhoust grumbled. “Perhaps he believes our enemy will return to their barracks once they see us waiting for them.”

“Not bloody likely,” Truwas cursed as he spit off to the side. “I heard their assembly trumpets not long ago. Many trumpets. They will come in force.”

“We will be ready then,” Marhoust stated. “Let us hope we do not all freeze waiting for our esteemed guests.”

Another round of distant trumpets sounded across the plain. The icy breeze blew across the broad battle plain, sending waves of snow swirling about and filling the air with brilliantly bright crystals. Truwas rode among the lancers to line them up and repeat the many rules he so often recited. Cayl also rode through the ranks, asking several men what cities they served and exchanging jests with those he recognized. Marhoust stared across the snowy fields, still as a statue on Broadback.

After several minutes, he could make out a black mass spreading across the white plain. Gusts of wind whipped up the snow and obscured his view of the advancing enemy. Dimly, he heard the shouts from their officers urging the lines onward. Broadback began to snort, his muscles rippling impatiently.

Marhoust glanced down the line of the Griffin army. Ophas and several other knights rode behind three tight lines of foot soldiers. The front two ranks wielded spears and shields while the third rank readied their heavy longbows. It was important to keep the foot in disciplined ranks. Once a line of footmen was broken, cavalry could thunder among them and exact a frightful toll on the panicked men. Behind the foot soldiers rode the bulk of the elite Golden Tide cavalry with the Lord Commander. Dragis would not commit his troops to either flank until he spotted the enemy horse across the field.

It seemed an eternity waiting for the Thrall to draw near. The Griffin army grew silent as each man stared across the plain awaiting the enemy. Connall was a fool. At least marching forward would have given the men something to do. Instead, their army remained as still as pieces on a chess board, each man likely wondering if he would live through the day.

Marhoust stared back impatiently at the advancing Thrall footmen. Their ranks were clearer now, and Marhoust leaned forward in the saddle, unable to believe what he saw. The enemy marched haphazardly in ragged lines, unprepared to defend themselves. If the Tide were to charge now, the Thrall foot would never form a sufficient wall defense in time. Marhoust stood higher in his stirrups to peer over the advancing enemy. The distant wind-whipped snow mostly obscured his view, but there was no sign of Thrall cavalry.

Men on both sides began to yell, and soon the plain was filled with sound of hammering steel and wild oaths. Marhoust looked anxiously towards Connall, hoping that the Lord Commander saw the opportunity and would order a charge. Certainly had Aidan been in command the charge would have been sounded. But the knights of the Golden Tide remained positioned in two straight, defensive lines. Connall was not forming wedges – either he failed to recognize the opportunity or was choosing to ignore it.

“Truwas!” Marhoust called. The lancer weapons master rode up. “Your men have practiced the wedge formation, have they not?”

“A few times,” Truwas replied. “But that is best left to the Tide. My men are new—”

“But they are familiar with the formation,” Marhoust insisted. “Line them up in three

wedges. I will take the center, you the right and Cayl the left.”

“Wedges are not a defensive formation,” he said slowly, confused. “They do not allow us to bring maximum spears to bear.”

“I said order the formation!” Marhoust roared. Truwas paused for a moment but turned his horse and began shouting orders to the lancers in clipped sentences as he picked out individual troops to head each group.

Marhoust could now clearly see the disorganized Thrall foot treading across the plain. Some parts of the enemy line were far ahead of others. Winded from their long charge in full armor, their boisterous yells were subsiding. Marhoust heard Connall’s voice shout over the clamor, but he could not make out his words. The Tide remained in their defensive lines.

“Marhoust?” Cayl’s voice asked at his left shoulder. “What are you doing? I thought—”

“We are going to charge,” Marhoust cried. He no longer felt the sting of the cold wind on his face or the chill in his fingers. Instead, blood pumped through his veins.

“But you said the Lord Commander —” Cayl began.

“The Lord Commander is an old fool who fails to see an opportunity!” Marhoust snapped, his fierce blue eyes never leaving the advancing enemy. “Look at the Thrall lines. They are exhausted and disorganized. If we smash forward in a wedge they will break in moments and we can chase them back across the entire plain, cutting them to pieces!”

The Griffin troops jeered and yelled insults at the advancing host in a continuous cacophony of sound. “It is folly to advance before Connall signals,” Cayl yelled. Marhoust looked at his friend’s face and saw his concern, but he shut out the questions that began to form in his mind.

“You are the left wedge,” Marhoust commanded. Behind him the lancers were drawn into position, their faces a mix of determination and fear beneath their gleaming helmets. “You are with me!” he yelled to them. “If you remain in a tight formation we will break those bastards!” Turning back to Cayl he called, “The left. Now!”

Marhoust saw Connall behind the footmen gesturing wildly and shouting at one of his attendants. The attendant spurred his horse towards Marhoust’s position.

Marhoust glanced back at the enemy. He could visualize his men smashing against the ragged line of Thrall footmen. The enemy would break and run, and his men would cut the Thrall down all the way across the plain. With another glance at the attendant riding hell-bent for him, he raised his sword and bellowed, “Lancers with me!”

He spurred Broadback forward and behind him he heard the shouts of the lancers. Out of the corners of his eyes he saw Cayl and Truwas spur their own mounts forward, their men riding behind them in rough formation.

With shouts of alarm, the front line of enemy soldiers saw the charge from their flank and abruptly stopped their advance. Confusion reigned as soldiers behind stumbled into the front rank. Some were sent sprawling onto the snowy ground. Others clumped into groups shouting at one another. A very few tried to form a defensive wall against the horses bearing down on them.

A fierce grin spread over Marhoust’s face. The enemy was in disarray! With quick glances to the sides, he saw Truwas and Cayl galloping in front of their own wedges, screaming insults at the enemy, their gleaming swords held high. Behind the Griffin footmen Marhoust thought he glimpsed the huge form of Dragis readying the Tide to join the charge.

Within a few horse-lengths of the Thrall footmen Marhoust reached up and clanged his visor closed. The front lines of the Thrall foot panicked – turning to run, throwing their spears

wildly, or simply dropping to the ground in fear as the slashing swords and spears were leveled toward them.

With a roar Marhoust crashed through the front line of enemy troops. Two Thrall foot went down under Broadback's rush, their screams of pain drowned out by the rising crash of metal. Marhoust slashed his sword left and right, laughing wildly as he watched arcs of blood spray up from his sliced foes. Within seconds he had ridden through the Thrall foot, and in the distance he spied a line of Thrall cavalry riding hard for him.

He pulled up on Broadback's reins and turned to bring his wedge back through the retreating Thrall troops. He veered, and a sword slashed out at him from where his lead lancer should have been riding. He barely parried the blow with his own weapon, then turned to see a Thrall footman standing below him. The footman, having lost the element of surprise, turned to flee. Marhoust let him go and squinted through the limited vision of his visor. He rode alone.

Turning back, he saw his men scattered along a thin line of Thrall troops who had somehow held their positions. A number of lancers had fallen, their horses screaming and flailing in the snow. Instead of following him through, the lancers had reined up and engaged in melee! Cursing their lack of discipline, Marhoust suddenly realized that he was surrounded by enemy troops. Most attempted to run by him, ducking in panic to avoid his blade. But several realized that their lines had held and they turned towards him, their faces masks of hate as they shouted for blood.

Marhoust spurred Broadback back towards the Griffin lines and swung his blade wildly about him. The warhorse screamed in fury, his kicking front legs splitting the face of an enemy who dared to get too close. But the ring of enemy troops around him raised their shields and slashed at Broadback's legs. The valiant horse surged forward through the crowd as the Thrall troops screamed and continued their assault from all sides. Marhoust's eyes searched desperately for help as he tried to maintain control of the bucking beast. He was only yards from the lancers when he heard Cayl shout his name over the din.

A Thrall spear slipped through the ringed mail on Broadback's neck and released a dark spray of blood. The mighty horse screamed and collapsed. Marhoust was pitched to the side like a huge boulder, his fall broken by the bodies of his assailants falling under him, their bones cracking beneath his enormous armored weight. He landed on his back and somehow held on to his sword, but within moments Thrall warriors leapt on top of him, shrieking insults, thrilled at the chance to kill a helpless knight. He roared and swung his sword aimlessly above him. With gruesome satisfaction he felt it bite into the flesh of his enemy.

A clash on the side of his helmet stunned his senses and shifted his visor, obscuring his vision even more. More enemy troops jumped on top of him and pinioned him down. He was helpless. Blades dug into the seams of his armor, searching for a place to pierce through the ringed mail shirt. Furious at his fate, he roared again helplessly.

Unbidden, a phrase from his youth came to him. "Bear your pain well." A wandering priest, with a tangled beard, soiled robe and dirty feet who occasionally visited the castle of Lord Bates. Learning of young Marhoust's dreams of knighthood, the old man with stale breath had intoned, "Bear your pain well. For once the gods see fit to remove you from this life, it will be all peace and comfort. Peace and comfort."

There was no peace or comfort now. Marhoust felt an enormous impact pummel his side, and a spray of blood splashed through his visor. He groaned in agony but the weights on his arms were suddenly gone. Through his crooked visor he saw a horse circle over him. Cayl's voice yelled orders as someone grabbed Marhoust's arms and lifted him up. The pain in his side

wracked him, but he was standing again. He quickly reached up and yanked off his helmet. With his tattered golden cloak he wiped the sweat and blood from his eyes. Cayl stood next to him and swung his blade in an arc to keep away a semi-circle of cursing Thrall foot troops. Several other lancers, also on foot, were gathered about him. Truwas was still mounted, rearing his steed at the enemy to keep them at bay.

“Back to the lines!” Cayl screamed. With Truwas covering them on the horse, the small troop backed out of the melee. The once pristine snow-covered plain was now trampled into muddy swaths and dotted with patches of crimson snow that steamed from the muddied ground. Wounded men begged for help or reached out with hands to grasp at legs as men tripped over them. If the pleas were from a Thrall man, the lancers quickly ended his suffering with a thrust of their blade. If the man wore Griffin colors, they grabbed him and dragged him back toward their lines, trailing bloody smears along the ground.

The Thrall began pulling back as well. The battle was over. Marhoust and the lancers stopped to catch their rasping breaths. Marhoust bent over, gripping his side. He was covered in blood from head to foot. A huge dent in the side of this armor bore the mark of a horse’s hoof, likely from Truwas’ horse as it jumped astride him. There were bright scratches at the seams of his armor where the Thrall warriors had tried to pierce him through with their blades. He could not yet tell if any of the blood that covered him was his own. Cayl stood beside him, steam rising in clouds about his head, his armor covered with smeared gore. He had lost his helmet and there was a bloody gash on his left temple. He wiped absently at the flowing blood as he scanned the field for remaining Thrall footmen.

“The Thrall retreat,” Truwas noted grimly, dismounting next to them. While his armor was also covered by streaks of blood, he appeared unharmed. “The Lord Commander has sounded a regrouping, although it looks as if Dragis continues to harry the enemy.”

“A victory?” Marhoust rasped. His side throbbed painfully.

“Yes,” Cayl breathed, surveying the bodies around them. “Certainly a victory.”

“But our losses were heavy,” Truwas stated, his voice hard. The old weapons master, sweat steaming off him, aimed an accusing stare at Marhoust. He took a step towards Marhoust and spit at his feet. “I tried to tell you the men were not ready to fight in that formation—”

“If they had held the wedge we would have exacted double the losses,” Marhoust insisted.

“If you had obeyed the Lord Commander we would have suffered half!” Truwas countered, jaw jutted out, fists clenched as if to strike. “Men are dead because they were taken off their horse! Because they rode in the wrong formation!”

Marhoust raised his fist and raged, “If they had held their formation—”

“They were new—”

“Then their trainer is at fault!” Marhoust barked. With an enraged growl, Truwas charged, drawing back his fist.

“Enough!” Cayl yelled. He wrapped himself around the struggling weapons master and pulled him into the other lancers who helped restrain him.

“The Lord Commander approaches,” one of the lancers murmured.

Feeling a touch of dread, Marhoust looked up. Connall, with Ophas at his side, galloped up to them. The two knights reined their horses in and halted. Marhoust gritted his teeth against the pain and stood up a little straighter.

The Lord Commander reached up to lift his visor, his eyes blazing with fury.

“Marhoust,” he declared. “Your orders were clear.”

The pain in Marhoust's side grew with each ragged breath. But he met the Lord Commander's gaze and held it, willing himself not to respond. The attack had not gone as he had envisioned, but it had still been the right thing to do.

The Lord Commander stared down at him. The horses whinnied with impatience. The sounds of combat were quickly fading, replaced with the cries of wounded men.

Connall finally spoke. "You will be taken into custody and confined. Truwas, Cayl, take this man's weapon and escort him to a cell in Castle Travis. See his wounds are treated and that he is fed. There he will await my summons on charges of disobeying the Lord Commander's order."

The Lord Commander turned his horse and galloped off towards the reforming lines of the foot. After a second of hesitation, Ophas followed without a word.

For a moment, Marhoust's mind raced. He wanted to explain himself, but the harsh reality of the Commander's words struck him dumb. His plan was strategically sound. It would have worked if only the lancers had followed . . .

Without a word, he handed his sword to Cayl. He could not look his friend in the eye as he turned and began limping back towards the castle, each step causing a flash of pain that thankfully drove the angry questions from his mind.

Chapter Three

Baron Loras Fralen toyed with the glass of brandy in his hand, twirling the brown liquor in a slow circle. His chair sat close to the roaring fireplace, and the pages of a thick tome laid open his lap, unturned for nearly an hour.

His steely grey eyes stared absently at the soaring eagle emblem of the late Lord Caron Pinixer embroidered in the rug at his feet. With winter fast approaching the Baron was loath to remove anything that kept the incessant cold at bay – even the coat of arms of his conquered enemy. The walls exuded cold, so overwhelmingly that the hunks of granite could have been ice carved from the mountain peaks. Embroidered window-coverings as thick as grain sacks failed to quell the chill breezes that penetrated every room. The smoke-darkened stone walls seemed to soak up the torch light, leaving the hallways shadowy and bleak. Each murky room looked like the last – frigid, grim and uninviting. Everything about this castle reminded the Baron of a tomb.

He should have sent for his own possessions in the summer, but he had not expected to remain here long enough to need them. Since the day he conquered the keep he had hoped to return home to Kosan in the arid, southern region of Thrall. He had not seen his daughter Elyce in over a year, an eternity to a ten-year old. She had almost given up begging for his return in her letters. He longed to return to the warmth and sunshine, but King Coriun had ordered him to remain.

Now the king had ordered his emissary here as well, and matters were worse. He closed the book and decided to find Donal, his second in command. He donned a heavy fur-lined cloak and left his quarters, moving briskly down frigid stone hallways dancing with shadows from sputtering torches. Even though he had demanded the servants heat the halls with twice the usual braziers, he could still see his breath misting out into the air. And the winter had barely begun. Why had the Pinixers ever chosen to live here?

The Baron made his way down several flights of the central staircase. At each landing, he nodded curtly to the bored guards, who quickly snapped to attention. In the great hall, servants cleaned up dinner from the rough wooden tables. Bright embers glowed in the eight huge fireplaces that ringed the room, outlining the carved stone griffins on the mantles in a sinister orange hue. The dim light could not reach the soaring timbers of the ceiling, and the dark expanse yawned above him like a starless night.

The Baron pulled out his fur-lined gloves and approached the guards at the massive iron-bound courtyard doors. “Have you seen Captain Donal?” he asked them.

“Yes, m’lord,” one of the guards offered with a salute. “He went up on the wall to visit with the men on watch, not more than a few moments ago. You should catch him at the west station.”

At a motion from the Baron, the two men hustled to open the massive doors, which creaked loudly from the strain. “Get some oil to those doors and have the servants deliver watered wine to the sitting room,” the Baron commanded. The frigid air outside enveloped him

like a smothering blanket. He hurried across the icy cobblestones of the inner courtyard, bending his head against the stiff wind that blew flurries of light snow across the darkened yard.

The silhouettes of guards huddled around their firepots dotted the stone wall nearly thirty feet above. The Baron put his gloved hands on the thick metal rungs of the ladder and began to climb. He hoped to find Donal quickly. He did not fancy the idea of making a complete round of the walls in the icy stiffness of the winds tonight.

At the top of the ladder, he saw several men gathered around a firepot looking over the western gates. Coarse sand had been scattered on the walkway to cut down on the slipperiness of the ice that coated the smooth stone at night, and he treaded his way carefully to the men.

“—then I could see that huge bastard Dragis not fifty feet away from me!” the familiar voice of his captain cried, pointing off into the darkness. “And I thought: this time I will send you to your rightful place in hell beside your father and brothers!”

“Captain Donal,” the Baron interrupted. “Save the stories for later. We must talk.”

Donal stopped abruptly and turned around, his arms still outstretched. The other three men, their faces hidden by thick fur capes, snapped to attention at the unexpected appearance of their Baron.

“Stories?” Donal exclaimed, his white teeth gleaming through a thick blond mustache and beard. “I was telling the men of my attempt to engage our friend Dragis the Giant in battle this morning! But, as usual, he ran from me.”

The Baron shook his head. His second officer’s excitement – no, *love* – for battle and the yarns it spurred were legendary. Donal had joined Fralen’s command just before the late King Tromin had ordered a campaign against the skurling hordes seven years ago. The young warrior swiftly made a name for himself with his sword and his audacious behavior. When Fralen decided to take a small group of warriors and scale the walls of Pinixer castle in the early morning hours, Donal was one of the first men Fralen chose to accompany him. They were finally spotted here on this catwalk, and it was Donal who won control of the western portcullis and opened it for the main force. After Fralen’s former captain and close friend Zuman was killed during the subsequent fight for the Lord Caron’s tower, there was little doubt which of the remaining officers deserved the post.

“I want to speak to you regarding the battle this morning,” Fralen said. “And the mission.”

Donal nodded grimly and followed him down the ladder. As they entered the keep, the Baron noted with satisfaction that a guard was already applying oil to the hinges of the great doors. The two men turned into a small oak-paneled room that bordered the great hall. The Baron removed his cloak from his broad shoulders and hung it on a wall peg. A mirror hung over the long fireplace running the length of one wall, and he glanced at the grey hair streaking through his close-shaven temples. Wrinkles touched the corners of his eyes, a reminder of how long he had been away from home. He appraised his newly grown mustache on his upper lip and saw it was also speckled grey. He would likely have his servant shave it off in the morning.

Donal finished adding several logs to the fire and Fralen motioned for him to take a seat.

“I heard that Lord Chagaris has arrived,” Donal commented. A bottle of the watered wine was warming over a candle on a small table, and Donal filled two mugs. “Are you finally to be granted leave to return home?”

The Baron, standing in front of the growing fire and enjoying the warmth soaking into his body, shook his head. “You have not earned your first command, if that is what you ask. There

was no mention of a leave.” He turned and lowered himself into a seat, taking a proffered mug from Donal.

Donal extended his booted feet towards the blazing fire. “Did Lord Charagis ask about the battle?”

“Of course.”

“And what did he say?”

“First he asked if we had picked men for this mission who matched the ‘specifications’ in his orders. I told him we had followed his instructions to letter, though assigning the dimmest men in our command to such a dangerous mission made even less sense than the vague orders they were given. He didn’t seem to appreciate my opinions on the matter.”

Donal pulled at the blond beard that surrounded his wide mouth. “We lost a great many men today simply to slip three of our own into Travis disguised amongst their troops. Do you honestly believe they are capable of continuing whatever ruse the emissary has in mind? We have no way of getting orders or messages to them.”

The Baron rubbed his brow with his hand, “I asked Chagaris about his reasoning for choosing such men, but he did not give me an answer. I expect we will learn eventually. Once he heard that we believed three of the six chosen men had been able to infiltrate the Griffins, he was too thrilled to pay me much attention. He said we had been fantastically successful.”

“What is the King’s emissary like?” Donal asked. Fralen heard the unspoken question: is he the monster everyone claims? In the two years since King Coriun’s ascension to the throne, Lord Chagaris had seen his influence expand rapidly. He was a member of the Order, a society of learned men dedicated to serving the nobility of Thrall, but Chagaris was despised by the populace for the numerous proclamations he made in the name of the King. He had confiscated lands and livestock, increased levies for the army and even taxed couples who produced too few children. It was by Chagaris’ direct orders that Fralen had embarked on the foolhardy skirmish with the Golden Tide this morning, a battle that had not gone well.

The Baron took a drink from the mug. The diluted wine was a harsh swallow after his exceptional brandy, and he forced down the drink before he answered. “He was not what I expected.”

At that moment there was a knock at the door and the guard outside called out, “Baron, Lord Chagaris would speak with you immediately.”

Damn, the Baron thought. “Of course, let him in.”

A diminutive bald man in fine green robes trimmed with red velvet swept into the room, his rotund face breaking into a delighted grin as he rambled forward. He held out his right hand, while in the left he gripped an iron staff the length of a walking cane capped with a carved head of a raptor. The Baron held out his own hand, which the robed man cupped with his soft, chubby fingers and shook vigorously, looking up into the Baron’s eyes and exclaiming, “Baron Fralen, I’m so glad I found you!” Chagaris continued shaking the Baron’s hand for an unpleasantly long time, finally giving it a squeeze before he let go.

“Lord Chagaris,” Fralen said. “This is Captain Donal, my second-in-command. He personally helped capture this castle – opening the portcullis himself.”

Donal stepped forward and Chagaris shook his hand as well. “May I join you?” Chagaris asked.

“As you wish,” the Baron replied, politely but not warmly, taking his own seat. Chagaris plopped down heavily into Donal’s chair with a sigh, resting the cane across his knees.

“Would you like some wine?” Fralen asked.

“Oh, no, no, no,” Chagaris insisted, smiling broadly and waving a plump hand in dismissal. The Baron relaxed slightly, hoping that the visit would be brief, but his hopes were quickly dashed. “You know, how silly would it be to give up an opportunity to share a drink and some tales with our esteemed eastern commander and his captain? I will take you up on your kind offer. I have heard that Lord Pinixer kept a fine cellar.”

Fralen went to pour Chagaris a drink as Donal asked, “Emissary, was your trip comfortable? The bird carrying word of your visit arrived only this morning.” Fralen and Donal both knew the trip east through the mountain passes required nearly three weeks – yet the bird had only been sent yesterday. As if Chagaris had wanted to surprise them.

“I did send a bird from Charlhom almost a turn of the moon ago but it must have fallen to some misfortune – perhaps an eagle – I have seen many of them on my journey.” Turning to Fralen, Chagaris asked, “An eagle was Lord Pinixer’s sigil, was it not?” As Fralen nodded Chagaris chuckled, “Perhaps Lord Caron interferes with us beyond his grave, reincarnated as his favorite bird!” Fralen failed to find the humor in the remark. “Regardless, I am glad I thought to send the second bird ahead yesterday – how rude it would have been of me and my retinue to show up on your doorstep without any warning at all!”

The Baron said nothing and simply handed Chagaris the mug of wine.

“The cold here is frightful,” Chagaris continued. “Not like your southern homeland, Loras. I was just through that region, three turns of the moon ago. When I left Baron Redwin’s camp outside Kaleb it was so hot and humid – within moments of bathing I was soaked through with sweat again. If I remember correctly, your lands were doing very well. The homes there were among the nicest in the realm, although Radic would change that if they could.”

“I am sure that our southern armies will not let that happen,” Fralen replied. Puzzled, he asked, “You said you left Baron Redwin’s camp? I thought Baron Orman commanded Kaleb.”

“He did,” Chagaris responded pleasantly, leaning back and cupping his mug in his hands. “But I had to execute him. King Coriun abhors poor performance in his commanders. Orman’s losses to the Radacians were frightful. Every turn of the moon he sent messages requesting more troops. The King had to call up more levies, with nothing to show for it.” Chagaris smiled at him apologetically and commented, “But I am not here to discuss the lack of performance of other commanders, I am here to hear about *your* victories! You have won each of the five campaigns you have commanded. The King is obviously quite impressed with your record. But, is it true that you personally have never suffered a single wound in combat?”

Certainly, it was a good sign that Chagaris was aware of his spotless combat record, but rumors of his fortune in battle could be interpreted as cowardice on his own part. “I have never suffered a cut from a blade,” the Baron stated. “Maces and flails have found their target often enough, and during the rebellion around Turyl I broke an arm in a fall when my horse was killed, but it is true that no man has ever drawn blood from me with a sword or spear. I fail to understand why this story makes the rounds so.”

“Fascinating,” Chagaris exclaimed, ignoring Fralen’s apathy for the subject. “You must be blessed by Ulrik the Powerful, eh? Watched over and protected as the clerics would have us believe?”

The Baron didn’t know how to respond to that remark. While the smallfolk of Thrall prayed to many gods, the Kings largely supported Ulrik the Powerful, building temples to the stern and militaristic god in all the major towns. Fralen personally had little patience for religion and even less for clerics. He had driven all clerics out of his own lands ten years past when their

useless prayers failed to save three of his children from the wasting disease. As best he could surmise, the clerics were charlatans and thieves, feeding off the fears of peasants.

Did Chagaris know of Fralen's dislike of religion? Did he care? The late King Tromin had tolerated nearly any religious order that did not question the sanctity of the nobility. Barons were allowed wide latitude in how they handled such matters in their lands, with the understanding that allowing a cleric to gain too much influence over the peasants could be dangerous to everyone. Fralen realized uncomfortably that he did not even know King Coriun's position on the subject.

"I guess I have just been lucky," Fralen replied finally.

"Lucky . . . yes, lucky," Chagaris mused. "And yet despite your luck you have also lost a great number of people closest to you. Your wife. Your children. Many of your closest advisors in battles, have you not? That must be difficult as well."

The Baron's unease simmered into a veiled anger. How dare this petulant man bring up his family. Or mention his lost officers as if their blood were on his hands. He reached for his glass again. "We all die eventually, Lord Chagaris. It is just a matter of how and when."

"Well, such difficulties certainly warrant a drink," Chagaris commented mildly, scratching at his chin with one fat finger as he watched Fralen. "I have taken enough of your time and really should return to my room. Thank you for the wine, Baron. I expect that I will want to talk with you tomorrow. You will be available?"

"As you command," Fralen replied, his voice even despite his anger.

"Excellent," Chagaris said. He bounced to his feet and Fralen and Donal rose as well. "Nice to meet you captain." Before Donal could even respond, Chagaris swept out of the room, leaving the two warriors staring at the door.

"I certainly had something else in mind," Donal said, shaking his head. "I pictured him wearing long black robes with an embroidered skull on the front as his sigil. Maybe a silver mask with bestial features."

The Baron seethed. "What was all that about? He obviously wanted me to know that he had researched my background and knew all about my family – but to what end? All the talk of my 'luck' and the fact that I have never been wounded by a blade in battle. Did it not sound as if he accused me of cowardice?"

"He has never seen you in battle," Donal objected. "He knows nothing of your leadership." Donal's expression broke into a wide grin. "I could see you were upset, but at the end there it almost sounded like you threatened him."

Fralen frowned, "I didn't mean it like that. I'm not quite sure where he was going with the conversation, but it almost felt like *he* threatened *me*."

"He was odd, truly, but he represents the King and why would the King possibly threaten you? You took Pinixer for him – a task which everyone believed impossible – with far fewer losses than anyone could have dreamed. It was a fantastic victory. Our enemies the Griffins are stuck down below the pass, the Golden Tide all but helpless against us here in this castle. The gold mines work day and night to enrich the King." The younger man slapped the table with one callused hand and declared, "You are the most successful commander the kingdom has ever known! What possible reason would there be for you to fear him?"

Fralen shrugged. Certainly it was a foolish idea.

"Unless," Donal paused, meeting the Baron's gaze. "You think the King fears *you*?"

The Baron scoffed, "Why? I have faithfully served him and his father before him."

“Undoubtedly so. But let us put ourselves in his place.” Donal was caught up in his story-telling mode, becoming more animated by the second. “Perhaps he fears you *because* you never lose. ‘Fearless Fralen’, whose record is spotless and whose blood has never been drawn in battle. Served unquestioningly by your men, you can snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, like when the skurling horde threatened Blackbear’s lands.”

“The heralds exaggerate that tale,” the Baron objected. “You should know as you wrote most of the lyrics.”

“Regardless,” Donal continued grandly. “While King Coriun, who unlike his father has never led a military command, sits on his royal arse in Thrall you accomplish one impossible task after another, giving the heralds more fodder for fantastic tales! Imagine his fear – you *never* lose a battle. What if someday you were to face him on the field?”

“That is treason!” the Baron stated, his eyes flashing. “I have no desire for Coriun’s throne. I have never sought to be sung about by the blasted heralds. Nor have I sought the ‘impossible’ tasks that I have been given. I do as my King orders to the best of my ability.”

“Surely,” Donal agreed in a teasing tone. “I would never suggest otherwise. All any king could ask for is a loyal commander who never loses a campaign and who is so popular with his troops that they would follow him into hell.”

“There is no point in this speculation,” Fralen declared. “I am loyal to our King and have no aspirations other than to soak in the hot springs of Kosan instead of freezing in this drafty cursed castle. The King has nothing to fear from me, and I am sure I have nothing to fear from him. Given the emissary’s reputation, my imagination likely gave more meaning to his words than was intended.”

Donal rolled his eyes. “If it were only his veiled threats over a glass of watered wine perhaps I might agree with you. But what of the other things he has asked of us? We arranged his room exactly as he requested. The items are there, and the windows have been tarred over.”

“I have no idea what to think of that,” Fralen replied, feeling chill again even though the room was finally comfortably warm. “He asked at least twice this afternoon if we were sure we had discarded the specimens from the three men we know were killed in the battle.”

Fralen did not wish to voice his own uncomfortable conjectures, and he suspected Donal felt the same. Everything having to do with the strange orders from the emissary had stunk of forbidden blood magic. Sorcery might be commonplace in ancient legends and mother’s tales, but the Kings of Thrall had banned its practice for generations. It was an unspeakable evil that would destroy anyone foolish enough to meddle with its power. Thrall was a kingdom of warriors – strength and iron were the means of influence and power. The late King Tromin, an imposing warrior king whom the Baron had respected and served for most of his career, had once ordered him to capture and execute men the King had proclaimed “plotters and false wizards.” The men had claimed to be able to foretell the future, create salves to heal diseases, and even control the mind of one’s enemy. The Baron considered them charlatans preying on the minds of the weak, and when captured they were cowardly and craven without exception. They certainly had possessed no magic to save them from the flames of the public pyre.

But Chagaris was the king’s emissary – his voice was that of the King. He had given orders, and despite his misgivings Fralen had followed them – as he had followed orders from his king his whole life – to the letter.

Finally, Donal asked, “I should continue my rounds. Do you require anything else?”

“No,” the Baron replied wearily. “I should rest. It has been a long day.”

“Truly,” Donal responded. He stood, grabbed his cape and headed for the door. The Baron watched his captain leave and then wearily got to his feet. With one last deep draught of the distasteful wine, he returned through the gloomy hallways to his own quarters.

The sun broke through the clouds the next morning, warming the air and melting the snow-dusted cobblestones in the courtyard. Messengers from the lower camp reported no activity on the part of the Griffin forces, so Donal and several of the officers departed on a hunting expedition for the day. The Baron would have loved to join them, but he knew that he needed to remain available for the King’s emissary. He pulled open the window-coverings, letting the sun into his sitting room. Basking in the light at his desk, he took in the breathtaking view from his window.

Pinixer Keep was a forbidding castle, nestled in a wide pass between ridges of snow-capped peaks in the Sauris Mountains. Its skillfully-crafted towers blended into the jutting mountaintops, many of which thoroughly blocked the transient sun. The ice beneath their shadows was nearly as old as the mountains themselves. Each of the keep’s three towers commanded an impressive view of the pass in both directions, and an unyielding stone wall enclosed them with the great hall and barracks. Massive wooden drawbridges to both the east and west lowered over a dry moat filled with rough stones and wickedly-placed iron stakes poking out of the frozen earth. Fralen shook his head as he tried to imagine taking the castle with any traditional tactics.

Off to the east he could dimly make out the town of Travis in the distance. The enemy’s Golden Tide cavalry remained encamped there. An impressive, disciplined force. They were well trained, well supplied, and fearless in battle, but they were made for fighting on the plains. They would never retake Pinixer Castle. With luck, they might be capable of overwhelming the lower camp Fralen had ordered constructed at the base of the pass, but they dared not try. Even in victory their losses would be devastating and their accomplishment trivial.

The distance between Pinixer Castle and the lower camp was not great, but the steep climb exhausted even the strongest of men. Troops rotated between the lower camp and Pinixer Castle as circumstances allowed. Entertainment was easier for the men to find in Pinixer than in the lower camp, even if it was only offered by debased widows scratching out a meager existence in the dilapidated town surrounding the keep. Small hovels, many of which had been gutted to the foundation for firewood, dotted the wide, rolling mountain pass all around the castle walls. Most of the inhabitants had been killed during the battle, fled, or imprisoned and put to work in the nearby mines.

Why anyone had remained there was a mystery to Fralen, as a more desolate place he could scarcely imagine. The winds were chill and cutting, with constant barrages of snow and ice. In his homeland, the breezes flowed over the mountains warm and dry. The land there was also rugged, but flowers and blooming bushes found soil enough to brighten the landscape.

His Lady Verice had nurtured gardens of flowers that had been a wonder to behold. Her roses, vast bushes of blooms in yellow, red, pink and white, were so fragrant that he would swear he could smell them leagues away as he returned home from campaigns. She had always been in those gardens, and he loved how she had looked when he would find her there toiling among her favorite blossoms – her lustrous dark hair pulled up tight in a bun, the sweat gleaming on her almond skin, honey-gold eyes that curved up at the corners. She would run to him when she spied him returning, crying in delight.

The first three children Lady Verice bore him – little Gergi, Lori and Saru – had all been born with his own light complexion and grey eyes. Even his bastard son had his look so strongly that there had been no denying his duty when the boy was delivered to him. But Elyce, his fourth and only surviving child, was her mother reborn. Her skin was dark and flawless, and she shared her mother's golden eyes, so intelligent and full of mischief. His servants had doted on her since the moment of her birth, even as they mourned the loss of her mother in the days that followed.

The Baron's thoughts were interrupted as a servant stepped out onto the balcony. "M'lord. Lord Chagaris' guards report that he asks for you to meet with him in his quarters."

"Inform them I will be there presently," the Baron responded. The servant silently padded off. He had hoped the emissary would not call for him so early, or perhaps at all.

He rose from the desk and crossed his mostly empty quarters, reaching for his uniform jacket. He passed the fireplace and eyed his many trophies lined on the mantle, each taken from a vanquished foe. Without allowing himself time to consider the wisdom of it, he picked up a jeweled dagger and concealed it in a deep pocket of his trousers, comforted somehow by its weight.

Several minutes later he approached the quarters that had been prepared for the King's emissary. Two huge warriors in gleaming chain stood watch outside the door, spears held at the ready and short swords within easy reach of their mailed hands. Their flat gaze sized the Baron up carefully as he approached. He felt a touch of anger at being scrutinized so in his own keep, but they opened the door for him without a word.

The only light in the room came from a dim lamp burning on a table in the far corner. The flame was set low, and the Baron waited at the doorway to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. There was a strange herbal odor to the room, a harsh scent that stung the Baron's nostrils and made his eyes water. He could feel the trails of vapor swirling thickly in the darkness.

"Ahhhhh," came Chagaris' voice from the gloom. His voice sounded exhausted, deeper than the Baron remembered from yesterday. "Please, come in. Close the door behind you."

"If your lamp requires more oil I would be happy to send the servant for some."

"No!" Chagaris rasped. "This light is sufficient."

The Baron closed the door. There was a grim onus about the dark room, as if it were angry at his intrusion. His small blade in his pocket suddenly seemed like no more protection than a child's plaything. He stood there uncertainly.

"Over here to your right," the emissary commanded. "Come to the couch. Sit down." The Baron slowly shuffled his way over, feeling with his feet and arms for the couch. The overpowering smoke hovering in the air stung his eyes and he stifled a cough. Concealed beneath the smoke was another odor, heavy, oppressive. Blood? He felt the couch and slid into it, knocking his knees against a hot brazier. The coals smoldered within, their dim light just revealing a stack of papers on the side table next to him. His eyes adjusted slowly to the gloom until he saw the silhouette of his guest sitting in an overstuffed chair across from him. Several lumpy, unrecognizable objects were scattered on the table in front of him.

Chagaris began, "I forgot to ask you yesterday. Is it not odd that none of the men questioned after you took Pinixer could enlighten us as to what happened to King Tromin?"

The Baron answered carefully, "I found it odd at the time, but there were very few officers left to interrogate. And the troops claimed to know nothing." It had been widely believed that Coriun's father had been abducted by the troops of Pinixer while hunting in the

mountains. His horse had been found wounded and his companions and guards murdered. A shield had been found as well, bearing the sigil of the house of Pinixer. It had been enough evidence to cause Coriun to launch the campaign that culminated with the Baron's triumphant capture of this castle. After the conquest, the Baron had sent search parties throughout the keep, its dungeons, and even the nearby mines in search of his missing King. His men had interrogated the Pinixer officers taken alive, but all denied to the death any part in the abduction.

"Unfortunately, poor King Coriun still lacks closure about the disappearance of his father," Chagaris mused. Suddenly, the emissary gasped in a quick, hurried burst of breaths, before resuming a more measured pace.

"Are you unwell?" the Baron asked. "Should I summon a healer?"

"No!" Lord Chagaris grunted. "I am fine. Your earlier report was correct, Baron. Three men made the keep in Travis."

"How can you know that?" the Baron asked, wishing instantly that he had not.

There was a long silence before Chagaris responded, "All three are in the keep." Through the gloom the Baron could make out the emissary's figure leaning forward on the chair to set something on the table in front of him. "It appears one is terrified and plans to escape. He is probably useless to us now." The Baron clenched his jaw as Chagaris spoke. There could be no denying what the emissary, a counselor to his King, was doing. There was no other explanation for how Chagaris could know what happened in Travis. Chagaris continued, "One is in the barracks. He seems confused . . . he will likely be discovered soon. He has forgotten his orders."

"They were instructed over and over to blend into the keep."

"Yes," Chagaris replied. "The stables, the weapons room, possibly in the kitchen. One of them . . . he is in the kitchen. Excellent."

The Baron pressed on. "I assume you summoned me here for a reason?"

There was movement from Chagaris, and the sound of a bottle carefully set on the table. "Yes. Information." The emissary paused, then leaned over and picked up one of the lumps from the table. "What do you know of Castle Travis?" The voice was listless, deeper, and somehow rougher than last evening.

"I have never been there," Fralen said. "We know it is much larger than Pinixer, although not as defensively sound. The keeps of the Confederation are similar in that they each contain a Great Hall, barracks, several towers -"

"Enough." Chagaris murmured. He was silent for several moments, but the Baron could see his hands moving over the lumpy object on his lap. "Who is Lord Commander since Aidan Biel assumed the Griffin throne?"

"A man named Connall."

"Do you know Connall's sigil?"

Six years past Fralen had met Connall at a tourney in Ritchfield. Thinking for a moment, he responded, "A sea-bird of some sort. Connall's family was from Barnett, a city bordering the Sunburst Sea."

"A sea-bird," Chagaris murmured, apparently to himself. "Yes. I have seen him." An uncomfortable silence followed, and another swirl of noxious smoke assaulted the Baron's lungs. Chagaris asked in a dreamy, distant voice, "What of Mor Dragis?"

"The Captain of the Golden Tide," Fralen answered. "A formidable warrior. His family were bannermen to the late Lord Pinixer, one brother was killed during the taking of the gates,

his father and another brother killed defending Lord Caron's tower. He was away from Pinixer, serving in the Tide at the time. Why?"

"He drinks heavily. Could be impetuous, prone to impatience and action? Perhaps unwise if prodded?"

"I cannot say," the Baron responded, befuddled as to how Chagaris had reached such conclusions. "I expect him to be a determined, committed, and dangerous foe."

Chagaris said, "We will see. If something happened to the Lord Commander, Dragis would take command, correct?"

The Baron hesitated. "Perhaps for a time. Dragis has been captain for years, so when Aidan Biel took the throne we thought Dragis would be picked to lead the Tide, but we understand Connall was named over him as Lord Commander."

"Dragis is quite the physical specimen." Through the gloom it looked like Chagaris petted something sitting on his lap. "A pity he fights for them."

"As we are the victors holding Pinixer," Fralen said, "I am quite satisfied with our own men." Anger pricked at him and he demanded, "How are you able to gain this information?"

Chagaris snapped, "You should stifle your curiosity and be content to use my information to accomplish the King's orders."

"I intended no offense," the Baron replied in as measured a tone as he could manage. There was an uncomfortable silence for a few moments. Fralen resisted coughing as the incense tickled his throat. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes," Chagaris replied. "Maintain a high state of alert among the troops."

"Connall prepares an attack?" Fralen asked doubtfully.

"No," Chagaris said, "But it is possible that in the very near future *you* will attack with all your strength. With the goal of taking Castle Travis."

"Attack Castle Travis? As the winter approaches? We haven't the men. I am confident that in due time – perhaps before the spring – Aidan Biel will see the futility of this war and sue for peace."

"Baron," Chagaris hissed. "King Coriun has many plans of which you have not been apprised. Peace with the Griffin Confederation is not our goal."

"We have no siege weapons readied, nor even the logs felled to begin their construction. My orders –"

"Orders change! If you need logs, begin procuring them. Must I remind you that I speak for the King?" Fralen clenched his fists in the darkness but remained silent. "Good! Be ready, await my orders, and do not question me. It irritates me when commanders question orders, and when I get irritated the King finds new commanders! Do you understand?"

The Baron straightened himself in his chair and muttered, "Perfectly." On the table between them something moved and scurried toward Chagaris. A rodent? Why did Chagaris with the room so dark? What was Chagaris hiding?

"One other thing," Chagaris barked. "Do you know if High Lord Aidan or Lady Deidre ever visit Travis? Attend to the troops?" Fralen shook his head. "Pity," Chagaris muttered. "It would be so helpful if she would."

Fralen commented sharply, "I would imagine that the High Lord sends his underlings to report on such activities, as King Coriun does with you."

Chagaris ignored the jibe. "I am really quite tired and need to rest for now. You may return to your own quarters."

The Baron prepared to stand when something stirred again on the table. Enough of Chagaris' intimidations. As he stood up he casually knocked the pile of precariously balanced papers next to him into the brazier. Dry paper flared up into flame. His eyes widened in horror.

Squirring about on the table were two clay figures, with small legs and arms. The clay was bright red, and stuck into the figures were the "specimens" Lord Chagaris had ordered removed from the men chosen to infiltrate the Griffin forces. A ripped-out fingernail was pressed onto one of the arms, and a long flap of bloody skin was wrapped around it like a belt. The head was even more horrific – a tooth pressed into the face and a twist of the man's hair jutting up from the head. Suddenly one of the figures jerked toward Fralen and a single large eye opened in the middle of its head, focusing on him.

"What by the hells!" Fralen swore, ripping his dagger from his pocket.

"Hold!" Chagaris commanded, his voice suddenly deep and strong. Fralen tore his gaze away from the ghastly figures and stared in disbelief at the emissary. Chagaris cradled a third clay figure in his cupped hands, one of his thumbs rubbing the head in a circular motion as a parent would comfort a child. Another bloodshot eye in the figure stared at Fralen as its diminutive legs kicked against Chagaris' chubby fingers. Where had the eyeballs come from? They had not removed eyes from the men!

Behind the emissary Fralen spied two figures slumped against the wall. Their dress identified them as castle servants. Their arms and legs were trussed up in wire and dried blood crusted over their chests. Open mouths hung down in agony, and angry, reddened holes gaped where eyes had once been.

"How clumsy of you, Baron," Chagaris said, his voice low and threatening. "Normally, what you have just seen would warrant your death. But that may be premature."

Fralen could not take his eyes off the monstrous doll in Chagaris' lap.

"King Coriun has sanctioned all that I do," Chagaris said, his intense gaze focused hard on Fralen. "My arts achieve a greater glory for the Empire than mere armies could achieve. If you are wise, you will see that. But it is not yet time that commoners learn the benefits of our abilities. Given your contributions to the Empire, Baron, I want to spare your life. But you must not speak of this to anyone. To do so will place the responsibility for many senseless deaths on your head. Are we agreed?"

The Baron swallowed thickly. "Yes," he gritted, forcing himself to replace the dagger in his pocket.

"Good," Chagaris replied after a few moments.

Fralen pointed to the bodies of the two servants behind Chagaris. "Why them?"

"They displeased me," Chagaris responded. "Although they denied it, at least one of them had spat in my food. For that alone I would have had them executed, but this way their death served a purpose." Chagaris moved his fingers under the stubby arms of the obscene clay figure in his hands, supporting the tiny figure as a father would a child until it was standing on his lap. "I know this must appear shocking to you, Baron, but you must understand the tremendous advantage my art will give us over our enemies. Through my pets here I can see what our men in Travis see, hear what they hear, and even control them for a period of time. With a few well-placed puppets among our enemies, I can further the King's goals in a way that may ultimately save the lives of countless troops. You and I both know that the strict order and organization that Thrall brings to society in the territories we conquer is a vast improvement over their previous lives. But these Griffin lords fear to lose their power, and will gladly sacrifice the lives of their smallfolk to enhance their own position. Is it not wise to achieve our purposes

while preserving the lives of as many of our citizens as possible? If you consider it carefully, you will see it is quite a bargain.”

Fralen knew his very life hung in the balance. He lowered his eyes and said, “You are the King’s emissary. It is not my place to question you.”

“A wise philosophy,” Chagaris replied, his tone full of suppressed mirth. He was enjoying this.

“Is there anything else?”

“No. You may leave now. Try to be more careful this time.”

Fralen turned stiffly and made his way towards the door.

“And Baron,” Chagaris called out. “Please refrain from bringing weapons into my quarters in the future. I would prefer not to order my guards to search you every time we meet.”

Biting back an angry retort, Fralen closed the door behind him.

Path of Peril