

In an age of rival empires, farflung colonies  
and courtly intrigue, simple truth is  
the world's most dangerous commodity.

# The Key to DARBAS



a novel of historical fantasy by

**DAN CONOVER**

# **The Key to Darbas**

*Dan Conover*

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are made up, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely unintentional (if occasionally entertaining).

THE KEY TO DARBAS

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First electronic edition, August 2009.

*For Janet*

## *Introduction*

# **The story of *The Key to Darbas***

I really enjoyed *writing* this book. What I *didn't* like was *selling* it, a grim campaign that began in the fall of 2003 and continued for roughly two frustrating years. Getting published still meant printing and mailing expensive copies in those days, followed by months without even acknowledgment of receipt from publishers and agents. *The Key to Darbas* eventually found an editor at a small New York science fiction house who recommended it for publication, but the company changed management weeks later and I gave up in disgust.

So why give it another try now? Because the world is morphing rapidly. Because self-publishing and social media are changing the way writers, publishers and readers relate. Because a friend of mine fondly showed off the Kindle app on her iPhone earlier this month.

I'm trying again because I think there *might* be a way for this book to find its audience without tossing it back into an indifferent (if not overtly hostile) publishing slush pile.

So whether you're reading this as a free e-book, downloaded it as a *gratis* PDF, or got your hands on a self-published paperback copy, thank you. You're a modern miracle.

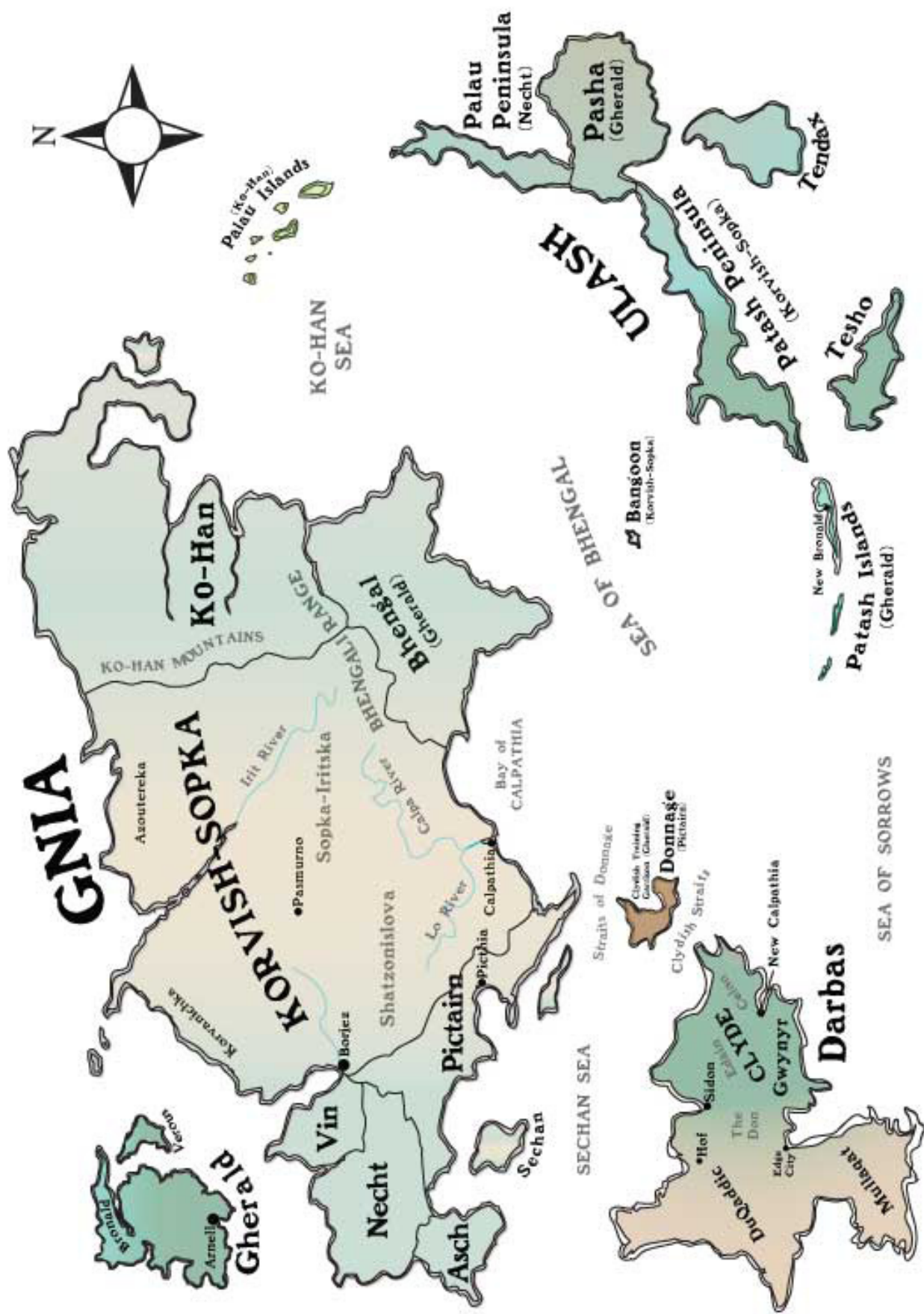
I ask two favors. First, if you like it, *please tell me* ([dan@danconover.com](mailto:dan@danconover.com)). Second, regardless of your personal tastes, would you consider passing it on to a friend who enjoys these kinds of stories? Because the future of this book depends on readers, not marketing. It either finds its audience or it doesn't.

*The Key to Darbas* doesn't fit easily into a traditional genre, and from a publisher's viewpoint that's both a blessing and a curse. But as a writer, I'm not really looking for *every* reader — I just want the readers *who like this kind of book*. If that turns out to be you, then howdy, stranger.

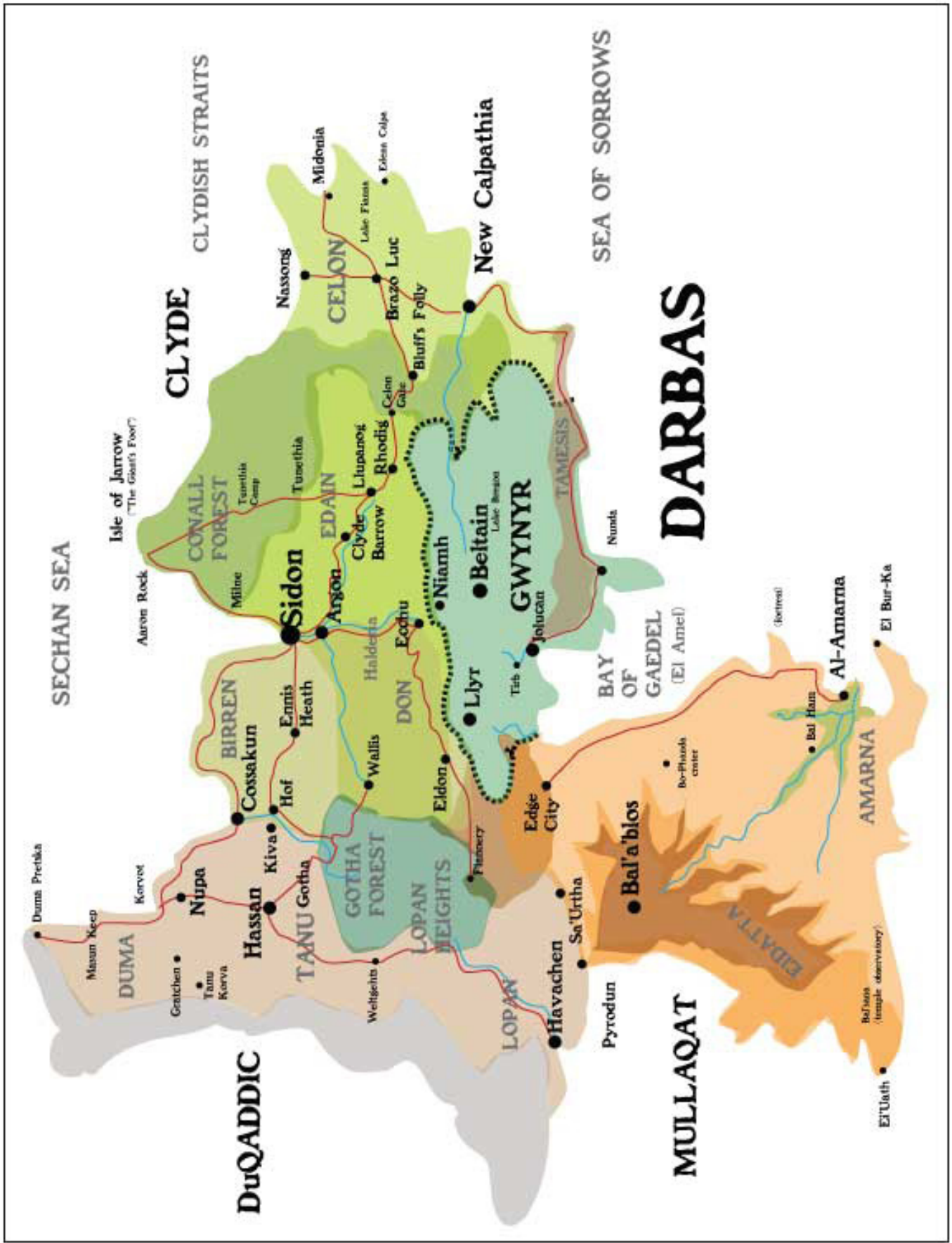
Thanks again for reading. I look forward to hearing from you.

**Dan Conover**  
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July 20, 2009  
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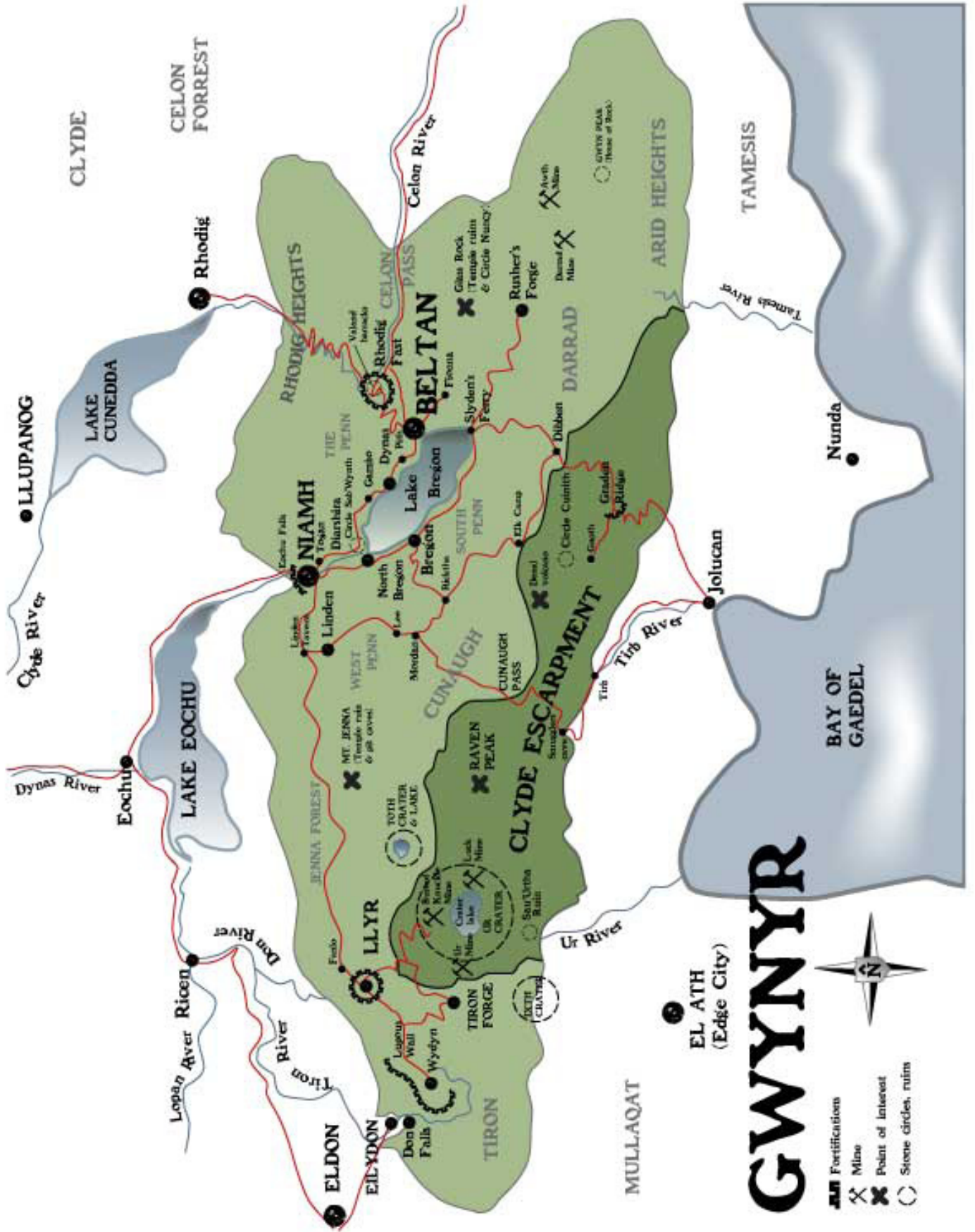
# MAPS



# The Western World







# GWYNYR

EL ATH  
(Edge City)



-  Fortifications
-  Mine
-  Point of Interest
-  Stone circles, ruins

MULLAQAT

CLYDE

CELON  
FORREST

TAMESIS

Nunda

Jolucan

BAY OF  
GAEDEL

RHODIG HEIGHTS

BELTAN

ARID HEIGHTS

NIAMH

CUNLUUGH

CLYDE ESCARPMENT

LLYR

TIRON

ELDON

EILYDON

MULLAQAT

LLUPANOG

LAKE CUNEDDA

LAKE Eochu

Lake Bregon

BAY OF  
GAEDEL

Cude River

Dynas River

Lohan River

Den River

Tiron River

Ur River

Ur River

Tig River

Tig River

Tamesis River

Celon River

Rhodig

Rhodig Fort

Bregon

Bregon

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Glas Rock  
Tensie ruins  
& Circle Nancy

Slyden's  
Ferry

EDL Camp

RAVEN PEAK

UR CRATER

TIRON FORGE

IXTH CRATER

IXTH CRATER

North Mine

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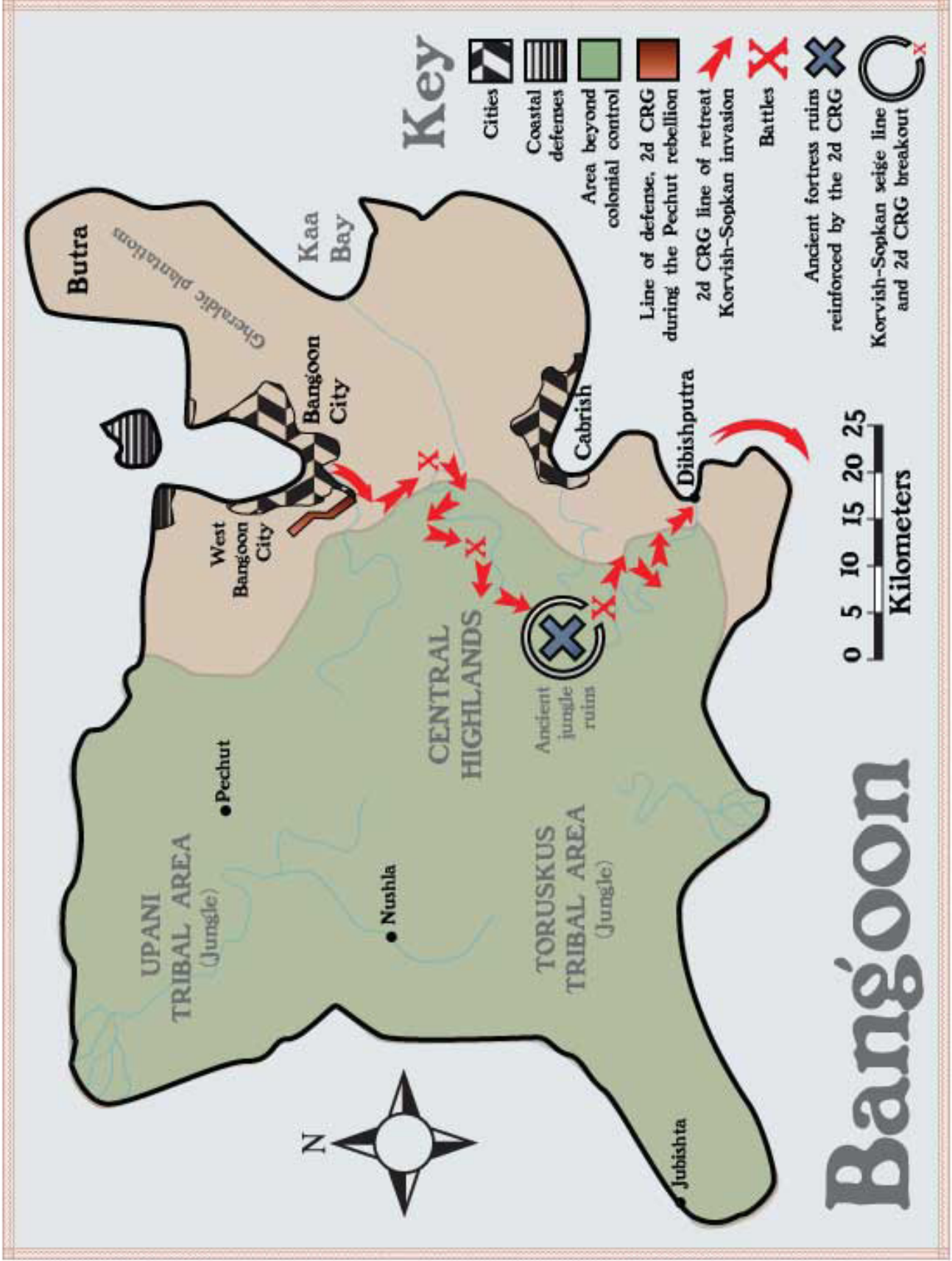
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Butra

*Gheralic plantations*

Kaa Bay

Bangóon City

West Bangóon City

Cabrish

Dibishputra

UPANI TRIBAL AREA (Jungle)

● Pechut

● Nushla

CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

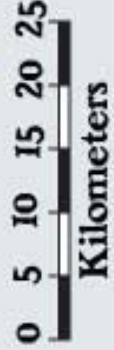
Ancient jungle ruins

TORUSKUS TRIBAL AREA (Jungle)

Jubishta



**Bangóon**



*Prologue*  
**Bangoon**

*“In retrospect, the seemingly endless wars of empire between the two great powers were practically unavoidable, if only for the mutual incompatibility of their ambitions. Korvish-Sopka was a backward, landlocked giant, its vast holdings and population spread across thousands of miles of open plain. Gherald was a small island with a great navy, a disciplined army and string of colonies that provided it a steady stream of wealth. What Gherald held, it wished to expand. What Korvish-Sopka saw, it coveted.”*

—Kirshan, Chapter 9, *“History of the Western Wars”*

*“Therefore, in the interests of domestic security and good order, these voluntary Clydish regiments, having been mustered into the service of the Gheraldic Empire overseas, shall be prohibited by law from setting foot on the Clydish homelands or anywhere within the continent of Darbas without the direct orders of the King of Gherald or his duly appointed representative at the Court at Arnell. Violators shall be tried for treason.”*

—Amendment to the Treaty of Sidon

*“The Korvish-Sopkan fleet caught the ships assigned to defending the colony completely by surprise, and the invasion force overwhelmed the Royal Marines within hours. Only the colony’s Clydish Regimental Group survived the initial onslaught, but it is reported to have fled inland. The capital is ablaze and the view from sea suggests the situation is already beyond hope.”*

—Gheraldic Colonial Office dispatch on the fall of Bangoon

*“Three in one and one in three; Darbas Is the Master Key; In Thy Wisdom Mote It Be.”*

—Excerpt from *The Secret Rite of The Beltan Line*

*Bangoon***General Barney Alt**

**L**ittle remained of the reconnaissance squad when Sgt. John Tera re-emerged from the jungle on the siege's final night, but the miracle was that anyone made it back at all. The scouts had been gone a week when the sentries on the lowest terrace of the elaborate ruin heard a commotion, and the three men emerged from the rampant Bangoon vegetation at a sprint, stumbling as they entered the rubble at the foot of the terrace. A flight of Korvish-Sopkan arrows dropped the trailing Clyde, who struggled to his feet before receiving the second volley, but the other two reached the wall and grasped the ropes that were lowered for them.

Tera, as usual, looked worse for the wear. He had picked up several new minor wounds to add to his scar collection and still bore an arrowhead that had partially embedded itself in the flesh of his hip during that final sprint to the safety. It was a barbed tip, and he lay on his side in the tent that served as the regiment's field hospital while the Gheraldic surgeon cut it out.

General Barney Alt, commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Clydish Regimental Group, sat beside him. As he had witnessed before, the sergeant seemed to leave his body when the pain grew most intense, and there was no expression on his face until the bloody bronze arrowhead clattered into the surgeon's tin bowl. He offered it to Tera, who smiled thinly and shook his head.

"Good to see you back again, sergeant," Alt said when it was done. "I was actually starting to worry this time. I must be getting fond of you."

Tera regarded his commander with intentionally bland eyes. "If the past week is any indication, let's hope your feelings for me don't grow any fonder, general. I could use a break."

Major Bowman Marbor handed Tera a cigar and struck a match. The Clydish sergeant nodded to the trim Gheraldic officer, then drew in the smoke, letting it swirl around his face while the surgeon stitched his hip.

Tera's face was almost handsome, Alt realized, and perhaps it had been once: Green eyes, high cheek bones, closely cropped blonde hair, olive skin bespeaking his half-Mullaqat heritage. Yet Tera was scarred and flinty for a mid-enlistment Guardsman. Can't be helped, Alt thought as he stowed the stray filament of compassion: Tera was both a scout archer and a Clydish enlisted judge. No man can live between two worlds without paying a price for it.

"Down to business then, sergeant," Marbor said, producing a map and a pencil. "Did you find anything to report?"

Tera looked at the map and pulled a creased and sweat-soaked piece of paper from his pocket – field notes from a difficult week. He studied both, sucking on the cigar at a slow, contemplative cadence.

"Your estimate is pretty close. Pretty close..." Tera's voice trailed off. "Their headquarters is a bit farther north than you thought. It's here, roughly. And they did as you expected – they followed our route in and never scouted another. They're dragging the supplies and heavy weapons along the way we came, and they're having a terrible time."

Alt smiled briefly to hear that, but the general was already growing impatient for the most important news. "What about the coast?"

The faintest hint of a grin dusted Tera's face. "There's no evidence of a Korvish-Sopkan presence at Dibishputra, and there are boats there, as you said there would be."

Alt rose suddenly, slapping the surgeon's table in triumph. Tera winced.

"Marbor, you little pessimist, didn't I tell you? Boats! It's a fishing village! Fishing villages have *boats!*"

"Hooray," Marbor said, his face a dry mask of feigned apathy.

"Are there *enough* boats, Tera?"



“Enough boats for what, general? The entire regiment? No,” Tera said. “There are maybe fifty in all, depending on the time of day.”

Marbor began shaking his head.

“Fifty fishing boats? We’re going to sail home on fifty fishing boats? That’s... that’s fifty men per boat. And that’s assuming they’re all sufficiently seaworthy to make the crossing, much less sneak past the Korvish-Sopkan fleet.”

“Yesterday you said you *liked* my plan,” said Alt, who was genuinely taken aback by his executive officer’s doubts.

“Yesterday there were more *boats*,” Marbor replied.

Alt felt the first taste of worry. Had his entire plan been based on a fundamental miscalculation? How the rest of the Gheraldic officer corps would revel in *that* back at the Arnell Club in Bhengal. “So what do you think now?” he asked Marbor. For all their differences, the well-groomed major was one of the few people the unkempt general actually trusted.

“Let’s just call it a deliciously new flavor of brilliant insanity, general,” Marbor said. “Come to think of it, this entire campaign could fall under that category. Utterly annoying and completely unorthodox. However, I buoy my spirits by reminding myself that had you followed Gheraldic orthodoxy, we’d already be dead or in a prison camp. Not that either fate remains unlikely.”

“These are not exactly your average fishing boats, major,” Tera interjected. “They’re more like corsairs. If there’s a fish caught in that town, it’s by accident.”

Alt advanced on his executive officer slowly, grinning. “Major Marbor, this is why I always tell you that it pays to get to know the local customs. Dibishputra is a fishing village, yes. But ever since the wars on Ulash, the wise elders of Dibishputra have been engaged in the far more lucrative pursuit of smuggling. Correct, Sergeant Tera?”

“Correct.”

The surgeon finished the stitching, bowed to the general, and retreated through the flap. Tera sat up stiffly, then lowered his feet to the floor and pulled up his uniform trousers. They were ripped and bloody, and as a soldier he made a sorry sight. His shoulders were broad and thin, and the blue-gray archer’s tunic hung from his torso as if stretched on a stick. But closer examination proved the eye wrong: Tera was made of tightly wrapped muscle that strung twitching bands across his chest, and what appeared to be weakness was merely a body refined by hardship into an efficient machine.

Alt was a different make of man, built like a barrel on two short, thick legs. At five-foot-nine he was half a head shorter than Marbor and seven inches shorter than Tera, yet the black-bearded general always filled a room. Tera could slip in and out like a wisp of smoke, but if Alt yawned, everyone nearby felt sleepy. Which was how he felt at the moment. The thought of his cot – deep in the ruins of this forgotten, overrun jungle citadel – called to him. There was a fresco of a woman painted into the ceiling of his quarters, and as something of an amateur archaeologist, Alt had come to enjoy falling asleep beneath her gaze. It would be so sweet, he thought, just to sag into the cot, to let the day and the battle and the tasks before him drift into a torch-lit haze...

“Sir?” Marbor asked.

“What?”

“You looked like you fell asleep.”

“Who? Me? You’re full of crap, Marbor. I was just thinking.”

“Care to enlighten us, then, general?”

Alt swatted at the major again and began pacing. “You know, you’re a cheeky bastard, Marbor. I should have you written up.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I very well may, too, once this is all over. Insubordination.”

“I shall dread the day.”

“Good. Now. What’s the situation on the Korvish-Sopkan line, Tera?”

“They look like they’re the ones under siege, sir. Half of them are sick with fever, and their field hospital is overflowing. Festering wounds, probably.”

“And the eastern section of their works?”

“Depleted. Far thinner than the other sections, so far as I could tell. That’s where we finally managed to get through.” Tera’s voice halted abruptly. “I tried to take the squad through the southern section three nights ago. Only three of us survived. And then, tonight, Cunard... was killed.”

“That’s not your responsibility, sergeant,” Alt said. “It’s mine.”

Tera stared at his boots.

“Last question, John,” Marbor said now, clamping his hand on the sergeant’s shoulder. “How close are Korvish-Sopkan heavy weapons?”

“A day. Maybe two, if they’re as tired as I think they are. They’re dragging twenty-foot trebuchets, and that’s not easy.”

Alt stepped closer.

“What does your Clydish intuition tell you, sergeant? Search it – your judge’s gifts have never failed me. Although, I might add, this would be one hell of a bad time to end that streak.”

Tera closed his eyes and seemed to drift away from the hospital tent. The seconds rolled into minutes before he opened his eyes.

“Tanith Powdras says the Korvish-Sopkan commander has sent a company of men to speed the transport of the trebuchets. They could be here as soon as midday.”

Alt rubbed a hand across his face, wiping away the greasy sweat of the tropical night. “Tell Miss Powdras I am in her debt.”

Marbor rolled his eyes.

"That's lovely, sir. Taking military counsel from Sergeant Tera's imaginary plaything."

Tera showed no emotion, but this was hardly a new area of dispute. Marbor was a Gheraldic gentleman, raised on a regal island where soldiers didn't judge their peers via invasive psychic rituals and men took flesh-and-blood mistresses, not dream wives. Alt was a Gherald too, but the general's transient youth with his ever-curious father had given him a more open mind. He jabbed a finger at Marbor's chest.

"I'll have you speak with a bit more respect about our sergeant's betrothed. After all these years at my side, you should have a ... higher understanding of the men we lead."

"Sir, you're the one with the reputation for having 'gone native,'" Marbor reminded him. "I'm the one with the reputation for being a cynic."

Alt scowled at Marbor, then turned his attention to Tera.

"Tonight, then? Can you go tonight?"

Tera tested the hip, then nodded.

"Paper and pen, ensign, and prepare to copy," Alt shouted over his shoulder to a junior officer. "I have orders to issue." He turned to Marbor. "Major, we're going to get everyone moving now, and I want the last man out of this ruin before the sun rises. Have the heavy-weapons platoon assemble the trebuchets in the courtyard, and tell the men to strip their packs to the barest of essentials. We are preparing for an extended run, not a long battle. Make sure they understand that."

Marbor saluted and hustled off to alert the regiment's leaders: commissioned officers from Gherald and non-commissioned officers from the Clydish homeland of Darbas. The twin moons stood high in the sky, and there was a breeze to keep the haze down and the bugs away. Alt stepped into the night with Tera trailing behind him and took a deep breath. He smelled the sweet rot of the jungle around them, but just a hint of moonflower, too.

"A fine night, Tera," Alt said.

"Yes sir. A fine night."

"Could be our last. Wouldn't surprise me a bit if we were all dead by sunrise" Alt said in his most chipper voice. Tera stared at him incredulously, but the general merely clapped him on the back and stepped by. "In the meantime, I think I'll go take a little nap."

**T**he face in the fresco on the vaulted ceiling above him had emerged slowly over the past week – first the eyes, just faintly recognizable through the mold and soot, then a jaw and a cheekbone. Through his concentration she had grown into a beautiful woman, and Barney Alt had fallen asleep by calling her forth from the ruins, contemplating her identity until exhaustion overtook him and the sounds of his troops outside faded. Her face drifted through his dreams, this goddess of a lost people who had disappeared into the jungle without even leaving their name.

Something jostled him, and Alt swatted at it absently.

"Excuse me general, but I am not a bug," Marbor said.

"You're certainly a pest," Alt replied, still not opening his eyes. "Morning already?"

"No," Marbor said. "But you have to get up anyway."

Did the major ever sleep? Maybe Marbor was more of a mystery than the woman on the ceiling – never seemed to see him in his bunk, yet his personality remained a constant. He was fit and neat, with dark, well-groomed hair, and he never even seemed to sweat. "I assume this is something important," Alt said, rubbing his face. How long had he been napping? It didn't even feel like 10 minutes.

"The Korvish-Sopkans are back to negotiate our surrender. Again," Marbor said. "I've kept them out of the way of our preparations, but you might want to move with some speed – the governor and the admiral are already with the delegation." Marbor tossed off the words as if he were advising Alt on some particularly dull social event, and disappeared up the stone stairs.

Alt rolled to his feet in the creaky cot, grumbling in the greasy dark at the inequity of life. Allowing the colonial governor and his staff to come along on this retreat had been a colossal mistake. The general slipped his feet into his boots with some difficulty, leaving the winding leather straps undone so that the buckles jangled as he climbed the stairwell that led up to the battlements.

The moons told him he had not been in his cot for very long. Wallain still teetered low and fat on the eastern horizon, while Lokin (the Mischief Moon) had slipped only slightly closer to the jungle. They spilled enough light to cast night shadows beneath the towers and spires that studded the exotic fortress. Jungle encroached it in a million ways, yet the structure remained intact and inscrutable. Acres of walls and cedar-shaped masonry towers surrounded a complex of plazas, structures, lawns and a central courtyard. Its exterior wall descended in terraces like a giant's staircase. Alt surveyed the scene by moonlight as he buttoned his tunic, and it distracted him. He did a poor job with the shirt, so that the right side rode higher than the left. His mind was elsewhere.

"Over here, sir," Marbor called, waving a hand. "They're waiting for you on the governor's lawn."

Alt brushed past him. "Then you should have woken me earlier."

"Whatever would I do without you around to correct my failings, general?" Marbor said. "By the way, you look like hell, sir."

"Occupational hazard, Marbor," he said, and the pair descended the crumbling stairs toward the set-back terrace where the Gheraldic governor of the Bangoon colony had pitched his tents. Alt spotted the delegation and cursed quietly. The three Korvish-Sopkan officers in their ridiculous hats sat confidently in folding canvas camp chairs facing Governor Falworth and Admiral West-erby, while the governor's jittery staff attended to cups, saucers and tiny pitchers of milk over the shoulders of the dignitaries. A tea party in the jungle, Alt thought. I shall have to note this for my memoirs.

All five rose politely as Alt rolled into their midst. While he was the lowest ranking of the six, he was also the deciding factor, and

they all by-Sula knew it. Falworth started to smile at Alt, welcoming him, but the expression melted into something more disdainful as the governor surveyed the general's appearance: muddy boots with straps and buckles dangling, one trouser leg properly tucked, the other hanging crooked. Falworth and Westerby were arrayed in their finery – a ruffled collar and a green waistcoat for Falworth, the maroon jacket of a Gheraldic officer for Westerby. But Alt wore the grimy logger's undershirt he had made famous, adorned only by his mourning-dove-gray tunic, improperly buttoned. With his beard and his wild hair, he looked more like a grumpy inn-keeper than a Gheraldic general, and the Korvish-Sopkans greeted him with more respect than did his countrymen.

"Good morning, General Alt," said Falworth, gesturing toward a chair and trying to hide an expression that made him look like a man sipping vinegar. "Please join us."

"Bring another chair for Marbor," Alt told the servant who hovered behind him. He sat heavily, crossing his legs and knitting his fingers across his belly. "Now, gentlemen, what pointless dealings have you engineered in my absence?"

Westerby fumed. "We are receiving this delegation from the opposition with honor and protocol, General Alt. Would you have us make them wait for the junior commander to rise from his bunk?"

Alt smiled beneath his black beard and turned toward the Korvish-Sopkan emissaries, the finest horse soldiers on the planet and proud heirs to a continental empire of mare's-milk-drinking plainsmen.. This was the third delegation they had sent to take the garrison's surrender, and only one of the men was new to him. "So you're the opposition now? Congratulations. You've been promoted. When I went to bed you were the enemy."

The new officer, by appearances a pureblood Sopkan, leaned forward in his chair.

"We have not been introduced. I am Villor Koh, a marshal of cavalry attached to the Marine Command. I believe you know my comrades, General Fredor Nushka and Naval Commander Antonic Burachs. My Gheraldic language will be sufficient, it is hoped, to translate these proceedings."

Alt took a long look at Koh, savoring him as one might enjoy a regional wine. He was Sopkan to his bones – the hard, angular face, the tawny skin. He was light and lithe and had small shoulders, but there was an athletic completeness to him, a man born to the saddle and weaned on mare's milk. He carried the tradition of a millennium of horsemen, proud warriors who simply didn't have a clue when it came to the kind of warfare their empire now demanded. The other two were either purely or predominantly Korvish, their skin pinker, their eyebrows bushier, their torsos thick with squat peasant muscle.

"Then tell your Korvish brothers that I am sorry to have kept them waiting," Alt said.

Koh nodded and mumbled something soft in Korvish, then returned his attention to Alt.

"Our message this morning is a simple one, general. Tomorrow we will attack your works and drive you from this ruin. In this attack you will all surely die."

"Yes, that is a simple message, Marshal Koh," Alt said, rising and offering a clipped but polite bow. "Thank you so much. Good night."

Falworth was now fully irritated. "General Alt, you will kindly sit down! That is not all!"

Koh continued. "We offer you terms that are decidedly more good than our last visit. We will see to the transportation of your junior officers to the nearest Gheraldic outpost. Your Clydes will not be taken from this island, and you, the senior officers, will be held at the governor's palace with freedom of the grounds during negotiations for your release. Surely an old soldier can see the honor in such an agreement."

"I believe we should consider this proposal with all due seriousness, Barney," Falworth said. Westerby, who looked like he was having difficulty holding his eyes open, grunted in assent.

"So, we're all in agreement, then?" Alt asked brightly. He saw the hope rising in Falworth's eyes. Good. All the better.

"So glad you could see it the *sensible* way this time, general," Falworth said.

"Yes, sensible," Alt said, lowering the boom. "I'm sure it will all sound *bloody sensible* when I explain it to my Clydes, the very warriors who have kept you safe within these walls these past weeks! 'Rally round, boys: I've sold you into a life of bondage, but take heart! Your Gheraldic officers will be home in the pubs of Bhengal within a month's time, and while you're breaking your backs for a foreign power, myself and the other senior Gheraldic powers will be reclining in comfort at the governor's palace awaiting our exchange. I'm sure they'll take that well, don't you?"

"It's not about your damned Clydes!" Falworth shouted, the remnants of his patience evaporating. "It's about common sense! We cannot stay here forever! Even if you succeed in holding *them* off, *we* will all starve to death!"

Alt smiled, leaned farther back in his chair and pulled a Bangooni cigar from his pocket. He bit off its tip and waited for one of the governor's servants to proffer one of the torches that surrounded the meeting. He took the smoke in like a connoisseur, swirling it around his tongue.

"Marshal Koh here says they'll be storming our works any moment now and that we all will surely die. So I wouldn't worry about starving, governor."

Koh's pride began to enter the conversation. "You mock our offer, general."

Alt laughed out loud. "You can be assured I don't mock *you*, brother Koh. But here's the simple truth: the 2<sup>nd</sup> CRG isn't going to give up this utterly fascinating ruin without a fight."

"General Alt!" Falworth's face practically glowed with fury. "Marshal Koh, please understand that the general does not speak for the colony or the Gheraldic Empire. He speaks solely as the commander of the 2nd Clydish Regimental Group, which through quirk of Colonial Office regulation, falls outside my direct line of authority."

"Governor, all of us in the great army of Korvish-Sopka know well the reputation of the Clydish Regiments," Koh said. "They are giants and heroes, but they are also mercenaries. We merely wish to offer them a better ... contract."



“Good luck with that, sir,” said Westerby, shooting an ironic look at Alt. Finally, here was something on which the two warriors could agree.

“Marshal Koh, you will find that my Clydes consider themselves as much a part of the Gheraldic Empire as any courtier of Arnell,” Alt explained. “I’m not sure why, but there it is.”

“We will find out how deep that loyalty runs,” Koh said. “The equally great empire of Korvish-Sopka can be extremely persuasive.”

On Bangooni rabble, yes, Alt thought. But the Clydes of Darbas were a different lot – one of the last pure Calpathian peoples on the planet. “Let’s cut to it, Marshal Koh: what are your plans regarding my Clydes should they reject your offer to serve your emperor?”

Koh stroked his beard absently. “I had not considered that possibility.”

“Well, consider it,” Alt said. “Because the only people who will agree to your terms are these gentlemen right here, and you’re more than welcome to take them.”

“We are not here to offer asylum to a deposed governor,” Koh said, his polite façade coming apart. “The purpose of this delegation is to seek the final elimination of the last armed resistance to our successful conquest of Bangoon. We have waited long enough to end this ridiculous ... *farce of a war!*”

Alt leaned forward and patted Koh reassuringly on the knee, an action that was sure drive the old horse soldier absolutely nuts.

“I understand, Marshal Koh, I truly do. The frustration must be working your patience to a nub – all this perfectly good land and not a single plain, not a single road, and not a single horse to be found. It must certainly be crimping your style.”

Koh recoiled as if a snake had just slithered between them.

“I will thank you, General Alt, to keep your hands off my person!”

Alt shrugged.

“Please, general...” Falworth said. But it was already too late.

“Think about our opponent’s position, governor. Just think about it,” Alt began. “An overwhelming victory over our fleet, followed by a perfectly executed series of multiple landings and the virtual elimination of our permanent garrison within just three days.” He turned to Koh. “You really are to be commended, and I mean that with all sincerity. It was a brilliant campaign.” Alt’s attention returned to Falworth. “And yet, with total victory within their grasp, the 2<sup>nd</sup> CRG slips through their noose, fades into the jungles where their horses cannot follow, where their wagons and trebuchets move at a pace measured in yards, not miles, per day. When they finally do catch up with us, we have fortified this ruin, rendering it impregnable to any force lacking heavy weapons, and the longer this siege plays out, the more likely a Gheraldic invasion force becomes. Correct, Marshal Koh?”

Koh spoke in a low voice to his comrades, who looked up at Alt with undisguised anger. “You will regret these words, General Alt,” Koh said. “You have assured the deaths of everyone within these walls.” The three Korvish-Sopkans rose, and after an exchange of salutes, marched out from the governor’s lawn. Falworth trailed after them, beseeching, and the group stopped outside of earshot and conferred again.

“Mister Popularity, as always,” Marbor said under his breath.

Alt grinned. “Dumping the governor and the admiral may actually work to our advantage,” he whispered. “I wasn’t sure how long Falworth and Westerby could keep up with our pace. Have you told them of our plans yet?”

Marbor shook his head. “It was my intention to keep the complaining to a minimum,” he mumbled.

Westerby stretched himself to full height, working the kinks out of his angular, knobby frame. “Well, Barney, that was quite a show.”

“Admiral, for reasons I cannot discuss it would be best if you went with the governor,” Alt said. The old sailor shrugged.

“I was going to go anyway,” Westerby said, taking Alt’s hand and shaking it. “My career ended when those bastards came ashore. A miserable failure, that. Anyway, it’s been a real pleasure getting to know you, Barney. You’re every bit as eccentric as everyone says, but a fine fellow nonetheless. Should you manage to survive all this somehow, do promise me you’ll stop by my club on Treasury Street in Arnell for a drink, yes? Yes. Wonderful, wonderful. Goodbye to you, too, Major.”

“Goodbye Admiral,” Marbor nodded formally. “Have a nice time being exchanged.”

“Oh, I intend to,” Westerby said, shambling off into the night to look for someone to accept his surrender.

**N**either Westerby nor the governor nor the Korvish-Sopkans knew the fortress’s most modern secret.: The bowels of the ruin contained two dismantled fifteen-foot Gheraldic trebuchets, stashed there years before by Alt and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Clydish Regimental Group.

The colonial office on Bangoon had sent the heavy weapons inland as part of a deal that settled a violent tribal uprising. “What would make your people more secure?” the Gheraldic administrator had asked the chief of a tribe that was particularly worried about raids by its rivals. “Some of those,” the chief had replied, pointing to a line of Gheraldic trebuchets on the parade grounds.

The chief and his tribesmen were utterly incapable of either operating or maintaining these heaving monsters of wood and bronze and cord, but Alt understood their feelings. A Gheraldic trebuchet was an impressive sight: A timbered frame supporting a massive counterweight and a fifteen-foot throwing arm, mounted on a sturdy timber chassis. With a rock or a ball of burning pitch attached to the arm, crews would ratchet up the counterweight. When released, the falling weight whipped the throwing arm overhead with a stunning velocity that could put tons of stone on target.

The basic technology had not changed in a thousand years, but Gheraldic engineers were famous for their improvements. After centuries of tinkering, standard Gheraldic heavy weapons moved more easily, set up more quickly and threw larger loads farther, more accurately and more rapidly. The empire's ballistas – giant crossbows on wheels or pinions – heaved enormous bronze-tipped bolts and canisters of Pictian fire. A third weapon, the catapult, tossed its smaller payload via spring tension.

But nothing was as awe-inspiring as a siege-busting trebuchet, and the locals simply had to have some.

The job of dragging the two gift trebuchets through the jungle to this temple-fortress fell to Colonel Barney Alt, the new commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Clydish Regimental Group. He barged the trebuchets as far inland as the rivers would allow, then dismantled them and carried the parts by hand up tiny trails only the locals knew. It was slow going, but Alt didn't mind: the chance to see this ruin had been worth every headache. His 2<sup>nd</sup> CRG camped overnight on the terraces after storing the dismantled trebuchets in the ruin, and Alt spent the entire time exploring, wondering at the mystery of the place, imagining how his father would have reacted to such an archaeological treasure.

The next morning, with the trebuchets and their stores of Pictian Fire packed safely away, Alt asked the local chief what he intended to do with heavy weapons in such a remote place. "Nothing," the man said. And that's what he did.

Much had changed for Alt and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Clydish Regimental Group in the intervening years: they had fought a bloody war against the Korvish-Sopkans in Bhengal; Alt had been stripped of his command, gotten it back, and returned with the unit to Bangoon. In the year since their arrival, the general had fumed and stomped and grumped, protesting another sentence of backwater boredom. At least the invasion had given him something to do.

Faced with surrender or annihilation, Alt led the 2<sup>nd</sup> CRG into the jungle instead, guiding his Clydish Regiment on an unnecessarily difficult route. Alt gambled that the Korvish-Sopkans would follow his path rather than scout an easier route, adding time to his march but slowing the progress of the enemy's heavy weapons and supplies to an over-burdened crawl.

Under different circumstances, Alt might have taken pleasure in his cleverness. He was not above such things – by his own admission, he wasn't *above* much at all. Yet the Clydes delighted in it. They were an exuberant, cantankerous race, known around the world as much for their raucous spirit as for their size and strength. They were prone to loud songs, epic tales and vigorous celebration. If a Clyde pinched off an overlarge turd, Marbor once said, the man was apt to write a ballad about the experience. Alt's love for them was an open secret, yet he was still not one of them.

What worried him most, as he resumed his pre-battle nap, was not the thought that Clydes would die in his break-out maneuver. That was to be expected. What scared Alt was the fallout of failure, that the men would look at him with betrayed eyes, their faith in him dying first as the last of his unorthodox plans finally came to naught.

But worry was a luxury now: Alt and his Clydes were committed. In less than two hours he would attempt to poke a hole in the Korvish-Sopkan siege lines, then lead the 2<sup>nd</sup> Clydish Regimental Group in a dash through the moonlight towards a smuggling village where the best he could hope for would be enough casualties to remove the burden of deciding who would stay and who would escape.

Alt pictured every phase of the operation in turn: the opening bombardment, the assault, the breakthrough, the alternating passages of lines as his CRG slipped away toward the coast. Few military units in the world could accomplish such a feat. Fewer still could do it in a jungle. But to do it at night, with no sleep? No, Alt told himself, there is only one unit in the world that could do what he asked.

"Am I too confident?" he whispered to the woman of the fresco. She smiled down at him from the ceiling, her face coy despite the smudging of time and soot.

"No," she whispered back. "You do what you must."

The woman on the ceiling tilted her head and Alt's heart practically stopped. Had she really spoken? He glanced around the room to make sure there were no other officers present.

"I'm sorry, have we met?" he asked.

"Of course." Her voice was the very dampness of the walls.

"Show yourself better," he said. "It's been damn frustrating trying to pick out your pattern."

"Look closer," she said, and when he did Alt noticed the lines of her green velvet gown and her brilliant red hair. They flowed and swayed as if he were viewing her through dark water instead of a thick film of filth. "Is that better?"

"You are beautiful, my lady."

"Quite."

"I'm leaving soon, you know. And there's so much for me to ask you."

"Perhaps there will be time to find me later," she whispered. "If you and your men fight as one tonight you may yet cross the water to safety."

"But I will never return to this place again," Alt told her, his fatigue-addled brain not caring that he was conversing with a ceiling. The woman in the fresco merely smiled at him, her hair and gown undulating.

"Give me a little something here," Alt pleaded. "What do I need to do to make this plan work?"

"You're going to have to *listen*," she said. "There will be a message you'll need to hear."

"What is your name?"

The vision looked at him with that same patient expression, but it did not reply.

Alt bristled.

"I'm talking to a ceiling, and even now I can't get a straight answer."

"Well, what did you expect?" the woman asked. "A vision on the ceiling does not play by your rules, general."

“All I asked you was your name. I’m about to go out and fight a battle, you know. The least you could do is tell me your name.”  
The woman on the ceiling laughed, but there was an edge to it.

“It just doesn’t work that way, Barney,” she said. “Anyway, pay attention: If you survive, steer your boats toward the Gheraldic colony at New Bronald in the islands south of Ulash. It’s your best hope. The future is not set, but much of what is to come may yet rely upon you and your men.”

The general felt himself torn between adoration and annoyance.

“New Bronald?” Alt complained. “New Bronald is a shit hole.”

“It’s your best chance,” she said.

“And I’m not dreaming?” Alt asked.

“I never said that.”

“Oh, that’s not fair. Am I dreaming or not?”

“John Tera has a dream wife, does he not?”

That gave Alt pause. “You’re not Tanith Powdras, are you?” he asked cautiously.

“I most certainly am not,” the woman on the ceiling scoffed, and Alt caught what looked like a hint of disdain in her expression.

“Now this is really beyond the pale. You are truly a difficult man.”

Alt frowned, knitting furry brows. “Okay,” he said. “Sorry.”

“That’s alright. Anyway, say goodbye, because Marbor is coming.”

“Already? Why couldn’t you have come earlier?”

The beautiful red-haired woman on the ceiling narrowed her eyes and drew her mouth tight. “Goodbye, Barney.”

And she was gone. Alt startled as Marbor shook his boot.

“It’s time, sir.”

“I by-Sula know what time it is, Marbor!”

“Well if you by-Sula know what time it is, then by-Sula get up! Besides, it’s bad form to take our prophet’s name in vain right before a battle.”

“I’m sure the holy sailmaker couldn’t care less whether I swear by him.” Alt swung his boots to the floor and stood suddenly, taking a deep and vigorous breath and exhaling it loudly. “Marbor, you won’t believe what just happened here. The woman in that fresco above us came to life and told me this might just work.”

Marbor looked at him blankly. “That’s wonderful, sir.”

“I’m so glad you think so,” Alt said, and he clapped the major on the shoulder as he strutted with loud steps out of the dark chamber.

*Bangoon***Sergeant John Tera**

John Tera sat with his head down and his eyes closed in the ruined courtyard, only vaguely aware of the muted hum of activity surrounding him. Torchlight flickered across the thin skin of his eyelids and the voices of the men assembling the trebuchets floated past like driftwood on a broad river. He held it all at bay, quieting his mind, but this time he had to go deep within himself to find the place where nothing hurt and fatigue was an abstraction.

Closer to the surface, everything hurt. He could feel the blood swelling around the torn flesh at his hip, pressing outward against stitches that strained to hold the wound in place. The surgeon had placed two leeches on either side of the incision to help keep the swelling down, and if he concentrated he could feel them blindly, slowly nursing on his blood.

Other hurts were older. His right knee throbbed its reminder of a pitchball match from his youth. The whip scars across his back tightened and relaxed with each breath. There were old arrow wounds in his shoulder and buttocks, and a sword scar ran south from his chest. Each wound was its own story, recited over and over, each contending for his attention. Tera gave each its turn, then pressed them into the background of his consciousness. Some Guardsmen said that he paid his pains no mind, but this was exactly backward: Tera paid attention to each wound, but had simply learned to put each in its place, freeing his mind to concentrate on the task at hand.

In truth, the fatigue was the greater problem. His legs were depleted, and each muscle called out for rest. They had carried him far beyond their capacity, until his body had begun consuming itself. Now he massaged each muscle mentally, urging the blood into his calves and thighs.

Sleep would be good, he thought, but sleep was another luxury he could not afford at the moment. He had hardly slept in the field, and what sleep he did find was often wormholed with feverish dreams of the Clydish homelands in Darbas. While crossing the river upstream from Clyde Barrow he would realize that the water plants swaying in the currents were actually the bodies of dead Clydish women, their long hair washing mutely ahead of their corpses. He would have simply dismissed the dream as the product of anxiety and homesickness, but a man with a trained intuition learns to pay his own signs a bit more heed.

Tanith Powdras desired his sleep, and her seductive whisper stroked his thoughts like light fingertips running through his hair. Tera shooed her away. Sleep would refresh his soul, but his body took priority. He had little time to repair it, and all of his concentration was required to heal the new wound and replenish his muscles. Not that Tanith cared. He suspected that his lover secretly wished he would simply abandon his body and spend all of his time by the mossy spring with her.

But Tera was tired, and Tanith Powdras would not stay put. She swam back across his concentration, shimmering in the darkness behind his shuttered eyes. Her fingers, very real now, fluttered across his temples, and then the swell and curve of her bosom, through thin cotton, settled against his back. Tera could feel her nestling behind him, kneeling, taking him in her arms and beckoning him down. He kept his inner eye closed, so as not to see the spring coming into focus around him, but he knew every detail of their meeting place, the home she projected.

The spring would be cool, even on a hot day, gurgling musically from beneath the lichen-speckled gray rock. Weathered stones lay tumbled around its boundaries, and the sunlight danced and swayed in the shadows of sacred poplars. John reached down with his hand and felt the warmth of the sunlit grass and the chill of the earth beneath it, but still he kept his inner eye closed.

"John," she cooed, soft as sleep on an autumn afternoon. "John, why do you avoid me like this?"

"I'm busy, Tanith. There's a war on."

Tanith Powdras ran her fingers under his tunic, fiddling seductively with the hair that sprouted between the tight muscles of

his chest.

"There's always a war on, John. You'd think a man would still find time for his beloved."

He pressed his inner eye more tightly shut.

"Tanith, it's like this: in half an hour I will open my eyes in the real world, and I will be seated on a Bagooni ruin and the men will be forming up in the darkness for a surprise attack. I'll probably be killed, but if I survive, I've got to run all night to the coast. And I hurt all over from scouting around in the jungle behind enemy lines for a week. So now is not the best time."

"So?" she asked. "That is thirty minutes from now. Thirty minutes of *your* time. Thirty minutes there could be *hours* here. Why don't you just open those beautiful eyes and look upon me?"

Tera shook his head, although all he wanted was to gaze at her. People said a dream wife sapped a man of his will to live, but Tanith Powdras had sustained Tera for years. Through wars and wounds and homesickness, she had been his refuge – the sole perk of his appointment as a judge. The same ritual that opened his inner-eye to psychic testimony also opened the door that allowed her in. If he could only look at her one more time, lie with her one more time...

"I can't," he said, shaking her off. "That wouldn't be wise."

He felt her rise up slightly and raise the hem of her cotton shirt so that the points of her breasts brushed lightly against the bare skin on the side of his neck, her body swaying almost imperceptibly.

He saw her so clearly in his imagination that it was as if he had relented and opened his inner eye to gaze at her. Tanith had been unchangingly beautiful since the day they had met almost six years ago, a raven-haired maiden with milk-white skin. She was trim of waist and small of breast, but her skin was smooth as cream and firm as river rock, and she spent her hours adorning herself, peering at her reflection in the deep pool of the spring. He could almost touch her face, the clear green eyes, the up-turned nose, the delicate chin. He imagined his rough cheeks burrowing into the flesh of her throat, felt her body turn and settle beneath him, her thigh rising under rustling fabric to enfold his hip and draw him...

Dammit, she was doing it again!

He opened his physical eyes suddenly onto the torch-lit scene of the ruined courtyard, where the heavy-weapons platoon had almost finished assembling both the trebuchets. Tera's pulse raced, and he had to gasp for breath. His dream wife was getting pretty damned pushy.

Casar, Alt's Bhengali scout, sat beside Tera with his back against the smooth stone of the interior wall, grinning at him with a face like a leering skull. The sergeant would never quite get used to the sight of him: Casar was ugly and beautiful all at once – ugly in his cruel face, beautiful in the same way that a weapon can be beautiful. His body was compact and densely knit, with copper-colored skin rippling tight across knots of muscle and bone. His head was as bald as a stone and the tribal tattoos that adorned it looked as though they had been chiseled there. The scars along his cheekbones had, in fact, been carved by elders of his tribe, creating a sadistic mask of mystery. Even his smiles seemed to arise from some secret irony of unspoken malice.

"What?" Tera snapped. Casar kept on grinning, wagging a narrow finger at him.

"John Tera not dreaming?"

"Oh, shut up. Do we have orders yet?"

"Alt say for me to watch John Tera. So, I do. John Tera is not to be disturbed. John Tera is special, no?"

Still, that smile.

"Casar, you look as though the Goddess skinned a man alive and draped his pelt over a pile of rocks."

The leering grew more knowledgeable. "So? Did you?" The tip of Casar's tongue flitted across thin lips.

"Did I what?"

"Your dream woman. Put her legs in the air? Tarked her, 'eh?"

Tera threw a backhanded fist into Casar's shoulder. The smaller man only laughed unpleasantly.

"Judges!" Casar said, and spat on the ground. "You all think yourselves noblemen."

Tera had had enough – years of such talk from Casar and others was more than enough. What did Casar, or any of them, know about the life of a judge? Knowing wasn't pleasurable, it was miserable, and Tera was sick of it. He sprang to his feet, nerves jangling with adrenaline and fatigue, and whipped his bronze sword from the scabbard that hung from his shoulder.

Yet as quick as Tera was, Casar was pure economy of motion. His own sword flashed in the torchlight, blocking Tera's swipe and diverting the blow. Casar rolled to his left, leaped to his feet and grabbed Tera's free hand with a twist that bent his arm back between his shoulder blades. The sudden move dropped the taller man to his knees, and he caught his breath sharply as Casar pressed the sharp edge of a bronze blade against his throat.

"John Tera not like Casar? So sad, old friend." The voice was a hissing whisper at his ear. "Are you ready to go to your dream woman? Casar will send you to her."

"Yes," said Tera truthfully. "I am ready."

"Too bad," said Casar as he shoved the judge away. "You die some other night."

Tera turned and looked at his comrade. The grin was gone, replaced by his usual stony scowl. Casar sheathed the sword and rearranged the scabbard beneath the thick belt that bound up his *schrah*, the traditional piece of cloth worn by the men of his tribe. Casar alone among the men of the regiment scorned the uniform of the unit, but then again he was really just one of the oddities Alt had collected in his travels, not a Clydish guardsman.

Tera considered offering Casar his hand in apology, but realized this would be viewed only as confirmation of his weakness. He sheathed his own sword instead, and went in search of Marbor.



The men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> CRG formed up by squad and platoon in the dim light of the Mischief Moon. Tera tracked it, concentrating on the dark line of trees in the foreground so as to perceive its motion and the slight wobble of its orbit. The attack would commence when Lokin reached its zenith and Wallain, the Mother Moon, peeked above the treetops. Tera could now barely detect the glow of the larger moon on the horizon. It would begin very soon.

Tera surveyed the scene around him, pressing it into his memory. Almost a thousand men knelt against the battlements at the top of the ruin in eerie silence, pressed two and three deep. He knelt among them, listening to them breathe, smelling the mass of them, an aroma of sweat and dampness mingled with leather and oil and smoke. The dim moonlight drained all color from the scene, but there was precious little to bleed away in the first place: these men were the King's Royal Archers, and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Clydish Regimental Group they wore tunics of a blue so muted they were almost gray. Unlike the Duke of Arnell Grenadiers and the Darbas Cavalry, the King's Royal Archers shunned the idea of jackets and buttons, choosing instead a hooded cloak of soft wool. In tropical climes the cloak usually served as an addition to their bedrolls, but tonight they were cloaked for battle. Tera tugged at his, loosening the cloak from the belt that gathered it at his waist, then tucked his trousers back into the tops of his boots and cinched the winding straps tighter. The sultry night was a misery, and each piece of his gear seemed a clunky annoyance – the pack, the quiver, the sword, the dagger, the war hammer. He fought the urge to shed it all in a frenzy of frustration and discomfort, but merely gripped his longbow instead and tried to feel grateful for the fact that they'd left their heavy wooden shields behind the day they entered the jungle.

Grouped near the center of the upper wall crouched the advance guard of the Duke of Arnell Grenadiers. These were stout men, the biggest and the strongest sons of Clyde. Their dress announced them boldly: bright red shirts under heavy bronze cuirasses. They wore polished helmets with nose guards that perched above heads of flowing hair and their hands, wrists and biceps were girded with armored bands. Of the three specialties in Clydish arms, the grenadiers alone had retained their shields on the overland trek. They pressed against each other in barely controlled irritation, their round bucklers getting in the way, their limbs bending protective leather in ways it was not meant to be bent. What nerves they showed displayed themselves in the way they fingered their war hammers, vicious weapons with almost twice the heft of an archer's standard issue. Despite the flaming grenades from which they took their name, the hammer was the grenadiers' primary weapon, relied upon to such an extent that a grenadier's sword was little more than a decorative accessory.

More grenadiers stood below the upper battlements in the courtyard, long lines of them jostling silently near the stairs and ladders. There was not the room to put them all at the top, so some would have to climb up before they began their descent. At least I won't have to contend with that, Tera thought.

Arrayed around the remainder of the courtyard were the dismal and dismounted members of the Darbas Cavalry, primarily men of the Celon province, kneeling beneath what seemed a forest of lances. The cavalymen and their sergeant major, the flamboyant Coom LaTrent, had been in a foul temper ever since Alt chose to trek the CRG through the jungle, a decision that required the abandoning of their precious mounts. They were still not quite over it and had fought and squabbled more than the archers and the grenadiers combined. Though LaTrent was fond of their standard blue tunics, he had dressed them for the tropics: silk undershirts so densely woven that they could follow a bronze arrow point into a wound without being pierced, knee-length britches over knee-high riding boots.

In the center of the courtyard, the heavy weapons platoon – an unhappy contingent of grenadiers – waited with burning torches beside the two fifteen-foot trebuchets. These models offered a much lighter throw-weight than the five they had left behind, but they appeared to be in good order, and there was no shortage of manpower to keep them well fed with Pichthian Fire.

Alt and Marbor, shadowed by Casar and a contingent of aides, stalked the broad turret to Tera's right. Marbor seemed more intent upon the enemy in the darkness below, leaning occasionally over the stone wall to look for signs of activity, but Alt was clearly fixated on the sight presented by his men. Let Marbor and the other Gheralds along these walls worry about the Korvish-Sopkans. Alt understood that this was really all about the Clydes. He believed in them, and they could feel it.

Well, if he believes, then so will I, Tera thought.

Lokin wavered in the sky above him, and over on the western horizon the silver orb of Wallain pushed her rays above the tree line. The time had come. Tera looked up at Alt, who seemed to notice the alignment and pause. Just a few more seconds, Tera thought, a few more moments of peace, maybe our last, assembled in our might on this mysterious ruin, its stories long forgotten.

Alt raised his arms high above his head and held them there. The time had come to pray, and the sound of murmured Sulist benedictions rolled along the battlements.

*By the Great Voice we are lifted  
And counted in our faith  
One for good and none for evil  
Let us rise and take our place.  
Sailmaker, be the wind  
As our own deaths we face.*

Tera, raised in the Church of Sula the Sailmaker, mumbled the words to himself, an old habit from his childhood in Clyde Barrow. Then, more quietly, he recited another prayer. A prayer from the Old Path.

*Maiden, mother, crone,  
And father all alone,  
Fill my heart with fire  
Or throw my body on the pyre.*

He let himself remember his homeland on Darbas – the gentle fields of The Edain, the enfolding mountains of Gwynyr, the cosmopolitan bustle of Sidon and New Calpathia – then quickly traced the path of the pentagram over his heart, closed his hand into a fist and kissed the back of it. “For my loves: mother, Chibura, Aideen ... and Tanith,” he whispered.

Alt dropped his arms to his side, and a battle cry exploded from the men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> CRG.

Three thousand throats opened in riotous ferocity, an explosion of sound that flushed birds from their night roosts across the jungle and sent great cats scrambling for the upper branches in alarm. It rolled out over the treetops and roused the Korvish-Sopkans from their bedrolls in the moment before the first of the two trebuchets loosed its flaming cargo.

The first burning bundle arched almost directly over Tera’s head, climbing high into the night sky before stalling and descending. Bits of liquid flame splattered among the archers as the Pictian Fire soared over them, but they held their ranks, waiting for the signal. Now Alt turned to them and pointed, and Lieutenant Denton leaped to his feat and gave the command.

“Archers! By ranks! Volley!”

Tera, who had knelt among the first rank, rose to his feet and drew his first arrow. Behind him, the second trebuchet lurched and another load of Pictian Fire pitched over the walls.

“Draw!” shouted Denton.

“Flight!” answered Tera and the men of the first rank as each drew back their bowstrings in unison and took aim on a spot of jungle below. They were shooting blind, but they were concentrating on the spot where they expected their first real opposition.

“Release!” Denton shouted.

Three hundred bowstrings snapped forward in the same instant, producing a harmonious concussion that stirred the air like a covey of quail flushed from tall grass. Another bucket of fire passed overhead.

Denton jumped to the wall where all could see his dark silhouette. “First Rank! Advance! Second rank! Volley!”

Tera slung his bow across his shoulder and scrambled over the wall with his comrades as the rank behind bellowed “Flight!”

It was a dark, eight-foot drop to the terrace below. Tera felt the chill in his stomach, then pushed off into space. He seemed to fall farther than expected, and pain shot spikes up his feet and shins when he landed. The archers of the second rank released their flight from the terrace above, and Tera staggered with the men around him toward the lip of the next terrace. The second rank would be following behind them in a moment, and he didn’t want anyone landing on him.

Private Tocorum, identifiable by his characteristic bad breath, leaned nervously against him on the right.

“Sula the Sailmaker! That’s a long jump down ahead!”

“Don’t think too much, private,” Tera said.

Above him he heard Denton shout “Second rank! Advance!” and the words pushed him forward. He grabbed Tocorum by the cloak and jumped, dragging the younger man along with him into the darkness. They fell for what seemed like far too long, and his scrotum retracted deep into his body on the descent.

The second landing was rougher than the first. Tera landed and rolled. Had that only been fifteen feet? New pains shouted at him from the soles of his feet, but fortunately for him he had landed on soft earth. Tocorum was not so lucky.

“Sergeant! Oh, Sula!”

Tera reached back for him, grabbing the hood of his cloak.

“Come on, Tocorum. This last one we descend on ropes.”

“I landed on a rock! My ankle! O Sula! Sula!”

Two terraces up, another flight of arrows leapt into the sky and Denton shouted “Advance!” Tera tried to pull Tocorum forward, then heard the sound of men leaping down the terraces and gave up on the private. He saw the second rank’s black outlines against the stars and scurried ahead, barely avoiding the crush of falling bodies. Behind him, Tocorum and the others from the first group who were slow to move cried out in pain.

Things were not starting well, and they hadn’t even reached the enemy lines yet.

“Come on, archers!” Tera shouted, the fear giving him a boldness that resembled courage. “Get those ropes over the last terrace and move!”

The ropes, staked out days before, uncurled like waking snakes, and each man grabbed on in turn and began backing down the wall. Twenty feet below them the next terrace waited on a night dark enough to make depth and distance a treacherous mystery.

“Let’s go!” Tera shouted as he followed the man ahead of him down the nearest rope, his feet against the crumbling wall and his heart pounding.

“Sergeant!” Tocorum screeched, but Tera put the boy’s cries out of his mind. Tocorum was already as dead as if the Korvish-Sopkans had put an arrow through his skull. There was nothing anyone could do for him now, not without signing their own death warrants. The sound of the another line of men thudding onto the terrace above shook the night, followed by more screams and more curses, plus the cascading roar of the next wave mounting the top wall to begin their descent.

Tera was halfway down when the confusion above him spilled over the rim. Several men fell off the terrace, grabbing at those still clinging to the ropes on the way down. The man above Tera lost his grip in a collision and the rope shuddered, but Tera kept his grip as the two bodies passed him. He regained his composure and scrambled down the rope again, but had to dodge another

falling man.

Rather than taking his chances on the rope, Tera took a calculated risk and used his legs to push himself as far from the wall as he could get. He seemed to run in the air as he let go and leaped the final eight feet to the bottom of the ruin, letting his body go limp as he landed and collapsing in a pile with two other soldiers.

But his relief at surviving the descent quickly dissipated as he became aware of a new problem: Korvish-Sopkans. Tera heard the sound of a shouted command from the jungle ahead and dropped instinctively to the ground. Seconds later the volley of arrows whirred above him, followed by the sound of shafts and points clattering against stone, mixed with the sickening thuds of those that found their marks. The enemy archers were only a few yards away, protected by vines and trees and darkness, and still the men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> CRG swarmed into the dangerous jumble of rocks and underbrush at the bottom of the fortress.

"Get down!" Tera shouted. "Everyone get down!"

But they couldn't stay down. Within minutes, perhaps 500 men had reached the bottom along the hundred-yard zone of advance, and the open area before the jungle began was only fifteen to twenty feet deep. The men were piled on top of each other, with the wounded still lying under the wall of the terrace and more spilling into the clearing every few seconds. Their assembly point was quickly turning into a kill zone. Tera tamped down his fear, but it pushed against the barriers encircling it, and he struggled to hold his own panic at bay.

The men were going to have to move forward, and the pace of those coming behind would have to be slowed.

"Sergeant Major!" Tera shouted. "Sergeant Major Carras!"

The archers around him began shouting for Carras as well, and soon word of his location was passed back. He was closer to the center, someone said.

More shouted commands from the jungle, and another flight of arrows – this one more accurate than the first – zipped out of the darkness. New cries of pain broke out along the crowded line. They were perfectly exposed, arrayed on a downward slope that offered no cover beyond the occasional boulder.

Tera knew he had to find Carras.

"Back in a few minutes, boys," he said to the remaining men of his squad and those who had become mingled with them. Tera pushed up off the ground and began running – bending low and picking his footsteps carefully through the men, rocks and vines – then dove for cover in the second between the next shouted Korvish-Sopkan command and the volley that followed it.

"Tellios!" cursed the man on whom he had landed. "That's my spine, guardsman!"

"Apologies," Tera said as he pushed himself up with his hands on the man's shoulders. "Carras!" he shouted as he ran.

"Here!" came the reply.

Tera ran to the sound and dropped down.

"Sergeant Major Carras?" he asked.

"That's me," said a voice two men over. "Don't bother getting up, Tera. We'll chat from here."

"We've got to move the men forward, sergeant major."

"Don't you think I bloody well know that? But this is the rally point, and I'm supposed to wait for the officers."

"I think a change of plans may be in order."

Carras was silent. There was more shouting from the jungle, and then another flight fell upon them. Tera pressed his eyes shut and Carras cursed. "Bloody Hell! Right in the shoulder!"

Tera raised up and saw the burly sergeant major reaching around to grasp the shaft of an arrow that protruded from his left shoulder. He would be a bit too tender for any archer the rest of the night.

"Sergeant Major, if you'll move them forward..."

"Just see if you can do something about slowing the advance, Tera. There isn't much time before we're all tarked."

"Aye," Tera said. "I'll get the message passed."

Carras rose to his feet, the arrow rising from his shoulder like a flag pole.

"Platoons!" the sergeant major shouted. "At the ready!"

Clydish sergeants along the tangled line returned the call.

"Ready!"

"Hammers!" Carras commanded. Along the line came the sound of rustling as 500 men slipped war hammers from their belts and hefted them in the darkness.

"Advance by the whole! Ten yards! Hoo-ah!"

"Hoo-ah!" the men roared, and the dark mass of them rose to their feet and moved – some running, some staggering – into the edge of the jungle. They had not advanced far, but by the sound of it some had already collided with the first Korvish-Sopkan pickets. Tera listened to the struggle, but held his ground. The next step relied on him alone, and he would have to quiet his mind quickly to do the work.

He forced his breath into a slower rhythm, and turned his attention to the air filling his lungs. This was his ritual, honed through training and years of practice: he imagined the energy of the planet as a cold blue flame and visualized each breath as another measure of it filling his lungs. The flames coursed through his body, flowing out of his fingers and toes. It took only two breaths before his mortal body was infused with the energy of life, and he felt himself glowing like a blue torch.

Now he opened his inner eye.

Tanith Powdras was bathing. She stood naked in the water of the spring pool, which rose almost to her hips. Dappled sunlight played across her skin, shimmering diamond-like on the droplets that clung to her.



“Beloved!” she crooned in real surprise. “I had so hoped you would return, but I was resigned to pouting.”

“I’m kind of in a hurry,” Tera said, dropping down to sit on the rock at the edge of the pool. “We’re getting killed back there.”

Tanith Powdras shut her eyes for a moment and saw the scene at the edge of the jungle. She opened them and stared at him again. “Oooo. That *is* bad.”

A vague expression passed over her face, and though she suppressed it, Tera recognized it immediately: It was hope she felt, hope for his death.

“What do you need, John?”

“Pass a message to Alt. He has got to understand that the men have gotten over-excited and in their zeal they are crushing each other on the terraces. I’m at the bottom and he’s at the top, so he cannot see what is taking place down here. We need some time to secure the bottom of the ruin before the rest of the unit pushes down on us. Can you do it?”

Tanith Powdras’s eyes flickered for a moment, and then she nodded.

“It will be done. And I’ll hurry. But John?”

He was rising to leave, but he stopped.

“Don’t fear, John. Death, if it comes, is not such a bad thing.”

“Yes,” he said, and leaned forward to kiss her quickly. “One way or another, I’ll be back soon.”

Tera opened his eyes. The first wave of Guardsmen was still clashing in the dark jungle ahead of him, and more men were still spilling down the works. Even if Tanith kept her word and passed the word to Alt at the top of the battlements, the communication in this world would move slowly and there would be a delay before the pace ebbed. He busied himself with moving the next wave into position to support the unplanned advance he and Carras had launched.

“What rank are you from?” he shouted to a new group that dropped from the ropes.

“Third!”

“Second!”

“Third!”

“Have you seen Denton?” Tera asked.

“Lieutenant Denton,” said a voice from Tera’s right. “I am here.”

Tera motioned to him and led the officer down the slope to the jumble of rocks at the edge of the jungle. Tera knelt behind a boulder, but Denton refused to hunker down.

“Here’s the situation, sir. Sergeant Major Carras has led the men from the first and second ranks in that direction to engage the enemy. The advance got out of control, and we were getting too...”

“He did what?”

“Who?”

“Sergeant Major Carras. Did you say he led the men in an attack?”

“Yes.”

“Wrong. That’s absolutely wrong. Your orders were to assemble the men here, at this rally point, and to await your officers.”

“Sir, you might want to get down here with me,” Tera said.

“To what end?” Denton demanded. “To cower before the enemy? Rather do my *job*, sergeant, that’s what I’d *rather* do, and that means pulling those men back *out* of the jungle to a point at which we can assemble in good order.”

“Stand if you like, sir, but the enemy is right there, and he’s been taking pretty good aim.”

“That is your concern, Sergeant Tera. My concern is putting some discipline in this assembly area. Round up the other NCOs and let’s bring those over-eager archers back to where they were told to be.”

Tera looked around again. Already the area was filling up a second time.

“Sir, there’s just not enough room.”

“Nonsense!” Denton said, correcting him harshly. “There is...”

The sound of a shouted Korvish-Sopkan command, more desperate now, emerged from the jungle.

“Sir, I’d get down...”

“... plenty of room if the men will only form up in tight...”

“... if I were you.”

The volley ripped out of the jungle toward the foot of the ruins, and the arrow that killed Denton nicked his jugular on its way through his throat. The lieutenant dropped to his knees in astonishment, his eyes mutely pleading with Tera. The sergeant reached out and touched the young Gherald’s shoulder, consoling him silently on the unhappy occasion of his death, and in a few seconds Denton slipped off to the next world. Sad, Tera thought, but it’s for the best.

“Men of the King’s Royal Archers!” Tera shouted. “Battle line, on me!”

The chaos of men formed hesitantly into something resembling a line, maybe 250 men in the dim moonlight, two and three deep in places. It was disorganized, but never mind. They would lose much of their ability to communicate the instant they stepped into the jungle, and under such conditions there was no logic in attempting precise maneuvers.

“At the ready!”

“Ready!” the men shouted back.

“Hammers!”

Tera slipped his free and hefted it, marveling at its silent, eloquent language of carnage. He raised it above his head.

“Advance by the whole! Hoo-ah!”

“Hoo-ah!” they shouted, and with Tera at the lead they poured off the foot of the ruin and into the dark tangle of the Bangoon jungle.

Tera had barely gone five yards when he stepped on the first body, an archer pierced by an arrow to the head. But the real fight still lay ahead. He pressed on, slogging through underbrush that hid his feet, swinging at vines and branches indiscriminately. He would be lucky to find Carras in this green hell, but they would find the fight. It was right ahead, and though the thick leaves dampened the sound, it was already a cacophony of crashes and screams. When he made contact with the archers from the first wave, he was only twenty yards deep into the jungle.

The first man he saw was leaning against a tree, facing him.

“What’s the word?” Tera asked.

“Damned if I know,” the man replied. “I think we were repulsed twice.”

“Are their earthworks ahead?”

“Clumsy ones. Felled trees, some dirt. Less than ten yards ahead. We made it over the top on the first charge, but they reinforced.”

“Join up,” Tera commanded, and the man from the first wave pressed in with the men of the second advance. Tera picked up his pace now, his pulse quickening. They needed to claim the works, if only for the fact that a prepared defense would give them some means of forming up and regaining communication. Whatever they did, they could not stay here.

Now the works emerged before them, five feet of tree trunks stacked and braced, with mud laid against the face. Tera could hear the sound of commotion from the other side, and the orange glow of the burning jungle cast wicked shadows. He broke into a run and the men behind him surged forward. Someone let loose a Clydish battle cry and they swarmed over the logs as one, screaming.

The scene on the other side was desperate and vivid. A line of men, friend and foe, battled five yards ahead of him against a backdrop of fire and chaos. The Clydes had succeeded in pushing the Korvish-Sopkans from their defenses, but reinforcements had collided with their advance and the archers were now fighting backward, trying to hold their ground. Tera did not pause, and the men followed. They crashed into the fight like a pitchball squad covering an open-field toss-off.

Tera almost climbed the back of the archer in front of him get to a good swing at the Korvish-Sopkan on the other side. The two-and-a-half-foot wooden-handled war hammer whipped downward, striking an awkward but fatal blow that crushed the bones of his enemy’s neck and collarbone. Similar scenes played out all around him as the new arrivals tipped the balance back in the favor of Clyde. The Korvish-Sopkan defenders began to fall back, held their ground briefly, and then crumbled.

Some of the archers began to pursue, but Tera and the other non-commissioned officers restrained them. They were only yards into the jungle, but even that distance was enough to cut them off from the main body.

“Steady! Steady!” he shouted. “Hold this line men! Form up! Form up! Keep to the hammers until you get the order! Steady!”

“Tera!” Carras shouted as he stepped into view, the arrow still protruding comically from his shoulder. “How many more are with you?”

“About half your number.”

The sergeant major scanned the scene. Roughly 700 archers and a few disoriented grenadiers milled about the Korvish-Sopkan works in the firelight. He stepped up to stand within a few feet of the younger sergeant.

“Well, that was one bloody hellish fight,” he said in a softer voice. “Are you whole?”

“I’ll pass for whole,” Tera said.

“Good enough. How goes it on the wall?”

“It should have slowed by now.”

“And the grenadiers on the center? Have they held their position?”

“As best as I could tell, yes.”

“We cannot stay here, Tera. We’ve got to move this body back to the assembly area. But it would not be wise to allow the enemy back into this position.”

“No,” Tera agreed.

“How many will you need to hold this ground while we assemble?” Carras asked.

Tera swallowed hard.

“Me?”

“Somebody’s got to hold these works. Are you suggesting *I* should stay here?”

“No,” Tera said. “How many would you suggest?”

Carras looked around.

“Keep the group you brought – it’s smaller. I’ll take the first group back to the edge of the jungle and form them up there. When you hear my whistle, we’ll be on the move. You’ll have to hurry, but if you move like you’ve got a purpose in life, you won’t be left behind.”

Carras smiled at him as if the whole struggle was nothing more than a practical joke between friends.

“As you wish, sergeant major,” Tera said.

Carras clapped his hand on Tera’s shoulder. “See you at the beach, then.”

Advance elements of the Korvish-Sopkan force began probing Tera and his men within minutes of Carras's departure. The skirmishes ebbed and flowed for elongated minutes, everything played out on a surreal stage lit by unseen fires. Tera reformed his rear guard on the other side of the timber wall and assigned five men as runners. He kept them on an anxiously constant rotation: one would beat his way back through the jungle to the main body, see what was going on, and come back. Meanwhile, another would have already begun the trek. It was an odd way of keeping up with events, but Tera worried that the breakout would begin without him.

The fourth runner returned with a surprise companion: Marbor. He stepped out of the vegetation like an aristocratic tourist, dressed in full Gheraldic infantry uniform – a black-felt-and-silver helmet with plume, a maroon jacket secured by a black belt, and tall black riding boots over dark pants. Everything about him gleamed.

"Going out tonight, major?" Tera asked.

"So to speak," Marbor replied. "Unlike our commander, I don't consider vanity to be a vice."

Tera smiled for what seemed like the first time in hours.

"Sergeant, you've done a good job here," Marbor said, extending his hand. They clasped wrists – the traditional Clydish greeting, Tera noted with pleasure. "Alt wanted me to get a look at the situation here and then take charge, if need be. Personally, I think he just wants you back with his staff. You're his good luck charm, John."

Tera searched Marbor's face for any sign of jealousy and found none.

"Major Marbor, I'll do what you ask. But this is a bit of a touchy situation. We can't pull out of this position too early, or the Milkens will be able to flank our assembly point. On the other hand, it takes longer than it should to move two hundred men thirty yards through the jungle without leaving someone behind."

Marbor nodded, but showed no concern. "It takes less time to move fifty. Take the rest with you. I don't have to beat the bastards on this line – I just have to impede them. Fifty will do, don't you think?"

It was Tera's turn to nod. He turned to start the business of rounding up the men, but Marbor stopped him.

"Sergeant, one other thing. A few minutes ago, I was standing with Alt on top of the wall watching our operation get off to a brilliant start. And suddenly this strange look came over the general's face. I immediately diagnosed it as gas, of course, but when the look passed he turned to me and ordered that I halt the advance."

Marbor looked at Tera as if he expected a response. Receiving none, he continued.

"The general informed me that he had just received a message from you indicating that the pace of the movement had gotten out of control and that the men were crushing each other near the bottom of the fortress."

Again he paused, and this time it was clear he expected an explanation.

"It's true, sir," Tera said. "The men were over-excited and the situation was deteriorating rapidly."

"I know it's true, sergeant. I saw the results. I just want to know how you communicated that truth to our commander."

Tera was well aware of the major's skepticism regarding the Clydish tradition of enforcing discipline through enlisted judges and psychic testimony. The sergeant tried to think of a way to explain what he had done, but Marbor only smiled and shook his head at Tera's struggles.

"Well, I'm sure your answer is absolute rubbish, whatever it is, but I thank you anyway," Marbor said. "Now move these men back, find Alt, and make sure he blows that damned whistle before he leaves."

It was in full frenzy by the time Tera reached him. The 2nd Clydish Regimental Group had reached the assembly point, and the mass of men within the narrow zone of advance stretched all the way back to the first terrace. One well-placed trebuchet toss would have killed dozens, and the sight of it made Tera queasy.

Wallain had cleared the tree tops and now glowed over the rim of the fortress above. The CRG's breakout was fully thirty minutes old, they had yet to move off the first square, and the sounds of armed struggle emerged from both the left flank and their escape route. Alt paced a five-yard circuit, his pale aides trailing him like smoke.

"Will someone *please* tell me what the *hell* is going on to the front?" he bellowed. "It's a simple question! *Staff!*"

The gaggle of aides converged on him like ducks on corn.

"Get the hell away from me!" Alt shoved the younger men back. "You! Stand there! The rest of you numb-nuts back off! Where the hell is Tera? Where the hell is Marbor?"

"Here, general," Tera said.

Alt looked at him as if they had never met, then turned abruptly to the frightened ensign he had frozen in place.

"What's your name?"

"Ensign Demont Quick, sir. I've been with your staff for three months."

"I don't care how long you've been with my staff, and I don't care what your first name is, either. Now you step your scrawny ass quickly on up to the front and get a report from Captain Wilston on the situation with the grenadiers."

Quick snapped to attention and saluted.

"Oh, will you just stop that and go?" Alt swatted the ensign, who lost his balance, recovered, and ran off. Alt watched him for a moment, then turned toward Tera, grinning.

"Did you catch that? I told him to 'step his scrawny ass quickly.' Man's name is Quick." The pleasure the general took in his own wit was, to put it mildly, incongruent in the midst of a battle. Yet something about it took a bit of the edge off Tera's anxiety.

"Pardon my saying so, general, but this whole thing is starting to look like a cluster-tark," Tera said. Alt's grin immediately turned to a scowl.

"I will *not* pardon you saying so, you insolent piece of rabble. Have you ever seen a battle plan that survived first contact with the enemy?"

"No."

"Then the proper assessment of our situation is that it is normal. Yes, it is a cluster-tark, but the enemy is even slower to react to events, and so the advantage remains with us. That is, it would be, if certain commanders..."

Alt turned as if he were addressing persons not currently present, and his voice rose with anger.

"...not to mention any names, *CAPTAIN WILSTON*, would start reporting in a timely manner!"

Tera and the hovering aides smirked. Alt caught the look, but didn't appear angry anymore.

"You've done good work here tonight, sergeant," he said. "Don't let it go to your head."

"No sir."

"You really are a smug bastard. You know that, Tera?"

"Whatever you say, sir."

"Good answer. *Staff!*"

A blond aide hustled up and snapped to attention.

"Lieutenant Bixby, sir!" he reported. Alt paused, and looked the aide over with pleasure. The general put his hand on the lieutenant's shoulder and turned to Tera as if he were presenting a prized sheepdog.

"Did you see that?" Alt asked. "A perfect example of adaptation to changing conditions. This young officer observed the misery of Ensign Quick and learned that I would both ask him his name and tell him not to salute. What do you think?"

"Impressive," Tera said.

"Damn right," said Alt, who now turned to the lieutenant. "Bixby, run along, find Quick, and ask him what the hell is taking him so long."

Bixby started to salute, stifled it, and then ran off after Quick, leaving Alt and Tera more or less alone.

"How well do you know your Darbas history, Tera?" the general asked as he paced, unwrapping a cheesecloth bundle of jerky. "Did they teach you about your great Clydish hero Liam LaFranq in that Sulist church school of yours?"

"All Clydes know something of Liam LaFranq," Tera allowed.

"As well they should," Alt said. "The bloody bastard brought my Gheraldic brethren to their very knees. United all the Clydes of Darbas – both pagan and Sulist – under one flag. They say he came down from the mountains of Gwynyr with great swords of witch-made steel. No army equipped with Gheraldic bronze could stand against his legion of wild-eyed, steel-armed Clydes."

"I'd trade a testicle for some of those magic steel swords right now," Tera said. "From what I hear of it, some steel would come in handy right about now."

"That it would," Alt said, biting off a chunk of jerky. "But here's what I believe: I believe it's just a tarking lie, that part about LaFranq's Clydes all marching down the mountain swinging steel swords. A few of them, perhaps, but that's not the point – it's simply the tale my Gheraldic ancestors told to explain how their vaunted infantry could be swept from the field by barbarians. The secret weapon of Darbas isn't steel. It's the men of Clyde. And that, my dear Sergeant Tera, is why I believe we're going to win tonight."

Tera nodded, then let his eyes drift off. It was an intimate, almost friendly moment, and Tera had learned to avoid such traps – particularly those set by Gheraldic officers. Like everyone in the Clydish Regiments, Tera was serving a twenty-year enlistment on behalf of an empire that feared his countrymen so deeply that its laws forbade the Clydish Regiments to set foot on their home soil. Alt might not be like the others, but he was still a Gherald, Tera reminded himself.

"I'm worried about Marbor," Alt said, changing the subject. "Think he'll be OK back there, sergeant?"

"Just as long as we blow the whistle when we're ready to start."

"Oh my. The whistle." Alt pulled a cut reed from his pocket, put it to his lips, and blew three short bleats. "I almost forgot."

"Sir, you were supposed to blow the whistle when you were ready to move."

"We're moving."

"But the aides – you wanted a report from Captain Wilston."

"May Sula curse it. We'll go without. I'm tired of standing here. Sergeant Major Carras!"

Carras, the Korvish-Sopkan arrow still wagging from his shoulder, stalked out of the darkness. "Sir!" he shouted.

"Prepare the men to move. We've been waiting entirely too long."

"Yes sir!"

"Tera, you stay by me. *Casar!*" Alt shouted.

The Bhengali was nearby, as he always was – Alt's little shadow. He approached with an unhurried air, and stood with his arms crossed.

"Casar, the goal of this mission is movement, not murder. If you set out on private hunts you will be left behind, and I will not delay one moment for you to catch up."

Casar nodded. Tera listened to the sound of Carras shouting out orders and the men trampling and fidgeting. They were formed and ready, not in battle lines but in columns – the kind of formation they would typically use for movement down an uncontested stretch of road. Conventional wisdom said battle lines were strong and slow, columns weak and fast. But none of the Clydes had ever seen a fight like this one.

"Regiment!" The one-word command thundered from Alt throat and the voices of his sub-commanders echoed across the lines and columns as they relayed the word to their companies, platoons and squads. Then, silence.



“Forward!” and again the subordinate officers repeated the command, each with a slight rise in their intonation, waiting the suspended order of execution. “Hoo-ah!” Alt shouted, and the men of the 2nd CRG gave him their enthusiastic reply: “Hoo-ah!” The assault was finally under way.

Movements like these were more complex than a simple order to move forward. While Alt had set the machine in motion, now the execution fell to the sub-commanders. The units at the front – the grenadiers – moved immediately, marching off in columns toward contact, then moving by platoons and squads into a tight double-line formation. Those units at the back would not actually move for several additional minutes.

Everything hinged on the ability of the grenadiers to punch through the dug-in line of Korvish-Sopkan infantry that blocked their escape route. Tera had probed those defenses and found them thin, as if it had never occurred to the enemy that Alt might attempt to break out, as if a footpath barely wide enough for two men was not a feature worth defending. Then again, the enemy had been fighting now for almost forty-five minutes. If their commanders were alert, the path ahead could be reinforced.

Now Quick reappeared, shouldering through the ranks, breathless. “General,” he said, pulling up to attention and saluting. “Ensign Quick reporting.”

“Where’s Bixby?” Alt asked.

“Who?”

“Bixby!”

“I thought you wanted the report on Wilston, sir.”

“Well then, out with it!”

“Captain Wilston reports he is heavily engaged in the zone of advance and requests...”

“Enough. Now go find Bixby.”

“Sir?”

“Go *find* Bixby! I sent him to report on you! And then both of you get back to me.”

“But Captain Wilston...”

“Just go, you puppy!”

Quick saluted and ran off. “And stop saluting me in the middle of a battle, you tarking idiot!” Alt shouted.

“Come on, boys,” Alt said to Tera and the rest of the headquarters staff. “If we wait on Wilston we’ll be here all night, and I want to take a boat ride.”

They moved rapidly up the columns, led by Alt at double-time pace. Faces turned to them as they jogged by, and the soldiers’ bewildered looks turned to cheers as they passed.

The scene near the front was even more chaotic than the one in the crowded ranks behind it. The Clydish Grenadiers closest to the fight crouched in lines, waiting for orders, but their arrangement was so haphazard it hardly seemed a military operation.

“Where’s Wilston?” Alt demanded of the first officer he found. The man pointed to the front, and Alt told him to prepare his men to move. The headquarters staff ran forward again, the sound of battle close ahead. Now they were in range of the enemy archers, who had abandoned the volley and were shooting at will, so that random arrows whizzed past them as they ran. In the dim light, Tera could make out the vague shape of an earthworks to the front and the forms of the grenadiers pressing up against whatever protection the jungle offered. A cleared area lay between them and the works, and Tera began to grasp that the mounds and piles in front of the works were the bodies of dead Clydes. They had been repulsed, and with no covering archers or trebuchet fire, the grenadiers were pinned down, unable to retreat and too afraid to advance. Alt and the staff found Wilston near the middle of the line, berating the grenadiers’ top sergeant.

“Wilston!” Alt shouted. The captain whirled to him with a face that revealed his panic.

“Sir!”

“What are you doing?”

“The men are cowards, sir! They have yet to clear the works, and they run away when victory is in their grasp!”

Tera tried to judge the length of the battle line, which was difficult in the darkness. It seemed to stretch for more than fifty yards, perhaps much more.

“You are worse than a coward, Wilston,” Alt said. “You’re an idiot. You’re attacking along too wide a front. I briefed all of you on your roles, but you in particular.”

Wilston pulled himself up to full height, towering over the general.

“My zone of attack is far more narrow than regulation demands for a unit of this size. Because of your – dare I say, ‘creative’ orders – I have already subjected my men to flanking fire and the very real threat of producing an indefensible salient.”

Alt stepped closer, staring straight up the captain’s nostrils.

“The entire point of my orders was to *create* an indefensible salient, you pompous ass! You are hereby relieved of your command. Report to Ensign Quick for reassignment as a staff runner. *Bixby!*”

The staff aide stepped forward.

“Lieutenant, you’re a quick study. This will be your first command assignment: a rather depleted company of grenadiers.”

Wilston’s fury spilled over.

“You’ll not replace me with some milk-suckling junior lieutenant, Alt! In fact, you’ll not replace me at all. I am a member of the House of Proxmire and a member of the Court at Arnell. I demand that...”

Alt had heard enough. “Casar!”

The Bhengali scout slipped his bronze sword from beneath the folds of his *schrah* and slashed it across Wilston’s throat with a

blindingly fast motion that left only the slightest scratch. The captain reacted in horror, but only a few drops of blood seeped from the wound.

“Wilston, you can bring it up at a court of inquiry. For now, you are to attach yourself to my staff and perform your duties as a soldier. If you do not, you will be executed. There is no time for foolery now.”

Finished with him, Alt turned to Bixby again. “Get them in tighter, no more than twenty yards of frontage,” the general said. “Tighter than that if you can do it, and hammers drawn. I’ll reinforce you, but you’ll lead the charge. We are going over that wall right there,” he said, pointing to a spot directly ahead of them. “Once we are across you will press the enemy on the left while the other companies press to the right. We will secure a space wide enough for the rest of the column to pass through, and no more. Understood?”

Bixby nodded, then ran off shouting. Alt smiled and without warning turned and ran back to the crouching grenadiers immediately behind them. The staff hurried to catch up.

It took him less than a minute to move another two hundred grenadiers up. He found Bixby with his one hundred and seventy five troops packed in tight, jostling with each other. Alt did not wait for them to prepare, but instead ran faster, shouted “Charge!” and broke into the Korvish-Sopkan kill zone at a sprint as Bixby’s grenadiers surged forward. Tera stumbled over a vine, regained his balance and ran faster, trying to keep up with the herd of men that raced toward the lines of mare’s-milk-drinking bastards, more afraid of being trampled than of the arrows that whispered around him.

The suddenness of their assault took the enemy by surprise, and there was not enough time for their officers to prepare a volley. Arrows came at them at a steady rate, then stopped as the volley was ordered, and the charge on the works became a race between Clydish feet and Korvish-Sopkan command efficiency. The first grenadiers, with Alt beside them, reached the defenses as the enemy archers fitted their arrows, and the first Clydish hammers struck before the volley could be released. The Korvish-Sopkan platoon at the point of their attack disintegrated instantly, either crushed beneath the blows or spilling over their comrades in a mindless attempt to escape. Tera cleared the wall, looked for Alt, and spotted him in the midst of the fray, tangled up with a Korvish-Sopkan officer of his own height. The general head-butted his opponent, smashed his ribs and killed him with a hammer blow to the skull.

They had broken the Milker line, and even though it was nothing more than a pin hole in a dike, Alt’s plan was working.

Grenadiers poured through the opening while reinforcements raced across the kill zone and joined the fight, pushing the enemy back and rolling up his lines, creating the salient – a deep, narrow incursion into enemy lines – that had so worried Wilston.

But a salient was a curious thing: once opened, it left the attacker vulnerable to a counterattack that could pinch his entire force off in an encircling maneuver. Yet it also turned the defending battle line into two separate and vulnerable columns, allowing the attacker to press his advantage outward against only a few men at a time, rather than struggling against the line’s full strength. Over time, a salient was a tactical mistake, and every officer understood that. But Alt did not intend to stand and fight here. He merely planned to open a temporary hole and run through it.

The width of the hole grew with every minute, spreading like a bloodstain on linen, and Tera climbed to the top of the wall to watch the progress of their gambit. Grenadiers rolled back the Korvish-Sopkan line to the left and right, engaging the enemy hand-to-hand, killing them, and moving on to the next defender. Meanwhile, the column pressed forward at a run, climbing the earthworks and pressing ahead. Soon they would have to funnel the advance into the footpath or it would stall again.

Alt stopped their lateral advance, and Bixby hurried to solidify a new battle line on the left side of the salient. Tera saw that it was time, and found Alt. The general’s jacket was soaked in the blood and brains of the Korvish-Sopkan officer he had killed, and he was breathing heavily. Their conversation was wordless: Tera pointed toward the entrance to the footpath, and Alt nodded.

The archers of Denton’s company had reached the head of the column, and Tera sought out their Clydish sergeant, Sean Gryff, who knelt with his men at the front. Gryff handed Tera a torch. “Follow me, at the double,” Tera said. Gryff nodded, then called out the orders, and the archers rose and jogged toward the entrance. The branches overhead made the path a dark tunnel, but the footing was solid and steady. Tera set the pace a half a step slower than the archers usually ran. This would be a long run with no stopping, because even a small deviation in speed would whiplash along the column, multiplying the delay into a full stoppage at the back.

Somewhere behind Tera, Alt waited for the rear guard, hoping to be reunited with Marbor. If Alt’s plan worked they would all eventually disappear down the footpath after the rest of the CRG, joining the others in the fifteen-kilometer run to Dibishputra.

Tera settled into the pace, running only as fast as the torchlight allowed. He checked through his pains and consciously controlled his limp. The lead group of archers would emerge from the jungle in about an hour and a half, and the path would become a road that descended from the highlands to the coast. Their skinny column would widen and be bathed in sunlight by the time they reached the harbor.

The night was not over. But at least it was all downhill from here.

*The unique quality of Darbas arose from the three distinct races that shared its land and destiny: the native Mullaqat, wandering nomads from the south who embodied a sad-eyed, mystical code of non-violence; the DuQaddish, a clannish people from the northern shores of Korvanishca who had followed a prophet to their dry western plains; and the boisterous Clydes, Calpathian refugees who settled in the eastern forests, valleys and highlands. Their combined history of relative peace and cooperation made what was to come all the more heartbreaking.*

*Atrocities began that winter in the western provinces, but many in the capital supposed them to be little more than the excesses of rowdy DuQaddish youths. In the spring, however, the violence reached the Clydish heartland, accelerating and expanding as it drove east. This sudden torrent of carnage, remembered today as “The Madness,” raged unabated across Clyde, a flash flood of death and vengeance that smashed everything in its path.*

—**Kirshan**, Chapter 11, “History of the Western Wars”

*The riders who struck Clyde Barrow were said to number more than one hundred, and are believed to be ouhasandans, the lowest class of DuQaddish society. More than two dozen Clydes are known to have died, and word of new atrocities arrives almost hourly. If ever there was a time for our Gheraldic ‘partners’ to come to our aid, this is the hour – yet the imperial garrison at Sidon remains within the city’s walls while the governor plays political games. Please render any assistance your office may provide.*

—Dispatch from **Counselor Bergonat** to “**Old Pete**” **Tuckard**, the Council of Darbas’ representative to the Gheraldic Court at Arnell.

*The House suspects imperial intrigues may play a role in these attacks. All Fionnans shall press their Gheraldic sources for pertinent information immediately and report to the mistress as quickly as practicable.*

—Encrypted orders from the House of Fionna, spy agency of Gwynyr

## Chapter 1

# Tuckard

**A**rnaud Novand had not been built for speed, plus it was early. Still, Pete Tuckard's aide made a sorry sight: Novand's combed-over hair splayed out from his bald head like gull wings, and the morning's coffee stained the unbuttoned lace of his cravat. He heaved for breath and leaned forward, elbows on knees, face red, bulbous neck festooned with sweat even on a chilly Gheraldic morning.

Tuckard regarded him with a mixture of pride and humor. This was Novand's heroism, he concluded: to run six blocks from dock to garret after waiting the night in a stiff chair, all to deliver fresh news already three weeks old. It wasn't much compared to feats of old, but it was loyalty.

"More coffee, Arnaud?" Tuckard asked. "You seem to be wearing much of your last cup."

Novand sat up, redoubling his chin to get a look. "Well, isn't that a pretty sight," he sighed.

"You are a good man, Arnaud. Would you care to read the news yourself?" Tuckard passed the folded report to his assistant undersecretary, slapped him hard on his marbled shoulder and walked to the back window. The side windows opened onto to Treasury Street and offered a convenient view of carriages en route from dock to court, but Tuckard preferred the view over the rooftops from the back, where the Gheraldic capital of Arnell spread out before him as he liked to envision it: a seaport city of sturdy merchant homes and worker tenements, laundry on the lines, advancing in ranks up Bailey Hill toward the majestic complex that housed the government, the king, the Court and its denizens.

He was twenty-one years in service to Darbas here, twenty-one years of waking up in this one sprawling room four floors above the Dragon and Rabbit Pub. In those two decades Tuckard had grown fond of Arnell's simple citizens and genuinely sick of its leaders. He had spent too many dreary afternoons amidst the hum and prattle of the Great Hall where Gherald's most influential families, clans, industries and institutions indulged in the strange combination of eating, drinking, debating, lobbying and conspiring that was imperial governance.

The hall, nicknamed "The Dinner Dome" by those who spent their lives there, was an over-indulgent mockery of representative government. Yet after all these years, its charms and comforts had left their mark on Tuckard. He had grown old there, and – despite his efforts at maintaining a vigorous lifestyle – a bit soft around the middle, too.

Tuckard began his morning exercises, bending his knees, thrusting his arms and pushing his rump outward. Novand shook his head and returned to reading. Tuckard kept half an eye on him, anxious to spot the reaction when Novand plowed past the fancy preamble and reached the plain truth of the report. But the assistant undersecretary read slowly, and so Tuckard was compelled to do a few more knee-bends than his normal allotment. His old joints popped and crackled.

When Novand reached the news, it dropped his jaw.

"I have family in Clyde Barrow, family on my mother's side," Novand said, lowering the letter and letting his eyes wander off. "A cousin and his wife and four children. I suppose it will be months before I learn whether they are among the dead."

"Let me be blunt, Arnaud," Tuckard said. "If Counselor Bergonat's character holds true, the news from Clyde Barrow is even worse than it appears. He has a bad habit of hoping for the best."

There had been previous reports of massacres, but this one was immeasurably worse. The initial unrest had been in the Don, a western province where Clydes were the minority. The raids on the countryside surrounding Clyde Barrow, however, were an assault on the Clydish heartland – a strike against not only the people, but against their culture and history as well. As a symbol, this attack was particularly ominous: despite its bloody past, Clyde Barrow was an open town, a place where Mullaqat caravans and DuQaddish tinkers were welcomed. Tuckard tried not to imagine the flames and screams Bergonat described.

"We must make the case before the House of Findlay," Novand said, a sudden firmness gripping his voice. "The garrison at Sidon must be deployed."



Tuckard pulled off his nightshirt, revealing a body both thin of thigh and full of belly. Novand averted his eyes.

“Yes, we shall make the case, as we have in the past. And Findlay will, again, argue with calm dispassion the regulations of LaFranq’s Bargain and the Treaty of Sidon. Those troops will not be moved.”

“Then what is the point of a Gheraldic garrison in our homeland if not to secure the safety of the citizens of Darbas?” Novand asked.

“Yes, what indeed?” Tuckard mused as he pulled on his shirt. “I am beginning to wonder if that is not the entire question.”

**W**hile Darbas had long enjoyed special status within the Gheraldic Empire, that status extended only partially to the workings of court. Within the airy confines of Herald’s Hall, the delegation from Darbas was assigned the second-class standing of Messengers, allowing them a voice but denying them a vote. Darbas was not quite a colony, yet not a fully recognized province of the Empire, either. The discrepancy arose for debate every few years. Someone would argue that no other colony was allowed a vote; Tuckard would remind them that Darbas, having never been defeated by Gherald, was not legally a colony. Nothing ever came of the argument, but at least Tuckard enjoyed irking his colleagues with the tale of LaFranq’s victory over the Gheraldic infantry.

November had always been a month set aside for financial matters in court, the time of year when budgets were presented and new contracts proposed. This was a time to watch the corners of the hall for comings and goings, as a persistent visitor to the Houses of Proxmire and Findlay could portend a radical change in colonial policy. It was the year 1101, Pictian Era, and the prospects for the 1102 P.E. budget loomed gloomy – yet everyone in the hall understood that an alert and enterprising House could turn even the darkest of times to substantial profit. Changing the subject to the actual crisis in the Clydish homeland would be a difficult task even for Tuckard, the wily Messenger of Darbas.

Tuckard and Novand entered the Hall through South Gate, an ornate but low doorway that had not, in fact, been anything remotely resembling a gate for centuries. As the entrance to Court that faced the waterfront, the South Gate had a maritime tradition. The stones surrounding it were carved to reveal ships and sea monsters. The most magnificent of these was “Old Bailey’s Bum,” a griffin-headed beast with a backside like a shapely nude woman. Members routinely kissed the bas-relief image for luck when departing the hall for sea voyages.

Tuckard and Novand spoke low between them as they approached South Gate, and without a break in their conversation each spun before the guards in practiced pirouettes that demonstrated they were unarmed. Petitioners Yard opened up beyond the door – not a yard, but a grand hallway capped by a vaulted ceiling. Its polished floors gleamed in the morning sunlight, and all those who lacked credentials to Herald’s Hall waited here. Over the years, those with standing business had become daily inhabitants of Petitioners Yard, a gaily outfitted but falsely enthusiastic group that surged forward at the sight of a new arrival dressed for court.

Devon Wallis, the No. 2 man in the Darbas delegation, waited at the far end of the hallway.

“Everyone is abuzz,” he said, skipping directly past the usual salutations. “What did you write this time, Pete?”

Tuckard stopped at the entrance to the Dinner Dome and fixed Wallis with dancing eyes. “Merely a letter to *The Post* making the case for the men of the 2nd Clydish Regimental Group, who are still defending the empire’s interests on Bangoon. Would the King abandon a unit of Gheraldic soldiers, Wally? But, since they’re *only* Clydes...”

Wallis was flustered to the point of distraction. “That is beside the point, Pete. You have insulted the House of Findlay, *again*, and neither Lord Findlay nor Lord Proxmire nor his little pal Dickey is likely to forget that. Do I need to remind you that we’re in the middle of the budget?”

“Do I need to remind you that there were, at last count, roughly 3,000 of our countrymen believed to be surrounded by the damn Milkers on Bangoon? Or that Lord Proxmire’s solution to this problem is to negotiate a price for the return of the unit’s Gheraldic officers, Clydish enlisted men be damned? Takes precedence over securing our own share of baubles from the budget, wouldn’t you say?”

Novand broke in, brandishing the new letter. “Besides, we’ve bigger problems this morning. The DuQaddish *ouhasandans* have struck at Clyde Barrow. This is no longer just unrest in the Don. The court must release the garrison at Sidon.”

“Have the stewards brought up the day’s wine?” Tuckard asked.

“A week’s quantity of it,” Wallis said. “I signed the receipt, and it waits on the serving stand. I thought there’d been some mistake at first – your order called up our entire stock of Eochu ’08. Fine stuff, that.”

“Yes, and I shall miss it. Come.” Tuckard motioned ahead, and Wallis and Novand preceded him through the grand entrance to Herald’s Hall.

“Gentlemen of His Majesty’s Court!” Novand boomed as they strode toward the center of the Hall. “The Honorable Citizen of Sidon, Messenger of Darbas, Peter Tuckard!” Heads all around the hall turned toward them, and Tuckard raised his chin another notch, avoiding their eyes.

By tradition, all members of court were to present themselves to the King from the center of the hall, beneath the apex of the dome, upon entering for the first time of the day. The fact that the king was not yet in attendance mattered not: Tuckard strode to the Point of Recognition, gave a vestige of a bow to the empty throne, and walked bold and erect to the Messenger of Darbas’s Quarters – a simple table of stained oak decorated only by the green, white and yellow flag of Darbas. Unlike most of the other credentialed seatings in the dome, the area allotted to Darbas remained relatively unadorned.

The various Houses adorned their seatings according to status and tradition. By far the most ornate belonged to the House of Proxmire, a House long symbolized by a winged serpent swallowing its tail. Generations of Proxmires had added to the architecture of their home in the dome, so that their delegates sat beneath an orange canvas awning held aloft by four carved helix posts of dark-

est mahogany, each one a serpent rising. What had once been a simple table was now a raised dais, and centuries of competition with other Houses had raised it to the point that Proxmire's delegates could only gain their seats by climbing one of two sweeping staircases that rose ten feet from the floor. Footmen and runners stood in waiting below the dais, and an appointment secretary sat before them at a separate table, keeping track of all those who sought business with the King's Treasury. A door beneath the raised seating led to a private meeting chamber, where secrets could be worked out, and the polished silver of Proxmire's serving chalices and wine bowls glowed in the low light.

The House of Findlay, located diagonally from Proxmire on the northeastern quadrant of the Hall, never attempted quite such a grandiose display. Findlay was a newer House, dating back a mere seven hundred years, and true to its family motto, "Service Before Self," the depictions on its leather-fronted desk told the story of Findlay's various contributions to the Empire. While other Houses were far more elaborate in the permanent architecture of their seatings, Findlay was a House on the rise and had become something of a fashion trendsetter.

Scattered between the seven major and three minor houses were the other recognized members of the court: the Sulist Church of Gherald, the messengers of Darbas, Bronald and Verous, plus various Trade Messengers from industries that bore the King's Commission.

Tuckard had just settled into his chair when the full delegation from the House of Proxmire entered through the door known as People's Gate. First came two flag-bearers to plant the standards of the House before its seatings, then the secretaries, then a single drummer, then the herald. "Behold the Lord of Proxmire!" he shouted. The drummer snapped a short burst, and Eorl Garrett, Lord Proxmire, stepped lightly through the door. Despite his heavy frame, Garrett seemed almost to float to the Point of Recognition, where he gave a slight bow and continued to his seating, climbing the staircase to his spot.

As if on cue, the tapestry behind the King's Throne flew aside to reveal Lord Ashton, the King's Minister of Court, who stepped to the table below the throne, lifted the jeweled Sword of Arnell high above his head and called out in a clear voice, "Hear now the Court! Rise to the greeting of your King, His Majesty Marlton IV, defender of Pictairn, ruler of the seas, champion of Sula and terror of Borjez!"

Each member of the court stood at attention, then bowed deeply, holding the pose for the requisite two seconds. Marlton IV smiled and waved back in all his toothy glory. He was a smallish man in his mid-forties with a reputation for doodling on parchment during long debates. His body was thin unto boney, with skin that stretched and crinkled across a face that featured prominent cheekbones and an expansive mouth. The crown seemed to swallow his head.

After the invocation by the Sulist Bishop of Arnell, Marlton addressed the dome. "Morning, gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "I trust the night was good to you all. I slept marvelously, marvelously."

Not so heavy rests the head that wears this crown, Tuckard thought.

"So, where were we last mealtime?" Marlton spoke this as an aside to Lord Ashton, but the acoustics of the hall were such that even a whisper from the throne could carry across the room. Ashton whispered into the king's ear, and his smile disappeared. "Oh yes. The Navy contract." Marlton was well known to be bored with the technical points in debates and quickly lost interest in most financial matters. "Hello the House of Proxmire! Do you wish to continue your..."

Ashton leaned to the king's ear again.

"Oh, sorry." He listened again, then broke into an excited smile. "I believe we have some new wine this morning?"

Tuckard pushed back his chair and stood.

"Your Majesty. The Messenger of Darbas wishes to offer up the finest wine in his cellar this morning as token of the importance of the matters before us." Tuckard raised his arms, and a squadron of court stewards came gliding from the serving stations with green bottles of wine from the foothills of Gywnyr in the highlands of Darbas.

Tuckard stared directly at the House of Proxmire, where Eorl Garrett scowled down at him, no doubt trying to determine what ploy Darbas had used on Ashton to open the floor to new wine during what normally would have been continuing debate from the previous mealtime. Garrett smiled falsely, and Tuckard lifted his glass in toast to him. Without breaking their eye contact, Garrett rose to his feet on his raised dais.

"Your Majesty! The House of Proxmire finds this wine not fit to drink!"

By custom, the members of court – many of whom had already taken their first sip – placed their glasses back on the tables before them. The agenda had been challenged, and the matter would have to be resolved before the debate and the drinking could continue.

At least Marlton was likely to be in his corner, Tuckard thought, if only because the king preferred lively talk.

"Who will defend the wine of Darbas?" Marlton asked.

"I shall," said the Messenger of Verous. "What quality in this wine so offends you, Lord Proxmire?"

"The House of Proxmire finds the timing of this course most distasteful," Garrett said. "I refer to this morning's *Post* when I say that while the fate of the Clydish Regimental Group on Bangoon is a concern to this body, other concerns, namely the Navy contract, are more pressing."

Tuckard rose. "Then the House of Proxmire will be pleased to note that while the CRG issue remains a dire moral imperative, today we bring both new wine and new business."

"Is there anyone else who wishes to protest this wine?" Marlton asked. Garrett searched the room, and spotting no support sat back down. "Hearing none, the Throne deems this wine fit to drink. Messenger?"

"Thank you, your Majesty," Tuckard said, and stepped around the table. He spoke as he walked to the Point of Recognition.

"As you know, I was a simple innkeeper before I took up writing in Sidon. I'm not much for fancy talk, so I shall cut to the meat

of things: The frigate *Dove* arrived this morning with the latest news from Darbas, and it is bad. Three weeks ago, a raiding party struck Clyde Barrow, a town of great cultural significance in the heart of the Clydish homeland. Dozens more have been killed.

“Gentlemen, the Clydes of Darbas have served the interests of our Empire for more than seven hundred years. Our Clydish Regimental Groups – including the one now surrounded on the colony of Bangoon – have carried the banner of Gherald across the globe. Yet imperial law forbids these warriors to set foot on the soil of their homeland – a rule that requires the people of Clyde to depend upon the Empire for their security.

“Seven centuries ago, Clyde’s greatest hero made a bargain with Gherald. The Clydes would send their young men to serve the Empire, trusting the Gheraldic garrison at Sidon to keep the peace in the homes they left behind. Today I ask the court to deploy the garrison at Sidon. To do anything less would be to abandon your most loyal friends to murderous banditry. I request your assistance, gentlemen – but morality and common decency demands it!”

The Hall erupted. Lords Proxmire and Findlay shouted for recognition, while the House of Teague rushed to its records in search of applicable protocols. Marlton IV surveyed the room with a vacant smile.

“I believe the Messenger of Darbas insults both our manhood and our intelligence,” said Ian Reggald, the Lord of Findlay. “First he suggests that the relief of common soldiers on Bangoon represents a moral imperative, thereby demeaning our morality, then he demands that the King break the Protocols of Sidon by deploying the garrison. These are complex matters of state, yet the Messenger equates the discipline of the Sidon garrison with cowardice.”

Marlton IV turned his gaze to Tuckard, smiling broadly in anticipation.

“Your Majesty,” Tuckard said, “it is not cowardice that I accuse, but callousness.”

Lord Proxmire addressed the King.

“Messenger Tuckard calls us callous,” he began. “Yet he refuses to address the central issue: The Treaty of Sidon, an obsolete document that the men of Darbas regularly interpret to suit their selfish whims. He asks – no, he *demand*s – that the King send forth our infantry to protect his brother Clydes, yet does he acknowledge that his precious Treaty of Sidon precludes the involvement of Gheraldic troops in the internal affairs of Darbas?”

“And let me remind the Court that we happen to be in the midst of a real war against the Korvish-Sopkans. If the King, in a moment of insanity, were to order the garrison forth from Sidon, what then would Messenger Tuckard recommend when the Korvish-Sopkan fleet appears at docks of his undefended capital? You are skilled at casting blame, Messenger Tuckard. Will you not accept responsibility, too?”

Tuckard took a short survey of the Houses of Proxmire and Findlay, then returned his gaze to the king.

“We stand before you today not as Clydes, not as natives of Darbas, but as citizens of the Gheraldic Empire,” Tuckard said. “We ask for protection of the Gheraldic garrison, but we do not offer to trade our liberty for security. We require only what the King would offer any other citizen of Gherald: the basic security of our homes.”

Now it was Lord Findlay’s turn to thunder.

“You *require*? By what right, by what law, by what *divine imperative* does the Messenger of Darbas *require* anything of this Court, of this King? No, sir, *you* are required, in this situation, to serve your King and do his bidding, as expressed by this Court. You do not demand of this Court, nor require of this Court, nor command this Court. You will do as this Court instructs, and you will do so with all due respect.”

Lord Findlay’s tirade shook Herald’s Hall as if he had, with his own two hands, throttled Tuckard to death at the Point of Recognition. The cross-talk amongst and between the Houses began almost immediately and rose as a low hum from the edges of the round room. It was not just this matter, they said to each other, it is the culmination of years of frustration. No one could remember such bold speech from a Messenger, insulting the Court, nor such personal venom from the Lord of a House.

While the protocol of Court stated that all ten Houses would vote on matters put before the King, in truth most of the Houses were weaklings compared to the men of Proxmire and Findlay. No House, no Messenger, would dare oppose the two united, particularly during budget season and on a matter that fell within the jurisdiction of Findlay’s Colonial Office.

Even Marlton IV, who loved lively talk as he loved little else in public life, had stopped smiling. Lord Ashton whispered in his ear again, and the crowd grew silent, hoping to catch a scrap of his words.

“Lord Findlay,” Marlton said. “Was that a formal rebuke of the Messenger from Darbas?”

“Yes, your Majesty. The House of Findlay claims rebuke of the delegate. Will the King so order?”

Marlton motioned to Ashton, who bent close. The two conferred in whispers. “The Throne seeks the will of the Court,” Marlton announced. “Shall the King rebuke the Messenger?”

The Houses of Findlay and Proxmire shouted their “Ayes!” simultaneously.

“Those opposed to the rebuke so state.”

The chamber was silent. Tuckard drew himself as tall as his bones would allow.

“Messenger Tuckard,” Marlton IV began, “you stand before the Court of Arnell under the King’s Rebuke. It is the finding of the Court that your words and actions draw dishonor upon your person and your delegation, and no dishonorable man may stand in this Court without penance. Under our law, you are to remove yourself and your delegation from the King’s Table at once, drawing no noontime nor evening meal, to return to Herald’s Hall on the morrow to receive the sentence of this Court. Is there anything you wish to say at this time, Messenger Tuckard?”

“Enjoy the wine, gentlemen.”

Tuckard turned on his heel and marched to his seating, where Novand and Wallis had already gathered up their things and stood waiting.

"I'd say that went well, wouldn't you?" Wallis offered under his breath as the three men strode out of Herald's Hall.

Wallis had long argued that Tuckard's simple one-room apartment was an annoying affectation. Other members of Court either lived in their House's quarters at the Dinner Dome, owned a grand home in Arnell or leased an appropriately luxurious apartment. It just wouldn't do to receive courtly guests in a workman's flat, Wallis had repeatedly told Tuckard

Tuckard's room was in fact rather large, taking up the entire top floor of Mrs. Ansonby's building. It offered windows on three sides, good light and excellent views. Tuckard's tastes were basic but manly, and his landlady kept the place clean despite its occupant's constant flow of papers, periodicals and books. It resembled the library of a gentleman's club, with shelves neatly stacked on almost every spare foot of wall and an abundance of leather-bound chairs arranged around low tables. There was a small kitchen table under a window that overlooked Treasury Street, and a seaman's chest by the fireplace served as the pantry. Even Tuckard's bed bespoke the man: big enough for two, but unadorned, covered only by a patchwork quilt.

The great Houses of Court were not required to find quarters. As a serendipitous outgrowth of the Gheraldic tradition of consultation and hospitality, the Court of Arnell was both a place of business and an elaborate dormitory. During ancient times, the royal Houses of Gherald had traveled in the winter to visit the king for a month of feasting, story swapping and strategizing. The old castle, of which only vestiges remained, had been expanded to give the members of the Houses rooms to stay in during these visits. Over the centuries, those stays extended until they reached the point that, for political reasons, no House dared ever leave, and the size and scope of their individual quarters grew into great wings of rooms that stretched out from the Dinner Dome like spokes on an aristocratic wheel. A member of the House of Proxmire, for instance, could easily pass the entire year without having to leave the Court proper for any reason.

Despite twenty-one years at Court, Tuckard remained wary of its seductive pleasures. This attitude had been the source of numerous dinner table debates with Wallis in the ten years since his arrival, but Tuckard looked forward to them. Wallis was a charming sparring-partner, a younger man of means and education who felt no shame for his tastes and held his own in verbal games. They were well matched, the Old Path priestesses would say, because their differences complemented each other.

But while Wallis had held up well during their proud walk out of Herald's Hall and Petitioners Yard, he now slumped in a leather club chair, fiddling with a clay pipe that had gone out a quarter of an hour before.

"We're tarked," he offered finally, breaking a long silence.

Novand, who had been pacing, stopped and glared at him. "I had been hoping one of you would come up with a solution to our crisis. Imagine my excitement at your conclusion."

"Oh, Arnaud, you are such a stick," Wallis said. "It bores me, your litany of sincerity."

Novand huffed, and resumed pacing. Tuckard regarded them both, the gifted libertine and the hefty patriot, and felt the first bit of humor returning to his mood. They were an odd pair, and as a trio they were even odder. Throw in the now-absent Glynnis Drea, their delegation's female secretary and professional spy, and it was safe to say that the delegation from Darbas was a veritable hotbed of eccentricity.

"I've been in worse spots," Tuckard began, tamping down his pipe and relighting it. "About twenty-five years ago I published an editorial that said, essentially, that the Bishop of Sidon was an ass, commission from Sula be damned. And he was, too, that arrogant prig. But needless to say, he didn't take the news well."

Wallis took the match for his own pipe and settled back as Tuckard continued. "The good bishop reminded the governor of the Edict of Heresy, and demanded that he march out the troops, shut down my press and haul me up on charges. And he did. Not the first time I had enjoyed the hospitality of the governor, either. The bishop came to visit me in my cell, and gave me a good reaming, reminding me of my place, so to speak."

Novand stopped his pacing and settled into a chair, chuckling. He had been there, too. They had been together almost longer than either could remember.

"Well, obviously you got out," Wallis said, "so there's not much suspense to this story. How'd you do it?"

"Blackmail," Tuckard said, puffing. "Bishop liked little boys."

"Old Pete was out of prison and the bishop was on a boat by the end of the day," Novand said.

"Our current situation is a little different," Tuckard continued, serious now. "I do not believe all is as it seems. Findlay is angry, no doubt, but his eruption goes beyond mere breach of decorum. I smell another skunk in this barn."

"Then what's the secret agenda?" Wallis asked.

Tuckard leaned back and launched a slow smoke ring from his throat. "I daresay this has something to do with the terms of The Treaty of Sidon. So far as we know, it's the only thing the Houses want from Darbas these days, besides taxes. It riles Findlay to no end that their influence ends at the walls of the city."

"Agreed," Wallis said. "But that's a bit abstract for our friends from Findlay. They're a pragmatic lot."

"Maybe there's something beyond it, but if there is, I don't see it. Perhaps they have some news that has yet to reach us," Tuckard said. "Arnaud, what of the docks?"

"Little to excite, I'm afraid. The Navy is outfitting a third trebuchet barge, and the only ship on the horizon is the *Terrier*, three days delayed from the Patash Archipelago. Should be dockside in an hour or so. Should I check on it for a packet? There is a Fionnan at New Bronald, though she writes infrequently."

"Yes, please, check," Tuckard said with a distracted wave. "And what of our own Fionnan? I could use a bit of cheer, and it does so brighten my day when she bends to pick up things."



"That, my friend, is a dangerous entertainment," Wallis said. "Fondle that bottom and risk drawing back a bloody stump."

"Adds a bit of spice to it," Tuckard said, puffing thoughtfully. "But Glynnis is too smart not to notice and too wise to care. I think she finds me amusing, actually. Still, I am beginning to feel ... annoyed by her absence. She should at least respect the *pretense* of being our office girl. A Fionnan is invaluable, but they're damned difficult to maintain. We're in a crisis here."

"She was at Ashton's place last night," Novand said.

"How many know about that, do you think?" Tuckard asked.

"As many as care to find out," Wallis said. "Not much goes on in court that cannot be learned, at least as regards those who come and go from bedchambers. Of course, our Fionnan does seem to enjoy some special powers in regards to not being seen."

"Lucky bastard," Tuckard said. "One of the privileges of rank is that beautiful spies find one worthy of manipulation. Perhaps I should reconsider my approach."

"Pete, we're not even members of court at the moment, and we're on the verge of being sent home," Novand said. "We're not even worthy of a bar wench's attentions today."

"Arnaud, you are a pessimist," Tuckard said. "Still, I think a spy's portfolio may be what we need at this point. Go and fetch Glynnis, and then stop by the docks to see what news the *Terrier* might offer."

Novand departed and Wallis and Tuckard spent the hour in playing *Betrayal*, a board game in which an opponent's pieces may be turned to the other player's side. Wallis was the more daring player, and had just converted one of Tuckard's pikes at the center of the board when Glynnis burst into the room in her usual manner – without curtsy or request, heading straight for the coffee grounds that Tuckard deliberately stored in a chest on the floor.

"Devon beating you again, Pete?" she asked as she passed their game.

"The bastard has turned my Queen's pike and has one of his Paladins pointed straight at my King," Tuckard offered his hand across the board. "I resign, Wally. Good game."

"Well, seems like it's just not your day. The word is you stirred the pot a bit too vigorously this morning, Pete," Glynnis said, bending for the coffee and giving Tuckard his daily dose of feminine backside. He sighed, then let his youthful feelings pass.

"Wallis's conclusion is that we're tarked," Tuckard said. "I am not convinced."

"Rough night?" Wallis asked her.

"Quite," she replied as she poured water from the pitcher into the coffee pot. "And an early morning. It's been a busy day." She set the pot over the fire, stoked a log, and collapsed into a chair in a most uncourtly manner. "Pete, we've got a problem."

"Do tell."

"Proxmire is most definitely up to something. His man Dicky was in the stacks last night pulling up the original copy of the Treaty of Sidon – which, fortunately, must be signed for."

Glynnis reached into her waistcoat and pulled out her own pipe, filling it with a mixture of cloves and Ulash herbs. Both the ladies of Court and the priestesses of Gywnyr would have frowned on the practice, but neither concerned Glynnis at the moment. Tuckard and Wallis, on the other hand, found the sight of a lovely blonde smoking a long clay pipe alarmingly provocative, and both were known to have picked up purses of her favorite Ulash mixture as a means of encouraging the habit.

Glynnis was not the first Fionnan to serve the Darbas delegation, but in Tuckard's estimation she was both the best and most bewitching in a long time. Not quite a match for Rialta in her days as the delegation's Fionnan, but close. There had never been anyone before or since who could match Rialta, not as far as Tuckard was concerned.

"That would have been good information to have had in hand this morning, young lady," Tuckard said. "Before our rebuke."

"You cannot have everything," she said, striking a match and sucking fire into the pipe until smoke poured from her lips. "You needed yourself on the King's Agenda this morning, and I had to work Lord Ashton all night for that favor."

"I do not criticize. I only observe."

"You old devil. You do both, and you do each with glee. Never trust a man who says he only knows how to speak plainly. He is plainly lying."

Glynnis gathered up the skirts of her emerald dress beneath her calves and curled her legs under her as she spread her arms along the back of the chair. A halo of sweet-smelling Ulash smoke enfolded her hair, which seemed the color of sunlight through honey. Tuckard marveled at the completeness of her and decided it was the secret to her magic. There were greater beauties at court – some had clearly been bred to the calling – but they were autumn leaves before a stiff wind. Glynnis' beauty lay in the self-possession of her eyes, in the muscles and curves and movements of her small, strong body. She was both athletic and feminine, and either quality could rise to the surface, seemingly at will.

Glynnis took another puff and acquired Tuckard's eyes with a penetrating gaze.

"You've been pondering the Court's interest in Darbas. I believe we have proven only the supposition that this interest exists, yet we know nothing of its true motivation. Have you considered this?"

"For some time," Tuckard said, settling back in his chair. "It could be power for power's sake, though we deem that too abstract a goal. There is the matter of the war, of course, and that can lead to all manner of insecurities. The court might wish nothing more than the ability to garrison Darbas beyond Sidon. We also offer a strategically significant base of operations, and few lands possess the natural resources of Darbas. That is no small issue during a war."

"Is that your preferred theory?"

"No," Tuckard said. "If I had to choose, I would select yet another motivation. The Court has always been deeply suspicious of the DuQaddish and their blood links to the Korvish. We Clydes have always been first among equals on Darbas, yet we have lived in peace with both the DuQaddish and the Mullaqat for centuries. This makes the Court nervous. How much imagination does

it take to assume that our Milker enemies could find friends among the DuQaddish? Or that a Korvish-Sopkan naval landing in the Mullaqat wastes would meet no resistance? I mean, let's face it: our Mullaqat brothers are more than just a little weird from the average Gheraldic perspective."

"Doesn't fit," Glynnis said, shaking her head. "If the goal is to further beat down the DuQaddish, then the Gheraldic garrison would have marched by now. What better pretext could there be to punish them than this current wave of madness?"

"That is an excellent question."

They sat silently for a moment, until Wallis – almost forgotten in their discussion – spoke up.

"Perhaps I have been too hasty in rejecting the first possibility," Wallis said. "Perhaps the abstract notion that the Court wishes power over Darbas for its own sake is the most likely. Perhaps we miss the point entirely. Our friends at Court have proven over and over again that the mostly likely motivation for any mysterious act is almost always personal profit. How much gold is there to be made in the direct administration of Darbas? Enough to make Findlay the first among Houses?"

Tuckard raised an eyebrow. "Yet Proxmire is the first among Houses now, and it supports Findlay in this. If one lord suspected the other, we would find friendship in unlikely places."

"Then perhaps we should go looking for it, Pete," Wallis suggested. The two men exchanged looks, and Glynnis unfolded herself gracefully, stretching her limbs like a cat in the sunlight.

"I have been in communication with Rialta," she said. "Our Lady suspects that the current intrigue here involves a plot aimed specifically at Gwynyr."

Wallis tossed his hands in the air. "How like the Lady to look at the wide world and find herself the center of it. And besides, she's *your* Lady, not *our* Lady."

Tuckard wagged a finger at his deputy. "If experience teaches anything, it is this: one should never be too hasty in rejecting the thoughts of the High Priestess of Gwynyr. Particularly this Priestess. Rialta is the first Fionnan ever to serve as High Priestess. If she suspects the eye of Court falls upon her mountains, then I will actively entertain that possibility."

"Personally, I believe your own eyes have already fallen on Rialta's mountains a time or two, you old goat," Wallis said.

Glynnis shot him a nasty look.

Tuckard heaved a sigh. "Oh, but he's right. Lovely mountains she has, although I would myself describe them rather as two hills, rounded and firm."

"Oh please," Glynnis said. "I can tell it is time for me to depart. You two may lounge around all day bemoaning your predicament, but I have business to attend."

Tuckard waved a distracted hand at her as she rose to go. "Glynnis, do be a dear and apply your art to trying to acquire us some useful intelligence today."

"What did you think my business was about?"

"Good. And while you're at it, stop by your altar and see if you can get our beloved Rialta to offer us more details of her suspicions. Now is not the time for her to be enigmatic."

Glynnis frowned at them. "I will speak with the Lady, but she will report what she is willing and no more. Now goodbye."

Wallis spoke as soon as the door closed behind her. "I find your attitude toward the Old Path priestesses more than a bit disturbing, Pete, and I'm not the only one. There are those who wonder where your true allegiance lies, and sometimes I wonder myself."

"My allegiance is to Darbas alone," Tuckard said. "And Gwynyr is a part of Darbas."

"Gwynyr stands alone, and you know it. It offers no representative to Council, allows no Sulist churchman to enter its borders and ever keeps a secret hand in the affairs of both Darbas and the Empire. They are our allies, and we would be lost without their Fionnans, yet you snuggle awfully close to the Highlands considering their history."

"Don't forget that Rialta, at least in her younger days, was a close friend," Tuckard said. "It was her mother, Rowene, who stood behind my appointment as Messenger, and Rialta the Fionnan accompanied me here on my arrival at Arnell. I would not betray them."

"The rumor, Pete," Wallis said, "is that you'd rather betray Sula and the church. Some speculate you did so long ago."

"I am still a Sulist, if that's what you're asking."

"There are those, it is said, who walk the Old Path with quiet feet."

"And if I did? Whose business would that be?"

"Mine, for one," Wallis said. "Not that care where your soul dwells, only that it is good to know what enemies may use against us. I, too, am a Sulist, though it makes not a bit of difference to my heart. Still, no one can question my allegiance. I am not in bed with those witches."

Tuckard felt more than a little assaulted by Wallis' statement, but his reply was interrupted by the sound of heavy footfalls ascending the stairwell at a run, and then the sight of Novand bursting through the door as if about to collapse.

"The 2nd CRG," he said, gasping as he bent over with his hands on his knees. "They've..." he gasped again, shook his head, waved his hand and finally just offered up the envelope to Wallis. He withdrew the letter inside and looked carefully at the contents. The pause drove Tuckard to annoyance.

"See here now," he began. "Someone better ..."

"They've escaped!" Wallis said, smiling now ear-to-ear. "It's a miracle!" He handed the paper to Tuckard, who snatched it from his hand with some vehemence.

*"Messenger Tuckard: It is with great pleasure that I report the arrival of our Clydish brothers from Bangoon at our Shores*

yesterday," the Fionnan's report began. "The Second Clydish Regimental Group sailed into the Port of New Bronald aboard a Fleet of Smuggler Corsairs, generating Great Surprise and Excitement across our little Colony, where all the recent news has been of Rumor and Alarm.

"Though I have been allowed little intercourse with the Command since the Arrival of the Corsairs from Bangoon, I can safely report that the CRG arrived in Good Number and Order, though with few of their Weapons and no Supplies. Their Strength I estimate at roughly 2,500 men, and they passed their three-day voyage in Good Health. A Goodly Number is Wounded or suffers from Jungle Malaise, yet their Morale is of the Highest Condition, for the Men prowl the Taverns with Great Rowdy Pryde.

The men are under the command of General Alt, who is himself a Most Interesting Character, if Memory serves. He is Rumored to have Tendered his Resignation from Gheraldic service.

"As for their Escape, it is Believed that they made their way to the renowned Smugglers Den of Dibishputra. There Alt delivered an Ultimatum to all the Sea Captains, making it Known that those who refused to Bear his Men across the Water would face immediate and painful Death, while those who willingly Complied would be Rewarded with Great Riches by His Majesty and the Court at Arnell. Their Fleet departed Dibishputra even as the Enemy gathered on the Docks to assail them, then slipped past the Korvish-Sopkan picket ships under Cover of Darkness.

"Our Contacts here report, however, that not all within the Gheraldic Command welcome the arrival of the Clydes, as the Conditions here are becoming Most Desperate. Korvish-Sopkan Ships of Line are Periodically Sighted off our Shores, and the Three Islands of the Archipelago are now Most Assuredly Isolated. While the Commander of the Garrison at New Bronald has repeatedly requested Reinforcement from the Colonial Office at Bhengal, the Clydes arrived with no Munitions or Provender, and are apparently Considered to be a Drain upon the Supplies of the Garrison.

"This will be Old News to you if my Message of Yesterday, sent aboard the Gheraldic Sloop Fox arrived Safely. However, as the Enemy is Multitudinous and New Information has Developed within the past Day, I have taken the Opportunity of providing a second report aboard the Frigate Terrier, which plans a Southerly Passage through the Sea of Sorrows.

"Yours in the Service of Fionna,  
"Deras"

Tuckard set the paper down on the coffee table and stood up, feeling a sudden urge to pace.

"Is there no word of the Fox?"

"None. Do you presume it lost?" Novand asked.

"No, it is far too early for that, far too early..." Tuckard's voice trailed off and he paced more intensely around the room now, thrusting his arms outward in a vigorous motion. "This changes matters, although I know not how. Not yet." He lengthened his step and kept up the arm-thrusting. "Still, whatever the play, it is good news. The first good news in weeks, gentlemen." He paused and stared down Wallis. "Sula be praised, eh, Wally?"

Tuckard stopped his pacing and began doing knee-bends, a practice he knew full-well annoyed his second-in-command. Something in the man found the sight of a seventy-year-old body vigorously contorting itself to be highly undignified.

"The first thing we must determine is whether or not the Court also has word. Clearly Findlay and Proxmire did not, or this morning's debate would have gone far differently," Tuckard said. "So, if we can assume that they did not know this morning, can we assume that they do not know this afternoon?"

"The Fox is a sloop of line," said Wallis. "Or, it was. If it ran afoul of the Korvish-Sopkan fleet and failed to outrun it, it's nothing more than a playground for sea bores now. If I were a gambling man – and I am, come to think of it – I'd place my money on the notion that Gheraldic colonial commanders wager more on security than redundancy when sending a report to their superiors."

"I concur," said Novand. "The commander at New Bronald is General Donny Baker. If there were ever a Gheraldic officer married to the Book of Military Order, it's him."

"Baker?" Wallis asked, suddenly interested again. "Really? Well, that's rich."

"Why?" Tuckard asked.

"Oh, it's a little thing. You know how I like to play a little Betrayal at the Officers' Retreat behind the Old Jack, and I've always paid particular attention to any gossip concerning the officers assigned to our Clydish regiments. Well, a little bird once informed me that Alt and Baker were definitely on the outs. It was Baker who had Alt stripped of command, back before the whole Tarvis River affair. I'm sure *that* was a lovely reunion."

Tuckard waved off the digression. "Be that as it may, the matter before us remains the amount of time this news remains solely in our hands. It may yet be a coin, and a coin well-spent is two. Our task at the moment is to decide where, and how, to invest it for..."

A nervous tap at the door interrupted him. The three men exchanged looks, and Tuckard cautiously advanced to it. "Yes? Who is it?"

"Only I," said the female voice. "Mrs. Ansonby."

Tuckard opened the door and his landlady stood meekly before it, her head encased in a lace bonnet and bowed ever-so-slightly in a subservient pose.

"Begging your pardon, Mister Tuckard, but you've had a visitor," she said, holding out a copper tray with an engraved calling card and a folded piece of paper upon it.

"Mrs. Ansonby, if I didn't know you better, I'd assume you were spying on me."

"Assume I'd what?"

"I'd assume you were *spying* on me."

"What?" she asked, cocking her good ear toward him.

"I said, I'd assume you were *SPYING* on me."

"Oh Mister Tuckard," she said, blushing. "I'd never lie on you. You're my best and longest-lasting tenant."

Tuckard smiled. "And you, Mrs. Ansonby, are a dear friend." He took the card and letter from the tray, then bowed to her. She returned the gesture, then backed out of the doorway as he closed it. Tuckard waited until he heard the sound of her footsteps retreating down the stairs.

"She was, of course, spying on us," he said once she had gone. "I do believe she is a dear friend, but that business about her deafness is a selective condition."

He held up the card and read it, and his expression immediately turned to sudden alertness. "Well, well," he said, handing the card to Wallis.

Tuckard broke the wax seal on the document, unfolded the letter and resumed his pacing. Wallis' eyebrows shot up his forehead as he read the calling card.

"Richard Q. Dalrymple, HMR?" he said. "Our little Dicky from the House of Proxmire walked all the way from Court to pay us a visit?"

"Most Honorable Messenger Tuckard," Tuckard read aloud, pacing more deliberately now. "I bid you fair tidings from my master, Lord Proxmire, and extend his sincere emotions of fraternal affection and regret at the tenor and substance of this morning's conversation."

"Oh, that's rich," said Novand.

Tuckard continued. "My Lord instructs me to inform you that he desires a chance meeting with your Honor, in hopes of discussing matters of friendship and reconciliation. Such a meeting could occur at the Grand Promenade, in front of Speaker's Rock, this afternoon at 4 o'clock. Sincerely, blah, blah, blah."

"Hark!" Wallis said. "Is that the sound of the second shoe hitting the floor?"

"Quite," Tuckard said. "And it is a heavy boot."

**T**he men of Darbas took their afternoon stroll on the Grand Promenade together, dressed in their finest overcoats. Tuckard's dress seemed particularly appropriate for the meeting, as his coat and hat were finely made and clearly a statement of his identity. His three-cornered hat was of a delicate fawn-colored felt, and his greatcoat of deepest Darbas green. He wore shiny black riding boots, handcrafted by the cobblers at Halderon's, the finest boot maker in Sidon, and a ceremonial curved sword in an engraved bronze sheath swung from the leather belt that enclosed the thick wool of his coat. He was a man of Court by his dress, but also a Clyde and a soldier.

They walked silently under opaque and scudding skies. The day had dawned cold and clear, but had turned at noon with a squall that rattled the city in a sudden burst of wind and rain. It left pools in the walkway and stained black the trunks of the oaks and lindens that lined the central park of Arnell, a walled refuge that only men of standing could enter. It was a dreary and turbulent day, and Tuckard watched as smoke rose from the chimney pipes of the city, then caught in the ragged wind the squall had left behind and raced away over slate rooftops and empty piazzas.

As the trio neared Speaker's Rock, Novand and Wallis dropped back a few paces, allowing Tuckard to stretch his legs and approach his meeting with Eorl Garrett, Lord Proxmire, with some privacy. Tuckard turned his head and took their measure: Novand was cold, and clearly wished this meeting could have taken place before a hearth somewhere, and Wallis looked distracted, as if scanning the yellowed lawns and bare trees for threat of danger. Wise, Tuckard thought.

Proxmire was easy to spot. He wore a tall hat and a greatcoat of Gheraldic maroon and he paced in front of Speaker's Rock before a retinue of three men. Tuckard approached him as if they were the oldest of friends.

"My Lord Proxmire!" he said, casting his arms wide. "What a most pleasant surprise on such an invigorating day!"

Proxmire cast a glance at Dicky Dalrymple behind him, then returned Tuckard's greeting with an equally ridiculous smile and a simple wave.

"Imagine my own surprise as well," he said. "There are so few members of Court on the walk today! Would you care to join me?"

Tuckard drew up to Proxmire, but kept a formal distance. Wallis and Novand hung back even further. "Aye," Tuckard said. "A walk would be most pleasant, your Lordship."

"Good then. Let us stretch our legs. And perhaps our minds as well, eh?" He gestured toward the broad path of crushed oyster shell, and the two men stepped off together, their retainers falling into silent formation a good ten paces or more behind them.

"Lord Proxmire," Tuckard began. "I am both honored and humbled by your willingness to meet with me."

"It is my duty, I feel," Garrett said. "You and I have served King and Empire together in Court since before the day I became the Lord of the House, and your kindness to me upon my ascension has not been forgotten. We may have crossed swords on occasion, but I have the deepest and most sincere respect for you. Herald's Hall can be a contentious and vituperative place, but it works best when even its adversaries can sit down to a meal and a glass and find fellowship and commonality of purpose. I cannot begin to tell you the feelings I experienced every time I glanced at your empty chair during our noontime meal, Messenger Tuckard."

"I am flattered, Lord Proxmire."

"You are kind to say so. And it is that kindness, that gentlemanly quality you possess, that inspired my thoughts to contact you."



There is still the matter of your rebuke, which position and propriety forced me to support. I hope you will understand that I did so with no malice, and with great regret upon my heart.”

“Of course, your Lordship. We all must do our duty.”

“As I feel you were only doing yours. Still, matters spiraled out of control, and some rebuke was necessary. Now there is the issue of limiting the damage. Findlay, I’m afraid, intends to seek your expulsion on the morrow. The Colonial Office grows impatient these days, and Findlay presumes that a new Delegate Messenger, perhaps your man Wallis, would better serve the interests of both Darbas and Empire.”

“Perhaps he is correct,” Tuckard said. “And perhaps he is not. The Court is within its rights to remove me, although it cannot select my replacement. Telios alone may discern who that might be.”

“I intend to see to it that you remain, Messenger Tuckard. You have served Darbas well, but you are also undoubtedly a citizen of our Gherald Empire. And I believe you love it as I do. Look around us! This grand park. Ahead of us the Arch of Heroes, commemorating our distant victory over Verous. Behind us, Speaker’s Rock, the very soul of our tradition of free thought. At every corner, a garden, though now fallow, surrounding some memorial or statue, each representing its own facet of our greatness as a people and empire. Look! The very architecture of Arnell, the red stone and white marble of its buildings, even the arches and columns of their design, all speak of one common theme: We are destiny’s chosen race. It holds true for my line, but for yours as well. We are all, at heart, the children of Old Calpathia. Does it not make sense that the Clydes of Darbas and the Gheraldic people should be brothers in empire, Messenger Tuckard?”

“Great sense. That is, in fact, the message of my delegation.”

“And, at its soul, I agree with that message. It is only the *practicality* of its expression that leads us to arguments in Court. But here we may speak plainly, as you like to say. Findlay claims that Ulash is the jewel in the crown of the Empire, and Teague is fond of Bhengal, on which his House made its fortune. But it has always been my belief that the beauty and worth of Darbas surpasses them all. Gherald without Darbas is nothing, I say, for we together preserve and uphold the Calpathian line.”

“Ah, but there are those who say that in the Kingdom of Gherald, the soul of Calpathia is but a dream, half-forgotten,” Tuckard said.

“But half-remembered,” Garrett said. “It is the part of us that sings. The part of us that sees not lumber by the board-foot, but a sacred grove. It is the fire in the blood that inspires our poets, that sends our troops into battle with spirit and courage. We have no greatness without our Calpathian heritage, Messenger Tuckard, yet Empire requires that such passions be tempered. Not forgotten, but disciplined. And that is the genius of our Gheraldic line – the staying power, the love of order. We are what we are because those two lines intermingled long ago in our history.”

“And we of Darbas are what we are because those two lines never met,” Tuckard said. “We too, are an amalgam, but an alloy of different stuff. I walk beside you not as a representative of the Calpathian Clydes, but of Darbas, a land shared in common by three distinct peoples: the Clydes of the forests, fields and highlands; the DuQaddish of the plains and western shores; and our nomadic Mullaqat brothers, who venture out from their southern deserts in peaceful caravans. Despite the violence of recent months, I speak not for one, but for all.”

“Ah, but that, my friend, is a matter worthy of some discussion,” Lord Proxmire said. “Lord Findlay and myself have many areas of disagreement, but we find common ground on this issue. It is time – no, long past time – that Darbas be brought closer to the heart of the Empire. For seven hundred years we have existed in a political state that can most accurately be defined as a confederation, and such influence as the Court may extend has been wrought through our fellowship with the Clydish people, not the DuQaddish or the Mullaqat. You claim to speak for all, but who can deny that the Clydes of Darbas are the most civilized of the three? Can you honestly look me in the eye and contend that your heretical and backwards DuQaddish or your heathen Mullaqat are of equal worth?”

“Aye. That I can, though recent events do shake my resolve at times.”

“As well they should. Messenger Tuckard, it is the feeling of both Proxmire and Findlay, and no doubt others as well, that the DuQaddish represent a dagger pointed at the heart of the Empire, and now is no time to be lax in our security. The Korvish-Sopkans challenge us around the globe, and it seems every year another profitable Gheraldic colony falls to their ambition.

“Yes, Lord Proxmire. And yet Darbas remains loyal.”

“But for how long?” Garrett asked pointedly. “For how long will it march alongside us when more than half its population consists of Mullaqat savages and DuQaddish blasphemers whose blood calls them back to the shores of Korvanichka? The DuQaddish are as purely Korvish as the Clydes are Calpathian. Your small continent has a divided soul, Messenger Tuckard.”

“An interesting and powerful analogy, Lord Proxmire. But it begs the question: what would the Court do to remedy the condition?”

Lord Proxmire grasped the back of Tuckard’s hand in a firm but moist grip. “The House of Proxmire proposes that the Gheralds and the Clydes bind their fortunes together. The Treaty of Sidon – what you like to call LaFranq’s Bargain – is an antiquated and obsolete document. Let us, together, write a new one, a treaty that will formally establish the Clydes as the stewards of Darbas and full partners in the Gheraldic Empire. The Clydes are the natural rulers of your continent, and have acted as such for centuries. Why should they cower in their basements and flee their homes before a murderous rabble of bloodthirsty heretics? Join with us, Pete, and Gherald shall set to order all manner of problems that beset your homeland.”

“Such as?”

“The Clydes of Sidon, the Don, Celon and Edain have managed to bring forth a civilization despite being burdened by the noble yet impractical concept of religious permissiveness. You are taunted and diminished on all sides by a proliferation of heresies. The

DuQaddish practice a mockery of Sulism and call themselves “The Chosen People,” even though they have never accepted the first edict from the Great Voice of Picthia. The Mullaqat are a lazy and shiftless race that worships death and considers morality a joke. And, though I am faint to say it, the worst of all are your highland Clydes of Gwynyr, with their Old Path barbarism.

“Messenger Tuckard, the Empire is sworn to the service of Sulism, and we have done more to secure the outcome of the Great Counting than any other people in history. It is our sacred duty to bring these heretics to heel and offer their children the hope and peace of Telios. How could we not profit, all of us, from such a simple and basic undertaking?”

“Go on,” Tuckard said. Proxmire smiled, a salesman who senses a contract in the offing.

“With the whole of Darbas finally governed, we would turn our attention to the trade question. Darbas cannot compete with the Empire for trade routes, but as a member of the Empire, in full standing, you Clydes could trade directly with other colonies and nations. And not only would this put an end to the constant irritation of Gwynyrian smuggling, but it would put those highland profits in your purse, where they rightfully belong.

“Then there is the matter of the war. Messenger Tuckard, it will surprise you not at all when I tell you that the cost of our rivalry with Korvish-Sopka is depleting the King’s Treasury at an alarming rate. Our spending outpaces our revenue at a pace of almost one million ducats a day, and the accordant reduction in trade is even more devastating. But with a full army of Clydes and the other peoples of Darbas, what campaign could we not wage against our enemies? Could we not land on the shores of Old Calpathia and march straight north into the heart of Korvish-Sopka, splitting their old alliance in two? Your people, with their keen eyes and enormous physical size, are beyond the capacity of any other race on the field of battle.”

“And what incentive, Lord Proxmire, would the Court offer to my Clydes to turn against their brothers and sisters?”

“Righteousness. Power. Wealth. The freedom to govern. The right to lands now despoiled by foreign and aboriginal squatters. The guiding hand and grace of Sula and Telios. And the power and resources to change the world, Messenger Tuckard.”

“And those would be?”

“The most precious and powerful of all materials, good sir,” Lord Proxmire said, reaching below the folds of his coat. His hand drew back with a remarkable object balanced on an open palm.

“Here. Take it. Feel it. It is the most important artifact possessed by the House of Proxmire. A thing from the past in which one can see the map of an entire future.”

Tuckard took the dagger that Proxmire offered him, and at its touch he felt an exhilarating chill rush up his arm. Never in his life had he beheld such craftsmanship, nor seen a blade of such metal. The dagger, from point to pommel, was the length of his two hands. The blade was thin and elegant and notched seamlessly into a brass hilt with a wrapped leather handle. The pommel was round and heavy and made of the same white metal as the blade. As a weapon it was a piece of art, perfectly balanced, lovingly executed, yet its only decoration was a set of runic letters engraved upon the hilt. Gazing at it, turning it in his hand, Tuckard felt the power and majesty of the dagger surging through his arm. The old talker suddenly found himself speechless.

“It is steel,” Proxmire said. “The mythical alloy, Messenger Tuckard. And it is very, very real.”

“Where... where did you get it?” Tuckard stammered. Garrett smiled broadly.

“In 259 P.E., one of my forebears marched out from the gates of Sidon to bargain with your General LaFranq. At the end of their parlay, as an act of faith and friendship, LaFranq offered this dagger to my ancestor, who carried it with him until his death, when it passed into the holdings of the House. We are more than 700 years removed from that day, and still the blade shines.”

“It is truly an unimaginable thing, Lord Proxmire.”

“And yet it is fact. The dagger you hold in your hands is solid proof that the legends were true. LaFranq’s Clydish warriors did in fact come down from the highlands armed with blades no armor could resist, blades of an iron alloy we cannot replicate to this day.”

“Such an object... must be truly priceless.”

“Aye, Messenger Tuckard. For it represents a power beyond all but the wildest dream of crowns and conquerors. Ours is a world rich in culture and knowledge, yet held back from its destiny by the simple fact that the very resources that could spark the flowering of our civilization are played out and overly precious. The iron smelters of Bronald have lain cold for more than two hundred years, and what little iron may be wrought now is more valuable than the purest gold, though it has little beauty to recommend it.

“Iron alone could make us great, Tuckard. It could bind together our ships, form great machines, hew the deepest rock, split the earth behind every plowhorse in the Empire. All to no avail. Its rarity makes it only a novelty in this day, a material for alchemists to covet away and scientists to ponder.

“But steel, Tuckard,” Lord Proxmire’s voice sank into a lower register. “Steel is truly the stuff of dreams. Imagine it: an entire world of steel. Armies wielding blades that do not break, clad in armor and mail that will not rend. Our own metallurgists have devised processes, of course, yet nothing that approaches the attributes of this legendary blade. And this dagger, this is but a toy! A trinket from Liam LaFranq! The swords of his day were so advanced, so perfect, that our fledgling empire could not stand against them. Just as the Korvish-Sopkans will fall before us once we mine the highlands of Gwynyr and the minds of those who hide there, hoarding their knowledge and wealth.”

They walked in silence for a moment.

“My dear Lord Proxmire,” Tuckard began. “Please do tell what would be expected of me.”

“Gladly,” he said, and his arm encircled the older man’s waist.

*The unprecedented fury and violence of the crisis in the Edain now spreads toward the capitol. I am sending this letter ahead by courier and departing today for the highlands. I implore The Lady to grant us an audience in three days time in Niamh. If there was ever a time to heal the wounds that divide us, it is this time. Our Clydish blood calls to yours.*

—Dispatch from **Counselor Bergonat to Rialta, The Lady of Gwynyr**

*These witches afflict our modern civilization with their savage ways and hidden hands, standing forever on the opposing side in the Great Counting. Yet everywhere witches pass in the street unchallenged, sit in our pews without rebuke, buy and sell without fear of retribution. We must ask, why should the church allow this?*

—**Bishop Jantes of Sidon**, from his 249 P.E. sermon “The Evil We Condone”

*By the fall of 258 P.E. only the great Clydish general Liam LaFranq remained unconquered in the lowlands. The final Gerhaldic assault on the mountains of Gwynyr and the Mullaquat deserts awaited only the return of spring.*

*But this is where history took a turn. Though she had turned her back on the lowlands during the invasion, Rhoane, the Lady of Gwynyr, invited LaFranq to winter his army near Niamh. There she outfitted the general and his men with weapons crafted of steel and magic, forging an alliance that would shake the Gheraldic Empire to its roots.*

*Despite their glorious victories in 259 P.E., the alliance between Rhoane and LaFranq would end bitterly. It is impossible to understand the politics of Darbas without comprehending the depth of this tragedy.*

—**Kirshan**, Chapter 2, *History of the Western Wars*

## Chapter 2

# Rialta

She was the loudest baby Rialta had ever heard, and meeting the parents, the Lady of Gwynyr understood why. They were young and tense, and even though she was only in their home because the family had written to request a blessing visit, the parents hovered about the high priestess as she held their tiny, screaming, bright-red daughter.

“Maybe it’s the way you’re holding her,” the mother said. “You’ve got her head down a little, Lady.”

The father leaned quickly to his wife’s ear. She exhaled in an exasperated burst.

“My apologies, Lady. My husband says I’m insulting you,” she said, her voice more annoyed than contrite. “If I am, I certainly don’t mean to be. It’s just that she never – well, she cries a *lot*, she always has – but she never really screams like *this*. And we certainly do everything we’re supposed to do. Our midwife gave us a list of instructions, and I wrote them down word for word, and we follow them to the letter, don’t we, Arl?”

The husband nodded. “To the letter.” Their daughter continued screaming, her thin but sizeable voice filling the immaculate confines of the sitting room in the family’s stone cottage.

“So I was just thinking,” the new mother continued, “that maybe she’s not used to you, and since you’re not holding her in the way she is accustomed, which was the manner in which the midwife instructed, perhaps that might be aggravating her, you see? That’s not a criticism, of course.” The mother reached out for the baby. “Here. Let me just take her back, Lady.”

Rialta looked at the woman but said nothing and made no offer to return the baby. Instead, she took the measure of the mother, then turned to survey the father again, taking in new details about him that she’d missed when they met. She turned and looked at the woman’s parents, roughly her age but much older in appearance, reading their faces and manner. Seconds ticked by in awkward silence, but still the mother stood waiting, as if frozen, with her arms extended. The baby screamed unabated.

Rialta caught the eye of her assistant, Willow. Neither said a word, but Rialta confirmed her diagnosis through the subtle play of expressions on her young handmaiden’s face. Willow stepped forward to take the irate infant from Rialta’s arms, and the mother almost sprang toward them.

“Is that wise? I mean, has she washed her hands? Not that I mean to criticize, just that...”

Rialta finished handing the baby to Willow, then turned and swiftly placed her left thumb on the mother’s forehead. She stopped in mid-sentence, and the Lady of Gwynyr, Rialta, daughter of Rowene, High Priestess of Beltan and the Old Path, stared deeply into her eyes.

“I want to thank you for allowing us into your home,” she said, slowly removing her thumb from the woman’s forehead. “It is a lovely home, immaculately kept.”

“Thank you, Lady.”

“Now, as for the baby. I have some herbs that I’m going to give you...”

“But how am I to give them to her? The midwife said...”

“They’re not for *her*,” Rialta said. “They’re for *you*. It’s a mixture of Valerian and Wort, and it will calm you.” She slipped a friendly hand onto the woman’s shoulder. “The arrival of a new baby is always a time of adjustment. It is clear that everyone here merely wishes the best for the girl. You have done everything your midwife instructed, but now your daughter’s screams drive fear into your hearts, because you suspect you have done something wrong. And you haven’t. It is a simple fact that babies cry, and when they cry they cry with bodies adapted to screaming in a way that would exhaust anyone over the age of 3. As you endure her screams, you become tenser, and as your efforts to calm her fail, your tension grows into a web that fills every room of this house. Your daughter cannot speak and has barely begun to see, but she learns in other ways, ways that grown people no longer remember and can barely

imagine. And as your tension fills her, her own discomfort grows, and from that discomfort arise louder, longer screams, making you more tense, and so on.”

The young mother’s jaw sank with shame. “So you’re saying it’s my fault?” Tears welled in her eyes and rolled quickly down her cheeks. “I’m the one doing this to my baby?”

“Yes,” Rialta said. “If you choose to see it that way.” She turned her attention to the father and the grandparents. “The question is not fault, but action. When a household focuses its attention on becoming blameless instead of on doing what is best, then problems invariably arise. You are all good folk, with good hearts, but your new baby is a teacher to all of you. She cares not whether you follow the instructions of the midwife, nor if your cottage stays spotlessly clean. She seeks only to sleep, and to be held, and to be fed, and to feel the warmth and security of a loving family around her. In your love for her, you have turned yourselves into her servants. This is not the natural order of things, and she senses it. So here is my word to you all: Relax. Life is not a contest.”

Willow handed the baby girl back to the mother, and her screams descended into mere cries.

“Now give her your breast,” Rialta said. “She is overwrought, and feeding will calm her.”

The mother lifted her shirt, and baby Tira took to her nipple instantly. Within seconds she was intently suckling, her screams replaced by contented mumbles.

“Lady, how long will it take before her crying subsides?” the mother asked.

“If you do everything exactly as I command, about a month,” Rialta said. “If you merely relax and let nature take its course, about four weeks.”

The grandmother thanked her formally and profusely. “We are simple people, Lady. Your wisdom on child rearing, acquired through the knowledge of the rites of Beltan, is truly a blessing to us.”

Rialta laughed. “All the wisdom I possess in these matters came from raising three children of my own. All of us survived the experience, so I consider the experiment successful.”

“Three children!” the grandmother said. “It seems hardly possible! Would that my figure have stayed so lovely after my three! And you’re so youthful!”

“I am no maiden,” Rialta replied, laying a hand on the old woman’s shoulder. “But I’m not so old that I no longer appreciate a little flattery.”

Willow reached into her traveling bag and removed two paper pouches of herbs, which she handed to the father with a smile. “This is best taken as an infusion. A pinch is enough, and boil only enough water for two. A cup at breakfast, noon and evening. That’s all.”

Rialta scanned the room, and made some minor adjustments to the position of the furniture as the residents watched her in stunned silence. Satisfied, she turned her attention to the doorway, which was unadorned, and reached into the pocket of her apron to remove a small tin of ashes. Dipping her finger into it, she stretched on tiptoe to reach the top of the doorframe, where she traced a pentagram in ash with her finger. “Grandmother,” she said, and the woman stepped forward. “Do you know your hexes and charms?”

“I was not trained at the temple, but I know such as the women of Niamh speak.”

“Then you know what you need to know. This is a lovely home, but it would benefit greatly from a cleansing, and I don’t mean a soap-and-water scrubbing. The energy of the house is tangled and knotted, but if you will arrange the proper charms and hexes, everything will be opened up and properly channeled. Windows, doors, hearth, all the places where spirit comes and goes, these must be the first. And it is more powerful if it comes from the family than if I do it.”

“How can we be more powerful in our spirit work than the Lady of Gwynyr?” the grandmother asked.

“It’s a mystery,” Rialta said. She shrugged, and for the first time on their visit, the family smiled as if they meant it.

Rialta’s journey to the highland city of Niamh was almost at a close, and in her own private way she felt weary. Willow could sense her fatigue, she was sure, but neither spoke of it as their horses clopped slowly along the stone-banked track from the now-peaceful home of Arl and Debrah Forj. November light, cold and high, filtered through heavy clouds over the village, but it was afternoon and the morning fog had lifted to offer beautiful views of the highlands. The landscape opened up at this bend in the road, rolling in humps and hummocks over fields marked by low stone walls. Niamh was the northern gateway to The Penn, the central valley region of Gwynyr where most of the highland population lived. The Penn was gentle, fertile earth, but the area surrounding Niamh was stony, and though centuries of tilling had removed most of the rock from the fields, everything here seemed marked and weighted by them.

There was a comfortable feeling that arose from this land so loved and tended. The spirit of the place still yearned for wildness, straining against the rock-wall ribs laid down by generations of farmers. In many other places one force held sway over the other, but here civilization and wilderness were almost perfectly balanced, and if Rialta merely quieted her mind she could sense the quiet hum of everything around her – the web of life infused with human spirit, but not overlorded by it. Each contained the other, and both profited by it. It was, she thought, the soul of Gwynyr expressed without words, and it filled her tired heart almost to breaking.

Niamh proper lay about a mile away, and Rialta tried to regard it with fresh eyes. Villages and farms comprised the heart of Gwynyr, but the highlands contained three significant cities that each expressed a distinct identity and spirit. Beltan, distinguished by graceful architecture and bounded on three sides by a crystalline lake, was Gwynyr’s holy city. Llyr, in the western mountains, was the city of industry, a place suited more for metalworkers and craftsmen than for farmers, and its energy – unbounded by the calming presence of trees – roiled with activity.



But Niamh was in some ways Rialta's favorite. The land here was gentler than the sharp peaks of Beltan or the bald cliffs of Llyr, and its spirit more accustomed to the habitation of people. The buildings of the city were lower and blended into the countryside as if they had grown there. Niamh lived close to the earth, expressed little vanity, and in its own way offered a more honest expression of the Old Path than Beltan, with all its whispered mysteries, ever could. It was, for the most part, a peaceful corner of the highlands, yet its fortifications and position on the Eochu Road also bespoke another heritage. Niamh had three times been a battlefield, the place where Gwynyr held the rest of the world at bay. That spirit also soaked deep into the roots of the land, and every time Rialta traveled this narrow road she felt the footsteps of the armies that had marched it long ago.

"Our friends back home in Beltan might not approve of this," Rialta said to Willow as they rode, "but I have come to believe that Niamh is a more complete expression of the Old Path than our holy city. There is a simple poetry in it. Here we have lived in a way that pleases the Mother, yet there are sad stories around us as well."

"I feel it also," Willow said. "Every year when we visit."

They reached the crossroads where their path turned to the right and descended into Niamh. The stone walls of the surrounding fields formed a great cross, and the shrines at each corner were nothing more than cairns, piled high by centuries of farmers. Rialta and Willow mumbled quick prayers as they always did at a crossroads, because each was a sacred place, a location where magic dwelt and possibilities and choices abounded.

Rialta felt those choices more heavily than ever before, for a part of her dreaded everything that lay ahead. The Old Path taught the value of living in the present, but the meeting that awaited her in Niamh tugged at her hem. It was the beginning of the future, a turn in the road and a difficult path. A three-man delegation from the lowlands had sent a message ahead requesting an audience, and though requests for Rialta's time were common, this piece of paper had felt as heavy as a stone. At least the prophecies had prepared her for this moment, but sometimes knowledge is an unwanted gift. The entire trip toward the meeting had been infused with nostalgia for the present, as if Rialta were looking at each house and field and grove and rock for the last time. There was war in the lowlands, a madness that spread like a disease, but Rialta's intuition steered her beyond the violence to the currents that stirred these events. They had originated long ago, but soon they would wash across Gwynyr and everything her people knew would change. The worst part, Rialta thought, was that so much of it would be of her own making.

The high priestess and the handmaiden paused for a moment in the crossroads, then started off toward the city.

"What are your feelings about this visit? About this meeting?" Rialta asked.

"I sense more sad stories ahead."

"And I, too. But new beginnings as well. Do you feel them?"

Willow looked down, then shook her head. "In truth, no."

But Rialta did. The beginnings of many things – some to be dreaded, but perhaps others to be cherished. She didn't really fear the future, she realized, but the getting there.

They rode in silence, and Rialta found herself wishing for just a little more time before the future began. "Are there any other households that have requested a visit today?" she asked.

Willow unfolded a piece of paper from the pocket of her apron. "No, my Lady, not on today's schedule. Although surely some will arise as we ride, if it please you."

Four stone houses and a tavern rose before them and the smell of wood smoke teased her nostrils with the promise of simple conversation and cozy comfort. She cleared her mind for a moment and let the image of their inhabitants come into focus on her inner sight. They would welcome her and their humor would warm her heart. Against that image she weighed the task that awaited in Niamh, where the delegation from Sidon had just arrived. There was little humor and no stew in that kitchen, she thought, only troubles and choices. She could tarry at this tavern, meeting the families and letting their laughter refresh her soul, or she could hurry on to meet her destiny in Niamh. The decision tugged at her, and Rialta realized she was unconsciously twiddling a strand of her long brown hair.

"One can wait, the other cannot," Willow said, once again reading her thoughts. "The delegation has come this far and will not be offended if you do not arrive until later in the evening. But this moment passes only once. My word to you is, relax."

Rialta smiled, both humbled and pleased by the way her young friend looked out for the part of her that was not her position, and the two women of Beltan dismounted before the tavern and stepped inside. They were well-received, and everyone from the surrounding farms soon heard the news and hurried there to sit with them. They spent the better part of two hours there, dispensing blessings and charms and bits of advice, all the while swarmed by children and kisses and stories and hand-clasping yeomen. Rialta took the measure of each farmwife, delighted in the squirms and squeals of each child who sat on her lap and made the conscious effort to let every ounce of emotion in the room saturate her heart. The world would change for them, Rialta mused, but there was nothing she could do about that. Her job was to do everything in her power to make those changes good ones. By the time they started back on their way in the early winter darkness she felt as if she were glowing, infused with the spirit of her people and ready to begin the task she had foreseen.

Simuae, the priestess of Niamh, was traditional and conservative even by Gwynyrian standards. She lived in a properly hexed cottage, kept her herb garden within the precise dimensions spelled out in the Beltan Grimoire and never, ever, gave an immediate answer to anything. Simuae loved the Old Path with all her heart, but it had become a worn groove on which her bare feet would never feel the touch of a single fresh blade of grass. To Rialta, the priestess of Niamh was the kind of woman who could summon forth the power from the center of her ring of stones at the height of midsummer and feel nothing more than the satisfaction of orderliness. The people of the city respected her, but even that was a benign emotion. To the

high priestess, Simuae was a pair of comfortable, dowdy shoes.

Simuae was certainly less than comfortable by the time Rialta and Willow dismounted at the end of the evergreen path that led to the Sisterhood House, a pleasant little corner of Niamh where cobblestones and laundry lines gave way to a friendly patch of greenery behind a traditional low stone wall. Simuae was alone, waiting for their arrival and fidgeting.

“Blessed be, Sister Rialta,” she said, bending her thick waist in a subtle bow. “You’re quite delayed and I was worried.”

“Blessed be, Sister Simuae,” Rialta said, dismounting swiftly. “I took time out to stop at a tavern and socialize.” She returned the slight bow and caught Simuae’s eyes as she returned to upright. The women were the same height and almost the same age – Simuae was a couple years her senior – but the look on her face made the subordinate priestess seem smaller and significantly older. Simuae’s expression combined disapproval and confusion and fear, and Rialta imagined she would like nothing more at this moment than to retire to her favorite chair beside her sitting room’s hearth, where she could pore pleasantly over the planting tables until it was time for the evening rites.

Willow took the bridles of their horses and followed Simuae’s handmaiden to the stables, while the two priestesses mumbled quick invocations at the garden gate and stepped through. The gate itself was a trellis of grape vines trained into an arch, and the straight path that opened beyond it was only five feet wide and bounded on either side by two evergreen hedges that towered above the women. It was twenty feet from gate to door, but the hedges opened twice along the route onto side gardens, carefully tended but turned under or gone fallow in the winter.

Sisterhood Houses served a variety of functions in Gwynyr. They were homes for initiates to stay in before their journey to Beltan, inns for traveling Sisters on the road, shelters for whomever needed a place to stay. But a Sisterhood House was also a meeting hall, a temple for handfastings, a private court for the settlement of disputes. Widows and widowers often moved in during their period of mourning, and those on spiritual quests were frequent visitors.

The Sisterhood House of Niamh was in truth a series of buildings surrounded by gardens and carefully tended trees. Its frontage on Wool Street, not far from the Niamh town square, was modest: thirty feet of hedge and gate and wall. But the compound spread out behind the storefronts along Wool Street and took up the better part of the city block between Lamb and Ewe streets. Hidden behind its hedges were a stables, a community vegetable garden, a small circle of standing stones, some seldom-used cottages under the aspens, and the hall itself.

The hall was made of hardened plaster on a frame of rough-hewn timbers. The women entered through a small doorway that led to an anteroom, then stepped into the center of the hall. The hearth, its fire pit fully ten feet across, lay before them, part of a stone chimney that filled the center back wall. The floor was blond wood, buffed to a low gleam, and the ceiling rose three floors above them. Lofts jutted out over the open hall, looking down on it from three directions, and under their eaves sat long tables and simple chairs. Visitors slept above, meals were taken below, and everything centered on the hearth. It served as both altar and kitchen, because the two were never far apart in the mind of the Old Path.

The three-man lowland delegation, interrupted at a game of Kot, set down their cards, rose from a small table near the hearth and bowed to the priestesses. They were dressed in the manner of Sulist Clyde farmers and woodsmen: a tall man with a perfectly bald head, a burly squire in a cloak, and a younger man, perhaps in his thirties, who stood only with the assistance of a cane. Rialta took a deep breath and registered their mood: tense but excited. They were looking forward to seeing her.

As they straightened themselves to full height, Rialta realized that none of them were strangers. The man with the bad leg was Dian, the most renowned poet of the Edain. His tall companion was Councilor Bergonat, member of the Council of Darbas and a respected farmer from Llupanog. The broad-shouldered man in the cloak was the last to rise, and as he swept back the hood from his gray head Rialta’s breath caught in her throat. He was Sergeant Rolph LaFranq, retired Clydish grenadier, legendary warrior, failed farmer – and the father of her middle child. She had not seen him in more than five years, and the sight of his thick, weathered face stirred quickly through her memories like a sudden breeze that lifts autumn leaves and swirls them softly into the air.

“Lady of Gwynyr,” Bergonat said. “We thank you for this meeting.”

“Councilor Bergonat,” Rialta said, offering him a bow that he returned. “The honor is mine. I was shocked to hear of your troubles and came at once.”

“May I introduce my companions? This is Rolph LaFranq...”

“Councilor, no introductions are necessary, as I believe you well know,” she said. An intentional slyness slipped into her voice. “How clever you are in your selections, too, for you bring me the greatest poet of the Lowlands, who is sure to receive my full attention, and the father of my second child, a man I dearly love. Surely you have reasoned that if your case does not win my approval, then your delegates will turn the tide.”

“It was most certainly a consideration, my Lady.”

Simuae almost clucked at them. “It was an act of rudeness, My Lady, for Councilor Bergonat to bring along Sergeant LaFranq without mentioning your past relationship for my dispatch to you.”

“No relationship is ever past,” Rialta said, and she stepped forward and took LaFranq’s bearded face in her hands. She was not a tall woman, but she seemed to grow in height so that her face was almost parallel to the old sergeant’s. “I have missed you, of course, you old bear,” she said.

“My Lady, I was only looking for an excuse to return to your highlands. And I found one.”

Rialta smiled in return and shifted her attention to Dian, taking his free hand in her own. “Our beloved bard,” she began. “The years treat you well, I see.”

“And I can see that the Lady is either nearsighted or fond of dispensing flattery,” Dian said, gazing boldly back at her in a way that irritated Simuae. “I can also see that your beauty has ripened with age, Lady Rialta. Your skin glows fair and creamy, your waist

is trim and your body is well-made and fit. A man could stare into your deep brown eyes and fall so completely under your thrall that you would have no need for magic.”

“Now see here,” Simuae began, but Rialta silenced her with a gesture that froze her lips in mid-scold.

“No need to fuss, Sister. Dian knows me well enough to remember that I enjoy a little flattery, and I like to imagine that it’s so true that he cannot help himself. Now bring me a chair, please, so that we can begin our parlay in comfort,” Rialta said. “And some water. There is more talk to be said here than dry throats can breach.”

“I’ve brought a little something to cut that water,” Dian said, producing a flask from a pocket in his vest. “If memory serves, in our last meeting you were quite enamored of the fine juice of the noble corn, a flowering grass of great height and – properly aged – a whisperer of tales.”

“Ah, but that was a campfire, and you were barely old enough to drink in those days,” Rialta said. “I have not tasted the brown whisky of the Don since.”

“Tis the better,” Dian said. “You’ll have lost the tolerance for it, and will be more receptive to my words.”

Simuae returned with an earthen pitcher and cups on a wooden tray and an initiate bore a chair for Rialta. The high priestess took the items and, with a look, ordered the women from the hall. Simuae clomped out of the room with the young priestess-in-training gliding beside her. The older woman closed the doors loudly, and the four were alone, their faces caressed by the light and shadow that played across the hearth.

“Lady Rialta, dark times trail our feet to this hall,” Bergonat began. “I regret only that our meeting must be under such dire circumstance and that I bring you not happier news.”

Rialta scanned the room once more to make sure no spies were lurking, then leaned forward and put her elbows on the table. “Dian, pass that whiskey.” She took the flask from him, poured a finger into her cup and took it down her throat with one draught. “Gentlemen, pleasantries bore me. You are all known to me, and I to you. Bergonat, you are a good farmer who plays at politics – and better than a good politician who plays at farming. Dian, you are gifted at words and can bring a tear to a young girl’s eye with nothing more than a phrase, but you are bitter in a way that words can never truly obscure. Rolph, you are a valiant heart and a dear soul, but you are the most inconstant man I have ever met, and if your mind is not wandering within the next hour, then your feet are likely to be.

“You bring news of war, and this is also known to me. Information is what you offer me in trade, and it is of value. But the assistance you seek will not, cannot, be freely and easily given. So Dian, spare me your honey and speak plainly, Bergonat, or you will try my patience.”

The councilor seemed physically taken aback, but Dian and LaFranq displayed nothing but savvy pleasure. Bergonat, whether he did so for reasons right or wrong, had chosen wisely in selecting his companions.

“I see,” he said, “that my friends were accurate in their description of you, Lady Rialta.”

“No parlor games with this bird, I told him,” Dian said.

“Out with it,” Rialta said, her wilting gaze steady on Bergonat.

“We are besieged,” he said. “As never in 350 years. What we once believed was just isolated unrest in the Don River valley has spread now into Edain. Riders from Hasan, hundreds of them, struck Clyde Barrow ten days ago. I cannot describe the carnage.”

“Then let me,” Dian said. “Clyde Barrow was a town of 7,000 souls, and a fifth of them lie beneath the earth in mass graves tonight. I hurried there from Tunethia a day after the attack, passing thousands on the road fleeing east to the forests of Conall. Outside the city I happened upon a farmhouse, or what was left of one. I found first the father, cut down with his wood ax in his hands, and behind him the mother and her two babes. Farther down the path lay their eldest daughter, a girl of perhaps thirteen years. Her eyes stared dully at the sky, as if her soul had left her body before the blade crossed her throat and ended her misery, for the rest of what I saw I cannot tell.”

Dian reached into his coat and withdrew a lock of golden hair tied with cord. “I took this from her, to remember her. She was a beautiful child, defiled and murdered by a madness that even I cannot speak.” He handed it to Rialta, who closed her eyes and stroked the hair softly. An image came to her: riders with torches thundering up the path to the farm – her father felled before her eyes, her blind race through the darkness and the fallow fields, the hoof beats behind her. The crush of men upon her, the weight of them...

Rialta opened her eyes with a start.

“And the news is worse than I imagined,” Bergonat said. “I departed Sidon five days ago, dispatching riders ahead of me to find you and arrange this meeting. On the day I began my journey, scouts reported an army on the move across Birren, bearing down on the capital. An army, Rialta. Not just raiders on horseback, slaughtering those defenseless farmers they passed. An army, with siege weapons, marching out of Ennis Heath, a sight no Clyde has seen since the days of Sergeant LaFranq’s ancestor, the great Liam LaFranq. The DuQaddish, a people long believed to be our brothers, have risen in bloody rage and turn now against the walls of Sidon.”

Rialta looked to LaFranq, her eyes asking the silent question.

“Aye,” he said. “It is all true.”

“And how did you survive to make it to this meeting, Bear?”

“It’s true that my eyes are failing, but the attack on Clyde Barrow came in the darkness, so I lost no advantage to my enemies. Those I found were easily dismounted, and turned rapidly at the first sign of stout opposition. These were not soldiers, Lady, but thugs and murderers. They came not to fight, but to kill, and they fled to other parts of the city faster than I could chase them.”

“And reports of an army moving against Sidon?”

“True as can be believed of farmers,” he said. “I met Bergonat at Argon, where he turned me south. We spoke to the same refugees. Edain is nothing but a turmoil now – thousands of people on the road or too frightened of roadways and fleeing across field and wood. Some seek security in Sidon. Others flee to Conall. My neighbors fled to Celon Gate, and we passed a virtual city of tents on the foothill frontiers of Gwynyr.”

“And you pity these people?”

“Pity is not the word,” LaFranq said, a bit of flint creeping into his voice. “They are tame and timid, my brother Clydes, too fat from the table, gone soft around the middle and weak in their hearts. I am ashamed for them.”

“Not all are so hard as brother LaFranq,” Dian said. “He would have old men and pitchballers stand against pike and sword with nothing more than forks and flails. They flee for their families, which is noble in its own right.”

“They flee for fear of death, and there’s nothing noble in that,” LaFranq countered. “The word for that is cowardice, and the cowards include even some of my old number, the Guardsmen. If only a dozen would have stood together, much of the horror could have been averted. What constables rallied against the enemy were overwhelmed and cut down. I do not pity those who fled. I loathe them.”

“What of the garrison at Sidon?” Rialta asked. “Has General Thierry deployed them to counter the threat from the west?”

“Not upon my departure, no,” said Bergonat. “But I left before word arrived from Ennis Heath. Thierry remains opposed to any action that violates the Treaty of Sidon. The Council – even the DuQaddish representatives – begged him to deploy after the slaughters at Wallis and Clyde Barrow, yet Thierry refused. I suspect he will hunker down, close off the city and await reinforcement if the siege be thick. Meanwhile, Clydeland from Hof to Celon Gate lies exposed, and if they be so bold, Celon may be theirs as well. There is no force afoot to counter the DuQaddish, for there is not one band of *ouhasandan* raiders on the loose, but many. That is why we have come to you, Lady Rialta.”

“Give us the Valand,” Dian said, interjecting with sudden intensity. “We know they exist. We know they are more than legend. Open your armories, pass out the steel, send them down the mountain. Let us be no longer two nations, but one people. Send us your heroes, Rialta!”

Dian’s outburst caught the others by surprise, and even he appeared somewhat caught off-guard by the tone of his words. Rialta collected herself, sitting back in her chair, and the men almost held their breath in anticipation of her reply.

“No,” she said slowly, drawing the word out to a point. The men seemed to exhale as one.

“Perhaps we have spoken too hastily,” Bergonat said.

“Not at all,” said Rialta. “I told you to speak plainly, and you have. I knew this is why you had come. Were I in your shoes, I would ask the same thing.”

“Then why do you rebuke us?” LaFranq asked. “We would not leave the Valand to fight alone. These attacks caught us unprepared, and we are so accustomed to bickering amongst ourselves that we forgot our warrior heritage. But I will remind them, and we will raise a militia, and when your warriors arrive we will march under the banner of Gwynyr as true Clydes, together again at last.”

Rialta’s eyes narrowed into feline form. “Why do I rebuke you? There are many reasons why, gentlemen. Let me ask you the same question. Why? Why now, after all these centuries, do our Sulist brethren ascend the path to Niamh preaching the sanctity of Clydish blood? Why now, after generations of persecution directed against my Old Path brothers and sisters of the lowlands, are we now to become one people? Why now, when the Empire you so long courted betrays you, do you turn to the one people who have refused to be subjected to a foreign crown?”

It was the mild Bergonat’s turn to be indignant, for while he was foremost a farmer, he was a farmer who knew his history.

“Your questions mock us, Rialta, but I will answer them just the same, whether you will hear it or not. Why do we come here, now, asking for your help? Because we need it. Why do we preach Clydish brotherhood? Because we hoped it would be some signal of our respect for you and our love for Gwynyr.

“Why did Old Path adherents suffer during the rise of Sulism in Clyde? That is a more complex question to answer. Yes, Clydes of the Sulist Church have committed atrocities, but part of the blame rests on the shoulders of Gwynyr. One might also ask, why did Gwynyr, which did more than any other region to bring about the creation of the Council of Darbas, choose not to join it? It was your ancestor, Rhoane, who trained and armed LaFranq’s ancestor, Liam, in 259. Yet once Liam LaFranq had won the peace, Rhoane refused to take her seat at the head of the council.

“And why, good Rialta, did Rhoane later send a Fionnan assassin to murder LaFranq, the hero of Clyde? After his death, why did the Sisterhood use their arts to steal from the Clydish Guard the magical weapons of Gwynyr? It was Rhoane who rendered the Guardsmen impotent, not the Gheralds.

“Did we grow to mistrust you? Yes. Our religion tells us we may know the heart of another by his works, and what have your works been these last centuries? Intrigue. Manipulation. You send forth your spies and agents and assassins, but never a delegate, or a midwife, or a caravan seeking trade. You close your borders to us, allowing only those to pass whom you grant special visas.

“But did we grow to hate you? Never. When the Great Voice of Pictia issued the Edict of Heresy in 770, who rushed to save the Library at Sidon and spirit its contents south to your safekeeping? Not priestesses of Gwynyr, but shopkeepers and carpenters from Sidon. Many of them good Sulists. And there are many of us who still walk the Old Path with quiet feet, attending temple services but hiding a mistletoe sprig above the doorway, or stopping to pray at a crossroads. Gwynyr is lost to us, but the ways of the highlands, of Old Calpathia, still run strong in our blood. If you choose not to see that truth, Rialta, that is your bitterness and not our own. But all will suffer for it.”

The High Priestess was impressed.



“Councilor Bergonat, that was the most impassioned speech I have heard from you, ever.” She reached across the table and squeezed the top of his hand. “You have convinced me, at least, of your own personal sincerity.”

She rose and walked to the hearth, opening and closing her fingers in its warmth. “Our history and relationship is not simple, and much of what you say rings of a truth beyond your mere perspective of it. The Sisterhood grows complacent, and the people of Gwynyr focus too often on the forms of the rites instead of the meanings behind them. We began as the defenders of a great tradition, but we have instead become its prisoners. Who knows when this began, or what was in the mind of Rhoane in those dark days long ago?”

Rialta faced the men again, a dark silhouette against a low fire. “But there are burdens I carry that cannot be shared here. There are prophecies passed along my line to me that predate even Rhoane, who merely played her part in them, whatever she believed that part to be. A prophecy is merely that: a warning, and never an instruction. What we do in the face of the world and its changes, that is discovered each day. I seek Spirit’s guidance in these matters, but I must interpret. And I am fallible, as is the Great Voice, despite his claims to the contrary. We are all of us, individually and collectively, fallible.

“I cannot tell all that I know, but I feel I can speak plainly to you on this part of it. The current troubles of Darbas were predicted centuries ago, as was much that has come to pass in the intervening years. I can also tell you that I am warned to look beyond the obvious conclusions to find a hidden hand.”

“Lady, there is the smell of Korvish-Sopka in the wind that blows from the west,” LaFranq said. “If the DuQaddish march with trebuchets, catapults and ballistas, then they march with some assistance. They have always been hand fighters, and often clever ones, but never have they built weapons of such sophistication. Such knowledge had to come from somewhere and it would not have been offered by the Gheralds.”

“The flow of knowledge in this world is a matter of constant concern to the ladies of Beltan, Old Bear,” Rialta said. “I shall ponder the news of the DuQaddish army, for it was unknown to me until tonight.”

“And while you ponder, Lady, the whole of Clyde lies naked under the hooves of western raiders,” Dian said. “How many innocents will die while you ponder?”

“As many as are called to do so, poet.”

It was Dian who seemed to feel the situation most strongly. He pounded the table, overturning cups and spilling water, and the firelight gleamed in his eyes as if the flame came from within and not without. “I am a man of words, and I do love them. But now is a time of action, not talk. You alone on Darbas have the warriors who could make a difference, men who could calm the provinces and return the people to their homes and farms in peace, and yet our talk turns to softer matters and we relax and smile, as if our words in this hall are what matters. Well, none of it matters – not our history, not our friendship, not the whiskey or the water. All that matters is the lock of hair I brought with me, the rape and murder of that child. And I will pledge my life, and my sword, if you will but grant me one, to avenge that act.”

Rialta returned to the table and sat beside Dian. “But vengeance is already on the march, is it not? Gentlemen? There is a part of your story you have not told.”

The trio exchanged looks.

“Speak the truth now or I will no longer call you men. The prophecies advance you, and the Clydes have already turned their rage against their DuQaddish neighbors. Yes?”

“Yes,” LaFranq admitted. “There have been reprisals.”

“There were riots in Sidon, before I left the city,” Bergonat said, his face cast toward the floor. “I am not proud of what has been done. Clyde and DuQaddish and Mullaqat and Gherald have lived together in peace for centuries in Sidon, intermingled and intermarried and all the stronger for it. I love our city as none other, even though my home is in Llupanog. There is not another place on the planet where diverse peoples have learned to celebrate their neighbors as in Sidon.”

“And yet the work of the raiders is done for them,” Rialta said. “They merely began the slaughter, and now our own Clydes perpetuate it.”

“It is true,” Bergonat said. “The DuQaddish man who delivers my newspaper, Vil, is among the dead, merely because he walked within range of the mob on his way home to his family.”

“And I am to send you the Valand to choose among the innocents for death?” Rialta asked. “Your golden-haired girl, Dian, or Bergonat’s paper-carrier? Whom shall they select?”

“But if you choose not to choose, still a choice is made,” Dian said. “Rhoane chose not to participate in the governance of Darbas, and so she accepted that lesser leaders would govern in her stead. If you choose not to intervene in this crisis, the crisis will continue and there will be no card you can play to influence its outcome. My Lady, the choices are hard, but they are the only choices afforded us.”

“And that is where we part,” Rialta said. “There are choices you do not yet see.”

“Such as?” LaFranq asked.

“What you believe to be nothing more than rogue bands of provincial raiders are in fact pieces in a much larger game, gentlemen. You ask me to send the Valand to act as policemen and peacekeepers when another role awaits them. And while I cannot know the particulars, prophecy tells me that help is already on its way to you from an unexpected quarter.”

“That is in part what frightens us,” Bergonat said. “If our help comes from Arnell, then our liberty will be the price of it. If from the princes of Korvish-Sopka, then the price will be liberty plus subordination to the DuQaddish. Necht and Asch could send troops to aid us, and surely the western alliance would love to secure a foothold in Darbas, but that would merely settle one fight whilst starting a larger one. We fear such help almost as much as we fear our own vulnerability.”



"I believe your help will come from none of those sources," Rialta said. "Your help – and ours as well – will come from within. The darkest hour of Darbas still lies ahead of us, but Darbas is the key, gentlemen. The key to everything."

"I do not understand," LaFranq said.

Rialta the High Priestess got up from the chair and walked again to the hearth, staring into the flames as if she were looking for something. As if commanded, the flames tripled in strength, filling the room with light and bathing the men with a warmth that prickled across damp wool and dried the skin on their faces. She turned to them, a dark figure outlined against the now roaring fire. Let it never be said, she thought, that the Lady Rialta does not now how and when to make a good impression.

"When the Clydes of Old Calpathia began their migration here," she began, "it was more than just land and peace that they sought, for they were led here by the Goddess and the God for purposes that extended far beyond their lifetimes. When Tanu, the spiritual father of the DuQaddish, led the Hundred Boats south from Korvanichka, they came not merely from fear, but because of a vision. They believe themselves to be the Chosen People, and they are – they are now among the chosen people, as are you, as am I.

"And the Mullaqat, our nomadic brethren whom you treat with such wry condescension, they too are chosen. They love not life, except during the Stirring, but they guard secrets you cannot begin to comprehend. You regard them as weak and childlike, but they are not. They are an old race, with an unbroken past that predates even our own, and Gwynyr is their protector, even more so than we protect the lowland Clydes of our own bloodline.

"Prophecy calls not for one race to emerge as the victor, but for all to emerge together as one soul, as one Darbas. Not for its own glory, but for the good of all. This is the sacred duty to which I am pledged and to which I have sacrificed my own desire. The time draws near when I will release the Valand to their mission, but that time is not tonight."

No one spoke for a moment. Dian broke the silence.

"That had the air of finality about it."

"Quite," Rialta said.

**L**aFranq walked beside Rialta under the light of Wallain through winter gardens sown over with rye, not touching her but close by her side. They stopped beside a weathered goddess statue and looked at the Mother Moon trembling atop the capstone of the sacred circle. Rialta stretched her arm to him and took his hand. "Come with me, Bear," she said, and led him through the standing stones to the grassy center of the circle.

They were a strange couple, and had always been so.

"I find it particularly annoying that you never really seem to age," LaFranq said. "Then there is the fact that you change the way you look so often that I can never conjure a particularly accurate image of you when I am away."

"That is by design," she said. "I do not want you to see me as aging. I would prefer that you see me as beautiful, and think of me fondly."

"Another of your secret arts?"

"Not so secret. All women do it. Some do it better than others."

LaFranq released her hands and turned around to look at the moon. "Well, I am not so hard to fool. My eyes fail me so that Wallain is nothing more than a bright spot in the sky, and the stones nothing more than shadows against a dark bowl. But parts of your image remain clear to me. You body, for instance."

"Oh, be off with you."

"No, I'm serious," he said, lifting his sword arm to follow the lines of the stones as he spoke. "You are not so big, not at all the towering icon your mother was in her prime. You have nice shoulders and a trim waist, but mostly I remember the curve of your hip and the line of your flank. It's your face that gives me trouble on nights like this. I remember each of your features as if I were tracing them with my fingers, but when I close my eyes I cannot arrange them to any satisfaction." LaFranq had stopped his outlining of the stones and now held his hand out in a more gentle fashion, his eyes closed, remembering. "Your cheekbones are high, but soft, and your nose is elven. There is a proud line to your jaw, but your chin is delicate, almost like a child."

"And my mouth?" she asked softly.

"It's usually open."

Rialta whacked LaFranq hard across his shoulder. It was like punching a cow, she thought.

"Why do you spend your time remembering me when I am standing right behind you, anyway, you old bear?"

He turned to her, grinning. "Aye, that you are. But I will be gone again, soon enough, and it's good for me to practice when I have you here for reference. So get a good look at me, priestess."

"I do not need to look at you to see you," she said. "I see you whenever I want."

LaFranq stroked his own face with his gnarled hand, its fingers thick and splayed at odd angles from years of broken bones and dislocations. "It must be pleasant for you, the image of such manly beauty. I'm sure you pine."

"Yes," she said. "I pine to gaze upon such brazen ugliness, or rather to listen to you revel in it. Truly, Rolph, you are not in any sense a handsome man. You are a mass of scars, and that oft-shattered nose of yours runs in more directions than a mountain road. My other men are trim and athletic, but you are thick, nigh on fat, and covered in coarse dark hair. Your head is the size of an over-ripe melon, and you have no neck to speak of. I have never understood, not from the beginning, why I love you so."

"It's my eyes," he said, bending close to her and batting his lashes.

"I think rather it's what's behind them," she said. "To be so old and have seen so much death, you have the eyes of a 10-year-old who has hidden a frog in his pocket."

LaFranq backed away and strutted around the circle deliberately, slowing occasionally to spin through the graceful movements of a grenadier's sword drill. "I am simply a man who served his enlistment and is now enjoying his retirement, my Lady. I have now been retired for as long as I was a soldier, and yet the time seems half as short. I think that is what you love about me, because we see in people what we want for ourselves." He parried an imaginary overhead attack, swung his shield-arm up into his invisible enemy's chest and brought his sword-arm low in a sweeping slice where the knees would be. "You covet my freedom, Lady. And I don't blame you."

"How's the farm?" she asked.

"I stopped by the place last year to check on the progress of the weeds," he said. "They are thriving. I don't know what I was thinking, imagining myself a gentleman farmer, but I still think about it sometimes. Maybe if the land grant had been in my native Edain instead of the flat fields near Eldon I would have taken to it better, but that's just speculation."

"And what have you been occupied with these last years?"

"I opened a fencing school at Argon," he said, defending a right-left gambit that ended with a closing step and a slash to the abdomen on the pass. "But the boys are not like they were in my day. Now everything is pitchball this, pitchball that. I almost have to drag my students off the field to get them to the school. Still, I sent three to the Guard last year, and the manly arts will not die out so long as I can still see well enough to teach."

"Your eyes truly grow worse?"

LaFranq ended his circling and bent over slightly at the waist, catching his breath and looking up at her, only ten feet away.

"My love, you are nothing but a blur to me, and it would not be much better if the sun were out. In a few years I will be blind, for all practical purposes."

Rialta walked to him and stroked his temples with cold hands. He straightened to his full height. "You should come back to Beltan, old friend. Our children need teachers as well, and there's no pitchball to distract them. Plus, I would enjoy your company."

"It's a tempting offer, to be sure," he said, kissing her hands. "But it's a lousy job to be your consort – or one of your consorts, I should say. I am just a farmer's son, and Beltan had grown rather stuffy by the time I hit the road, if memory serves. Still, I would love to see Cerdith again. How is she?"

"I see her seldom enough myself," Rialta said. "She is apprenticed to Fionna, and I have not seen her in two years. Cerdith is almost fifteen now, not far from her first assignment."

"And the other two?"

"Ritha is 17, and will take her vows in the spring. Cainen is 11, if he is still alive. I sent him off with his father years ago, and their band has not been seen in Gwynyr since. But that is not unusual for the Mullaqat – they come and go with no schedule. I thought it best that he found that part of his soul first."

"Don't you worry?"

Rialta paused for a moment and let her thoughts travel the well-worn path to the place inside her that always monitored her children. "No," she said. "He is fine."

"And you? How do you occupy your time these days?"

"With little or no pleasure, which would be one good reason for you to return to me," Rialta said. "I still do the rites and mark the sabbats and esbbats, and there are blessing visits to make and disputes to settle. I perform the secret rites alone, of course. But mostly I am consumed by events at home and abroad. The Madness in the Don and the Edain worries me more than you know, and your 2nd CRG was, until last week, trapped on Bangoon and teetering on the brink of annihilation. There is treachery afoot in the court at Arnell, and some design is being played out from Sidon, although news of this surprise army does..."

LaFranq drew a finger across her lips. "Enough. I get the picture."

"Will you come? With me?" she asked him, her voice barely a whisper.

"I'm sorry," he said gently. "I would love to. But there is this matter of the war. And it is a war, Lady, you have made that clear. How can I rest upon the hospitality of Beltan when there are raiders on the loose in my Edain, not to mention a siege at the gates of Sidon? Wars are my trade. Wandering and teaching, these are just hobbies, much as farming was. Only I am better at the former."

"We should go back," Rialta said. "There is much to do in the morning, and I have a long trip ahead of me." The words were meant to sound final, but she didn't move. The awkward stillness ached, but LaFranq broke the moment by stepping closer to her.

He balanced her heart-shaped face in the cup of his heavy palm, his dim eyes searching it as if he were making a map, paying particular attention to the lines at the corners of her eyes. "My bunk is made for one, but it can always sleep two. If that would comfort you, My Lady."

"It would," she said, grasping his wrists with her hands. "But I must decline your offer tonight. My attention is needed elsewhere now."

"As it please the Lady of Gwynyr," he said. LaFranq kissed the peak of her forehead and walked back to the hall, leaving the High Priestess of Beltan alone in the silence of the moonlit standing stones.

The first snow on the season fell on their three-day ride to Beltan, but Rialta and Willow pressed hard to the road and the journey was joyless. The priestess was miserable company, falling into distant thoughts and privately searching intuitive flashes for meanings that were not forthcoming.

Willow tried to break the silence several times the first day, and Rialta felt a certain amount of guilt for her cursory replies. The maiden was more than appropriately solicitous, as good a friend as Rialta had in the world, but her thoughts were dark and private and nothing she wished to add to Willow's burden. She was not as she appeared, the Lady thought: Willow's delicate

features and golden hair merely hid an inner strength. Yet how much more could she carry? We shall soon discover that, Rialta realized.

The longer they rode, the further afield her mind wandered. She was overdue for the secret rites, and now was not the time to be lax in the way she attended them. The portion of herself she had set aside for Barney Alt seemed thin and hungry, like a garden planted with high hopes that struggles through harsh weather and neglect. Rialta tried to focus her mind on the Madness in the Edain, comparing the situation to her overlay of prophecy, but the gaps were large and shadowy, and the act of conjecture carried into deeper worries.

"I'm in over my head," the voice told her. "I'm playing at this job, not living the role assigned to me. I'm taking huge risks because I'm overconfident of my fate, and others will suffer for my arrogance."

It was an old argument, one that was never really settled, merely set aside by discipline and training. The Old Path recognized the voice of self-doubt – sometimes as the respected teacher of humility, other times as the emissary of the shadow that haunts every soul. Priestesses were introduced to this voice early in their training and asked to form a relationship with it – rejecting its destructive guise and listening for its wisdom. But now it was hard to tell the difference, and so Rialta chose not to struggle with it, packing it away for later consideration. She was engaged in a course of action. Self-destructive behavior was a luxury she could ill afford.

By evening they had reached Sab'Wynth, the circle of standing stones at the tip of Lake Bregon. Rialta waited while her handmaiden shooed away the pilgrims who had gathered to make their offerings at the circle, then entered the circle alone, calling up the dome of energy she needed to work the secret rites. The rites themselves took her only ten minutes, but the process required a rather draining half-hour. Merely maintaining a solitary magic circle of such size required more power than most could muster.

Afterward Rialta wished for nothing more than sleep, and though Willow clearly would have preferred to travel on, the two settled down in their bedrolls and fell asleep side-by-side as snowflakes drifted down and settled on their faces. Dawn came overcast and muffled, and they ate a simple breakfast with the pilgrims before taking to the road.

They slept at an inn at Dynas by the lakeshore that night and departed early. Snow kept the visibility low, and they did not see Beltan until they were almost upon it. The Rhodig Mountains, which had seemed so very far away at Dynas, pressed close to the shore here and rose in wooded peaks that formed a giant amphitheater at the back of the city. Rialta surveyed the approach to her home city much as she had the road to Niamh, trying to see it with fresh eyes, trying to preserve it in her memory. Beltan's ancient heart was laid upon the ruins of a habitation even older and more mysterious, perched on a peninsula that jutted more than a mile into the lake. It had long ago outgrown this spit of land and the modern city sprawled back against the sheltering mountains and spilled north and south along Lake Bregon. The northern edge of Beltan was only 100 years old, and consisted of neatly arranged homes with red slate roofs and white plaster walls laid out in a close pattern along cobblestone streets. North Beltan came to an end at the Ney River, and Rialta and Willow crossed the graceful arch of the Chienox Bridge under the failing light of afternoon. The sacred swans of the Ney floated beneath the bridge and the sight of them calmed Rialta's heart.

They reached the Old Town at dusk. Pungent chimney smoke hugged the shoulders of the city and cold clouds settled low over narrow, winding streets of stone. The spring festival of Ostari was only a few weeks away, but winter showed no signs of failing here. The snow in the lanes and the darkened alleys muffled all sound, and there was a wet weariness to the weather as if the cheery chill of Eule had worn down to a joyless routine. February, she thought, has all the charm of caked mud on a cold boot. The riders passed through the First Wall, which here meant the innermost, and Rialta mumbled a prayer at the gateway. It was good to be home, yet their return offered her little pleasure.

They arrived at Pyth Nuemyn soon after, and Willow kissed her mistress's hand before they parted. A groomsman took Rialta's stallion and saw to his care, and with sisters from the order tending to her things, Rialta climbed the winding stairs to her apartment. She slept fitfully in her sprawling quarters and seemed to hear every footfall and clatter in the Pyth Nuemyn, the rambling and disjointed building that served as residence to the High Priestess, dormitory for the priestesses of her order, seat of government for Gwynyr and – incongruously – a busy inn with a bustling kitchen.

The original Pyth Nuemyn had been little more than an indoor hall for religious ceremonies, but since the Old Path preferred its ceremonies outdoors, the hall was little used. Over time, a Sisterhood Hall grew up around it, changing through necessity into a permanent residence for the Order of Orwyne, a lively group of practitioners who saw themselves not as regal mystics, but kitchen witches. Rialta was the first high priestess of Beltan to associate herself with the Orwyne since the days of Rhoane, who abandoned the old order in her final years. And though Rhoane's successors had preferred the halls of the Order of Amarynth, Rialta had sensed wisdom in Rhoane's choice and shocked the city by choosing Orwyne as her order. Seldom had she regretted the decision.

Having Rhoane in residence brought a steady stream of visitors and petitioners to the building. The small ceremonial hall remained as it had been, but architects added on a new hall, three times larger, to serve as a de facto seat of government for the highlands. This, combined with the reputation of the Orwyne kitchen, brought more visitors, and soon the enterprising order opened a new wing for guests – actually a new level, for it had run out of flat ground and was forced to build on the side of the mountain. Over the centuries that too had expanded, adding private rooms and meeting chambers, and its growth quickly outstripped the ability of the kitchen to keep up. A new kitchen followed.

Pyth Nuemyn was great architecture by accident, and first-time visitors were often disappointed. Other buildings in Beltan soared like the surrounding mountain peaks, but Pyth Nuemyn rose no higher than three stories at its tallest, and most of it was no higher than two. Rialta's apartment overlooked an interior courtyard, built around a grassy square studded with standing stones, and if she was ever lonely she could wind her way through passages and hallways to one of the two kitchens, where someone was always cooking or conjuring. Unlike Beltan's other grand buildings, Pyth Nuemyn hummed with activity and good cheer even at odd hours.

But on this night, Rialta felt none of it – only the cold of the snow and the bite of the drafts through the stone sills. She wandered the rooms of her suite as would a ghost.

In the morning she rose early and ate her breakfast with the rest of the order, pitching in to serve the others bread and soup. She bathed in the communal bath, dressed herself in a simple brown dress and white apron and wound her way to the string of offices where the staff that served her was already beginning the day's work: filling ledgers, reading correspondence, passing along news and judgments and reports. Rialta went straight to the conference room and seated herself at the head of the table, where a cup of tea and a stack of papers awaited her.

An hour later Willow arrived to brief her on matters that had arisen since her departure and go over their schedule. Oolden Krow, the minister for agriculture, stopped by for a chat, and they discussed the distribution of new wheat for the spring planting. Her last pre-noon appointment, a metal smith from Llyr, was late in arriving, and she listened half-distracted as he lobbied her for a contract on his new line of copper plumbing fixtures.

Lunch was pleasant – lentil soup and dark bread, with goat cheese brought by boat across the lake from West Penn – but Rialta was growing increasingly anxious.

There was only one item on the day's agenda that concerned her, and that was the arrival of the Fionnans.

“What can be done about the 2nd CRG?” Rialta asked as soon as they were seated. It was an unusual way to start a meeting, but she had been waiting for days to ask the question.

“Very little, it seems,” said Quinn, the white-haired mistress of Fionna. “They have escaped Bangoon – with perhaps a bit of inspiration from our Lady – but their new location is barely an improvement. New Bronald is almost without hope.” Quinn threaded her fingers and placed her hands on the table before them – a sign of her efforts at internal composure.

“Who is the commander there?” Rialta asked.

“A General Donny Baker,” Quinn said, speaking from memory. “Alt's former superior. They have nothing but bad blood, and Baker is unlikely to consider any course of action beyond waiting for orders. In fact, My Lady, given the circumstances I fail to see why you maintain such an interest in the 2nd CRG. They are not soldiers of Gwynyr, and they seem quite beyond our help.”

“We must see to it that the 2nd CRG returns to Darbas. I have foreseen a role for it,” Rialta said. It was the first time she had spoken those words to anyone. Quinn was unable to conceal her surprise, and cut her eyes to her two companions, Xenon and Margot.

“That seems quite impossible on its face, Lady Rialta. For several reasons. But perhaps you have already considered them?”

“I have,” Rialta said. “Gheraldic law precipitates the stationing of any Clydish regiment on Darbas proper. Additionally, the 2nd CRG escaped in greatly diminished strength and with none of its horses or heavy weapons. Third, there is the matter of our General Alt, who has apparently decided to end his military career, leaving the CRG without a commander. Should I go on?”

“No, Lady,” Quinn said. “I believe we both understand the gist of the problem.”

“None of which changes the basic issue. It is my belief, though I cannot offer any evidence to support it, that the 2nd CRG is destined to return to Darbas. I foresaw its escape from Bangoon, an escape so unanticipated that Gherald had ceased to include the group in its military planning. They are, in essence, an army without a mission or home. Moreover, they are – so to speak – in the neighborhood.”

“You are suggesting that the Gheraldic Colonial Office will send the 2nd CRG to reinforce Sidon? In contravention of its own rules?”

“I am saying that desperate times lead to desperate measures, and that we may influence many matters under these conditions.”

Margot, who kept her eye on colonial intelligence, entered the conversation. “My Lady, we are aware that General Thierry has sent out letters of alarm from Sidon on every ship that sails from the port. Copies, of course, were sent to the Colonial Office in Bhengal, but those letters sailed also for New Bronald on the sloop *Reliance*. If Baker is as anxious to be rid of Alt as we suspect he is, he might be nudged into action. He is not a bright man.”

Rialta scanned their eyes. “Bring me whatever you have of General Baker's,” she said. “I wish to have a word with him.”

“I believe we have an envelope on the general,” Quinn said. “Margot will bring it to you tonight.”

Rialta nodded and Quinn detected that their meeting was at an end. She summoned the others and they rose from the table, but the High Priestess bade her linger. After the other Fionnans left, Quinn returned to the table and sat beside Rialta.

“Your wish, My Lady?”

“My wish is that this were all behind us,” Rialta said. “Quinn, I fear that I have set us all upon a dangerous path.”

“I fear it myself, as does your mother. But perhaps there is no easy path in times like these, my Lady.”

“You and I received much of the same training, Quinn, and much of what training I have come from you. You are familiar with the prophecies, and you are sworn to the service of Gwynyr. I need you to tell me if I am making a mistake.”

“In truth, my Lady, I am sworn to *your* service, not that of Gwynyr. And while I have read the prophecies, I have never conducted the secret rites. My assessment would be based on incomplete information.”

“As is my own. The secret rites give shadow and texture to the prophecies, but they do not further illuminate them. I sense that the alignment is occurring, but I sensed that from the moment my mother rejected my sister and placed me in this job. Up to now, I have acted on this belief by myself, trusting my own intuition. Now I beg you stop playing the clever Fionnan and be my trusted counselor. My ... personal counselor.”



"Of course," Quinn said. "In that case, yes, I do believe that the prophecies are aligning."

"Yet all is chaos," Rialta said. "The prophecies did not predict what is happening with the *ouhasandan* riders in the Clydish lowlands."

"Nor did they specifically predict the rescue of the Library of Sidon by the citizens of that city. Yet it happened, and once it was done it became clear to all that it fit perfectly within the lines left us by the Grandmothers."

"I did not foresee the *ouhasandans* rising up so terribly," Rialta said. "They seemed such simple people, so incapable of action. As the lowest of the DuQaddish race, they seemed hardly worth my consideration. So foolish. It's always the lowest of the low who have the least to lose."

"Such people are also the easiest to manipulate," Quinn said.

Rialta's gaze floated off to the window the snow that drifted past the pane.

"Forgive me, my Lady," Quinn said. "But there is something you wish to say that your tongue will not speak."

"And how do you know that?"

"Because Willow told me this of you. You are twiddling the hair beside your ear, and your handmaiden says this is always a sign that you are restraining yourself from speaking what truly troubles you."

Rialta removed the fingers from her hair.

"In that case, then here it is: Gwynyr has been given stewardship over the wisdom of the past, a map of the future and possession of the precious metals that can thrust Darbas into its foretold place of prominence. Yet to make use of what has been given to us goes against the teachings of the Old Path. So, Quinn, the fundamental question for me is, 'Whom do I serve?' Do I serve the glory of Darbas, or just the Clydes, or just the people of Gwynyr? Do I serve the Old Path and those who walk it, or something beyond it that I cannot see? Is it my job to preserve what was and what is, or to act as midwife at the birth of what is to come?"

"What does your training tell you?"

"Many things. I am to be as the water, yielding and overcoming. I am to be as the fire on the plain, sudden and surprising. And ultimately, I am to choose."

"By the word, or by the gifts?"

"That, too, is mine to choose."

"Then if the word is unclear, what do the gifts tell you?"

"They suggest," Rialta said, "that the age of the secret rites is coming to a close. That the Old Path has reached a fork."

"And you stand at that fork?"

"Yes. And wonder which way to lead."

Quinn reached over and took Rialta's hand in her own. Their shared history flowed back and forth across the simple touch, and the High Priestess felt the strength of her former mentor coursing through her wrist.

"Whichever direction you choose, my Lady, you shall find me there."

"Would that I could barter this burden to one as wise as you, Mistress Quinn."

"Yes," Quinn said, stroking her hand. "But it has been given only to you."

Rialta found General Donny Baker in his bedchamber in New Bronald, reclining with a book and absently digging at his ear with the tip of a goose quill. Dropping in on unsuspecting people was always a risky proposition, for when people do not expect a visit they are apt to scratch and poke and groom themselves, and Rialta never knew how she would find them when she went traveling.

Baker experienced her arrival as a chill breeze, for he drew up the sheet around his chest and kept reading. In her own bed, in her apartment in Pyth Nuemyn in Beltan, Rialta clutched a lock of Baker's hair, a snip of which she had dribbled into the flame of a black candle, inhaling deeply. After completing the rite she had quickly laid down, for traveling outside one's body is always safer when one puts the body in a position through which no harm may come to it.

Now she hovered above the general, willing herself slowly down to his level and looking around his room curiously. It was high-ceilinged and designed to catch shade and zephyrs, for even though New Bronald was practically on the same latitude as Beltan, it was stroked by warm currents that flowed off the coast of Patasha, and it stayed semi-tropical most of the year. Baker kept his room in a simple, military style, she noticed. There was a portrait of Marlton IV on the wall, a rack with two swords beside it, and a wooden armoire for his uniforms. The trunk in which he kept his underclothes stood open to reveal them in all their perfectly rolled glory, and the bedside table was bare except for a wash basin and pitcher – and an opened letter. The priestess looked closer and saw that it was the plea from General Thierry in Sidon. She smiled invisibly.

Rialta adjusted her perspective until she was practically lying in the bed with Baker, close enough to catch his scent: the general smelled of soap and powder, with just a hint of middle-age decay to his breath. Baker readjusted himself on the bed as she drew near to him, but he himself had not enough of the gifts to see her: He merely felt a change in the room, and looked around to see if someone had entered without his knowledge.

"You know what would be a good idea?" she began softly. "Send that bastard Alt and his colonial rabble to Darbas. That will get them out of your hair."

Baker's eyebrows shot up his forehead, and he turned his head as if he meant to kiss her – only his eyes looked past her to the pillow beyond.

"Thierry needs them, and you do not," she whispered in words that flowed straight into his mind. "Every day they spend on this island is a blow to the order and discipline of this garrison. Bhengal and the Colonial Office will leave the Clydes here to rot,



dumping yet another problem on you, and without great care they will undo everything you've built. Send them away now while you can."

Baker stared at the ceiling, working his jaw in a circular motion. "Preposterous," he said to himself as if he were musing. "Out of the question." But he did not seem convinced by his own words.

"Thierry needs the manpower," she said. "Darbas may be besieged by the enemy. Better to fight them there and win than to lose and invite them to descend upon New Bronald, which cannot hold against any concerted attack, Clydes or no Clydes. You have the ships and crews – those refugees who arrived from Bangoon almost two months ago but refuse to risk the Korvish-Sopkan pickets without cargo or orders. Put them to use."

"Crazy thought. Crazy..." he said, his voice trailing off. "They'd have my star. They'd bust my balls. Regulations..." He scratched his nose. "Still..."

"They'll praise your insight and decisiveness," Rialta whispered. "They'll hail you through Mariner's Gate and clap your shoulder at Colonial Hall in Bhengal. When Darbas stands victorious because of your wisdom, the honor and glory will accrue to your name."

"Major General Baker..." he said testing out the title.

"They'll say you are a born strategist," she said. "Just the kind of man to sit at the Court of Arnell to advise the Houses on colonial matters. Why concern yourself with tactics at this stage, when you can see the big picture?"

"Major General," Baker said, luxuriating in the sound of it. He set aside his book and settled farther down into the bed, then shifted his hips slightly and let out a fart. "The Hero of New Bronald, as if such a place deserved one." He blew out the glass lantern.

Rialta in her projected form lay beside him, tiring quickly. Such travel could not be sustained, and she would sleep for the better part of a day to recover from it, but her best opportunity was only moments away and she didn't want to miss it. Baker's breathing settled into a slower pattern, and the priestess studied the general's bird-like profile and balding head until she was sure he had entered the crossroad between sleep and waking life. He was hypnagogic, and Rialta's golden moment had arrived. This time she spoke to him as a voice, not merely an inaudible suggestion.

"General Donny Baker, this is your destiny speaking. On the morrow you will issue orders dispatching the 2nd CRG and General Alt to Darbas at the request of General Thierry. You are not to wait. You are to do it before breakfast, as it is the will of Telios. And you shall fear no retribution, for the path of fate leads to its own ends, which are elevated above those of mere men. Now speak your pledge and commit your honor."

"I shall," the man mumbled, and then he turned on his side as if annoyed by the pillow talk of his wife.

Rialta could not be sure that the order had taken, but there was nothing more she could do. She felt herself receding, then rose like a vapor through the room and the roof until the upper winds caught her and swept her out over the ocean, sailing high above the moonlit waves at incredible speed toward Beltan. She arrived back in her body almost an hour later, and though the jolt of re-union made her gasp, she did not rise. The Lady of Beltan clutched at the sheets of her bed and released them slowly, settling down to a long sleep and feeling the wheels of destiny as they turned about her.

*The only flaw in our operation was our failure to anticipate just how formidable a defensive obstacle their unfinished canal would prove to be. Let others assign that blame, for the argument distracts from the most obvious point. Our invasion of Patasha combined strategy, tactics, psychology, trade and diplomacy into an unmistakable restatement of the world's balance of power. It proved not only to Gherald, but to all the world's nations and alliances, that the Empire of Korvish-Sopka would not longer content itself to administering the trackless plains of central Gnia. Patasha signaled our arrival as the world's pre-eminent power, while reducing Gherald's control over Ulash to less than half the size of the original colony.*

*Some say our conquest of Ulash was incomplete, for it left Gherald with holdings on the continent. I say that the products of our success make that situation nothing more than a temporary annoyance.*

—**Marshal Javon Hanskof**, Preface to *The Official History of the Conquest of Patasha*

*Why did we ever imagine ourselves plantation masters? I suppose it all seemed so romantic at the time, dreaming around the hearth back home. But now another crop has failed and Harvey is dead and the foreman has run off and the slaves have all been sold. Won't you please take pity on me and the children and send us enough money to book our return passage? No matter how long I live, I shall forever rue the day I first heard the cursed name "New Bronald."*

—**Mrs. Jilliette Frazen**, pleading for mercy in a letter to her in-laws, after five years of failed farming on the Gheraldic colony of New Bronald, just south of the Patasha peninsula.

*When a man has a boot on his throat, does he pause to think, "My, that's a lovely boot! I wonder where it was made?" The thinking man concerns himself only with removing that boot from his throat – along with the tyrant who wears it.*

—**Professor Eseau LaDram** in his anti-Gheraldic pamphlet *Practical Independence*.

*It would be so very helpful if you would explain to these Celonese firebrand friends of yours the difference between liberty and anarchy, for I fear they have childish ideas about the one and not nearly enough fear of the other.*

—**Diar Naesa**, mayor of New Calpathia, in a letter to **LaDram** at the height of the refugee crisis.

### Chapter 3

## Alt

Barney Alt squinted across Donny Baker's sparse office in disgust and disbelief.

"Donnage is a tarking rock in a sea of pluff mud!"

"Would you prefer I returned you to Bangoon?" Baker asked. His face formed a study in dulled indifference

"I would prefer, General Baker, that you let me remain here until my separation orders arrive. I sent the Colonial Office my resignation. I've no doubt they'll accept it."

"As well they should," Baker said, his eyes narrowing. "You are a disgrace as an officer, and I would have endorsed your resignation letter had you only asked. And, may I remind you, as your superior as well as your serendipitous commander, you *should* have submitted the resignation of your commission to *me*, not to the Colonial Office."

"You couldn't have granted it."

"That is not the point." Baker picked up a leather-bound copy of *The Gheraldic Book of Military* off his spindly desk and poked at it with his finger for emphasis. "Regulations require that all subordinate officers are to submit all requests, be they for termination or transfer or promotion, through their appropriate chain of command. Your decision to bypass that chain of command and communicate directly with the office in Bhengal is yet another insult against me, General Alt."

"Then it is a double bonus," Alt said, rising from his whitewashed wooden chair and stopping in front of Baker's desk with his hands on his hips. "I had not intended it to insult you, but imagine my good fortune that you took it as such, anyway."

"You place a great pride in your verbal cleverness, don't you, Alt?"

"Yes. And what is it, exactly, that you take pride in?"

"That is really none of your concern. Your concern, at this moment, is the preparation of your CRG for travel. It is the wish of this command that you and your Clydes depart from New Bronald on the first available tide."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I shall arrest you."

"If you arrest me, my Clydes will revolt."

"Then I shall have them arrested."

"You don't have the muscle."

"Then they'll be convicted as traitors and hanged." Baker's face flushed red. "Really, Alt, I could arrest you for treason based on that threatening exchange alone. Should, probably."

"Oh, let's cut past that," Alt said. "I am many things, but I am not a traitor, and you know it. I just don't want to go to Donnage. I want to go to Bhengal, turn in my gear, fill out my retirement papers and go home. My career is finished. Sending me to Donnage will only keep me in uniform that much longer. And is that what you really want?"

"What I really want is for your unit to depart my colony."

"And why is that? There's a Korvish-Sopkan fleet prowling offshore, and an invasion could come at any moment. You could use the extra hands."

"Extra hands are one thing. It's extra mouths that are the problem," Baker said. "The fall of Patasha and Bangoon cut off our regular supply lines, we cannot grow what we need here, and Telios alone knows when we'll receive our next shipment. Meanwhile, your Clydes are an unbudgeted drain on my resources."

"But we're fighting men, general. If the invasion comes next week..."

“Then yes, I shall regret this decision. But what if it comes six months from now? Or a year? Then the Korvish-Sopkans may stroll our streets unmolested, for the inhabitants of New Bronald will have all starved to death. And really, General Alt, why should they bother taking an outpost like this one? They’ve already rendered it net a liability to Arnell, and they would gain little or nothing by removing it from the Court’s portfolio.”

“You’re taking a short-sighted view of the situation.”

“And you, sir, are merely conniving. I am, in fact, the one who is taking the long view.” Baker rose and walked to the open window, where he stood with his hands behind his back and gazed out at the sun-bleached shabbiness of the backwater port. “Who was it that said, ‘Good commanders think tactics. Great commanders think logistics?’ Well, I think logistics, general. And the logistics of this situation clearly state that you and your violent colonial rabble should leave this island and go someplace else where you may be of service to your King, not remain here where you only hinder his cause.”

“But why Donnage?”

“Strategy, Alt. Donnage may be the most forsaken and tide-ravaged place on the planet, but it also controls its two most strategic straits. It’s also home to the permanent Clydish training garrison. If your Clydes are useful anywhere, it is there.”

“In that case, why not send us to Darbas? You have received General Thierry’s plea for help. You know of the unrest there. Send us back to Sidon and let the men of Darbas secure their own homeland.”

A faraway look passed across Baker’s face. “I did consider that possibility for a moment.” The look passed. “But Gheraldic law prohibits it. Your Clydes enjoy certain perks, but their preferred status also comes with clear prohibitions. No Clydish Regimental Group is allowed to set foot on Darbas, General Alt. It’s the law, and I shall not be the first commander to break it, no matter what the need.”

Alt exhaled deeply and stretched his back. Baker turned to watch him as an ocean breeze rifled the thin curtains, rustling papers in various orderly stacks and scattering fragments of sun-glare and shadow around the room.

“If you’ll agree to stay out of trouble, I’ll agree to let you stay here while you wait for your orders to Bhengal. It won’t be pleasant for either of us, but since we both have a common interest in removing you from the Kings’ service as soon as possible, I see no rational reason to make you accompany the 2nd CRG to Donnage. And a few months of temporary command will look good in Marbor’s C5 file.”

Alt considered the offer for a moment, then shook his head. “Marbor will just have to wait. I’ve come this far with this command, and I’ll retain it until I get papers that say I’m not a commander anymore.”

“You yourself said your career is over,” Baker said. “What’s the rational thought behind extending it for no particular purpose?”

“I’m afraid I’m just post-rational about some things,” Alt said, drawing up stiffly and offering a creaky salute to his superior officer. “Whom should I see at the docks?”

**N**ew Bronald sprawled back from the waterfront as if by accident, a tumble of boards and shingles overrun in places by the profligate moonflower vines that owned the island. The constant wind off the Sea of Bhengal was both so warm and so humid that it felt like one wore it: a salty, gritty cloak of ocean air. It swirled through groves of native palms and mixed with the debris of leaves and fronds and insect bodies and emerged as the rotting breath of the island, a patient decay that went about its business of undoing civilization inch by inch.

The contrast between the island and the empire cut both ways in Alt’s heart, and on his last evening on New Bronald he sat on the piazza of the decomposing house where he had been quartered and tried to untangle it all. The engineer in him despised the disorder of the place, but the naturalist and observer reveled in it. New Bronald was a mistake, the kind of place where empires come to die. Yet there was a lesson here as well.

The colony, such as it was, had always been an afterthought. Now it was all that remained of Gherald’s once-glorious colony of Ulash, the spidery, rock-spined archipelago to which the empire owed so much of its wealth. Ulash was a treasure – a place so significant that its outline appeared on Gherald’s ten-duccat coin. The colonies in Bhengal and Bangoon were profitable, but even though Ulash was the most distant and last in terms of conquest, it alone produced the surge of wealth that turned a nation of seafarers into a world power: Compari leaves for the Blood Death; copper and tin for bronze; Bezil fruit; the prized aphrodisiac *abjura*; and slaves by the tens of thousands.

But all that had ended within Alt’s lifetime. First the northern peninsula declared its independence and aligned with Necht, using politics as a lever to pry itself free from the machinations of the Colonial Office in Bhengal. Then came the Korvish-Sopkan invasion – something no one in the Court at Arnell deemed possible until after it had happened. How could a race of backward plainsmen challenge the greatest navy on the planet? Even Alt had considered it a military impossibility.

Yet by the time the Milkers had secured the southern peninsula and chased the Gheralds back to the continent’s central bulge, it was all too apparent that the rules of the global game had changed. The Korvish-Sopkans had mastered the use of sea-going galleys, and the Bezil-fruited slopes of the southern peninsula colony of Patasha had fallen permanently under the control of the great power from central Gnia. Only the conversion of Gherald’s great canal project into a defensive works stopped the Korvish-Sopkan northerly advance, and though the Empire still held some of the most valuable ground in Ulash, its grip was tenuous.

Down in New Bronald, where the warm Ulash Current curved in off the north shore of the island and anything built with less than perfect care came undone after only a few years, the invasions and wars were little more than bumps and noises that disturb a long slumber. The fall of Patasha left New Bronald even more isolated, and Gheraldic disinterest in the colony was visibly manifest in the shoddy clapboard barracks and cheap wharves that went up quickly, promptly came apart and slowly fell down. Attempts at



building inland plantations failed, and the ornamental moonflower vines brought by the island's ill-fated settlers were all that remained. They ran riot across the island, choking out the native species and perfuming the wind with an overwhelming sickly sweet air. The descendants of slaves and laborers populated New Bronald now, little more than wards of a distant state, 5,000 of them living in spectacular squalor in the shanty towns and narrow streets of the capital.

Over this realm of decay presided General Donny Baker, a persnickety careerist with a habit of failing upward. Alt had disliked him ever since their years together in Bhengal. The aftermath of the Bangoon debacle had roused him from the orderly boredom of his final posting, and he seemed to personally resent the crews of the merchantmen and men-of-war that had fled to his harbor after the fall. The word on the docks was that Baker had at first tried to get them to leave, but later feared an imminent invasion and ordered them stay – just in case a sudden evacuation of his tiny garrison proved expeditious.

But the invasion did not come. Instead, he got Clydes – more than 2,500 of them, sprawled across the decks and holds of the smuggling corsairs from Dibishputra. That they had made the crossing at all was a miracle, but Baker found only expanded annoyance in their arrival.

The day Alt stepped off his corsair at New Bronald was the first time he had ever set foot in the colony, and despite its tawdry condition the old family curiosity drove him to study the place. A month had been more than enough time for that, and his Clydes were losing their discipline. Few ships came or went from the port, and in their boredom the Guardsmen brawled along the waterfront at night. Alt put them to work, but still there was trouble – enough to keep Tera and the other enlisted judges busy most days. The news from Darbas had only made matters worse.

Reports of the massacres in the Edain had come from an unlikely source: the proprietress of a waterfront brothel. Marbor made her acquaintance first and brought the madam – a displaced Clyde named Deras – to Alt. He quizzed her closely, shocked by her descriptions of the murdering bands from DuQaddic, but chose ultimately not to tell the troops.

It didn't matter. News of the Madness in their homeland reached all their ears within a week, and it put the Clydes into a rage. Two days before Baker's decision to send them away, a bar fight between grenadiers and Gheraldic sailors turned into a rolling brawl that spread from the bawdy part of town to the waterfront docks before running out of steam in the early morning hours.

Alt watched the sun set on the waterfront and caught the sound of the insects as they fell into a harmonious rhythm, their whir-rings rising and falling as night descended. Up the oyster-shell street came the sound of an island couple squabbling, the crash of plates and bowls. He had found the heart of entropy, and it was time for them all to leave.

**D**eras was going to be a problem, Alt thought as he watched her sashay along the dock toward the *Buckland*. She was tall and fair-skinned despite the tropical climate, and she moved with a sensual fluidity that captured the eye of every Clyde who half-dozed along the wooden pier waiting for the order to board.

Marbor, he thought, was the worst offender, and to cap matters, Deras leaned forward and kissed Alt's executive officer on the cheek when she reached the foot of the gangplank. The men hooted and Marbor grinned self-consciously, but Deras seemed not the least embarrassed. Of course not. This was her trade.

"General Alt, thank you so kindly for your gracious assent to my request for passage," the Clydish madam said, extending her hand.

"My assent was not gracious," Alt replied, ignoring it. "It came under duress. And if you cause me any trouble, I will have you put right off."

"Please excuse my commander," Marbor said, bowing slightly. "He is unaccustomed to the company of women and he forgets his manners."

"I am sure that your most manly commander would remember them quickly enough if he were... given the opportunity to *enjoy* the company of a woman," she said.

"Marbor, you are a stooge," Alt said. "Madame Deras, do you see the way you ... excite the men? We're going to get on a boat in a few moments and this pathetic fleet is going to limp off. You will be the only woman on board, and if you don't think that will make you extremely popular, you've forgotten what Clydes are. You will be so popular, in fact, that whomever you bestow your favors upon will be hated by each man you ignore. So keep your favors to yourself – understand?"

"Yes, general."

The two faced off in silence, but at the last moment Deras ruined it by blowing him a discreet kiss. Alt tossed his hands in frustration and stomped off down the pier, shouting for the captain of the *Buckland* and anxious to get under way, even if the destination was only Donnage. Any place on the planet was better than the docks of New Bronald.

**T**hey were eleven ships in all: three ships-of-line, including the *Buckland*, the massive troop ship *Sechan Sea*, a nimble sloop and six merchantmen. Keeping them together was a chore, as the *Sechan Sea* rode low in the water and struggled to make wind, while the sloop *Bernard* darted over the waves and often had to lay off sail to allow the others to catch up.

The first day of the voyage was expected to be the most dangerous, and the Clydes on the four fighting ships stayed below decks, clearing the fighting spaces for the ballista crews. Yet the Korvish-Sopkan pickets stayed well to starboard and if they ever noticed the little fleet they showed no interest in giving chase.

The first three days brought them good weather and pleasant speed, and few of the men took sick. The sea was almost glassy once they passed over the Ulash Current, which drove them south, and they picked up prevailing winds that drove them west. The fleet entered the Sea of Sorrows on the fourth day with everyone, except Alt, in good spirits.

But the morning of the fifth day dawned red and portentous, and by afternoon the wind had turned against them and a storm towered above, pushing down from the west. The captain of the *Buckland* thought the better of challenging this monster, and turned the fleet due south to avoid it. But all day it gained on them, and by nightfall the first drops were spattering down on the watch.

The seamen were shocked by the rising storm's ferocity – a freakish beast unleashed out of season and in the wrong place. Never in the month of December had they faced such an enemy in these waters, and as the barometer continued its plunge the waves turned from rogue raiders to dark walls that rose before them. The sailors' shock turned to deep dread.

For the Clydes pressed in upon each other below decks, the storm began as a sickness in their stomachs. Salt water soon splashed across the floor, diluting the vomit spilled there, but soon the lamps went out and the holds of the ships became black, pitching chambers of stench and fear.

The first victim was the *Bernard*, capsized by a titan that rose so ominously above the sloop that the deckhands must have wondered if they weren't in fact staring at a black sky. The *Bernard* disappeared beneath it without a trace, taking more than one hundred men with it.

The remaining ten ships fought on through the night, but as dawn broke the storm continued unabated and the fleet was scattered. Aboard the *Buckland*, Alt battled his sea sickness like a personal affront to his dignity, demanding that he be allowed above decks. But the sight of the angry ocean filled him with despair.

By morning of the seventh day, the storm had passed, and the sky dawned clear and fresh above the Sea of Sorrows. The *Buckland* was quite alone in the vast expanse, and Alt feared that his entire unit had been lost. By mid-day, however, eight of the nine remaining ships had reunited, and by late afternoon the *Sechan Sea*, with fully 600 Clydes in its belly, plowed into view. In addition to the *Bernard*, whose death was witnessed by several crews, the *Marlton Profit*, a tobacco ship with 175 aboard, was also gone.

The remaining nine were in poor shape: damaged, dismasted, difficult to steer. In the hold of the *Tendax-Partner*, more than two hundred Clydes worked feverishly around the clock to bail out the rising water that threatened to take their ship.

Deras, surprisingly, survived the storm in better shape than most, displaying an uncommon calmness even during the worst of it. Marbor was also annoyingly fresh. Alt felt queasy and weak and in a foul mood as well.

On day eight, the captain of the *Buckland* looked toward the horizon where his original course lay and deemed it too dark to risk passage under such desperate conditions. The captain of the *Tendax Partner* sent word that his ship would not make it as far north as Donnage – and certainly was not fit to pass through the Clyde Straits. Securing a steady fix on the night sky, the captain of the *Buckland* gave new orders: The fleet would sail directly to the nearest port – New Calpathia, the capital of the Celon Province, in the region of Clyde, on the troubled little continent of Darbas.

New Calpathia gleamed in the slanting afternoon light under a brisk winter sky, neatly ordered and brightly colored. Alt had visited the city before and found himself anxious to be ashore, for it was one of his favorite places. Though neither as old nor as cosmopolitan as Sidon, New Calpathia was a place where things worked, where the reek of antique sewers didn't stain an evening stroll or taint the off-shore waters. Leaning against the rail of the *Buckland*, Alt let his mind fill in the blanks of his view of the city, which he had never seen from the sea before. The peaked roof with the Pictian columns stood at the center of the university, and Alt remembered the green lawns and brick paths of its campus, the red brick of the buildings, the deep shadows of the trees that surrounded the standing stones left behind by the school's Old Path founders. To its right stood the steeple of St. Jallaed, erected in honor of the loyal brother of Sula the Sailmaker. Alt imagined the cobblestone street that ran past the massive temple on the hill, the café umbrellas and awnings of the SoDunn district fluttering under a spring breeze. Farther down, closer to the waterfront, was Celon Hall – the seat of local government, the place where the writers and theorists held forth – and around it, the taverns where the debates continued after the formal sessions closed.

Even the waterfront, reconstructed after the Gheraldic Navy burned it down during the dispute over the Colonial Act, had a semi-classical beauty. The wharves and docks lay at right angles, suggesting the permanence and mindfulness that seemed the trademark of New Calpathia. It was a young city, but it combined both a freshness of thought and a sense of its identity that no other place Alt had traveled ever matched.

Their little fleet, with the *Buckland* at its head, followed the harbor pilots who had come out to meet them. The pilot boats were sprightly craft, and one raced ahead while the other tacked before them, leading the nine surviving ships slowly through the channel markers to an anchorage within the protected harbor. Only the *Buckland* and the *Tendax-Partner* would be taken directly to dock, and the exchange with the pilot who had come aboard had been strained. Though himself a Clyde of Celon, his employer was the Gheraldic harbor master, and the unexpected arrival of Clydish troops on the horizon would be enough to grind the teeth of any Gheraldic functionary.

The *Tendax-Partner* was Alt's primary concern. In the days since the storm everyone aboard had worked in shifts to hold it together and beat back the insistent sea. Not only were the men exhausted, but the captain of the *Buckland* seemed concerned that even this close to safety the merchant ship under his care could still fail. He had argued with the pilot, demanding a berth for the *Tendax-Partner*, but the pilot was only grudgingly swayed. The harbor had rules for vessels in trouble, but it also had rules for military ships.

*Buckland* hove to port with relative ease, and a gang of dock workers under the direct supervision of the harbor master pulled it to its berth quickly. But the *Tendax-Partner* struggled. With its steering degraded, it took the wrong angle of approach, and the foundering vessel stalled in the water, losing forward momentum until the tide began to push it back. It was still too far from the dock for a hand-thrown rope to reach, but the longshoremen of New Calpathia were an efficient group. Two oversized crossbows were rolled into position, firing rope bundles across the deck of the merchantman. Dock workers took up the slack on large,

wooden drum winches, and the *Tendax-Partner*, now listing severely, drew up to the wharf. It had not even been secured before the Clydes on board began leaping to shore, desperate to get off. A squad of police quickly cordoned the area, holding the blinking, exhausted Guardsmen on the plank piers.

Back at the *Buckland*, the unloading was more orderly. The men below decks formed into lines, but the queues were held in place while the captain awaited the arrival of the harbor master. Alt paced, worrying about the scene on the *Tendax-Partner* and watching the other seven ships steer into a wide spot in the channel to drop anchor. The *Sechan Sea*, with the largest portion of his unit aboard, looked to him the worst of the lot, one of its three masts cut loose days before and only the foremast still capable of putting up sail. It rode even lower in the water than it had the day they left New Bronald, and Alt wondered if it, too, was leaking.

The *Buckland's* captain, Germund Ready, called to him, and Alt straightened his uniform as he walked to the gangplank, for once wanting to look his best for a meeting with a Gheraldic officer. The harbor master was resplendent in a maroon jacket and white lace shirt, the sea breeze ruffling his curly white hair beneath a black felt hat. He ascended to the *Buckland*, requested permission for his entourage to come aboard, and exchanged salutes with Captain Ready.

"Lieutenant Commander Stephen Wicker, sir, at your service," he said, offering a perfunctory bow. "I'm His Majesty's harbor master. I do believe we've met."

"Several times, commander," Ready said, returning the bow and offering his hand. "Better circumstances, though." He gestured to Alt, who stepped forward and bowed. "May I present General Barney Alt, commander of the 2nd Clydish Regimental Group?"

"Pleasure to meet you, sir," Alt said, trying to sound polite.

"And I you," Wicker said, though he offered no bow in return. "It's the Clydes under your command I'm not so sure about. May I ask you gentlemen what, exactly, you are doing here?"

"Couldn't be helped, sir," Ready said. "Our passage to Donnage from New Bronald was interrupted by a storm that sank two of our craft, and most of the surviving vessels were too damaged to continue. I decided to put in here, as it was the nearest port."

"You're a bit south of that passage, aren't you? And I am unaware of any storm of such magnitude. Highly unusual for this season, isn't it?"

"Freakish," Ready said. "But I am surprised you've not heard reports."

"Yes, well. Regardless of your destination and difficulties, there is the more immediate matter of what to do with you. Your presence here with a CRG is unprecedented and highly illegal."

"You cannot refuse us," Ready said. "We are a Gheraldic fleet under distress."

"I have not and would not refuse you. The question is simply what is to be done with your cargo. You arrive here at a time of dire consequence. In truth, I am rather conflicted. The city is in need of a functional military unit, even though its presence is forbidden by law."

"What is the problem, sir?" Alt asked.

"Refugees," said Wicker. "Thousands of them. And with them, disease and famine. If there were a way to arrange it, legally, one could find quite a few uses for your men in New Calpathia."

Alt was alarmed. He had heard of the siege of Sidon and the bands of raiders in Edain, but there had been no news of trouble in Celon.

"Whatever the condition of the colony, my men will gladly do whatever is needed to assist here," Alt replied.

"If I may, sir," said Ready, "maritime law and tradition clearly supercedes whatever code prohibits the stationing of Clydes in Darbas. I foresee no liability for you, sir, in allowing these men to disembark."

Wicker scanned the scene around him, pausing for a moment on the squad of police tussling with the Clydes who had clambered off the *Tendax-Partner*. "Yes, you are correct about the legal precedent, captain – but what is really at issue is what I may do with the men from your ships. Holding them here may be the most prudent course, legally, but in reality the most dangerous."

Wicker turned his back on them and walked to the rail to survey the rest of the fleet as it dropped anchor.

"Here is what we shall do, gentlemen," he said. "For the time being, the men aboard the *Buckland* and the *Tendax-Partner* shall be taken ashore. The men aboard the other vessels shall remain aboard them until I confer with the proper civil authorities. Understood?"

"Understood," Ready said.

Alt grunted.

**M**ayor Diar Naesa made the decision to camp the 2nd CRG at Bowler's Green, an acre of lawn that divided the So-Dunn district and the edge of the university campus. Naesa met them at the docks with his staff in tow, and led the men from the two docked ships through the streets himself, walking alongside Alt as the guardsmen shouldered their gear, formed into columns and stepped off.

Marbor kept an eye on the troops, allowing Alt to converse with Naesa and sight-see. Though New Calpathia remained the city he remembered, Alt noticed something different about the place. The streets looked shabbier than on his previous visit, and there was a ragged quality to many of the people who lined their way, cheering and shouting encouragement. Laundry and bedding flattered from many of the piazzas, and there were cook fires and small camps set in several of the public squares and roundabouts.

Naesa acknowledged none of this, conversing with the general about Alt's last visit to the city. The general felt perplexed by the man: he was a stork-like figure, tall and gangly despite his age, and though he was respectably dressed, his attire displayed none of the vanity of the mayors Alt had met before. Naesa had bad teeth and keen eyes, and though he was scrupulously polite, he gave the impression of masking a sharp intellect instead of the usual ponderous ignorance. The day was bright and clear even in the

fading afternoon light, and the breeze picked the wisps of hair off Naesa's bare, balding head and arranged them in absurd wings and flaps.

Alt had expected Bowler's Green to be vacant on their arrival, but as the CRG approached their campground it became apparent that others had taken up residence before them. Naesa sent a constable running ahead, and several squatters were roused from their tents. Alt and the CRG paused while the squatters' belongings and tents were hurriedly taken down, packed up and hustled out of the way, and then Marbor gave the order and the sergeants took over. They needed no instructions when it came to setting up camp, and Bowler's Green was rapidly transformed into an orderly sea of white canvas. There was enough room left over for the previous inhabitants to return, and with the assistance of the archers they set up not far from the guardsmen's camp.

Winter's night descended on them, and Naesa and Alt stayed until the last of the weapons were racked and the first of the cook fires lit. The Gheraldic senior staff was invited to lodge at the mayor's house, and rooms for the junior officers were quickly arranged.

**D**inner at the mayor's home was particularly good, made even more satisfying by weeks in the jungles of Bangoon, the salted fish of New Bronald and the stomach-churning passage. Naesa served them a first course of leek soup, plates of pickles and olives, dainty squabs on beds of sautéed greens and an entrée of roast beef and mashed neeps. Afterward there was coffee, and Naesa led Alt and Marbor into a study off the dining room.

To their surprise, the room was not empty. The three men in attendance were, by the looks of them, citizens of substance: a broad-shouldered banker introduced himself as Terrance Brogan, and his companions as Eseau LaDram, a professor of politics at the university, and Sham Maeson, a member of city council. Each shook hands with Alt and Marbor, and Naesa's butler poured them brandies and filled their pipes. They sat in imported chairs of red Findlay leather and waited for their host to speak. But Alt could sense intrigue, and it made him antsy.

"So," Alt said, fixing Naesa with a log-splitting gaze, "what the hell is going on?"

"I cannot begin to express the surprise and relief that your arrival brings us," Naesa began. "Your dangerous passage may prove to be most timely and significant. Won't you sit?"

"I'll stand," Alt said, leaning an elbow on Marbor's high-backed chair. "That way I can retreat more swiftly if the situation arises."

"We're not here to attack you, general," said Brogan. "I can assure you of that. We come here as your friends, with an awareness of your reputation and a deep appreciation for all that you have done."

"Then it's worse than I feared," Alt said. He straightened as if to take his leave, but stayed instead, striking a match and lighting a Bangooni cigar from his dwindling cache. A cloud of blue smoke enshrouded his head and curled through his black beard. "Flattery always precedes a proposition, gentlemen. And I'm not interested."

"Perhaps if you fully understood our situation, general..." Naesa said.

Now Marbor took up his boss's cause.

"What you do not realize, gentlemen, is that our good general has passed the requisite time in service to take his retirement. In fact, General Alt's letter announcing his intention to give up his commission has already been sent to the Colonial Office. My commander is now, as the soldiers like to say, 'short,' and I refer not to his lack of stature but to his remaining time in service."

"Very funny, Marbor," Alt mumbled.

"Nevertheless, Providence has brought you to our shore," said Maeson. "While I can certainly appreciate that a man nearing the end of his service may wish only to proceed to his time of leisure, is there not also a personal reserve of honor on which we may draw? For surely you are brought here by Telios himself for some greater purpose."

Alt downed his brandy in one draught, and began to pace.

"Gentlemen, honor in the military sense is by and large a construct of comfortable fools and civilians," he said, pacing the floor behind their chairs. "If you are, as you claim, knowledgeable about my service record, then you are making up the part about my personal honor. I have made a career out of being dishonorable in the face of the enemy, as I find that this improves my ability to kill him. Honor is what leaders fall back upon when they run out of ideas, and it invariably leads to defeat. Honor is the pretty word we give to jealousy, fear and stubbornness. As you Clydes like to say, it chops no wood and carries no water. So do not attempt to sway me with noble appeals to my honor, gentlemen of New Calpathia, because you will find me quite immune to that disease."

Alt stopped his pacing, took a deep draw on his cigar and leaned on the back of Brogan's chair, triumphant.

But he had underestimated Naesa. The mayor stood, stretching his gangly body and thrusting out his chest. In another man it might have been puffery, but Naesa's crackling, popping joints suggested another purpose. The pleasant mask came off, and suddenly Alt was confronted by the man in full – his eyes as sharp as an eagle that spots a fish, the intensity of his spirit animating the space around his bony, arthritic body.

"General Alt," Naesa said, "you are a pathetic liar. But I applaud your performance. As you can see by looking at me, I am no soldier. Just holding a hammer might break my arm. But I do appreciate the theater, and I recognize good acting whether it is played out on a stage, or from a podium, or in a debate hall, or even here, in my own den. And you, sir, are the consummate actor. I suspect you even convince yourself.

"But the facts speak otherwise. Allow me to recall them. As a young lieutenant, a grenadier platoon leader in the 2nd CRG, you dragged a ballista up an unoccupied hill during the Battle of Halleton and stood your ground, even though the rest of your unit was in full flight."

"I retreated as well," Alt said.



“Yes, but only after halting the rout and only at the last possible moment. And then there was the uprising on Bangoon. You took command after your superior officer was killed and held on against a superior force.”

“Bangoon is an island. There was no reasonable opportunity to withdraw.”

“True. But you kept your wits about you, and when the opportunity to attack presented itself, you did not hesitate.”

“There is often no light between desperation and honor, sir, as I’ve already explained,” Alt said.

“Ah, even now our good general refuses to retreat, even when the battle is only fought with semantics,” Naesa said. “But this brings us to your service in Bhengal. You were relieved of your command and sent to build a road through the jungle. There you were trapped by a Korvish-Sopkan expeditionary force, and this time you had no army. Yet you fought them anyway, at Tarvis River.”

The color drained from Alt’s face.

“I’d thank you not to mention that episode, Mayor Naesa.”

“Fine. There is more to talk about anyway. After Tarvis River, you were called back to the command of the 2nd CRG at a time when the unit was on the brink of collapse. You did not have to accept the posting, and it clearly placed your life at risk. Yet you took it anyway. What was that, if not honor?”

“That, sir, was nothing more than a career officer taking a calculated risk in an effort to redeem himself in the eyes of his superiors,” Alt said.

“Most people may see it that way, general, but I am not most people. And neither are you,” Naesa said. “For final proof, I offer your most recent action. On multiple occasions, General Alt, you were given the opportunity to surrender to the Milkens on Bangoon. The rest of the Gheraldic leadership surrendered while under your protection, and you allowed them to leave. And why did you not join them? Because you worried about the fate of your men, Clydes who are my brothers but not yours. You cast your lot with our Guardsmen, and found a way to get them off the island. The evidence of your work now sleeps on Bowler’s Green. What was that, if not honor?”

“Pathetically poor judgment?” Marbor offered.

“No one asked you, major,” Alt snapped at his executive officer. He turned his attention to Naesa. “Mister Mayor, you are skilled at words, and parlor combat has never been my strength. But while you may win a meaningless battle here, you lose sight of the war. It matters not that you wrap words around me. Pinning the mantle of honor on my shoulders unbidden does not make me an honorable man and will not win me to your cause, whatever it may be. I did what I did on Bangoon, and elsewhere, because I chose to do so at the time. I made those choices not to gain honor, but because I thought I could win. I tell you here and now, I see nothing I can win in New Calpathia – nothing except a chance to refit my fleet and proceed to Donnage, and from there on to Bhengal and Gherald. My estate will be modest, but it will be mine, and I hope that there are still enough days allotted to me that I may find some measure of peace and enjoyment before I am called to the Great Counting.”

“Still your reticence betrays you, general,” Naesa said. “For you reject our request without hearing it. Why would you be so quick to cover your ears if you were not afraid of your response?”

“I am afraid of many things, Mayor Naesa. Myself among them. As you should be. You forget that you are speaking to a Gheraldic officer.”

“But not a Gheraldic gentleman. One is a job. The other is an identity. And while your blood may be Gheraldic, no one in this room – yourself included – believes you are Gheraldic by inclination. Your love of Darbas and the Clydish people is well-documented, General Alt. In your own homeland you are considered a disgrace and an eccentric, yet here you are respected and adored. Are you the kind of man who would reject that love for a falsehood?”

“Yes,” Alt said. “I am exactly that kind of man.”

“I believe it not.”

“It matters not what you believe.”

The two men stood staring at each other, as if they might come to blows at any moment. Alt prayed that Naesa would retreat from the conflict. But Naesa was far from finished.

“General Alt,” he began again, “the city of New Calpathia is on the verge of famine. Refugees have filled our walls past the point of capacity, and now spill unprotected into huge camps outside the city. The very farmers who once provided us with food now huddle in tents, and their harvest is carted away through Celon Gate to feed the DuQaddish siege army at Sidon. Tonight’s fine dining was a charade, my weak attempt at warming you to the prospect of aiding the people of this province. Within a week our food stores will be exhausted, and more than 50,000 men, women and children will begin to starve.

“Outside the walls, the situation is even more grave. The bulk of our refugees go without protection in camps with no meaningful sanitation or order. Two nights ago the raiders were so bold as to ride directly into the camp. They slaughtered more than two dozen citizens of Celon, and the survivors made it clear to me that the victims’ blood stained my hands as much as anyone’s.”

“That is an excuse,” Alt said. “There are men among them. Let them form their own defense.”

“They know not how, or with what, to fight,” Naesa said. “We are not the warriors we once were, general. We are a nation of pitchballers and bards now, tavern heroes and grandiose thinkers, more in love with the notion of liberty than the reality of it. And even if the refugees did form their own militia, it cannot defend them against the threat of epidemic that hangs over their camps. We are constantly alert to the emergence of the Blood Death, which struck our province only five years ago, but it need not be the plague to wreak havoc among a people living under such conditions. The squats have already begun to strike them, and soon you will see the very old and the very young disappear very quickly – although not so quickly as to bring them comfort in their final, miserable days.”

Alt studied his host carefully, then began his pacing again – only this time more slowly, with a pensive gait. “Mister Mayor, I assume there is a point to this story,” he said.

“I was trying not to put too fine a point on it, general.”

Alt’s chin sank to his chest as he continued his slow, bobbing circuit around the backs of their chairs. There was silence for a moment as Alt worked things out.

“Let’s see if I can find your point for you,” he started as he passed behind Brogan’s chair. “You see the problems as sanitation, security and starvation. Sanitation is simple. You have civil engineers here at the university and surplus population in the camps with nothing to do. You work out a plan for basic waste disposal and water distribution and put the refugees to work on building it. You don’t need a military unit for that.

“Security would be a logical mission for soldiers, but let’s examine that thought. New Calpathia has a population of about 30,000, protected by city walls manned by what amounts to a constabulary. You have roughly 20,000 refugees and what? About half of them are quartered outside the walls?”

“Maybe more like fifteen,000,” Naesa said. “We’ve taken no accurate census, but the figure seems to grow daily.”

“In that case, fifteen,000. These fifteen,000 refugees are besieged by groups of riders no larger than 100 men on horseback. They bring no heavy weapons, and they do nothing more than probe and harass. Soldiers could make short work of them, but the question is, why bother? Even if only 3,000 of your refugees are strong enough and able enough to serve as security guards, you’d still outnumber any enemy that you could reasonably expect. It’s criminal, really, that the leaders of the refugees haven’t already established a perimeter and a watch.”

“That is, in part, the problem,” Naesa said. “There is no leadership in the camps. No coordination. And what watch they have is undermanned and ill-equipped.”

“Nevertheless, to use my Clydes to guard your Clydes would be a foolish use of manpower. Security is solvable with the resources you have at hand. So that is not your intended use for my regimental group. Which brings us to the third ‘S’ – starvation.”

Alt stopped pacing.

“Let me assure you all, gentlemen, that my troops would make lousy farmers.”

Naesa, who had been standing through Alt’s speech, chuckled and folded himself into his chair, crossing his legs and leaning back. “Surely, General Alt, your vision extends beyond that.”

“Assist me,” Alt said.

“We do not live in a desert, general. This is Celon. It is fertile ground, some of the most fertile ground in Darbas. Our harvest this year was good, and our herds of cattle were fat and full of milk. That we face starvation is not because there is no food to be had, but because someone else has it.”

“What we need,” Maeson said, “is someone to go out and get it.”

“Someone to raid the raiders?” Alt asked. “Oh, that is rich.”

“Not that we wouldn’t mind your assistance in the two other areas as well,” Naesa said. “Leadership in the camps would go a long way toward solving the sanitation and security problems, and our civil authority here is too fractious and ideological to provide direction under these circumstances. The farmers all want to take a vote on everything – they are mad for democracy, thanks in part to the writings of our Professor LaDram here, yet when it comes time to take the vote, they fall into arguments over the rules, and how the votes shall be counted, and who shall be eligible to vote. And then the riots break out.”

“Lovely,” Alt said.

“The countryside is in chaos,” Maeson said. “I have been out among the refugees, and they make it clear that the primary stores at Brazo Luc and Nassong are not only guarded by the *ouhasandan* raiders, they are being carted off through Bluff’s Folly on the road to Edain. The province is being stripped, but there is so much to strip, it is taking the enemy too long to accomplish the feat. They are vulnerable.”

“We think a well-armed cavalry would be able to seize the wagons and redirect them here, where we need the food,” Naesa said. “We have the horses. What we need are the men and the weapons.”

“And the leaders to guide them,” said Brogan.

“And this is why you have invited us here?” Alt asked.

“I invited you here because a commander requires comfortable quarters,” Naesa said. “You are welcome to lodge here in this house – which is the house of the people, not my family – for so long as you remain in New Calpathia. But yes, we invited you to this meeting with this matter in mind.”

“I do not think you grasp the weight of what you request,” Marbor said. “Gheraldic courts tend to take things like, say, the law against Clydish troops setting foot on Clydish soil rather seriously. So long as the general holds his men within the city and they act only as visitors, not as soldiers, there is some chance that Alt will not be tried on charges of treason. For him to agree to your request – to mount an expedition in search of your stolen wagons – might feed your city, but it would strip the general of a retirement he has certainly earned.”

“Surely they would not jail the general,” Naesa said. “That is nothing but paranoia.”

“I agree,” Marbor said. “But I find it more than likely that the general’s enemies at court would be quite happy to strip him of his meager retirement package.”

“But I thought you said you had an estate waiting for you,” said Brogan.

“My military retirement is my estate,” Alt said. “It is true that my father was a nobleman who took me with him on his travels, but it is also true that I was his bastard son, not his legitimate heir. My half-siblings firmly established this fact after his death. I have

a bank account at Arnell that has been growing for twenty years, but that will serve only to buy me a modest home. For income I shall have to rely on my pension, and if I am put out to pasture in disgrace, that pension will be either rescinded or reduced. I know such concerns sound neither noble nor glorious in the face of your current crisis, but I do ask you to understand that I am a soldier. I do not ask for much, but I am fiercely protective of everything I've earned."

"That is certainly understandable, General Alt," Naesa said. The men sat in silence for a moment, with only the hiss and pop of the fireplace disturbing the stillness.

"I suppose," Brogan said, "that we could offer the general our own financial package. I am a banker, you know."

"Yes," said Naesa. "I'm sure we could come up with some stipend."

"Ah, but therein lies the rub," Marbor interjected. "For this stipend would be payable only if you are around to pay it. And at the moment, the future of Darbas appears to be a risky investment."

The silence descended again. This time there was an air of finality about it.

"Gentlemen," Alt said, "I shall take my leave of you now, for it has been a nasty month, and I am looking forward to a long night's sleep. However, I wish to apologize for my boorish behavior and thank you for your hospitality and your trust. I am unaccustomed to both. Your situation concerns me, and I will do what I can to help during my short time here, but I will do so within the boundaries of the law, for once, and I will risk neither the lives of my men nor the careers of my Gheraldic officers in doing so. Perhaps in the morning some of you can take me on a tour of your camps and defenses and I will be able to make suggestions. Is that a sufficient compromise, for now, to repay you the night's hospitality?"

"Yes," said Naesa, who rose and shook the general's hand. "Thank you."

"Then I shall bid you all goodnight," Alt said, and he bowed to the New Calpathians. Marbor rose and followed him from the room.

"You're going to help them, aren't you?" Marbor said softly as they walked down the hall.

"Oh, shut up," Alt mumbled.

"General, you are becoming quite predictable."

"Oh really? And where do you predict I'm going to put this foot in just a moment?"

"Directly in your mouth, I suspect" Marbor said. They reached the entrance to the wing where the officers' quarters were located, but Marbor continued on down the hall.

"Where are you going, major?" Alt asked after him.

"I'm going to check on our female companion from the voyage," Marbor said over his shoulder.

Alt fumed. "Somebody has to see to the men early in the morning, and it's not going to be me. You can't oversleep."

"Who said anything about sleeping, sir?" said Marbor, who waved without looking back as he disappeared down the stairs.

**N**aesa and LaDram accompanied Alt on his tour the following day, offering him a fine chestnut mare and riding the wide battlements of the city wall three abreast. Alt was impressed by the works, which sacrificed height for depth. Tall, narrow defensive walls had long been one of his peeves as a military engineer – traditional Gheraldic defensive positions placed archers behind high battlements, yet their very height precluded the quick and easy movement of soldiers. Once the enemy achieved a breach, defensive reinforcements were always slow to arrive because most high walls were accessible only by single file. New Calpathia's defenses seemed to be modeled after his own ideas. They were not imposing, but they could be defended easily.

After they descended from the wall, the men rode through the southwest gate into the largest of the refugee camps. The squalor and odor of the place struck Alt first, for while smell is not the most powerful of the senses, it is the most commanding. Once he adjusted to it, he shifted his concentration to the details. The tents and huts were pressed against the walls like a frozen wave, as if proximity to the stone offered some protection. Instead, it merely hindered the effectiveness of the defenses.

Beyond the practical matters of location and efficiency, there was the daunting matter of scale and organization. The camps were laid out at random, densely packed in some places, thinly spread in others. Cook fires sent up spindles of smoke from odd positions, and just traversing the camp was a challenge, for there were no alleys, no lanes to follow. Few of the shelters actually qualified as tents – some were nothing more than lean-tos, while others were amalgamations of wood, canvas, suspended rugs and cowhide. The larger ones appeared to have been cobbled together as clan residences, with central cooking and gathering areas, but almost all of them were cramped and muddy from the trappings of too many feet, and squadrons of dirty children ran between the poles and ropes. Rinsed-out laundry hung like defeated flags from practically every available inch of line, and the sound of morning coughs emanated from the recesses of every other shelter.

The scale of the misery shocked Alt, as did the scope of the work ahead. He found himself thinking through the problems as he would have approached an assignment at the academy. It was clear that the authorities had been slow to respond to the initial problem and that the camp had sprouted quickly and without direction. There was no evident planning, and many of the structures were now semi-permanent. They would all have to be moved and rebuilt if the camp were to ever have any hope of redemption. He would draw out a grid, clear lanes and alleys, give each a number, create a system for governance, sanitation and food distribution. They would build latrines and assign monitors to them. Maybe cisterns as well, he thought, until they could run some kind of water line...

"You mentioned that these folk couldn't agree on anything," Alt said to Naesa as their horses clopped slowly through the shanties. "What is the problem?"

"Celon has always been the most self-reliant of the provinces," LaDram said. "Each village has its own council, and the residents

accept little centralized direction. You must remember that we are the youngest of the civilizations of Darbas, and almost a third of our population traces its heritage back to Gherald, not Calpathia. These men take orders poorly.”

“Most of my cavalry was raised in this province,” Alt said. “I find they take orders very well – so long as they are good orders.”

“The mayor tried at first to organize this lot, but there has always been some suspicion of the city among the rural folk,” LaDram said. “After that attempt failed, the mayor asked me to intervene.”

“Professor LaDram is something of a hero in Celon,” Naesa said. “He is our leading proponent of independence, and the country folk adore him for it.”

“But I failed as well,” LaDram said. “I tried to organize them into units by village, but they quarreled amongst themselves and instead of electing a council fell into a series of camps. Those on the outskirts of the camp fought with those closest to the wall, and soon there were fights along the boundaries of each piece of turf, disputes over food and water deliveries, complaints about trench latrines placed too close to another chief’s plot of land. This may look like one camp, but it is in fact a series of them, each one competing with the other.”

“That’s a recipe for disaster,” Alt said. “We shall have to change that immediately.”

“We, sir?” Naesa said, smiling.

“Yes, we,” said Alt. “And please wipe that smirk off your face. I simply cannot stand to look upon such disorder. I am an engineer by trade. It offends my sensibilities.”

“How do you suggest we proceed?” asked LaDram.

“Bring the afternoon food and water delivery to a central location, and march it out under the protection of as many of your constables as you can muster. Everyone will have to come to the wagons, and once they arrive I’ll begin dividing them into groups. They’re going to have a lot of work to do.”

“They’ll likely riot,” LaDram said. “They don’t appreciate being ordered around.”

“Then bring stocks and ropes. We’ll take away the worst of the troublemakers and leave the rest under pillory as a reminder.”

“They’ll definitely riot. And they will outnumber our constables.”

“They’ll by-Sula respect this uniform,” Alt said.

“You’re a Gherald, sir. It will only make matters worse.”

“We’ll see about that,” Alt said. “I am simply not in the mood for foolishness.”

**T**hey did riot, but it was half-hearted. Alt had barely begun to speak when the arguing began, and the crowd on the left surged forward toward the wagons. The general nodded to the constables, and a squad of them waded into the refugees with their wooden staves swinging. By the time those on the left had retreated, Alt’s men had bound five of the troublemakers and placed them on the wagon.

This didn’t resolve the matter, and the standoff continued: the people from the camps shouting at Alt and each other, the constables standing their ground, and groups of men occasionally pushing forward toward the wagon only to be repulsed under flailing sticks. The food and water remained undistributed and the constables began to get nervous, but Alt sat above it all in the saddle, moving his horse from one hot-head to another, identifying the leaders, noting them in his mind. Several more men, and one particularly ornery old woman, were added to the collection of bound prisoners, and now their family members joined the fray, screaming and wailing and demanding the release of their kin.

A concerted push by the mob could have easily overwhelmed Alt and the constables, but the same lack of coordination that made the camp so miserable also made an organized attack impossible. The impasse stretched past half an hour.

Forty-five minutes into the confrontation, opportunity presented itself. A young mother worked her way to the front of the cordon, holding aloft a 2-year-old girl, screaming for Alt.

“Please take my daughter!” she wailed. “Please take her away from here!”

Alt turned his horse and rode up to the woman, lifting the child into his saddle to sit her before him.

“People of Clyde!” he shouted. “Look upon your folly!” The shouting diminished, and Alt felt the first shudder of hesitation among them. “This child is your future! What speaks it of you that you cannot even safeguard your own young! What shame upon you that her mother would rather trust a Gherald with her daughter than her own countrymen!”

The leader of the girl’s village stepped forward. “Give me the child and I shall safeguard her! We don’t need your intervention!”

“Then prove it!” Alt demanded. “Prove it now! Do as I say, and send one leader from each village forward to take counsel!”

The crowd wavered, but then an elderly man stepped forward and stood silently. A ripple passed through the front row, and a second elder walked into the no-man’s-land before the line of constables. Then a third, and a fourth. Within a minute, there were more than twenty. The mob crew quiet and more orderly. Alt called them together so he could speak without shouting.

“Thank you for assisting me,” he began quietly. “We are going to organize this camp, and you will each play a role. We are going to begin by making this distribution orderly. From there, we are going to identify work crews from each of your villages to begin the process of organizing this camp into a sensible grid. By tomorrow, the camp will be clean and neatly laid, and we will establish a meaningful defensive perimeter and a rotating guard so those on the outskirts will be as well-protected as those by the wall. In two-days time we will have established a sanitation system, a means of distributing water, and an infirmary for those of your number who take ill. Once those priorities are complete, then, and only then, will you be allowed to establish your own self-governing councils.”

“What about our kinsmen who sit bound on the wagon?” a man asked.

“They shall be returned to you as soon as this camp is in good order. I seek only to make this situation livable for you and the



residents of New Calpathia. I have no interest in jailing anyone, only in ending this chaos. It threatens all of us.”

“It’s your arbitrary rule that threatens all of us,” said one of the men, but he spoke the words and did not shout them. “We are a free people, not Gheraldic cattle.”

“Then as a free people, seize this chance I offer you. I shall give you order out of chaos. I have no desire to govern you, so establishing the nature of that order shall be your concern. Freedom without order is not liberty, for what is the value of being free only to live in fear? Agreed?”

“Agreed,” the man said, and his assent passed through the leaders like a fresh breeze off the sea. Alt lifted the young girl from his saddle and handed her to the elder of her village, who thanked him.

“Guard her well,” Alt said, “for her life alone rests on my shoulders.”

**B**y the end of the day the Clydes had staked out the lanes and alleys of the new camp, working alongside Alt and engineers from New Calpathia. The village leaders brought rosters of able hands to a bonfire meeting after the evening food delivery, and Alt saw to the creation of a work schedule. Everyone would have a job, and many would have several.

At daybreak, the moving of the shelters began, and by noon the new grid had emerged. Digging crews put up earthworks around the perimeter of the camp, and gangs from the city arrived to help with the laying of temporary cisterns and water lines – just shallow trenches, really, lined with sail canvas from a merchant’s warehouse. Though they were a fractious people, they were all of them hard-working and proud, and no sooner had some sense been brought to their habitation than each group competed with the other to make their portion of the camp the most livable. The first of the new trench latrines were quickly replaced in some locations by privies, and wagons from the city arrived bearing lime. By nightfall there was a defensible outer line punctuated by a series of squat observation towers, and while the first 500-man guard shift took its position along the perimeter, the second and third shifts fashioned staves and practiced their use under Marbor’s direction. They had come farther in one day than Alt had imagined possible.

On the morning of the third day the village councils met and selected their representatives to the camp assembly. Alt attended the afternoon assembly with LaDram, and both fielded questions on ethics, rules and organization. Marbor arrived from the city with a wagon load of bows and arrows, and archers were selected from among the guard and outfitted with weapons. It proved a timely delivery, for that night the *ouhasandan* raiders probed the camp. Their scouts were cut down by a shower of arrows, and the few riders that came too close to the defensive walls were slaughtered. Alt’s only disappointment was that the Clydes took no prisoners, but news of the victory raised morale across the camp. At breakfast there were already songs about the heroes from the night before, and the people quickly learned the words and walked through the camp all day singing them loudly.

It was music to Alt’s ears, but his optimism was tempered by the knowledge that despite all the refugees had accomplished, they would soon begin to starve. At least, he reasoned feebly, they will starve in good order.

*The Clydes on the eastern side of the Celon Gate, however, consider themselves quite distinct from the stereotypic Edain yeomen. Celon is the continent's easternmost province and its population is made up almost entirely of pure-blood Calpathian Clydes, with a few Gheraldic immigrants thrown into the mix. The grasslands north of the provincial capital (New Calpathia) lack the deep topsoil of The Edain's famously productive fields, but farms and ranches here tend to be larger, and typically more profitable.*

*This is horse country, and the elites of New Calpathia enjoy two universal passions: horse racing (it's even more popular than Clydish pitchball) and political argument. There is a self-aware spirit of mobility, modernity and independence among the people of this province, and this trait makes their society both charming and maddening. Despite their vigor and intelligence, these New Calpathians lack the discipline and order that empire demands.*

—**Derek Ketneb**, Chapter 4, *A Year Abroad in the Land of Darbas*, Travlogue Press

*Unlike the neighboring Clydes, who comprise Darbas' dominant culture, the DuQaddish share no common ancestor with the Gheraldic peoples. Though they consider themselves Sulists, the DuQaddish comprise a strange sect that considers itself above the edicts of the Great Voice of Picthia, and their strictly tiered society most resembles the clannish tribalism of their Korvish cousins.*

*We enjoyed the enthusiastic hospitality of our DuQaddish hosts, but we generally found these poor plainsmen to be superstitious, backward, and lacking in the social graces and noble traits that unite the Calpathian peoples of Gherald and Clyde. We remain haunted by the indolent stares of the low-caste DuQaddish, a group known as the ouhasandan, and recommend that future travelers collect their DuQaddish souvenirs in the cosmopolitan city of Sidon and give this rough western province a miss.*

—**Ketneb**, Chapter 9, *Ibid*

## Chapter 4

# Tera

Sergeant Major Coom LaTrent had quite simply run out of things to do, and this was never a good thing. Bowler's Green had grown overcrowded during the week since the 2nd CRG had set foot on Darbas, and with the arrival of the cavalrymen from the *Sechan Sea*, the place had turned tense. LaTrent seemed to seethe with some private inequity, taking inordinate interest in the appearance of himself and his men, holding twice-daily uniform and camp inspections. In between he paraded around the invisible barrier that, by order, limited the Guardsmen's freedom of movement. To the civilians he must have seemed a striking figure: tall and slim of hip, with an almost boyish face despite his forty years. Even though he was throwing a slow-motion tantrum, LaTrent moved with a regal elegance.

Tera and the rest of the regiment were not as impressed. They had grown accustomed to tedium long before their arrival in New Calpathia and went about the day in a languid manner intended to allow free passage of the hours. But LaTrent – always an overly energetic man – could no longer bear the waiting. His term of enlistment had expired on Bangoon, and by all rights he was more than a month overdue to muster out and take his pension. Making matters worse, he was now imprisoned (his words) in his home province, within the narrowest of slices of the city he loved best in the world. His long circuits were the pacings of a caged, flightless bird, and he strutted in his finest uniform and cape with his most brilliant plume projecting from his hat. To Tera he seemed a peacock on a tether, desperately attempting to attract a mate.

But eventually even LaTrent would grow tired of his promenades, and he would repair to the cook fire where Tera, Sergeant Major Carras, Sean Gryff, Casar and other non-commissioned officers passed the afternoons in extended games of Kot. Once upon a time LaTrent had been an intense participant in this running game, but now he was too distracted. Rather than sitting in, he would fidget and complain, polishing his sword obsessively while occasionally shouting orders at his nephew and aid, a mouse-like private named Pic Perot.

Carras, who had almost drowned at Dibishputra and was only now recovering from the arrow he took at Askla, had never been overly fond of his fellow sergeant major. It was, in part, the traditional rivalry between archer and cavalryman, but it was personal as well. Carras was large for an archer, large enough in his adult form to have passed for a grenadier, and he looked at the world through a brawler's eyes. LaTrent was expansive and verbose, quick to take offense and sharp of word. They had maintained a wary truce for years, but on this particular afternoon, LaTrent launched into a non-sequitor tirade about the alignment of the archers' mess tent and Carras responded by throwing a tin mug at him. LaTrent drew his sword, Carras threw his chair, and the two men fell upon each other in a sudden outburst of fury.

Tera witnessed the entire event, and so was ordered to attend when the matter was called before Marbor that evening.

The executive officer seemed distracted when he entered his makeshift office on the ground floor of the mayor's residence. Marbor had spent the day in the camps outside the wall, though what he did all day was information that was not shared with the men. He poured himself a finger of Celon whiskey, didn't offer any to the men who stood silently waiting for him, and swirled it slowly around his mouth before swallowing.

"Where do I begin?" he asked no one in particular. Marbor stared out the window onto the street with his back turned toward them as he spoke. "Do I begin with the obvious statements about discipline? Or should I cut straight through the lecture to the relevant points about punishment? Or, rather, should I pretend to show real interest in getting to the bottom of this situation?"

Marbor turned and faced them.

"Well? Any suggestions? You are, after all, two of my most trusted non-commissioned officers. Have I not relied on your judgment countless times in the field? Have I not trusted you to run my camps and attend to the order of my garrisons and barracks?"

"Yes sir, you have," said LaTrent. "And I am deeply sorry to have presented you this problem."

"How touching!" Marbor's voice was a parody of sincerity. "Observe, gentlemen: heartfelt concern from our plumed sergeant major. You'll forgive me if I am less than moved by your apology."

LaTrent flushed red, but it was Carras who spoke.

"Oh, bugger yourself, Marbor. LaTrent may be a festooned cock, but he's a Guardsmen of twenty years who has full right to claim his pension, and yet you've delayed his out-muster despite the fact that we're standing in his home province. He got on my last nerve today with his peevish prattle, but I'd be peevish too, under his circumstances. Give the bastard his papers and let him go."

"Go bugger yourself? Did I hear you correctly?"

"Those were the words of my mouth, major. I'm tarking sick of your Gheraldic sarcasm. If you want to bust our balls, then do it. But don't subject me to your lilting cleverness."

Tera had known Marbor for almost a decade, but he had never seen him so angry.

"Stocks! Stocks for both of you! Sergeant Tera, see to it!"

"Major Marbor, I..."

"Don't speak another word, Tera, or there will be three stocks on Bowler's Green this evening!" Marbor shouted. "You have no idea of the sacrifices I have made for you provincial bastards, and yet you repay my trust and loyalty with disrespect? I should have you hung for mutiny, Carras. The law allows me that, at least."

Two of Alt's lieutenants stepped forward with shackles, and LaTrent and Carras held out their hands. Tera watched in amazement as the two senior NCOs were led from the room.

"Major, please," Tera said after they had left and the two were alone. "This will be a disaster. What's come over you?"

Marbor poured himself another whiskey and slumped into the leather chair behind the desk. "Just the end of my career, I suppose. The imminent prospect of either starvation or arrest can have an agitating effect on a man my age." Marbor's attention drifted off.

"Sir, if you pillory the two of the Group's three sergeants major under these conditions, you will have exactly the kind of mutiny the Court at Arnell feared when it set the law forbidding us from setting foot in our homeland. You will not be able to control that situation, and both you and the general will be destroyed by it."

Marbor rubbed his eyes and let the truth sink in. "Bring them back," he said, his eyes still pressed shut. "Tell them they'll spend the night under the hospitality of His Honor the Mayor. I'll deal with them in the morning."

Tera saluted and ran after the lieutenants. They had not yet marched the sergeants major to the dark street, and only a few guards and constables had actually seen the men in their shackles. Each of them was given a room in the East Wing of the house, and they passed the night on feather pillows and cotton sheets, marveling at the ironies of military discipline.

**T**he morning discussion was held after breakfast, which the three NCOs ate in a pantry while the Gheraldic officers and the Clydish civil authorities were served in the formal dining room. Their meal was followed by what seemed an over-long wait, made longer by the fact that neither LaTrent nor Carras could abide the other. Tera found himself absorbing each man's hostility, and the silence and tension tightened his stomach.

When they were finally called to Marbor's office, it was Alt who greeted them. The major stood behind him, looking both formal and drained, but Alt was relaxed and booming, his feet up on Marbor's desk and his fingers knit behind his head as they entered.

"Ah, gentlemen!" the general said. "Do come in. Have a seat, Sergeant Major LaTrent, Sergeant Major Carras. Fine morning, isn't it? You can feel a touch of spring in it. Good for the blood."

The sergeants major sat, and Tera took up a space against the wall next to Lieutenant Bixby.

"Gentlemen, I've heard about your spat yesterday," Alt began. "It won't do. I can't have that kind of thing in my Regimental Group."

"We are dreadfully sorry," LaTrent said.

"Good," said Alt. "LaTrent, I'll start with you. I'm having you put out of the Guard immediately."

"Thank you, sir," LaTrent said.

"And I'm taking your pension."

It took a moment for the weight of that casual statement to strike the sergeant major. LaTrent shot to his feet.

"General! I have been your loyal..."

"Oh, shut up LaTrent. I didn't say I was taking it away. I'm taking it and holding it. It will be given back in due time. But first I have need of one final mission from you."

LaTrent sat back down, cautiously.

"Men, here's the situation: beginning today, every living soul in this city and the camps beyond will be cut back to a half ration of food. Those who have been living outside the ration system will face criminal charges, and all the food and fuel in the city is to be rounded up and consolidated. The mayor had been hoping that relief ships would have arrived by now, but this has not occurred, and there's no telling when they will show up.

"In the meantime, the bounty of Celon has been packed up and carted off by these *ouhasandan* raiders. What this province needs is that food, and I cannot go out and get it."

Carras spoke up.

"So you want the men to go and get it?"

"Not as such," said Alt. "The men are under my command, and I am constrained by law here. But Sergeant Major LaTrent, on

the other hand, is now a retired Guardsman, a citizen of Darbas with the right to come and go as he pleases.”

“Let me get this straight,” Carras said. “You want our little fop to go out and single-handedly drive off the *ouhasandans* and return with food for the city? You would do better to send him off in search of every stolen mirror – finding looking-glasses is his only real talent.”

“If there is a man alive who could perform that task, it is I, sir,” LaTrent said, standing again and bowing deeply. “Sergeant Major Carras is a cave-dwelling knuckle-dragger who mistakes sophistication and intelligence for lack of courage. I assure you all, there is not a man alive whose personal courage exceeds my own – others may equal it, but none surpass it. I simply prefer to accomplish my missions by inflicting pain upon the enemy rather than myself, a concept that my colleague no doubt wrestles mightily to comprehend.”

“I comprehend plenty, sergeant major,” Carras growled. “And if he’s going, then I’m going.”

“I’m afraid not, Sergeant Major Carras,” Marbor said. “I’ve checked on your leave status, and you’ve only got a week due to you at the moment. That’s not enough time to accompany Sergeant Major LaTrent – or should I say, ‘Citizen LaTrent,’ on his journey. Voluntary assistance with LaTrent’s errand will be limited to men who have at least three weeks accrued leave.”

“You’re proposing this mission as a *vacation*?”

“Well, I hear this province is lovely in the spring,” Alt said. “Haven’t you heard that, Major Marbor?”

“Stunning, from what I hear,” Marbor said. “I’m sure the men will have a delightful time.”

“How many am I to take, general?” LaTrent asked.

“No more than twenty,” Alt said. “The major has done some research into our personnel records, and he suspects you’ll find about twenty-five Guardsmen are eligible for this excursion. Beyond that, there are able-bodied men among the refugees, and citizens of New Calpathia who would probably leap at the chance to go for an extended ride in the countryside.”

“Sir,” Tera interjected, “you’re talking about sending a group that will equal a mere fraction of the size of our enemy to raid stores that will surely be under heavy guard.”

“Doesn’t bother me,” LaTrent said.

“Nor me,” Alt said. “I have the greatest respect for the men of this unit. Any *ouhasandan* who chooses to get in their way will surely regret the encounter.”

“Then I shall take my leave and prepare to depart with Sergeant Major LaTrent,” Tera said. “You’ll find that I have more than the requisite amount of leave in my account.”

Alt shot a surprised and angry look at Marbor, who shrugged discretely. “I thought you just said this was a crazy idea, Sergeant Tera.”

“I’m sure it is,” Tera said. “But it’s the only idea we have at the moment.”

Word of LaTrent’s “errand” spread quickly around the camp, and the newly minted civilian leader of the “touring group” quickly set up a recruitment desk on the lawn outside the mayor’s home. Putting aside his uniform was difficult for the suddenly retired sergeant major, but his new civilian hunting outfit was stylish and trim, and he sat behind the folding wooden table beside his nephew, Pic Perot, as the younger man wrote down information about each of the volunteers. Marbor sat off to one side, observing and making sure that the civilian operation went according to his commander’s plan.

Tera watched him from a distance at first, but eventually sidled up beside the major and stood at his flank as they watched the line of volunteers move up and past the desk. Neither man broached a conversation for the first few minutes, and it was Marbor who finally broke the silence.

“Sergeant, I wish to thank you for your advice yesterday. It would have caused ... a problem had I disciplined the sergeants major.”

“You’re welcome, sir. Glad I could help you avert any... problems.”

They fell silent again. Tera made mental notes as men he knew well approached the table. Sean Gryff was among them, and he was a sturdy companion, if not much of a horseman. For that matter, neither was Tera.

The man behind Gryff would more than compensate for their lack of skill in the saddle. Private Noan Smyth was the finest rider in the Clydish cavalry, and in his three years in the Guard had won the annual mounted archery competition twice. He was slim and lithe and appeared almost unnatural standing on his own legs.

The company would be heavy on cavalrymen, a military specialty in the Guard that drew primarily from the riders of Celon and New Calpathia. In addition to Smyth, LaTrent and Perot, those already signed on included Sergeant Derrick Watts, a half-Gheraldic rancher from Nassong, Private Carn Aeblys, a brutish man from the streets of Sidon, and Private Joe Bailen – better known for his sense of humor than his fighting skills. He would be good to have along just for entertainment, Tera thought.

“Sergeant Tera,” Marbor said softly. “Do you know the name of this cavalryman?”

Tera took a good look at the man standing before the table. He was familiar, but the name wasn’t coming to him easily. The man was a six-footer with long brown hair, and Tera recognized him as the source of the camp’s penny whistle music in the evenings. Usually he would hear it from a distance, since the cavalrymen would set up separate from the archers, but he had seen him strolling at dusk, working plaintive, meditative music through a thin copper tube. They had never met.

“I believe his name is Seamus, sir, but the last name eludes me.”

Marbor looked back down at his clipboard.

“Seamus Dannan. Does that sound right?”



“Could be.”

“He meets the criteria. Hasn’t taken leave in more than two years. Quiet fellow, isn’t he?”

“Never met him, sir.”

Marbor returned his attention to the clip board, marking notes on pages.

“You know, sergeant, it appears we’ll have more than enough volunteers. There’s really no reason for you to go along.”

Tera considered that for a moment. He felt no particular desire to thrust himself into another dangerous situation, and riding out into the countryside on this errand would definitely place him in harm’s way. Training and experience could go a long way toward overcoming superior numbers, but there is a tyranny in math. The prospect did nothing to attract him.

But another side of himself simply longed to be at large in Darbas, riding through fields and towns he remembered from almost half a lifetime ago. He hadn’t seen Celon since his 16th year, when the Clyde Barrow pitchball team had attended a festival in Brazo Luc, and the image of its wide-open horizon had stayed with him. Others were signing on for adventure and revenge, but for Tera it was more for the ride – for the chance to be himself, in his homeland, traveling without orders.

“I think I’ll go anyway, major. I haven’t been out and about in a long time. It will be a nice change.”

“Yes, a fine holiday, I’m sure. Watch a few birds, breathe some fresh air, kill a few murderous thugs. Quite relaxing.”

“Killing has never been my specialty, sir.”

“No, your specialty appears to be collecting new wounds. But let me put a finer point on this. The general is ... shall we say, *distressed* at the prospect of you riding out on this ... errand. He has asked that I talk you out of it.”

“Why doesn’t he just order me not to go, then?”

“I don’t know. Why doesn’t he spend his time getting our ships repaired instead of taking on the job of organizing these refugees? Why doesn’t he spend his time in the university library as I’ve suggested? Why doesn’t he act like a normal, rational Gheraldic officer? I suspect at times that he makes his choices merely because he knows they will annoy me personally.”

“General Alt doesn’t require my services here,” Tera said. “He has eight other judges who can handle cases, and the archers appear to be of little use in his civil engineering projects.”

“It is neither the judge nor the archer that Alt wishes to keep close by. It’s you, Tera. You’re something of a favorite tool of his, and I believe he likes having you at his disposal when certain situations arise.”

“Nevertheless, I’m in the mood to go,” Tera said. “Please send the general my regrets.”

“Listen, Tera,” Marbor said. “You’ve nothing to do. Why don’t you take long naps and spend hours on end recreating with that dream wife of yours?”

“Because lately she’s getting on my nerves. She’s quite demanding these days.”

Marbor looked up from his clipboard. “Sergeant Tera,” he said, “you are a very, very strange man.”

That said, he got up and walked into the mayor’s mansion.

**B**y day’s end there were twenty men in LaTrent’s touring company. Tera, Gryff and Private Tante Edram comprised the archers. The grenadiers were represented by Sergeant “Strawfoot” Zylen, the largest man in the 2nd CRG, and Sergeant Tremous Maesen, a former member of Tera’s pitchball team from Clyde Barrow. There were six cavalymen, counting LaTrent.

The rest of the company was made up of true civilians from the refugee camps. Squire Necky and his teen-age son Tom were farmers from Bluff’s Folly who had gotten their first taste of fighting on the perimeter. Termus Rydy and Maxus Tailon were pitchballers from Rhodig, trapped by the Madness during a sports festival at Brazo Luc. Their coach, Tourno Portis, looked familiar to Tera, and he too had signed on.

The last four to join were retired Guardsmen who had settled in Celon: Tam Chicora and Val Tremble were former grenadiers from the 3rd CRG; Darious Pack was a cavalryman from the 1st CRG; and the oldest member of the group was Kemp Harvous, a thick-necked archer from the 2nd who had been a senior sergeant when LaTrent was a green private. Harvous was the first to arrive at the gathering point near the perimeter of the camp the next morning, and he watched intently and wordlessly as the other men arrived.

Tera came on foot, carrying nothing more than a bedroll, weapons and a cloak. His borrowed civilian clothing felt marvelously comfortable, and he luxuriated in the feel of the hunting moccasins that LaTrent’s friends had provided. The equinox had passed two days before, and the dawn walk through the sleepy city had been quiet and fresh, scented by the first flowering trees and brightened by the songs of the early migratory birds, recently returned to Darbas.

There was little talk at the meeting point, where the men stood in clusters or off by themselves while Perot and several outfitters unloaded a wagon and began dividing up the company’s gear. Twenty minutes later the horses arrived under the guidance of New Calpathian wranglers: three horses per man – enough to keep up a fast pace across the province, if need be. Tera introduced himself to his horses awkwardly, almost apologetically, but found himself wondering what such great speed would get them if they were successful and returned to the city with a train of wagons in tow.

LaTrent arrived last, making his usual grand entrance as the residents of the camp began their day, rising to stoke cook fires and begin their shifts on the various projects Alt had set before them. They had received news of the half-rationing well, but Tera knew that would be a hard attitude to maintain. At least volunteering for this trip means I’ll eat better than those who stay behind, Tera thought as LaTrent reined his horse by the wagon, feigning interest in the loading of provisions into the troupe’s saddlebags.

“Gentlemen, good morning,” LaTrent said as he drew his horse beside them. “Is everyone ready for a nice little ride?” There were a few mumbled replies.

“So nice to see that you’re all in a chipper mood,” he said. “Let me take this opportunity to remind all of you of the rules. You are volunteers, but this civilian operation will still be run with military order. Without it, we will find ourselves quickly running for safety. Suffice it to say that we comprise an impromptu militia and that I am its commanding officer. Those of you with military ranks, active or otherwise, will be referred to by those ranks. Those of you without basic Guardsman training will be referred to as privates, no matter what your age.” LaTrent looked at Squire Necky as he spoke. The thick-necked farmer showed no reaction.

“Now, our ‘errand’ today is to go out and find the wagons now being routed toward the DuQaddish army in the field outside Sidon and return those wagons to New Calpathia, where they are in great need. To accomplish this errand, we will have to outwit the bands of *ouhasandans* now roving the fields of New Calpathia. While this seems like a difficult task, allow me to remind you all what the word ‘*ouhasandan*’ means in DuQaddish: it means ‘outside the ranch.’ These are the lowest of the low – men with little formal training, no practical education and few opportunities. I’m sure they were easy enough to recruit, and recent experience teaches how brutal they can be against an unarmed enemy. We, however, are quite well armed, both with weapons and experience.

“I propose that we set out toward Brazo Luc, which was the last known location of the food stores we seek. Once we have found the wagons, we will kill the necessary amount of *ouhasandans* and return with the supplies. Whether we make a second foray will depend a great deal on how well things go on our first trip. Any questions?”

“How shall we move?” asked Pack, the retired cavalryman.

“Ah, good question, Senior Sergeant Pack. I propose to move in a two-by column formation, with an advance scouting party of four men and a two-man rear guard, spaced at tactical interval. If we are probed we will post outriders, but I have no intention of moving to a line formation unless the situation proves desperate.

“Those without formal military training will tend to the extra horses during the march, and should keep them well within the main body. The scouts will be cavalymen Smyth, Watts and Dannan, accompanied by archer Tera – who, though weak in the saddle, has a reputation for cleverness in the field.”

LaTrent offered Tera a polite tip of his plumed hat.

“You’ll find we are well provisioned for this excursion, so I ask that you refrain from too much plundering. We may be stealing from the *ouhasandans*, but what they possess was stolen from our countrymen. And with that business aside, please gather up your gear and prepare to move. I wish to depart within three minutes.”

The company proved agonizingly slow for Tera. Lacking a clear structure, the men either jostled for position at the front or dawdled, and it took them more than five minutes to secure their gear, mount their horses and form the column. LaTrent seemed not to notice, as he was distracted by the crowd from the camp that had formed around them. Tera took practically no time collecting his few bits of equipment, but the civilians had a hard time of it, and Zylen seemed to be wrestling his horse instead of mounting it. Dannan took particular care with what appeared to be a stick wrapped in silk cloth. The five minutes dragged into ten, and as Tera and the three other scouts waited for LaTrent to take control, his intuition began to flash alarms that his conscious mind could not ignore.

“Well, this is bloody ridiculous,” Smyth said.

“I don’t know which is more painful to watch – the civilians or LaTrent,” Tera said. Dannan chuckled, but lowered his head as if to mute it.

Finally finished with his admirers, LaTrent spurred his horse and galloped to the front of the column. He grinned at the scouts and said under his breath “I’ve waited my whole career to say this.” They understood, because it was no secret that LaTrent had always fancied himself a natural officer rather than an NCO.

“Scouts out!” LaTrent shouted, and the four men urged their horses forward, breaking into a gallop. Behind them they could hear the sound of LaTrent ordering the column forward, and Tera found himself happy to be among the advance party, which would move with freedom instead of choking on dust at a canter with the main body.

With Dannan taking the lead, Tera and the two other cavalymen fell in abreast, and once they had covered several miles to put them well ahead of the rest of the company, they fell back to a walking pace.

“Nice day,” Watts said, stripping off his riding cloak as the air warmed.

“Yes, fine day to be in the cav,” said Smyth. “How long shall we stick to the road, sergeant?”

“There’s a village about five miles ahead,” Dannan said. “I figure if we haven’t been killed by the time we reach that crossroad, we’ll swing across the fields to the west and ride the crest of that low ridge you see in the distance.”

“We could get there faster if we cut west now,” Watts offered.

“True,” said Dannan. “But there’s a little magic at every crossroad.”

Tera was surprised to hear such words spoken among a band of Sulists, and filed away the thought that his impression of Dannan would need careful tending.

The first day ended with a beautiful sunset and a meal of dried beef and hot tea. Tera sat with his back against a hickory tree, letting the tea warm his insides as he took in the view of the empty countryside. They had passed several ruined villages and hamlets on their first ride, rendezvoused with LaTrent to adjust their course, and moved several miles to the north to this prominence to camp for the evening and scan the next morning’s route. There was little left to do but enjoy the tag end of the day.

Ahead lay the Nassong Road and a two-day ride to Brazo Luc. And though the air was fresh with new buds and awakening earth, occasionally they had passed places where the wind carried the sickly sweet scent of human decomposition or the sour tang of burned hair. They had seen only one dead body – it had once been a grown man, by the looks of the clothing – but they left it in

the ditch where it lay and continued on.

Still, there were mysterious patches of disturbed earth outside the sacked villages, and the every-so-often whiffs of death on the spring breeze were enough to spoil the pastoral pleasure of the trip. Tera felt the landscape teeter in his mind between beauty and terror. Everything seemed peaceful from atop this hillside – it only became a nightmare upon closer inspection.

They drew straws after dinner, and the job of riding back to the main body with the map fell to Watts. It was almost midnight when he returned.

“There was movement on the road half a mile from here,” he said. “I had to lay low and avoid being silhouetted. Wallain is awfully bright tonight.”

“How large?” Tera asked.

“No more than ten. Scouts probably. I was close enough to hear them talking.”

“*Ouhasandan*?” Dannan asked.

“DuQaddish, for sure. I don’t know them well enough to tell by accent.”

“Most of the *ouhasandans* come from the Tanu region near Hassan,” said Smyth. “They’ve actually got a rather lyrical way of speaking.”

“You’ve met them?” Tera asked.

“My father is a professor at New Calpathia,” he said. “He took us west when we were children and we spent a year traveling about. His specialty is politics, you see.”

“The nature of politics has taken a rather brutal turn of late,” Watts said. “But your father is still a respected man, even if he is a bit of an idealist.”

“I’m not familiar with him,” said Tera.

“That’s because you’re from The Edain,” said Dannan. “These Celon Clydes are mad for politics and theory. Every farmer is a closet philosopher here.”

“Aren’t you a Celon Clyde?”

“I was raised here, yes,” said Dannan. “But my parents are immigrants from Gwynyr. They came down the mountain when I was little, and our family has never had much faith in the political path.”

Smyth retrieved a clay pipe from his saddlebag and offered around pouch of tobacco. Each man took him up on it, and within minutes they were puffing contentedly.

“Watts, did LaTrent order us to proceed north?”

“Yes, as you suggested. He wants us to cross the ford west of the bridge and reconnoiter the road on the other side, then send someone back with word if its safe to pass. He’ll wait in the wood line on that ridge to the south.”

“Simple enough,” said Dannan. “That leaves us only with the matter of Watts’ *ouhasandan* scouts.”

“I’d leave them be,” said Smyth. “If they blunder into LaTrent they’ll be sorry, and they’re more likely to stay on the road and pass him entirely.”

“I wonder what they’re doing,” Dannan said. “If they’re in control of an empty land, you’d think patrols would be a secondary concern.”

“Maybe they’re not scouting,” said Tera. “Maybe they’re scavenging. We did pass several homesteads and a couple of villages.”

“Those looked fairly well picked clean,” said Watts.

“Yes, but we didn’t look carefully.”

“I say we get some sleep now,” said Dannan. “We’ll rotate the watch, and I’ll take the last one and wake you all before dawn. Then we’ll ride down and find the scouts, and I’ll take care of them.”

The other men laughed.

“You’re a fine cock of the walk, Dannan,” Watts said. “What are you going to do, take on ten men by yourself?”

“You said yourself there were no more than ten. That usually means less.”

They laughed again.

“Figure out the watches between you, but wake me at 3,” Dannan said. He walked lightly over to his bedroll and pulled out his penny whistle, settling down on his blanket and playing a slow tune that wove like ivy around a trellis. At first it seemed a risk, but Dannan played softly and the sound took the edge off the day. Tera took the first watch as his companions packed off to bed, and he scanned the moonlit patchwork of woods and fields and streams, wondering where they would go in the morning and whether he would see another moon.

In his sleep he quickly found Tanith Powdras, and they rolled together most of the night by her sacred spring. “You seem amazingly relaxed,” she said to him.

“I heard the nicest tune before I fell asleep,” he said.

“Ah, it’s that Seamus Dannan,” she said. “He’s a beauty.”

“Should I be jealous?” Tera asked.

“Be jealous if you like,” she said. “If it brings you to me more often.”

Dannan shook Tera softly awake.

“Leave your horse and come with me,” he whispered. “They’re closer by than we thought.”

The men were roused in a few seconds, and Tera found himself instantly fighting his usual pre-combat panic. Death is always frightening, but death that comes too early in the day, or too late in the night, or when your bladder

is full, or when your last meal is undigested – this is a special kind of fear. He found himself stumbling off to meet an enemy in the darkness, feeling unprepared for anything but his morning tea and a nice long pee.

Not a quarter of a mile from where they had camped, a draw on the hillside formed a nicely protected cove at the edge of the wood line. Wallain was down, and Tera estimated it was only minutes before dawn, so the only light came from the waning face of Lokin. It was just enough to reveal the sleeping bundles of the *ouhasandan* riders. They slept in a circle around the remains of a tiny cook fire, but in the pale gray light it was hard to count where one man left off and another began. Tera counted their horses instead: seven of them.

They were outnumbered, but it mattered not. The *ouhasandans* had gone to sleep without leaving a watch that Tera could spot, and it would be relatively simple work to surround their camp and kill them silently from a distance while they slept. This seemed to be Dannan's idea as well, for he posted each of the three scouts behind rocks and trees within range of the sleeping enemy, forming a clean kill zone.

"Stay here, and do nothing until you get my signal. Understood?"

"Yes," Tera whispered. Then Dannan slipped silently away, heading downhill.

Minutes passed, time so silent that Tera found himself breathing with the rhythm of the *ouhasandan* snoring. He crouched behind a rock with a bronze-tipped arrow fitted lightly to his bow, yet no signal came.

Soon the dawn arrived, false light giving rise to the earliest rays of the day, and at the violet moment Tera gave the Old Path daybreak prayer silently, tracing the pentagram and the circle of the sun over his heart. His anxiety grew despite the ritual, for either something had happened to Dannan or the man was truly untrustworthy, and neither was a pleasant thought. The men would soon be awake, and then all advantage would be gone. Even though the morning was chill, Tera found himself beginning to sweat. He was near to wetting his pants on account of not relieving himself when he woke, and a nauseous lump grew in the pit of his stomach. He bent his head down and clutched at his crotch to bring his physical urges under control.

When he raised his head again, the nausea grew. The *ouhasandans* were still sleeping, clearly visible in the quickly gathering light, but they were no longer alone. Seamus Dannan stood in the center of the circle of bedrolls with his head down and his hands clasped behind his back. Tera pressed himself against the cold rock, feeling the moss tickle his clammy neck. Now the shooting would be even more difficult, unless he aimed without concern for his fellow Guardsman. Tera held his eyes shut and tried to regain his calm.

The sound of the waking *ouhasandans* opened his eyes. The first to see Dannan had screamed in alarm, and the others awoke with a start, flailing around beneath their blankets, knocking over cook pots and rucksacks as they scrambled for their weapons. Dannan remained motionless, not even looking up or unclasping his hands, and within seconds he was surrounded by seven men armed with swords, daggers and pikes. The only thing resembling a weapon on the Clyde was what looked like a lacquered stick of black wood that Dannan had thrust through his belt. How can he challenge seven men with a painted half-staff?

Tera leaned around the rock and braced his left foot against a nearby tree. He drew back the arrow and took aim on the man who stood behind Dannan, assuming that the first attack would come from that position. Yet Dannan remained still as a stone, and Tera's fingers began to feel the strain.

He caught the sound of a voice – Dannan's voice – speaking something low and muffled in what sounded like another language. The *ouhasandans* shouted back at him, still nervous, and they looked around behind them, as if they had been warned that they were surrounded. They didn't see Tera, who was motionless, or the other two men, and turned their attention back to Dannan.

The tension held for another second, and Tera increased his pull on the bow, his forearm and shoulder aching now from the strain. Any second now...

But it happened faster than the archer could follow. The first move came from the sword-wielding man Tera had targeted, really nothing more than a flinch. All Tera saw was a flash of silver as the black-lacquered staff separated to reveal a bright blade, then the backward thrust of that blade into the chest of the man behind him. The sudden movement caught Tera almost as much by surprise as it did the *ouhasandan*, who was dead before he crumpled to the ground.

Dannan removed the unbelievably slender sword from its victim's chest, twirled it in his right hand and brought it swiftly across his body with a two-handed grip. The morning light glinted off the blade as it swept across the bellies of two more *ouhasandans*, splashing blood as it passed through them.

Dannan pivoted gracefully toward the remaining four, who now surged toward him, one with a pike, the other three with broad-bladed bronze swords designed to hold up in close-fought, cut-and-slash combat. The next strike of Dannan's blade sliced through two of the bronze swords as if they were made of cheese, and the graceful return stroke severed their throats.

The pikeman lunged forward as Dannan turned toward the final swordsman, but the Clyde stepped deftly to the side and struck backward again with his curved blade, stabbing the pikeman through the ribs from the side. He hung suspended on Dannan's blade for a moment, then slumped.

Only the last swordsman remained, but he trembled before the Clydish warrior. Dannan took two shuffling steps forward with his lead foot, then swung his sword for the last time, cleaving the *ouhasandan's* blade just above the hilt. The raider stared in horror at his broken sword, then fell to his knees to plead for his life.

Dannan sheathed his blade smoothly and bent at the waist as if to speak to the terrified survivor. The color drained from the man's face, and he stumbled backward, found his feet, and ran frantically off down the hill toward the fields below.

The entire combat had taken less than seven seconds – less time than it took Tera, Smyth and Watts to climb down from their hiding places and reach their comrade. It took them longer than that to find the right words.

"Uh," Tera said, "what the hell was that?"



“That was *waulagh domus*,” Dannan said softly. “It means, ‘delivering a message to the enemy.’”

“And that weapon?” said Watts.

Dannan slid it silently from its wooden scabbard, bent to wipe the blood on the shirt of the pikeman, and handed the sword to Tera.

“This is my father’s sword. The Valand call these *sioboeth*. ‘The swords of the ancients.’”

Tera held it reverently, testing its weight and balance and marveling at its perfection. It was slightly longer than his arm, yet only two inches thick at the hilt. Dawn light gleamed along its edge, and the braided leather handle was still warm from Dannan’s touch.

“This is steel,” Tera said, marveling at the wonder he held in his hand. “Steel like the weapons of the original Guardsmen. LaFranq’s swords.”

“In truth, it is better,” Dannan said. “The skill of the makers has improved over the centuries.”

Tera passed the *sioboeth* to Watts.

“I’ve never seen such a thing in all my life,” he said.

“You have some explaining to do, sergeant,” Smith said, taking the sword from Watts. “I’ve ridden with you for three years and I’ve never seen this before.”

“I only this week received it,” said Dannan. “My father was a Valand who fell in love with a woman and renounced his vow when he learned that I had been born. He deserted, carrying only his *sioboeth*, and took us to start a new life in Celon. When I was a boy I found his sword, and rather than beat me for it, he decided to train me in its use. We trained every night from the time I was 6 until the day I left to join the Guard.”

“And what became of your father?” asked Tera.

“He died while I was away. It was just his time – he was much older than my mother. She gave me this only five days ago.”

“And I thought such weapons were the stuff of legend,” Smyth said.

“Many legends contain bits of truth,” said Tera. “Brother Trefallian used to tell the boys in the compound that the Valand themselves were only legend, just as the magic of the Old Path witches was nothing more than tales told to frighten children.”

“Magic is not as easy to hold in one’s hand as a *sioboeth*,” Dannan said. “Yet, if it does not offend your Sulist sensibilities, I believe it is as real and as strong as the steel before you.”

“Did you use magic just now? When you walked into the midst of these guys?” Smyth asked.

“Do you pray before you go into battle?”

“Of course,” said Smyth.

“Then yes, I used a form of magic. But mostly I used common sense. Had we ambushed them, none would have likely survived, and even if one returned he would tell only the story of cowardly archers who slaughtered his companions as they slept. The man I let go will have a very different story to tell, and all who hear it will carry a seed of doubt when they come looking for us. That’s a powerful weapon.”

“Personally, I think you were just showing off,” said Smyth.

“Well, there’s a bit of that, of course.”

“What I want to know is, what did you tell those guys?” Watts asked.

“At first I told them ‘good morning’ in DuQaddish. Then they asked me who I was and what I was doing, and I told them, in Clydish, that I was the Angel of Death and that I had come to kill them. They told me I was an ox-raping piece of dung – or at least that’s how I translated it – and then they attacked.”

“But what did you say to that last guy?” Watts asked.

Dannan took the sword back from Smith and slipped it back into its scabbard.

“I said, ‘Go.’”

**T**era was surprised at how long it took them to reach the ford, and there was some argument about whether they had passed it. Dannan seemed unsure, but eventually they found a place that was shallow enough to cross, and whether that was the proper ford or not, they retraced their path on the opposite bank and at noon approached the bridge over the Elk River from the west.

As LaTrent had feared, the bridge was guarded, but the guard was perfunctory: three men with only a signal fire for communication. Smyth rode a mile beyond the bridge to scout for reinforcements, but he returned an hour later with no worries to report. Dannan decided they would take out the sentries the old fashioned way, and they left the horses behind, snuck within twenty yards of their quarry and dropped all three with a single flight of arrows.

Dannan sent Watts back along the Nassong Road to give the go-ahead to LaTrent, but Tera found himself with a more difficult task. One of the *ouhasandans* had survived, which meant it was time to gather a little intelligence.

Watts was the skilled medic among them, and he had worked fast to staunch the bleeding wound in the raider’s lower back. He feared that damage had been done to the man’s kidney, and cared for him as if he were a comrade. Standing near Watts, Tera picked up on a compassionate streak in the cavalryman, information he stored away for further use later.

“Do you understand what I must do?” Tera asked Watts.

“Yes,” he said, keeping his bearded, homely face averted. “You’re going to poke another hole in him and stick your finger in it. I’m well aware.”

“It’s the best way for us to find out what’s ahead of us.”

“Sergeant Tera, you do what you gotta do. I’ve been a Guardsmen long enough to know about it. But that don’t mean I gotta like it. I’m a Sulist, and whether what you do works or not is beside the point. Slicing up prisoners is nothing more than torture, and you’ll have a lot of explaining to do at the Great Counting, brother.”

“I understand,” Tera said. “I was raised Sulist myself. I still attend the services.”

“I’m not blind, John. Don’t think I haven’t noticed the way you trace the pentagram on your heart before a battle. You may profess to be a Sulist, but you walk the Old Path with quiet feet, boy. Remember: you can only serve one master. I serve Telios. Whether you serve him or Luzustrous is your problem.”

“The people of the Old Path believe there is no master.”

“And Luzustrous is an excellent liar, but we’re not here to discuss religion. If you’re going to cut him, cut him.”

The three scouts walked over to the shade where the wounded *ouhasandan* rested on his good side, and Tera knelt.

“Do you speak Clydish?” he asked slowly.

“A bit,” said the raider.

“My name is John Tera and I am a judge. I’m going to explain what is about to happen to you, because it’s better if you understand.”

“You’re going to kill me,” the raider said. “I’m surprised that you haven’t already.”

“No, you will not die at my hand. But what I am about to do to you will hurt.”

“Torture, then?”

“I will make a cut into the muscle of your chest, just above your heart. After the wound is opened, I will insert a couple of fingers into the cut. When I do this, the truth that you know will be made apparent to me. I will know what you know.”

“If you are so sure, then why are you telling me this? Torture me, for I cannot stop you. I am *ouhasandan*. I was born to suffering.”

“I’m telling you because you can make the experience easier for both of us. Speak the truth now. It will not stop me from cutting your chest, but something about speaking the truth first makes the testimony by wound go by with less pain. The cut on your chest will be the least painful part of what is about to happen. Trust me in this.”

“I don’t care, Clyde. I should have died at the moment the arrow entered me. If your friend had left me alone I would have expired by now, but he is a Sulist as I am, and he showed me mercy – and even though his Godly act will only bring me greater suffering, I honor him for it.” The *ouhasandan* exchanged looks with Watts.

“What is your name?” Tera asked.

“Misha. My name is Misha. I hope it burns its mark into your conscience, John Tera.”

“Whoa now,” said Watts. “We may be brother Sulists and all that, Mister Misha, but don’t you go getting all high and mighty. This is my home, and what you boys have done here is gonna put you square on the bad side when the Great Counting comes.”

“What is done is done for God. We were sent in his name, and in the name of Telios, and to honor the glory of Sula – who walked among *my* people, not among *yours*.”

“Apparently you were sent here to get a good whuppin,” Watts said. “And hell, I was starting to feel sorry for the little guy. Cut him nice and deep, John Boy.”

“Tell me where the rest of your comrades are now,” Tera commanded.

“Find out for yourself.”

“Tell me what you’ve done.”

“I killed heretics, servants of Luzustrous. They will never spawn another generation, and hence the Great Counting is assisted. I fought for Sula!”

This was more than Watts could abide. He bent low and punched the reed-thin *ouhasandan* in the mouth. Misha howled in pain and curled himself into a fetal position.

“Sorry,” said Watts, blushing.

“Hold him down and let’s get this over with,” Tera said, and with the other two men assisting him he soon had Misha on his back. Dannan stuffed a rag in Misha’s mouth to quiet him while Tera cleaned off the hooked blade of his testimony knife. The *ouhasandan*’s eyes grew wide when he saw it, for it was a cruel-looking instrument, and his struggling increased.

Tera tried to put it out of his mind. He had done hostile testimony before, had even cut men he actively hated. Yet the more he felt about the man before him, the worse it would be for them both. There was no pain Tera could inflict that he would not feel.

Misha’s muffled howls rose two octaves as Tera sank the tip of the knife into the flesh above his left nipple. It did not go as deep as he would have liked: there was little muscle to the man’s chest, and the hawk-billed blade scraped across ribs as Tera jerked it toward him.

Blood pulsed from the new wound, and Tera said one last, silent prayer before thrusting his first two fingers into the opening and descending into his enemy. The pain of the man’s wounds shot through Tera instantly, but the true agony came as their minds met and clashed – one probing and recoiling, the other fighting animal-like in response to the intruder.

Sometimes it felt as if the witness rose into Tera’s mind like a sudden spike, but taking testimony from Misha was like standing on the edges of a pit that is collapsing in upon itself and the beast at its center. Tera’s first instinct was to retreat, but he stifled the feeling and allowed himself to fall into the man’s cauldron of emotion and memory.

Misha was a baby soul, Tera realized, an entity with few incarnations whose conscious mind was like a dim torch in a vast, dark cellar. He kept only a minimal number of thoughts within the light, and fought desperately to keep other possibilities outside of its circle. Tera’s intrusion threw this limited man into a panic, and his obsessive barriers against the rest of his experience disintegrated

almost instantly. Baby souls were both the easiest and most difficult subjects for a judge – easy in the sense that there were no clever disguises for the truth, difficult in that the lack of order in his conscious mind and the turmoil in his subconscious was frightening to encounter.

Tera regained his footing, sensing the barrier between where his own soul ended and Misha's began. The pain was only a vague throbbing on the physical plane now, as if he stood on the bottom of a shallow, burning lake, and though he felt it, he had moved past it. This was *banum jugnas*, the moment of regaining one's bearings within another's soul, and it was always the crucial step.

With his own identity clear again, Tera relaxed his defenses and allowed himself to feel Misha's experiences. Unlike the first descent, in which the souls crashed together like two storm waves in the ocean, the controlled second meeting – or *banum gritnas* – was like water seeping through a small breach in an earthen dam. Misha's life began to flow into the judge's consciousness, first as random little memories – Tera caught the image and scent of a newborn puppy sleeping on bed of straw and felt a deep associated sadness – and then as larger, more complicated things. Desire and guilt over an older woman from the hasada... *She despises me. She should pay...* The taste of cream, still warm from the udder... Dancing at the harvest festival ... *Left, left, and right, spin...I cannot dance... Are they laughing at me? Left, no right! Spin! Catch up!...* Threshing inside the walls of the hasada, failing the wheat ... *Does the foreman notice? I must work harder if I want a place on his crew, but my arms are skinny and weak and O how they ache...* Losing his virginity to a prostitute outside the walls ... *She doesn't even look at me! She lies there mocking me! She is a gnarled stump, and she thinks herself better than Misha? ...* A pilgrimage to Da Nupa... descending into the cave of the Tanu Mutan... the Second Son of the hasada says "Yea, though you are sinful and weak in the flesh, still you are the chosen people of God" ... "My sufferings shall make me great, and my faith is loved by Telios, savior spirit of the world"... *Yes, I shall love my brother and serve God, even though the mighty despise me and think themselves my betters, my faith is a secret between myself and Sula, and his justice shall make the heretics and lords of the world tremble...*

Within moments, the tiny stream of Misha's mind carved a wider and deeper course, and the flood of his memories and emotions came too fast for Tera to experience each individually. They flashed past him in tangled strands and knots, and he absorbed them more than observed them. This was the difficulty of the unordered mind, for events were bound in unexamined emotions, and logic flowed in oxbows and bitter pools, as if the will of the body directed the actions of the mind, as if regret and shame were physical sensations. Desires wrapped themselves in emotions, and the confusion of his feelings and memories led directly to frustration and anger... The puppy sleeping on the straw and the older woman and the harvest dance and the foreman's scorn and the words of the Second Son and the wheat and the mystery of the deep cave in Da Nupa, all these things swirled and clotted in Misha's mind, emerging and receding in the darkness, one spilling over into the other until they became nothing more to him than a black veil of fear and shame through which hope was only a fragile pinpoint of light.

Tera had reached *banum ola*, the abstract totality of the Other. Misha infused him now, neither good nor evil. No longer were there any secrets between them – only the painful task of unraveling the truth. Now Tera would apply the order, and the pain of its application would sear them both. Strands of emotion and memory, severed from their knots, would flail about like whips.

"How did you come to this place?" *The Third Son of Hassan recruited me! He promised that God would take pleasure in our vengeance! He said the treasures we collected were ours by right! That Telios would be pleased to see his people reclaim what was theirs by His will!* "Did you kill Clydes?" *Of course! They fornicate with the Gheraldic enemies of the Tanu Mutan, who keep us in poverty as the price of loving God!* "Who is your commander?" *The Third Son of Hasada Cascadus! He is harsh and cruel to us! I hate him! You cannot blame me for his actions! Why do you torture me so?*

"Tell me your crimes." *The woman at the farm fought back, but we showed her! Antonic and Cornic held her down and I was the first! It is a shame upon my soul, but the lesson had to be delivered! The Second Son of Hassan said our justice would be blessed! He promised!*

"Did you kill her?" *No! Just her husband and the boy child! They cried as we defiled the women, and then we sent them to Luzustrous. There is use for the women, and more lessons to be taught. I bound them off as I was told, but she spit in my face and I beat her!*

"Where are the rest of your number?" *At the city by the lake, and they will come soon, they will come and kill you dung-licking Clydes! The man who escaped this morning crossed my bridge and told us of your murder magic, your swordsman of Luzustrous. They will come soon, and you will be sorry you were born!*

"What are they doing at the city by the lake?" *The wagons are made ready to leave, but each band of one hundred is to draw its provisions first. They come in turns, and little remains to be taken.*

"How many wagons have gone? And by which route do they go?" *They travel west from the city by the lake, by the road to Celon Gate. They have been moving for weeks toward the forest, toward our Great Army! The hasandans look down upon us ouhasandans, safe within the lovely walls of the hasadas, but now we are the ones who sustain them! Soon we will join them at Sidon and our glory will be all the greater, for we are the ones who brought the Clydes low, and our bravery and boldness shall be legend!*

"Do you fear death, Misha?" *Yes! It is a shame upon my soul! I cannot help it, even though I know my reward awaits.*

"Are you certain of your righteousness?" *No! Telios forgive me! My faith is weak, and the screams of the farmers haunt me! Telios forgive me if the Second Son lied, if the Third Son bade me to do evil! I was not taught to kill, but the teachers now demand it. What am I to do, John Tera? Have I become an evil man?*

"That is beyond me to judge. I shall leave you now." *I fear what lies before me! Help me, John Tera, though you are my enemy!*

But there was no helping Misha, and though Tera felt the tendrils of the *ouhasandan's* soul trailing after him as he rose from the meeting of their minds, through the confusion and past the burning pain to the surface and the waking world, there was nothing more he could say. Tera withdrew his fingers and opened his eyes, and Misha went limp. The judge staggered to his feet and shook

his head to clear it, while Dannan and Watts led him to the base of a tree to sit and recover. The mental connections he had made and broken sizzled and popped inside him, and Misha's physical pain lingered for a few moments longer in Tera's body. But Watts brought him a canteen, and before long he had cleared out the last remnants of the joining and found himself back to normal.

"The wagons have been moving for weeks, and the last of them are now being readied at Brazo Luc," Tera said. "But we should not go there – each of the *ouhasandan* bands is collecting its share of provisions before returning west. Better we should chase the wagons on the road to Celon Gate, where the defenses will be lighter."

"And what about this Misha fellow?" Watts said. "Is he good or bad?"

"He's a murderer and a rapist, but as for good or bad ... he's just a small man with demands that exceed his abilities."

"Should we kill him?" Watts asked.

"That's not for me to say," Tera said.

**L**aTrent arrived with the main body an hour later. The men ate a late lunch at the bridge and the scouts acquired two fresh horses apiece for the hard ride across the countryside toward the Bluff's Folly Road. LaTrent made plans to divide his force to escort the wagons he hoped to capture, and Tera saw how his eyes glowed fiercely at the prospect of glory.

Most of the men ate their lunch silently, staring at Misha, who slouched beneath a poplar. His eyes were open, but they seemed to be focused on an inner landscape, and Tera understood that it was a bleak place where shame had finally smothered hope.

After they had eaten and LaTrent gave the order to prepare to move, Tera turned away from the bridge and looked off into the distance. He knew what was coming.

"And string this one up by his neck before we leave," LaTrent ordered casually. Tera pressed his eyes shut and said a quick prayer.

Misha said not a word, but he cried softly in the moments before they hoisted him aloft. Tera absorbed the sounds of the man's death behind him, but he allowed them to stir only the lightest of his emotions. Who can judge a man and not himself be judged? He felt the passing of Misha's soul like a warm gust of wind, then mounted his new horse to catch up with the other three scouts.



*The essence of the modern, evolved game, then, lies in a player's ability to conceal his ultimate line of attack. Classic theorists divided play into the early game, the middle game and the end game, but Scritomy revolutionized Betrayal by rejecting classical analysis. During his reign as the Gheraldic Grand Champion, Scritomy eschewed the formalism of the classic early game, wildly offering unsupported pikes in trade and responding asymmetrically to what had once been considered "strong" positions.*

*Consequently, modern Betrayal emphasizes a balance of calculated aggression and passive deception that masks a player's intent. Accordingly, modern theorists write only of the early game and the end game: the former may be of any length, and the latter is always completed in a matter of minutes.*

*"What counts is not the appearance of strength," Scritomy wrote, "but only the end result. In the game of Betrayal, as in life, victory rides swiftly, suddenly, and always without mercy."*

—**Lord Athon**, Introduction, *The Strategy and Tactics of Modern Betrayal: A Grand Champion's Guide to A-Level Theory & Practice*.

Chapter 5

# Tuckard

**N**ews of the siege at Sidon scrambled agendas and rearranged the daily order of life from Petitioners Yard and the Dinner Dome to the outlying apartments and ministries. For the Court, the disaster at Bangoon had been an embarrassment and the escape of the abandoned 2nd CRG a humiliation, but word of an uprising in the Empire's most stable province was cause for panic, not just alarm. For Pete Tuckard, it was an opportunity, and his traditional long day stretched even farther into the night.

The news had arrived in the previous afternoon, on the heels of the news earlier in the week that the 2nd CRG had arrived, miraculously, at the docks of New Bronald. Tuckard had turned his early knowledge of that event to secret advantage: After retaining his seat during the rebuke proceedings, he rose to address the Hall and deliver his apology. His humility and dignity had been on full display, and few were of a mood afterward to deny his simple request: a cash payment to the family members of the 2nd CRG, plus the authorization to raise a replacement unit immediately. With glowing support from Lord Proxmire, the vote was heavy on sentiment and light on details, but Tuckard now held a document that authorized the payment of a large sum of money and permitted him to purchase military supplies. It had been a good day.

Even Eorl Garrett, the Lord Proxmire, did not quite seem to grasp what he had just authorized. He seemed more than satisfied that Tuckard had come into the Proxmire fold, and had laid out a series of secrets that left Tuckard stunned. It was everything he could do to mask the shock he felt, but the old messenger played his part well.

As the various Houses took their seats in the Hall, Tuckard found himself anxiously awaiting Glynnis' arrival. She had been gone all night on an errand, and had missed their scheduled meeting that morning. This could be either good or bad, as she was either dead or working too productively to stop.

The morning session opened with Marlton IV looking more oblivious than usual, but the gravity of the situation was clear in the worn expression on Lord Ashton's face. He sailed through the opening formalities and hurried the call-and-response tradition of dispensing with the scheduled agenda, moving the Court efficiently and gravely to the Sidon matter.

Lord Findlay was the first to hold the floor, laying out a more detailed description of the situation on Darbas than had been officially announced the day before.

"The situation is not as grave as has been rumored," he said, referring to notes on the lectern before him. "In addition to the dispatch from the governor, I am in receipt of a most thorough assessment by our military governor, General Thierry. He reports, and I quote now, 'Though the army arrayed before us comprises no less than 20,000 men and at least a dozen mobile siege engines of modern construction, my own garrison here affords me 10,000 Gheraldic regulars and at least double the number of heavy weapons brought forth by the enemy. After the initial bombardment on the third day, our ballistas were brought to bear with great effectiveness, and the DuQaddish were forced to pull their trebuchets back beyond the range of our weapons.'

"Gentlemen, I think you will find that the situation in Sidon, although serious, is far more stable than immediately presumed," Findlay said. "The Korvish-Sopkan fleet has not appeared off the coast, resupply by ship remains an easily accomplished task, and between our regular forces and the local militia we are immediately capable of meeting their army man-for-man along a well-fortified defensive wall. In short, Sidon is in no imminent danger of collapse, and the long-term prognosis is good."

"Lord Findlay," Lord Proxmire said, rising in his place, "how confident should we feel in the estimates of General Thierry?"

"I would place all confidence in his reports. He is one of our finest commanders, and though he is new to the Sidon garrison, I am to understand that he has improved both the readiness and the discipline of the Darbas Legion during his short tenure."

"Yes, of course," said Proxmire. "My question concerns not the qualifications of the commander, but rather the source of his information. It is one thing to stand upon a high wall and count, another thing to have assets in the field who count the movements of forces that have not yet come to bear. Do we have such agents who send word to the general?"

“For security reasons, I am not at liberty to discuss the status of agents in the province of Darbas,” Findlay replied. “Suffice it to say that I am most satisfied with the quality of the intelligence available to General Thierry.”

Lord Teague rose to speak. “If it please the Court, Lord Findlay, what does this General Thierry propose as a course of action?”

“Thierry is of the opinion that we should resupply Sidon by sea and post the necessary warships to prevent the unexpected arrival of a Korvish-Sopkan task force,” Findlay said. “He is of the opinion that the army from DuQaddic is little more than a well-armed militia, not accustomed to the rigors of a lengthy siege and lacking the discipline to conduct a successful assault on the city. The general proposes that in some weeks the order of the army at the wall shall be degraded, and at that time he will march his regulars out upon the field and drive them back to whence they came.”

“Forgive me, sir, but at two-to-one odds?” said Teague.

“Our history is full of such victories. Is it not, Lord Proxmire?”

“Let it never be said that the veteran warriors of the Gheraldic Empire fear superior numbers, particularly when those numbers be rabble,” Proxmire said. “Yet the proposed solution to this problem is not without its risks.”

“General Thierry would have us believe that within some unspecified period of time, he will divine that the moment has come for him to attack. In the first place, this will require that the Empire provision the needs of an entire city by sea for a period of months. At last count there were more than 40,000 residents of Sidon, and that count is quite old. As the keeper of the King’s Purse, I would remind you all that providing such relief will be a significant drain on our pockets.

“Second, there is the matter of the spring planting. If warfare precludes the orderly conduct of agriculture in The Edain, then the harvest will bring nothing but starvation and the Darbas contribution to the annual budget will be reduced even further.

“Third, not one week ago this chamber almost came to blows over the demands of my good friend, the Messenger of Darbas. I remind him and the rest of the Hall how fortuitous we are to have rejected his request that the Gheraldic garrison be marched out to restore order in the province, for had we done so our soldiers would have been cut off from their post and Sidon might now be in the hands of the enemy. Still, it raises the question: Can the army at Sidon march out from the walls under our treaty? Messenger, I would like to hear your thoughts on these matters.”

“I appreciate the Court’s concern for my homeland,” Tuckard said, stretching the kinks out of his joints. “As for the treaty, it will be a simple matter to acquire the necessary civil authority for such a mission. The Council of Darbas is in session at Sidon, and will no doubt accede to whatever is necessary to lift the siege. I am told that the members of the DuQaddic delegation were caught quite by surprise to see their countrymen digging earthworks around the city, and they are said to be profusely apologetic.

“Of greater concern to me is the situation in the heartland. The Clydes of the Edain, the Don, and even Celon have been the victims of an unprecedented series of outrages since last fall. Never in our history have the peoples of Darbas fallen into such violent relations, and every report in my possession attests to the utter chaos created by these *ouhasandan* raiders.

“If Darbas is to remain standing, some effort must be made to disperse this army at Sidon and track down the raiding parties that now roam at will in the valleys and plains. To wait longer is to court starvation for my entire race, not to mention continued atrocities. And while I am thankful that the Gheraldic garrison was not lost, I remain convinced that those soldiers are stationed in Sidon for a purpose. I would ask that we consider a strategy that would bring more immediate relief to the King’s subjects in my homeland.”

“And what of the treaty?” asked Proxmire. “Is the Messenger prepared to accept the duties and responsibilities that come with the full protection of the Gheraldic Empire?”

It had all been building up to this, of course. This question. Tuckard had considered his reply all night.

“Yes, gentlemen, I believe we are,” Tuckard said. “Speaking as the Messenger of Darbas, I will stake my career on it.”

Tuckard sat back down as the buzz filtered through the Hall.

“Not much of a career remains to you if this happens,” Novand whispered.

“Yes,” Tuckard said under his breath. “That is exactly my point.”

**D**ebate on the proposition of reinforcing the garrison at Sidon sprawled through the noon meal and into the afternoon. Despite Proxmire’s urgings, the Court seemed hesitant to commit troops to anything beyond the defense of the city, and unfounded worries about Korvish-Sopkan invasion fleets fluttered across the room.

The arrival of Glynnis spared Tuckard from continued tedium. The old man and the young woman made small talk past Bailey’s Bum and the Mariner’s Gate, waiting until they were well outside of earshot before turning to the serious business.

“How many are following us?” Tuckard asked.

“Two from Findlay, one from Proxmire, and a dear old lady from Teague, of all Houses. It’s almost cute.”

“Are we beyond their hearing?”

“I think so. Put your arm around me and we’ll talk more softly. And slow your pace. They’ll have to back off.”

Tuckard enfolded Glynnis’ shoulder in a grandfatherly embrace as they turned off Treasury Street onto the wide Avenue of Empire. Spring was arriving, and the first blossoms painted the plum trees.

“Last night was something of a success, I think,” Glynnis began. “But much of what Lord Proxmire described to you does not check out. That’s the first issue.”

“This comes as no surprise. But explain.”

“Proxmire claimed that Gheraldic agents had learned of some kind of fanatical religious movement gathering force in the north-

ern region of Duma, and that Thierry was briefed on this potential threat before he was dispatched to Sidon. Proxmire's suggestion was that the Court was aware of this problem and stood ready to act – if it could secure certain concessions from our Council.”

“Go on.”

“Furthermore, Proxmire said that Gheraldic agents were dispatched to monitor and defuse this movement weeks before Thierry's departure.”

“Your point?”

“The details don't match the facts. These *ouhasandan* raiders are not themselves *from* Duma. They are primarily from Hassan, to the south. In fact, so far as my sisters have been able to determine, there is not a single group of *ouhasandans* from Duma now operating in the Clydish lands.

“Couldn't they have recruited their country cousins to do the job?”

“It's possible, but not likely. Then there's the matter of these agents Proxmire spoke of. We Fionnans keep a close watch on all the known Gheraldic agents in Sidon, and while it is true that they were dispatched, this happened *after* Thierry arrived, not before.”

“That's a small detail,” Tuckard said. “It could have been easily confused in the telling, and even so, it proves nothing.”

“You're right,” Glynnis said. “But this morning I got a look at the Findlay ledger. Thierry drew more than 100,000 ducats from the Colonial provisional fund before his departure. The withdrawal was categorized as ‘For services.’”

“How do you find these things?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“No, come to think of it. Consider it a rhetorical question.”

“Finally, those agents whom we monitored never set foot in Duma. Nearly every single one journeyed to Hassan, making calls on practically every Second Son in the canton.”

“What are you suggesting, Glynnis?”

“Proxmire told you that the Gheraldic emissaries became aware of this fundamentalist threat, attempted to thwart it and then chose instead to play it to their advantage. He suggested that, despite the cost to our Clydish people, alliance with the Empire could still prove beneficial through the exploitation of Gwynyr.”

“Yes, go on.”

“I'm suggesting that Proxmire and others at the Court sent Thierry to Sidon with orders to create this crisis,” Glynnis said. “Proxmire and Findlay drew off more than three quarters of their provisional fund and spent it on bribes for the DuQaddish religious leaders in one canton. They sent their agents out to deliver the money and recruit the raiders, then ordered the Gheraldic garrison to sit on its hands while the *ouhasandans* gutted the countryside. All to get us to beg for their protection.”

“A clever thesis, and likely true. Still, it does nothing to explain the army outside Sidon. Why would Thierry offer bribes to raise an army that marches against his own walls?”

“What if one did not beget the other?” Glynnis asked.

“You suggest that the raiders in the east are unrelated to the siege army?”

“Consider this: what if the Gheraldic attempt to create a crisis merely plowed the ground for another, separate intrigue? Everyone in Court wanders around in a Korvish-Sopkan panic these days, but what if they're right? If the Korvish-Sopkans have agents among the DuQaddish, as we believe they do, then wouldn't a time of unrest in the Clydish homelands make the perfect opportunity for an unmolested march across Birren to Sidon?”

“You weave webs within webs within webs, my dear.”

“The evidence of a Korvish-Sopkan hand is right in front of us. Our DuQaddish neighbors are sturdy farmers and ranchers, but they have no skill with siege engines. It's not their style of fighting, yet it's exactly what is needed against a walled city like Sidon. The Fionnans there report that the heavy weapons deployed in the field are of Milker design. I propose that their agents caught wind of the *ouhasandan* gambit and chose this as their time to strike.”

“In which case, we face more than a native uprising.”

“In which case, we might even welcome Gheraldic intervention.”

“How does the Lady feel about this? Have you ... communicated?”

“Not in weeks. It's a tiring process for her, as you know.”

“I have heard from the Council,” Tuckard said. “Through more traditional means, of course. Bergonat says Sidon is in turmoil, with the DuQaddish residents hiding in their homes and their representatives alternating between apology and belligerence. They don't know which way to jump, which lends support to your idea of an unseen hand. At any rate, he suspects there are almost enough votes to grant the Gheraldic Empire control of the province in exchange for security and intervention. Only Bergonat remains a holdout on the Clydish side, but so far that is enough. The Mullaqat will not vote, and even if the DuQaddish representatives vote as a block against the move, the Clydes hold the tie-breaker – so long as Bergonat votes with them.”

“And which way do your feelings lie, Messenger?”

Tuckard squeezed her shoulder a bit tighter. “I wish I could say they blow with the prevailing wind. Life would be much simpler if that were true. But no, I cannot abide it. The future of Darbas lies along an independent path, not in the manipulations of a faltering empire. No matter what it costs us, I cannot support giving up our freedom.”

“And yet this is exactly what you pretend to support in the Hall.”

“Tis true,” Tuckard said. “But that is the cost of knowledge. My acquiescence grants me access to a more intimate class of lies from Lord Proxmire, and these are already proving to be quite useful. I will stake my career on the promise of imperial control, but that career is already nearing its end. If I return to Darbas in disgrace, so be it. The ancients say, ‘Accept disgrace willingly.’ If it helps



to buy us liberty, then disgrace is small price to pay.”

“You’re playing games with the most powerful man in Gherald,” Glynnis said. “If you’re to pay a price for that, the price will likely be your life.”

“I’m old,” Tuckard said. “And the Great Counting awaits us all.”

**W**allis and Novand shared dinner with them at the Dragon and Rabbit, then repaired to Tuckard’s apartment to talk strategy.

“I have news,” Novand said as he closed the door. “I’ve been dying to tell you since this afternoon, but your walk was overlong. And so was our most public dinner.”

“We had business to discuss,” Glynnis said.

Novand settled into one of Tuckard’s chairs. “This concerns the 2nd CRG and it comes from Coopersmith, my friend at the shipping company. He says the 2nd CRG has landed at New Calpathia – something about being blown off course, he said – but whatever the reason, they’re back on Darbas and it’s nothing short of a miracle. I’m sure our friends in the Colonial Office have heard this through formal channels by now, and I’m more than a bit surprised our Fionnan hasn’t already told us.”

“It’s news to me,” said Glynnis.

“Personally, all this news is getting to be tiresome,” Wallis said. “Just when I’ve adjusted to one earth-shaker, another arrives on its heels. It’s starting to affect my digestion.”

“I can’t believe the Colonial Office would allow a CRG on Clydish soil,” Tuckard said. “They’ll have the commander’s head. What’s his name again?”

“Barney Alt. And though I’ve no proof, this has the Lady’s handwriting all over it,” said Glynnis.

“I assume this affects our plans. Again,” Wallis said.

“Yes, but once again for the better,” Tuckard said. “Do you think they’ll march?”

“New Calpathia swarms with refugees,” Novand said. “If I were them, I’d want to get out of town.”

“Perhaps they’ll just board their ships and sail off,” said Tuckard. “You said they were merely blown off course. Where were they headed?”

“Bhengal, according to Coopersmith. But he’s sometimes less than credible.”

“Spring tides in the straits of Donnage can be treacherous,” Glynnis said. “The ships would have to wait on the right moons.”

“So perhaps they are in Darbas for some time,” said Tuckard. “I suspect the Lady will attempt to take advantage of this, whether the situation is of her making or not.”

“Lady Rialta does like to dabble,” said Glynnis. “Well, *that* sounded catty. Apparently I’ve been around Court too long.”

“I’ve been around this conversation too long,” said Wallis. “Might we have another drink?”

“Don’t expect me to get it for you,” Glynnis said.

“I never did,” said Wallis, who rose and walked to the bar, pouring himself a glass of Celon whisky. “Now. Messenger Tuckard. What do you propose we do?”

“I do wish you’d call me Pete,” Tuckard said, leaning back. “I’m already stiff from our walk, Glynnis. Can you believe that? I suddenly feel five years older.”

“You certainly look it,” said Wallis.

“I think we should count on the 2nd CRG being put to some use,” Tuckard said, staring off at nothing in particular. “We can’t direct it, but we can certainly support it. Meanwhile, we have the sentimental sum of 20,000 ducats for the poor mothers, widows and orphans of the 2nd CRG, which nevertheless showed up quite alive. Additionally, we have a piece of paper which authorizes us to spend money toward the outfitting of a replacement unit for the one we supposedly lost on Bangoon. And while events have certainly overtaken the intent of that resolution, it nonetheless remains legally enforceable. For the time being.

“Novand, I’d like for you to rise in the morning and proceed directly to your shipping agent friend and settle on a price for a voyage to New Calpathia. We’ll need ships outfitted for the transport of horses. Wallis, you’re a shrewd man. Carry the Court’s authorization to the King’s Stables and see how many war horses you can acquire. The delivery will have to be quick, since Proxmire is likely to hear about it and become upset, but once the deal is set and the ships are laid on, he’ll be hard-pressed to reverse the transaction.”

“Why horses?” Wallis asked. “Why not provisions? Or weapons?”

“Ah, but a horse is a weapon,” Tuckard said. “A horse is the freedom to maneuver, and whatever horses the Guard once had were left behind on Bangoon. If we want our boys to chase the enemy in the field, they’ll have to be able to move with equal or greater speed. How many do you expect we can buy and still have enough money left over to pay for their transport, Novand?”

“If they’re the right ships, five hundred. Six hundred if we’re really lucky.”

“Make it four hundred,” said Tuckard. “We want them all arriving in good health, not half dead from an overcrowded voyage. That will also leave us some cash to deliver to our friends in New Calpathia. Supporting an army in the field is an expensive endeavor.”

“You’re putting an awful lot of faith in something you know little about,” said Wallis. “This is lunacy.”

“Yes, but it’s inspired lunacy,” said Tuckard. “Given our current situation, lunacy may be our best and brightest hope.”

It was only much later, after the rest of the delegation had gone home, that Tuckard's restlessness got the better of him. He paced around the apartment, disturbing the moonlit stencils of the window panes upon the wooden floor, but it was not enough. His mind was a jumble of anxieties and ideas, so he dressed himself and headed down the stairs. The night was pleasant and fraught with spring, and he wanted to breathe it deeply.

His primary concern was Rialta and the faith he placed in her initiative. He had known her as a young Fionnan, a girl much like Glynnis. She had been the youngest ever assigned to the Gheraldic mission, but she was wise and mature for a teen-ager, and looked older than her years anyway. Later, the trouble with her mother and her sister led to her recall to Gwynyr, and news of Rialta's selection as the next High Priestess shocked Tuckard more than anyone.

He thought he knew her, but he had thought many things and been wrong before.

"My old friend," he said softly as he walked down Treasury Street toward the docks, "if there were ever a time for you to use that magic of yours to reach me, now would be the time. I'd reach out to you, but I'm a Sulist, as you know."

Tuckard hoped to hear her voice in return and wondered what that would feel like. Would she appear as a presence, or just a disembodied idea framed clearly in his mind? But he felt nothing, heard nothing except the midnight wailing of house cats in the alleys.

"If I have guessed wrong, forgive me," he said. "I am wandering in a dark room in search of the right door, and all the knobs feel very much the same. Would that you were here."

With that he heard the sound of footsteps behind him, and turned with a hopeful thought that this was Rialta's way of projecting herself to him. But the footsteps belonged not to a single woman – there were two men behind him, dressed oddly for the docks and making a turn onto Treasury Street from one of the alleys he had just passed.

A shiver passed through the old messenger, for he had not noticed them there and the hour was late. He did not lengthen his stride, but he gathered his cane in both hands. The polished walking stick was a gift from Rialta, and it contained a surprise – a slender spike of black iron, the first such thing he had ever seen, and it remained one of his most closely guarded secrets.

The footsteps drew nearer, but Tuckard restrained his urge to run or spin around. Once upon a time he would have almost welcomed the prospect of a fight under these conditions, for he was large and strong as a young man, and even in middle age he felt robust compared to the average Gherald. Now he felt only fear, and it in he realized the tragedy of growing old – for though he was near the end of his years, the diminishing strength of his body had robbed him of his physical courage, and from that loss flowed the weakening of his mind as well. He twisted the handle of the cane and it disengaged from the stock, freeing the black iron needle in case he needed it.

"Messenger Tuckard, turnabout please," said a voice from behind him. It chilled his blood, and he stopped, turning slowly to see who confronted him.

"And who are you?" Tuckard asked with false bravado. As soon as he spoke the words, though, he recognized them. These were not any men – they were the two shadows who had trailed him that afternoon during his walk with Glynnis. The two men from the House of Proxmire.

"Who we are is of no importance, sir," the tallest of the two said. "Only your identity is significant, and that identity is traitor to the Empire." The men slid daggers from the sleeves of their overcoats. "We come bearing a message for you, Messenger: It is a mistake to cross swords with the House of Proxmire."

Tuckard looked about frantically for help, but there was none. He considered screaming, but the fear caught in his throat, stifling any sound. The old man fumbled with the cane as his two assassins spread out to circle him, finally drawing out the long spike. But his attempt at appearing competent with its use felt pathetic – he jabbed it toward the shorter man feebly, and stumbled as he turned on the cobblestones. "Get away! Get away or I'll run you through!"

The first man darted toward him, slashing across the forearm that held the spike. Pain shot up his shoulder, and the iron shaft of his cane bounced off his assailant with no effect. This was a thrusting weapon, not an edged weapon, and he was too slow to use it.

The taller man lunged at him now, but Tuckard deflected his thrust with the cane and they collided shoulder-to-shoulder. He drove the dagger backwards toward Tuckard, but it caught in the folds of his coat and merely ripped out the lining. The shorter man rushed him from the opposite side, but Tuckard whipped his spike toward him and he backed away. That was all the opening the taller man needed – he plunged his dagger into the flesh of Tuckard's shoulder, and the pain drove the old messenger to his knees as the cane dropped from his hand.

He tried to control his breathing and regain his feet, but he was gasping for breath and the blood was already soaking through into his coat. "In my younger days," he said, panting, "I would have killed you both."

"These are not your younger days, you tarking ass," said the shorter man. "This is your last day. This is the day that you..."

He never finished his sentence, because it's impossible to speak with a dagger through one's throat. Glynnis had thrown it from some distance, but there was little doubt it would find its mark – she seldom missed, particularly when the need was great. It took several seconds for the taller man to recognize that something was awry, and by then she was already almost upon him. He spun to meet her attack, but he only blocked her first two blows. The others came faster than he could match, and as he recoiled she stripped him of his dagger, twirled it in her hand and stuck it straight into his heart. He stood staring at her for a moment as he died, trying in vain to grasp what had happened.

"We've got to get you off the street," Glynnis said as she helped Tuckard to his feet. "Who knows what other traps they might have laid for you."

"How did you know?" Tuckard asked. "How did you know to come find me?"

“The Lady,” she said. “She told me in my dream and woke me.”

“In your dream?”

“Yes,” Glynnis said, grasping his wounded forearm and leading him back toward his apartment. “Oh, and she told me to tell you, ‘Thanks for the horses.’”

*All that remained was to place the traditional rosemary wreath upon her head and then turn together to receive the blessings of their nation. Rowene lifted the wreath gracefully, yet at the last moment a stray breeze seemed to catch it, and the wreath fell to the ground. Rulana opened her eyes in sudden, silent alarm, and everyone involved in the public initiation went instantly tense.*

*Rowene's second attempt managed to get the wreath atop her daughter's head, but it was somehow askew, and a second later it dribbled down over Rulana's face and fell to the ground. Multiple witnesses reported that the wreath appeared to scurry away from her hands when Rowene bent to collect it for a third try.*

*Even a famously single-minded witch like Rowene could not ignore so obvious a divine message, and to Rulana's obvious horror, the High Priestess of Gwynyr rose, turned to the assembled multitudes and announced that there would be no succession that day. Her shocked elder daughter fled from the amphitheatre blind with rage and humiliation, and later that evening word reached the House of Fionna that Rialta, Rowene's youngest, was to be recalled immediately from her posting at the Court of Arnell.*

—**Aranne Drutal**, *A History of the Sacred Line*



## Chapter 6

# Rialta

**W**illow was up before dawn making ready for the journey, but Rialta had her own business to attend. She conducted the secret rites in the courtyard circle at first light, a time that always seemed to give them an added umph, then met with her staff over breakfast. There were concerns about the increasing number of refugees outside the gates of Niamh and in the Rhodig Heights, and Rialta wanted the situation resolved. The mayor of Llyr had sent another trade delegation, which demanded an audience with the High Priestess, but they would have to wait for at least a couple days. She gave instructions for their entertainment and lodging, and though she did not go into too much detail on any one of the issues, the meeting took longer than she had hoped and her departure was delayed.

Mother will not be pleased, she thought.

It was after nine when she finally descended to the stables and mounted her stallion. Willow smiled wordlessly and led them out of Pyth Nuemyn and down toward the docks. The High Priestess had her own personal barge, one of the perks of office, and the oarsmen sat patiently as they boarded with their horses. The crossing would take the better part of the day, even with the prevailing wind, but the weather was nice and posed no apparent threat. Rialta settled into a comfortable seat beside her handmaiden and wrapped them both in her woolen shawl.

"I've been a dreadfully boring traveling companion for you of late," Rialta said.

"You've had a lot on your mind. You need not concern yourself with my entertainment."

"But I do need to concern myself with humility, for if I lose that, I lose everything," Rialta said, stroking the young woman's hair. "It's so very easy to lose touch, and I'm supposed to be more in touch with the world than anyone else. Please forgive me."

"You need not even ask," Willow said.

"I suppose there is some work I could do, but it's such a nice day for a trip across the lake," Rialta said. "How about we play Kot instead?"

"I'm sure we could get up a game. I brought your cards just in case."

The women settled into an extended game with the barge's officers, and no one complained when Rialta won. It was never a good idea to enter a gambling game with a woman who can read minds.

**R**owene, Rialta's mother and the former High Priestess, had chosen to pass her unburdened years in the South Penn, a rolling valley of dairies and pastures and woods on the shore of Lake Bregon opposite Beltan. For herself she requested little, but in the two decades since she had left her job to Rialta, Rowene had turned her simple cottage outside the village of Bregon into a glorious garden.

Early Spring arrived like a skittish horse in the highlands, where snow could fall in the morning and give way to warm sunshine by late afternoon, only to be beaten down by cold rain all night. The clouds seemed to move a little faster, ragged strips and lumps of them speeding across the sky, and Rialta was always amazed to find the first naked sprouts and buds pushing their luck against the morning chill. Ostari was almost a week away and the hardwoods were still as bare as November, yet the first tiny flowers were already beginning to bloom. She blessed the spirit of the Jack in the Green for his work and breathed in the hopeful hardiness of her mountain home.

The road out of Bregon was narrow and bound by meadows of fresh spring grass, and Rowene's cottage was immediately identifiable. Even from a distance it was clear that there was garden magic at work here, for there was too much color for so early in the season. Rowene had surrounded it with humble stone walls, and every inch of ground within them was tended and cultivated. Ivy clung to the walls, curling under timber eaves and obscuring every right angle. A curved trellis thick with flowering vines arched over the gate, and even the path from the road was made sprightly by ankle-high clusters of tiny snowdrops and purple vinshers. Rialta paused at the gate and noted the hexes, then blessed herself with the pentagram and struck the thick copper bell with the mal-

let that hung beside it. No matter what one's power, it was never wise to cross the threshold of a former high priestess unbidden.

The door to the cottage opened to reveal Rulana, Rialta's older sister, who dusted white flour off her apron and gazed out to see who had come to visit. When she recognized the face at the gate as her sister, the color drained from her skin until it was almost as white as the milled wheat. Rulana ducked back inside the cottage for a moment and reappeared without the apron, walking to the gate with a large smile plastered across her face.

"It has been too long," Rulana said, unlatching the gate and opening her arms to enfold her sister. Rialta stepped into the embrace as one might step into a huge pillow, for Rulana was tall and substantial and her thick arms pressed Rialta's head between her breasts as if she meant to either nurse or suffocate her. "And is this Willow that I see? I had heard you were grown, but the last time we met you were but a child on the floor of the kitchen at Pyth Nuemyn playing with jacks."

"Hello, Rulana," Willow said, and the larger woman extended an arm so as to hug both of the visitors.

"You've grown quite strong," Rialta said when Rulana released them.

"Mother and I like building things with stones," she said. "They're not as plentiful as they are in Niamh, but they're free for the taking if you spend enough time in the fields. As you can see, we've been quite busy. It does a body good."

"I assume you anticipated our visit," Rialta said.

"I anticipated *a* visit, but no, I had not foreseen that the visitor would be you," Rulana replied. "I spend more time in the kitchen and the garden than I do exercising the gifts, and as mother foretold, it suits me. As for what she has anticipated, mother has not shared that with me."

"In fact, I believe I was summoned," Rialta said. "How is she?"

"Finally showing her age. You'll see. Lately she's been more interested in vegetables and husbandry than her flowers, so they've fallen to my care. She has friends in the village she visits. Terribly boring old gossips."

"And you?"

"I have mother," said Rulana. If there was bitterness in the words, she masked it well. Rulana motioned to the door, and they followed her up the path and inside.

Though the cottage was small, everything inside was neat and beautiful in its simplicity. Rialta recognized items she always associated with her mother – the thatch broom with the crooked handle she had always used for cleansing ceremonies, the ornate wooden altar Rowene had always favored. The sitting room was cleverly hexed, and the hall to the kitchen was decorated with plates and paintings under glass frames. Rialta recognized the artist as Rulana, who had always been good with a brush.

They found Rowene seated in the back yard under the grape arbor with a tray of seedlings on the table before her. The yard behind her stretched out in straight rows of topsoil that were dark unto black, and two young men worked near the back wall, one hoeing while the other planted. The old priestess didn't look up, but motioned to Willow and her daughters as they stepped out of the cottage.

"Kiss me, daughter," she said as Rialta drew near, but her attention remained on the tender seedlings before her. Rialta bent and kissed her mother's thin white hair and marveled at the almost blue translucence of her liver-spotted skin. "Willow, it's so good to see you."

"And I you, Holy Mother."

"Rulana, do be a dear and take young Willow and see to their horses. You left them by the gate and they're getting nervous. I don't want them wandering off."

"Yes mother," Rulana said, and she returned to the cottage with the handmaiden.

"Do sit, love," Rowene said sweetly, and Rialta slid onto the bench on the other side of the wooden table. The grapes had not yet begun to bloom, and the afternoon sun cast webs of shadows through its vines to sway upon her mother's face.

"These are my new favorites," she began, nestling another seedling into a larger terra cotta pot. "It's a kind of pepper from Ennis Heath, something called a dragon's breath yellow. I started growing them three seasons ago, and everyone said they'd never take here with the colder highland climate. But I think I've finally gotten it right. Aren't they lovely?"

"Lovely, mother."

"Of course that's not why I brought you here, to look at my peppers. Actually, I wanted your advice on which of those two gardeners yonder I should take for my next lover. I rather fancy the younger one because he's got such a nice behind, but the older one is strong as an ox and has that little wicked twinkle in his eye."

Rialta stared at her mother dumbfounded and had to hold her hands in her lap to keep from twiddling her hair.

"That was a joke, honey," Rowene said, leaning toward her. "Do you remember jokes? No? Well, never mind, I had to wait until my retirement to rediscover humor, and no doubt you'll be the same way." Her eyes trailed off to the garden where the two men worked. "Still, it is true that I like the little one's butt quite more than I should. Of course that's neither here nor there."

"Rulana said you were finally starting to show your age," Rialta said. "Judging by your remarks, that age would be about fourteen."

"Ah, then that's good news. We sages are supposed to appear as little children. But you, my dear, you're looking quite adult. And you have matters to discuss, I believe."

"Where would you like to start? I do believe you called this meeting," Rialta said.

"How about destiny?" Rowene said, lifting another pepper seedling gently from the tray. "I think you've been rather distressed about that subject of late."

"Yes, that would be good topic for you to address, seeing as how you're the person who scrambled all our destinies quite publicly," Rialta said. "Rulana has barely spoken to me since you pulled me out of the House of Fionna and stuck me in her rightful

place.”

“Ah, but it never really was her place to begin with, was it?” Rowene said, brushing dirt from the roots of the plant. “Rulana was my second daughter by birth order, and fell to the role of first-born only when Rona died. That broke the line of the Fathers for the first time in centuries, and everything was pretty much up for grabs after that.”

“But she was the one who spent her entire life training to do the rites, not me,” Rialta said. “You packed me off to the Fionnans, and I was quite happy with the prospect of that life.”

“I know, dear,” Rowene said. “It was hard, wasn’t it? But I was stubborn in those days, and Rulana was so sincere in the way she applied herself. I really wanted it to work out for her, but I must have known, somehow, all along.”

“Does Rulana hate me, mother?”

“Hate is too strong a word. She hated me for a time, of course, but that’s understandable. After we had our little showdown while you were in Gherald things got better, and we’ve worked out a pleasant life together since then. Your time of healing will come, too, but I think being around you reminds her too deeply of what could have been. Plus she hasn’t quite learned to accept humiliation willingly yet, and let’s face it: coming that close to the line of succession only to have your mother deny it to you in public is pretty damned humiliating. I feel bad about it still. Poor child.”

“And do you feel bad about me?”

“You? No. The subject is destiny, and this is your destiny. You still doubt it, but I don’t.”

“I wish I could be so sure of my actions,” Rialta said.

“Yes, but that’s the trick, isn’t it, honey? You still see them as your actions. But are you the director or the conduit? And from what we believe about the Path, is there really any difference? You really should relax more. It makes things so much easier.”

“Mother, I have accepted what it means to be High Priestess. I conduct the secret rites and I hold the knowledge back from the rest of the world. I bless the babies and sign the contracts. Nowadays I even dabble in world events at an unprecedented level. But it isn’t easy for me and it wasn’t easy for you and to hear you suggest otherwise is truly annoying.”

“Stop twiddling your hair, dear, and tell me what you really think.”

Rialta dropped the strand she had been unconsciously twirling and tossed her hands up in exasperation.

“I don’t like this job! Okay?” she said. “The world is falling apart and I have picked a plan that, even if it works, will probably end our way of life here in Gwynyr. I hate this job, and I wish you’d given it to Rulana, who actually wanted it. How’s that?”

“Much better,” Rowene said, smiling. “Here, make yourself useful.” She slid the tray of seedlings to the center of the table and passed her daughter a couple of pots filled with dirt. “Honey, I know you don’t like hearing this, but this situation is exactly why I had to pick you, not your sister. There is no way Rulana would have ever taken a course of action that would threaten Gwynyr, but if you read the prophecies clearly, that’s exactly what must happen. You’re not here to preside over a peaceful paradise, Rialta. You’re here to destroy it.”

“Well, that’s very comforting, mother.”

“Not that you *will* destroy it. Gwynyr must always be your first concern, and it’s just spiritual law that to secure our future you must first risk it. The prophecies are vague, but there’s no doubt that the coming time of transformation will be most disturbing. Let’s change the subject. This is too depressing.”

“Yes,” said Rialta. “Let’s.”

“You know, the thing about my first year growing these peppers was that I listened to the seed-seller’s advice and kept them in pots all through the summer. When the nights would get cold we’d go out and pick up the pots and carry them inside the greenhouse, but it really didn’t work. They set fruit, but the peppers were tiny and twisted. So the second year I set the seeds in these trays, moved the seedlings to the pots as I’m doing now, and then set the pots aside and planted them in the garden around the first of May.

“It worked like a charm. They set fruit immediately, and even though the nights got cold, the plants flourished. It turns out these peppers like to put down roots that run deep and wide, and the only way to give them that is to take them out of their protective pots and let ‘em grow the way the Goddess intended.”

Rowene paused and leaned across the table, her face transforming into the crone aspect of the Goddess herself. “Get my point?”

“Oh my,” Rialta said, who recoiled in surprise from her mother’s display of power. “I’d almost forgotten how you used to do that to me.”

“We of the Old Path have forgotten that it’s a path, not a place,” Rowene said. “The seed of our faith came from far away, and our ancestors here had to sprout it carefully and tend it constantly. A seedling must grow strong before you move it to the garden, but if you keep it too long in a little pot, it won’t grow the way it was intended. That’s Gwynyr, Rialta. It’s a pot that’s too small for its plant. So you’re going to have to break the container – to allow the plant to spread and flourish.”

“And if I kill the plant in the process?” she asked.

“Nonsense,” Rowene scolded. “How do you kill what has no body? We call it the Path for lack of a better name, because the true Path is nameless. It is without form or substance, but it is everywhere. One doesn’t need rites and visions to see it – look, it’s right here, in this seedling, in this arbor, in this one little leaf.” She held up a linden leaf for her daughter.

“The mystery of life, Rialta. How can we protect it? How can we improve it? We either live within it or outside it. If we are in accordance, life is easy. Step outside or deny it and the way becomes difficult. That is how you know, dear – not by magic, but by the road under your bare feet. How does it feel?”

“Rocky, at times,” Rialta said. “But other times smooth.”

"And the course you have chosen? How does that feel?"

"It feels right. Only I have my doubts, late at night."

"That is natural," Rowene said. "I taught you about that voice. You walk this path in the dark, and a bit of caution can be a good thing."

"But sometimes I am afraid. To use your metaphor, what happens if I let this plant grow wild and it is overtaken by other, more aggressive plants?"

"I wouldn't worry about it," Rowene said. "You have the prophecies. What do they tell you?"

"That we cannot keep the ancient knowledge out of the world much longer. And once I stop holding the secret rites, that knowledge will begin to spread, mother. The library at Ba'a'Blos will be opened and the learning that destroyed the first world will run free again. Power will flow to Darbas, along with all the temptations that accompany it. The Sulists will adjust easily to a world of machines, but we require a closer connection to the web of life. Only the people of the Old Path will suffer for the release of this knowledge."

Rowene reached out and clasped Rialta's hand. "And that, dear daughter, is why we were entrusted with it. Yet perhaps, if we are alert, Gwynyr may yet profit from this. These are dangerous times, but from this danger flows unlimited opportunity for our people. I can sense it, deep in my bones, Rialta. Great power will accrue to us. You need only to trust me."

Rialta slept peacefully in her mother's guest room after a delicious meal served by Rulana, then awoke to the smell of rolls and coffee – an unexpected delicacy from the hills of Ulash. How her mother acquired such things was a mystery, but she was almost used to that by now.

After breakfast, Rowene insisted that her daughters take a walk with her, and she outfitted them both with ridiculous broad-brimmed straw hats and smooth, sturdy walking sticks. Rialta recognized the sticks instantly – they were Amaranthe wands, the double-handled kind, cut from the heartwood of great ash trunks. Even when doing something as simple as taking a walk, her mother played on several levels at once. They said goodbye to Willow at the gate and set off down the lane toward the rising hills farther south.

"Tell us about my grandchildren, Rialta," Rowene said as she moved them along at a chipper pace.

"Cainen wanders with his father, but I sense his spirit is growing stronger and I shall see him soon. Cerdith just passed her fourteenth birthday and excels at languages and archery. I saw Ritha just last week," Rialta said. "She is doing well in her studies and was excited about the stone circle she was able to sustain. Ten minutes, by herself, at Sab'Tana."

"How long before she takes her place beside you?"

"It could be within the next year," Rialta said. "She is 17, so it could happen at the first sabbat after her teacher declares her ready."

"And her Fathers? Have you selected them?"

"There are several candidates I'm rather fond of, but I haven't found all seven yet."

"Do you know which one will stand as the First Father?" Rowene asked.

"No. That honor is particularly hard to select."

"And your Fathers," Rowene said. "Have you met with them recently?"

Rialta blushed. "I'm afraid not. I've been rather busy."

"You should never be too busy to consult with the men who fathered your first child," Rowene said. "They were selected not merely to fill you with quality semen but to serve as your friends and trusted confidants during your term as priestess. Don't ignore their wisdom just because they are men. We women account for only half the wisdom of our species – even if it is the better half."

"I must admit that's the one thing I didn't regret about not taking my place beside mother," Rulana said. "The thought of entertaining seven young men, one after the other – well, that was never really appealing to me."

"It wasn't so bad, really," Rialta said, her thoughts going back to the ceremony that produced Ritha nine months later. "They were actually rather sweet to me. As introductions go, that's not a bad one."

"Personally, the thought of seven young men sounds pretty good to me these days," Rowene said. "I may have skin like an empty sack, but there are times when I still feel like a maiden instead of a crone. Seven young men – it would be like a buffet."

The women laughed.

"Daughters, it is good to hear us laugh together," Rowene said. "This is something we gone far too long without. And this is, in part, why I brought Rialta here. Rulana, it's time you two began sewing up those old wounds."

Rulana flushed red, but kept walking.

"What's past is past, mother," Rulana said. "I have accepted my place, renounced my power, and sought your forgiveness for the war I tried to wage against you. I have devoted my life to our life together, and I have drained my heart of the bitterness it held for my good sister. So I do wish you would just drop it."

"Not a chance, Rulana," Rowene said. "Listen, you're a good daughter, and you were always an extremely powerful witch in your own right – as I found out quite forcefully. But the bitterness remains in your heart for Rialta, and while we're not likely to resolve that problem today, it's high time we started. Not for some intimate little family harmony, but for the sake of the Old Path. Rialta's purpose is upon her and her full attention is needed on the tasks at hand. And though Rialta will not admit to it, she is not yet free of our past, either. She cannot be at her full power if part of her aches with regret and hopes for reconciliation with you."

"I do alright for myself," Rialta said. Rowene snorted derisively.

"You'd think three middle-aged witches from the same family would be able to speak truth to each other," Rowene said. "You're



both full of manure.”

“Well, you’re not always such a prize yourself, mother,” Rulana said.

“It’s true,” the older woman said. “I do enjoy playing tricks on you, but you bring it upon your own head, Rulana, by acting so full of yourself. And don’t even get me started on your sister here – if Rialta’s ass gets any tighter it will begin to play music.”

“Then what is it you want us to do?” Rulana asked. “You always get your way regardless, so why should I even pretend to oppose you?”

“Good, you’ve come around,” Rowene said. “Here, follow me.” With that, the bent old woman stepped off the lane and started striding up a grassy hill toward a small copse of trees and boulders atop the ridge above. Rialta kept pace with her easily, but big-boned Rulana struggled. They reached the trees in a few minutes, and Rowene raised her walking stick and turned around with her arms spread wide.

“No standing stones, no golden groves, no sacred history of rites passed down through the ages,” Rowene said. “Just three women on top of a beautiful hill in a beautiful land on a beautiful day, with the wind and the earth and the sky as our witnesses. We don’t need the trappings of magic – just the power of the planet itself is enough. Now cast the circle with me, and let us bind together whatever we have, not for ourselves, but for the Path. Agreed?”

“Wait a minute,” Rialta said. “Are you saying you just picked this place at random?”

“Of course! And isn’t it lovely?”

“Mother, that’s one of your personal charms scribed on that rock,” Rialta said.

“I never said I hadn’t come here before,” Rowene said, acting hurt.

Rulana looked around the knoll, then bent over and picked up a small stone.

“What is this?” She asked, holding up a small square of folded paper that had been hidden beneath it.

“How should I know?” Rowene protested. “Look, all I wanted to do ...”

“It’s our hair,” Rulana said, unfolding the paper. “You snipped off bits of our hair last night while we slept, didn’t you mother?”

“As if there’s a crime in that,” Rowene said, shrugging her shoulders. “Really, I don’t understand why you girls are so suspicious.”

“Perhaps we’re suspicious because we were raised by a woman who was always poking her fingers into things,” Rialta said. “What’s your point here, mother?”

“Oh fine, just ruin everything,” Rowene said, seating herself on one of the larger rocks. “This was for your own good.”

“You can’t make us like each other,” Rulana said.

“I was stupid to try,” said Rowene. “I’m just a foolish old woman.”

“Oh puh-leeze!” Rulana and Rialta said together.

“Do you see what I have to put up with?” Rulana said, gesturing toward the retired high priestess. “She’s constantly up to something. Every day, day after day after day. And then she sits around with those nattering ninnies from Bregon talking about flowers and babies and who is humping whom in the village and they talk for hours and they just never *shut up!*”

“Well what do you expect me to do about it?” Rialta shouted. “Trade places with you now? ‘Oh, look, Rulana, I’ll just put aside my job and the future of entire tarking world and come over and watch mom for you.’ Is that what you want?”

“I don’t want your stupid job anymore!” Rulana screamed. “Why can’t you people get that through your thick skulls! I made my mistakes in my youth and I’m done paying for them! I’m sick of this subject!”

“And I’m sick of acting apologetic for taking on a responsibility I never asked for in the first place!”

“Yeah? Well I’m sick of you strutting around with your trim little figure and your perky little tits and your nose stuck up in the air like you’re Little Miss Perfection!” Rulana said.

“Me? That’s the pot calling the cauldron black!” Rialta scoffed. “Look at yourself! You’re just the picture of martyred domestic perfection, Rulana. It’s not my fault that you decided to engage mother in a spell-war during my absence and she had to pull your teeth! That’s what cost you your powers, not me! So why don’t you just deal with the hand life dealt you and stop this incessant whining!”

“Come over here and I’ll stop your incessant *breathing*, you uppity...”

“Oh, don’t you call me uppity,” Rialta said.

“I’ll call you whatever I like! Because you’ve earned it! You’ve earned every bit of it!”

“What did I ever do to you?”

“You ruined my life!” Rulana screamed, catching her breath in surprise after the words escaped her lips. “That’s what you did! Those Fathers who loved you that night should have been my Fathers! Those children you bore and suckled should have been my children! The chain at your waist and the charm at your throat and the love of all the people who see you, all those things would have been mine! And, and, what’s worse is, *you don’t even appreciate it!*”

Rulana turned away from Rialta as she began to sob softly. The sound of it pulled Rialta in two directions – the first of which wanted only to get as far away from her sister as she could, while the other wanted nothing more than to hold her head and wipe the tears from her pretty face.

“Rulana, I never wanted this for you,” she said. “I never wanted this for either of us.”

“I know!” Rulana cried. “It’s not your fault! Oh, it’s just me! This is why I couldn’t be High Priestess, because I wanted it too much and I’ve been petty and mean about it ever since, first to mother, now to you. And I’ve tried so hard to get better about how I handle this.”

Rialta stepped up behind her and put a comforting hand on Rulana’s back. “Actually, you tried to kill mother. You only yelled at

me. So I'd say your efforts are paying off."

They both laughed, but Rulana's came out more like a snort because of her tears.

"I'm so sick of being angry," Rulana said.

"Will you forgive me?" Rialta asked. "Can you forgive me? I promise you I don't scorn this gift anymore. I take it very seriously. More seriously than I should."

"Of course I can forgive you," Rulana sniffled. "Can you forgive me?"

"In an instant," she replied.

Rulana turned her bleary face to Rialta, then spun swiftly and picked her up in a sudden embrace. Rialta gripped the back of her sister's neck and felt her warm tears on her own cheek. "It's going to be okay, honey," Rialta whispered. "And I need you so much right now."

"Okay," Rulana said, putting her down. "Okay. It's going to be okay."

They squeezed each other's hands one more time and sniffled before they turned toward the rock where Rowene had been sitting. But the rock was empty.

"She's gone!" Rialta said.

"What is she up to now?" Rulana said, turning around swiftly to look for their mother. The realization was slow to dawn on both of them.

"Oh my Goddess," Rialta said. "She's done it to us again."

"She planned the whole thing!" Rulana said. "That bitch!"

They caught sight of the old woman walking back down the lane below them, and a gust of wind that stirred the new grass as it ascended the hillside carried the sound of her triumphant laughter.

**T**heir voyage home to Beltan was even more enjoyable than the trip across, and Rialta noticed that Willow was like a flower that blooms when its face is turned toward the sun. The more attention Rialta showed her, the more beautiful Willow became, and the high priestess and the handmaiden gossiped and joked the whole way across the lake. By the time they reached their home shore, Willow glowed with an inner light, and the result was obvious upon the crew. They watched her intently and wistfully as the women guided their horses onto the dock, and Willow blushed as they waved good-bye to the men.

"Handmaiden Willow," Rialta said. "I think the time grows near when we should talk about your wedding."

"My wedding?" she asked. "I don't even have a lover, much less a betrothed."

"Yes, but I think it's time you did," Rialta said. "You are too beautiful and good to waste your life tending to me."

"But this is my life, Lady."

"We'll soon see about that," Rialta concluded.

After dinner with the rest of the order, Rialta pleaded fatigue and went upstairs to her quarters. She was truly tired, but mostly she found herself in need of some simple privacy. The bed beckoned, and she thudded into it.

The bouncing mattress overturning her travel bag, and along with her pocketknife, mirror and candle, an envelope spilled out of it onto her quilt. Rialta immediately recognized this as her mother's work, snapped open the blade of the knife and sliced the envelope. Her mother's hand had become less bold over the years, but it was still clearly her script.

*"Dearest Rialta:*

*"Forgive me for not speaking these words when you were present, but I wanted you to receive them in private, in the security of your own room.*

*"It's about your plans for the 2nd CRG. I agree that they are likely the source of the hero described in the prophecies, and you were wise to bring them here, however you managed it.*

*"But I suspect you have identified our General Alt as the hero, and in this instance I believe your instincts have failed you. I implore you not to invest too much energy in this man, for though he is brilliant beyond a doubt he is also – in my experience with him – arrogant, capricious, quick to judgment, unstable in temperament and generally ill-suited to the role you would assign him. In addition, despite his affection for our people, Alt is a Gherald, and the prophecies clearly call for one of our own.*

*"Instead, I urge you to look elsewhere in the 2nd CRG for our champion. This Sergeant Major LaTrent who is now chasing down wagons in Celon is an excellent candidate. So too is his fellow cavalryman and scout, a New Calpathian named Seamus Dannan, a handsome and valiant man who walks the Old Path. Our people would follow either into battle at Sidon, and both should be protected.*

*"There is, however, a third Guardsman who has come to my attention – a half-Mullaqat from Clyde Barrow named John Tera. You will remember him, of course, as the young pitcher whom you forbade to marry when he appeared before you as a teen-ager. This Tera is still angry over the girl you 'took' from him, and in his heart he blames you, my dear, for each and every suffering he has experienced since.*

*"I beg you not to judge him too harshly yet, for of all the options available to us now, he seems the most likely choice.*

*"Love – Mother."*

What bothered Rialta the most was her mother's knowledge of the men, since they had barely discussed the CRG and Alt. How could she have learned about the other three from her isolated perch at the cottage whilst keeping up her gardening schedule? In

truth, Rowene's knowledge of the situation exceeded her own, particularly on the matter of this John Tera. She hadn't sensed his weight on the web of connections between events, and her mother's focus on him made her wonder what else she had missed.

Her memories of Tera were vague, and she had to concentrate to call them into focus. She saw him as a whip-thin teen, a desperate child raised in the Sulist Daughters of Ljudgnah cloister of Clyde Barrow. He had fallen in love with a farmer's daughter from Llupanog while attending a pitchball festival, and after his team returned home Tera ran away to be with her again. Returned to the Daughter's cloister, he was lashed by the head priest, but escaped again— this time tracking his love to Beltan, where her parents had sent her for training in the Old Path sisterhood.

Tera came to Rialta's attention when he was caught in the initiates' dorm and brought to her for judgment. She remembered her horror at the wounds on his back, plus the touching mixture of sensitivity and ferocity in his eyes – but when he demanded that his intended bride be released to marry him, Rialta's sympathy evaporated. Her judgment attempted to offer the boy some mercy, granting him a three-month stay with a gentle farming family from the West Penn while his lady – a blonde Edain Clyde named Aideen – completed her initial training. But he was no more mature when he returned, and Rialta pronounced him unready to marry. Aideen agreed tearfully, and young Tera stormed away from Beltan and out of her life.

In truth, the High Priestess had given the incident little thought, and even though she was aware of Tera's presence in the 2nd CRG she had paid him scant attention. Judging matches was one of her duties, and she had judged thousands over the years. The only reason Tera remained in her mind at all was the pathos of his upbringing and his tragic inability to make use of an opportunity even when it was laid at his feet. Nor had things turned out well for his beloved Aideen, who dropped out of her training not long after his departure and returned to Llupanog. Rialta heard later that the once-promising initiate had married a Sulist farmer, and that was that.

Was there some emotion from her earlier experience with him that had dulled her sensitivity to what he had become? Her mother seemed quite impressed with him, yet he had barely registered for Rialta, whose attention had always flowed strongest to Tera's unit commander.

And could she have totally missed the mark with her attention on Alt? The thought worried her immensely. True, he was a Gherald, but she thought the prophecies were deliberately vague on the topic of whom the hero would be. Her translation from the Old Calpathian read: "a man will arise from the land of the Clydes." While others interpreted this more narrowly, Rialta believed that it only described the place from whence the hero would rise to prominence. But what if mother was right?

Still, this was no time to doubt her choices. She had felt the aura of destiny about Alt from the day they first met, back in their youth when he was a young lieutenant engineer and she was her mother's chosen successor. They met below Niamh: Rialta was on an intelligence-gathering mission from Rowene, and Alt was surveying for a bridge across the Eochu gorge in the foothills. The High Priestess had been concerned that the road was nothing more than a way to move a siege army to the gates of Gwynyr, but Rialta, after her visit with Lieutenant Alt, counseled Rowene to allow the project to proceed.

Rialta lay back on her bed and remembered the last portion of the project – the bridge that eliminated two miles of treacherous switchbacks below the falls in the Eochu gorge. Alt was short and odd-looking, but he had deep, sensitive eyes and he worked like a fiend alongside the laborers, dense muscles flexing and shining. Her younger self had admired the virility and power of the man, and many of the same traits she later came to love in Rolph LaFranq were present in the young Alt. His own feelings more than reciprocated hers, but though Rialta sensed a future between them she also sensed that this destiny would not involve a bed. She both led him on and held him back, and the bridge was completed a month ahead of schedule. Alt asked her if he could use the extra time to tour Gwynyr at her side, but while Rialta pondered his request new orders came for the lieutenant and he was off to Sidon to work on the city's decaying sewer system. Their farewell was awkward, for she offered him no opening for a kiss and the young man eventually shook her hand without looking in her eyes and hurried off to his horse. But the high-priestess-in-waiting never lost track of Alt's progress, and had always searched for a place for him in the prophecies she safeguarded.

The act of remembering only fed the flames of her doubt. Had she done nothing more than transfer her physical attraction to an intense young man into something grand and unthreatening? Was her image of him distorted by her own repressed feelings? Could she trust her intuition on anything that concerned the man?

Rialta stilled her mind, closed her eyes and silenced her internal critic. The answer came to her in Rulana's voice: "Just go with it." A smile spread across her face as she accepted this verdict, and she slept deeply.

Quinn and her entourage were waiting for Rialta at breakfast, and she considered it a sign of the times that the Fionnans were so regularly in attendance at mealtimes. The expression on the face of the Mistress of Fionna told her there was significant news to discuss, but they waited until the dishes were washed and put away by the witches of Orwyne.

"Speak," Rialta said when they were alone.

"Strange goings on in Arnell these days," Quinn said. "Have you considered the implications of the attack on the Messenger of Darbas, my Lady?"

"They are no more dire for Messenger Tuckard than they are for the rest of us," Rialta said. "The attempt on his life was very much of his own making, for our dear Mr. Tuckard enjoys his own cleverness. Your Glynnis will keep him safe, I'm sure."

"My dear Lady, your callous tone is far from convincing," Quinn said. "Pete Tuckard was a dear friend of yours, and it was your warning that sent our Glynnis out in search of him. Why not admit to your fondness for the old man?"

"I am fond of many people, but that is neither here nor there. These are treacherous times, and everyone who has a part to play must play that part, whether their personal outcome be happy or sad. Pete's part is not complete, and though yes, I love him fondly, it is his position I protect, not the man. I cannot let emotion cloud me in this matter, Quinn."

"I see," Quinn said. "What a fine Fionnan operative you would have made, Lady."

"Yes, but that is not my role, is it? Now, what else is on your mind?"

"The news from Celon is very interesting," Quinn said. "There's a band of soldiers from the 2nd CRG roaming in the countryside now, and this past week these rovers captured a team of wagons headed for Bluff's Folly and sent them back to the city. Rather a large and heroic celebration of this feat in New Calpathia, I am told."

"Is Alt in command of these rovers?" Rialta asked.

"He has remained at New Calpathia," Quinn answered. "We have a Fionnan very close to him, and she reports on a regular basis. You favorite general is making quite an impression in the camps and with the city fathers, but so far he has ventured no farther. We do believe, however, that the mounted rovers were his idea, even though he disassociates himself from them."

"And the rovers – who leads them?"

"A long-time cavalry sergeant named Coom LaTrent. He makes even more news than Alt, and apparently he's quite the striking figure."

"Are there any other names that rise to your attention?" Rialta asked.

"In particular? There's a very interesting New Calpathian named Seamus Danna. You may be familiar with him."

"The name is familiar."

"The last name particularly," Quinn said. "His father, Thamas, was a member of the Valand who broke his vow and deserted. The stories we hear suggest his son Seamus may be using both Valand training and weapons out in the countryside."

"Did the father manage to escape us with his *sioboeth*?"

"Oh yes. It was quite the scandal at the time"

"You'd think I'd remember it more clearly," Rialta said. "That doesn't happen often."

"Hardly ever," said Quinn. "But now the gossips in the refugee camps tell a story about Danna wielding a magical sword and killing twenty men single-handedly. We believe Thamas passed his *sioboeth* on to his son."

"And this LaTrent," Rialta said. "He is becoming a hero?"

"Rather self-consciously a hero. He rode into New Calpathia at the head of the hijacked wagon train himself – leaving the bulk of his unit in the field without a commander, by the way. The people of the camps gave him presents – apparently he likes feathers – and he left the next day with an even larger group of riders. Most of them are civilians, but he plans to bolster his forces now and become even bolder."

"It sounds as if the counter-uprising has finally begun," Rialta said. "Yet I will be honest with you, Quinn – I do not sense greatness in this man LaTrent."

"His loyal fans would be most disappointed to hear that, my Lady."

"What of the force he left behind in the field?" Rialta asked. "Have you heard any news of their progress?"

"Only that they were pursuing more wagon trains into the Celon Forest. But I am largely dependent on reports from the field – you're the one with the gifts. What do they tell you, Rialta?"

"I feel strangely blocked in this matter," Rialta said. "Makes me want to twiddle my hair."

Quinn grinned at her. "Twiddle away, my Lady, if it clears your mind."

"It's as if there is a gap in my intuition," Rialta said, her voice trailing off as she wondered at the anomaly. "A rather well-placed gap, and large enough to accommodate a gang of oxen. It's as if my own gifts are conspiring to withhold information from me."

A second thought occurred to her, and her eyes narrowed suddenly.

"Or, of course, perhaps someone else is using their gifts to obscure an important fact from me. We are a nation of witches, of course. It could be anybody."

"Knowing something of your powers, my Lady, I'd think the number of potential meddlers would be quite reduced."

"I wouldn't be surprised if that number was very, very small indeed," Rialta said. "Quinn, we are going to make a journey, you and I. Send riders ahead to the Valand barracks at Rhodig Fast and prepare a guard of ten warriors. I want you and your best women to accompany me in the morning."

"Where are we going, my Lady?"

"We shall strap on the swords we wore long ago, my teacher, meet the Valand at their fortress and descend the Rhodig Heights to the Celon Forest. I want to get a look with my own two eyes at whatever it is someone else is hiding from my inner sight."



*In Llughmah, Luzustrus found his perfect servant, for she was good and trusting and kind and guileless. Only later, in her shame and surrender to Telios, did Ludnasagh achieve holiness, and her compassion for the sinful and lost conveys the Love-That-Surpasses-Understanding, the infinite grace and mystery of Telios, to a wicked world. Her suffering completed her.*

*So when the student asks, What is the command of Sula when we are confronted by the cohorts of the enemy? Answer thusly: Leave the mercy to Llughmah, leave the judging to Telios, and serve as you have been commanded by righteousness.*

*We confront a spiritual enemy who is the perfect liar. Do you think you can outwit him?*

*Therefore trust not your eyes, nor your ears, for these are the weapons of Luzustrus. Do not trust your tender emotions, for that is the weakness of women, beguiled by The Evil That Poses as Beauty.*

*To be a true servant of the Sailmaker and to act on behalf of Telios demands a faith that will march through fire and never falter. We must be strong if we hope to prevail at the Great Counting.*

—**The Third Tanu-Mutan**, verses 16-20, *Letters IX*

## Chapter 7

## Tera

There were nights when John Tera went eagerly to his meetings with Tanith Powdras, for sometimes he hungered for escape. He counted himself lucky to have found her in particular – all of the eight other enlisted judges of the 2nd CRG had found their own dream wives after the splinter was removed from their foreheads, but many of those matches brought the men little satisfaction after a few years. He had been with Tanith for a long time now, and she was often the only thing in his life that brought him any pleasure.

“How long have you been here?” Tera asked her as he leaned back against her in the spring-fed pool.

“Time is meaningless here,” she said.

“Not true,” he replied, but it was a relaxed contradiction. “You feel the time when I am away, or else you wouldn’t be jealous of my waking life.”

“Whoever said anything about being jealous?” Tanith said, pulling a strand of his hair sharply. “I am not jealous, I am lonely. When you are here, the spring and the grove and the grass become full and we are surrounded by time and touch. When you are gone there is no time – only the experience of being in this place with only myself for company.”

“But you have communication with other spirits,” he said. “You could have conversations. You could gossip.”

“I can have communication with whatever I please. I can go anywhere I choose to go. But the problem with this plane is that there’s no difference between places, spirits, this and that. There is only oneness on this plane, and it’s dreadfully boring.”

“Then why don’t you come back to the physical plane? There’s little oneness there,” Tera said.

“Oh John, you are a silly man. Your plane is far too painful, and I’ve been here for far too long to go back now.”

“I thought you said there wasn’t any time here,” he said.

“There isn’t a word for what I’m talking about,” Tanith Powdras said. “Not a word you would understand. Besides, we can become who we are slowly, or it can happen all at once. Here, everything happens all at once – except when you’re in the glen.” She bent and kissed the side of his neck. “And then I get to experience each moment... one after the other ... in all its delicious fullness.”

“Lovely, dear,” Tera said. “Except you’re changing the subject.”

“You are a skinny ox,” she pouted. “You’re so stubborn it makes you stupid sometimes. Don’t you understand? This is not my home. This is the place where we meet, and we both create it together. It is a retreat for two souls, love. This is why we sought each other out – because we both need this place.”

“But I am not the first judge you’ve met here, am I?”

“Of course you’re not my first judge – but you’re the first judge I’ve met *here*. And you’re quite my favorite.”

“Tanith,” Tera said, sitting up and turning around. “Help me to understand this. If I were to die in my physical body, how could this place continue to exist? I mean, if I were timeless, wouldn’t I slip into this void you talk about as well?”

“No,” she said, finally getting serious. “It’s the relationship between two souls that creates this place. It’s what goes on between us that gives it time and space, and so long as we are both here together in love, everything is beautiful.”

“Then what happened with your previous judges? Why aren’t you with one of them instead of waiting around for me?”

“Must we talk about this?” Tanith Powdras asked. Her eyes pleaded with him. “You came to me so passionately this time, as if I were the only person who could wash the blood and pain from you. I could feel you need me. Can’t you just feel me need you and let that be enough?”

“I must know,” Tera said. “Your enigmas trouble me in my waking life. Why were you there waiting for me when they pulled the splinter from my forehead? What happened to my predecessor?”

Tanith resigned herself to the conversation and splashed water on her face. "Because we stopped loving each other, and the place we had made for our illusion stopped being beautiful. It was a palace on a hillside, but he didn't believe in it the way I did. So the rooms became dingy and the gardens outside grew rank with weeds. That is what happens when love dies, John – our beautiful illusions become nightmares from which we cannot wake. Only two can create a paradise, and one alone cannot sustain it."

"Where is he now?" Tera asked.

"He went back," she said. "I wasn't even sad to see him go, because he wasn't like you. He was a grenadier, too enamored of the body, anyway. I think I prefer archers, for your art takes place in your mind."

"And the others? The ones before your grenadier?"

"Went back. All gone."

"And how do you know I won't go back, Tanith? When it's my turn to leave my body behind?"

"Perhaps you will," she said, leaning forward to kiss his lips. "But I think you truly love me – not just the pleasure I provide you, but me, my soul. Look around us. This spring is my favorite place ever. It's so simple, yet everything about it is perfect. The others created elaborate visions with me, places with towers and turrets and silk sheets and cushions. But here I am so much more beautiful, even though my clothes are simple and I have no bed. This place we have created flows from love, John, and everything about it touches me. I could stay here with you forever and never seek another lover."

"Do I love you, Tanith? Or is that just a dream as well?"

"You love me," she said, kissing him again. "Of that I have no doubt. Yet I am not all you love. You will have to decide if love that brings pain is more dear to you than love that brings only bliss."

Their kisses grew deeper, and Tera lifted her from the spring and carried her to where their cotton sheet lay in swaying pools of sunlight and shadow beneath the trees. Afterward, Tanith let him sleep, for even though he came to her during his waking sleep, his physical body and mind could not refresh itself if he passed the whole night playing with her. He passed out of Tanith's glen and into his own dreams, where his soul sorted through its troubles and soothed the kinks out of his day.

He woke just after dawn in the Celon Forest to find Seamus Dannan seated beside him, already dressed for the day in the blue-gray light of the morning. The cavalryman gazed at him with a bemused smile, and offered him one of two steaming tin cups of tea.

"Here," Dannan said. "Ulash tea from yesterday's plunder. The thought of it woke me early."

Tera tried to sit up, but a fresh pain in his left arm made him wince.

"How's the arm?" Dannan asked. "It looks like it bled again in the night."

Tera managed to rise to a sitting position with the use of his right arm and examined the dressing on his left. The white bandages were stained red, a reminder of the sword tip that had slashed across his forearm the day before as he stumbled away from his attacker with his hands raised in futile self-defense. Only Dannan's quick action had saved him from the ambush, and the fleeing *ouhasandan* pickets had led them right to the wagon with the broken axles they were trying to protect. This group tried to stand and fight, but there were only eight of them, and they were teamsters, not warriors. Tera felt only revulsion at their deaths.

"It hurts," Tera said. "I don't know that I'll be able to draw a bow for some time."

"Here," Dannan said. "Try this brace." He flipped a stiff leather gauntlet to Tera. "It will help keep pressure on the wound while you ride, and if you must defend yourself, the hard piece that runs from elbow to palm will take some of the tension off your wound."

Tera slipped the brace over his palm and tied off the thongs that secured it to his arm. It left his fingers free, but bending his wrist would be quite impossible. "This is wonderful," he said, cinching it down. "I've worn archery braces before, but never one like this."

"My father made it," Dannan said. "It was a gift to me when I left for the Guard."

"Your father was quite a craftsman."

"In many ways," Dannan said. "You might understand him better than most, for you, too, are of the Old Path. I'm correct in that, am I not?"

Tera looked around self-consciously, but Watts was off doing something with the horses and Smyth was fifteen feet away with a toothbrush hanging from his mouth while he strapped on his boots, his red hair shooting out from his head in spikes and waves.

"Yes," Tera said. "In my heart, I am."

"It's okay," Dannan said. "I understand that quite well. My parents attended the Sulist temple and taught me blend in with my neighbors. But in our home we walked the Old Path with quiet feet. Sometimes not so quiet."

"My mother came from the sect at Eilydon, so she was Old Path but not truly of Gwynyr," Tera said. "When she became pregnant and had to leave, she settled at a Daughters of Llugnah compound and that's where I was raised."

"So you weren't just raised with knowledge of the Temple – you were raised in the Temple itself."

"Just outside it, actually," Tera said. "Life in the cloister was a little strange."

"I will admit this to you," Dannan said. "I understand why my parents left Gwynyr, but part of me grows lonely for people who think as we do. Hiding my beliefs – my training – has been hard."

"I wasn't trained as you were," Tera said. "My mother did little witchy things, but she didn't often speak openly of them, and I didn't really understand what they were until I spent some time in Gwynyr."

Dannan was impressed, and instantly interested. "You've been there? Not the foothills but the highlands themselves?"

"Just a summer, really, and most of that in the West Penn. But I did get to see Beltan."

"Is it as glorious as they say?"

Tera sipped the tea Dannan had brought him.

"It's a beautiful city," he said. "But I was not happy there."

They both drank in silence for a moment.

"Please pardon me if this is too personal," Dannan said, "but do you have a dream wife like the other judges?"

"I have one," Tera replied, "though whether she is like the others I cannot say."

"And is her name Aideen?"

Tera's tea went down his windpipe and exploded out of his mouth as he coughed violently.

"I'm sorry, John," Dannan said. "That was too personal."

"Where did you hear that name?" Tera asked.

"You said it in your sleep, just now as I was bringing you tea," Dannan said. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to wake you from her."

"No," Tera said. "It's not a problem. Thank you for letting me sleep."

Dannan rode close to him much of the day, in part to keep watch over the wounded archer but also, Tera thought, because he sought some friendship. Tera was flattered, for Dannan was quickly becoming a legend, but it also occurred to him that the younger sergeant might see him, too, as something more than just another soldier. Tera had never been the great fighter Dannan was, but his name was known throughout the CRGs for his various exploits, and judges carried special status. Tradition called for them to serve alongside the men in their old platoons as a means of keeping them humble, but that didn't stop the other Guardsmen from regarding them as special. Nor did it prevent the judges from beginning to believe it.

The four scouts left the broken wagon where they'd found it, but not before removing what provisions would serve them and leaving a note for the main body, now greatly diminished by the departure of LaTrent, Perot and all the civilians. While LaTrent escorted the recaptured wagons back to New Calpathia, Zylén had been left in command. In truth the decisions were made by Dannan – Zylén merely endorsed them when the scouts rode back for councils. Their progress through the forest had been slow, and Tera had begun to realize that despite LaTrent's vanity, the man had a gift for leadership that Zylén – and even Dannan – sorely lacked.

By seniority and position, Tera could have easily assumed command in LaTrent's absence. LaTrent had even suggested it. But Tera was never eager to take such a role, preferring to serve instead of lead. Though he had spent much of his career performing reconnaissance missions, seldom had he done so on horseback, and this band of rovers was definitely patterned after the cavalry's methods. Besides, even though Dannan had only seven years service – and merely two years as a sergeant – he had proven himself more than capable of the job.

Still, as yesterday's ambush had proven, the forest was a dangerous place for a quartet of mounted scouts. The road to Celon Gate and The Edain beyond was narrow and deep, with stately trees on either side. There was little sense scouting for the wagons, for they were clearly just ahead of them, but then again, so were the *ouhasandans* that guarded them. Tera felt the inevitability of their collision with a larger force to be too great a risk and favored reuniting the scouts with the main body, but Dannan liked the idea of keeping the advance party and trusted that they would be able to disengage in the event of an encounter.

"Watts, would you bring me the map?" Dannan asked as they forded a tiny stream at the bottom of a draw. Watts stopped alongside him and handed over the oft-folded piece of paper. "See how the road swings up along this spur and then levels out on top?" Dannan said, pointing. "That's this crossroads right there."

"Looks like there's some kind of settlement," Watts said. "Odd place for it."

"Definitely a couple of buildings there, according to the map," Smyth said, peering over Dannan's shoulder.

"I don't like it," Dannan said. "What do you think, John?"

"I'm surprised we haven't run up on a skirmish line already," Tera said. "If they've made any use of those buildings, they'll at least keep a perimeter watch on the roads for anything that might approach."

"We'll fan out," Dannan said. "Smyth and I will swing the farthest wide, cross this logging road that runs north-south on either side, and come in on the crossroads from the opposite direction. Watts and Tera will get off on either bank of this road, stay well out of sight, and probe for defenses here – on foot, of course, as you near the intersection. Understood?"

"Where's the rally point?" Watts asked. Dannan scanned the map.

"According to this, there's a high-ground clearing just off this side road, about a mile south of the intersection," Smyth said. "What do you think?"

"Seems like a nice place for lunch," Dannan said. "Agreed?"

They were. The men waved goodbye, and Tera found himself alone in the great Celon Forest for the first time in his life.

Unlike the Conall Forest to which it connected in the north, the forest that divided Celon from Edain covered a land of steep valleys and significant hills. The trees here had never been cut, and the forest was comprised foremost of great firs that rose straight as sunbeams to form a canopy high above the floor. What undergrowth the forest produced was soft with spring buds and, where the ground was flat, rose from vast beds of bear grass. The tall, bare trunks of the firs gave the forest a tremendous, airy stillness, and the light that filtered through from above reminded Tera of the great Sulist cathedral of St. Jallaed in Sidon. It was a kind of natural beauty he had never encountered before, and experiencing it alone gave him an almost reverent feeling.

Tera let his mount pick its own way through the wood, rounding the trunks of fallen trees rather than leaping them. There was no rush – if the crossroads were defended, he or Watts would be the first to encounter the line and there was no sense in moving too quickly and being seen. This was scouting, not raiding, and Tera was not in the mood to die on such a beautiful day. The Mullaqat



side of his soul should have desired exactly such a death, but the spirit of his mother's people had always ruled him. Let the Mullaqat dream of death, Tera thought. It will find me one day whether I seek it or not.

He found estimating distance difficult in the forest, but after about twenty minutes felt he must have covered at least a mile: about two-thirds of the distance to the crossroads. That was close enough for safety's sake, and Tera dismounted and tied his horse off to the limb of a fallen fir. He chose to carry little with him – nothing but his dagger and his bow, plus his canteen. As he set off, he found himself appreciating the stalking moccasins the New Calpathians had provided, for if he picked his way carefully he made almost no sound as he passed.

The ground had flattened out as the map had promised, and he found himself striding silently through a shaded undergrowth of knee-high grass. At one point he startled a herd of deer, and the sudden movement terrified him. He dropped to the ground instinctively before he recognized that the sound came from animals and not the enemy. After that he moved more slowly, his eyes alert to slight changes. More significantly, he had tuned his mind to his inner sight, and though his ability to focus it was limited to testimony by wound, it still gave him flashes and colors and hints of things his eyes couldn't see. As he drew nearer to the crossroad, he felt as if he were walking in a meditation, and the air began to take on the color of danger. Tera knew there were *ouhasandans* at the crossroads long before he saw them, but the anticipation gnawed at him.

There should have been guards – groups of them spread out on either side of the roads leading away from the junction, enough to halt a moving column and hold off an attack long enough for the rest of the group to mount a defense. But even though Tera doubled back after spotting the tavern that sat by the intersection, he found no guards, nor even evidence that they had ever properly defended this place. Perhaps they didn't know how to set up a perimeter, Tera thought, but the task was so simple that it boggled his mind to consider such lack of precaution. Finally satisfied that he hadn't left a hidden line of pickets behind him, Tera moved forward, keeping low and staying behind trees.

The tavern stood out from a good distance – it was two stories high, made of notched logs, and smoke rose from its chimney. Along with the sight of it came the sounds of *ouhasandan* voices, querulous and obstinate in a language he didn't understand. To Tera they sounded drunk, but that would be good fortune of a kind he didn't expect.

Drawing nearer, he began to pick out other details. Behind the rough tavern stood a low barn, for horses only, he figured, and catty-cornered at the crossroads stood another building – perhaps a home, or maybe a trading post. The forest seemed to open up behind it, and on closer inspection he could see that perhaps a quarter acre of trees had been felled there – recently, it seemed, for smoke curled into the air from piles of wood and brush.

Tera approached the crossroads from the southwest corner. Before him lay a low structure of recent, shoddy construction. He stopped and let the pieces of information form and fall into place in his mind. A tavern on the southeast corner with a stable for horses. A trading post on the northwest corner where someone was building a clearing. Immediately in front of him, something new – a barracks, perhaps? Whatever it was, it blocked his view of the ground northeast of the crossroads. There might be nothing there at all – this was already the most significant settlement they had passed since they entered the forest two days earlier, and even if it was the meeting place for those who made their home in the surrounding woods, there was little to sustain much activity. Tera found himself wishing for high ground that would let him see it all at once, but the forest was flat and open here. There was nothing to do but risk moving closer.

The ground behind the long building before him had been cleared to a depth of about twenty-five feet, and the stumps were squat and fresh. Tera hugged the dirt and considered going no further, but his vantage point was sorely limited. Some chickens pecked at the ground among the stumps, and against the back wall of the building stood a row of wooden barrels under a pollen-stained tarp. While the tarp looked old, light-blonde staves indicated the barrels were quite new. He heard the sound of coughing from within the building, but it was a woman's cough, not a grown man's.

Minutes passed without movement or more clues, and Tera's curiosity began to overcome his fear. The drunken-sounding voices near the tavern faded as the sun climbed toward noon, and Tera risked moving closer. He darted across the stump-filled yard to the row of barrels and knelt to inspect them: Celon whiskey from Brazo Luc, charcoal filtered and potent. Even one barrel was more than a year's wages for a local farmhand, but the stash here was wealth beyond imagining for an *ouhasandan* from Hassan. He could understand why this hadn't been ahead to the troops outside Sidon. This trading post was more than just some routine way station along the raiders' route to the Edain.

Tera skirted the edge of the building, staying low to avoid casting shadows through the poorly chinked logs. Reaching the corner, he crawled around it and rose only slightly to give himself a view of the crossroads. What he saw appalled him.

At least a dozen *ouhasandans* were sprawled around the front porch of the tavern, most of them passed out or sleeping, a few seated on the benches or steps half-dozing in benches. But the women set him back. There were five of them, in bloody, tattered clothing, lolling listlessly beneath the hitching rails to which their hands had been tied. They ranged in age from early teens to one who appeared to be in her mid-fifties, and what they were doing there was not immediately apparent. That they had been sorely mistreated was obvious. And everyone was waiting for something.

The minutes drifted by, but in time Tera heard a stirring inside the tavern, then the sounds of an argument between men. The drowsy *ouhasandans* heard it too, and roused themselves. Soon two men – a balding brute and younger man with no front teeth – came through the door and walked to the hitching post that held the five women.

They appeared to be haggling, and the point of contention was the older woman.

Tera expected the women to respond in some way, but their fatigue was too profound. They barely moved even when the men prodded and squeezed them, but the older woman took the worst of it. The bald man hoisted her to her feet by the hair and bent her over the rail, lifting her skirts to give the toothless man a better look. He spanked her behind, dropped the skirt, and spun her

around with her chin in his hand to display her face. The toothless man shook his head in disagreement, waving his hands, and the older woman began to cry.

Tera had to avert his eyes when he saw the bald man pull out a curved knife, but the sudden screams of the other women told him what terrible deed had just been done.

The casual murder of the older woman appeared to move the negotiations forward, and in a few minutes the toothless man shouted to the sleepy-eyed men on the porch and they hustled off across the crossroads toward the building where Tera hid. He prayed they would go around the other side of the building, and luck was with him. He could hear them in the rear, lifting the tarp and grunting as they hoisted one of the kegs. They emerged again, struggling under the weight of the whiskey, and sat it down in front of the bald man. Satisfied, he issued orders to the men on the bench, who sauntered toward the back of the inn. They returned with five more Clydish women, all of them of child-bearing age, tied together with ropes that bound their hands behind their backs and strung them ankle to ankle. The bald man and the toothless man shook hands, and Tera realized he had just witnessed their sale.

He watched in horror as the men cut the cords that bound the women, striking those who gave any indication of resistance, and led them across the crossroads to the barn-like building that sheltered him. He pressed his back against the side wall as they approached, and when he heard the front door open, the sound of screaming and wailing burst from within the walls.

This was no barracks, Tera realized. It was a barn – a barn for women.

He pressed his face against one of the logs and peered through the chinks. The light was poor, but he could make out human forms rising off the straw floor, scattering for the corners as the new prisoners were pushed inside. The men struck out at the women with the sticks they carried, and he could see them chasing around in the dark. The wailing disconcerted him and made him want to close his eyes, but he forced himself to look anyway. Soon the men had found what they had come for, and they closed and latched the door behind them. Tera peeked around the corner and saw them dragging a very young-looking girl back toward the tavern. Unlike the others who screamed, she only cried softly and clutched at her torn dress. Two men supported her by the arms, and her feet barely touched the ground, for they surely could not have carried her to where she was going.

Tera sat back against the log wall, trying to control his breathing. He peeked again, and even the drowsy drunks were up and smiling now, following the toothless tavern keeper and the bald slaver through the door. Fifteen men, dragging one schoolgirl inside to celebrate their deal. Never in his life had Tera felt so much rage coupled with so much impotence.

To assault the *ouhasandans* now would be to risk more than just his own neck, since even at fifteen-to-4 odds the scouts' chances of victory would be slim. Even that assumed that all four of them would move at once, and even if the other scouts were here, they had no way to communicate? Besides, there might be more men inside the tavern, not to mention the third building across the road. He had seen no one enter or leave it, but that didn't mean it was empty. In fact, his intuition told him, it was not.

Still, to run away and do nothing? He had not caught a clear glimpse of the young girl they had hauled away, but the sight of her being led across to the tavern burned his eyes even when he held them open. And the murdered woman – he had turned away at the moment of her death, but the men had just left her folded at the waist across the hitching rail, too inconsequential to even drag away.

Too much terror. Too much hatred. Too much blood and death. Life had inured him to too much pain and horror over the years, but never had he witnessed such a scene. What little faith in humanity remained in him was now nothing more than dry dust lifted by the wind, and he realized this, too, was a Mullaqat image: "The soul comes from dust and there it shall return." He closed his eyes and saw the image of his half-Mullaqat father, John al-Barqat, standing beside him in the fields outside the Daughters' cloister on one of his visits. "It is only life, like a breeze, that stirs the dust and makes it rise, my son. But eventually, all souls settle back to the one. This is the way of life, and there is no tragedy in it. Those who say we Mullaqat love death are only half right, you see, for what we love is the stirring, the wind of life that carries us aloft. When you feel that stirring in you, you must follow it wherever it leads. Only do not fear the settling that must follow."

Tera had alternately caressed and rejected those words, throwing himself after passions and bearing their after-effects with stoic indifference for most of his life. And yet he hated his father as well, for the suffering and self-destruction his impulses had often wrought.

And what would al-Barqat say here? Would he recognize that rage, too, was a form of the life-force stirring? Or would he shake his head like the apathetic poet he was and counsel pacifism? "Only God can give life, John. And only God should take it away. That is not for you to judge." Damn him, Tera thought.

He opened his eyes again and found himself staring up toward the tops of the trees. All had been such stillness and peace only an hour before. After the violence of the previous week, what a gift from spirit to have those few minutes alone in the forest. That is what awaits me, he thought. Just peace, and a place by Tanith if that is what I choose. Then the war will end, this constant war and struggle. My body will fall away, return to my father's dust, leaving all those old wounds and scars behind.

But what of hope? That too would fall away, and in some deeply chambered corner of his soul he had always kindled hope, as faint and abstract as it was. That was his mother's teaching, hers and Sister Chibura's. Even in his darkest hours, the times when death would have been sweet release, that insistent little flame had pushed him one step further, one step further. And it wasn't gone, not yet. He felt it flicker, but hope remained in his heart. That's fine, Tera thought. I can carry it until the end, and it will not desert me.

He traced the pentagram over his heart and whispered "For my loves – mother, Chibura, Aideen and Tanith," then closed his hand into a fist and kissed it. He had done so before many a battle, but this time he felt another love tugging at his sleeve and he paused.

“And for this world,” he said.  
That settled it, and he was ready.

**H**is first thought was for the women trapped inside the newly built barn. If he freed them they might have a chance, but if they screamed as they had before they would only draw attention to him and all would be for naught. Tera realized he could not open the door and free them – but he could certainly lift the latch. Getting to that latch would be something of a trick, for he would have to cross the front of the building in full view of the two *ouhasandans* who patiently waited their turn on the porch of the tavern. He let a few more minutes pass, and soon the bald-headed slaver stomped out onto the porch and tapped one of the two men on the shoulder to go inside. The bald man stepped around the corner of the tavern and stopped to take a pee off the porch. That should be enough, Tera thought.

Stretching his bow was difficult, and the wound on his left arm screamed for relief despite the leather brace supporting it. Tera silenced the pain as best he could and brought the fletched end of the arrow against his cheek, drawing down until the notched sight on his bow reached the chest of the sleepy *ouhasandan* who leaned against the wall on the back two legs of his wooden chair. Tera raised his arm slightly to add elevation for the range and released.

The silent arrow sped on its way, descending with tremendous speed that drove it so far through the *ouhasandan's* skull that it pinned his head firmly to the log behind it. He died instantly, and outside of a minor convulsion, barely moved. The bald man continued his extended urination unaware of the death at his back.

Tera duck-walked to the door of the barn, kneeling beside it to examine the latch. It was a simple thing, really, just a piece of wood on a cord that fit through the heavy board that barred the door. He slipped it out and raised the creaky board slowly out of the way, using the latch itself to hold it open. The women inside would only have to push out and they would be free, but that was something they would have to do for themselves if he did not make it back.

Now for the slaver's turn. The bald man had finished relieving himself and was shaking off the last drops when Tera took aim and let his arrow fly. It whisked off with the archer's animosity trailing behind it, for he knew where the man's organ had been and wanted nothing more than to see the bald man die.

For once in his life, though, John Tera got to have his pleasure doubled. At almost the same instant that Tera's long arrow sank into the *ouhasandan's* broad back, a bolt from an unseen crossbow ripped through the man's throat. He fell to his knees, unable to bellow but not yet dead, clutching in confusion at his wounds, then pitched over off the porch, face-first into his own puddle of stinking mud.

Tera had an ally.

He jogged toward the tavern with a third arrow fitted to his bow and aimed toward the door. But the first movement came not from the door but the side of the building by the stable – a lone *ouhasandan*, looking as if he had just roused himself from a drunken stupor. He froze when he saw Tera, then shouted a confused “Hey!” In the moment it took the *ouhasandan* to understand, Tera stopped, redirected his aim, and sunk his shot squarely into the center of the man's chest. It didn't drop him. The *ouhasandan* stared at Tera if as if pleading silent, horrified ignorance, so Tera took two steps closer, raised his bow again, and shot him a second time. The man collapsed almost at his feet.

The sound of footfalls at his back spun Tera around, but it was Dannan who approached behind him, not an enemy. The long-haired sergeant pointed to the roof, and they ran across the muddy road together to the porch of the tavern. Tera gave him a boost up and Dannan swung onto the canted roof, mantling himself toward the open window on the second floor. That's where she is, Tera thought.

Moments after Dannan drew himself up against the wall, a shirtless *ouhasandan* stuck his head out the window to see what the noise was. Dannan's *sioboeth* flashed down, separating the man's head from his shoulders so that it rolled down the roof, landing with a thud on the ground in front of Tera. The dead face was frozen in a look of everlasting surprise.

Though he could hear a commotion upstairs, Tera didn't pause to watch. The dead man in the leaning chair cradled a DuQadish broadsword in his lap, and Tera unsheathed it, stringing his bow across his back. Perhaps he could kill some more as if they rushed out the door, he thought, and he pressed himself against the wall, waiting.

But instead of *ouhasandans*, the next face he saw was Noan Smyth. He rounded the corner of the building at a sprint, and tripped over the body of the bald man. Smyth was up in an instant, his excited face asking the wordless question, “What the hell are you doing?” Tera placed a finger to his lips, pantomimed loading a crossbow and motioned toward the back door of the tavern. Smyth nodded and hurried off.

Inside, Tera could make out the sound of yelling, fists pounding on a locked door and boots on wooden stairs. Dannan would need help, but could likely take them one at a time at the door upstairs, so Tera struggled with the adrenaline that raced through him and waited. Long seconds passed, and he picked up the sound of an irritated man stomping toward the front door. Tera raised the sword, but waited until the man had stepped clear of the doorway before he delivered the blow to the side of his neck. It was the toothless innkeeper, and he fell stunned to the floor of the wooden porch, grasping at the blood that pulsed from his artery and stared up at Tera in shock. The second strike clove the man's face.

Confusion broke wild at that moment. Masculine screams broke out upstairs, followed by the sound of feet running down risers. In the front room of the inn, *ouhasandans* looked out the door and saw the sight of a blood-spattered Clyde holding a sword. Rather than charge toward him, they ran toward the back door, which aligned with the front to allow the air to circulate. The first *ouhasandan* out the back met with Smyth, who planted a bolt in the flesh of the man's belly. He fell backward, bellowing like a gored ox, and the crush of men trying to flee the inn found themselves cramped and crushed in the hallway by the stairwell.

Tera experienced a moment of his own confusion. He was loathe to enter the dark tavern, but to stand on the porch looking frightening was only a momentary advantage. Yet again, fate chose for him: an arrow suddenly appeared in front of his face – an *ouhasandan* arrow that embedded itself firmly in the doorframe. Tera looked back in its direction of origin and saw three raiders in various stages of undress emerging from the house across the road. Significantly, each one carried a bow and the first man was reloading. Tera ducked inside the tavern and decided he would take his chances there.

The chaos served him well, for with Smyth sniping from the back yard, the men in the hallway were in a panic to get somewhere else. The shots were not all fatal, but already three men were wounded from his bolts, and their screams and the sound of the men trying to push their way out of the stairwell into Smyth's line of sight made the tavern a cacophony of terror. Tera closed and barred the door behind him to hold the enemy archers at bay, then descended with a Clydish battle cry on the men fleeing before him in the hallway.

So far, none of them had found their wits sufficiently to seek a proper weapon. The raider nearest him grabbed a chair to shield himself, and Tera dared not test the mettle of his DuQaddish bronze sword by trying to smash through the wood. Instead he grabbed a leg and shoved, pushing the man so that he fell backward against his mates. He twisted as he sprawled over the man behind him, and Tera used the opening to pierce his back with the sword point.

One of the raiders finally had the good sense to slam shut the back door, and the already gloomy inn fell another shade darker. Only Tera and Dannan were inside with the enemy, and they were outnumbered at least 6-to-2, with another three men wounded but not yet dead. Tera heard the *ouhasandan* archers pounding on the door behind him, then the sound of window glass shattering. They would either come in via that route or spot him inside and put an arrow through his skull in another moment, so Tera abandoned his attack in the hallway and sprinted across the shabby front room to the hearth. He really didn't have a plan outside of surviving a few more seconds.

The archers outside chose the latter course, and another arrow whispered past him. Tera ducked and crawled under the tavern's long wooden table.

Another raider ran into the serving hall, screaming, and this was a mistake, for the archers on the porch mistook him for the enemy and he fell to the floor next to Tera with two arrows protruding from his neck and head.

For the first time since he had made his decision to attack, Tera felt truly afraid, for he was paralyzed. He dared not stand, for he would be cut down, and if he stayed in place he would be slaughtered like a pig. Even with victory so close, he felt death even closer, enveloping him, reaching out to him like the blood that spread out from the dead man beside him.

Then just like that, the fight was over. It ended with sudden swiftness, the tumblers of fate spinning and falling into place all at once. Dannan, who had fought his way down the stairs, killed the last two men before him with consecutive swings of his *sioboeth*. Smyth kicked open the unbarred back door and killed the only man who opposed him. Outside, the three archers on the porch fell quickly to Watts, who killed one with his crossbow, the second up-close with his war hammer and dropped the third with a well-placed bolt as the *ouhasandan* ran for cover. All of this happened simultaneously, and it was not until later that they sorted out what had happened.

For Tera, it was as if the battle reached a crescendo, with screams and noise all around him, and he merely pressed his eyes shut and waited for whatever lay ahead. Seconds later it was over, with only the moans of the wounded in the hallway and the shouts of the other scouts calling out "Are you okay? Who is still alive?"

"I am!" shouted Tera, leaping to his feet. "I'm alive! It's Tera here!"

"Smyth here!" from the kitchen, and "Seamus here!" from the hall. Watts was the most distraught, for he had arrived late and assumed all the others were dead. He pounded on the door and practically fell through the window, picking up the only serious wound of the group when he sliced open his hand on a glass shard.

Dannan grabbed Tera in a hug that almost squeezed the breath from him, and Smyth clapped them on the shoulders with so much enthusiasm that both Dannan and Tera winced. When Watts reached them, cursing his bloody hand, the four men fell into a single embrace, feeling in each other's arms the reality of what they had just accomplished.

"No one will believe this story," Dannan said. "No one in a million years."

"I don't believe it myself," Smyth said. "What in the name of Sula did we just *do*?"

"I thought I was too late," said Watts.

"My boy," said Tera, grasping the horseman's neck, "you were right on time."

It was only after they had confirmed and celebrated the miracle of their survival that any of them remembered why they had fought in the first place – and what awaited them upstairs and in the dark barn.

The four Guardsmen carried the girl gently down the stairs and out onto the porch, picking a spot where the sun fell brightly to lay her down. She was maybe fifteen and pretty, but none of them could look at her for long. Her left eye was blackened and swollen shut, and blood was beginning to clot on her split lower lip. Watts sat with his legs dangling off the edge and they laid her head in his lap and brought his medical bag while he spoke softly to her, smoothing her damp and matted hair with the palm of his good hand.

Smyth tended to Watts' wound while Watts tended to the girl, and Tera led Dannan across the road to the barn. Despite his efforts to open the latch and the commotion at the tavern, none of the captives inside had thought to try the door.

What they found inside would haunt Tera the rest of his life. The women began screaming the instant they opened the door, and even though the men spoke softly to them in Clydish, no one seemed to understand that they had been freed. Eventually the men retreated a few feet beyond the threshold, leaving the door open, but still the women were slow to rise up and walk out of it. The



first to emerge were furtive and came out cautiously, blinking in the dim light of the forest. Dannan explained to them who they were and what had happened, but the first women showed no emotion. Only later, as the first women explained what had happened to those who were the slowest to leave the barn, did they all begin to cry.

Watts stayed with the young girl on the porch while the other three set about bringing the others food and water. As they awoke to themselves and their freedom, their first emotion was shame – at their hygiene, their smell, their appearance, none of which could be helped. They sat in a cluster, huddled together in fact, avoiding the eyes of the Guardsmen and eating bread and cheese from the tavern's larder with little apparent interest.

Only when they recognized one of the dead *ouhasandan* as Tera dragged him out of the inn did they show any real life. They screamed in rage and set upon the dead body as a pack, beating it and ripping the dead man's hair from the scalp. As their rage subsided, the sound of one of the wounded men inside babbling in DuQaddish reached their ears, and as if on cue they half-ran, half-staggered up the steps, pushing Tera and Smyth aside as they sought out the injured men in the kitchen. Tera considered trying to stop them, but Smyth shook his head. The Guardsmen went back outside and waited for the fury to subside.

"They can't have been in bondage for more than a month," Dannan said as he and Tera kept a respectful distance from the survivors.

"I've never seen human beings like this," Tera said.

"We are none of us that far removed from their condition," said Dannan. "And that is what is truly frightening."

Zylen arrived with the rest of the band just after 3 in the afternoon, and the sound of the approaching hoof beats sent most of the freed women scurrying for the forest. Only when they saw that the new horsemen posed no threat did they return, filtering out of the forest in twos and threes but still keeping their distance from the soldiers.

"I cannot believe that this was done," Zylen said, staring at the women with too-bold eyes. "This is an atrocity like none we've ever seen before."

"Don't look at them like that," Dannan said under his breath. "They're still quite scared of men, and we need to calm them."

"We've not been able to get an intelligible bit of information out of them yet," said Tera. "I suppose we could have, but they need some time to adjust, we thought."

"And we'll have to move them soon," Smyth said. "If this was the place where women were kept and traded, then it makes sense there will be more *ouhasandans* through here at any time. It's not safe."

"We don't have the horses to move them," said Zylen. "Even if we did, they look hardly fit to ride. Have they eaten?"

"Weakly," said Tera. "Whatever strength they had left was spent on killing the three wounded men we had left restrained in the tavern kitchen."

"You mean these women killed someone? They seem hardly able to walk. How did they do it?"

"You don't want to know," said Dannan. "The fresh blood on their clothes is not theirs, if that helps."

"Sweet Sula," said Zylen. He looked over at Watts, who had not moved from the porch since the moment he had taken the girl's head on his lap. Two older women had joined them on the porch, and they too stroked and comforted the girl. "What's happened to her?"

"She was taken upstairs and raped," said Dannan. "We were able to free her, but not quickly enough."

"Is she going to be alright?" Zylen asked. Tera considered the question.

"Yes," he said. "In time she will be. In time they all will be."

Zylen set up a proper perimeter as the afternoon wore on, and some of the men took to the kitchen with buckets and mops and cleaned it well enough to begin making a meal. By evening the second guard shift had taken over and the dead *ouhasandans* – all seventeen of them – had been laid in a single shallow grave. The women avoided the tavern, refusing to go inside again, so Zylen built a fire in the center of the crossroads, where they appeared to feel the most secure. Dinner was a thick beef stew, and the women ate in shifts while they took turns bathing in a trough by the stables. The men took care to give them privacy.

As night fell, several of the women began to show signs of normalcy, and Dannan invited those who felt ready to come over and sit with the men and tell their stories. At first only three agreed, but as the night wore on every one of them had joined the soldiers and the campfire became crowded.

They were, almost all of them, women of Nassong and the surrounding area. Most had been taken prisoner within the previous three weeks, but their sense of time was suspect and they argued amongst themselves about it. Many had witnessed the murders of their families, and there were two pairs of mothers and daughters, plus one woman who said she was a grandmother.

Only one, a twenty-five-year-old mother of two infants, could clearly recall the number of times she had been raped. Her name was Trina, and she was violated first by each of the eight men who murdered her family. For the first three nights they were the only ones to attack her, but on the fourth night she was taken to an inn outside of Brazo Luc and placed in a room with four other women. The rapes continued, but this time by a steady stream of new *ouhasandans*. One of the other women killed herself, but Trina refused to give up. The assaults continued every night for four nights, and then she and her two roommates were tied behind a wagon and marched west.

Just outside of Bluff's Folly they were traded to the bald-headed man, and after a bad first night, the attacks subsided for a time. There were twenty women packed in the basement of a farm house, and though they could hear the comings and goings of many men upstairs, none of them were brought up the stairs. It was only a temporary respite, though, Trina said, because the raiders were more concerned with moving other goods.

Three nights later, they were moved to a hotel in the center of Bluff's Folly and tied to beds. All those whose wagon trains

stopped by on their way through to Celon Gate were invited up, and the nights were long and painful. One of her companions died on the second night, but Trina held on until they were moved again.

This time the trip brought them to this place, a crossroads called Micklers' Store. Whoever had lived here once was long gone, and the place had become a trading station for everything the *ouhasandans* didn't want to give up to the DuQaddish army at Sidon. The number of women swelled to more than fifty at one point, and the raiders threw up a hasty barn to hold them, plucking victims one or two at a time for use at the tavern. Drunken brawls occurred on a nightly basis, and several of the women who were pulled from the barn never returned. Trina had a pretty good idea what had become of them.

All told, she figured she had spent more than a week in the barn, and had eaten only twice. By her own count, she had been raped eighty-seven times in just under a month. "I kept count," she said, "because I didn't want them to win."

"Did any of them ever tell you why they were doing this to you?" Tera asked the group.

"For God," one of the older women said. "They said they were doing it for God."

"For the Great Counting, that's what they told me," said a young red-head. "That they would fill our bellies with true believers and thereby tip the scales against Luzustrous."

"And what did they have you believe would become of you?" Dannan asked.

"We were told those of us who were most worthy would be taken to the army at Sidon," Trina said. "I think some of them truly believed it, at first, but then I think there was confusion. They didn't know what they were going to do with us. These were not the most organized and intelligent of men."

"We are, all of us, so sorry for what happened," said Zylen. "We regret that you have been so sullied, so ruined."

Trina spat on the ground.

"And I regret that you are such an idiot," she said. "I am not ruined. That's priest talk. I am a Clydish woman, sir, a lady of Nas-song. I was before this happened, and I will be until the day I die. Your four scouts have given me my life back, and for this I am thankful." She turned to address the women. "But if any of you thinks you are ruined by this, you're going to have to convince me. Don't let anyone tell you what has happened is a stain upon your soul."

"But our husbands," said one of the women. "They'll not have us any more!"

"Your husbands are dead!" shouted Trina. "And your sons! And your daughters! You have been foully abused, but you're still here! Now the sons of Clyde rise up to beat back the *ouhasandan* bastards, and you, too, are still standing! I say we fight beside them, not cower in shame! I didn't count each time and curse each face just so I could survive and spend the rest of my life acting as if I am less than what I was! I held on because I hoped that some day, some day I would be able to deliver my own vengeance – and those three pathetic men in the kitchen were nowhere near enough."

"Lady," Zylen said, "surely you don't mean to mount up with us and ride against the enemy as soldiers?"

"I mean to do exactly that," said Trina. "And if you mean to stop me, you had better never fall asleep."

**A**t sunrise, the Guardsmen rose and began packing to move. Zylen and the bulk of the group took all those women who wished to return to New Calpathia, placing them two-at-a-time on the spare horses. A smaller group – Dannan, Tera, Smyth, Watts and Sean Gryff – would press ahead, accompanied by Trina and three of the women. Their plan was simple: scout ahead to Celon Gate itself and send word to New Calpathia on the enemy situation. All of them were now agreed on one proposition: clearing the *ouhasandans* from Celon was not enough.

"If there is any man of Clyde who will not take up arms and march upon this enemy, let him explain it to me personally," Trina said. That was enough of a case for the Guardsmen.

The scouting party moved out behind Dannan, waving goodbye to the rest of the group. This is the end of LaTrent's Rovers, Tera thought as he urged his horse up the road. From here on out, we are on our own.

The women rode behind in a separate group, not for protection, but from their own sense of camaraderie. Trina seemed to be an elixir for them, and the others picked up her sense of ferocity and fed upon it. Misqua was a shop-keeper from Brazo Luc, hard-faced and distant. Elaine was a barrister's wife from Nassong who had lost two teen-age sons to the raiders. And between them rode Jessarae, the fifteen-year-old redhead Dannan had saved from the upstairs room. She still had not yet spoken, but when the time came for each woman to make her choice, she strode over to stand by Trina and refused to be swayed. Each received whatever weapons she desired, and though Tera wondered what skill they might show with them, he did not doubt the courage they would put behind them.

Inwardly, Tera was happy to put Micklers' Store behind them, but a strange sound made him turn in the saddle. Back at the crossroads, the women and the rovers were tossing torches into the buildings, hollering and shouting as the flames licked up the tainted wood and belched bales of noxious smoke into the still morning air.

*At least the pagan ceremony serves a useful function in Old Path society. A priestess who observes the “Great Rite” with selected men from her city or village during the lunar alignment is reinforcing the connection between the people and their misguided sense of the divine. What function is served by the ritual abuse of our cloistered churchwomen by our priesthood, other than a bodily function?*

*To claim that Flootide is anything but a perverse appropriation of the pagan ritual of Fulltide, designed to grant our otherwise-celibate priesthood some limited sexual release, makes a mockery of priestly credibility. Excusing this church-sanctioned act of sexual predation upon our own Daughters of Llugnah as some theologically valid “re-enactment” of Llugah’s deception is an act of indefensible hypocrisy. Whatever the original thinking behind the edicts that established the practice, we as the living church of Sula bear a unique and pressing responsibility to end it.*

*The practice of Flootide is a stain upon the Church that should be cleansed from our orthodoxy at the earliest opportunity.*

*—From the Letter to the Great Voice Concerning the Abolition of Flootide, signed by 100 priests and bishops, 992 P.E.*

## Chapter 8

# Rialta

**W**illow would not be left behind, and her surprising intransigence caught Rialta off guard. The first morning of their journey in search of the Rovers was the first time that the two of them had ever fought, and the Lady of Gwynyr was pleased to find herself losing. Willow had no knowledge of self-defense and could work only elemental magic – not the divine magic that might protect her in combat – but she was so adamant in taking her place beside her mistress that eventually Rialta relented. It was either that or physically remove her from the gate.

The ride to Rhodig Fast took a full day, the second half of it spent in a tedious string of switchbacks as the road from Beltan gained a sudden 2,000-foot rise in elevation. The hardwood forest began to thin at 4,500 feet, turning to a narrow band of pines before surrendering to thickets and bogs of mountain laurel above 5,000 feet. Even these flowering hells thinned out in the upper elevations, and as the road approached the fortress the ground turned rocky and sparse, with boulders surrounded by alpine meadows of grass and wild snowdrops in their spring bloom.

Rhodig Fast nestled at the confluence of three mighty peaks and the Celon Wall, a thirty-mile ridge that dropped a stunning 3,000 vertical feet on its western face. Two passes converged here: one that descended north into the town of Rhodig in southern Edain, the other a skinny trail that followed the headwaters of the Celon River down a narrow gorge toward the province that bore its name. By building a fortress here, Gwynyr controlled both approaches at once, and the oft-improved walls of the fastness – though particularly vulnerable because of the vast area they enclosed – had never been breached in war.

In truth, Rhodig Fast was less a traditional fortress than an enormous circular wall surrounding an empty plain. In an emergency, the entire population of Beltan could retreat here to camp in semi-secure displeasure, but the ominous-looking defenses were practically empty during peacetime and would require significant repair if they were needed to repel an assault. Only the Order of the Valand kept a permanent residence here, and members of the order, looking more like monks than warriors, met Rialta's small company at the gate and led them inside. A long ride across the windswept valley inside Rhodig Fast still lay before them..

They approached the Valand's barracks as initiates lit the evening watch fires inside the compound and masters sounded the massive wooden *toom*, the suspended hollow tree trunk that called the compound to twilight rites. This necessitated an awkward pause in their journey, for even though they were only a few yards from their destination, rites were observed here with humorless discipline. The riders dismounted for a simple ritual, consisting of nothing more than raising a circle, a spoken invocation and a series of gestures marked at the cardinal positions. When it was over, their guides led them back to their horses and the company entered the compound's gate on foot.

Their needs were tended by silent squads of initiates, young men with shaven heads. Most of the men in the compound were young and bald, members of an apprentice corps called the Va, serving out five-year commitments while learning the warrior arts and the strict Old Path traditions of the Valand. Acceptance into the Valand never came within the first five years, and only those who chose to remain after their terms expired were eligible for inclusion. Even that was a rare and honored event, for there were never more than 100 Valand at any time, and a replacement could not be chosen until one of the 100 either died or became incapable of service through advancing age.

The Va maintained the watch along the towers and ran the daily life of the barracks, leaving the elite knights of the Valand to a life of constant training and contemplation. Their vows called them to perfection and service, and though they were occasionally summoned from Rhodig Fast by the Lady to adjudicate difficulties or hunt down criminals, it had been centuries since the Valand had been called to war. Rialta found them a strange expression of the Path, for though they were deeply spiritual, they were in many ways cut off from the Wheel of the Year in their high mountain pass, and their discipline kept them separate from the natural



ways of the body. Had there been any more than 100 of them, she would have feared their power.

Rialta, Willow, Quinn and her two Fionnans bedded down quickly in an empty room with a swept dirt floor. The *toom* woke them before sunrise and called them to prayer within the courtyard's standing-stone circle, and after a quick breakfast of goat stew from the kitchen's overnight kettle, they walked to the stables to meet their assigned escort: five Valand with five Va in support.

The Valand were an austere bunch, dressed in loose robes of black silk with dark wool cloaks that hid their sacred *sioboeths*. It was a matter of honor to the Valand that from the time they took their oath until the time they passed out of the service, their hands touched no other weapon. The Va wore steel swords of a similar (though less elegant) design, but dressed more in the manner of common soldiers: trousers and boots and coats instead of moccasins and silk and robes. The Va arrived carrying saddle packs, longbows, tools, food and heavy bundles of rolled tent canvas, but their Valand leaders walked with their hands tucked within their sleeves.

One other trait held them apart: While the Va kept their heads shaved clean – the Valand never cut their hair. So while they wore no sign of rank, one could tell a great deal about a Valand's time-in-service by looking at the relative length of his hair. New Valand had shaggy heads, but veterans had long tresses that flowed down their backs, and only thin braids from their temples tied-off behind their heads kept it out of their eyes. Senior leaders often chose to weave their hair into a single braid and coil it atop their heads, a style that gave their skulls an elongated appearance.

"Good morning," said Rialta. "With whom should I speak?"

"I am the *Nae Rasa* of this group," said the shortest of the Valand.

Rialta recognized the man. "Good morning, Father Ash. It is good to have you as my *Nae Rasa* again."

Ash bowed deeply, his thick mane of gray hair obscuring his face. "It is always an honor to serve our Lady," he said.

"Do you require further instructions, father, or was my message enough?" Rialta asked.

"You may give them as you like, but we understand our mission."

"Good," said Rialta. "Then let's be off."

The fifteen riders set off out the western gate, beginning their descent along the footpath that traced the tiny origins of the mighty Celon River through lichen-speckled boulders and high-mountain thickets of dense, low shrubs. The edge of the escarpment lay before them, offering panoramic views to the foothills below. Willow rode at Rialta's side where the path allowed, falling in behind her when the width required a single-file march. After two hours the path became a road, great trees towered above them, and she rode at the Lady's side again. Rialta could feel the maiden's curiosity straining.

"You may ask me about whatever is on your mind," Rialta said. "You're driving me to distraction with your unspoken questions."

"They don't speak," Willow whispered. "They don't speak at all, except for that Father Ash person, and he hasn't opened his mouth since we set off."

"They speak to each other," Rialta said, "but only when it is necessary. They consider their silence holy, and with few exceptions, only the *Nae Rasa* will speak to us during this journey."

"I know that more words count less, but this is taking it to extremes," said Willow.

"The Valand take everything to extremes," said Rialta, eschewing Willow's stage whisper and speaking in her normal conversational voice. "That is their code – they seek perfection. And they mean it."

"Hardly seems to be Old Path to me," said Willow, who kept her voice quiet. "And besides, I've met two before, and *they* spoke."

"They were probably on a mission," Rialta said. "Speech is necessary then, and they talk whenever they deem it necessary. On this mission they will let the *Nae Rasa* speak for them, and any formal communication they have for us will be passed through him."

Willow leaned closer and whispered. "Do you trust them, my Lady?"

"I trust them implicitly," said Rialta softly. "And not at all."

**T**he Gwynyrians camped at a traditional spot along the lower reaches of the pass, but they were like two separate groups that stop at the same campground. Rialta and her party worked together to string up their canvas fly and light the brazier that would heat their tea. Beside them, the five Va erected two large campaign tents, reconstructed the stone fire circle left by previous travelers, set up a field kitchen under a tarp, dug a latrine and erected a canvas screen for privacy, then marked a thirty-foot circle with rocks to serve as sacred ground for prayers.

The five Valand, meanwhile, spent the time training in silence – conducting sword drills, unarmed-combat routines and strength exercises that impressed even Rialta. Although it was difficult to discern the physiques of the men beneath the robes, it was not hard to comprehend the strength of men who could perform more than 150 pushups without rest or pause.

Willow appeared to be offended by the attitude of the Valand toward their Va servants, for though she had spent her life doing things for her mistress, she had been raised in the Order of the Orwyne, which stressed the importance of humility and simple living. As a member of that order, Rialta still participated in some of the cooking and cleaning at Pyth Nuemyn, and this behavior was considered normal. "For such great warriors, those boys in black appear to be afraid of getting dirty," Willow said.

Her attitude softened a bit after evening rites. With the business of the day complete, the Valand became different people – they smiled and spoke amongst themselves and with the Va, offering the younger warriors tips on their own martial arts practice and laughing quietly at jokes. Though they remained respectful and formal toward Rialta, they showed an easy rapport with the Fionnans, who joined the Valand and the Va around their campfire for conversation. Rialta and Willow turned in early, but not before

being offered a seat at the fire and bowls of food. The Lady of Gwynyr drifted off to sleep to the soft sounds of their voices and laughter.

They were right back to business before dawn – the Va breaking camp, cooking breakfast and packing to leave, the Valand taking more sword practice and exercise as the hidden sun lit the sky above the canyon walls that surrounded their misty camp. Dressed only in white undergarments, their lean, limber strength was clear to anyone who cared to look.

The party descended for two more days as the pass grew wider and more streams joined the flow to form the Upper Celon River, and by the time they camped below the Celon escarpment on the third night, the river had grown too wide to jump and too deep to wade. They had entered the Celon Forest.

Though Rialta had passed through this forest twice in her youth, she had never before followed this route and the great trees sang to her so loudly that it was almost distracting. The priestesses of the Old Path had abandoned these forests for the safety of the highlands generations ago, but they were well-remembered and revered. Mountains were beautiful and harsh, but Rialta had always loved the valleys, sacred to the Goddess, as well as the deep forests of the lowlands that had never felt the bite of an ax. Here the silent hum of the tree-spirits filled the space between them with a pristine and vibrant awareness, and she felt them noting her presence as she passed.

Rialta stopped when she was far enough away from camp to have some privacy and lifted her arms in the Goddess stance – feet shoulder-width apart, arms above her head, palms up, fingertips out – feeling the power of the forest and the web of life that sustained and animated it. Her mind traveled easily upon it, gliding really, feeling its emotion and perspective, the rocks among the roots and the last rays of sunlight on the canopy of buds and spring leaves above. There was a pattern and rhythm to everything in the forest, and though its totality was too complex to decipher and diagram, whoever could relax their consciousness could not only feel it, but be infused by its power – could lose their human understanding of time and sense simultaneously the patient breathing of the trees and the scurrying haste of the insects. Rialta offered herself too it gladly.

But somewhere in her reverie, the troubles of the forest reached her. They did not come like separate visions or messages, but as disturbances, the way a spider feels the fly that has become entangled in its web. The awareness shocked her, and as her human mind instinctively put meanings into the information, it broke the connection she had established and brought her back to her body.

Somewhere far to the north a great evil was occurring, and nearer to Rialta, a band of women and children was on the move, hiding in the forest, trying to stay ahead of their pursuers. But more immediately significant, she realized, was that she was being watched by human eyes. Rialta looked around for her observers, didn't see them, and turned with self-conscious languor to walk back toward camp. She startled when her eyes fell on Father Ash, who stood silently only ten feet in front of her.

"Blessed be!" she said, catching her breath. "I thought someone was watching me from the forest."

"You were right," he said. "We're surrounded, in fact."

"By whom?"

"Bandits," he said casually. "No more than thirty of them."

"What do they want?"

"Whatever we have, most likely. I thought I might assist you."

"They will attack?" she asked.

"In a moment. I'm sure they'd like it to get a bit darker first. Please stand behind this tree."

"This tree? Why?"

"Because I expect they'll shoot arrows first," Ash said. "Just take cover and it will be over quickly."

Rialta stepped behind the tree and peered out at Ash in the fading light of the shadowed forest. The moments passed slowly, but Ash did not move or even seem particularly alert. Only when the first arrows came zipping softly out of the twilight toward him did he shift his body, and even that seemed unhurried and graceful despite the swiftness of his reactions. Ash dipped his shoulder, spun to the left and stepped off once to his right to let them pass, and the third arrow sank deep into the tree trunk that protected her.

The attackers became evident now, first just birdcalls and sounds in the brush on either side of them, then more arrows and more passing movements by Father Ash. The air vibrated with their flight, but some of them were so far off target that Ash didn't even react to them, just standing in profound stillness as they whispered by.

The charge crashed in upon them like a herd of deer flushed from a wood by hunters: three, four, five men rushing through the dim light with swords drawn. Ash waited for them, then drew his *sioboeth* at the last moment to parry the great swing of the first man's blade. Steel easily defeated bronze, and with a movement so subtle that Rialta couldn't even recognize it, Ash disemboweled his enemy. The second and third man arrived more or less as a team and tried to coordinate their attack, but Ash killed them easily, feinting and slashing so that his blade was never blocked. His two remaining opponents came no closer, then fled unmolested into the forest.

The sound of commotion back at the camp alarmed Rialta, and she drew her dagger as she ran and hoped she could reach Willow before any harm came to her servant, but when she looked back over her shoulder to speak to Ash he was far behind, walking unhurriedly.

She needn't have worried. While their camp was under attack, the attack was feeble and the defenders were skilled. Va archers took care of most of the marauders, and the bandits who made the mistake of running into the fray found themselves face-to-face with the chilling efficiency of the Valand.

It ended quickly, as Ash had promised, and the skirmish's denouement was merely the sound of the retreating attackers crashing through the dark wood.

"Should we pursue, *Nae Rasa*?" one of the Va asked as Ash reached the camp.

"No," he said. "We're here to protect this group, not punish bandits. Unless you wish to alter our mission, my Lady."

"Not at all," Rialta said. She knelt beside one of the dead and regarded him with curiosity. He was too short to be a Clyde, and even though he looked a bit young and malnourished there were deep muscles in his chest and his shoulders were broad. DuQad-dish to be sure, she thought, and had this cub grown into his full manhood he would have been a glorious thing. She felt a deep sympathy that was not sorrow, and reached down to touch him. His body quivered slightly.

"Here's one who isn't dead," Rialta said.

"If you please, my Lady," said Ash, drawing his sword.

"No," she said, checking his pulse. It was faint and failing, and there would be no recovery from the wound to his head. At his moment of death there was a sweetness to his features that touched her.

The Lady of Gwynyr placed her fingers lightly on the head wound and closed her eyes. The transference occurred quickly and without the searing pain that a Clydish enlisted judge would have experienced, and after a few seconds the man's eyes shot open. Rialta's eyes met his, and she touched a finger to the dying *ouhasandan's* lips and smiled gently. Then she passed her left hand over his face and his soul slipped out of his body.

"He was nothing but a child, really. I doubt this bunch will give us any more trouble," Rialta said. "They're looking for easier prey."

"Ah," said Ash. "Then I suggest we make dinner."

**H**ow is it," Willow asked as the morning began to burn off the dawn mists, "that the Valand were able to sense the danger around us before we did?"

Rialta checked to see whether any of the Valand were riding within earshot, and deemed their conversation private.

"Because we serve the Old Path," she said, "and the Old Path serves them. We attempt to see life in its totality, while the Valand focus solely on one aspect of it. This makes them very good at what they do, of course."

"Yet it troubles you," Willow said.

"Yes," said Rialta.

"May I ask why?"

The Lady considered her response carefully – long enough, perhaps, to appear rude.

"I see it this way," Rialta began. "The Code of the Valand demands perfection in the arts of combat. Yet the Old Path teaches us that the sharper the blade, the sooner it will lose its edge. This is a philosophical difference that isn't truly negotiable. From our perspective, no matter how perfect they are in their arts, the Valand themselves can never achieve perfection. The urge to perfection in human beings is natural, and if we align ourselves with that natural perfection of the world and walk as we were meant to do, then we can experience perfection. But it cannot be attained *within us* because perfection only exists *around us*."

"Because the Valand seek to possess perfection, they walk beside the Old Path – but not on it. And what does not follow the Path will soon become lost."

"I don't understand how you can say that these men are not of the Old Path," Willow said. "They are scrupulous in their observance of the rites, they serve the Lady without question, and even though I was suspicious of them at the start, I have never seen anyone so blessed with the gifts of spirit."

"Well, this is my point," Rialta said. "The Old Path is magical, but the Old Path is not *about* magic. We use and control magic in our orders, but that is not our purpose – magic is only a tool we use in our work, which is maintaining the Path in the world. If we use it as such, then it does not bounce back upon us in unintended ways. I dare not summon those powers for their own sake, and every time I flirt with that temptation or enter into areas where I fear my own self-deception, I tremble. So this is what I fear for the Valand: if their dedication to the rites becomes more about achieving their goal of interior perfection and less about how that perfection would serve the Path, then they will have lost their way. It is a subtle point, but magic is subtle."

"What do you fear will become of them?" Willow asked.

"I don't know," said Rialta. "Their fate is not mentioned in the prophecies, and I am not much of a diviner. I know that they have contributed greatly to Gwynyr's survival and security, as has the House of Fionna."

"But those things that they do – the way they dodged those arrows – are these powers that are available to all of us?"

"I suspect so," Rialta said. "But if it required that you dedicated your entire life to that one skill, to the exclusion of all other aspects of living, would that be a good trade?"

"I guess not," said Willow. "But I must say I was mighty thankful for it this morning. They seemed a gift from the God, and blessed by the Goddess."

"I could be wrong, of course. Perhaps they are the way of the future," Rialta said. "Perhaps the Old Path will punish the Valand by giving them even greater powers. It admonishes us to seek the low places, as would water, and honors that which is simple and plain. One is never farther from the Path than when one is set on high, as I must constantly remind myself. There is no greater curse than desire, Willow, no sadder state than the responsibility of great power."

Her pronouncement effectively silenced their conversation, and they rode wordlessly for several minutes. Rialta could feel Willow's soul wrestling with something large.

"Lady," Willow said when she finally spoke up, "if that be true, then it is a mistake to place the High Priestess of the Old Path in the position of ruling the country."

"Quite," said Rialta.

**T**hanks to the dying *ouhasandan*, Rialta had a much better understanding of the quarry the bandits sought in the forest. She first had sensed their prey in the quiet moments before she became aware of the *ouhasandans*' eyes upon her, and now their goal came more clearly into focus: a group of holy women, leading refugees deep into the forest for safety.

She led her company up narrow footpaths and along streams rimmed by dense laurel, following her intuition now instead of her intellect. The nearness of the fugitive women was like a beacon to her, but the land beneath the trees lay in deep folds and shadows, and finding anything in this wilderness was not an easy task. The Valand seemed not to care, for any mission was the same to them, but Rialta sensed the irritation of Willow and Quinn, who didn't understand why their progress had been diverted.

The Gwynyrians caught their first break around midday as they advanced slowly up the bed of a stream. A short waterfall had masked the sound of their approach, and the sudden clap of a rock being overturned above them instantly drew the Lady's attention. Rialta caught sight of a flash of white petticoat as the woman wearing it disappeared into the laurel, and upon inspection it was clear that there had been three at the stream washing bloody laundry, some of which they left behind.

Even though this meant the refugee band was close by, the search continued slowly. There were signs of a large group on the move almost everywhere, but Rialta tracked them cautiously, not wishing to cause an unfortunate incident. It took two hours to reach them, and when they did make contact it was because the women they pursued had chosen to be found.

The first to greet them was a stout Clyde of Edain: a farm woman with a thick torso and the forearms of a teamster. Her hair was drawn back in a blue kerchief, and she stood defiantly at the top of a low ridge under tall trees with her feet spread wide and her left hand grasping a heavy wooden staff. The Valand looked to Rialta for a signal, and she wordlessly bade them to stay back while she did the talking.

"What do you want?" asked the woman. Rialta looked at the Clyde's coarse dress and apron more closely and recognized it. Of course, she thought. They're not *my* holy women. This was a Daughter of Llugnah – a cloistered servant to a Sulist temple.

"Only to help you, good Daughter?"

"Aye, to help *me*. That's a fat one. You're an armed witch from the Highlands and these are dangerous times. Explain yourself?"

"I sensed you ahead and thought perhaps I could give you and your band some aid," Rialta said. "The dangerous times drew me here, and though you are not the object of my mission, it is not my way to pass by those in need when I have help to offer."

"You've picked a strange place to take your holiday," said the Daughter. "There are bands of DuQaddish prowling about everywhere. The countryside is in turmoil."

"Yes. I believe you call them the *ouhasandans*."

"Murderers and rapists more like it, but they are the country cousins of the Tanu Mutan, for certain sure. Have you met them yet?"

"At dusk past," Rialta said. "They thought us simple travelers."

"And I take it you are not?"

"No, Good Daughter, we are not. I am Rialta, the Lady of Gwynyr, and my escorts are the finest warriors of the highlands."

Chibura's eyes went skinny. "The Lady Rialta," she said. "I'm afraid I know a good bit about you, and not all of it good."

"I am sorry to hear that," Rialta said.

"And what is it you wish to offer us, Rialta, Lady of Gwynyr? For though we are all Clydes, we are of the New Path, not the Old. Would a witch priestess still consider us kin? For if you offer charity, we need of none of that."

"What is your name?"

"Daughter Chibura of Clyde Barrow."

"Then Daughter Chibura, you are of my family, whatever your path. I carry food and medicine, plus warriors of Gwynyr who will ensure safe passage to your group. All I ask is your conversation."

Chibura eyed the Gwynyrians cautiously. "Then come," she said, and set off at a rapid pace. Rialta felt as if she were chasing a Clydesdale.

The middle-aged Daughter walked for the better part of a mile before she stopped and used her staff to beat a three-part rhythm on a tree trunk. Within a few more feet the rest of the band came into view – women, children and the elderly, with only a handful of adult men and women to protect them. They poked out from behind trees and walked into the open slowly, glancing to the rear for avenues of escape.

"Forgive them their manners," said Chibura. "The sight of people on horseback makes them skittish."

"Then we shall dismount," Rialta said. She motioned to the others and each followed her lead. They entered the circle of the refugees on foot, their high-backed Gwynyrian mounts inspiring almost as much awe as their strange highland dress. Most of these people, the Lady thought, have never even seen a person of Gwynyr, much less a company of Valand and Fionnans.

"Stop here," said Chibura. "There's someone I want you to meet." She stalked off to the west, where a group of women was carrying buckets of water from a stream. A few moments later she returned with one of them, a delicately beautiful woman of grandmotherly age who smiled at Rialta silently.

"Lady Rialta, this is Daughter Mary Almaterra of Clyde Barrow," Chibura said. "This is the mother of a boy whose life you most utterly ruined."

"Pleased to meet you," said Almaterra, extending her hand. "You are lovely, my Lady."

"As are you, Daughter," said Rialta.



John was a headstrong boy in those days," Almatara said as she handed Rialta a cup of water from her bucket. Rialta offered the cup to Chibura, who shook her head, and then passed it on to Willow, who sat cross-legged beside her. The rest of the group gave them privacy, and after Almatara had passed water to all who wanted it, she lowered herself gracefully to sit beside them.

"And just as he was strong-willed, so was I weak in both the spirit and the flesh back then," Almatara said. "I was not the mother I could have been, not the mother I wanted to be. If there was anyone who raised him, it was Chibura. And we don't see eye-to-eye on this matter."

"Daughter Mary and I don't see eye-to-eye on many things," said Chibura. "I am the practical one, and she is the beautiful spirit. But we are an order of the faithful, and it is her spiritual gift that I follow, not my personal thoughts."

"Chibura is my most loyal friend, and she cared for me even when I was not well. She loved me even when I did not share her faith in the way I do now."

"Daughter Mary was a witch like you once," Chibura said. "When she came to me she was nothing more than a wisp of lilac. Now she is the most beloved Daughter of our order, and as pure a Sulist woman as ever drew breath. So don't go telling me there's no magic outside those pagan stones of yours. Mary is living proof otherwise."

"I would never have made such a rude assertion," Rialta said.

"Chibura does not accuse you of it, dear Lady," said Almatara. "She is just blunt in her speech. However, she does not know Gwynyr, and she assumes that since I was of the Old Path, I must have been of your discipline." She turned and spoke directly to Chibura. "I was raised in Eilydon, which lies beyond the control of the Beltan priestesses, just below the Falls of the Don. Gwynyr stops where the water drops."

"It matters not to me," the stocky daughter said. "One doesn't need to know the plumage to recognize a bird."

"Eilydon is a paradise," said Rialta. "What drove you from there?"

"I became pregnant without the permission of my order," said Almatara. "I could have aborted it – we had the same herbs as the ladies of Beltan – but I felt I could not. So I rode out with the next band of passing Mullaqat in search of a place to give birth. The roaming life suited me poorly, and I was in poor health when they dropped me off at the cloister in Clyde Barrow. Chibura took me in and I gave birth to John the next morning."

"I almost lost them both," Chibura said.

"Was the father Mullaqat as well?" asked Rialta.

"Yes," said Almatara. "A poet named John al-Barqat. He came to me unexpectedly at Fulltide and I couldn't say no. That had much to do with my decision, Lady Rialta. A child of Fulltide is a special child indeed."

"I myself have a child by a Mullaqat," said Rialta. "Though it's his memory I cherish, and not his immediate presence."

Almatara giggled. "They are rather ... memorable."

Chibura poked her frail friend in the shoulder and glared at Rialta. "I'm used to your unusual ways, Mary, but I never thought you'd fall into sleep-over talk with the woman who pushed our John off into the Guard."

"But I didn't do that," Rialta said.

"Then tell me what you did," Chibura said, "because our John was quite adamant about the point."

Rialta felt ill-at-ease with the start of their conversation. She had come to the forest looking for the rovers, but in large part she had come here in search of John Tera, to see if her mother's focus on him was correct. Now she was seated with the very women who had raised the man, and their talk had gone too quickly to their shared and uncomfortable past. It was an odd way of making an acquaintance, and she marveled at the power of spirit as she felt herself treading lightly around its hem. Is this more of mother's work? It was hard to tell where the old lady from Bregon began and ended.

"John came before me as someone who had broken into the initiates' dormitory at Beltan," Rialta said. "He demanded that his beloved – I believe her name was Aideen – be released to him on the spot. I could have sent him down the mountain then and there."

"But you showed him mercy," said Almatara. "I'm very grateful for the time you granted him with that farm family, Lady. John once told me those were some of the most pleasant days of his life – a far better summer than he would have spent in the cloister."

"I had hoped it would help heal him," said Rialta. "The scars upon his back..."

Almatara and Chibura both lowered their eyes.

"No, no, I didn't think either of you had put them there," Rialta said. "He told me where they came from."

"It's not your mercy that offends me, Lady Rialta," said Chibura. "It was that you stood there in your magical finery and told a mere boy that he would never marry. He may have looked older and tougher than he was, but he was a sensitive and kind child. 'Twas your words that broke his heart, for he looked upon you with great respect. In his letters home that summer he was always going on about the Lady Rialta, how wise and fair you were. He was sure you would grant the two of them their freedom."

"I didn't tell him he would never marry," Rialta said.

"Ah, but that's what he *heard*," said Almatara.

"His young lady herself said she was not ready to marry him," said Rialta. "And one had only to talk with the boy to understand how ill-prepared he was for the union. Marriage is not an escape, but to your son it appeared that way – as one can understand, for it seemed he had much to flee. It is my job to judge matches, and I judged that one not ready."

Chibura wiped away a tear. Rialta hadn't noticed it forming, and was surprised to see the leathery old Daughter show such emotion.

"Does it shock you to see a Daughter cry, Lady?" Chibura asked. "Well, we do. I may serve Telios, but that doesn't make me any

less of a woman. And just because my only child died in infancy doesn't mean I don't love the other children of the cloister as my own."

"I'm sure you do," said Rialta.

"She does," said Almatara. "She is mother to us all of us from the house at Clyde Barrow."

"You are not what I expected," Chibura said to Rialta. "But that doesn't mean I trust you. The priest says that the service of Luzustrous robs you witches of your beauty, and I can see that he is wrong. But still you are what you are: unrepentant dabblers in dark magic. So if I have judged you harshly because of John, please forgive me. But understand that my faith tells me that your Old Path ways set him in the wrong direction."

"It was not just Rialta who showed him the old ways, Chibura," said Almatara. "You know I walked the Old Path with quiet feet for many years, even there in the cloister. I taught him to pray both ways, for it took years for me to understand the true meaning of Sula's teachings, and my faith was weak when John was a boy."

"You were always a good Sulist," said Chibura, grasping Almatara's hand. "All strong faith is tested."

"And grows in adversity," Almatara said, squeezing Chibura's hand back. She turned to Rialta. "Please understand. Our faith is an inclusive one, but it also teaches us to beware of false masters. Some consider the Old Path of my childhood the tool of Luzustrous, and I neither blame them nor argue the point. I did not step off of the path. I merely chose a new one for where it may lead. Do you understand?"

"Perhaps," said Rialta. "I am unlike the High Priestesses before me who never set foot outside of Gwynyr. I lived in Sidon and Arnell, and I have befriended Sulists and read your holy texts and worshipped at your great cathedrals. I have no doubt that your Sula was truly an ascended master. I merely choose – with *my* heart, Mary Almatara – to keep my feet on the Old Path."

"Then we shall walk together," Almatara said. "I shall respect your path and I know you will respect mine, and if our hearts are open I am sure true spirit will come to dwell within us. I have seen the worst, the very worst, of what the Sulist Temple can do, and yet the love of Telios and Llugnah fills my soul with peace. Perhaps some of it will spill over into your soul, as well."

"I will take my blessings wherever I can find them, Daughter Mary," Rialta said. "There is no greater gift than the blessing that comes as a surprise."

"Well, there's another surprise waiting for you then, Lady," Chibura said. She and Almatara exchanged glances, and the stocky woman rose and spoke to a blonde in her thirties who sat under a tree watching their conference but just out of earshot. The woman followed Chibura back to the small circle.

"May I present the widow Aideen Tourno," Chibura said. "You knew her as Aideen Damon in her youth, when she came to you as an initiate. We knew her as John's beloved."

"Blessed be," said Rialta, rising to greet her. "Today has been full of surprises."

Aideen looked as if she were about to speak, but instead she simply burst into tears and grabbed the Lady around the neck, sobbing and hugging the priestess with an abandon that bespoke something beyond words.

**A**lmatara and Chibura had escaped in the night with the other inhabitants of their cloister, fleeing toward the south-east during the *ouhasandan* raid on Clyde Barrow. At first they fell in with a great stream of refugees pressing toward Celon Gate, but further attacks scattered the column, and there were dozens of people among the human tide who could not keep pace. The two daughters of Llugnah could not abandon them to their fate.

It was Chibura who found the cave, and in the first week there was just enough room to hold them all – maybe twenty of the most frail refugees left behind by the mass exodus. The Daughters ventured out at night in search of other stragglers, and within weeks they had collected a full forty. Their activities attracted attention, for the *ouhasandans* were everywhere in southern Edain in those days, and so their slow-moving group limped deeper into the forest.

Even without raids, death trailed them. The toll among the sick was heavy, and the two Daughters had little medicine or food to give. Over their weeks in the open, the survivors had been winnowed down to a more mobile group: the pregnant women had given birth, the town-raised children had adapted to life on the move, and even the elderly among them were tougher than they had been at the beginning.

At one point in their travels they had encountered Aideen and another woman – escapees from a prison camp on the road to Bluff's Folly – and not long afterward they found themselves being tracked by the pair's pursuers. There was a brief encounter between them, and though the refugees drove the three men back into the woods, the pursuit did not end. They had been on the run from the *ouhasandans* the Gwynyrians had encountered for almost a week.

Almatara told the tale to Rialta as their combined group made its way north along a footpath that led toward Celon Gate. The Gwynyrians had given up their horses to the refugees, and Rialta and Chibura had teamed together to compel the frail Almatara to take the Lady's mount.

"And you believe that John is with these rovers you seek?" Almatara asked.

"I am sure of it," Rialta said. "No. That is too strong. I am *almost* sure of it. In truth, your son is one of the reasons I came down off the mountain, Daughter Mary. My own mother has heard news of their progress, and she senses that John may hold a special place in the destiny of our people. I thought it best to see for myself."

Almatara rode silently for several steps. "And you, Lady Rialta? Do you sense some destiny for John?"

"No, I wish I could say that I did. The priestesses of my line have been studying the prophecies for generations in search of clues to our future, and I myself have devoted far too much energy and intuition to finding the right man for the job that lies ahead. But those searches did not produce your son as the answer, not for me. It is my mother who believes in him, and she is far too knowl-

edgeable to be simply dismissed. If she is correct, then your son will require all my attention and protection.”

“I hope your mother is wrong,” said Almatara. “John has experienced more needless suffering than any man I know. He does not need the burden of his entire people.”

“That’s wise, Mary,” Rialta said. “Too many mothers confuse glory with happiness.”

“You must understand,” said Almatara. “I will release John to whatever purpose Telios calls him. But I wish him peace and pleasure.”

“And when you found Aideen in the woods? Did you think perhaps you had found the way to give it to him?”

Almatara looked around to see if Aideen was at their heels.

“In truth, my Lady, Aideen was never my choice,” Almatara said. “She was John’s choice, and I neither opposed nor encouraged it. If she is the love that he seeks, then I hope he is happy in it.”

“Tell me about his childhood,” Rialta said.

“He takes his first name from his father, but his last name was given to him by our priest, Brother Trefallian. In John’s youngest days, he was caught between the two of them. John al-Barqat drifted in and out of our lives for years, for he had become obsessed with me in a very un-Mullaqat way. Sadly, so had Brother Trefallian. Al-Barqat was beaten to death outside the cloister when John was only 6, and not long after that Brother Trefallian had me called to Floodtide.”

Rialta shuddered inwardly. The Sulists had adopted many of the Old Path practices in their early days, and to the Gwynyrians, Floodtide was the worst of the Sulist perversions: a mixture of Fulltide – the Old Path observance of the lunar alignment of Wallain and Lokin – and the Great Rite, in which seven carefully selected “fathers” were brought to the maiden high priestess to sire her first child. In Gwynyr, Fulltide was a celebration of the erotic aspect of life and the Great Rite was symbolic of the bounds between the priestesses and the people.

The early Sulists recast the lunar alignment ceremony as a ritual reenactment of Llugnah’s deception by Luszustrus, and conducted the rite in secret. A Daughter from the cloister would be called to the temple to submit to sexual intercourse with one or more priests. Church dogma called the ritual an honor to the Daughter, who was believed to transubstantiate the spirit of Llugnah. The Deceived during the act, but the hypocrisy of the claim was apparent to all, and reformers in the modern church had all but eliminated the practice over the past decade.

“And how did you fare?” Rialta asked.

“Not well,” said Almatara. “I had been called to Floodtide before, but the Floodtide after the murder of al-Barqat was the worst. Afterward my spirit grew dim, and I retreated from life in the cloister. Chibura kept me going, but for years I was little more than a shadow. It was meditation on the spirit of Llugnah that brought me back, but by that time my John was full-grown and off with the Guard. I was too weak to protect him.”

“And the beatings?”

“Brother Trefallian paid special attention to John, in part to punish me, I suspect. But the worst of them came after the pitchball festival at Llupanog. Did you know that John was once the top pitchballer in Clyde Barrow?”

“I did not.”

“Chibura said he was particularly gifted, though I must admit I never understood the game well enough to tell. He was gone to the annual festival in Llupanog for more than a month, and all the papers said he was the best center-half of the games.”

“I had no idea,” said Rialta.

“Well, anyway, that is where he met Aideen, and no sooner had he returned to the cloister than he was asking to go back. Trefallian decided that John had been disrespectful and ordered him whipped. John ran away with one of the temple horses, and when the constabulary returned him two weeks later, Trefallian tied him to the discipline post and whipped John himself.”

“And this was all before he came to me?” Rialta asked.

“Yes. Does this help you to understand?”

“Oh my yes,” Rialta said. “No wonder her parents were so anxious to offer their daughter to the highlands. Better no daughter at all than a daughter married to a wild son of the cloister.”

“Trefallian’s beating ended John’s pitchball career,” Almatara said. “Had he remained whole he might have made his living at the game – the Clydes of the Edain are mad for the sport, and a star center-half can earn as much in a year as a successful farmer, if you can imagine such a thing. Several cloister children have used pitchball to make their place in the world outside the temple, and I wished that for John. I still hoped that he might coach, but that was not to be.”

“And this Brother Trefallian,” Rialta asked. “What became of him?”

“His treatment of John was widely reported, and the Bishop of Sidon called him back,” Almatara said. “The last I heard he was on the staff of the cathedral, although I must admit that I have had little use for news of him. He is the kind of man who makes a mockery of Sula, for Sula taught the divinity of both Telios *and* Llugnah, and there are priests who only heap scorn upon her spirit. Llugnah was deceived by Luzustrous, yes, but are we not all deceived and imperfect? Is it not the spirit of love and sacrifice that makes us holy? The priests believe Telios is higher than Llugnah, for he was sent by God to redeem her bargain, yet Llugnah came to our aid and comfort of her own free will. How can anyone value one above the other?”

“Our path honors both the Goddess and the God,” Rialta said. “Discord only arises when one is placed above the other.”

“And there is discord all around us now,” said Almatara. “I fear it like any other human being, but my greatest sadness is that all of this evil is done in the name of Sula, who taught only peace and love for each other.”

“One must learn to see the difference between the teachings and the teachers,” Rialta said.

“Bless you for saying that,” Almatara said.

“And blessed be all things,” said Rialta. Their eyes met, and whatever it was that passed between them worked its way around Rialta’s thoughts, rearranging bits of information she once believed were firmly under her control.

Celon Gate was still the better part of a day’s walk to the north when Rialta’s band reached the road from Bluff’s Folly. They stopped to rest and water the horses at a stream within the forest, then continued on in hopes of covering a few more miles before nightfall.

But they made little progress. Just as refugees had once flooded this road as they fled to the east, now *ouhasandans* trickled back west in small mounted groups. The first of the raiders to ride up upon them consisted of a mere quartet. The raiders hesitated, then fled, but Rialta wanted their horses and sent a couple of Valand to collect them. The second group was larger: eleven men on horseback who seemed more intent on making speed than harassing refugees. They attempted to frighten the women out of the road and spur their horses past the group, but the highland warriors took them down as well, adding eleven more horses to their stock.

As the group neared the spot on the map where Rialta hoped to camp, they found more stragglers waiting – a pathetic and nervous group of seven raiders nursing wounds and rattling dry coughs. These abandoned their four exhausted mounts and ran into the woods when they saw the approaching Clydish horsemen. Father Ash bade Rialta and the refugees to set their camp well off the road, but the Va kept a close watch throughout the night and the Valand did not sleep at all. In the morning, Ash told Rialta that dozens of *ouhasandans* had passed them in the darkness, though none in groups any larger than twenty men.

“Something is afoot,” Ash said as he handed Rialta her morning tea. “These men are afraid. What do you suppose has happened?”

“I’ll get right back to you on that,” Rialta said. “Follow me.”

Ash and a Va archer trailed the Lady a hundred yards into the forest and stood watch as she cast her circle and assumed the Goddess position at its center. Rialta cooled the voices in her mind and envisioned the energy of the forest as cool blue fire, racing through her nostrils with each breath, coursing out of her fingers and the bottoms of her bare feet. She shaped the energy and slowed it, envisioning a still lake on a windless day, then let her mind slip below its surface.

Here the images came to her as if she were scrying in a crystal: John Tera crouched behind a tree counting soldiers atop the timbered wall of Celon Gate; Seamus Dannan tending to horses in the forest with two women at his side; Coom LaTrent on horseback with three dozen men behind him, thundering across an open field toward a hastily constructed works outside a Celon village.

And then she found the image she had been looking for: Barney Alt in uniform, riding at the head of a long column of troops, moving west.

Her recognition of this event – of its significance, both to the Clydes and to prophecy – stirred the stillness of the pool and broke her connection to it. Rialta tried to reestablish the vision, but she had driven it away. It was hard to hold one’s mind open to receive such signals, nigh on impossible to simultaneously experience and think about them. It was frustrating, but she had the basic knowledge she needed and that would have to suffice. Rialta lowered her arms, muttered her private thanks to the Goddess, and closed the circle by retracing it in a clockwise path.

“Did you find anything of use to us, my Lady?” Ash asked.

“Oh my yes,” Rialta said. “*Nae Rasa*, it would behoove us to make speed today. Celon Gate lies three hours ahead, and I want our warriors atop that wall by mid-afternoon.”

“As it please the Lady,” Ash said. He bowed and strode ahead of her to the camp to prepare his men.

Rialta did not stop to scry again, but her morning excursion had established a connection to everyone she had seen in her vision, and it was fresh and sensitive. She could not see Tera or Dannan or Alt, but some knowledge of them informed her intuition, and her confidence in its accuracy increased as the sun rose. Her inner sight told her an opportunity was at hand, and she did not wish to let it pass, even if it meant taking a risk with the refugees.

The Valand rode at the front of the column, with the Va and the Fionnans in the rear. Rialta stayed in the middle with Almaterra and her twenty-eight charges, but the Lady was poor company. She refrained from conversation, choosing instead to serve as a listening post, quieting her mind so that no ripple in the pool of her intuition would go unnoticed. The first pebble to disturb it came at mid-morning, with the Gate still more than an hour’s ride.

“Father Ash,” Rialta shouted. “There is a large group of them only a few hundred yards ahead – perhaps thirty men, in disarray. They are riding together, but they are squabbling.”

“Should we close with them?”

“Oh yes, Father. Kill as many as you can and scatter the rest. You do fight from horseback, don’t you?”

“When called to do so, of course.”

“Then we shall see you in a few minutes,” Rialta said. “Now be off.”

The *Nae Rasa* spurred his horse to a gallop and the other four Valand leapt ahead to join him. Almaterra and Chibura exchanged incredulous glances.

“You are quite the callous witch, sending five men off to attack thirty,” said Chibura. “Even the bravest of the Clydes would call that madness.”

Rialta smiled at the Daughter. The smile only grew larger when the band came upon the scene of the battle fifteen minutes later. They passed the first *ouhasandan* bodies lying in the center of the road, then several more sprawled in the ditches on either side. The next hundred yards contained no further carnage, but then four more lay in a pile, and as they passed that little scene of horror



the women looked up to spot the five Valand returning with an even dozen horses trailing behind them.

"I suppose you're going to tell me it was your witchcraft that empowered those men in their murderous work," Chibura said to Rialta.

"Oh no," said Rialta. "It was their witchcraft alone."

Though most of the *ouhasandans* had escaped into the forest, those on the fastest mounts had simply outrun the Valand and raced ahead toward the gate. "They will be expecting us," said Father Ash.

"Good," said Rialta. "Now we have only to find our friends and we can begin our attack in earnest."

"And who are these friends, my Lady?"

"Clydes all," she said. "Four men and two or three women. They have been keeping an eye on the gate for several days."

"And you have a plan for them?" Ash asked.

"No," said Rialta. "But I suspect they have a plan for us." She closed her eyes and waved her hand dismissively. "Now let me be. I'm summoning them."

**T**he first to approach was Dannan, though initially they glimpsed only the sight of riders on either side of the road, pacing them in the trees. The highland warriors instinctively sought to drive them off, but Rialta shook her head, and they stayed in formation. After a few minutes, Rialta grew impatient and ordered the company to halt. That ought to bring him down, she thought.

It did. A few moments after they stopped Rialta heard an exchange of mourning dove calls on either side of the road, then the sound of horses making their way slowly toward them. Two riders appeared in short order, and they stepped into the road from either side – a tall, long-haired man with a *sioboeth* slung across his back, and a Clydish woman with fierce eyes who fingered the hilt of a bronze DuQaddish cavalry saber.

"Make yourselves known," said the man.

"You are Seamus Dannan, a son of Gwynyr," said Rialta as she urged her horse forward, weaving between the Valands' chargers.

"I knew that," Dannan said, showing no surprise. "And I'm pretty sure who these men in black are. But you, good lady, are a mystery."

"I am Rialta. Do you know the name, Seamus?"

"All know that name, my Lady." He bowed in the saddle.

"How far ahead to the gate?"

"Almost a mile."

"And what is its disposition?"

"In turmoil," said Dannan. "The *ouhasandans* have been flooding through it as if pursued by demons. I at first thought the demon might be a certain cavalryman, but now I see that it was you."

"Ah, but in truth it is neither myself nor your friend Coom LaTrent that they fear," Rialta said. "It is your commander, Barney Alt. Even now he marches past Bluff's Folly, driving the cowards before him. I'm sure there will be more coming along behind us shortly."

"And how may I serve the Lady in this situation?" Dannan asked.

"Tell us how we may take Celon Gate," Rialta said. "I wish to turn it into a trap."

Dannan looked at Rialta with an expression that resembled shock.

"*Okaaaay*," he said, drawing the word out slowly.

**A**sh was agitated, and Rialta struggled to mask her amusement. She had never seen a Valand, much less a *Nae Rasa*, show anything resembling anger, and such an event was nigh-on historic, she thought. How deep does perfection run? Here is my answer, she thought. It runs no deeper than the rules that create it, and no rule can encompass the whole of the world.

"I cannot fight beside him," Ash protested. "He is not of the Valand, yet he carries a stolen, sacred *sioboeth*. I should kill him where he stands, not follow his orders in battle."

"Ah, but Father Ash, that is where you are mistaken," Rialta said evenly. "They are not his orders, they are mine, and not only will you fight beside him, you will offer up your life, if need be, in young Seamus Dannan's defense. For that is my will, *Nae Rasa*. Would you dishonor your *sioboeth* by upholding its power above your vow to me?"

"I would rather die," said Ash.

"How convenient," Rialta said. "For you will have every opportunity to do so in the next few minutes."

*Go ahead*, Rialta thought. *Go ahead and disobey me. It's what you've wanted to do all along. Why serve the weak mistress of Beltan when you have all the power? Go ahead*, she thought. *Test me*.

Ash's glare, which she had allowed to penetrate her as he willed it, now reflected back upon him with the full force of her order. *Yes*, she thought, *now you see. Now you see how you are revealed to me*. Recognition spread across his face, and the fury in his eyes was quickly cloaked.

"You see, Father Ash," Rialta said, lowering her voice as she stepped closer to him, "only the Path grants you your powers. And only the Path can take them away. Without them, you are simply men with swords, and men with swords can be defeated. So I suggest you refocus your energies on what is right and spend less of them on holding back what you have deemed to be wrong. Am I

understood?”

“Completely,” he said.

“Good. Now blessed be, and let us get about our business.”

Rialta’s war council began ten minutes later when Dannan returned with more of his band: a scout named Watts and four women – Trina, the fierce-eyed woman from their first meeting, and three others. Quinn attended with the Fionnans, but only Ash represented the warriors from Rhodig Fast. Chibura was a late addition and came without an invitation. Rialta considered having them all sit in a circle, Gwynyr-style, but chose instead to just cluster around their tattered map. She was already sensing too much discomfort from the Sulists.

Dannan smiled and introduced himself and his companions as they approached the group, and for a moment Rialta feared that Ash would break his promise when the *sioboeth*-wearing lowlander extended his hand in greeting. They locked eyes for a second and the smile faded from Dannan’s face, but the confrontation went no further.

“The defenses are laid out like this,” Dannan said, bending over the map to point with a whittled twig. “The wall itself is as intact as it ever was and runs more than five miles in either direction. However, the enemy has not improved it, and this wall was never built as a military works. It is a customs point, nothing more than sharpened tree trunks, most of them reaching no higher than fifteen feet above the ground. It is lightly defended on the flanks, and the two scouts from our group who have not yet returned had no difficulty crossing it yesterday. However, here – where the road passes through the gate – the defenses are far more sturdy.”

Trina handed Dannan a piece of paper, which the cavalryman unfolded and spread on top of the map.

“This is a diagram of the layout at the gate,” he said. “Here is the guard shack – just a shelter for one man, who raises a pole that blocks the road. It is nothing, really. Past that, it’s twenty feet to the gate. There are archery slits at ground level on either side, and they keep about ten men atop the wall above. Since the gate is recessed about ten feet, trying to press our luck here would put us in a crossfire from above and below. Even though it is defended by a relatively weak and disorganized force, we recommend bypassing it. We’ve scouted it for days, and the wall can be breached or flanked with ease.”

“And if we crossed it elsewhere,” said Rialta, “What then would we do next?”

“They wouldn’t expect us to attack from behind the wall. I would wait until we have night on our side.”

“And what awaits us there?” she asked.

“Anywhere from thirty to fifty men, but most of the ones who seem to be assigned here are accountants and constables. This is where the DuQaddish command strips whatever plunder their raiders attempt to sneak back to the west. All the conversation at the gate is about contraband. They confiscate horses and search saddlebags and the customs house on the other side overflows with loot from Celon Province.”

“Do you speak Qaddish, Sergeant Dannan?” Rialta asked.

“I understand a bit, since their talk has become so intertwined with ours over the centuries, but no, I do not speak it.”

“I speak it,” said Ash, regarding Dannan coldly. “We are trained in more than the use of a sword.”

Rialta considered Trina’s drawing, and secretly searched her intuition for the answer.

“Here is what we shall do,” she announced. “We shall gain the gate through deception.”

**F**or Rialta, her preparations for the assault seemed a sweet taste of the Fionnan life she had once imagined for herself. Her plan was simple, and though it entailed some risk, it offered speed, surprise, and directness. But in truth none of these things gave her more pleasure than the simple fact that she was going into harm’s way herself, as she had been trained to do, and not merely sending others off to act on her behalf.

Not that there weren’t surprises. The guard shack in front of the gate was empty when they approached, and Ash had to shout back and forth several times with the men atop the wall before an official could be roused to authorize their passage. The wait at the gate seemed interminable, and Rialta worried that the longer the men atop the wall spent looking at them, the more likely their disguises would be revealed.

In truth, the Valand looked silly in their *ouhasandan* clothes, and the bloodstains upon them were, in some cases, far too prominent. The Valand had objected to even touching the weapons they had to wear to complete their enemy getups, and Rialta thought they looked far too formal to fool anyone for long. Hiding their *sioboeths* had been something of a chore, as well, but they had followed Dannan’s suggestion and slipped them into the bedrolls behind their saddles.

As the wait dragged on, Rialta began to worry about the fake knots around her wrists. If they drooped, would someone notice? There were four of them playing the role of captured women, and each stood as if tied by a rope behind a man’s horse. Rialta’s first weapon would be her dagger, but she intended to use that only for the first strike, just long enough to cast aside her shawl and draw the sword that hung across her back. She itched to free it, even though she knew that was the wrong attitude for the High Priestess, but the slowness of the *ouhasandans* plucked at her nerves.

Once the official arrived with his entourage, events unfolded quickly. The top man was slovenly but substantial, a citizen of DuQaddic but not himself an *ouhasandan*. He spoke to them from above the wall and seemed particularly interested in the women. Rialta did not speak the language but picked up enough to understand some of the questions: “Where did you get them? Have they been approved?” Ash argued with the boss, but it seemed more of a haggle than a confrontation.

After about a minute the gate opened, and the boss walked out with two other men and inspected them, gripping Rialta by the chin and opening her mouth to get a look at her teeth. He grinned as he looked her in the eyes, his smile revealing a set of broken and missing bicuspid. Rialta shot a look at the open gate and the Gwynyrians sprung their surprise.

Rialta killed the boss swiftly, and all three of the raiders died at the hands of the Fionnans without making more than a groan.

The men atop the wall were slow to react, and all Rialta's plan needed was a few seconds. Va archers emerged from their hiding places in the forest and dropped several of the sentries, while Dannan, Watts and the five Valand spurred their horses through the gate to the other side.

The battle behind the gate was disorganized and marked by the enemy's confusion. The men and women from Gwynyr immediately set to work with swords, dispatching the first of those to sound the alarm. Dannan and Watts stayed in the saddle, working with crossbows to remove threats that were farther away. Though their attack was poorly coordinated, the enemy response was even weaker.

The largest group to oppose them after the initial sentries was a motley assortment of thugs that first ran toward them, then tried to stand its ground at the customs house. There might have been twenty all told, but most fled after their first clash with the now-dismounted Valand. It was not a fair fight, nor did Rialta intend it to be.

To the former Fionnan, the entire episode felt like it was over before it even began, and afterward Rialta stood with her sword tingling in her hands for a few seconds longer than necessary, savoring the all-too-human pleasure of competence, violence and risk. Then she sheathed her sword, bowed to Mistress Quinn, and surveyed the situation.

The gate was theirs now, and it was intact. Unless the next band of *ouhasandans* was considerably larger, she could hold this wall against them for a time – long enough, she hoped, for the Clydes under LaTrent or Alt to arrive and crush the remnants of the bloody raiders like bugs against a stone. Then, perhaps, she would learn what she had come to find here.

**T**era arrived half an hour later, walking out of the forest with a cavalryman named Smyth. Rialta did not go to greet him but recognized the man immediately. He was taller than Dannan and moved with a tightly wound grace that mirrored the look of his eyes. The pain of his youth was still there, she thought, but it had been tempered by something else. They were mystical eyes, unassuming and hard, but with a touch of unrevealed depth, like a pebble dropped down a well that makes no sound. Mother was right to see something in this man, Rialta thought.

"This is the man we came to see," Rialta whispered to Quinn, who sat beside her on a bench outside the customs house.

"Impressive," she said.

His reunion with Dannan was clearly that of two friends, she thought, and she recognized by Tera's expression that the news of his mother's presence had just been passed to him. He broke away from his friend and began hunting through the crowd for her, and when he spotted Chibura he broke into a run and fell upon her with a savage hug.

Almaterata was a bit farther off and had been tending to a minor wound collected by the cavalryman named Watts. The sound of Tera's voice calling her name roused her, and he spotted her when she rose to stand. They approached each other slowly, and Rialta could see that both were crying. The Guardsman fell to his knees before her and clasped her around the waist gently while his mother stroked his hair.

Rialta could not hear their words, but Almaterata was speaking to him softly and the Lady of Gwynyr had a pretty good idea what Tera's mother was telling him. The Guardsman looked up with a startled expression and looked past his mother to lock eyes with the woman Aideen, who stood tentatively behind Almaterata, her expression a mixture that Rialta could not easily read.

Tera rose and stood beside his mother, gazing at his lost love for the first time in fifteen years. Neither moved nor spoke, and the silence between the two former lovers engulfed the Lady of Gwynyr with a pure stillness that stretched back over long years.

*The beauty of exploration is that it becomes its own reward. Despite my many expeditions and field studies, I never tire of thinking about the next one, and I am soon restless when called by duty to “take my ease.” Home, hearth and family all have their charms, but I find them most enjoyable when I am not present.*

—**Reginald Alt**, in his preface to his *Archaeological Survey of Central Bhengal*

*The path of the highland witches is the path of deceit and secrets. To act or imagine otherwise is to court disaster.*

—**Fulton Yuhl**, Librarian of Sidon, from *The Politics of Darbas*



## Chapter 9

# Alt

Professor LaDram had proven more excitable than Alt had first expected, and now the general watched the man stalk the lawn below. The rest of the group of leading citizens could at least sit, but LaDram was a pacer, the kind of man whose intellectual intensity took physical form. Alt had seen it happen in the camps, where talk of politics and action replaced all other forms of entertainment, and there LaDram was the star. He would warm to his topic slowly, but once he was rolling his words became enchantments, and dozens of men and women would hang entranced upon them. Now all the talk was about what Alt would do next, and LaDram could do nothing but wait – a role with which he was clearly not comfortable. Under different circumstances, the general might have enjoyed the spectacle.

Alt stepped away from the window and blew a long jet of cigar smoke from his mouth. The second-floor ballroom of the mayor's residence stretched in gleaming afternoon light, its stillness accented by its emptiness, and as Alt began walking slowly back toward the chairs where Marbor and Mayor Naesa waited, the sound of his boots on the floorboards echoed like distant thunder.

"This is not a decision you should rush," Naesa said as Alt spun his own chair around backward and sat down. "We have already asked much of you, general. No one here will think less of you if you simply remain in New Calpathia."

Alt looked at Marbor. The question was implied.

"There is no doubt that the *ouhasandans* are fleeing the province," Marbor said. "From a purely tactical standpoint, Celon has withstood the crisis and things can now begin returning to normal."

"Major," said Alt, "how normal can things be when the wives and daughters of Celon are driven like cattle toward The Edain?"

"I tend to agree," said Naesa. "I don't know that 'normal' in the old sense is even possible, regardless of the status of the missing women. The carnage in the countryside is simply unprecedented. How do the survivors get on with any kind of normal life after such massacres?"

"That is a civil problem, not a military one," said Alt. "The military problem is simply this: as the raiders retreat to the west, they become a more concentrated force. The genius of their campaign lay in decentralizing their commands, allowing bands of pillagers to create random chaos. That was easily dealt with by our irregular cavalry. But now the little streams flow into one great river, and there will be thousands of these *ouhasandans* on the march together. Even LaTrent's rovers can't deal with numbers that large.

"We can let them go, and you gentlemen of Celon can reclaim your farms. But if we allow them to leave then there is no hope of recovering these stolen women. And more significantly from a military standpoint, the sieges at Sidon will be greatly enhanced. That is the question on the table. Should we set upon the enemy now, before he has a chance to organize, or should we do nothing and let General Thierry deal with the greater threat on his own?"

Marbor cast his arms in the air in exasperation.

"That is not the question at all, begging the general's pardon," he said. "Forgive me, Barney, but I know you better than you know yourself, and someone has to say this. Framing this decision as a strategic one, with the interests of the Gheraldic Empire at its heart, is nothing more than clever rationalization. Yesterday's news of large groups of women being herded toward Celon Gate offended your sense of morality, even though you claim to have none. This is not a rational issue, it is an emotional one, and no matter what you decide I want the truth to be clear between us."

"I never claimed to have *no* sense of morality," said Alt. "I have merely attempted to make it clear that I am, first and foremost, a practical engineer."

"That is insignificant to what we are deciding here," Marbor said. "If we march, all of us who wear the rank of Gheraldic officers

will be instantly in violation of the law. The ships are repaired, general. You can put off that conclusion by ordering more pointless inspections, but the truth of the matter remains. We could board the men this evening and be off to Donnage on the morning tide. Where is the practicality in avoiding our military orders?"

"As I said before, general, you would leave here with the respect and admiration of the entire city," Naesa said. "I know LaDram and the others want to see you march after the raiders, but even they will understand in time."

"You are kind," said Alt. "Mayor, I have enjoyed your hospitality and friendship, and whatever happens I shall miss you and look forward to our next meeting. But now I must ask you, in all seriousness, to put aside that friendship, to put aside your gentlemanly honor. Mayor Naesa, tell me the truth: what would you have me do?"

Naesa did not hesitate a beat.

"Form your Clydes and go get the bastards," Naesa said. "It's what I had hoped you would do from the beginning."

"Thank you very much, mayor," Alt said, rising. "I will go make the arrangements." Marbor rolled his eyes.

"What do you mean *you* will go make the arrangements?" the major called after Alt. "You know bloody well that I make all your arrangements!"

"You're not coming along this time, Major Marbor," Alt said as he passed through the door and into the hall.

"The bloody hell I'm not!" Marbor shouted. "And thank you very much, Mister Mayor, for giving that stubborn old mule the permission he was looking for!"

Alt smiled, and was glad Marbor could not see it.

**A**lt kept the officers and senior NCOs waiting longer than he should have. They were likely thinking it was one of his disciplinary tricks – Alt assumed at least some of his men were bright enough to know that he liked to leave them squirming before he brought the hammer down – but in truth the general simply didn't want to say the words that he had brought them in to hear. He listened to the footfalls and low mumblings of their talk through the wall and stared out the window into the mayor's garden, trying to identify the different species of plants.

That's what father would have done, Alt thought. He would have brought everyone in, gotten distracted by the botanical glory outside, forgotten his scheduled meeting and spent the afternoon wandering around with his sketchbook, making notes. But Reginald Alt could afford that. He was an eccentric Gheraldic nobleman who had spent his entire life following his curiosity and taking pride in the fact that he had never earned a penny for himself or anyone else. As a young man of the House of Newlin he had acquired a proper wife and family, but home was only a place he visited from time to time. The bulk of his adult life had been spent in the wild places of the Empire: the blustery highlands of Bronald, the inland jungles of Bhengal, the balmy coasts of Ulash. Sometimes the expedition was archeological, other times it had to do with botany or zoology. It really didn't seem to matter. Reginald Alt just liked being out in the field and had enough education and money to dabble in a variety of disciplines.

Barney Alt's mother had been another of Reginald's dabbings. The daughter of a Bronald innkeeper, Zola Brandeis was a ruddy-cheeked highland girl, accustomed to hard work and cold water. Alt had no memory of his parents together, but his parentage had never been a secret. Barney had been an Alt since birth, and Reginald sent Zola a healthy allowance each winter, enough money to send young Barney to the county's only school, alongside classmates from its leading families. Unlike his Brandeis cousins, Barney had advantages: a horse when he was nine, sturdy boots instead of the usual moccasins. Under Zola's strict orders, Barney had excelled at his studies, worked hard in the stables of the Brandeis Inn, and spent his free time ranging the Bronald highlands.

His normal childhood ended at eleven with a letter from Reginald. Within a week he was packed and loaded onto a ship bound for Bhengal. The next seven years of his life were spent following Reginald around the colonies, viewing an exotic world through the eyes of a man who alternately adored and ignored him. They spent the first two years in the backcountry with Reginald's privately funded zoological expedition, and the tutor Reginald had hired for the trip was little more than an afterthought amidst all that he was learning in the course on an average day. When he emerged from the jungle at thirteen, the future general was already a sturdy and quick-witted young man.

The rest of Alt's adolescence was less stable. Reginald left him alone for more than a year on two separate occasions, but even during his father's absence Barney continued in his footsteps. They shared a restless intelligence, and while his status as Reginald Alt's bastard kept him away from the Court at Arnell, it opened doors in the colonies. At fifteen, with his father back home in Gherald, Barney signed on with an archeological expedition in Bhengal and spent a winter in the backcountry digging up yet another of the region's countless ruins. It was Barney's first experience leading men and solving engineering problems, and by the time the rains came and his father returned, the young Alt had already established a reputation as a steady hand.

At seventeen his father left him behind again, this time on the island of Bangoon. No sooner had they arrived from Ulash to begin organizing an expedition to the interior than news came of Reginald's daughter's impending marriage, and Barney's father was gone again. Though Reginald promised to send money, it never arrived, and after a few months the house servants quit and the bank took the house back. Barney Alt found himself alone and broke and decided it was time to strike out on his own. He booked passage to Ulash with the last of his father's money.

In retrospect, the mystery of the missing payments was easily solved: Reginald's wife and grown children had seen to their disappearance. They were Pfennas, members of the House of Findlay and well-connected at court. Reginald's bastard was an embarrassment to them, and it was no task at all to cut him off.

But if they had hoped that cutting off Barney's money would turn him against his father, they were sorely mistaken. The illegitimate son was having the time of his life in Ulash, working as a deckhand and longshoreman before picking up a job as a work-gang foreman on the canal project. He attributed the missing funds to his father's forgetfulness and threw himself into life on his own

with characteristic passion.

Those carefree years came to an end two summers later when a young lieutenant named Daedalus Alt showed up at the canal barracks with a letter from Reginald. Daedalus, one of Barney's cousins, had been sent to find him and put him on a boat to Gherald, where an appointment to the military academy awaited. Barney sailed with high hopes. He looked forward to seeing Reginald again and training as an engineer.

But Reginald was ill, and lived just long enough to see to Barney's acceptance at the academy. The old man died three months after his bastard son arrived in Gherald, and the Pfenna side of the family made sure that whatever money had been set aside for Barney and Zola dried up.

Reginald would have admired this garden, Alt concluded. It was more about classification and propagation than ornamentation. There was a scientific mind at work here. *Perhaps, he thought, if I stay here long enough, I'll have time to go afield and find some plant that has never been documented – a vine, perhaps, that crawls over rubble and walls and obstructions. And I'll name it after him. Reginald would appreciate that.*

But that was distraction, and Alt had allowed himself more distraction than the situation would grant. He stood and lit a cigar, then stomped to the door and burst through it. His officers and NCOs immediately shot to attention.

"At ease, men," Alt said. "There should be enough chairs for all of you." He looked around, saw that there were not enough, and went himself to pull in two more. The men looked at him in amazement.

"Here," Alt said, offering the chairs to two NCOs. "Sit down."

With everyone arranged comfortably and their eyes burning with questions, Alt leaned back against the desk and scanned the small library. He hated good-byes.

"Men, this is the end of our time together as a unit," Alt said. "I've received word of atrocities in the rural areas, and dealing with the enemy here is far too large a job for our comrade LaTrent and his irregular cavalry. It's going to take a unit the size of a CRG, and the only such unit available, unfortunately, is ours.

"Since Gheraldic law forbids such an action, all the Gheraldic officers of this unit are hereby released from service to my command. You will find spacious accommodations on board the *Tendax Partner*, and it will carry you to Bhengal on the next proper tide."

"And you, General Alt?" asked Lieutenant Wilston, his face practically reptilian with contempt. "Will you be sailing with us, or committing treason?"

"Neither," said Alt. "The CRG will march under my command, but we march in the interests of the Empire, not against it. I will take my chances with the Colonial Office after the job is complete, but I cannot in good conscience ask any of you to do the same. Fortunately, we have prepared our NCOs for the job of leading men in the field, so I believe we can still be effective. No insult to your professionalism as officers is implied, gentlemen."

"Such an insult is not only implied, it is explicit," Wilston said. "You are both an outlaw and an ass, general. A military unit without professional leadership is like a ship without a helm. It will founder on the first rock."

Alt avoided locking eyes with the recently demoted Wilston.

"I expected a certain amount of skepticism from our esteemed lieutenant," Alt said. "Is there anyone else who wishes to express outrage before we part?"

Lieutenant Bixby stood.

"Yes, I wish to express outrage," Bixby said. "Great outrage. Outrage at you, general, for excluding us from your plans. Outrage at Gheraldic law that prohibits Clydesmen from serving in the defense of their homeland. And furious outrage at you, Lieutenant Wilston, for you are both a coward and a scold."

"How dare you!"

"I dare," said Bixby. "I dare to match you with any weapons you care to choose, at sunrise if necessary."

"Done!" Wilston shouted. "My factor shall call upon your factor!"

"Oh do shut up, both of you," said Marbor. "Neither one of you has a factor. You're lieutenants, not Lords. And there will be no dueling, either. I haven't the patience."

"Then that's settled," Alt said. "Do you have any more questions? You may all draw three months pay from our treasury. That should cover your expenses and make up for your lost wages on Bangoon and New Bronald. You'll see to that, won't you, Major Marbor?"

"I suppose I could delegate it," Marbor said. "I have to pack for the field, you see."

"You are not welcome on this expedition, major."

"Yes, but that is really rather irrelevant, isn't it? My place in this CRG is as executive officer, and that is where I shall stay. The rest of the officers are free to sail, but I shall march. General."

Alt scanned the room. Bixby and Quick rose from their chairs, but the rest remained seated.

"Very well," Alt said. "Those who wish to march with the unit stay behind, but to the rest of you – go with my blessings and thanks. Oh, except for you, Ensign Wilston. You can go to hell."

"Ensign?" Wilston blustered. "On what grounds?"

"Insubordination," Alt replied. "You called me an ass and a traitor. Didn't he, Marbor?"

"I heard it myself."

"You'll see to the paperwork, major?"

"Oh, gladly," Marbor said.

"I shall have your heads for this," Wilston said, drawing his sword and pointing its tip at Alt. "When my uncle at Court learns of this, you'll find yourself seeking mercy in short order."

"Ensign, you ought not go about pointing sharp objects at people," Alt said evenly. "It's considered rude."

Wilston left in a huff, but the other officers stayed behind just long enough to salute the general one last time before filing out. Once they were gone only Marbor, Bixby, Quick and the NCOs remained. Carras shut the door.

"What's the plan, general?" Carras asked.

"It's a simple one," Alt said. "Drive the enemy from the province, raise an army as we march and lift the siege of Sidon, inflicting maximum carnage upon these barbarous bastards in the process."

"When do we begin?" Bixby asked.

"Now," Alt said.

In truth, Alt would have preferred a much larger force to tackle the job ahead, but this was a concern he shared only with Marbor. The major's status report offered him only 1,714 men out of a unit that had once boasted 3,000 trained and fully fit Clydes, and the tally of losses made him weary. The unit had been short-handed for months before the invasion, and the fighting on Bangoon had taken its toll. Alt would always wonder whether there were men left behind at Dibishputra, and in his heart he hoped that all those who had not made it to the docks were dead – that guilt was easier to stomach than the thought that he had left them behind to fend for themselves. A few had died on the crossing to New Bronald, and then there were those lost in the storm.

More had mustered out since their arrival at New Calpathia, and Alt had let them go despite his better judgment. There were the two sets of men serving in the irregular cavalry – the general hoped to reacquire them, soon – and there had been deserters, too – not many, but enough to fill a squad. And the quiet fact was that the CRG had not been at its full, assigned strength for so long that the 3,000-man figure was little more than a clever fiction, repeated to impress tavern girls and foreign agents. The two groups, Alt knew, were often one and the same.

Marbor saw to the field muster and brokered what supplies could be had from the civil authorities. Late in the afternoon, Alt had ridden out to check on the unit's preparations, and what he saw heartened him. His 1,714 had been bolstered by an additional 250 Celon Clydes from the camps – the best men from the watch. Even better news came with LaDram, who arrived at the head of three hundred mounted militia from New Calpathia. Though not fully trained, at least these soldiers came with their own horses and uniforms, plus a respectable train of wagons, a field kitchen, a group of surgeons, and a single, obsolete trebuchet drawn by a team of oxen. All told, Alt would begin his march with roughly 2,250 men. It was a start, at least.

He spent his last evening at dinner with Mayor Naesa and his entourage, and even Marbor made an appearance with the Madame Deras on his arm, looking more splendid than ever. There were toasts all around.

After the farewell dinner, Marbor returned to the camp and Alt retired to his room for a final night's sleep in a real bed. A midnight knock at the door roused him in surprise, and he answered it half dressed. It was Madame Deras, but she had changed clothes since the dinner. Alt wondered how she had gotten into the mansion.

"I came to bid you farewell and good luck," Deras said, smiling coyly. "But I can see you are not prepared to receive a female caller."

"No, I am not," said Alt. "So thank you and good night."

Deras leaned against the open door frame, the amber silk of her shawl spilling like honey down her otherwise bare arm. "Would you like me to come in anyway?"

Alt pressed his lips together and felt his conscience, his libido and his practical nature engage in a grumpy argument. He quickly settled it.

"You're Marbor's girl," Alt said. "Now go home."

"Can't a Clydish woman thank her nation's champion?" she cooed. "I'm quite thankful – and quite skilled. Dear Marbor need not know a thing."

"Well, yes, but I'm tired. And tomorrow is a big day. So..."

"Then at least lean close," she whispered. "At least let me give you one little gift before you go." Her lips were moist and ripe, and they called to Alt. How long had it been since a woman had even kissed him? How long? Even one kiss, even if it meant nothing... He found himself leaning forward to her even without his conscious mind willing it, as if he were ... enchanted...

The thought broke the spell, and at the last moment before his lips would have touched hers, Alt recoiled. As it turned out, it saved his life.

The knife meant for his throat flicked toward it just as the general pulled away from the kiss. Deras adjusted to his sudden movement, but not accurately enough, and the blade merely nicked the side of his neck. Alt staggered backward, and in the second it took him to grasp that the madam from New Bronald had come to kill him, Deras transformed from a beautiful seductress into an efficient warrior. Alt instinctively raised his hands in defense, and fresh blood spurted where the assassin's blade scored his palms and forearm.

Gathering himself against the attack, Alt threw a quick jab that Deras easily dodged, darting in to slash at his abdomen just above his hip. The new wound both hurt and surprised him, and Alt tumbled over a chair. He rolled over to face her again and saw her descending toward him. But he also saw Casar, and she did not.

The tribesman caught her wrist as she prepared to plunge the dagger into Alt, and even though the appearance of a second man surprised her, her reaction was swift. She spun out of his grasp with a twisting motion and launched a series of kicks and punches



that backed Casar away. The bald warrior received her attack and defeated it, then smiled at her, drawing his own short sword. Deras attacked again but Casar blocked her blade thrust, stepping past her and slashing into her belly as he gripped her hair. She died with her body suspended by her lovely tresses, and Alt's bodyguard waited until she went limp before dropping her to the floor.

"The general has many enemies, yes?" Casar said, wiping his sword on Deras's silk shawl. "A beautiful death."

"She fought like a man," Alt said, rising and examining his wounds. "And not just any man, either."

"She was a good killer. But not as good as Casar. Still, I would honor her."

The commotion raised the rest of the mansion, and soon Naesa arrived. The mayor rolled Deras onto her back and unbuttoned her shirt to reveal her left breast. It was adorned by a small blue tattoo: a circle with two crescents affixed to either side.

"A Fionnan," Naesa said. "This is no ordinary courtesan."

"What does it mean, mayor?" Alt asked.

"It means," said Naesa, "that you should be quite wary of the women of Gwynyr. Apparently, the Lady herself wishes you dead."

**A**lt waited until the march had begun to give Marbor the news about his lady friend, Deras. The major took it well – too well, Alt thought – and didn't seem to grasp the gravity of the situation until the general removed his gloves and pulled back the bandages on his hands to reveal the wounds beneath. Marbor's eyes lit up with surprise, and Alt concluded gratefully that his second-in-command was not a member of whatever plot had formed against him.

"It was said around my household," Marbor said, "that the Court at Arnell was lousy with Fionnans – and not just the Messenger of Darbas' delegation, either. Of course, we're of the House of Teague, which isn't a leading house, and those men thrive on conspiracies. But by their reputation, those women are devils."

"You didn't notice the tattoo?" Alt asked. "I can only assume you had opportunity to see it."

"Perhaps it was too dark," Marbor replied.

Alt thought that evasive, but kept it to himself. The major was clearly troubled by the news, and the general didn't want to press him on the matter or let him know the full extent of his wounds. The slice in his side screamed with each movement of the horse beneath him.

They rode in silence for a few minutes before Marbor spoke again.

"I knew she was a Fionnan," he admitted, his eyes upon the distant horizon. "I knew and I didn't tell you, Barney. Please forgive me for that."

"Why?" Alt asked.

"Because I thought she had come to protect you."

"Then why not tell me?"

"Because, general," Marbor said, "you are not a man who accepts help graciously."

**T**heir first contact with the enemy came just north of Brazo Luc, four days march outside of New Calpathia. It was a small band, and after a brief skirmish with Alt's cavalry scouts, the *ouhasandans* slipped away to the west. Alt doubled the patrols and lengthened the day's march.

On the afternoon of the fifth day the scouts reported the tail end of a wagon train pushing toward the Celon Forest. Alt sent the cavalry ahead with orders to harass and detain the enemy if possible. By nightfall, Alt's column had drawn close enough to the skirmishing that he could hear the sound of the enemy voices from the other side of the stream that lay before him.

The first fight was hardly even worthy of the word. Alt's grenadiers waded the stream at first light, and what resistance the enemy gave soon collapsed into a rout. The Clydish enlisted judges took testimony by wound from several of the prisoners, Marbor divided up the supplies from thirteen captured wagons, and the CRG resumed its march.

On the seventh day the scouts reported some kind of skirmish ahead at the village of Sect, just east of Bluff's Folly. Suspecting that his reunion with LaTrent lay just ahead, Alt ordered the column to the double and they jogged toward the confrontation.

What he found was more than depressing. It was LaTrent, alright, or what was left of his second group – mostly civilians – who had ridden out with him after he returned with the first train of wagons. Most of them lay dead or dying, and the survivors had fled. Almost 500 *ouhasandans* held the village, which was being used as some kind of staging area, and Alt's cavalry blocked their escape. To Marbor's surprise, the general recalled them before he launched his assault.

"Always give your enemy a means to escape," Alt said. "That way they don't fight as hard."

It was the largest battle so far, and it was over in less than forty-five minutes. Guardsmen swarmed the *ouhasandan* defenses and once again the enemy fled *en masse* after the initial contact, leaving their wounded behind. The difficult part was finding LaTrent. Alt's Guardsmen had gone right past him the first time they walked the battlefield, but the general sent them back to look again. His body lay under a horse, not far from a hastily constructed defensive works. The men recognized him at first by his plumed hat – only the feather protruded from beneath the dead stallion.

"It looks as if he attempted to charge them, across this field," Marbor said. "What was he thinking?"

Glory, Alt concluded inwardly. He was thinking about glory.

By nightfall the remaining members of LaTrent's second group filtered back from the fields around the village. There were eleven in all, three of them Guardsmen, and they confirmed Marbor's theory. LaTrent had been convinced of victory, even though the numbers were against them – the *ouhasandans* could not stand up to a Clydish attack and would disintegrate just as they had in the past, the sergeant major had told his men. LaTrent had led their charge across an open field, but a single volley of arrows had laid

them low. The plumed dragoon had been the first to fall.

Sergeant Major Carras saw to LaTrent's burial personally. Alt and Marbor attended it, and the general spoke a few words. It was a simple, Sulist ceremony on a scented spring day. Afterward, the enlisted judges took more intelligence from the wounded *ouhasandans* left behind, and their screams floated on the breeze to the general.

That evening, scouts reported large groups of raiders to the north of them moving west toward Bluff's Folly. Alt considered a forced march but chose to keep his pace instead. The larger the enemy grew, the more slowly the enemy would move.

His CRG reached Bluff's Folly by midmorning the next day to find signs of recent activity. Marbor was apprehensive about the escape they had allowed the enemy. From here the pursuit would enter the Celon Forest, and all their tactics would have to change. There would be no traditional battlefield within such a wood, though the *ouhasandans* would find plenty of opportunities for ambush.

Alt was less concerned. He understood this enemy, and its primary motivation now was not just fear, but shame. News of his march had drained Celon of the last of the raiders, and the road to Celon Gate and The Edain was like a drain pipe. He only hoped that something would block that drain long enough to allow him to clean it out once and for all.

As the march through the forest continued, Alt read signs of enemy panic all along the road. There were bodies left in ditches and farm animals roaming in the woods. Disabled wagons were left to the elements along with the treasures they carried. But the clearest sign was the women. They appeared along the road in small groups, either freed by their fleeing captors or escaped through their own cunning. After speaking with them, Alt understood the *ouhasandan* even better, for these were men who understood right from wrong but had lost that understanding to some kind of group madness. They fled not only the pursuing Clydes, but their collective guilt as well, and Alt – with his own memories of the massacre at Tarvis River – knew that conscience is a relentless foe.

Ten days into the march, Alt passed a burned-out crossroads trading post marked by freshly dug graves. When he camped that night to the west of it, he studied the map and his attention came to rest on Celon Gate, the physical barrier at the edge of the forest that also marked the beginnings of The Edain. He would reach it soon, and what he found there would determine whether the *ouhasandans* would escape or die. He spoke to his leaders about it that night and several of them prayed aloud for justice. Alt silently concluded that justice had nothing to do with it.

Sergeant "Strawfoot" Zylen and his rovers arrived on exhausted horses the night before the battle at Celon Gate. News that Alt and the CRG were on the march had reached them as they escorted women from the forest back to New Calpathia, and they had left the women with the civilians from their band and ridden practically non-stop to catch up. Even with horses to exchange along the ride, both the men and the animals were near the breaking point when they finally reached their unit. They had not heard the news about LaTrent, and most took it hard.

But there would be little rest for the new arrivals. Advance scouts began delivering news of the enemy just ahead, bunched together near the Celon Gate. Reports came in a steady stream: a large group of *ouhasandans*, perhaps a thousand strong. And there was some kind of fight ahead at the gate. The enemy situation seemed confused, and sensible reports of their strength and disposition were impossible to come by.

"They are without central command," said Alt. "So they fight amongst themselves instead of pressing the gate."

"We don't know what they know," said Marbor. "For all we can tell, there could be an equal number of Edain Clydes manning that gate."

"Or it could be nothing more than a pitchball team with slingshots," Alt said. "These men are not prepared for this kind of fight, but if we give them enough time, they might find a working answer through their mere desperation. We should attack while they are in confusion."

"Sergeant Major LaTrent had a similar idea," Marbor said.

"Ah, yes," Alt said, grinning. "But then again, there's no feather in my cap to obscure my vision, is there, major?"

Lieutenant Bixby began waking the troops at 4 a.m., and by 5 they were formed by platoons and companies. Alt woke Zylen and his group personally and sent them back to their old units, the final stroke in breaking up the irregular cavalry. Dawn was still more than an hour away when the general met with his leaders and sketched out the battle plan.

Alt thought they received it well – even the militiamen. They would march in column formation up the road until they were about half a mile away from the spot where the scouts had sighted the main body. There they would break into a broad skirmish line, set into place by an advance party. Alt would remain on the road with the militia in reserve behind him, and after half an hour they would begin advancing. Those farthest out would attempt to flank the *ouhasandans*, if possible, and the entire formation would contract into a more sturdy battle line once contact had been made and the arrangement of the enemy force could be determined.

"And what does the general's vaunted intuition tell us to expect this morning?" Marbor asked as the two officers rode side-by-side on the movement to contact.

"Zylen says that Tera and Dannan rode forward to scout Celon Gate," Alt said. "I suspect there is little more than that scouting party holding it. If the *ouhasandans* have any sense whatsoever they will have attempted to breach a weak point in the wall during the night rather than press another attack on the center. But beyond that, I really don't know what to expect. I expect we'll win, of course."

"Of course," said Marbor.

*And God replied "There is no task but the one I have given to Telios."  
Hearing this, Llugnah replied: "Then I shall go and be with them, who  
suffer for my mistake;  
"And when they suffer, I shall comfort them;  
"And when they mourn, I shall lift them."  
Then God said: "Deception was your destiny, not your fault. Abide with  
me and keep me well."  
But Llugnah took her leave of God and went among the people, for she  
understood they needed love as well as logic.*

—Verses 33-38, *The Book of Telios*

## Chapter 10

## Rialta

**O***uhasandans* probed the wall through the night and kept Rialta busy. There were not enough of them to defend the length of the fortifications at Celon Gate, so it was up to her to sense where the next attempt to breach the wall would come and lead defenders to the spot before things got out of hand. The Lady of Gwynyr spent much of the night in the saddle with her eyes closed, trying to sense the next surge of impending disaster, and as it formed in her mind she would lead the Valand at a gallop to repulse the enemy.

Yet something was confusing her – another factor she could sense. Defining it took several hours, as she was focused on the immediate threat posed by holding this line against more than a thousand men with only a few defenders at her disposal. When she finally realized that it was the arrival of Alt and the 2nd CRG that she felt, the knowledge gave her only momentary relief. The harder the *ouhasandans* were pressed from the rear, the more desperate they would be in forcing the issue at the gate. A concerted attack was more than they could handle, and only the enemy's caution and fragmented leadership had spared them this long. She had made plans to retreat if a large attack came, but now she understood that her people would have to hold the wall as long as possible if Alt were to destroy the raiders between them.

"How will these next ones come?" Willow whispered to her mistress, handing her the canteen.

"They are digging," Rialta said. "Just ahead."

The Valand waited silently where Rialta had indicated, and this particular attempt to break through ended quickly when the first *ouhasandan* dug back to the surface, poking his head up like a mole. Her highland warriors waited until three of the enemy emerged before rising and killing them, and by the sounds that came from the other side of the wall it was clear that the rest of the digging party immediately abandoned their project and fled.

"Where to next, my Lady?" Father Ash asked after it was done.

"There are a group of climbers who have already topped the wall a bit closer to the gate," Rialta said, opening her eyes. "Maybe five of them. But there are more waiting their turn behind them."

"And are there any more?" Ash asked.

"Yes," said Rialta. "There are several, to the north. But those are deserters, not war parties. I suggest we let them run."

"It will be over soon," said Willow. "Dawn is almost risen."

"It's just beginning," Rialta said. "Father Ash, when we reach the climbers, please allow me to continue on to the main gate while you do your work. The *ouhasandans* are about to be attacked, and in their rush the focal point of their escape will be at the gate, where there is a road. Please join me there when you are finished."

Ash nodded and they rode hard to intercept the raiders who had scaled the wall.

**T**era was on duty above the gate when Rialta climbed the ladder to the sentry walk. Several Va waited with him, but everyone kept their heads down. No sense in giving the enemy an easy shot, or in giving away their tiny numbers. The Va were only in the way right now, as far as Rialta was concerned, and she needed a moment with Tera before the fighting started. Their first meeting the afternoon before had not gone well.

"Gentlemen of the Va," she said, "please give me a private moment with Sergeant Tera." The men bowed and took up positions several yards away.



"You might as well sit down, my Lady," Tera said, offering her a spot beside him. "No sense in collecting arrowheads."

"Thank you, sergeant," she said, gathering her skirts and apron and sitting down. Their legs hung off the edge of the sentry walk together. "I am sorry to intrude upon your peace, but I do hope we can have a fresh start on the conversation we attempted yesterday. It's rather important."

"I apologize if I was rude," Tera said. "I did not intend to be. You have my full respect."

"Oh my no," said Rialta. "You were quite polite. Quite coldly polite. I understand that you do not like me, John Tera, and I think I understand why. I just hope to change your mind about it, that's all."

Tera avoided her eyes and looked off into the darkness.

"John, I need your trust," Rialta said. "I need it more than you can know right now. And unfortunately, I need it right away."

"To what end?"

"Well, for starters, your General Alt is just through those woods, and your Guardsmen are moving into position as we speak. Dawn has broken and their attack will commence in just a few moments."

Tera's face changed expression and Rialta recognized it as the look of a man who is searching his intuition, not his intellect. Once he found what he was looking for, his face went blank. *He's scared*, Rialta realized, *but it's not of the battle that's coming. It's of talking to me.*

"It's okay," she said, touching his arm gently. "You've carried this for a long time, and in just one day all the people from that point in your past emerged from the forest together. Your mother, Chibura, Aideen. And then me. Plus you are exhausted. You don't show it, but I can feel it. Just sitting next to you makes me tired."

"Then why not let me rest?" Tera asked. "Perhaps when I have rested my mood will be less dark and I will receive your words more gracefully."

"I would if I could," she said. "I promise you that. But there are some things you must know before this fight begins, or else all may be for naught."

"Tell me what you wish," he said. "It is true that I carry conflicting feelings toward you, and much of that is anger. But I will listen as I have trained to do, and separate my feelings from your words."

Rialta considered things carefully, closing her eyes and opening herself to spirit for guidance. But somewhere in the distance the sound of raised voices broke out in the forest, and both she and Tera turned their heads to listen. It had begun, and the high priestess betrayed her urgency in the way she reached out to grasp his arm.

"John, there is more at stake here than a simple battle for a worthless gate," Rialta whispered. "This battle will be won, and it will lead to bigger battles. There is a prophecy that tells me these things, and I must serve it. But the prophecy also calls for a hero – a great man who shall arise from the land of the Clydes and unite the peoples of Darbas to drive the enemy from our shores. I do not know who that hero is, but I believe he is among us here, now."

"And why do you tell me this?"

"Because it is quite possible that you are that hero, John. And if you are, you must be most careful this morning."

Tera's face betrayed him for once. The fear was perceptible this time.

"You are surely mistaken," he said. "I am a sergeant, and no great warrior. I'm half Mullaqat, a tarking misfit, without even a single relative beyond my mother."

"And you may not be the hero of which the prophecies speak," Rialta reassured him. "In fact, I do not believe that you are. But others – some of them no doubt wiser than I am – are quite confident. And so I must protect you, John. I cannot risk your death here."

The sounds of alarm in the forest had grown into a general alert. There were Clydish bugles deeper in the woods, and men rushed around in the dim glow of morning just beyond the wall.

"If you serve a prophecy as you say, my Lady, then it matters not what happens to me," Tera said. "For if I am your hero, as you call him, then I shall survive again. And if I die, then I am not your hero. It seems to me that your best course is to wait and watch and let fate decide."

"Prophecy is never so simple," Rialta replied. "And to be blunt, John, I fear for you now. You have survived by keeping your feelings at bay, but this morning your feelings are at the fore, and you know it. How will you respond? Will you fight with passion to defend those you love? Or will you fight cautiously, hoping to preserve yourself so that you can experience more time with them? In either case you are more vulnerable, for if you fight with either cause in mind you are just that much more distracted from the moment. And all combat is about the moment, dear. Your mind must be clear."

"Then why are you distracting me with this talk? Why tell me to be careful if caution can be its own distraction?"

"Because I can help you," Rialta said. "If you will let me. If you will trust me."

Tera swept her hand from his arm.

"Trust you to do what? To set your own course for my life as you did before? To coldly place the needs of Gwynyr above my own right of free will? I was a boy when we met before and I was foolish," he said. "I am not a boy any longer."

Looking at him and sensing the ferocity of Tera's guarded soul, Rialta saw her way in. There was no time to build the trust she needed to help him, but there was another way to purify his concentration for the coming fight.

"Fine," she said, rising swiftly. "Proud Clyde. You are not a boy, but you are not fully man yet, as I can see. Fight as you will, John Tera, and I will assist you as I may. But know that at the end of the day I will still be standing, and if you are not here to guide them it will be me – Rialta, Lady of Gwynyr – who will decide the fates of those you love."

"Don't you threaten me!" Tera said, raising his voice as he stood. "I will cut you down where you stand!"

“Save it, Guardsman. You are not the warrior you think you are.” Rialta turned her back to him, then descended the ladder.

“Heap all the scorn you like on me, Lady,” Tera called after her. “I can take it. I have taken far worse, and I always come out on my own two feet! Do you hear me, Rialta?”

*Oh my yes, she thought to herself. You speak with the voice of a focused young man now, John Tera. You sound like a person who will not allow death to enter – if only to spite me.*

Making him despise her was not the tactic she would have chosen in a perfect world, but it was all that time and circumstance allowed. Tera’s hatred seemed to soak into her skin as she backed down the ladder, and it hurt on many levels. *Ah, but there is no time for that now, she thought. He and I are very much alike in that way.*

**F**or the first forty minutes of the battle, Alt’s assault on the *ouhasandans* had the net effect of turning the enemy’s attention away from the gate and the wall. Rialta and the others experienced it as a war of sounds – bronze on bronze, war cries and individual screams, the heavy, breathless collisions of men along great lines. With every passing minute the sounds drew closer, and then came the first sight of the battle – panicked *ouhasandans* running to the rear until the wall stopped them. They clustered against it in small groups until Va sniping dispersed them.

The enemy returned in much larger groups ten minutes later – receding waves of them, falling backward toward Rialta’s small group of defenders. She put them all to work now – the Va, the Valand, the Fionnans, the scouts, the women from the camps, even those refugees from Mary Almaterra’s band who were fit enough to hold a bow or a slingshot. They lined the wall near the gate, putting up a disorganized resistance that sent terror through the ranks of their enemies.

About an hour into the battle, fear turned the *ouhasandans* away from the 2nd CRG and toward the wall with concerted fury. Rialta couldn’t tell which of the men had taken charge, or whether the *ouhasandans* together, as a group mind, merely realized what had to be done, but she recognized the volley of arrows that raked the sentry walk. Two of her defenders – a Va and a refugee woman – died instantly. Seamus Dannan ordered them all to take cover, but Rialta stood up and watched as hundreds of *ouhasandans* rushed the wall, tossing lassos unto the sharpened points of the timbers or merely making human ladders for others to climb. Valand headed off to intercept the attackers, but there were more arrows, followed by more raiders.

The 2nd CRG had broken the enemy’s will to fight, but in doing so had given them the desperate courage to assault the wall. Dozens would die in the effort, but Rialta knew that eventually the *ouhasandans* would break through. No training or cunning or magic could stop them. The high priestesses reached over and took the bow from Willow’s hands.

“What are you doing?” the handmaiden asked.

“I’m yielding,” said Rialta. “Come with me. Father Ash! Sergeant Dannan! Follow!”

The Lady of Gwynyr gave her instructions on the move. While she and Willow rushed Almaterra and the sickly refugees into the customs house and two of the Valand followed to protect them, Dannan and Smyth unbarred the door at the gate, pushed it wide and scrambled back up the wall.

Opening the door had the desired effect. Given an easier means of escape, the *ouhasandans* followed the path of least resistance, abandoning their assault on the walls and running through the gate in spastic clots and tangles. Those defenders who remained on the walls followed Rialta’s instructions and held their fire, while the Lady worked quickly inside the dim customs house, gathering herself with a quick ritual of gestures before launching a simple but effective enchantment. All the situation required was that the *ouhasandans* bypass the customs house in their flight, and that was easily accomplished. They rushed by without giving the building a second thought while Rialta channeled the overlooking spell like a deep vibration that hummed pleasantly through her outturned palms.

Hundreds of the *ouhasandans* made it through the gate, most of them on foot, before the grenadiers at the center of Alt’s formation reached the center of the wall and cut off the escape route. They were followed by militiamen from New Calpathia, who marched through Celon Gate as if they were on parade and took up positions on the Edain side, relieving the defenders on the wall. Next came the command staff and the mounted cavalry, which received its orders and thundered off in pursuit.

The battle continued on the Celon side of the wall, but it was a desultory affair, more of a pursuit than a fight. By mid-morning that was finished as well, and the 2nd CRG assembled on the Edain side with two dozen *ouhasandan* prisoners. Rialta and Willow watched the action unfold from the porch of the customs house, surrounded by the refugees, the Fionnans and the men from Rhodig Fast.

Dannan and the scouts approached the man she immediately recognized as Alt, and though she couldn’t hear their words it was clear by the way they motioned and glanced in her direction that she was the topic of their conversation. Alt’s eyes locked on hers with an expression that mixed eagerness and caution, and then the general dismounted and walked toward her. Rialta stepped down off the porch and moved toward him, stopping short of a greeting and bowing deeply at the waist. When she straightened up, she was eye-to-eye with a man she hadn’t seen in the flesh since she was the priestess-in-waiting.

“Blessed be, General Alt,” she said. “Welcome to Darbas.”

“Lady Rialta,” he said, giving her his own clipped military bow. “A pleasure to see you again.”

She could see that it was more than just a pleasure, and she felt guilty for it. Rialta had been memorable to him, and she had always known this and used it to suit her purposes. But standing in front of the reality of the man was different, for there was a genuine quality to him that was apparent, and she could not avoid the fact that she had abused it. Plus there was something else in his eyes – not just a longing, but a suspicion. What did he know?

“And I you, Barney. Life has taken us many places since we parted.”

“Did we part?” he asked, a slight smile creasing his face. It was both playful and mean. “Seems to me that I came around to have

a proper parting, but you wouldn't come down to see me off."

"That, I'm afraid, was more complex than you imagine, Barney."

"Yes, I'm sure. Nothing is ever just simple with you, is it, my Lady?" The question was truly a statement, and she felt the statement as an indictment. "And please stop calling me Barney in front of the men. It's bad for discipline."

His words and manner hurt, but Rialta swallowed the pain. "Of course, General Alt. Please forgive my familiarity."

"There is nothing to forgive, as there was no transgression to begin with," Alt said. "Now, if we may, there is some business for us to discuss, my Lady. I'm told that you ordered the gate to be opened, allowing hundreds of our enemies to flee into The Edain just as I was pressing their destruction."

"That is correct, general."

"An excellent move, that," Barney said. "Well-timed, too."

"One can overcome by yielding," said the high priestess. "Water will wear down a stone."

"And an enemy should always be offered a means of escape," said Alt. "I didn't learn that at the academy, you know. My time at your feet in Niamh was well-spent."

"You were never at my feet, general."

"Semantics," Alt said. "At any rate, the first part of our campaign has proven successful, and now the second portion begins. You are aware of the siege at Sidon?"

"Yes."

"Then may I assume that you plan to accompany me on this march?"

"Myself and my party. With more to follow soon."

"Excellent. Then allow me to introduce my second in command, Major Bowman Marbor."

Marbor bowed deeply, then took her hand and kissed it.

"Charmed," he said.

"And I can see that you are charming, major," she replied.

"Pay no attention to him," Alt said. "Particularly if he starts commenting on your beauty. It's a bad habit of his."

Rialta laughed suddenly, with much of the sound emanating from her nose.

"What's so funny?" Alt demanded.

"Nothing," said Rialta. It was nothing more than Alt's way of speaking that amused her, and the fact that she could feel humor after the events of the last several days delighted her. Perhaps she was punchy from fatigue, but now she found herself having to stifle a persistent giggle.

"Perhaps she just finds the general humorous," said Marbor. "And who could blame her?"

Alt did not appear amused.

"I should have put you on whatever work detail would have kept you at the greatest distance from the Lady, Marbor. And, come to think of it, that is exactly what I will do. We'll camp here today, for the rest of the day, and I want the troops ready to stand for a field inspection by mid-afternoon. War council at sunset. I'd like you both to attend."

That said, Alt turned on his heel and left the two of alone.

"I do think I've offended him," Rialta said.

Marbor looked at her with the same unspoken suspicion she had noticed before in Alt. Something else was at play here, she realized, and it would not do to have the very men she had counted upon operating outside of her trust.

"Major Marbor, you have the eyes of a man who carries a great concern that goes unspoken."

"It's nothing, I'm sure," he said. "Now, if you don't mind, I have matters to attend upon." He bowed again, and was off.

**M**ary Almaterra grew more graceful with each passing hour, Rialta thought to herself. The Gwynyrians had set up their camp not far from Almaterra's band of refugees, and as Rialta sat beneath a tarp writing out the lengthy instructions that would set the next phase of the war in motion, she was regularly distracted by the scene outside the adjoining tents. A steady stream of Guardsmen stopped by the cook fire outside Almaterra's lodging, drawn not by her rank or position but by something both unspoken and undeniable. By early afternoon the group had grown to more than two dozen Guardsmen, and they sat cross-legged on the ground, conversing respectfully with the brown-haired, reed-thin Daughter of Llugnah. After a while, her son joined them, and Tera sat beside Almaterra with her hand resting gently on his.

They are Sulists, she thought, and who better represents the image of their beloved Llugnah the Deceived than Mary Almaterra? The Old Path teaches respect for all things, but it is almost silent on the subject of compassion. And perhaps this is what the people need now – this empathy and love that flows so naturally from this one, frail woman.

Rialta caught herself twiddling her hair and stopped, her eyes checking secretively to see if anyone had noticed. But no one was paying any attention to her, and for just a moment a spike of jealousy shot through the high priestess. She remembered what it was like to be loved like Almaterra, only it seemed like every year isolated her further. Rialta caught the jealousy like a lightning bug in a glass, then willfully released it.

Willow, too, was transfixed, and wandered closer to the audience. Eventually the handmaiden noticed Rialta's attention had fallen on her, and she hurried back to the Gwynyr tents as if chastened.

"You need not be ashamed, you know," Rialta said. "Theirs is a beautiful story, don't you think?"

"Well, to be honest, I don't really know it," Willow blushed as she returned to packing her saddlebag. "It's not one of the lessons they taught us at the temple."

Rialta mused on that for a moment. She had only learned the Sulist mythology because it was taught to the Fionnans, and even that instruction had been for the purpose of deception: religious camouflage for agents in the field.

"You may ask me what you wish, Willow?"

The handmaiden had only been waiting for an opening and plunked herself down beside her mistress. "I don't understand the story of this Llugnah at all."

"Llugnah was a female spirit who was tricked into a bet by Luzustrous, the Sulists' demon spirit," Rialta said. "Luzustrous bet her that human nature was crass and evil, and Llugnah challenged that view – thereby creating duality out of what had been – to that moment – only divine unity."

"But in the Old Path, human nature contains both of these aspects, as do both the Goddess and the God."

"Yes, and that is the oneness against which the Sulists rebelled. In their view, once the bet was made, life was divided into two separate and competing spheres – a dark side and a light side, each governed by its own warring spirits."

"But how can this be so?" Willow pleaded. "How can human beings, who are so clearly comprised of both aspects, believe themselves to be one or the other?"

"Well, to the Sulists, these divisions are the result of the deceptions of Luzustrous and the guidance of Telios, the spirit sent by their God to defend Llugnah's side of the bet."

"Why didn't their God simply send Llugnah to do the job? It was her bet."

"They believe only Telios was worthy of the task," Rialta said. "Llugnah simply sacrificed herself to the eternal service of humanity out of her own guilt and compassion."

"So, she's what to them? Merely the spirit that created this mess?"

"I think," Rialta said, her eyes falling on the gentle Almaterra as she kissed the forehead of a Guardsmen who knelt before her, "that the Sulists love her most of all."

**A**lt's war council began shortly after nightfall and hours after Willow began her ride back to Beltan with an escort of Va and Valand. Rialta arrived at the torch-lit gathering with Quinn, Ash and Almaterra, whom the high priestess had invited to attend. Chibura tagged along, unwilling to join the circle but incapable of leaving Almaterra's side.

The general waited on them with Marbor, Bixby, Quick, Casar, Carras, Zylen, Dannan, Trina, Tera and LaDram, who was nattily attired in the bright blue jacket of the New Calpathian militia. Their conversations were muted and serious, and they stood in small clusters around a folding wooden table on which several stones held down a map of the province, mumbling quiet greetings as Rialta joined them. It would be a stand-up meeting: few chairs traveled with this army, and Alt had shunned the customs house as a headquarters. Rialta sensed a message in the setting. This was a field army, not a set of officers and a mass of anonymous men. Everything they did would be done together. Just as she had hoped.

Alt dispensed with the introductions once he sensed that all the participants had arrived. He merely walked to the map and began talking, and the others crowded around to see what he was pointing at.

"Our march to Sidon runs straight through the heart of The Edain," he began. "If we keep a good pace we'll reach Rhodig in a couple of days, skirt the shore of Lake Cunedda, and arrive at Lluganog in four to five days time. If there is no significant resistance we should be in Clyde Barrow in week, with Argon a couple days beyond that. And that's as far ahead as I wish to plan this operation right now. Argon in ten days, ladies and gentlemen."

"And exactly what is it that you intend to do when we reach the river town, general?" Marbor asked.

"Begin fighting," he said. "Our scouts report rumors that the DuQaddish hold territory in force as far south as the confluence of the Clyde and the Dynas rivers at Argon. Between here and there I expect no encounters beyond the occasional foraging party. We'll keep the cavalry well out in front to screen our march, with scouts ahead of the main mounted body. Sergeant Dannan, that will be your job again."

"Thank you," Dannan said.

"Meanwhile, beyond keeping up a decent pace, our primary concern will be raising additional troops as we go," Alt said. "We are far too small a unit right now to have much chance of driving the enemy away from the gates of the city, and we won't have the luxury of a great deal of time. The countryside has been largely stripped of food and provisions, which is one reason why we cannot dawdle. It will not do to be starved when we reach the siege, and if we are successful in recruiting the additional men we need to make this attack, provisions will become even more of an issue."

"Forgive me for correcting you, general," Trina said. "But you'll be arming women too by the time this is done. It's not only the men you need."

Alt stared at the wraith-like Trina for a moment as if trying to place her, then forged ahead with his plan. "We must have a meaningful force assembled and prepared here, outside Argon, within two weeks. News of our arrival may draw some DuQaddish reinforcements from Sidon, so we should anticipate a serious fight here and prepare to receive it as an attack if the enemy senses our weakness."

"Then perhaps we should mask our strength," Rialta said.

"I can only hope that we will have strength to hide," Alt replied.

"I think you will be surprised at what awaits you, General Alt," she continued. "My handmaiden departed for Gwynyr this afternoon. When she returns you will have each of the one hundred Valand at your disposal, plus another six hundred Va warriors. Their arrival alone will push your numbers close to 3,000 trained men, and more than seven hundred will be armed with steel weapons."

"Your scouts will have already heard rumors of a Clydish militia afoot in The Edain. I believe those rumors will prove to be true,



and that will give you several hundred more trained fighters. Meanwhile, our march past Rhodig will draw thousands more from the refugee camps in our foothills, with more streaming down from Niamh. The Clydes of The Edain will return to their homeland in force, General Alt, and all you will need to do is put pikes in their hands.”

“But I have no pikes to distribute,” he said.

“You will find weapons aplenty in Clyde Barrow,” Almaterra said. “It is the traditional battleground of the Edain, and there is a fine armory in the basement of the temple. Even the *ouhasandans* will not loot a Sulist temple, no matter how desperate their barbarism.”

“There is something more, although I cannot promise it,” Rialta said. “I have sent a request to the mayor of Llyr asking him to send down steel swords of his city’s manufacture. These are not entirely legal in Gwynyr, but I believe they have been forged anyway. Were it another city I could ensure their delivery, but then again, were it another city I could guarantee they would never have been made in the first place. If I am correct and the mayor is willing, then we will enter the battle for Argon exceedingly well armed.”

Alt was impressed. “What else can you offer our band, my Lady?”

“She may offer my services as well,” Quinn said. “I am Quinn, Mistress of Fionna, and I am currently in communication with more than a dozen of my order within the city of Sidon and the lands over which we shall march. There are almost a hundred more men and women commissioned by me who will aid you, either as agents in the field or as swords at your command. You will find us quite effective.”

“We already have,” Marbor said coldly. Why was he so hostile, Rialta wondered.

“So we shall be reinforced,” Alt said, pondering. “Much of our additional force will consist of trained men – and women.” He nodded to Trina. “But we shall still be outnumbered. Our latest estimate suggests we will find as many as 30,000 men, equipped with heavy weapons, surrounding the walls of Sidon.”

“A more accurate assessment would be 36,000,” Quinn said. “Several of our agents confirm the number.” Rialta made a note of the lack of reaction in Alt’s expression. *It scares him, she realized, but he dares not show it.*

“And how many Clydes, Mistress Quinn, would your agents estimate are waiting to join forces with us?” Alt asked.

“Roughly speaking?” she asked. “You can expect to assemble perhaps 5,000 to 6,000 additional Clydes at Argon. This would give you a force in excess of 8,000, with about half that number properly trained and equipped for military combat.”

“This is madness,” Marbor said. “We cannot press an offensive with such odds against us.”

“Then what would you suggest?” Alt asked.

“We form a defensive line outside Argon,” Marbor answered. “We find a way to supply our garrison, deny the enemy access to The Edain, Celon and Gwynyr, and spend the summer raising a proper army.”

“To attack when?”

“In the spring, if the DuQaddish do not retreat first. Surely there will be reinforcements from Gherald before then, and most likely that will be enough to discourage our enemy, and he will simply go back where he came from. The siege will be lifted, the empire will be served, and the Clydes will be protected.”

“But only some of the Clydes,” said Almaterra. “We have brothers who live among the DuQaddish in the provinces of Birren and Don, and these will be without our protection.”

“Nor does that solve the matter of your Gheraldic brothers,” Rialta said. “So far they have denied their help to the lowland Clydes as part of a clever political game. How will the rules of that game be changed when there are Gheraldic units spread out across Darbas? Celon would immediately rebel, and that would only create new factions, new tensions. While I appreciate your strategy of patience, Major Marbor, war is about more than armies drawn up along symmetrical lines, and this situation is far more complex than you imagine.”

“You forget, my dear ladies, that you are speaking with a Gheraldic officer,” Marbor said. “While I have great sympathy for your needs, my loyalty must be clearly established. I serve Marlton IV, the Court at Arnell, and the Empire of Gherald. You – all of you – are citizens of that empire, and it matters not to me whether or not you consider yourselves such.”

Now LaDram stepped forward.

“Major Marbor has made his position clear, General Alt. He fights for Marlton IV, and not for you personally. No doubt he considers our talk treasonous, our concerns irrelevant. I had hoped for better. But what of you, general? Will you lead us to victory only to betray us to the tyrants of the Court?”

“My allegiance can be more simply defined,” Alt said. “I serve my men. My Clydes. When our battles are joined, there is no king, no lord, no grand imperial glory that spurs me forward. It is only my men that receive my loyalty then.”

“A very politic answer from a man who claims to shun politics,” LaDram said. “But we are not in battle at the moment, are we? No swords are drawn. So whom is it, exactly, that you serve, general?”

Rialta saw the first true flash of anger in Alt’s expression – and noted how quickly he shelved it.

“I am a Gheraldic officer and a citizen of the world,” Alt said. “And I am not a traitor.”

Marbor stepped past Alt and thrust his finger toward LaDram. “Regardless of our loyalties, you, sir, have overstepped the bounds of decorum and common sense. You are a politician in a pretty blue jacket, and it is much too clean to be the uniform of anything but a parade-ground warrior. Our concern now is numbers, not rhetoric, and eight thousand troops simply cannot defeat an enemy of 36,000 armed with heavy weapons.”

“Begging your pardon, major,” Rialta said, “but that is simply not true. Our great hero, Liam LaFranq, defeated your Gheraldic empire’s finest infantry with just 5,000 men of Gwynyr. The race goes not always to the swift, nor does the battle go always to the strong. We can win this war before a single blade is drawn if we are but united and clear in our intent.”

"And what should that intent be, Lady Rialta?" Alt asked.

"Peace," she answered. "Peace not only for the Clydes, but for the DuQaddish as well. And for the Mullaqat. And for your Gheraldic brothers, too, if they will simply accept it. Darbas has descended into madness, but the sickness has hidden here, dormant, like the Blood Death, for centuries. If we march as an army of vengeance, then the madness will continue. But if we march as an army of peace, then when the war is concluded there will be something upon which to build. And we must bear that in mind when the battle is joined."

"What role will Gwynyr play in that peace?" asked LaDram. "Will you join us at the table this time, or will you play the role of your ancestor and retreat again to the highlands, content to manipulate and scheme rather than participate and build?"

"Oh do shut up," said Marbor. "Really, you bore me, LaDram, with your constant political drivel."

"I should have your head for that," LaDram blustered.

"Then go and get your so-called militiamen, for me against you alone would hardly be worthy of interest."

"Shut up, both of you," Alt said. "Rialta is right. I have no interest in punishing the people of DuQaddic, only in dispersing them from Sidon and the Clydish homelands. What you people will do to heal these wounds is your business, not mine, for I shall be retired in Gherald and you shall be left with the task of repairing what has been destroyed. I will not make that task any more difficult by giving the DuQaddish further reason to hate you. They already appear to have reason enough."

"And your plan, general?" Rialta asked. "You have heard much here. How would you have us proceed?"

Alt walked to table and leaned over the map. He studied it for several silent moments, then slapped at a bug feeding on his neck.

"We will defeat them at Argon first," Alt said, holding up his hand. "And after that we will be joined by the Gheraldic forces at Sidon and crush the enemy between us like a mosquito between a thumb and forefinger."

"But what if your Gheraldic friends remain behind the safety of their walls and wait until the enemy is weakened and we are destroyed?" LaDram said.

"Then we shall die," Alt said. "That, I'm afraid, is a rather simple conclusion."

Rain blew up from the west that night, ending weeks of glorious weather and whipping the camp with bands of vengeful squalls. It drenched the tents in the darkness, and the wind snapped poles and sent lines flapping. It was still there in the morning, stalled and persistent, dumping water on the Clydes but no longer slashing at them. Their march began in puddles and muck, with the columns soaked and water pouring off of every brim.

It rained through the day, then halted intermittently as they made camp. Showers came and went through the night, but by mid-morning the sky was darkening again. The second day of the march brought more implacable downpours, and progress slowed to a crawl as the roads gave up any hope of structural integrity and turned to sucking ribbons of mud. Rialta kept her place near Alt and watched as the weather leached into his mood. Marbor seemed visibly angered by it, losing his Gheraldic decorum and striking out at the teamsters as if the mud were their fault, but Alt just grew silent and inward. Nature had given him a free pass to this point, but now it was exacting its price. The second day's march was longer than planned but covered far less ground, and it did not end so much as it just stopped, exhausted and ill-tempered, miles from the spot on the map that had been their goal.

The worst of the weather came and went, but there was no sun to speak of for the first week, which ended a full day's march east of Clyde Barrow. At evening staff meetings, Marbor pushed Alt to reconsider his plans in light of changing circumstances, but Alt was in no mood to negotiate his vision. His depression had fermented into a glowering bitterness, and though Rialta tried to reach through it to him several times, Alt rebuffed her on each occasion. Try as she might, her nightly searches through the storehouses of her intuition brought her no new insights into Alt's mind, and she began to admit to herself that the weather had affected her outlook as well. The days were tiring and left everyone chilled, and the nights lacked the spirit and camaraderie that had buoyed her at the beginning of her journey. Rialta considered her mood a personal failing: she was the high priestess of a religion that worshipped nature in all its aspects, and if anyone should have recognized the blessings of the rain, it was her.

Instead, Mary Almaterra was the person who remained the most deeply centered and unaffected. Chibura cursed and swore like the teamster she had become, the muscles of her forearms flexing and popping as she helped shoulder their wagons through the low places, but Almaterra rode slowly through the column with a beatific smile, encouraging those who faltered and brightening the faces beneath the lines of rainspout brims. If there was any bitterness between Chibura and the woman she had once protected and had now come to serve, it was not apparent. Almaterra needed no title. Her identity was her holy power, and every action that flowed from her looked and felt as natural as a stream running downhill.

They arrived at Clyde Barrow in late afternoon, dragging wagons that had broken down late in the march. Marbor advised a day's halt for repairs, hygiene and morale, but Alt wouldn't hear it. Their conversation turned into a debate, their debate into an argument, their argument into a screaming fit, and Rialta feared the two old friends would come to blows. Instead, Alt merely scalded his loyal retainer with an eruption of words, then compromised bitterly. Marbor would stay behind with the wagons, the refugees, all the impediments to speed. While the major oversaw the refitting and restocking of the larger group, Alt would press ahead with the cavalry and secure a line against the enemy at Argon. Though he proposed it as a tactical decision, Rialta knew better. The general was merely frustrated. He ached to be free of the restraints of a large group, free to move and stretch.

But neither the rain nor their pace was the largest concern. More than a week had passed without the new arrivals from Gwynyr that Rialta had promised, and Alt was clearly impatient. The Lady felt them on the move, but was again impeded in some way. She could not see them clearly, nor connect to their thoughts. *This is the result of an unbalanced mind*, she thought. *The fog of attachment*. This was the reason why other priestesses stayed above the fray and out of the field. Her back ached and her butt was sore and

her inner vision was clouded.

Part of the job now was sending riders back along the road to Rhodig and west toward the Dynas River in hopes of finding the units that were supposed to be supporting them. With Alt requiring all the cavalry for his push to Argon, the task fell to the Valand and the Fionnans. Rialta considered riding with them, then decided against it. She was anxious to see Willow again, to be with someone who would show her just a little warmth. But her real use to the army would be in clearing her mind and reviving her intuitive gifts. The way to do that was to stay here and meditate, not take on another task, so she sent her people east and west and moved in with Almaterra and Chibura at Clyde Barrow's vacant Daughters of Llugnah compound.

A few of the townspeople had returned home by the time the army arrived, but the compound adjacent to the Sulist temple was empty – a three-story dormitory surrounding a now-overgrown courtyard. Chibura and Almaterra installed the most sickly of the refugees in comfortable rooms and set the rest to work, cleaning the ravages of neglect and *ouhasandan* looting, for while the temple itself was untouched, the same consideration had not been offered to the Daughters wing. Rialta set herself the task of baking, and within a few hours had produced several dozen loaves of hot bread from milled flour that had gone unnoticed by the raiders. After the refugees and the Daughters were fed, she chose to deliver the rest herself.

Marbor received his graciously, but despite her gift of still-warm bread, the major remained distant. He was ensconced in a modest – but relatively unplundered – home near the center of town, and men came and went on errands, tracking mud across the dingy floors. Since his unofficial priority was to repair the men's morale, Marbor had allowed each squad to find its own lodging for the night, giving each Guardsman a break from camp routine. This entailed reports and headcounts and lists and rosters, all of which he perused and filed, turning a tradesman's home into a bustling headquarters.

Rialta found Tera a block away with his squad, where the archers had quickly turned an abandoned inn into a comfortable home. He was outside on its porch smoking a pipe as she approached.

"Blessed be, John Tera," she said, unwrapping two loaves of dark bread and offering them to him. "I've brought you some bread to go with your supper."

"Thank you, my Lady," he said. "How is mother?"

"She is a most remarkable lady, your mother," Rialta said. "I've never met anyone like her."

"She was not that way before. Not the way I remember her."

"And how has she changed, John?"

"She is at peace now," he said. "The woman I remember was tormented and fragile. But now..."

"Your mother Mary has tapped into something holy. It's not of my path, but I am not so blind that I cannot see it."

Tera smiled slyly. "Don't tell me you're about to become a convert."

"Aren't you the comedian now?" Rialta said. "But there is room in our thinking for other ways. We forget that, of course, but the words are there if one only reads them. Our path is supposed to be a choice, but one that acknowledges that other paths may yet lead to the same destination. Unfortunately, few of my people understand that."

Tera nestled the cloth bundle of bread into his lap and blew a smoke ring. "Mother told me she fought against the Sulists in her heart until there was nothing left in it, not even anger. Personally, I think they broke her, Lady Rialta. I think they broke her down until she just learned to survive in their world and they left her alone."

"Or perhaps," Rialta said as she slipped onto the bench beside him, "perhaps your mother simply winnowed the wheat of truth from the chafe of its outward form. Perhaps she found, through her suffering, the essence of the Sulist faith. But your heart is still hardened to the possibility, isn't it?"

"You *are* a convert," he said, but his eyes remained on a distant point.

"I'm not like the priestesses who came before me," Rialta said. "They were trained in only one way of thinking, while I was trained in several. And that is why I am priestess now – because I am the priestess the times require. We have been apart too long, we Clydes. Don't you think?"

"I try not to think too much."

The two of them sat silently for a few moments.

"Have I misjudged you, Lady Rialta?" Tera asked eventually.

"Yes, I hope so," she said.

"And are you trying to be my friend?"

"Not your friend, not exactly," Rialta said. "There is a certain detachment I must keep, and it makes me a lousy friend. But I do hope to gain your trust, and perhaps even your affection."

"Why me?"

Now it was Rialta's turn to carefully consider her words.

"John, I told you before that there's a chance that you are the hero prophecy described. And I also told you that I didn't feel that to be your destiny. But I am becoming convinced that whatever you are, you are more significant than I first imagined."

"You see, this is exactly why it is so hard to trust you, Lady," Tera said. "You engage me for the role I may play in your schemes, not for the person I am."

"What weight do you give your own feelings, John?"

"I have them," he mused. "I'm quite in touch with them."

"But do you act on them?"

"When circumstances allow."

"Indeed. And what about when 'circumstances' interfere?"

"Then I set them aside," he said. "Until circumstances are different."

"Then how are we so different, in this regard?" Rialta asked. "I hope you don't consider me devoid of feeling, and I ask only that you try to see me as a woman with great responsibilities."

"Such as?"

"The wisdom of a world long gone, John. Only those that would not profit from it were given its stewardship – we of the Old Path, of course, and the Mullaqat. And you are the product of those two ancient lines, brought together at Fulltide. For that alone I would watch you and protect you."

"I understand that," he said. "But despite all your magical knowledge, it gives you only modicums of power. So why guard it so zealously?"

"It's not magic that we guard," she replied. "Magic is there for the taking, and anyone may claim it. It's something else, something far deeper. Was there magic in the books of the Library of Sidon? No. Yet we preserved it anyway, even though the libraries of Beltan are far more extensive."

"Then what is it?"

"I cannot say. Not now. But will you trust me when I tell you that there is a place, here on Darbas, where the knowledge of a forgotten age is stored and tended? Will you accept, without any evidence beyond my own word, that much of my life is devoted to the containment and protection of that knowledge?"

"I will accept it," said Tera, "for I see no reason for you to lie about it. But neither does it make sense to me. Why protect knowledge that you do not use? Why withhold understanding that could serve your people?"

"Not just my people, John," Rialta said. "All people."

"Well and good," he said. "Still the question remains. Why?"

"Why do your commanders not share what they know with the men in the ranks? Why do parents not teach their toddlers how to strike a match? Or ride a horse?"

"Are you so wise, my Lady?" he asked.

"I fear I am not, John. May I?" she beckoned his pipe, and Tera handed it to her. Rialta took a slow puff and sat back. In the simple sharing there was progress, but she tried not to become very aware of it. "There is more than just the forgotten age that weighs on me. There are the prophecies, which I alone must interpret. There is the war, which I must prosecute. There is the harvest to manage, the ceremonies and rites that must be performed. There are babies to bless, homes to hex and sisters of many stripes who must be counseled and rebuked, if need be. The Valand worry me, and my own Fionnans grow far too clever for their own good. And then there's that insufferable mayor of Llyr, with his lobbyists practically in residence at Pyth Nuemyn. Sometimes the life of a soldier seems downright attractive."

"It's not all bad," Tera said, taking the pipe back from her. "Sometimes we Guardsmen get good tobacco."

"I loved a Guardsman once," she said. "I still do, I suppose. He's around here, somewhere, and blessed be the moment when he finds our General Alt."

She felt her warming relations with Tera go instantly chill.

"Oh please don't," she said. "Really John, you are going to have to cut me loose from that whole business about you and Aideen."

"I'm sorry, I suppose," he said coldly. "It's just difficult for me to listen to you speak of love."

Something inside her snapped on the surface of Tera's harsh and unfair judgment. Perhaps it was the fatigue, or just the effort it took to press through the defenses of this stoic man. Maybe it was the net effect of being attuned to the needs of so many people only to receive formality and suspicion and cold politeness. And maybe, somehow, there was a little guilt, too. But her eyes flashed hot and her voice became a rasping, brittle whisper.

"How dare you, John Tera," she said. "How dare you judge the quality of my love, the depth of my soul? You have lost much, but you have no idea what I have loved and lost – men, children, sisters, everything I dreamed of becoming. All so I could take on the joyful task of tending to people who mistrust me. So congratulations, young sergeant, for if you dreamed of hurting me, you have succeeded."

Rialta instantly regretted her loss of control and feared she had squandered in just a moment all the gains it had taken her a week to earn with John Tera. But Tera surprised her, for though he recoiled at first as if he had touched a burning coal, his eyes opened wide. He stared at her as if in alarm for a few seconds, but then he relaxed, and Rialta sensed that for the first time in days someone had seen her for who she really was. His hand tapped hers lightly, reassuringly, and then he looked away.

"I am sorry, my Lady. My words were crass and small, and I wish I could call them back."

And in that moment, she saw through to his true self as well: gentle and forgiving, but passionate, too. In the time it took her to recognize it, though, he packed that soul away again, like a man who must protect a child against a savage world. So sad, she thought. So sad what we do to our brave little children. She took his hand softly in her own.

"You weren't right for each other then," she said. "Whether you are right for each other now is something I haven't given much thought. But I suppose you have."

"I don't know," Tera said. "It's awkward. We've been together on this march for more than a week, but we've barely spoken."

"And how much of that is your pride?" she asked.

"A goodly portion," Tera sighed, closing his eyes. "She complicates things."

"Such as?"

"I have a dream wife. A spirit."



"Tanith Powdras," Rialta said. Tera's eyes flew open.

"How do you know her name?"

"Who doesn't?" Rialta replied. "Well, that's not fair, really. Most wouldn't, of course. But Tanith is a well-known spirit, at least among the women of my order. She was a daughter of Gwynyr, once, generations ago. I've never really understood why she chose to stop coming back, but there is no doubt she is a beautiful soul in her own right. I can see how the sudden appearance of Aideen would put you in quite a triangle. How is Tanith taking the news?"

"She doesn't know," Tera said. "I've kept it from her."

Rialta was impressed.

"Then you are quite the remarkable man, John Tera."

"Yeah," he said. "Sadly, I'm afraid you're right."

The night outside was dreary, but the showers were gentle and the chill air abated somewhat. Rialta gave herself ample time for meditation for the first time in a week and fell asleep with the comforting sound of rain. Morning brought heightened activity, as Marbor rose in an energetic mood and set the men of the CRG on a dozen tasks. They had a day to get themselves and their equipment back in order, to repair broken axles and scavenge for supplies. The renewal of their march lay just ahead, with battles not far off, and everyone seemed to understand that this was their last opportunity to prepare.

Afternoon brought high, overcast skies and moderate temperatures, and spring flowers picked this day to bloom all around them. Rialta felt her mood improving even more, and passed a pleasant dinner in the Daughters compound conversing with Al-matera. Even Aideen joined them, and the Lady of Gwynyr drew out more of her story: how she left her priestess training behind and suffered through a dismal marriage to an Edain farmer, how she had given birth to two children and lost track of them in an *ouhasandan* attack. They were fine, she was sure, but her husband was dead and this concerned her not the slightest. Rialta found Aideen's account of things disturbing, particularly her detachment from her children, and sensed a strange layer of insulation between the woman's thoughts and emotions. She took her leave when politeness allowed, and set out on a walk near twilight.

She could feel herself coming out of her blues, just a bit, but she was not as young as she once was, and they still trailed her. Rialta fingered the hematite bracelet she had put on to absorb the veiled hostility that surrounded her and spoke a cleansing prayer as she walked. She had tried to reflect it all back, had girded herself with subtle amulets and protections, but bad things had soaked into her with the rain. Now she could let them go. She had to.

There was a break in the clouds, and the setting sun spun golden trails through it, reds and oranges and smoky haze splashed against a clean-washed blue sky. The Lady of Gwynyr picked her way through the puddles past the pitchball field toward the outskirts of town, thinking about Aideen and Tera and the prophecies.

But the sound of approaching hoof beats broke her reverie, and she stopped where she stood and looked back toward Clyde Barrow and the approaching rider. It was Ensign Quick, and he reigned in his horse beside her and struggled to keep it under control.

"You seem in a hurry," Rialta said.

"Major Marbor asks that you ride with me back to his headquarters," Quick said. "Messengers report that there is a problem at Argon."

"A problem? What kind of problem?"

"It's General Alt," he said, offering her his hand. "Please."

Rialta climbed aboard the saddle behind him and gripped his waist as they galloped back into town. When she closed her eyes, the soft clouds of the dying day were replaced by dark ones, roiling and mounting, carried on by hard, cold winds.

*Cavalry shall be employed only for one of these five purposes: 1. Scouting; 2. Screening; 3. Harrassment of supply lines and rear areas; 4. Raids that serve to slow an advance; and 5. On those rare occasions when the enemy force is observed to be temporarily vulnerable and in poor order, direct high-speed attack and pursuit. This poses a risk, but the superior commander understands the rewards of pursuing a fortunate opportunity are often worthy of risk.*

—Chapter 9, *Gheraldic Guide to Military Tactics*, a.k.a. *The Blue Book*

## Chapter 11

## Alt

The main body came out of nowhere. One moment he had his cavalrymen neatly deployed in light skirmish lines, simply keeping contact with the DuQaddish pickets, and the next thing he knew there was a mounted column flowing out of a wood line to his east, on his right flank, a never-ending stream of soldiers and horses. They pranced out as if on a parade ground, taking their time, forming into two broad lines. He could not even count them, but there must have been more than 1,500 horsemen arrayed on the hillside below the trees, patient, implacable.

Why had he been so slow to react this time? Perhaps he doubted his eyes, for they betrayed what his mind had told him was possible. But why had he been so cocksure? It seemed unimaginable that this enemy would draw soldiers away from its primary objective to hunt down an approaching foe. Of course, that's what he would have done, if he had the luxury of cavalry at a siege. Send them out to hunt, head off a problem before it presses on one's flank. He would have done exactly that, so why did it surprise him that his opposing commander would himself be so bold?

Whatever the reason, Alt wasted precious minutes watching the new reality form on his eastern flank. Bixby waited at his side, begging him to respond, but Alt simply couldn't take his eyes, or his mind, off the DuQaddish cavalry. *Not just infantry, mind you. But cavalry. Why was I so sure I would find only infantry here? They must have heard of our approach, if only from the survivors of Celon Gate.*

But now it was upon him, and Bixby became more insistent.

"Sir! You must give me the order to pull the men back. You must do it now!"

"Bixby," Alt demanded, "where the hell did that cavalry come from? Why didn't our scouts find it first?"

"General, our scouts found this picket line," Bixby said. "They were behind it. How could our scouts see them?"

"A good scout would have known," Alt said. "A good scout would have sensed it!"

"Sir, please give me the order."

"I'm fighting blind here!" Alt bellowed. But his rage was not at Bixby, nor at the scouts. It was himself he loathed now, his arrogant, confident stupidity. *I led us into this trap, he thought. I sentenced these men to die. I left behind the very forces that could have won this fight, all because I fixated on Argon and the meeting of the two rivers, all because I hoped I would find warriors from Gwynyr waiting for me here. And instead I find only defeat and death, waiting for me. Taunting me.*

"Sir..."

"Oh just do it," Alt spat. "Pull them back." Marbor wouldn't even have asked, Alt thought. Marbor would have seen it and known what to do, but Bixby fusses and worries about protocol. The lieutenant sent the order by bugle call, a sharp tattoo of five notes, repeated and repeated, the urgency apparent to all who could hear it. Fall back, fall back, fall back on me. Yes, bloody well good, but then what?

*Then what?*

The men on the right melted away from their skirmish lines as the order reached them, but they had not all reached their horses when the sound of a great roar rose from the enemy cavalry. Alt had arrived on this field with fewer than 600 cavalrymen, and a mere two hundred of them stood on his right against at least 1,500 enemy horsemen. They could not fight here, they could only run, and they could only run so fast.

"Dannan!" Alt shouted.

The long-haired cavalryman reigned up beside him.

"Yes sir!"

"Take the left flank and the reserve body and begin the retreat now," Alt said. "We crossed a tributary three miles back. I want

everyone across and that bridge ready to fall by the time I arrive. Understand?"

"Sir, if you'd rather, I can stay here and fight with the rear guard while..."

"No, Dannan, you numb-nut, I would *rather* that you *talking well do* what I ordered you to do without tarking *talking about it* like we're two old friends having a *goat-tarking beer!* Now shut up and go! And send riders back to Clyde Barrow! We're going to need help!"

Dannan spurred around and headed off to begin the move just as a second roar erupted from the enemy horsemen, and they began their charge down the hillside.

"Bixby!" Alt shouted. The lieutenant rushed up beside him. "Get down there with the men on the right and try to slow them down at that first rise. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir!"

"And make sure you don't get decisively engaged!"

"Yes sir!"

"That means you have to run away!"

"Yes sir!"

"And don't get yourself killed!" Alt shouted after him.

But they were hollow words. There was no order to the retreating right flank, no structure, no unity. Bixby threw himself into the job, galloping between groups of fleeing horsemen, trying to rally them together, trying to form a line, trying to mount at least one organized volley. But they were too frightened, too scattered. Two dozen cavalymen pulled up beside Bixby at the first rise, but the pursuit was on their heels, and though he turned them to the fore, their one volley was nothing more than pine needles in a tornado. Bixby tried to turn them to retreat, but the enemy loosed its own arrows, and the lieutenant and the men around him fell as if cut down by a single great scythe.

"It's time to run, General Alt, yes?" Casar asked.

"I've got to bring these damn horsemen under control!"

"Later, you do. Now you run. Yes?"

"Yes, dammit, yes," Alt agreed. "Come on!"

They pounded back down the road to the south, followed by the rapidly falling survivors of the right flank and the cresting wave of enemy cavalry.

**A**lt and the last of the men from the right had barely made it across the bridge when Dannan's axes dropped the last of the supports and a third of the low bridge splashed into the little river. The first of the pursuing enemy cavalymen stopped on the bridge and retreated beneath the withering thicket of arrows from the south bank, but all the destruction had accomplished was a temporary reprieve. Already the enemy was riding hard up the north bank, looking for a place to ford, and the stream was small enough that Alt had no illusions about how long it would take them to find one. He put his men in columns and continued the retreat, hoping to put some kind of distance between himself and this overwhelming force.

Ahead lay several bridges between himself and the main body at Clyde Barrow. He could destroy them all, delaying the riders who pursued him, but all that would do was delay his own march back to Argon once he had brought his own full force to bear. Alt decided to destroy one more bridge, and to take it down carefully, in a way he could quickly repair. The rest he would leave standing.

They stopped an hour up the road to change horses, but whatever thoughts Alt had of getting cleanly away crashed down around his ears with arrival of two rear-guard scouts. The enemy was directly behind them, and closing rapidly. The general hurried the men back into the saddle, some of them still on the horses they had stopped to exchange, and their retreat took on the feeling of a panicked rout. Those with fresh mounts sprinted ahead, leaving only the most exhausted in the rear, with the enemy almost within crossbow range.

He needed a break, a bit of luck, a terrain feature he could defend. He needed *something*. And he needed it soon.

**T**here was a village ahead – not much of one, but a village, just across the bridge he had intended to topple, back when he imagined he had the time. It sat at the confluence of the Geerdon River and the placid Clyde, a river town with a dock for flatboats. Could he escape across the wide Clyde, leaving his enemy behind? No. There was only one flatboat at the dock, and it sat solidly on the mud.

Alt looked at the map. The town was named Tulla.

Whatever its name, the town offered little in terms of tactically significant terrain except for an "L"-shaped levee that protected the town from the temperamental Clyde and the broad-shouldered but considerably smaller Geerdon. Just a low levee. Could he dismount and stand here? Five hundred of his exhausted cavalymen against three times their number? Yes, he could, but not for long. There was no time to prepare, no time to dig in, just get over the bridge and fan out and try to keep the enemy from crossing.

There was just no choice, Alt reasoned. He could not keep running, not like this. Eventually more of his horses would falter, taking their desperate riders down with them, one at a time, with the enemy coming on in waves, pressing and harrying him. Alt urged his mount ahead and thundered across the wooden bridge with the lead riders, shouting at them and ordering them to fan out along the levee. It was sturdy and squat, a solid earthwork designed to hold back water, not protect outnumbered defenders, but it would have to do. Alt stood at the foot of the bridge, urging the last of the column across, then ran back to the levee to watch as



the first of the enemy column approached at a gallop. *The first volley will have to be precise, he thought. The first volley will have to scatter them, deter them, slow them down, or we are all dead.*

The DuQaddish horsemen were tightly packed and in their wheat-colored uniforms they almost matched the tan hides of their pale mounts. They rode under red pennants, and each held a bronze saber. They would attempt to charge through his arrows, and had no interest in exchanging volleys. *Damn their relentless hides, he thought. These men are far better warriors than I ever gave them credit for being, foolish me grown over-confident after weeks of smashing ouhasandan rabble. Now I'm fighting plainsmen, men born to the saddle. Third Sons of the hasadas, military men by training. Please let the first volley be effective.*

The first of the charging horsemen reached the bridge, the sound of their hoof beats amplified by the wood. Somewhere among them, a bugle sounded, and their speed increased another notch as the men in the saddles broke into a terrifying roar. Just a few more seconds, Alt thought, raising his arms and scanning left and right down the levee at his panting Guardsmen, crossbows pressed against their shoulders. "Ready!" he shouted.

But he never gave the second part of the order.

The sound came from the village square behind him: first just voices and shouts, then the crack and thud and whoosh of a trebuchet unloading its lethal cargo. The missiles shrieked overhead, descending in a sudden burst that sprayed thousands of river rocks across the length of the bridge. Tons of small stones ripped and smashed through the charging column of cavalry, shattering skulls and sternums, splintering the wood and railings.

The battle ended with stunning swiftness. One moment the bridge was filled with charging horsemen, the next moment it was choked with broken flesh, and nothing stood higher than the belly of a horse laid low. The wounded groped around in shock and doomed, dying horses quivered and shook. Those who had not entered the death zone wheeled and clutched at their tack, trying to control animals wild with terror. A few men splashed in the river where they had landed, but then they went under and everything was quiet.

The bridge was splintered but still standing, yet none of the DuQaddish cavalymen dared tempt a second crossing. They milled about on the north bank, just out of range of his crossbows, trying to make sense of what had happened.

"Dannan!" Alt shouted. "Go find that trebuchet and report back!" The sergeant mounted his horse and rode toward the center of the village. Alt kept his eyes on the north bank, hoping the enemy would not find its courage a second time. If they cleared the bridge and came hard, he could not hold them long at the levee. But for the moment, it seemed, they were not yet ready.

Dannan returned less than a minute later with three men on horseback. "General Alt!" he said. "May I present our most timely allies!"

Alt walked toward them as if he were in a hurry. They were an odd trio: a grizzled bear of a man; a twisted-looking cripple; and a thin man of aristocratic bearing with a head as hairless as a pitchball. "Gentlemen, I'm General Barney Alt, 2nd Clydish Regimental Group. Now who the hell are you?"

"I am Dian," said the cripple. "You may call me General Dian. We are The Edain Irregulars, and you can thank us later for saving your sorry arses. On my right is Counselor Bergonat, who goes by the rank of colonel now, and on my left, Rolph LaFranq, who refuses to accept any title above Sergeant Major, although that plays bloody hell with our rank structure."

"Tarking good shot back there, gentlemen," Alt said.

"Preset aiming," LaFranq said. "A trebuchet is a lovely weapon when one can bring it to bear, but it's slow to load and hell to aim. So I just locked it in on one spot and waited for someone to cross it."

"I assume you had a forward spotter somewhere?" Alt asked.

"Of course," LaFranq replied. "In the bell tower."

The general smiled.

"We had heard we might pick up some local assistance on this ride," Alt said. "Although I must say I wish we'd picked you up sooner."

"For what?" Dian asked. "So we could have ridden into a trap right alongside you? Then we'd all be dead. No, general, be thankful we were otherwise occupied and decided to meet your main body here."

"How many are you?"

"Seventy-five men of horse," said Bergonat. "And one trebuchet."

"It's of my own design," said LaFranq. "I've made some improvements since my retirement. First CRG grenadier, with a fair share of time in the heavy weapons platoon."

"And the rest of your men?"

"They're reloading," said Dian. "To cover you in case those hayseeds get the idea to try that bridge a second time."

"I like the way you loaded with small stones the first time," Alt said to LaFranq. "Very clever, that."

"Then you won't like this second shot, if we spring it," he replied. "One big rock, to take that bridge down to pilings. If she's of a mind to be accurate today."

"Forgive our sergeant major," said Dian. "He endows our siege engine with feminine characteristics."

"Oh don't you start," said Bergonat, rolling his eyes. "You wrote an ode to the damn thing last night."

"Yes, and it was lovely, too," said Dian. "Would you like me to recite it for you, General Alt?"

"No thank you, Dian."

"That's General Dian, you Gheraldic arse, and don't you forget it. We Clydes can do our own fighting, and our own leading. And it's time you men of Arnell starting learning that."

Alt took his measure silently. Dian was stooped even in the saddle, and one didn't need to see him on foot to recognize his with-

ered leg and the crutch hanging where his pike should be. Everything about him looked pained.

“My apologies,” Alt said, bowing slightly. “Now, if we may, how do you propose we contend with our present circumstances, General Dian?”

“Well, we spent three weeks building that great tarking trebuchet, since our beloved LaFranq refused to listen to reason, and I for one am not of a mind to abandon it after one shot. So I say we stand our ground here.”

“We cannot stand here for long,” Alt said. “Even with your trebuchet, it won’t take the enemy too long to find a ford.”

“There’s a nice one ten miles east,” said Bergonat. “I recommend we contest it.”

“Fine,” said Alt. “But that only buys us so much time.”

“Then I recommend that the rest of your unit hurry up,” Dian said. “Because this is where we’re fighting.”

*Llyr, the province in the western highlands, is the most independent of the Gwynyrian districts, celebrating a proud heritage of craftsmanship, commerce and illicit smuggling. Llyrians follow the edicts of Beltan, but only so far, and may be best understood as a race of wealthy, unrepentant scofflaws.*

—**Derek Ketneb**, Chapter 14, *A Year Abroad in the Land of Darbas*,

*Archer Tommy dress-right-dress now  
 (On the forced-march all night long)  
 All your sins you must confess now  
 (On the forced-march all night long)  
 Five smiling maids you tarked in hay now  
 (On the forced-march all night long)  
 If you can do that than you can do this now  
 (On the forced-march all night long)*

—A verse from *Archer Tommy*, a popular Clydish marching call

## Chapter 12

## Tera

Tulla was a place Tera knew well. It lay in a valley of broad, fertile fields, boasted an active waterfront for flatboats, and, once upon a time, a claimed rabidly enthusiastic pitchball booster club. One of his earliest matches as a starter had been played here, just the youth squads from Tulla and Clyde Barrow squaring off for a short, three-day festival. But it was here that he had first gained notice. Life changed after the Tulla festival, and only a year later, at age fourteen, Tera had been promoted to Clyde Barrow's primary traveling team. He had fond memories of the place, and it upset him to see it burning.

They had first noticed the smoke more than 45 minutes before their arrival in Tulla, in the twelfth hour of their forced march from Clyde Barrow. Marbor had stepped them off at midnight and driven them blindly through the darkness. The ordeal was only a blur to Tera now, a gauntlet of fatigue they had endured together to get to this spot on the map before it was too late for Alt and the cavalymen. By the time they reached the battlefield and drew up into battle lines, Tera and the others were thankful for the simple fact that it meant they could stop walking for a few minutes.

The only thing that had saved Alt to this point were the levees, Tera thought as he scanned the scene ahead. The levees weren't much, but at least they served as a hasty fortification and looked to be working so far. The DuQaddish cavalymen still fought under their red pennants, but Alt's dug-in defenders had forced the enemy to dismount and fight like infantry. Were he not so exhausted, Tera would have enjoyed the irony of two cavalry units slugging it out like grunts.

Carras dressed their lines rather obsessively, and Tera was surprised to find himself feeling slightly annoyed by it. He had grown accustomed to the freedom of scouting and traveling with the command staff, but now he was back in the ranks, just another mindless sergeant with a bow, and he didn't like it. Well, get over it, he told himself. It was stupid to be annoyed on top of being tired and scared and hungry. Plus, he rather desperately needed to pee.

Tera tried to ignore the feeling, but it was becoming rather more insistent than his usual pains. He stood with the front rank at parade rest, trying to look imposing and disciplined, but after a while it was no use. He shifted his weight and brought his knees closer together in vain attempts to take the pressure off his bladder. Sean Gryff, who stood behind him with the second platoon, snickered.

"Oh shut up," Tera said. "It's not funny."

"If you say so," said Gryff, and the other members of the second platoon stifled laughter with him.

*Why do I always have to pee? What a great way to die,* Tera thought.

Their arrival on the field was already changing the situation in front of them. The DuQaddish had about 1,500 cavalymen in their wheat-colored uniforms, more than enough to press a flanking attack against the 600 Clydes behind the levees. But with the rest of the CRG now forming just a few hundred yards to the south, the enemy commanders had no choice but to disengage. To that extent, the battle had already been won. But Tera knew Marbor, and Marbor knew Alt, and Alt would never want to see a temporary opportunity like this pass unexploited.

The enemy's southern flank began fighting backward toward their horses, which huddled nervously 100 yards behind their line. Tera estimated those horses were about two hundred yards from where he stood. *Please, don't make us run that distance,* he prayed. *I'm too tired to run, and I'll wet myself by the time we get there.*

But then Marbor thundered by on his horse, absorbing the changes on the field in front of him, calculating time and force and distance. Here it comes, Tera thought, another tarking charge.

"Companies!" Marbor shouted. "Advance!"

Yep, he thought. It's going to be a charge. Please, God, Goddess, Sula, Telios, Llugnah, whomever, please don't let me die like a



milksop baby in a soaked diaper.

They stepped off in good order, with drummers beating out a sharp rhythm and fifes whistling brightly in the still mid-day air. But they had covered no more than fifty yards when the DuQaddish realized they were running out of time and broke into a run for their horses.

Suddenly Tera ached for a traditional stand-up fight. First *you* fire some arrows. Then *we* fire some arrows. Once we're close enough there's a short little charge and we beat on each other for a while until somebody gives up. It was a brutal, ugly and nerve-racking way to conduct warfare, but at least it was comforting in its predictability. Or at least it used to be.

"Get ready boys," Gryff called out behind him. "Stay tight, and don't overrun the first rank."

"Don't worry," said another man behind him. "I couldn't overrun me own grandmother this afternoon."

Marbor waited until there was no more time to wait and then raised his sword and screamed "Charge!" The 2nd CRG let out a huge roar, but Tera's contribution was really nothing more than a whimper. He was running, but with a self-conscious limp. One hundred and fifty yards to the horses, to the collision, and the enemy was now in full flight.

He would remember only the barest outline of the battle afterward, for it was disorganized and surreal. Some of the DuQaddish reached their horses and fled before the Clydes reached them, and even as the two masses of men collided there were horses, some with riders, some without, racing around wildly in the melee.

Tera's first encounter was a narrowly averted disaster. The DuQaddish cavalryman raised his sword to block Tera's hammer blow, but Gryff ran into Tera just as he began his swing and knocked him forward, sprawling on top of his enemy and spilling to the ground in a pile. Tera rolled clear and someone else finished the man off, but it was an embarrassing way to start a battle and it was only through sheer force of will that he kept his pants dry. Falling, it seemed, was a bit of good fortune, for the most savage fighting took place on the front line, and those who were behind raced around looking for someone to hit. Tera spotted Sergeant Major Carras bound up with a particularly skillful adversary and sneak-attacked the man from behind. Later, Tera joined in against a burly sergeant who put up a distinguished fight before the outnumbered trooper finally succumbed. Much of the time he just looked around for something to do. But charges were often like this: you march to the battlefield in neat order, run screaming into hell, wander around for a bit, and when it's over, if you survive, you get back in line.

This time the advantage belonged to the CRG, and by the time the fight was over more than half the cavalymen from the DuQaddish southern flank had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. Archers and grenadiers milled around in the field, unsure whether the attack had ended, while Alt's cavalry cheered from behind the levee and the surviving DuQaddish horsemen raced to rejoin their comrades on the eastern flank. The enemy had held the advantage, and then they lost it. Now they would retreat.

John Tera didn't care about any of that. He stopped where he stood, all sense of propriety lost, unbuttoned his fly and whizzed gratefully on the bloody ground. Sean Gryff clapped him on the shoulder, guffawing, and soon the entire unit seemed to have joined him, a chorus of men laughing in celebration and relief.

*When you have a body, Tera mused as he peed, sometimes your priorities become very, very simple.*

**W**ith the Clydish defenders holding the bridge over the Geerdon, the DuQaddish cavalymen were forced to retire to the east and the ford they had crossed the previous day. Alt decided to harass them the whole way, leading half his cavalry out of Tulla to skirmish with stragglers. By the time he returned that evening, the supply wagons from Clyde Barrow had arrived and the 2nd CRG was busy setting up a new camp.

Tera ran into Alt as the cavalry cantered back into town on the Geerdon River road.

"Where's Marbor?" the general asked as he passed the sergeant, who was carrying a bundle of wood for the cook fires.

"He's back in the square with those Edain Clydes and their trebuchet," Tera replied.

"Good," Alt said. "I've been meaning to take a look at that. Now what the hell are you doing?"

"I'm carrying wood."

"Well drop it and follow me. I want you back with the command staff for the duration. No more running off on your little adventures."

"My little adventures?"

"And none of that attitude!" Alt shouted as the column picked up speed behind him and thundered back into Tulla.

Alt's mannerisms were annoying, but bunking with the command staff meant no camp life that night, and for this Tera was grateful. He and the others found rooms in abandoned homes overlooking the town square that evening, and the half-breed sergeant was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the mattress.

Reinforcements arrived throughout the next day. Trina and the fighting women from the Celon Forest were the first, followed by LaDram with his militia and then river of faces they had never seen before. These were refugee men from The Edain, come down from the foothills and armed by Almaterra and Chibura at Clyde Barrow. They entered the village in small groups, usually no larger than forty or fifty, but there were dozens of these bands. Marbor drew the task of trying to set them in some order, but he made little progress until he finally turned to Dian and said "General, you handle it." The crippled bard and Rolph LaFranq took to the work with vigor, and within just a few days the Edain Irregulars grew from seventy-five mounted men to a force of more than eight hundred infantry in an orderly if shabby encampment. They trained even after nightfall, incorporating new arrivals every few hours.

The Gwynyrians showed up a day later. These were men of Llyr, hard-muscled metalworkers who were exceedingly (even excessively) well-armed. They traveled on horseback at the head of a substantial support train, more than 500 horsemen with teams of wagons in the van, and they brought with them several hundred more lowland Clydes from the Don. The Llyrians were a difficult bunch, for they seemed suspicious of Alt and they camped outside the perimeter at Tulla by themselves, insistent that they would

not participate in any activities until Rialta arrived.

That happened on the fourth day. The High Priestess rode into Tulla with Willow at her side and a stunning display of power behind her: seven hundred Va and Valand on horseback, plus more than a thousand armed men and women of Gwynyr. The rest of her contingent consisted of almost 2,000 Edain Clydes from the refugee camps at Niamh.

"There are more coming," Rialta told Alt when they met her on the road. "More from the camps, more from the highlands, more from Celon. General Alt, I give you your army."

Organizing it all was the first job. There were almost 6,000 of them by nightfall, as well as hundreds of returning villagers and Edain farmers, the vanguard of a displaced civilian population, filling the buildings of Tulla and spilling into camps on the outskirts. Some brought weapons, some brought provisions, some brought their families, and some brought nothing but themselves. By noon the next day the number of fighters had risen to 7,000, but that was nothing compared to the influx of returning Edain residents – a torrent of men, women and children made bold by the army before them.

"I wish we could have kept them away," Alt said. "They're a terrible nuisance."

"They live here," Tera said.

"I don't care," said Alt. "They're in the way. And they eat."

But they also provided food – secret storehouses in bunkers and cellars the *ouhasandans* had missed. Alt pushed his organizational agenda harder, setting up civil authorities and inventories. Tera accompanied him to multiple meetings, watching the general poke, prod, inspire and annoy various leaders toward his way of thinking. The army moved into the fields south of Tulla, abandoning the comfort of the homes on the town square for the unity of camp life, and the camps themselves took on the look of ranks. Guardsmen tents, uniform and neat. Edain Irregulars with lean-tos and tarps. The Valand and the Va slept in immaculate canvas palaces. The men of Llyr were harsh, but their tents were well-made and crisp.

After their meeting with Rialta, the Llyrians softened a bit, talking more openly and revealing the secret contents of their wagon train: steel weapons. More than 1,000 swords. Daggers almost too many to count. Pikes with long, steel points that would not break. Shields, lightweight, round, unbreakable. News of their armory spread quickly.

"I have made a deal with the mayor of Llyr," Rialta told Alt and the others at the evening staff meeting. "All the weapons and armor may be distributed as you see fit, general. But they are not gifts. The Llyrians have an inventory, and they want their weapons back when you're done with them."

"And what of your end of the bargain?" Alt asked.

"I'm to leave them alone," she said evenly. "By accepting their terms, I have, in essence, granted the western province of Gwynyr its independence. So use these weapons well, general, for they come at a great cost."

Tera pondered her words from his seat near the back, puffing on his long-stemmed clay pipe. Alt seemed a bit impressed by her announcement as well.

"My Lady, I am stunned by your sacrifice," Alt said. "I can use those weapons, but at the cost of half your nation? It's too great a price for just a few swords."

"It's only a third of Gwynyr, not half," Rialta said, lighting her own pipe. Tera noticed that hers was as simple as his – but also that she seemed to be smoking more as the campaign wore on. "Besides, it is a simple bargain. I have only granted them recognition of a truth that is already more than a decade old. Llyr pays only lip service to my edicts now, and every one of those weapons outside is illegal under Gwynyrian law. Yet thank the goddess for them, I say."

"Still, 'tis a noble act, one nary another sovereign under sun nor moons would grant," said Dian.

"Is it so noble?" Rialta mused mildly. "I think not. For if we fail in our campaign then the DuQaddish and the Korvish-Sopkans will rule the land all the races have shared here, and eventually their eyes would fall on Gwynyr. Then they might find allies among our friends from Llyr. And if we are but partially successful, then the DuQaddish and their advisors will retreat to the west only to be replaced by the Imperial Infantry and Gheraldic governors, men of court who covet the mines and forges of Llyr. I could not stand long alone against them, either."

"But if we are successful," she said, blowing a contemplative smoke ring, "then at the end of the war all of Darbas will be united for the first time since the days of Liam LaFranq. Then the old borders we have come to imagine will be meaningless. So while it appears that I have granted Llyr a great boon, is it really so?"

Marbor spoke up. "My only question to you, dear Lady of Gwynyr, is how you can overlook the carnage of the past year to see your way through to a united Darbas? This is no longer the peaceful province you remember. The Clydes remember the atrocities of the *ouhasandans*. The DuQaddish will remember the atrocities of the Clydes. I cannot imagine that your beloved Council of Darbas will be able to govern the vengeance that will ensue if the Empire is forced out. And, as a Gheraldic officer, it is my simple duty to point out to you, my Lady, that your words are pure treason. No offense intended."

"And none taken, dear Marbor," she said. "You are a gentleman of honor. But it is a simple fact of war that men and women of different intentions must bind up their differences and march together. You fight to relieve your imperial forces at Sidon. I fight to unite this continent. But our goals, right now at least, are in concert, and so we are allies. If this be true in war, why can it not be true in peace?"

"A lovely sentiment," said Alt, "but it's bunk."

"Why are you so convinced of that?" Rialta asked.

"Because people are a terrible lot," Alt grumped. "Wars bring them together under one of two commonalties: either greed or fear. Peace lets each man turn to his own way, and those ways are quickly in conflict. The Empire only keeps a lid on these conflicts and provides an orderly way to let out the steam. But if you toss the empire out of Darbas, you will do nothing but create a vacuum,

and it will most assuredly suck every old hurt and grievance out into the open. Your path leads to violence of its own kind, Lady Rialta.”

“And so what if that be true?” Dian argued. “We Clydes have learned to pick up the sword again. So what if the outcome be that the DuQaddish retreat to their own lands and we reclaim our own? We shall rekindle our bond with our highland brethren, and the combined lands of Gwynyr, Celon, Edain and perhaps even the Don will flourish together.”

“But that is not enough,” Rialta said. “I’m sorry, Dian, for yours is a lovely vision in its own right. But I cannot accept it. Do you all think it merely accidental that so many different peoples were brought here in search of a holy land? Do you think it an accident that foreign agents have sought to provoke this bloodshed? I live by a prophecy that tells me there is a greater purpose for Darbas, and I cannot set my goal below that mark.”

“Then tell us that purpose,” Dian said, becoming agitated. “You speak in riddles and cast your spells, but you never lay out your thoughts plainly. What is this great purpose? Is it power? Is it wealth? Is it Old Path conquest? Is it the second coming of Sula you wish to herald? Or do you merely foresee a wider arena for the priestesses of Beltan and the agents of Fionna? Tell us, O Great Rialta, before we come to doubt you again.”

This time Tera had heard enough, and before he could even think about it he was on his feet.

“If you wish to ask a question, ask it” Tera said, pointing the tip of his dagger at Dian. “But ask it plainly, and with respect, or I’ll teach you the proper way to address a wise woman.”

The crippled bard imploded with short-fused fury and whipped his sword from its scabbard. “Then die with me, you bloody half-breed! You Gheraldic mercenary!” Dian limped quickly but awkwardly toward Tera, raising his sword to swing it, and Tera prepared to dodge and thrust.

Seamus Dannan put a stop to the fight before it started, and he did so without even rising from his seat. His *sioboeth* flashed from his side and swept gracefully through the air, slicing Dian’s bronze cutlass in two. The broken blade dropped to the wooden floor of the dining room in which they met, and all eyes turned on the swordsman in sudden astonishment.

“What?” Dannan asked the crowd. “I thought we were having a discussion.”

“Well, there’s your peace, Lady Rialta,” Marbor said. “Forget about uniting the three peoples of Darbas when we can’t even stop our own Clydes from killing each other, I say.”

“Stow it, Marbor,” said Alt. He turned to Rialta. “My Lady, we are old friends. And while I cannot imagine the world that you see, I admire it nonetheless and always have. You are not on trial here. Please forgive our rudeness.”

“You are, all of you, most gracious,” said Rialta.

Tera returned to his tent that night in shocked surprise at himself, his heart racing as he walked through the darkness. Had he really let his feelings slip like that? Why would he do such a thing? And for Rialta, of all people. He was used to living in a chaotic world in which all things seemed in flux, but the thought that he could no longer count on controlling himself scared him more than anything else he could imagine.

Yet, in a strange way, it felt good.

**T**era’s sense of alarm passed, and he found himself enjoying the walk, even enjoying the feeling of freedom that had come with his sudden outburst in the staff meeting. Spring was firmly established now, and the night fields outside Tulla were verdant and gentle. Tera passed the turn that would have taken him back to camp and walked toward town, enjoying the liberty his staff post afforded, smoking, thinking, breathing the air, feeling parts of himself he had pressed away to protect from hardship.

He was so relaxed that the sound of footsteps behind him barely even caught his attention. The voice that called out to him, however, stopped him in his tracks.

“John Tera, you cannot avoid me forever,” the woman said, her words both soft and faintly scratchy. He spun around to look at her.

It was Aideen. She had found new clothes somewhere: an embroidered white blouse like a maiden might have worn, a light-weight shawl, a nicely made skirt that fell to her ankles but moved as she walked. Her shoes were slippers, not the boots of a farm wife, and there was a rosy blush to her cheeks. She strode towards him slowly, one foot pointed in front of the other, as if about to begin a measured dance. Aideen brushed a long strand of light brown hair from her face.

“I wonder,” she said, her words falling rhythmically, “why that is. Why does John Tera avoid me? After all this time, one would think that John Tera would like to sit and have a talk. Why is that, John Tera?”

Aideen stopped within arms’ reach of him, her fingers knit together and her head cocked slightly to the side, a parody of a quizzical expression.

“I’ve been busy?” Tera asked.

“Uh-uh,” she said. “Try again.”

“There’s a war on?”

“You’re lying, John Tera. And you’re no good at it.”

“Well, you have to admit, my mother was always around.”

“No she wasn’t.”

“It felt like she was. And that Rialta, too. How did you get here?”

“Don’t you want to know how I’ve been, John?”

“Yes.”

"Don't you want to tell me your stories?" she whispered.

Tera struggled to control his breathing. "Why did you come looking for me, Aideen?"

She reached out slowly and touched his arm.

"Because I believe in fate," she said. "Because all these horrible things have come to pass, and yet at the end of them, there you are. I think Llughnah brought you to me, John. I feel it in my bones."

Tera looked for words, but they were jumbled in a pile, like the bottom of a junk drawer.

"Is there another woman, John?" she whispered.

"What? You mean like a regular, living, breathing woman?"

"Yes."

"Well no," he said, flustered. "Not at all."

"Oh, I'm sure there have been others," she said. "We're grown people now, and I was married and have two children. But I never forgot about you, John, never for a day. It was always you, somewhere in my heart, even on my wedding day."

"But you never wrote me," he said.

"I couldn't," Aideen pleaded. "My husband was jealous enough already. And suspicious. He allowed no hexes in his home and never let me talk about Gwynyr to the children, never wanted to hear about my time as a novice in Beltan, the part of my life with you in it. He knew about it, of course, but he wanted it wiped clean. So I couldn't, John. I counted you as lost."

Tera looked up from her, scrambling for something that wasn't falling away under his feet. "The moons are pretty tonight."

"Yes, beautiful. A beautiful spring night. And here you are. And here I am. Don't tell me you didn't dream this would happen. All those years, John. Didn't you dream it?"

"Yes." It was difficult to keep his voice from quivering, and he swallowed hard, hoping she wouldn't notice. This was almost exactly what he had dreamed: the two of them, reunited and free, alone under the moons on a soft and beautiful spring night. And she was still lovely, even though the years had not been kind. Her face retained its flawless shape – high cheek bones, large, almond eyes, the thin little nose, the narrow chin. But the softness was gone, as if time had distilled her sweetness into something more potent. There were crow's feet at her eyes, and her youthful figure was thicker, more curved. In many ways, she was more attractive than ever, but there was something alien about her now. Aspects he couldn't describe.

"Where are your children, Aideen?"

"Probably back in Llupanog by now," she said, stepping closer to him and gazing up into his eyes. "I was separated from the main group. They're with their grandparents."

"Don't you want to see them?"

His questions seemed to annoy her.

"Of course I do. But once I have them again, how will I find you? No, baby, you have to trust. I've thought about this every night since we were brought back together, I've thought about this. I was too weak when we were younger, and I let everyone take you away from me. But I'm a grown woman now, John, not a fearful maiden. I've suffered as much as I intend to suffer and given up every dream I ever had for the sake of others. Now the man that I love comes back into my life just after I am made a widow, and I'm supposed to wait on you to come and woo me? I could spend the rest of my life waiting, as shy and gentle as you are. John, I'm not waiting another night."

Her arms wrapped around his waist, and she pulled him close, burying her cheek in his chest.

How does the past come back into our lives? How do ghosts become real? What happens when our past and present selves collide? And what should we do? The questions swirled around him at first as if he were watching the scene from a comfortable distance, but then the Mullaqat side of him felt the stirring, the life force, the desire. It surged through him for the first time in years, lighting the spot of every touch aflame, opening up empty rooms, rushing along limbs and across skin and fingertips. This was now, and now was the dance of moonlight on her hair, the lips of her, the swell of flesh beneath cotton, the rosemary scent of her breath on his neck.

The night was painted in moon shadows and watch fires danced in the camps while windows glowed in the town, but between the two, in the living fields of Edain, hidden by the tall grass of spring, Tera led Aideen to a secret place and laid her down.

**B**ecause they were friends, Seamus Dannan saw to John Tera's personal armory and training himself. The distribution of the steel weapons from Llyr was a matter of some contention, for everyone recognized that those who possessed them were much more likely to fight well and survive. Alt determined that only the best-trained units would be equipped with the new weapons, and that ruled out the militias and irregulars. In the end, he selected the grenadiers and certain cavalry troops to receive the swords, passed out the pikes until he ran out of horsemen and then held on to the armor and helms. Archers like Tera were left out, but he was part of the command staff now and fell into a different category.

Dannan stopped by the staff area on the afternoon of the distribution.

"I saved these out for you," he said, unrolling the cloth bundle on the ground to reveal a long, narrow sword, an elegant dagger with a decorative handle and a wide leather belt designed to hang over the swordsman's shoulder. Tera knelt on the grass beside him.

"What do you think?" he asked, as he handed Tera the thin, double-bladed sword. It came with a serpentine hilt that twined around the handle to protect the swordsman's hand and a lightweight metal scabbard with a thumb catch. "When I spotted this one I knew I had to save it for you."

Tera lifted the sword and unsheathed it, whipping it through the air. The weapon seemed to sing as he tested it, each stroke



producing a tight, high-pitched whisper. Such a blade seemed impossible, so unbelievably light and so perfectly balanced that a man could change its direction almost as if by willing it. Tera stepped back and took several more strokes, marveling at the speed and control the weapon offered.

"It's not quite a *sioboeth*, but it's still a remarkable blade," Dannan said. "You'll have to think differently if you want to make full use of it."

Tera stepped through the first few moves of the Guard's primary one-handed sword drill: a blow to the right, an overhead block, a step toward his invisible opponent and a slash across the midsection. It was a move he had practiced countless times, yet nothing about it felt right.

"May I?" Dannan asked. He took the sword from Tera and stepped to the side. "A bronze cutlass is really just a cleaver, so the Guard taught us a way of fighting that tries to hide its failings." He whipped the sword back and forth and then held it in front of him with his arm fully extended, rolling his wrist and twitching the point of the blade. "Bronze is soft, doesn't hold an edge well, and breaks. So our lowland blades are short, thick and heavy, and we use them as a means to bully our way close enough to the enemy to use a dirk or throw a punch. But this, John, is called a rapier. And it's a very different weapon."

"It's too long," Tera said. "It confuses me."

"Change the way you think," Dannan said. "This is a thrusting weapon, not a hacking tool. You don't bang with this. You slice. You pierce." Tera watched, entranced, as Dannan drove the rapier forward, parried an invisible thrust and sliced back toward the center.

"But it's so light," Tera protested. "How can it do anything against a trained fighter with a cutlass?"

"Come on," Dannan said, retrieving Tera's standard-issue sword and tossing it to him. "Let's find out."

Tera picked up his buckler and unsheathed his bronze blade, which was easily half the length and four times the width of the rapier. The two men squared off, and Tera made the attack, coming in behind his little shield and slashing across the rapier blade Dannan held extended before him. The force of his blow knocked the rapier out of the way, but in the amount of time it took him to gather his cutlass for the next stroke, the rapier had flashed back up – and its tip stood poised at his throat. Dannan had hardly moved. He had not needed to move.

"Do you see, John? This weapon is about range and speed. Force and strength mean almost nothing to it."

Tera wasn't done, though. He learned his new weapon from an enemy's perspective first. Force could move it aside, but the momentum it created led to instant death. A more subtle approach failed, too. No matter the hand-speed Tera brought to the attack, he couldn't overwhelm Dannan's rapier. In defense, his cutlass was hopelessly overmatched. He tried other weapons as well – a borrowed two-handed bronze sword, which was even less effective, and his own war hammer. Both were hopeless against the basic geometry of the Llyr rapier. A quick, straight, unbreakable line could defeat all manner of curves, loops, arcs and slashes.

After twenty minutes of probing it, Tera asked Dannan to give the rapier back. He turned the sword thoughtfully in his hand, trying the stance Dannan had demonstrated. It seemed awkward. Enter combat with the sword to the front instead of leading with the shield arm? It was unnatural.

"I don't know that I can adjust to this," Tera said, trying to advance with his right foot in the front instead of his usual left. "How can I unlearn how to move my feet, much less my sword? I'll close on my first adversary and trip over myself."

"You do that already," Dannan winked, unsheathing his *sioboeth* and taking up a fighting stance. "You'll get the hang of it."

"I want one of those," Tera said. "At least you can fight with two hands, instead of walking around like some tailor with an over-long needle, trying to poke somebody." He thrust toward Dannan.

The cavalryman blocked it and recovered his defensive stance. "You *really* don't have time to learn this one," Dannan said, smiling. "That's just a sword. This one is a whole philosophy."

Tera tried a couple more attacks against the *sioboeth*, but each ended badly.

"Please don't tell me the men of Llyr gave a bunch of these prissy blades to the grenadiers," Tera said, lunging again. Dannan counter-attacked and Tera was quickly retreating, their steel blades clanging and striking, the vibrations shuddering up his arm to his shoulder.

"No, thank god," said Dannan. "No way those brutes could learn the rapier in short order." He lowered his *sioboeth* and wiped the sweat off his brow with his sleeve. Tera realized that he, too, was sweating, and stripped off his shirt, dabbing at his face with it before tossing it on his tent. "But make no mistake, John, your sword is by far the superior weapon. It's an intelligent weapon, a thinking man's weapon. Elegant and deadly. Perfect for you."

"I guess that's a compliment," Tera said, a slight grin creasing his face. "Again." This time Tera attacked with a fake slash, and when Dannan went to block it Tera made the blade disappear, changing direction with such velocity that Dannan had to arch his back and sling the *sioboeth* with his left hand to block the rapier in time.

"Much better," Tera commended himself. "That felt almost natural."

Dannan was scowling now, and it wasn't feigned. "Well good for you, but you almost disemboweled me there. That is a real sword, you know. Sula!"

"So what did Llyr have for the grenadiers?" Tera asked, slashing at the air to feel the speed of the sword.

"Oh, perfect weapons for them, really," Dannan said. "Great two-handed monstrosities. Five and six feet long, some of them."

"The old Liam LaFranq swords," Tera said, rushing Dannan. The attack drove him backward in a flurry of blocks and parries, but in the end the *sioboeth* swordsman merely checked his fatal stroke. "You're very impressive with that thing, you know," Tera said.

"And you're a quick learner," Dannan said, pausing to strip off his shirt now, too. He was athletic and muscular, almost as tall as Tera but far more powerful and fluid. What a pitchballer he would have made, Tera thought. "That rapier design you've got there



is a relatively new one – much newer than the either the two-hander or this *sioboeth*,” Dannan said. “Personally, I think it might be the best of all, although I’m only passingly familiar with it. My father was a bit of a collector.”

Tera turned away for a moment, whipping the rapier around for the sheer exhilarating joy of it. When he turned back around, Dannan’s expression had utterly changed. His jaw hung slightly open and his eyes were wide.

“By Sula, John,” he said. “Your back. The scars...”

Tera realized what had so upset him. He seldom removed his shirt where anyone could see him, but he had been lost in his fascination with the new weapon and so engaged in the pleasure of practicing with his new friend that it slipped his mind. He knew how ugly and disfigured he was. He had just forgotten to hide it this once.

“I’m sorry,” Tera said, retrieving his shirt. “It’s pretty awful, I know.”

“Yes, it is awful,” Dannan said. “What did they do to you? Who would do such a thing?”

“It’s nothing, really. Just a reminder of a misspent youth and a few unhappy encounters in a long career as a Guardsman.” Tera held up his arms and let the undershirt wiggle down over his torso.

“John, I’m surprised they even let you in the Guard with a back like that,” Dannan said.

“Well, we can’t all be perfect like you,” Tera replied, and he instantly regretted the words. “I’m sorry, Seamus. That didn’t come out the way I intended.”

Dannan tried to hide his emotions, but that was one area in which he was not as skilled. “That’s alright, John.” He gathered up his own shirt. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“Really, Seamus...”

Dannan smiled. “You’ve put me through quite the workout,” he said, taking his leave. “We’ll get together tomorrow and do it again, if you like. But I’ve got a patrol to run tonight, so if you don’t mind, I’ll be leaving.” They shook hands the Old Path way, grasping wrists.

“Until then,” Tera said.

“Until then.”

“Thanks for the sword,” Tera called after him.

“You’re welcome,” Dannan called back as he pulled his penny whistle from his pocket. “Tomorrow, right?”

“Tomorrow,” Tera said. Dannan played an old Clydish tune as he walked away, the music calling back to something in Tera’s past. His rapier suddenly felt heavy in his hand, and he reflected on the damage old wounds can cause.

**T**heir new orders arrived just after noon, following a series of staff meetings that took up most of the morning, and the rest of the day was devoted to making preparations. New arrivals had pushed the number of fighting men and women in their impromptu army to just over 14,000, and that fact alone was enough to force Alt into a decision, Tera reasoned. An army like this was a tenuous balancing act. Move too soon and its untrained ranks would melt away like fat in a skillet. Wait too long and morale would plummet. Too many people, not enough food – and just ahead, a waiting army that still outnumbered them two-to-one. Tera spent the morning watching the unit commanders come and go from Alt’s tent, saw them leave flushed and flustered. Even Rialta, without a unit to command, left with a troubled expression. He wanted to reach out to her, just as he had wanted to reach out to Dannan. But he didn’t.

That evening, as the newly christened Army of Darbas settled down to rest for the coming march, Tera paid a last visit to Aideen, who had found an unoccupied cottage on the edge of town and was treating it as if it were her own. He begged off an extended stay, but he brought her bread and cheese and they lounged around for a couple of hours. Her need for him was both intoxicating and astounding. Afterward, Tera lay with his boots up on the bed and Aideen stroked his hair and cooed to him, all the while talking incessantly about life after the war, where they would live, what they might do. His indifference surprised him, but then his concerns were more immediate. Hers sprawled and rambled, and it seemed a pleasant fantasy on the eve of a march to listen to a woman talk about things like the herbs for next year’s kitchen garden and the linens for their bed. Whether or not he would ever see such things was hardly even an issue for Tera. He could barely imagine such a life, much less make serious plans for it.

He felt guilty as he lay down in his tent – guilty for the way he had allowed Aideen to begin designing a life with him in it, guilty for the way he had obscured his trysts with her from Tanith Powdras. Though he concealed his thoughts, that feeling of guilt must have trailed after him into the glen he shared with his dream wife, for when he awoke to it the spring was different. Lurid roses grew where once had been only wildflowers, and Tanith sat on the mossy gray rock dribbling petals into the spring pool.

“The roses are a nice touch, I suppose,” she said. She dropped another petal and watched as the current swirled it and carried it slowly downstream. “And the jewelry.” Tanith held up her arm for him to see, and it was decorated in gold bracelets. “Is there something you wish to tell me, John?”

He nuzzled her neck. “We march to Argon in the morning.”

“How nice,” she said, and Tera felt a cold breeze ruffle through the wood.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, and sat on the rock beside her.

“You are closed off to me. Not that you aren’t always, in that particular manner that is distinctly you, but in new ways.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I think my time is drawing near.”

“Your *time*?” Tanith almost chuckled. “Your time is no closer than it ever was, John Tera. You are the ultimate survivor, aren’t you? Death has no better chance of getting inside you than anyone else does.”

“Why are you so angry? Don’t you like the roses?”

“Yes, the roses,” she said, and held one of them up to ponder. “The reddest red I’ve ever seen.” And with that, she deliberately

impaled her forefinger on a thorn. One bright red drop of blood formed on its tip. "Thank you so much for bringing such terrible beauty to our glen, my love."

"Then I'll take them away," he said. "I just thought..."

"You can't take them away," she whispered. "They're here now, and they'll grow. They'll snake around in the grass and flourish in every sunny spot. That's how it works, John. What you bring here stays here."

*I'm sorry*, he thought to himself.

"I'm sorry too," she said, answering him as if he had confessed everything. "I ask a lot of you, my sweet little mortal. And I know I'm not the easiest dream wife a man could want. I'm vain and needy and I know it, but I do love you so. Perhaps I should just release you."

"Release me?"

"To whatever it is in your waking life that draws you away," she said softly. "Of course I think I know that thing, and it pains me. But if you would only tell me..."

"Tell you what?"

Tanith turned on him and her eyes were fierce. "You know exactly what. Who is she? Who is this woman who poisons you against me so that you must bring me flowers and thorns?"

Tera stood up and walked away from the rock. "You don't understand at all," he mumbled.

"I don't understand? That's a joke. I understand perfectly, you pathetic liar. You've got a waking woman now and she takes up your imagination, so that when you come to me you come bearing trite gifts to cover your distraction. What we've had was perfect. Did you think roses would make it better? Is my bare arm no longer decoration enough?"

He sat up straight and looked off to his right. "It's Aideen," Tera said. "She has found me."

Tanith flung the bracelets at him. "Of course it's Aideen, you idiot. Did you think I was so stupid I wouldn't recognize her handiwork? Oh, you've picked a pretty one, John, a pretty little leech to suck you dry. I don't quite know why you even bothered to come back here, not after the chill in the air the last few times. And now roses and jewelry? Did you come to say goodbye? Is that why you're here?"

"Can't you be the least bit understanding?" he pleaded. "I live in another world, too, you know. *My life isn't over*. And it's all very confusing sometimes."

"And now you want me to sit beside you and talk about your feelings? Is that it? Oh, that's rich, John, very rich."

But it *was* confusing. The whole thing was confusing. All those years of carrying Aideen in that secret chamber of his heart, all those years of nursing his mother through her madness, of blaming Rialta, of hating Brother Trefallian. The scars and the wounds and the concentration that held it all together. The discipline...

And then there was Tanith herself, and the glen they created. So much pleasure and peace, and none of it real. But was Aideen any more real? Not the maiden he had hidden and preserved, certainly not. There was the resemblance and the memory, but that was only outward appearance. Time had changed Aideen as well, had made her soul like the scabblings of nails on a stone wall, desperate claws searching for a handhold. He could feel her rooting through him like a starving dog in search of a morsel, a blind hunger that excluded all other thoughts and considerations. But how much of that was her and how much of that was this time? This madness? No one was unaffected. How could he decide?

"John," Tanith whispered. "John, you're crying. Did you know that?"

He reached a hand up to his cheek and felt the warmth of a tear. It stunned him. How could that be? And how could she tell? His back was turned to her.

"It's nothing," he said. "I'm only feeling bad for how I've treated you."

"No, it's more than that." Her voice was softer now, but still not quite forgiving. "I am harsh, I do know that. But it's an odd thing, John. All these years I've wanted to see you break down, to let me in, and now, when it finally happens, it's because of this and I don't want to enter. Isn't that awful of me?"

"No," he said, stowing away the emotions again. "No, it's perfectly understandable. You shouldn't have to deal with this, and I'm not strong enough to sort through it all yet. I hope you'll give me a little time."

"Yes, I'll give you time," Tanith said. "After all, I've got nothing but time. But I do have to admit, I hate these tarking roses. They're going to be a real thorn in my side."

"Was that a pun?"

"It's called humor, John Tera. It's not much humor, but it's the best I can muster under the circumstances."

"So you forgive me?"

"Let's not go that far just yet," she said, stripping off her shift and slipping into the pool. "You live separated from your emotions, but I *am* my emotions. Whatever I might promise you will only be undone by the next feeling to flit across my self-indulgent little mind. If you can understand and accept that, I suppose I can try to understand the fact that you're more than a little... conflicted right now."

Tera climbed up on the rock and squatted there, watching her luminous white body move through the dappled sunlight and the deep shadows of the pool. She was beautiful, and he loved her. Nothing really changed that. "Should I stay?" he asked.

"Of course not, love," she said, not looking back. "I'm bathing."

"When should I come back?"

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll come looking for you when I'm ready."

"Your timing is usually lousy," Tera said.

“Yes,” she said, swimming away from him. “Don’t you just adore it?”

Forming the column for the march took forever, and Tera was annoyed to distraction by the delays. Back when it was just the 2nd CRG, everything went smoothly, but now there were others in the column as well, and their new comrades moved as if indifferent to time and efficiency. The militia from New Calpathia was at least quasi-professional, but the Edain Irregulars with their new recruits were practically impossible to move, and the members of the Llyr squadron took offense at their place in the column and refused to step onto the road while their officers argued the case with Alt. Farther back, Sergeant LaFranq and his platoon grappled with their beloved trebuchet, trying to wrangle the unwieldy weapon onto the road behind a stubborn team of oxen. The CRG stood at ease, waiting for the rest of the army to fall into place, and the Valand sat silent on their horses, expressing no emotion, but the rest of the column was a chaos of civilians with weapons, of oxen and carts and supply wagons, of camp followers and families, of wives shouting demands to husbands and children running about the legs of the teams.

“This is not starting well,” Rialta said to Tera as they waited at the head of the column with the command staff while Alt and Marbor struggled to bring the rest of the army into line. “But Alt won’t listen to me.”

“You’ve had words with him?” Tera asked.

“He hears, but that is all,” Rialta said indifferently. “He does as he pleases, no matter what my intuition suggests. It’s becoming a common theme in my life.”

“And what does your intuition tell you? A commander would be wise to listen to the Lady of Gwynyr.”

“My dear John Tera, you’re hardly one to talk. My intuition tells me, among other things, that your Aideen is a very dangerous addition to your life right now. Would you act upon that advice?”

“No,” he admitted. “Not just upon that advice alone.”

“Nor will your General Alt,” Rialta said. “The way is clear to bypass Argon, but he refuses to consider leaving an enemy in our rear. So we will tarry at Argon fighting a pointless battle.”

“That’s good strategy on his part,” Tera said. “If your intuition is telling him to pass by a significant force that will only close upon us from behind later, I can see why he ignores your advice.”

“But that is only part of it, John,” she said, her fingers distractedly working a strand of her hair. “Something about this whole campaign is amiss. Something eludes me. Perhaps it makes me too cautious.”

The sound of voices raised in celebration moved up the road, and Alt and Marbor appeared riding beside the column, each unit cheering as they passed. The two officers galloped into the cluster of the command staff, and Casar quickly took his place at the general’s side.

“My Lady, Sergeant Tera,” Alt said, tipping his hat to them. “Fine day for a walk in the countryside, wouldn’t you say?”

“Quite,” Rialta replied.

Tera rode beside her as the army lurched forward, and they conversed pleasantly for a time. But it was clear to him that she was troubled.

“John, I haven’t thanked you for coming to my defense at the meeting,” she said. “I didn’t expect it.”

“Neither did I.”

“How long has it been since you acted impulsively?” she asked.

“It’s a new development.”

“Yes,” Rialta said. “And it’s yet another thing I failed to foresee. A small thing, I suppose, but part of a larger pattern.”

“I was beginning to wonder what was bothering you.”

“John, I am beginning to think I may need your help. Your intuitive training is in an ancient technique that we no longer practice in Gwynyr. Yet for all its failings, it remains quite accurate when used properly.”

Tera laughed. “What I can see is nothing compared to your vision.”

“Under normal circumstances, yes,” she said quietly. “But these are not normal circumstances. How ironic is it that right now, when I need it most, I trust my own intuition less than ever?”

“This is war,” he said. “War changes everything.”

“Yes,” she said. “And I’m afraid we’re about to find out just how true that statement is.”

*I have no use for theology, but even an old goat such as me can see that The Edict of Heresy is an extremely useful document. If the DuQuaddish are to be suppressed, shall we not do so via the most exalted of reasons? Let them pay for the right to worship as their conscience dictates. Whoever said free will should be free?*

—**Marlton The Great**, in a letter to his chancellor



## Chapter 13

## Alt

The battle at Argon went better than he had planned, a rare and happy surprise for a general under any circumstances. Alt was so pleased that he kept Marbor up half the night writing down an account of it for posterity, and though his second-in-command was in a pissy mood the next morning, Alt ignored it. Victory was great medicine for the soul.

First, the 2nd CRG's cavalry had fixed the DuQaddish lines. Then the archers had flanked them. Once the enemy was worn down sufficiently, the grenadiers moved forward with their bright new steel swords, and after only a slight pause the enemy retreated north, just as Alt had expected. The *coup de grace* came in the form of the New Calpathian militia, which emerged from the woods behind the retreating DuQaddish and blocked the road, screening the movement of the Valand, which charged into the enemy ranks under a storm of Va arrows. The battle was over by noon, his own casualties were very light, and the bulk of the enemy force had offered little resistance before surrendering.

The last, perfect touch, though, was the capture of his opposing commander – Serbotus Bartelmus, third son of the Bartelmus Hasan. Alt had seen to his comfort with a great display of deference and respect, and under Rialta's advice had been unusually generous in his treatment of the captured enemy soldiers.

Bartelmus waited for him at the small table set up outside the tents where he and the other DuQaddish commanders had spent the night. He was a robust man with shoulders like an ox, not at all unlike Alt, and he rose from a game of Kot and bowed when Alt entered his compound. Alt saluted, and in a few moments the rest of the staff had been shooed away and the two men sat at the table alone. Alt offered his former enemy a cigar.

"So early in the morning?" Bartelmus asked.

"Well, you're on vacation now," Alt said, striking a match. "Did your night pass comfortably?"

"Yes, General Alt. You have been most chivalrous."

Alt laughed, holding the match to the end of Bartelmus's cigar as the smoke rolled from his lips. "General, that's the first time anyone has ever used that word in connection to me."

"Then I am doubly honored," the DuQaddish commander replied.

"Good. It was my intention all along to flatter you. No doubt you are suspicious of my motives."

"Well of course," Bartelmus said pleasantly. "Such things are understood."

"Then I'll be direct so you can start trusting me," Alt said. "It is my intention to lift the siege at Sidon, but I have no intention of fighting your army if that can be avoided. What odds would you lay on that proposition?"

"Long ones," Bartelmus replied, puffing. "I believe we still outnumber you, and steel alone will not win a battle."

"But why should we fight?" Alt asked. "Why not simply retire from the field and avoid the carnage? Surely the siege is not going well. Are you that sure of Korvish-Sopkan assistance?"

"That's a trick of yours," Bartelmus said, wagging a finger at Alt as if he were a naughty child. "You'll not get me to confirm even the existence of the Korvish-Sopkans."

"Doesn't matter," Alt said. "I know they're with you. And I presume they've offered you an invasion fleet. That's why you're holding on, continuing a siege without making new attacks. You expect to be reinforced."

"Maybe. Or maybe the Gheraldic commander will be reinforced first. Whatever, we've formed an army with the intent to use it, General Alt. I don't see my brethren quitting the field now just to satisfy your urge not to fight."

"What would it take to send your people home in peace?"

"Only the departure of your Gheraldic Empire from the lands of the DuQaddish," Bartelmus replied. "We have grievances, general. The taxes we pay as the cost of our religious freedom under the Act of Heresy condemn our entire race to perpetual poverty. Gheraldic support for the Clydes renders our representatives on the Council of Darbas impotent and silly. And while we scrape by

on barren plains, your Clydes live off the fat of a rich and fertile homeland.”

“From which you have tried to drive them,” Alt replied.

“Not I,” said Bartelmus.

“But your people have. Your *ouhasandans*.”

“The *ouhasandans* are not my people. Yes, they are DuQaddish, but they are separate entirely. Like children in adult bodies. We try to care for them, but how can we when the Empire drains away the wealth of each season as payment for the simple right to worship as God intended?”

“I see,” Alt said carefully. “So it is your contention that the leadership of DuQaddic has no responsibility for the *ouhasandan* atrocities in the Clydish homelands?”

“Correct,” Bartelmus said.

“Do you consider me a fool?” Alt asked politely. “The Korvish-Sopkans came and conspired with your leaders to send the *ouhasandans* out to pillage the Clydes while your army formed for the siege on Sidon. It’s a simple fact, general.”

Bartelmus smiled.

“Perhaps not so simple, General Alt. Perhaps not so simple at all. Perhaps, my friend, the two events are not connected at all.” His eyes were sly and unwavering, shining through the cigar smoke. Alt tried to mask his disgust.

“I suppose,” Alt began, “that were I in your boots I too might look for a way to disconnect the two. A soldier fights as he is ordered to fight and may do so well or poorly regardless of the righteousness of his cause. Yet it is harder to fight with honor when the cause one fights for is shameful.”

Bartelmus smiled more broadly.

“How very clever you are, General Alt,” he said. “And how very naive. Do you believe so strongly that your own cause is any less shameful? That your Gheraldic Empire is less barbaric than you imagine the leaders of DuQaddic?”

“Yes,” Alt said. “Yes, after what I have witnessed in this campaign, I do.”

“How interesting,” Bartelmus said. “And how sad. Tell me, general, what is the name of the board game that is so popular among the men of your Court at Arnell? The game in which a clever player may turn one of his opponent’s pieces into one of his own?”

Alt knew the game well. “It’s called Betrayal.”

“Exactly, general. The name of the game at the Court of Arnell is Betrayal. Consider that when you attempt to piece together the truth that underlies our current situation.”

Alt left his meeting with Bartelmus in a curious funk, and, after turning it over in his mind for several hours, sent Marbor to summon Rialta. The three met in his tent by lamplight.

“The commander of the DuQaddish forces at Argon has presented me with a riddle,” Alt began. “In fact, it’s the same riddle we’ve been attempting to answer since we arrived in Darbas, and I think it’s high time we solved it. My Lady, what secret truth lies at the bottom of this war? I ask you because I think you know.”

The high priestess cut her eyes away from him and began to twiddle with her hair.

“Perhaps, my Lady, I should have phrased the question differently.”

“No, my dear general, you have phrased it perfectly.”

“Then will you answer it? Because Marbor and I will feel a lot more comfortable with the roles we are to play if we understand the game.”

“I would answer it for you,” she said. “But I cannot.”

“Then how about this question, and forgive me for asking it, Barney,” Marbor said. “Lady Rialta, why did your assassin try to kill General Alt in New Calpathia?”

Rialta’s face lit up with shock, her jaw dropping ever-so-slightly before slamming shut. “Gentlemen, that’s just not true.”

“Ah, but it is true,” Alt said, holding up his palms to reveal the scars. “On the night before we began our march, a Fionnan came to my quarters with a knife. They’re yours, aren’t they? These murderous Fionnans?”

“General Alt, Major Marbor, please,” Rialta pleaded. “You must believe me when I tell you that no agent under my command would have done anything to harm you. On the contrary, it has been my intention all along to bring you here safely. It could not have been a Fionnan.”

“Do your Fionnans not bear the mark of their service? A tattoo, perhaps?” Marbor asked.

“Yes,” said Rialta, undoing the laces at the collar of her cotton blouse. “But only a particular tattoo.” She pulled down her blouse to reveal the top of her breast, displaying the goddess tattoo inscribed upon it. “Do you see? This is the mark of a Fionnan.”

Alt exchanged looks with Marbor.

“Yes, my Lady,” Alt said. “And unfortunately, that is the same tattoo worn by the woman who tried to kill me.”

Rialta clutched at her blouse, her eyes trailing away from the men.

“That cannot be,” she said, as if speaking in a dream. “The Fionnans are sworn to my service.”

“So now, perhaps, you can answer for us the question you refused to answer before,” Alt said gently. “What secret truth lies at the bottom of this war?”

“General, I didn’t answer because I refused to do so,” Rialta said. “I didn’t answer because I didn’t know.”

“Forgive me, my Lady, but I find it hard to believe that a woman of your powers would not know something this important,” Alt said. “I believe it is your business to know.”

“You’re right,” she said. “It is my business to know. But all I know are theories. I have not wanted to confess this, but there is no point in withholding it now. Gentlemen, my powers of sight have been greatly diminished ever since I left Gwynyr. I was wrong

about this battle you fought today, for instance. I was convinced it was a mistake. And now you tell me that one of my own Fionnans attempted to kill you, the very man I believed the prophecies brought to this place to..."

Rialta stopped abruptly. Marbor shot a glance at Alt.

"Prophecies?" the major asked.

"I have said too much," she replied, looking at the ground, compulsively twisting a thin braid with the fingers of her right hand.

"No, Lady Rialta," Alt said softly. "I'm afraid you've said entirely too little. And I'm also afraid I have misjudged you." The general caught Marbor's eye and inclined his head toward the door of the tent.

"Oh my, look at the time," Marbor said. "General, Lady, may I take my leave? I have... duties."

They nodded to him and Marbor slipped through the canvas flap.

"Rialta," Alt said, shaping the sound of her name. "Ours is a strange story, is it not?"

She would not meet his eyes. "It is a sad story, Barney, and I for one am ashamed for it."

"I must admit, I assumed up until this moment that you bore me some malice, that you intended to have me killed when I no longer suited your purposes."

"Then why did you agree to ally with me?" she asked.

"For the same reason I assumed you had allied with me," he answered. "Because you needed my army just as I needed your assistance. War tends to create such partnerships."

"But that was never it, Barney," she said, looking up to meet his face. "I am ashamed of the way I have treated you. Your heart has always been warm to me and I have used it coldly."

"I think it's time, finally, for you and I to speak truth to each other," Alt said. "I'll begin. I fell for you the first time I met you. And you must understand, a young man of such negligible beauty tends to fall awkwardly."

"You were awkward," she said, but there was no humor in her voice. "But you were sweet, too. You were brilliant and sincere and I quite adored you in those days."

"But you did not love me, I know," he said.

"No, I did not," she said, reaching out to take his hands in her own. "I am sorry, Barney."

"It's quite understandable," he said, giving her hands a friendly squeeze. "I'm not the most lovable of men."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong, Barney," she said. "To me, you are the *most* lovable of men – strong and smart and confident, curious, inquisitive, intuitive, compassionate. You bluff and bluster, but you are more thoughtful than you ever let anyone see. It took great effort on my part not to love you."

"Ha," Alt said, trying to mask the effect her words were having upon him. "All the effort of looking at my big, ugly face."

Rialta reached up and stroked his cheek, the palm of her hand cool upon his skin and stubble. "Ah, but there you are wrong, too. I have always adored this big, jumbled face. The way it expresses you."

"Flattery makes me suspicious," he replied.

"Barney, you must understand this," Rialta said, her eyes growing stronger and more confident. "I could have fallen into you just as you did to me. And the results would have been disastrous. A priestess-in-waiting can take no single partner, and you were unprepared for a life spent loving a woman who could never form an exclusive bond with you. Could you have loved me and sent me to sleep with the Fathers at Fulltide? Could you have been my loving, understanding consort, living a life with no vocation in Gwynyr, seeing me only when I deemed it proper?"

"You could have come away with me," Alt said.

"You know I couldn't have," Rialta corrected him.

"Yes, but it was a lovely thought for all those years," he replied, smiling.

"Barney, love," she said, placing a finger on his lips to silence him. "It just couldn't be. That's all. You have to see it that way. I did, and it made me colder to you than I ever wanted to be. I had to keep you at a distance."

"Did you ever..." he began, but then cut off his sentence. Rialta finished it for him.

"Did I ever think of you? Of course I did. Many times. I kept my eye on you, too, for all those years. Even from the beginning I sensed greatness upon you. I still do."

"This may sound crazy, but I have to know," he said. "Back when I was on Bangoon..."

"You saw a woman on the ceiling."

"Was it you?"

"Of course it was, Barney. I was the vision on the ceiling at Askla. I was the dream you had before the battle of Tarvis River. How many nights, when you were drifting off to sleep in some forsaken tent camp, did you feel like you were not alone? It was me, Barney. It was always me. I could never have a life with you, but I looked out for you always. It was my penance."

"For rejecting me? That requires no penance."

"No," she said. "Not for what I had done. For what I will do." Rialta took her hands away from him and stood, turning her back to him. "I suppose it has come the time for me to reveal to you what I do know. I've told Tera, I should tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"About the prophecy," she said. "There is an ancient document, kept secret by the High Priestesses of Gwynyr, that speaks of the end of this age and the beginning of the next. I believe this war is the start of it all. And I believe you may be the one the prophecies foretold – the man who will arise from the Land of the Clydes and bring Darbas to its place of power in the world."

"Me? That's insane," Alt said.

Rialta turned to face him. "Thank you for being *so* understanding."

"I'm not even *from* Clyde," Alt protested.

"That's what mother said. She doubts my feelings on this, and perhaps she is right."

"Well, these prophecies, what do they say? Do they describe what is happening? Do they give you insights?"

"You mean to say, general, 'Can they be turned to my advantage in the field?' And my answer would be no, they're of little practical use. In truth, they are mostly an annoyance to me, for they are written in the old tongue and they are vague to the point of mockery."

"Yet you study them."

"Study them? I have obsessed over them," Rialta said. "In the Old Path, there is no notion of pre-destination. So how can there be prophecy? And yet there is one – a prophecy so deep and profound that, if you consider its implications, it challenges our very principles of free will. So if free will is the essence of the soul, then am I free to make mistakes and miss the opportunity to bring forth the new, golden age? But if free will is only our limited perception of our role within a predestined, grand design, then why am I even bothering to study the prophecy? I could just do nothing and everything would turn out as it was intended."

"Yes," Alt said. "I can see how that would be annoying."

"Quite."

"But surely it gives you some insight as to what we face here. Something useful."

"You never quit, do you?"

"Marbor says it's a character flaw."

"Yes," Rialta said. "I can see why you love him so. But here is what I know – some of it by interpretation of the prophecies, some of it by other methods." She sat down on Alt's cot, and try as he might, he couldn't help imagining her giving up and reclining there, her arms beckoning him to join her.

"The key to everything is Darbas, Barney. Not you, not me, not the DuQaddish or the Clydes or the Gheralds. This *place*. Darbas contains the iron that will forge a new era. It hides the knowledge of a forgotten world, as well as the sacred stones that serve to keep that knowledge hidden. Even more significantly, it is the place where three peoples have lived together for centuries – the very three peoples who, together, can serve to bring this new age to fruition. That is why the outcome of this war is so significant. We cannot allow this hatred to fester when it is done, or none of the other things will matter. Darbas is the hope of the world, and I am afraid that you, my dear, are the hope of Darbas. As I am fond of you, I don't wish heroism upon you, and yet I have worked to place you here, now, to become that hero."

"But it might not be me."

"No," she said. "It might be Tera. It might be Dannan. It might be someone we have all overlooked. But right now, the odds are it's one of you three, and so your safety becomes my top priority. That is why I could never send someone to harm you, Barney."

Alt considered that. He had no doubt that she spoke the truth, for the light of her heart was visible in her eyes. She would never seek to harm him. She had brought him here and now he understood why and his mind stumbled on the gravity of the answer. But if she would risk so much to summon him, perhaps...

"Rialta, ponder this with me," he said. "Assuming, for a moment, that I actually were one of the possible candidates for this hero in your prophecies, who might have cause to remove me from the game?"

Rialta lowered her head as she contemplated her answer. "Many, of course. The DuQaddish and their Korvish-Sopkan allies, for one. Your own Gheraldic Empire, for another. Even the men of Llyr would probably be glad to see you rubbed out."

"But how many of those would have any knowledge of the prophecies?"

"None of them would."

"Who else, then, Rialta?"

"There is no one else," she said. "I can think of no one."

"Surely you can. I can."

"Who?"

"Your own priestesses. The Ladies of Beltan. The Fionnans, perhaps. They would know, and perhaps they favor another."

"Nonsense," Rialta said. "The prophecies are closely guarded. Only the high priestess and those most trusted by her are allowed to see them."

"And with whom have you shared them?"

"No one," Rialta said. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. It was made clear to me from the start that my time as high priestess was to be the time of the transition, that my knowledge of the prophecies was to be kept close. I have told no one, until now."

"Rialta," Alt said, his voice honing in on the point, "who made that clear to you?"

"I don't understand what you're getting at," she said, confusion apparent on her face. "It was clear."

And then it was clear to him, as clear as her visible confusion on so simple a point. "My Lady, don't you see?" he asked. "Even now, when I bring you to the gate, you cannot open it and enter. You cannot even speak the words that form in your mind."

"Why are you speaking to me in riddles?" Rialta asked. "That's my job."

"Answer this question, Rialta: who told you about the prophecies?"

"The High Priestess."

"And who was the High Priestess?"

"My mother, of course," she said, annoyance audible in her voice. "Really, Barney, I don't understand why..."

The realization struck her like a cold squall.

“Blessed be,” she said, her voice trailing off. “It was mother.”

“Why couldn’t you remember that? When I asked you before who else would know, you left out the most obvious answer.”

“It didn’t even occur to me...” Rialta said, her eyes lost in the wonder of it. “But it’s the most obvious answer.”

“And how is it that the Lady of Gwynyr would miss the most obvious answer?”

“The spell of overlooking,” Rialta said. “The most basic spell of all.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are those who say the priestesses of Beltan can make themselves invisible,” she said. “That we can make objects disappear. Well, of course we cannot. We’ve never had that power. To make an object disappear, well... let’s just say that this would require more power than the standing stones combined can provide, all for something so insignificant.”

“And yet...”

“And yet how easy is it to cause someone to simply overlook something that is right in front of their eyes? We use it all the time. I used it at Celon Gate to keep the custom house safe while the refugees were hiding inside it. I never even imagined that someone could use it on me.”

“Why would your mother want to hide her hand in these events, Rialta?”

“I don’t know, Barney. Even now, knowing it to be true, I cannot see anything in her direction.”

“Who could? Could another priestess take you around the spell somehow?”

“No,” she said. “Mother wouldn’t hide it only from me. She would hide her role from everyone.”

“What else would she hide?”

“I don’t know. It’s awful. My sight has become so limited. I am like two people inside myself, one who sees and the waking self who cannot.”

“Then only the waking self is obstructed?”

“Yes,” Rialta said. “You cannot stop people from seeing the truth, only from recognizing it.”

“Then I know the answer,” said Alt. “Although I do not like it.” He stood and walked to the flap of the tent and raised it.

“Staff!” he shouted, and within a few moments a Clydish soldier appeared.

“Private,” Alt said, “go and fetch me John Tera.”



*Wherever we shall be in the winding of the world,  
In the thee & me & wee of it we'll walk  
And whatever we shall dream in the dreaming of the world  
Bless the witching of the words that we shall talk.  
For if thee & me are we  
And I am not the other,  
Then the witching of the free  
Is the willing of the Mother.*

—*The Grimoire of Beltan*

## Chapter 14

## Tera

**A**lt's tent was the best place to take Rialta's testimony, but even that seemed crowded and dim, and Tera dreaded reentering. He shivered when Marbor came for him, but took a deep breath and ducked into the opening. A special cot had been set up for Rialta, who sat propped up on her elbows, smiling softly. Willow sat on the ground beside her and Alt stood in the corner, jaw in his hand, elbow propped up by his other arm.

"Don't be upset, John," Rialta said, motioning toward him. "This is a gift you are giving to me, not a punishment. You must not think of it any other way."

The high priestess had stripped down to her petticoat and undershirt, and she lay upon fresh cotton sheets. Willow held a stack of towels and bandages to sop up the blood that would soon flow, and Marbor handed him the curved knife he always used – only it smelled of alcohol. Everything was clean and blessed, as befitting a high priestess, but when he looked at the perfect, creamy skin of her breast and imagined plunging the blade into it, his stomach turned.

"Steady him, for crying out loud," Alt fussed at Marbor. "Sergeant Tera, stop thinking so damn much. This is a mission, just like any other, and you're under my orders. Now get down here and do your job."

Willow stood to move out of his way, and Tera picked up one of the canvas chairs and set it beside Rialta's cot. His eyes lingered on Willow's for a moment, and he could feel himself silently begging her forgiveness. She seemed to grant it, and her very presence calmed him.

"John," Rialta said, "this won't be like the other times. I promise. You won't be violating me, and I will welcome you in."

"It's painful, Lady Rialta. You don't know what it's like. It's not just the wound, but the feeling of having someone else inside your mind, compelling your truth."

"Have you ever taken testimony from a high priestess before John?"

"No."

"Then you don't know what it will be like. Now let's stop talking about it. I don't need to prepare." Rialta lay back down on the cot, pulled down her shirt to expose her breast, and closed her eyes.

Tera looked around to the others in the tent. There was no reprieve. He turned back to her and took her in – the lovely shape of her, the perfect skin, the elegant repose, the calm acceptance. He closed his own eyes and found his inner sight, then breathed fire into it, reviving it until it was stoked and ready.

He marked the spot carefully, just below the place where the muscle of her chest flowed into her arm, directly above her heart. She did not flinch when he touched her with the point of the curved blade, but he held his breath and gritted his teeth when he pushed it into her and slid the razor-sharp edge outward. Rialta let out only a tiny gasp and her muscles clenched as she grasped Willow's hand tighter. Blood spilled out onto her white skin, and Tera worked to staunch his own guilt at vandalizing such a perfect thing. Then he mumbled a quick prayer and pushed his fingers into the wound.

**T**here was no feeling of falling, and, after the initial shock, not even any pain. His inner eye opened and he found himself alone in the darkness with Rialta, who stood before him in a shimmering white robe with her arms outstretched in the goddess stance.

"Blessed be, John Tera," she said brightly. "Welcome."

"Where are we?"

"You are within me. It's a fine and private place, isn't it?"

The high priestess slipped the white hood back from her head, then stepped forward and took his hand. "Come with me. Let's go

and find what has been hidden.” John waited for her to move, but she was still. *“Oh John, you’re a bright boy, figure it out. You have to lead.”*

I have to lead? Well of course, he thought. If she could lead me to the truth, she would have already found it. He grasped her hand tightly with his right, stretched out his left in front of him and began walking in the direction she had indicated, feeling the way ahead through the darkness. Soon his fingers collided with something solid.

*“Use your light, John.”*

Tera had to think about that for a moment, but then he understood. He breathed deeply, feeling the blue fire surge through his lungs, and when he released it through his fingers it flowed outward like a living liquid, blue light lapping against and illuminating the wall. After several more breaths it had become painfully bright, a torch that glowed from his hand wherever he directed it. They walked along the wall with the blue flame spread out before them, and after a few steps they came upon a door.

*“I’ll wager that’s it. Are you ready for whatever lies behind it?”*

I don’t know, John thought. It depends on what’s there.

*“An honest answer. I like that in a man.”* He felt her squeeze his hand, and he turned the knob on the door and pushed it open.

“Who is it?” a voice called from within.

“Go on, John. Lead me through. This is the door I’ve been looking for.”

They stepped through, and his eyes came to rest on an older woman seated at a garden table, her head covered in a wide straw hat. The darkness was gone, and they were in the middle of a moonlit country yard. Everything about it seemed real, except for the fact that the edges of his vision shimmered like waves on a pond.

“How clever of you, my dear,” the old woman said, never looking up from the seedling she was transferring to a larger pot. “And to think you used my own champion to bring you here. Very, very clever.”

*“Hello, mother.”*

“You’re disappointed, I’m sure. Well, out with it. Tell me what a terrible mother I am. Bless the goddess, your sister has certainly told me as much. Over and over again. But get it over with, because the moons are near their zenith and this Mallow will go bad if I don’t get it in the ground tonight.”

*“What are you doing, mother? Of all times to put an enchantment on me, this has to be the worst.”*

“Well what do you think, child? Why am I doing this? Because you needed it. Because you weren’t ready for the things that had to be done. The things that still must be done. I am old, honey. This sort of thing doesn’t bother me any more.”

*“I am the High Priestess of Gwynyr, mother. Not some novice. This is my job, and you’ve interfered. You’re supposed to be RETIRED!”*

“Retired?” the old woman began to chuckle. “That’s quaint. What did you think, Rialta? That I’d acquire all that power and then just go off and garden? Be content to talk and gossip with some insipid little sewing circle of aged farm wives? My mother certainly didn’t, and she was a pain in my behind until the day she died. Actually, longer than that, even. She was always meddling, even after we buried her.”

*“But you still haven’t answered the question, mother. Why? Why would you blind me to the truth just when I need to see it most?”*

“Why? Because you’re about to screw everything up, dammit! And I’m not talking about a battle here or a rescue there. I mean everything! Every single tarking thing we’ve ever stood for! You and your idealistic ways. You would read a stupid prophecy and listen to your feeble little intuition and lead the people of Gwynyr to ruin! That’s why. How do you like that?”

There was brooding rage in the woman’s voice, like a sudden thunderhead that blocks out the sun on a lovely day. Rialta’s reply lacked the rage, but it deepened the cold.

*“You’ve lost your mind, mother.”*

“Lost my mind? You haven’t even found yours yet. Oh, I often wondered, honestly, but this little scene clinches it. You were a mistake, Rialta, a grievous mistake. Your simple-headed sister would have been an awful high priestess, but at least she never would have pulled a stunt like this. If I could undo you, I would, but instead I’m stuck with you.”

*“You’ll not stop me. I’m wise to you now, mother. I’ll trust my own feelings and put you aside. And when this war is over...”*

“You’ll what? Kill me? Throw me in some prison? Cut off my powers? You’ll do nothing, because you won’t finish this war. I will. You’ll be the one who gets retired. You and your barbarous General Barney Alt.”

*“Yes. Yes. Let’s talk about Barney Alt.”*

“He’s a disaster. An unmitigated disaster.”

*“He’s exactly the man the prophecies called for. Isn’t he?”*

“Prophecies,” the old woman said, the word flying from her mouth as if she had spat it. “Barney Alt is the destruction of Gwynyr. The end of the priestess power. He is the subjugation of the Old Path to a Sulist future, Rialta. I should have killed him when you were a mere girl and he came nosing around, all moon-eyed and dreaming up your skirts. I should have sent the Valand to take his tarking head, that’s what I should have done.”

*“Barney Alt is the one, mother. He’s the only one. Not only can he fight this war to a successful conclusion, but he can do so without losing the peace that will follow. He has the gift. The three peoples will trust him.”*

“And what about Gwynyr? What will happen to our homeland once the peoples are united? Do you really think that an Old Path Gwynyr can survive in a united Darbas? What a stupid thought. We shall be trampled asunder. The glory of Llyr – which you so stupidly gave away, and which will take me months to recover – will be lost to us. Oh, I want that steel to flow forth just as you do, only I will use it to protect our way of life, not squander it on some idealistic dream of unity.”

*“There is no one else, mother!”*

“Nonsense! Look beside you! Tera and Dannan, either one could do the job. They are my creations, Rialta, as hard and brave and noble as any man could dream of becoming! The people will follow them, and the victory will be for Clyde and Gwynyr, not some vague idea of geographical identity.”

Rialta stepped in front of Tera, and the surface of the image of the old woman in the garden shimmered unsteadily as she moved into it. *“What do you mean they’re your creations?”*

“You know exactly what I mean. Really, you are a difficult girl.” The old woman cast her eyes down and fiddled with her pot and trowel.

*“I’m not a girl. I am the High Priestess, the Lady of Gwynyr.”*

“Don’t push your luck with me, Rialta. You’ve put me in a bad mood.”

*“Undo the spell of overlooking.”* The high priestess pulled a dagger from the folds of her white robe. *“Break your enchantment now.”*

“I’ll do no such thing. Don’t make me put you in your place.”

*“Last chance, mother.”*

The old woman whipped the straw hat off her head, and suddenly her white hair flew back as if she were facing into a stiff wind. It rippled the loose and translucent skin across the bones of her face, and her features became fierce and feral, like a dog that contests a bone left on the floor of a kennel. Her eyes were raw and pale, and her mouth – ringed by broken and sharp-set teeth – hissed and snarled. In only a moment she had been transformed and revealed, and the force of it stirred up the shimmering surface of the image before Tera.

*“You’ll curse this day! You’ll fall on your face at night for the rest of your life and rue the day you crossed your mother!”*

*“I’ll do no such thing. And you should see yourself. You’re hideous, and you’re not scaring anybody, you know. So stop it.”*

The ugliness departed from the old woman as if a cloud had suddenly lifted, and she fell back into the small and pleasant appearance she had offered when they arrived. Even the ripples on the surface of the vision settled.

“Oh Rialta, you’re breaking a mother’s heart,” she pleaded. “Don’t you understand the difficulty you’re calling upon yourself? Forget about Gwynyr. Without my protection, all the difficult choices ahead will be yours alone. All the suffering. The sacrifice. I will bear these things for you, only you must trust me.”

*“I won’t make that mistake again.”*

“Surely you can feel my love. Isn’t that real?”

*“Of course it’s real. But there is more, too, and I can see it now. You are the clever one, mother, the way you hid everything from me. But perhaps it’s easy, hiding what someone else never wishes to see.”*

“Let that John Tera, that sergeant over there, let him carry the people,” Rowene said. “He is immune to the suffering now, Rialta. He’s like the steel of Gwynyr, put through the fire until he comes out the other side, hard and shiny. Take him for your lover if you like. Rule Gwynyr and Clyde as husband and wife for all I care. Or take the other one. Dannan. He’s certainly prettier, though maybe a bit more needful. Of course, you might like that better. Either one will do. I had to have a fall-back plan. Trust your mother.”

Rialta looked back through the rippling surface of the vision to Tera, her eyes finding his. For a moment she seemed like a watercolor in the rain, her body dripping down blotter paper, melting through to him, and he could feel her thoughts like a tiny voice in his heart. *It would be lovely, John Tera. I could never admit that, but parts of it would be lovely. You are such a beautiful soul...*

She turned back to face Rowene.

*“Mother, enough. Break the spell and do not hinder me again.”*

“No. The spell is made, and cannot be undone.”

*“So be it.”* As quick as the flash of a silver trout in a mountain stream, Rialta’s hand grasped her mother’s wrist and pinned it to the table. The older woman cried out, but she was too weak and slow to avoid the dagger as Rialta slammed it down, driving its point through the back of her mother’s hand and down through the wood of the table, down so far that the hilt pressed against her knuckles. *“So shall I bind you here, where you cannot wander and meddle. The dagger of Beltan, blessed by Goddess and God, shall keep your covetous heart from roaming free as I do my work.”*

“You assault your own mother!” the woman screeched, grabbing at the black handle of the dagger as Rialta walked away. “You seal all our fates, for you shall be blinded by my spell and I shall be bound by yours!”

*“That was your choice.”* Rialta was poking around in the herb garden as she spoke. *“You set us on this path when you chose to break your vow to the secret rite and dreamed of possessing the knowledge of the old world for yourself. Now who knows what will happen?”*

“Get out of my garden! Get over here and take this damned *athame* out of my hand!”

*“Nope.”* The high priestess was on her knees now, using a white-handled knife to slice several branches off a low-growing herb. *“You’re going to stay right there. I’ll decide what to do with you later.”*

Rialta stood up and returned to the old woman, holding out the large handful of herbs for her to see. *“Wymote leaf, mother. Picked from the garden of the witch who enchanted me. I may not be able to break your spell, but this ought to put a dent in it, don’t you think?”*

“You little bitch,” the old woman said thinly.

*“I’m so glad you approve.”*

“Well, you leave me no choice,” the old woman sighed. “You stab me, you bind me, you steal my very own herbs. What’s a mother to do? I curse you, Rialta. May your hour of triumph be the moment of your disaster.” She turned to Tera. “And you, ungrateful half-breed. May you sink to the insignificance you were bred for. You could have had everything, you know.”

*“Mother, that was uncalled for. You should have left him out of this.”*

"Well, I warned you. But you wouldn't listen. Always smarter than your mother. Always brighter than your mother. You never learn, but you'll find out the hard way now. It's such a shame, but I'll weep no tears for you, Lady of Gwynyr. And his fate, well – that's on you, too. You brought him along."

"Actually," Tera interjected. "It was *me* brought *her*."

"Oh, who asked you?" the old woman hissed. "I should have let you die on the whipping post when you were ready to expire. I should have let you die a dozen times. Your fire doesn't burn that bright, John Tera."

"Mother!" Rialta's voice was intense. "*If you say another word to that man I shall take every last one of your gifts when I return.*"

"You *wouldn't*. I'm your *mother*, Rialta."

"*I would. I'd leave you less powerful than you left Rulana.*"

"Now that's harsh."

"*I might even kill you. I haven't decided yet. So ponder that while I'm away, because I will be coming home, and you'll be my first chore upon my return. If you're lucky, I'll be in a good mood. In fact, that should be your primary focus right now, mom. Putting me in a good mood. Because right now, to tell the truth, I'm really TARKING PISSED!*"

"Rialta!" the woman screeched after her as the high priestess stepped through the shimmering vision and back into herself. "Don't leave me here like this!"

"*Come on.*" Rialta took Tera by the hand. "*We've been in here a long time, and I've lost a lot of blood.*"

Rialta did not wake when Tera left her, and the concern was apparent on all the faces surrounding him when he opened his eyes. He was lying on the ground, his body covered in sweat, and most of the towels Willow had pressed around the wound lay in a bloody pile beside him. They seemed not to notice him there, lying on the ground, for their attention was on the Lady. But as he sat up and tried to clear his head it was Willow, handmaiden to Rialta, who turned and helped him rise. His jaw ached from being clenched for so long, but she handed him a tin cup of water and helped him drink.

Rialta was so pale from the loss of blood that she seemed to fade into the sheets, but Willow placed a poultice her chest and her mistress stirred. The vapors almost drove the rest of them out of the tent, but Rialta opened her eyes and smiled.

"Welcome back," said Alt. "Did you have a nice trip?"

"Yes, quite," Rialta mused. "I went to visit me 'mum."

"Are you alright, my Lady?" Willow asked.

"Oh my yes," she said. "Not quite up to dancing yet, but better than I've been in a long, long time. But that is the least of our concerns. I have a task for you now."

"Anything," Willow said.

Rialta opened her hand to reveal a wadded mass of herbs.

"This is Wymote leaf," she said. "Be a dear and go boil me a pinch of this for tea. You might want to take a cup yourself. It's good for the eyes. And take care with the rest. We'll be needing it."

If the others in the tent were too amazed to speak, Tera didn't notice. He was laughing too hard to see.



*The game itself has much to recommend it – it exercises our youth, teaches teamwork, and promotes physical fitness. But those who pursue it with such abandon, with such fanatical and singular devotion, demonstrate the lowly state to which modern ways have allowed our once-great Clydish culture to sink. When a high-scoring center-half is better known to the average man in the street than the great heroes of the past, or the grand churchmen and political figures of the present, then naught but doom awaits our people.*

—*The Scourge of Pitchball*, an editorial, *The Sidon Daily Post*

## Chapter 15

## Rialta

**M**orning came hot and dry, with a taste of dust and haze just behind the cool sweetness of dawn. The army was several miles down the road by midmorning, when the summer sun began to do its work, and from the top of a small roadside barrow Rialta sat upon her horse and stared in wonder at the column. It stretched for miles under a cotton sky, moving steadily up the Sidon Road, with the spires of Argon still visible in the distance. Though she had foreseen such a thing, the reality – the gravity – of it struck her as a miracle. An army of Clyde, marching on the capital city. It seemed to her both the most beautiful and most horrible sight of her life.

“What a mess,” Willow said, leaning forward in the saddle. “I always imagined that an army would look sharp and clean.”

“You’re getting harder to please,” Rialta said.

“Perhaps,” said Willow. “And you’re getting harder to take care of. Drink this.”

Rialta took the canteen the handmaiden offered and took a long pull on it. The tea inside was cool and sweet with honey, an herbal concoction Willow had whipped up to help restore her strength after the previous night’s ordeal.

“I don’t have much time to get you back to full health,” Willow said, her voice taking on the no-nonsense tone of a long-suffering nurse. “General Alt said we shall be encountering the enemy within two days. You don’t want to go in all punity, do you?”

“No,” said Rialta, handing back the canteen.

“Then come on,” Willow scolded. “We get a place at the head of the column and you want to go sight-seeing. I’ll not having you riding back here, choking on everyone else’s dust in this heat. We’re falling behind.”

Rialta felt slightly miffed, but the feeling was tempered by an appreciation of Willow’s constant care. “Since when do you get to order me around?” she asked.

“Since you decided to stop showing any common sense where your own health is concerned,” Willow replied. “Come on.”

They spurred their horses to a canter and rode along the column, acknowledging the waves and greetings of the army as they passed. It was a fine summer day, Rialta thought.

**T**he march went smoothly, if slowly, and despite the humidity of the Lowlands Rialta enjoyed the day as much as any in recent months. She rode beside Alt and Marbor much of the afternoon, and where there had been suspicion and guardedness before was now a sense of ease and fellowship. Marbor, she decided, was a particularly pleasurable man, intelligent and witty, a combination of all the finest qualities of Gherald she had come to appreciate during her posting at the Court. Duties kept pulling him away, but he would ride back up to the head of the column and pick up their conversation where they had left off.

Alt was less talkative, but even in their silence she felt a new sense of comfort. Her inner sight was clearing, and not only had she regained Alt’s trust, but Alt himself. One was a necessity, but the other was a desire, a personal balm, like a broad circle closing in her life. *I was meant to ride beside you, Barney Alt*, she thought. *All those years ago, from the day we met, we were meant to do this, together.*

And then there was Tera and his friend Seamus Dannan, who rode together and accepted her company brightly. Their presence produced an energy in her, the sensation of cold mountain water splashing down into a sun-warmed pool. *Great power flows from these two*, but she did not speak her thought. Their conversation was about home, with plenty of questions about Gwynyr and the Old Path from Dannan, interspersed with short musical riffs on the penny whistle. *So much loneliness in these two, but so much gentleness, too.*

Her own people kept their distance. Mistress Quinn was particularly stand-offish, and Father Ash had taken on the visage of a

stone cliff. *That's understandable*, she thought. The Valand's loyalties had been divided for a long time, thanks to mother's interference, and how they would fall in the coming days was yet to be determined. The reawakening of her intuition was like the blooming of a flower – the act was lovely, its completion was anxiously anticipated, and there was nothing she could do to speed the process. Whatever action she would take toward them would have to wait until she could see their hearts more clearly.

So Rialta focused on the present, on the metallic summer buzz of insects in the fields, the brassy light on the lowland meadows, the feeling of sweat under her clothes and the smell of dust and horse and oiled leather. She sensed the hum of the souls around her and opened her inner self to the passing sensations of cloud and sunlight, to the web of life in this portion of the world. Gwynyr was high and chilled and clear, and the forest of Celon had been thick and tightly woven, but here life was lush and insistent, bursting and fecund and unstoppable, spilling over the once-tended lines of fields and lanes and gardens in the empty villages they passed. A hard year had driven the people away, but now they were returning. The land itself seemed to yearn for their hands, for the comforting scrape and turn of plows, for the sluice gates to open, for the ditches to fill and the fields to drink. The feeling gave her nothing but joy, for Rialta sensed that all this would come to pass, one way or another, that in the end her own role was nothing but vanity compared to the annual turn of the wheel, to the needs and gifts of the land and the people, one to the other and back again.

**M**arbor carried the news to the evening staff meeting, entering their circle with Dannan at his side. "Sergeant Dannan's scouts bring word of the enemy disposition," the major said. "They are most strangely arrayed." Alt stretched out the palm of his hand to indicate the map spread out on the table, and Dannan stepped up to it, referring to notes as the rest of the group crowded around. His hair hung loosely from his pony tail, strands of it falling over his face as he bent over the map, and Rialta felt his nearness pull a thread through her that was nothing but womanly. *Whatever else he is, he is certainly beautiful.*

"Here are their outer lines," he said, indicating an area about a mile beyond the walls of the city. "They are expecting us and have begun digging defenses that are oriented toward our army instead of the city."

"Draw them," Alt said, handing Dannan a pencil. The process took a few minutes, as the sergeant referred back to the notes several times, but under his light hand the picture of the enemy emerged before her eyes: a wavering crescent stretching several miles before the gates of Sidon, now fearfully and defiantly etched into the ground in anticipation of their assault. The besiegers were now the besieged, yet they would not pack up and flee.

"And this?" Alt asked, pointing to a grid Dannan had sketched on the far western edge of the map. "Is this some kind of camp?"

"It appears to be a hospital, according to Watts," Dannan replied.

"If it is, it's a big one," Marbor said.

"It's the Blood Death," said a woman's voice. Rialta looked up and spotted Quinn moving forward toward the table. "I have a report that the Blood Death has broken out among the DuQaddish army in just the past week."

Rialta flashed angry but hid the emotion. *She* has a report? By what right are her reports given to anyone without first having been presented to the Lady of Gwynyr?

"How long have you known this?" Alt demanded.

"Only just now," Quinn said.

"I see," Rialta said coolly. Her eyes flickered with Quinn's for a moment, and Rialta realized for the first time that not only was Quinn aware of Rowene's interference, she was aware that Rialta was aware of it. It was only a little kiss of recognition, but it had a strange effect on the High Priestess. It calmed her.

"I can't decide whether this is good news or bad," Marbor said. "Personally, I have no great desire to engage an enemy who may kill me by no more than coughing. It weakens their strength, but still I consider it a most unlucky turn for us."

"Luck has nothing to do with it," said Willow. Rialta turned toward her in shock. Her handmaiden had never before spoken up in a staff meeting, yet she spoke now with the confidence of a woman born to a position of power instead of an orphan raised in the temple kitchens of Beltan. "The DuQaddish have been dug in outside Sidon for months now, living in tents and poor sanitation. What better place for the Blood Death to gain a hold?"

"But what of engaging them in a fight?" Alt asked Willow. "Even if we win, we could lose later if the plague spreads to us."

"The real danger would come later, after we've won," she replied. "The sick won't fight, but they'll have to be tended. Personally, I'd take this news as a gift from spirit – staying mindful, of course, that every gift spirit offers comes with a responsibility."

Alt turned to Rialta for silent confirmation. She nodded in assent.

"Okay," he said. "Then let's figure out how we shall proceed."

The staff meeting stretched long into the night, with sergeants coming and going, fetching scouts and Fionnans. Everyone with knowledge was quizzed and queried, and the map on the table became increasingly detailed. By midnight the picture of Sidon and the siege emerged clearly: despite the siege, the city was in better shape than the army outside its gates. Because the DuQaddish had never cut off the port, they had never effectively reduced the opposition. The defenders and besiegers traded trebuchet shots a few times a day, but there had been no real effort by either side to force a resolution. Both were clearly waiting for something. The debate over what those somethings were spilled late into the night.

Rialta didn't hear LaFranq. She smelled him. It was a nice smell, faintly salty, with just a touch of cinnamon and tobacco to it. It seeped into her sleep and bloomed in her dream, so that she sensed her old lover sitting beside her, and she turned her head and opened her eyes and saw him there in the darkness. He sat motionless on the ground, not even looking at her, his failing eyes gazing off at nothing. Rialta realized he was listening.

"Hello Rolph," she said softly.

"Hello," he whispered without looking at her.

"What are you doing here, Old Bear?"

"I got worried about you. I don't know why."

"How disappointing. I thought for a moment that maybe you missed me," she said.

"I miss you plenty, my Lady. It's you that doesn't have the time for me." The old soldier seemed relaxed and conversational, but he was clearly on alert. "Sorry to wake you, although I didn't really expect you wouldn't notice me here."

"One would think."

He smirked.

"Rolph, what are you doing? Is there trouble?"

"You're the intuitive one," he said. "I just had a dream and woke up and knew I was supposed to come here."

"Did I summon you?" she asked.

"No, I rather think something else sent me."

She lay back, pondering this, and let her hand trail out to his shoulder. It felt solid and substantial, and she was instantly comforted.

"I'm in danger, aren't I?" she asked.

"So it seems," he whispered. "But if you know what the threat is, I sure would appreciate you telling me."

"I don't know," she said. "But you're right. I can feel it. You shouldn't be here, Rolph."

"I know," he said. "And I don't know what good I'd do you, if it came down to a fight, anyway. But maybe whoever it is will sense me here and think the better of it."

Rialta squeezed his shoulder and delighted in him, his valiant and humble heart, his scarred face and earthy humor. "I have horribly mistreated you, Rolph. I've ignored you for days. Will you forgive me?"

"It's been pretty busy. You have a war to win, and I have a trebuchet to tend. She's only heavy weapon in this entire army, so she gets most of my attention these days."

The Lady of Gwynyr breathed deeply, taking in his scent again, and found herself aroused in a way she hadn't felt in weeks – months, perhaps. She felt it as tingling warmth in her belly, as a hum along her thighs. It was, in part, her body stating its case, reminding her that whatever else she was, she was still *a body*. It needed food and breath and touch, but there was more, too. She imagined the feeling of the weight of him bearing down on her, the tender crush of her blind, loyal paladin, and the thought thrilled her.

"I suppose I should be going," he whispered. "Whatever I thought I felt is gone now."

"Don't you dare," she growled, rising off the creaking cot and sliding to the ground beside him. "Leave me now and I'll hex you, Bear."

His crooked, muscular face grinned in the low light. "Really," he whispered, "I came here to protect you."

"And nothing else ever crossed your mind?"

"Who? Me?" he protested. "My intentions were pure."

"Pure, huh?"

"Semi-pure. Sort of pure. Only remotely unpure."

"You sweet little liar."

"Mostly pure. Primarily..."

She didn't let him finish the thought, kissing him hard and cleaving to him in a way that made her feel catlike and urgent. They were silent, as required by the lack of privacy in a tent camp, and they didn't speak real words again for a long, long time.

It little surprised her that she rose from her cot in a good mood in the morning, for her time with Rolph LaFranq had revived her as much as the confrontation with her mother had restored her. Perhaps more so, she thought as she brushed Willow's hair while they sat outside tending their breakfast cook fire. The encounter with Rowene had been a duty, but the night with Rolph had been a pleasure, a reminder of her humanity, a re-grounding in the world. And beyond even that, Rialta recognized a simple truth that she seldom dared whisper to herself: she needed to feel loved just like everyone else. She wasn't beyond the requirement – she had merely adjusted to going longer between refills.

The camp was busy as the army prepared for its afternoon march. Alt had decided to move them after lunch, confident that the enemy's defensive lines were static enough to allow him to maneuver into position and give the men a last night's sleep before forming them for battle at dawn. She could feel the camp's energy as an aggregate. There was an optimistic sense that the campaign was near its end, coupled with the difficult knowledge of what lay between the now and the then. Fear of death was a universal theme for everyone except the Mullaqat, Rialta mused, and even that was a bit unnatural.

"Why did your mother betray you, my Lady?" Willow asked, breaking their morning routine of chores and pleasantries. *Leave it this one to ask the probing question*, Rialta thought. She gave an extra tug on the brush, just enough to hurt, but she smiled as she did it.

"You've really become bold in the past few weeks," she said. "What kind of handmaiden gets into the business of high priestesses?"

"What kind of high priestess brushes a handmaiden's hair?"

"A high priestess who likes brushing hair. Rulana and I used to do this for each other when we were girls."

"I never really thought of it this way before, but Rowene betrayed Rulana, too," Willow mused.

"I don't think mother sees any of it as betrayal," Rialta said. "To her it's just looking out for what's best for everybody, whether everybody likes it or not. It's a rather lonely position."

"Is she lonely?"

"I think mother gave up the ability to be lonely long ago."

"What shall you do with her when this is over, my Lady?"

Rialta pondered the question for a moment. "I really don't know," she began. "I don't know that I really have either the power or the inclination to punish her. Besides, if we are successful here, my hands will be quite full when we return to Gwynyr. Things will not be the same."

"Why should they stay the same?" Willow asked. "I've changed. You've changed. Everything around us has changed. Why should Gwynyr remain stuck?"

"That's my point exactly," Rialta said.

"But your mother doesn't see it that way. And neither does Quinn."

Rialta did not respond, but the pace of her brushing slowed.

"Ever since you began giving me this Wymote to drink, my intuition has been getting stronger again," Willow said as she sprinkled some of the herb into the small pot over the fire. "It tells me Mistress Quinn is not to be trusted."

"Mistress Quinn was my teacher," Rialta said. "We are in a war, and she controls the Fionnans. I have little choice but to trust her."

"There is always a choice, my Lady," Willow said.

Her handmaiden was certainly right about that. But sometimes the best choice was to wait before choosing.

Shortly before lunch, a remarkable thing happened. A pitchball game broke out. The buzz in the camp caught Rialta's attention, and she and Willow trailed after the others toward the assembly field – really just a patch of thatch that the layout of their camps always left empty. The grass was tall there, too, coming up around the knees of the players, but they played with abandon, smiling and shouting and colliding with a stunning force that left Rialta wincing. Soldiers crowded around the edge of the field, cheering and laughing.

She didn't even recognize Tera at first. He seemed a completely different man in motion – younger, more graceful, happier. Unlike the rest of the players, Tera kept his shirt on, and after each tackle he was the one calling them all to reform their line, pointing people into position, calling for the ball. The new play would begin, the men would scatter upfield, and Tera would be left alone behind the original line with the melon-sized leather ball, fending off charging defenders before tossing the ball out to one of his teammates. The man with the ball would take a couple of running strides forward, then turn and look for someone to pitch the ball back to. At some point the defenders would catch up to the ball carrier and slam him to the ground, but afterward the victim would bounce up smiling and laughing, and the teams would form into lines again and repeat the madness. Through it all, and even though Rialta could scarcely tell what was going on, it was obvious that Tera stood out.

"Look out!" Willow shouted as Tera slipped a tackle and slung the ball deep downfield to a teammate who was immediately clobbered. "Do you understand what's happening?" she asked Rialta. "Because I don't, but it's terribly exciting. Is that your friend Tera?"

"Yes," Rialta said, scanning the crowd for someone she knew who could explain the game to her. "I knew he was a pitchballer, but I never really learned the game, so I didn't understand. It's horribly violent."

"It's the Clydish game, my Lady," said Rolph LaFranq, slipping up behind her in the crowd and lightly touching her waist. "If you're to be a leader of the people, you'd be wise to learn their ways."

Rialta smiled and ignored the public familiarity LaFranq had displayed. "Well then, tell us what's going on."

"I can't see it," he said. "But I'm enjoying it just the same."

"Well then, tell us the rules," Willow said. On the field a new play began, but this time, instead of throwing the ball to another player, Tera dodged between on-coming defenders and zipped the ball between two poles that had been stuck in the ground about six feet apart. His team celebrated, lifting him up off the ground, and the defenders kicked at the grass and cursed.

"The game itself is about running into people, but the object is to throw the ball into a net," LaFranq said. "And it sounds like someone just did it."

"There is no net," said Willow.

LaFranq squinted at the field. "Are those poles?"

"Saplings, by the look of them," said Rialta.

"Then that's the net," said LaFranq. "Here's how it works: The team with the ball lines up and pitches the ball back to the center-half, who looks to toss it to a teammate. The man who receives the ball can only run five yards with it before he pitches it backwards to another teammate or gets tackled. The person who receives the backwards pitch can run as far as he can get, and if he has a shot at the goal, he takes it."

The two teams lined up at opposite ends of the field after the score, and Tera tossed the ball as far as he could toward the op-



position. This set both squads in motion, and they raced toward the center of the field, men colliding with each other as one of the players scooped up the ball and tried to run. He disappeared under a swarm of Tera's teammates.

"It's brutal," said Rialta.

"Yes, but war is brutal, isn't it?" LaFranq asked. "This is what we developed in place of war – a game that simulates it. On every successful play there is a step forward and a step back. You play as a team, but in the end it's up to one man to seize an opportunity and take his shot. And if you make a mistake – well, it's not good."

Back on the field, Tera's team dropped back on defense to cover the scattering offensive players. The opposing center-half stepped away from Tera's charge and threw the ball out toward his nearest teammate. His defender seemed to sense the play developing and burst forward, snatching the ball out of the air and racing toward the opponent's goal. Though others tried to catch him, the man was too fast, and when he neared the two poles he slowed down, casually tossed the ball between them, and brushed the long hair away from his face. It was Seamus Dannan.

"Oh my," said Rialta.

"Oh my indeed," said Willow.

"What?" LaFranq asked, squinting. "What happened? An interception? What?"

"Never mind," Rialta said reverently as the half-dressed swordsman jogged back to start the next play. "I think I understand this game now."

The match went on for another fifteen minutes before Marbor stopped it, but for that short time Rialta stood enthralled by the spectacle, marveling at the grace and power and passion of the men who played it. They came in different shapes and sizes, big ones and little ones, but each seemed to play a role, and in their spirit she found something new she had not expected. The Lowland Clydes had not lost their sense of identity. They had simply updated it.

As the game ended and the players walked off the field, laughing, dripping mid-day sweat and wiping blood off various wounds, Rialta stilled herself and breathed in their energy. It was virile, potent, defiantly optimistic, the energy of a people who stretched back across forgotten eons to an older world they could scarcely imagine. Another march lay ahead of them, and beyond that, death and suffering. Yet on the brink of it all, they played, and as they walked off the field together, player and spectator began to sing.

*O center-half is a manly art  
Strong as an ox and quick as a fart  
That spreads the field to spin and twirl  
And runs away like a little girl.  
O hail our glorious center-half  
Now take him home and give him a bath.*

*The superior commander recognizes the wisdom of doctrine and applies it to his every thought and action, for doctrine conveys efficiently the accumulated knowledge of centuries of military tradition.*

*Yet moments sometimes arise when doctrine alone cannot trump the realities of the forces arrayed against one's unit. At such moments, the superior commander recognizes doctrine for what it is, then abandons it without a second thought to pursue the course of action most likely to lead to victory. Military doctrine exists solely to serve the cause of victory, and should never be used to rationalize the orderly and predictable progression of an army to defeat.*

—**Major Barney Alt**, unpublished manuscript for his book *Modern Command*, from the special collection of the Royal Academy Library

*Win the battle before it begins.*

—Passage from *The Grimoire of Beltan*

*'Twas here we chose to stand  
and stars went spinning round.  
You and I against the time  
We stood this bloody ground.*

*Now stars no longer shine  
And our time's long past its end.  
What we won has been resigned.  
Not a drop was worth my friend.*

— **Dian**, *A Clydish Requiem*

## Chapter 16

## Alt

The first difficulty was not the defenses *per se*, but the enemy's heavy weapons, and Alt had little to counter them. The enemy's aim was lousy, but the rain of stones and fire was simply unnerving, and there was the risk that one portion of his army would break, causing the rest of it to erode before the attack was even begun. *Something will have to work soon*, he thought.

Perhaps putting the worst of the soldiers up front had been a mistake, Alt fretted. He couldn't suffer such losses from his trained troops, not with the plan he had in mind, but amateurs didn't take to the role of trebuchet-fodder kindly. They stood in ranks for the first two volleys, though just the sound of the approaching third shot caused the mass of them to flinch, and had it not missed them entirely Alt thought they might have quit the field then and there.

That was how the morning went. Along the western crescent of the DuQaddish works, Alt and Marbor worked unit after unit up into position, placing them outside of arrow range but well under the arcs of the heavy weapons, which snapped and threw random death at his lines every few minutes. As the shape of the battle developed, Alt watched the movements of the enemy behind the works closely, watched as they moved more and more men into the trenches to meet his threatened assault, becoming more assured of his intentions as his ranks on the field before them swelled. In previous battles, Alt had searched for a way to deceive his enemies, to feint one way and thrust where they least expected it. But in this fight, he had a different idea.

Alt simply wanted to gather as many of his enemies in one place as possible, the better to smash them. And so far, his opposite number was cooperating.

"At least you're getting your wish," Marbor said, leaning across his saddle to survey the opposing lines. "Happy yet?"

"Yes," said Alt. "Yes, very happy."

"We're going to be attacking an enemy with superior numbers at his point of greatest strength, you know?"

"That was my idea. I've been turning this over in my head for several years, actually," Alt said.

"Oh *good*," said Marbor. "I was afraid you just woke up yesterday morning and thought, 'Well, I'm feeling rather unorthodox today.'"

"You sound less than confident in my battle plan, Major Marbor."

"Me? No, I think it's a lovely plan. I'm sure it will be discussed in all the academies for years to come. Personally, I don't know why no one ever thought of it before. If you're outnumbered, just attack the enemy where he wants you to attack. Oh, and while you're at it, make sure you give him plenty of warning so he'll be sure to have time to reinforce. Yes, lovely plan. Absolutely lovely."

"Shut up, Marbor."

"Yes sir."

Under different circumstances, Alt might have been angry at Marbor's sarcasm, but today was different. Never had he felt quite so confident, and through the strength of that confidence he could understand Marbor's view compassionately. It did seem crazy, from a conventional sense. But the conventional sense didn't consider the limiting effect of a static defense overly packed with men. It didn't account for the psychological condition such a situation would present to the enemy. And it most certainly didn't factor in the advantage of steel swords.

He couldn't outrun this enemy. He couldn't encircle it. If he punched through where it was weakest, he would create a salient. If he stood back he would be smashed by stones and cut down by arrow volleys. In a straight-up fight, Alt had only two advantages, and he had to use them both. He would be free to move while the defenders could only stand in place, and once the hand-to-hand combat commenced, his weapons would defeat the enemy's.

There was a third advantage, but it was one he couldn't control directly. Behind those city walls stood an armed force of his

countrymen, and his deliberately showy maneuvers were scripted for that audience. So far they had held in place, content to let the siege play itself out, but Alt knew their commander, General Thierry, from days in Bhengal. Thierry had earned a reputation there for avoiding contact until victory was assured, a trait that other officers despised but Alt appreciated. For while it was true that Thierry was likely to wait until he had secured all possible advantages, it was also true that the general spent a great deal of thought and energy *acquiring* those advantages. If the Clydes could draw the DuQaddish into a closely packed position, Thierry might well march out of Sidon to apply the killing stroke. Without the assistance of Thierry and the Gheraldic infantry, Alt reasoned, he would be hard-pressed to hold any success he might find.

The morning was heavy and hot, and merely sitting on a horse watching the pieces move into place was sweaty work. Alt opened the collar of his tunic wider and pulled on the top of his logger's shirt, circulating air down to his chest. It brought little relief. The Lowland humidity was thick and breathless even at midmorning. Three hundred yards to his front the archers were wheeling into position, packed tightly against the flank of the militiamen. *Maybe that will steady them. Maybe the presence of veterans will give these armed civilians courage.*

"No sign of movement from the gate," Marbor said nervously. "Really, I don't know what Thierry's waiting for, unless he hopes to wait until both these provincial armies are bled to death."

"Thierry always waits," Alt said.

"You're quite confident," Marbor said.

"Yes. It's supposed to inspire confidence in you as well, you know."

"Sorry it hasn't worked yet. Maybe I'm like Thierry, waiting until I see something that inspires me to commit."

A snap, bang, and whine from the enemy lines caught Alt's attention. He looked up just in time to see an enormous boulder land right in front of his assembled CRG archers and smash through their ranks, leaving a gaping hole where a dozen men once stood.

"Sula!" Marbor cursed.

Alt closed his eyes and swore softly.

"Well. That doesn't help matters," the major said.

Alt reopened his eyes. The archers were still holding their ranks, and he said a thankful prayer. On the far flank, the rest of his archers were coming on line, and the entire front was holding up despite the work of the DuQaddish heavy weapons. Off to the east, the grenadiers were forming, with the men of Llyr in battle line behind them. This would be his punch – a thousand men, tightly bunched, passing through the advancing lines before them and crashing into the enemy defenses. The command to unsheath swords passed through the grenadier ranks, and though Alt could not hear it, the sight of so many steel blades slipping out of back scabbards and flashing high in the air reminded him of why he felt so sure today. There was no close-action weapon his enemies could use to counter those two-handed Llyr swords, and if his grenadiers had been deadly with hammers, they would be unstoppable now.

The sound of approaching horses turned his head, and Alt watched as Tera rode toward him leading Rialta, Willow, Quinn and Bartelmus, the captured enemy commander. Alt bowed to them from the saddle, and all returned the courtesy.

"How many have we lost so far?" Rialta asked.

"Enough to break my heart, but not enough to change my mind," Alt said. He turned to Marbor. "It's time. Go down and take command of the forward group. Once their advance has brought them within fifty yards, order the charge – but keep yourself far enough back that you don't get killed. You need to order the grenadier charge before the front lines actually reach the enemy works. Understood?"

"Absolutely," Marbor said jauntily. "I'll meet you in Sidon, General."

"Not just yet," Alt said. "Here, we've got some witnesses now." The general reached into his tunic pocket and retrieved a small paper box, pausing to wink at Rialta for just an instant. "By my count you'll be leading well over 3,000 men, Marbor, and that's beyond the authority of the rank of major."

"By my count I've been keeping tabs on you for years, and that, too, is beyond the authority of a mere major," Marbor replied. "Hasn't been an issue until now."

"Well, this should help in future," Alt said, handing the box to Marbor. "Wear these in good health, Colonel Marbor."

Marbor opened the box and removed the two golden eagles of a Gheraldic colonel. He blushed, but his sense of irony remained intact.

"General, you shouldn't have," he said slyly.

"Congratulations," said Bartelmus, bowing. "Although I do not wish you success, I sincerely hope you die honorably as befitting your new rank."

"Thank you, general," Marbor said, holding his mount still while Alt leaned over to pin one of the eagles to his shoulder. Rialta rode up beside him and fixed the other to the opposite shoulder. "Death is quite possible, General Bartelmus, but perhaps I shall make it back after all, and then you and I can continue our game of Kot from last night. I believe you are ahead."

"Ahead? You could survive a dozen battles and not catch up, Colonel."

Rialta leaned forward and kissed Marbor on the cheek.

"Blessed be, Colonel Marbor," she whispered. "My protection goes with thee."

Marbor sat tall in the saddle, nodded to her, and with a last look back toward Alt spurred his mount and raced toward the center of the battle line. It was hard to watch him go. They had been through so many fights together, and Alt could not imagine how he would carry on without the major – now colonel. The promotion had been overdue, but for some reason Alt worried that it would cost him, that he had sent his closest friend off to do something entirely too dangerous. There was a sudden wave of panic in his

gut, and he fought to contain it, struggled to subdue the urge to ride after Marbor.

"How long will it be until we know?" Tera asked.

"Whether the attack will go forward?" Alt asked. "That is already decided. The attack will be made, regardless."

"It will succeed," said Rialta. "I can feel it."

"Yes, but how detailed is that feeling?" Alt asked. "I feel it, too, but I cannot see the end of the game."

"I cannot foresee the future, not like I can see the present," Rialta said. "I can sense possible futures and act upon them. And I feel good about this one."

"The attack is foolish," said Quinn, her sudden entrance into the conversation catching everyone off guard. All eyes turned toward her, but she seemed not to care. She sat tall and aloof in her saddle, the Lowland humidity turning her white hair into a cloud that surrounded her face. "You place too much faith in both General Thierry and your highland weapons, General Alt."

"So be it," he said. "I place greater faith in my men, and very little faith, I'm sorry to say, in your reports. They have been an unending stream of unbidden pessimism."

"As you wish, general," Quinn replied. Her manner was neutral, yet he couldn't miss the underlying hostility. "My agents will serve you regardless, no matter what our situation. Still, it is not too late to avoid committing the Valand. They will be of great use to you should we be required to retreat."

"I can imagine almost no circumstance under which that possible future would come to pass," Alt said, turning his attention back to the lines. The militia was moving forward, with the archers on either flank holding slightly back. Another volley of trebuchet stone soared overhead, scarring the fields just behind their ranks. The grenadiers parted to let the stones roll by, then reformed and continued.

To the front, the first of the men came within range of the DuQaddish archers behind their low works, and the enemy arrows whistled high in the air. At the last moment the militiamen raised their wooden shields and ducked underneath, receiving the rain of sharp points and then marching forward again. But there was an unsteadiness to their line that was apparent to Alt and the rest of the observers.

"You are outnumbered three-to-one at the point of attack," Quinn said. "You are sending untrained soldiers into a hornet's nest. They will collapse before they ever reach the works, and your decisive charge will founder before it even begins."

"Ah, a wise woman," said Bartelmus. "With all respect, general, there is a certain oddness to your plan. Only I cannot tell whether it is cleverness or insanity."

"It is not too late for you to hold back the Valand," Quinn said. "If no one else will speak the truth, then let that duty fall to me."

On the field before them, the front lines reached the direct-aim range of the DuQaddish archers, and the militia were slow to raise their shields. The volley ripped through them, and their advance stopped suddenly. Alt held his tongue. This was no surprise. He hadn't expected the militia to last much longer than this, and if they would only get just a little bit closer...

"General, I am only speaking of prudence here," Quinn continued.

"You are speaking of disloyalty and cowardice," Rialta said evenly. "Quinn, your way is the way of the thief. You sneak around at night, taking what you will. What do you know of a stand-up fight? This is Alt's world, not yours."

"I know quite a bit about fighting, my Lady," said Quinn, her eyes implacable. "And much of what you know you learned at my feet."

The next volley raked the stalled lines of the militia, and somewhere near the center, a portion of the front rank gave way. *It is like this in war*, Alt thought. *As brave as we may hope to be, the sight of death and suffering robs us of our courage.* He was not angry at the men who fled, scrambling back through their comrades, heedless to every thought except the commands of the body. He merely hoped that the rest of the unit would hold on to its sense of honor for just a few moments longer. They were only seventy-five yards from the works now, almost close enough to charge.

"Mistress Quinn, that will be enough," Rialta said, her voice rising a notch. "You have taught me many things, including the ability to recognize my hidden enemy. You are to stay at my side for the rest of the battle, and you are to speak only when I speak to you. Is that understood?"

"If my Lady wishes to squander good counsel..."

"Your Lady wishes to win this battle, and your Lady does not wish to live and act by the half-measures you prescribe. Another word, mistress, and I will ask General Alt to have you placed under arrest. Think you are capable of that, general?"

"Most gladly," Alt replied.

"Whatever manner of fighting you Clydes produce, I must say that your command procedures are most entertaining," Bartelmus said.

Alt could barely pay attention to the testing of wills between the Gwynyrians. A third volley smacked into the militia, this one stopping its advance utterly. The erosion came from the back ranks, men who had seen their brothers ahead of them fall and felt no wish to step into their places. What had once been an orderly military unit was deteriorating into a panicked mob, capable of little more than impeding the charge that marched up behind. For the first time since the night before, Alt felt himself go cold. He had guessed wrong. He had placed too much faith in the willingness of farmers to die for an uncertain objective. His self-confidence had obscured his reason.

"Rialta," he asked. "Why did you believe in this plan?"

"Because it was a good plan," she said, "and because of Marbor. Look."

He was easy to spot. The colonel was riding amidst the retreating militia, threatening, shouting, rallying them. They were still



too far from the lines to make the charge Alt had ordered, but there was something in a mind stricken with terror that can work to a leader's advantage, and Alt had forgotten it. Under the proper guidance, the mind that flees to the rear can also be made to run toward the enemy.

Marbor did not reform their lines. He simply charged them forward – a tangled mass of men, wavering, hesitating, then running toward the enemy, with the colonel on horseback, leading them on. The wave that had receded now surged ahead.

"Blessed be, he'll be killed," Willow said suddenly.

"Join me, handmaiden," Rialta said, and she grasped the younger woman's hand and closed her eyes.

Yes, thought Alt. *Yes, use what you have, whatever you have.*

The last organized volley struck as the men reached the works, and it spilled Marbor from his horse. Alt winced, and scanned the scene with his glass. Close up, the battle was nothing but confusion – motley, outnumbered farmers grappling with uniformed troops. They had no more reached the point of the attack than they began falling back again in earnest, yet they had done more than Alt had ever hoped: they had cleared the path for the men who followed, who must only cover the ground quickly now. Yet who would lead them? He would have to take over himself, Alt realized. There was no one else.

"There he is!" Bartelmus shouted. "My Gheraldic bastard friend is back on his feet!"

Alt dropped his spy glass and spotted his subordinate – not near the fighting, but back a ways, his maroon jacket clearly visible amidst the confusion, staggering, limping, waving a pennant, calling the grenadiers forward. They moved rapidly now, double-timing in formation, jogging into the chaos near the works and then bursting into a sprint, shoving militiamen out of the way. The first of the burly Clydes crested the works before the last of the militiamen had fallen away, and the collision could be heard at a great distance.

The shock of it registered on Bartelmus's conflicted face. One moment he had been happy to see Marbor alive. The next moment he bore witness to the terrifying power of Gwynyrian steel.

Bronze shattered. Wood splintered. The grenadiers wielded the heavy two-handers like thunderbolts, not so much fencing as smashing, their opponents more concerned with fighting their own shock and fear than actually countering the men before them. Pikemen offered the best response, but their weapons disintegrated in their hands. Archers were unable to get off a shot in the swirling melee. The DuQaddish with swords and hammers survived only when they were able to come in under the great swipe of a Llyrian two-hander and body-check a grenadier, but even this was short-lived hope. Panic began as a small stain at the center of the DuQaddish line, but it spread rapidly, fear spilling backward and outward with the men who turned and ran before the onslaught. It became a contagion.

Now came the men of Llyr, running into line just abreast of the slogging grenadiers, wielding lighter and even deadlier weapons. One-handed swords, mostly, refined weapons like the one Alt had chosen for himself. The Llyrians were not great soldiers, but they were craftsmen, men who understood the nature of their weapons. They slashed and parried, beating the short bronze swords opposing them with great ease. The virus of fear accelerated its spread.

The 2nd CRG's archers entered the fray from their position on the flanks of the charge. Forgotten until now, they had moved close enough to assail the enemy who had packed in behind the defenders at the point. Their arrows leapt from anxious bowstrings, humming in the air, striking individual targets instead of mowing down troops like a great scythe. They did not volley, and Sergeant Major Carras moved them up by paces, shooting as they advanced, turning the enemy away from the push in the center.

"I have never seen anything like this," Tera said incredulously.

"And God willing, you will never see it again," said Alt, who turned his attention to the city gate. It shimmered in waves of heat, but still it remained closed. Surely Thierry must be getting the point by now. Surely he would understand that his moment had arrived.

"Here they come!" Rialta shouted.

Alt lowered his glass and turned back to the east. It was a terrible and beautiful sight: almost 2,000 Valand, Va, and 2nd CRG cavalymen, their horses galloping with heavy hooves across the Lowland plain, emerging from the distant wood line that had masked their movement. Their target was the thin spot in the enemy line near the wall of the city, a weak flank that would allow them access to underbelly of the DuQaddish defense. This was the killing stroke, but also the greatest risk, for once they entered the fray, there would be no way for them to escape – except by death or victory.

"How is Marbor?" Alt asked Rialta. "Is he okay?"

She closed her eyes again. "He is in pain," she said, "but he has survived the worst."

"Where is he hit?" Alt asked.

"Several places," she said, her concentration continuing. "The most damaging are in the legs. He cannot walk, I fear."

Alt searched the battlefield frantically. "I don't see him. Where is he?"

"He can see the works, but he has not crossed them," she said, but it was impossible to make him out. The rest of the army now flowed toward the breach in the enemy lines, with LaDram's New Calpathian militia now passing over the bloody ground and looking for the nearest fight.

"I must go get him," said Alt. "Stay here while..."

"I'll go get him," said Tera. "I'm the most useless man in the entire army right now."

"Fine," Alt said. "Casar, go with him, and kill anybody that even looks threatening."

"Yeah boss," said the tribesman. "I take good care of the colonel."

"Well, take good care of the sergeant, too, dammit," Alt called after them.

"It's working, general," Rialta said, pulling her horse so close beside his that the animals' sweaty flanks touched. "Do you not see

it?"

"The cavalry has not yet come to bear," he said, watching as the horsemen drew close to the thin spot Dannan had picked out in their defense. "If the enemy draws more soldiers to confront the breach, we could yet lose. Even a steel sword is only as powerful as the arm that swings it, and it is a hot day to face an uneven fight. I need a little help from General Thierry now."

"It's not coming," Rialta said, matter-of-factly. "But you knew that. You wished it. You reasoned it. But you knew all along you would have to win without him."

"Bull," he protested.

"If I'm lying, then why did you risk your cavalry – and my most elite warriors – to spring a trap?" Rialta asked. "Thierry could have done that most effectively simply by walking through the gate."

"I cannot control Thierry," Alt said. "I had to use what I had at hand."

At the far eastern edge of the line, the cavalry now reached the defenders, leaping ditches that would have slowed a foot soldier but proved little impediment for a horse. They punched through and kept moving, Valand leaning far out from their saddles to strike down those who dared oppose them.

"I have misjudged you," Bartelmus said, the sadness in his voice matched only by the sense that his own integrity had been breached. "It was foolish of me not to have accepted your offer."

"It's not too late," Alt said.

"I am a fool, but not that big of a fool," Bartelmus said. "The victory is yours, general, and the hopes of my people will be set back a century or more. We dared to dream that we could match the Gheraldic Empire, that we could stand as equals against your Clydes. Now we are defeated by a force half our size. We shall return to our plains humbled, humiliated. No one shall rise so boldly from DuQaddic for generations, and our shame shall turn us inward."

"Rubbish," said Alt. "We can end this right now."

"How?" Bartelmus implored him. "How can you put lightning back in a cloud?"

On the field before them, the cavalry, riding unimpeded through the back side of the defense, descended on the heavy weapons. The tenders of the trebuchets evaporated before them.

"Are you respected among the leaders of your army?" Alt asked Bartelmus, focusing every once of his intensity on the question.

"Yes."

"Then ride with me. Let's stop this thing."

"What terms do you offer?" Bartelmus asked.

"We end the war," Alt said. "You take your people back across Birren. You promise to do a better job of handling your problems with the *ouhasandans*. You state your grievances with the Clydes, the Clydes will state their grievances with you, and we'll let the Council find a way to settle things. That's politics, and it won't be pretty, but it's better than this."

"This war will be disaster for us," Bartelmus said, shaking his head woefully. "We shall be subjugated."

"I cannot speak for the Gheraldic Empire," said Rialta, "but I will speak as a Clyde. What has happened in the past year has been a madness, but if we end this war with mercy, the madness can end with it. I give my word, as Lady of Gwynyr, that I will do whatever is necessary to make Darbas peaceful again."

Bartelmus looked from Rialta to Alt and back again.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" he asked. "I've wasted an entire planting season on this stupid war."

Stopping the fighting was not without risk, but neither was it impossible. Alt rode with Bartelmus toward the center of the fighting, where the rapid erosion of the DuQaddish line worked to their advantage. Alt ordered his exhausted soldiers to cease their pursuit, and though it took a few minutes to get the word around, soon the attack stopped and the DuQaddish survivors fell back toward their hospital compound. The archers on the west flank were slow to get the word, but after fifteen minutes all the fighting was complete except for where the Valand and the cavalry were sowing havoc in the rear. Extracting them was the trickiest part, and ultimately Alt did it himself under a flag of truce, a maneuver that required him to place all his trust in Bartelmus and the DuQaddish field commanders at the spot in the line where he sought passage. Marbor would have howled at him for that one, Alt thought, but Rialta nodded her assent, so the general took the chance.

When he returned ten minutes later with his mounted troops, picking their way slowly through the shocked soldiery of the plainsmen, Rialta's eyes told him everything he needed to know. She had dreamed a great victory, one that ended not with destruction but with wonder, and somehow he had made it real. As the horsemen passed through the weary lines of their former enemies, a cry rose from the DuQaddish – not a war cry, but more of a prayer of thanks. For all those who had survived, the end of the battle was a blessed miracle, and the cheers of the enemy rose and spread. Across the empty gap between the armies, shouts began to rise from the Clydes, too, and soon the battlefield was an ocean of sound, two great masses of men celebrating, both victor and vanquished.

*Never in all my life, never in all my career, have I witnessed anything approaching this,* Alt thought, and he paused in the space between the armies and let the sound wash over him.

Matters were not yet complete. Alt had stopped the fighting unilaterally, with a viable enemy force still standing on the field, and while Bartelmus was a general, he was not the commander of the siege army. The DuQaddish command staff rode out to meet them, and Alt dismounted and greeted them in the no-man's land. The leader was an old man he had never heard of before, a General Tarpian, but after Bartelmus' introduction things went well. The DuQaddish asked questions about what the Clydes would expect

to accomplish before the Council of Darbas, and Alt suggested that a court of inquiry might be of use to both sides.

"I am not at all sure what has happened here," Alt said. "I suspect you, too, know only part of the story."

"Yes, and I am curious by nature," said Tarpian. "Yet what I cannot so easily accept is the notion of submitting my people to the justice of a court that is run by Clydes."

"Then let us ask the Mullaqat to serve in that role," Rialta said. "I shall suggest as much to Counselor Bergonat as soon as we can find him. But you have more immediate concerns, General Tarpian. The Blood Death that sapped your army's strength before this battle still rages in your camp."

"There is little to be done about it," he said. "We are trying to keep the healthy separate from the sick. Beyond that it is for Telios to decide."

"If you wish, my handmaiden and I will inspect your camp. We understand that your beloved Sula first rose to enlightenment during an outbreak of the Blood Death, that he healed thousands and stopped several plagues during his lifetime. Though we do not claim such powers, we do know several herbal mixtures that will slow the spread of the disease in the body. If your medical staff would assist us, we would gladly help you prepare as much of it as time and circumstance allows."

"Your offer is most gracious," Tarpian said, bowing.

"In the meantime, all I ask is that you march all those healthy enough to do so back to the west," Alt said. "Quit the field. Today."

"This we will do," Tarpian replied. "I am proud of my men, and I have no doubt that – equally armed – they would have stood up well to you today. But I thank you for your mercy, General Alt. It is better treatment than we have ever received from a man of Gheraldic blood."

"I am a citizen of the world," Alt said, bowing. But as he straightened, a strange feeling swept over him. For the first time in his life, he realized that he really, truly meant those words.

Rialta and Willow rode with Tarpian and Bartelmus, and Alt set about moving his own troops into their new positions. The battle had taken less than three hours, but the men were spent, depleted as much by the heat as by the fighting. Many simply collapsed in place. Once there was some order to their ranks, Alt left their disposition to their NCOs and rode in search of Marbor. He found him under a lean-to in the field hospital set up by the men of Llyr.

"Didn't I tell you to stay in the rear of the attack?" Alt said, offering the colonel one of the last of his Bangooni cigars. "You damn near bollixed that one up."

"Oh, hush yourself," Marbor said, taking the cigar and shooting his commander a sideways glance. "Somebody had to take charge of your carefully engineered cluster-tark."

"And now I see you've gone and gotten yourself wounded, colonel. I don't remember authorizing you to do that."

"Yes, I feel a bit like our Sergeant Tera this afternoon," Marbor said as he struck the match Alt had offered. "An arrow in my back and another in my thigh. But the worst injury" – he puffed smoke as he lit the cigar – "I got from falling off that damned horse."

"What?"

"My knee. I've torn something inside it. The horse went down and I tried to jump off to keep from being crushed and I just landed awkwardly. It was the first time in my career that I've ever cried out from pain. Fortunately, I don't think anyone noticed. Oh, by the way, did we win the war?"

"You have alarmingly limited faith," Alt scolded. "Yes, of course we won the damned war."

"Good," said Colonel Marbor, "because I am entirely ready to go home now. Life among these savages has finally taken its toll on me, and I could use a nice, fallow winter on the family estate. Did Thierry come out at the end?"

"Not a sign of him yet," Alt replied. A dark cloud seemed to pass over Marbor's face. "What?" Alt asked.

"Nothing," the colonel said, taking a slow puff. "It just strikes me odd."

A real shadow fell over them, and Alt turned to see who was standing behind them. It was Casar.

"You come now boss," said Casar. "The Gheralds, they are here."

"General Thierry?"

"No," said Casar. "Some other guys. Very clean."

"How nice of them to call," Marbor said. "Do send them my regards."

**A**lt had expected the Sidon command to come out at some point, but the Gheraldic officers who waited for him were acting entirely too strange. With Marbor hardly able to move and Rialta off with the DuQaddish, Alt rode to the meeting with only Tera and Casar beside him. He would have gone alone, but the Sidon garrison had sent a delegation, and he felt the need for some kind of entourage.

Instead of coming to his headquarters, the Gheraldic officers waited in the field between his lines and the city walls, acting more like a parlay than a liaison group. A party of infantrymen had thrown up a hasty tarp, and several Gheraldic officers waited for him on folding chairs beneath it. Alt and his two soldiers dismounted, handing the reins of their horses to the guards, and turned to face the Gheralds, who stepped from underneath the tarp and snapped a smart salute. Alt returned it warily.

"General Barney Alt," said the highest ranking of the group, a colonel. "At last I meet the legend."

"Legend, hell," said Alt, offering his hand. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

They shook hands. "Colonel Perry Proxmire of the House of Proxmire and the Cold Mountain Bronald Horse. I was two years ahead of you at the academy, and I know your cousin, Daedalus Alt."

"How is Daedalus?"

"Splendid," said Colonel Proxmire. "Still a charming fellow. And he speaks highly of you."

"Glad to hear it. Colonel Proxmire, allow me to introduce Sergeant John Tera of the 2nd CRG and Casar, my loyal retainer from our days in Bhengal. Two fine soldiers."

"A pleasure," Proxmire said, bowing curtly. "On my right is Captain Roberts, and on my left, majors Thindrick and Cundra. Would you like to step into the shade?"

"Certainly," said Alt. He took his chair and turned it at a canted angle before he sat. "Now, Colonel Proxmire, why on earth are we sitting out here on the plain like two foes hashing out an agreement instead of meeting in my headquarters, as decorum would suggest? I would wager you are a man who puts great stock in decorum."

"Most assuredly," Proxmire said, arranging himself carefully. "And you see, I am in fact following decorum, General Alt. For it is my duty today to determine exactly what you represent – friend or foe. This is, quite simply, a parlay, until I learn otherwise."

"Explain, please."

"Consider it from General Thierry's point of view," Proxmire said. "Here he has been given administrative authority over a rebellious province of the King's empire, and no sooner does he take office than the countryside deteriorates into anarchy and an army of rabble clumsily besieges his capitol. Not a week ago the fleet that was to reinforce our garrison collided at sea with a Korvish-Sopkan invasion fleet, and a great naval battle reduced both armadas to an alarming amount of driftwood. Then another rebel army, led by an outlaw Gheraldic officer shows up at the gate, wielding steel weapons. Certainly you understand the general's urge to exercise caution in such a situation."

"Wait a minute," Alt said. "An *outlaw* Gheraldic officer? Since when did I earn that title?"

"Since the day you illegally embarked on a campaign that brought a CRG back to Darbas," Proxmire said, smiling broadly. "This cannot come as a surprise to you, General Alt. The law is quite clear on this matter."

"We were blown here by a storm."

"Yes, yes, and I'm sure you have many good reasons for your actions, all of which our governor will take into consideration. Am I to take it that the purpose of this army was to lift the siege of Sidon?"

"The purpose of this *army* was to liberate the Clydish homeland," Alt said. "My *individual* purpose was to lift the siege of Sidon. Both intentions fit nicely together. Now that both have been met, this army will quite simply cease to exist."

"Well, that is good news," Proxmire said. "This is a province of the Empire, General Alt, and it's as fractious and seditious as any I've ever encountered. The Court has expressed a keen interest in bringing order to Darbas, which has claimed just enough independence to create such a chaotic situation. The troubles of Darbas are of its own making, but Gherald shall end them, and for starters that means there can be no army, no regiment, no platoon, no squad of men who stand at arms and fall outside our control. Do you get my point, general?"

"I get several points," Alt replied. "I get the point you are trying to make, but also several of the points you are trying to obscure. So what, exactly, have you come here to seek, colonel?"

"Your company," said Proxmire. "General Thierry views you as a lost lamb. It's time to bring you and your officers back into the fold. A suite has been prepared for you at the governor's mansion, and you will be thoroughly debriefed and treated with all respect until such time as you return to Gherald."

"And then?"

"And then you shall retire, correct? I am told your paperwork was filed months ago. Your career has been splendid, general, absolutely splendid, and today's victory capped that career in spectacular fashion. But it's over now, General Alt. It is time for you to claim your reward."

"And my army?"

"What of it?" Proxmire asked. "You yourself said it had ceased to exist with today's victory."

"My CRG still exists."

"And it shall continue to do so. Under new officers. On Donnage."

Alt caught Tera's eyes for a moment, registering the suspicion there.

"Fair enough," Alt said, looking at the ground. "It's been a good run. It should take me only a few days to wrap up matters here, and then I shall join you."

"Oh, but that won't do," Proxmire said. "You are to accompany me now."

"Now?"

"Yes, today. At this moment. You may send for your things, and they will be brought to you. General Thierry is most insistent on this point. He is quite anxious to speak with you."

"Am I under arrest?"

"That is a most indelicate word," Proxmire said, shaking his head. "No, you are not. Let us simply say that your presence here, with this army, is disturbing. The general will feel much more relaxed when you are seated with him, in his headquarters, sharing a brandy and discussing matters befitting men of your stature."

"Well, Colonel Proxmire, of the House of Proxmire, you may tell your commander, whom I believe is also of your House, that General Barney Alt will gladly join him for that brandy, but not upon the timetable he has laid out. I have matters to attend upon, and when they are complete I shall ride into Sidon with my officers. Until then, you shall all have to be patient."

Proxmire's eyes grew cold.

"I could escort you in under armed guard, you know."

"You'd never make the gate," Alt said.



"You'd never make it to your horse," said Casar.

"Very well," the colonel said, rising. "Then our parlay here is complete. I shall pass your words on to General Thierry, though I don't think they shall please him. In the meantime, you would be wise to conclude your business quickly and to enter into no agreements that commit the Empire, by either word or implication, to any course of action that has not been reviewed by the Gheraldic command. Understood?"

"I understand," Alt said, his fury rising audibly now, "that I do not like your tone, colonel. I understand that your lack of trust is insulting. And furthermore, I understand that in some unspoken way, I pose a threat to your commander's intentions for this province. Now *you* must understand something: I seek only to retire, but I shall do so by my own standards of conduct, and not until I have acquitted myself properly in the disposition of my army. You may tell your General Thierry that I shall join him shortly, but that I do not respond well to threats. Is *that* understood, Proxmire?"

"How sad," Colonel Proxmire sighed. "I was one who felt an inclination to admire you for your tactical brilliance. But now I see why the others suspect you so. You are as arrogant and unstable as they say."

"I am what I am."

"And so shall you be, always," Proxmire said. "But that is your business. And now my business is concluded. So good day, general."

The colonel turned his back on Alt and walked out of the tent toward the horses, followed by his officers.

"It's not over, is it?" Tera asked as they mounted their horses.

"No, I'm afraid not," said Alt.

"Good," said Casar as he slid into the saddle. "I am beginning to like this war."

**H**e tried not to wrestle with the decision, because he knew it really wasn't his to make, only his to offer. And yet he knew. And the knowing gnawed at him, gnawed at him like the sight of Marbor's empty folding chair that someone had set up in the command area, like the silence that surrounded him, the silence that would continue to surround him. Though he rejected the thought each time it rose, he also knew that it was true. The worst part was that he would be lonely.

After pacing around outside his temporary field office for a few minutes, Alt understood his duty and that he had limited time to execute it. Tera followed him as he made his way through the worn-down troops, men who dug listlessly into the ground constructing defensive works out of sheer force of habit and napped on their backs in magnificent exhaustion. Occasionally one or two would hail him, but Alt was practically in another world and could not trouble himself to respond.

Marbor lay as they had left him, his left knee swollen grotesquely, sticking out of his torn-off trouser leg like a mockery of a limb. The wound in his back was superficial, really not much more than a scratch, but the arrow that had pierced his right thigh was the one that almost took his life. It had nicked his artery, and only a tourniquet had saved him. Alt stood above the colonel and watched him sleep in the afternoon heat, noting to himself the man's poor color and drawn condition. Marbor, the gentleman from the House of Teague, the executive officer who never seemed to sleep, never seemed to take ill, never once appeared to be hung over. Now he slept so still that were it not for the light rising and falling of his chest, Alt would have thought him dead. He looked better when I first visited, Alt thought, then realized that perhaps that, too, had been for his benefit.

The general collected a footlocker filled with rolled bandages and sat it beside Marbor's cot to serve as his chair. He wanted to call him by his first name, Bowman, something he had never before done, but it just seemed too unnatural.

"Marbor," he called, shaking his subordinate's shoulder gently. "Marbor, wake the hell up."

The freshly minted colonel rose to waking like a man surfacing through murky water. Alt laid the back of his hand on Marbor's forehead and noted a slight temperature.

"What's wrong?" Marbor said, taking stock of himself and Alt.

"I have news," Alt said. "Here, drink this first." He handed Marbor a canteen, and the colonel took a swig and then poured the rest on his face.

"Somehow," he began, "I get the sense it is not *good* news."

"Thierry has ordered me, you, and the rest of the Gheraldic officers to enter the city," Alt said. "Those who do not will likely be regarded as outlaws."

"Outlaws? Has he lost his tarking mind?"

"Quite possibly. But that's the long and the short of it, Marbor."

"When is this to happen?"

"Now," Alt said. "Immediately."

"Well that's just unreasonable," Marbor said, propping himself up higher on his elbows. He winced as the movement activated one of his wounds. "He should at least give us time to wrap up our affairs here."

"Nevertheless, those are his orders."

"Direct orders?"

"Direct and, I'm afraid, quite lawful."

"Oh well," Marbor sighed. "I suppose that doesn't give us much choice, does it? When do we leave?"

"I can have Sergeant Tera transport you right now. There's a litter standing by."

"Sergeant Tera? I thought the order specified the Gheraldic officers?" Marbor asked, his voice perplexed.

"It does. But I won't be going," Alt said. "Not just yet."



"What are you talking about? You're coming right along with me, general. You've been boring me with speculative tales about your plans for early retirement for five years now, and the time is finally here. If you like, you can come up to Teague County for a while. It's nice there in the fall, and it looks like I'll be playing a lot of Kot. You could improve your game."

"I can't leave yet," Alt said. "I have duties to complete here first. A day, maybe two, maybe three, should be sufficient. And then I'll join you."

Marbor looked hard into Alt's eyes.

"You're lying," he said in an off-hand voice. "It's absolutely apparent. You crazy bastard, they'll take your pension at the very least. You can't ignore a direct order from the military governor of a province like this. Under the usual circumstances, yes, but not when our being here breaks the law."

"I'm the 2nd CRG commander," Alt replied. "It gives me some leeway."

"It gives you flat nothing," Marbor hissed. "Ignore this order and you truly *will* be an outlaw, Barney. What's so important here that it can't be delegated, eh? What makes you so special that you can't hand off the duty to Rialta, or LaDram, or Bergonat for that matter? This has nothing to do with wrapping up your responsibilities."

"It's my army," Alt said. "I didn't ask for it, but it's mine. And you don't abandon a thing like that – it's too dangerous. All armies should be feared, even armies of liberation. It must be demobilized, sent home. Reports and letters must be written. Our stockpiles must be fairly distributed, our weapons collected and returned to the men of Llyr. And I don't need to tell you this, Marbor. You're my staff bureaucrat. You're the one who usually tells *me* this stuff."

"You have gone native," Marbor said, shaking his head. "They said it for years and I laughed it off, but it's true."

"And where's the harm in it?" Alt asked. "I'm still a subject of the Empire, a servant to Marlton IV. None of that has changed."

"The harm in it," Marbor said deliberately, "is that you are disobeying a lawful order, an order that, legally, comes from the crown itself. It breaks the code."

"The code," Alt laughed. "Yes, tell me about the code."

"Laugh if you want. But it's the code that makes us men. It's the code that gives us honor. And you laugh and you scoff and you make light of it every chance you get, but after all the words, you have always lived the code, Barney Alt. You cannot abandon that now just because you feel a higher calling. Hell, we all feel a higher calling from time to time. Except we are soldiers. It's not the highest calling, but it's what we are."

Alt knew it was truth as he heard it, and the words hurt. With Marbor it was so pure, so uncomplicated, an attitude made all the more amazing by the fact that the colonel was a complex and sophisticated man. Yet on matters of honor, all that counted for him was the promise. A word given was a word lived, whatever it cost, and Alt had counted on his subordinate's simple loyalty for long years. He would not assail that honor now.

Yet there was, somewhere in all of this, another truth. Another loyalty.

"I will come, Marbor," Alt said finally. "Only I will come when my duty here is complete."

Marbor cut his eyes away from his old commander.

"I cannot stay here with you, you know," Marbor said, staring into the distance. "You'll have to handle all the details yourself and you'll make a terrible, tarking mess of things. I shudder at the thought."

"So do I," Alt conceded.

A single tear etched its way down Marbor's cheek.

"We did have a good run, though. Even this abortion of a campaign was an interesting little adventure, right up to the time when that bloody horse fell on me."

"I thought you jumped clear."

"Jumped, fell, toppled, whatever," Marbor said testily. "It's over now, anyway. If you wish, I will gladly serve as a character witness at your courts-martial. It's the least I can do."

"And what will you say of me?"

"That you are a stubborn old mule," Marbor said. "And that it was my honor and privilege to serve under your command. I shall also say, to whomever cares to listen, that if I had had any choice in the matter, I would have never left your side. General."

"I know that," Alt said, cutting his eyes away from his friend out of respect.

"Good," said Marbor, suddenly formal again. "With whom shall I be traveling?"

"It's just you and Quick now," Alt said. "Tera here will escort you and the litter bearers."

"Litter-bearers my ass," Marbor said. "I'll not enter the city and meet my new commanding officer in a reclining position. I intend to ride."

"Ride?" Alt laughed. "You couldn't bend that knee if you tried."

"Then I'll go in on a wagon, dammit."

"Do you think this army has spare wagons just sitting around, waiting at the beck and call of senior officers? And why would I give you one? I might need it for something."

"You'll give me the damned wagon, Barney Alt, or I'll get up off this cot and give you a sound thrashing."

Alt smiled, and patted Marbor on the forearm.

"As you wish, Colonel Marbor," he said. "Sergeant Tera, go find a wagon and a horse to pull it and return here." Tera stalked off in search of one, and Alt turned his attention back to Marbor. "It's over for you, too, Bowman. I know you don't want to confront this truth, but I've seen knees like this before. This isn't something you'll just recuperate from in Teague County. Your military career, at least as a field officer, is finished."

“Say what?”

“I said your knee...”

“No, no, before that. You called me Bowman.”

“Well, it’s your tarking name, isn’t it?”

Marbor laughed. “It’s been so long since I’ve heard it around here that I began to wonder. Well, Bowman it is, and Bowman it shall be, I suppose. Guess I’d better get used to it.”

“Bowman, I just wanted to say...”

“Save it,” Marbor said. “We’ve been together too long.”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose we have.”

Barney Alt stood and stared at his feet, his thoughts stammering silently in his mind. In the end, he could think of nothing that would encapsulate them, and in lieu of words, he drew himself erect and presented a silent salute to his subordinate officer.

Then he turned an about-face and strode off.

He did not look back.

*Officers should pay particular attention to their operations in the immediate aftermath of battle, for consolidation and application of force must be tended if power is to be successfully expanded.*

*—The Gheraldic Manual of Military Order, a.k.a. The Blue Book.*

*Great Sorrow oft' stalks great victory.*

*—The Beltan Grimoire*

## Chapter 17

## Tera

Marbor sat up as straight as he could in the straw-covered wagon as he waited for the Gheraldic officer to escort him through the gate into Sidon, his full-dress uniform perfectly turned out except for the trouser leg, which had been neatly cut off to expose his swollen knee.

“It has been a pleasure serving with you,” Lieutenant Quick said, offering his hand to Tera. “It seems an abrupt and sad ending to our campaign, don’t you think?”

Tera shook the younger man’s hand and realized he had never really learned a thing about him. “Thank you,” he said. “Please do keep an eye on Major – I mean Colonel – Marbor.”

“I don’t need an eye,” said Marbor, who stared straight ahead, expressionless. “I need a shoulder. Someone to support me.”

“I’ll be that,” said Quick.

“Would you like us to wait on you until your escort arrives?” Tera asked.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Marbor replied. “Come on, Quick, give me a hand here. It’s probably best that I enter the city standing, anyway. Or at least leaning. Or hopping.”

“I think not,” Tera said. “You’ve got two bad legs, not just one.”

“I’ll do as I wish,” Marbor said defiantly.

“You’ll fall on your face,” Tera said. The colonel pondered the prospect.

“On second thought, I shall remain seated. I have come to trust your counsel over the years, Sergeant Tera. I shall remember you for it.”

“We’re going to miss you, colonel,” Tera said.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes you are. Anyway, do give my regards to your mother and Rialta and all the other ladies you happen to meet along the way, Tera. I do hope to see you all again someday, under more pleasant circumstances.”

A Gheraldic captain, flanked by four enlisted men, came through the gate at a brisk pace, stopped at the wagon and read off a piece of paper.

“Colonel Bowman Marbor?”

“Speaking,” Marbor replied.

The captain saluted, and Marbor returned it briskly. “Welcome to Sidon, sir. I’m instructed to escort you and the officers of your party to the governor’s residence. The enlisted members of your group are to accompany Sergeant Tomas to the holding area.

“There are no enlisted members of my party,” Marbor said. “Only myself and Lieutenant Quick. These others are merely a courtesy escort.”

“Regardless of that, I’m under orders to place all enlisted members of the local armies under observation in the holding area, colonel.”

“Rubbish,” Marbor said.

“My orders come from General Thierry, Colonel Marbor. Your sergeant and these litter bearers are to be taken to the holding facility for the time being.”

Marbor exchanged looks with Tera.

“Oh fine,” Marbor said. “But I shall be immediately taking this matter up with General Thierry to allow for their release. Now do be a good young captain and come assist me in standing.”

Marbor leaned forward and as the captain lowered his shoulder to help lift him, the colonel drew a Llyrian dagger and pressed its point against the captain’s chest.

“Upon further reflection, those negotiations for their release are beginning a little early,” Marbor said smoothly. “Have your men stand easy, captain, for we are outside the gate and your Imperial mandate does not extend to the countryside. Really, I’m saving

you all from a most annoying court of inquiry. Understood?"

"Yes sir," said the captain.

"Ah good." Marbor turned to Tera. "This is no time for long good-byes, Sergeant Tera. Have a nice life."

"Thank you, colonel," Tera said, and he scooped both the litter-bearers onto the stout draft horse he had borrowed for the trip. "Until we meet again."

"And tell Barney Alt he owes me yet another favor!" Marbor shouted after him.

Had the orders reached the archers on the wall, they never would have made it away from the gate, and Tera didn't wait around for them to be passed, spurring the great horse awkwardly ahead with the litter bearers bouncing behind him on its massive rump. Once he was clear of the walls he slowed the horse to a walk again, taking just a minute to survey the scene and reflect on the day. They had risen before dawn, begun probing and exchanging volleys around 7, moved deliberately to the point of attack all morning and then unleashed the shattering blow around 10:thirty. The hand-fighting had gone on for more than an hour, and things were pretty much quiet again by lunchtime.

The DuQaddish had begun to withdraw by 2 p.m., and all that remained of their once-great army was a field hospital for those who could not be moved – the wounded in one area, those stricken with the Blood Death in another. Then there was the parlay with the Gheraldic officers, and now, with Marbor delivered, there was the matter of doing something with their own army. It was almost 5:30, with perhaps two hours of sunlight remaining, and the Clydes had not yet begun to make camp. Perhaps Alt means to move us tonight, Tera thought. Perhaps we shall fall back a bit, so as not to appear menacing to General Thierry...

Tanith Powdras's voice sounded suddenly and desperately inside his thoughts.

"Run, damn it!" she shouted silently.

Without thinking, Tera spurred the horse again, surprising the litter-bearers.

"What the hell are you doing?" one of them protested.

"I have no idea," said Tera, and the horse passed through a crossroads at a clumsy, heavy-footed gallop. That was when he heard the sound of the trebuchet behind them, and he understood Tanith's message. The crossroads was a pre-set target, and he had had been walking right under it.

"Hold on!" Tera shouted, urging the horse faster and wishing he was alone on his usual mount. The rain of stones whistled toward them and exploded on the ground, but their horse was just out of range. He glanced back as their mount accelerated wildly, marking in his mind the cloud of dust that would have been the spot of his death without Tanith's intervention. *Thank you*, he thought, but he did not receive her reply.

The trebuchet shot woke the army from its summer evening drowsiness, and Alt was waiting for him as he rode up and dismounted, leaving the litter bearers to the horse.

"What happened?" Alt demanded.

"They tried to take us into custody," Tera said. "And then they tried to kill us."

"This is not a good sign."

"Should we stay here?" Tera asked. "It seems to me that we're in range of their heavy weapons where we stand."

"Well, if we were in range, then the DuQaddish have been in range for months," Alt said. "And if they were in range, then why didn't Thierry shoot at them?"

"Unless he was conserving his ammo," Tera thought out loud.

"Conserving his ammo..." Alt said, his voice trailing off. "You may be right about moving everyone back a bit, come to..."

Alt never finished the sentence. The sound of more than a dozen trebuchets, ballistas and catapults snapped the evening stillness in an almost simultaneous heave, filling the sky with tons of stone. Alt stood stock still watching it come, for there was no place to run, nothing to hide under.

"Those bloody bastards," he said aloud in the moment before the stone shattered everything he had built and tended.

It struck all at once, a storm of stone missiles that bounced and flew and smashed, obscuring the bulk of the army in a thick cloud of dust. As it lifted, Tera and Alt began to make their way back towards the center of the army, but the center of the army was gone. This was where the bulk of the militiamen had formed, Tera realized, and now there was almost nothing standing – just a few dust-covered, disoriented survivors, wandering in shock. His archers, Tera thought distractedly, had been right next to them.

Right next to them. The words resonated like an echo in a well.

"Sergeant Major Carras!" he shouted, running through the dust. "Sergeant Gryff!" Tera stumbled and landed face-first in something bloody and unrecognizable. He wiped himself off with his sleeve and rushed forward again, but soon he was alone in an otherworldly landscape of devastation. Wounded men staggered past him like ghosts, neither speaking nor crying, some of them cradling shattered limbs, one of them walking around as if he were looking for something, his arm quite noticeably absent. Now the moans of those who could not stand began to rise, and Tera felt himself sinking into the realization of what had just occurred.

"Sergeant Major Carras!" he shouted again.

"John?" came a voice. "Over here."

The voice was Sean Gryff. Or what was left of him. He lay on his back, his face covered in blood and dust, his hips and legs smashed to pudding.

"Oh Sula," Tera said involuntarily as he bent above his fallen friend. "They got you good this time."

"It's funny, because this one doesn't hurt," he said, a slight gurgle in his voice. He grasped Tera's wrist.

"I'll kill them, Sean, I swear," Tera said. "I swear it on your blood."

"Don't be an idiot," Gryff said. "This is war. We'll laugh about this someday, on the other side."



"I don't want it to end this way," Tera said.

"Then don't let it," Gryff replied. He did not speak again.

In the distance, Tera picked up the sound of another launch from the walls, and a few moments later the crash of more tonnage somewhere else along the line shook the earth. He left Gryff's body where it lay and gave up his search for Carras, running through the lifting dust cloud back toward where he had left Alt, looking for something to do, something he could latch onto.

"John Tera! John Tera! Are you here?"

Tera turned toward the sound and picked out two horsemen.

"Over here!" he shouted. The horsemen emerged from the dust and he recognized Dannan and Smyth.

"Mount up!" Dannan shouted. "Alt is pulling everyone back, and the Gheralds are marching out of the gate and forming just in front of us."

Tera took his hand and climbed onto the horse behind him. "Has Rialta returned?" he asked.

"Where was she?" Dannan asked.

"At the DuQaddish field hospital," he answered.

"We'll get horses," Dannan said. "Let's go."

Somewhere in the confusion they found the cavalry, hurriedly gathering its gear to pull back. Dannan grabbed a horse for Tera and spare ones for Rialta and Willow, then gave his men instructions.

"Watts says Alt has ordered everyone to scatter and get away," Dannan said as he handed the reins to Tera. "Everyone who is able to do so is to rally at Clyde Barrow as soon as they can get there. It's a disaster."

Tera climbed into the saddle and looked through the haze toward the walls of Sidon, where a maroon sea of Gheraldic regulars was spreading across the plain, a steady flow of them streaming out of the wide gate, marching four abreast.

Another sight caught his attention as well. To the east, the Valand and Va were trotting on horseback out across the field toward the Gheraldic lines.

"What the hell are they doing?"

"Changing sides," Dannan said.

"That cannot be," Tera said, but Father Ash's horse sprinted ahead under a white flag and conferred briefly with a mounted Gheraldic officer. The Valand continued their defection unimpeded.

"We are so tarked," Dannan said. "Let's get Rialta."

The three Guardsmen galloped west toward the remains of the army of DuQaddic.

Rialta and Willow were easy enough to find, but this was both a good and bad thing. The three Clydes intercepted the two Gwynyrians on their horses hurrying back toward Alt and the army, the horror of the situation masked by the need to act quickly and correctly. But Tera and Dannan weren't the only people looking for the Lady of Gwynyr. Smyth picked out the riders bearing down on them and recognized the robes of the Valand, with Va as outriders.

"We cannot stand against them," Rialta said.

Their route of flight took them due south at first, but their pursuers were dogged, and Tera reasoned that their best chance was to rejoin the torrent of retreating soldiers and camp followers now streaming southeast down the Clyde River Road. They turned west and rode cross-country only to run into a desperate fight several miles from the city. A contingent of Gheraldic cavalry had caught up to the rear of the fleeing army, and the dismounted and disorganized Clydes were unable to disengage. Their plight disgusted Tera, who could not believe that Alt would leave such men behind to die, but there was little the five of them could do to change matters.

Dannan turned them south again, and they skirted the running battle with the dust of the advancing infantry column visible behind them and the sun balanced on the western horizon. It was already the longest day Tera could remember, and it was far from over.

The receding army clogged the road, its members abandoning everything that slowed them as they went. Broken wagons, lame horses, supplies, wooden shields, war hammers and bronze swords littered the shoulders of the road, but the pace of the retreat was fast and frantic, continuing even in the darkness. Tera wanted to blend into it, but Rialta insisted they move on, and the band swung wide to the east, riding more slowly on their fatigued mounts and finding their way over wide Lowland fields under the light of the two moons.

They finally decided to rest near midnight, convinced that whatever trail they had left to the Valand who tracked them would be impossible to find after mixing with the army on the road.

They woke in the morning to the sight of a distant battle to their west, somewhere back near the Clyde River Road. Some portion of the army must have lost its will to run and turned to fight, but the flaming arcs of Pictian Fire told the story of Gheraldic heavy weapons, and Tera could imagine the effect of the regular infantry upon his disorganized comrades.

They stayed off the river road, riding parallel to it several miles east, cutting across empty fields and occasionally following lonely country lanes from farm village to farm village. By day's end they had reached the outskirts of Argon. Fatigue was catching up to them, and even the threat of being hunted by the Valand began to lose its motivating force. Tera guided them to a barn southeast of Argon, and they were all asleep by nightfall.

"Can you forgive me?" he asked Tanith Powdras.

"I suppose I already have," she said softly. "If I'd really been mad at you, do you think I would have hurried you out from under that trebuchet?"

"I wonder if we can talk," he began. "Not that we haven't always, but we always seem to talk about *us*, about how things are here and how we wish they would be. I don't know that you've ever taken any real interest in what I do when I'm in my other life, and I didn't want to bore you with it, but Tanith, I have to admit that right now that's where I feel I am the most needed. Is that foolish of me?"

"No, John." She stroked his shoulder. "And you must forgive me for not being more understanding. I just grew so tired of suffering and all the infinite disappointments of incarnate life. I'm afraid it has made me callous to you at times."

"Should I be worried?" he asked. "Because I don't know how to read Rialta. At times she seems so convinced of our cause, yet other times, like tonight, she just looks tired and frightened."

"She and I have some history," Tanith conceded. "It's not all pleasant. But if I speak truly, then yes, she is a good choice for this time. This isn't a particularly enjoyable incarnation for her, but there's no question in my mind that's she's doing the right thing. I'd trust her."

"I do," Tera said. "What worries me is our situation. Yesterday we were a victorious army. Today we're leaderless, rudderless, powerless, a rabble. And yet Rialta still seems to think we can win."

"She's right, you know," Tanith Powdras said. "That doesn't mean you *will* win, but you certainly can still find a way out."

"What should I do?"

"Have a little faith," she said. "That's advice I ought to follow myself."

"I feel awful," Tera said, leaning into her. "I've mistreated you. I've been a bad dream husband."

"You're talking about Aideen," she said. "I know all about your little liaison in the field, John."

"Yes, that, but other things as well," Tera said. "I haven't ever given myself to you fully. Even now I still don't know that I can."

"Don't fret it," she laughed. "This is all a dream, John. It has been a good dream for both of us, but we've both been changing all along. You are no longer the sweet little boy I first met, and though it pains me to say it, I'm no longer the sexy little hedonist I was. I'm becoming real again. Damn it."

"What are you saying?"

"How many lifetimes have I sat out now? Three? Four? Time is so difficult for me to measure here. I have avoided much. All the suffering of growing up, of growing old. And yet I missed things, John. I missed the sweetness of a baby on my shoulder, the way it feels at the end of a day to come home from the fields to a good meal. I missed the excitement of first loves, the pleasures of new competencies. The company of friends. I didn't just give up pain, John. I gave up joy, too."

"You're coming back, aren't you?"

"Soon, I think," she said. "I have felt that old tug, but I've felt it more strongly since Aideen came along. The jealousy was almost like being alive again, and so was the pain that came with thinking about losing you. But you were never really mine to begin with. That's not to say I haven't loved you."

"I've always been bad at saying this," John stammered. "But I do love you, Tanith. And the thought of you not being here in my dreams..."

"But I'll always be in your dreams," she whispered. "What's left for me now is to make sure that those dreams are pleasant ones, not sorrowful ones. That's why I can't leave yet. I need to take care of you a bit longer. I've not taken care of you enough, and I see that now. What I've missed by not seizing that long ago ... well, it's why I want to go back."

Tera turned his face to her and grasped the back of her neck to draw her down to him. But Tanith pulled away.

"Really, John, I'd love to. But now is not the time."

"Why?"

"Because that bitch Mistress Quinn is outside the barn. And you're going to have to deal with her."

"What? You're kidding?"

"I'm completely serious. Now before you wake up, listen to me. You're going to have to have faith for this to work. If you go and try to force the issue, things will not turn out well. Do you understand? Let Rialta guide this."

"Are the Valand with Quinn? Are we undone?"

"There are Valand with her, yes. And Fionnans, too. But this is not about you, John. It's about Rialta. You must support her, but you must believe in her. It's time we all started seeing her for what she will become."

"And what is that?"

"The mother of us all," Tanith said, and she kissed Tera lightly and sent him on his way back to the world.

**W**ake up," John whispered as he shook Dannan. "They're outside." The cavalryman rose fluidly in the gray light of dawn, his head twisting around in the still barn where dust motes hung suspended like slowly drifting stars.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Quinn. And she has Valand with her."

Tera moved on to wake Rialta as Dannan drew his *sioboeth* and dropped quietly from the hayloft to the packed dirt floor.

"Quinn?" Rialta asked as he woke her. Tera nodded.

As Smyth and the women got up, Tera moved to the wall and peered out between a gap in the timbers. The riders who had tracked them sat silently in the saddle near a tree line about a hundred yards away, and Tera wished for his bow. He counted five

horses – and only four riders: Quinn, a gray-beard Valand, a Va and a beautiful young woman. But the empty saddle worried him most of all.

Then he heard a sound directly below him and understood. Quinn had sent a single Valand to do the job. And Dannan was below, unaware, peeking through the half-open door...

“Seamus!” Tera shouted as he ran toward the opening of the loft to jump down. “Valand at the right of the door!”

The sound of steel meeting steel reached him as he dropped through the air. Tera gained his feet to find the two swordsmen framed in the wide opening of the barn doors, one of which they couldn’t close the night before. The Valand was relatively young, with shoulder-length blonde hair, and he moved with all the mystical grace of his order, his black robes flowing as he attacked. Dannan fought differently, a mixture of Old Path suppleness and CRG savvy, blocking efficiently and confidently but throwing in his own surprises. He met an overhead stroke by delivering a high block while dropping low on one bent knee and catching the Highland warrior off-guard with a kick to his calf that caused him to stumble. The Valand hopped away to gather himself and then he was on the defense, receiving a flurry of strokes from Dannan that drove him backward. Yet Dannan was wise enough not to over-pursue. He disengaged and they took each other’s measure, circling lightly in the doorway.

Quinn and the rest of the trackers made no effort to intervene, and by now Rialta and the others had joined Tera inside the barn.

“He’s shocked,” Rialta whispered. “In the history of the Valand, no swordsman has ever bested any member of the One Hundred in single combat.”

The Valand attacked again, and he did so without gathering himself for it. In the beat of a hummingbird’s wing he went from stillness to a slashing, swirling assault, and Dannan retreated rapidly before it. Tera held his breath, for now that the Highlander had recognized the skill of his opponent he had taken his game to another level, and Dannan had never faced such fury. The cavalryman stumbled over a trough and fell backwards, but the Valand did not pause to allow his opponent to recover.

The end came swiftly and suddenly. The blonde Valand leapt over the trough, his sword raised high in the air, and as the tumbling Dannan struck the dirt floor he grabbed a handful of barn dust and flung it at his enemy’s face. The robed swordsman involuntarily closed his eyes, and as his killing stroke swept by Dannan harmlessly, the Celon horseman drove his father’s *sioboeth* directly into his attacker’s chest. It happened so quickly that it was almost impossible to understand the how of it.

The Valand grasped at the wound as Dannan removed the blade, then fell to his knees, dropping his perfect *sioboeth* to the dusty floor. He coughed, looking from face to face in the barn, then lowered himself to a sitting position. Dannan collected the man’s *sioboeth*, but otherwise kept his distance.

“May the Goddess take me now,” he swore, trying to control his breathing.

“She’ll do no such thing,” Rialta said as she stepped forward. “I hope you are ashamed of yourself, Valand.”

“I am,” he said. “No member of my order has ever lost to an outside swordsman.”

“Not of that,” she said. “You should be ashamed of betraying Gwynyr and your Path.”

“I have followed the orders of my Father,” he said. “I was instructed to collect you, my Lady, not to harm you.”

“That matters not,” she said, scolding. “It’s time you stopped listening to your father and listened to your mother, so to speak. Perhaps it was not the swordsman who bested you, but a swordsman who fights for the right cause.”

“I am ashamed,” he said, looking at the dust. “Ashamed of all of it.”

“Give me your oath, Valand, and I shall tend to you.”

“I wish to die,” he said. “I have dishonored my entire life.”

“Yes, you have,” Rialta said, kneeling before him. “But it’s never too late to redeem it.”

The wounded warrior looked up into her eyes, and seemed to recognize something there. He held his fist over his heart.

“You have my oath, my Lady. My sword and my life.”

Rialta made a series of blessing gestures and lightly kissed his forehead. “What is your name, Valand?”

“Brother Yarrow,” he said, coughing.

“Welcome back, Brother Yarrow,” she said. “Willow, would you see to our brother? I have some business to attend. Gentlemen, you come with me.”

The Guardsmen walked out of the barn behind her, their swords at the ready, and when the two sides met halfway in the field outside the barn they stopped about five yards apart.

“Good morning, Mistress Quinn,” Rialta said.

“And you, Lady Rialta.”

“You and your party are now under arrest,” the High Priestess said. “I’ve had quite enough of this intrigue.”

“I’m afraid you’ve got this backwards,” Quinn said. “I’ve come for you, and I’ll be taking you back to your mother now. If you will come quietly, I’ll let your retainers live, but if you resist me I can assure you they will die. Brother Yarrow is a good young Valand, but he is not yet the warrior that Father Cliff here has become. Your swordsmen will not stand for long against him.”

“My swordsmen will not fight yours,” Rialta said. She turned toward Dannan and motioned for the fallen Valand’s *sioboeth*. She hefted it once, gauging its weight and balance, then swept it through the air precisely. “The fight will be against me alone. Father Cliff, do you wish to take up arms against the Lady of Gwynyr?”

“You know that I cannot,” the gray-beard said.

“Of course you can’t,” said Rialta, returning to stillness. “And you won’t arrest Mistress Quinn because she works for my Mother.”

“That is correct. I am divided between priestesses, my Lady.”

“Yes, and you can serve only one.”

“I serve Gwynyr,” Father Cliff said.

“But which Gwynyr?” Rialta asked. “That is what we are here to decide. The Gwynyr of the past? A stagnant place where the Old Path is empty but well-tended? Or the Gwynyr of the future? You must choose, Father Cliff.”

“Really, Rialta, this has gone too far,” Quinn said, annoyance mixing with alarm in her voice. “Put down your sword and come with me.”

“Actually, Mistress, I think the answer here is that you must take up your sword. For your Valand will not oppose me, and his wounded comrade is now sworn to my service. You had planned to kill my companions and kidnap me, and this would have worked. Except there is no one of Gwynyr who will take up arms against the Lady, and as you can see, the Lady is now armed. So if you want to take me, it will have to be by your own hand. Unless Father Ash is lurking somewhere about.”

“You are a foolish, stubborn young woman,” Quinn said. “Harming you is the last thing on my mind. We don’t want you dead – we want you back where you belong, on the side of *your* people, not these strangers. Besides, if it comes to fighting, you would be wise to remember that it was I who taught you the sword. Do you think there is a trick you know that I didn’t know first?”

“I’m really not that young anymore,” Rialta said, smiling. “And it’s not this *sioboeth* you should fear – it’s the spirit that guides it. For I feel it this morning, Mistress Quinn. I feel it surging up from the dirt through my feet, flowing from those trees and this grass, from the animals and insects. When you attack me, you attack our land. That gives me a most powerful ally.”

“You are both arrogant and maddeningly difficult,” Quinn chided. “You would squander every single thing your line has sacrificed to achieve. Your mother loves and cares for you, but she also loves Gwynyr. If you will but *listen* to her, then Gwynyr will finally rise to its rightful place as the leader of the world. What good is it to defeat the Gheraldic Empire, my Lady? We should be *allied* with it. You and your army have proven the power of our steel and our craftsmanship, and now the Court will know that the answer to its Korvish-Sopkan problem lies in the hills outside Llyr. Come with me and we shall raise Gwynyr to the crest of the world. Not by war – but through trade. Through knowledge.”

“How interesting,” Rialta said. “You speak of raising Gwynyr, yet the Old Path teaches that we are to yield, to seek the humble places. At least that’s what my Path teaches. What path are you on, Mistress?”

“This is your last chance,” Quinn warned, but her voice carried a desperate, pleading note. “Don’t make me do this, Rialta. Please. If you would but listen to reason we would all be reunited again, and the future would be assured. But you must understand that I am empowered to kill you if need be, although it cause your mother great pain. Her first duty is to the people, and you would bring them disaster at the moment of their greatest triumph. And truth be told, for all I love you, I will kill you if you leave me no choice. My loyalty goes to something greater than all of us.”

“Killing you will bring me great sadness also,” Rialta said, “for you were my teacher and my counsel and my friend. But if this is where we are, then so be it. I shall mourn you far more than you will ever understand in this life.”

Quinn slid from the saddle and drew her rapier. “There is no pleasure in this for either of us,” she said. “I shall take your life and lose all hope of joy in my own.”

“That should be the sign unto you that you are moving in the wrong direction, my beloved mistress.”

“But I am committed, my dear student,” she said. “And sadly, so are you.”

Tera exchanged glances with Dannan and found his comrade silently urging him forward, inclining his head toward Rialta. They could step between them, draw their swords, defend the Lady, and die honorably doing so. Yet Tera remembered Tanith Powdras’s words to him and shook his head. This was Rialta’s battle, and his faith had to go with her. Both he and Dannan stayed put.

An otherworldly stillness fell over the misty morning as the two women circled each other. Quinn moved with a youthful grace that belied her white hair and translucent skin, and for the first time Tera recognized the danger hidden within her. Rialta moved more slowly than usual, but her steps revealed no tension, no haste. The older woman tossed off her dark riding cloak and brandished her sword aggressively, but Rialta, in her simple brown dress and white apron, showed no alarm. She reached up with her right hand and released her hair, letting it spill down her back, then rocked backward into a comfortable stance and waited. If Quinn was expecting the Lady to make a mistake, she would wait forever. Tera recognized the moment and involuntarily held his breath.

The older swordswoman lunged forward at the Lady of Gwynyr, her rapier slashing and twitching. It all transpired in just a moment, but to the trained eye each classic movement played out as if framed by a great painter. A slice to the face. Another strike to the torso that rolled backward into a thrust. A step, a step, a thrust and a stroke.

Rialta deflected each move gently, and to Tera she seemed as effortless as water flowing over rocks, as natural as a tree that bends in a strong wind. Tera had seen Rialta in many guises – the noble priestess, the compassionate healer, the wise sage – but he had never seen her like this before, and the recognition reached him like strange music played by an unseen flute. There was no aggression in her movements, merely blocking, guiding and sidestepping the set-up strokes before ducking Quinn’s kill-thrust by dropping to her knee. It was a simple defense to a complicated gambit, and in the moment she defeated it the battle ended, for Quinn’s attack carried her body forward and Rialta’s single reply impaled the great teacher through the heart.

The white-haired spy mistress hung on the blade of Rialta’s *sioboeth* for a moment, the shock of her death blending with the realization that her mission had failed, and in her eyes Tera saw – fleetingly – the mournful loss of a future that would never be. Quinn collapsed, dead on her feet, but Rialta caught her as she fell and cradled her to the ground, sobbing lightly, clutching her teacher close to her breast and rocking back and forth on the grass.

All eyes turned away from them, as if to give their joint grief at least a moment of privacy and respect.



After Father Cliff and the wounded Brother Yarrow, Quinn's other companions were Duceaus, a three-year Va, and Thaney Grace, one of the more promising of the thirty-something Fionnans in Quinn's inner circle. With the battle over, they seemed unsure of what to do, and they waited for Rialta to rise.

"If you're waiting for me to instruct you, don't," she said to them as she laid Quinn's body down upon the grass and withdrew her *sioboeth*. "Battle settles nothing but who lives and who dies. What you will do now is a choice you each must make. Particularly you, Thaney Grace."

"Why me, my Lady?" Grace asked.

"Because you knew better, as did Quinn," Rialta said. "John, love, we're going to need to put dear Quinn in the ground very soon. Would you go about trying to find us some shovels in that barn?"

"Yes, my Lady," Tera replied, and he and the two cavalymen returned to the structure where they had passed the night.

"Is she alright?" a desperate-looking Willow asked as they entered. She sat on the ground with Brother Yarrow's head in her lap, pressing a cloth into the wound in his chest. "Did she kill Mistress Quinn?"

"Yes to both," said John as he opened a timbered door to a tool room and stepped inside.

"Well do tell me *something*," said Willow. "I'm always the one left behind to fix this one or heal that one. I almost never get to see anything."

Tera emerged with two shovels and a mattock and handed them to his comrades. To his surprise, Willow's face suddenly struck him as beautiful, the loose strands of her just-woke-up, honey-blond hair shining like a halo in a shaft of morning light. He lingered behind and squatted on his haunches beside the handmaiden, his shovel leaning against his shoulder.

"It was the most tragic thing I've ever seen," he said softly. "And I've seen a few things."

"How is she?" Willow whispered. "She tries so hard to be tough, but I worry about her."

"She cried," Tera said, suddenly realizing that Rialta's tears had made him strangely jealous. "But she seems to be okay."

"But why?" Willow asked. "Why did she fight Mistress Quinn?"

"Because if she had not, Quinn's Valand would have killed us all," Tera said. "She did it for us."

"My dear Goddess," Willow said, turning her face away from Tera's. "It's more than I wish to carry. You don't know how they used to be together, John. You can't imagine what this will do to our Lady."

"If there's one thing I can do, it's imagine such things," Tera said. "But we do what we must, and if we survive we bind up our wounds and put the past in the past and move on to the next thing. That's it. That's all there is, Willow."

"Is it?" Willow asked, turning her eyes back toward him. The question was truly a question, a seeking, hungry question, and the searching behind it took him aback. "Is that really all there is, John?"

"I... I think so," he said, standing. "I really need to go help."

"Of course," Willow said softly. "Move on to the next thing."

Tera paused at the door. "That Valand, Brother Yarrow," he said. "What will become of him?"

"He'll live," Willow replied, gazing at the blonde man's handsome face. "Seamus just barely missed his heart. Forgive me for saying so, John Tera, but I sense that your wounds run deeper."

"Nonsense," he said, and hurried on his task, his face hot.

Rialta was seated cross-legged on the ground when he returned, engaged in conversation with Thaney Grace and Father Cliff while Dannan and Smyth dug a hasty grave for Mistress Quinn behind them. Tera joined in the digging.

"You cannot be partially committed," Rialta said. "Not today. Today each of us must choose, and once the path is chosen there is no turning back."

"You would forgive us for betraying you?" Grace asked. "Just like that?"

"Just like that – if your heart be true," Rialta said. "Anger is a luxury to me now. It is a luxury to us all. And let me make the truth plain: my path is both difficult and unsure, for unlike my mother and Mistress Quinn, I am not cursed with the comfort of certainty. If you ride with me, you will look forward to nothing easy, not for a while yet. Fate seems to have chosen mother's side in this."

"Until this morning," Father Cliff said. "Fate chose you this morning."

"And perhaps it will choose to continue doing so," Rialta said. "I cannot predict. I can only follow what I believe to be true, and I believe that my path will ultimately lead to the best outcome for everyone involved."

"But what of Gwynyr?" Grace asked. She had sharp eyes fixed in a broad and well-made face. "Quinn's quarrel was not with you, my Lady, but with the future you envision for our homeland. Will you sacrifice our well-being for the freedom of our Sulist cousins in the Lowlands?"

"It is our well-being that I seek," Rialta replied. "Not what passes for it today – for that is short-sighted – but for what we *could* be. The greatest gift is neither wealth nor security, my dear, but the ability to become all that we are. We Gwynyrians have fallen far, far short of that mark for too long, Thaney Grace. Why do you think we were given the iron in Llyr? The libraries in Beltan and Bal'a'Blos? The sacred knowledge? Was it to claim power and lord it over the world? Or was it because spirit understood that we of the true Old Path would use it wisely – not for ourselves alone, but for all people?"

"And you believe that such knowledge can be shared with Sulists?" Father Cliff asked.

"I believe it should be," Rialta said. "I believe it *must* be."

"I am afraid, my Lady," said Father Cliff. "It is an unusual emotion."

"You are wise to be afraid," Rialta said, reaching out to touch his knee. "And in your ability to speak that truth, you have given me a great gift. For now I am no longer afraid."

"I shall join you," Grace said, rocking forward and lowering her head before Rialta for her blessing. Rialta kissed her and Grace



rose. "It shall likely cost me my life, but I am thankful beyond words for your forgiveness, my Lady."

"And I shall join you too," Father Cliff said, rising to his feet in a single motion. "Perhaps other Valand will join me."

"Yes, I believe many will," said Rialta. "They follow the orders of Father Ash, and they do so both out of training and habit. But all men can change."

"When I return to them, Ash will seek my report," Father Cliff said. "I will tell him the truth, and then we shall engage to the death. It is most saddening, but it is how things must be. Though perhaps he, too, may change. I do not consider him a bad man."

"Blessed be, Father Cliff," Rialta said.

"I want you to keep my Va," he said, climbing into the saddle. "He is a good Va. And please take care of Brother Yarrow, for he was my student, sponsored by me into the One Hundred."

"We shall," said Rialta.

"Blessed be," said Father Cliff, who bowed from the saddle, kicked his horse and thundered off.

The burial of Mistress Quinn was simple, befitting the deepest traditions of the Old Path. Rialta, Willow and Grace joined hands over the grave and spoke in the Old Calpathian tongue, and Tera shut his eyes and found the image of a tree with deep roots, probing the ribs of the planet, joining its energy with all that flowed around it. When they were done and the tools put away, the seven of them helped the wounded Valand into the saddle and mounted up. His suffering would be intense and constant, but they gave him the best of their healing arts and hoped for the best.

Clyde Barrow was still two days' ride away.

Clyde Barrow occupied a fond and painful place in Tera's memory, but as he rode south with Dannan and Rialta he realized that the same could be said for his entire people. It was bloody, hallowed ground for the Clydes, and though the residents lived as prosaically as circumstances allowed, there was always the Barrow east of town and the Fields of Stone just north of it to remind them. That was not to mention the skulls and bones and arrow tips and steel points that plowing invariably turned up. Clyde Barrow had been the site of the two most climactic battles in the history of Darbas, and the spirit of the land was both mournful and exultant.

Mary Almaterra had taught him to listen to the land here, walking with him in the summer, encouraging him to let the spirit of each place he visited speak. Farmer Chordeas' wheat field was the spot where Liam LaFranq's original Clydish Guard had surprised and massacred a colonial regiment from Verous. When he was six he recognized that the land was angry and sad – embarrassed, really. The ford at Market Creek where the children of the compound went to splash and wade and play had been the site of an ambush during the first DuQaddish war, and from an early age Tera had always felt an anxiety there, an underlying, faint tremor of watchfulness. It was not unusual to see the children stop their play and look around suddenly.

In those days, Almaterra was still more Eilydon than Lowland in her thinking, and though she tried to be a good Daughter of Llughnah, she taught her son the Old Path way of thinking too, sometimes on long strolls, sometimes curled in bed together by candlelight in the Daughters compound. Valley land was usually gentle and accepting, she taught him, and while the spirits of the Highlands were often a bit austere and suspicious, they reveled in their windswept beauty. The Plains of the Don to the southwest were expansive and lonely, places that ached for touch and yet could turn on a person. Of all the world she had seen, the place that called most to her blood was her home in Eilydon, but she spoke little of it except to tell him that its chambers and caverns and pools were both loving and haughty. He had not understood at the time how two such things could go together.

Growing up Sulist but walking the Old Path had given Tera an unusual understanding of Clyde Barrow. Praying in Chapel School every day had taught him the power of story – the sense that all of life was part of something larger, that each person's choices and actions were significant in the eyes of God and Telios. But sitting alone in a field and opening himself to the voice of the land taught him that everything in the world was infused with spirit, that a place could be as sacred as a word. The Sulist in him saw life as a morality play on an elaborate set, but the Old Path side of his heart saw the set as a significant member of the cast. He had taken a goodly portion of his personality from the land, embodying its sorrow and willful forgetfulness, its generosity and deep, brooding memory.

The land and the life upon it were not separate. They were one thing, each affecting the other.

But now that knowledge chilled him, for the survivors of Sidon were streaming south, driven onward by the Gheraldic infantry, and soon another army would converge on his hometown and another battle would commence. Had Alt considered this in the moment of the disaster when he called out a rally point and sent his army fleeing from its new enemy? Had he consciously selected the place for its significance, or did he merely think of its tactical attributes? In either case Clyde Barrow was a good spot, but still Tera dreaded it. This land understood terrible conflict. It blood comforted it. Those who fell here would feel the ground reaching out to them, enfolding them, bearing them away, but that was an army he did not yet wish to join. After years of accepting death, he now wanted to hold it away.

Their cross-country route had concluded a day before, and now they moved with thousands of others along the Tunethia Cut, the single-lane road that stretched south from the logging camps of the Conall Forest to shores of Lake Eochu. The people trudging beside them were a motley: refugees, newly returned to The Edain now turning to run again; militiamen and irregulars, either deserters or cut off from their units; even more-or-less intact units, like LaDram and his New Calpathian militia, which marched in tight column formation under fife and drum. Rialta's band had passed the New Calpathians that morning, flowing around them when their unit stopped for a rest break, and LaDram seemed overjoyed to spot them.

Gossip also flowed. Rialta learned of the many ways she had been killed – by Valand, by traitorous Willow, by Fionnan assassins, hung by General Thierry himself. Another line of tales had her as the traitor, riding to meet the Valand and leading them against the

Lowland Clydes. The third series of rumors told of her exploits behind enemy lines, harrying the Gheralds with magic and cleverness, allowing the survivors of the army to escape while she stayed behind at great risk to herself.

Other gossip was equally reliable: Valand death squads that crept into camps at night, slaying dozens before slipping away unnoticed. Battles at Argon. Alt was dead. The great swordsman Seamus Dannan was dead. Dian and the Edain Irregulars were decimated after making another stand at the bridge. Colonel Marbor was leading the Gheraldic cavalry against them. The Blood Death had broken out. All the road was a river of alarm and despair, flowing upstream to the place where Clydish hopes and fears had always gone, to Clyde Barrow, where heroes slept in the ground.

The land began to change, and Tera realized they were almost home. Ahead lay the gentle, low hills, breaking the monotony of flat fields, and tree lines stretched along the boundaries of farms. They passed the squat stone wall of LaFranq's Picket, and the rooftops of Clyde Barrow came into view. It was a walled town, but the wall was little to speak of now, gone organic after centuries of messy life, taken down in places to let roads run through, built upon, built into, undermined. It would not do as a fortress, and there was little Clyde Barrow could offer as a place to make a last stand except for hills and woods and streams, a general's playground of terrain features, of open spaces and sheltering hides, blind spots and great vantage points. Such things offered no singular advantage to either side, but generals had used these features time and again. Somehow, somewhere in the rolling fields that lay ahead, Barney Alt would collect his army and turn to fight.

Something ahead was slowing the traffic on the Tunethia Cut, and Tera stood in the saddle to see what was obstructing them. It was a picket, the first sign of military organization since the stones descended upon them at Sidon. Several archers of the 2nd CRG stood by the roadside, ledgers in hand, marking down tallies of those who passed, steering groups and individuals in various directions.

"Well, Telios be praised, it's Judge-Sergeant John Tera and the great Seamus Dannan," said the corporal, whose name Tera could not remember. "The general is on the lookout for you both. May I assume this is the Lady Rialta?"

"Yes," said Tera. The corporal made a mark in his book.

"Everybody's been waiting on this party, it's safe to say. Welcome to the Clyde Barrow Military Zone, or the CBMZ as the first sergeant likes to call it. This party is to report to the general's headquarters – that's the GHQ – on the double. Take this pass." He handed a slip of paper to Tera. "Now mind your manners and do exactly as you're told. The general is on a tear about discipline these days."

"Hello Seamus," said a woman's voice. Tera looked down and to his right and recognized Trina, the woman from the forest, standing beside them. Even though both he and Smyth had been part of their rescue party, she seemed to recognize only Dannan, and her fierce eyes latched onto his.

"Blessed be," said Dannan. "Where in the world have you been?"

"We got here yesterday," she said. "I fought in the ranks at Sidon, Seamus, just as I said I would. They gave me this sword." Trina held up a Llyrian two-hander that seemed almost as big as she was. "Actually, I took it myself after the battle, but they let me keep it. Now I'll really be able to do some damage."

"I have to report to the general," Dannan said. "Where can I find you?"

"By the apothecary," she said. "We're camped in the building next door."

Dannan turned to Tera.

"It's fine," Tera said. "I can show you."

"I'm glad you're well," Dannan said to Trina. "We'll come visit when time allows." They began walking their horses forward.

"I waited for you," Trina called after them. "I'm going to fight by your side this time. We're going to take them down by the dozens!"

"That woman is nothing but fermented sorrow," Willow said quietly.

"But she loves you, Seamus," Rialta said. "In her way."

"You misunderstand her," Dannan said, blushing.

"Perhaps," said Rialta. "And perhaps so do you. You should ask John here what he thinks."

"I think," Tera said, "that love is highly overrated."

"Spoken like a true expert – at lying," Rialta said.

The pass said Alt's headquarters was located at the temple, in the Daughters compound, and as they rode up the grade to the remnants of the town gate, Tera's mind slipped ahead to his childhood home, to his mother, to Chibura, to his long-lost love Aideen, to his commander. All of them waited just ahead, and Sergeant John Tera realized that after thirty-three years, he had finally come full circle.

*The treasonous betrayal of our fleet to the Korvish-Sopkans is the single most dastardly deed in the history of our mighty Empire, and the vile author of this treason – Messenger Peter Tuckard of Darbas and Sidon – must receive the most immediate and vengeful disposition of justice.*

—“The Price of Treason is Death,” editorial, *The Arnell Courier*

## Chapter 18

## Tuckard

Though they tried not to show it, there was no question in the old man's mind that the rest of his delegation was worried about him. They sat silently around Tuckard's flat, Wallis by the empty hearth, Glynnis by the open window, Novand perched on a stool in the kitchen pondering a pickled egg. No one had spoken in several minutes, and Old Pete Tuckard was beginning to get annoyed.

"We have until morning, you know," Tuckard said, casting back the sheet that covered him. "And I'm not dead yet."

"What are you doing?" Novand asked with alarm. "You're not supposed to get out of bed. That was what the doctor said."

"Doctors be damned," Tuckard said, placing his feet on the floor. "Besides, that was more than a month ago, and I'd better be able to stand on my own two feet tomorrow."

"Personally, I think we'd do better if I rolled you out to the Point of Recognition in that marvelous wheeled chair of yours," Wallis said. "Sympathy vote and all that."

"I've gone more than seventy years without need of sympathy," Tuckard spat. "I don't want to take it up as a hobby now."

"Rubbish," said Glynnis. "You've played the sympathy card as often as any other, you cantankerous old gamesman. And there's not a person in this room who doesn't know it."

"Nevertheless, I tire of convalescing," Tuckard said, and he rose to his feet, standing unsteadily for a moment before he began doing shallow leg bends and thrusting his arms out semi-vigorously. "See now? Look at that! I'll be fit as a fiddle in no time."

"Fat lot of good it will do you on the gallows," Wallis said.

"Wallis!" Novand exclaimed.

"Oh do let's give it a rest," said Glynnis. "He's right, you know, and we're the pooftahs who've been slinking around pretending the truth isn't fatal. But it is. The Court hangs traitors."

"But he hasn't done anything traitorous!" Novand protested.

"Oh, I've done many things traitorous," Tuckard said, correcting him. "I've just never been *indicted* on any of them. Unfortunately for me, it's much easier for the authorities to find evidence of treachery when the alleged crimes are of Lord Proxmire's creation."

"We should have taken our evidence straight to Marlton IV the night you were attacked," Novand said, reprising an old argument. "We could have cooked Proxmire's goose right then and there!"

"Oh please," Wallis groaned. "Let's take up that old fantasy again."

"No," Glynnis said firmly. "We shall most certainly not. Life is too short."

"That was not funny," Wallis said.

"I didn't mean it as a joke," Glynnis answered, glaring.

"Enough," Tuckard said, sitting back down on the bed. He was tired, which disturbed him, but his companions seemed rather relieved by it. "Since all you seem capable of doing is either boring me with silence or tiring me with pointless argument, then leave me alone. I need to think."

"You... you want us to leave?" Novand asked.

"No, I want you to sprout wings and fly about the flat singing '*Chirp chirp chirp, I'm an enormous Novand-bird!*' Yes, I want you to leave!"

"Well, far be it from me to presume upon a seat where I'm not wanted," Wallis said, gathering himself. "Come along, classmates. The teacher is in a foul mood this afternoon." Novand and Glynnis followed him to the door.

"Not you just yet, Glynnis," Tuckard called after her from the bed. "You can stay."

"Maybe I want to leave," she said.

"Maybe I don't tarking care!" Tuckard shouted. "Really, you are the most difficult group of friends I've ever had. Gentlemen, go."

Madame, please stay behind.”

“The condemned man’s last request, eh?” Wallis said suggestively. Glynnis punched him solid on the arm. “Ouch. Please be a bit gentler with Old Pete, eh?”

“Oh, be off,” she said, shutting the door behind them. She turned toward Tuckard and put her fists on her hips. “You’ve really gotten crotchety since your wounding, Pete.”

“Give me a bit of sympathy,” he said. “I go on trial for my life tomorrow.”

“I thought you said you didn’t want sympathy,” she countered.

“I don’t. Can’t stand it. But do come sit with me, girl.”

Glynnis sat cautiously at the foot of the bed.

“You’ve been checking on it, I know. Please do give me the answer,” he said. “Was it Wallis?”

“No,” she said, looking down. “He is friendly with many Gheralds, and I suspect he has given away a secret or two whilst in his cups, but nothing suggests it was Wallis who betrayed you on the matter of the horses. Nor was it Novand.”

“Then who?” Tuckard asked.

“I suspect it was Novand’s friend Coopersmith at the shippers. The House of Proxmire keeps a close eye on the waterfront for the same reasons we do. It was not a secret we expected to stay private long, anyway.”

“And Lord Ashton,” Tuckard said. “Will he carry our petition directly to Marlton IV? I fear we’ll have little chance once we get to Court unless the King intervenes.”

“Ashton will do what he can,” Glynnis said. “Only I wouldn’t expect too much. You’re accused of sending messages to the Korvish-Sopkans, Pete, and the letters are a damned fine forgery of your hand. Ashton can’t put himself too squarely on your side, or he’ll risk his own career.”

“Perhaps it would have been better for all of us if I had simply died,” Tuckard said. “I crossed Eorl Garrett, which I always knew was tantamount to suicide. I don’t see any way out of this. Do you?”

“No, Pete,” she said, touching his foot. “I’m afraid they’ve got you this time. Like you said, it’s easier when the evidence can be created to fit the crime.”

“The irony is, I considered doing exactly what they accused me of doing,” Tuckard chuckled. “I’d have done it, too, if I had anything to trade. Anything for Darbas, love. It’s the light of the world.”

“I believe it, too,” Glynnis replied softly. “And I’ll give Ashton a good go tonight to see what I can do to influence Marlton IV’s sentencing. We may yet keep you from the gallows.”

“Glynnis dear, that’s the last of my worries,” Tuckard said. “All hope is lost at home now. Thierry’s betrayal of Alt and our Clydish army has left us worse than when we started. For all we know the battle may be long done by now, and Gherald may already hold the length and breadth of The Edain down to Gwynyr. Perhaps Celon will stand, and the Gwynyrians are wicked fighters, but the Clydes alone cannot resist the Gheralds. I’ve wasted my life defending the interests of our cute little Council of Darbas, and now all has come to nothing. We shall become a vassal state, like all the others. Against that future, the gallows seems more than a bit merciful. Drop, snap. Over.”

“We could run,” she said. “You’re only under house arrest.”

“I can barely move,” he confided.

“You leave that to me,” Glynnis said.

“No, no, don’t,” he sighed. “I’m ready to face my fate.”

“What will you do, Pete?”

“Tell the truth,” he said. “All of it. It won’t help me any, but perhaps my seeds will fall on fertile ground somewhere. So long as hope survives, no war is ever truly lost. We’re playing for the future now, my dear. Not for ourselves.”

Glynnis moved forward and patted his hand, and they sat that way well into the evening.

**T**he trial of Pete Tuckard was the biggest news to hit the Court at Arnell in decades, and all the papers were there. Some of the reporters were guests of the Houses. Others packed into Petitioners Yard, elbowing each other for a spot near the door to the Dinner Dome. Most notable among these journalists was the editor of *The Arnell Swift Guardian*, the decorated writer Derwin “Pop” Sherwood. Sherwood was the most-read man in Gherald, his weekly column providing homework for everyone in the room. He sat beside the House of Teague, for though the Teagues had been in retreat among the Houses of Court for decades, they had recently delved quite profitably into the popular press. Other Houses either published or patronized newspapers around town, but these were silly little sheets, devoted to shaping opinion, not reporting the facts. *The Swift Guardian* was not at all like the others – which was why it was both the best-read of the papers and the most likely to be found defending itself in court.

Tuckard was proud to have entered the Court on his own feet, but he struggled to collect himself at the Darbas seating, gathering his strength for the walk to the Point of Recognition. Novand would set a chair for him there, for he was in no shape to stand, but Tuckard wanted the walk to be memorable.

Ironically, the knife wounds had largely healed – it was the accompanying infection and fever that brought him to the brink of death and robbed him of his strength. All he wanted to do now was get on a boat and sail home to die in peace, but he had one more speech to make.

He stood for the entrance of the King and played his part in the customary preliminaries, calling out when called upon, and matters proceeded quickly to the headline event. Findlay, still in league with Proxmire, read the charges of indictment, and only the



second came from Eorl Garrett. Marlton IV seemed to ponder them as if they were news to him, and then turned to face Tuckard. "Messenger Tuckard of Darbas," he said. "You have been charged with the crime of high treason. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty, your majesty."

"Do you wish to call a barrister to your defense?"

"No, your majesty," Tuckard replied. "I shall be defending myself."

"Lord Findlay," Marlton IV said, "shall you represent the prosecution?"

"Nay, my Lord," Findlay said. "I wish to call Eorl Garrett, Lord Proxmire, to that duty."

"As you wish," the king said. "Lord Proxmire, the Court is yours."

Garrett rose from his high seating and descended the stairs to the floor of the Dinner Dome, stalking out to the Point of Recognition and surveying the room slowly, carefully, as if making eye-contact with each of his supporters, searching for anything, any response that would give him pause to worry. Finding none, he placed his hands behind his back and addressed the crown.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Court, King Marlton IV of Gherald, it is my sacred and painful duty to lay out the evidence and charges against one of our own today, a man with whom we have shared fellowship for lo these many years. Yet, sadly, a man who has, in the twilight of his service, turned traitor against the Empire he was sworn to uphold.

"Let the record show, and let it be passed into evidence, that the papers I hold in my hand represent two separate correspondences from Messenger Peter Tuckard of Darbas to an agent of the Korvish-Sopkan Empire on May 6th and 9th. Both of these letters, written in Tuckard's own, distinctive hand, contain secrets of a military nature, which were intended for use against our own forces in hopes of furthering the cause of his native Darbas.

"Let the record further show that these letters were delivered to a blind drop on the waterfront by Messenger Tuckard himself, picked up by this Korvish-Sopkan spy, and later collected from his possession by our own security teams upon his arrest on May 10th. This agent was interrogated, tried and convicted of the crime of espionage, then executed on June 16th.

"Contained in these letter are the departure dates, dispositions, and ship assignments for many of the Gheraldic troops who were dispatched to reinforce the garrison at Sidon. As we are all painfully aware, the reinforcement fleet was disastrously engaged at sea by a Korvish-Sopkan armada. One can only wonder what messages got through to our enemies.

"Finally, I have here a list of names, many of them members of court, who can attest to private conversations and public actions by Messenger Tuckard, all of which confirm or corroborate the charges now applied against him. This witness list and the text of these letters has been made available to you all in the packets provided to you at your seatings.

"It is our contention that Messenger Tuckard is, and has been for some time, an enemy of our Empire. Yet we are a merciful people. While justice demands punishment for these crimes, conscience – and, yes, friendship – requires us to mix pity and compassion with our justice. Messenger Tuckard is an old man, past seventy, whose mental faculties have been in retreat for some time. He has also been gravely wounded by waterfront thugs, and that is a story made doubly tragic by circumstances, for were Messenger Tuckard not so lonely in his old age he would not have been trolling the docks for companionship alone at such an unsafe hour.

"Therefore, it is the hope of this House that we, in our assembly, may offer Messenger Tuckard exile to his homeland, a probationary sentence that will allow him to spend his final days in peace among his people, provided that he admit his guilt to us today and then retire most quietly from public life. Let it never be said that we are weak, but let it always be said that we are fair and merciful, for a great Empire such as ours requires no blood vengeance for the crimes of a lonely, confused old man."

"Do say, Lord Proxmire," Marlton IV asked from the throne, "what would be the penalty for one such as Messenger Tuckard should he plead innocent and be found guilty?"

"Death by hanging, your Majesty," Garrett said. "Sentence to be executed upon the morrow."

"You may be seated, Lord Proxmire," the king said. "Messenger Tuckard, there is what appears to be a very generous plea offer extant from the prosecution, and I for one am inclined to endorse it. Do you understand the offer?"

"Most clearly," Tuckard replied.

"And do you now wish to change your plea to guilty?"

"Absolutely not," Tuckard said, rising. "For though it be not punishment but gift to return me to my beloved Darbas, I cannot claim crimes that I did not commit."

"And what evidence do you have to offer against that presented by your prosecutors, eh?" Marlton IV asked, his eyes merrily warming to the prospect of a spirited debate. "Have you witnesses?"

"I have truth," said Tuckard.

"Then by all means, Messenger, take the Point of Recognition," Marlton IV said, sweeping his hand toward the center of the room.

Tuckard stepped out from behind his seating and walked slowly and stiffly to the point, Novand trailing behind him with a chair. He placed it there and waited for Tuckard to sit, but the old man waved him off and instead took his place behind the chair, gripping it with both hands to steady himself. This would be his last speech to the Court, and he didn't want to make it while sitting down.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Court, Your Majesty, people of Petitioners Yard within earshot," Tuckard began, his voice clear and strong. "What is the strength of our Empire? Does it lie in our glorious army? Our most advanced and professional navy? Is it some quality of our traditions and institutions that gives us strength? Or is it, as some believe, the blessing of God upon our sovereign Lord that lifts us up?

"There are many who would say yes to each of these suppositions, but today I tell you that I believe there is another answer, that the strength of Gherald lies not with any of these things, but within the hearts and minds of its people. For though I am a man of Darbas, I have lived among you for many years, and in that time I have come to love the citizens of Gherald as I would an adoptive

family. I live among them. I see their industry, their determination, their cleverness, their enterprise, and it is in them that I find the answer to this question: what singular attribute raised this small island nation up above all the other peoples of the planet? And the answer is, the people. For while our institutions grow corrupt and self-absorbed, the people work with the same enterprise they always have. And while the army loses its initiative under the command of politically connected generals whose greatest battles have occurred in drawing rooms, the people send their sons off to serve the King, providing him with soldiers who are brave and steadfast and honorable.

“And while you, yourself, your Majesty, are minimized and manipulated by your ‘friends’ here in the Dinner Dome, it is your subjects – the common people you almost never see – who love you most truly. So when I say that I love Gherald, you will understand my meaning. I do not love this Court. I do not love our generals. And though I feel a personal fondness for you, my King, it is not love. My love is for the people, for they are truly great – and only the failures of those assembled in this room holds them back from the destiny they would otherwise claim by right.”

The rumblings of the Dinner Dome rose, with several voices shouting out for Tuckard to be silenced. Tuckard stole a glance at the House of Teague and noted that the entire seating sat listening attentively – all except Sherwood, who scribbled furiously on his pad.

“As for my alleged guilt, let me be plain,” Tuckard continued. “Like each of us in this body, I am a gamesman, and I have played games with the truth here in this dome. All of you who spend your days here know exactly of what I speak, but those of you on the outside may only guess. So let of talk of it now, without fear, for the people have a right to know. In truth, I have been engaged in a duel of wits with the Houses of Proxmire and Findlay for some months, and I have used every rule of Court and every bit of information I could acquire to hold up my end of that duel. These primary Houses hold a secret, and for that secret they would sacrifice much: the lives of my countrymen, the lives of our soldiers, my life, even the honor of our Empire. And that secret is iron. Vast deposits of it, hidden among the highland fastness of Llyr in the province of Gwynyr. Enough iron to forge a new Empire, bigger and stronger than anything the world has seen before.

“And not just iron, either. But knowledge. The knowledge of how to turn that iron into steel. Steel for swords, for devices, for things that, in our ignorance, seem the stuff of dreams. But these men of Proxmire and Findlay are visionaries. They see the power of it, and they want it – not only for Empire, but for themselves.

“So I ask you all to ponder this question: If the mines and forges of Llyr could be acquired for our Empire, who would profit first? Or the man who makes the contracts? Steel is wealth, ladies and gentlemen, because it represents a worldly power beyond any other. Only the faithfulness of my highland brothers and sisters have kept this wealth hidden for so long, but now the secret is out. And more than anything else, the House of Proxmire wishes to control it.

“Yet fate has conspired against these most grasping of Houses, for Darbas – though a proud part of this Empire – lies beyond the direct control of this Court. And while Lord Proxmire could have simply come to this body and said ‘Listen, the steel we need to beat the Korvish-Sopkans lies in the hills of Llyr and we must go get it,’ that would have given everyone an equal shot at controlling it.

“Instead, the House of Proxmire began a clever game, sending a general from its own House to Darbas along with enough money to buy an army of rabble and assassins. And for the better part of the past year, thugs in the employ of one of our own Houses have murdered, raped and ravaged the peaceful Clydes of The Edain and The Don and Celon – all for only one goal: that my proud people would bend to their knee and beg for the protection of Empire, trading freedom for security, giving up their birthright for protection.

“This plan failed, and Lord Proxmire remains quite bitter about it. The DuQaddish with whom Proxmire conspired rose up against the Empire, and the Clydes in the east and south formed together for their common defense. Eorl Garrett believed my people would crumble and that he would claim the mines. Instead he only roused Darbas from a long slumber, and we shall be wide awake now to every gambit he and others of this Court attempt.”

The grand and lofty dome lay profoundly silent. He had them, Tuckard realized, and soon his words would be read outside this place. It was time to close the deal.

“I stand falsely accused of treason, and my countrymen – who fought valiantly to save our Gheraldic soldiers at Sidon – are betrayed by our Empire’s treachery,” Tuckard continued. “All hope seems lost for Darbas, for our army is crushed and there is no force to match the Imperial Infantry. On the morrow, I shall be hung by the neck until dead. There seems nothing to do but give up, to accept the fate that awaits us.

“Yet still we do not give up,” Tuckard thundered, his great voice strong and passionate, his words echoing in the silent chamber. “Darbas will fight for its freedom, even if it means separation from this corrupt and conspiratorial cesspool that we call a Court. I shall die with my head held high, even though a rope snaps my neck. And all shall be done without malice to our Gheraldic brethren, the honorable people of this great empire, for our quarrel lies not with them, but with this room!”

Tuckard paused, gripped the back of his chair tighter, and surveyed the hall around him. Some of the seatings were visibly enraged, but other sat in rapt attention. Marlton IV even leaned forward, his face red but his eyes bright. And in the entrance to Petitioners Yard, the press and the onlookers stood as still as statues. *It worked*, Tuckard thought to himself. *The seed as been planted.*

“In the morning,” he concluded softly, “my life shall be over, for your judgment on me is a foregone conclusion. Know that I bear those honorable men of this Court no ill will, for you must do what you must do to survive and work for good. But to the tyrants among us – to the Proxmires and the Findlays of this Court – let my condemnation be clearly recorded. Your days are near their end. You offered me mercy in hopes of silencing my voice, and I chose death. Others, by the thousands, will do the same.”

Tuckard turned to face Eorl Garrett, his eyes burning holes into the now-nervous aristocrat.

“Power, gentlemen, is like water,” Tuckard concluded. “It wears down resistance, drowns its opponents. When you work only to guide it in its natural course, then fortune accrues to all. But when you attempt grasp it in your hands, it cannot be held. And when you try to dam it back, it bursts through. Bottle it for your own use, and it ceases to work.

“You may kill me and those like me, dozens of us, every day of the year. But in the end you shall fall, as natural law prescribes. On this, the eve of my death, I pray only that the coming flood drowns merely the wicked, and that it shall spare the good people of Gherald.”

The hall was silent and stayed that way as Tuckard took his last walk back to his seating. The other members of his delegation were in tears, and the sergeants at arms who stood behind them could only avert their eyes.

Summer made the morning glorious, bright and warm and cooled by the sea breezes. No one had stood upon these high gallows in a generation, but Tuckard took his place above the trap door proudly and looked down peacefully from the battlements of the Court at the great city before him.

Arnell had come to a halt for this moment, and far below him in the streets he could see the people of the city standing stock still, watching. Did they hate him? The papers were no indication. Most that morning had decried him as a liar and a traitor, a treasonous scoundrel. But *The Swift Guardian* had printed his speech word for word, and he knew that truth was like water, too. It would find a way.

It had been such a life, filled with friends and debates and laughter, adventures and love. And he knew not what would come next – either the pleasant wait for the Great Counting or communion with the spirits before returning to the world in another body. The thought of his spirit being extinguished by the scratchy rope around his neck never even crossed his mind.

His thoughts turned to Darbas at the last moment, to the reports of the destruction of Alt and Rialta’s army. Yes, all hope seemed lost, but his bones did not believe it.

*I have done all that I could, he concluded. And it will not end here.*

## Chapter 19

## Clyde Barrow

## Alt

One reason that everything had flown into such chaos, Alt reasoned as he watched two Edain Clydes scream at each other over some obscure matter involving reports on food distribution, was that his staff had been practically decimated. It wasn't just the departure of Marbor that hurt, although that was the worst of it, but the loss of Quick, and Bixby before him, had left his headquarters without any of its usual Gheraldic efficiency.

And then there were the deaths of so many of his noncommissioned officers, senior men like Carras and Zylen, even reliable junior sergeants like Gryff. Once, not so long ago, camp life, marches and other administrative details were attended to by experienced soldiers and hummed along in the background of his mind. But now the experienced soldiers were gone, his army was a shambles and the new people he had placed in the vacant positions were both unknown to him and unaccustomed to the way he liked to do things. Alt had put out a call for men and women who had worked in administrative jobs and assigned those volunteers all manner of tasks, but there was no cohesion in their efforts and nothing by-Sula worked.

It was late afternoon and the argument between the two men over whether stored food and packed food should be listed separately had spilled over into a full-blown event, attracting other members of the staff to the new headquarters in the Daughters of Llugnah compound library. In typical Clydish fashion the original argument had become a mere proxy to other, older grievances, punches had been thrown in the hallway, and all work had ceased. Alt understood that he should intervene, put down the hammer of discipline he had been preaching since they arrived the day before, but depression and fatigue got the better of him. If he inserted himself into the fight, he would have to resolve it. And once he resolved it, he would have to teach each of the participants how he wanted his reports done. And that would require him to think about details. And thinking about details would take him away from the place where his mind needed to travel. So rather than do anything, Alt left the men to fuss and walked out of his headquarters.

He already knew what the troop strength reports would tell him: Not enough. Not enough strong backs, he thought as he descended the stairs to the ground floor, not enough trained troops. Not enough officers, not enough food. Not enough medical supplies, not enough horses. Not enough places to put people. Not enough civil authority, not enough reliable intelligence. Most of all, not enough time. Not enough breathing space to reforge his shattered weapon, this army, this cobbled-together mass of Clydes. Men and women swirled around him, everyone rushing, no one acknowledging the presence of their commander, many of them not even recognizing him. How could he lead them when he didn't even know them, couldn't control them, had no hope of organizing them?

The compound and temple sat on the highest spot in the town of Clyde Barrow. It was just a low hill, really, but as he stopped at the broad, arched entrance, the town unfolded before him like a tableau under afternoon light. Cobbled streets busy with soldiers and militia and Guardsmen, and beyond them the remnants of the old wall and the fields beyond, stretching and rolling out to the Barrow itself. The grassed-over mass grave rose out of the countryside like an island in a lake of humanity, for there were thousands of Clydes camped outside the town, a haphazard reunion of forces, and they seemed to cover everything except the Barrow with their indiscriminate disarray. If Marbor had been here, the placement of each group would have given him a visual reference: Edain Irregulars here, New Calpathian militia there, Don Volunteers, Men of Llyr, Gwynyrian farmers, untrained refugees someplace where they could be watched carefully. But scanning this scene gave him no information beyond the obvious. He had lost control of his army.

He had been a fool to think of regrouping. It was his first impulse after the trebuchet attack, for Thierry had acquired all his advantages and was finally ready to fight, and Alt understood in his gut that he should never face Thierry on the Gherald's terms.

So Alt's Army of Darbas had melted away, had ceased to be. It had fled south from Sidon not as a unit but as debris carried by a

flood, with no command, no discipline, no order or structure, just thousands of individuals making their way to Clyde Barrow to see if the army could be once again reconstituted.

The confusion this had engendered over the past three days and four nights had affected Thierry as well, for everything he struck at disintegrated and his route of march was slowed by the chaos on the Clyde River Road. Though helpful, Thierry's inconvenience had come at a terrible price for Alt, who now rallied a demoralized and splintered force.

Still there was no sign of Rialta. He had lost her when the stones flew from Sidon, lost two of his best sergeants to search for her. The Highlanders grew restless, and in truth he doubted his own ability to make them fight if their Lady was not present. Everyone needed something to believe in, and without Marbor and Rialta, Alt found himself among that number. What did he believe in? Without that answer, how could he lead?

"General Alt!"

He turned to his left and found Dian staring at him from the saddle.

"What is it, General Dian?"

"You're in a foul temper, aren't ye?" the poet asked. "And with a faraway look in your eyes, too. As if you've finally found sorrow. It's rather beautiful, in a sad way."

"What do you know about it anyway?" Alt scoffed.

"More than I could ever tell, Barnabus Alt, and more than you would care to hear," Dian sighed. "But I did not come here to swap sad sonnets, commander: I bear you good news. Our Lady Rialta has passed through the pickets and makes her way to you here as we speak."

Alt did not answer, but only looked at Dian, searching his eyes.

"Ah, you seem overjoyed at my news. I should have expected. But I do report that she seems in fine health and glowing with strength, and it's high time someone around this bedlam had that look. General Alt, we're overdue for a war council. Now that Rialta has arrived, can I count on you to convene one? Or should I take that task upon myself?"

"Is that her there?" Alt asked, pointing up the street to a group of riders.

"Yes," said Dian. "And she rides with Danna and Tera."

Alt squinted, and picked out Rialta among the group. The sight of her face seemed to settle his mind, and the first breeze in days stirred the fog of depression that had settled around him.

"War council in an hour, there in the courtyard of the Daughters compound," he said. "Can I count on you to spread the word to everyone, General Dian? It seems my own staff has lost all its efficiency."

"I shall tell everyone – even those who do not wish to hear it." The cripple bowed low in the saddle and then spurred his horse forward.

## Rialta

It was not the usual crowd for one of Alt's war councils, the Lady of Gwynyr thought as she took her seat on one of the benches that lined the walls of the courtyard. The usual commanders were there, but they came with retainers and on-lookers, and the least-organized of the groups brought entire entourages. The armed farmers of northern Edain, refugees turned warriors, stood in a silent knot, smoking long-stemmed clay pipes. Volunteers from the Conall Forest, most of them newly arrived, sat sprawled upon the ground, whittling with flint knives. Her own Gwynyrians seemed to cluster together in a way that gave her comfort: men of Llyr next to Fionnans and farmers from Niamh, squires from The Penn, woodsmen from the southern high reaches below the lake. And there were women among the group as well: Almatara and Chibura, hostile Trina from the Celon Forest, fighters from the Highlands with kilts and bows. It was a hasty and disorganized council, but these were the hardest of the bunch, the survivors, the ones who had not faded away after the defeat at Sidon. This gave her hope.

Alt had seemed pleased to see her in a way that warmed her spirit, but their private meeting was over quickly with little of substance said. He was anxious to prepare for the war council, and though Rialta considered asking for a reprieve while she recovered from the journey, she didn't. The general was intense and manic, and Rialta had learned to let him run when he was in those moods. Now he conferred with LaFranq and several scouts by the main entrance to the courtyard, and Rialta watched him closely, catching his eye upon occasion. *I give him strength*, she realized. *He looks over here when he is unsure*.

The hushed conference by the entrance concluded and Alt walked quickly to the center of the courtyard and began.

"Attention," he said. "Thank you. Here is our situation."

The yard fell instantly silent. *How does he do that?* Rialta wondered.

"The enemy has camped at LaFranq's Picket, just beyond our perimeter. This means scouts will probe our position here during the night, and we can expect an attack by General Thierry in the morning. Casar, hold up the map."

The Bhengali scout unrolled a tapestry embroidered with the general outlines of Clyde Barrow, handed one side of it to a soldier in the New Calpathian militia, and stretched it out for all to see. Alt drew his Llyrian rapier and used it as a pointer.

"The attack will come from the north, straight down the road, for this is the broadest and fastest avenue of approach. Thierry moves with 10,000 men, and must keep them together, so I expect no feints. If all goes according to his plan, he will draw up his lines just outside of town, put his heavy weapons in place on this low ridge and attempt to drive us back to the river."

"How can you be so sure?" asked a Llyrian. "The path you describe puts him under high ground on his eastern flank."

"I can be sure of what I know of the man," Alt said. "You are correct in assessing that the hills east of his line will concern General



Thierry, and for whatever concerns him Thierry will have a plan. Those hills will be accounted for quickly, or he will not move.”

“Then what would you have us do?” Dian asked. “General Thierry moves with 10,000 well-disciplined men, and though we match him in numbers, we can barely find our own arse since Sidon.”

“We cannot stand up against him, not as we did against the DuQaddish,” Alt replied. “If we can muster 10,000 total, I will be amazed, but such countings are a fool’s errand. As brave as your warriors are and as strong as our Highland steel may be, trained Gheraldic infantry marching under the protection of professional heavy weapons crews trumps every strength we have.”

“So we’re to retreat?” Dian asked.

“On the contrary,” Alt said. “We’re to advance. For while we cannot stand against him, we can most certainly disrupt him. If Thierry finds us where he does not expect us in the morning, then he will reconsider his plan, and if he reconsiders it, his movements will stall. When they lose their momentum, we will have an opportunity – not for anything decisive, mind you, but for a chance to bleed them.”

“Will bleeding them do the trick, General Alt?” Bergonat asked.

“If we are to fight only one battle, then we will lose,” Alt said. “But a series of battles in which we have the initiative...”

“But he has the heavy weapons,” said LaDram. “Every time we form anything stronger than a skirmish line those great bloody trebuchets will start finding their range. I need not remind any of us here what that means.”

“And that is why the first thing we must bleed dry are those weapons,” Alt said. “In the morning, once Thierry has assessed our lines overnight, he will move the bulk of his force south in perfect parade ground order. His trebuchets, set up upon this low ridge, will have been targeted during the night on where he believes our lines to be. But our lines will not be there – they will be several hundred yards to the front, dug in and ready, just far enough forward that when Thierry begins to spread his columns out, they will blunder right across us.”

Dian seemed to grasp the concept. “If we turn up where he expects to be assembling, Thierry will reconsider more than just the front of his force.”

“Only for a moment,” Alt said. “After the initial exchange we will have only a few minutes before he regroups and comes after the forward units. That is when our 2nd CRG cavalry must strike hard in the rear – here, on the ridge, where the trebuchets will be located.”

Alt’s concept was becoming clear to Rialta, too. It was a plan predicated not on force or strength, but on *timing*. If the cavalry struck where Thierry did not expect it at the same time that his assembly area was disrupted by an enemy that wasn’t supposed to be there, then Alt would have created doubt in his opponent’s mind. And doubt could lead to mistake

“General Alt, if I may,” said Rolph LaFranq, who now walked toward the center of the courtyard. “The pace of battle is a weapon, as is the fog that it creates in the mind of our enemy. Yet the fog of war covers all men once the battle begins – ours as well as theirs. If the pacing falls short of your plan – if the events are not perfectly coordinated – then it will not be Thierry who panics and collapses, but us. And begging the general’s pardon, but we’re not the most efficient and coordinated bunch these days.”

“I shall place my best units in the front this time,” Alt said. “Second CRG grenadiers in the front line, cavalrymen on the flank.”

“And if they’re overrun?” LaFranq asked.

Alt had no answer.

“It’s a bold plan,” said Dian. “I like it. But the risks are catastrophic.”

“We cannot just sit here and let them come as they please,” LaDram argued. “That would be perfectly prudent suicide.”

“We simply don’t have the strength,” LaFranq said. “It’s not a matter of whether General Alt has constructed a logical response to the problem, it’s the simple fact that we cannot give him enough resources to *construct* a logical response.”

“Then what would you have us do, LaFranq?” Dian asked. “At least Alt’s idea might account for the trebuchets.”

“At the cost of our only cavalry,” said Bergonat. “I can offer up the horsemen of our Edain Irregulars, but they’re truly only mounted guerillas, and that still does not solve the problem of getting our horses around his flank without their being noticed.”

“In that I can be of help,” Rialta said, standing. She felt all eyes fall upon her, and physically restrained the urge to twiddle her hair. “General Alt, your plan is brilliant and brave, and it offers us our best hope of success. The risks involved are high, and the odds run against us, but when one cannot fight against an enemy’s muscle one might fight against the enemy’s mind. And that is where I can give you assistance.”

“How so?” Alt asked.

“I have my ways,” Rialta said. “Oh my yes I do.”

## Dannan

They moved along the forest path in silence, the sound of their horses’ hooves muffled by the rags they had tied over them before departing. Dannan had counted seven hundred horsemen assembled in the darkness before they began their ride and wondered aloud how so many men and mounts could be moved so far and so close to the enemy without being noticed. But it boiled down to faith: Rialta had said it would be done, and who was he to question her?

They had pored over the maps by torchlight before departing, for there would be no opportunity to check them again once they began their ride – any light would alert the Gheralds to their presence. And so the responsibility fell to him – Captain Dannan. After years as an enlisted man and sergeant, of taking orders, Seamus Dannan had received a field commission. Suddenly, the possibility of taking a wrong turn under the Dark Moons terrified him more than the thought of death.

He had tried to wear the mantle of leadership with dignity when Alt bestowed it upon him, had tried to inspire confidence at their torch-lit meeting earlier in the night. But now leadership was about picking the right road without the luxury of seeing the paths ahead, and he kept his scouts on a short leash. Even under the best of circumstances they were riding perilously close to the Gheraldic lines. A wrong turn could dump them right in the middle of a Gheraldic camp, or steer them hours in the wrong direction. What use would his sword training be then? Finally, he worried, he would be exposed for what he was: a misfit, a pretender, a sorry excuse for a warrior.

Not that he lacked confidence. His parents had instilled it in him relentlessly, never allowing the phrase “I can’t” to be spoken in their home. His mother had drilled the children during the daytime, preparing them for a life course that ran through the university and on to professional stature. His father had taken the night hours, after chores were done, to teach Seamus and his younger brother the way of the *sioboeth*. And yet when the day was done, they were still not like their neighbors. They were Highlanders, strange folk to the Clydes of Celon Province, and when the other children went off about their play, the Dannans were still hard at work.

It wasn’t until he joined the Guard that Seamus Dannan came to understand how it felt to be a part of something, and he excelled at the disciplines of military life. In uniform, he only had to be better than the common standard, and that was easy compared to the challenges his parents had set before him. The Guard demanded soldiers. His parents had demanded something close to perfection, as if they were preparing their children for a long and exacting mission. He loved them and always would, but leaving their home had felt like escape.

Now his column crept along the pitch-dark road, and Dannan had to force his attention onto the task at hand: a silent, blind, five-mile ride, then a coordinated raid against the Gheraldic heavy weapons, followed by a hasty flight back toward their own lines. Every bit of the plan was magically derived – the same Old Path magic his parents had publicly renounced and secretly taught their children. The mission had been blessed by a priestess. Their movement around the enemy’s flank was protected by the Spell of Overlooking. Even the order to begin the attack would be delivered by a Fionnan who rode beside him, sent along for the sole purpose of staying psychically connected to Rialta. It was the same magic that had fascinated him since childhood, and now he served it and it served him.

A sound ahead: a muffled rider returning. Dannan’s eyes had adjusted to the darkness, enough to make out the lines of the man seated upon the horse. The new captain halted and the scout pulled alongside him. “There’s a fork in the road ahead we didn’t expect, sir,” the man said. “I don’t believe it’s on the map.”

Dannan sat still on his horse in the blackness, pondering his course. After all our fantasies of glory, this is what real leadership feels like, he realized. There is always a road that isn’t on the map.

## Tera

The first step had been scouting the location, and that’s where everything could have come undone. Tera had alternately crawled and sprinted through the darkness beyond the CRG’s lines, carefully clearing a front three hundred yards beyond their own. Even one Gheraldic picket in the wrong place could have junked the entire plan – the cavalry would have been recalled, the militia reorganized, the waiting grenadiers behind him given new orders. But that one picket was somewhere else, so Tera sent a runner back with the word and the grenadiers rose up and moved quickly and quietly across the field.

The digging began around 2 a.m., the scrape-scrape of their shovels clearly audible despite their best efforts at silence. Surely the Gheralds would hear it, recognize its proximity and come investigate. But there was no scouting party, no probe. The sound of an enemy digging in was not unusual before an attack, and the mind perceives what it expects to find. Perhaps it never occurred to the enemy that these crazy grenadiers would dig in here. How could anyone think this was a good idea? And so what they could not imagine, the Gheralds did not recognize.

Tera moved silently up and down the line with Willow always at his side. She was his communicator, sent along to serve as their psychic link to Rialta – and, by extension, Alt – back in Clyde Barrow. That the Lady would have risked her closest aide on the front line both shocked and frightened Tera, for not only were their chances exceedingly slim, but even if he survived he didn’t want to return to the high priestess without her handmaiden. They kept up an anxious and random inspection throughout the night, measuring by footsteps the distances between men, checking and rechecking the depth of their shallow trench. It wasn’t meant for fighting, but for cover, dug into the back of a low ridge that split the field.

A couple of hours before dawn, Tera found a place near the center of the line and decided to stay there. He and Willow dropped down into it, and Willow passed him her canteen. He acknowledged the gesture with a nod.

“How much longer?” she whispered.

“Not much,” he replied. “But it will feel like forever.”

## Rialta

She had situated herself in the highest vantage point in town, the tower of the Sulist temple. It was a poor choice for comfort – the stones were cold and hard and the wind was annoyingly constant – and even worse for company. The parapet had been built for a single prayerful cleric, not as an observation post for soldiers. But the Lady did the best she could under the circumstances.

Rialta had carried several pillows with her, and by sitting cross-legged with her back hard against the stones there was room for

one other person – the Fionnan Poole Ardu, a fidgety field operative newly arrived from Sidon, where she was better known as the harp player in the Sulist Cathedral of St. Jallaed. They sat facing each other, their eyes closed, working in tandem. Rialta had moved herself so deep into spirit that without support from another practitioner of the Old Path magic she would have had to concentrate to maintain the connection to her body. Ardu focused on the Lady, keeping her body and soul intact.

In Rialta's mind's eye, the dark fields below the tower stretched out like a watercolor painting. Toy soldiers moved silently across the imaginary landscape, and Fionnans and other Old Path devotees glowed in their positions, their trained souls shining as bright as stars against the dim backdrop of the countryside.

For most of the people participating in this battle, the worst of it would begin soon, and they would pit their bodies against other bodies and either win or lose. But for now, the person working the hardest was Rialta. She would have to send and receive messages to and from the Fionnans, but at the moment the bulk of her attention was focused on the Spell of Overlooking. She knew what Tera and Dannan did not: that the cavalry column had, at one point, passed within twenty yards of a Gheraldic picket, that Tera's grenadiers were dug-in not one hundred yards from the enemy lines, but a mere fifty. These things were unknown to others because Rialta kept them unknown. The enemy simply didn't notice things that might have otherwise raised an alarm. It wasn't a perfect spell, and it couldn't make people disappear, but it fogged the brain. Rialta had to concentrate to keep it focused in the right places. And there were many of them.

A young Clydish staff runner from Alt's headquarters poked his head up into the cramped tower and disturbed her concentration for a moment. Rialta opened one eye.

"What?" she demanded.

"The general asks," the runner said, "if the Lady is ready to commence the action?"

"Yes," Rialta said.

"I'm to ask you," the runner said, "have you encountered any problems?"

"Dozens," she said. "You may tell the general we are ready to proceed."

But in the back of her consciousness, there were anomalies, shadows she was not yet ready to share with Alt. The sense of great forces on the move, moving in from the west and south. Under different circumstances, she would have cleared her mind until the image rose into focus, but her present duties made that all but impossible. Never before in all her life had she divided herself into so many areas of simultaneous concentration: the sense of the battlefield, the expansive Spell of Overlooking, the open connections with Willow and the Fionnans in the field, plus secret awarenesses of Alt and Tera and Dannan. Each tendril quivered and screamed for her attention, but she kept each in the background, spinning along while she quieted her mind and kept one foot in the real world.

It would be a long day, and she knew it would drain her to her core. Nor was it without personal risk. Already she was spread as thin as gossamer, and should the leash to her physical self stretch to breaking, that would be the end of that. But she let the sense of approaching destiny swell at the edges of her peripheral vision and silenced her inner voices. Day was about to break.

## Alt

Sunrise can seem so ugly on a battle day, Alt thought. Some arrived with a red sun like a bloody wound, and even on those mornings that rose clean and speckled with birdsongs, Alt's knowledge of what lay ahead colored the scene. After more than twenty years in service to the King, the approach of a large battle still turned his stomach into a churning pit. The fact that today's enemy was his own Empire only made matters worse.

Rialta's decision to take her place in the tower annoyed him beyond words. When she had first proposed the idea of using herself to provide instant communication to his distant units, he had imagined the Lady sitting on a horse beside him, not positioned in a tall tower so that he had to arrange a virtual bucket-brigade of staff members to pass messages back and forth. But he had not come this far only to stop trusting Rialta, and believing in the people around him was as close as Alt ever came to faith. She said she needed the isolation to maintain her concentration, and who was he to argue?

Still, Rialta felt like a tether, for keeping communication with her meant keeping himself away from the front lines. All his orders would be passed through her, which, he thought again, was *why it was so damned inconvenient to have her in that bloody tower*. He stood atop the wall of the compound courtyard, watching the first light break over the gray land, and restrained his annoyance. *This is not the way they taught us to command at the academy*, his voice told him. *This is not the way to lead troops*.

"Soon now, boss," Casar said. "Soon they will be moving. Then we go get us some?"

"Not now," Alt said. "You just stand there and shut up."

Casar was restless. "I could go with Sergeant John Tera, go help him kill Gheralds. Would you like that, boss?"

"You forget that I am a Gherald, you bloody savage," Alt scolded. "I'm not anxious for this."

"You should clear your mind," Casar counseled. "It's a big fight, boss. It don't matter where you from today. You should be more like me."

"Be quiet," Alt snapped. "I'll send you back to Bhengal, I swear I will."

"Okay by me," Casar replied, shrugging.

The glow on the eastern horizon was quickly turning to day. Alt bit his lip and scanned the ridge where Tera and the grenadiers had established themselves, but it was hard, even with his field glasses, to make out much among the morning mists.

Still, there was something, just beyond the ridge. A sound, a faint tint of maroon behind the gray. It grew, spreading across the field, growing in density and detail.

Thousands of men. His countrymen. His enemies.

## Thierry

A terrible situation, General Thierry thought as he tried to make out the enemy position through his field glasses. Come all this way, rolling the rebels up like a cheap carpet, only to arrive on the field of the decisive battle and find everything askew. His scouts had reported almost no enemy activity during the night, and this was entirely unlike Barney Alt, a man he had studied carefully. Part of him expected the mist to lift and reveal that Alt was long gone, packed up and run away during the night. At least that would explain the silence – his forward lines had reported nothing more than the distant sound of shovels. And if that were the case, so be it. Alt could only run for so long, and all his running would buy him little.

But the other part of himself believed Alt had selected this ground for a purpose. His knowledge of Darbas was admittedly slim, but even Thierry understood how sacred this place was to the Clydes. They would fight like demons to defend it, and Alt would understand that. He'd use it. Thierry was almost sure.

But that certainty, like every sure bet he'd ever made, haunted Thierry through the night, robbing him of sleep and confidence. How did he *know*? What if more Clydes had rallied here than his dubious scouts had reported? What if their numbers were reinforced during the night with more Highlanders with more steel? The effect of that on his men could be disastrous, for even though they were professionals, they were still only men, capable of both heroism and cowardice. They feared the Highland steel, and well they should. Thierry feared it as well.

He had risen early and dressed in his finest uniform, taking great care to shave closely, and he held himself erect in the saddle although his back ached even worse than usual and his sinuses throbbed like mad. Once upon a time he had cut a dashing figure upon a horse, but those days had passed more than a decade before. Now he felt self-conscious as he rode among the men, for his slowly curving back had robbed him of his military bearing, and his shoulders were slim compared to the soldiers in the ranks. At times he felt like a great bloody stork, his balding head covered by pompous hat, his skinny limbs offset by his plump belly. But that was not his fault, he reasoned. He had not been sent here to act as a field commander but as a military governor, a headquarters job. Only Proxmire had issued new orders. Why he had to destroy Alt was beyond him, but those were his instructions. Obliterate all possible opposition. Arrest Barney Alt. Begin the occupation of Darbas and return to Sidon to initiate the new civil bureaucracy. That's what he was fighting for now: the end of this phase and the beginning of the next.

And yet if this was the decisive day, it had begun terribly. His back and head and neck were a linear mass of discomfort. His scouts were as unreliable as usual. The King's Own Bronald Archers were late in rising and slow to form. The Northshire Grenadiers were poorly dressed, their lines practically serpentine. On the ridge behind him, the heavy weapons batteries were far from prepared – at least by his standard – and his surprise inspection had caught them flat-footed. Now they scurried about in haste aligning themselves by regulation, a job that could have been done the night before, if any of his officers showed the slightest bit of initiative. Oh, they were a surly, insolent lot, and he would see to it that each paid the price on their coming evaluations. Victory was so close – and this was his best opportunity. Yet his intuition was alarmed, for reasons he could not fully explain.

"The front rank is on the move, sir," said his executive officer, Colonel Duspor. "If you care to accompany me, I shall lead you to the ridge and you may begin the assembly."

"Any sign of the enemy yet?"

"None, sir – but we've only begun moving," Duspor replied.

"Oh, very well, let's go," he said, and with his staff entourage in tow, Thierry cantered painfully toward the ridge where he planned to align his force, face the enemy and begin the barrage. His signalman rode two horses over, stringing a line-of-sight chain of flag-carrying privates who would connect him to the heavy weapons no matter where he might go on the battlefield.

Telios, how his head hurt. Just one time, he thought, let everything go as it should.

And then, disaster.

It started as a sudden roar not fifty yards ahead of him, just atop the low ridge, where the first of his infantry regiments – the House of Teague Royal Maroons – was taking up its position at the center of the line. *Too early to be shouting*, he thought, *those damned idiots*. "Tell those fools to be quiet!" he shouted to Duspor.

But it wasn't the Royal Maroons who were shouting, and in another few seconds he recognized the truth. The Maroons weren't giving a battle cry – they were screaming in alarm. The roar he heard was the enemy, followed by the sound of metal on metal, of men colliding. Thierry squinted through the morning fog, cursed his failing eyes and recognized the uniform of CRG grenadiers – a mass of them, right in the center of his army, flailing away at his boys with those damned great bloody steel two-handers.

Everything is wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

"What in the bloody hell are those Guardsmen doing there!" Thierry shouted at Duspor.

"I don't know, sir."

"They're not supposed to be there, colonel!" Thierry ranted. "They're supposed to be three hundred yards back!"

"They were last night, sir!"

On the ridge above him the Royal Maroons broke and fled, tumbling back through the weak-kneed, pampered Northshire Grenadiers, creating a mass of confusion at the center of his army. *His* army. An extension of himself that was no falling apart and retreating, soiling his name, his bloody reputation!

"Colonel Duspor!" Thierry shouted. "Get those men back in line!"

Then came the terrible sound. He had heard it a hundred times, a thousand times, but this time it curdled his testicles. The snap



and hum and whirl of a trebuchet. A trebuchet not his own. Stone, he thought. Stone coming this way.

“Bloody hell they’re shooting at us!” he screamed, wheeling his horse and giving it the spur. *They’re all looking at me*, he realized as he fled the sound, racing back through the ranks of men awaiting their orders to move forward. *They’re looking at me run as if they wouldn’t. Well damned their hides, it’s not like I’m a soldier of the line, there’s no one here to take my ...*

The debris crashed just behind him, right in the center of his army. A perfect bloody shot, meant for him. Yes, meant for him. He stopped his flight and turned to stare at the hole in his ranks, at what used to be the Northshire Grenadiers. Barney Alt had sent that stone out looking for him. *A tarking assassination attempt!*

It had claimed some of his staff, too. Cut them down, all those fools who didn’t realize that when a veteran soldier turns and runs, it’s for a bloody good reason. Serves them right, he thought.

“Shall we move them forward, general?” Duspore demanded as he emerged from the chaos, his uniform covered in dirt from the near miss. “They do not appear to be many...”

“I want a barrage on their lines right now!” Thierry said. “Just as we planned it!”

“Do you mean on the lines we thought they were in or the lines where they seem to be, sir?”

“What?”

“If we fire on the ridge where they are now, we’ll kill our own men!”

“Damn it, Duspore, you’re to fire the heavy weapons on the targets we established!”

“But what if they’re not...”

“Do it, Duspore!”

The colonel gave the order and the young signalman snapped out a semaphore message to be relayed to the batteries. “General, if I may, there’s the matter of the Guardsmen to our front. If we could move our men forward...”

“My men move forward after a barrage, not before one,” Thierry said, his mind struggling to comprehend not only the situation but Duspore’s apparent lack of grounding in the fundamentals of combat. Moments later the great opening volley raced over their heads, as if the contents of a quarry had been heaved into the air. The ridge before them obscured the target, but the cloud of dust told him the volley had struck.

“Now, may I order the men forward?” Duspore asked.

He’s talking to me as if I’m a child, Thierry realized. *Very well*, he thought. *Patronized by my own executive officer. That will go down in the book.* “Colonel Duspore,” Thierry said, drawing himself up in his saddle, “what do we know of the enemy situation?”

“We know that he is there!” Duspore said, his frustration audible now. “He’s right there, General Thierry, right there in front of us, and he’s pushing us back before we even form for battle! Now may I please have permission to flank the bloody bastards and begin the business of killing them? Sir?”

“You have my permission, sir,” Thierry said coldly, “to return your sword to me and repair to our headquarters to await what provisions I may make for your conduct. You are most assuredly relieved of duty, Colonel Duspore, for I shall not go into battle with an executive officer who panics at first contact with the enemy and who insubordinately counsels actions which he has not first investigated. Do I make myself clear, sir?”

“Clear as crystal, general,” Duspore said, throwing his sword on the ground. “May Telios have mercy on us.”

“Staff!” Thierry shouted as Duspore thundered past him. “You there! Fetch me Lieutenant Colonel Carby! Tell him he’s been promoted!”

The scene at the center of his line was dreadful, absolutely dreadful, Thierry thought. Rebel grenadiers pushing his men backward, his whole advance stalled. *I need my cavalry*, he thought. *I need reports. I need to know what I’m facing. And I’ll not blunder my way into one of Barney Alt’s clever little traps like some junior lieutenant.*

“By Telios, my head hurts,” Thierry complained to himself.

## LaFranq

Normally he would have stood aside for this work, but this morning wasn’t normal. They had only one functional trebuchet thanks to the failure of the one the New Calpathian militia had brought along, and it was just a matter of time before the enemy spotted it and started raining stone down on their heads. So the trick would be getting off as many shots as fate would allow. Everyone pitched in – a chain of farmers and shopkeepers – passing the pile of stones they had collected during the night to his trebuchet crew, dumping them into the basket. LaFranq took his place at the receiving end of the line, shouldering the stones into the weapon, shouting back to the men in the line to keep them coming.

Weight was everything. Load it too light and the stone shrapnel would sail over the enemy’s head. Load it too heavy and it would plop meaninglessly at their feet – or worse yet, crack the throwing arm. Had this been a proper war, he would have grouped the stones beforehand, but as it was he felt fortunate to collect so much stone in the first place. He eyeballed the basket as each new addition fell into place for the second shot.

The enemy was somewhere over that ridge, but his eyes gave him no clues. In this task, the men who served as his spotters were his eyes, and the aiming took place in his mind. Equations. Trajectories. Distances. Counterweights. The basket seemed full enough, he thought, and he had the men bearing stones in the line set them down.

“Add one more counterstone!” he shouted as he stepped clear of the basket. “Ready!”

He listened for the sound each crewman checking his duties and calling back “Ready!” A ton of stone, give or take a few hundred pounds, sat prepared for launch.



*Sula, friend to mankind, guide this stone. Llughnah, our comfort, spread mercy among those struck down. Goddess and God, may the shot be of the Path.*

“Release!” he commanded.

## Willow

She had witnessed combat before, but nothing had prepared her for its close-up reality. *How am I to report our situation to Rialta when I can think of no words to describe it?* she thought, and huddled closer to Tera. She was supposed to signal the Lady when the Grenadiers could no longer hold their position, bringing forth the New Calpathian Militia and the 2nd CRG archers to cover their retreat. She had almost sent the Lady this thought-message the instant the fighting began.

How could they not be dead yet? The Grenadiers lashed out at an enemy that could have surrounded them in mere minutes, and yet it did not advance. Tera and their sergeants held the grenadiers back, fearful that too aggressive an approach could cut them off, and so they battled with those who stepped forward against them, defending a low rise in a broad field against a sluggish army that seemed reluctant to engulf them.

Tera did not take to the fighting, choosing instead to stay behind and keep his eye on her, for she was the key – their hope and salvation. If she died, they would be cut off, unable to communicate, and Tera protected her as if she were a fragile treasure. She clutched at the back of his belt, and every few moments he would reach a hand behind to make sure she was still with him. She could do little more, for she was not equipped for fighting. Her only weapon was a delicate steel dagger with a handle of silver and hematite that Rialta had given her before they parted. It would do her little good in a fight, but if it came down to a choice between death and capture... well, the dagger comforted her.

On her left, a surge of activity, and Willow turned in horror as a mass of maroon-jacketed soldiers pushed against the grenadiers protecting their flank. The Guardsmen packed in shoulder-to-shoulder, swinging their two-handed swords, crushing and shattering the swords and shields of the enemy, flinging blood and gore on each backstroke. The attempt pushed the grenadiers to what seemed their limit, coming so close that someone’s warm blood splattered on her face. But the tide subsided without explanation and the attackers fell back.

Then, whistling overhead, came the stones from their trebuchet. They slammed into the ground beyond, mowing down ranks of Gheralds, weakening their center yet again. The grenadiers had been fighting for more than ten minutes and still no one had driven them off the ridge.

“We are holding them,” Willow thought to Rialta. “I don’t know how, but for now, we’re holding them.”

“Blessed be,” came the silent reply. Willow opened her eyes again and tried not to dwell too long on any one of the horrors confronting her.

## Alt

“I’m beginning to feel hopeful,” the general said to Bergonat, who had joined him on the wall, “and it’s making me nervous. I almost never feel good during a battle, particularly one as odd as this.”

“Surely you must believe in our chances,” the counselor said. “Why else would you risk all by standing to fight here?”

“I like our chances of hurting Thierry this morning, and perhaps even repulsing him for a time,” Alt replied. “But to beat him outright? It isn’t possible.”

“And yet you’re beginning to believe it,” Bergonat said, savoring the words. “You’re beginning to think we can win.”

“It will pass,” Alt said, dismissing the thought. “All depends upon us recalling our shock troops safely. And so far, the grenadiers are giving a good accounting of themselves.”

“What of the cavalry?” Bergonat asked.

“I just passed the order to Rialta,” Alt said. “They should be in play in just a moment.”

“Hand me those glasses,” Bergonat said, and put them to his eyes. “There they are, coming out of the trees.” He handed them back to Alt, who focused them on the sight of the horsemen pouring out of the wood line above the heavy weapons arrayed on the second ridge. There was practically no one to oppose them.

The trap had been sprung.

Could it be? Could they really win it all at once?

Alt handed the glasses back to Bergonat. “Counselor, tell me what you see. I cannot bear to watch.”

## Dannan

They were unopposed, and the trebuchets lay just ahead in rows, fat wooden monsters feed by armies of servants. Only when it was too late did the crews recognize the new threat sweeping down upon them, and most of them merely turned and ran. One bold group tried to swing its weapon to face the cavalry charge point-blank, but their machine was unwieldy and the result was disastrous. The horsemen swarmed over the crews, hacking them down as they ran or stood to fight.

Dannan looked south to the main body of the Gheraldic army and saw that it was beginning to respond. There was the cavalry, held in reserve instead of being sent out to scout, and now it raced toward him. It would almost be a straight-up fight, but Dannan’s task was here, with the trebuchets, not there on the field. The Clydish cavalry had reached the enemy’s war engines, but now the riders had to dismount and destroy them.

He leapt from his horse and bounded up onto the first of the heavens. LaFranq had briefed him once the night before, but now worried that the technology would be too tricky. The heart of the machine was a torsion bar, a great timber reinforced and girded by thick ropes. Dannan located the spot just beyond the cradle where the pivoting arm lay and swung his *sioboeth* at the thick cords that connected it. One stroke was not enough, and neither was five. He stood above the iron-like bundle of rope, hacking as if at a stubborn log. I should have brought an axe for this, his thought.

The seventh stroke did the trick, not so much slicing the ropes as weakening them until they exploded. Wood splintered and loose ends flew around like angry hornets. This was one machine that would not throw again today.

Dannan jumped down, pulled out a grenade of Pichian Fire from his pouch and lit the fuse. The flaming liquid inside coated the base of the trebuchet when the grenade broke on it, and tongues of fire began to lick up the beams. Satisfied, Dannan stepped back to survey the rest of the job. All along the ridge other cavalymen were completing similar actions, while just below them the rest of the Clydish riders duelled from the saddle with their Gheraldic counterparts.

His Fionnan communicator, Thaney Grace, rode up beside him as he remounted his horse.

"We're overmatched," she said. "I've sent Rialta word that we're withdrawing."

"Come on," Dannan said, "let's go help our boys disengage."

They rode hard toward the swirling fight, and at the last moment Dannan loosed his *sioboeth* and said a quick prayer.

## Thierry

Perhaps it was the destruction of his heavy weapons that pushed him into action. Before it had all seemed a matter of methodical, carefully considered procedure. He knew his forces outnumbered theirs, that he held the edge in heavy weapons, training, and leadership at the lowest ranks. His greatest enemy, he had thought, was haste.

But the sight of his trebuchets burning on the ridge awakened his mind to the possibility of actual defeat, and once Thierry committed to a plan of action he was hard to dissuade. He stopped giving his orders through intermediaries and rode to the front line himself, pushing the men forward from the positions where they had crouched. Soon the ridge was a sea of maroon jackets and the absurdly small band of grenadiers who had held them up was fleeing across the field to safety.

Normally he would have sent his cavalry to pursue them, but since his horsemen were otherwise occupied with running off the mounted Clydes, Thierry ordered his archers at the double and attempted to cut the grenadiers off. The trap almost worked, but a solid group of Clydes in bright blue jackets appeared on the field and discouraged his pursuit. *There will be time*, he thought. *We're moving now, and there's no way they can stop us.*

Thierry dispensed with the usual parade-ground display and brought his force over the ridge at once, trailing units catching up with the leaders and forming on the move into a thick line, three regiments deep. They had farther to march than he had expected, for while the grenadiers had moved up, the rest of the Clydes had moved back, and the stones he marched over told him that his trebuchet barrage had killed nothing but grass.

His men received the first volley of arrows at long range and barely even paused. "That's it, my boys," he shouted, urging them forward. "Keep it coming!" He had hardly slept and had started the day off cranky, but now he was in a battle, and throughout his career he had always warmed to the big fights. The enemy was at hand now, and he could smell victory. The early hour had been Alt's, but Thierry had weathered his enemy's expected tricks. The rest of the day would belong to him.

His men stopped short of the enemy barricade and raked the line of farmers with a mass volley of arrows. Clydes without shields fell before him in rows. It was a brave defense, Thierry realized, one worthy of honor. But it was also pointless. *So sad*, he thought as his men charged forward.

## Rialta

The tide had turned against them, the Lady of Gwynyr realized as she processed the thoughts of everyone to whom she had tuned her soul. Alt's grenadiers were spent, exhausted, shattered, cowering and panting behind the front lines. The cavalry had escaped, but could not return – its way was blocked by pursuing Gheraldic dragoons. Below the tower, on the plain surrounding the Barrow, the Gheraldic regulars pressed the thin first line, anchored by the New Calpathian Militia, farmers from The Edain and 2nd CRG archers. And though she could not see the line, she felt its strength fading.

Behind it lay the Gwynyrians, the Men of Llyr, the Edain Irregulars. Perhaps they would stand.

But their army was collapsing.

Rialta hoped that the Fionnan beside her in the tower would not notice her tears, but she had no time to open her eyes to check. She was too busy trying to find some solution, reaching out with her mind toward the forces she had sensed earlier.

## Father Ash

The bitterness burned alkaline within his chest. A lifetime in the Valand, of duty and service, reduced to this: sitting alone on a horse watching as others fought the great battle of his age. It made his mood foul and murderous, and these were alien emotions to him. Recent events had dictated these feelings, had changed him, had led him to this lonely hill – when he should have been down in the fray, his brothers by his side, turning the tide with their matchless skill.

*Irony has never been a Valand strength, but we shall all have to adapt to it now*, he thought. How ironic was it that the man who led the mutiny against him had been Father Cliff, the very leader Father Ash had considered his most loyal and disciplined sub-

ordinate? Or that the act of demonstrating his superior prowess in single combat with a traitor would somehow consume the One Hundred in such a bloody fratricide? Cliff was an excellent swordsman, but no match for Ash, and the senior commander had expected that his victory would settle things, convincing those who wavered which side was righteous. Yet it seemed to have the opposite effect, and soon more *sioboeths* were drawn. Rialta or Rowene? Each man had to choose, and it split the Valand in two.

He didn't want to think about it. Only a Valand could kill a Valand, but seldom had it ever happened. And then, in a single night... scores of them.

It didn't matter, he thought, it couldn't matter. One Valand could change the world, and as painful as his duty was, it remained clear. His *sioboeth* was sworn to Gwynyr, to the line of the High Priestess, to the survival of the Old Path in a sea of enemies, and Rialta had been a mistake. Rowene's mistake. A mistake only he could correct now.

He had been watching for the arrival of the rebel Valand, those who had backed Rialta in last night's battle and won at a senselessly bloody price, and when he spotted them on the road riding hard to the south Ash immediately began counting. Fifteen, sixteen... twenty-one in all, twenty-one warriors left out of what began as One Hundred, with no Va in sight. Perhaps they had been released from duty, left to choose their own allegiances, but it hardly mattered. Now twenty-one of his former brothers would attempt to turn a battle against his side, twenty-one Valand in a battle against thousands of soldiers.

They could not survive. They could not prevail. Never would he have risked their lives in something so pointless. The sadness of it all, the great waste of such men, surged across his heart.

But so be it, Ash concluded. Division had consumed the One Hundred, and now misplaced idealism would finish the job. He had survived, and would survive, and at the end of the day he would return to Gwynyr and Rowene and begin rebuilding the One Hundred.

The only certainty was this: Rialta, the cause of all this tragedy, would not see another sunrise. Of that he was assured, for he had assigned the task to himself.

## Tera

The spirit was beginning to rise again among the grenadiers, and Tera could feel it growing like a great wave that feeds on the receding of the one before it. They had been thrown off their position and cast back to the safety of their own lines, but now the fear and exhaustion were fading and the old confidence was returning. Men who had sat upon the ground and sobbed like little children moments before were now standing, watching the battle to their front, regaining their courage. The rally was on.

But Tera didn't want to go back. The thought of another battle sickened him, and he struggled to keep his mind on the task before him: stopping the bleeding from the arrow wound in Willow's chest. Shock was beginning to set in, and she was pale and cold, but at least she was still responsive.

"We're not beaten yet, are we?" she asked.

"No," Tera said, pressing the wadded bandage against the wound. "The grenadiers are rallying."

"They're such brave men," she said. "Really, all of you are. Thank you for not leaving me on the field, John. You could have simply run away."

"You're light enough," he replied, and as he moved the bandage, for just one moment, his finger slipped into the wound. He had not consciously willed it to do so, but his hand felt as if it were guided. Willow's soul flashed across his consciousness like sun bursting through cloud, and both man and women gasped at the encounter.

*I know who you are.*

Tera recoiled from the meeting, shocked by the intimate recognition, and the wound pulsed blood again. "I'm sorry," he said as he reapplied pressure. "That was an accident."

"There are no accidents, John Tera," Willow replied. "You have to leave me now, don't you?"

"Yes," he said, knowing the answer to be true. "We're rallying. I don't want to fight anymore."

"But you must," she said. "I understand that."

He sat with her for a few more minutes, even as the grenadiers formed their ranks and began marching back toward the fight. Once the bleeding had stopped and he had wrapped a bandage around her chest, there was no longer any excuse to hold him with her.

"You keep safe," he said.

"I will see you again," she said. "But first you must go defend the Lady."

*The Lady*, he thought as he trotted to catch up. *Is it really all about her?*

Ahead lay a broad field of battle, with tangles of men fighting hand-to-hand at the center and left flank. He fingered his rapier hilt and felt the old terror merging with the desire to draw blood. *It goes poorly for us*, he realized, *but some skilled steel may yet change matters. All we need is the favor of the Goddess now.*

That was when he recognized them in their black robes: Valand on horseback, striking at the rear of the enemy lines, leaping to the ground and slashing their way into the surprised Gheralds. A pitiful number, but Valand nevertheless – men we counted lost to us.

The grenadiers broke into a run, holding their two-handers before them as they neared the fight. Tera loosed his rapier from its scabbard and felt a battle cry rise in his throat, and in the moment before he plunged it into his next adversary he felt as powerful, as light and free as he had ever had been.

## Thierry

He had gotten too close. A simple mistake and a common one, but annoying nevertheless. The attack was going well on the right, and he had joined it, encouraged it, urged it on. But as his ranks on the right advanced and the farmers fell back, the center of his line had stalled, and Thierry had been slow to respond. Well, how could he *not* have been slowed? He was pressing an advantage, and it cost him his overall view of the field. *Duspor was at fault here*, Thierry reasoned. His insubordination had required his removal, but normally he would have been available to spot the faltering regiments at the center and reinforce them.

There was still time to recover, he reminded himself as he rode back toward the center. He still held the most important advantages, and the pause at the center was mostly the result of the routed grenadiers reentering the fray. They were ferocious fighters, brawny giants with swords that stirred fear in the minds of his best troops, but they were only men. They would get tired, they would be overwhelmed by numbers, and then *they* would feel the fear.

But rounding the rump of the salient at the center, Thierry spotted a sight that made his blood drain cold. *Valand!* A score of them, where they were not supposed to be and fighting for the other side, pinching the very center of his army against the grenadiers and blue-jacketed militia!

*Betrayed! Betrayed by men whom he had granted passage!*

A series of calculations ran swiftly through his brain. His army advanced on both left and right around this rock at the center. If both flanks could turn, the rock could be surrounded and reduced, but if either the left or the right faltered, then his army would lose cohesion.

It played both ways: This fight at the center of the battle could lead suddenly to both victory or defeat for either side, and though Thierry could grasp his own advantage, he remembered the lesson of his mentor. Win the battle before it is fought. He wanted a fight where the only opportunity for sudden victory was his own, a battle in which the enemy's choices were limited to how best to lose. Proceeding in a battle the enemy could win despite all the Gheraldic advantages was irresponsible.

"Pull back!" he shouted, at first to no one in particular. Thierry regained his composure and focused his attention on the lieutenant colonel now filling Duspor's slot. "Send messengers to the left and right flanks and have them disengage and countermarch to form a new line here. We risk losing cohesion."

Horsemen raced off a few moments later to deliver the word and Thierry's attention returned to the Valand. They fought with chilling efficiency, and the odds against them hardly mattered – they formed a sphere of flashing steel that none of his hand-fighters could penetrate.

"Staff!" he shouted again, and a young lieutenant emerged at his side. "Bring me an archer platoon to this spot, at the double."

One platoon should be enough, he thought. If I can't kill them hand-to-hand, I'll kill them at range.

## Alt

"The idiot is pulling back," Bergonat said, lowering his field glasses. "He's on the verge of flanking our grenadiers and he's pulling back."

"He doesn't understand his position," Alt said, taking the glasses from the disbelieving councilmember. "Therefore he doesn't like it."

"What should we do in counter?" Bergonat asked.

"Go down there and kill us some," said Casar. Alt shot him a withering look.

"If he pulls back, we pull back," Alt said. "Pass the word to the commanders and Rialta. When Thierry disengages, our troops are to displace to the second line and join with the men of Llyr."

"There's no place to go after that," Bergonat said. "Except forward."

"Correct," Alt replied. "And if Thierry attacks such a position, he will have forgotten the wisdom of always leaving your enemy a means of escape."

Alt focused his field glasses on the center of the battle. He still didn't understand why these Valand had joined him, but they were eating their way through Thierry's army like a drop of acid through fabric. Now the Gheralds had closed in behind the Highlanders, but they had almost fought their way through to the grenadiers. A miracle? Or training? The Valand surprise had killed relatively few Gheralds, but it had shaken them and forced his opponent into a perfectly reasonable blunder.

He closed his eyes for a moment and let the future play out like a memory. The line falls back, a new line forms, the Gheralds come to meet it. Still outnumbered. Either each of his men fights with the strength and courage of epic heroes or they collapse and everything comes to a sudden end. Unless Thierry compounds his mistake and disengages for the day...

Alt said a silent prayer for the latter, and tossed in a nod to the Old Path deities as well. Couldn't hurt, he reckoned.

Dannan

The chase had gone on for more than an hour, with Dannan's troops looking for a way around their Gheraldic pursuers while Thierry's horsemen drove them east and prevented their turn to the south. He kept expecting their pursuers to give up: they were getting no closer. But another look back told him his enemy was doggedly content to force the issue. The cavalry battle, if it ever happened, would be separate from the main fight.

"When did you last hear from Rialta?" Dannan asked Thaney Grace as they sat in their saddles on a grassy rise that gave them a good view of the oncoming enemy cavalry. "Does she know our situation?"

"I have not heard from her," Grace said. "But she knows where we are."



"Please try to reach her," he said, wheeling his horse around to catch up to the rest of the unit. She spurred her horse to stay up with him.

"It's kind of hard doing this on the move, you know," she grouched. "If I don't pay attention to where I'm going, I'll run into a tree."

"Trust your horse," he said. Dannan slowed his pace a bit and nodded to Grace. The Fionnan closed her eyes, and within a few seconds her eyelids were flickering and her face was flush. They flew wide when she reopened them.

"Dannan," she began, her voice wondrous. "It's you."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Lady. She calls for you. It's *you*, Seamus Dannan."

"What does she want?" he asked.

"She wants you to come to her. Now. *Right now*. She senses danger. And if the Lady calls for you, then you must be..."

"I must be what?"

"The hero, Seamus. The one prophecy said would rise from Clyde. The hero of all the Clydes."

Her words fell on him. How could it be *him*? The hero of all the Clydes?

And then a thought occurred: Was this why his parents had raised him as they had? He was shocked and terrified and excited all at once. Yes, he had a special role. He had always sensed it: a destiny that kept him separate and alone, but also one that gave him strength at the worst times. And after all these years, was this finally the day that he would understand it?

"But how am I to reach her?" he asked Grace. "We cannot turn except to fight, and if I engage with the Gheralds, the cost will be too great."

"She doesn't call for *us*," Grace replied. "She calls for you. You alone, Seamus. And you must hurry, because her voice in my mind is reedy and strained. She has been in the spirit realm now for far too long, and she nears her limits."

"Will you explain to Sergeant Ethen?" Dannan said.

"Yes," she said. "Now go."

Dannan turned his horse about and urged it on, plotting his course as he rode. He would slip past their pursuers behind the nearest wood line, then cut a diagonal path to the southwest, back to Clyde Barrow, the battle and Rialta. Somewhere, over miles of hills and fields and woods, lay the destiny he had sought his whole life, and he raced toward it headlong.

## Rialta

**F**eet. Thousands of feet. Dust and stone and soft grass trampled. Horses. Wagons. And a dark figure. Hunting. Fast-moving clouds, scudding and racing and swirling as they went, the sky behind too blue, the wind too fast, everything accelerated and upsetting.

The Fionnan. What was her name? The little one. The harp player? From Sidon, yes, from Sidon, she plays for the Sulists. Pretty and small. She strokes my face, my hair, and her mouth moves but I can't pick out her words. What is her name? Very annoying that I can't remember.

Wake up? Is that what she said? Am I sleeping? Is this a dream? I am never so chilled in dreams, but it's cold in this tower. And only moments ago I was in the sky, on the road...

"Rialta, my Lady," Poole Arduus said, shaking her. "You've spiked a fever. You must come back to your body now. I cannot hold you here any longer myself."

A fever. Hold me? Rialta flexed her fingers and suddenly found herself a physical being again, a realization so shocking that she gasped out loud. *I've been mind traveling. I've been holding the entire battle in my third eye.*

"That's right," Arduus said, pulling her forward and enfolding her in thin arms. "You're back with us now, my Lady. Your fight is over for today. Rest now."

The warmth of Arduus's shoulder felt comforting, and Rialta burrowed into it like a lost child who has been found. So cold. She shivered and Arduus held her closer. So cold and lonely, and still parts of her trailed through the ether, like smoke returning to a fire. Armies. Men. Movement. A dark figure. Dannan and Alt and Tera and LaFranq and Willow, somewhere, wounded, bleeding, hiding her pain and fear.

"Is the battle won?" Rialta asked.

"No," said Arduus. "We are safe for the moment, and the enemy has withdrawn. But the Gheralds are reforming and will soon attack again."

*I have failed, Rialta thought. I took myself as far as I could go, and now I have failed. There is no more Spell of Overlooking, no more protection, no more communication. They fight without me now, and I am a miserable, small woman.* She began sobbing, and Arduus readjusted herself and hugged her closer.

"Take me to Mary Almaterra. Please," Rialta whispered.

## Alt

**H**e would worry about Rialta later, Alt told himself repeatedly, but he was lying. He was worried about her now, and it was an inopportune time for it. The Gheralds were moving forward again, their lines strong and not nearly as depleted as he had hoped. He needed to focus on this problem, not think about a psychic casualty who would probably recover her strength. If he couldn't win here – right now – then none of that mattered anyway. Rialta would become a prisoner. He could see the



coming fight clearly, but victory? It was too many moves deep into the game, and he couldn't find the progression.

But it wasn't too late to quit. He could pull back, couldn't he? Send up the white flag? Perhaps broker a deal that would send some of these people home safely? He mulled the worst-case scenario frantically as the Gheraldic lines moved within range of his archers and the first volley sprung into the air. Still outnumbered two-to-one against trained troops on ground that gave him few advantages. The wise thing...

"General Alt!"

Bergonat ran toward him, accompanied by a dust-covered man he had never met before.

"General, this is Lieutenant Glovan from New Calpathia. A messenger. With good news for a change!"

The oddly dressed officer bowed deeply. He looked like a road-weary middle-aged accountant, not a soldier, and what passed for his uniform was really nothing more than a cape over civilian clothes.

"General Alt, I come bearing greetings from Mayor General Naesa, who trails not two miles behind me with the Celon Four Hundred. We are lancers, newly raised and trained at New Calpathia, riding upon the 400 mighty war horses you had sent from Gherald. Mayor General Naesa thanks you and bids me tell you that we are at your disposal."

"What do you mean *I* had sent?" Alt asked. "I've done no such thing. What are you talking about?"

"The ships bearing the horses arrived some weeks after your departure with a letter from Messenger Tuckard of Darbas that they were for General Barney Alt and the defense of the Clydish homeland. Naesa assumed that you had sent for them. It was he who ordered us outfitted and trained. We'd be farther along in our skills, but there was some sense of urgency to find you and join in."

Four hundred lancers? Alt turned the thought over in his mind and wondered whether it was his Sulist prayer or his Old Path prayer that had done the trick. He grabbed the messenger by the collar and pulled him suddenly, shoving a map into his face.

"Show me where Naesa is," Alt demanded.

"Here," Glovan said. "Just south of town on the Clyde River Road. He may be farther north now."

Alt considered the position. "Bergonat will escort you back, and you will ride like hell, do you understand? You are to tell Naesa to drop whatever traveling gear you carry and swing your force wide east of this point. This spot on the map is our line right there." He pointed to the developing battle. "Got it? If you swing your lancers wide here, you will enter the battle there, on the flank of the enemy. You must tell Naesa to hurry, and when you attack, attack hard into that flank. You must roll the enemy up, push him west. Bergonat, do you understand?"

"Yes sir," the councilman said.

"Then go, dammit!"

The two men hurried off awkwardly, with Bergonat screaming for a horse, any horse, and Alt recalculated the game. Four hundred unexpected lancers. The war horses doubled their strength. The element of surprise figured in as well, as did their position on the flank. *Maybe enough*, he thought. *Maybe enough to drive Thierry back another time.*

But maybe not. In the distance to the north Alt could see the dust of another unit on the march. Reinforcements for Thierry most likely. That would explain his willingness to pull back before. His patience. Why risk all when you have another card to play?

Down on the field below the town, the battle was now fully joined, and Clydes who had crouched now stood, some volleying with bow, others loosing swords and hammers and pikes and closing with the tight ranks of the Gheraldic infantry. How many times had he swung between despair and hope on this day, this morning turned to afternoon under a heavy summer sky? In the north, a thunderhead towered above the field, the summer heat fueling it, feeding it, and the air grew electric.

They had held on, and they might yet win more time – if skinny old Naesa could just come in at the right place at the right moment.

## LaFranq

Tera fingered his rapier nervously as the line of Gheraldic infantry before them neared its charge. LaFranq clapped him hard on the back.

"Wanna trade weapons, lad?" LaFranq asked. "Your highland steel is pretty, but I favor the reliability of a good hammer."

"Aren't you supposed to be throwing rocks?" Tera asked testily.

"Ran out," LaFranq said. "Besides, I like it better when I can see what I'm doing."

"Well just don't confuse me with the enemy, you blind old bear," Tera said.

*Confuse you? LaFranq thought. I'm here to protect you, you great wiry bugger. If Rialta sees something in the man, then the man needs to come out of this fight standing.*

"Here it comes!" LaFranq shouted. "Steady now, boys!"

"How can you..." Tera began the question, but the battle cry of the Gheralds cut him off. They broke into a run with their shields held up before them, and as they did the Clydes roared and surged forward. The two masses met in a shattering crash, and in the first seconds there was nothing but confusion.

LaFranq met his first Gherald head on, lowering his thick shoulder and plowing into him with an explosion that started in his hips and thighs and drove the man right off his feet. He died quickly under Rolph's hammer. The second to die was the man who tried to double Tera. LaFranq smashed his head from behind. Never saw it coming.

The old sergeant kept Tera on his hip, never venturing too far away. The numbers were against them, but the Clydes were physically larger and had better weapons. LaFranq soon found himself enthralled with the battle, roaring and swinging and punching.

War wasn't life, but he was never as alive as when he stood on the precipice of death. It filled his lungs and fired his muscles and even though he could barely see his opponents, his eyes no longer mattered.

It was better not to see the man you kill.

## Naesa

Weeks of training, of travel, of nervous wondering – in the end it all equated to this. His heavy horses trotted into a line of black equine muscle on the flank of a great battle, and at his order, four hundred untested lances went from vertical to horizontal.

One hundred yards. He gave the order and they charged.

An entire life devoted to service, to his people, to the art of governance and the ideals of democracy. And yet somehow it had come to this: bouncing awkwardly in the stirrups of a huge Gheraldic steed, a lance gripped tightly in the crook of his arm, one hundred yards to a battle with the Empire for the freedom of Darbas. He was a leader yet not a soldier, not built for it like the other men. But he had gotten them to this point, and for that he was proud.

Fifty yards. The maroon Gheraldic platoon on the end of the line wheeled about. *Archers! Twenty-five yards!* Naesa bent forward in the saddle, preparing for the collision. He picked out a man. *That one. Drive this lance through his chest. Aim for the chest. Do my duty.* The archers drew their bows.

“For Darbas!” he shouted, and the Four Hundred joined the cry as they covered the final yards and the Gheraldic archers released their arrows in a deadly hiss.

Naesa saw the arrow that split his skull and killed him, but it was a mercifully short flight.

Thierry

The thunderstorm blew in from behind them, heralded by cracks and the sweet smell of rain on heavy gusts of wind. Within moments it was dumping fat drops that fell in sheets, and his view of the battle took on a silvery sheen. It seemed to make the battle quieter, more distant. Almost peaceful.

The horsemen on the eastern flank had alarmed him, and they had certainly delayed the inevitable. Their first charge had been devastating, consuming an archer company and overrunning a whole regiment of infantry. But the pace and focus of the battle ebbed and flowed, and soon the horsemen revealed themselves as well-armed amateurs. A gallant group, yes, but now scattered, unsure. A twenty-minute nuisance, really.

It progressed well, Thierry thought. The western flank of Alt's defense had been the weak spot throughout the battle, and now it fell back, periodically collapsing. Within another few minutes those defenders would be pressed against the useless wall of the town, and then the center would be truly enveloped. Highland steel had made Alt's defense credible, but numbers would win it. As he always told his officers, there is a tyranny to math. Alt should have learned that from their time together in Bhengal.

The rain cooled him, and he found his mind wandering to his actions after the war. If Alt and this mountain witch survived he would place them under arrest. The other leaders would be executed swiftly, but Arnell wanted those two and would have them. Once this threat was eliminated he could begin his mission in earnest, and his life beyond beckoned to him like a young woman singing sweetly. Finally, the miseries of a career invested in the service of the Empire would be rewarded.

Thierry wondered for a moment where he would spend his retirement, but quickly settled on the Farmingham Estate his family owned north of Arnell. Then his focus returned to the western flank, and he trotted toward it, preparing his final blow.

Only the sound of thousands of men behind him diverted his attention.

## Bartelmus

He had promised Alt he would return with his army to DuQaddic, and he had broken his promise. True. But were not some things more important than a promise? Than his honor? Killing Gheralds, for instance. And ridding their land of their oppressors? Was that not a goal that both he and Barney Alt, his former captor, shared? Cannot two former enemies who share a common goal join together? That was Alt's message to him all along, and they were not so different.

It wasn't a full army, barely larger than the force he had used to fortify Argon. Too many DuQaddish were either stricken by the Blood Death or fearful of it, and the other Third Sons had demanded sufficient forces to protect their *hasadas* against any marauders who might come in the winter, for it would be a lean year for everyone on Darbas. Bartelmus understood their concerns and had not argued. He simply sat outside and waited, and eventually Third Son Taumuan came out and informed him what forces had been granted for his request.

And so they had marched, an infantry without cavalry (for all the mounted units had been returned to DuQaddic), with Bartelmus in command and several of their secretive Korvish-Sopkan advisors along for the ride. He didn't particularly dislike them, Bartelmus thought, but they struck him as very similar to the Gheralds he had met. *Is this the way it works?* He wondered. *Do we merely take enemies as friends to cast off our old enemies, only to replace one with another?* That would be sad and foolish. But Alt seemed different. Perhaps they would break this cycle now.

He had arrayed his men rapidly, recognizing that he was arriving on the field at a crucial moment and time was more important than perfect order. In truth, Bartelmus welcomed the sudden downpour, the thunder crashing in the background. It gave the setting a certain drama, and Bartelmus liked drama. He charged his front ranks early, and they jogged down the hillside toward the trapped Gheralds. Thousands of DuQaddish, fighting not for themselves alone, but for Darbas. How proud he was of them! The enemy turned, suddenly confused, and its forward progress evaporated. All along General Thierry's line, veteran soldiers began to panic.

Would the Clydes, when they remembered this battle, sing his name? Would the Mullaqat learn of it and place him in their poems? And his own people – would he become their hero, too, at last? Could he paint over the stain that Argon had left upon his reputation? And would the memory of this event help heal the wounds left by the *ouhasandans* and sanctimonious Second Sons? He prayed that it would, for he loved his people with all his heart, and the shame of their atrocities upon unarmed civilians tainted his every happy thought. We may think of the *ouhasandans* as somehow separate from the higher castes, but they are our own creation, our own responsibility. Bartelmus had vowed to do something about that when all this was over, but his first task was redemption.

Despite the surprise he had sprung on Thierry, it was not a quick battle. The terrified Gheralds, pressed between two enemies, fought with great courage, and Bartelmus's losses were high. But the matter had been settled the moment he had arrived on the field, and Bartelmus was a patient man. Within an hour it was done.

## Alt

**M**iracles happen, the general thought as he saw to the disposition of his countrymen, now prisoners of Darbas. *One moment the Clydes teeter on the edge of defeat, the next they are aided by former enemies and the battle falls into their laps.* He only wished Marbor had been there to see it, and in the stunned aftermath of the campaign he suddenly discovered that his primary emotion was loneliness.

He met Bartelmus on the field, his rescuer beaming with pride as he bowed deeply in his saddle.

"General Alt, my sword is yours," he said.

"You saved my butt, general," Alt replied.

"Oh, you would have found a way out on your own," Bartelmus said, sitting upright again. "It was only a matter of time."

"What will you do now?" Alt asked.

"Return to DuQaddic," said Bartelmus. "We've missed two plantings, and the harvest will be weak. We came not for conquest, but to prove that we, too, love Darbas. Besides, we've all had about enough adventure, don't you think, General Alt?"

"Quite enough," he answered.

It took the better part of an hour to find General Thierry among the dead. Alt stopped by to pay his respects and spent several silent moments regarding the aged face of his old commander. Memories of his early days fighting the Korvish-Sopkans in Bhengal and on the frontiers of Calpathia streamed through him, and there was no joy in his victory. Thierry had never been a friend, but he had once been a comrade. In death he seemed both small and worn, his eyes left wide in shock and his chest split in two.

LaDram and Bergonat came to relieve him, passing on news from other quarters: Dian was dead, as was Naesa. The Gheraldic cavalry, unseen for much of the day, had escaped back toward Sidon, and the cavalry of the 2nd CRG was only now returning. But most of the news was good.

His biggest concern now was Rialta, who lay in the Daughters of Llugnah's infirmary under a wildfire fever, tended to by Mary Almatara and Chibura. Like so many, she had given everything she had today, and more.

Alt rode slowly back through the army toward the town, worrying about what he would find when he reached the Lady of Gwynyr. He was so preoccupied that he didn't hear it at first.

It began slowly, but rose as he went.

The army was cheering him.

## Dannan

**M**ary Almatara's smile had faded, but her dark eyes only grew in their intensity. "Seamus," she said, "there's little you can do for Rialta now. She just needs to rest, and so do you."

Rest. It sounded so sweet. The Daughters of Llugnah infirmary was full of empty beds, and their cool white cotton sheets sang to him. To lie down on a real bed again, to let the day and the battle fall away...

But that was one thing he could not consider. Lady Rialta slept fitfully, with Chibura wiping down her face and arms with wet cloths, and yet somehow she had called for him. There was some purpose for his being here, some danger that threatened her, only she could not rise from her fever to tell him. Every intuitive signal that reached him spoke of vigilance, and for that he was thankful. He had not come all this way to fall asleep at the moment he was most needed.

"Thank you, Mother Almatara," he said. "But I'm fine."

"You are hardly that," she said, stroking his arm. "But I will not torment you. Do as you wish, Seamus Dannan. We're all quite proud of you today."

*Proud of me. I wish I was proud of myself,* he thought. The second-guessing began almost as soon as he departed the cavalry and started his overland trek back to Clyde Barrow. Why had he run so long and so far when pursued by the Gheraldic dragoons? True, they were greater in number, but none of them had steel swords and lances. Had he only turned his men to fight, perhaps they could have cut through the enemy and returned to the battle. Perhaps the Clydes could have defeated Thierry without the need of the DuQaddish. It was all so simple when he was alone, so easy to be brave when someone else gave the orders, yet when the responsibility of command fell to him, his only thought was to run. The shame of it made the skin of his neck burn.

But he would not fail Rialta again. Standing guard over her felt so natural, almost peaceful. She should sleep, and he should watch, and somewhere in that relationship he felt the glow of his truest self. Thaney Grace's words whispered to him, and his own terror of the responsibility she predicted gnawed at his gut, but maybe it was all so simple. Every queen needs a paladin, and in that

light his feelings for Rialta made sense. She was beautiful in an unconventional way and he loved to look at her, but the emotions this stirred were neither heated nor covetous. He loved her in a way that sought only to protect her, and it seemed his highest calling.

If she sought more from him than that, if she wanted him to be her Clydish hero, then he would offer it up. But not for himself.

Perhaps he could sit. That wouldn't violate his duty. Dannan moved a bundle of bedclothes down the bench by the door and eased onto it, placing his sheathed *sioboeth* across his lap. Much better. He felt his feet throb and his muscles hum. So tired...

He shook his head clear and made a quick inventory of the room, just as his mother had taught him. Rialta and Willow in the bed beside hers. Almaterra watching over them, and Chibura working. An entrance beside him, and four windows, three stories up, overlooking the street on one side and the courtyard on the other. Late afternoon light casting long shadows. Late afternoon. He had been awake for more than thirty-six hours...

Enough of that.

He could challenge anyone who entered by the door with only a turn and a step, and if someone scaled the stone walls to the windows he could cover the distance between his bench and Rialta in only four steps.

Footsteps scraping up the stairs to the hallway outside. Adrenaline spurted through his veins, and he drew his sword and rose in one motion, but it was only John Tera at the door.

"Glad to see you in one piece, though I'm hardly surprised," Tera said. "How is she?"

"Rialta is feverish, but she'll be fine," Dannan said.

"I figured *that*," said Tera. "I meant Willow."

Almaterra wrapped a slender arm around her son's waist and pressed herself against him. "I prayed you would come back," she said.

"Yes, and without a single wound," he said. "It's been a rather remarkable day."

"You boys can talk here, and you're welcome to take a nap if you like, but keep your voices down," Almaterra said, kissing John and returning to her post beside the priestess.

"You look like crap," Tera said.

"You're not exactly winning any beauty contests either," Dannan replied. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't know," Tera said distractedly, his eyes straying toward the beds where Rialta and Willow lay. "Worried about my mother, I guess. Sorry you missed the party, Seamus. Did you hear the way they cheered Alt?"

"No. Or I didn't know what they were cheering."

"Well," Tera said, lowering himself onto the bench, "I'm too tired for cheering. You?"

Dannan sat down beside him. "I'm okay."

"Seamus," Tera said quietly, "I'm supposed to be the stoic one. Remember?"

"Sleep will be nice," Dannan said, trying not to think about it too much. "But something is making me nervous. Everyone is still out in the field, and this compound is practically unguarded. The security here is atrocious."

"You're paranoid," Tera said, slumping against the wall.

They sat silently for a time, and Dannan felt his mind drifting – a pleasant feeling, really. Perhaps he really was worried about nothing, and John's presence comforted him. The future seemed to open before him, and he felt himself surrounded by friends. He imagined serving Rialta proudly alongside Tera, enfolded by purpose and fellowship. Whatever would come would come, but he would not be alone any more. No longer would he have to hide his true self, and after this campaign people would accept his Gwynyrian heritage as gift instead of threat. He was weary, but the fatigue had worn his anxieties smooth and old. Soon he would forget them entirely. It felt like a penny whistle tune his mother had taught him long ago, and the sound of it echoed through his mind, bringing with it the image of the fields outside his home in Celon...

"So I suppose you think that now you're both big heroes and don't have to work anymore, is that it?" Chibura stood over them with her fists on her hips. He hadn't even noticed her before, and it startled him.

"Yes," said Tera. "That's it exactly."

"Well, it doesn't sell around here," she said, and handed him a clay basin. "Go fetch me some more water, Johnny. Seamus, you can sit a while longer, but I may need your help in a bit as well."

"Yes ma'am," he said.

Tera looked at him and smirked. "I'll be back in a minute," he said. "And I'll see about getting you some relief, too."

## Tera

Aideen had been waiting for him in the hallway at the top of the stairs, sitting on a bench and embroidering. She put down her work when he emerged.

"What of the Lady?" she asked, threading a hand up his sleeve.

"She sleeps," Tera said. "Mother is with her, and they say she will be well."

"I'm sure she will be fine," Aideen said, and her face took on a sweet, sleepy expression as she drew closer to him. "Our war is over now, John," she said. "What happens next?"

He didn't know. There had been no time to think about it, and his mind was a jumble of fatigue. What *would* happen next? Would he return to the CRG? Would there even *be* a CRG? He had never seriously considered the prospects of surviving his enlist-



ment.

"I don't know," he said. "But mother needs me now. I'm going to get water. They're trying to keep Rialta cool."

"I'll go and fetch it for you," Aideen said, kissing him. She took the basin from his hand and headed down the stairs.

"And if you see Alt, tell him I said we need some guards up here," Tera called after her."

"Yes dear," she said, her voice echoing in the stairwell. Tera sat on the bench.

What *would* he do next? It was such a strange question. He'd never really had to ask it before, not for more than a decade. Aideen certainly had her plans, but what about Alt? Or Rialta. Would they need him as well? What of his mother? No doubt she had her hands full. And Dannan – everyone spoke of him now, and his victory over Brother Yarrow had been turned into a single-handed besting of a whole platoon of Valand. Would Dannan ask him to serve beside him? They were friends now, something neither had experienced in years, and Tera was sure Seamus would want his company in whatever endeavor was set before him.

No matter, Tera concluded. He would wait. He would listen. He would watch to see how everything shook out and do what was necessary, and if that did not suit Aideen, so be it. Time had changed him as it had her, and he felt no closer to her than he did to Willow, whom he barely knew. The handmaiden lay in the bed next to Rialta's in the other room, fading in and out of wakefulness. He reached deep into his pocket and felt the silver-and-hematite dagger she had dropped just before the arrow struck her. Tera had secured it, and as he ran his fingers over the metal sheath he felt something of her clinging to it... something timeless, something that ran deeper than this life.

"John," said the voice of Tanith Powdras. It was neither cooing nor pleasant, but called to him as if beginning a command. "John, get up. Get up now and RUN!"

Run? Run where? "Where would you have me go?"

"Get away, John! There's no time, and you cannot stand against him!"

Stand against whom?

The slightest sound to his right caught Tera's attention, and he turned to see a figure in a black robe slip through the window and land cat-like in the hallway. How could anyone ... they were on the third floor...

The robed man slipped back his hood and Tera recognized the face of Father Ash, his gray hair framed by the setting sun that streamed through the window behind him.

"Father," Tera said. "Father, what are you doing here?"

The Valand master's *sioboeth* hissed as it slid out of its sheath, and Tera understood. Ash had come for Rialta. Just inside the door...

"Seamus!" Tera shouted, drawing his rapier. "Seamus! He's here!"

Father Ash came at him with his robes swirling and his blade slashing. Tera blocked it with his rapier and kicked the bench at him, but the Valand cleared it gracefully, landing on silent feet and brushing Tera's sword out of his way with one sweeping, graceful swing.

The *sioboeth* felt cold as it entered his body, and Tera dropped to the floor of the hallway in disbelief. Ash gave him only a short look, shaking his head as he would at a foolish child, and moved on to the door.

## Rialta

She could almost feel the *sioboeth* piercing Tera's side in the hallway, and the sensation woke her, screaming. They were connected, and had been ever since Tera entered her through the wound. Now his wound pierced her...

Father Ash. The danger she had felt... It was Father Ash, had always been Father Ash. Her mother's warrior. Rowene's assassin...

At the door. It swung wide, and the Valand in his dark robes danced through it, deflecting Seamus Dannan's attack almost effortlessly. *Seamus... what was he doing here?*

Tera behind him, slumped against the wall in the hallway, his blood pooling on the floor... Seamus fighting desperately inside the room, pressing Ash hard... Willow awake now, screaming, and Almatra behind her, clutching Chibura. Everything around her hummed with connections, with friendships and histories, with loves and old fears. Yet Father Ash would rend them all, one by one – the ultimate expression of the power her line had created long, long ago. And then he would take her life, and Rowene would win, and the world would change yet again.

Rialta searched for her magic, for something to aid Seamus. *Oh, the gifts of that man!* Her love for him surged as he fought, throwing himself against the greatest of the Valand swordsmen. Surely no man had ever fought so boldly and wildly against a Valand master, his body and *sioboeth* a symphony of motion, striking low and high and low again, spinning and thrusting behind his back, ducking and rolling and coming back up to launch another attack. No Valand has ever faced such moves, she thought, for Seamus fights from his soul, and he fights for me...

And then Father Ash blocked a high strike and kicked Dannan hard in his chest, and the younger man staggered backward for just an instant. That was all Ash required.

His first slash opened Dannan's belly.

The second sliced his sword arm off at the elbow. Dannan's *sioboeth* clattered to the floor.

It happened so quickly that it registered first as a sickening feeling in her stomach before her conscious mind understood. Rialta begged for the fever to consume her again, for she could feel Dannan dying, quickly seeping away in shame and sadness...

All for nothing. All for nothing. Her entire life, and all the sacrifices of so many, only to end like this...



Almaterata rushed to her, enfolding her in an embrace and covering her against Father Ash's fatal stroke. Rialta tried to shove her away and Chibura tugged at her friend's waist, but the waif-like Daughter could not be budged. We shall all die together, Rialta realized.

"Lady Rialta," Ash said over the wailing around her. "I bear you a message from your mother. She says she loves you and will long mourn your death."

Some magic. Somewhere... something she could use... but her mind was fevered, frazzled, useless...

"I shall mourn you too," Ash said, raising his *sioboeth*. "But remember, there are many things worse than death."

The *sioboeth* hung above them in Father Ash's hands. But it didn't fall.

Ash's mouth flew open in shock, and as he staggered to the side, Rialta spotted Tera leaning in the doorway, his left hand holding his wounded side together, his right hand fumbling awkwardly for his rapier. As Ash turned, Rialta recognized the hilt of Willow's dagger protruding from the Valand's back and understood. The dagger she had blessed for Willow's protection had come back to her, had flown from Tera's hand into her enemy. *When did he learn to throw a dagger?*

Father Ash turned on Tera again, the blood flowing from the dagger in his back, and raised his *sioboeth*. Tera lifted his rapier feebly and prepared to fend him off as best he could, but in the moment before they engaged Chibura leapt from behind the Valand, tackling him around the waist and driving him down. Ash screamed in rage as his *sioboeth* hit the floor, then smashed his fist into Chibura's face.

Tera stepped toward them, but the color drained from his face and he slipped on his friend's blood, collapsing across Dannan, their bodies tangling on the stone floor.

From the open door came the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Alt's voice, shouting her name. Help coming...

She rose from her bed unsteadily as Willow shouted for her to stay down and Father Ash tried to reclaim his *sioboeth* and Chibura clung doggedly to his back. Help is coming, Rialta thought, help for all of us.

It is *our* victory, not mine, not Alt's, not any single person's, and no assassin could undo it. No single man, no magic that goes against the Old Path, no intention that is not pure shall undo what we have done...

And when she had stood, she raised her hands above her head and spread her feet wide and closed her eyes and opened herself to the Path, not willing, not intending, but surrendering. When she opened her eyes again the room seemed infused with silver, and every face shined – even Father Ash's. He could not strike her down. He did not have the strength.

Alt ran through the door with Casar at his side and stopped in shock.

Father Ash spotted them, gave up trying to reclaim his sword, pushed Chibura aside, and with Casar at his heels, slipped through the window and dropped three stories to the street below.

Alt caught Rialta around her waist as she slumped.

"Take me to John and Seamus," she whispered to him, and Alt lowered her beside the two soldiers.

Dannan did not speak, for there was no strength left in the great swordsman. *Poor, sweet Seamus. How had he found her?* His wounds were too great now. The High Priestess nuzzled up against his face and clutched him hard against her. *Such a great and lonely soul, so confused and ashamed. He shouldn't die this way, doubting himself...*

"You did it, Seamus," she whispered. "When it counted most, you did it."

She pulled back from him and looked into his eyes, as plaintive as a dying doe's.

"You will always be my hero, Seamus Dannan," she said, her voice husky with tears, and kissed him lightly on the forehead. *Please spirit, she prayed, let him feel this last blessing.*

As if released, his soul departed quietly.

She turned her attention to Tera, whose breathing had gone shallow.

"John," she said, grasping his hand and taking stock of his wound. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he whispered. "We shall talk about it in the next life, okay?"

"Oh my no," said Rialta, kissing him. "You'll live through this."

"I will?" Tera asked, wincing against the pain. "It doesn't feel like I will."

"It never does," said Almaterata as she knelt beside her son and took his face in her hands. "But sometimes we make it anyway."

*Epilogue***The Key to Darbas**

**T**he boat had skimmed across the placid waters of Sidon Harbor under a salty breeze, and even though the general was unsure of what duty called him, the trip was pleasant. Alt had settled on a spot under the rustling tarp, trusting the pilot and treating the day like a vacation – which it was, really. A holiday. He barely remembered what one felt like.

Late summer on the water. The light was flat and bright and the reflections danced in patterns on the tarp above him as they made their way out to The Giant's Foot, the island at the mouth of the harbor. He had never been there before, but it was famed for its ancient ruins and its Old Path circle of standing stones. And its beaches. Alt had never been a big fan of the beach, preferring instead to take his liberties poking curiously around the interiors of the places he had visited. Now a message called him to a day at the beach, and he resolved to relax and enjoy it like a normal person.

The small sailboat wove its way through the maze of coastal creeks and marshes that lay between the mainland and The Giant's Foot, and the island emerged on the horizon as nothing more than a hump in the flat landscape of reed and water. A carriage and a driver stood at the dock, and Alt observed them closely as they drew up alongside the pilings. A Clydish squire with a rough buggy waited for him, and he took a sailor's hand as he disembarked the boat and climbed onto the hack.

The driver rode him through a maritime forest of low, bent trees and rank inland marshes. Their road was packed sand, and the two horses pulled hard to keep them moving, but after a few moments the forest thinned out and they climbed a rough corduroy road of timbers through a line of dunes. Then the road stopped altogether and the driver reined the horses to a halt.

"You'll find them over there," the driver said, pointing toward the beach. Alt stood in the carriage and spotted their party: a cluster of tarps and umbrellas and horses just seaward of the dunes, with tiny figures of men and women sitting by a fire or bathing in the surf. The general tipped the driver, and set out walking.

It was a long walk, and the sand shifted under every step, so that by the time he neared their group he was sweating steadily under the late afternoon sun. Darbas was a temperate place, but summer seemed to stretch lazy and long here, and Alt suddenly found himself struggling with the overwhelming sense that he had been here before. And it was not an entirely pleasant feeling.

Willow greeted him, smiling broadly.

"She's in the surf," the handmaiden said, rising naked from her spot under a flapping tarp. "She will be so happy to see you."

Alt averted his eyes nervously from the beautiful young woman and recognized that the man lying beside her was Tera. He rolled over slightly and grinned at his commander.

"Welcome to the beach, general," Tera said.

"Well, I can see you're enjoying yourself," Alt said. "At least you've got your clothes on."

"Some of us look better this way," he said.

"And some of us don't," Alt said, nodding to Willow. She smiled. The wound above her breast seemed to be healing nicely, he noted.

The sand was hard-packed by the widely variable tide here, and the walking was easier. Alt considered the expanse of beach before him and stopped, stripping out of his boots and tunic and rolling up the bottoms of his trousers over his calves. He'd be damned if he'd strip naked like a Gwynyrian, but that didn't mean he had to walk on the beach like some pent-up emissary from the Court at Arnell, either.

The tide was out, and the beach extended more than one hundred yards to the line of breakers over rippling ribs of sand shaped by the retreating water. They were hard on his feet but they were cool and damp, and he slowed his pace and tried to enjoy the

feeling. The sun soaked through the thin cloth of his undershirt, and the sense of familiarity with the place surged upwards again, almost angering him. It was nonsense. He had never been here before. He was only confusing it with some other beach in some other land. They all looked the same to him, and he had never liked any of them.

As he neared the surf, Rialta popped out of a wave, her nude body propelled by a crumbling breaker. The Lady of Gwynyr shook the sea out of her hair and wiped her face, then opened her eyes and recognized him. She raised her hand in greeting, and a second wave, bigger than the one she had just ridden, smacked into her back and knocked her down.

Rolph LaFranq, his great hairy back matted with salt water, plucked her up. A current of jealousy filtered through Alt, but he stowed it and pretended not to be affected by the sight of their nakedness.

"Blessed be, Barney Alt," Rialta said, seawater streaming off the points of her breasts and sunlight glimmering on her wet, bronzed skin. Two weeks at the beach had treated her well.

"Good to see you as well," Alt said.

"Old Bear, leave us be," Rialta said as she tromped back toward the beach. "We have business."

"Gladly," said LaFranq as he shook Alt's hand. "I hate talking business."

The thick-torsoed retired Guardsman brought Rialta a lightweight cotton piece of shimmering fabric, and she wrapped the patterned shawl around her shoulders, the shift barely covering her. LaFranq ambled off, and as Alt watched him he understood why Rialta referred to him as an old bear. He lacked almost nothing but claws and a snout.

"And how is the capitol?" Rialta asked, setting off down the beach ahead of him. "Is everyone behaving?"

Her curved bottom swayed under the see-through cotton print. "You know damn well they aren't," Alt said. "And to tell you the truth, Rialta, I'm mad at you."

"Mad at me?" she chuckled over her shoulder as she trailed her feet through the surf. "How novel?"

"Don't make a joke of it," Alt said. "We fight this whole war your way because you say the people of Darbas have to be brought together, and then no sooner have we opened Sidon and reconvened the council than you go on this vacation, leaving me to keep the civil war from breaking out all over again."

"So you think me irresponsible?" Rialta asked, her voice teasing.

"Yes," said Alt, "although to be frank about it, you have such a nice bottom that it's getting very difficult for me to stay self-righteous about it."

Rialta shifted her cotton wrap to cover herself better, but the thin fabric only clung to her damp skin. "Perhaps it would be better if I walked beside you," Alt said, speeding up.

"I'm sorry it disturbs you," Rialta said. "Being sky-clad is one of the great pleasures of the Old Path. You should try it some time, Barney."

"You forget that I'm a Gherald," he said. "By the standards of my own people, I'm practically naked right now."

She laughed again, and threaded her arm around his.

"I brought you here because it's time you and I had a real talk, Barney. There is much for us to discuss, you and I."

"Where do we begin?" he asked.

"Tell me about Sidon."

"Marbor says hello," Alt said. "Actually, he said 'Please do tell the lovely Lady of Gwynyr that I shall miss the sight of her inordinately.' I think you may count him among your admirers."

"I admire his taste in women," she replied. "And how is our good colonel?"

"Adjusting well to his invalid status, I think. I suspect he'll go into politics now that his military career is finished, and he practically begged me to let him deliver our message to the Court. He's of the House of Teague, and carrying our peace proposal will give both he and his House a certain amount of cache. Teague could stand a bit of that."

"I am thankful for his injury," Rialta said. "Had it not occurred, he might have fought against us with Thierry at Clyde Barrow. I would have mourned his death there greatly."

"It occurs to me that had he been there with Thierry, it might well have been you and I who died at Clyde Barrow," Alt pondered aloud. "And there was already too much death there."

"I shall miss many of our comrades," she said, looking out to sea. "Dian was a friend for a long time, and a great poet. Quinn was my teacher. But Seamus Dannan hurts the most. Did you know him well?"

"He was the quiet type as a soldier, and I never paid him much mind until we arrived here. If you'd have told me then that half the babies born in The Edain this summer would be named Seamus in his honor, I'd have considered you crazy."

"Seamus is a legend now," she said. "He was groomed for that destiny at great personal cost by my mother."

"Your mother?"

Rialta tucked her hair behind her ear and began to twiddle a strand of it. "I have never gone into great detail with you about the prophecies," she said, "but everything that has transpired here has been in fulfillment of them. Foremost among them was the prediction that a hero would arise from the land of the Clydes and unite all of Darbas. Mother knew this just as I did, and long before I came to power she sensed destiny upon the shoulders of Seamus's parents. They raised him with mother's words heavy on their minds, with the secret belief that their son would become that hero."

"But she was wrong."

"Was she?" Rialta asked. "In a way, I suppose she was. But without Seamus, I wouldn't be here, and neither would you."

"They say that you called for him," Alt said. "Did you know that he would die defending you?"

"In truth I don't remember it," she said softly. "I was out of my head, quite literally, at the time. If I called to him it was most un-

consciously, but does that make any difference? Perhaps destiny called to him. Perhaps it calls to all of us, if we could only hear it.”

“It is always a tragedy, to lose someone so gifted. In all my career I never saw a such a hand fighter.”

“This will sound harsh, but there is a way in which I see his death as a gift,” the Lady said, sloshing her feet more slowly through the water. “There is never only one future, and it is easy for me to see events had Seamus lived. The people loved him and told tales of his exploits around our camp fires, and had he survived many would have looked to him for leadership. Yet for all his gifts, the ability to lead was the least of them. In that he would have been susceptible to my mother, and she would have surely preyed upon that weakness. Perhaps she even created it.”

“What is your mother’s role in all this?” he asked. “We have often talked around this subject, but it’s time we cut to the heart of matters.”

“Mother,” Rialta sighed. “We all have our blind spots, and I suppose mother is mine. I don’t know, really. Part of me is inclined now to see her hand in everything, yet I know that isn’t true. She is imperfect, or else we would not have prevailed as we have. And perhaps she was even necessary for our success. One can never be sure. But I can tell you that my dear mummy has divided Gwynyr into warring factions for the first time, all for her belief that it must never be less than first. She promoted Seamus to me as the hero of the Clydes, and Tera as well. But I don’t think she foresaw them becoming so close. Or becoming so loyal to me.”

“John certainly seems better than the last time I saw him,” Alt observed.

“On the outside, yes. Our friend John still has some difficult choices ahead of him, Barney. Heart choices, but other choices, too. I wish that it were easier for him, but I can’t make it that way. Still, I’m glad I brought him along. He mourns Seamus as if his death were his own failing, and his wounds were serious this time.”

“He seems to have recovered nicely.”

“That’s Willow’s doing, really,” Rialta laughed. “Even more so than my own magic or the ministrations of his mother.”

“A beautiful woman can give a man cause to do much.”

Rialta looked at him slowly, and it made him nervous.

“Was that meant as a compliment, Barney?”

“Did you take it that way?”

“Yes.”

“Then it was,” he said. “And you’re welcome.”

“What of the political situation?” she said, changing the subject abruptly.

“What kind of woman redirects the conversation away from her own beauty?” Alt asked, his own hopes tightening around the question. They had come so far, and still she held him at bay, cavorting in the surf with that Rolph LaFranq and sending for him only after leaving him alone for weeks in the capitol.

“Just go with it, Barney,” she said, the slightest bit of annoyance in her voice.

Women, he thought.

“Oh alright,” he said. “Chief Counselor Maelfar convened the council and immediately took up your resolution to reconstitute it. The Council continues to serve as the provisional government of Darbas, with emergency powers, but the convention on forming the new government begins next week and the delegates who are already in the city have wasted no time. Already there are fights and intrigues.”

“And the factions?”

“LaDram is the worst,” Alt said. “He spends all his time in the halls and pubs working the crowds, plying the delegates with liquor.”

“Will he win?”

“One supposes. Half the city seems afire for democracy.”

“And the other half?” she asked.

“The other half is violently opposed to mob rule – so violently opposed to it that one worries they may form their own mobs against it at any moment.”

“What of the DuQaddish? How will they fall on this question?”

“They are divided as well,” Alt said. “Some are contrite about the *ouhasandan* atrocities, other deny them. Most are simply focused on the issue of trials: they don’t want them. The Clydes, of course, do. But I think there’s a compromise building that will work.”

“Do tell.”

“Bergonat has taken up your suggestion that any trials be conducted by the Mullaqat. Everyone seems to trust them to be impartial.”

“Oh, they’ll be impartial alright,” Rialta said. “Perhaps too impartial.”

“How can one be too impartial?”

“Never mind,” she said. “It is good news. LaDram’s ideas will make for a messy but strong government, and the Mullaqat will make an excellent judiciary.”

“Well, that settles that,” Alt said. “The variable in all of this has been you, my Lady. How Gwynyr goes will decide these questions. In fact, when word got out that you had sent for me, half a dozen people lobbied to be brought along just to get a few minutes of your ear. All the controversies of Sidon and Darbas await your voice.”

“Then we shall decide them, for they must be concluded quickly,” she mused. “There are more pressing and dangerous matters ahead shortly. Starvation, for instance.”

“Not to mention war with either Gherald or Korvish-Sopka,” Alt said.

“Or both,” she replied. “Barney, we have no shortage of enemies within and without. There is Blood Death amongst the DuQadish, and it will spread. Practically no one will harvest this fall. Thousands of people are displaced, and there is vengeance in many hearts. That’s not to mention the true origins of the *ouhasandan* uprising, which must be investigated, or the future of the DuQadish Sulists. The Tanu Nupa will certainly expect a seat at the table for any major decision, and I’m told he is quite the difficult man. And whatever he gets, the Bishop of Sidon will want as well.”

“What else?” Alt asked.

“Gwynyr is a problem, and even when I return to Sidon for the convention I cannot stay long. Mother has retreated to the hills, and the Orders in Beltan are divided and unsure in my absence. Llyr has already begun exercising its independence, and if I do not return soon all the Highlands will descend into civil war. We shall have to work closely together on this, you and I.”

“We?” he asked. “Since when did this become ‘we?’ I am of retirement age, my Lady, and LaDram assures me that the new government will give me land grants to make up for my lost Gheraldic pension. I intend to take him up on the offer. You will always have my support, but my role in the affairs of Darbas ends there.”

Rialta stopped and turned toward him.

“Barney, don’t you understand?”

“Understand what?”

“You cannot retire.”

“I most certainly can.”

“Foolish man,” she said. “The Gheraldic Empire is gone. All of Darbas is a shambles. There’s a government in the making, but it’s far from stable and won’t be for a long time. There’s only one person who can hold all this together. And it’s you.”

“You need a politician, Rialta. Not a soldier.”

“I need both, Barney. And I have both in you.”

His frustration rose.

“Lady Rialta, I have given you everything. My career, my loyalty, my life. I have laid my citizenship and my fortune as forfeit for your plans, and now it is time for me, after all these years, to claim some pleasure in the time I have left. How can you ask otherwise of me?”

“Because you were born to this, Barney,” she said softly. “And you know it. Who else has the respect of the three peoples? Who else commands an army in all this chaos? Who else can bring order to Darbas? Only you, Barnabus Alt. You are the one – the hero of the prophecy. You are the man who rose from Clyde to bring Darbas together – not Seamus, not Tera – and you can neither run nor hide from that truth. You must accept it, or your final years will be a misery.”

“And what makes you so sure of that?” he demanded.

“Because this is your second chance, Barney,” Rialta said, staring deeply into his eyes. “And it’s my second chance, too. Except the last time we stood here, on this beach, we had different names.”

She paused, then stopped walking altogether. Rialta turned her face away from him, and Alt struggled to meet her eyes. But they were far out to sea.

It seemed so familiar. A man and a woman on a beach. This beach...

“Stop talking in riddles, Rialta,” Alt said.

“Don’t you remember?” she asked. “Or is your mind so practical, so dismissive, that you cannot feel it here? With me?”

“You’re making me nuts,” he said, fighting back the *déjà vu*.

“Do I have to spell it out for you, Barney?” she asked. “Just stop fighting it.”

The feeling that had tugged at him from the moment he stepped onto the beach rose like a wave. The woman from the ceiling fresco at Askla. A man with long hair. Two lovers fighting on the beach...

*I made you, Liam!*

*I made myself! And I’ll not be your lap dog!*

*Don’t say that! Don’t even think it!*

The shock of it sent him crashing back into the present, and he looked at Rialta in horror. Her eyes were patient and steady, but there was sorrow in them, too.

Alt felt himself as if he was spinning. The hero of the Clydes. The man who had first driven the Gheralds from Darbas only to falter at the end by making the bargain that sealed the fate of all three peoples. The Gwynyrian hero who had marched against his own people and been assassinated by the Fionnans. It couldn’t be him. It could not.

“Don’t play games with me, my Lady,” he said, but he was pleading now.

“Your name at the time was Liam LaFranq,” she said. “Mine was Rhoane. And between the two of us, we made a royal mess of things.”

“You don’t know that,” he said. “You have no proof!”

“There is no proof,” she said. “But there is knowing. I have not always known, not in the way of knowing that you can speak. I knew when we first met that we had been together before, Barney. And over the years my knowledge of you grew, and with it grew my understanding of what you meant – not just to me, but to all of us. The hardest part wasn’t believing he was you, but accepting I was her.”

“It’s a trick,” he said. He was clinging to anything.

“But you just remembered it too. I saw you,” she said. “You saw us here. You felt the pain.”



"We were lovers," he said, incredulous.

Rialta nodded. "That's a fact that isn't widely known. We came here after you made your bargain with the Gheralds, and it was here that you asked me to marry you, to join together in ruling Darbas. And I, Rhoane, rejected you, because a Lady of Gwynyr does not marry. But you wanted to be my equal, not my consort, and it ate away at your heart."

"Stop it, Rialta," he said, both panic and acceptance rising in his chest. He gripped the priestess by her biceps and pulled her to face him. "This is another of your enchantments, and I want you to make it stop!"

"Barney," she whispered, and he realized he was gripping her too tightly.

They looked so similar, he realized, though Rhoane – the lady in the ceiling at Askla – had been a little taller, a little thinner, a little younger. Maybe it was the eyes.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why us or why now?" she replied.

"Either. Both."

"I don't know that I can give you an answer. But I can tell you that the connections between us are powerfully strong and incredibly dangerous. We loved each other then, yet that love turned to betrayal and murder and changed the course of history. How could we not be linked forever?"

"Then you feel it, too," he said. "Dammit, I knew it. I've loved you since we first met, and you've been hiding it the whole time."

"I don't know that you and I can ever really be together, Barney," she said, turning away. "The feelings are... too powerful. I hope you understand now."

*Not fair*, he thought, and both anger and hope accompanied it. "When did you know?" he asked.

"Truly? Not until just now, when we remembered together. Yet in a way I have always known, as you have. We are not here by accident, Barney."

"If I am Liam and you are Rhoane, then we're here for each other, aren't we?"

"I don't know why spirit gave us a second chance," she said. "But I do know that if we fail to meet its challenges, all will suffer for it. The world will suffer for it."

"In what way?"

"Barney, love, I know a great secret, a secret kept by my line for generations. A secret my mother keeps as well. And it will either tear our world apart or lead it into a golden age. We are only its midwives, Barney, but we attend to its birth – and only the slightest mistake will kill it in its cradle."

"What secret could be so great?"

"That we stand on the forgotten shoulders of an older world, Barney. A world in which iron was not so rare, a world in which disease did not stride the globe. We were once a people who settled among the stars and lived like gods, until our arrogance brought us low. What effect would such knowledge have if it were set loose in the world?"

"It's just a story," Alt replied.

"It's a story that comes with evidence," she said, fixing her eyes solid on his. "The knowledge. The learning. The folly and the wisdom. Our forebears died slowly, but before they disappeared entirely they constructed a great library – a library so advanced that no one could read it for thousands and thousands of years."

"Where?"

"At Bal'a'Blos, in the mountains to the south where the Mullaqat roam. And there is more. As the old world passed out of existence, our ancestors entrusted the stewardship of their knowledge to two peoples: the Mullaqat, who would not be tempted by it, and the Calpathian Clydes, the guardians of the Old Path, who would protect the Mullaqat from those who would harm them."

"Bal'a'Blos is a myth," Alt said, shaking his head.

"I assure you that it is not," she replied, "for I have seen it with my own eyes and obscured it by the Secret Rite ever since I became the high priestess. As every priestess in my line has always obscured it. We did this not for ourselves, but for a world that was not ready to receive such knowledge, Barney. Now the world grows stagnant and restless, as the prophecies foretold, and the time has come to release the shroud we of the Old Path have held over the minds of the people. It's time for the knowledge to be set free."

"Knowledge of what?"

"Of treatments that would let your friend Marbor walk as he once did. Of medicines that would cure the sick. Of machines that think and powerful weapons that kill at great range. Our ancestors flew across the skies and off to the stars, Barney, but they drained the land of its power and wealth until there was nothing left, and when the land was sick and weak the people were easily wiped out. We are their children – and you don't give children matches until they are old enough to safely make a fire. To put it bluntly, Barney, it's time for us to grow up. And it has to begin with you and me. We have to be more than we were."

"But why us?" he asked, his voice desperate this time.

"Because Darbas is the key to unlocking both the past and the future," she said. "And you and I are the key to Darbas."

"I don't want this," Alt said, shrugging off her touch and walking ahead. "I've spent my whole life in service and I'm sick of it." He spun around. "Do you know what I want to do, Rialta? I want to wander about. I want to be randomly curious and utterly irresponsible. I want to follow my whims. And to be honest about it, I'd like you to be one of those whims."

"Me? A whim?" she laughed. "I don't think so, although it sounds flattering coming from you."

"Well, don't let it go to your head," he said gruffly.

"Don't you think I want the same things?" she asked, and for the first time she flashed her own anger. "You act as if you're the only one in the world who ever wanted something simple he couldn't have. Personally, I'd *like* to let things go to my head. I'd like to

wander around and travel the world as I was trained to do at the House of Fionna. I'm as curious and restless as you are, Barney."

"See, I told you we were a good match," he said. "When do we leave?"

"We don't," she said. "We stay here. For better or for worse, we chose these lives. These lives, not someone else's. Either we learn from them and face the tasks before us or we spend our time hiding from who we are. That's the path of misery."

An approaching figure caught Alt's eye, and he turned to see who it was.

"That's Brother Yarrow," Rialta said. "He comes to tell me that dinner is ready."

"Rialta," Alt whispered. "What are we to do?"

"What we must," she answered. "I will join you at Sidon and we will set political things on the right path together. Then I will return home to settle Gwynyr and you will find a way to bring peace to the rest of the country."

"And then there will be peace?"

"Someday," she said. "But giving birth is never easy. Trust me on that."

They stood silently for a moment, both of them staring at the gentle waves that swept in and out over their feet.

"Lady Rialta," the young Valand said, "Willow sent me to tell you dinner is ready."

"I'll be along," she said, and Brother Yarrow turned and walked off. "Do you care to join us, or will you be heading back?" she asked Alt.

"I don't know," he said.

The Lady of Gwynyr rose on her toes and kissed his bearded cheek.

"I do so love the beach," she said. "It's one of the things you just don't get in Gwynyr. Enjoy it, Barney. You deserve it."

She turned away and began walking after the young warrior, and the sound of the waves seemed to rise as he watched her leave.

But it wasn't only his perception that had changed, for somewhere far above him the two moons aligned and the tides shifted beneath their pull. The water rose swiftly about his legs, each outgoing wave tugging at his feet and sinking him deeper into the sand. Off to the west the sun hung red and low on the horizon, painting everything in the world in a different light, and Barney Alt stood beneath the bowl of sky in the rising tide, sighed, and let it all be.

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Shining Rock Wilderness, August 2009. Janet Edens photo.

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### ***Design notes***

This book was typeset by the author using InDesign. The body text is Minion, set 10.5p on 12p leading and optimized for standard home printing. He also designed, executed and digitally typeset the four maps, using Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop. If you're working on a similar project and have any questions about software settings, etc., he's happy to share the styles and settings he derived for this edition if you e-mail him (dan@danconover). He's also usually available for hire as a photographer, designer and illustrator.

### ***Web notes***

This book's website (also designed and hosted by the author) is [www.darbasweb.com](http://www.darbasweb.com). The site has all the usual stuff, plus free downloads and a store where you can order additional copies and other Darbas-related goodies.

It's also where you'll find the collaborative DarbasWiki. Readers with questions about the story or its characters are encouraged to contact the author and/or the reader community via the site, and are invited to participate in the construction of a richer, more in-depth "Darbas World" on the wiki.

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For more about the author, please visit [www.danconover.com](http://www.danconover.com). His blog, [www.xark.typepad.com](http://www.xark.typepad.com), welcomes readers with eclectic tastes.



**With** the last of its significant iron mines exhausted long ago, civilization plods slowly along. But now intrigue follows rumors of a highland motherlode in the small southern continent of Darbas, and two rival colonial empires will do whatever it takes to control it.

Against these shadowy powers stands an unlikely team of heroes: Messenger **Pete Tuckard**, Darbas' aging representative to the royal court of the Gheraldic Empire; General **Barney Alt**, a Gheraldic officer whose success commanding colonial troops ruined his military career; Sergeant **John Tera**, an enlisted soldier from the Clydelands of Darbas; and **Rialta, the Lady of Gwynyr**, political and spiritual leader of the independent Old Path highlanders whose wisdom and power have held a hostile world at bay for centuries.

When their heartland falls under assault by mounted bands of low-caste western plainsmen, lowland Clydes are shocked by their Gheraldic protectors' refusal to help. In desperation, they turn instead to their clever highland cousins. But stopping The Madness will take more than Gwynyrian magic. It will take an army.

General Alt happens to have something rather *like* an army, and it's just arrived on the eastern shore of Darbas under the strangest of illegal circumstances. Will his beleaguered 2d Clydish Regimental Group be enough to scatter the raiders and reveal the hidden hand behind their campaign of terror?

*Dan Conover (danconover.com) is a former cavalry sergeant, news reporter and metro city editor who left the newspaper business in 2008. His science fiction has been published in four print anthologies. He lives in Charleston, SC., and blogs at xark.typepad.com.*

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