

## Of Kings and Castles: Pawns

*By Derrel J Weaver*

### **25 Vires, 1027 I.C.: The Battle Strewn Streets of Sicaris**

A low opaque haze of smoke and dust rolled thick over the carnage that was once the proud city of Sicaris. The moans and pleading cries of the wounded rose from the gloom; occasionally the high-pitched whinny of a dying horse pierced the low murmur of death rising from the rubble. Many a gurgled dying breath passed unnoticed as another victim of the battle died alone in the cold and dark of the shattered city. Figures moved through the rubble and miasma like ghostly apparitions, searching for family members and fallen comrades. A banshee-like wail of pain marked each sorrowful discovery as the ghosts dropped to their knees to cling to their lost loved ones. The children lucky enough to have survived were the worst. They seemed to have an endless supply of tears, and the dead far outnumbered the living.

Slowly the fog of battle parted to reveal two of the exhausted defenders of the city moving to the stairs of a large fountain. The fountain was once beautiful; its pristine white marble surface reflected the glistening water flowing upon its surface. Now, the fountain flowed red with the blood of battle, mirroring the state of the sorely wounded city. Both men were covered with sweat, grime, and blood. Most of the blood belonged to the scores of Yhing hir felled by their blades, but an ample amount also poured from the gaping wounds borne by both.

The larger of the two wore the remnants of cleaved lorica segmentata, which had been pierced in many places, most notably where the broken lance still protruded grotesquely from his side. The legionnaire's proud Coryani features were smeared with grime and his short, silver-blond hair was matted down with sweat and blood. Despite his wounds, the larger man virtually carried the younger, smaller man who limped along beside him, leaning heavily upon him for support. Though his bulging muscles strained with the effort and the exertion caused fresh blood to flow freely from his painfully pierced side, Hurrious val'Tensen uttered not a single word of protest or complaint. In fact, he did not speak at all. His mind was elsewhere, thinking about the true burden he carried that day. Gently placing his young charge down upon the blood-slicked steps, Hurrious assessed the damage the battle had wrought on his cousin, General Roderick val'Tensen.

Even to an untrained eye, Roderick was a mess. His Andrean plate was mangled and holed in a dozen locations, and most of them seeped fresh blood. However, it was his leg that needed immediate attention. It had been cleaved through to the bone, which shone white against the bleeding red meat of the gaping hole. Looking forlornly at his tattered cloak, Hurrious instead called over his faithful war hounds. The two dogs dutifully trotted to their master, their senses alert for danger while their long pink tongues still licked the fresh blood dripping from their jowls. Reaching into one of the dog's packs, Hurrious produced his white and gold toga and began ripping it into bandages. He knew the wound would require magical healing to mend properly, but the duo of val'Tensens had long ago given away all such luxuries to the civilians they had nearly died defending. Without preamble, Hurrious wadded up a large piece of toga and stuffed it into the hole. Then he bound the wound tightly with several long strips of ripped cloth. Roderick tensed beneath his crude ministrations, but to his credit, the young Milandisian noble did not cry out in pain. Once Hurrious was satisfied that the bandage would keep Roderick from bleeding to death, he turned his attention to Roderick's split helm and what he feared he might find beneath it. The helm was nearly cleft in two above Roderick's left eye and the blood from the wound beneath had matted the long black locks that cascaded down Roderick's back. Very slowly, and very carefully, Hurrious eased Roderick's helm from his head, pulling away the matted hair to reveal...a scratch. Hurrious breathed a sigh of relief and smiled at the thought of how the scar might drive the young ladies of the Milandisian Court crazy with desire. Even Elandré might find the scar appealing if she ever returned from wherever she had gone. When Roderick looked up and locked eyes with Hurrious, though, all the mirth of the moment instantly vanished. Roderick's gray, red-rimmed eyes were older now. In the last few days they had seen too much death: Death by his order, death by his lack of orders, death by his actions, death by his inactions, death by his own hands, and death at the hands of countless others. He had been witness to the death of friends, loved ones, and even entire families. He had witnessed the death of the innocent alongside the guilty, and he had witnessed the death of an entire city. In the last few days, his eyes had witnessed too many types of death and now their cold gray depths reflected the death of his own innocence. Gone was the bright and joyful

glimmer of happiness, the light of youth and love of life. Roderick's haunted gaze pierced Hurrious more painfully than the lance in his side. Roderick broke the silence first.

"I made it?" Roderick's voice was quiet and raw, as if he hadn't spoken for days, and his words were more of a statement than a question.

Hurrious studied his cousin's face for a long moment before dropping his gaze and retrieving his water skin. He longed for something stronger, but water would have to do. He handed it to his cousin, who was already drinking greedily when Hurrious found his voice. "Yes. You made it," he said sadly, the names and faces of many who didn't coming unbidden to his mind.

Roderick took several long pulls from the water skin. The water was cool and refreshing and he drank until the skin was empty. Unconsciously, he wiped the runoff with the back of his hand. The water mixed with the grime and dried blood created the appearance of a freshly bloodied hand. For a long moment Roderick stared at his bloody hand in silence. Then he said quietly, "I wish I didn't." Looking up, Roderick again locked eyes with his cousin. "Hannz, I understand now," he professed, his voice full of emotion and pain. Tears welled in his eyes, then began their slow journey down his face, tracing thin lines of clean flesh onto his cheeks as they blazed a pure trail of sorrow through the grime and blood.

Searching his heart, Hurrious could find no wondrous words of encouragement, nothing to take away the pain. Instead, he replied, "I know. And for that, I am truly sorry." Watching his cousin's tears fall, Hurrious felt his own eyes well with tears. He knew words were pointless now. So, he rolled to his side and sat next to Roderick, their backs leaning against the blood-spattered base of the fountain for support. Though the movement caused the lance in his side to shift painfully, it was nothing compared to the pain in his heart.

For a time, the two sat weeping in silence, surveying the destroyed city around them. Finally Roderick said, "How did it come to this?"

Hurrious sighed heavily and thought to himself, "Good question. How *did* it come to this?" Hurrious let his thoughts drift back, to sift through his memories of things he had seen or heard, trying to organize them in his weary mind to find an answer to that very question...

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### **1 Lampyris 1027 I.C.: City of Vengeance, Beyond the Wall of the Gods**

Uhxbrectit looked to his new guest, a strange feeling growing within him. Was it pride? So quickly had this one grown and learned. He was a fine instrument, to be sure, perhaps his finest yet. Finally satisfied, the ancient Devil Lord growled, "You may go now. Tell your mother that everything is in place. You will have all you need from me." As the handsome young Yhing hir turned to go, Uhxbrectit's clawed hand reached out and grabbed his shoulder, a little too firmly. "Just one thing. Do not fail me... son."

### **15 Foedus, 1027 I.C.: Republic of Altheria, Somewhere on the Serpentine Path between New Althré and Semar**

Looking at the strange markings in the dirt, Phun Ghurhk sat astride his prized Altherian mountain stallion. The tracks were not from Sseth as he had expected, but, judging by the pattern, whomever they belonged to seemed to be tracking a party of ss'ressen. The Sseth tracks did not bother him for he was near the end of his tour with the Shining Patrol and well acquainted with the vile Reptilian Empire. The new tracks however, were troublesome. They were humanoid, that much was clear, but they were thinner than a human's tracks and very numerous. With the shortage of troops, no members of the Patrol should be out this far, at least not in the numbers he was seeing. Very troubling. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Phun turned his attention back to the trail that lay ahead of him. Checking the dispatch case he carried for the hundredth time today, he pulled his canteen from his saddlebags and offered his horse several palm-fulls of water before taking any for himself. Once his thirst was quenched, he resumed his steady pace, his senses alert for the danger of the Sseth... and the new, unknown group in the area.

The Council of Wisdom had personally selected Phun to deliver these dispatches to General Muatma Bunkakin, and he would not fail them. In his four years of service to the Patrol, Phun had gained the well-deserved reputation as the finest courier in the known lands and he did not wish to soil his status this close to his retirement. The steady beating of hoofs and a small cloud of dust from the dry trail were the only traces of his presence as he continued his solitary quest toward Semar.

### **16 Foedus, 1027 I.C.: Republic of Altheria, On a Mountaintop Observation Post**

The message was clear. The Shining Patrol was running on a skeleton crew and the Ssethregorans knew it. For the second time in a month, the Serpent Empire had sent a large force to probe the defenses of Semar. The last force was over a thousand strong, and this one was at least twice that number. The first probe had run straight into a large force of heavy cavalry returning to Milandir to bolster the forces decimated by the recent fighting there. Not many Sseth had survived that chance meeting. General Muatma Bunkakin carefully scanned the approaching force with his spyglass, taking pains not to allow light to reflect off the lens. He and two score of Altherian sharpshooters were cunningly concealed on this mountaintop and he did not want to inadvertently give away their position with an untimely reflective flash of light. Slowly, he set down his spyglass and sighed. There were simply too many of the enemy. Licking his parched lips in the heat, he slid his eyes to the left and right down the line. These men were some of his best sharpshooters, but these 40 men were no match for the thousands approaching below, no matter how skilled. Shifting his gaze to the mountain canyons to his left, he uttered a silent prayer to Althares for the Captain and crew of the *Cadic's Grace*. They were the Patrol's only hope of winning this engagement and they would have to silently and invisibly snake their way through the treacherous canyons to avoid the prying eyes of the Ssethric archmages and elementalists. Any miscalculation during their journey would lead to a calamitous explosion that would signal their deaths...and very likely the deaths of everyone on this mountaintop.

The General involuntarily flinched as the top of a tree only 100 yards away was sheered off near the top with a loud "*crack*." Shaking his head, he smiled when he realized how low the Captain had to be to sheer off that treetop. Even before the falling treetop had hit the ground, General Bunkakin had retrieved his flintlock rifle and pulled the hammer back, mimicking his well-disciplined men. Normally, a commanding officer had to shout orders to his men, but these elite warriors knew their business well. Their business was death, and business was about to pick up. Each targeted an obvious Sseth officer or spellcaster, and though none of them realized it... they all wore smiles.

A sudden roar of cannon fire brought the *Cadic's Grace* shimmering into view as elegantly as its namesake. The massive broadside was brutally accurate and caught the Sseth forces unawares. Hundreds of warriors simply vaporized into red mist with the opening volley. The Shining Patrol was open for business. The seasoned warriors and commanders of the Sseth forces instantly began trying to rally and regroup, but one by one, the mountaintop sharpshooters turned those cries for order into blood-gurgling cries of death. And the crew of the *Cadic's Grace* was not yet finished with them either. Onboard the ship, the Captain shouted, "Ready about!" and his hand-selected crew sprang into action. The rigging became frantic with activity. The Boatswain dropped the main topsails in the same instant he deployed the radial masts and unfurled the stern port sail. With but a thought, the Captain sent a gust of wind against the sail, causing the entire ship to rotate on its center axis and bringing its starboard cannons to bear on the Sseth forces. "Fire!" The instant the cannons were aligned, the ship rocked with its second massive broadside. Hundreds more Sseth evaporated into bits and pieces of gore, stalling any attempts to rally or reorganize. On the gundeck, the port cannons were nearly reloaded, and now the crews of the starboard cannons began the same arduous task. "Ready about!" Again the Boatswain sprang into action, but this time the stern port sail was furled and the stern starboard sail was unfurled. A thought from the Captain rotated the ship on its center axis a second time, bringing the port cannons to bear once again. "Fire!" The ship thundered for the third time, rocking against the massive volley of 100 cannons. "Full sail! Helmsman! By the lee!" Instantly, the stern starboard was furled and the radial masts were stowed. The main sails were hoisted and filled with wind as the Helmsman tacked the vessel to starboard, using the wind to gain speed and separate the ship from the Sseth forces. "Buckets over port!" Dozens of crewmen poured buckets of fragmentation bombs over the port side of the ship onto the heads of their enemies. They exploded on impact, wreaking further havoc. "Deckguns! Clear the port gunwale!" From the stern, amidships, and bow of the ship, fire began pouring out of the large-bore, 20-barreled, rotating flintlock rifles, each manned by a crew of two. By the time the 60 shots had cleared the barrels, *Cadic's Grace* had already begun to shimmer out of sight, leaving a devastated Ssethric force in its wake.

Surveying the destroyed force in the valley below him, Muatma could not suppress a small feeling of pride. He was nearly ready to stow his spyglass when he noticed the Ssethric elementalist gesturing toward the rapidly departing ship. "Akilha!"

"I've got him, Sir," was the calm reply at his shoulder. For most men, this would be an impossible shot, but Akilha was known for making the impossible possible in all ways relating to flintlocks. The young Altherian wearing the cocky grin squeezed the set trigger on his rifle and sighted down the long magical tube attached inline along the top of the barrel. The elemental's snout appeared in the tube, though the target was easily 700 yards away. Taking a breath to steady himself, Akilah exhaled and during the natural pause between breaths, he gently squeezed the trigger of his beloved rifle. *"BANG!"* The rifle jumping in his hand was a surprise, as is the case with all true marksmen. Looking through his scope, it took a couple of seconds for the round to find its mark. The left eye of the Ssethric caster suddenly imploded, spewing blood and brains out the spherical hole in the front and the decidedly larger, jagged hole in the back of its head.

"Good shot!" came the chorus of accolades from his companions.

"Damn crosswind," he thought dejectedly.

### **15 Lampyris, 1027 I.C.: Hinterlands, a Cave near the Seven Horsemen on the She'haulk Mountains**

"Son, sit with me a moment," sizzled the feminine voice from the darkness. The charismatic Yhing hir wearing the bright green turban and sash of a Wa'dir set aside the Golden Falcon Standard he had been working on and moved to sit with his mother. "What did your father have to say?" the Immortal Hyena Queen hissed from the darkness.

"He bade me not to fail him."

"Just a moment," she interrupted him.

Slinking into the cave unheard and unseen to everyone except the Hyena Queen, who sees and hears all in her domain, was a man dressed in the garb of one used to working in darkness. "You sent for me, my Queen?"

"Yes." It was more a breath than a word. "I have a task for you."

"Who is it you wish killed?" he replied to the darkness, his eyes narrowing. He did not like conducting business in front of this newcomer who seemed to occupy so much of his Queen's attention lately.

In the shadows, the Hyena Queen's face contorted into a hideously feral grin as she read her minion's thoughts as easily as one might read a textbook. "I wish for you to kill a Val. His name is Sergei val'Mordane. You will find him in the wastes of the Blessed Lands, delving into matters that should be... left to rest. Wear this. It will lead you to your prey." A gnarled, age-spotted hand reached from the darkness, holding a necklace made from human teeth strung together with vocal chords. Dangling from the center was a freshly removed human eye, the bloody nerve endings still twitching as they hung from the gray-irised sphere.

Without emotion, the assassin simply took the necklace and placed it around his neck. No stranger to death, torture, or insidious magic was he. However, he did scream in pain as the eye suddenly animated and burrowed into his chest. Momentarily disoriented by seeing from a third eye, the assassin tumbled to the ground. Adjusting to the new sight granted by the Queen's demonic gift, the assassin regained his composure and stood quickly. The eye on his chest looked to his left and he turned his head to follow its gaze. "By your leave, your Majesty. I will begin the hunt."

"You may go," hissed the darkness. Without further comment or sound, the assassin was gone. "Now, where were we? Oh yes. Your father bade you not to fail him, but you serve me... do you not?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Good. Are the preparations made?"

"Yes. I have the necessary information. Tomorrow I will travel to Sicaris, to the chapter house of the Knights of the Holy Pillar. I will enlist them to my cause by promising to rid the Holy Oasis of your forces. Once they are removed from the Oasis, others will flock to my banner. I will become known as the chosen Wa'dir who reclaimed the holiest of sites from your vile grasp. Once I have enough warriors, I will conquer this entire region, starting with Sicaris."

"Do you think me vile?" The Hyena Queen stepped from the shadow, her form shifting from that of an old hag to one of a comely young lady. Her voice mirrored the change, evolving from a sizzling hiss into a sultry purr. She lovingly stroked a single finger down her son's handsome cheek, her lips pursing into an alluring pout.

"Of course not, Mother."

"Good. For while you will *serve* me tomorrow, you will *service* me tonight." With that, she leaned down to kiss her son.

## 12 Libidine, 1027 I.C.: Nevanne, breakaway province of Ulfila, Coryani Empire

During a rare moment of solitude, General Menisis val'Tensen sat hunched over a large antique oaken chest. Within its meticulously maintained confines, his calloused fingertips absentmindedly inventoried his personal collections. The upper portion of the chest was bursting with military awards, decorations of valor from nearly every portion of Onara and from every major campaign carried out by the Coryani Empire. Once, he had worn these awards with pride. *Pride*, he thought, *an ugly master*. One by one, he gently picked up the awards and carefully placed them on the chair next to him. The Laurel of Valor, three separate Armillae of the Laurel of Vigilance, and scores of other Coryani medals joined dozens of Altherian awards, and an ivory scroll tube containing a single letter of marquee he gained in his youth. With a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, he placed the ivory tube aside as well.

Reaching back into the chest, the General's hands found the hundreds of bound pages that made up his personal journal. Filled with accounts of daring, valor, and triumph, they offered little comfort now. Just under his journal, his gaze fell upon a painting of his family. Placing his forgotten journal to the side, Menisis gently picked up the painting and longingly traced his fingers over their faces. Tears welled in the General's eyes as he silently contemplated the fate of his family. *My family*, he thought. *Cursed for eternity, and now I have failed them too*. Shaking his head, he returned his attention to the chest. Just below the family portrait, the chest held copies or originals of several ancient texts, including the val'Tensen family history, some of the rarest holy texts of Hurrian, the val'Tensen family pledge of loyalty to the Empire, several of Emperor val'Dellenov's tragic military dispatches, the Milandisian declaration of secession from the Empire, and the Milandisian val'Tensen family's declaration of support for Milandir. "Augustos was a fool to throw away the honor of our family... just to sate his carnal lusts," lamented Menisis bitterly. Looking at what remained in the bottom of the chest, he amended sourly, "And, he's not the only fool."

The last three parchments were his own battle plan to conquer Moratavia, the Peace Treaty that had ended that brief conflict, and the Emperor's subsequent order to engage the army of the Swords of Nier. Reaching to the desk behind him, the General drew forth another collection of papers. These parchments contained the Emperor's written declaration labeling Menisis a traitor to the Empire. Shaking his head sadly, the General placed these papers with the others and was beginning to replace other items in the chest when a firm knock at the door drew his attention. Setting aside the remaining items in his lap, he moved through the low lamplight to the sturdy oaken door of his private chamber. "Yes?"

"It's me, Cousin," came the thickly accented and muffled reply from beyond the door.

Smiling in recognition, the General unlocked and opened the door, revealing an extremely disheveled looking young Val flanked by two large, equally harried canines. Momentarily ignoring his appearance, the General wrapped his cousin in a warm embrace. "Hannz! It's so good to see you! But, by the Gods, you stink!" he said with a small laugh. "And so do they!" finished the General as he released his embrace and nodded in the direction of the dogs.

Slightly abashed, the young Val replied, "It is good to be seen. I apologize for my appearance, but we rode straight through. And as for them," he said as he reached down to lovingly rub his faithful companions' ears, "they can't help it. They're Milandisian."

Normally the General would have at least smiled at the good-natured joke, but instead, he winced slightly, a fact not at all missed by his young cousin. For their part, the dogs seemed to know they were at the center of some joke, so they simply turned twice, sighed, and laid down. Smiling at his companions, Hurrious looked up to see the General studying him intently.

"By the fires of Nier, boy, what happened to your armor? Bandits? Voei?"

Locking his steel gray eyes with those of his cousin, the young Val replied very simply, "Storm." With that one word, a thousand more passed between them, though none were spoken. Breaking the moment of awkward silence, Hurrious continued, "So?"

"So. How did you survive?"

"Saved by our enemies." Hurrious smiled, looking to the silver nametags dangling from the spiked collars of his dogs. One carried the inscription *Calsestus*; the other, *Adolphos*.

This time, the General smiled too. "I bet that stings, being saved by your enemy."

The young Val smiled broadly at the rare jest by his normally solemn cousin. "I bet it does at that. In any case, the storm nearly killed us, but I had some magical trinkets I picked up in Marketplace. They mended us quickly enough. Well, everything except our equipment."

"I had heard you were in Solanos Mor... solved some major problem for the King, won the dwarven medal of honor. I even heard that you later negotiated a treaty with the dwarves on behalf of the Arch-Prelate of Valentia, whom you served at the Convocation, but you turned down the role of acting as his Seneschal. That is, if my sources are correct."

Uncomfortable with accolades of any kind, and knowing where this conversation was leading, Hurrious changed the course of the conversation rather abruptly. "I would like a drink."

Raising an eyebrow, very much aware of his cousin's discomfort, the General relented. "Yes. Where are my manners? Would you like some wine?" The General moved to a small table and poured several fingers of the burgundy liquid into two wine bowls.

"Please." Hurrious took the offered drink, and winced as the Savonan red burned his broken lips. But, he did finish the wine, and refilled the bowl himself before settling down to business. "I bring news from the Convocation."

"Ah yes, the Convocation. As I said before, I understand you accompanied Morushun val'Ishi instead of our own val'Tensen Arch-Prelate from Ulfila. I'm very interested to know why." The General settled into his chair and resumed his task of putting away the items from the chest.

"Because the Arch-Prelate of Ulfila has the morals of a jackal, the ethics of a val'Mehan, and the piety of a dung pile. He is more interested in Imperials than principles or faith. Gold guides his conscience, not Hurrian. I could never serve one such as he. During the Convocation, our delegation actually had to *buy* his neutrality between you and the Emperor. Before we purchased his vote, he swore to present your head on a platter to the Emperor."

"Did he now?"

"Yes. I also discovered that he has become quite the drug peddler to augment his finances. If we were at any other location, I would have killed him myself, or died trying. By his actions, he is a threat to humanity and a stain on civilization. He should be removed."

"Do you have any proof?"

"Of course not," Hannz's face twisted into a grimace. "If I had proof, I would have delivered it... with the Arch-Prelate's head."

"I see. Centurion!" Almost immediately, an officer opened the door and entered to answer the General's call.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Take a Century and find the good Arch-Prelate. Tell him that I would very much like to take a meeting with him at his earliest possible convenience... and be sure he understands that *right now* would be very convenient for him."

"Yes, Sir!" The officer turned abruptly and departed, leaving the two Val alone again.

"Where were we?"

Hurrious reached into a bag on his belt and withdrew a single piece of parchment. "This is a list of people who attended the Convocation from an organization called the Mourners of Silence. They are an evil group dealing in assassinations, theft, robbery, and worse. They have actively plotted against the Church, mankind, and even Elandré val'Assanté."

The General took the parchment and studied it briefly. "This one..."

"Is my problem," the younger Val replied evenly, cutting off his cousin.

"I see. Some of these people have been to my manor. They have been my guests."

"I know."

"You are sure of this information?" The sour look on the young Val's face was the only answer the General needed. "And what would you have me do with this information?"

"I care not," he said with a shrug. "This is simply something I thought you should know. I have also given it to Morushun val'Ishi." Holding up his hand to stave off the question he knew was coming, "I gave it to him because I believe he is the head of another secret organization known as the Orthodoxy. Before he was murdered, Felician val'Mehan confided in me that he was the head of this organization. I believe Morushun is his replacement. This organization seeks the reunification of the Mother Church. Since these two groups are obviously aligned against each other, I put the information in the hands I thought would benefit humanity most."

Impressed with his young cousin's flanking maneuver, the General nodded his head in approval.

"Well done. Is there anything else?"

"Well... I have no facts to back this up, but I also heard that the Emperor's uncle is actually his father."

The General's head snapped abruptly around to regard his protégé. "How accurate is this information?"

"It is a rumor without real proof. But, one of the deals brokered during the Convocation was for the Emperor to talk to his dead father through the val'Ishi Arch-Prelate. Wouldn't it be interesting to listen in on *that* conversation? Or, perhaps, even to hold one with the Emperor's supposed father's spirit ourselves?"

"You do know what this means if it turns out to be true, don't you?"

"That Calsestus is not the true Emperor. The real heir would be his brother. It would not surprise me at all if he moved against his brother soon. If I heard the rumor..."

The General looked vaguely disturbed by this statement and walked to his desk. Shuffling through reports, he pulled out several of note. "The Emperor has just ordered his brother's legion from the Western Marches to Savona. He has ordered the Legion of the Watchful Hunter to replace them."

"The Legion of the Watchful Hunter? Another rumor floating around the Convocation was that they were all dead, or undead, depending on which version of the rumor you heard."

"Your friend Rauth is from that legion, is he not?"

"Yes. We will see what more information we can find on that legion for you, once we return from Sicaris."

"So, you've heard?"

"Yes, everyone has heard. A Wa'dir warlord is trying to start a holy war. Many tribes are flocking to his banner, and he intends to destroy Sicaris. So... what are your plans?" The young Val moved over to his cousin's war map to study it more closely.

"I plan to defend the Empire. I am sending two legions to Port Talbith, just east of here. They will move by ship, north, to Censure, where I will join them." The General indicated various points on the map as he spoke, mirroring his words exactly. "I plan to ride to Milandir, collect the Legion of the Defiant Shield, and march them overland to Censure. There, I will rearm and re-equip them from the stores carried by the other two legions."

The young Val said nothing, but his face gave away his thoughts.

"You have something to say?"

"No. You are the General. You know what you are doing."

"Don't play the fool with me, Hurrious! Spit it out!" snapped the General, momentarily overcome by a very uncharacteristic anger. "Why should I play at something you have obviously perfected?" retorted the young Val, his anger rising as well. After a few tense moments, with his anger once again under control, he amended softly, "I am sorry, Cousin. Since the storm, I have had a very difficult time controlling my anger. Forgive me."

"I understand. I suspect the storm's full effects will not be known for quite a while. Anyway, you are forgiven, provided you answer my question," he said with raised eyebrows.

Sighing, Hurrious weighed in. "It won't work. The King will not allow you to march across Milandir with your legion, no matter how cordial your relations are. It would be political suicide. But you obviously know that."

The General eyed his youthful cousin, impressed with his grasp of the situation. Menisis knew very well the reality of the matter, but he was using this plan as a test, trying to draw Hurrious into a position that he had so far deftly avoided. Further baiting the trap, the General continued, "What would you have me do, then? March them into Naeraanth to join the other legions traveling by ship?" The General expected Hannz to agree to this part, but was instead surprised by the response he received.

"No. I would have you ask Duke Adolphos to lead your legion north, through Milandir, under a Milandisian banner. Perhaps he can even lead them into battle, side by side with you. That would allow him to repay his debt to you, allow King Osric to save face, and allow you to move your men as quickly as possible. You might even gain an ally, though I doubt that last part.

The General sat back in his chair, stunned, shock plainly displayed on his face. "Are you serious? Adolphos is a dog! He is a..."

"Val'Tensen. He, too, is a servant of Hurrian. He is part of our family, and has sworn to defend humanity, just as we have. It is in his blood. I know you hold no love for Adolphos, and neither do I. But I will not let my pride stop me from doing what must be done to serve humanity, and neither should you."

For a long moment the silence hung like a blade between them. Finally, Menisis nodded his head. "You know, you are just like your father. Stubborn as a mule."

Hurrious smiled. Rarely could he think of his father and not smile. "He was a good man."

"Yes. Yes he was. But Adolphos is not," countered the General.

"That is not entirely his fault," Hurrious answered pointedly.

"Do you think I made him the way he is?"

"No." Hurrious sighed. "No-one can make a man's soul into something it is not. Only the Gods can do that. But events can alter one's perspective and sanity. And anyone can see that events have not been kind to him."

"I see. So. What do you propose I do once Adolphos turns me down? Because you and I both know he will."

"I hope not, but you are probably right." Looking into the candlelight reflecting off the swirling red liquor in his bowl, Hannz suggested, "Perhaps Roderick would agree to help you."

"Roderick? He is just a boy."

"He has a strong spirit. I saw that when he disobeyed his father over the incident with Elandré. If you cannot heal the wounds of our family with the father, perhaps you should look to the next generation?"

"You are serious? He has little, if any, training. How can I turn an army over to him and give him the title of General?"

"My father once told me, 'The measure of a man is found in his deeds, not his titles, nor his decorations or wealth.' By all your measurements, he is a boy. By my father's measurements, he is a man, a good man. His heart is in the right place, and though he might still be innocent, he *can* be the right man for the job. He has a quick wit and steady nerve. He has courage. Since he has shown no one animosity, he might be able to engender a wide base of support from the other races and nations. I think the others will follow him. If he will take the title of General, I will follow him."

"Why won't you take the title?"

"There are only two titles I covet: Friend and servant of Man. I have no grand ambitions to become General, nor Defender of the Empire."

"Defender of the Empire is not just a title, boy, it is a duty!" Anger rose in the General's voice.

"Fair enough," Hannz replied calmly, a sadness creeping into his voice. "I guess my Empire is a little larger than yours. I think Roderick's is too."

The General smiled at the obvious bait. "Yes, you are definitely your father's son."

Hurrious again smiled at the mention of his father, but this time the joy had been robbed away. "I do not crave title, awards, or battle. I guess that is the real difference I see between us."

"What is that?"

Hurrious drew his sword and held it, palm up, to his cousin. "If I could lay this down right now, and never need it again, I would die a happy man. Would you?" Again the silence hung between them. "I beg your leave. I'm tired and need rest. When do we leave for Milandir?"

The General seemed momentarily struck by his young cousin's words. "You are coming with me? After you just said all of that?"

Hurrious sighed and replied sadly, "My Empire is large, and my sword is still needed. My blood is a duty, and I am its slave. I will see you in the morning." The young Val rose and left the room without another word, his dogs obediently following.

The General pondered his departed cousin for a few moments, then sat at his desk and began drafting a letter to Roderick val'Tensen.

### **3 Libidine, 1027 I.C.: Hinterlands, the Oasis of the Shining Pillar**

The handsome young Wa'dir stood with confidence, surrounded by the Knights of the Order of the Holy Pillar. In his left hand he held a bloody scimitar, and in his right he held aloft a traditional standard of the Yhing hir tribes called a Yik. His Yik featured a Golden Falcon, from which hung many dyed horsetails and the severed head of the Hyena Cultist who had been commanding the troops holding the Oasis. He stood at the center point of the Oasis because, for the first time in many years, the Yhing hir controlled this site, which was holiest of all. Gim'Karee addressed the Nawals, who had gathered at his request. He assembled them here to bear witness to his power, and to join it. Nawals from nearly all the tribes were represented here, including the mercenary Khur Gi, the Takomir, the Hurkomir, and even a few Vanomir. It was a uniting of the tribes, nearly unheard-of in recent times.

However, though they had gathered here together, Gim'Karee noticed that they were still huddled into tribal clusters. He would change all of that. He would give them a common enemy, and common blood. "You stand here in the holiest of sites as my guests, and that is good." Many of the Nawals murmured their agreement or shook their heads to show their gratitude. Others banged sword to shield to



show respect. Gim'Karee sheathed his scimitar and held his banner out to a Knight of the Holy Pillar, who accepted the Yik and bowed with respect. Gim'Karee held his hands up for silence. "Yes, it is good. But, it could be better." Many of the Nawals murmured nervously, unsure where the young Yhing hir was taking them with his speech. "You know of what I speak, but many of you will not say it. But, I WILL! Foreigners have overrun our lands; they have taken from us our birthright! They have taken from us that which Im'Gabarr gave to us so many years ago! I have reclaimed some of that birthright, but I will need your help to reclaim the rest! If you will fight beside me, we can reclaim all that has been wrongfully stolen from us. Even now, some of our Vanomir kin are in Sicaris, growing fat on OUR wages, forcing us to trade for what is already rightfully ours! They grow rich as they trade with the foreigners, making US their slaves. I say NO MORE!" The subtle inflections of his voice had entranced his audience who abruptly erupted into a loud and vigorous applause. "First Sicaris! Then, the Hinterlands!" He could barely be heard above the cheering, but his words had the desired effect. The cheering grew even louder. "TO WAR!" Gim'Karee walked down to his tent and all the Nawals followed him, save one.

Yeh Chu Li, also known as the Southern Fox, had come to the meeting at the behest of his master, Lo Kaijou the Black. The tall redhead of mixed Khitani and Yhing hir blood did not like what he was seeing at all. Lo Kaijou maintained the peace in this region. Peace was good for business, and war would be a disaster. Where would the food come from if they destroyed the cities and stopped trade? Where would they acquire weapons? The Hinterlands were very poor in such resources. Who would rule? This young Wa'dir? Leading a war and ruling a people were very different things, and this one called Gim'Karee made him nervous. Where was he from? Why had no-one ever heard of him before? Why did everyone feel so *compelled* to follow him? No, this was bad, and he wanted no part of it. Yeh Chu Li watched as the Nawals entered the Wa'dir's tent for a war council. He saw the tent surrounded by a protective ring of other Wa'dir and some of the Knights of the Holy Pillar. Shaking his head to clear away his nagging doubt, he turned, mounted his horse and rode off to warn Lo Kaijou of the coming storm.

If he had waited only a few more minutes, he could have heard the snarling of the hyenas and the screams of the Nawals...

### **9 Libidine 1027, I.C.: Kingdom of Milandir, City of Treslau**

The ringing of swords carried through the courtyard of the val'Tensen estate. Leaning against one wall of the courtyard, Divelos Norvitecus, Blade of Hurrian, watched the practice session with a mix of mild amusement and feigned disinterest while he chewed absentmindedly on a tree root. Standing bare-chested and covered in sweat, Roderick val'Tensen was hard pressed to fend off the vicious blows of his two more-experienced assailants. After the third time his sword clattered to the ground, the Abbot of the Order of the Blade stepped forward. "May I?" His voice was calm and even like a morning rain.

"Of course." Roderick yielded his sword to the slightly built, gray-cloaked man.

"When you hold the blade like this," Divelos adopted the pose Roderick had been using to defend himself, "you expose yourself to attacks from here, and here." The Abbot indicated the vulnerable areas with his left hand while holding the sword with his right. "But, if you move your back leg out of line, and raise the sword to here, you can defend yourself from most attacks, like so. Gentlemen, if you don't mind?" Roderick's two training partners stepped forward, timidly at first, but as their blows found empty space or were effortlessly deflected by the Abbot's longsword, they began to attack with their full fury. It didn't matter. While still chewing on his root, Divelos simply deflected or avoided every attack, giving pointers and a running narration of the combat to Roderick and his training partners. When his lesson was complete, Divelos effortlessly disarmed both his breathless opponents and sent them sprawling while he held both their weapons in hand.

"The Duke will see you now." The page's voice rang clear through the courtyard, now devoid of the sounds of combat.

"Ah, duty calls," he said, breathing easily despite the intense lesson. Turning his attention back to Roderick, he said, "Keep practicing. Higher guard, bent back leg. Got it?"

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir." Roderick turned his attention back to his training companions, who had just been so thoroughly humiliated by the Abbot, and he knew full well that those same men had done an almost identical job in humiliating him earlier. Shaking his head, he adopted the stance that had been shown to him and began practicing once again. "Hey, this works!" Pleased with his newfound prowess, Roderick continued to defeat the attacks of his increasingly frustrated partners.

Walking through the vast halls of the val'Tensen keep, Divelos was not impressed with the wealth and opulence so garishly displayed wherever his eye lingered. He was similarly unimpressed as he noted the family chapel had been severely damaged during the recent storm, and only now were work crews even beginning to clear the rubble. That did not speak well of the Duke, in his opinion. The Abbot was shown into a grand dining room decorated with trophies and regalia of the val'Tensen family's glorious accomplishments. "The Duke will be with you in a moment." As the young page left him, the Abbot wondered if the Duke realized all this pomp was lost on a simple monk, or if he carried on this behavior as a matter of course due to his time in the Royal Court. Taking in the room with a glance, the Abbot chose to sit in a simple wooden chair pushed up against the wall instead of one of the elegantly carved and upholstered dining chairs he would be expected to sit in. In a moment, another servant brought him a steaming cup of tea, which he readily accepted. The servant watched him quizzically, both for his choice of a seat and for the way in which he tasted the tea with just the tip of his tongue before fully drinking it. But, the servant gave no offense, and after ensuring that the refreshment needs of the Abbot were met, he left the dining room.

"Ah, Abbot Norvitecus, so glad to see..." The Duke's grand entrance was cut short by the monk's unexpected seating choice. It is difficult to convince someone you are glad to see them if you are looking in the wrong direction when greeting them, and the Duke was looking where the monk should have been seated instead of where he actually was.

"I am over here."

Duke Adolphos shot daggers from his eyes at his servant, who should have warned him that the Abbot was sitting in a servant's chair, but he said nothing. Instead, his face quickly shifted back to that of a cordial host. "As I was saying, it is good to see you. Won't you join me for lunch?" The Duke indicated the dining table with his hand. Sitting at one end of the vast table, the Duke was not surprised that the Abbot rose and then sat in the chair directly to his right instead of at the other end where he had motioned. The man lacked all social graces. "So, how are things at the abbey?"

"This is good tea. Why have you summoned me?" The Abbot was a no-nonsense kind of guy and had no intention of wasting words saying nothing.

"Very well. Let us get straight to business." Adolphos put an edge to his voice to let the Abbot know he was not pleased with his breach of protocol. "I think the time has come for the Order of the Blade to come to terms with their place in the hierarchy of our household."

"And where, precisely, is our place?" The Abbot's voice was calm but he kept his eyes averted from the Duke, much to the Duke's displeasure.

"The val'Tensens of Milandir fund your monastery. We have given you land, money, and sanctuary, and WE should be the only ones trained by your Order. Is that clear enough?"

"I see." The monk calmly took another sip of his tea. "If it is a simple matter of funding and land, I'm sure the services we provide to our monks would be welcomed in other locations if our choice of students bothers you."

Adolphos laughed out loud. "You really are naive. Don't mistake this for a conversation. You will do as you are told. You will stop training Coryani val'Tensens... and you will give me Precision. Now!" Adolphos had lost his composure and his hands were beginning to tremble. Still, the Abbot remained passive in tone, though not in word.

"No, we will not. Was there anything else you wished to discuss?"

"YOU WILL DO AS I SAY, OR SO HELP ME, I WILL DESTROY YOUR ABBEY STONE BY STONE AND PRY THAT SWORD FROM YOUR DEAD HANDS!" The Duke slammed his hand down on the table, spilling his own tea for emphasis. The loud bang resounded through the castle walls.

The Abbot very slowly raised his eyes above his cup of tea to look directly at the Duke. His eyes carried more fire than the steam rising from his cup, and they bore straight through the Duke, piercing him like a blade. Done without hurry, and quite deliberately to surely be noticed by the Duke, the Abbot rotated his chair from the table. He then turned his forward foot slightly to the left, opening up his hips to an attack stance should he choose to make one. But his simple words cowed the Duke without need of a fight. "You may test that assumption at your leisure. Thank you for the tea." Very slowly, the Abbot rose from his chair, his eyes never leaving the Duke. His simple, graceful motions brought the pommel of his longsword swinging into easy reach. Slowly, purposefully, the Abbot placed his cup of tea directly in front of the Duke. The clink of the cup was the only sound in the room besides the heavy, angry breathing of

Adolphos. "I can show myself out." Without making any noise, the Abbot departed, leaving the steaming Duke alone with his very good cup of tea.

### **19 Anguis, 1027 I.C.: The Blessed Embrace Orphanage, Enpebyn**

Thayer Dekens watched the two young boys playing at war. Thayer had seen enough of war to know it was not a game, nor was it something to celebrate. But, the innocence of youth allowed Phineous and André to do just that. Thayer hoped the boys would grow up without ever having to see war. Looking down to his journal, he began writing.

### **28 Anguis, 1027 I.C.: The Blessed Lands, Somewhere near the Lost Citadel of Nier**

The black-robed figure huddled over yet another skeleton. Carefully, he placed a small piece of black onyx into the skull's mouth and uttered an incantation. Within moments, the skeleton stood as a hellish red glow filled its eye sockets. Sergei val'Mordane smiled beneath the hood of his cloak as another creation joined the ranks of his ever-growing army. His smile suddenly faded to a look of shock, however, as the sword thrust through his back and protruded from his chest. It was a perfect killing blow. Sergei dropped to his knees and fell face down into the sand. Rennax smiled as he watched his prey fall dead to the earth, knowing the Hyena Queen would be pleased. Rennax shook himself violently and torrents of sand ran like rivers from his cloak. He had crawled flat on his belly for the last several hours, getting closer to his prey, watching, and waiting for the optimal moment to strike. When the opportunity finally did present itself, Rennax had coiled himself like a sand cobra and sprang forth with a perfect strike. Never had he made a finer cut, and he had made many during his years working for the Hyena Queen. He looked down at his victim with contempt. Sergei didn't move, didn't breathe; he was surely dead. Rennax's smile grew even wider as he contemplated what this stupid Val might have been carrying with him in this forsaken waste. He was obviously a wizard of some type, and they always had valuable trinkets. Rennax reached down and pulled his sword from the corpse, then rolled him over to begin his search.

"Hello, my new friend," hissed the corpse to a horrified Rennax. Sergei's hand shot out quick as a viper's strike and grasped Rennax by the throat. Waves of cold poured through the touch and Rennax could barely move. In an act of desperation, he again thrust his sword through Sergei's heart, twisting the blade with all his might. Bones snapped and cloth ripped, but Sergei's grip remained, and tightened. "I really wish you would stop trying to ruin my cloak. Or... are you trying to kill me? I find that funny, you see, because I am already dead!" Sergei pulled back the hood of his cloak with his free hand, and the taut white skin, the sunken, glowing red eyes, and the slightly fanged mouth smiling at Rennax left little doubt that Sergei was indeed a walking dead. The last bit of resistance left Rennax's body and he found himself hoisted off his feet by his throat as Sergei stood up. "So, what should we talk about?" Sergei asked casually, pulling the sword from his torso with his left hand while holding Rennax a full foot off the ground with his right. "Ah, yes, you were going to tell me all about yourself, and who sent you to kill me." If possible, an even more evil gleam appeared in his eyes. "But, not right away, I'm sure. First..." Smiling even wider, an altogether unpleasant thing by itself, Sergei slowly pushed a piece of black onyx into his new friend's mouth. He then began sewing Rennax's mouth and eyes completely shut. While the eye in his chest watched the vivisection that followed, Rennax tried to scream, but the noise was muffled through his sewn lips.

### **13 Lampyris 1027 I.C.: The Blessed Lands, a Campfire in the Middle of Nowhere.**

A blind old man wearing a tattered white cloak sat alone at a campfire, idly poking the embers with a crooked stick.

### **12 Libidine 1027, I.C.: Kingdom of Milandir, The Road Between Treslau and the Abby of the Order of the Blade**

Divelos Norvitecus rolled over the last of his attackers and checked for a pulse. This one was dead too. Of course, there was really no need to question them; he already knew who sent them. The Duke had indeed tested his assumption, and he had assumed wrong, very wrong, if he thought the monks of the Order would stand for such behavior. For a brief moment, Divelos thought of returning to the val'Tensen estate to settle the matter personally and permanently, but he knew the odds would be stacked too heavily against him. And, if the Duke had been foolish enough to order an attack on him... he would have to warn his brothers. They would need to make arrangements to protect the Order, their teachings, and Precision. Quickly, Divelos stacked the 12 bodies into a pile, gathered just enough wood to make a crude pyre, and lit it.

Driving a longsword point-down into the ground, he hung the fallen warriors' 12 holy symbols of Hurrian on the crossguard and prayed for their souls. As an afterthought, he reached to the Milandisian val'Tensen crest embroidered on his robes and ripped it free with one powerful motion. Spitting on it, he added the cloth to the holy symbols and hurried down the road toward the Abbey.

### **19 Foedus, 1027 I.C.: The Republic of Altheria, Semar**

General Muatma Bunkakin sat at his desk. His features were strained and his salt and pepper hair had given way to more salt than pepper since the Battle of Semar. Lines of worry on his face had recently become canyons. Behind him, a large piece of burned wood hung on the wall. In Altharin, it read, "*The Damned*." He scowled at his guest. "Excuse me?"

"I said that we had an arrangement. You would do well to remember it."

"I see."

"No, General. I don't believe you do. If you don't deliver on your end of the bargain, my associates will become most distressed. And, they might do something rash, maybe to you... or maybe to your family. But, I..." Something in the General's eyes brought the young thug up short. An icy chill traveled down his spine, as if someone had just walked over his grave.

When the General spoke, it was as if he were already talking to a corpse. "Citizen Wandabi. Let me convey the current status of our agreement to you in no uncertain terms. We have no agreement. I needed to trade with you to protect Semar. Now that that threat has been dealt with, you are irrelevant, except for the fact that you just made a potentially fatal mistake by threatening my family. When you leave this office, I will deposit one hundred thousand Owls into an account to be paid to anyone who pikes the heads of you and your associates on the walls of Semar should anything happen to my family, or me. I hear the Church of Cadic is quite good at collecting such funds." Rising to his feet, the General stepped closer and leaned very close to the now cowering man. His voice became a sinister whisper. "But, the money won't be necessary if you ever enter my sight again, because I will personally pike your head for the crows to feast upon, and I will sleep soundly that night." Regaining the commanding tone to his voice, the General called to an aide. "Altern! Escort Citizen Wandabi out of my sight. Should he ever be seen here again, show him in politely, and then bring me a pike!"

"Yes, Sir!" The young Altern tried very hard to contain his smirk, but failed. Motioning his arm toward the door, he continued with, "This way, Citizen Wandabi." When the man rose, it was evident a small puddle had formed beneath him. "I'll send someone to bring you a new chair, Sir."

"Very good. That is all."

"No, Sir, it isn't. Phun Ghurhk has arrived with dispatches from New Althré, and the Captain of the *Cadic's Grace* is here to see you."

"Very well. I will see Phun Ghurhk now. Tell the Captain to wait."

"Yes, Sir."

Moments later a dust-covered dispatch rider appeared and did his best imitation of a Shining Patrol salute. Under one arm he carried an official dispatch case. "Dispatch rider Phun Ghurhk reporting, Sir!"

The General smiled and returned the salute crisply. "Sit down before you fall down, Phun. Don't you think I know who you are by now?"

Looking at the soiled chair, Phun wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Um, I prefer to stand, Sir."

Following the Yhing hir's gaze, the General looked rather abashed. "Oh, that. Sorry." Pushing the wet chair away, the General pulled his own chair out from behind his desk. "Now, sit. That's an order." The General moved aside some papers and sat upon his desk, facing the young rider.

"Yes, Sir." Phun sat in the chair and, despite his best efforts, after several days in the saddle he couldn't quite suppress the satisfied sigh that escaped his lips. "I bring important dispatches from New Althré."

"I know. You were not supposed to be here until tomorrow."

"Yes, Sir, but you know me."

"Yes I do. Did you encounter anything unusual out on the trail?"

"Yes, Sir, many sets of slender humanoid tracks. It wasn't Sseth, Sir, but I couldn't quite place the tracks either. But," he hesitated for a moment, then continued, "there were a large number of them, Sir. A LARGE number of them." To Phun, the General looked distracted, perhaps preoccupied by something, and he was very surprised that he hadn't asked for the dispatches yet.

"I see. Several of our outposts have stopped responding. I thought it was Sseth, but this might be related. We will look into it. Is there anything else?"

"Um, the dispatches, Sir," he said as he held out the pouch. The General still did not move to take the offered package.

"Phun, how long have we known each other?"

The question surprised him, and he lowered the dispatches, sensing that something was indeed very wrong here. "Nearly four years, Sir."

"And your tour is nearly up, is it not?"

"Yes, Sir"

"And what will you do when your tour is over?"

"I think I am going home. I have heard that a great leader has risen among my people and united the tribes. He is a holy man, a Wa'dir. I would very much like to meet him."

"I see. If you will do something for me, I will sign your release papers tomorrow, and you can be on your way to meet this holy man."

"What would you have me do?"

"Arrive tomorrow."

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't. But, I ask you to trust me on this. I need those dispatches to arrive tomorrow, not today. Will you do that for me?"

Phun did not understand the General, but he knew Muatma was a great Nawal, and he trusted his judgment. "Yes, Sir, I will do this for you. When should I arrive?"

"Any time after sunrise will be fine. Thank you, Phun. When you leave, please tell the Captain of the *Cadic's Grace* to come in."

"Yes, Sir." Phun rose and left the office. He was confused, but he would honor the strange request from his Nawal. On his way out, he told the aide to send in the Captain, and his mind was already abuzz with plans to join his tribesmen in the Hinterlands at the Oasis of the Shining Pillar of Im Gi'barr.

The Captain of the *Cadic's Grace* entered the office of General Bunkakin with a cocky swagger. Seeing the General, his handsome face broke into a wide grin, his teeth flashing pure white in contrast to his very dark skin. Snapping a precise salute he said, "Captain Bunkakin reporting, Sir!"

The General snapped an equally precise salute to his son before speaking. "Come here and give me a hug, my boy!" The two men embraced warmly until the General began vigorously rubbing the top of the Captain's head.

"Come on, Father!"

"I know. You're too big for that now." Muatma waved his finger in the direction of his son, "But you are going to get far worse if you don't start writing your mother more often!"

"I know, I know. But, in my defense, I have been rather busy," he said with an easy smile. "Well?"

The General returned the smile. "Fine. You and your crew were spectacular. Happy?"

The Captain beamed at the praise. "Always. Of course, with such skill, discipline, and precision, and not to mention good looks, I think I'll soon be moving up to General and bumping the older men into retirement..." The young Captain cut short his self-indulgence when he noticed his father slowly stroking the burnt wood from "*The Damned*" with a faraway look in his eyes. His tone changed instantly to one of concern. "Father, is something wrong?"

The General was startled out of his reverie. He had been having reoccurring nightmares of the *Cadic's Grace* falling from the sky in flames, but he wasn't going to share those dreams with his son. He couldn't. "Yes? What?"

"I asked if something is wrong."

"Yes, there is. Tomorrow, dispatches will arrive from New Althré declaring General Menisis a renegade. Any forces commanded by him are to be embargoed from shipments of blast powder."

The young Captain looked at his father with a raised eyebrow. "Tomorrow, you say. The dispatches WILL arrive tomorrow. Did I hear that right?"

The General smiled at his son. "Yes. You heard that right. Although, by the time the dispatches arrive, I will have already sent out a very large shipment of blast powder to the General's troops moving toward Sicaris. I believe that shipment left this morning."

"I see. Well, not really. Where is all this leading?"

"When the dispatches arrive, I must obey the orders of our esteemed Council of Wisdom, so I must send someone to retrieve the blast powder shipment. Unfortunately, I ordered the leader of the caravan to use any means necessary to conceal himself from anyone trying to stop the shipment."

"Yes," the Captain paused, finally understanding what his father was saying without saying it, then continued with, "That *is* very unfortunate. So, you need someone to volunteer to go and retrieve the shipment?"

"I accept your offer."

The Captain smiled at his father. "And, I suppose the only place I can be sure to find the shipment would be at Sicaris?"

"That would seem to be the most efficient course."

"Of course. And, if the *Cadic's Grace* happens to witness any hostilities in the area that might threaten the shipment?"

"I expect you to use any and all means to defend yourself and your crew."

The Captain's smile faded. "Father, you are taking a huge risk to help Menisis this way. I know you two are close, but this could ruin you, me, our entire family. There are rumors of Yhing hir armies, Infernal armies from beyond the wall... if the *Cadic's Grace* is destroyed..."

"Did I ever tell you how Menisis got that scar on his face?" The General was looking out the window now, his face trying very hard to contain the emotions flowing through him.

His son noticed his father's strain and moved to stand with him, looking out the window. "No, Father. You never told me that story."

The General put an arm around his son and hugged him close. "A long time ago, a young and cocky Captain, very much like yourself, led a fresh Century of the Shining Patrol on a punitive expedition into the swamps. The Sseth had raided several outposts, and this man promised to make them pay. Against the advice of a seasoned young Altern, this Captain rushed headlong after the enemy and led his men straight into an ambush. They were slaughtered. The young Captain was grievously wounded and surrounded by Sseth when the young Altern appeared over his body, accepting the blows meant for the Captain. One of those wounds he still bears today. A scar on his left cheek." The General's left hand stroked his face, vividly remembering when the wound was still fresh. "The Altern picked up his Captain, gathered all the other wounded he could find, and took shelter in a nearby cave. For three days and nights, the Altern stood alone at the mouth of that cave, cleaving any Sseth who ventured too near. He was death incarnate. He was glorious. When our reinforcements arrived on the fourth day, they found a wall of bodies surrounding the mouth of that cave. The wall was taller and wider than a man, and standing in the center, the eye of death itself, was the young Altern Menisis val'Tensen. The man who saved my life, and the lives of the 12 other survivors of that expedition." Tears were rolling down Muatma's cheeks as he recalled the terrible carnage and loss of life. "I once asked him why he did what he did that day, and do you know what he said?"

The young Captain found that words had eluded him. He was too caught up in the imagery created by his father of the close family friend he thought he had known for so many years.

"He said, 'Because you were my Captain.' It never occurred to him to do anything other than to save me and as many others as he could. What kind of man would I be if I didn't try to do the same?"

The young Captain nodded, finally understanding a great many things that were a mystery to him until this revelation. Returning his father's hug, he finally found his voice. "We will leave at dawn."

The General turned and faced his son, looking at him as if trying to memorize his face, as if it were the last time he would ever see him again. "Son, be careful. May Althares guide you." With those words, the General kissed his son on the forehead and released his embrace.

"I will, Father," he replied simply. With that, Captain Menisis Bunkakin turned and went to inform his crew of their immediate departure.

### **11 Foedus, 1027 I.C.: Kingdom of Milandir, Farm Fields Near Naeraanth**

The young Val sat in the middle of the waving field of wheat. He was dressed in a fine jerkin of deep blue with gold trim, and lying on the ground next to him was his scabbarded longsword. In his hands was a black book in which he was idly writing. The gentle winds that moved through the golden stalks of wheat reminded him of his lost love, Elandré val'Assanté. Carefully, Roderick dipped his quill into a pot of ink and began writing. "Dearest Elandré..."

At the edge of the field three figures emerged from the wood line. Hurrious looked to his two dogs, and with a gesture from his hand, he sent both stalking in opposite directions. With a predatory grin, he began working his way forward as silently as he could. Anyone watching would have been hard-pressed to keep from laughing at the heavily armored Val tiptoeing forward with exaggerated steps, much like a mythical beast is often depicted in a really bad stage play.

Finished with his letter, Roderick pondered the lovely features of his would-be bride. Her angelic face, her porcelain skin, and her well-rounded figure were all that occupied his thoughts. So lost was he in his daydream that he never heard the impossibly comical figure sneaking up behind him. The throaty growl of a dog easing its head from the wheat directly to his left was his first hint of danger. Locking his eyes with those of the war hound, he began moving his right hand to the sword lying at his side. Another low rumble from an even larger dog to his right brought his hand to a stop. Then the very large shadow of a man fell upon him from behind and he just knew that the intrigue of court life had finally caught up to him, all alone in the field. A booted foot stepped down on his sword, thwarting any attempt he might have made to draw it. This was it. This was the end.

A heavily accented voice spoke from behind him. "So, this is a mighty defender of Milandir, caught unawares in an open field like a child? Like father, like son, I suppose."

Roderick instantly recognized the voice and his eyes narrowed to the dogs flanking him. He nodded in understanding when he saw the nametags on each war hound. "I guess this just proves my father was right about you backstabbing Coryani," he said defiantly. Roderick winced at the sound of a sword being slowly drawn from its scabbard. Perhaps his insult had gone too far.

"Really? I always thought that you Milandisian val'Tensens were the experts on backstabbing and oath breaking." The edge of the keen blade eased just past his right ear, within a breath of his exposed neck, then ventured down to poke the journal in Roderick's hand. "And for all your supposed loathing of the Coryani, here I find you pining away for one."

Smiling wickedly, Roderick looked pointedly at the dogs and countered, "Well, we don't all have the luxury of traveling with our chosen mates, and at least mine has only two legs. But, knowing your side of the family, it's probably the best you could do."

Realizing he had lost this verbal battle, Hurrious's eyes narrowed menacingly, and his jaw muscles bulged as he ground his teeth in frustration. Looking from one dog to the other, he said, "Get him." As one, the three figures pounced on their hapless victim.

### **11 Foedus, 1027 I.C.: Kingdom of Milandir, Naeraanth, the estate of Duke Adolphos val'Tensen**

General Menisis walked briskly from the front door, pulling his gauntlet back onto his hand. "Where is Hurrious?" he barked to his aide.

"He's tracking down Roderick. I take it things went poorly?"

The General only glowered in response. "Find Hurrious. Tell him to meet me at the castle. I ride to speak with the King. Make sure he delivered the letter."

"Yes, Sir."

The General and his aide departed in a cloud of dust, leaving Adolphos val'Tensen standing alone in the shadows of his doorstep. If anyone could have seen his face, they would have noticed the freshly stinging red welt in the shape of a gauntlet on the side of his face.

### **11 Foedus, 1027 I.C.: Kingdom of Milandir, Farm Fields Near Naeraanth**

"Aaaa!"

"Heel! Down boys!" Hurrious immediately leaned down, concerned that their roughhousing might have actually hurt Roderick. "Are you all right?"

Roderick smiled at his cousin, but the pain was still there. "I'm fine," he lied. His hand remained clutched to his side. The whining dogs drew a playful pat from Roderick to reassure them that he wasn't really hurt.

Hurrious wasn't buying it. Neither were the dogs. "Ribbs?"

"I said I'm fine. Really."

"And you are a horrible liar. Really." Both men smiled at each other as Hurrious helped his cousin to his feet. On closer inspection, he also noticed bruising beneath Roderick's right eye, and what looked to be bruises on the outside of his left forearm. "Who did this to you?"

"Hurrious, this is not your concern. Drop it."

"Adolphos?"

"Hurrious! I said to drop it!" Roderick did his best to lighten his tone. "So, what brings you here to ambush me?"

Hurrious was reluctant to let the matter drop, but he had other duties to attend to, so he let it go, at least temporarily. "I'm here with General Menisis."

"Really?" They began walking together toward their horses. "So, did you come to build something or burn something this time?" The comment was in jest, but Roderick noticed that Hurrious flinched nonetheless.

"I have a letter for you from General Menisis." Hurrious stopped and faced his younger cousin. With great reluctance he produced the letter and placed it in Roderick's hand.

"What's wrong? Did someone die?"

Hurrious felt somehow choked, but managed to shake his head. "Not yet."

The cryptic answer from his normally straightforward cousin troubled him, but Roderick broke the seal and opened the letter. As he read it, his eyes became as wide as saucers. When he finished, he was breathless. "Is he serious?"

"Yes, I'm afraid he is. What is your answer?"

"What does my father say?"

"He was presented with the same offer. I'm fairly sure he said no."

"Oh, I bet that is not all he said either. What are you going to do?"

"Wait for your answer, then carry it to the General. I believe he was going to seek an audience with the King when he left your father's estate here."

"What will the King say?"

"You will have to ask him for yourself, but I think he will allow it if you accept the offer."

"If the King will allow it, I will accept."

Hurrious stepped closer to his cousin, putting a hand on each shoulder and looking deeply into his eyes. "Are you sure you understand what you are agreeing to? Are you sure you truly understand what this might cost you?"

Roderick swallowed hard, his mind abuzz with possibilities. His father could disown him; he could be injured or killed in battle. The loss of his own innocence never occurred to him. "I think so."

"Very well." Hurrious sighed and lowered his eyes. "I will ride with you to see the King and the General, if you will allow it." Roderick's enthusiastic smile was the only answer needed.

### **11 Foedus, 1027 I.C.: Kingdom of Milandir, Naeraanth, The Royal Palace**

King Osric adjusted the large dolphin tapestry behind his throne. Its workmanship was exquisite, with fine gold thread interwoven among many layers of other threads. He pondered the relationship of each thread and wondered if it bore any resemblance to the relationship of the different personalities and agendas of those in his court. He would find out more shortly. The page walking in from the great hall interrupted his thoughts.

"Sire, all the Regents are here. And General Menisis val'Tensen is requesting an audience."

The King's head snapped around to the page. "General Menisis is here?"

"Yes, Sire. He arrived only moments ago. He has a very small entourage with him. Shall I refuse them?"

"Are they armed?"

"Yes, Sire; should I have them disarmed?"

King Osric pondered the ramifications and the timing of such a visit and looked back to the dolphin tapestry. His eyes then fell on the face of his trusted Champion, Sir Gerhard val'Holryn, who rarely left his side. Arriving at a decision, he said, "No. Once I have assembled the Regents here, you will summon Menisis here as well. This is going to be a very interesting day."

Not fully understanding his King's meaning, the page nonetheless hastened off to do his King's bidding. Sir Gerhard said nothing, but loosened his sword in his scabbard, just in case.

Moments later, the Regents began entering the room. Queen Orlantha was the first to arrive and stood before her throne, just to the right of Osric's. Immediately following the Queen, Duchess Eldora val'Dellenov flowed into the room, her grace and beauty nearly matched by the stunning gown she wore. Osric couldn't decide if it was her ample bosom or the stunning sapphire necklace that drew men's gazes to her chest rather than her face. Duke Victor val'Holryn and Margrave Valdemarr val'Ossan arrived together,



still debating whatever topic had drawn them together in the waiting chamber. Duke Adolphos arrived next, and he moved... erratically. Osric pondered the enigmatic Duke for a moment. He seemed angry, very angry. Perhaps he knew that General Menisis was here? In any case, the General would be a guest of the King and no concern of the Duke. Still, rumors had begun circulating in court about some of the Duke's activities lately and if they did turn out to be true, he would have to be dealt with. The last Regent to enter the room was a man nearly as large as the doorway. Squeezing his way through, the profusely sweating Arch-Prelate Sabinus val'Assanté waddled directly to the buffet, much to the disgust of those who watched him. The Regents arrayed themselves at their positions at the table, waiting patiently for Sabinus to find his seat after returning with double armloads of food from the buffet. Once the Arch-Prelate was in position, the King and the Queen sat simultaneously and the Regency Council immediately followed suit, although it took several more minutes of maneuvering for Sabinus to wiggle his abundant girth past the arms of his chair so his even more abundant bottom could settle upon the seat of the chair, which groaned in protest. King Osric formally opened the proceedings.

"Welcome everyone. We hope your journeys here were pleasant ones. We have summoned you all for a rather extraordinary occasion. But first, it has come to our attention that we have a very special guest with us today. Show him in."

General Menisis strode confidently into the chamber. His armor gleamed in the light, and his flowing cape billowed behind him. He was the picture of a perfect legionnaire. Another legionnaire followed close behind the General, and while Hurrious was not dressed as elaborately and his manner was not as confident, he had been here once before, when the young King had knighted him. He recognized the room, although it seemed much smaller than he remembered. Osric instantly recognized the General, and his young companion seemed very familiar somehow. Duke Adolphos was the first to speak.

"What is the meaning of this? Guards!"

Sir Gerhard had already begun moving toward Adolphos when Duke Victor val'Holryn's voice flared to life. "How DARE you summon guards to greet a guest of the King? You will be silent or you will be removed from this table!" Duke Adolphos thought to say more when he noticed the King's Champion moving in his direction. Thinking better of it, he kept his council to himself.

"We are sorry for the ill-advised outburst, General Menisis. Welcome to our home," the young King began once the outburst was finished. "To what honor do we owe this visit?"

"Thank you, your Majesty." The General's voice rang clear in the chamber. Suddenly the General's eyes narrowed and seemed to stare straight through the King, as if he were looking behind him. A moment later, a smile tugged the corners of his mouth and his face regained its composure. "I hope your majesty has been well since our last meeting."

"Indeed we have. Would you do us the honor of dining with us this evening?"

"Though it would honor me greatly, I must reluctantly decline His Majesty's generous offer. I am here on Imperial business."

"Really? We were informed that you were no longer... appointed a position in the Empire. At least not one of command."

"That remains to be determined, in my mind. However, I am here on Imperial business nonetheless. I have ordered the Legion of the Defiant Shield to assemble, unarmed, here in Naeraanth as soon as possible. They will begin arriving shortly. I have replaced the soldiers with engineers and craftsmen to continue helping with your rebuilding efforts. I know this was not part of our agreement, and I beg your forgiveness for being forced to alter it."

"If things are as you say and we have no reason to doubt your word, you have no need of forgiveness, but we give it at your request. Tell us, what do you plan to do with your soldiers once they are here?"

"Your Majesty, I would like your permission to allow a ship to dock to retrieve my soldiers. We move to defend Sicaris and need to assemble with all due haste to do so. Many innocent lives will be lost if we do not arrive quickly enough. I had hoped to move my soldiers in a different manner, but those plans were ill-conceived." The General looked pointedly at the young Val standing beside him. The young man did not turn from his gaze, nor did it seem to faze him.

The King glanced to the Regency Council, his eyes moving from one to another, finally lingering on Duke Adolphos. Turning his attention back to General Menisis, he said, "You may dock your ships and retrieve your soldiers with our blessing."

Duke Adolphos rose from his chair. "What?!? You have no authority to make such decisions! The Regency Council..."

"Is dissolved," came the King's voice. "That is why we called you here today." Duke Adolphos felt two powerful hands on his shoulders that forced him back into his chair. Sir Gerhard stood scowling behind him. The King continued, "As we have reached the age of majority, the Regency Council is disbanded. We, King Osric, hereby assume full control of the Kingdom, relieving the Council of all its power and duties. Of course, we still value the input of our noble countrymen, so we have created an advisory board to help guide us with our decisions and help keep us informed on any potential issues. The former members of the Regency Council are all invited to join this advisory counsel. Now that that matter is settled, General, is there anything else you require of us?"

"No your Majesty. Though I would like you to know that a flotilla of Coryani vessels is currently moving up the coast from Port Talbith. They launched several days ago and are to rendezvous with the Order of the Pearl Maidens, who have agreed to guide them into Pearlspar. From there, we will march north to Sicaris. If your Highness wishes to deploy his Navy to keep an eye on the Coryani ships, we would consider it a great honor and be thankful for the escort."

"Excuse me, General, we know we are no great strategist such as yourself, but is not Censure closer to your destination?"

The General smiled at the King's obvious grasp of the situation, though he tried to downplay it. "Yes, your Highness. Censure was my first choice. But they have refused to let my legions pass through. It seems they do not trust our intent, and I do not wish to force the issue."

"I see. Margrave, you will lead our Navy north to escort the Coryani fleet." With a smile, he added, "You will ensure that their intent is honorable."

"Yes, your Majesty. With your permission, I should leave at once to make the arrangements." When the King nodded, Margrave rose, nodded to Duke Victor and General Menisis, then departed quickly, passing young Roderick and Tensen who watched intently from the shadows of the hallway.

"Now, General, is there anything else you would ask of us?"

"No, your Highness. Thank you very much for your indulgence."

"Nothing at all? Not even this?" The King held out his hand and a young page handed him a First Imperium legion standard. "I believe you might recognize this, yes?"

The General's eyes fixed on the standard. "Yes, your Highness. I recognize that standard. It is from the Legion of the Pride of Chendo."

"So we were told. We were also told it was in your power to take it, but you did not. Didn't you want it?"

The General smiled in his response, "More than you will ever know."

"Then why did you not take it?"

"Because that would not have been the honorable thing to do." Adolphos moved to say something but Gerhard's hands on his shoulders pressed harder, silencing the outburst before it began.

"What would you say if we offered you a choice? This banner, or our assistance moving your men to Sicaris?"

"I would tell you to keep the banner."

"And that, my friend, is why it is yours." The King held the banner out toward the General, much to the astonishment of Menisis and the assembled nobles.

"Sire! Surely you don't mean to give the banner to this murdering Coryani?" The Arch-Prelate's voice slithered through the air to sully the moment.

Before anyone else could respond, Hurrious lost his temper. His voice trembled like the low roll of thunder when he spoke. "Aren't you Coryani too, or does it only suit you when being a lap dog for the Emperor? Who are you to speak of murder?"

"Hurrious!" General Menisis tried to reign in his young cousin.

"I know you for what you are, and I know what you did." The gluttonous Arch-Prelate quickly regretted his comments and seemed to be looking for somewhere to flee. Finding no refuge, he instead tried to shrink his immense girth further into his chair to no avail.

"Hurrious!"

Trembling with uncontrolled rage, Hurrious continued, his voice rising with each word, "You are a disgrace to the faithful, your countrymen, Milandir, the council, the Church, the King, and the very blood in your veins. You are a liar and a coward. You have no faith, no honor, and no soul."

The loud "*slap!*" stopped Hurrious from reaching for his sword. "Hurrious! You forget your place! Wait for me outside!"

As if awoken from a dream, Hurrious glanced around the room, his face red from his cousin's blow, but also from his own embarrassment. Again in control of his temper, he looked around sheepishly. "Please forgive my outburst, your Majesty." He bowed deeply, shuffling his feet for a moment as if looking for a better way to apologize. Finding none, he simply walked from the chamber in shame.

The General looked to the assembly, "Allow me to offer my apologies for my young cousin. He has not been himself since the storm."

The King waved off the apology as if it was not necessary and the Arch-Prelate wisely kept silent for the duration of the audience. "General?" Again the King held out the standard.

Menisis moved forward slowly and accepted the banner with trembling hands. "Thank you, your Majesty. This means a great deal to me."

Locking eyes with the General, the King said softly, "We are even."

The General nodded in understanding. "Thank you again. If you will excuse me, I have arrangements to make."

After the General departed the King looked to his councilors. "We believe we have accomplished all that is needed here today. You have our leave. We will summon you again when we have need."

One by one the Council Members rose to leave the chamber. Adolphos was the first to storm out of the room. The Queen rose quietly and squeezed the King's shoulder reassuringly before she left. The Duchess of Sylvania bowed so low her necklace nearly touched the floor before departing the King's presence. Her position granted the young King such a prolonged look at her feminine assets that he began to wonder if, perhaps, she secretly worshiped Larissa. Duke Victor smiled at the young King and bowed low, but gave him a reassuring wink before he departed. "About time," he said as he left. The Arch-Prelate was the last to leave, just as he was the last to arrive, but not due to lack of effort. For several minutes he pushed and pulled at his girth until he finally pried himself loose from the chair that had been holding him captive. He left without a word.

Once the chamber was empty except for the King and his Champion, the King spoke into the air. "Well?"

The tapestry behind the throne parted, allowing a lithe man wearing deep blue robes to step forward. "Most of the Regents took the announcement well, but Sabinus was unreadable."

"You said, 'Most.'"

"Yes. The Duchess and Duke Adolphos seemed rather distressed at your proclamation. Perhaps we should keep an eye on them."

"Very well. What of General Menisis?"

The wizard seemed uncomfortable. "He knew I was here. I don't know how, but he did. One minute I couldn't read a thing, the next I could. It was as if he LET me read his thoughts."

"And?"

"And, he was fully truthful with you. I think he has a genuine admiration for you, if not affection."

"Interesting. And his young companion?"

"That one was an open book, at least until he lost his temper, at which point he was unreadable."

"So?"

"At first he kept praying."

"Praying?"

"I know it is strange, but he kept repeating the same words. 'Please, Lord Hurrian, spare him the trials that lie ahead.' But, once Sabinus chimed in, his whole mindset shifted."

"Did you get anything before he closed up?"

"Yes." A shiver ran through the mage's body. "In his mind, he had already tried and convicted Sabinus for some terrible crime. If the General had not stopped him, he would have killed Sabinus, or died in the trying."

"Do you think he was thinking of the incident at the Convocation?"

"Maybe, but I do not know for sure. I do not believe the Emperor's death would upset him so, judging by his other comments."

"And you got nothing from Sabinus?"

"No, but you saw his reaction as well as I. He was definitely guilty about something."

"Yes, I did." Looking to his two trusted aides, the King confided, "I believe this matter needs further investigation."

In the greeting chamber, the hastening Duchess of Sylvania finally caught up to the Duke of Tralia.

"Adolphos!"

He turned at her voice, his eyes plainly displaying the fire in his heart. "What do you want, woman? I have no time for games."

The pleasant face the Duchess wore to court melted away to reveal a visage that would curdle milk. "Don't get snappy with me! I think we need to talk in private."

"About what?"

She lowered her voice conspiratorially, "About that ignorant whelp on the throne. If he can't be controlled, he will have to be dealt with."

The Duchess had his full attention now, and his voice lowered to match hers. "And how do you suppose we do that?"

The Duchess smiled in a way that left no doubt that she was somehow related to the predatory beasts of the forest she ruled. "The Eastern line is not yet dead... and there is another heir to this line."

## **12 Foedus, 1027 I.C.: Kingdom of Milandir, Naeraanth, the estate of Duke Adolphos val'Tensen**

Roderick moved through the main room of the estate towards the family armory. His thoughts were occupied with the thousand preparations he had to make, and his stomach was full of butterflies at the thought of the adventure he was about to undertake. The angry voice that called out to him from the darkness startled him.

"Where have you been, boy? Conspiring with my enemies?"

Roderick momentarily stopped and turned to face the emptiness that held the voice. As his eyes adjusted to the room, he could see his father slouched in a chair near the corner. He could also smell the drink, and his father was an angry drunk. His ribs ached momentarily in reflex at the thought. Contempt crept into Roderick's voice. "Don't you have matters to attend to that require you to be sober for once?" He turned his back on his father and continued his trek to the armory.

"Do not turn your back on me, boy!" The angry voice followed from the darkness and caught up to Roderick in the armory. "Who do you think..." The voice broke off as it saw Roderick girding himself for battle. "Where do you think you are going?"

"To Sicaris."

"You are going to fight alongside General Menisis? You are going to join his legions?" the words were a contemptuous statement, not really a question. But Roderick surprised Adolphos with his response.

"No. I am going to lead them, at least until the General arrives." He didn't look up, but he could feel the waves of anger washing over his father and he knew this would not end well. But, he had resolved himself to do what he must.

The Duke momentarily contained himself. "Son, this is not our battle. You are forbidden to go."

Roderick did look at his father now, a hard penetrating glare. "Not our battle? The King has even asked for volunteers to help with this conflict. Is it not our duty to..."

Adolphos snapped, "Do not lecture me about duty, boy! I gave you a simple task, one even a gnome could have accomplished! Marry that little whore! But..."

The powerful backhanded swing caught Adolphos full on the face and sent him sprawling. It seemed to shock Roderick more than his father, but he recovered himself quickly. His voice was resolute with an edge it had never held before when he spoke. "You will never speak of her that way again, or so help me, I will remove your tongue." Roderick saw his father's eyes darting to the swords lined up on the racks and beat him to the draw. Holding the longsword's blade even with his father's throat, he continued. "I have never been ashamed to be your son until today! I will no longer be a victim of your anger and frustrations. I will no longer listen to your lies. Too long have I held my council and stayed my hand. If you ever raise your hand to me again, I will gleefully hack it from your wretched body. And trust me, if you ever fall below my sword, General Menisis will not step in to save you, not this time. I have seen you both on the field of battle and witnessed your behavior in Court, and he is the better man, in all ways. You are a disgrace as a Val, as a Knight of the Realm, and most definitely as my father. He possesses all the knightly virtues that you lack." Adolphos moved to slap the sword from his face. Roderick quickly countered with a flexing flick of his wrist that cut the offending hand while keeping the blade in line with his father's throat. Slowly he pushed the blade into the flesh, forcing his father to lie back on the ground,

and he held him in place there with the blade. "Your pettiness and hatred have consumed you. You nearly cost the King his life in pursuit of your stupid vendetta and personal agenda. I am going to Sicaris even if you are too cowardly to do so and there is no way you can stop me. The King has asked for heroes, and I intend to be one. I know now that this is a concept your self-centered, self-righteous, self-serving, pompous, arrogant, bullying, soul will never comprehend. You are a sad, petty little boy in a man's body. I will no longer be party to your malicious ideals. Your scheming may have already cost me my one true love and I will not let you rob me of my honor, too! I pity you, Father, for you have neither love nor honor in your heart. Goodbye." With his last word, Roderick moved his sword from his father's neck and quickly left the estate.

For a long while Adolphos lay on the cold stone floor contemplating what to do. With a finality colder than the floor on which he lay, he said, "So be it, *hero*."

### **13 Foedus, 1027 I.C.: Kingdom of Milandir, Naeraanth, Outside the Sea Froth Inn**

With his final instructions given to young Roderick, the General embraced him warmly. "Take care of yourself. Don't do anything trying to impress me. Just see to the defenses."

"I will, Sir. Don't worry, we will hold until you arrive."

With a gleam of pride in his eye, the General nodded. "I know you will, Son. May Hurrian guide and protect you."

"And you, Sir." Roderick thought it strange that in a couple of short days, this man had become more of a father to him than his own father ever was. Melancholy washed over him at that thought and he turned his mount away. Cantering to the end of the lane, he pulled up on his reins, waiting.

The General seemed a bit puzzled by this until he saw Hurrian mounting his horse, girded for battle. "And where are you going?"

"With him."

"But I need you here. I need you to take the standard to..."

"I am going with Roderick because that is where my heart is leading me."

The General put an edge into his voice that was usually reserved for admonishing his officers. "That is not a request. It is an order."

Hurrian continued adjusting his tack, then pulled his cloak from where it had bunched beneath him. Leaning down to adjust the bit, he lowered his voice so that only the General could hear it. "Cousin, you sadden me. You are a noble and honorable man, you are the head of my family, a beloved General, a great leader of Men, and you are my friend. You have been like a father to me, and I could not have asked for better. For all these reasons and more, I love you. But," Hurrian raised his gaze to lock eyes with his cousin, "let us not repeat the mistakes of the past. I am no longer a soldier in your legions. There is only one who can order me at his leisure." His gaze pointedly moved from the General's eyes and settled on his holy symbol of Hurrian before returning to the General's face. "It is best we don't *forget our places* in the grand scheme of things. I know I don't." Hurrian smiled at the obvious consternation on the General's face, but his smile was one of sad resignation and affection. There was no malice.

The General simply nodded, knowing nothing more needed to be said on the matter. "Our blood is a duty."

"And I am its slave."

"Good luck, then. Keep him safe," he said, nodding toward Roderick.

"I will do my best. If his life requires my death, it will be done." With a little more mirth he added, "But if it's all the same to you, don't dally."

The General laughed and slapped the rump of Hurrian's horse. Moments later Hurrian had joined Roderick and both men were cantering away down the trail.

The General's aide walked to his side. "That boy is just like his father."

Menis nodded agreement. "I hope he doesn't end up just as dead." With a mock shudder and a grin, he added, "His mother would kill me."

### **14 Foedus, 1027 I.C.: Kingdom of Milandir, Somewhere on the Road to Sicaris**

For many hours the two rode in silence. Periodically, Roderick would look to the trail behind them. After several such instances, Hurrian asked, "What are you looking for?"

"Aren't your companions joining us?"

Hurrian smiled. "They already have. Rauth and Ratt scout the trail to our front. Tykar and Phen guard our rear. Arianell will join us shortly."

Roderick strained his eyes to see further down the trail to his front, then to the rear. "Are you sure? How do you know?"

"Because that is what they do. When you have traveled together as much as we have, you learn your companions' strengths and use them."

"I see," Roderick said with uncertainty. "Then what is your strength?"

Hurrius laughed. "Talking. Thinking. I am the smart one, you know."

A look of deep concern crossed Roderick's face, but he found himself smiling anyhow, not really sure if his cousin was joking or not. Then another thought occurred to him. "What if one of them gets into trouble? How will you know they need help?"

Hurrius grinned again. "Oh, trust me. We would know. Trouble of that nature is usually very loud."

"Oh," Roderick again offered with the same uncertainty. "Hannz?"

"Yes?"

"This will be my first battle. Will it be glorious like Father says? Will it be like I've read in the histories?" His voice was edged with innocence, enthusiasm, and a little fear.

Hannz decided to be brutally honest. His eyes traveled far away, visiting any one of the many battlefields he had seen. "No, Roderick. It will be dirty, violent, brutal... savage. Often there is no quarter given or asked. You will hear the screams and whimpers of the dying. You will see the fields and streets of Sicaris run red with the blood of friend and foe alike. No small amount of that blood will be yours. Some of it will be spilled by your blade, but it will all be on your hands. That much blood has a way of staining a man's soul. Your fields of grain will no longer hold the solace they do now. They will be replaced by fields of festering, mangled, putrid, rotting husks of men, women, and children who are being feasted upon by rats and carrion birds. Their eyes, tongues, and other fleshy bits being eaten right before your eyes, assuming you are not part of the rotting pile. Once you see such things, your dreams will be forever haunted by the screams and pleas of your victims, and with the longing looks of those you failed to save, or those who died by your orders. No matter the outcome of the fight, you will have lost something of yourself that can never be regained. There is no glory in battle." Returning to the present, Hannz looked to his cousin's face, which had turned as white as any summer cloud. Hurrius immediately regretted his choice, but knew Roderick must be prepared for what lie ahead. "Hey, you asked," he offered feebly. "Don't worry, you'll be fine," he added with more certainty than he actually felt.

Roderick swallowed hard, trying to absorb the imagery that had been presented to him, but his cousin's reasoning troubled him. "Hannz, if there is no glory in battle, why do we fight?"

Hurrius nodded, knowing this question would be forthcoming. "The only glory I've found in battle has been in saving more lives than I've taken. Ultimately, sadly, it comes down to the numbers."

"I don't understand. Haven't you been in many battles?"

"Yes. And, I've never won one."

"What? But I thought you were a great warrior, a veteran of many campaigns!"

"First, there is nothing 'great' about being a warrior. Second, do not equate skill and experience to greatness. Greatness is only found in the saving of lives, never in the taking."

"I don't understand."

"In every battle, someone is killed, and someone does the killing. Most people would agree that whoever does the most killing and carries the field has won the battle. Would you agree?"

"Yes."

"I do not. Are you truly victorious if you have slain those whom the Gods bade you to safeguard? Each life you take was someone's parent, child, or sibling. The blood on your blade will stain your soul as surely as you shattered a family by spilling it. There is no victory there."

"Then how do you win a battle?"

"You don't. The best we can hope for is to save more lives than we take. Perhaps then the Gods will be merciful when they judge us."

Roderick thought for a long moment before continuing. "If you truly believe that, why do you follow this path, knowing where it will lead?"

A profound sadness swept through his companion. "To spare others the pain of doing what must be done." Lost in his thoughts for a moment, he finally continued. "Sometimes, I think the real victors are those who lay dead on the field. The rest of us have to live with what we have done."

For several minutes they rode on in silence, both lost in thought. Then, up ahead on the trail, they spied an unnerving sight. Arianell the Red rode into view from a side trail. She was known as "the Red" for a reason. Dressed in a fine mesh armor bearing the holy symbol of Keleos, her angular Eloran features were covered from head to toe in fresh blood. She was obviously girded for battle and her fanged teeth shown white against the gory red pallet of her body when she smiled to Hannz in recognition. Roderick slowed his mount to a crawl, his hand slowly moving toward his sword.

"Who... *what* is that?"

Hannz's easy smile relieved his cousin's tension... at least a little bit. "That is Arianell the Red. She is one of my companions, and a dear friend. A little off at times, but I think her heart is in the right place. I think. Are you wearing any yellow?"

"What?! No, why?"

"She doesn't like yellow."

"What?!" Roderick stammered a bit, unnerved by the sight of the blood-covered Elorii. Then he lowered his voice to a whisper, hoping she couldn't hear him as they approached. "Hannz. What's wrong with her?"

"Too much battle," was Hannz's deadpan reply.

Roderick swallowed hard and managed a halfhearted smile as introductions were made. He did not, however, offer to kiss her hand.

As the three travelers made their polite, if somewhat stained introductions, they were being observed from a nearby tree branch. "Sure enough," Gunter thought to himself. "Riding right down the road like he said. This is almost too easy. Amateurs!" With the precision born of many hours of practice, the assassin notched an arrow and brought his bow to bear on the wayward Roderick val'Tensen. As he fine-tuned his aim for the killing shot, a movement to his right drew his attention. What could only be described as a gnome wearing a giant rat hide stepped from behind a tree and pointed directly at him.

"Rat!" the disgusting figure said excitedly.

Afraid this newcomer might spoil his ambush, Gunter quickly shifted aim in his direction but found his movements abruptly halted. Suddenly protruding through his chest was an exquisitely crafted gladius, blood flowing in rivulets down its length. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he recognized one of the symbols on the weapon as a marking from the Legion of the Watchful Hunter. Gunter tried to voice his surprise, but a vice like hand had already clamped over his mouth. "Amateur," Rauth hoarsely whispered into the dying man's ear. Rauth held the man still through his throes of death, then slowly lowered the corpse without a sound to his eagerly waiting companion. "Rat!" he said excitedly as he began rifling through the man's belongings. Rauth grinned down at the greedy little gnome and licked his fangs. Raising his eyes, he surveyed the area, again looking for other assailants. Seeing no danger, he dropped soundlessly to the ground to join in the bounty.

After the introductions were made, Arianell scanned the area with her keen senses, then nodded to Hannz. "It is done. We can go now."

"What is done?" Roderick asked with sudden concern, an uneasy feeling washing over him, and not just from this... Elorii woman thing at his side.

"Our trail has been cleared," was Hannz's enigmatic reply. "Let us go." Without further explanation, they rode on to Sicaris.

Roderick looked to his cousin, then to the Elorii. "I sure could use a bath," he offered as a hint.

"Why? If you are clean, the enemy can tell when they've stabbed you," Arianell replied.

Roderick winced.

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Roderick winced in pain as he sat up straighter. "Hannz?"

Roderick's voice brought Hurrius back to the fountain at Sicaris. "Yes?"

"I had asked you how it came to this."

Hannz looked at the devastation surrounding them. He looked through the haze to the pile of bodies where the mysterious Holy Champions of Hurrian and Illiir had made their back-to-back stand. No sign of the warriors was ever found, but the tangled mass of corpses left in their wake spoke volumes of their prowess. He looked to the sky for an answer, but none was forthcoming. The sky's only offering besides gathering storm clouds seemed to be a group of large crows perched atop the remains of the

Coliseum. For a fleeting moment, he was curious as to why they were not feasting on the fresh meat below. Looking to his weary cousin, he finally choked out the only reply his heart or mind could supply. "We failed."

Roderick nodded, understanding far more now than he ever cared to. Squinting his eyes against the pain in his leg and the sting of the battle smoke, he saw death itself walk from the mist. The armored General was covered head to toe in blood, none of which appeared to be his own. In a way, Menisis vaguely reminded Roderick of Arianell, though he was by far more unnerving when seen this way than she would ever be. Death smiled at the two val'Tensens leaning against the fountain. Taking in the men with a glance, Menisis understood their pain and death's smile faded. As glad as he was that these two had survived, he knew well their loss, and their anguish. Without a word, he joined them and sat resting his back against the fountain. For a long time, the three sat together, and wept.

The largest crow watched the spectacle from his perch atop the Coliseum and was deeply moved by what he saw. Perhaps there was yet hope for Onara. He had not cried since the loss of his brother, but now he tilted his head and shed a single tear. Before the teardrop touched the ground, the sky erupted with a soft and cleansing rain.

As the rain fell, the fog began to settle, revealing even more devastation than before; the streets were full of corpses, and the buildings were in ruin. The blood began flowing in wide streams as the rain sought to somehow cleanse the gore and make clean the wreckage of Sicaris. The trio of val'Tensens sat in the rain for a long while, the blood, filth, and sweat being slowly washed from their bodies by the fresh water. Menisis finally spoke. "Let us get your wounds tended." Rising to his feet, the General helped Hurrious and Roderick gain their unsteady footing.

Before departing from the fountain, Roderick reached into the bag at his side and brought forth his journal. He looked at the book as if it were a stranger. "My fields are no more," he whispered. Looking to the sky, he let the rain wash over him, but he knew it was pointless. Returning his attention to the journal, he dropped it into the fountain. His words of love and hope written on the pages slowly melted away. "I will never be clean again."

The crow watched, and listened, and understood. Then, he too wept for Roderick.